

Queers, erotomaniacs and Victorians

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Author: Ian Gibson

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Any historian analysing a historical novel is bound to appear a little pedantic, taking a spade to the proverbial soufflé, but here goes. It would of course be foolish to start measuring *Fingersmith* against the 'real' historical sources, as it is not my job here to demand that it be 'more authentic', more like the actual historical accounts presented by Ian Gibson and the like, but to examine the reasons why certain stories about the past and not others have come to the fore. The main reason that the motifs of *Fingersmith* are so familiar and enduring, I think, is that for all the fact-mongering of the professional historian, our view of the Victorian past owes far more to its literary heritage than to any learned footnote.

This is shown by the fact that *Fingersmith* was part of a wave of 'neo-Victorian' fiction which emerged in the 1990s, and includes Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), and Waters' other two Victorian novels *Tipping the Velvet* (1999) and *Affinity* (2002), though she has since moved on to the 1940s (*The Night Watch*, and *The Little Stranger*). These books are characterised by a kind of pastiche – they do not try and hide their source material (Dickens, Mayhew, the sensation novel, social investigation, academic literary criticism), but instead flaunt their fictiveness and wear it proudly as a badge of honour, a kind of homage to Mrs Braddon et al. This attitude – exemplified by the plausible but made-up slang that forms their titles – is an attempt to inhabit rather than transcend one's sources, to do Victorian fiction as faithfully as possible but to include the bits that couldn't be said or depicted at the time, thereby adding a modern sensibility. Done badly, as in the recent BBC adaptation of Faber's novel, the result can seem like a set of gothic clichés laid end to end: desperate middle class wife suffocated by domesticity – check; evil bourgeois paterfamilias keeping secret prostitute/pursuing double life – check; mad woman in attic, or about to be confined there – check; mad doctors about to perform horrific procedures on said mad woman – check; sexually repressed evangelical moral hypocrite – check; doppelgangers; dark, bleak house in the country; impersonation; purloined letters; fogs; check, check, check. The point is not to deny that these things

happened or existed in the 19th century, but rather to inquire into why these particular tropes and stories, and not others, have proved so incredibly durable. Why do we need the Victorians to be the dreadful hypocrites that these novels imagine? Why do we demand that these things are the everlasting sign of 'the Victorian'?

Fingersmith starts in a thieves' den in the Borough in London. Sue Trinder, an orphan whose mother, she supposes, had been hanged for murder, is a fingersmith – a pickpocket. She lives in the house of Mrs Sucksby, a baby-farmer and the matriarchal ruler of her little gang. Sue is employed by the genteel conman Richard Rivers (known as 'Gentleman') in a scheme to defraud an heiress, Maud Lilly, of her inheritance. She is to go to Maud's suitably bleak house in the country as her ladies' maid, to gain her trust and act as chaperone while Rivers, who teaches Maud drawing, seduces and carries her off. Having married her, Rivers says he will then incarcerate Maud in an asylum and steal her money, giving Sue her share. Maud is no ordinary heiress, though. Her uncle, Christopher Lilly, is an obsessive collector of erotica, and employs Maud as his assistant. Every day, she reads books from his library so that he can compile an exhaustive bibliography of sexual acts and perversions. The conspiracy is complicated by the fact that Sue and Maud slowly fall in love, but this does not stop Sue from fulfilling her part of the bargain with Gentleman. This section of the story is told from Sue's perspective, and we feel that we know this story with all its gothic tropes, but the brilliance of *Fingersmith* is that it sets out the themes of sensation fiction mainly as a way of lulling the reader into a kind of false security. We know this story, and this protagonist, we think, just as Sue is so sure of herself and certain about what is happening. We are so immersed in Sue's point of view, so familiar with it, that the sudden demonstration that all is not what it seems is all the more effective.

