

**Bringing the Body to Bear on Neo-Victorian Fiction:
Non-normative Femininity, Gendered Embodiment, and
the Legacy of the Victorian Feminine Ideal**

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of the author's knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.



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Abstract

The representation of women's bodies in neo-Victorian fiction has implications for assessing the genre's capacity to intervene in contemporary debates about gender. Such textual representations – particularly those focused on non-normative women's bodies – form part of a larger generic interest in the experiences of historically marginalised subjects. This interest has been variously interpreted by critics as a way to displace anxieties about contemporary social inequalities onto a salacious version of the nineteenth century past, a means for interrogating the legacies of Victorian-era attitudes toward differently raced, classed, and gendered subjects in the present, and as a self-congratulatory impulse designed to emphasise our supposed evolution beyond Victorian prejudices. In relation to gender, critics are increasingly exploring the intersections between contemporary feminist theory and feminist neo-Victorian fiction, with a particular focus on the influence of postfeminism. However, what such approaches have thus far elided is the centrality of the body to women's identities, an (albeit problematic) equivalence which is present in both neo-Victorian portrayals of non-normative femininity and debates about women's status in both Victorian and contemporary culture.

To address this gap, this thesis analyses non-normative feminine embodiment in eight neo-Victorian novels published between 1983 and 2012, using a framework comprised of neo-Victorian criticism, contemporary feminist theories of the body, and scholarship on Victorian-era scientific, medical, and cultural discourses on women's bodies. Adopting this framework makes it possible to see the parallels these novels construct between nineteenth and late-twentieth/early twenty-first century approaches to defining (ideal) femininity. Attending to how particular modes of non-normative femininity – including freakery, (failed) maternity, madness, non-binary gender identities and queer sexualities – are embodied by characters in these novels reveals their shared interest in portraying the body as the locus of women's exclusion from various realms of social, political, and cultural life. By suggesting that contemporary categories of exclusion are indebted to Victorian-era gender norms, these texts engage with the question of whether such legacies are capable of being discarded in favour of a conception of the body that refuses to enact women's disempowerment.

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Introduction

It will always be about body! Always for us! I don't see a time when it won't. I can't say you can't have my body, that's already decided, it's already obtained. If I had fired the first shot it would have been on a different field – in the mind. All I can do is interfere with what they think is theirs, how it is supposed to look, the rules.

– Sarah Hall, *The Electric Michelangelo*

Grace, a mononymic principal character in Sarah Hall's *The Electric Michelangelo* (2004) makes clear in her polemic, cited above, that it is impossible to divorce women's bodies from their history as an object of patriarchal control. Understanding both historical and contemporary experiences of womanhood and how these are re-imagined in fiction is thus dependent on accounting for the body and the attendant norms that shape subjects' experiences of their corporeal selves. This thesis interrogates the representation of non-normative femininity in eight neo-Victorian novels, with particular attention to the body's role in registering resistance to gendered norms of appearance and behaviour. As Susan Bordo demonstrates, norms are intrinsic to the very construction of femininity: "the construction, of course, is always homogenizing and normalizing, erasing racial, class and other differences and insisting that all women aspire to a coercive, standardized ideal" (*Unbearable Weight* 168–69). In this sense, femininity "is not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 177). Modes of feminine embodiment that fall outside this ideal – and are thus designated non-normative – form the focus of my textual analyses. The novels included in this study were published over three decades (1983-2014), from the early 1980s to the early 2010s, and comprise six texts by women and two by men. The wide timespan and inclusion of texts by male and female authors demonstrates both the genre's long-standing interest in the representation of subversive figures and the importance of including texts that fall outside the remit of studies on contemporary women's writing or the oft-vaguely defined subgenre of "feminist neo-Victorian fiction".¹

¹ See, for example, King's analyses of contemporary feminist fiction, including Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), Victoria Glendinning's *Electricity* (1995), and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) among others; Heilmann and Llewellyn's work on the sexual and scientific gaze in the feminist neo-Victorian novels of Jane Harris, Belinda Starling and Barbara Chase-Riboud; and the numerous studies on Sarah Waters such as those by R. Carroll ('Becoming My Own Ghost' 2007), Muller ('Sexual f[r]ictions' 2012), and O'Callaghan ("The Grossest Rakes of Fiction" 2015; *Sarah Waters* 2017).

While feminist neo-Victorian fiction lacks a universally agreed upon definition, critics typically point to a similar set of characteristics when applying the term to neo-Victorian texts. For example, Jeannette King argues that historical fiction by women (of which feminist neo-Victorian fiction forms a part) is involved in “rewriting history from a female perspective, and recording the lives of women who have been excluded or marginalized” (3–4). In a similar vein, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn argue that feminist neo-Victorianism “aims to interrogate the legacy of historically specific paradigms in contemporary society” by focusing on the “cultural, socio-political, and imperial implications of the scientific construction of the sexed, raced, and classed female body” (*Neo-Victorianism* 106). While these characteristics act as useful identifiers of feminist texts, our understanding of neo-Victorianism’s contribution to contemporary debates in general, and the female body in particular, are limited by attending to feminist examples of the genre in isolation. By focusing their analyses on texts which are female-authored, feminist and/or told from a female perspective, neo-Victorian scholars risk obscuring the wider genre’s construction of the legacy of nineteenth-century ideas (and ideals) about gender. This thesis thus explores how neo-Victorian texts both rehearse and rework Victorian gender ideals as a way of engaging with contemporary debates about gender norms and the concomitant marginalisation of non-normative subjects. This, in turn, has broader implications for assessing the genre’s capacity to advocate for other marginalised groups.

Feminist neo-Victorianism has attracted much critical attention, with debate centring on the extent to which its attempt to foreground women’s experiences is capable of expanding received notions about nineteenth-century women’s lives. In a similar vein, neo-Victorianism’s tendency toward explicit representations of female sexuality has attracted criticism from some circles for its purported willingness to exploit vulnerable subjects in the service of displacing contemporary culture’s ills onto the Victorian past (Kohlke, ‘Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel’ 57), while others view such representations as critical to recognising and, by extension, dismantling the reverberations of Victorian-era attitudes toward women in the contemporary present. To examine the relationship between neo-Victorian fiction and contemporary debates about gender, critics have increasingly turned to feminist theory and, in particular, postfeminism. The competing definitions of postfeminism have seen it put to use on both sides of the debate regarding neo-Victorianism’s status as

sexploitative (Primorac, 'The Naked Truth') or politically-minded (O'Callaghan, "'Smash the Social Machine'").

However, what neo-Victorian criticism's use of postfeminism in particular, and feminism in general, has tended to overlook are the specific strands of these theories that address the relationship between gender and the body. This is a curious oversight given that critics of Victorian literature and culture have long been attuned to the ways in which nineteenth-century gender discourse was inextricably linked to cultural, scientific, and medical assumptions about the female body and, in turn, the role fiction plays in reflecting and contesting these assumptions (Gilbert; Matus, *Unstable Bodies*; Shuttleworth, 'Female Circulation'; Silver). In fact, several critics have taken the body as the focal point for interrogating fictional engagements with Victorian gender ideals, especially in relation to illness and disease as forms of non-normative feminine embodiment (Torgerson; Vrettos). For example, Beth Torgerson uses a framework drawn from medical anthropology in her analysis of illness in the novels of the Brontë sisters "in order to arrive at the cultural critiques implied by these illnesses" (Torgerson 14). Following on from this approach, I use feminist theories of the body to explore how neo-Victorian depictions of non-normative femininity critique the legacy of Victorian gender ideals in contemporary culture.

My use of the term "contemporary" denotes both the broad genre to which the novels analysed in this thesis belong and the cultural context of their publication. The emergence of contemporary British fiction – as a genre distinct from the fiction of the post-war period – is typically dated to the mid-late 1970s and the advent of Thatcherism (Bentley 2; English 2; Mengham 1). Margaret Thatcher's ascension to the Conservative Party leadership in 1975, followed by her Party's victory at the General Election in 1979, brought about widespread political, social, and cultural upheaval (Bentley 2; English 3). In an attempt to grapple with these changes, contemporary British fiction turned toward the past which saw the publication of historical novels proliferate (Mengham 1). In a continuation of this trend, Marie-Luise Kohlke notes the dramatic increase in the publication of neo-Victorian novels from the mid-1980s onwards ('Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter' 1). As well as their thematic relevance to exploring neo-Victorianism's representation of women's bodies, the inclusion of *Waterland* (1983) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984) in this thesis coincides with this period of societal change and the expansion of the genre. Following on from this, my inclusion of two novels from each of the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s is intended

to capture the genre's persistent interest in adapting Victorian ideas about the body as a way of engaging with contemporary gender discourse from the 1980s onwards. To avoid collapsing the distinctions between, for example, the contemporary moment of the 1980s and the contemporary moment of the mid-2010s, each chapter situates the novels in relation to the debates surrounding gender that were salient at the time of their publication. However, by applying feminist theories of embodiment to my analysis of the texts, I also seek to demonstrate the continuities that emerge across the thirty-year timespan, particularly in relation to the coercive power of gendered norms and how these are reified on the body.

While neo-Victorian critics have long been interested in the "politics of gender" in the genre (MacDonald and Goggin 3), full-length studies that take the body as the focal point for analysing the genre's representation of gender are notably absent. This is a surprising omission given that the body is "not only the place where women are controlled and defined, but is a site on and through which gender is constructed and inscribed" (DeMello, *Body Studies* 118). Despite the increasing uptake of feminist theories by neo-Victorian scholars (O'Callaghan, "'Smash the Social Machine'" 68), feminist theory on the body is yet to feature in a substantial way in analyses of the genre's gender politics. This strand of feminist theory "takes difference, domination and subversion as starting points for understanding the conditions and experiences of embodiment in contemporary culture" (Davis 14). Feminist theory on the body is thus particularly useful for analysing gendered embodiment in neo-Victorian fiction because it dovetails with the genre's interest in the experiences of "the excluded, the outcast, the downtrodden, the marginalised, [and] the colonised" (Kohlke and Gutleben, 'Introduction: Bearing After-Witness to the Nineteenth Century' 19).

Historically, feminist theoretical approaches toward the body have been marred by a "celebration/transcendence binary" (Threadcraft 207). Shatema Threadcraft advocates for a more nuanced approach that situates embodied practices "firmly in the domain of disciplinary power" (207). She argues that "[n]ormative feminine bodily practices in Western culture train the female body in docility and obedience to specific gender ideals" (Threadcraft 219). In this thesis, I apply the work of feminist theorists of the body like Susan Bordo, Sandra Bartky, and Rosalind Gill – all of whom are interested in the interplay between normative femininity, embodied practices, and gendered power relations – to representations of non-normative women's bodies in neo-Victorian fiction. Using contemporary feminist theory to analyse the genre's portrayal of bodies that fail to conform to Victorian gender ideals allows me to

interrogate the ways in which the “the contradictory qualities of the Victorian era [...] seem strikingly similar to those that shape and inform our own moment, fraught with conflicting versions of womanhood, feminism, and gender performance all of which add up to very complex and often perplexing (sexual) politics” (MacDonald and Goggin 3).

All the novels examined in this thesis engage with the lives of women who have been excluded from or marginalised by mainstream society as a result of their failure to embody normative femininity. The difference, then, lies in the nature of each text’s engagement with these figures. For instance, some neo-Victorian novels construct gendered norms of embodiment as immutable in the sense that though these norms are socially constructed, their power is such that any transgression is met with a coercive demand to conform and, if such coercion should fail, removal from mainstream society. Others acknowledge the difficulty of embodying a non-normatively gendered subject position while carving out ways for their characters to survive in spite of or, in some cases, as a result of their subversion of gender norms. More commonly, the marginalised figures in any one novel are consigned to different fates. Thus, only by examining the trajectories of various female and female-identifying characters in these novels can we reach a nuanced understanding of neo-Victorianism’s construction of the complex legacy of Victorian-era gender ideology in the contemporary present.

Finally, it is important to avoid conflating historical fiction by women with feminist historical fiction: just as male authorship and/or male narration does not preclude texts from participating in feminist fiction’s project of foregrounding the experiences of marginalised women (see, for example, James Buxton’s *Pity* or Sarah Hall’s *The Electric Michelangelo*), so too are female-authored or female-narrated texts capable of perpetuating phallogentric discourse, as is the case in Essie Fox’s *The Somnambulist* (2011) where the traditional trajectory of marriage and motherhood is presented as the only route to women’s survival. This thesis thus demonstrates that neo-Victorianism’s representation of non-normative femininity exists along a continuum, from novels that nullify the subversive potential of non-normative femininity through conformity or removal, to those that celebrate non-normative modes of gendered embodiment and use these to imagine an alternative vision for the present where women’s freedom of embodied expression is not constrained by our inheritance of the Victorians’ rigid gender norms.

The Politics of Neo-Victorianism

Neo-Victorianism's contribution to twenty-first century socio-political discourse is highly contested. While some critics champion the genre's potential for redressing historical injustices and/or critiquing contemporary instances of discrimination (O'Callaghan, "Smash the Social Machine"; S. J. Carroll), others view the genre as inherently conservative. For instance, Kohlke is critical of the genre's tendency to sensationalise past abuses of marginalised subjects in a calculated move to appeal to late-twentieth and early twenty-first century readerships ('Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel' 55). To assess the validity of these claims, it is important to address the question of whether historical fiction more broadly – and neo-Victorian fiction in particular – has the capacity to intervene in the political sphere, or whether its necessarily retrospective gaze limits the genre to the repetition of historical abuses of power and the reinforcement of Victorian values. In this thesis, I address this question by exploring the extent to which the genre's representation of non-normative female embodiment constitutes a political act. Attending to textual portrayals of non-normative femininity demonstrates neo-Victorianism's enmeshment in contemporary debates about gender and the body which, in turn, have broader implications for assessing the genre's political valence. Through their representations of characters who possess – or wish to possess – a woman's body, these novels interrogate the consequences of possessing the wrong kind of body. By reconstructing Victorian modes of non-normative embodiment for late-twentieth and early twenty-first century readers, they suggest that contemporary culture continues to rely on a narrowly defined set of embodied characteristics to differentiate between subjects across gender categories as well as construct boundaries between normatively and non-normatively gendered subjects within these categories.

Christian Gutleben interrogates neo-Victorianism's political potential in his foundational work *Nostalgic Postmodernism* (2001), the first book-length study of the genre. He surveys a wide array of neo-Victorian novels and categorises them as either parody or pastiche based on whether they adopt a subversive or nostalgic approach to the past (Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism* 8). For Gutleben, pastiche is inferior to parody because it is grounded in an "imitative frenzy [that] cannot but suggest a lack of originality" (*Nostalgic Postmodernism* 85). However, this claim equates nostalgia with conservatism and, as a result, Gutleben overlooks nostalgia's potential as a vehicle for critique (*Nostalgic Postmodernism* 218). In

contrast, Kate Mitchell proposes a productive view of nostalgia which accounts for the contribution neo-Victorian novels make to the production of cultural memory. Her concept of “faux-Victorian” fiction is similar to Gutleben’s pastiche category, in that it denotes texts that “silently imitate” their Victorian predecessors (Mitchell 118). However, unlike Gutleben, Mitchell does not equate pastiche with nostalgia. Instead, she argues that faux-Victorian texts are capable of engaging in a “sustained, critical engagement with the past” (5). This thesis is informed by Mitchell’s approach – in that it analyses novels which fall both within and across Gutleben’s categories – and focuses on the ways in which these texts use the body to engage with Victorian and contemporary debates about gender.

As a genre, neo-Victorianism is preoccupied with representing historically marginalised groups. Women – and non-normative women in particular – are no exception. A shared characteristic of the eight novels examined in this thesis involves the social sanctioning of women and woman-identifying characters who fail to conform to normative models of gendered embodiment. However, while some texts construct such social ostracism as a necessary step in their characters’ return to conformity, others condemn such intolerance and find ways for their characters to embrace their embodied difference. For example, some novels reinforce the status quo through their female characters’ capitulation to the societal pressure to self-correct to normative femininity (Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus*; Phoebe in *The Somnambulist*). Others excise deviant women from the narrative through death (Marianne and Mrs Sucksby in *Fingersmith* (1999); Cissy and Mrs Samuels in *The Somnambulist*) or institutionalisation (Mary in *Waterland*) in an attempt to nullify their challenge to the existing social order. On the other hand, some novels construct non-normative femininity as a way to move beyond the systems of surveillance and control which typically act to circumscribe female embodiment, such as through the rejection of heterosexual marriage (Anna in *The Painted Bridge* (2012)) or the male gaze (Grace in *The Electric Michelangelo*). Rather than assuming a hierarchical relationship between texts that reject normative gender roles and texts that reaffirm them, I argue that both strategies contribute to contemporary debates about gender but to different ends. Texts that ostensibly reconstruct Victorian values may do so in order to suggest that these values continue to influence attitudes toward women’s bodies in the present, while texts that imagine a future for their female characters beyond the confines of normative femininity also suggest a Victorian legacy, but one that is capable of revision.

Whereas Gutleben uses the mainstreaming of postmodernism to cast doubt on neo-Victorianism's subversive potential (*Nostalgic Postmodernism* 220), Samantha Carroll argues for the importance of viewing the genre through a postmodern lens. In taking the latter approach, I heed Carroll's appeal for neo-Victorian scholars to reject the trend toward a narrow focus on the genre's nineteenth-century attributes and instead remain cognisant of its very contemporaneity (172). According to Carroll, such a focus creates a hierarchical approach to analysing neo-Victorian texts that she identifies with scholars like Llewellyn and Gutleben, as it actively produces a reading of the genre as regressive by giving the "Victorian 'original' precedence" (172). Carroll goes on to argue that neglecting neo-Victorianism's postmodern inflections diminishes our critical ability to examine the role these texts play in mediating present-day concerns (180). Acknowledging neo-Victorianism's contemporaneity is not designed to commit the same error in reverse: that is, to relegate a text's Victorian elements to irrelevance. It is thus critical for neo-Victorian scholarship to attend to the ways in which "neo-Victorian fiction's representation of the Victorian past is also the lens through which a variety of *present* concerns are examined" (S. J. Carroll 180). This entails moving away from a view of postmodernism as synonymous with political impotence, a position which belies the fact that postmodernism "still garners vocal opposition from its right-wing detractors, suggesting that its radical potential is far from dead" (S. J. Carroll 190). If postmodernism's radical potential remains, then so too does the radical potential of neo-Victorian fiction. While representations of non-normative femininity may be commonplace in neo-Victorian fiction – such commonality does not connote a lack of political valence. Instead, neo-Victorianism's continued representation of marginalised and oppressed groups is an integral part of advancing the political recognition such groups are afforded in contemporary society. Carroll rejects claims that the repetition of such tropes leads to a loss of the genre's political power, instead arguing that such representation is an important precursor to political activism in the present and must continue until recognisable social and political change occurs (198). In line with Carroll, I argue that all the novels in this study, whether they ultimately reaffirm or reject Victorian gender ideology, attest to the importance of representing women's struggle for bodily autonomy because they suggest that – like the Victorians – we continue exist in a culture which seeks to define – and limit – women's opportunities based on the extent to which their bodies conform to a narrowly-defined set of gendered norms. Given that transgressing norms of gendered embodiment remains a risky endeavour in contemporary culture – as I will demonstrate with reference to feminist work on the body – neo-Victorianism's construction of these bodies in the imagined Victorian past

allows us to interrogate the parallels they suggest between Victorian and cotemporary attitudes toward women and how these, in turn, work to shape women's relationships to their bodies in the present.

In *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, Gutleben is reluctant to entertain the possibility of neo-Victorianism contributing to contemporary political debate. He argues that the shift of subversive practices from the periphery to the mainstream has resulted in the loss of "their seditious impact and intent" (Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism* 172). Consequently, he views neo-Victorianism's revision of Victorian norms as "a fashionable attitude, not an ideological battle" (Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism* 170). However, in Gutleben's later work on neo-Victorianism and trauma, he and co-author Kohlke assert that "'doing' history, whether in theoretic or literary terms, is *always* political, since it constitutes a form of public discourse, disseminating implicit ideological judgments as to what is – and is not – worth recording and remembering *as* history in the first place" ('Introduction: Bearing After-Witness to the Nineteenth Century' 8; emphasis in original). I draw on this latter approach in my thesis to analyse the political implications of authors' selective reconstructions of the Victorian past – indeed, such selectivity is unavoidable given that, from a postmodern historiographical perspective, there is no authentic, singular past awaiting representation because history "is always already textualized, always already interpreted" (Hutcheon 143). More specifically, I examine the way in which neo-Victorianism reimagines the lives of marginalised subjects – in particular non-normative women – to demonstrate the genre's contribution to enhancing our understanding of historical injustices, its capacity to inform how we negotiate the legacy of the Victoria era in the present, and its engagement with contemporary debates about the status of women's bodies in Western culture.

Marginalised Subjects in Neo-Victorian Fiction

The political potential of neo-Victorian fiction is particularly contentious when it comes to the representation of historically (and, in some cases, contemporarily) marginalised groups. This debate mirrors the wider discussion of neo-Victorianism's political valence, where perspectives range from charges of conservatism and prurience to those which laud neo-Victorianism's recovery of voices lost from the historical record. The latter is most commonly viewed as a sign of the genre's potential for redressing historical injustices and

contributing to socio-political discourse around inequality in late-twentieth and early twenty-first century Western societies.

While the specific conditions that coalesce to produce marginalised subjects have changed since the nineteenth century, the categories of marginalisation – such as gender, race, and class – remain relatively unchanged. For instance, while the legal frameworks that prevented most women from voting or owning property in the Victorian era have been superseded, other gender-based inequalities – like the sexual double standard – persist (O’Callaghan, “Smash the Social Machine” 78). As Stephanie Genz argues, “a woman’s life continues to be circumscribed by markers of femininity, feminism and femaleness that measure her respective strengths and failings in these categories” (*Postfemininities in Popular Culture* 3). In the chapters that follow, I investigate neo-Victorianism’s exploration of these categories, with a particular focus on their embodied markers, in order to consider how the texts themselves participate in the historical construction of femininity and bring it into conversation with the late-twentieth and early-twenty first century present. This investigation points to neo-Victorianism’s potential political valence insofar as its representation of non-normative women’s bodies highlights the consequences of failing to meet culturally prescribed definitions of ideal femininity and femaleness. Regardless of whether an individual text presents these prescriptive definitions as immutable or malleable, or conformity as inevitable or optional, their interest in the trajectories of these women suggests the ongoing influence of nineteenth-century ideas about gender in the formulation of contemporary attitudes toward women; a legacy which must first be exposed and acknowledged before it can be revised.

Neo-Victorianism’s interest in reconstructing the experiences of historically marginalised groups also raises ethical questions over the influence this has on understandings of our relationship with and perceptions of the Victorians. For Gutleben, “retriev[ing] the forgotten of history is the very principle of postmodern revisionism” (*Nostalgic Postmodernism* 124). In the case of neo-Victorian revisionism, critical debate centres on whether representations of forgotten subjects are capable of altering our perception of the past through exposure to heretofore silenced voices, or whether the genre is doomed to re-victimise the very voices it seeks to amplify while leaving our perceptions unchanged. In his analysis of Sarah Waters’ neo-Victorian trilogy, Llewellyn is critical of her recovery of lesbian history, arguing that it “does not, ultimately, change history or the way in which the majority of us view the past”

(‘Breaking the Mould?’ 208). This perspective is at odds with a postmodern approach to historiography, of which neo-Victorianism – given its postmodern allegiances – forms a part. Where Llewellyn’s claim appears to suggest the existence of a singular and static history which Waters has failed to overwrite, postmodern historiography seeks to acknowledge the multiplicity, changeability, and incompleteness of any attempt to account for the past. Rather than change history by substituting a hetero-centric account of the past for a queer-centric one, neo-Victorian representations of non-binary and/or queer subjects provide an alternate narrative which co-exists – though not always harmoniously – with ‘official’ history. This additive approach to history – where stories interact and compete with each other – increases the range of perspectives available to neo-Victorianism’s readership as they attempt to make sense of the resonances of the Victorian past in the contemporary present. Kohlke and Gutleben’s insistence on the importance of representing traumatic histories is relevant here, as all the novels in this thesis include characters who experience trauma as a result of the mismatch between their gendered embodiment and the dictates of normative femininity. Though Kohlke and Gutleben question the ethics of writing trauma, they also argue that “reject[ing] representations of trauma outright would mean silencing trauma or, in the case of unrecorded or inadequately acknowledged historical traumas [...] silencing trauma *anew*, replicating the actions of perpetrators and victimisers” (‘Introduction: Bearing After-Witness to the Nineteenth Century’ 17–18). As such, it is critical for scholars to attend to neo-Victorian representations of trauma, lest we contribute to this culture of silencing which protects perpetrators and the systems which enable them.

While Llewellyn claims that re-imagining forgotten voices has a limited effect on the views held by the “majority,” it is difficult to provide evidence for this claim or its counter, particularly with reference to Waters’ texts. If the representation of subjects from socially marginalised groups – such as those who identify as LGBTQIA+ – were as ineffectual as he claims, it is unlikely that the increasing recognition afforded to these subjects in many Western societies would have eventuated. While neo-Victorianism’s representation of non-normative figures is only a small part of the increased representation occurring in the wider cultural sphere, it nonetheless “participates in the gradual expansion of cultural norms to accommodate a diversity of social subjects” and has the “potential to advocate for transformative changes to the political equality of such subjects beyond the narrative” (S. J. Carroll 195). Given that such largescale social and political change occurs gradually and incrementally, its effects are often most visible from a distance. As such, Llewellyn’s

dismissal of the potential for Waters' texts to contribute to increased acceptance of diverse sexualities may thus be premature. For instance, Victorian writers were unable to write openly about lesbianism and thus often encoded references to lesbian desire through the figure of the vampire (Signorotti 610) or the ghost (Castle 6). Given such restrictions, it's likely that these writers would have found it difficult to imagine a time where the frankness and openness with which Waters writes of queer sexuality would be permissible, let alone a time where same-sex marriage has become a legal reality in many countries. It is therefore important to recognise that the continued representation of marginalised figures in fiction is a valid pursuit precisely because it contributes to expanding the range of stories available about heretofore taboo topics. Taken in isolation, the effect of individual texts may seem inconsequential, but conceived of as part of a larger project which seeks to redress historical injustices and prevent their recurrence, their cumulative effect on cultural understandings of the experiences of marginalised subjects and the inequalities they face cannot be discounted.

In contrast to Llewellyn, Helen Davies takes a more optimistic view of neo-Victorianism's capacity to alter contemporary readers' perceptions of the past. Davies probes the limits of this capacity in *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freakshow* (2015), in which she draws upon work from both freak studies and disability studies to examine the genre's representation of freakshows. With particular reference to texts that reimagine the Victorian freak show, Davies argues that the genre "offer[s] – albeit limited – opportunities for redressing historical power inequalities" (*Neo-Victorian Freakery* 60). Such texts invite contemporary readers to re-examine Victorian culture's exploitation of freak bodies from a temporal distance that is likely to amplify their disgust at such practices. However, they may also prompt them to consider how attitudes to non-normatively embodied subjects in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries will be viewed by future generations. Unlike medical discourse on embodied difference, which purports to be objective but relies on a dichotomous approach to bodies as able or disabled, Davies argues that freak shows – in both their Victorian and neo-Victorian iterations – have the potential to redefine difference in ways that champion the multiplicity and fluidity of bodies. This in turn enables readers to consider alternatives to contemporary culture's construction of normative embodiment, which works to exclude non-normative bodies from mainstream cultural, social, and political discourse.

Davies also cautions contemporary readers against identifying too closely with the predicament of the Victorian freak. While such identification represents “an avenue of empathy” it also “reflect[s] back only what we project onto the Victorian era in the first instance” (203). However, the idea that we project our sensibilities onto the Victorians is not necessarily problematic. While recovering the Victorian freak through fiction could be viewed as a way to pander to contemporary culture’s fascination with the sordid elements of the nineteenth-century past, it also reveals the persistence of ableist attitudes toward non-normative subjects which in turn perpetuates the association between embodied difference and marginalisation. Readers’ access to the Victorian freak is thus mediated by contemporary cultural attitudes toward embodied difference, as well as neo-Victorianism’s construction of the freak body in ways that serve its own rhetorical aims.

This thesis is less concerned with whether neo-Victorian fiction offers genuine reparation to the oft-mistreated Victorian freak – who, in any case, is unable to receive such a gesture even if it is granted – and more concerned with the way in which the genre’s representation of freak and other non-normative bodies suggests parallels between attitudes toward embodied difference in the nineteenth century and the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As postmodern historiographical discourse highlights, textual representations of the past are never neutral and, as such, the motivations that drive such representations must be considered, particularly where the experiences of marginalised figures are concerned. While representations of non-normative bodies in neo-Victorian fiction inevitably reflect contemporary cultural understandings of the nineteenth-century past, this should be considered further evidence of the genre’s political potential, rather than a sign of its inability to effectively engage with contemporary concerns.

Chapter Summaries

The first chapter outlines the broad theoretical framework on which this thesis is based and introduces the key points in the debate about neo-Victorianism’s representation of marginalised figures that are further explored in the following chapters. I begin with a discussion of the genre’s approach to representing female figures, particularly where overt representations of sexuality are concerned, and the extent to which this has been characterised by critics as prurient escapism on the one hand, or a necessary step in

interrogating the legacies of Victorian-era gender politics in our own time on the other. I go on to examine the uptake of feminist theory in neo-Victorian criticism to date by tracing various critics' use of French feminist theory, third-wave feminism and, more recently, postfeminist theory. While this demonstrates the benefits of contemporary feminisms for interpreting neo-Victorian texts, it also highlights the incompleteness of this approach when it comes to analysing textual representations of non-normative women's bodies. The remainder of the chapter thus demonstrates the need to incorporate contemporary feminist theories of the body and scholarship on Victorian-era gender discourse into analyses of neo-Victorian portrayals of gendered embodiment. Only then can the proliferation of non-normative bodies in neo-Victorian fiction be contextualised in relation to the parallels these texts construct between the Victorian past and the contemporary present and the way they use these parallels to suggest the latter's indebtedness to the former for its approach to constructing, shaping, and regulating femininities. While this framework informs my textual analyses in the following four chapters, the chapters themselves focus on addressing criticism more specifically tied to the issues emerging from the novels themselves. Each chapter is focused on a particular aspect of non-normative femininity – freakery, madness, (failed) maternity, and non-binary gender/queer sexuality – and compares the representation of these modes of gendered embodiment in two neo-Victorian novels.

Chapter Two explores the representation of the freak body in *Nights at the Circus* (1984) by Angela Carter and *The Electric Michelangelo* (2004) by Sarah Hall. In both novels, the focal female characters challenge normative modes of femininity through body modification practices which accentuate their embodied differences and enable them to pursue careers as performers in the liminal spaces designed to contain freak subjects, like the museum, circus, and amusement park. Analysed within a framework of Bakhtin's theory of carnival, Victorian freakery, and feminist scholarship on body modification, I argue that both women view freakery as a means to escape the otherwise narrow roles demanded of them in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While both novels present a utopian vision of a world where women are free from the dictates of the male gaze, in Carter's novel this is undercut by Fevvers' reliance on her audience for her sense of identity, a need which is ultimately fulfilled through her marriage to the journalist Walser. The tension between Fevvers' desire for independence and her willingness to engage in self-objectification in exchange for fame and fortune thus finds a conventional resolution in heterosexual marriage. In contrast, Grace courts the gaze in order to challenge the perception of the female body as

an object of consumption. Her tattoos – a series of eye motifs – return her audience’s gaze and, in so doing, they disrupt the distance between freak and spectator upon which the latter rely to shore up their sense of normalcy. Rather than participate in the sexploitation with which neo-Victorianism has been charged, Hall challenges the sexualisation of the female body in contemporary culture by focusing on body modification practices which contravene feminine beauty norms.

Chapter Three focuses on the relationship between nineteenth-century scientific, medical, and gender discourses in the construction of female madness and how this inflects contemporary re-imaginings of the madwoman of Victorian sensation fiction. In particular, this chapter is interested in the notion of madness as a cultural, rather than biological, inheritance, which primarily exists to nullify the threat non-normative pose to existing gendered power dynamics. Like Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*, Graham Swift’s *Waterland* (1983) has attracted much attention from neo-Victorian critics. However, criticism has largely focused on the links between Swift’s narrative and the concept of postmodern historiography, with the multiple histories relayed by its narrator, Tom Crick, considered a prime example of postmodern historiography’s rejection of the notion of a singular historical truth. Tom’s narrative – both in the novel itself and the critical focus on it – contributes to silencing the experiences of the novel’s madwomen – Tom’s wife Mary and his Victorian ancestor, Sarah.

In this chapter, I look beyond Tom’s narrative to the stories and recollections held within Mary and Sarah’s bodies. This focus, which reveals their capacity for agency, goes unrecognised by the men around them. I then turn to a more recent, and as yet less studied, novel – Wendy Wallace’s *The Painted Bridge* (2012) – which depicts life inside a Victorian asylum focalised through the experiences of Anna, a woman wrongfully institutionalised by her husband. While Swift avoids detailed depictions of either the nineteenth-century asylum in which Sarah is placed or its 1980s counterpart in which he installs Mary, Wallace’s focus on the minutiae of asylum life highlights her female characters’ subjectivity, individuality, and resilience in a system designed to punish their non-normativity rather than cure their supposed mental illness. While in *Waterland* Mary’s voice is forcibly excised from the narrative by Tom, her corporeal presence haunts it and, like Wallace’s protagonist Anna in *The Painted Bridge*, her body acts as a record of her past trauma and present unhappiness which questions the legitimacy of how female madness has been defined and mobilised against women in both Victorian and contemporary culture.

While madness was closely aligned with non-normative femininity in the Victorian period, maternity was considered synonymous with its opposite, the feminine ideal. Taking mother-daughter relationships as its focus, Chapter 4 examines what happens when this ideal fails to materialise or is sullied by the maternal figure's madness, fallenness, or criminality. Both *Fingersmith* (2002) by Sarah Waters and *The Somnambulist* by Essie Fox (2011) examine the intergenerational effects of maternal inadequacy and the extent to which such legacies can be overcome. In Waters' novel, maternal death – of the madwoman Marianne and the criminal Mrs Sucksby – is presented as a necessary precondition for their daughters' ability to negotiate a more sustainable mode of non-normative femininity, this time grounded in a lesbian relationship.

In contrast, Fox's novel positions conformity to the ideal as the only viable remedy for female suffering. As in Waters' novel, the deaths of first-generation mothers Cissy and Lydia in *The Somnambulist* is positioned as a consequence of their failure to embody the maternal ideal. In contrast, second-generation mother Phoebe's fallenness is redeemed by her marriage to Quin, demonstrating that compliance with normative gender roles is capable of erasing transgressive bodily acts. While Sue and Maud reject the heteronormative family model of Victorian and contemporary culture by forming a queer family structure, Fox suggests such an ideal is not so easily cast off. Waters' novel thus offers a more positive view of the possibilities for resisting restrictive gender norms, while the only women to survive – let alone thrive – in Fox's novel are those who conform.

The final chapter of my thesis is focused on the representation of non-binary and queer subjects in two neo-Victorian novels from the late 1990s – Patricia Duncker's *James Miranda Barry* (1999) and James Buxton's *Pity* (1997). The titular characters' engagement in cross-dressing as a way of expressing (in *Pity*'s case) and concealing (in *Barry*'s case) their gender identities acts as a critique of the sex/gender system by disrupting the apparent harmony such a system assumes exists between a subject's sexed body, their gender identity, and their outward appearance. Though both novels are set in the nineteenth century, their representation of gender diverse subjects responds to debates about the relationship between gender and the body that were circulating at the time of their publication, particularly with regard to Judith Butler's work on gender performativity (*Gender Trouble* (1990); *Bodies That Matter* (1993)) and the emergence of transgender studies in the early 1990s (Bettcher and

Garry 1). Barry, who identifies as a woman but cross-dresses as a man is afforded the respect, deference, and privilege that masculinity confers, while Pity – a biological man who identifies as a woman – experiences the violation and subjugation that have historically gone hand in hand with femininity. By positioning Pity and Barry’s vastly different trajectories as the product of their publicly performed genders, Duncker and Buxton question the Victorian belief in sexual difference and critique its persistence in the form of essentialist approaches to sex and gender in contemporary culture.

The eight novels analysed in this thesis span three decades and encompass both canonical and lesser-studied examples of neo-Victorian fiction by both men and women. Taken together, this represents the first sustained investigation of non-normative female embodiment in the genre. This thesis argues that representations of non-normatively gendered bodies in neo-Victorian fiction enable the genre’s critique of Victorian gender ideology while suggesting that this ideology remains influential for the construction of normative femininity (and the ideal body it prescribes) in contemporary Western culture.

Chapter 1: Women, Bodies, and Feminisms: A Framework for Examining Non-normative Femininity in Neo-Victorian Fiction

[...] while the female body is a material entity, the feminine or woman's body is a symbolic construct: namely, what size, shape, color, the ideal feminine body is, how much hair it has, in what it is clothed, and how it walks and takes up space are all socially constructed. In fact, it is through the adoption of these behaviors and ornaments that a woman signifies herself as a woman, and her body as a woman's body.

– Anna Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*

This chapter outlines the various theoretical frameworks which inform my analysis of the representation of women's bodies in neo-Victorian fiction. While the Introduction examines the extent of the genre's political valence with regard to marginalised subjects in general, this chapter focuses on the specificities of women's experiences of marginalisation. I trace the tools that construct, shape, and regulate femininities in both Victorian and contemporary culture with particular attention to how the body becomes one such tool in the hands of medical, scientific, and popular cultural discourses, before turning to how neo-Victorian fiction explores such constructions through representations of non-normative bodies. This enables an investigation into how these texts participate in reimagining Victorian femininities in order to bring them into conversation with how femininities are constructed in late twentieth and early twenty-first century culture. The Victorian period proves particularly productive for authors wishing to explore contemporary femininities because both periods are marked by an obsession with defining woman as body with reference to a narrow – though temporally contingent – set of feminine norms.

I begin with a discussion of feminist neo-Victorianism's attempt to redress the silencing of women in the historical record through narratives which foreground female experience. In contrast to Victorian culture's wilful denial of the existence of female sexuality – and, where denial was impractical, such as in the case of prostitution – its construction as an aberration – these texts frequently engage in explicit and overt portrayals of female sexuality. Much like the debate over neo-Victorianism's politics, such portrayals have divided critics, with some lauding their potential for promoting reflection on our indebtedness to the Victorians for our own gender and sexual mores (Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism* 140), while others

view it as a convenient strategy for avoiding such an examination (Kohlke, 'Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel' 56).

I then turn my attention to the way in which this debate has been inflected by neo-Victorian criticism's engagement with contemporary feminisms and, in particular, postfeminist theory. While neo-Victorian criticism's uptake of feminist theory has been relatively limited, both Antonija Primorac ('The Naked Truth'; *Neo-Victorianism on Screen*) and Claire O'Callaghan ("Smash the Social Machine") use differing conceptions of postfeminist theory to examine the genre's representation of female (sexual) agency. Studies on single authors, most notably Sarah Waters, have also examined the interrelationship between her work and contemporary gender and sexual politics (Jones and O'Callaghan, *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*; O'Callaghan, *Sarah Waters*). The use of postfeminist theory in particular has enabled critics to probe the interaction between neo-Victorian fiction and contemporary debates about gender. However, there is a lack of critical attention among scholars of neo-Victorianism to the specific ways in which gender is embodied, both in the texts themselves and in Victorian and contemporary culture. Given the centrality of the body to discourses about women in both periods, it is surprising that contemporary feminist theorists of the body and, to a certain extent, critiques of nineteenth-century gender ideology have thus far been overlooked by neo-Victorian critics. The second half of this chapter is thus devoted to demonstrating the relevance of these approaches for analysing the representation of women's bodies in neo-Victorian fiction by both male and female authors. Integrating these frameworks into neo-Victorian criticism allows us to contextualise the genre's persistent interest in non-normative femininity in light of both Victorian and contemporary constructions of the female body, a preoccupation which suggests that the latter's approach to the body as the site on which gender norms are negotiated, enacted, and policed has its roots in the nineteenth century.

