

Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith*: Leaving Women's Fingerprints on Victorian Pornography

By **Kathleen A. Miller**, University of Delaware

“‘Where are her gloves?’
‘Threw them aside, sir. Wouldn’t have them’.” —FN

<1> Upon arriving at her uncle’s house, Briar, a rebellious and resistant Maud Lilly, one of the heroines of Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith* (2002), refuses to wear the snow-white kid-gloves her uncle Christopher Lilly forces upon her. After enduring entrapment, isolation, and physical abuse at the hands of her caretakers, Maud adopts the kid-gloves and, with them, the position of secretary to her uncle’s extensive bibliographic pornography project. She becomes a *fingersmith*, (1) skilled at the adept use of her hands, yet powerless to use them for her own purposes and for her own pleasure. And although Maud’s sight will save her uncle’s, and her hands will be his hands (208), the white gloves, both literally and figuratively, will act as a barrier, preventing the heroine from leaving her fingerprints on her surrounding world, including the traditions of Victorian bibliography and pornography. By encasing Maud’s hands, Christopher Lilly appropriates the young heroine’s physical body in order to support his “body”-of-texts project.

<2> The conflict between the human body of the writer/reader and the “body” of the physical book resides at the heart of Waters’s novel. Christopher Lilly claims to only value his books as objects, while Maud and Sue’s pornography values the content of the text and the personal meaning it possesses for readers, especially themselves. Although Christopher Lilly claims to have a purely academic interest in these texts, he is aware of their content. And much as he objectifies the book as object, when he uses his niece’s body as a kind of machine to manage his collection his relationship with Maud re-enacts the objectification of the Victorian female body found in his pornographic books. The production, consumption, and transmission of texts thus assumes a highly ideologically charged and gendered relationship to the reading experience. The novel illuminates how a gendered subject’s individual relationship to books can make writing, reading, and collecting texts potentially dangerous actions. Writing against the historical tradition of late Victorian pornography as a sphere exclusively for masculine sexual enjoyment, Waters offers readers an inversion of the Victorian pornographic marketplace. She argues that while the male-dominated production, transmission, and consumption of pornographic narrative leads to gender oppression and exploitation of women,(2)female -controlled writing and reading creates

an erotic⁽³⁾ literature of love, inclusion, and equality rather than female degradation.⁽⁴⁾ The long history of scholarship on pornography has complicated the binary between exploitative pornography and healthy erotica, but Waters implies this distinction; the binary is in play within the novel. Although the writers in Christopher Lilly's collection and Maud both write pornography, the ends to which they put this pornography vary.

<3> By marking the transition from the limitations of the pornographic material book to the more open potentialities of the erotic text, Waters shows how the Victorian pornographic book trade can become "human," privileging the emotional interiority not only of the text, but also of the reader. Maud and Sue subvert the male-dominated tradition of Victorian pornography by destroying Christopher Lilly's library and by writing/reading an erotic literature of their own, not coincidentally in the very room where Maud destroys her uncle's books. Working from within the system, Maud and Sue re-write and re-direct the form and object of Victorian pornography and book culture. Maud and Sue's gaining control over pornography also allows them to gain control over their own identities; by reinventing their relationship to the Victorian book, they invent themselves. Through the inversion of the gendered hierarchies involved in reading and writing, *Fingersmith* offers a corrective to the inheritance of a male-dominated pornography trade. The transition from body/object to body/content is central to the text, as Sue and Maud come to understand the inner lives of books and the inner lives of their own bodies. When both women privilege their own interiority, their thoughts and emotions, they can begin to write an erotic literature of love, not merely a pornographic literature of sex.

<4> While Waters suggests that the inheritance of male-dominated British pornography of the 1860s-1880s holds no attraction for women, by inverting the production history of these Victorian books and giving it a female inheritance, she concludes that erotic pornographic literature can be a sexually and socially liberating force for women writers and readers. Not all pornography is created equal, nor is all pornography used for the same purposes and to meet the same needs.⁽⁵⁾ In *Fingersmith*, Waters insists that the female subordinate's ability to "gaze upon [herself] with all the pleasures and dangers this form of objectification entail[s]" (Sigel 155) may offer a socially destabilizing, but ultimately necessary and freeing, personal and social, sexual and political, liberty. In fact, through erotic writing, women can destabilize entrenched social ideologies that encourage female submission and oppression. Readers see this development of female power in the lives of Waters's two female protagonists. As they reclaim control over the book, the writing and reading of pornography no longer represents a dangerous act, in which men subvert and marginalize women's power. Their experience mirrors Carole Vance's suggestion that pornography can be used as a social artifact that responds to social change; female victimization need not be inherent to pornography but instead can be removed in order to explore "feminist desires for sexual freedom" (qtd in Sigel 158). Waters's reimagining of the Victorian pornographic and bibliographic tradition proves to be a feminist project of reclaiming pornographic ideologies of social control through women's erotic literature, in order to "explore" female "freedom."