When Sue and Gentleman arrive at the mad-house where Maud is to be entombed, it is the doppelganger Sue, and not Maud, who is taken away to be locked up. It turns out that the whole scheme has been dreamed up by Mrs Sucksby with Sue, not Maud, as the patsy. She has done this because it is Maud, and not Sue, who is her real daughter. Seventeen years previously, Mrs Sucksby had helped a lady called Marianne Lilly to give birth to an illegitimate daughter. The dying Marianne despairs at the fate awaiting her daughter – to be reclaimed by her family and confined forever in the trappings of gentility. She does a deal with Mrs Sucksby – they will swap babies. So Mrs Sucksby sends her own daughter, Maud, to live a life of enervating luxury with the Lillys in the country, while Marianne's daughter (Sue) remains in the Borough. In order to claim the Lilly's fortune, which will come to Sue in due course if her true identity is found out, Mrs Sucksby has to reclaim her own daughter (Maud) and inveigle her into the plot, as well as sending Sue (the real heiress) off to the madhouse. Sue is locked up, but escapes thanks to that stand-by of the sensation novel, the improbable coincidence. She returns to the Borough and confronts Mrs Sucksby, Maud and Gentleman. There is a scuffle and Gentleman is fatally stabbed, it is not clear by whom – Maud or Mrs Sucksby – but the matriarch admits her guilt in order to save the daughter she has grown to love, is arrested and hanged. Sue finally learns the truth, but in an amazingly forgiving mood, returns to Maud (who now occupies the crumbling house in the country). They declare their love for each other, and commit themselves to a future living off the writing of the same pornography that Maud had spent her life reciting.

I don't want to suggest that Waters is a prisoner of the historians, still less that they are, like Mrs Sucksby, hiding behind every narrative turn. However, it is interesting how academic history has contributed to this particular vision of the Victorian. The love between Sue and Maud is a case in point. Although Waters is sometimes lazily typecast as a writer of 'lesbian romances', her work relies on an unstated allegiance to particular historical assumptions that belong to what Alan Sinfield called the 'queer moment' – the idea that, in the 1990s and since, the fixity of sexual identity and its history was suddenly in question. This turn reflected the centrality of Michel Foucault to our idea of modern history, in particular his view that the confines of sexual identity – the alleged solidity of homo and hetero – were a relatively recent, 19th-century invention. Before that, the implication was, there had to have been a period 'before identity,' that was paradoxically less constrained than the present. Putting the rightness or otherwise of Foucault to one side, it is clear that the Victorian era plays this role – the past as a place of paradoxical liberty – in Waters' novels. Another noticeable influence is the historiography inspired by Lillian Faderman's compendious history of lesbianism since the Renaissance, *Passing the Love of Men*.⁽¹⁾ She, and those who came after her like Sharon Marcus, argued that because Victorian women were not thought to possess an active and independent

sexuality, the idea of lesbianism was in many ways inherently implausible (although this idea has been critically scrutinised by Martha Vicinus in her 2004 book *Intimate Friends* (2)). Following Foucault's account, Faderman suggested that this meant that in the homosocial world of the Victorian woman, it was possible for same-sex love to develop without it ever attracting the label of pathology (or indeed any label). Maud and Sue's love for each other follows this pattern, with the important difference that they are not chaste, as Faderman's account suggested they might have been. They are unaware of anything as crude as a sexual identity, however, and instead their love develops naturally from everyday proximity such as sharing a bed. 'It is only that we are put so long together, in such seclusion', Maud says, barely deceiving herself, 'We are obliged to be intimate' (p. 252). This liberty entails a form of self-creation, for if there is no pattern to follow, it must be invented. This too is one of the tropes of queer history and theory, the principle of which is to subvert notions of identity. Indeed the indeterminate nature of Sue and Maud's attachment, the fact that there is no name for it, is registered in the novel by the insistent use of the word 'queer' in all its guises to describe uncanny and unfamiliar states – people move 'queerly', ask 'queer questions', have queer feelings, while queer things happen.