For the purposes of this thesis, my interest lies less in the function of the deviant woman in nineteenth-century culture, and more in the types of embodied expressions that were marked as deviant and, by extension, what this suggests about the cultural valorisation of particular kinds of female bodies in the Victorian past and the contemporary present. In both Victorian and contemporary culture, the body is held as central to women's identities and the possession of the ideal body is deemed a marker of women's success. While the Victorians lauded women's immateriality in public, in private those same women were encouraged to

devote considerable attention toward disciplinary practices designed to bring their appearance and bodily comportment into line with the ideal. Even as the shape of the ideal has changed – with hyper visible sexuality (within approved limits) now prized over demure ethereality – the demand to conform has remained whilst being cynically rebranded in popular culture as a symbol of women’s freedom and choice over their bodies (Gill, ‘Postfeminist Media Culture’ 152). Contemporary women are scarcely more immune to the pressures of ideal femininity than their Victorian counterparts were and, as long as conformity to the ideal remains synonymous with reward and deviance with suffering, these choices cannot be said to be made freely, regardless of what postfeminist culture would have women believe.

(Re)Writing Women in Neo-Victorian Fiction

While categories of marginalisation necessarily intersect and discrimination can be levelled at individuals based on their membership of multiple identity groups – from gender, race, class, able-bodiedness and so on – it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine neo-Victorianism’s engagement with marginalised figures in their entirety. While acknowledging that it does not exist in isolation, this thesis takes as its focus the representation non-normative women’s bodies in eight neo-Victorian novels. Though a range of experiences mark these characters bodies as non-normative – from freakery, to mental illness, maternity, and queer sexuality – their experiences of embodied difference are all heavily mediated by gender; their bodies are subject to surveillance, policing, and correction in ways that are specific to their identification as women. For instance, Victorian madwomen’s experiences differed from those of mad men – one only has to think of trajectories of ‘mad’ Lady Audley and her ‘eccentric’ nephew Robert in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s 1862 novel – because their illness itself was taken as proof of their refusal to conform to their Victorian feminine ideal.² This is due in part to the medical profession’s alignment of hysteria with female sexual desire and its cure with the chastity of the feminine ideal. The ideal held that women’s ambitions should extend no further than marriage and motherhood and, unsurprisingly, both were touted as cures for a range of mental afflictions (Matus, *Unstable Bodies* 215–16). Victorian approaches to madness were a microcosm of what Elaine Showalter refers to as the “gender asymmetry of the representational tradition” – which aligns women with “irrationality,

² See Jill Matus’ ‘Disclosure as “Cover-up”’: The Discourse of Madness in *Lady Audley’s Secret* for a discussion of this.

silence, nature, and [the] body” and men with “reason, discourse, culture, and mind” – a tradition which remains relatively unchanged. As result of this stasis, when men experience madness it is “metaphorically and symbolically represented as feminine” (Showalter 3–4). The tradition Showalter refers to implies a hierarchy of mind over body which, given women’s association with the body, shapes cultural attitudes toward them. In this hierarchy, even women who complied with the demands of the Victorian feminine ideal occupied secondary social positions compared to their male counterparts. It follows, then, that women who transgressed this ideal – through madness or some other display of non-normative female embodiment – were doubly disadvantaged.

Critical attention toward marginalised figures in neo-Victorian fiction has often turned its focus toward women. However, much of this work examines the representation of women *by* women writers.³ For example, Jeannette King’s work on contemporary feminist fiction’s response to the nineteenth-century ‘Woman Question’ situates the genre within the broader context of women’s historical fiction which focuses on “recovering the lives of women who have been excluded or marginalised” (3–4). King analyses several novels by contemporary women writers – including Sarah Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) – in order to examine the reasons behind the genre’s preoccupation with the nineteenth century. For these writers, part of the appeal of returning to the Victorian period is the potential it offers for reimagining the lives of subjects whose liminal status in nineteenth-century British society placed them beyond the reach of (overt) narrative representation. King argues that contemporary novelists have a distinct advantage when it comes to representing women’s lives because they are not constrained by the social taboos which prevented their Victorian counterparts from openly engaging with non-normative constructions of gender and sexuality (King 4). For example, lesbianism in Victorian literature was either relegated to the supernatural realm or, in realist narratives, covertly implied through portrayals of close female friendships. In contrast, *Tipping the Velvet*’s narrative foregrounds queer relationships, even if the characters themselves feel compelled to conceal their sexuality from public view (King 4). King argues that the distinguishing feature of feminist historical fiction is the position occupied by their female and female-identifying characters: instead of existing on the periphery of the narrative they occupy the central role (3). In so doing, these novels give “women back their place in history,

³ See King; Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Metafiction and Metahistory*; and O’Callaghan, “Smash the Social Machine”.

not just as victims but as agents” (King 3). This attempt to rewrite women into history typifies the genre’s revisionist impulse, which is itself critical because women “have repeatedly been relegated to the realm of myth, and sentenced to discursive non-being in the prison-house of patriarchal *History*” (Kohlke, ‘Into History through the Back Door’ 153; emphasis in original). In this sense, both the novels themselves and King’s analytical approach have parallels with postmodern historiography: by foregrounding women’s experiences they contest the notion of an authoritative, singular, and fixed male-authored history in favour of a history – or, more accurately, *histories* – which are multiple, fluid, and contested. In their quest to focus as much on the minutiae of everyday women’s lives as they do on the ‘grand narratives’ of world events, these texts highlight the interplay between the personal and the political. This thesis’ focus on representations of non-normative feminine embodiment in novels by both male and female authors thus has implications for larger debates about neo-Victorianism’s political valence, particularly in terms of its ability to advocate for marginalised subjects. It shares King’s view that by highlighting Victorian women’s struggle for autonomy in a society which saw little role for them beyond the dictates of marriage and motherhood, feminist historical novels “provide a bridge between past and present, making it easier for the reader to identify ideological pressures at work on the experience of gender identity today” (King 178). It tests this claim against a broader range of fiction, including examples authored by men as well as those that post-date King’s analysis and engage with later theories of feminism, womanhood, and embodiment.

Despite King’s attempt to foreground contemporary concerns, Claire O’Callaghan is critical of her tendency “to focus on nineteenth-century feminist debates [...] as opposed to contemporary feminist theories and responses to them in neo-Victorian texts” (“Smash the Social Machine” 68). O’Callaghan points to the utility of postfeminist criticism for addressing this gap because of its ability to “highlight the overlaps, intersections and continuities (as much as dissonances) between feminist histories and cultural critiques of women, gender, and sexuality” (Smash the Social Machine 67). Adopting a postfeminist framework in her analysis of Emma Donoghue’s reconstruction of the Codrington Divorce trial in *The Sealed Letter* (2008) allows O’Callaghan to attend to the specific nature of the continuities King suggests, in this case in relation to the “sexist and misogynistic responses to female sexual behaviours from the nineteenth-century past that parallel attitudes expressed in the new millennium” (“Smash the Social Machine” 65). While, like King, O’Callaghan focuses on female-authored texts, this thesis analyses novels by both men and women using

an approach that combines nineteenth-century gender ideology and contemporary feminist theory on the body, regardless of whether the novels themselves can be classified as feminist in terms of their representation of female and female-identifying characters. This approach reveals the ways in which contemporary texts revisit and revise nineteenth century ideas about gender to reckon with the persistent centrality of the body in defining normative femininity. I argue that the neo-Victorian novels analysed in this thesis emphasise the reverberation of Victorian attitudes toward women in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, in that they suggest such attitudes continue to shape sociocultural understandings of what it means to be a ‘woman’ and the ‘right’ kind of woman at that, as well as the attendant freedoms – or lack thereof – such labels afford.

Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn devote a chapter of their book *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century 1999-2009* to the relationship between nineteenth-century sexual and scientific discourses and sociocultural attitudes toward women’s bodies. Though their book analyses a wide range of neo-Victorian fiction by both men and women, their discussion of the genre’s engagement with the “sexualised and scientific gaze” is limited to female-authored texts, including Jane Harris’ *The Observations* (2006), Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Hottentot Venus* (2003) and Belinda Starling’s *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007). Heilmann and Llewellyn consider these texts to be exemplars of feminist neo-Victorianism because they “problematize nineteenth-century – and, by inference, contemporary – sexual, textual, and scientific inscriptions of the gendered, classed and raced body” (*Neo-Victorianism* 110). Their theoretical framework mirrors the novels’ focus, grounded as it is in “feminist approaches to science, the body, pornography, and the gaze” (*Neo-Victorianism* 110). This framework leads them to identify a “Foucauldian theme central to all three novels: the way in which individuals and their bodies are disciplined into discourses of power through ‘observation’” (Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism* 111). They argue that Starling, Chase-Riboud, and Harris construct the Victorian medical and scientific gaze as a coercive force which, when directed at their non-normative female characters, positions survival as contingent upon conformity. This in turn demands the subject’s self-correction to the norm, a process which contributes to the production of their body as ‘docile’. As Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo’s analyses of Foucault demonstrate the disciplinary power of the gaze has a disproportionate effect on women because they are held to a much narrower set of gendered norms of behaviour and bodily comportment compared to men. This thesis builds on Heilmann and Llewellyn’s work both in terms of the time period

under examination and authorial gender. It examines neo-Victorian fiction's reconstruction of nineteenth-century gender discourse, which was heavily influenced by medico-scientific thought, and what this suggests about contemporary Western culture's indebtedness to Victorian ideas for its approach to women, bodies, and femininity. While neo-Victorian representations of 'failed' femininity in the Victorian period indicate that the definition of non-normative femininity has shifted over the centuries, they also demonstrate that the category of 'woman' remains one of exclusion, in that belonging continues to be governed by a subject's ability to comply with a set of culturally powerful – if arbitrary and artificial – norms of gendered embodiment. Where nineteenth-century gender ideology mobilised biologically given sexual difference as a justification for limiting women's access to social, political, and educational opportunities, contemporary Western culture's obsession with self-improvement encourages women to direct their energies toward practices which enhance their bodies' aesthetic appeal, rather than practices which threaten to disrupt established gender roles. The structural barriers of the nineteenth century which produce gender equality still exist, but they have been carefully masked by the internalisation of gender norms and the rhetoric of choice.

Heilmann and Llewellyn share King's optimism about the revisionary potential of women's historical fiction. They argue that feminist neo-Victorian fiction "draws attention to and thus challenges us to confront the continuing legacy in our own time of the sexual violation of the human and especially the female body cloaked in the guise of science and education" (Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism* 142). However, their analysis of the way this legacy operates in contemporary culture is limited to a single example: Gunther von Hagens' exhibition 'Body Worlds: An Anatomical Opus'. Heilmann and Llewellyn describe the exhibition – which involves the display of partially dissected corpses, often arranged in salacious poses – as a cross between a "Victorian freak and a contemporary peep show" and the "genres of slasher and snuff" films (H&L 141). While they view the exhibition as a microcosm of the uses and abuses women's bodies have been subjected to in the name of science, their assertion that "our interest in the Victorian body [...] reveals less about the Victorians and more about our own preoccupations," could be tested through a more detailed engagement with the contemporary manifestations of Victorian-era gender norms in the present (*Neo-Victorianism* 107).

To address this gap, my thesis examines neo-Victorian representations of non-normative femininity, focalised through four categories of embodied experience: madness, (failed) maternity, sexual and gender identity (as expressed through cross-dressing), and freakery. Attending to specific categories of non-normative female embodiment enables an assessment of neo-Victorianism's investment in revising and contesting contemporary gender norms through fictional portrayals of their nineteenth-century antecedents. For example, while Wendy Wallace's reimagining of the Victorian asylum in *The Painted Bridge* may shock contemporary readers with its depiction of treatments that are more akin to physical torture, when analysed from a feminist theoretical perspective, the novel also suggests that nineteenth-century ideas about women's biological predisposition to madness continues to shape understandings of the gendered dimensions of mental illness in contemporary cultural, scientific, and medical discourses. Moreover, while the tattoos that cement Grace's status as a 'freak' in *The Electric Michelangelo* may seem innocuous to contemporary readers, the eye motif – which both invites and frustrates the gaze – is a metaphor for debates surrounding women's body modification practices in the present in terms of the extent to which particular alternations conform to or reject the aesthetic ideal that accompanies normative femininity. The freedom to participate in such practices is inflected by larger debates about the limits placed on women's corporeal agency, hence any modification which produces a deviation from the ideal female body risks societal censure.

Such censure is in part the product of a phenomenon first identified by Bartky in the late-1980s, whereby normative femininity was becoming increasingly defined in and through the body and its appearance, rather than through women's performance of traditional roles like wife and mother (42). Some three decades later, this shift has not only remained but intensified to form one of the central components of postfeminist culture (Elias, Gill and Scharff 25). If, as Bartky and Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff contend, normative femininity is now inextricably linked to the body – though I would argue this phenomenon is not entirely new but has its roots in Victoria-era gender discourse – then this link must also be theorised in light of its effects on non-normative subjects. As Elias, Gill and Scharff contend, the “intensity of beauty norms can also be seen by looking at their constitutive outside – by what, in this case, is defined as opposition to these norms. The costs of this are felt disproportionately by some groups of women more than others – for example, trans rather than cis women, disabled rather than able-bodied women, fat rather than slim women” (27). While this thesis as a whole is concerned with the effects of normative

femininity on women whose bodies exist outside the norm, my analysis of *James Miranda Barry* and *Pity* in Chapter 5 pays specific attention to the impact of such norms on transgender and non-binary subjects.

As with the representation of marginalised figures in neo-Victorianism more broadly, some scholars are sceptical of the genre's penchant for representing non-normative femininity and, in particular, queer subjectivities. While King celebrates contemporary feminist fiction's interest in overtly addressing subject matter considered taboo in the nineteenth century – such as lesbianism (4) – Marie-Luise Kohlke questions the motivations behind such liberatory zeal. Far from enabling contemporary readerships to reflect on and contest the persistent echo Victorian gender norms in the present, Kohlke argues that “By projecting prohibited and unmentionable desires onto the past, we conveniently reassert our own supposedly enlightened stance toward sexual liberation and social progress, indulging in the self-satisfactions of our assumed superiority” (*‘Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel’* 56). In essence, Kohlke's contention is that highlighting the Victorians intolerance toward diverse subjects allows us to avoid examining our own prejudices. However, I argue that examining neo-Victorianism's representation of the treatment meted out to non-normative women with reference to contemporary feminist analyses of the body fosters a level of identification between ourselves and the Victorians. This, in turn, disrupts any attempt to sustain an attitude of “preferred ignorance or deliberate denial,” which Kohlke argues we possess in relation to “our own culture's complicity in free market systems that enable continuing exploitation and abuse, sexual and otherwise” (*‘Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel’* 57). This is not to say that the parallels constructed by these novels could not be deliberately ignored by readers. Indeed, Christian Gutleben has drawn attention to “the difficulty prejudiced readers have in altering their convictions” (*Nostalgic Postmodernism* 169). However, I do not assume that the texts themselves encourage or are complicit in such a denial.

While some of the novels examined here – chiefly those which neutralise the threat of non-normative femininity through their characters' return to conformity or excision from mainstream society – could be said to share in Gutleben's scepticism regarding the possibilities for reducing prejudice because they suggest embodied difference is incompatible with surviving, let alone thriving, this is not the same as suggesting that this status quo should remain. The pessimistic outlook these texts adopt toward the viability of non-normative femininity contravenes Kohlke's claim that the “neo-Victorian novel's sexsation brings with

it very real dangers of inadvertent recidivism and obfuscation, not least through romanticisation” (‘Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel’ 70). However, given the suffering experienced by non-normatively gendered characters in all the novels analysed here, it is difficult to read even those text which permit the survival these characters (Grace in *The Electric Michelangelo*, Anna in *The Painted Bridge*, and Sue and Maud in *Fingersmith*) as providing a romanticised vision of freedom of gendered and sexual expression. While Kohlke argues that “liberationist engagement can only be sustained by *not* conflating liberty with sexual liberation, or knowledge with sexual knowledge” (‘The Neo-Victorian Sexsation’ 354; emphasis in original), such a separation does little to account for the reality of the lived experiences of women in phallogentric cultures, whose desire for liberation and equality is not so easily divorced from the historical limits which have been placed on women’s sexual agency or indeed the fact that, for the Victorians, the supposed volatility of women’s sexual and reproductive systems was considered incompatible with access to knowledge (in the form of education). Given that “[k]nowledges, like all other forms of social production, are at least partially effects of the sexualized positioning of their producers and users” (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 20), we cannot simply consign the entanglement of women’s identities with their sexualities to irrelevance, but nor is such an entanglement incapable of being revised and contested.

Neo-Victorianism and Contemporary Feminisms

Joyce Goggin and Tara MacDonald’s introduction to *Neo-Victorianism and Feminism*, a special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, highlights the longstanding connection between the genre and feminist theory. However, the precise nature of this connection is the subject of much debate, particularly with regard to whether neo-Victorianism has a productive or problematic relationship with contemporary feminisms. Goggin and MacDonald frame this dilemma in terms of whether “neo-Victorianism is self-serving, self-satisfying, and/or self-eroticising, or does it still wield political potential?” (5). This question reflects a persistent tension in neo-Victorian criticism in relation to the genre’s level of complicity in sanctioning both historical and contemporary power imbalances between subjects who belong to different identity categories, particularly those concerned with gender, race, and class. As discussed, some scholars are critical of the risk sexsational narratives pose for revictimising marginalised subjects. Others like Carroll insist that neo-Victorianism’s interest in drawing

attention to the plight of historically marginalised subjects has the “potential to advocate for transformative changes to the political equality of such subjects beyond the narrative” (195). This thesis explores the polarisation of debate in this area with reference to representations of marginalised women to argue that categorising individual texts, let alone the genre as a whole, as either sexsational or political creates a false dichotomy which obscures the relationship between marginalised subjects and narrative strategies for recovery, representation, and redress. Such polarisation is problematic because classifying the genre as sexsational limits the available interpretations of graphic and/or confronting depictions of non-normative sexualities to their voyeuristic appeal or capacity to shock, rather than exploring what such intrigue or discomfort on the part of readers reveals about contemporary attitudes toward gender, sex, and sexuality and whether such responses are, in fact, borne out of recognising ourselves in the neo-Victorian past. On the other hand, claiming that the representation of marginalised subjects is inherently progressive is also problematic, as it’s clear that some neo-Victorian fiction *does* use sexsation for the more questionable means that Kohlke suggests – that is, to appeal to a readerly desire for scandal and debauchery without any consideration of – or interest in – the ethical implications of such representations.

Nadine Muller points to a similar problem when she refers to the critical construction of an opposition between sexsational and literary neo-Victorianism. She argues:

[...] neo-Victorian fiction, through its historical settings and/or references to the past, can function as an indicator of feminist issues of the present independent from its intellectual ambitions, be it through an unconscious replication of the Victorian discourses or practices which these texts set out to critique, or be it through a critical and self-conscious interrogation of the issues they thematise as well as of the means through which they do so. (Muller, *Ladies, Lunatics and Fallen Women* 35)

Muller’s observation highlights the fact that even when neo-Victorianism’s political valence is acknowledged, such acknowledgements are restricted to specific texts and are, in turn, laden with judgments about literary value. As a counter to this view, Muller argues for a shift away from the scholarly bias toward metatextuality as the only productive way for texts to contribute to contemporary socio-political discourse. Like Muller’s work, this thesis is not confined to – or interested in – assigning measures of literary value to particular texts. I will, however, explore the implications of Muller’s argument regarding “unconscious” and “self-conscious” reproductions of nineteenth-century gender discourse, particularly in relation to the treatment of characters who resist the dictates of normative femininity. Her claim that

both groups of texts “can function as an indicator of feminist issues” is curiously neutral (Muller, *Ladies, Lunatics and Fallen Women* 35): do all the texts function in the same way; or indicate the same issues? A more nuanced approach requires interrogating the positions neo-Victorian texts take on contemporary feminist issues – is their critique of the Victorian, conscious or otherwise, an indicator of the persistence of nineteenth-century ideas about gender or an assertion of progress? In the case of the former, what do these texts suggest about the potential for societal change? These are the questions with which this thesis is concerned. My analysis demonstrates the way in which even unconscious reproductions of Victorian-era gender discourse offer critique through the trajectories of their female characters. In these texts, non-normative femininity is resolved by a return to conformity with established gender norms, or the removal of the aberrant woman from mainstream society – through a combination of institutionalisation, incarceration, and death. For example, in *The Somnambulist* unwed mother Phoebe is reformed through her marriage to Quin while fallen woman Cissy dies by suicide. However, this is not to suggest that unconscious texts necessarily support the sanctioning of non-normative femininity that occurs in their narratives. Instead, their inability to envisage a viable alternative that preserves their characters’ non-normativity points to the impossibly narrow scope of acceptable roles for women and suggests – albeit covertly – the need for reform.

The difference between self-conscious and unconscious texts lies less in the presence or absence of critique – as Gutleben would have it – and more in how these texts deploy their critique of Victorian gender discourse in order to engage with debates about the status of women’s bodies in contemporary culture. For Muller, “self-conscious” texts are those which “purposely suggest similarities and parallels between Victorian and contemporary periods and explicitly challenge positivist notions of the past” (*Ladies, Lunatics and Fallen Women* 253). While this definition could also be applied to those texts that adopt a self-conscious approach to the representation of Victorian gender discourse, the presence of this approach does not necessarily make for a progressive political intervention. For instance, *Waterland*’s metatextuality is a key feature of its critique of conventional historiography and yet its narrative representation of Victorian and contemporary experiences of female madness is largely an unconscious reproduction of Victorian-era approaches to the issue. As such, even self-conscious texts that acknowledge the problematic nature of both Victorian and contemporary constructions of gendered norms of embodiment can struggle to imagine how such norms might be revised. While a text’s level of self-consciousness necessarily inflects

its approach to the nineteenth century, it does not in and of itself determine whether the non-normative characters will meet the same fate as their Victorian counterparts or whether, as in Hall's, Wallace's, and Waters' novels, some instances of non-normative feminine embodiment are positioned as more than a temporary transgression and are instead held to be an effective form of resistance against gender norms.

Despite Goggin and MacDonald's assertion of the interconnectedness of neo-Victorianism and feminism, the application of feminist theory to the analysis of neo-Victorian fiction is still in its preliminary stages. Both Muller (*Ladies, Lunatics and Fallen Women 2*) and O'Callaghan ("Smash the Social Machine" 68) have noted the slow uptake of contemporary feminist theory by neo-Victorian critics. Early work in this area includes that of Rachel Carroll, who argues against adopting a generational approach to women's historical fiction because it produces a relationship between the present and past where the former is always indebted to the latter ('Rethinking Generational History: Queer Histories of Sexuality in Neo-Victorian Feminist Fiction' 135). Her analysis of Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999) focuses on the recovery of female sexuality and is grounded in the notion that both feminist historiography and feminist neo-Victorian fiction actively produce particular versions of the past which reflect their own positionality regarding women's exclusion from male-centred histories (R. Carroll, 'Rethinking Generational History: Queer Histories of Sexuality in Neo-Victorian Feminist Fiction' 135). Carroll also engages with Judith Butler's theory of performativity in her analysis of Waters' use of seances in *Affinity*. She argues such spaces provide a "masquerade of heterosexuality," which simultaneously enable the expression of female sexuality whilst reinforcing Victorian gender norms (R. Carroll, 'Rethinking Generational History: Queer Histories of Sexuality in Neo-Victorian Feminist Fiction' 142). For example, while Ruth's sexuality is coded masculine – in that its display is only permissible when she performs under the guise of Peter Quick – Selina's sitters are free to participate in these sexualised encounters provided they remain passive and (wilfully) ignorant of Peter's true identity ('Rethinking Generational History: Queer Histories of Sexuality in Neo-Victorian Feminist Fiction' 142). However, Carroll's focus on performativity elides the very physical nature of these encounters. For example, Selina recalls a private sitting with Miss Isherwood, directed by Peter: "You must take off your gown now & you must grasp Miss Dawes' [...] I felt her arms come about me & her face come close to mine [...] He put his arms about her & I felt his hands on me, now we had her hard between us & she began to shake" (Waters, *Affinity* 262). Invoking corporeal sensations in Selina's

sitters – particularly through the use of touch – is thus as integral to the expression of female sexual desire as performativity.

In contrast to Carroll’s use of performativity, Adele Jones draws on French feminist theory in her analysis of Michèle Roberts’ *In The Red Kitchen* (1990). With a particular focus on Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic approach to feminism, Jones examines Roberts’ engagement with Kristeva’s ideas as well as applying a Kristevan framework to her analysis of the novel itself. While acknowledging that Kristeva’s work has been overlooked by feminist theorists who view psychoanalysis as inseparable from patriarchal discourse and thus ill-suited to feminist re-appropriation, Jones argues that Roberts’ novel uses Kristevan theory “to undermine the very foundations on which it is based, thus subverting the misogyny and androcentrism of psychoanalytic discourses” (Jones 89). While Jones views this as evidence of the persistence of Victorian-era gender discourses in the present (87), her psychoanalytic focus necessarily restricts her interpretation of these continuities to the way in which female suffering continues to be coded as hysteria (101). While this is undoubtedly important and will be reflected in my chapter on women’s madness, it fails to capture the myriad ways in which Victorian ideals around female embodiment persist in the present. The legacy of nineteenth-century gender discourse is not limited to the pathologisation of women’s distress as mental illness. As my analysis of non-normative femininity in neo-Victorian texts demonstrates, these authors are engaging with contemporary debates about the extent to which such discourses inflect cultural approaches to various aspects of female embodiment, with particular attention to women’s sexual and reproductive lives.

In an attempt to redress neo-Victorian scholars’ reluctance to engage with contemporary feminist theory, Muller advocates for an approach grounded in third-wave feminism. She adopts this approach in her analysis of a range of neo-Victorian texts – including *Fingersmith* – that engage with areas central to third-wave feminist debates, such as matrilinealism, pornography, mental health, and prostitution (*Ladies, Lunatics and Fallen Women* 3). While she acknowledges that multiple definitions abound of both neo-Victorianism and third-wave feminism exist, she maintains that the genre and the theoretical stance share two key characteristics: firstly, a preoccupation with the relationship between the past and the present and secondly an approach to historiography which often produces paradoxical sexual politics (Muller, *Ladies, Lunatics and Fallen Women* 7–8). Muller is careful to distinguish third-wave feminism from postfeminism: a distinction made possible by her reliance on a particular

definition of postfeminism which positions it in opposition to “an emerging political movement and ideology with strong affiliations to second wave feminist theory and activism” (Genz, ‘Third Way/ve The Politics of Postfeminism’ 341). By comparison, third-wave feminism is considered to be closely connected to earlier feminist movements and this, for Muller, marks its suitability for examining neo-Victorian fiction (‘Not My Mother’s Daughter’ 131–32). Applying a third-wave feminist lens to the genre enables an understanding of the way in which neo-Victorian texts “act as exemplifications of and, at times, critical comments upon the problematic textual and sexual politics pertaining to the feminist issues they revisit and which are evident in their own acts of representation and historical revision” (*Ladies, Lunatics and Fallen Women* 3). In contrast to Muller’s use of third-wave feminism, O’Callaghan favours postfeminist theory in her analysis of feminist neo-Victorian fiction. According to O’Callaghan, postfeminist theory is critical to understanding neo-Victorianism’s engagement with contemporary gender discourse (“Smash the Social Machine” 65). Her more favourable view of postfeminist theory is in part enabled by the adoption of a different definition to Muller. Like third-wave feminism, postfeminism is a contested term (Genz and Brabon 5). Just as there is no one “authentic” Victorian past available for representation in fiction, nor is there an “*original* or *authentic* postfeminism that holds the key to its definition” (Genz and Brabon 5; emphasis in original). Broadly, there are two competing views of postfeminism: the first “signals the ‘pastness’ of feminism,” while in the second the “prefix denotes a genealogy that entails revision or strong family resemblance” (Genz and Brabon 3, 3–4). While Muller adopts the former definition to set up an opposition between postfeminism and third-wave feminism, O’Callaghan opts for the latter’s more positive framing in her analysis of Donoghue’s novel.

Postfeminism’s dual definitions produce marked differences in the conclusions scholars reach regarding neo-Victorianism’s engagement with contemporary gender and sexual politics. This is particularly evident when comparing Primorac’s work on adaptations of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes with O’Callaghan’s analysis of Emma Donoghue’s *The Sealed Letter* (2008). Primorac’s analysis of the BBC’s *Sherlock* (2010-) and Guy Ritchie’s films *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011) is framed through a narrow definition of postfeminism as antifeminism, an approach she aligns with scholars like Gill and Angela McRobbie (‘The Naked Truth’ 98). Drawing on what she views as a broader trend in neo-Victorianism on screen, Primorac argues that the adaptations unduly sexualise Irene Adler, to the extent that the agency of Conan Doyle’s Adler is erased (‘The

Naked Truth' 99). Primorac invokes Gill's critique of the conflation of sexiness and empowerment in postfeminist media culture to demonstrate that the adaptations' purported "liberation" of the Victorian text is in fact illusory ('The Naked Truth' 105). While the adapted Adler may be "financially independent, sexy, and sexual [...] her freedom does not imply social power. Instead, the postfeminist woman's freedom is coded as freedom to consume [...] and eventually to conform to social rules" (Primorac, 'The Naked Truth' 103). However, Primorac's usage of the term postfeminism to denote antifeminism obscures the possibility of interpreting Adler's bind as a critical commentary upon the 'choices' contemporary women face.

In her more recent work, *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* (2018), Primorac expands on the connections between postfeminism and neo-Victorianism by surveying a wide array of visual texts from the genre. The book includes a renewed discussion of adaptations of Conan Doyle's work, again focused on Adler, as well as an examination of the roles cultural memory, costume, and the Gothic mode play in reworking Victorian heroines for consumption by contemporary audiences (Primorac, *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* 4, 13–15). For Primorac, "neo-Victorian costume dramas' representations of Victorian women offer the fulfilment of postfeminism's impossible goals, with the added frisson of engaging with sexual taboos and corsets" (*Neo-Victorianism on Screen* 5). That is, they depict women who embody the paradox of postfeminist media culture: a sensibility that celebrates women's agency at the same time as expecting them to use that agency to embody normative femininity. In so doing, she argues that these adaptations fill the "vacuum for more or less nostalgic fantasies of the past created by postfeminist media culture" (Primorac, *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* 7). Her critique is similar in its inflection to Kohlke's work on the neo-Victorian sexsation, in that she focuses on the way in which the genre works to displace onto a version of the Victorian past which is at once comfortably sanitised and sexually explicit the intractable problems such a culture poses to women in the present. While I also critique postfeminist media culture, particularly in terms of its role in proliferating an unattainable embodied ideal for women, it is important to distinguish between postfeminist theory itself – which is characterised by competing definitions – and the way in which it has been co-opted by particular realms of textual and visual culture. Elias, Gill, and Scharff make this distinction, claiming that "rather than *being* postfeminists we identify ourselves as *critical analysts of postfeminist* culture, interested in interrogating the ideas and discourses that comprise contemporary common sense" (25; emphasis in original). This distinction

avoids conflating all texts that deal with concerns central to contemporary (post)feminist debate with those that advance the problematic aims of postfeminist culture by acknowledging the possibility that contained within the former are texts which represent this culture in order to destabilise it.

While O’Callaghan acknowledges the strand of postfeminist theory that aligns itself with antifeminism – on which Primorac’s analysis is based – she favours Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon’s definition of postfeminism, which sees it as a “challenge [to] the idea that feminism has succeeded in achieving its goals and continues to advocate a broad range of still current feminist concerns while recognising that new agendas have developed in the period since the Women’s Movement” (O’Callaghan, “Smash the Social Machine” 66).

O’Callaghan draws on the work of a number of postfeminist scholars – including Genz and Brabon, Gill, and Natasha Walter – to argue that Donoghue’s representation of the Codrington divorce trial in *The Sealed Letter* “reconstructs sexist and misogynistic responses to female sexual behaviours from the nineteenth-century past that parallel attitudes expressed in the new millennium, and which are the renewed subject of postfeminist criticism” (“Smash the Social Machine” 65). Where Primorac views postfeminism as responsible for and intrinsic to the proliferation of sexist and misogynistic approaches to female sexuality and thus uses it as a label for particular texts she sees as implicated in this project, O’Callaghan advocates for postfeminist theory’s usefulness in “highlighting how ‘old’ feminist concerns are being revitalised in new and worrying modes” (“Smash the Social Machine” 66).

Applying a postfeminist theoretical lens to Donoghue’s novel facilitates O’Callaghan’s exploration of the parallels she constructs between attitudes toward same-sex attracted, unmarried, and divorced women in the Victorian past and their contemporary counterparts (“Smash the Social Machine” 71, 81). O’Callaghan argues that postfeminist theory is critical to this project because it enables an exploration of feminist neo-Victorianism’s response to the increasing visibility of sexism in contemporary culture, which entails “exposing oppressions of the past whilst shedding new light on feminist politics in the present moment” (“Smash the Social Machine” 84). Though O’Callaghan limits this intervention to feminist neo-Victorian fiction, postfeminist theory provides a useful lens to examine neo-Victorianism as a whole, regardless of a text’s feminist status. By virtue of their representation of non-normative femininity, all the novels in this thesis engage in the project

of recovering – by reimagining – the experiences of marginalised women, a project typically aligned with feminist neo-Victorianism and women’s historical fiction more broadly.

More recently, critics have deployed contemporary feminist theories to examine Sarah Waters’ oeuvre. In their introduction to *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms* (2016), Jones and O’Callaghan critique the dominance of nineteenth-century feminisms in scholarly approaches to Waters’ texts for their propensity to obscure Waters’ engagement with feminist issues beyond the first wave (‘Sarah Waters’s Feminisms’ 2, 4). Their edited collection is thus founded on the premise that Waters “not only uses the historical form to comment on the present *and* modern gender politics but her writing is actively informed by them” (Jones and O’Callaghan, ‘Sarah Waters’s Feminisms’ 5). Jones and O’Callaghan’s emphasis on the need to place Waters’ novels in dialogue with various waves of the feminist movement – both past and present – is not dissimilar to the framework used in this thesis, which combines scholarship on nineteenth-century gender discourse and contemporary feminist theories on the body to examine non-normative feminine embodiment in neo-Victorian fiction. Indeed, O’Callaghan and Jones acknowledge the centrality of the body to Waters’ writing, with Part III of the collection devoted to “explor[ing] how her writings highlight long-standing, and often unresolved, feminist concerns and debates concerning the female body and women’s position in society more broadly” (‘Sarah Waters’s Feminisms’ 15). However, none of the chapters in this section engage with key feminist theorists of the body such as Grosz, Bartky, Bordo or Gill and inferences about the genre’s engagement with these debates are necessarily limited by the collection’s focus on a single author.

O’Callaghan continues this focus on the intersections between Waters work and contemporary debates about gender in her book-length study *Sarah Waters: Sexual and Gender Politics* (2017). Here, O’Callaghan argues that Waters’ contribution to such debates is facilitated by her ability to transcend theoretical boundaries. Rather than being bound by an allegiance to a particular wave of feminism, Waters’ texts traverse the various waves of feminist theory as well as post-feminist and queer theories in order to critique contemporary cultural understandings of the relationship between gender, sexuality, and identity (O’Callaghan, *Sarah Waters* 2). By focusing on the “representation of non-conforming gendered and sexual subjects [...] Waters promotes a queer conception of identity across her novels that rejects a singular and essentialist logic towards gender and sexuality in favour of plural possibilities for gendered and sexual expression (O’Callaghan, *Sarah Waters* 2–3).

While O’Callaghan’s study redresses the neglect of contemporary feminist and queer theories in scholarship on Waters (*Sarah Waters* 7), this thesis applies a similar theoretical stance to a wider range of neo-Victorian authors.

Defining ‘Woman’: Constructing Victorian Femininities Using Medico-Scientific Discourse

The increasing pathologisation of certain types of bodies and embodied practices in the Victorian era speaks to medico-scientific discourse’s growing influence on how the boundaries of normative femininity were defined and policed. In the early Victorian period, religion was still the primary basis for the cultural construction of women’s roles (King 10). However, as the century progressed, scientists and physicians began to assume authority for defining women’s placed in society (King 12). While this was presented as a shift toward greater objectivity, particularly where the ‘evidence’ of sexual difference was concerned, it is important to recognise that “medical and scientific views of the female body were not so much the product of advances in those areas of knowledge, as ideological interpretations of that knowledge” (King 19). In this way, scientific discourse worked to legitimise the existing cultural preference for separate spheres by providing a biological explanation for women’s suitability for marriage and motherhood. However, this is not to suggest that scientists were unanimous in their agreement regarding the nature and extent of sexual difference. While “Victorian cultural politics may have needed the scientific legitimation of ineradicable sexual differences [...] theories of sexual fluidity were especially useful in formulating ideas about differences among women of different classes and cultures” (Matus, *Unstable Bodies* 21). From this perspective, sexual difference was both biologically given and susceptible to behavioural and environmental influences, providing an expedient way to account for women who failed to conform to the ideal (Matus, *Unstable Bodies* 6). This distinction protected the middle-class Angel’s reputation from being sullied by her less privileged counterparts.

Medico-scientific discourse’s emphasis on the fundamental differences between men and women shaped the era’s gender ideology and its expression through cultural attitudes toward women’s roles in society (Matus, *Unstable Bodies* 5). This preoccupation with sexual difference was also reflective of a wider zeal for classification that gripped nineteenth-century culture (Halberstam 7). In service of preserving the privileges men enjoyed in

Victorian society, the concept worked to reduce the troublingly amorphous category of ‘woman’ to a dichotomous typology of female experience: with the Angel/Madonna/Virgin on one side and the Demon/Magdalene/Whore on the other (King 10). The Angel represented the culturally valorised feminine ideal whose innocence, chastity, and moral purity required protection, or more pessimistically, policing. In contrast, her counterpart’s refusal or inability to comply with the feminine ideal was seen as a threat to the existing social order deviance, a threat which must be contained lest she spread her degradation to other women, or worse, to men. However, this is not to suggest that the realities of Victorian women’s lives were neatly captured by these two categories. Rather, the categories were an organising principle which served a useful ideological function by reinforcing women’s secondary position in society at a time when their campaign for greater social, political, and economic opportunities and recognition was gaining momentum.

The pervasiveness of sexual difference in nineteenth-century gender discourse was crucial to the maintenance of rigid gender roles within Victorian society. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century, prescriptive notions about men’s and women’s suitability for different pursuits was crystallised through the doctrine of “separate spheres”. This doctrine held that men were innately suited to the public sphere and, by extension, participation in the labour market, while women were ideally placed to exist in the private sphere as the moral guardians of the home and family (Poovey 77). However, only those women whose conduct and sociodemographic characteristics aligned with the Victorian feminine ideal could we trusted with such a role: “[a]t the same time that ideas about universal and essential sexual differentiation served to underpin the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres, so concepts of sexuality as a dynamic and unstable process, responsive to environment and culture, allowed ideologically important distinctions to be made between classes and races” (Matus, *Unstable Bodies* 25). Jill Matus’ foundational work on the Victorians’ inherently contradictory approach to sexuality highlights the selective nature of nineteenth-century gender ideology: women’s physiology supposedly made them more similar to each other than they were to men, yet when that physiology failed to engender conformity to the feminine ideal, social and cultural factors were held to be corrupting influences on women’s “natural” propensity to embody the role of the Angel/virgin/Madonna.

