

(Ab)using matrilineality: *Fingersmith* and the formation of identity fictions

S Tack

Department of Modern History, Macquarie University

Abstract

This paper explores the reimagination of gender and sexuality norms in Sarah Waters' novel *Fingersmith*. *Fingersmith*, as a neo-Victorian and postmodern novel, shows that rather than "history" and "identity", there are "histories" and "identities". As such, the novel questions patriarchally constructed histories about processes of the formation of gender(ed) identity. This paper suggests that the novel's two protagonists have been forced to appropriate a certain identity in a society that valorises biology and genetic predisposition and that is built upon the notion of the gender binary. By foregrounding themes such as motherhood and matrilineality, madness and pornography as strategies for the confinement of women in the society under scrutiny in *Fingersmith*, this paper analyses the ways in which the novel opens up a space in which gender and sexuality can exist as unbound by binary thinking.

Keywords: *Fingersmith*, Sarah Waters, performativity, matrilineality, identity, identity fictions

Through an analysis of Sarah Waters' novel *Fingersmith*, this paper explores how the neo-Victorian genre opens up the possibility to reimagine norms about gender and sexuality. Neo-Victorian fiction is a postmodern genre, and as such, *Fingersmith* questions and queers essentialist beliefs pertaining to identity, gender and sexuality. I argue that *Fingersmith* is a project that endeavours to deconstruct patriarchally constructed histories about processes of the formation of gender(ed) identity, and the apparent naturalness of these histories and identities. In doing so, Waters' novel gives a voice to those who have traditionally been denied one. *Fingersmith* is concerned with the discursive production of the subject and the performative effects of the narrativisation of individuals' identities. Through an exploration of recurring themes in the novel such as motherhood and matrilineality, madness, and pornography, this paper suggests that the novel's two protagonists, Sue and Maud, have been forced to appropriate certain identities in a society that valorises biology and genetic predisposition and that is built upon the notion of the gender binary. Only through their realisation that identity is not stable and that their identities and histories have been fabricated for them, can the protagonists overcome patriarchal oppression and write their own futures and lives. *Fingersmith*, as a neo-Victorian novel, succeeds in envisaging "female" gender and sexuality as un-negotiated by the patriarchal, without constraining its protagonists to those requirements of femininity based on one's congenital sex which are prescribed by the gender binary.

Neo-Victorian fiction is a late twentieth and early twenty-first century genre, and is neither the same as nor simply a copy of Victorian fiction. I argue that the neo-Victorian genre, rather than an inferior copy of the original and a nostalgic return to the past (Gutleben in [Carroll, 2010](#)), is a contemporary genre with its own agenda and agency. Since writing

always originates within a certain society and certain discourse(s), neo-Victorian fiction is thus not only involved in nineteenth century but also in modern-day issues. [Hutcheon \(1988\)](#)

identifies neo-Victorian fiction as historiographic metafiction. She argues that its

theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past. ... it always works within conventions in order to subvert them. It is not just metafictional; nor is it just another version of the historical novel or the non-fictional novel. (p. 5)

As such, the genre fits within a postmodernist tradition, in that a postmodernist approach is interested in destabilising categorisation so as to expose the constructed character of those categories that are seemingly unproblematic, natural and knowable. [Waugh \(1984\)](#) has thus argued that

any text that draws the reader's attention to its process of construction by frustrating his or her conventional expectations of meaning and closure problematizes more or less explicitly the ways in which narrative codes - whether 'literary' or 'social' - artificially construct apparently 'real' and imaginary worlds in the terms of particular ideologies while presenting these as transparently 'natural' and 'eternal'. (p. 22)

Consequently *Fingersmith*, in its use of techniques such as shifting focalisation, multiple points of view, blurred boundaries between good and bad, and unstable identity, draws attention to the discursive construction of history, truth and norms. It is a project that suggests that rather than history and truth, there are histories and truths. Through its investment in postmodernism, neo-Victorian fiction therefore opens up the possibility to queer and reimagine both Victorian and modern-day perceptions of gender and sexuality.