<5> The fear of inheritance and its relationship to female oppression haunts the novel. As Victorian women, both Maud and Sue inherit a cultural tradition of female powerlessness and submission. Although Mrs. Sucksby and Marianne Lilly attempt to assert control over the

circumstances of their daughters' lives by switching the infants at birth, their creation of their daughters' false identities ultimately leads to the girls' powerlessness and exploitation. If, however, readers believe that Maud and Sue's story truly begins at the novel's *end*, then this could suggest that the mothers' actions ultimately free their daughters. While their mothers unsuccessfully attempt to assert power in a patriarchal society, both through reproduction and through the production of new birth narratives for their daughters, Maud and Sue eventually gain power and control through the creation of the Victorian erotic book. Cora Kaplan writes, "this ending can be seen as a celebration and libertarian defense of the sexual and the literary imagination, and its appropriation by women writers today" (113). The text illuminates the high stakes involved in female modes of production—both the literal reproduction of women through childbirth and the production of women's writing. Female modes of production, particularly literary production, can destabilize existing gender hierarchies that encourage female submission and oppression. Once Maud and Sue succeed in gaining power through eroticized female writing and reading, they prove able to construct their own female narratives of identity and to surmount the fear of inheritance.

Male-Dominated Pornography in Victorian England, 1860-1880: Henry Spencer Ashbee and London's "Cannibal Club"

<6> The image of women working to alter a damaging inheritance through the power of words functions not only within the novel's plot, but also in Waters's own writing career. *Fingersmith's* twenty-first-century adaptation of the Victorian past confronts an inheritance of violent, exploitative pornography from the 1800s. While Waters focuses her novel's discussion on the increasingly "scientific" pornography of the 1860s-1880s, the link among Victorian science, pornographic sexuality, and the objectification of the female body existed long before then. Perhaps the most prominent example of the conflation of Victorian science and the erotic is the case of Sara Baartman, or the "Hottentot Venus." Baartman was presented to white audiences in the nineteenth century to demonstrate the "contradiction of beauty and freakery" (Hobson 22) embodied in the black female form. Janelle Hobson notes the "erotic" nature of these freakshows: "Moreover, Baartman's body was constantly depicted in the nude in various caricatures and sketches, which invited a pornographic gaze (Abraham, 226)" (23). Baartman was viewed as a scientific and erotic object devoid of interiority, an object on which men could write their sexual fantasies. Waters shows how women can re-write these male fantasies by considering female interiority. Thus, erotic relationships can be reconfigured as expressive of the whole person, not just of the physical body; they can encompass love, not sex alone. Waters remakes the Victorian past, while also demonstrating how women of the present can reshape a sexual tradition.

<7> Sarah Waters focuses her discussion of Victorian pornography on a fictionalized representation of Henry Spencer Ashbee and the Cannibal Club. Situating her novel in this particular epoch of the 1860s through the 1880s allows her to comment on how both books and women should be read; in the 1860s "the combination of imperialism, sadism, and sexism signaled the emergence of a new relationship between sexuality and society; the word and the flesh became bound together quite literally and figuratively to form a new type of pornography" (Sigel 50). This new pornography centered upon the book as object and on book

culture. *Fingersmith* suggests that, as the inheritance of a Victorian pornographic book culture has been passed down, a culture that objectifies women's bodies has simultaneously been transmitted along with it.

<8> In the acknowledgments to *Fingersmith*, Waters writes, "The index upon which Christopher Lilly is at work is based on the three annotated bibliographies published by Henry Spencer Ashbee...Mr. Lilly's statements on book-collecting echo those of Ashbee, but in all other respects he is entirely fictitious" (n.p). While Waters claims to have constructed an entirely fictitious representation of Ashbee, the world of Victorian bibliography and pornography in which she situates the figure of Christopher Lilly shares many similarities with Ashbee's world. In *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914*, Lisa Z. Sigel(6) uses extensive bibliographic study to document pornography's audience, prices, shop locations, and methods of distribution. In addition, she notes which pornographers worked together at a certain time, what they produced, and how they learned the trade. She then correlates these findings with broader patterns of literacy and distribution of wealth and speculates about how widely pornography circulated (7).

<9> According to Sigel, the late 1700s and early 1800s marked a period of "libertine" pornography, as the figure of the sexually uninhibited libertine came to prominence. Publishers of pornography, such as William Dugdale, attempted to make pornography available to the working classes (21). Dugdale had come to the pornography trade from politics, and he saw his new work as an opportunity to inspire social revolution while mocking the learned, rich, and pious. Although the poor still had difficulty gaining access to narrative pornography, due to poverty and literacy constraints, woodcuts, lithographic stones, copper plates and other visual complements to the written text promised greater access for the common man. Pornographers attempted to use pornography as a revolutionary tool of political reform, suggesting that utopia could be formed from the powerless (women and racial minorities), as they were uncultured and uncivilized; they could be used as a 'blueprint' for a new human sexuality (49) and a new set of social relations. While Sigel notes the possibilities of exploitation in such a sexual model, she deems the late eighteenth century a more progressive period for gender and sex roles in pornography and opposes it to the gender oppressive decades of the 1860-1880's, with their very different pornography trade.(7)