While the various terms used to signal ideal femininity have different origins – the “Angel” is a shorthand for the character of Honoria in Coventry Patmore’s poem *The Angel in the House*

(Poovey 8) and the Madonna is a biblical reference to the Virgin Mary (King 10) – they are used interchangeably in scholarly literature to refer to the woman at the centre of the Victorian middle-class domestic ideal. Typified by her sexless, compliant, and virtuous nature, she is an ethereal being who places motherhood at the centre of her identity (King 10–11). In contrast to the emphasis on the singularity of women’s bodies in cultural and medico-scientific discourses, women themselves “were urged to downplay every aspect of their physicality, including (but not limited to) their sexuality” to demonstrate their conformity to the domestic ideal (Silver 9). Yet somewhat paradoxically achieving the appearance of being divorced from one’s bodily functions necessitated a near-exclusive focus on those very functions in order to keep them in check through a concerted program of self-regulation and self-denial. As King argues, the “ideal of female sexuality being latent but repressed shifted the crude angel/whore distinction into a sense that any apparent ‘angel’ could be harbouring a potential ‘whore’ if sufficient supervision were not exercised” (23). As such, both self-regulation and external surveillance were deemed necessary to ensuring that the domestic Angel retained her purity and this, in turn, became another strategy through which Victorian culture forced women’s attention inward in an attempt to distract them from the campaign for equality.

Given that Victorians viewed the able-bodied male as the archetypal human form, women were always already ‘other’ simply by virtue of possessing a female body. However, women who failed to embody the feminine ideal were doubly disadvantaged, as the dominant culture stepped in to punish their deviance and attempt to enforce conformity. While the terminology used to refer to these women varied, they shared an emphasis on creating a linguistic opposition to the designations reserved for the Angel. Just as definitions of ideal femininity had their roots in religious discourse, so too did those pertaining to non-normative femininity. For example, the terms “Magdalene” and “fallen” were invoked to create an affinity between women’s disruptive sexualities and Eve’s original sin (King 10; Anderson 3). However, fallenness is a “wide umbrella term” which “cuts across class lines and signifies a complex of tabooed behaviours and degraded conditions” (Anderson 2). Amanda Anderson distinguishes her approach to fallenness from that of other critics, like Mary Poovey, by asserting that definitions of fallenness must go beyond transgressive sexuality as their defining feature (15). Instead, she argues that “fallenness should be understood principally in relation to a normative masculine identity seen to possess the capacity for autonomous action, enlightened rationality, and self-control” (Anderson 13). From this perspective, a lack of self-control may

indeed have its expression in sexual transgression but it is also symptomatic of a wider belief in women's dulled capacity for regulation, which in turn reflects Victorian concerns about the limits of agency and the "power of environment over character" (Anderson 6).

While any deviation from the Angel typology could theoretically be constructed as deviant, in practice cultural definitions of deviance coalesced around women who transgressed gendered norms of sexual behaviour. As nineteenth-century scientific and medical discourse "conceived of passionlessness as a physiological norm, rather than merely an ideal, any evidence of sexuality in a woman could be deemed deviant" (King 21). To avoid undermining this approach, the (hyper)sexuality associated with prostitutes (Matus, *Unstable Bodies* 48) and madwomen (King 22; Showalter 55) was held to be the product of a physiological malfunction. Prior to the 1850s, prostitutes' bodies were considered physiologically distinct from those of other women and this, in turn, was viewed as the cause of their entry into sex work – rather than societal factors which made prostitution one of the few viable ways for women to earn an income (Matus, *Unstable Bodies* 48). However, as the ideal of passionlessness began to take hold the distinctions between prostitutes bodies and other women's bodies were called into question. To maintain the distinction, prostitutes became increasingly aligned with "disease and contagion," thereby enabling their continued ostracism from mainstream society (Matus, *Unstable Bodies* 141). While excessive sexuality in women was deemed problematic, so too – in certain circumstances – was its absence. At the same time as passionlessness typified the ideal for married, middle-class women of childbearing age, the "perpetual virginity of the old maid" was culturally derided, the repression of all sexual feeling was considered symptomatic of hysteria, and post-menopausal women were viewed as "unsatisfactory unsexed being[s]" (King 32, 33). Again, we see the paradoxical and complex nature of Victorian gender ideology, in that even the supposed idealisation of sexlessness could be mobilised as a marker of deviance in women who otherwise failed to conform to their prescribed roles as wives and mothers.

The vast majority of Victorian scientific discourse on sexual difference focused on women's reproductive functions. While some physicians looked to differences in the size and function of male and female brains to construct the latter's mental capabilities as inferior, women's capacity for reproduction and its attendant processes were widely considered to be the source of her innate suitability for the domestic sphere as well as her physical and mental frailty. For instance, the discovery of involuntary ovulation in the 1840s led to the ovaries being "seen as

the essence of femininity, and reproduction as women's essential function" (King 15). Yet at the same time menstruation – the very process that allowed women to discharge this "essential function" – was blamed for making women more susceptible to disease than men (King 17). Sally Shuttleworth expands on menstruation's contradictory status in her analysis of mid-Victorian medical textbooks and popular advertisements for menstruation remedies. She argues that both media had a vested interest in presenting women as hapless victims of their menstrual cycles because it justified medical intervention in the case of the former and encouraged the consumption of profitable if therapeutically questionable "medications" in the case of the latter (Shuttleworth, 'Female Circulation' 51). As the disruption or alteration to a woman's menstrual cycle, rather than its "regular" operation, was considered pathological (Shuttleworth, 'Female Circulation' 49), women were instructed to avoid any behaviours which were believed to place the regularity of menstrual flow in jeopardy (Shuttleworth, 'Female Circulation' 57). It should come as no surprise that the forbidden behaviours – chiefly any form of mental, physical, or emotional exertion – were the same behaviours that Victorian society's phallogocentric cultural discourse perceived as a threat to male dominance. For instance, campaigns for greater access to formal education for women were met with opposition from scientific arenas not only because women were considered physiologically incapable of managing the demands of reproduction and education but because such mental exertion would invariably lead to ill-health (King 18). Scientific and medical discourses thus worked together to marry physiological concepts and societal mores in an attempt to circumscribe women's agency and preserve the status quo.

While scientific and medical discourses shared an interest in defining the boundaries of female health and illness, it was medicine that assumed responsibility for monitoring women at risk of ill-health and treating those suffering from the effects of disease. The professionalisation of the medical profession in the Victorian period coincided with women being subjected to historically unprecedented levels of medical surveillance and intervention (Shuttleworth, 'Female Circulation' 48). Socially prescribed definitions of normality and deviance became aligned with health and sickness respectively as behaviours which "would have been defined simply as immoral or illegal, increasingly were defined in medical terms" (Archimedes 2). This shift cemented the medical profession's authority to oversee the management of deviance under the guise of their ability to treat 'medical' conditions. However, as with scientific discourse, existing cultural attitudes toward women influenced the medical management of female pathology. Theories of sexual difference were again

mobilised, this time to distinguish women's experiences of illness as distinct from men's (Archimedes 28) and, like the malleability of these theories, so too were models of disease revised to accommodate cultural constructions of ideal femininity. For example, hysteria became a "catch-all" diagnosis for any "behaviours which did not fit the prescribed model of Victorian womanhood" (Archimedes 12), while medical interventions often targeted women's reproductive organs because they were "seen as the cause of intellectual and emotional problems" (King 20).

Regardless of the purportedly noble aims of medicine's foray into the treatment of female deviance, what emerges from the historical record is the spurious construction of the causes and symptoms of disease and the concomitant reliance on the surgical interventions this produced, both of which were used to justify the violence inflicted upon women's bodies. The disproportionate attention given to women's reproductive organs when designing surgical interventions is evidence of Victorian medicine's covert desire to control female sexuality and, by extension, women's place in society. While Isaac Baker Brown ostensibly developed the clitoridectomy as a treatment for female insanity, the markers of "insanity" in his patients included seeking employment outside the home or desiring a divorce (Showalter 76). Practitioners like Baker Brown thus used diagnoses of and treatments for female insanity as tools for constructing, regulating, and reinforcing the boundaries between normative and non-normative femininity. However, due to disagreement amongst the medical profession as to the efficacy and appropriateness of clitoridectomies, their popularity was relatively short-lived (Showalter 76). Despite its limited use, Showalter argues that the procedure nonetheless have symbolic meaning because they denote "the surgical enforcement of an ideology that restricts female sexuality to reproduction" (77). While clitoridectomies were in vogue in the 1860s, ovariectomies were the more widely performed of the two procedures in the Victorian period as a whole throughout the Victorian period (Ehrenreich and English 111). Like the clitoridectomy, the ovariectomy was presumed to be a cure for all manner of deviant behaviours, including "troublesomeness, eating like a ploughman, masturbation, attempted suicide, erotic tendencies, persecution mania, simple 'cussedness,' and dysmenorrhea" (Barker-Benfield qtd. in Ehrenreich and English 111). The operation was "judged successful if the woman was restored to a placid contentment with her domestic functions" (Ehrenreich and English 112). As Shuttleworth notes, unregulated and medically-questionable remedies designed to cure menstrual suppression rather than treat the pain associated with menstruation were frequently administered to women of childbearing age,

while violent treatments were also meted out to menopausal women (Shuttleworth, 'Female Circulation' 56, 75). Far from revealing a concern with ameliorating women's pain, these treatments were more often than not the cause of women's suffering. Disguised as evidence-based medicines prescribed by learned professionals, they were in fact part of the sophisticated machinery of disciplinary practices and mechanisms of surveillance that encouraged women to be both attentive to their bodily functions and willing to submit to external regulation when their efforts at self-surveillance ultimately and inevitably failed. A number of the novels examined in this thesis (*Waterland*, *The Painted Bridge*, *Fingersmith*, and the *Somnambulist*) position this pathologisation of women's bodily functions and the attendant surveillance practices it enables as tools that facilitate the marginalisation of their non-normative female characters. Although Victorian ideals of femininity focused on non-corporeality, interventions designed to correct aberrant femininity often targeted the body under the assumption the unruly, visible body could be transformed into the invisible ideal if only the right treatment were applied. Neo-Victorian novelists critique this assumption by representing non-normative female characters whose bodies act as sites of resistance against such attempts to impose conformity to the ideal.

The Female Body in Contemporary Feminist Theory

As discussed above, neo-Victorian critics are increasingly looking to contemporary feminisms to explore the nature of the genre's engagement with contemporary debates about gender. However, this work has largely focused on French feminist theory (Jones; Novák), third wave and post-feminisms (Muller, 'Not My Mother's Daughter'; O'Callaghan, "'Smash the Social Machine'"; Primorac, *Neo-Victorianism on Screen*), and single author studies (Jones and O'Callaghan, *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*; O'Callaghan, *Sarah Waters*). With the exception of Rosalind Gill, whose theorisation of postfeminist media discourse attends to its construction of an embodied ideal, there has been minimal uptake of key feminist theorists of the body – such as Elizabeth Grosz, Susan Bordo, and Sandra Bartky – by neo-Victorian critics. This is a peculiar oversight given that the genre itself has a predilection for representing non-normatively gendered subjects and that conceptually women and the body have always been, and continue to be, intimately linked. Though the form the ideal female body takes is temporally specific, both Victorian and

contemporary culture rely on the existence or, more accurately, the creation of such an ideal as a way of delimiting normative femininity.

Phallogentric culture's predilection for defining woman as body is underpinned by a mainstay of Western philosophical thought that views the body as inferior to the mind. Long neglected by feminist theorists due to this very association, Grosz played a pivotal role in recovering the body as an object worthy of feminist enquiry, while both Bordo's and Bartky's work centres on the social construction of normative femininity in the late twentieth century and the ways in which this is transmuted into a set of idealised physical and behavioural attributes which shape both attitudes to, and women's experiences of, their bodies. This approach recognises that regardless of whether women conform to or resist the dictates of ideal femininity, the norms which comprise it are negotiated at the level of the body. As in the Victorian era, attempts to ensure women comply with the dictates of ideal femininity in contemporary culture have given rise to a range of surveillance strategies and regulatory practices experienced at the level of the body. While the cultural pressure to conform can thus be traced back to the nineteenth century, it manifests in different ways in contemporary culture: in the former, compliance was largely achieved through external regulation, usually by members of the medical profession, whereas in the latter (social) media, popular culture, and medical discourses combine to offer up a version of ideal femininity for women to consume, internalise, and police (in both themselves and others). Contemporary feminist theories of the body are thus well-placed to enable a strategic examination of neo-Victorian engagements with non-normative femininity and the potential parallels these texts suggest about the centrality of the body to women's identities in both the Victorian past and the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This approach allows us to see the reverberations of nineteenth-century gender ideology – which sought refuge in biology to justify the limitations placed on women – in contemporary phallogentric culture's attempts to restrict women's embodied agency.

Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* (1994) thus forms a key part of both the conceptual framework of this thesis and the rationale for its focus on female embodiment. She presents a wide-ranging critique of Western philosophy's approach to the body, particularly with regard to its failure to acknowledge or account for sexual specificity in theorising subjectivity (*Volatile Bodies* xiii). Grosz argues that this failure has resulted in “[a]ll knowledges and practices hav[ing] thus far represented the energies and interests of one sex alone” (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* xi).

Such a one-sided approach has led to both the silencing of women's experiences and theorisations of gendered embodiment that work to maintain the gender inequality upon which Western phallogocentric culture depends. Such an approach perpetuates "[m]isogynist thought [which] has commonly found a convenient self-justification for women's secondary social positions by containing them within bodies that are represented, even constructed, as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control" (*Volatile Bodies* 13). The pervasive view of women's bodies as inferior to men's is, in part, responsible for feminist theorists' reluctance to engage with the body in their development of accounts of female subjectivity. Instead, contemporary feminisms tend to disregard the body entirely or, in adherence to the mind/body dualism which underpins Western philosophical thought, approach the body as the passive, inert counterpart of the active, enquiring mind (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* vii, 3). In contrast to these approaches, Grosz views the body as a product of "historical, social, and cultural exigencies," rather than a "natural or precultural" object (*Volatile Bodies* x). In line with this perspective, she argues that the body is "capable of being lived and represented in quite different terms, terms that may grant women the capacity for independence and autonomy" (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* xiii); that is, the body and its meanings are not lost to feminist renegotiation. Given this, attending to the body is a critical component in any attempt to revise the status of women's bodies in contemporary culture. As I contend in this thesis, neo-Victorian representations of non-normatively gendered bodies have the potential to enhance understandings of how femininities are constructed in both Victorian and contemporary culture because in both periods the body is the site on which the boundaries of normative femininity are negotiated.

The concept of sexual difference is central to Grosz's reformulation of the relationship between the body and subjectivity. While the current association between the body and women's subordination need not be a foregone conclusion, nor will its status be altered by relegating the body to the realm of unimportance. Grosz calls on feminists to acknowledge sexual specificity by developing theories of the body which reject the mind/body dualism and are focused on the body as a cultural product and the concept of "*embodied subjectivity*" (*Volatile Bodies* 22; emphasis in original). Despite Grosz's appeal for such theories to avoid biologicistic, essentialist and binary approaches to the body, her insistence on the "irreducible specificities" of male and female bodies risks exposure to the very pitfalls she cautions against (*Volatile Bodies* 189). For example, her adherence to a binary model of sexual difference is particularly problematic when it comes to the consideration of transgender or

intersex bodies. Grosz's contention that the "transsexual may look like a woman but can never feel like or be a woman" (*Volatile Bodies* 207), is at odds with more progressive theorisations of transgenderism which reject the premise of a natural or pre-existing connection between sex and gender and instead prioritise transgender subjectivity (Stryker 148–49). In contrast, Grosz's theory cannot account for the discord transgender subjects experience between their assigned sex at birth and their gender identification. While I agree with Grosz's larger claim that the body is capable of being re-thought in ways that challenge the status quo – a claim which informs my thesis focus on neo-Victorian representations of the body, Grosz's theory is not without limitations. I address these limitations by engaging with the work of other feminist theorists – chiefly Susan Bordo, Sandra Bartky, and Rosalind Gill – who focus on how the gendered body is perceived by the self and others, rather than its sexual (and biological) specificity.

Both Bartky and Bordo draw heavily on Foucault's work in their analyses of the feminine ideal in contemporary culture and how it affects women's experiences of their bodies. While they are critical of Foucault's gender blindness, his theorisation of disciplinary power and its concomitant production of docile bodies is a useful lens through which to understand the operation of gender norms and their role in classifying some bodies as compliant and others as deviant. According to Foucault, disciplinary power aims to produce "subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies," but it does so by making individuals complicit in their own subjection (*Discipline and Punish* 138, 203). This type of power operates through three modalities: "surveillance," "observation," and "comparative measures that have the 'norm' as reference" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 193). Implicit in the operation of all three modalities is the notion of "compulsory visibility": their effectiveness relies on the extent to which individuals understand themselves as being subject to an ever-present and judgmental gaze which, in turn, encourages them to self-correct to various norms (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 194). This phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated by its absence: when disciplinary power fails to produce the requisite docility in an individual, disciplinary punishment steps in to provide a "corrective effect" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 180). For Foucault, "What is specific to the disciplinary penalty is non-observance, that which does not measure up to the rule, that departs from it. The whole indefinite domain of the non-conforming is punishable" (*Discipline and Punish* 178–79). In this sense, any characteristic which marks an individual as outside the norm leaves them vulnerable to punishment. The operation of this mechanism in relation to individuals who deviate from gender norms is clear

in each of the novels discussed in this thesis: violence is meted out to female freaks, madwomen are institutionalised, failed mothers are killed off, and non-binary and queer subjects are forced (back) into the closet. It is not that disciplinary power aims to eradicate non-conformity in its entirety – indeed, the very existence of norms depends on creating categories of exclusion. As such, the operation of disciplinary power, and its ability to produce docile bodies, relies on the presence non-conforming subjects whose punishment acts as a warning to others of the consequences of non-compliance.

While Bartky's influential essay "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power" (1988) was first published over three decades ago, its repeated inclusion in edited collections since attests to its ongoing relevance for feminist theorisations of the body.⁴ Bartky engages in a feminist critique of Foucault's work on disciplinary power to examine the relationship between gender norms, embodied practices, and the coercive power of the feminine ideal. However, Bartky is critical of Foucault's neglect of gender and his resultant inability to theorise the differential effects surveillance, observation, and normalisation (through self-correction or punishment) have on subjects according to their gender. Bartky charges Foucault with being "blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine," and goes on to argue that this blindness has serious repercussions for women's lives because it "perpetuates the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed" (Bartky 27). Ignoring the specificities of women's embodied experiences makes it impossible to acknowledge the unequal positions gendered subjects occupy within disciplinary power regimes. As a result, the disproportionate influence disciplinary practices exert on women's bodies are masked by an apparently universal – but in reality, implicitly male – body. To redress this blindness, Bartky expands Foucault's theory of disciplinary power to analyse practices used predominantly by women in service of pursuing a body that conforms to the feminine ideal.

Just as the body is a cultural product for Grosz, for Bartky the ideal female body is both historically and culturally contingent (28). Writing in the late-1980s, Bartky notes that the "current body of fashion [for women] is taut, small-breasted, narrow-hipped, and of a slimness bordering on emaciation," a set of characteristics that more closely resemble a stereotypically boyish body than that of an adult woman (28). By taking a gendered approach

⁴ Conboy, Medina and Stanbury (1997) and Weitz and Kwan (2014) and are two such examples.

to the mechanisms which produce docile bodies, Bartky identifies a range of (self-)disciplinary practices performed by women in an attempt to meet the slender ideal, chief among them dieting and exercise (28). As well as these practices – which work to transform the body’s shape – others like applying makeup, clothing choice, and skincare regimes coalesce to ensure the body assumes the correct appearance as well as the correct size (Bartky 31). Bartky views these practices as evidence of women’s internalisation of patriarchal norms surrounding the feminine ideal. Grosz rejects this connection because it discounts the possibility of reading such practices as “modes of guerrilla subversion of patriarchal codes” (144). Though she acknowledges that the “line between compliance and subversion is always a fine one,” she fails to illustrate how practices denoting compliance can be distinguished from those that appear compliant but are in fact subversive (*Volatile Bodies* 144). Nor does she explain why individual women should adopt and perform these practices in such similar ways if this is not attributable to striving to meet a culturally constructed ideal, a point Gill takes up in her critique of the concept of choice feminism over a decade later. Bartky, on the other hand, argues that these practices operate in an environment in which the “pervasive cultural view of women’s bodies is one of deficiency that must be rectified” (33). This view of the female body as inferior is an extension of the more general view Grosz highlights regarding women’s inferiority to men. However, here the emphasis is on the ways in which women themselves are encouraged to take steps to correct this inferiority. Bartky stresses that even though dominant cultural discourse implores women to participate in such self-correction, any attempt to do so will inevitably fail because “it requires such radical and extensively measures of bodily transformation that virtually every woman who gives herself to it is destined in some degree to fail” (Bartky 33–34). Perversely, the very disciplinary practices designed to rectify the female body in fact continue to reproduce female inferiority and, as a result, these practices “must be understood as aspects of a far larger discipline, an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination” (Bartky 37).

If – as Bartky contends – the ideal female body is illusory, why do women continue to direct their energies and attention toward such apparently futile disciplinary practices? The answer for Bartky is two-fold, encompassing both internal and external factors. Firstly, due to disciplinary power’s diffuse nature, no single institution is responsible for regulating femininity. As a result, the “disciplinary power that inscribes femininity on the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere” (Bartky 36). Disciplinary power may be largely invisible, but non-conformity still comes at a price. In the absence of an institution to mete out “public

sanctions,” a woman who does not conform to the demands of normative femininity “faces a very severe sanction indeed in a world dominated by men: the refusal of male patronage” (Bartky 38). Therefore, part of the reason women continue to engage in practices designed to enhance their body’s resemblance to the feminine ideal to shore up their precarious position in contemporary Western society. Secondly, Bartky argues that to some extent “all women have internalized patriarchal standards of bodily acceptability” (38). Women do not participate in disciplinary practices solely to gain external (male) approval, but because the feminine ideal has been “incorporated into the structure of the self” (Bartky 38). Achieving – or at least attempting to achieve – the ideal thus becomes a marker of an individual’s level of self-mastery and stable sense of identity (Bartky 39). This is why the disciplinary practices which align with ideal femininity – like dieting, exercise, and beauty regimes – are so compelling: they offer women a way to obtain an albeit illusory level of power because with conformity comes approbation and preferential treatment. However, gaining such approval comes at the cost of a woman becoming “a self-policing subject, a self committed to relentless self-surveillance” (Bartky 42). Such “self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy” (Bartky 42), which highlights the disproportionate impacts disciplinary power and technologies of surveillance have on women compared to men.

Like Bartky, Bordo builds on Foucault’s work to examine the relationship between normative femininity, beauty standards, and embodied practices. For Bordo, the value of Foucault’s work for feminism lies in his theorisation of modern power. This model demands that “we cease to imagine ‘power’ as the *possession* of individuals or groups – as something people ‘have’ – and instead as a dynamic or network of non-centralised forces” (Bordo, ‘Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body’ 191; emphasis in original). This approach allows feminist theory to move beyond the oppressor/oppressed model of power which dominated discussion in the 1960s and 1970s, a period Bordo criticises for its tendency to conflate men with power and women with powerlessness (‘Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body’ 190). While Bordo is critical of the lack of nuance that resulted from such a conflation, she is nonetheless careful to remind feminist scholars that adopting Foucault’s “conception of power does *not* entail that there are no dominant positions, social structures, or ideologies emerging from the play of force; the fact that power is not held by *anyone* does not mean that it is equally held by *all*” (‘Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body’ 191; emphasis in original). In contrast to the oppressor/oppressed model, which cannot easily account for instances where women are complicit in their objectification and sexualisation, this model

promotes recognition of the ways in which women “may contribute to the perpetuation of female subordination, for example, by participating in industries and cultural practices which represent women as sexual enticements and rewards for men – without this entailing that we have ‘power’ (or are equally positioned with men) in sexist culture” (Bordo, ‘Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body’ 192). While men may not possess power, they have a vested interest in preserving institutions in which they have historically been *positioned* as more powerful than women (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 29). This begs the following question: if power is not held by men or, indeed, by anyone, but operates through a network, how are normative models of femininity reproduced and enacted over time?

To answer this question, Bordo applies Foucault’s model of power to the cultural construction of the female body. In so doing, she examines the role both institutions and individuals play in establishing, maintaining, and policing the boundaries of normative femininity. At the institutional level, Bordo singles out the influential roles played by the medical establishment and the fashion and media industries – with particular regard to the latter’s emerging digital presence – in defining the parameters of the ideal female body (*Unbearable Weight* xvi, xviii, 143). Whereas the Victorian medical establishment constructed non-normatively feminine behaviours – such as the expression of sexual desire – as symptomatic of some underlying dysfunction of the reproductive system and targeted interventions at these internal processes, medical discourse in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries tends to be geared toward surface-level (or skin-level) interventions that are designed to correct aberrations from the aesthetic ideal of normative femininity. An illustration of this shift in focus is evident when comparing Shuttleworth’s work on the medicalisation of menstruation in the Victorian period discussed earlier in this chapter and Bordo’s observations on cosmetic surgery in contemporary culture. In the former, remedies designed to correct imbalances in women’s menstrual cycles were presumed to produce outwardly observable differences in their adherence to normative femininity (Shuttleworth, ‘Female Circulation’ 55), whereas in the latter the relationship between intervention and outcome is more direct. For instance, Bordo highlights the fact that increasing numbers of women are undergoing breast enlargement surgery “in order to look normal” as a consequence of a “culture in which “normal” is being radically redefined, not only by the images but by the surgeons” (*Unbearable Weight* xvi). Together with the medical establishment, advertising, film and television, and fashion photography all contribute to the

demarcation of normal and abnormal bodies by portraying ever-narrower images of the feminine ideal (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* xviii).

As Bordo reminds us, the mind/body dualism – which is a foundational principle of Western philosophical thought – is also gendered. This dualism constructs the mind as active and the body as passive and aligns men and women with each category respectively (*Unbearable Weight* 11). While Grosz demands that the mind/body dualism be dismantled in order for a feminist philosophy of the body to take hold, she also claims that “Patriarchal power relations do not function to make women the objects of disciplinary control while men remain outside of disciplinary surveillance” (*Volatile Bodies* 144). However, given women’s historical association with the body it stands to reason that they are disproportionately impacted by such technologies of surveillance and the cultural demand to conform to normative femininity. For instance, so feared were the potential excesses of the female body in the Victorian era, that the ideal woman was expected to be both obsessively devoted to monitoring her internal bodily functions for any sign of disorder at the same time as projecting a vision of ethereality and bodilessness worthy of the designation ‘Angel’. In the process of attending to the demand to conform “female bodies become docile bodies – bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 166). To return to the previous example, the Angel’s efforts at self-regulation are inflected by the knowledge that should she fall, a male authority figure – be it her father, husband, or physician – will step in to enforce conformity. In this way, the “social manipulation of the female body” works to maintain gendered power relations through external regulation (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 143). By encouraging women to devote ever more time and energy to disciplining their bodies in “pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 166), phallogentric culture ensures the simultaneous satisfaction of the (male) gaze and women’s subordination by diverting their attention toward beauty standards that are themselves relatively undervalued because of their association with the feminine.

Where Bartky looks to diet, exercise, and makeup to illustrate her argument about the disciplinary practices in which women engage in an attempt to embody a particular aesthetic ideal, Bordo turns her attention to hysteria, agoraphobia and anorexia to examine the pathological potential of such rigid adherence to the feminine ideal. Rather than view these disorders as aberrations, Bordo argues that they reveal the way in which women’s bodies

function “as a surface on which conventional constructions of femininity are exposed starkly to view through their inscription in extreme or hyperliteral form” (*Unbearable Weight* 174–75). The disordered female body can thus be seen as an exaggerated expression of conformity to the feminine ideal. However, while the existence of the feminine ideal may have proved immutable thus far, it is by no means static or incapable of revision. What constitutes normative femininity and the disordered female body – which are themselves inextricably linked – is both temporally and culturally specific. For example, the “nervous tremors and faints, the anesthasias, and the extreme mutability of symptomatology” experienced by nineteenth-century hysterics are “concretisations of the feminine mystique of the period, produced according to rules that governed the prevailing construction of femininity” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 169). Far from failing to embody the Victorian feminine ideal, women suffering from hysteria become victims of their own success in acquiring the traits associated with this ideal. Turning to a contemporary example, the anorexic body “immediately presents itself as a caricature of the contemporary ideal of hyper-slenderness for women, an ideal that, despite the game resistance of racial and ethnic difference, has become the norm for women today” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 170). While Bordo links the epidemic of eating disorders to the cultural milieu of the 1980s in her early 1990s writings on the subject (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 168), there is little to suggest that the slender ideal has vanished. Instead, it has morphed into the demand that women’s bodies be toned as well as slender, as these characteristics have come to denote sexiness.

In both the nineteenth and late-twentieth centuries, dominant cultural forces shaped both women’s experiences of their bodies and the shape of the ideal body itself. While Bordo notes historical differences in how feminine norms of embodiment are enforced, she also highlights the continuities across time. For instance, in the Victorian era women’s compliance with these norms was typically enforced through a combination of external regulation, such as monitoring and intervention from medical professionals, and the use of garments like the corset that temporarily altered the body’s appearance (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 143). In contrast, women in the late-twentieth century were expected to practice self-regulation and alter their physical forms through practices such as diet, exercise, and cosmetic surgery so that the pre-given ideal is rendered visible on surface of the body itself (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 212). Despite these differences in the mode of enforcement, the nineteenth and late-twentieth centuries are united by the fact that “whether externally bound or internally managed, no body can escape either the imprint of culture or its gendered

meanings” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 212). Both periods also witnessed fluctuations in established gender roles, as women demanded increased opportunities to participate more fully in social, political, and economic life. For Bordo, the concomitant threat this poses to existing gendered power relations explains why “Anxiety over women’s uncontrollable hungers appears to peak [...] during periods when women are becoming independent and are asserting themselves politically and socially” (*Unbearable Weight* 23). To neutralise this threat, popular media discourses are mobilised in an attempt to preserve the status quo and reaffirm the salience of existing gender norms. Bordo illustrates this phenomenon through her analysis of both Victorian conduct manuals and advertisements for diet products in women’s magazines and on television in the late twentieth century. She argues that these media forms share the “same metaphorical universe, as well as the same practical prohibitions against female indulgence” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 122). Just as conduct manuals cautioned Victorian women against the display of an unrestrained or voracious appetite and instructed them on feminine consumption patterns, so too do contemporary diet advertisements “teach appropriate behavior” by encouraging consumption of their products (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 122).

However, similarities between the Victorian past and late-twentieth and early twenty-first century Western culture are not limited to the pressures both societies exerted on women to conform to the feminine ideal. They are also present in the way in which the concept of a disordered body emerges both out of and in response to narrow definitions of normative femininity. While the symptomatology of Victorian hysteria and contemporary anorexia may differ, both disorders have “symbolic meaning...[and] *political* meaning under the varying rules governing the historical construction of gender” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 168; emphasis in original). The disordered body is imbued with political valence because its exaggeration of the feminine ideal entails a protest against the unrealistic standards to which women’s bodies are held. However, such a protest’s capacity to effect change at the cultural level is ambiguous at best, as both conditions demonstrate the ways in which a “source of potential for resistance and rebellion is pressed into the service of maintaining the established order” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 177). For example, the Victorian hysteric’s muteness has been viewed as a rejection of the “symbolic order of the patriarchy,” but “muteness is [also] the condition of the silent, uncomplaining women – an ideal of patriarchal culture” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 177). Similarly, while the anorexic may “*feel* autonomous and free [...] harnessing body and soul to an obsessive body-practice is to serve, not transform, a social

order that limits female possibilities (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 179; emphasis in original). In order to resolve this contradiction – that is, that disorder as resistance ultimately strengthens patriarchy’s hold – Bordo argues that “we must *work* to keep our daily practices in the service of resistance to gender domination, not in the service of docility and gender normalization” (*Unbearable Weight* 184; emphasis in original). This thesis aims to explore this contradiction in relation to neo-Victorian representations of disordered or otherwise non-normative female bodies, with particular reference to how such representations navigate the tension between resistance and capitulation to Victorian gender norms. Just as Bordo situates her analysis of anorexia within the contemporary valorisation of the slender ideal that harks back to Victorian-era anxieties surrounding women’s appetites, so too is my analysis of non-normative bodies in eight neo-Victorian novels contextualised in relation to the cultural forces shaping the construction of femininities at the time of their publication whilst also attending to the way in which they harness Victorian ideas about the body to speak to the origins of these forces.

Bordo’s and Bartky’s studies of the cultural construction of ideal femininity and the methods of consumption in relation to imagery of female bodies were largely undertaken in the pre-internet age. While the ubiquity of the internet and personal electronic devices has no doubt changed the way in which the feminine ideal is transmitted and consumed – including through the addition of a range of digitally enabled strategies for self-surveillance – what remains constant is normative femininity’s ability to shape women’s experiences of their bodies, not to mention the bodies themselves. Gill’s more recent analyses of postfeminist media culture shares several parallels with earlier feminist work – like that of Bordo and Bartky – on the way in which dominant cultural discourses contribute to strengthening gender norms (‘Postfeminist Media Culture’ 2007; ‘The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism’ 2017). While Gill notes the contested nature of the term postfeminism – it is “used variously and contradictorily to signal a theoretical position, a type of feminism after the Second Wave, or a regressive political stance” – she argues for a view of postfeminism as a “sensibility” (‘Postfeminist Media Culture’ 147–48, 148). This sensibility is typified by an “obsessive preoccupation with the body” which is itself a product of the “pervasive sexualization of contemporary culture” (‘Postfeminist Media Culture’ 149, 150). Expanding on Bartky’s observation that normative femininity is increasingly defined by aesthetic rather than behavioural characteristics (42), Elias, Gill and Scharff draw attention to the way in which postfeminist culture affords prominence to the body “less for what it can do than for

how it appears” (25). Within this culture, the body is “figured as both the locus of womanhood and the key site of women’s value” (Elias et al. 25). However, not all women’s bodies are valued equally. As Gill observes, contemporary culture values a particular mode of feminine embodiment above all others: the sexy body (‘Postfeminist Media Culture’ 149). However, it is important to remember that this preoccupation with the sexy (or sexual) body is not a new phenomenon: such an obsession also typified Victorian culture, particularly with regard to the mobilisation of medico-scientific understandings of sexual specificity and their uptake in the popular media as a way to bolster existing gender roles. The difference, then, lies less in the focus on female sexual embodiment, and more in the cultural attitudes towards it. For example, where the Victorians valorised passivity and sexlessness in women and constructed any display of sexual desire as deviant (Pykett 16; King 23), postfeminist culture rejects “passive objectification” in favour of women who actively embrace their sexuality (albeit within carefully defined limits) (Gill, ‘Surveillance Is a Feminist Issue’ 151). Notwithstanding this difference in the types of female bodies revered in Victorian and contemporary culture, they share a preoccupation with using these typologies to make distinctions between normative and non-normative bodies, a distinction which marks some women out for preferential treatment while others are cast out.

Just as the Victorian period was typified by its contradictory approach to women’s bodies, so too do women’s bodies continue to occupy a central position in contemporary culture whilst carrying a range of contested meanings. As with the translation of Victorian gender discourse into advertising material and conduct manuals, so too does the translation of postfeminist discourse in mainstream media place women in a double-bind: “On the one hand, young women are hailed through a discourse of ‘can-do girl power’, yet on the other hand, their bodies are powerfully reinscribed as sexual objects; women are presented as active, desiring social subjects, but they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance which has no historical precedent” (Gill, ‘Postfeminist Media Culture’ 163). While Gill’s observation about the unprecedented nature of contemporary surveillance practices has a technological bent particular to late-twentieth and early-twenty first century culture – in that she notes the proliferation of digital technologies like beauty apps and photographic filters among others – it is interesting to note that Shuttleworth makes a similar claim in relation to the surveillance of women in the Victorian period (Shuttleworth, ‘Female Circulation’ 48). Rather than being without precedent, it is thus possible to view the contemporary surveillance of women’s bodies as the continuation of a phenomenon which first accelerated in the nineteenth century,

the key difference being that the former is driven by media and popular culture, while the latter was propelled by medico-scientific discourse.

While the dissemination of images of sexy bodies across both mainstream media and social media platforms media's dissemination of sexiness may seem like a progressive shift compared to the repression of female sexuality in the Victorian era, the fact remains that it continues to function as a coercive demand to conform to normative femininity. However, instead of an "external, male judging gaze" enforcing conformity to a particular type of feminine embodiment, the pressure to conform is "internalized to form a new disciplinary regime" (Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture' 152). Gill couples her analysis of the coercive power of the 'sexy' ideal with her criticism of postfeminist media discourse. This discourse mistakenly subscribes to the "notion that all our practices are freely chosen," which is problematic because it "presents women as entirely free agents and cannot explain why – if women are just pleasing themselves and following their own autonomously generated desires – the resulting valued 'look' is so similar – hairless body, slim waist, firm buttocks, etc." (Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture' 153, 154). Like Bordo and Bartky, Gill looks to women's magazines as a prime example of the pressure placed on women to engage in self-surveillance of their bodies and adopt practices which promise to enhance their 'sexiness' ('Postfeminist Media Culture' 155). Both these magazines and postfeminist media culture more broadly present the body "simultaneously as women's source of power and as always unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and re-modelling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever-narrower judgments about female attractiveness" (Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture' 149). The conflation of sexiness and success encourages women to strive for a sexy body because it commands societal approval, but it is also important to recognise that acquiring such a body requires both economic and personal sacrifices. In this sense, while contemporary media discourse co-opts feminist theory to present women with a vision of themselves as empowered subjects, Gill cautions against assuming that the media has "somehow become feminist and has adopted unproblematically a feminist perspective" ('Postfeminist Media Culture' 161). Taken together, the work of Gill, Bordo, and Bartky demonstrates the persistence of restrictive constructions of normative femininity in the final decades of the twentieth century and on into the opening decades of the twenty-first – some of which have their antecedents in the Victorian past – and the ways in which individual practices are mobilised in the service of conformity or resistance to such ideals.

While Bordo's and, to a lesser extent, Bartky's work on the cultural construction of the female body has been taken up in a limited way by literary scholars, their work has yet to be applied to neo-Victorian fiction.⁵ For instance, Delys Bird brings Bordo's theorisation of the way in which disciplinary practices operate on the female body to bear on her analysis of the relationship between women, food, and the body in contemporary Australian fiction (95); while Mario Benvenuto and Rossella Michienzi apply Bordo's work on the disordered body to Margaret Atwood's exploration of anorexia as resistance in her novel *The Edible Woman* (119). The contemporaneous nature of the publication of Bordo's work and the novels in Bird's study demonstrates its utility for analysing the relationship between textual representations of the body and its status in contemporary culture. Given that Bordo also identifies parallels in attitudes to the female body between the Victorian period and the closing decades of the twentieth century about which she writes – a feature her work shares with one of the central tenets of neo-Victorianism – it is perhaps no surprise that her work has been applied to the study of Victorian fiction, albeit in a limited way. For example, Cheryl A. Wilson argues that the representation of dance in New Woman fiction acts as a signifier of the contested status of women's roles at the *fin-de-siècle* and, more broadly, identifies the shared interest that New Woman writers and contemporary feminist theorists of the body (like Bordo) have in probing the “systems of control” which construct women's bodies as sites of oppression and resistance (‘Mona Caird's Dancing Daughters’ par. 4).