These queer assumptions threaten to do two things: firstly, they can make us anachronistically project a late 20th-century habit of self-invention back into the past, and make those who seem to do it the object of our histories. Secondly, it can allow us to imagine characters like Sue and Maud as somehow outside history and discourse, inhabiting instead a world of almost pure self-creation. Sue's initially self-confident narration and clever way with locks and wallets, as well as her disdain for Maud's real servants stuck in a world of servility and hierarchy while she lives a life 'without masters' (p. 38) seems at first to be just such a story. However, the inversions of the novel cleverly upset these comforting possibilities and potential excesses – Sue and Maud are not in command of their own stories. They are after all subject to history – although by the end of the book they seem to be escaping from it once again.

While the twin protagonists of the novel are inventions in more ways than one, Maud's uncle is consciously if very loosely based on a real person – the bibliographer of the erotic, Henry Spencer Ashbee, also known as Pisanus Fraxi, whose life is chronicled in Ian Gibson's biography. The contrast between Maud's uncle – a figure straight out of the gothic – and the obsessive cataloguer Ashbee tells us a great deal about what we want from Victorian stories. Ashbee was the son of the manager of a Hounslow gunpowder factory who made a good marriage to the daughter of a wealthy merchant and joined the family firm. His extensive travels on business in Europe and America allowed him to pursue his bibliomaniacal vocation: collecting books, including quantities of erotica and pornography. This work resulted in the production of two massive bibliographies – the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (1877), a record of erotica, and the more conventional *Centuria Librorum Absconditorum* (1879), the former worked up from a vast collection of rare and erotic texts brought mainly on his business trips. Gibson also speculates that Ashbee's talent for the exhaustive makes him a likely candidate for the authorship of the anonymous 11-volume pornographic bore-athon *My Secret Life* (c.1888–95).

Gibson presents Ashbee as the classic example of a Victorian double life. He kept up a respectable home in Bloomsbury, while at the same time taking an office a few miles away in Gray's Inn to store his books and work on his bibliography of the erotic. He may also have had an illegitimate daughter, a key beneficiary of his will. He socialised with other bibliophiles and book dealers, including the great experts in the literature of venerology, Richard Monckton Milnes and Richard Burton, both of whom were members of the Cannibal Club, an informal society devoted to consuming and curating the pornographic. For Gibson, Ashbee's life is prima facie evidence of the fact that he was hiding some sort of secret perversion, whether 'erotomania', a love of flagellation, or excessive masturbation. Gibson therefore tries hard to present Ashbee's travels as erotic quests, noting his admiration of Spanish dancing girls or Indian ladies, as well as seeing his habit of marking crosses in his diary as a possible secret record of masturbation. In this respect, Gibson tries hard to locate Ashbee as one of Steven Marcus' *Other Victorians* (3), a book which he uses as his principal guide to the territory. Marcus argued, famously, that the pornographic was symptomatic of a society that increasingly thought of sex as a distinct and separate domain of knowledge, and that the pornographic was therefore useful as a mirror image of official moral attitudes.

Maddeningly for Gibson and us, Ashbee's diaries contain nothing about his personal motivations. Instead, he comes across as peeved, irascible and obsessive. On his travels he is swindled by dull Americans, hates Arabs, deplores the rudeness of the French (characteristically failing, while in Rouen, to say anything about *Madame Bovary*), and is the very picture of an anti-Catholic Tory. Back at home the bourgeois paterfamilias alienates his sensitive son, the arts and crafts pioneer and homosexual Charles, not least by severely upbraiding him for wearing a straw boater and flannels to the office. For all Gibson's efforts to demonstrate that Ashbee was hiding some fascinating secret or revealing compulsion, he frequently comes across as uncultured and narrowly middle class, his fascination with erotica driven by little more than the mania of a collector – the need to list and obtain every example of what he wanted. This characteristic is demonstrated by Ashbee's later work – an equally obsessive and laborious attempt to own every single illustration to *Don Quixote*. It is this attempt to catalogue everything that alone makes Ashbee a plausible author of the interminable *My Secret Life*.