<10> By the mid-nineteenth century, as Sigel argues, the state of Victorian pornography had become male-centered and devoted to the objectification of women.(8) Increasingly, "the application of labels such as pornography, obscenity, and indecency hinged upon access. It was presumed certain people could look at representations with limited emotional, social, and legal consequences while others could not" (Sigel 4). Women and racial minorities proved unable to gain access to pornography because of high prices, low literacy rates, class-specific cultural references, and unequal patterns of state repression and production in distribution patterns linked to the dispersal of pornography (Sigel 120). Minorities became the marginalized objects of pornographic representation. Instead of depending largely upon middle-class, radical reform-minded printers, pornography became the product of conservative forces—the cultured, educated, and moneyed. The men who wrote and read much of the British pornography produced in this time period—figures such as Henry Spencer Ashbee, Algernon Charles Swinburne,

Richard Monkton Milnes, Sir James Plaisted Wilde, and Charles Duncan Cameron—were all members of the London Anthropological Society’s “Cannibal Club.” These men claimed to study pornography as a way to uncover scientific empiricist truths. Quite literally the “word became flesh” as these men projected their erotic fantasies onto depictions of the colonized other, eroticizing cannibalism and the use of African flesh as a material for binding pornographic books.(9) Unlike earlier pornographers such as Dugdale, they cared less about the breaking of social divisions and class lines than about their own personal and scientific relationship to pornography.

<11> Maintaining a scientific relationship to pornography proved essential for these men, since the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 stated that magistrates could destroy obscene printed materials (Pearsall 382). Thus, the members of the Cannibal Club would have to link all pornographic sub-genres in the purposes of scholarship. For example, literature on phallic worship could bridge the gap between scholarship and pornography: it “clearly crossed the divide between licit and illicit; when broached in the auspices of the Anthropological Society, the topic could be scholarly, but when privately printed, anonymously written, and hidden behind a discreet blue cover [...] the topic clearly became pornographic” (Sigel 72). As members of an elite, all-male social club, these gentlemen reaffirmed the rigid social divisions and gender hierarchies that were being challenged elsewhere in late-Victorian intellectual circles. John Camden Hotten, who came to the pornography trade from the British literati, served as the primary publisher of Victorian pornography during the period of 1860-1880. Hotten, a well-known and respected publisher of Mark Twain and Walt Whitman, began to sell his publications through subscription lists.(10) Thus, he radically narrowed the distribution. The prices of his published works were high, the volumes themselves were privately printed, and sold through subscription, and the people involved in the distribution, transmission, and consumption of pornography all came from aristocratic families—defined by wealth, education, and social standing (Sigel 58-59).(11) During Hotten’s publishing reign, the mass production and democratization of pornography ceased.

<12> Not only did pornography take a decidedly classist turn during the 1860s-1880s, it also became a very male-centered activity: “Through their ‘brotherhood,’ they established a fictive kinship based upon self-proclaimed mutual alienation...the Cannibal Club united to create a vision of sexuality that could be both transgressive and masculine” (Sigel 55). Ashbee and the members of the Cannibal Club used pornography in order to define the physiological differences between various human bodies—in essence, to assert a physiological reason for British, white, male supremacy in Britain’s imperialist empire. For example, the London Anthropological Society deemed mulatto children a biological “abnormality” placing “exoticized” and “eroticized” foreign women and their children at the “mercy of their ‘flawed’ biology” (72). Pornography became a tool of maintaining political and sexual hierarchies. 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.

<13> The tradition of scientific pornography faltered in the late 1880s, as increasingly voyeuristic literary pornography gained influence. One constant remained, though; pornographers still excluded women and minorities from the production and consumption of

pornography: “The disenfranchised served as models for the desires of the wealthy, but these people could rarely see, let alone reinterpret, the goods—based upon them—that circulated in the marketplace” (Sigel 118). It was not until the early 1900s, when other methods of pornography, especially the photo-postcard appeared, that women began to have access to producing and consuming pornography.(12)

The Word Becomes Flesh: Female Influence in Victorian Pornography, Erotic Literature, and the Creation of a Female Inheritance

<14> Although bibliographic study of the history of pornography suggests women would not be able to gain access to pornography until the early 1900s, in the period of roughly 1860-1880, Waters positions women in the exclusionary all-male world of Victorian pornography.(13) Not only does she have Maud act as scribe for Christopher Lilly’s (i.e., Henry Spencer Ashbee’s) highly influential Victorian bibliography, she ultimately positions Maud as a writer of lesbian erotic literature *and* both Maud and Sue as consumers of pornography. And though historical evidence would suggest that Sue would have been even more restricted than Maud from access to pornography, and to the possible pleasure it may offer, because of her gender, education, and class, she too proves able to join Maud in the production, transmission, and consumption of pornography. Thus, by the narrative’s conclusion, both women use Victorian bibliography and pornography for their own ends and they no longer serve as victims; instead they re-write and control the production of Victorian pornography as a means of empowering themselves.