Another key study of Victorian literature's representation of the female body is Anna Silver's *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (2002). Silver applies both Bartky and Bordo's theorisations of the female body to her analysis of Victorian conduct manuals, beauty advice, medical literature, and fiction (20). In particular, Silver builds on Bordo's understanding of the disordered body as emblematic of, rather than antithetical to, the feminine ideal in particular cultures. Silver argues that “control over the body, a fundamental component of Victorian female gender ideology and anorexia nervosa, theoretically links the model of the passionless or self-regulated Victorian woman with the anorexic woman” (11). In addition to this theoretical association, Victorian women also took practical steps to exert control over their bodies in an attempt to meet the slender ideal. Drawing on Bartky's extension of Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, Silver analyses practices such as food refusal (12)

⁵ See, for example, Benvenuto and Michienzi, Bird, Sartain, Sauble-Otto, Vester, and Wilson.

and tight-lacing (32) to demonstrate that power depends on “women’s compliance, as survival strategy or sources of validation, for success” (23). While Silver notes that the form the ideal female body takes is historically contingent and, as such, is subject to continual revision, she stresses that “our attitudes toward the body are still fundamentally ‘Victorian’,” chiefly because contemporary Western cultural discourse “emphasizes and praises discipline over the body to the same extent – if not more so – than does Victorian discourse” (175). Given that the body occupies a pivotal position in the construction and regulation of femininities in both Victorian and contemporary culture, it is critical for any analysis of femininities in neo-Victorian fiction to engage with feminist theorists of the body like Bordo, Bartky, and Gill because their work illuminates the cultural milieus into which various examples of the genre emerge, thus enabling the texts to speak more clearly to their temporal context. This, in turn, enhances our understanding of the way in which these texts reimagine the lives of women who deviate from the Victorian feminine ideal in order to suggest that the marginalisation of non-normatively gendered subjects in contemporary culture is indelibly marked by attitudes from the nineteenth-century past.

Chapter 2: Neo-Victorian Showgirls: Reflecting – or Rejecting – the Voyeuristic Gaze

Nights at the Circus (1984) by Angela Carter and *The Electric Michelangelo* by Sarah Hall (2004) explore modes of resistance to normative femininity through representations of female “freaks” and their participation in body modification practices. In Carter’s novel, the tension between conformity and resistance to normative femininity is explored through bird-woman Fevvers. While Fevvers’ wings would ordinarily see her consigned to the category of the monstrous feminine, she stylises her allegedly congenital deformity in ways that accord with feminine beauty norms and this, in turn, enables her career as a performer. Fevvers’ cultivated persona as a sexually desirable winged wonder exists in constant tension with the non-normatively feminine aspects of her character that are visible off-stage, like her gluttony and size. The focal female character in Hall’s novel also engages in body modification practices by having a series of eye motifs tattooed on her body. Like Fevvers’ wings, Grace’s tattoos are a source of income in the freak show space of Coney Island. However, inherent in both the design itself and Grace’s performance of embodied difference is a challenge to the norms of feminine appearance and the status of the female body as an object of consumption.

Nights at the Circus presents a more optimistic view of the possibilities for female bodily autonomy than *The Electric Michelangelo*. Whereas Carter’s novel strikes a hopeful tone through Ma Nelson and Fevvers’ predictions of women’s imminent freedom from the need to commodify their bodies, Hall’s novel positions moving beyond this history of commodification as a near-impossible task. This suggests that the gains envisioned by Carter have failed to materialise in the intervening two decades separating the novels’ publication. However, I argue that Carter’s optimism is misplaced in that the strategies through which she suggests bodily autonomy can be reclaimed in fact contribute to reinforcing the principles that comprise ideal femininity. While Carter’s novel relies on working within the boundaries of existing social structures to carve out space for women’s corporeal autonomy, Hall is critical of this as a route to bodily freedom. Her novel denies the possibility of erasing traumatic (female) histories to suggest that liberation necessitates an understanding of women’s oppression in both the past and the present. Hall’s female protagonist, Grace, repeatedly voices her determination to move beyond the boundaries of established gender norms when devising potential strategies for achieving greater freedoms for women. Whereas

Nights at the Circus positions the *fin de siècle* as the end of female oppression, Hall points to the timelessness of women's struggle for bodily autonomy by drawing parallels between early twentieth-century Coney Island, Victorian freakery, and the contemporary policing of women's bodies. Grace's project of body modification challenges the dominant cultural construction of female beauty – as pure and unmarked – that works to limit women's corporeal expressions in ways that reaffirm the body's status as an object of male desire.

Situating these novels within a framework of Bakhtinian carnivalesque, Victorian freakery and feminist scholarship on body modification, I argue that Grace cannot rely on her audience, or the journalist Walser, for her sense of corporeal identity as Fevvers does. Unlike Fevvers' wings, Grace's tattoos act as an assertion of corporeal agency that are not dependent upon the gaze of others for their meaning. The difference between the two novels is not so much the mode of resistance – both Fevvers and Grace engage in body modification practices – but the motives behind their performances of non-normative femininity. Driven by fame and greed, Fevvers works to fulfil the prurient desires of her audience. In the process, she becomes complicit in her (sexual) objectification. In contrast, Grace's tattoos act as a direct and deliberate challenge to such sexualisation and, in so doing, allow her to reject narrow definitions of femininity in favour of constructing meanings of the female body that are typified by their multiplicity, individuality, and freedom of expression.

While this chapter does not seek to claim the progressive nature of neo-Victorianism as a whole, it does aim to demonstrate that focusing on representations of non-normative embodiment complicates the notion of “political correctness in retro-Victorian fiction” as a “fashionable attitude, not an ideological battle” (Gutleben, *Nostalgic Postmodernism* 170). For instance, in Hall's novel Grace positions her body outside the realm of normative feminine appearance as a way of intervening in the commodification of women's bodies according to male-authored constructions of sexual desirability (Şerban 190). Fevvers' trajectory, on the other hand, demonstrates the benefits that come with a certain level of conformity – her body may be unusual in form, but she nonetheless fashions her appearance with the intention of being desirable and attractive to a thrill-seeking but ultimately conservative audience. Admittedly, this is somewhat of a forced choice: unlike Grace, whose tattoos can be hidden by clothing if she so chooses, Fevvers' wings are a “conspicuous deformity” that inhibit her ability to pass as a normatively embodied subject off-stage (Carter 18). Fevvers' attempts to conceal her embodied difference with clothing have the unintended

consequence of producing the appearance of an altogether different deformity: “on the street, at the soirée, at lunch in expensive restaurants [...] she was always the cripple” (Carter 18). As I will demonstrate in Chapter 5 in relation to cross-dressing subjects Pity and James Miranda Barry, the subversion of boundaries – able-bodied/freak, male/female, normatively/non-normatively gendered – may be permissible in performative spaces like the circus, brothel, or music hall stage, but such permissibility is conditional upon the subject’s ability to pass as ‘normal’ in everyday life.

Both Fevvers and Grace benefit from the protection of spaces in which subversion is the norm. Ma Nelson’s brothel, Schreck’s museum, Kearney’s circus, and even the stage at the Alhambra where Fevvers first meets Walser, are all designed to house displays of non-normative embodiment that would attract ridicule or censure in the outside world. While Hall’s novel creates an equivalence between the travelling carnivals which frequented English seaside towns and their permanent invocation in the form of Coney Island, *Nights at the Circus* carefully demarcates between the various performative spaces inhabited by Fevvers, highlighting the differing levels of agency permissible in each space. For instance, Fevvers is equally vulnerable to the whims of Ma Nelson and Madam Schreck in the brothel and museum respectively, the only difference is the attitude of her captors. While Nelson’s benevolence protects Fevvers – she is put on display, but never offered for more than visual consumption – Schreck’s greed and malice sees her denied wages and sold to one of the brothel’s clients, Rosencreutz. In contrast to these spaces, the stage and the circus offer Fevvers comparative freedom, in that she is able to negotiate the nature and terms of her employment (with Lizzie’s help). In this way, the novel reveals that even among spaces which trade in licentiousness, there are varying degrees of repute and respect afforded to the performers within them.⁶ While Fevvers experiences greater autonomy in the circus and the theatre, it is nonetheless true that her level of freedom in *all* of these spaces, including the brothel and museum, is conditional upon her capitulation to the phallogocentric construction of woman-as-spectacle and the female body as sexual object. Fevvers’ performance as a bird-woman trades on her audience’s fascination with her liminality, particularly in the brothel and museum spaces which are designed to appeal to men. While Fevvers’ feathers allow her to court the divide between human and animal, she is careful to avoid a definitive

⁶ I return to this continuum later with regard to nineteenth-century freak shows and the tension between agency and exploitation faced by Victorian performers.

identification with either – as demonstrated by her slogan “Is she fact or is she fiction?” – lest she be persecuted for transgressing the laws of nature (Carter 3). Calculated though this strategy is, it also reveals the extent to which Fevvers’ relies on her audience for her sense of identity in contrast to Grace, who views her performance as a tattooed wonder as a strategy for critiquing the male gaze. Upon being presented with Grace’s ocular design, Cy realises that she has chosen it for its ability to convey this critique: “Even as he looked at the eye it looked back, so that he couldn’t really see it and have it be assessed – not in the way that seen things are taken and consumed by the viewer [...] The eye out-manoeuvred his gaze, it failed to be inanimate and resisted being used or judged as an object” (Hall 258). Grace intends for her tattoos to have the same effect on her audience as they do on Cy, in that she wants them to disrupt the audience’s association of women, and women performers in particular, with objects of consumption.

Scholarship about neo-Victorian fiction often focuses on the ethical quandary of representing Victorian sexualities. The central tenet of such arguments lies in the notion that neo-Victorian fiction is complicit in the exploitation of vulnerable subjects because its use of explicit sexual material is a calculated move designed to appeal to its readership’s desire for salacious content rather than a strategy for engaging with contemporary socio-political debates about gender and sexuality (see Gutleben 170 and Kohlke, ‘Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel’ 55). For Kohlke “the ‘fine’ and novel aim of historical inquiry and exposé is the pretence [...] that potentially masks a self-indulgent prurient voyeurism” (Kohlke, ‘Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel’ 54). In Carter’s novel, Fevvers markets her bird-woman status to a voyeuristic audience but her performance lacks the subversive quality of Grace’s deliberate inversion of the gaze. She celebrates the idea of body-as-spectacle, courting the (male) gaze in the performance spaces of the brothel, the museum, and the circus in an attempt to fulfil her desire for fame, fortune, and the independence she assumes these will grant her. For example, despite sensing Rosencreutz’s predatory nature Fevvers agrees to a private audience with him because “what Mr Rosencreutz is willing to pay for the privilege of busting a scrap of cartilage was quite sufficient to set my entire family up in comfort” (Carter 92).

In Hall’s novel, the heavily-tattooed Grace is both revered – as a curio in the circus-like setting of Coney Island in the 1940s – and feared for her subversion of feminine beauty norms both on and off stage. While Grace also courts the gaze through performance, she does

so in order to disrupt the very premise it is built on: that women's utility lies in their ability to conform to externally imposed definitions of female beauty and sexual desirability. For Grace, the eye tattoos are a form of resistance to these definitions and, more broadly, the patriarchal ownership of women's bodies. She tells Cy that without the tattoos "my body already belongs to them. I don't care if it is not thought of as beauty. I don't need it to be" (Hall 272). In contrast to the claim of voyeuristic prurience Kohlke levels at the genre, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn argue that "in exploring the resistance of their fictional protagonists to actual abuses in the past, neo-Victorian fiction by women seeks to overwrite the pornographic 'edutainment' of our contemporary present" (*Neo-Victorianism* 140). I take up this notion of "overwriting" in my analysis of *Nights and the Circus* and *The Electric Michelangelo* to demonstrate that their reimaginings of the female freak creates a space for readers to reflect upon the status of women in contemporary culture and their continued struggle for bodily autonomy.

While *The Electric Michelangelo* has thus far attracted scant critical attention, there is a wealth of criticism devoted to Carter's works. In particular, *Nights at the Circus* has divided critics over its status as a utopian novel. Some, like Andrzej Gąsiorek and Abigail Dennis, limit the novel's utopian vision to its turn-of-the-century setting. Gąsiorek argues that Carter "rewrites history as utopia, envisaging the closing of the last century as the opening of a brave new feminist world" (126), while Dennis links Carter's novel to the mood of hopefulness which pervaded the women's movement in this era (129). However, any attempt to capture such a mood necessitates a form of rewriting which is inevitably inflected by the needs of the present. This approach has led others like Jeannette King and Magali Cornier Michael to interpret the novel's optimism as transcending its setting to comment upon the status of women in the contemporary context of its mid-1980s publication. For Michael, "the novel does not merely point out the oppression of women by a male-dominated system [...] it offers potential solutions" (513). I argue that the novel is indeed utopian in its vision, but that the strategies through which it suggests this vision be realised have limitations. This is because the solutions Carter offers are bound up with the self-same constructions of ideal femininity that contribute to women's oppression. This is particularly evident in relation to Fevvers, whose identity formation is closely tied to the male gaze and, more specifically, to heterosexual marriage. King begins to tease out this contradiction by suggesting that Fevvers' desire for Walser contradicts the New Woman tenet of total independence from men (142). That the narrative should end with Fevvers' marriage to Walser, despite both hers and

Lizzie's vocal opposition to the institution, speaks to a conventionality that calls into question the radical nature of Carter's utopian vision. Comparing Fevvers' trajectory to that of Grace in *The Electric Michelangelo* reveals alternative strategies for female empowerment that are not reliant on an institution that historically existed as a means for transferring ownership of women between their fathers and their husbands.

Another dominant thread in criticism of Carter's works is that of intertextuality. This is most commonly theorised in terms of the extent to which Carter incorporates references to the work of other writers and filmmakers in her published works. For instance, critics have identified intertextual relationships between Carter and Jonathan Swift (Hunt), William Butler Yeats (Sinowitz), Charles Dickens (Duggan), and filmmaker Federico Fellini (Peach). In her introduction to a collection devoted to intertextuality in Carter's fiction, Rebecca Munford argues that such readings "provide an opportunity to re-visit the ambivalences, fissures and pleasures of her work" (5). While examining Carter's engagement with other works undoubtedly adds to an appreciation of the complexity of her writing, the scarcity of criticism exploring her influence on other writers results in an incomplete picture of her work's longevity and import. Indeed, Linden Peach campaigns for a "fuller discussion of the feminist and post-feminist works for which Carter paved the way" in order to highlight "how Carter's fiction is situated not just in theoretical debates over representation but in concrete issues around social relations" (190).⁷ In neo-Victorian criticism, this discussion has largely focused upon the connections between Carter and Sarah Waters, particularly with regard to *Affinity* (Kohlke, 'Into History through the Back Door') and *Tipping the Velvet* (King). Both King and Marie-Luise Kohlke read Waters' novels as a pessimistic response to *Nights at the Circus*' utopian vision. In analysing the intertextual relationship between *The Electric Michelangelo* and *Nights at the Circus*, this chapter expands the range of texts that are considered as forming a part of Carter's legacy. In so doing, it aligns Hall's novel with the pessimistic bent critics have identified in Waters' fiction and explores the basis for neo-Victorian fiction's increasing scepticism toward the possibility of a feminist utopia from the turn-of-the-millennium onwards. While *Affinity* reveals the reliance on the fantastic to be an

⁷ In recognition of the fact that post-feminism is a contested term, it is important to note here that Peach's use of the term is aligned with post-feminism as a revisionary process, rather than as a disavowal of earlier feminisms.

ineffectual means of escape⁸, *The Electric Michelangelo* rejects the fantastic entirely. Instead, Hall adopts a realist approach to the representation of non-normative femininity, which she positions as the key to disrupting the phallogentric cultural norms that continue to circumscribe women's freedom of embodied expression.

Victorian Freakery

Both Carter's and Hall's novels are intimately concerned with the figure of the nineteenth-century freak – Fevvers in her guise as a winged circus aerialist and Grace as a heavily tattooed performer in an amusement park. Despite the enduring interest in the freak body in popular culture, freakery was largely ignored in academic circles until the late twentieth century. The evolution of what has been loosely termed 'freak studies' dates from the mid-1970s, complete with its own history of trends, from the social constructivist perspective of Robert Bogdan in the 1980s, which held that freaks were actively engaged in their commodification, to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's invocation of literary analysis and historiography a decade later, which focused on the cultural and temporal specificity of defining 'normality' and the role of the 'abnormal' body as a receptacle for societal anxieties (see Garland-Thomson ix–x). Carter's novel aligns with Bogdan's work both temporally and thematically, in that both view the freak's performance through the lens of economic necessity, rather than as a route to corporeal freedom, though the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. While careful not to betray her pecuniary motives to her audience, Fevvers is nonetheless motivated by a desire for riches: "You did not think of calculation when you saw her, so finely judged was her performance. You'd never think she dreamed, at nights, of bank accounts, or that, to her, the music of the spheres was the jingling of cash registers" (Carter 9). Bogdan and Garland-Thomson's approaches converge in Marlene Tromp's edited collection, *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain* (2008), where Christopher Smit argues that the Victorian freak ought to be viewed as "an entrepreneurial figure", as an active subject rather than perennially disempowered object (291–92). Rebecca Stern, writing in the same collection, argues for a similarly progressive view of the transformative potential of freak discourse: "alongside viewers' capacities to feel

⁸ *Affinity's* protagonist, Margaret, is taken in by Selina's purported status as a medium. Mistaking Selina's trickery for supernatural abilities, Margaret is duped into aiding Selina's escape from prison, only to be discarded once Selina is reunited with her lover, the maid Ruth.

horror, superiority, or pity, that is, there is the potential for them also to experience feelings of association or alliance that are engaged and ethically conscious” (224–25). My analysis of *The Electric Michelangelo* is informed by this more recent approach, in that I read Grace’s performance of the freak body as an informed and deliberate campaign for female bodily autonomy. Her project resonates with contemporary women readers, who continue to grapple with the legacy of the inequalities embedded in nineteenth-century gender ideology which inform current cultural attitudes toward normative femininity.

While this chapter focuses on Fevvers’ and Grace’s capacity for agency in their performances of freakery, this does not deny the uses and abuses to which the freak body was frequently put in the Victorian era, nor does it seek to claim that all neo-Victorian novels are free from such exploitation. As Helen Davies notes, texts which reproduce, rather than self-consciously engage with, the Victorian (and modern) desire for spectacle fall short of an ethical engagement with the historical figure of the freak (*Neo-Victorian Freakery* 13). However, like Davies, I argue that it is crucial to challenge the idea that freakery is synonymous with oppression (see *Neo-Victorian Freakery* 6), in order to expand the possibilities of enfreaked embodiment to include empowered subjects. To illustrate this need, Davies contrasts Victorian representations of the nineteenth-century giantess Anna Swan as a “passive” figure (*Neo-Victorian Freakery* 101) with Susan Swan’s fictional re-imagining of her in *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (1983). In Swan’s novel, Anna “takes ownership of her performance and self-presentation, and this is framed as a feminist strategy” (Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery* 104). I argue that Grace’s performance of self as spectacle engages in a similarly deliberate assertion of feminist agency. Unlike many of her real-life counterparts, who were coerced or coaxed into a life of performing by profit-hungry managers, Grace’s self-made enfreakment is freely chosen and calculated to play on the public desire for entertainment: “No point in paying to see the Lady of Many Eyes if you can see her tattoos on the street when she walks, is there? The people will only stare when they have paid bucks to stare and they are stared back at” (Hall 271). While Nadja Durbach argues that the “very act of displaying one’s body publicly rendered the female performer, regardless of the content and nature of the performance, a sexual object” (147), reading Grace as complicit in her objectification ignores the fact that, simply by virtue of being a woman, she is always already looked at. Fittingly, Cy describes a sailor’s whistle directed at Grace as “a last flush arrow aimed at her composure with a message tied to its shaft saying she was still a woman after all, and this fact alone had drawn the man’s bow” (Hall 243). As Victoria Pitts argues,

the “unmarked female body [...] can be found neither in history nor in anthropology; in the lives of contemporary women, it appears not simply as an ideal type but as a myth” (75–76). Given that the female body is always already marked, Grace’s ability to inscribe and perform a self-determined version of her body represents an empowering, rather than exploitative, engagement with historical freakery and its modern-day equivalents. The allure of the freak body is, in part, drawn from a self-conscious fascination with one’s own body. In viewing the freak, the spectator is able to displace his/her own bodily anxieties onto the ‘Other’ and, in this way, “Coney could hypnotize the crowds with their own fantasies and squeamishness made external” (Hall 189). As Joyce Huff demonstrates:

Freakified bodies are represented as existing in a binary relationship to the norm. The logic upon which this binary is constructed aligns nonstigmatized bodies with the cultural ideal. What this opposition offers to subjects whose bodies are thus defined as normal is the illusion of freedom from the uncertainties, flux, and grotesqueries of bodily existence. This fiction can only be maintained, however, by the continued and systematic devaluation of the freakified body [...] (44–45)

The denigration of the freak is thus essential to maintaining the reassuring distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and this, in part, is the attraction of Coney Island: “voyeurism was key [...] that pivotal ocular quality to anything on offer. The devouring eye” (Hall 185). The freak embodies the somewhat contradictory tension between staging the grotesque for public consumption and, at the same time, concealing the performative nature of constructing the self as freak from that same public, so as not to disrupt the illusion of watching the ‘Other’. The audience, for its part, is equally implicated in this contractual exchange: its members perform both their fascination and repulsion at the freak’s ‘Otherness’, while denying the similarities that would threaten to collapse the freak/normal divide. The subversive potential of Grace’s bodily modification lies in her deliberate disruption of the ease of distinction between audience and freak. As her body recovers from the tattoo needle, it begins to turn its gaze outward: “There was a large scabby, healing tattoo exactly centre on the flesh of her stomach, already observing the world through its conjunctive, crusted eye. It looked like something deformed from one of the freak shows” (Hall 271). Far from offering her body up for consumption, Grace’s visual ‘deformity’ is the very quality that allows her to resist such devouring gazes, because it forces her audience to examine their own bodily permutations. If the audience cannot enforce the boundaries between their bodies and Grace’s, then they, too, become freakified as objects of her voyeuristic gaze.

The distinction made by freak studies between viewer and performer and their respective associations with the educated and the educator, seems at odds with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival, in which the identities of performer and audience are simultaneously enacted by all participants (see Bakhtin 7). Fevvers, in courting the gaze, is more interested in maintaining this distinction between herself as spectacle and her audience as spectators. In contrast, Grace, in returning the gaze of her 'audience', is both viewer and viewed and, as such, these categories are once again collapsed as the inhabitants of and visitors to Coney Island engage in the collective project of looking and being looked at. In this way, carnival participants gain an awareness of the permeable boundaries between bodies that, in other spaces, are unquestionably considered to be discrete entities. However, the confinement of such subversive expressions to the carnival space casts doubt upon whether such progressive modes of embodiment are possible in the outside world. For Marlene Tromp and Karyn Valerius, freakery is inherently context-dependent – the status of the freak body changes across temporal, geographical, and historical space (4). This chapter thus engages not only with the historical specificities of Victorian freakery as represented in Carter's and Hall's novels, but also, the continuing relevance of such attitudes in twenty-first century culture. This raises questions about how the neo-Victorian invocation of freak discourse intersects with contemporary body politics. How might the literary representation of the Victorian freak, and its descendants, speak to ongoing debates about the normalisation of sexual exploitation of the female body, and the importance of embodied acts of resistance?

Hall's narrative begins in the English seaside town of Morecambe Bay, where Reeda Parks runs a hotel for consumptives and an underground abortion clinic. The novel follows the life her son, Cy, a tattoo artist who moves to Coney Island to practice his craft. In the amusement park space of Coney Island, Cy is surrounded by performers with various bodily modifications that attract crowds seeking leisure and entertainment, not unlike the visitors to Morecambe itself. It is here that Cy meets Grace, a performer who commissions him to tattoo her entire body, excluding her face and hands, with eye motifs. The design is based on an "almost-hieroglyphic, black-rimmed, black-lashed" image Grace tears from a book (Hall 247). The "old and parchment-like" quality of the paper (Hall 254), coupled with the well-documented Victorian cultural obsession with Egypt (see Richards 17), hints at the image's nineteenth century origins. The placement of Grace's tattoos under her clothing also reflects a common strategy among female tattooed performers of the Victorian era, whose ability to conceal their tattoos allowed them "full (albeit feminine) freedom in public" (Braunberger

12).⁹ Though Grace views her tattoos as a way to assert her bodily autonomy, she also monetises them by making them the centrepiece of her freak show performance. However, this visibility makes her vulnerable to attack from those who see her transgression of feminine beauty norms as an affront to the modesty and decorum phallogentric culture expects of women.

Although Hall's novel is set during the opening decades of the twentieth century, she consistently invokes Victorian-era freak show imagery in her depiction of the novel's twinned amusement spaces. Morecambe Bay and its US double, Coney Island, are constructed as crumbling legacies of the Victorian fascination with freaks, where non-normative bodies were celebrated as objects of pseudo-scientific study and commoditised for the pleasure of a viewing public. As Durbach argues, "despite claims to be exhibiting an 'authentic' body, what was on display was in fact staged, posed, and narrated in ways that belie any attempt to suggest that [...] these were unmediated human specimens whose bodies were transparently legible" (47). Far from freakery being a self-evident condition, performers within carnival spaces like Coney Island were engaged in a process of constant mediation, whereby their embodied presentations were continually re-worked to appeal to the spectators of the day. Indeed, as tattooed freaks became more common in the late Victorian era, performers went to ever greater extremes to maintain their sensational status by inking larger surfaces of skin with increasingly unusual images (Fisher 96). The artificiality of freak bodies is also evident – and capitalised upon – in the seaside location of Cy's childhood: "Children annually sold tickets for tours to see the local boggarts, monsters, spirits and wee folk of the area [...]. The boggarts themselves ranged from convenient stray dogs, vagrant tramps and

⁹ In the early Victorian period, tattooing was associated with savagery and primitivism due to a history of colonial encounters with tattooed indigenous peoples, some of whom were returned to Europe and exhibited as a precursor to Western tattooed performers (DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription* 47, 49). Though Westerners increasingly began to take up the practice, tattooing remained largely invisible in Victorian Britain (Bradley 137), as prior to the 1880s, it was confined to the working classes, sailors, and criminals (Fisher 94). However, with the invention of the electric tattoo machine in the late nineteenth century (estimations vary from the 1870s-1890s; see Fisher 95), tattoos became more accessible. This advancement coincided with both a fad among the upper classes for tattoos (Fisher 95) and the emergence of female tattooed performers in circuses and freak shows (DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription* 58; Mifflin v). However, by the mid-twentieth century, the popularity of tattooed freaks had waned as the public's appetite for sensation grew harder to satisfy (Fisher 96). Grace's ahistorical popularity as a performer in this period thus demonstrates the novel's collapsing of temporal boundaries between 1940s New York and nineteenth-century Britain, while her departure from Coney after Sedak's attack cements the status of tattooing as a crumbling legacy of the Victorian era – a trend reversed in the later twentieth century.

drunks, to friends and younger siblings dressed in raggedy clothing with twigs entwined in their hair and mud on their faces” (Hall 36). Similar to Carter's Victorians, Cy and other opportunistic youth play to the public fascination with the abnormal in the early twentieth century, itself a legacy from the Victorian age. In this way, the supposedly ‘normal’ space of Morecambe becomes enfreaked through the entrepreneurial tactics of its youth and comes to act as a forerunner – a kind of travelling carnival – for the purpose-built Coney Island.

The amusement park space of Coney Island engages in a meta-performance of both the Victorian freak show and its more immediate antecedent, Morecambe Bay. When Cy arrives in Coney Island, the allusions to Morecambe are immediately apparent: “it was Morecambe gone putrid and suffering without any of its former inhibitions [...] As if this truly was the nation’s purgatory, where any prurient display was advocated, any misdemeanour was acquitted, any sin suspended before a hopelessly hung celestial jury” (Hall 186–87). Morecambe and Coney are constructed as holding pens for societal excess: spaces in which the viewing public can excise their forbidden desires before returning, cleansed, to ‘normal’ life. The nineteenth-century freak show served a similar purpose: it provided an outlet for the Victorian obsession with the abnormal – a clandestine fascination with the body’s capacity to leak from its social confines – and re-affirmed the spectator’s own performance of normalcy and propriety. For Smit, the Victorian freaks’ “employment of their own bodies, as objects, was made a lucrative process by a cultural and economic milieu of spectacle and fascination” (292). However, this is not to suggest that the freak is a pre-existing or natural identity that simply benefitted from a period of fashionable exposure. Much like the gendered body, the freak body is equally constructed and performed for particular purposes in particular spaces.

In contrast, *Nights at the Circus* is unambiguously neo-Victorian, set as it is in 1899 with frequent flashbacks to Fevvers’ earlier life. The novel opens with an interview that takes place between American journalist Jack Walser and Fevvers at the Alhambra theatre in London after one of Fevvers’ performances. Walser’s intention to include this interview in his series “Great Humbugs of the World” (Carter 8) indicates that he has already reached a conclusion as to Fevvers’ status as bird or woman and seeks only to confirm his pre-existing supposition. In the course of the interview, Fevvers recounts her childhood: a foundling, adopted by prostitute-come-housekeeper Lizzie, Fevvers grows up in the surrounds of Ma Nelson’s brothel. Nelson, a cross-dressing Madam, is the first to recognise the performative potential of Fevvers’ wings – the emergence of which, at age 14, coincides with Fevvers’

entry into puberty – styling her as “cupid” and putting her on display for the pleasure of the brothel’s male clientele. Following Nelson’s death and the breakup of the brothel, Fevvers agrees to become an exhibit in Madame Schreck’s Museum of Woman Monsters. However, like Fevvers, Schreck is motivated by greed and sells Fevvers to the wealthy Rosencreutz, who is convinced that Fevvers is the Angel of Death and that, by sacrificing her, he will achieve immortality. Here, Fevvers performs the first of her fantastical escapes from the clutches of a powerful, domineering man; the second comes after her stint in St Petersburg with Colonel Kearney’s circus, when she dodges capture by the Grand Duke who, like Schreck, wants her for an exhibit in his collection of curios. Infatuated by Fevvers after his all-night interview, Walser goes undercover as a clown in Kearney’s circus so that he may follow her to Russia. Though they are briefly separated when the Circus disbands, the novel ends with their reunion and marriage.

In order to receive recognition as a freak, Fevvers’ staging of her body must accord with her audience’s desire for spectacle. As such, she engages in a process whereby her identity as both woman and freak is continually made and re-made through performance. Fevvers tells Walser: “My feathers, sir! I dye them! Don’t think I bore such gaudy colours from puberty! I commenced to dye my feathers at the start of my public career on the trapeze, in order to simulate more perfectly the tropic bird” (Carter 24–25). By taking measures to enhance the aesthetic appeal of her “natural” deformity Fevvers demonstrates the highly constructed nature of the freak’s performance at the same time as fulfilling the role of woman as decorative object. While Abigail Dennis argues that “Eroticism, rather than monstrosity, defines her identity as performer and celebrity,” (117) I argue that these characteristics are not so easily disentangled. Fevvers’ monstrosity is the precondition for her career as a performer and her celebrity status – without it, she is just another foundling destined for a career as a prostitute in Ma Nelson’s brothel. Her success as a performer, however, lies in her ability to transform her monstrous identity – through the use of dyes, costumes, and makeup – into one that delights rather than revolts her audience. Fevvers’ self-conscious enhancement of her wings thus suggests that her monstrosity is the source of, rather than anathema to, her sexual appeal. The maintenance of her sexual and, more broadly, visual appeal as a performer depends upon her continual assertion of bodily ambiguity. In contrast, Grace’s performance disrupts the normative status of female-body-as-sexual-object because her subversion of feminine norms is *too* visible. That is, unlike Fevvers, she embraces her freak identity, rather than seeking to subsume it under a more conventionally feminine aesthetic. The motivation

behind Fevvers' work to achieve this delicate balance is articulated by Walser thus: "If she were indeed a *lusus naturae*, a prodigy, then - she was no longer a wonder. She would no longer be an extraordinary woman, no more the Greatest *Aerialiste* in the world but - a freak. Marvellous, indeed, but a marvellous monster" (Carter 188 emphasis in original). The demands of the audience place certain restrictions on Fevvers' corporeal autonomy. She must continually keep her spectators, Walser among them, guessing as to the "true" nature of her deformity, or risk losing their favour. Fevvers is free only in so far as she performs within the limits, albeit on the very edge of those limits, of acceptable feminine decorum.

While Hall's novel depicts freaks as active subjects, Carter's representation of freakified bodies is more ambiguous. In *Nights at the Circus*, the freak body and, in particular, the female freak body, is vulnerable to exploitation. For instance, the five women – and one hermaphrodite – who form the exhibits in Madame Schreck's museum of women monsters, are robbed of both their economic and personal liberty: "the moment that her front door shut behind you, you were her prisoner; indeed, you were her slave" (Carter 70). While Schreck performs a similar function to that of a brothel madam, in that she orchestrates her captives' interactions with the museum's male clientele, the women and Albert/Albertina are not permitted to leave the premises nor, like Fevvers, are they paid their promised wages (Carter 70). Despite the abundance of criticism directed at *Nights at the Circus* as a whole, scant attention has been paid to Madame Schreck as an exploitative figure. One exception is Anna Hunt's work on the intertextual relationship between *Gulliver's Travels* and *Nights at the Circus*, where she cites Schreck's museum as an example of the way in which "these texts assemble a viewing gallery of anti-Venuses, a collection which questions idealized ideas of femininity" (135). However, while the museum may indeed act as a "lumber room of femininity" (Carter 78), the captive status of the women within it demonstrates that the novel's challenge to normative models of femininity is not as revolutionary as Hunt suggests. Fevvers describes Schreck as a "wicked puppet that pulled its own strings" (Carter 65), and, while it is true that she enjoys both authority and personal freedom, it comes at the expense of other women. The human exhibits in Schreck's museum have no more autonomy than their inanimate counterparts in other such museums. Indeed, the exploitative and restrictive nature of life in Schreck's museum is not dissimilar to Wendy Wallace's portrayal of the Victorian asylum in *The Painted Bridge*, which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. Schreck sequesters the women in a cellar-cum-crypt and they are only permitted upstairs if a gentleman, upon touring the museum, requests (and pays Schreck a

premium for) a private audience. In an allusion to the underworld, the crypt is referred to as “Down Below” or “The Abyss” and contains a series of “profane altars” on which the women perform (Carter 68). This allusion to hell, coupled with the prison-like environment, reinforces the idea of female and hermaphroditic freak bodies as both dangerous and defiled. In the world above-ground, the grotesque bodies of Schreck’s exhibits pose a threat to established gender norms and power relations and, as such, the museum exists to contain this threat by imprisoning their bodies in an institution which exists solely to satisfy male desire.

Though Fevvers escapes both Schreck’s museum and her subsequent capture by Rosencreutz, she makes no attempt to conceal her “visual defiance of femininity” (Hunt 153). Instead, she commits to making a spectacle of her wings in return for economic gain. In part, this is little more than a practical response to the tenuous position of the nineteenth-century freak, as Lizzie is well aware: “All you can do to earn your living is to make a show of yourself. You’re doomed to that. You must give pleasure to the eye, or else you’re good for nothing. For you, it’s always a symbolic exchange in the marketplace; you couldn’t say you were engaged in productive labour, now, could you, girl?” (Carter 217). Lizzie’s remark suggests that Fevvers’ survival is dependent on her ability to mobilise her only asset – her embodied difference – in service of courting the gaze. Excluded from traditional channels of economic security, such as marriage or other forms of labour, the freak’s body was often their only available source of income. The passage above attests to both Lizzie’s Marxist ideological bent (Michael 493), as well as the extent to which phallogentric culture equates women’s value with their appearance and attractiveness to men. As Dennis argues “Fevvers chooses to sell the spectacle of herself, her consciously performed freakish sexuality, because she is aware that as a woman – and a bird-woman at that – she has no choice but to be the focus of the masculine gaze” (123). The lack of viable alternatives for these human spectacles has led some critics to conclude that the economic necessity of performance diminishes the extent to which this can be viewed as a kind of freedom. According to Smit, “the dark reality is that in order to capitalize on their own freak identity, these performers had to concede, and buy into, a market that no doubt caused a great deal of harm” (292). However, I argue that the problem is not so much with economic necessity, but with the lengths to which Fevvers is willing to go to secure financial benefit. After taking up residence at Madame Schreck’s, Fevvers muses: “Then it comes to me how I might never leave this place, now I have come here of my own free will; that I have voluntarily incarcerated myself among the damned, for the sake of money, even if from the best of motives; that my doom has come upon me” (Carter 66).

Though Fevvers' enters Schreck's museum on the premise of saving Lizzie's family from poverty, her confinement there forces her to reflect on her prudence of prioritising wealth over personal freedom; though, as her encounter with the Grand Duke reveals, the lesson is short-lived. While Grace participates in the freak economy in order to destabilise it, Fevvers seeks to profit from it with little regard to its ethical quandaries. This is not to say that Grace does not profit from her body; her stage performance is undoubtedly designed to attract paying spectators, but she is more driven by the desire to disrupt the relationship between performer and spectator than she is by the promise of riches: "They will pay to see me looking back at them. It will be a good joke. It will be funny, like being the invisible woman" (Hall 272). In this way, Grace's motives are more closely aligned with Lizzie in *Nights at the Circus*, in that they both possess a certain revolutionary zeal for societal change with regard to that status of women.

The objectification of women's bodies is a recurring theme in *Nights at the Circus*. However, just as the freak show reveals more about its spectators than the freak bodies who perform in it, so too does objectification shed light on the phallogentrism which produces it. This is particularly the case with Ma Nelson's clientele, who justify their behaviour through denigration of the prostitute's body: "Though some of the customers would swear that the whores do it for pleasure, that is only to ease their own consciences, so that they will feel less foolish when they fork out hard cash for pleasure that has no real existence unless given freely" (Carter 42). Framing prostitution as an act motivated by female desire allows Nelson's clients to avoid confronting both the ethics of their actions and the material conditions which lead to the commodification of women's bodies for male pleasure. King argues that "prostitution is represented here not as evidence of female insanity, but as a rational choice" (139). While Ma Nelson's prostitutes appear to share this view of their labour, with Fevvers asserting they were "working women doing it for money" (Carter 41), they nonetheless function as a means to externalise the corporeal anxieties of their clientele. The same is true of the visitors to Madame Schreck's museum, where "women are literally cast as museum objects to be viewed and consumed" (Michael 510). As with the prostitutes in Nelson's brothel, the prime motivation for the consumption of Schreck's freaks is one of displacement because "it is only by comparison with stigmatized subjects that "normal" ones appear free" (Huff 44-45).

Like Ma Nelson's customers, Schreck's patrons participate in the denigration of the freak bodies housed within the museum. In so doing, they create an artificial divide between the self and the spectacle by transferring their own depraved desires onto the freaks' bodies in a manner which belies the fact that "there was no terror in the house our customers did not bring with them" (Carter 70). In order to reassert their own normality, Schreck's customers must actively participate in the illusion that the source of such terror lies in the freaks' embodied difference rather than their own minds. The primary role of the freaks and prostitutes in Carter's novel is thus to allay male anxieties, be they sexual or existential. This is in direct contrast to Hall's novel, where Grace's performance of freakery is borne of a desire to frustrate her audience's ability to displace their fears onto her body, thus forcing them to question their belief in their own normalcy.