As typical for a postmodern novel, *Fingersmith* highlights that there is not one essential truth or history, but that truth and history are fluid concepts constructed through the prevalent discourses within societies. The novel continuously exposes perceived truths as

fictions and narratives, and in doing so lays bare the fluidity of notions that are generally perceived as natural and essentialist. Briar is constructed as a gothic mansion that symbolises patriarchy. When Sue first arrives at Briar, she notes that “there might as well have been grooves laid out for us in the floorboards; we might have glided on sticks. There might have been a great handle set into the side of the house, and a great hand winding it” ([Waters, 2012](#), p. 108). As such, she hints at patriarchy and patriarchal discourse as an all-encompassing structure of clear-cut patterns that one cannot simply step out of. This description paints a distanced and removed picture of Briar and patriarchal discourse, and is thus used as a tool to queer individuals’ movement within it. When Gentleman tries to convince Maud of the greatness of his plan, he tells her that Sue “will be distracted by the plot into which I shall draw her. She will be like everyone, putting on the things she sees the constructions she expects to find there” (Waters, 2012, p. 227). Everyone is thus complicit in the perpetuation of patriarchal discourse, as [Grosz \(2013\)](#) argues that “the subordinated are implicated in power relations even if they are not directly complicit in them . . . as [power’s] internal condition, the ‘hinge’ on which it pivots” (p. 196). In *Fingersmith*, where one ends up in life depends on whether one (un)knowingly accepts the patriarchal plot as natural and true and participates in it, or not. Waters, in constructing not one but multiple plots that each of her characters is invited to accept, exposes the perceived naturalness of discourse and history as fictions that allow for fluidity.

Each individual is produced within the prevalent discourses of the society s/he lives in. [Jagose \(1996\)](#) suggests that queer is “always an identity under construction, a site of permanent becoming”, and rather than being in opposition to identity politics, it interrogates “both the preconditions of identity and its effects”. In *Fingersmith*, one “is” not, but one “becomes”. Sue and Maud construct their identities through the fictions that have been

constructed for them, and continuously “become” through the truth effects of those fictions. [Butler \(1990\)](#) posits that gender is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 33). The processes of identity formation in the novel function in a similar manner. Sue and Maud are performatively moulded and mould themselves into what they have been told they are. An example of this is the naming process. Sue is introduced to the reader as Sue Trinder. However, when she decides to take part in Gentleman’s plan, she takes on the fictional identity of Susan/Sue Smith. When Sue thinks the plan has been completed, she discovers that Maud and Gentleman were involved in another plan that consisted in moulding her into the embodiment of Maud Lilly. Others believe her to be Maud Lilly, and Sue gradually starts to internalise that identity. Ultimately, it is discovered that Sue is actually Susan Lilly. Each of these names comes with a history, with a past and with a life. In her exaggerated use of name changes, Sarah Waters draws attention to the constructedness and fictionalisation of identity, and thus queers it. She implies that identity is neither stable nor innate and that therefore the structures that construct certain groups of individuals as inferior are grounded in fictions.

In *Fingersmith*, descent is traced through the figure of the mother. Identity formation for the two protagonists takes place through their belief in what [Muller \(2009/2010\)](#) calls “matrilineal fictions” (p. 111). The importance attached to the figure of the mother is exemplified in the manner in which the two girls introduce themselves at the beginning of their stories. Sue says, “I believe I am an orphan. My mother I know is dead. But I never saw her, she was nothing to me. I was Mrs Sucksby’s child, if I was anyone’s” (Waters, 2012, p. 3). Maud begins her story with,

The start, I think I know too well. It is the first of my mistakes. I imagine a table, slick with blood. The blood is my mother's. There is too much of it. ... Beyond the beat [of dripping blood] come other, fainter cries: the shrieks of lunatics, the shouts and scolds of nurses. For this is a madhouse. My mother is mad. (Waters, 2012, p. 180)

The two protagonists thus construct their identities as a result of their maternal origins.

Narrative progression is only achieved when the girls accept their maternal fictions as truths. It is Sue's belief that her mother was a criminal and was hanged for her crimes, and Maud's belief in her genetic predisposition to become a madwoman, that convinces both characters to participate in Gentleman's plan. This, I suggest, exposes the performative effect of genealogy, of a belief in genetic predisposition in dichotomously gendered terms, used as a strategy to keep women obedient.

The discovery that the two girls' maternal origins are stories and that they have been switched at birth, shows that what they assumed to be their "natures" are nothing more than fictions. They have, however, constructed their identities around these fictions. Muller (2009/2010) argues that the novel thus not only "concerns itself with *living with* a maternal prehistory", but, more specifically, "with *re-enacting* it" (p. 115). Through the performative effects of matrilineal fictions, Sue and Maud have thus become what they considered themselves to innately be. Their fictive identities have been constructed for them by Marianne Lilly, Sue's biological mother, and Grace Sucksby, Maud's biological mother. The protagonists' identities were set out in a contract between the two mothers (Waters, 2012, p. 532), written up in an attempt to help their daughters escape the patriarchal norms held about women that they themselves had not been able to break away from. Marianne Lilly wanted a future for her daughter that did not involve the child's oppression by her father and brother and thus had her raised by a woman, while Grace Sucksby believed that money would function as a means of liberation for her daughter. It is, however, not simply their discovery of

the constructedness of identity, history and truth that allows Maud and Sue to escape and subvert patriarchally constructed notions of femininity. What is required is the death of each of the accomplices in the fictionalisation of their identities: Mr Lilly, Gentleman, Marianne Lilly and Grace Sucksby. [Gilbert and Gubar \(2000\)](#) suggest that “before women can even attempt the pen which is so rigorously kept from them they must escape just those male texts which . . . deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen” (p. 13). However, in *Fingersmith*, both the male and female authors and texts that gave birth to the protagonists’ identities must be escaped, in order for them to be able to attempt the pen, to write their own identities as individuals rather than as dichotomously gendered beings. The power of the authors of the old fictions must thus be fully overthrown so as to enable the writing of new fictions.