<15> The creation of a female literary inheritance begins with the act of creation embodied in the births of Maud and Sue. Although Mrs. Sucksby and Marianne Lilly do not generate female books, they do engender female children. In addition, they construct birth narratives for their daughters, switching their babies’ identities and projected life paths. Mrs. Sucksby informs Sue that her mother was a thief and murderess. Those around Maud tell her that her mother suffered from madness. Ultimately, the narrative reveals that Mrs. Sucksby, Sue’s surrogate mother, is actually Maud’s biological mother, and Sue Trinder is actually Susan Lilly, the daughter of the madwoman, Marianne Lilly. Maternal inheritance, which originally seems a fearful, and ineluctable destiny, damning the young girls to a life of either murder or madness, proves as unstable and shifting as the development of the heroine’s identities. Through complicated plot machinations, the lines of identity are blurred; in essence, Maud becomes Sue, Sue becomes Maud, and Mrs. Sucksby becomes Marianne Lilly, as Marianne Lilly becomes Mrs. Sucksby. In the narrative women unite not only through literary production, but also through other modes of female production, such as childbirth.

<16> Through Mrs. Sucksby and Marianne’s attempts to subvert and control male institutions of sexuality and exchange by switching their daughters, they inadvertently condemn their children to the guardianship of mad pornographers, abusive gifters, and insane asylums. Patriarchal ideological systems prove too entrenched, and all four women fall victim to problems of gender and social class in relationship to female production. Gentleman remarks, “ ‘My opinion is mild enough. It concerns your—your sex, and matters of creation. There is something, Miss Lilly, I think your sex must have...Why the liberty...of mine’ ” (116). Gentleman taunts Maud with woman’s seeming reliance on man in order to (re)produce. Mrs. Sucksby and Marianne’s act of

switching daughters does represent an effort by women to create new birth/life narratives, but by participating in a corrupt male game, with the likes of Christopher Lilly and Gentleman, the mothers fail in their attempts to liberate their daughters. Maud and Sue only begin to negotiate a new world, free from the specters of the past, when they cut ties with Christopher Lilly, Gentleman, Marianne Lilly, and Mrs. Sucksby. (Significantly all these individuals are dead by the novel's end). Once the daughters have reconfigured their inheritance, keeping parts of their past and excluding others, in order to free themselves, they can begin to write their own life narratives through the creation of books in the genre of erotic literature. Male-dominated pornographic books, writers, and readers no longer can terrorize these women's lives, or use texts to assert oppressive power.

<17> While both heroines suffer traumatic experiences with reading and writing,⁽¹⁴⁾ Maud's relationship to the history of male-dominated Victorian publishing most clearly demonstrates the dangers of the Victorian pornographic book and the powers inherent in controlling its production, transmission, and consumption. Christopher Lilly asserts his professional bibliographic interest in his collection's materials. He uses these texts not for sexual titillation, but for the pleasures of the collecting: "The world calls it pleasure. My uncle collects it—keeps it neat, keeps it ordered, on guarded shelves; but keeps it strangely—not for its own sake, no, never for that; rather, as it provides fuel for the satisfying of a curious lust. I mean, the lust of the bookman" (209). Lilly assures Maud that she will "soon forget the substance, in the scrutiny of the form" (209). Maud rejects Christopher Lilly's culturally sanctioned form of book lust; instead, realizing that books should be valued for their pleasurable content, and for their effects upon readers, not merely for their attractive form.

<18> Christopher Lilly's lack of interest in reading books coincides with his lack of interest in "reading" the lives of the people around him. He shows no concern for the welfare of Maud as a young girl developing into womanhood: "'My happiness is nothing to him...Only his books! He has made me like a book. I am not meant to be taken, and touched, and liked. I am meant to be kept here in dim light forever!'" (130). He cares only to appropriate her body in order to continue his scholarship. Thus, in his world, women, like books, are valued as objects, rather than as beings with inner lives. Neither books nor women have any emotional resonance for this set of male readers.

<19> Maud finds no personal interest in the role of bibliographer, as the one cataloguing the physical properties of book as object. Her uncle forces her to assume the position of secretary, and both bibliography and pornography come to represent male domination over book production and women alike:

This is the first day, perhaps, of my education[...]I never have a governess: my uncle tutors me himself, having Mr. Way set a desk and a stool for me close to the pointing finger on his library floor. The stool is high: my legs swing from it and the weight of my shows makes them tingle and finally grow numb[...]though he claims to be free of a desire to harm me, he harms me pretty often. (204)

Young Maud proves physically powerless in these early scenes of instruction. Unable to reach the floor, she becomes dwarfed by the pornography surrounding her. As her legs and fingers grow numb, her career as a compiler of a bibliography becomes tied to associations of physical discomfort and abuse. Once again, Christopher Lilly privileges the physical book over the living female body. Maud learns that to work for her uncle, to participate in the male pornographic trade, she must “bite down her rage as [she] once swallowed [her] tears” (212). Maud’s instruction becomes haunted by the fear of the past. She says, “They say children, as a rule, fear the ghosts of the dead; what I fear most as a child are the specters of past lessons, imperfectly erased” (204). This fear of the past, a fear of inheritance, relates to the action of copying another’s words; her uncle does not allow her to write her own text, for she merely copies the words of male writers. As long as Maud associates her bibliographic task with masculine words, desires, and domination, the world of Victorian pornography can offer her no pleasure.