Carnival, Spectacle, and the (Male) Gaze

Mikhail Bakhtin's foundational work on the grotesque examines carnival culture in Europe during the Middle Ages. His reading of carnival provides a useful lens for understanding Grace's and Fevvers' performances of non-normative embodiment. According to Bakhtin, "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom" (Bakhtin 7). In Hall's novel, Coney Island is one such carnival space where the divisions between spectator and performer are continually challenged. It provides its performers, Grace among them, with a venue for self-expression outside the confines of New York society. As a liminal space, Coney Island suggests the possibility for boundary transgression and the potential for the modification of existing social orders. For Cy, the island is "[h]orrific proof that the Victorian era could not invoke and conjure the black soul of the Gothic and eternally suppress its darker energy with mere cages of ornament and primness and order" (Hall 190–91). Coney Island's boundedness is thus not only geographic, but temporal, as it becomes a kind of Victorian time capsule which allows visitors to disregard its relevance to the 'outside' world of the present. However, it is also imbued with subversive potential – the possibility that the underbelly of Victorian society will ultimately leak from Coney's attempt to contain it. In this way, the novel contests Bakhtin's assertion that such a conception of the carnival is lost in the modern canon. Bakhtin identifies a trend,

beginning with the Romantics and persisting in contemporary literature, which has seen grotesque imagery stripped of its positive, universalist pole (Bakhtin 26). The grotesque body itself is a key site of this transformation: no longer “a body in the act of becoming”, it is instead “an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body” (Bakhtin 317, 320). However, Hall’s depiction of bodies, and, chiefly, freak or non-normative bodies, is far more reflective of the fluid, unbounded body of the Middle Ages than the restricted body of modernity. In disrupting the status quo to return to this model of the body, Hall suggests that the potential for female autonomy lies in the reclamation of the body’s boundlessness that modernity has sought to quash in favour of a more docile, less threatening body. However, she does so by staging this reclamation in the bounded neo-Victorian space of Coney Island, which suggests that such fluid modes of embodiment may still be subject to censure outside the carnival world.

In order to account for the specificity of Fevvers’ and Grace’s performances of freakery, it is important to acknowledge Bakhtin’s shortcomings with regard to gender. Mary Russo’s feminist intervention in Bakhtin’s theorisation of the grotesque highlights his failure “to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic, and thus his notion of the Female Grotesque remains in all directions repressed and undeveloped” (63). To redress Bakhtin’s gender blindness, Russo analyses various performances of non-normative female bodies to argue that such displays form part of the strategy to reclaim traditionally male-occupied spaces within the carnival sphere and, by extension, intervene in political and ideological debates concerning female bodily autonomy (26). The search for autonomy is also a key feature of feminist debates surrounding female body modification. For instance, several scholars theorise female tattooing as an active and empowering practice that has the potential to contest dominant power relations (see Braunberger 3; MacCormack 64, 79; and Mifflin ii). Approaching the novel in this way enables us to understand Grace’s tattoos and Fevvers’ wings as performative acts which attempt to overwrite the cultural and critical silence toward women’s assertions of bodily autonomy.

In contrast to Coney Island, carnival spaces in *Nights at the Circus* reinforce, rather than subvert, the established order. Carter’s carnival spaces are thus more closely aligned with Lauren Langman’s interpretation of Bakhtinian carnival as a “safety valve,” a transgressive space which provides temporary relief from “the frustrations of medieval life,” or, in this

case, life in the late nineteenth-century (660). Both Madame Schreck's museum and Nelson's brothel allow for – and encourage – the expression of licentious desires. As Fevvers relays to Walser, the difference is that Nelson's brothel “accommodated those who were perturbed in their bodies and wished to verify that, however equivocal, however much they cost, the pleasures of the flesh were, at bottom, splendid. But, as for Madame Schreck, she catered for those who were troubled in their...souls (Carter 63). While both spaces exist to satisfy male sexual desire, Fevvers' distinction highlights the depravity particular to the visitors of Schreck's museum and, indeed, Schreck's willingness to indulge them: “the tariff soared by leaps and bounds if you wanted anything out of the ordinary” (Carter 70). However, notwithstanding the brothel's primary purpose – to service male clientele – the women within it are undoubtedly engaged in what Russo terms “[r]eclaiming space” which, in the context of women's liberation, is usually “understood as a freedom from oppressive bodily containment” (26). While men are temporarily permitted access to the brothel space and, by extension, the bodies within it, Fevvers is careful to explain to Walser that “it was a wholly female world within Ma Nelson's door” and indeed as its name – “Nelson's Academy” – suggests, Nelson envisages the space as one in which the women are free to pursue hobbies and engage in the development of skills to prepare them for a life beyond prostitution (Carter 42).

As locations removed from the immediate environs of their male visitors' daily lives, both the brothel and the museum act as holding spaces, or safety valves, for their visitors' anxieties. These anxieties are, in turn, displaced onto the bodies of the prostitutes and freaks within. In this way, the restoration of normality that comes from leaving the carnival space is just as important as the transgressive experience itself (Peach 132–33). The return to normality is essential not only to the success of Schreck and Nelson's enterprises, but also, Colonel Kearney's circus. The movement between normal and abnormal space is literalised in the circus' cloakroom: “Once the paying customer successfully negotiated the ticket window, one left one's furs in a cloakroom that, during performance, became a treasury of skins of sable, fox, and precious little rats, as though there one left behind the skin of one's own beastliness so as not to embarrass the beasts within it” (Carter 121). By doffing their cloaks at the door, the audience members construct a divide between themselves and the circus performers. Indeed, their enjoyment of the spectacle to follow is dependent on their ability to temporarily suspend any awareness of a shared subjectivity with the performers. This is because, inside the performance space of the circus ring, the body casts off its social

restraints and is free to indulge in transgressions which would otherwise attract censure. In Sarah Gamble's comparative study of *Tipping the Velvet* and *Nights at the Circus*, she describes the performance spaces within the novels – the music hall and circus respectively – as “places of licence in which the dissident body can be displayed and its illegitimacy and unintelligibility celebrated; yet also contained” (134). The containment Gamble refers to occurs when the audience leaves the licentious space to return, once more, to a world governed by social mores. However, while the visitors to Schreck's museum remove the costumes upon their ascent from the basement, and the audience members of Kearney's circus don their furs and sables, the performers are left to languish in these liminal spaces. As a result, the existing hierarchies that the carnival spaces in Carter's novel disrupt in fact act as moments of reassurance for those desperate to reassert their own normality.

Walser's determination to classify Fevvers as bird or human is reflective of phallogentrism's broader obsession with defining “woman”. Indeed, Walser becomes increasingly preoccupied with finding evidence to prove his assumption that Fevvers is not a bird-woman, but a hoax. Convinced that Fevvers' feathers are nothing more than a costume, Walser wants to destroy the illusion of authenticity she has created and reveal her status as a fake. His role is “ostensibly, to ‘puff’ her; and, if it is humanly possible, to explode her, either as well as, or instead of” (Carter 9). Walser's inability to accept Fevvers' bodily ambiguity aligns him with the scientific zeal for classification that characterised the Victorian era and which I discuss in more detail in relation to cross-dressing in Chapter 5. The novel's 1899 setting is significant with regard to Walser's desire to uncover the ‘truth’ of Fevvers' biology, as it was during this period that the New Woman Movement threatened to destabilise tightly held distinctions between gender roles for men and women (King 32). This movement provided a locus for *fin de siècle* anxieties “that some kind of degeneration was setting in, possibly even that these newly powerful women everywhere in evidence heralded the Apocalypse” (Fernihough 97). Indeed, part of what makes Fevvers so threatening is her refusal to conform to feminine norms: her size, voracious appetite, and disinterest in concealing her bodily functions all contravene the Victorian model of ideal femininity, which held that women should be ghostly and waif-like in appearance and manner. It is these characteristics, particularly those concerning her appearance and comportment, that have led Fevvers to be read as an exemplar of the Bakhtinian grotesque (Dennis 124). However, Fevvers' performance of the grotesque lacks the deliberate subversive quality of Grace's body modification because her chief motivation in styling her appearance is to appeal to her audiences. While she is largely

successful in this regard, her otherwise unfeminine appearance gives rise to speculation that she is not a woman at all. Early in the novel, Walser wonders whether Fevvers is a man (Carter 37), while during her time with Kearney's circus an anonymous letter published in a newspaper – no coincidence that this is Walser's medium – casts doubt upon her humanity. The letter "claims that Fevvers is not a woman at all but a cunningly constructed automaton made up of whalebone, india-rubber and springs" (Carter 171). The letter recalls Fevvers' earlier description of Schreck as a "puppet that pulled its own strings" (Carter 65), while whalebone invokes the corset, a garment which restricts women's range of movement. However, as Fiona Coll notes, the automaton also played a "role in articulating an important set of anxieties that attended the expansion of mechanization in the Victorian world" (21). Casting Fevvers as an automaton suggests an equivalence between the New Woman and the machine, both of which threatened to irrevocably alter day-to-day life. If Fevvers cannot be classified as a woman, or, worse, as a human being, then she is without the presumed biological limitations that nineteenth-century scientific and cultural discourses deployed as evidence of women's inferiority to men. Walser's drive to categorise Fevvers is thus born of the need to contain her body within the binary sex/gender system in order to minimise the threat she poses to the established social order.

Initially, Walser is convinced that the truth of Fevvers' body can be uncovered by confirming the presence or absence of her navel (Carter 16). However, as his attraction to Fevvers grows, he loses interest in his mission of fixing her in an ontological sense. Walser's time with the Siberian Shaman also contributes to his loss of interest: his experiences of mysticism destabilise his conviction in the absolute divide between fact and fiction such that, when he is reunited with Fevvers and she exposes her unmarked stomach, he "is no longer in the mood to draw any definite conclusions from this fact" (Carter 347). Other male characters within the novel also share Walser's early obsession with wresting control of Fevvers' narrative, often through violence. Fevvers' experiences with domineering men like Rosencreutz and the Grand Duke are exemplars of what Fernihough refers to as the "precarious balancing act of womanhood, an act in which self-assertion, making the body *visible*, always carries a certain risk" (89–90; emphasis in original). While Fevvers' courts the gaze of these men through her performance of femininity and freakery, this, in turn, makes her vulnerable to those who view it as their duty to claim ownership – and thereby authorship – of her in the name of the patriarchy. As mentioned earlier, Rosencreutz kidnaps Fevvers with the intention of murdering her. Both Rosencreutz's self-presentation and his occupation reflect his status as a

symbol of patriarchal authority: he wears a gold medallion bearing a phallus with wings entwined with a rose (Carter 80), with the same design carved in stone in his ceiling (Carter 84); and he is an anti-suffragist Member of Parliament (Carter 90). Fevvers describes the meaning of this symbol as a signifier of how the “penis, represented by itself, aspires upwards, represented by the wings, but is dragged downwards, represented by the twining stem, by the female part” (Carter 88). When Fevvers realises that Rosencreutz intends to kill her, an inversion of patriarchal dominance occurs: drawing a phallic symbol of her own – Ma Nelson’s Sword – Fevvers threatens Rosencreutz before making her escape by flying through an open window (Carter 95). The use of the fantastic to secure Fevvers escape “enables Carter to bypass and undermine phallic power and to posit other forms of power” (Michael 512). While Michael admits that “flying away from an aggressor is not a practical solution,” he goes on to maintain that the image is one of “empowerment” (512–13). Recounting the details of her fantastical escape to Walser, Fevvers describes how “fright lent me more than human powers. I soared up and away from that vile place” and hid from Rosencreutz’s henchmen in the “top branches of an elm” (Carter 96). As with the recollections of her pubescent sprouting of wings, this tale is designed to engineer doubt in Walser’s mind as to her true nature, but it also makes her escape exceptional and places it beyond the reach of “human” women. In contrast to Hall’s use of realism in representing Grace’s response to her attacker, Carter’s reliance on the fantastic for Fevvers’ salvation presents a problematic optimism in terms of the strategies available to women to escape male control.

Fevvers’ desire for powerful men – and the fortune she assumes she can glean from them – is not dulled by her encounter with Rosencreutz. Indeed, the episode is repeated in Part 2 of the novel, with a Russian Grand Duke cast in the role of Rosencreutz. Appealing to Fevvers’ expensive taste, the Duke first sends her a diamond bracelet (Carter 201), followed by a pair of diamond earrings complete with an invitation to dine with him and a promise to complete the set with a diamond necklace (Carter 202). The Duke demands that Fevvers attend the dinner alone, without her protectress Lizzie and, ignoring her foster-mother’s protestations and warnings, she accedes. During dinner, the Duke tells Fevvers that he is a collector of “*objets d’art* and marvels. Of all things, I love best toys – marvellous and unnatural artefacts” (Carter 220). Taking Fevvers on a tour of his gallery of Imperial Eggs, it soon becomes clear that the Duke considers Fevvers one such toy and wishes to collect her. After confiscating her sword, he shows her an Egg purpose-built for her containment: “it contained a case made out of gold wires with, inside, a little perch of rubies and of sapphires and of diamonds [...] The

cage was empty. No bird stood on that perch, yet [...] She said goodbye to the diamond necklace down below and contemplated life as a toy” (Carter 225–26). Noting Fevvers’ penchant for narrow escapes, Fernihough argues that she “negotiates a trajectory between the post-structuralist recognition that identity and sexuality are themselves performative [...] and the materialist recognition that fleshly, anatomical bodies do exist and are vulnerable” (101–02). This negotiation is particularly evident in Fevvers’ escape from the Grand Duke where, having lost her sword, she must rely on her body and sexual appeal – and, as with her flight from Rosencreutz, on Carter’s use of the fantastic – to secure her freedom. After bringing the Duke to orgasm, Fevvers drops a toy train onto the gallery floor, whereupon it transforms into the very real train where Lizzie and the rest of Colonel Kearney’s circus await (Carter 226). Though Fevvers’ manages to escape metaphorical imprisonment inside the Duke’s egg, his physical violence toward her is nonetheless rendered visible on her body: she is “raddled with tears, hair coming down, again, gypsy dress ripped and clotted with semen, trying, as best she could to cover her bare breasts with a filthy but incontrovertible tangle of pin feathers” (Carter 227). Fevvers’ attempt to conceal her breasts suggests that the Duke’s sexually motivated attack leads her to associate her naked body with shame and defilement. As such, at the same moment when Fevvers experiences a heretofore unknown level of embodied vulnerability, Carter’s use of the fantastic enables her to re-enter Lizzie’s protection. However, as discussed earlier, the notion of fantasy as a viable means of escape from victimisation is problematic.

While both Grace and Fevvers choose careers that court the gaze, Fevvers’ performance is more closely tied to her identity than Grace’s. While Grace’s sense of identity comes from her assertion of bodily autonomy, Fevvers relies upon the gaze of her audience and, more specifically, Walser, for her sense of self. In reminiscing on her formative years at Ma Nelson’s brothel, Fevvers opines: “so it was I served my apprenticeship in *being looked at* – at being the object of the eye of the beholder” (Carter 23; emphasis in original). Several critics agree that Fevvers embodies the categories of both subject and object simultaneously (Dennis 117; Douglas 5; Michael 500). According to Michael, “Fevvers’s exhibits herself as object for an audience’s gaze; yet, as the author of herself as object, she is also subject and thus has control over how much she will allow herself to be consumed by her viewers” (500). However, I argue that this reliance upon her audience limits the extent to which she is able to manage such exposure levels. Stranded in the Siberian wilderness, away from the consuming gaze of an audience, Lizzie remarks that Fevvers is “fading away as if it was only always

nothing but the discipline of the audience that kept you in trim” (Carter 332). As the novel progresses, this notion of an audience becomes focalised in the figure of Walser: “She cocked her head to relish the shine of the lamps, like footlights, like stage-lights; it was as good as a stiff brandy, to see those footlights, and, beyond them, the eyes fixed upon her with astonishment, with awe, the eyes that told her who she was” (Carter 344–45). Far from demonstrating that she embodies the role of subject in the performance of herself as object, her reliance upon Walser demonstrates that he is the true author of her identity. Michael Sinowitz’s analysis of *Fevvers* argues that “step[ping] outside this [patriarchal] gaze means reconfiguring and examining how one forms one’s sense of self” (112). However, *Fevvers*’ exile in Siberia culminates not in a new formation of self, but a return to the gaze as signifier of self. Without the pretence of an audience, and a male-centred audience at that, *Fevvers-as-subject* would cease to exist.

Fashioning the Female Freak: *Fevvers*’ feathers and *Grace*’s tattoos

Like *Fevvers*, *Grace* rebels against feminine beauty norms. Andreea Șerban argues that *Grace* uses her tattoos – 109 eyes spread across her body – as a way to contest received notions of the ideal female body as pure, unmarked, and available for the imprint and inscription of the male gaze (114). As punishment for deviating from this ideal, *Grace* suffers an acid attack at the hands of Malcolm Sedak, who is offended by the “desecration” of her body (Hall 286). Patricia MacCormack argues that “tattooed women are frequently described as disrespecting the sanctity of their female bodies” and goes on to ask, “if tattooing mutilates the female body, we should ask whose version of the female body is this body?” (67, 70). In Hall’s novel, Sedak’s attack is motivated by his desire to fix *Grace* in his own – and, arguably, wider society’s – image of ideal femininity: “He had wanted her body altered, put back to how she belonged, restored to grace and femininity, restored to God’s blueprint for her kind. As if the acid might have licked off the tattoos like the tongue of a mother cat, leaving behind a blank white skin to be preserved by the salve” (Hall 286). In this way, Sedak’s attack is represented as a perverse form of would-be salvation. Stripping *Grace* of the visible record of her subversion – her tattoos – is intended to produce a commensurate effect on her subjectivity by reinstating her compliance with patriarchal control (Șerban 191). However, far from returning her body to an unmarked state redolent of Victorian conceptions of female purity, Sedak’s act of reclamation creates new marks upon *Grace*’s body and, by extension,

her mind. As a result, her zealous assertion of embodied agency is amplified rather than quashed. As Pitts argues, “reclaiming projects do not return the body-self to any pre-victimized state of body or selfhood” (85). This is because the very idea of the pure or natural female body is in itself a falsehood. Even without visible ‘scars’ – either those willingly inflicted by the tattooist’s needle, or violently imposed by the acid – Grace’s body is always already marked. Her body carries the history of her gender, as it holds within it a record of the patriarchal exploitation of the female flesh.

However, Grace’s embodiment of such histories is crucial, rather than detrimental, to her ability to author her body in the present. Far from being synonymous with subjugation, “the past, a past no longer understood as inert or simply given, may help engender a productive future, a future beyond patriarchy” (Grosz, ‘Histories of the Present and Future’ 16). Even while patriarchy persists – in the form of phallogentric cultural discourse – the past informs Grace’s active opposition to and refutation of the oppression inflicted on women’s bodies: “Grace had been outnumbered by the men of history [...] but she had found a way to win her freedom, and for a time she had celebrated the identity of her body as her own sovereign state. And now the land had been razed again [...]. But her eyes, those dark, solemn, prolific eyes still glimmered and said her mind had not lost that spirit of rebellion and never would” (Hall 308). In collapsing the distinction between Grace’s eyes and their tattooed counterparts, this passage indicates her determination to recreate the acid-ravaged ink in her own image. By viewing her “razed” tattoos as a marker of her survival and continued rebellion, Grace demands to be seen as an autonomous and self-defined subject. As Grosz argues, “if bodies are inscribed in particular ways [...] then these kinds of inscription are capable of reinscription [...] of being lived and represented in [...] terms that may grant women the capacity for independence and autonomy” (*Volatile Bodies* xiii). Grace’s body is, in this sense, doubly double. On one hand, it records not the victimisation of her gender and her capacity to rewrite this narrative of social injustice. On the other hand, the contemporary woman’s scarred flesh re-enacts the embodied histories of abused Victorian female freaks and women of the period more generally. Her body thus ‘speaks’ as well as ‘looks’ back, testifying to both her own and her historical counterparts’ suffering.

Hall’s focus on Grace’s aesthetic choices – and their repercussions – highlights the ways in which women’s bodies have been policed by the male gaze. In patriarchal discourse, female bodily expression is limited to two discrete categories: “Women’s bodies have been

controlled by the male as either virgin mothers or whores: the male wants to protect/confine to the home the sexless wife/mother/daughter while he wants to gaze at/objectify/commodify the sexual woman” (Hardin 84). Far from being natural categories, the sexual/pure distinction is constructed in relation to norms of feminine appearance and behaviour. Assigning women to the sexual or pure category is then used to justify the exploitation of the former and the confinement of the latter. For Natasha Walter, “the rise of a hypersexual culture [...] has reflected and exaggerated the deeper imbalances of power in our society” (8–9). Within such a culture, patriarchy persists less as an overt structural determinant of female bodily expression, and more as one among a number of discourses that insidiously encourage women to internalise normative constructions of female beauty under the guise of empowerment. *The Electric Michelangelo*’s protagonist, the tattoo artist Cy, makes this connection between the male gaze and the maintenance of patriarchal power explicit: “Some days it was abundantly clear to him that men were truly still mesmerised by women, obsessed with their definition and their difference, and that all he was doing with his ink and his needle was recording the history of the female sex through the symbolic vision of another species” (Hall 165). This obsession with defining ‘woman,’ as though she, as a separate ‘species,’ is possessed of some universality which exists in direct opposition to man’s individualism, reinforces women’s perceived inferiority by creating a space where their exploitation is not only justified, but necessary in order to preserve dominant power relations. Though Hall’s novel offers an alternative narrative to the dominant construction of woman as (deserving) victim, Grace is not exempt from the experience of such violence. This suggests that the novel remains sceptical about the extent to which body modification can achieve full liberation for the women who practice it.

Grace’s commitment to her tattoos and her response to Sedak’s attack, seeks to, and arguably succeeds in, disrupting the monopoly of the male gaze, whereas Fevvers’ performance reinforces it. A challenge to the objectification of women’s bodies is embedded in the very design of Grace’s tattoos – the eyes return the gaze of the observer (Şerban 194). The design recalls Bakhtin’s theorisation of the grotesque which he argues “is interested only in protruding eyes [...]. It is looking for that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body’s confines” (316). The eye motif repeated across Grace’s skin allows the ink to extend beyond her body, demonstrating the permeable boundary between her flesh and another’s. As Cy looks at her, he notices how “The eye outmanoeuvred his gaze, it failed to be inanimate and resisted being used or judged as an object [...] Truly, he did not know who

was primarily looking at whom, Cyril Parks or the eye, because his gaze was mirrored, deflected, equalled. It was as if the image was playing a game with him” (Hall 258). The game Grace plays is that of transforming the notion of female body-as-spectacle to viewer-as-spectacle. As a player in this game, Cy becomes a stand-in for the postmodern reader who seeks to consume Grace as neo-Victorian spectacle. Her protruding eyes gaze upon the audiences both inside and outside the text in a mirroring of Russo’s analysis of Bakhtin’s carnival: “audiences and performers were interchangeable parts of an incomplete but imaginable wholeness [...] Boundaries between individuals and society, between genders, between species, and between classes were blurred or brought into crisis in the inversions and hyperbole of carnivalesque representation” (78). In Hall’s novel, Grace enlists her body in the blurring of gender boundaries through her assertion of the right to gaze actively at those who would seek to consume her, becoming, in a sense, a consumer herself.

However, as Grace’s approach to body modification demonstrates, the return of the gaze is not an end in itself. It is, rather, a step in the process of reclamation – obtaining bodily autonomy is dependent upon rejecting the male gaze and constructing a new mode of seeing that transcends normative prescriptions of feminine beauty (Şerban 191). In Michael Hardin’s examination of tattooing’s rising popularity among women, he argues that “the body becomes the appropriate space of reaction [to gendered power imbalances] because for so long it has been the site of appropriation” (85). Grace’s understanding of her tattoos reflects Hardin’s observation, such that when Cy points out the apparent contradiction between her insistence that the tattoos can be concealed by clothing and her plan to exhibit her tattooed body, she responds: “They can think what they like, but what they cannot do is use me with their damn eyes. Not ever again” (Hall 272). For Grace, the ability to conceal her tattoos is critical because it allows her the freedom to decide when, where, and by whom she is looked at. In a similar vein, MacCormack argues that “the amount of resistance with which conservative culture meets them [tattoos] evinces their continuing potential to alter power relations” (79). As such, when Sedak – a representative of conservative culture – seeks to erase her embodied act of resistance, she avenges herself upon him. With Cy as her accomplice, Grace breaks into the asylum – another familiar neo-Victorian space – where Sedak is serving his sentence and, akin to the sword Fevvers brandishes at Rosencreutz, she attacks Sedak with a metal fire iron (Hall 318). In contrast to Carter’s use of the fantastic to effect Fevvers’ escape, Hall casts Grace’s retaliation against Sedak in the realist mode. She uses the fire iron to blind Sedak, quite literally robbing him of the ability to gaze upon women. As a result, he is

stripped of the power to punish other women who – like Grace – contravene normative definitions of female beauty.

Grace's use of violence in her attack on Sedak is both a means of reclaiming her embodied agency and a problematic feminist strategy. Her retaliatory act is indicative of her refusal to embody the role of victim traditionally assigned to women. According to Claire Renzetti, "it is women's 'nature' to be passive; the respectable woman, the feminine woman, is socially constructed as a natural victim. Thus, the woman who uses violence is inherently a 'bad' woman" (49). In this way, Grace's act is troubling: while it continues the pattern of subversion against feminine norms that her tattoos began, it seems simultaneously to endorse the very norms she resists. Indeed, Grace attracts Sedak's ire because "her monstrous body, with its living orbs that watched him back [...] struck him impotent" (Hall 287). In looking back at her audience – both during her performance and, more broadly, as she moves through public space – Grace resists and returns the objectifying male gaze. However, her return of the gaze is no match for Sedak's acid. While Grace's tattoos are deliberately designed to allow "her clothing" to "seal off the images" (Hall 264), the acid attack disrupts her ability to delimit the visible borders of her bodily subversion. In order to regain a sense of autonomy, Grace turns to violence, blinding Sedak in a "vague quid pro quo affair" (Hall 317). That this act goes unpunished by the authorities suggests that Hall resists an unequivocal condemnation of Grace's methods. Thus, while "[m]any feminists insist that we can and should do better than patriarchs", Martha McCaughey and Neal King assert that "Rebellion never runs free of oppression" (2). Yet criticising Grace's use of violence as mere appropriation of patriarchal strategy, here designed to reverse the victim/perpetrator dynamic, fails to take into account the fact that she exists within a culture that legitimises violence as a means to gain control. While I do not suggest that Grace's particular mode of rebellion ought to be lauded as a feminist victory in and of itself, robbing Sedak, the embodiment of quasi-Victorian values, of his violating (and violent) gaze nonetheless reasserts her identity as an embodied subject.

Fevvers' ability to use body modification practices as a site of resistance to patriarchal control depends upon her continued assertion of corporeal ambiguity. In fashioning a narrative to support this bodily indeterminacy, Fevvers aligns her deformity with mythic origins. She tells Walser that "I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but just like Helen of Tory, was *hatched*" (Carter 3; emphasis in

original). According to Michael, “Fevvers resists male-centred designations of her by assuming control of her own self-construction and undermining the conventional opposition between reality and fiction” (518). In her interviews with Walser, Fevvers frames herself as Helen, both overtly – “Helen of the High Wire” – and covertly, in describing her strong identification with the painting of Leda and the Swan in Ma Nelson’s drawing room, in order to stall Walser’s attempts to fix her identity (Carter 3, 28). However, while such mythical allusions permit Fevvers’ continual courting of the divide between fact and fiction, it also suggests that she is the product of a violent coupling; that is, Zeus’ rape of Leda. Peach argues that Fevvers’ “references to Venus and Helen are also disturbing because they remind us of the extent to which the classical worldviews that underpin Western civilisation are dependent upon spectacles (133–34). However, Peach underestimates the disturbing nature of Fevvers’ self-presentation, in that aligning herself with classical conceptions of the female body also reinforces the association between femaleness and vulnerability that Grosz views as complicit in the maintenance of misogynistic thought (*Volatile Bodies* 13–14). Fevvers’ reliance on myth as a strategy to narrate her bodily ambiguity and combat the definitional impulse inherent in patriarchal discourse is thus a problematic one, as her agency is limited to working within traditional understandings of the female body, rather than contesting them.

The presentation of Fevvers’ bodily deformity shifts – from biological given to artful deception – depending on her location within particular performance spaces. In Ma Nelson’s brothel, this deformity is framed as purposeful modification, ostensibly undertaken in order to protect her from prying male eyes: “Nelson made it known that those shining golden wings of mine were stuck over a hump with strong adhesive and did not belong to me at all so I was spared the indignity of curiosity” (Carter 34). While such curiosity is seen as dangerous in the setting of the brothel, fostering such curiosity is crucial to Fevvers’ subsequent success as a performer: “Her subject position depends on her skills at both creating a spectacle – to whet her audience’s appetite for ontological certainly – and sustaining its mystery, thus denying the satisfaction of that appetite. Should she lose this ability or the interest of her audience, she would also forfeit the autonomy, however precarious, she enjoys as the locus of desire” (Dennis 128). Walser, though utterly convinced at the outset that Fevvers is a fake, is also pragmatic about the need for such deception: “for, in order to earn a living, might not a genuine bird-woman, in the implausible event that such a thing existed – have to pretend she was an artificial one?” (Carter 16). However, the issue is not so much that the novel refuses to reach a definitive conclusion regarding Fevvers’ ontology. Indeed, Fernihough argues that

Fevvers' "great triumph" lies in her ability to be both fact and fiction (105). Even if her wings are "real," in the sense that they are a product of her biological makeup, they are still modified and staged in ways which appeal to particular audiences and herein lies the limitations of her resistance. While such staging may give her a sense of freedom, her modification – however far she is responsible for it – is designed to accede to an audience's desires; unlike Grace's tattoos, which are designed to disrupt her audience's confidence in the propriety of their gaze.

With regard to the possibilities for gender equality, Fevvers is an inherently more hopeful character than Grace. Her attitudes are, in part, why *Nights at the Circus* has been read as an optimistic text. For Sinowitz, "Carter uses the autobiography of the be-winged Fevvers as part of an allegory about women's aspirations to soar over the nets and restraints of a strongly patriarchal world" (112). In this way, Fevvers' ability to fly literalises the aims of the New Woman Movement. As an adolescent, Fevvers "saw my future as criss-crossing the globe for then I knew nothing of the constraints the world imposes; I only knew my body was the abode of limitless freedom" (Carter 45). Though she goes on to be exposed to some of these constraints, particularly through Rosencreutz and the Duke's violence, she remains convinced of her status as a pioneer. Referring to the dawn of the twentieth century, Fevvers tells Lizzie that "On that bright day, when I am no more a singular being but, warts and all the female paradigm, no longer an imagined fiction but a plain fact – then he [Walser] will slap down his notebooks, bear witness to me and my prophetic role" (Carter 339). The issue with the worldview Fevvers expresses here is that it reflects an assumption that she can somehow exist outside history; and that the social and cultural norms which work to restrict women's freedom do not apply to her. As a result, while Fevvers' feminist politics may seem more radical than Grace's, they are radical only insofar as they fail to take account of the continuing legacy of the historical oppression of women.

Both novels present women's struggle for bodily autonomy in their respective presents as a continuation of the various limits that have been placed on women's freedom throughout history. However, while Fevvers is confident that 1900 will herald a "new dawn" for women, Lizzie is far more pessimistic (Carter 338). When Fevvers begins to wax lyrical about when the "brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates", Lizzie cuts her off with the retort: "It's going to be more complicated than that [...] This old witch sees storms ahead, my girl.

When I look to the future, I see through a glass, darkly” (Carter 339). Taken together with Lizzie’s revolutionary zeal – she comes from a “family of bomb-makers” and, whilst in Russia, she dispatches letters written in invisible ink to “comrades in exile” (Carter 266, 346) – her comment suggests that she regards the passage of time as an insufficient means to effect change. Instead, Lizzie suggests activism is needed, which places her radical political outlook more in line with Hall’s Grace than that of the idealistic Fevvers. Michael views Lizzie as a representative of Marxist feminism, which “emphasize[s] the material world in which women are daily oppressed as women” (493). Marxist feminists “situate analyses of women’s oppression within specific political, cultural, historical, economic and ideological contexts” (Michael 493). In the context of novel’s *fin-de-siècle* setting, Lizzie views marriage and reproduction as two such avenues for women’s oppression. When Walser declares that he has known “some pretty decent whores [...] whom any man might have been proud to marry,” Lizzie’s derision for the institution is evident in her retort: “Marriage? Pah! [...] What is marriage but prostitution to one instead of many? No different!” (Carter 21). Initially, Fevvers appears to share Lizzie’s stance: when a member of the Siberian brotherhood of free men explains that they “go towards our deaths as joyously as we would toward a marriage” she thinks “anyone with any sense would go towards their *marriage* as if towards the noose, rather than the other way around” (Carter 271). However, Fevvers’ eventual marriage to Walser suggests that her allegiance to Lizzie’s worldview dulls over time, as does her distaste for conforming to societal conventions.

When Lizzie realises Fevvers is entertaining the possibility of marrying Walser, she attempts to dissuade her from the union. As they search for Walser, Lizzie and Fevvers encounter a pregnant woman in a deserted hut who has been sent there to labour alone due to the superstitious beliefs of her tribe. Lizzie tries to convince Fevvers that this chance encounter is in fact a warning: when Fevvers asks “What the ‘ell is going on?” Lizzie responds “I’m sure I don’t know [...] Unless this tableau of a woman in bondage to her reproductive system, a woman tied hand and foot to that nature which your physiology denies, Sophie, has been set here on purpose to make you think twice about turning from a freak into a woman” (Carter 336). The sight of the lone tribeswoman reinforces Lizzie’s belief that the most dangerous thing for a woman is to *be* a woman and that Fevvers, in marrying Walser, will be forced to forgo the freedom that freakery bestows. While Fevvers’ freedom as a freak is not limitless – her encounters with Schreck, Rosencreutz and the Grand Duke attest to that – it does at least

afford her the capacity to make choices about her body and the uses to which it is put, even if she does not always choose wisely.

While tattooed bodies – particularly female bodies – were common in freak shows of the Victorian era, Grace’s understanding of her tattoos and their significance has far more in common with contemporary tattoo practices than their status in the historical setting of the novel. While the recent material turn in feminist criticism is beginning to restore the “physicality of the human body” after its relative absence in poststructuralist discourse (Alaimo and Hekman 15), it has also been criticised for its tendency to underestimate the influence of earlier feminist theorising on the body (Hinton and Liu 131). In contrast, feminist work on body modification recognises the ongoing relevance of Grosz’s corporeal feminism in understanding the potential for bodily actions to alter existing power relations (see Botz-Bornstein; Craighead; Fenske; and Pitts). In an echo of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque body, Pitts argues that “in late modernity, the body is presented as a plastic, malleable space for the creation and establishment of identity” (50). This postmodern approach to the body, like neo-Victorianism itself, is an act of recovery: it rejects the closed, complete notions of the Romantic, Victorian and Modernist body in favour of a reversion to earlier invocations of the body as a fluid and shifting entity. However, the Victorian freak body – and its neo-Victorian re-imaginings – demonstrate that far from dying out, the carnivalesque body of the Middle Ages continued to exist at the margins of a society which favoured more rigid and essentialising bodily conceptions, formulated on the basis of disciplinary religious, moral, or ‘scientific’ categories.

Hall’s novel recovers this marginal history through Grace’s emulation of Victorian performers’ tattooing practices, thereby suggesting that “a tattooed body can challenge representations of the traditional female body and the body itself as an intelligible and fixed phenomenon” (MacCormack 57). Hardin’s analysis of female tattooing takes up this notion of disrupting taken-for-granted appearances: “The tattoo becomes the sign of the woman’s recognition of the historic and violent imposition of the male cultural narrative upon the female, the denial of woman’s place as his object in that narrative, the removal of herself from the patriarchal exchange, and the presentation of a new and individual, female narrative, which by being inscribed upon the body, cannot be appropriated” (82). While such a view emphasises women’s agency in determining the appearance of their bodies, these practices have been shunned by radical feminists, who subscribe to the view that body modification is

yet another form of self-mutilation on behalf of women who have internalised patriarchal models of control (Jeffreys 410). However, such a conflation does little but reinforce the idea – vehemently contested by Grosz – that any engagement with the female body in the contemporary sphere is necessarily an example of female submission (*Volatile Bodies* xiv). Instead, she argues that we must move “beyond the model of woman as passive victim of male power who is robbed of agency and efficacy” (Grosz, ‘Histories of the Present and Future’ 21). Aware as she is of such criticism from radical circles, Pitts argues that “women are not choosing whether or not to be modified and marked, but are negotiating how and in what way and by whom and to what effect” (76). Body marking, in this sense, is neither inherently submissive nor subversive. It is the woman’s degree of control over her tattooing, coupled with the performance of her tattooed body in social space, that determines the extent to which such bodily modification practices are mobilised in support of female agency.¹⁰

Though Hall’s novel is temporally located between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the 1960s, her representation of the body throughout the novel reflects contemporary, rather than historical, models of corporeality. Like Bakhtin’s carnivalesque body and the fluid corporeality of the feminist body modifier, Grace’s body refuses to be bound by rigid, externally imposed definitions of feminine appearance. Many of these arguably constitute a nineteenth-century legacy, concerned as the Victorians were with gender and codification, thus rendering Grace’s tattooed corporeality both testimony to and contestation of this cultural inheritance. The body modification strategies pursued by the women in Pitts’ sociological study “imply that their body-stories are in flux, opened to the possibilities of re-inscription and renaming” (Pitts 73). The comparable fluidity of Grace’s body/body-story is evident after the attack, when she is described as, “an undecided compound, not quite solid, not quite liquid, but something in between” (Hall 297). This fluidity demonstrates her capacity to reassert her bodily autonomy, by constructing a new identity that both acknowledges the violation and yet refuses to be defined by it. As Pitts notes “modifications

¹⁰ Grace’s self-determined tattooing exists in direct contrast to that of the titular character in Belinda Starling’s neo-Victorian novel, *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007). Whereas Grace selects both the design and artist of her tattoos, Dora is forcibly branded with the emblem of the *Sauvages Nobles*, a group of upper-class men involved in the pornography trade. In a sense, this is the Victorian freak show made real, as performers often invented narratives of forcible tattooing to draw crowds (see Mifflin 18). However, the violence inflicted upon Dora troubles Hardin’s assertion that to be tattooed is to resist appropriation (82) because, unlike Grace, Dora’s branding is an act of appropriation by men who seek to trade in her tattooed skin.

of the body that open the body's envelope are, from the Western perceptive, abject and grotesque, but as the women describe, they also place the body in a physical and symbolic state of liminality and transformation" (57). The acid attack, though plunging Grace's body into a state of trauma by eating away at her flesh and, by extension, her tattoos, nonetheless delivers her into such a liminal space, where her subsequent choice to blind Sedak reflects her capacity to reclaim her narrative. However, the novel's suggestion that Grace's only route to reclamation lies in violence does little more than effect a role reversal between victim and perpetrator. As a result, the text's overall message of the importance of moving beyond existing forms of exploitative power relations is undermined.

Though Sedak's attack on Grace is an overt act of violence, it is not the first time her skin has been unwillingly marked. Far from being an aberration, the attack exists as an overt display of the violence routinely inflicted upon bodies which occupy a precarious place in the existing social order. For MacCormack, "skin is a marked surface inscribed with texts of race, gender, sexuality, class and age before it is marked by ink" (59). The skin's status as a marker of difference in contemporary culture is not dissimilar to the way in which Darwinian classificatory practices based on physical characteristics were co-opted to justify the hierarchical nature of Victorian society. From this standpoint, the disempowerment of non-white, non-male bodies was an inevitable consequence of their evolutionary inferiority (see King 156–57). Refusing to question the impact these varied forms of in/voluntary inscriptions – both past and present – have on the lived experiences of bodies can only contribute to the continued exploitation of female bodies. Grace herself is only too aware that, in order to resist the men seeking to consume her, she must redraw her bodily territory: "She had always said it would be about body, hadn't she, that the battleground had been chosen by others and a war would be fought there, and won or lost? Hers had been the site of an almighty uprising, on a territory mapped out and claimed by an administration that had every intention of preserving empire and dictating the law of the land to its colony" (Hall 307). Hall's conflation of Grace's body and colonisation in this passage reflects both the expansive reach of the Victorian Empire and the shared – though distinct – struggle for independence faced by women and colonised peoples. However, it is impossible to raze the battleground of the body – or, indeed, the colonial past of now independent nations. To attempt to do so would be to deny the power of the gaze that has been directed toward the female form and the colonised Other. Instead, what is needed is a "reordering of power and not its elimination" (Grosz, 'Histories of the Present and Future' 19). Body marking is not an unmediated practice, even

when it acts as an assertion of agency there are cultural, historical, and social abuses of power which necessitate such an assertion and, as such, what Grace does – and what feminism must do as Grosz implores – is to continue to wrest the always already ‘colonised’ body back from patriarchal control, to win the battle.