What makes Ashbee interesting is not whether he was the secret author of a pornographic masterwork, but simply his rather mundane desire to compile and collect – it is that which makes him a typically modern surveyor of the sexual. For an obsessive like Ashbee, pornography was the ideal idiom. It is modern and industrialised, boring and repetitive, a matter of enumeration, listing and ticking off all the required acts, body parts, positions and perversions. Even he conceded that his enterprise tended this way, and that much of what he read was 'dull and insipid'. In that respect Ashbee is a figure of transition from an older libertine culture of erotic education – a kind of literary *ars erotica* in which small groups of elite men gathered to celebrate their priapism and investigate the female body – to a more modern one of scientific ambition and classification. It is therefore no coincidence that his work became the basis of later sexology and history, and that he was consulted by the early sexologists like Iwan Bloch, since he shared their aim of encyclopaedic compilation. Ashbee's life is also a valuable corrective to the gothic imagery of *Fingersmith*. Unlike Mr Lilly, and separate offices in Gray's Inn notwithstanding, Ashbee did not shut himself away in a gothic pile but lived in the world, and there is no way he could have collected such a volume of erotica while closeted in that fashion and without his extensive European links (though in the novel Mr Lilly has some dubious denizens of Holywell Street to help him with that). As Lynda Nead and others have tried to show, the problem with pornography in mid-Victorian Britain was not that it was hidden away, but that it was all too public, and, thanks to the expansion of cheap print, all too available.

In that vein, one could point out, spade in hand, that many of the tropes given new life by the neo-Victorian novel and its television versions are actually looking a bit worn out. I admit I said I would try and avoid this kind of comparison, but it has to be done, if only to provide some perspective on the power of fiction to dictate the vision of Victorianism. For instance, the idea that sane women were routinely incarcerated in asylums for harmless moral infractions owes more to the sensation novel than the historical record, and derives its popularity from a few scare stories associated with the women's movement that were later

employed in books like Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady*.⁽⁴⁾ One of the most notorious of these cases was that of Edith Lanchester, who was confined by her family in 1895 for taking up with a railwayman, and therefore seems to fit the Victorian pattern, but who was in fact released four days later as the result of public outrage. While not disputing that it happened in isolated cases, historians like Andrew Scull have questioned whether women (sane or otherwise) suffered from the 'great confinement' that Showalter outlines any more than men did. Similarly, although women were thought prone to hysteria that might be linked to their reproductive system, and were threatened with hair-raising surgical treatments, these were rarely if ever carried out, and, in any case, horrific medical procedures and ideas were hardly confined to the treatment of women. It is therefore surprising that tropes like the looming mad-house and the sinister mad-doctor have died so hard.

The continuing passion for the neo-Victorian, and for its familiar stories and characters, represents our unending compulsion to find the secret heart of Victorianism. Their surreptitious ways and inexplicit desires encourage the idea that our crinolined forebears are hiding something vital that will in the end be known, that in spite of their evasions, we can 'really know' what they are about. Just like the hidden library at the heart of the old, dark house where Mr Lilly transcribes his bibliography, or the revelations of Mrs Sucksby, we imagine that this secret is there, and that when we find it we will know all. But as Gibson shows, Ashbee, like many other Victorians, is not really hiding anything in the depths of his psyche – his only passion is the will to know, or to list. In spite of that there is still a steady demand for sensation, and for the imagined certainty that is ours alone.

Notes

1. Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (London, 1985).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women 1778–1928* (Chicago, IL, 2004).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (London, 1966).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London, 1985).[Back to \(4\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/feb/02/fiction.sarahwaters> [3]

Orange Sorbet

<http://orangesorbet.wordpress.com/2011/03/21/review-fingersmith/> [4]

That Aint Livin'

http://meloukhia.net/2010/08/book_review_fingersmith_by_sarah_waters.html [5]

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/feb/25/biography.features> [6]

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