<20> Christopher Lilly uses a hand with a pointing finger to mark the “bounds of innocence,” separating the average individual from the poison of his pornography. He says of the dividing line, “Cross it you [Maud] shall, in time; but at my word, and when you are ready. You understand me, hmm?” (196). Thus, female sexual knowledge becomes subordinate to male pleasure and male dominance—her uncle controls Maud’s sexual education, and the eventual ruin of her “purity,” for his own ends. Maud will be educated as a sexual being, not for her own pleasure, but rather to serve as secretarial fingersmith to her uncle’s work. Regarding the possibility that Maud may take female sexual pleasure into her own hands, the maids note: “Thank God she wears gloves, at least... That may keep her from further mischief” (210). The fear that Maud may use her hands to masturbate for her own sexual pleasure, becoming her own fingersmith, threatens to undermine the control her uncle has over her initiation into both sexual behavior and sexual knowledge. By using the pornographic texts for her own pleasure, Maud may destabilize the power structure in her uncle’s house. The finger establishes Christopher Lilly’s linkage of sexual arousal to intellectual arousal. While his sinister pointing finger may never physically penetrate Maud, it does violate her, demonstrating how male control over access to pornography effectively exerts social control by limiting female psychological sexual identity development.

<21> In a confession to Gentleman, Maud says, “ ‘Sometimes,’ I say, not looking up, ‘I suppose such a plate must be pasted upon my own flesh—that I have been ticketed, and noted and shelved—so nearly do I resemble one of my uncle’s books’ ” (229). While instances of doubling abound in the text (Sue/Maud, Christopher Lilly/Gentleman, Mrs. Susckby/Marianne Lilly), one of the most significant instances of doubling occurs between Maud and her uncle’s books. She becomes thin, white, and fragile like the aging pages of a text. Her hands are cased in gloves, like a book’s hide, in order to protect the pages. Waters suggests book collecting, bibliography, and pornography become dangerous when the human connection to these activities ceases. Objectification of his books coincides with Christopher Lilly’s objectification of people, particularly his callous disregard of Maud’s interior life. Maud’s physical weakness and delicacy echoes the fragility of her stunted emotional development.

<22> Feeling like one of Christopher Lilly’s objectified possessions, Maud desires liberty more than anything else. For Maud, this means a house without books: “I know. London, where I will

find my liberty, cast off my self, live to another pattern—live without patterns, without hides and bindings—without books! I will ban paper from my house!” (252).(15) Yet Maud does not find liberty in a book-less house in London; instead, she must reinvent her relationship to the history of Victorian books in order to (re)invent herself. Readers have already encountered examples of Maud’s rebellious nature and her attempts to invent herself—failing to wear her gloves, arranging her escape from Briar with Gentleman, and abusing her maids—but her resistance to adopting Christopher Lilly’s relationship to Victorian books clearly demonstrates her development of an independent female identity, an identity embodied in the production of a woman’s erotic literary tradition.

<23> Maud’s reinvention occurs gradually. As long as she remains under the control of Christopher Lilly, her relationship with Victorian bibliography and pornography proves to be one of anger and resentment. Maud enacts her rage against her uncle by damaging the site of his domination, control, and abuse—his books. When she prepares to leave Briar, she injures *The Curtain Drawn Up*, a pornographic text: “Still, it is hard---it is terribly hard, I almost cannot do it—to put the metal for the first time to the neat and naked paper. I am almost afraid the book will shriek, and so discover me. But it does not shriek. Rather, it *sighs*, as if in longing for its own laceration; and when I hear that, my cuts become swifter and more true” (306). The act of physical violence against the book not only harms her uncle, but it symbolically severs her from her role as secretary. She doubles with the book, personifying it as longing for its own laceration; cutting the book helps set it, and Maud, free. She has already begun the process of seeing books as subjects, as having an inside or an emotional interior.

<24> At the end of the text, Maud once again subverts Christopher Lilly’s male-dominated pornography project: “Don’t pity me...because of *him*. He’s dead. But I am still what he made me. I shall always be that. Half of the books are spoiled, or sold. But I am here. And look. You must know everything. Look how I get my living” (581). Maud not only destroys Christopher Lilly’s library, but she uses this room to write her books. She makes her own literary space, by destroying the source of her uncle’s power and taking his place. Waters uses pornography to serve as a sign of a larger statement about how books should be used and understood—books, and by extension their readers, should be valued because of what they have to say, not because of the role they play as objects.

<25> Despite this progress towards freedom, the process of writing women into a new tradition of Victorian erotic writing, a liberating and empowering feminist tradition, does not prove complete until the end of the text. At the text’s end, Maud and Sue have adopted a feminine gendered writing and reading practice that values the content of the book over its physical form. Men no longer control and appropriate the female body; women have gained agency over the female human body’s relationship to the Victorian textual body.