The Victorian concept of madness is used as another tool to question the construction of identity fictions for women so as to keep them in line in a patriarchal society. In Maud’s case, madness is linked to heredity, and as such to her matrilineal fiction. She is convinced she carries a madwoman’s blood in her body, and so believes she is predisposed to become a madwoman herself. Marianne Lilly, Maud’s assumed mother, gave birth to a child while not married and tried to escape the reign of her father and brother. She was constructed as a madwoman in a context that assumes madness to be “a departure from conduct deemed appropriate such as self-control and moderation. If a woman behaved outside these middle-class norms of femininity, then she suffered from moral insanity” ([Bernstein, 1997](#), p. 82). Maud’s uncle Mr Lilly uses the notion of hereditary madness as a strategy to confine his assumed niece to his patriarchal rule, and to exert power over her by instigating a fear in her for her true nature. When he picks her up from the madhouse where she lived as a child after

her mother's death, he tells the matron: "I see she wears her mother's likeness. Very good. It will remind her of her mother's fate, and may serve to keep her from sharing it" (Waters, 2012, p. 181). He also makes sure that she gets her mother's room at Briar and drinks from "a crystal glass engraved with an M", she says "to keep me mindful, not of my name, but of that of my mother; which was Marianne" (Waters, 2012, p. 196). [Bronfen \(1998\)](#) suggests that hysteria and madness were often diagnosed in "those well-born and idle, of delicate nervous constitution, and sexually or socially dissatisfied" (p. 111). Maud, as the niece of a high class man who has trained her in the art of cataloguing and reading pornography in his lonely gothic mansion, is thus very likely to be perceived a madwoman by the outside world. Consequently, she is raised so as to internalise a fear of madness and as a result constructs an identity for herself that not only involves the constant threat of madness, but an identity that is madness.

Sue is not raised to believe she carries madness in her blood. In Gentleman's and Maud's plan she is, however, constructed so as to look like Maud Lilly/Rivers and being interpreted as a madwoman by strangers. As such, *Fingersmith* can be seen as a commentary on patriarchal societies that construct and label women as mad and irrational so as to keep them in line. Bronfen (1998) argues that madwomen were considered to display a "proclivity towards manipulation and deception" (p. 114). Sue, in her attempt to deny that she is Maud and to hold on to her identity as Sue, unconsciously reinforces the doctors in the asylum's idea that she is truly mad. She is surrounded by other madwomen and is continuously being told she is mad. One performatively becomes what one is considered innately to be, and the structures underlying this process are made invisible. When she catches a glimpse of herself in the reflection of a window, Sue notes,

I looked, as the lady had said, like a lunatic. My hair was still sewn to my head, but had grown or worked loose from its stitches, and stood out in tufts. My face was white but marked, here and there, with spots and scratches and fading bruises. My eyes were swollen - from want of sleep, I suppose - and red at the rims. (Waters, 2012, p. 433)

Sue has thus started to embody madness, a fiction that has been imposed on her by the patriarchal figures in the novel.

Mr Lilly, Maud's uncle, is a scholar compiling a dictionary of pornography. When he brings Maud home to Briar from the asylum where she was raised by the nurses after Marianne Lilly's death, he trains her in the organising and copying of pornographic texts. He thus transforms her into a fallen woman and thus knowingly constructs a future for her in which she is confined to his work and house. When Maud indicates that she would prefer to leave Briar, he tells her that "they will think you tainted, should you tell. You understand me? I have touched your lip with poison, Maud. Remember" (Waters, 2012, p. 199). No man would want her and so she cannot go anywhere. [Miller \(2008\)](#) argues that "for women, these men's ability to assert power over the written text proved dangerous, as it encouraged political and sexual hierarchies that advocated the exploitation, oppression, and submission of women". Sue, when she discovers what it is Maud is doing every day, assumes that Maud knows everything about sex, and that she thus lied when she asked Sue to tell and show her how to make love in preparation for her wedding night with Gentleman (Waters, 2012, p. 545). Maud, however, maintains that she "did know nothing" (Waters, 2012, p. 545). *Fingersmith* here communicates that all Maud knows is what the sexual act looks like through a patriarchal lens, and needs to learn about sex un-negotiated by the masculine. Waters thus not only comments on the non-availability of a "female" pornographic canon, but also on

modern-day pornography that routinely deploys a male gaze in its representation of sex and as such objectifies women.