Cy, for his part, struggles to understand how any practice that champions the visual and the grotesque can be empowering. Cy (or see/sea) is unable to separate his profession from the history of male voyeurism and, as such, is limited to a perverse reading of Grace’s strategy of resistance. For MacCormack, “tattooed skin provokes response, it invites other bodies to fold into it. It demands engagement, whether the interlocutor is critical or celebratory of inked flesh” (77). Eliciting a response through body modification is far more important in contesting the historical silence toward female bodies than the specific nature of that response. Cy’s ability to understand this is, in part, restricted by his gendered complicity in the objectification of female bodies: “he had known what she was up against all along, hadn’t he, him with his booth walls drowning under images of sex and stylized female bodies?” (Hall 308). While Cy doesn’t possess Grace sexually, he recognises that he can no more remove the historical entitlement men hold towards the possession of women’s bodies than she can become invisible or live outside of such constructs. Instead, Grace demands engagement through her body modification practices; she refuses to be ignored: “I can’t say you can’t have my body, that’s already decided, it’s already obtained. If I had fired the first shot it would have been on a different field – in the mind. All I can do is interfere with what they think is theirs, how it is supposed to look, the rules” (Hall 274). Body modification cannot undo history, nor restore the body to a pre-violated state. Indeed, “the language of reclaiming, even written on the body, does not imply material reclamation in an objective sense; past body oppression is not reversed, rape culture is not erased” (Pitts 79). However, the impossibility of erasure does not render Grace’s interruption futile: through her tattoos, as well as the skin grafts which reclaim her acid-ravaged body, she demonstrates that body modification need not be inherently supportive of patriarchal ideology. Instead, it can be directed by motivations and actions which assert bodily autonomy.

In the novel, tattooing is a crucial strategy for identity formation, re-formation, and reclamation. The tattoo artist, then, is responsible for rendering such expressions of individuality visible on the skin. For Cy, “to tattoo was to understand that people in all their confusing mystery wanted only to claim their bodies as their own site [...]. It was to

understand that in order for a body to be reborn and re-yoked, first it needed to be destroyed and freed” (Hall 260). Though re-yoking has connotations with tattooing as self-mutilation (see Jeffreys 410), Hall challenges the notion that bodily destruction and transformation are inherently incompatible. Instead, she suggests that re-inscription is dependent upon the erasure of earlier markings. This malleability reflects “recent trends in the tattoo industry that promote bodies as living canvasses and tattooists as artists” (Craighead 43). From Cy’s perspective, Grace’s reclamation is undermined by her determination to display her tattooed body. However, it is crucial to recognise that Cy is not only an artist – the Electric Michelangelo of the novel’s title – but also a “conduit” through which Grace chooses to rewrite her body canvas (Hall 262), much as a writer chooses a favourite pen. The eye tattoos allow Grace to assert her individuality and resist objectification by the male gaze, while simultaneously opening herself to the same. As a result, even the men she ostensibly trusts, like Cy, are unable to fashion her in their own image: “he began to realize that there was a hopelessness to any wistful portrayals he might make of her [...] her corporeal immediacy refuted his designs” (Hall 264). Grace contests the boundaries of ideal feminine appearance that society attempts to impose on her by creating an alternative mode of beauty that engages with male desire by refusing to be contained by it.

Like Cy, Walser acts as a conduit for Fevvers’ story. However, while Cy transfers the eye image onto Grace’s skin, so that her body tells the story, Fevvers’ history is fashioned into narrative by the journalistic impetus of Walser. As will be discussed at length in relation to Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, narrativizing history necessarily involves distortion and, when that narrativization is performed by another, the distortion is doubled. While Lizzie remains suspicious of Walser’s motives for pursuing Fevvers, her foster-daughter entreats her to view him as their liberator:

Think of him not as a lover, but as a scribe, as an amanuensis...Think of him as the amanuensis of all those whose tales we've yet to tell him, the histories of those woman who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history as if they had never been, so that he, too, will put his poor shoulder to the wheel and help to give the world a little turn into the new era that begins tomorrow. (Carter 338)

Fevvers’s goal is a noble one, but there is no evidence that Walser shares her desire to recover the histories of these lost women. Indeed, the intermingling of sexual attraction with Walser’s role as scribe troubles the notion of him as an impartial recorder of Fevvers’ (and other women’s) stories. Peach argues that “even though Fevvers’s story in *Nights at the*

Circus is written by a male, the male voice is emasculated” (136). However, no matter how emasculated Walser may be, there necessarily remains an act of translation, whereby Fevvers’s embodied memories are conscripted to Walser’s narrative. Further, this act of translation contributes to the restoration of Walser’s masculinity: like Tom in *Waterland*, telling Fevvers’ story enables Walser to assume the role of chronicler of official history. Under Walser’s gaze, Fevvers feels “herself turning, willy-nilly, from a woman into an idea” (Carter 343). The linearity and coherence demanded by narrative works to contain Fevvers’ corporeal excess and, like *Waterland*’s women, she is written out of her own history. In her work on the intertextual relationship between *Nights at the Circus* and Sarah Waters’ novel, *Affinity*, Kohlke argues that “by centralizing extremely socially marginal characters [...] as primary narrators and historical commentators, they metaphorically give voice to the historically silenced and forgotten who *have no history*” (‘Into History through the Back Door’ 153; emphasis in original). While the re-appropriation of narrative voice is a common trope employed by neo-Victorian fiction aimed at re-writing women into history, the fact remains that, in *Nights at the Circus*, the revolutionary status of this act is undermined by the outsourcing of this narrative to the male recorder of events.

Though Grace’s skin is scarred and her tattoos are blurred by the effect of the acid, she refuses to cede control over her body. She undergoes experimental skin graft surgery, which, in repairing the damaged tissue, creates yet another version of her body. Upon her recovery, Grace returns for a final visit to Coney Island, where she undresses in front of Cy. Once again, he adopts the hybrid role of viewer/reader in trying to make sense of Grace’s new body-text: “If her eyes said love [...] his clamouring heart and the racket of his blood drowned the message out, so he would never know for sure. He could not fathom the bravery of that exposure [...] Stronger than diamond or atomic propulsion or wrought iron” (Hall 305). Grace’s naked revelation foregrounds a peculiarly bodily form of resilience and resistance to definition, one that is unequalled by even the strongest naturally occurring minerals and man-made structures. Cy’s struggle to reconcile the multiplicity of meanings imbued in her gesture with his physical arousal is reflective of the neo-Victorian “sexploitation” more broadly. Grace’s strip-tease both capitulates to the sensational expectations of readers and frustrates it, in that her body remains, to a certain extent, uncharted territory. Rather than accept the version of her body Sedak has created, or the one Cy wishes to impose, Grace transforms the skin grafts and scars from markers of her victimisation into markers of agency by re-asserting control over the conditions under which

her body is viewed. In this sense, her scars perform a similar function to her tattoos, whereby the “tattooed body resists organization by presenting another layer which must be organized, the signification of which is volitional but neither clear nor stable” (MacCormack 64).

Grace’s wilful exposure of this – albeit involuntary – extra layer of signification demonstrates the body’s limitless capacity to be rewritten.

The ending of Carter’s novel is as ambiguous as Fevvers’ body itself. While the overall tone remains optimistic, I argue that Fevvers’ marriage is evidence of the novel’s misguided optimism. Fevvers’ supposed freedom is predicated upon her entering into an institution which, historically, treated women as one of many forms of property which could be exchanged among representatives of the patriarchy. In fact, her marriage is a direct contradiction of her earlier assertion to Walser that “I did *not* await the kiss of a magic prince, sir! With my two eyes, I nightly saw how such a kiss would seal me up in my *appearance* for ever!” (Carter 42–43). Sinowitz contends that “at the end of the novel, we have no definite answers to whether Fevvers will avoid ultimately falling into the traps laid out by symbols and the roles patriarchy prescribes” (113). Yet, even as Fevvers searches for Walser in the tribal village, she is already losing her sense of self: “and she would see, once again, the wonder in the eyes of the beloved and become whole” (Carter 338). Far from adopting Grace’s commitment to self-definition and self-sufficiency, Fevvers outsources her identity, her sense of wholeness, to Walser. Lizzie sees Fevvers’ reliance on Walser as the antithesis of female emancipation: “I raised you up to fly to the heavens, not to brood over a clutch of eggs” (Carter 335). While the ontological uncertainty over the nature of her deformity remains, it is impossible to conclude whether Fevvers is capable of reproduction. However, her marriage to Walser indicates that the process of acceding her bodily autonomy, which reproduction would accelerate, has already begun: “Let me introduce my wife, Mrs Sophie Walser, who formerly had a successful career on the music-hall stage under the name of– ”(Carter 348). Once united with Walser, Fevvers gives up both her name and her career on the stage; her identity, now, is Walser’s to determine. There is thus little to suggest that Fevvers’ utopian visions will be realised through her marriage.

Conclusion

Neo-Victorian fiction's representation of marginalised figures – especially female figures – shares the Victorian freak show's status as a liminal space. By collapsing the boundaries between past and present, normal and abnormal, neo-Victorian engagements with female freakery highlight the resonances of nineteenth-century gender ideology in contemporary attitudes toward modes of female embodiment. In the various Bakhtinesque carnival spaces in Hall's and Carter's novels – from Coney Island, to Schreck's museum, and Kearney's circus – spectators marvel at the non-normative bodies of female performers in an attempt to reassert their own normalcy. However, while Carter's novel grants this reprieve, Hall's refuses it. Both Fevvers and Grace modify their bodies in order to court the gaze, but the former does so in order to give pleasure – and, indeed, experiences the gaze as pleasurable herself – while the latter returns the audience's gaze in order to unsettle their conviction in their right to define her through this gaze.

Hall adopts a realist mode to explore the themes of female freakery, bodily autonomy, and the persistence of gendered power imbalances across time and space. In contrast, Carter's utopian vision – embodied by Fevvers and achieved by use of the fantastic – is undercut by her main character's trajectory. In both Part 1 and Part 2 of the novel, Fevvers' desire for the attentions (and riches) of powerful men place her in danger of imprisonment or death, with her twin escapes relying variously on stripping, the use of her wings, and a toy train which becomes life-size. Finally, when Fevvers' sense of self begins to fade in the Siberian wilderness, her salvation takes the form of a reunion with Walser. In marrying Walser, Fevvers outsources authorship of her identity and story and, in so doing, she forgoes the comparative freedom she enjoyed as a freak performer. As such, while Carter's novel may be more optimistic than Hall's regarding the potential for female bodily autonomy and women's right to self-definition, the strategies – heterosexual marriage, sexual desirability – through which she suggests this can be achieved are inherently conventional.

In contrast, Hall's novel suggests that the legacies of the Victorian past are not so easily dispensed with. Aware of the historical limits placed on women's freedom and embodied expressions, Grace asserts her right to assume authorship of her flesh by commissioning an intricate design of eye tattoos which are concealable by clothing. This allows Grace to move

between her on- and off-stage personas more easily than Fevvers, whose ‘wings’ are ubiquitous in any setting. It also allows Grace to mediate access to her body and disrupt the definitional power of the gaze: even when she displays her naked body on stage, her tattoos work to conceal her flesh. However, like Fevvers, Grace’s display of her freakified body makes her vulnerable to the ire of men affronted by the audacity with which she asserts her subjectivity and the commensurate weakening of their power to objectify her that this implies. In contrast to Rosencreutz and the Grand Duke’s attacks on Fevvers, there is no such fantastical escape for Grace. When Sedak’s acid attack overwrites Grace’s tattoos with scars, she blinds him in an act of revenge and leaves Coney Island to remake herself again in her own image.

Neo-Victorianism has been charged with perpetuating the present-day sexploitation of women through its tendency to sensationalise, rather than critique, portrayals of Victorian female sexuality. However, rather than accede to the desires of her contemporary readership to be titillated and entertained by the overt sexualisation of her female characters, Hall focuses on Grace’s tattoos as an assertion of autonomy which challenge the patriarchal objectification of the female form. Here, body modification becomes a mode of rebellion against feminine beauty norms, which exist as part of a wider strategy – in both Victorian and contemporary culture – to ensure women continue to conform to the roles phallogocentric cultural discourse deems it acceptable for them to perform.

Chapter 3: Not Quite Mad: Pathologising Women in *Waterland* and *The Painted Bridge*

Neo-Victorian representations of madness rework a figure familiar to readers of Victorian sensation fiction: the madwoman or, more precisely, the woman who is designated mad. Reading the sensation novel in light of the critical distance afforded both by time and by contemporary critiques of nineteenth-century medical and scientific discourses reveals the ways in which Victorian cultural norms surrounding gender worked to pathologise unruly or troublesome women under the veneer of scientific objectivity (Matus, *Unstable Bodies* 191; Pykett 95). This chapter examines neo-Victorianism's engagement with nineteenth-century gender, scientific and medical discourses with a focus on the representation of the madwoman in Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983) and Wendy Wallace's *The Painted Bridge* (2012). Swift's novel repeats its Victorian counterparts' reluctance to represent life inside the asylum, while Wallace turns the sensation novel's penchant for revealing the criminal underbelly of Victorian middle-class society toward the asylum space. *Waterland's* protagonist, Tom Crick, is an unreliable narrator who privileges his self-recorded account of history over other modes of remembering and, in the process, works to silence the embodied memories of his wife Mary and her nineteenth-century double, Sarah Atkinson. On the other hand, Wallace uses third-person omniscient narration to provide a seemingly impartial account of life inside Lake House – a private asylum for women – and depict, in lurid detail, the inhumane treatments to which its patients are subjected. My analysis focuses on how Wallace uses this narrative strategy to revisit both Victorian and neo-Victorian portrayals of madness. Wallace's choice of narration suggests that marginalised groups are less able to adopt the postmodern playfulness of *Waterland's* approach to history, as this has thus far been the purview of the powerful. In contrast to the ironic tone Crick deploys in relation to the lineage of women and madness, Wallace's narrative style suggests that bearing witness to the reality of these women's lives is a necessary first step in redressing the historical silencing of their experiences.

While Wallace's novel is wholly set in the nineteenth century, *Waterland's* dual narrative structure – one Victorian, one contemporaneous to the novel's publication – reveals similarities between Mary's and Sarah's treatment, suggesting that contemporary understandings of mental illness continue to be inflected by nineteenth-century gender

ideology, as well as the changing demands of normative femininity. While research has often connected female madness with surveillance and control, in that pathologizing displays of non-normative femininity enable their proponents to be monitored, this chapter aims to reveal the agency and resilience practiced by female madwomen in both Swift's and Wallace's novels. Attending to the experiences of female characters in these novels demonstrates the way in which their narratives reflect the female body's historical status as cause and target of suffering and construct embodied acts of resistance as a challenge to feminine norms of behaviour. While Mary's voice may be forcibly excised from the narrative by her husband Tom, her corporeal presence haunts it and, like Wallace's protagonist Anna, her body acts as a record of her past trauma and present unhappiness which speaks back to male-imposed diagnoses of madness.

Reading *Waterland*: The Limits of Postmodern Historiography and Narrative Catharsis

Waterland creates a gendered hierarchy among modes of memory through its reliance on narrator Tom Crick, who controls the narrative perspective at the expense of acknowledging women's embodied memories. This bias has been perpetuated in the bulk of criticism on *Waterland*, which tends to focus on Tom's narration as an exemplar of the postmodern approach to historiography (for examples of this approach see Brewer and Tillyard 49; Janik 84; and Schad 911). This framework ignores the corporeal agency of *Waterland*'s female characters and, as a result, *Waterland*'s women are constructed as powerless puppets on the grand stage of man-made history. However, theorising the novel in light of the emergence of feminist neo-Victorian criticism in the late 1990s and early 2000s has the potential to redress this critical silence. To allow the bodies of *Waterland*'s women to "speak," I shift the critical focus away from postmodern historiography toward a corporeal feminist reading of this foundational neo-Victorian novel. Applying such a theoretical framework redresses the silence toward female experience in both the novel and its criticism. My analysis of *Waterland* focuses on Crick's wife Mary and his Victorian ancestor Sarah Atkinson to demonstrate the persistence of nineteenth-century gender ideology in the novel's present, particularly in terms of how the boundaries between normative and pathological femininity are defined and policed. I argue that a feminist neo-Victorian reading of the novel shifts the

focus from memory-as-story to memory-as-body, which, in turn, reveals the agency inherent in the bodily actions of *Waterland*'s female characters.

A significant body of criticism on *Waterland* has thus far been reluctant to move beyond the ideological context of the novel's reception. Hayden White's work on postmodern historiography and Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction both came to prominence in the 1980s, the decade of *Waterland*'s publication. Postmodern historiography challenges the nineteenth-century model of history as an objective process of discovery by emphasising the transformative role of narrative in shaping our understandings of the past (White 20). From a postmodern standpoint, history is multiple, contingent and devoid of any inherent meaning "because any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories" (White 20). Historiographic metafiction is also concerned with narrative as a means to know the past: Hutcheon uses the term to describe novels like *Waterland* which "are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (5). These theories continue to underpin critical approaches to the novel that probe its exploration of the divide (or lack thereof) between fiction and history and the role of narrative in ordering discordant events from the past into a logical and coherent tale of progress.¹¹ For John Schad, "like postmodernism, *Waterland* may not allow us even the consolation of an end to the "Grand Narrative" of history since, it is implied, there never was such a narrative" (912). However, such interpretations of *Waterland*, which rely on the ideological context of the 1980s narrative turn in history, promote a view of Tom as a blameless figure whose trajectory has been dictated by chance events and the circumstantial nature of history. In so doing, they obscure his complicity in silencing female voices. While the novel does indeed trouble the notion of history as a Grand Narrative or a linear pursuit of progress, this does not deny Tom's personal attachment to such models of the past. Ultimately, Swift suggests that Tom's attempts to impose order on past events are futile. However, in making the attempt, Tom nonetheless silences women's histories in service of his quest for catharsis.

¹¹ For discussions on the relationship between fiction, narrative and history in *Waterland* see James Acheson (2005), John Brewer and Stella Tillyard (1985), Margrét Gunnarsdóttir Champion (2003), Robert K. Irish (1998), and Del Ivan Janik (1989).

The cathartic function of narrative is a key feature of more recent *Waterland* criticism, inspired by the move toward ethical reading practices and trauma theory in literary studies in the 1990s. However, this body of criticism tends to reproduce postmodern historiography's focus on Tom at the expense of examining the gendered dimensions of traumatic histories. Richard Rankin Russell argues for an ethical reading of the text, in which the key to Tom's catharsis lies in confronting his role in past events and communicating this to his audience through the medium of storytelling (120). Similarly, both Tamás Bényei (109) and Eric Berlatsky (260) adopt a psychoanalytic framework to argue that Tom's narrative is driven by his desire for meaning and explanation. Berlatsky claims "like his mother, [Crick] embraces the necessity of narration as a therapeutic and comforting re-mapping of the chaotic and disquieting otherness of the past" (269). Nonetheless, such a process is only necessary insofar as Tom, wedded as he is to the patriarchal narrative of progress that demands forward movement, cannot accept Mary's stasis. While Stef Craps' trauma-informed approach attends to Mary's rejection of story, she frames this as a retreat into fantasy while arguing that the novel positions curiosity "as our greatest asset in search for an ethical way of being in the world" (103). Whether from a postmodern perspective, or one grounded in trauma theory, the continued critical emphasis on storytelling, curiosity, and catharsis occludes the fact that the narrativisation of history in *Waterland* necessitates silencing less powerful figures in service of the dominant narrative.

While there are a limited number of attempts to redress the scholarly silence toward women in the novel, such as Katrina Powell's critique of Swift's traditional representation of "woman as mother" (75) and Pamela Cooper's analysis of Mary as a "placeholder" for male desire (385), these critiques focus on Mary's victimhood and thus cannot account for her embodied acts of resistance. In contrast, an interdisciplinary approach combining neo-Victorian criticism, corporeal feminism, and work on embodied memory, enables the collapse of the victim/agent divide in favour of a more inclusive model that accounts for the embodied subjectivity of *Waterland's* women. A significant body of criticism within neo-Victorian studies focuses on the genre's capacity to re-imagine Victorian gender ideology by representing female characters who embody non-traditional gender roles (Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism*; Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*; King; Llewellyn, 'What Is Neo-Victorian Studies?'). Jeanette King provides an important intervention in this field by demonstrating that feminist writers do not engage with Victorian-era anxieties about the status of women to highlight female oppression but, instead, to champion the oft-

unrecognised expressions of agency by Victorian women and their contemporary counterparts (3). Similarly, Grosz problematises essentialist understandings of women in her foundational work on corporeal feminism, *Volatile Bodies*. She argues that “misogynist thought has commonly found a convenient self-justification for women’s secondary social positions by containing them within bodies that are represented, even constructed, as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control” (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 13). Combining King’s approach to feminist neo-Victorian fiction and Grosz’s corporeal feminism enables a re-evaluation of Mary’s various bodily “ailments” as markers of resistance – rather than capitulation – to patriarchal oppression.

The Victorian Madwoman Returns: Mary and Sarah’s Disruptive Sexualities

Tom’s preoccupation with fashioning ordered and coherent narratives from past events elides the way in which Mary’s experiences resist narrative ordering. Instead, Mary uses her body to express her relationship to the past. Tom’s attempt to shape history, “to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories” (Swift 68), is emblematic of his desire for a Grand Narrative capable of conferring meaning onto his experiences, even though the novel itself suggests such a narrative does not exist. In outlining a framework for corporeal feminism, Grosz calls for an alternative approach to accounting for the past, whereby “a completely different set of perspectives – this time based on women’s specificities, experiences, positions, rather than on those of men, who hide themselves and their specificities under the banner of some universal humanity – is possible and needs to be explored” (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* xi). Turning our attention – as Grosz suggests – to the specificities of women’s experiences, Mary’s abortion emerges as a challenge to Tom’s universalising discourse. For Mary, the abortion exists as an experience outside narration. It exists as embodied memory, mobilised by Mary in service of her challenge to Tom’s perception of women’s bodies as sites of permeability and weakness. In her analysis of two neo-Victorian novels, Gail Jones’ *Sixty Lights* (2004) and Helen Humphreys’ *Afterimage* (2000), Kate Mitchell asserts, “the body is engraved by time, etched with past experience. In this sense memory is carried with us bodily, not so much remembered as ‘membered,’ or embodied” (162). In this way, the body “becomes a medium for the repetition of the past, [and] its unbidden persistence in the present” (Mitchell 160). While Mitchell does not connect this observation to *Waterland*, it’s clear that the memory of

Mary's abortion is etched onto her body by the "witch doctor" Martha's crude tools. By leaving Mary infertile, the abortion returns in the present both as Mary's failure to mother and as a counter-narrative to Tom's view of the generative nature of history. In this sense, her body is not just a cataloguer of memory, it plays a pivotal role in memory-making and memory-remaking.

Feminist scholars have long sought to understand the historical association between the perceived weaknesses of the female body and the justification of unequal gendered power relations. For Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the madwoman figure in nineteenth-century literature "is usually in some sense the author's double, an image of her own anxiety and rage" (Gilbert and Gubar 78). In *Waterland*, Tom performs a version of this doubling, by continually recalling the figures of Victorian madwoman Sarah Atkinson and seventh-century oracle St Gunnhilda in order to position Mary's madness as a form of gendered inheritance: "In another age, in olden times, they might have called her holy (or else have burnt her as a witch). One who hears the voice of— One to whom— They might have allowed her the full scope of her mania: her anchorite's cell, her ascetic's liberties, her visions and ravings . . . Now she gets benefit of psychiatry" (Swift 328). While Tom attempts to frame his institutionalisation of Mary as an inevitable consequence of the instability of the female psyche, his ironic tone suggests that even he is sceptical of the connections he suggests exist between women, madness, and religious devotion. As Jane Ussher argues, "the outspoken, difficult woman of the sixteenth century was castigated as a witch, and the same woman in the nineteenth century a hysteric, in the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries, she is described as 'borderline'. All are stigmatising labels. All are irrevocably tied to what it means to be 'woman' at a particular point in history" (81). From this perspective, madness can be seen as temporally, spatially, and culturally contingent – it is a failure to embody a particular version of the feminine ideal, rather than an affliction of an individual mind. For instance, Mary's institutionalisation is the result of her failure to produce a child and her attempt – through abduction – to lay claim to the identity of mother to which she has no right. As such, Tom may speak playfully of history's treatment of madwomen in an attempt to distance himself from such approaches, but his actions – in institutionalising Mary – reveal his complicity in punishing women who fail to conform.

The shifting meanings ascribed to women's embodied experiences in *Waterland* mirror the fluidity of the Fenland landscape that permeates the narrative. For Pamela Cooper, "porous as

the Fenland itself, the woman's body signals through its enterability a general instability of boundaries" (387). However, we need to be alert to the way in which Tom actively constructs this affinity between women and water. He connects St Gunnhilda, Sarah and Mary not only to each other, but also to the land-reclamation project undertaken by his male ancestors. In this way, "each of the key women [in *Waterland*] becomes symbolically over-determined by the stories that attach to them" (Mitchell 187). For Tom, female bodies are fluid entities that, like the River Leem, "have a troublesome habit of bursting their banks [and a troublesome habit of defying male authority], changing their course and every so often becoming choked with silt" (Swift 72). Like the Fenland waters, women's bodies require constant (male) observation and intervention. In this way, the "sluices and staunches built to control the flow" of the River Leem (Swift 75) are akin to the asylum and its gates, which Tom moves freely between after "deposit[ing] my wife, along with certain personal articles, pending psychiatric treatment" (Swift 326). Tom's investment in constructing these feminine lineages is driven by his need to displace responsibility for Mary's purported madness. His active participation in the patriarchal project of stemming the flow of women's embodied subjectivities belies his professed reverence for Natural History and its imperviousness to human intervention.

Sarah Atkinson's bodily actions provide a counter-narrative to Tom's representation of her as the archetypal Victorian madwoman. By re-imagining the Victorian era as a "revolutionary, progressive phase" (Swift 334), Tom lauds the Atkinson men as "humble champions of Progress" (Swift 206) while Sarah is relegated to the status of a "living fossil" (Swift 206). However, Sarah's embodied fluidity disrupts Tom's phallogocentric desire to define her: she is at once "Guardian Angel, Holy Mother, Saint Gunnhilda-come-again" (Swift 99) and "stark-mad" (Swift 89). Like Tom Crick, Sarah's husband Thomas Atkinson is motivated by guilt to pathologise his wife's experiences. Following his assault of Sarah, Thomas attempts to regain control over his wife by seeking advice from a variety of (male) experts under the guise of curing her:

And that the reply of the wizened occultist [. . .] drove the last rivet of grief into old Tom's soul: that Thomas Atkinson, as Thomas himself well knew, was only receiving the punishment he merited, and that, as for his wife, no magic in the world could bring her out of the state which she herself – had not Thomas looked closely enough into her eyes? – wished to remain in. (Swift 85–86)

According to the occultist, Sarah's body contains an alternative account of her illness: one that is, in fact, not illness at all, but rather a deliberately undertaken vow of silence (Powell

70). Its power lies in denying Thomas the salvation for his sins that he so desperately seeks. For Mitchell, “Sarah Atkinson impedes the onward and upward march of the Atkinson dynasty, and by extension, of Progress, indeed history itself, by subverting her husband’s energies for expansion and redirecting them toward herself” (88). However, Tom remains deeply suspicious of the extent of Sarah’s influence. He refers to the “stories” told by “popular opinion”, which suspected Sarah of possessing “the gift to see and shape the future” (Swift 88). Tom imagines Sarah uses this purported talent to undermine Thomas’ authority over his sons: “to them indeed she imparted, perhaps in plain words, perhaps by some other mystical process of communication, wisdom and exhortation” (Swift 88). Despite Tom’s attempt to emphasise the visible, audible actions of his male ancestors – Sarah’s experiences are largely confined to a chapter titled “About the Rise of the Atkinsons” – her silent machinations continue to haunt his narrative of Progress.

Tom emphasises the humane treatment of mental illness in the late-twentieth century – in contrast to the Victorian era – by using the terminology of contemporary psychology to frame Mary’s condition. However, slippages in the language he uses to theorise Mary’s malady indicate his attachment to nineteenth-century cultural and medico-scientific discourses on madness and sexuality. Despite Tom’s reference to Mary’s condition as “schizophrenia” (Swift 152) and her treatment by a “psychiatrist” (Swift 309), he cannot help but describe “the cloistered precincts of this asylum –” (Swift 327) – which itself has allusions to the celibacy of cloistered nuns like St Gunnhilda – before correcting himself “that is, hospital” (Swift 327). According to King, Victorian anxieties concerning female sexuality led to fears “that any apparent ‘angel’ could be harbouring a potential ‘whore’ if sufficient supervision were not exercised” (23). In Tom’s re-imagining of the Victorian past, his ancestor Sarah Atkinson’s suspected adultery is punished first by a violent blow to the head, delivered by her husband Thomas, and later, by institutionalisation at the hands of her sons (Swift 83, 100). Both Crick and Atkinson are threatened by their wives’ sexual agency and alleged infidelity: Sarah and Mary (whom Tom suspects of sleeping with his brother) are “written and rewritten by and as male desire” (Mitchell 88). Though Tom invokes modern understandings of madness, he is driven by the same obsession for control as his ancestor: “Is this a case (like Thomas Atkinson?) of doting solicitude leading to jealous imaginings? For Mrs Crick, you’ll have observed, children, even from those atrocious newspaper photographs, is a well-preserved woman” (Swift 132). Tom’s tacit acknowledgement of the similarities between himself and Atkinson is part of “his subjective desire to present himself in the best possible

light” (Acheson 91). By pathologising Mary’s behaviour, he fashions himself as the doting husband responsible for protecting the honour of his vulnerable wife. While in the nineteenth century, “the greatest danger to a woman’s mental health, and to her moral worth, came from her sexuality” (King 20–21), the same is true in the novel’s present. Mary is punished for her multiple failings to embody the feminine ideal: first through her teenage promiscuity and later through her failure to reproduce (Powell 65). As Tom leaves the hospital in which he places Mary, “his historian’s eye takes in [. . .] the stone status of some founder or benefactor [...] notes, on the pink granite plinth [. . .] the word which modern preference for plain ‘Hospital’ or, begrudgingly, ‘Mental Hospital,’ cannot, in justice to this worthy’s memory, erase: ‘. . . Asylum’” (Swift 327). Just as Tom’s recollections of the past take precedence over his wife’s Mary’s, so too is the statue of the (presumably male) founder of the asylum afforded deference over any gesture toward more accurate naming conventions. Though the terminology used to describe madness shifts across time, Tom’s narrative indicates the persistence of Victorian-era anxieties toward female sexual agency and its presumed association with hysteria, which he himself is implicated in through his treatment of Mary.

Leaving Narrative Behind: Abortion as Embodied Memory

Tom struggles to transform Mary’s embodied memory of her abortion into a self-affirming and coherent narrative of male control over female reproductive rights and transfers the blame for his failure onto Mary. For Mitchell, Mary’s “abortion, which disrupts teleological history, marks too her rejection of history, stories and things made to happen and the meaning that accrues to them” (81). Mary’s rejection of story elicits disappointment in Tom, who aligns her mid-life return to religion with her behaviour after the abortion: “He knows that Mary locked herself away of her own free will. Though he does not know [. . .] Whether God spoke to her (then too) as He spoke, above the howls of the demons, to St Gunnhilda; whether she found Salvation; whether, perhaps, she was visited by the ghost of Sarah Atkinson” (Swift 122–23). While Tom seeks to emphasise the irrationality of female behaviour in this passage, the underlying issue is that these three women deliberately employ strategies that place their bodies outside the reach of male influence. St Gunnhilda “surviv[es] on nothing but her prayers” (Swift 25), Sarah undertakes a vow of silence that “cannot be reclaimed” (Swift 85), and Mary retreats into religion, “drifting away” from Crick (Swift 133).

Creating an affinity between Sarah and Mary legitimises – at least to himself – Tom’s institutionalisation of Mary through the rehearsal of a historical precedent of male intervention in female (in)sanity. However, it is important to note that Tom, not Mary, is descended from the Atkinson line. As such, the most salient similarity between Sarah and Mary is their attempt to resist their husbands’ controlling influence. Like Sarah, Mary engages in her own form of deception: in the asylum, she “stares, vigilantly and knowingly (the common ruse of the inmate: it’s they who are mad, not me), at those frail, playground children” (Swift 328). This passage indicates not the ruse of the inmate, but the ruse of the narrator: Tom’s construction of Mary as madwoman is self-serving and inaccurate. For Mary, the madhouse is a refuge – and an imperfect one at that – for a woman seeking to escape patriarchal control.

Tom interprets Mary’s madness as a by-product of her inability to fashion the traumatic memories of her abortion into an ordered, coherent narrative. According to Craps, “the unassimilated event, which brings time to a halt, goes on happening in the world of the trauma: it continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time” (74). While this suggests that Tom’s attempt to transform trauma into narrative is futile, he nonetheless remains convinced that the route to catharsis lies in storytelling:

First there is nothing; then there is happening. And after the happening, only the telling of it. But sometimes the happening won’t stop and let itself be turned into memory. So she’s still in the midst of events [. . .] which haven’t ceased. Which is why it’s impossible to get through. Which is why she can’t cross into the safe, sane realm of hindsight and answer the questions of the white-coated doctors. (Swift 326–27)

Far from having an intrinsic mental disturbance, Mary is deemed mad because she cannot order her bodily recollections in a way that affirms Tom’s narrative of patriarchal progress. He cannot – or, more aptly, will not – afford Mary’s embodied memories the same credence as his own acts of storytelling because this would undermine his authority as narrator: “Children, women are equipped with a miniature model of reality: an empty but fillable vessel. A vessel in which much can be made to happen, and to issue in consequence [. . .] And it was Tom Crick, history-teacher-to-be who [. . .] was responsible for filling the then avid and receptive vessel of Mary Metcalf, later Mrs Crick” (Swift 48). As an act of “unhappening,” Mary’s abortion literally destroys Tom’s issue. He cannot acknowledge

Mary's reproductive autonomy because "for the Atkinsons, invested in empire and progress, paternity is related to the desire to control reality, to shape the future" (Mitchell 75). Tom's obsession with male acts of "happening" and his reductive conceptualisation of women's bodies work together to overwrite Mary's bodily autonomy.

The teenage Mary's decision to terminate her pregnancy without recourse to Tom demonstrates her embodied agency. While Craps claims that Mary's decision to abort is motivated by "a sense of guilt about the death of their friend Freddie Parr" (74), I argue that it is a challenge to the idea of man-made history. When discussing the pregnancy with Tom, "Mary says firmly: 'I know what I'm going to do'" (Swift 137). She "doesn't move her head or speak when he gets up and shouts: 'What's that then, Mary? *What* are you going to do?'" (Swift 137; emphasis in original). Here, Tom is forced to adopt the passive position – he is no more in control of Mary's decision than he is able to coax the plan from her. Her power to make "something [. . .] unhappen" erases Crick's claim to paternity and, in so doing, his desire to leave a legacy (Swift 294). Though Tom attempts to fill this void through teaching, Mary's ability to make do "with nothing" threatens his grasp on reality (Swift 131). For Mitchell, "Mary's disruption is an attempt to abort history itself. Mary's empty vessel has been filled, things have been made to happen inside her, just as history is made to happen within an empty reality" (89). Mary's body refuses to be contained by the narrative boundaries Tom seeks to impose upon her. Instead, the memory of the abortion is embodied as infertility, thereby acting as a continual reminder of her power to intervene in history. Tom's obsession with storytelling is no match for the fluid, shifting nature of Mary's body: "he's already reached the limits of his power to explain, just as his wife (a once dogged and patient woman) has ceased to be realistic – has ceased to belong to reality" (Swift 113–14). Mary's abortion and its re-enactment decades later, in the form of the kidnapping, demonstrates not a loss of reality as Tom would have it, but the presentation of an alternative reality where women's reproductive rights are divorced from male desire and control.

Mary's present-day kidnapping of a child from the supermarket is an attempt to express the lingering trauma of her abortion through embodied action. According to Powell, "while maternity in this novel symbolizes normality, infertility symbolizes unnaturalness and a lack of completeness only attained through motherhood" (71). In response to Mary's attempt to reclaim the socially revered role of mother, Tom redoubles his efforts to control her: "The wife pulls. The husband pulls. Baby blankets unravel [. . .] As the husband pulls he cannot

suppress the sensation that he is pulling away part of his wife. He is tearing the life out of her” (Swift 267). While Craps asserts that “Mary re-enacts past traumatic experiences in contemporary reality” (75), she does not examine Tom’s role in Mary’s re-traumatisation. Plucking the child from Mary’s body, as Tom once plucked a duck during her abortion, is a violent, non-consensual act designed to punish Mary’s expression of agency. While Tom removes the physical baby, he cannot remove the trace of Mary’s lost maternity: “she hands it over, in a trance. But it’s still there really, still in her arms. Always will be” (Swift 310). For Powell, women in *Waterland* “are either mothers or insane” (71). She goes on to argue that while Sarah Atkinson’s status as a mother is a redeeming feature that mitigates against her alleged madness, the same cannot be said for Mary because she lacks a legitimate claim to the role of mother (Powell 63). While Mary attempts to lay claim to this role through the abduction of a child, her actions do little more than bolster Tom’s case for her institutionalisation. While Tom acknowledges that Mary will always carry the baby in her arms, he is troubled by this model of history as absence. This recognition – that Mary’s trauma cannot be erased – highlights the sardonic nature of Tom’s claim that she will “benefit” from modern-day psychiatry.

In contrast to the kidnapping, where Tom plays an instrumental role in returning the stolen baby, he is positioned firmly – and literally – off-stage during Mary’s abortion. This is a female-only realm, involving a partnership between Mary and the local “witch” Martha. Martha duly banishes Tom from this space: “An’ you best make yisself scarce, bor. You best sit you outside quiet an’ not git in owd Martha’s way. An’ stop that blubbering” (Swift 305). Though the losses of both children inflict trauma on Mary, the abortion is distinguished by Mary’s consent. According to Gilbert and Gubar, “From a male point of view, women who reject the submissive silences of domesticity have been seen as terrible objects [. . .] But from a female point of view the monster woman is simply a woman who seeks the power of self-articulation (79). Tom’s attempt to demonise Martha by labelling her a “witch” who “got rid of love children” (Swift 296–97), is born of his indignation that such a person – such a woman – can perform the role of accomplice in Mary’s abortion while he himself is excluded. In this collaborative pact between Martha and Mary, the abortion is symbolic of the female body’s capacity to rewrite its past, present, and future. After the abortion Tom is tasked with discarding the remains of the foetus – “what the future’s made of” (Swift 307) – in the pail. Though Martha instructs him not to look, he cannot resist: “I howled. A farewell glance” (Swift 315). Craps reads Tom’s determination to look in the pail as emblematic of his

“resolve not to blind himself to the true horror of the abortion” (76). However, I argue that his disavowal of Martha’s instructions represents his desire to wrest control back from these women. By bearing witness to his loss of posterity, Tom seeks to reclaim it and, in so doing, reinsert himself into the narrative. Despite this, Mary’s actions cannot be overwritten by Tom’s narrative gaze. By reversing Tom’s impregnation of her – making it “unhappen” – Mary asserts her autonomy and undermining Tom’s power over her body and, by extension, her embodied memories.