There was Mr. Lilly’s old desk. Its lamp was lit. And in the glow of it, was Maud. She was sitting, writing[...]. Her hands were bare, her sleeve put back, her fingers dark with smudges of ink. I stood and watched her write a line. The page was thick with lines already. Then she lifted the pen, and turned and turned it, as if not sure what to put next. Again she murmured, beneath her breath. She bit her mouth. (575)

As Sue watches Maud deep in composition, she realizes Maud has taken back the pen for creative, rather than merely rote copying, purposes. Sue “reads” Maud’s body, seeing her engaged in a sensuous act of authorship. Her writing involves the flesh, legs, arms, and mouth. Perhaps, most importantly, Maud no longer wears her gloves; her fingers are smudged with ink and she now has the ability to literally, and figuratively, leave her fingerprint marks on the pages of Victorian bibliography and pornography. “Her hands did not tremble. They were bare, and marked, as I have said, with spots and smudges of ink. Her brow had ink upon it, too, from where she had pressed it” (578). The physical body becomes linked to the pleasures of the text, of readership and authorship. Maud becomes not merely a reader of texts, but a writer of words. And as she smudges ink on Sue, her body too becomes Maud’s text. Maud’s erotic writing, the text on which she leaves her fingerprints, does not function in the same Victorian pornographic tradition as her uncle’s bibliographic, pornographic project. Whereas, Christopher Lilly’s work means abuse and exploitation for Maud, her erotic writing promises joy and fulfillment.

< 26> Although Maud has claimed a role in Victorian pornography publishing, members of the nineteenth-century pornography world, such as Mr. Hawtrey, refuse to accept her: “ ‘I asked a friend of my uncle’s, once,’ she said, ‘if I might write for him. He sent me to a home for distressed gentlewomen [...]they say that ladies don’t write such things. But, I am not a lady...’” (581). When Sue questions Maud about a girl like her writing “*books like that*” Maud responds, “ ‘Like me? There are no girls like me’” (581). In this brief comment, Waters hits on a perhaps all-too true statement—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. In either case, Waters writes or re-writes such a girl, a nineteenth-century female writer and pornographer, into the tradition of the production, transmission, and consumption of Victorian pornography, one who creates erotica out of love for another woman and not through objectification of women’s bodies. She suggests that women writers cannot fully participate in the male-dominated tradition of late nineteenth-century pornography, nor should they. In order to exert female power, they must create their own tradition, their own inheritance. They must privilege the content of the book, the power of the text for female writers and readers, in their mode of female literary production.

<27> It should be noted that readers may assume Maud writes for the male Victorian pornography book trade; it proves highly unlikely, as a woman in the 1860s, that she has her own Victorian pornography publishing trade. Hence it may seem that her writing has become subsumed by the dominant male discourse.(16) Yet the text makes a distinction in how female writers and readers of Maud’s books, in particular Maud and Sue, may use these texts. By focusing on the reader response, rather than the material book, readers of *Fingersmith* can safely conclude that when Maud assumes control over her uncle’s study, her role as pornographer will differ from her uncle’s—she does not merely take his place, but she invents a female literary place of her own. From within the system, she re-directs the form and object of Victorian pornography. By creating a new loving, erotic literature written and read for its pleasurable content, women writers and readers can control how they produce and consume certain pornographic texts and how these texts can assert power.

<28> Although the heroines prove unable to articulate their mutual sexual desire earlier in the novel, due to socially prescribed fears of sexual propriety and inherited madness, Maud's lesbian pornography allows her to express her sexual desires, not only physically, but also textually. Book lust becomes subsumed by human desire for another human body: "Quickly my daring hand seized her most secret treasure, regardless of her soft complaints, which my burning kisses reduced to mere murmurs, while my fingers penetrated into the covered way of love" (579). Maud uses the word "love," and the words are written in this closing scene on un-bound paper. She does not write books, but words. She does not write sex, she writes love; therein lays the difference between pornography and romantic erotica. Maud's writing does not merely serve as a projection of her desire—she finds the ability to put her desire into language, in both her dealings with Sue, alluding to her "sweet dream" (301), and in her art. In her erotic literature she becomes a more "active" partner than in her lesbian love scene. Whereas in their first encounter, Sue's fingers serve as sexual agent, in Maud's writing she assumes control of the finger as a source of female sexual pleasure—both Sue's and her own. As the two women prepare to continue their lesbian relationship, at the novel's close, readers sense that Maud and Sue will be able to acknowledge their sexual desire for one another freely. Female literary production has helped to empower both women, to enable them in constructing their sexual identities.

<29> Lest it appear Waters neglects to develop her other heroine, Sue, the end of the novel hints at both the physical relationship of the two girls and the possible creative, writing relationship they may share:

'What does it say?' [...] [Maud] said, 'it is filled with all the words for how I want you... Look.' She took up the lamp. The room had got darker, the rain still beat against the glass. But she led me to the fire and made me sit, and sat beside me. Her silk skirts rose in a rush, then sank. She put the lamp upon the floor, spread the paper flat; and began to show me the words she had written, one by one. (582)

Maud promises to make Sue both sexually and textually literate. The tradition of female erotic literature promises to include: a loving relationship between two consensual partners, as opposed to the female victimization, objectification, and exploitation encouraged by male-dominated pornography of the 1860-1880s; the inclusion of female writers/readers, unlike the gender/class exclusionary publications of John Camden Hotten and the Cannibal Club; and economic and sexual liberty for women, instead of limited political and social agency within conservative Victorian gender/class hierarchies. Whereas Maud used to believe she must choose between a lover or freedom (253), a life with books or a life of liberty, Waters offers her heroines both. Her novel shows Maud and Sue taking control over nineteenth-century erotic fiction for women, writing it their way, for their purposes. Instead of being oppressed by pornography, by becoming authors, pornographic fingersmiths, they re-appropriate a male literary tradition and change the nature/value of books and people, as both become subjects with interiority, rather than just objects to be bought and sold. Thus, Waters re-inscribes books themselves on entirely new ground.