In his attempt to confine Maud to patriarchal norms and to his rule through pornography, Mr Lilly creates his niece as pathological and dirty in the minds of patriarchal men. Consequently he, I suggest, unwillingly confines her to a space where she cannot exist in the company of men. He thus ultimately hands her over to a world in which women can write and construct their own histories, presents, futures, truths and fictions. Maud and Sue need to understand that identities are not stable and based on essentialist views, in order to be able to rewrite and change these identities and the fictions that frame processes of identity formation. After reading Mrs Sucksby's letter revealing her biological origins, Sue returns to Briar. She finds the library

changed. The paint had all been scraped from the windows, the finger of brass prised from the floor. The shelves were almost bare of books. A little fire burned in the grate. I pushed the door further. There was Mr Lilly's old desk. Its lamp was lit. And in the glow of it, was Maud. She was sitting, writing. (Waters, 2012, p. 541)

Maud is writing pornography. Her writing originates in the love for a woman, Sue, and not in the oppression of women. As such, she has commenced a project of writing a pornographic canon untouched by subordination, of rewriting gender and the gender binary, of sexuality. Moreover, this literature is negotiated by neither a male nor a female pornographic heritage, by neither literary paternity nor literary maternity. Miller (2008) argues that "in the world of Victorian publishing there *are* no girls like Maud, or if there were girls like Maud, they have been written out of history. At least, there remain no *known* girls like Maud". *Fingersmith* as a novel is thus also a rewriting of the archive, with Waters effectively giving a voice to those who have traditionally been denied one.

Conclusion

Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* constructs women's oppression and identity as a consequence of the prevalent discourses in patriarchal societies. As a postmodern novel, *Fingersmith* questions these discourses that are grounded in essentialist beliefs in stable identity and dichotomous sex and gender. Sue's and Maud's identities are the result of carefully fabricated gender(ed) fictions. Through an exploration of matrilineality and motherhood, I have argued that the switching of Maud and Sue at birth exposes the heredity of character traits as fraud. However, the protagonists' belief in heredity is required for the successful completion of Gentleman's plan and as such of the patriarchal plot. Waters uses Victorian notions of madness that construct women as inherently mad so as to show that one becomes what one is perceived to have innately been. The novel questions beliefs in essentialism so as to expose the processes in which the structures underlying the belief in natural identity are displaced from view. Pornography, once a tool used by Mr Lilly to confine Maud to his reign, is transformed into a liberating practice that allows women to break free from the identity fictions that have been fabricated for them and that they have come to internalise. As such, *Fingersmith* communicates that the realisation that identity is constructed through a series of fictions opens up the possibility to subvert and transform these fictions, and allows for a rewriting of these fictions that is not grounded in dichotomies and oppression.

References

- [Bernstein, S. D. \(1997\)](#). *Confessional subjects: Revelations of gender and power in Victorian literature and culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- [Bronfen, E. \(1998\)](#). *The knotted subject: Hysteria and its discontents*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- [Butler, J. \(1990\)](#). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- [Carroll, S. J. \(2010\)](#). Putting the 'neo' back into neo-Victorian: The neo-Victorian novel as postmodern revisionist fiction. *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 3(2), 172-205.
- [Gilbert, S. M. & Gubar, S. \(2000\)](#). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination* (2nd ed.). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- [Grosz, E. \(2013\)](#). Experimental desire: Rethinking queer subjectivity. In D. Hall & A. Jagose (Eds.), *The Routledge queer studies reader*. New York: Routledge.
- [Hutcheon, L. \(1988\)](#). *A poetics of postmodernism: History, theory, fiction*. London: Routledge.
- [Jagose, A. \(1996\)](#). Queer theory. *Australian Humanities Review*, 5. Retrieved from <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-Dec-1996/jagose.html>
- [Miller, K. A. \(2008\)](#). Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith*: Leaving women's fingerprints on Victorian pornography. *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 4(1). Retrieved from <http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue41/miller.htm>
- [Muller, N. \(2009/2010\)](#). Not my mother's daughter: Matrilinealism, third-wave feminism & neo-Victorian fiction. *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 5(2), 109-136.
- [Waters, S. \(2012\)](#). *Fingersmith*. London: Virago Press. First published 2002.
- [Waugh, P. \(1984\)](#). *Metafiction: The theory and practice of self-conscious fiction*. London: Routledge.