***The Painted Bridge* and Neo-Sensation**

Much of *The Painted Bridge*’s plot centres around life inside Lake House, a private women’s asylum in mid-Victorian England. Wallace uses the asylum as a vehicle for exploring the impact of restrictive gender roles on women, and the way in which these roles interact with medico-scientific discourses to produce diagnoses of madness. The novel’s 1859 setting is coterminous with the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, a connection which highlights the role Darwinian evolutionary theory played in bolstering existing assumptions about normative femininity by offering an apparently biological basis for what was culturally held to be women’s innate suitability for marriage and motherhood. The novel’s focus on women’s experiences inside the asylum, nearly thirty years after *Waterland*’s publication, demonstrates not only the neo-Victorian genre’s ongoing interest in representing marginalised figures but also a metafictional interest in critiquing the silencing performed by earlier iterations of the genre itself. While Wallace’s novel is yet to attract the attention of neo-Victorian critics, it shares some characteristics with some more studied feminist neo-Victorian rewritings of the asylum – such as Sarah Waters’ *Fingersmith*. The novel’s focus on female subjectivity and the minutiae of life inside the asylum writes back to nineteenth-century literature’s silencing of female experience and, more specifically, the sensation novel’s reluctance to offer a realistic portrayal of conditions within the asylum. D.A. Miller makes this point in relation to *The Woman in White*, arguing that “It would be quite difficult to deduce a sociological understanding of Victorian asylums from Collins’s novel, which, voiding a lively contemporary concern with the private madhouse, describes neither its structure nor the (medicinal? physical? psychological?) therapies that may or may not be practiced within it” (113). Reading Wallace’s novel as a response to *Waterland* also

demonstrates its capacity to address the silencing of female experience within the neo-Victorian genre.

My analysis of Wallace's novel draws on the work of Elaine Showalter and, more recently, Lisa Appignanesi and Jane Ussher, all of whom examine the roles nineteenth-century medical, scientific and gender discourses played in constructing women's madness as an expression of deviance from and a challenge to the Victorian feminine ideal. Wallace's protagonist Anna Palmer is wrongfully committed to Lake House by her husband Vincent and struggles to prove her sanity to those charged with her treatment. Vincent's motivation for institutionalising Anna is two-fold: like Mary, Anna fails to embody the role of docile wife prescribed by normative femininity; but she is also punished for threatening to expose Palmer's double life when she discovers that he is, in fact, already married – to a former theatre actress, Maud Sulten, with whom he has a child. Through Anna and her fellow inmates in Lake House, Wallace foregrounds the connection between women's frustration at their restricted roles in Victorian society and experiences of madness. While madness is constructed as a product of these societal limitations, the label itself also operates within the novel as a means to pathologise women's rational feelings of anger. In doing so, Wallace represents Lake House as a space of containment which works to stifle its patients' ability to protest against the gendered hierarchies of power inherent in the structure of Victorian society. The threat these protests pose to the existing social order is thus nullified both linguistically – by labelling these women 'mad' – and physically, through institutionalisation in Lake House.

Anna is deemed a madwoman because she refuses to conform to the mid-Victorian feminine ideal. As discussed in Chapter 1, the ideal woman of this period was a sexless, compliant, and virtuous figure, for whom marriage and motherhood formed the central pillars of her identity (King 10–11). With the emergence of Darwin's evolutionary theory, the cultural ideal became a biological inevitability, as women came to be "understood as being fashioned by evolution for the home and maternity, nervously frail, intellectually inferior" (Appignanesi 120). While Anna's sister Louisa conforms to the feminine ideal, Anna is marked as improperly feminine.¹² The contrast between the two sisters is redolent of Lyn Pykett's

¹² In Lyn Pykett's study of femininity in women's sensation novels and New Woman fiction, she argues that the meaning of the proper feminine "depends on a series of excluded terms" (16). These excluded terms include woman "as a demon or wild

observation about the Victorian sensation novel: citing the pairing of Lady Audley and Clara Talboys as an example, she argues that sensation novels frequently juxtaposed “an apparently, or actually, 'improper' heroine [...] with the epitome of proper femininity in such a way as to redefine both categories” (19). Louisa may be devoted to her husband and children, but her husband also suspects her of carrying a predisposition to madness, inherited from her mother (Wallace 24). Anna’s marriage suggests conformity, but the “usual relief” she experiences at the arrival of her period (Wallace 83) and her assertion that she is not “not cut out for domestic life” (Wallace 379) attest to her failure to fully embody the domestic ideal. As Appignanesi notes “Not conforming to a norm risks the label of deviance or madness, and is sometimes attended by confinement” (7). Anna’s ailment is constructed by both Vincent and the doctors he employs to examine her as madness, but it is, in fact, indicative of her transgression of Victorian gender roles. Anna’s desire to leave Vincent (Wallace 236), coupled with the fact that she “had always been curious about the sexual act” (Wallace 145) but does not want to have a child (Wallace 45) places her at odds with Victorian gender ideology, which held that marriage was the only acceptable outlet for female sexual desire (King 22). According to this ideology, marriage and motherhood were the only avenues through which women’s otherwise “morally dangerous” sexuality could be contained (Ussher 19). Victorian cultural discourse thus idealised women as sexless “Angels” at the same time as suspecting they harboured illicit desires which must be brought under control (King 23). Wallace describes marriage as “necessary” for Anna: “She had to. She had no inheritance, no skill in nursing or governessing” (Wallace 85). Anna’s marriage to Vincent is thus a practical, calculated decision – she has no family wealth and, unlike Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Audley, she lacks the skills to style herself as a governess. As I noted with regard to Fevvers in the previous chapter, middle-class Victorian women had few opportunities through which to pursue economic independence and, as a result, marriage was often the only viable way for women to stave off poverty and social ostracism. However conventional Anna’s motives, they cannot disguise the mismatch between her attitudes toward the institution – unlike Fevvers Anna retains these views after her marriage – and the societal expectations of married women. Anna’s distaste not only for the institution, but also

animal; a whore; a subversive threat to the family; threateningly sexual; pervaded by feeling; knowing; self-assertive; desiring and actively pleasure-seeking; pursuing self-fulfilment and self-identity; independent; enslaver; and victimiser or predator” (Pykett 16).

for her husband, leave her unwilling to perform the role of docile wife and this, in turn, leads to her confinement in Lake House.

Madness as Cover-up: Male Betrayal and Women's Suffering

Anna's disinterest in performing normative femininity is coupled with suspicion toward Vincent's fidelity. After finding a letter from Vincent's wife Maud Sulten, Anna confronts him and demands to know whether Maud is his mistress (Wallace 122). Vincent rebuffs Anna's accusation by suggesting it is the product of a delusion, thereby shifting responsibility for his bigamy onto her: "You are imagining things, again. I want to hear nothing more of this, do you understand? I forbid you to speak of it to me or anyone else" (Wallace 123). Vincent's demand that Anna remain silent on the subject of Maud is similar to Thomas' attack on his wife Sarah in *Waterland*, in that both represent an attempt to wrest control of the narrative of infidelity from their wives. However, in Wallace's novel the husband, not the wife, is the unfaithful party. By framing his affair as a manifestation of Anna's deranged mind, Vincent begins to lay the groundwork for Anna's institutionalisation. Mary Russo argues that historically "Hysterics and madwomen generally have ended up in the attic or in the asylum, their gestures of pain and deviance having served only to put them out of circulation" (67). Collins' Sir Percival Glyde and Wallace's Vincent have a shared motivation when it comes to the institutionalisation of Anne Catherick and Anna respectively: they are both trying to preserve a secret that has the potential to damage their reputations. While Sir Percival is driven by a desire to protect the "secret of his birth" (Marsh 102), Vincent wants to prevent his marriage to Maud becoming public knowledge.

Like Thomas Atkinson and Tom Crick, Vincent views institutionalisation as an appropriate punishment for Anna's lack of feminine decorum. In response to her curiosity about Maud, Vincent feels that "Anna was prying. Concerning herself with matters that didn't concern her" (Wallace 89). His actions can be read in light of current understandings of the ways in which madness was mobilised in Victorian society to exert control over women: "The diagnosis of madness thus functioned very effectively to rid society – or husbands – of women who were 'difficult', or who were no longer wanted" (Ussher 70). Just as definitions of hysteria and madness are culturally and historically contingent, so too are they capable of being misapplied or abused by those in positions of power. For instance, Anna's and Mary's

actions are interpreted as symptoms of madness – rather than reasonable responses to their experiences of grief and trauma – because their husbands carefully and deliberately translate their wives’ embodied distress into narratives which enables their confinement. However, the similarities between Mary and Anna are not limited to their husbands’ overwriting of their distress. Both women are attempting to work through their past trauma at the loss of a child, the memories of which erupt into the narrative present. Mary’s backyard abortion as a teenager is paired with her kidnapping of a child; while Anna, who witnessed her younger brother Antony’s drowning as a child, disobeys Vincent by travelling to Wales to render aid to a boy saved from drowning. In both cases, their actions act as a catalyst for their entry into the asylum. While in Swift’s novel Mary’s and Sarah’s suspected infidelities provides (mock) justification – at least in Tom’s view – for their institutionalisation, Wallace shifts the infidelity onto the male character in order to highlight Anna’s blamelessness. Though this removes one possible motivation for Vincent’s institutionalisation of Anna, it does little to imbue her with any sexual agency. Unlike Mary and Sarah, she remains faithful to her husband, even if her conformity to feminine norms is found wanting in other ways.

Reading the Mad Body: Medical Discourse and the Trained (Male) Eye

Wallace’s portrayal of madwomen foregrounds the importance of cultural context in diagnoses of mental illness, drawing attention to the limitations of relying solely on individual pathology to understand the causes of madness. The novel implicates the restrictive nature of nineteenth-century gender ideology – which was made manifest in the doctrine of “separate spheres” (Poovey 77) – in producing behaviours which were subsequently pathologised as symptoms of madness. Wallace’s mouthpiece for this perspective is Dr Lucas St Clair, a comparatively enlightened member of the medical profession who visits Lake House to conduct diagnostic experiments. St Clair is convinced that “Half the female patients in his care had been driven to the edge of reason by their limited lives” (Wallace 59). Such limitations are evident in Anna’s marriage to Vincent: though she longs for a meaningful occupation, she is constrained by her role as a vicar’s wife. Furthermore, when Anna does attempt to act independently – by going to the aid of a victim of a near-drowning – her actions draw Vincent’s ire and cement his decision to have her institutionalised. St Clair’s theory regarding the root cause of his patients’ distress is similar to Ussher’s push for women’s misery – both historical and contemporary – to be

acknowledged in discussions of mental illness. However, Ussher provides an important caveat: “Acknowledging misery does not mean that we accept that it is madness, or ‘mental illness’ [...] we can reframe women’s distress as a reasonable response to the material circumstances of their lives, to gendered roles [...] and to the intersubjective context within which women negotiate suffering” (186). Reframing Anna’s experiences in light of Ussher’s formulation reveals Lake House’s ostensible existence as a therapeutic haven to be little more than a veneer for a prison-like institution which seeks to contain women’s distress, thereby preventing its disruptive effect on the tightly held yet fragile gender roles in Victorian society. St Clair makes this connection between the asylum space and the prison explicit: “About half were not mad by any measure he would employ. They were debilitated by disease or hardship, driven to the edge of madness by life itself. He felt sometimes that he was not working as a doctor but as a custodian. A jailer for the people society had no use for, the old, the feeble and the broken-hearted” (Wallace 228). By questioning the diagnoses meted out to the women in his care, St Clair casts doubt on the legitimacy of the very medical profession of which he forms a part. In this way, Wallace casts St Clair as a visionary figure whose observations reflect the now-familiar critique of Victorian diagnostic practices and the role these played in institutionalising women who transgressed norms of gendered behaviour.

The Painted Bridge’s preoccupation with madwomen and the spaces designed to contain them – like Lake House – mark it as an example of neo-sensation fiction. According to Jessica Cox, the inclusion of “narratives of violence, sexual trauma, and sexual desire” distinguishes neo-sensation fiction from Victorian sensation fiction (32). Cox goes on to argue that contemporary authors are drawn to Victorian sensation narratives because of the potential for revising those aspects which, from a contemporary standpoint, appear regressive or problematic – particularly in relation to gender (25). In this way, neo-sensation shares the revisionist impulse of the neo-Victorian genre of which it forms a part (Cox 4). Like its Victorian predecessor, neo-sensation fiction is typified by the presentation of surface-level order and respectability that, over the course of the narrative, is gradually undone to reveal “scandalous secrets and illicit connections” (Marsh 100). In Pamela Gilbert’s analysis of one of the most well-known examples of the sensation genre, *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), she argues “Lady Audley’s story must be absorbed into the overall narrative of the healthy [male] social body, if unity is to be maintained. If her story cannot be “absorbed” or healed in this manner, then it must be excised or expelled from the body” (225). At first, Lady Audley appears to be the embodiment of the middle-class Victorian Angel; in fact, so successful is

her performance of ideal femininity that she is able to transition from the poverty-stricken, abandoned wife of George Talboys to a governess for a respectable family and later, the wife of Sir Michael Audley. However, her nephew Robert Audley's dogged pursuit of her uncovers her status as a bigamist and (attempted) murderess. Following this revelation, Lady Audley is no longer considered fit for the position of Sir Michael's wife. To protect his uncle's reputation, Robert Audley bribes a doctor to certify Lady Audley as mad and her excision from the narrative is achieved through her confinement in a Belgian asylum. However, like Anna, Lady Audley is not institutionalised because she is mad but because of the threat she poses to the existing social order. Even the doctor who agrees to certify her is convinced of her sanity; he tells "The lady is not mad...She is dangerous!" (Braddon 385). Through Lady Audley's wrongful institutionalisation, Braddon "draw[s] attention to the reinscription of badness as madness" (Matus, 'Disclosure as "Cover-Up"' 347). Lady Audley's calculated plot, which includes the faking of her own death (as Helen Talboys), allows her to enhance her social position through reinvention. This duplicity blurs the boundaries between ideal and deviant femininity (Pykett 19) and therefore must be punished. Both Lady Audley and Anna are punished for deviating from feminine norms. However, for Lady Audley (and, indeed, for Mary) this punishment represents the end of her narrative trajectory while for Anna it is the catalyst for her to leave Vincent and pursue her goals. In both Victorian and neo-Victorian novels, the asylum is used as a repository for unruly women whose expressions of dissatisfaction with the social order threaten the continued dominance of patriarchal power.

St Clair acts as a counterpoint to the more recognisably Victorian attitudes of characters like Querios Abse – the lay superintendent of Lake House – and Dr Higgins, whom Abse employs. Both men display little interest in theorising alternative explanations for their patients' distress – indeed, their livelihoods depend on rejecting such explanations. While St Clair is troubled by his status as a jailer, Abse feels no such moral unease. He describes Lake House's patients as "Parasites on the body of healthy society without higher thoughts or aims other than to secure their own individual liberty" (Wallace 161). Abse's representation of madwomen as parasites denotes a less than human quality and works to reinforce the idea of women's inferiority to men. Interpreting his patients' desire for independence as a danger to the stability of Victorian society disguises Abse's fear that women's increasing independence will lead to a usurpation of his individual power and legitimises the institutionalisation of non-normative women by presenting it as necessary for the greater (male) good. This is not

dissimilar to fears surrounding the emergence of the New Woman, as discussed in the previous chapter in relation to *Fevvers*. In contrast to St Clair, the views espoused by Higgins reflect dominant understandings of madness in nineteenth-century scientific and medical discourses, which held that women were biologically more susceptible to madness. Women's reproductive systems were assumed to be the cause of this biological vulnerability: "despite their awareness of poverty, dependency, and illness as factors, the prevailing view among Victorian psychiatrists was that the statistics proved what they had suspected all along: that women were more vulnerable to insanity than men because the instability of their reproductive systems interfered with their sexual, emotional, and rational control" (Showalter 55). In Wallace's novel, Higgins disregards the social and structural causes of Anna's distress; instead diagnosing her with "hysteria" brought on by "Suppressed catamenia" and "Uterine disturbance" (Wallace 46). Determined to read Anna's condition as an inevitable consequence of femaleness, rather than a product of her husband's ill-will and desire to protect his reputation, Higgins' subsequent remark that "Most of your sex" suffer from hysteria "at some times in their lives" (Wallace 46) demonstrates his accord with the prevailing view of women as the biologically inferior sex. Far from being confined to the medical profession, such views were pervasive in mid-Victorian society – in part due to the cultural currency of Darwin's evolutionary theory – and worked to reinforce women's secondary social status (Appignanesi 107; Showalter 122). For example, Anna's husband Vincent is convinced that "Women did not age as well as men, generally. In temperament as well as in the flesh. Their weaker brains deteriorated rather than strengthened with the passing of the years" (Wallace 184). Vincent's solicitation of Anna's diagnosis thus reflects cultural attitudes toward non-normative femininity which were in turn bolstered by pseudo-scientific evidence implicating female biology and, in particular, the female reproductive system, as the chief cause of madness.

In order to diagnose female insanity, Victorian medical professionals actively constructed tenuous links between internal biological disturbances, physical characteristics, and observable behaviours. In this way, women's bodies functioned as texts that could be "read by the trained eye" for the presence or absence of mental illnesses (Appignanesi 63). With regard to fictional representations of madness, the twenty-first century has witnessed a trend among British authors of returning to the Victorian era to work through issues concerning women's mental health (Muller, 'Hystoriographic Metafiction' par. 2). Nadine Muller coins these texts "hystoriographic metafiction" – an amalgamation of Showalter's term

“hystories,” denoting histories of hysteria and Hutcheon’s “historiographic metafiction” – because they reconstruct nineteenth-century approaches to hysteria in order to critique the ongoing interaction between medical and gender discourses in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illnesses in women (‘Hystoriographic Metafiction’ pars. 4, 27). While Muller applies this framework to several novels, including Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1997), the distinction she makes between Sebastian Faulks’ *Human Traces* (2005) and Michael Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) is similar to my argument about the voicing and silencing of female experiences in Wallace’s and Swift’s novels respectively. Muller argues Faulks’ novel demonstrates the ways in which “women’s bodies and the stories they tell” have been overwritten by medical discourse (‘Hystoriographic Metafiction’ par. 11), while Faber’s “voices the narrative of the madwoman without overwriting her story” (‘Hystoriographic Metafiction’ par. 16). In novels like Faber’s and Wallace’s, which give voice to women’s experiences, the narrative of madness competes with other explanations for the women’s behaviour, chief among them a history of trauma and the effects of restrictive gender norms (Muller, ‘Hystoriographic Metafiction’ par. 3). While both Faulks’ and Faber’s novels contain “a misread bodily narrative” which contributes to their female characters’ misdiagnoses, the latter encourages suspicion toward the medical professionals responsible for the misreading (Muller, ‘Hystoriographic Metafiction’ par. 13). A similar misreading occurs in Wallace’s novel, when St Clair mistakes aspects of Anna’s physical appearance and mannerisms as evidence of hysteria. While consulting the photograph he has taken to aid in his diagnosis, St Clair asks Anna: “Do you not see the slightly fixed stare? The tension of the muscles by the jaw? The face, alight with nervous energy? [...] These are the classic signs of hysteria, Mrs Palmer” (Wallace 151). Though St Clair’s stance on Anna’s sanity alters as the novel progresses, he is initially convinced of the truth-telling capacity of photography and, moreover, his ability to correctly interpret the image. Using photography as a diagnostic tool concretises the unequal power dynamics between man and woman, doctor and patient, by placing the (male) medic in the position of the superior subject, while Anna is reduced to the (photographic) object. St Clair’s approach relies on the assumption that all bodies contain within them a singular truth that, with the right tools and training, can be read and understood. However, in reality, “Bodies may be made of hard matter but we perceive, understand and shape them in coded ways” (Appignanesi 431). As such, when St Clair proclaims that “The face contains muscles of expression. If the mind is troubled, so are the features [...] the face is the mind unveiled” (Wallace 130) he fails to recognise that his reading of Anna’s body is inextricably linked to normative constructions of feminine

appearance, comportment, and corporeality. Furthermore, his medical training predisposes him to conflate “troubled” with “mad”, rather than search for alternative explanations for Anna’s discontent. Anna’s physical features are thus significant only in so far as they confirm the diagnostic label St Clair has already ascribed to her.

St Clair is a fictionalised version of Hugh Welch Diamond, a key proponent of the use of new technologies in advancing psychiatric diagnostic practices (Showalter 86). Photography was one such technology that became a key tool for diagnosing madness in the nineteenth century. In line with the assumption that madness manifested in observable, physical characteristics, photography gave physicians a purportedly neutral, objective method for recording and assessing markers of mental distress. St Clair’s use of photography is met by opposition from many of his colleague. For instance, Grieve – the superintendent of the London hospital where St Clair works – is convinced that “The human eye does a better job of assessing a lunatic than a glass one ever will” (Wallace 59–60). Despite this, St Clair initially believes that photography offers “a scientific way of looking [...] Free of the old prejudices and preconceptions” (Wallace 3). While his intentions are noble – he views accurate diagnoses as the key to improving the of efficacy treatments (Wallace 56) – his assumption that technological innovation is synonymous with objectivity is at best naïve and at worst dangerous to his female patients. In this way, Wallace’s novel engages with Showalter’s observation about the role of photography played in shoring up power imbalances between physicians and madwomen: “That we should have so many remarkable pictures of Victorian madwomen, and so few of their words, reminds us how strongly the power of definition rested with the male observer” (97). Although St Clair claims “Photography is the art of truth. The camera draws from nature, without interference of man” (Wallace 127), this negates the fact that any ‘truth’ these photographs possess remain subject to the physician’s interpretation. There is no self-evident diagnosis present in the image itself. In Smit’s analysis of Diamond’s work, he argues that “The subjects of his photographs are not ‘present’ by any means of identity but rather by their medical condition. They remain disempowered, a condition marked here by a lack of direct eye contact and a forced perspective employed by the camera” (296). Like Diamond, St Clair’s affords primacy to his subjects’ medical conditions: he presents a series of numbered, but unnamed, photographs to

his fellow Alienists¹³, and asks them identify the asylum patients among them (Wallace 354). In this way, St Clair uses the photographs to speak to the women's mental states, while rendering the women themselves voiceless. He also instructs the women on what to wear and how to pose (Wallace 325), demonstrating both the constructed nature of the images and his desire to assert authorship over the women's narratives. St Clair's belief in photography as an objective (and complete) tool in the diagnosis of madness allows him to sidestep uncomfortable questions about his role in defining – rather than simply documenting – the boundaries between sanity and madness.

Anna is instrumental in St Clair questioning, and ultimately rejecting, his belief in photography's utility for diagnosing madness. Though Anna discusses her doubts about his method with fellow patient Talitha, she agrees to be photographed in the hope that it proves her sanity. However, when St Clair proceeds to diagnose her as a hysteric based on his interpretation of the physical features captured in the print, she challenges his reading of the image: "Dr St Clair, I'd hoped your theory was right [...] But it seems that you weren't able to see the truth in it [...] Will you make another picture? It might tell you something different?" (Wallace 153). Anna's awareness of the subjective nature of the gaze is a complicating factor in making accurate diagnoses that St Clair has yet to consider. However, he later revisits the first print he made of Anna, which forces him to confront the limitations of his perception: "Her eyes, the direct appeal they made, announced her desperation to be free, he could see now [...] He stopped, arrested by a thought that hadn't occurred to him before [...] Perhaps it was not only the photograph that might alter. The viewer could change too" (Wallace 232). St Clair's expression of doubt illustrates his growing awareness of the fact that even a single image can contain a multiplicity of meanings, depending on the context in which it is viewed and the positionality of the viewer in relation to the subject.

St Clair's misreading of Anna's photograph troubles the presumed interchangeability of the physical body and its photographed image. Lisa Appignanesi argues that both nineteenth-century asylum photographs and late-twentieth and twenty-first century medical imaging technologies – such as MRI scans – share in a politics of interpretation: "Scans are no more

¹³ Alienism was the precursor to the modern discipline of psychiatry (Appignanesi 60). It was pioneered by the French physician Phillippe Pinel in the late eighteenth-century and represented the first attempt to adopt a medicalised approach to the diagnosis and treatment of madness (Appignanesi 63, 65).

an accurate rendition of ‘reality’ than these older images once were; after all, they are computer-generated images processed [...] and then read using codes where assured parsing requires great subtlety and experience” (146–47). The instability of such coding systems is made explicit when St Clair develops the second photograph of Anna in preparation for presenting his experiment at a meeting of the Alienists’ Association:

The bruises and scabs gave her the air of a textbook madwoman from the old days, a caricature. They were absences on the plate, clear spaces on the glass where there ought to have been flesh. After some consideration, he’d filled them with ochre and graphite [...] He’d had a further idea after he’d believed the whole process was finished. He had re-instated the print he made of Mrs Palmer before correcting the plate. The same photograph, unretouched, was on the table now in the third row. It looked like a different woman. (Wallace 327–28)

St Clair presents the second image – taken after Anna undergoes various treatments at Lake House – to his colleagues in both its original and doctored form. Among the thirty photos of various women, mad and sane, “Only on two pictures had the gentlemen been unanimous. Mrs Anna Palmer, on the unretouched image, was a lunatic. Mrs Anna Palmer, free of scabs and bruises, was not” (Wallace 355). The Alienists’ inability to correctly interpret Anna’s state of mind from the (same) image forces St Clair to confront the fallibility of his profession and its enmeshment in the politics of the gaze. Despite the fact that the only difference between the two images lies in St Clair’s alterations to the plate, Anna is pronounced sane in one and mad in the other. This discrepancy illustrates the danger of relying on assumptions about normative feminine appearance when making diagnoses, instead of allowing women to speak to their embodied experiences.

In contrast to Abse and Higgins, Wallace positions St Clair as comparatively enlightened in his approach to the diagnosis and treatment of madness. He feels disillusioned by the medical profession’s existing approach to treatment and is particularly critical of the tendency for public asylum superintendents to bow to external pressures when determining which patients are cured. St Clair’s colleague Maddox tells him that Grieve is “after fifty per cent of patients discharged within a year, certified as cured” because it “Makes him look good to the commissioners” (Wallace 170). When Maddox relays Grieve’s criticism of St Clair’s “discharged uncured” rate, St Clair responds: “Where’s the merit in discharging people when they’re still ill? Or saying they’re well when they’re not? It’s pointless. It’s dangerous” (Wallace 170). Unlike Abse, Higgins, and Grieve, St Clair demonstrates a genuine interest in improving outcomes for his patients. Though Wallace has clearly modelled St Clair’s use of

diagnostic photography on Welch Diamond, she has also fashioned him as more progressive than his historical counterpart. While Diamond's "Women were given props that symbolized, often with pathetic futility, the asylum superintendent's hope of making them conform to Victorian ideals of feminine decorum" (Showalter 87), St Clair is determined to avoid reinforcing such ideals in his photographs:

The beauty of them, their scientific significance, was that he'd [...] photographed every sitter in the same way as Mrs Palmer. Persuaded each to wear a white scarf over their hair and a plain, dark gown. Free of props, against a black background, only their faces spoke from the inside of the oval frames. No recent coiffure or flash of diamonds or intrusion of potted palms contributed to the statement of mind of each individual. (Wallace 325)

While St Clair acknowledges that his patients' suffering is due in part to the era's restrictive gender roles, he refuses to let his portraits contribute to the already over-determined construction of normative femininity. In Muller's analysis of Faulks' *Human Traces*, she highlights the way in which "medicine, particularly in the area of mental health, can overwrite women's bodies and the stories they tell" ('Hystoriographic Metafiction' par. 11). While St Clair initially conforms to this pattern, he ultimately concludes that photography is not the solution to diagnostic uncertainty. His openness to Anna's critique of his method is, in part, what leads him to this conclusion. In this sense, Wallace's text is more in line with the subset of historiographic metafiction Muller identifies as giving voice to – rather than overwriting – women's experiences of mental illness ('Hystoriographic Metafiction' par. 12). This is evident in St Clair's altered view of the utility of his portraits: while he concedes their limitations in relation to diagnoses, he comes to recognise their value for offering "the opportunity for patients to define themselves by them, or contradict them" (Wallace 356). St Clair's emphasis on self-definition demonstrates a commitment to encouraging expressions of agency in his patients which sets him apart from his textual and historical contemporaries.

Ambiguous Cures: Treating – or Torturing – Madwomen

Wallace's novel highlights the way in which the social control of non-normative women through institutionalisation was often facilitated by corrupt asylum superintendents and medical professionals. Anna's husband Vincent, together with Abse, Higgins, and the doctors who certify her are all implicated in her wrongful imprisonment. When Anna asks Lovely – one of Lake House's attendants – "How does anyone get out of this place?" (Wallace 47) she

responds “They get out sooner or later, miss, most of ‘em. It depends mainly on what happens outside. Who wants them out. Who wants them in” (Wallace 48). Lovely’s response suggests not only that the patients have little power over their institutionalisation, but that their confinement has little to do with any objective assessment of their mental health. With reference to the eighteenth-century asylum, Appignanesi notes that “There were cases where keepers collaborated with siblings or partners in abducting and confining troublesome, though sane, members of families whose fortunes were worth stealing” (Appignanesi 26). Though there is no economic advantage for Tom Crick or Anna’s husband Vincent in confining their wives, the institutionalisation of both Mary and Anna is nonetheless motivated by their husbands’ need to reassert control in the face of challenges to their authority. However, the execution of these desires is not be possible without the complicity of those involved in populating and administering the asylums. Both Anna and Lady Audley are certified by mad by doctors whose medical judgment comes secondary to their desire to uphold a sense of male solidarity by fulfilling the wishes of Vincent and Robert respectively. Though Abse admits that “The credentials of the doctors who'd signed the papers [for Anna’s certificate of insanity] had struck him as bogus” (Wallace 293) he soon disregards this moral qualm in favour of the economic benefit institutionalising Anna will confer: “A good cure rate impressed the families but depressed the revenue [...] Querios had made a rough calculation earlier of what Mrs Palmer would mean for business if she proved an average case. Totted up what sum might be added to that if she had the full range of treatments” (Wallace 23). The lack of regulation in private asylums like Lake House meant that both lay superintendents like Abse and the medical professionals they employed were able to exercise their prejudices relatively unchecked. Ussher argues that the centuries-long pattern of women being overrepresented in diagnoses of madness can be explained by the vested interests of such professionals: “Some would say that women *are* more mad than men [...] I proffer an alternative explanation – that women are subjected to misdiagnosis and mistreatment by experts whose own pecuniary interests can be questioned, as can their use (or abuse) of power” (1). The abuse of power Ussher refers to is nowhere more evident than in the actions of Dr Higgins. He belittles Anna’s experiences by reminding her that “the doctor is generally considered the one who knows what’s important. Eh?” (Wallace 44). Later in the novel, St Clair describes Higgins as “a disgrace to the profession” and an “old charlatan” (Wallace 308). The treatments Abse and Higgins administer to Lake House’s patients are reflective of medicine’s approach to non-normative women in the mid-late Victorian period: “English psychiatric treatment of nervous women was ruthless, a

microcosm of the sex war intended to establish the male doctor's total authority" (Showalter 137). In Wallace's novel, this microcosm is expressed through Abse and Higgins' disregard for their patients' wellbeing and their complicity in confining sane women for monetary gain. Corruption marred the Victorian asylum system – particularly in the case of private asylums like Lake House – and, more often than not, this led to the further traumatising of vulnerable women like Anna.

The treatment regime Anna endures at Lake House exemplifies the often-deliberate failings of the medical profession to treat female patients in a humane manner. In the nineteenth century, the treatment of insanity underwent a shift from physical restraint to moral management. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Appignanesi notes that "with moral management, the manacles, chains, handcuffs, strong chairs and scold's bridles – the whole apparatus of physical coercion – gradually went, to be replaced by the moral tools of talk, observation and judgement" (48). However, Foucault himself was critical of this shift because of the way it positioned madness as a product of an individual's failed morality: "the madman [...] is no longer guilty of being mad; but the madman, as a madman, and in the interior of that disease of which he is no longer guilty, must feel morally responsible for everything within him that may disturb morality and society" (*Madness and Civilization* 246). Both Abse and Higgins pay lip service to the idea of moral management: Higgins tells Anna to "Count yourself lucky... Abse believes in restraint from within. There are no shackles here, no bridles. The tea isn't laced with antimony and you won't find yourself in the strait waistcoat, unless strictly necessary" (Wallace 46). However, like Tom's approach to Mary's madness, Abse and Higgins' actions provide a stark contrast to their professed philosophy. Upon entering Lake House, Anna is subjected to a course of emetics (Wallace 46) and a cold shower in a cubicle "like an upended coffin" (Wallace 120) which she describes as "torture" (Wallace 121). The cruelty of the treatments administered to Anna increases in severity as she herself becomes more rebellious. Like her near-namesake Anne Catherick in Collins' novel, Anna escapes Lake House with Abse's daughter Catherine in tow. However, both are soon recaptured and Anna is subjected to Abse's ire: "Since her return, Querios hadn't wanted to treat Mrs Palmer, he admitted to himself. He'd wanted to punish her. That was the only purpose the [whirling] chair had ever served. Terror" (Wallace

294).¹⁴ As Abse's admission makes clear, determining when restraint becomes "strictly necessary" is a highly subjective process which is based more on the whims of the treating professionals than the potential benefits to their patients. In addition to multiple stints in the whirling chair, Anna is purged (Wallace 281), her scalp is shaved, burned by hot irons, and frozen with ice (Wallace 282), and leeches are "applied to her private places by Dr Higgins" (Wallace 283). These treatments, many of them legitimised through their supposed effect on "cooling the blood" (Wallace 46), are examples of the "range of invasive interventions practised solely on women, focusing on the sexual or reproductive body" (Ussher 67). Their pseudo-biological justification works to disguise the true nature of these "therapies": they are acts of violence designed to invoke a sense of powerlessness in women thereby engendering their submission to male authority.

Ultimately, it is Anna's conviction of her sanity and her resilience in the face of torture which secures her release from Lake House. However, her eventual freedom does not negate the way in which the treatment dismantles – albeit temporarily – her embodied sense of self. Like its historical counterparts, Lake House has a dual purpose in negating the threat non-normative femininity poses to the social order: it acts as both a space of confinement and reform. As Showalter argues "In line with their celebration of women's domestic role, the Victorians hoped that homelike mental institutions would tame and domesticate madness and bring it into the sphere of rationality" (17). With regard to Anna, her institutionalisation is designed to tame her otherwise rebellious nature. The goal of her treatment is to overwrite her desire for independence; a desire that contravenes the dictates of ideal femininity. Lake House achieves this denial of independence by removing various avenues of self-expression which are available to the women in the outside world:

It had shocked her when she arrived to see the women's naked ankles in the slippers, their cracked, spreading heels. Now, she was the same as them. She was being undone, pulled apart like a piece of knitting. Personhood came down to small things. One's own clothes. A letter in a familiar hand. The opportunity to step out of the door, rain or shine. (Wallace 119)

¹⁴ In the novel, the whirling chair is described as a "high-backed chair, attached to the end of a wooden beam". (Wallace 277). Anna is strapped into the chair before being spun at high speed in different directions (Wallace 278, 279). The mechanised device, operated by a wheel, is likely based on 'Cox's chair': a rotating chair constructed in the early nineteenth century by the physician Joseph Cox, who advocated for its use in the treatment of insanity (Wade et al. 74). Such chairs – known variously as "circulating swings" (Wade et al. 73) or "whirling chairs" (Wade et al. 78) were widely used in asylums across Europe throughout the nineteenth century, though their usage peaked in the period from 1810-1840 (Wade et al. 78).

In contrast to Miller's aforementioned criticism of Collins' reticence to depict life inside the asylum, Wallace's focus on the intimate details of the patients' lives inside Lake House reveals the extent to which its operations are designed to constrain their freedom and deny their individuality. The removal of such privileges is, in fact, an exaggerated version of the limitations Victorian women faced *outside* the asylum, where personhood was subsumed upon marriage into their husbands' identities. The consequences of Anna's rejection of this conflation between her identity and Vincent's – "She never thought of herself as joined to him" (Wallace 128) – are evident in the physical and mental trauma she endures at Lake House. For instance, immediately after her first session in the whirling chair, Anna begins to dissociate from her body: "She understood; her skin no longer contained her, she had left her body and was rolling weightless around the room. Her self had been driven out of her" (Wallace 279–80). By the following day, when Anna is strapped into the chair for the second time, she has lost her will to resist: "She began to scream, but not for help. There was no help [...] After a week of treatment, Anna stopped trying to remember where she was or why this was happening" (Wallace 280). The treatment renders Anna mute (Wallace 283), thereby succeeding in (literally) silencing her protest at her wrongful institutionalisation. However, as noted with reference to Susan Bordo's work in Chapter 1, muteness occupies a tenuous position between protest and resistance: it is both a "reject[ion] of the symbolic order of the patriarchy" and "the condition of silent, uncomplaining woman – an ideal of patriarchal culture" (*Unbearable Weight* 177). In this way, the treatments which are designed to erase Anna's desire for independence also paradoxically – by virtue of her muteness – enable its continued assertion.

As well as the physical violence inherent in many of the treatment regimens administered at Lake House, the patients also face structural violence in the form of discrimination. Abse's wife, Emmeline, draws attention to this stigma when she laments her lack of social calls, commenting that "People didn't like to visit Lake House. They feared being seen coming through the gates, feared the whispers about confined relatives, contaminated blood lines and unmarriageable daughters" (Wallace 104). In Matus' analysis of Lady Audley's wrongful incarceration, she highlights the attraction of private asylums like those inhabited by Lady Audley and Anna: "the private 'rest-home' asylum offered a solution to caregiving at home, as well as a way of muffling social shame and stigma" ('Disclosure as "Cover-Up"' 349). Concealing non-normative women from public view allowed their families to create both

physical and emotional distance between themselves and their supposedly mad relatives. As Vincent admits, “It could not be allowed to emerge that his wife was suffering from nerves. It would have serious repercussions for his career” (Wallace 89). Stigma toward the mentally ill was not, however, limited to the general public. It is important to recognise that “mental illness is also the *name* given to a set of ills by various sets of mind doctors. The illness may provide meaning and definition [...] or it may inflict stigma.” (Appignanesi 538; emphasis in original). Querios Abse defines madness as the inverse of ideal femininity: “he disliked lunatics above all other kinds of people. They were devious. Cunning. Untrustworthy” (Wallace 161). Far from being neutral terms, diagnostic labels are imbued with the values of those with the power to apply them and, as such, “by defining what is mad we define what it is to be sane, or more specifically, the boundaries of behaviour for the ‘good woman’” (Ussher 7). In this way, both the labels, and the characteristics which they imply work to deny the individual experiences of Lake House’s patients.