<30> Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* proves to be a highly ideologically charged construction of the nineteenth-century novel for twenty-first century purposes, as she rewrites the history of the

Victorian pornography trade in order to advocate a female, lesbian past in erotic literature. Short-listed for the Man Booker and the Orange Prize, “Waters’s trio of novels, thematising lesbianism in the Victorian, have been so successful that they have nicknamed a new subgenre: the slyly metrosexual ‘Vic Lit’” (Kaplan 8). Her books have proven popular with scholarly and general readers, lesbian and mainstream audiences, alike.⁽¹⁷⁾ Perhaps such popularity proves indicative of a twenty-first century culture prepared to rewrite, and to right, the tradition of female sexual exploitation in male-dominated pornography and to encourage erotic literature that focuses on sexual equality, inclusion, and freedom for both genders. Female writers and readers desire a new liberty—as Waters’s puts it “the rare and sinister liberty” (239)—of redefining the power of the book and the text’s dangerous ability to not only exert power over individuals, but also its ability to encourage power and agency in women readers.

Endnotes

(1) Sue Trinder, the novel’s other female protagonist, offers the novel’s definition of a fingersmith: “By then, Flora was quite the fingersmith: the Surrey was nothing to her, she was working the West End theatres and halls—she could go through the crowds like salts” (7). According to Waters, fingersmith functions as nineteenth-century slang for thief. The term not only implies thievery, but it also refers to one who has an adept use of his or her hands, generally. In light of the novel’s discussion of Victorian pornographic literary subcultures, the term also carries a sexual connotation. As of 2007, the term “fingersmith” does not appear in *The Oxford English Dictionary*.^(^)

(2) *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines pornography as “The explicit description or exhibition of sexual subjects or activity in literature, painting, films, etc., in a manner intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings; printed or visual material containing this.” While the definition does not focus on obscenity, lewdness, or indecency, the word carries such connotations; “porno” suggests a Hellenistic Greek and French tradition of prostitution and obscenity. Thus, as a medium containing obscene content, pornography is commonly viewed as a corrupting influence encouraging depravity for those who are likely to read, see, or hear the pornographic contents (see *The Oxford English Dictionary*: “Obscene”).^(^)

(3) Erotic literature pertains to “the passion of love; concerned with or treating of love; amatory” (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). Unlike the definition for pornography, there is no sense that the word “erotic” possesses obscene connotations.^(^)

(4) Cora Kaplan argues for the presence of lesbian sadomasochism in the text (113), suggesting that Waters acknowledges the discrepancy between power relations and the emotional violence (112) also present in the lesbian relationship. On the other hand, I contend that Waters’s final

statement regarding the lesbian relationship in *Fingersmith* is that it proves a powerful corrective to heterosexual patterns of male dominance and abuse.(^)

(5)Waters's novel exists in a compelling relationship to nineteenth-century pornography and sexuality; the novel reflects not only nineteenth-century concerns, but also twenty-first century concerns about pornography and erotic literature. In particular, her novel confronts the tense relationship of contemporary feminism to pornography. In her discussion of Waters's novels, Cora Kaplan writes, "In the 1980s a major debate erupted among feminists generally and within lesbian feminism in particular about the nature of women's sexual fantasies, the limits of erotic literature, and the ethical boundaries of same sex practices" (112-113). Twentieth-century anti-pornography feminists such as Catherine McKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and Susan Griffin, argued that pornography, historically, has led to violence against women, specifically rape. Accordingly, not only should society work to eradicate pornography, but in no way should women seek to reclaim it as a means of gaining power. On the other hand, Sigel argues that twentieth-century feminist scholars lacked a historical perspective for their arguments regarding pornography, since they based these solely in the contexts of the 1970s-1980s women's liberation movement. Consequently, they have put all pornography and erotic writing into the "monolithic history of female oppression" (6). Sigel attempts to show how pornography must be read within its historical framework.(^)

(6)Sigel builds most of her claims on the work done by Ashbee, but his bibliographic work ends in the 1880s. After the 1880s, she uses Peter Mendes's *Clandestine Erotic Fiction: 1800-1930* to talk about Victorian pornography—its content, production, consumption, and transmission.(^)

(7)Sigel notes that in texts such as William Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1794), "the author's use of women's bodies and women's sexuality formed part of an attempt to refocus the social order. Societal liberation would come from within women's bodies. However, this meant that women's sexual acquiescence was necessary for true social reform" (32). Yet Sigel notes a quickly occurring shift in these kinds of pornographic texts, as she compares *Fanny Hill* to another popular pornographic text, *A Man of Pleasure in Paris*, as well as to *The Exquisite: A Collection of Tales, Histories, and Essays, Funny, Fanciful, and Facetious*.

The point of the works shifted from a consideration of new sexual and social possibilities to a demonstration of penile conquest of the vagina as privilege. Increasingly, the visualization of sexuality relied upon a cohesive picture of the world as already sexualized and waiting. Women's availability became the signifier of a sexualized world. Thus, women's place in revolutionary sexuality began to shift from subject/actor to object[...].information was pointed in a specific direction, away from so-called degeneracy and toward heterosexual intercourse. (48)

Thus, readers see women and men's desire to work together for liberty superseded by "woman as object" rhetoric that reinforces woman as the adjunct to men's liberation, not as the active participant in securing liberation for both sexes and a new society.(^)

(8)See, also, Stephen Marcus's *The Other Victorians* and Peter Webbs's "Victorian Erotica." Like Marcus, Webb argues that authors wrote Victorian pornography primarily for a male audience; in *The Lustful Turk* (1821), "The speed with which both Emily and Silvia are transformed into willing victims of their rapist betrays the fact that the book was written by a *man* for the pleasure of other *men*" (Webb 98).(^)

(9)"Richard Burton promised Frederick Hankey that he would bring back from his next mission to Dahomey, Africa, in 1863, human skin to bind Hankey's volumes by de Sade. Hankey owned other volumes bound in human skin, but Burton promised one stripped from a living woman — 'sur négresse vivante' — so it would retain its luster more readily" (Sigel 50).(^)

(10)Robert Pearsall notes the advent of mail order pornography, during the period of 1860-1880, and the use of mailed flier advertisements for pornography promotion. Since pornography was illegal, and as Pearsall and Sigel state, many pornographic books and magazines were limited in print runs, pornography sellers must have had a strong, reliable base clientele maintained largely by word of mouth.(^)

(11)Pearsall illustrates how expensive pornographic magazines proved to be: "*The Boudoir*, of 1860, cost 15 shillings per volume of thirty-two pages. *The Cremorne*, with obscene and incredibly incompetent illustrations, dated 1851 but really of 1882, cost a guinea, was privately published in, the title page states, Cheyne Walk, and was issued in an edition of three hundred copies" (365).(^)

(12)Although pornographic illustrations existed prior to the 1900s, in other words, pornography had already made the movement from narrative to visual, access to these illustrations, illustrations accompanying narrative, proved limited (especially during the period of 1860-1880). *Fingersmith* touches briefly on the development of photography and its relationship to pornography. Christopher Lilly and his male friends discuss photography as a record of the amatory act. While his friend supports the role of photography in pornography, Lilly proves resistant to it. He argues that photography is "gripped by history..it is corrupted by it!" (226). For Lilly, words prove more enduring than photographs. While this declaration proves an interesting argument as to why Lilly prefers pornographic words to photographs, another reason for Lilly's resistance to photographs could be their potential to democratize pornography.(^)

(13)Marianne Lilly gives the year of Susan's birth as 1844. Based on the heroines's ages (roughly 18 years) the novel appears to take place around the year 1862.(^)

(14)When Sue informs a doctor at the asylum of her real identity, he insists that she is lying. He says, "*Fancies*, Mrs. Rivers. If you might only hear yourself! Terrible plot? Laughing villains? Stolen fortunes and girls made out to be mad? The stuff of lurid fiction! We have a name for your disease. We call it a hyper-aesthetic one. You have been encouraged to overindulge yourself in literature; and have inflamed your organs of fancy"" (447). Thus, female reading practice becomes associated with delusions and an inability to dissociate fact from fiction. Once again, the book, along with perceptions of who reads it and how she reads it, can be used to terrorize women.(^)

(15)Maud tells Sue, “Not read! Ah, Susan, were you to live in this house, as the niece of my uncle, you should know what that meant. You should know, indeed!” (73). Maud envies Sue’s illiteracy and the comparative freedom it allows her at Briar. Both reading and writing have become spoiled for Maud; freedom becomes inextricably linked to no longer being bound by the text.(^)

(16)Sigel argues a significant change in nineteenth-century pornography occurs when women and minorities gained access to representations of their own body, largely through the development of the pornographic postcard. The content of Victorian pornography did not change per se, but, as noted earlier, the subordinated could now gaze upon themselves, with all the pleasures and dangers that this form of objectification entailed (155). Scenes of lesbian sex exist in Christopher Lilly’s pornography collection, but it is clear that these scenes only occur when a woman is “in want of a man” (295). Presumably, since Maud reads these scenes aloud to a group of her uncle’s friends, these scenes are created for male consumption and pleasure.(^)

(17)Both *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith* have been adapted into highly successful BBC television films.(^)

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The lives of two young women collide in an engrossing Victorian thriller that alternates between the twisting back alleyways of Dickensian London and the cloistered gloom of a Gothic mansion. Raised in a den of petty thieves, or "fingersmiths," plucky orphan Sue Trinder (Sally Hawkins) agrees to help a con man known as Gentleman (Rupert Evans) defraud and betray wealthy heiress Maud Lilly (Elaine Cassidy).^Â *Fingersmith*, read as a Victorian Era suspense/thriller, is very good. I couldn't stop reading it. It has all of the best elements of suspense, old creepy mansions, thieves and cutthroats, and madhouses.^Â I also like that there are subjects, like Victorian pornography, that defy the general conception of Victorians as buttoned-up.