Limiting Labels: Women’s Distress Rewritten as Mental Illness

Anna’s case reflects one of the most salient issues with diagnostic labels: their inadequacy for representing the complexity of women’s experiences. Her diagnosis of hysteria fails to account for Vincent’s role in her institutionalisation and is at odds with her conviction of her sanity. Beginning in the early nineteenth century “under the power of the new professionals [alienists], claims of madness were now more difficult to reverse: for those with less social power, like women, this could make unwanted confinement difficult to resist or escape” (Appignanesi 60). Anna explains that she was institutionalised “only because my husband didn’t understand why I acted as I did” (Wallace 45) and insists “There is nothing wrong with my mind” (Wallace 34). However, Abse dismisses her perspective in favour of the diagnosis proffered to her by Higgins – hysteria – a diagnosis which retrospectively legitimises Anna’s initial confinement and the treatment program she undergoes. While Anna’s treatment is intended to secure her submission to the will of Abse and Higgins, it has the opposite effect, in fact reinforcing her defiance of patriarchal rule. After Anna’s week-long stint in the whirling chair, “the hollow feeling gave way to a sense of enormity. Of a world inside herself that stretched backwards and forwards, that was impermeable, invulnerable. She was whole, peerless. They could do nothing at all to her, not now and now ever” (Wallace 285). Anna’s determination to retain her subjectivity in the face of physical and mental trauma contributes

to her decision to “Free herself” by appealing to St Clair (Wallace 148). However, the medical profession’s bias toward women is not so easily erased; St Clair remains convinced Anna is a “lunatic” (Wallace 151). Lady Audley faces a similar struggle: in an attempt to escape punishment for George Talboys’ (presumed) death and the arson attack at the Castle Inn, she tries to convince first Alicia (Braddon 294) and then Sir Michael (Braddon 301) that Robert is mad. However, Lady Audley does not have the benefit of patriarchal power which allows Robert to pass off his monomania as eccentricity and succeed in his mission to have Lady Audley institutionalised. As Matus argues, Lady Audley’s “attempt to empower herself through a medical discourse that has already positioned her as powerless is therefore futile” (‘Disclosure as “Cover-Up”’ 350). While Anna’s attempt to empower herself through medical discourse similarly fails, she secures her release with recourse to juridical discourse. When Sir John – a magistrate – visits Lake House as part of a routine inspection, Anna secures an interview with him and professes her sanity. She highlights Vincent’s role in bringing her to Lake House “on false charges of hysteria” and Abse’s willingness to “oblige and serve as a gaoler” (Wallace 342), before describing how the various treatments she’s endured brought her “close to losing my mind” (Wallace 344). As a result of her testimony, Anna is released from Lake House. Unlike Braddon, Wallace suggests that women can work within discourses historically associated with female disempowerment to enact change; however, it is important to recognise that Anna’s freedom is the result of an individual’s benevolence – on the part of Sir John – rather than any systemic change in medico-legal approaches to madwomen.

Women’s Solidarity as a Route to Freedom

The friendships Anna forms while in Lake House are instrumental in preserving her sanity and maintaining her motivation to campaign for her release. However, when Anna first arrives at Lake House, she attempts to distance herself from the other patients in the belief that it will prove her sanity: “She must keep herself separate, prove that she wasn’t one of them, that she didn’t belong here and never would” (Wallace 26). However, Anna’s resistance to the companionship offered by Lovely and patients Talitha and Lizzie soon wavers and she comes to take solace in their shared predicament as asylum patients and, more broadly, as women in a male-dominated society. In her analysis of Sarah Waters’ *Affinity*, Jeannette King argues that close friendships between single women – like that

formed between Selina and Margaret – work to challenge patriarchal ideology (85). While the prison setting of *Affinity* can be considered analogous to Lake House, in that both exist as spaces to confine non-normative women, it is important to acknowledge that Selina and Margaret’s friendship is eventually revealed as a fakery, driven by the former’s Selina’s manipulation of Margaret. While Anna and Lizzie are both married, I argue that this does not preclude the transferability of King’s observation on friendships between women in *Affinity* to those in *The Painted Bridge*: they may have husbands on the “outside,” but within the asylum walls they are reliant on each other. Regardless of their marital status, their friendship thus works to contest the male-controlled world inside Lake House. For example, soon after the whirling chair treatment which renders Anna temporarily mute, she notices Lizzie “watching her with eyes full of care” (Wallace 286). Furthermore, Lovely’s encouragement is instrumental in Anna’s decision to appeal to Sir John for her release: “It was true that she was frightened of the chair. She was terrified of being strapped into it again, kept there for as long as Makepeace’s whim demanded. But Lovely was right. It was her chance. The only one remaining to her. She had to take it” (Wallace 333). However, this sense of female solidarity does not extend to the matron Makepeace, who derives pleasure from Anna’s suffering and “offers petty cruelties in place of kindnesses” (Wallace 343).

Reciprocity is a key feature of the friendships Anna forms inside Lake House. For instance, after Anna and Catherine’s failed escape she continues to provide Catherine – who suffers from anorexia – with support (Wallace 312). She is also instrumental in securing Lizzie’s release: Anna demands the doctors sent by her sister examine Lizzie instead of her and the latter is subsequently declared sane (Wallace 304, 360). As Appignanesi notes, first wave feminism viewed hysteria, rebellion, and feminism as products of the same root cause: all offered ways for women to “express their anger at the circumscription of their lives” (421). While viewing madness as a form of rebellion in and of itself is problematic due to the loss of agency that often accompanies diagnoses and treatment (particularly where this involves involuntary institutionalisation), Lake House’s women nonetheless form alliances in order to support each other and campaign for fairer treatment. This demonstrates that the asylum space is not synonymous with disempowerment, despite the efforts of the medical profession to make it so.

Anna’s ambitions outside the sphere of marriage and family challenge the normative gender roles ingrained in nineteenth-century culture. Victorian-era physicians often drew links

between women's desire for independence and madness as a way of preserving these roles and, by extension, the gendered power relations they helped to uphold. Nineteenth-century medical discourse held that "Mental breakdown, then, would come when women defied their "nature," attempted to compete with men instead of serving them, or sought alternatives or even additions to their maternal functions" (Showalter 123). Anna's insistence on her separateness from Vincent (Wallace 128) – itself a radical viewpoint in a society that considered women to be the property of their male relatives – is accompanied by her desire for an occupation. For Anna, "If, as a woman, she was able to make any contribution to society, she'd always prayed that it should be in assistance to sailors" (Wallace 33). Her institutionalisation cements her determination to pursue a different role to that of docile wife and mother – a role Lizzie suggests Fevvers capitulates to by marrying Walser. Jane Ussher notes that nineteenth-century author Charlotte Perkins Gilman's recovery from mental illness was achieved by "resisting and rejecting the constraints of the role of wife and mother" (191) and goes on to argue for the relevance of this approach for contemporary women's lives: "Rejecting the mantle of the 'good woman', the fantasy of idealised femininity, which is internalised from childhood, is thus central to women's recovery and resistance" (193). Upon leaving Lake House, Anna transforms her ideological opposition to performing the role of the good woman into action. After reading about a sailors' mission in a magazine, Anna decides to travel to Liverpool to offer her services, with Lovely as her companion.

There would be a purpose for her in a place like that. Even if she did what Lovely did, washed floors, served meals, fetched and carried. Talked to people and treated them like human beings. *I have work for you*. The idea was a lodestar, a point by which to orient herself. She tore out the pages and, as she folded them into the ugly bodice, breathed in the sharp, hopeful tang of newsprint mixed with the stale pall of the fabric. (Wallace 322; emphasis in original)

Cox argues that neo-sensational appropriations of *The Woman in White* frequently incorporate "narratives of lesbian desire," citing *Fingersmith* as an example (31). Though less explicit than *Fingersmith*'s portrayal of the relationship between Sue and Maud, Wallace's depiction of Anna and Lovely's commitment to each other may imply a queer relationship, in a manner similar to "mainstream Victorian fiction, where lesbian relationships are almost always disguised as close friendships" (Moore 632). In the above passage, Anna expresses a desire for a meaningful occupation. While this reflects St Clair's assertion that "Human beings need a purpose" (Wallace 33), her decision to pursue this course of action is, in part, driven by his refusal to aid in her release. Such pursuits were unavailable to many Victorian

women and, as Appignanesi notes, some women responded by embodying the role of the madwoman: “Throughout the nineteenth century, talented, middle-class women were to shake off the chains of their socially restricted forms of usefulness by unconsciously choosing invalidism as a preferable form of life” (51). While Catherine Abse embraces self-starvation and the invalidism it induces – as, indeed, does her namesake Catherine Linton in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) – Anna’s decision to work with sailors demonstrates an alternative trajectory. She recognises that pursuing work which aligns with her values – the welfare of sailors – offers her a level of independence that neither marriage nor institutionalisation can match. Working with sailors (as with Mary’s kidnapping of the baby) also represents a way to process her past trauma at the loss of Anthony.

Catherine Abse’s anorexia is an illustration of the unconscious choice Appignanesi describes above. For Catherine, self-starvation is a performative act which registers her discontent with the constraints Victorian gender ideology imposes on women’s lives. Catherine longs to “change her name to Aurora, like her heroine Aurora Leigh, and go live in Italy” (Wallace 78), much like Selina and Margaret adopt names from *Aurora Leigh* when they plan their escape. However, Catherine’s reality, as she tells Anna, is that she is “just as much a prisoner as you are” (Wallace 188). While both women desire more fulfilling lives, Anna directs this energy outward by planning her escape from Lake House, whereas Catherine directs her energy inward by “conquering my appetites” (Wallace 311). Like Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*, whose hunger strike represents a “desperate attempt to regain control” (Crouse 186), Catherine Abse attempts to gain control over the trajectory of her life through self-starvation. As Anna Silver argues “control over the body, a fundamental concept of Victorian female gender ideology and anorexia nervosa, theoretically links the model of the passionless or self-regulated Victorian woman with the anorexic woman” (11). However, like muteness anorexia’s status as conformity or protest is ambiguous. Anorexia denotes conformity to the demands of normative femininity to such an extreme that it becomes disordered. In this way, anorexia is an expression of the “clear continuum on which the normative and the disordered were located for Victorian women” in a period when “femininity itself required the holding of breath, the loss of air, the choking down of anger and desire, the relinquishing of voice, the denial of appetite, the constriction of body” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 50). In this way, the ‘Fasting Girl’ Catherine idolises is simultaneously the epitome of conformity to feminine norms and the owner of a body worthy of exhibiting in a freak show. During Catherine and Anna’s short-lived escape from Lake House, Catherine demands to be taken to a fair to see

the 'Fasting Girl', whom she describes as "one of my heroines" (Wallace 215). Her conviction that freedom from appetite denotes freedom from the constraints of femininity is such that she continues to emulate the 'Fasting Girl' even after the latter privately confesses that she is "starving"¹⁵ and Catherine reads about her death in the newspaper (Wallace 313).

Catherine's self-starvation exists at the disordered end of Bordo's continuum because she restricts her appetite to such an extent that she loses the embodied markers of femininity. Her mother, Emmeline, frequently finds food Catherine has hidden or discarded (Wallace 139, 175, 316), while Catherine tells Anna "I can't eat the food we have at home [...] Most things stick in my throat" (Wallace 75). While it "was not socially acceptable for Victorian women to eat large amounts of food at the table, and though a small appetite connoted the appropriately "bodiless" woman, not to eat *at all* was extremely disruptive of social norms" (Silver 15; emphasis in original). As Catherine's breasts shrink (Wallace 135) and her periods cease (Wallace 134), Emmeline comments on her daughter's retreat from normative femininity: "As soon as she became old enough to start the rehearsals for womanhood in earnest, she'd stopped. It was as if she had lost all interest in female life. One might also think she'd begun to despise it" (Wallace 134). While self-starvation allows Catherine to protest the conditions of her life, this protest is largely ineffectual because it comes at the expense of the very body she wishes to liberate; as Anna tells her "Fasting isn't living, Catherine. It's more like dying" (Wallace 313). Catherine's eventual recovery takes a similar form to Anna's: she finds a useful occupation in caring for her sick mother. Catherine "was losing the haunted look she'd had all winter. She'd become bossy and practical in the sickroom; she was going to be a poet, not marry one" (Wallace 371). Catherine's initial response to the circumscription of her life weakens her body, while Anna's response to her confinement draws on her corporeal strength, and it is the latter the novel suggests is key to women's liberation.

Conclusion

¹⁵ As was sometimes the case with Victorian freaks, the Fasting Girl is a victim of exploitation. After hearing the girl's confession, Catherine buys food for the Fasting Girl, but the girl's manager prevents Catherine from giving it to her (Wallace 313).

Representations of madness in *Waterland* and *The Painted Bridge* broadly conform to the two subtypes of hystoriographic metafiction identified by Muller. While Tom's partial account of history contributes to the silencing of Mary and Sarah's experiences of being designated 'mad', Wallace's third person omniscient narrator gives voice to the experiences of Lake House's patients. This difference in narrative style implies that revealing the truth of occluded stories is a necessary precursor to any attempt to redress women's traumatic histories. In both novels, medical practitioners and male relatives collude to confine the bodies of non-normative women in asylums as a way of nullifying the threat they pose to existing gendered power relations. Tom's construction of Mary's madness as a gendered inheritance and Higgins, St Clair, and Abse's dismissal of Anna's professed sanity are acts of silencing which work to maintain the authority phallogentric culture bestows on them. Presenting non-normative femininity and madness as interchangeable enables Anna, Mary, and Sarah's legitimate distress, past trauma, and frustration at their limited lives to be consistently overlooked then overwritten as pathological. Though diagnostic and treatment practices have changed considerably since the nineteenth century, the parallels between Mary and Sarah's experiences of madness in *Waterland* suggest that feminine norms – particularly the demand to mother – continue to exert a coercive force over women's lives.

As critics, we must be prepared to move away from the explicit narrative Tom presents in order to find ways to account for the implicit, non-vocalised, forms of "speaking" one's memories. Crick's narrative is designed to endear himself to his audience and, in so doing, deflect attention away from the narrative violence he exercises over Mary and Sarah. However, by resisting this narrativizing process, Mary's embodied memories disrupt Tom's quest for catharsis and trouble his reliance on storytelling as a means to order the past. Her abortion destroys Tom's legacy and demonstrates that women are capable of erasing men's contributions to history. Such acts of erasure, when controlled by women themselves, must be afforded the same level of agency that Tom applies to male acts of happening.

Swift's reticence to depict life inside the nineteenth- or late-twentieth century asylum is reminiscent of the Victorian novel's squeamishness on the subject. Even sensation novels like *The Woman in White* or *Lady Audley's Secret* – which delighted in shocking readers through their representation of taboo subjects – were largely silent on their characters' experiences inside the asylum. However, these silences have proved productive for contemporary authors, with both novels acting as "intertexts" for neo-sensation's revisionist impulse (Cox 13). For

instance, Wallace's focus on the minutiae of asylum life highlights her female characters' subjectivity, individuality, and capacity for resilience in the face of a corrupt system which seeks to crush women's agency rather than cure their ailments. While Wallace's novel represents Victorian treatment practices as akin to torture, Anna's trajectory demonstrates the way in which embodied acts of resistance can work to challenge normative femininity and allow women to reassert control over their narratives.

While Wallace's novel has not achieved the same level of critical recognition as Swift's, its focus on Anna's response to her wrongful imprisonment encourages us to consider the counter-narratives that exist alongside medico-scientific discourses about female madness. Like Mary in *Waterland*, the memories of Anna's trauma reside within her body, which she draws strength from in her quest to prove her sanity and secure her freedom. Taken together, *Waterland* and *The Painted Bridge* reveal neo-Victorian fiction's capacity to both repeat and redress the marginalisation of non-normative women by foregrounding the embodied experiences of women who have been designated mad.

Chapter 4: Matrilineal Fictions in *Fingersmith* and *The Somnambulist*

This chapter examines the intergenerational transference of non-normative femininity in neo-Victorian fiction, with a particular focus on mother-daughter relationships as the vector for transmission. Both Essie Fox's *The Somnambulist* (2011) and Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* (1999) involve a series of matrilineal narratives which depict biological, adoptive, and imagined mother-daughter bonds. These novels are haunted by mother figures who struggle to live up to the Victorian maternal ideal – itself an illusory construct designed to promote adherence to rigid gender roles. The mother figures' embodiment of non-normative femininity leaves a legacy which shapes their daughters' embodied identities. Both novels engage with stereotypes of Victorian maternity – from the fallen woman, to the mad mother, to the Angel in the House – to critique the role such typologies played in shaping cultural understandings of motherhood and mothering in the period.

In Waters' novel, mothers and mother figures internalise phallogentric approaches to the female body and, in so doing, they become instruments of the patriarchal order. The subsequent death of these mothers – Mrs Sucksby and Marianne Lilly – demonstrates the futility of appropriating male tools of power at the expense of other women. It also suggests that maternal death is a necessary precondition for their daughters' ability to negotiate an alternative mode of non-normative femininity, where the appropriation of such tools is used to promote female solidarity and the expression of queer desire. Rather than mimicking the transgressive femininities performed by their mothers – the madwoman and the criminal – Sue and Maud's transgression of normative femininity takes the form a lesbian relationship. They reject the heteronormative ideal of Victorian culture by forming a queer family structure which does not depend on the reproduction of patriarchal values.

While maternal death and absence is also a prominent theme in Fox's novel, it does not present any viable alternatives to the traditional heteropatriarchal family model. Like Waters' depictions of Mrs Sucksby and Marianne, who privilege their biological daughters at the expense of others, Fox reaffirms bio-centric definitions of motherhood through the relationship between Phoebe and her biological mother Cissy. As in *Fingersmith*, the first-generation mothers in *The Somnambulist* – Cissy, Maud and Lydia – all fall short of the maternal ideal. However, the trajectory of Cissy's daughter Phoebe who gives birth and then

bows to external pressure to marry reaffirms rather than challenges Victorian constructions of normative femininity. Instead of suggesting – as *Fingersmith* does – that such norms are barriers to female agency, Fox's novel focuses on the failings of individual women to embody ideal femininity. However, the suffering endured by Cissy, Maud, and Lydia is not the product of individual responsibility. Instead, it reflects the structural disadvantages with which all women – and women who subvert gender norms in particular – must contend. Both novels suggest that the feminine ideal and, more specifically, the maternal ideal is ultimately unattainable. Cissy, Maud, and Lydia are not ‘good’ mothers as construed by the ideal because their energies are not directed solely toward being singularly devoted to their children. While the contemporary maternal ideal may assume a slightly different shape to its Victorian counterpart, Fox's novel is resigned to the persistence of the ideal as a coercive force which shapes women's performance of motherhood. In contrast, Waters' novel rejects the legacy of the maternal ideal, instead focusing on the possibility that a feminist revision of the past could provide a model for liberating women from the constraints of normative femininity in the present.

While Fox's novel is yet to attract the attention of neo-Victorian scholars, a wealth of critical attention has been devoted to *Fingersmith*. Much of this work has centred on discussions of the novel's ending, particularly in terms of the liberatory potential – or lack thereof – of Maud and Sue's production of pornography. While some critics view their authorship as a positive expression of agency which enables their escape from patriarchal control (Muller and Llewellyn 1), the majority call attention to the limits of this agency by focusing on the way in which Maud's adoption of her uncle's role as pornographer implicates her in a cultural history of female sexual objectification (Davies 159; Kohlke 64; Llewellyn 204–05; Muller 123). Claire O'Callaghan draws attention to this critical disparity: “Given the wealth of feminist discourse on pornography and a body of work that argues for neo-Victorian's liberatory appeal, it is surprising that there are such narrowly conceived readings of *Fingersmith's* ending” (571). To explore the possibilities of, rather than the limits to, Maud and Sue's agency, I argue that an intergenerational perspective, which compares their trajectories with that of their mothers reveals the progressive nature of Waters' novel. Sue and Maud's authorship does not exist completely outside the confines of nineteenth-century print culture. Indeed, they overcome significant barriers to become self-sustaining authors. While Waters “doesn't present a lesbian utopia” (Mitchell 132), nor does she position Maud and Sue's authorship as a straightforward imitation of Christopher Lilly's – Maud's adoptive

uncle and Sue's biological uncle. While Sue and Maud may participate in a historically male-focused medium, they also revise it by producing pornography that expresses their sexual desire for each other (Miller par. 29).

Lesbian desire forms a second key strand of criticism in relation to *Fingersmith*, with many critics examining the novel's role in recovering lesbian history (Kohlke 350; Mitchell 127; Palmer 70). Again, the focus has been on the limitations of this recovery with critics such as Helen Davies (161) and Mark Llewellyn (208) questioning the extent to which Waters invents rather than recovers this past, given that figures like Maud are absent from the historical record. Llewellyn goes so far as to claim that "Putting lesbian characters into the sphere of Victorian fiction might explode a few cliché's in the popular imagination, but it does not, ultimately, change history or the way in which the majority of us view the past" (208). However, as Astrid Erll argues in her work on cultural memory, societal constructions of shared pasts are necessarily selective: societies create "versions of the past according to present knowledge and needs" (5). Llewellyn's claim that Waters' depiction does not change history is thus a misnomer: as Erll's use of the term "versions" makes clear, history is neither fixed nor singular. As such, there is no single history capable of being changed, because history is comprised of multiple narratives which are themselves subject to continual revision (White 20). Waters' insertion of a lesbian relationship into the Victorian past is thus reflective of this revisionist impulse at the same time as being – to return to Erll – an attempt to speak to the present need to confront the persistence of homophobia in contemporary culture. Taken together, cultural memory discourse and postmodern historiography demonstrate that Waters' fictionalisation of women's historical struggle for agency can contribute to the creation of multiple pasts as well as influencing how we think about the present.

O'Callaghan and Nadine Muller have already begun analysing the relationship between historical fiction, feminist thought and contemporary gender discourse. While O'Callaghan analyses *Fingersmith* through the lens of second-wave feminist approaches to pornography (560), Muller highlights neo-Victorianism and third-wave feminism's shared preoccupation with exploring the tensions between the past and present by analysing the novel's "matrilineal narratives and the mother-daughter relationships they define" (111). Tess Cosslett defines a matrilineal narrative as "one which either tells the stories of several generations of women at once, or which shows how the identity of a central character is

crucially formed by her female ancestors” (7). In this chapter, I move away from analysing neo-Victorianism’s role in charting the changes between various waves of the feminist movement to examine the way in which *Fingersmith* and *The Somnambulist* use matrilineal narratives to construct contemporary ideals toward mothering and maternal identity as legacies of Victorian-era gender discourse. Fox's representation of second-generation Phoebe's trajectory uncritically reaffirms the salience of the maternal ideal and its role in defining the boundaries of normative femininity. In contrast, Waters’ novel actively challenges this ideal by developing an alternative family model that does not place maternity at the centre of women’s identities. Instead, Maud and Sue reclaim their bodies and sexualities from the ownership of others to form a fulfilling lesbian relationship, suggesting that women’s liberation is predicated upon a rejection of heteronormativity.

Mothers and Others: Biological and Adoptive Mothering and the Failure of the Maternal Ideal

The selflessness Marianne Lilly and Mrs Sucksby display toward their children initially appears to conform to the Victorian maternal ideal. However, such selflessness extends only as far as their biological children – Marianne/Sue and Mrs Sucksby/Maud – while their adoptive daughters are readily sacrificed. In order to spare their daughters from the miseries of their own lives, Marianne and Mrs Sucksby switch Sue and Maud as infants. Marianne is determined to protect Sue from the abuse she herself suffered at the hands of her father and brother, while Mrs Sucksby wants Maud to benefit from the wealth and position that come with bearing the Lilly name. After giving birth to Sue, the invalid Marianne writes a letter revealing that she is Sue’s mother and includes instructions for her fortune to be distributed equally between Sue and Maud when they turn eighteen. Convinced that she will die before this milestone, Marianne entrusts the letter – and the responsibility for carrying out her instructions – to Mrs Sucksby. Marianne’s “last statement” requests that Sue “*know nothing of her unhappy mother, but that she strove to keep her from care*” while Maud should be “*be raised a gentlewoman; and to know that her mother loved her, more than her own life*” (Waters 532; original italics). Though Mrs Sucksby dies when the girls are seventeen, her elaborate plot to secure the entirety of Marianne’s fortune – which involves tricking Sue into taking Maud’s place in an asylum – suggests that she would have kept the letter concealed. As it is, Sue only discovers the letter when Mrs Sucksby’s clothes are returned to her after the

latter's death. Mrs Sucksby and Marianne's actions demonstrate the power of biological ties, in that each is willing to condemn another's child to a life they would not wish upon their own, and, in Mrs Sucksby's case, to cheat her adoptive daughter out of her fortune to ensure her biological daughter is the sole beneficiary. That blood is privileged over and above their shared experiences as women makes reading *Fingersmith* as a feminist text problematic, at least where the first-generation women are concerned. Sue and Maud also privilege competition over collectivism initially, betraying each other to further their individual goals. However, their reconciliation at the close of the novel demonstrates the potential that comes from discarding such a model in favour of working together toward shared goals.

After Marianne's premature death in an asylum, the nurses become maternal figures for Maud. They engage in a form of collective mothering, with Maud describing herself as their daughter and reminiscing about "having known the favours of a score of mothers" (Waters 180). At age eleven, Maud's uncle Christopher Lilly takes her from the asylum to live at Briar, the family estate. In Part 1 of the novel (narrated by Sue), Maud tells Sue that Lilly's housekeeper, Mrs Stiles, "made her know a mother's love" (Waters 67). However, in Part 2 of the novel (narrated by Maud), this is revealed to be a falsehood as Maud recalls the frequent beatings she suffered at Mrs Stiles' hands (Waters 192). Sue, on the other hand, is doted on by Mrs Sucksby "because she covets her fortune" (Mitchell 135). Sue, however, mistakes this covetousness for love: "She had been paid to keep me a month; she kept me seventeen years. What's love, if that ain't?" (Waters 12). After discovering Marianne's will, Sue realises that "It was only ever Maud she [Mrs Sucksby] wanted" and before her death Mrs Sucksby confesses: "I should have given my hands, my legs, my lungs, for the saving of hers [Sue's]. But do you think, that when I did those things I was doing them for her [Sue]? What use will a commonplace girl be to me, when I am rich!" (Waters 534, 345). As the above quotes demonstrate, Mrs Sucksby views Sue as a disposable commodity: she is valuable only for her utility in Mrs Sucksby's plan to retrieve Maud and secure the entirety of Marianne's fortune. Thus, her greed cannot be separated from her solicitous treatment of Sue – for the plan to succeed, Sue must trust Mrs Sucksby and accede to her demands, including that she goes to Briar under the guise of duping Maud.

Given that Mrs Sucksby orchestrates Sue's removal first to Briar, then the asylum, it is easy to read her grief over Sue's departure as insincere. However, it appears more genuine when considered alongside her death-row wish for Sue's biological parentage to remain a secret.

After Mrs Sucksby's death, Maud repeats her last words to Sue: "That she hoped you never knew. That she wished they might hang her, ten times over, before you should. That she and your mother had been wrong. That they meant to make you a commonplace girl. That that was like taking a jewel, and hiding it in dust. That dust falls away..." (Waters 543). Mrs Sucksby's desire for Sue to remain ignorant of the agreement between her and Marianne demonstrates her love for Sue. In co-opting Maud to keep the secret, Mrs Sucksby aims to spare Sue from the knowledge that her adoptive mother lied to her and tricked her. Mrs Sucksby's comment also suggests that class has a hereditary basis: Sue may have been raised in a working-class household surrounded by petty criminals, but underneath this dust she remains an upper class "jewel". In this way, Sue represents the inverse of the anxieties surrounding class mobility in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, a key example of the Victorian sensation genre which Waters' writes back to in *Fingersmith*. As Matus argues "what seems primarily to be the matter with Lady Audley is that she threatens to violate class boundaries" ('Disclosure as "Cover-Up"' 335). Where Lady Audley is at fault for "appropriating social power beyond her entitlement" (Matus, 'Disclosure as "Cover-Up"' 335), in *Fingersmith* downward – rather than upward – mobility is seen as harmful because it recalls cultural anxieties around the moral fitness of working class women to be mothers. By placing Sue in the care of Mrs Sucksby, who embodies the Victorian association between the working class and criminality, Maud exposes an innocent child to the corrupting influence of an unfit mother.

If not for Sue's escape, Mrs Sucksby presumably would've remained content for Sue to live out her days as Maud in the asylum, as this is the element of the plot which brings about the longed-for return of her biological daughter Maud. However, when Mrs Sucksby is convicted for Gentleman's murder, her imminent death causes her to reflect on the moral implications of switching Maud and Sue as infants. Georges Letissier argues that the contrition Mrs Sucksby displays at the end of her life demonstrates that she "is simultaneously an obnoxious ogre cynically owning up to her readiness to sell new-born babes [...] while also displaying a distorted version of biological and sentimental maternal love at other moments" (382). By representing Mrs Sucksby's and Marianne's mothering as both self-interested and self-sacrificing, Waters blends the boundaries between "good" and "bad" mothers, villainy and opportunism, deliberate cruelty and misplaced acts of love. Though both women seek to improve the lives of their biological daughters, it comes at the expense of their adoptive daughters and, in the case of Mrs Sucksby, at the expense of Marianne's wishes for the

distribution of her fortune. Waters' emphasis on division – rather than solidarity – between first-generation mothers in *Fingersmith* demonstrates the way in which division works to augment phallogocentric power structures. Rather than working toward a strategy to protect *both* girls from the ills each woman views as most salient, they consign their adoptive daughters to various forms of suffering. It's clear that protecting their biological children at the expense of another's does nothing to challenge the structural features – poverty, class, patriarchal power – that produce such disadvantage in the first place. However, solidarity triumphs over division when Sue and Maud reunite, as they work together to support each other emotionally and financially rather than competing for scarce resources.

In contrast to Mrs Sucksby, in *The Somnambulist* Maud Turner's overt moralising initially appears to cast her in the role of the ideal mother. However, in time Maud's motivations for mothering Phoebe are revealed to be as self-serving as Mrs Sucksby's initial plans for Sue. Maud plays mother to her niece, Phoebe, who is the child of an affair between Maud's sister Cissy and wealthy department store owner Nathaniel Samuels. In an act of deception not dissimilar to that which occurs in *Fingersmith*, Phoebe is raised to believe that Maud is her biological mother and that Cissy is her aunt. Maud's fervent religiosity and overt moralising is redolent of the "Angel in the House" figure, which was one of many symbolic constructions of the Victorian feminine ideal. Lyn Pykett's analysis of femininity in the women's sensation novel and New Woman fiction provides a range of examples of how Victorians conceptualised ideal femininity: "The system of the proper feminine may be represented by the following set of polarities (the list is by no means exhaustive): the domestic ideal, or angel in the house; the madonna; the keeper of the domestic temple; asexuality; passionlessness; innocence; self-abnegation; commitment to duty; self-sacrifice; the lack of a legal identity; dependence; slave; victim" (16). Together, Cissy and Maud embody the "two seemingly opposed models of womanhood constructed in nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology – refined angel, or helpless prey to the workings of the body – [which] come together in discourses on maternity, for woman's mission is both to ensure, physically, the healthy reproduction of the race, as well as the spiritual superiority of the middle class" (Shuttleworth, 'Demonic Mothers' 32). Determined to save Phoebe from Cissy's fate as a fallen woman, Maud provides her with a spiritually guided upbringing. Unlike Cissy's more indulgent approach to Phoebe, Maud casts herself Phoebe's moral guardian:

Maud, my mama, was so ordered and strict you'd hardly think them related at all. I used to feel like a frayed piece of string caught up in an endless tug of war, being torn between Cissy, all music and light, and Mama with her stern and daunting frown as she sat there embroidering quotes from the Bible, or reciting from that book of hers, the one full of *Moral Advice for Young Ladies*. It felt like a penance. (Fox 10–11)

The book Phoebe refers to is most likely a conduct manual, which proliferated in the nineteenth century as a way to impart bourgeois domestic ideology onto women and girls (Morrison 211). As Lucy Morrison notes, “these texts share common assumptions, principally the determination that women's dominant aspirations must be toward the roles of dutiful wives and self-sacrificing mothers. Similarly, sections about the importance of religion and women's conformity to traditional positions secondary to those of men invariably appear” (211). However, Maud's overt concern with Phoebe's morality is little more than a cover for the benefits she receives as caretaker of Cissy and Nathaniel Samuels' child. Like Mrs Sucksby assuming responsibility for Gentleman's murder – Maud was the killer – Maud Turner constructs her mothering through a narrative of self-sacrifice. She frames her estrangement from her husband William as having occurred “for the sake of *your* [Cissy and Phoebe's] reputations” (Fox 288; emphasis in original). However, like Mrs Sucksby's initial interest in Sue, Maud is drawn to Phoebe for pecuniary motives rather than any sense of motherly affection. Becoming Phoebe's substitute mother allows Maud to keep Cissy close and, in so doing, she benefits from the house and allowance Nathaniel provides for Cissy and Phoebe. This absence of maternal devotion is revealed after Cissy's death: when Nathaniel threatens Maud with eviction, she offers him Phoebe in exchange for remaining in Tredegar Square. To avoid raising suspicion about the arrangement, Maud suggests that Phoebe serve as a companion to Nathaniel's wife Lydia. After Nathaniel agrees to her proposal, Phoebe notes the effect on Maud's spirits: “Mama, her spirits much revived, had already employed a new gardener and instructed the nearest agency to find her a maid and a cook, and it seemed that the chance of reclaiming her life was all that it took to surrender mine” (Fox 116). Like Mrs Sucksby's willingness to exchange Sue for her biological daughter, Maud's relationship with Phoebe is similarly transactional: Phoebe is an expendable casualty of Maud's greed. Like Marianne and Mrs Sucksby before her, Maud participates in a patriarchally-endorsed system of exchange – this time under the guise of religious benevolence – by approaching Phoebe and Cissy as commodities which can be traded in return for her own economic security.

Despite Cissy's (secret) status as a fallen woman, she emerges as the most idealised mother

figure across the two novels. Though perhaps this is unsurprising, given that, as Heather Milton argues, “Victorians involved in the rescue of “fallen” women believed that the power of maternity could potentially redeem these women” (55). Redemption in Fox’s novel is less straightforward given that Cissy relinquishes her claim to Phoebe and with it her identity as a mother, thus preventing any form of public salvation. Milton goes on to argue that George Eliot’s *Felix Holt* debunks the Victorian ideology of motherhood which produced such beliefs: “Through her reworking of the maternal narrative, Eliot argues that an all-consuming, self-denying love is unhealthy for the mother, child, and, ultimately, the state” (56). However, in Fox’s novel, it is Cissy’s *inability* to mother Phoebe that is presented as all-consuming and ultimately unsustainable as Cissy commits suicide. After Cissy’s death, Phoebe asks family friend Old Riley why Cissy gave her up, to which she replies: “She gave everything up, her career, her friends. For years, she more or less hid from the world so as to stay living close to you. And every day it broke her heart, having you think that Maud was her mother when it should never have been that way” (Fox 297). Though Maud is recognised as Phoebe’s mother, the selflessness Cissy demonstrates in her care of Phoebe aligns her with the Victorian maternal ideal, thereby reinforcing the primacy of biological motherhood.

In contrast to Cissy, Lydia and Maud fall short of the Victorian maternal ideal because their primary interest in Phoebe is as a salve to their unhappiness. Ann Heilmann and Llewellyn argue that while mothers in Victorian fiction are typified by their absence and are usually coupled with the presence of a “defective surrogate,” mothers in neo-Victorian fiction are a crucial presence and are usually accompanied by a “sister figure” (65). They go on to argue that in neo-Victorian fiction the “mother (or mother-and-sister pair) is the mark of trauma, literarily represented as the *Urtext* which, if recovered and read correctly, is able to furnish a resolution to the protagonist’s predicament” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 65; original italics). While Phoebe’s reading of Cissy’s trauma results in a conventional resolution to her “predicament” – to avoid repeating her mother’s trajectory, Phoebe marries the father of her child – Fox’s novel collapses Heilmann and Llewellyn’s distinction between mothers in Victorian and neo-Victorian fiction. Though Maud and Lydia are clearly aligned with the “defective surrogates” of Victorian literature, Cissy is an absent presence: while alive she inhabits the “shadows” – like the fictional Victorian mothers to which Heilmann and Llewellyn refer (65) – forced to play the role of Phoebe’s aunt. It’s not until her death that she resumes the role of (neo-Victorian) mother and, in turn, the role of mother as a mark of trauma. Unable to share in the knowledge that Cissy was her mother in life, Phoebe invokes

this mother-daughter bond through Cissy's ghost. She imagined Cissy "looked out from over my bed – Cissy, my guardian angel, warding off spirits who walked in the night, false mothers who tried to claim me as their own, or a sister who wanted the truth to be told" (Fox 396). Here, Cissy is again aligned with the "good mother" – the invocation of angel imagery overwrites Cissy's status as a fallen woman, while her imagined protectiveness of Phoebe is distinguished from the self-serving motives of Phoebe's "false mothers" Maud and Lydia. As with Maud Lilly and Mrs Sucksby's preferential treatment of their biological children, Phoebe's longing for Cissy affirms the primacy of biological motherhood over adoptive maternal bonds. While Fox's novel blurs the boundaries between Victorian and neo-Victorian mothers, it conforms to the generic representation of the family more broadly. In neo-Victorian fiction, the "family's representation is thus always also a re-presentification of absence, a ghostly *trace* of the impossible, longed for ideal rather than the thing itself, of something that *never existed in the first place*" (Kohlke and Gutleben 22; emphasis in original). Cissy returns to Phoebe as a ghostly trace and, in marrying Quin, Phoebe reimagines the idealised resolution to Cissy and Nathaniel's affair – on discovering Cissy was pregnant, they "planned to elope, to make a new life in America" (Fox 209) – a resolution that was quashed by Esther's death and Nathaniel's resultant decision to remain with Lydia.

Maternal Trajectories: Embodying the "Bad" Mother

In both *Fingersmith* and *The Somnambulist*, first-generation mothers – whether they be biological or adoptive – fare worse than their daughters. While this suggests a narrative of progress, the daughters' positive outcomes should not be conflated with progressive gender politics. In Waters' novel, Sue and Maud do indeed thrive as a result of rejecting heteronormativity, but in Fox's novel Phoebe's resolution is far more conventional and suggests that, had she not married Quin, she would have faced similar prejudices to that of her biological mother Cissy. In the immediate aftermath of Gentleman's murder in *Fingersmith*, it appears that Maud will face the same fate as Sue's imagined mother and be sentenced to hang for murder. Though Sue loses sight of who stabbed Gentleman in the scuffle, Mrs Sucksby's reaction indicates that Maud is the culprit:

[Mrs Sucksby] looked at me, and then at Maud. 'You might run.'
 I said nothing. Maud shook her head. 'Not from this,' she answered. 'Not now.'
 'You know what follows?'
 She nodded. Mrs Sucksby glanced again at me, and then again at Maud, then closed

her eyes. She sighed, as if weary.

‘To have lost you once, dear girl,’ she said. ‘And now, to lose you again—’ (Waters 507–08)

While Mrs Sucksby grieves the loss of her daughter a second time – the first being when she exchanged her for Sue – she appears resigned to Maud’s fate. However, when the police arrive John Vroom – another of Mrs Sucksby’s orphans – names Mrs Sucksby as the murderer. Her subsequent confession affirms Sue and Maud’s innocence: “I done it. And these girls here are innocent girls, and know nothing at all about it; and have harmed no one” (Waters 508). Maud’s life – and with it her ability to form a lesbian relationship with Sue – is thus secured by Mrs Sucksby’s sacrifice. Instead of naming Maud as Gentleman’s killer, she assumes responsibility for the death herself. In this way, the fictional mother Mrs Sucksby invented for Sue becomes the reality: Mrs Sucksby is tried and hanged at Horsemonger Lane Gaol with Sue watching on as she believes Mrs Sucksby did “for my own mother” (Waters 523). Unlike Magwitch’s attempt to use an “economic bond” to secure his position as Pip’s “second father” in *Great Expectations* by becoming his benefactor (Houston 17), Mrs Sucksby attempts to secure Sue and Maud’s filial affection through self-sacrifice. She thus inhabits an unstable position within Victorian gender discourse’s dichotomous view of women. While her criminality marks her transgression of the feminine ideal of innocence, her faked confession is an act of maternal love which reflects the singular devotion expected of mothers by this same ideal. Waters’ representation of Mrs Sucksby’s sacrifice as a necessary precondition for Maud and Sue’s freedom is an example of Jeanette King’s observation about feminist neo-Victorian fiction more broadly: she argues that these texts bring “a modern, feminist sensibility to the reconstruction of Victorian women’s lives [...] making it easier for the reader to identify ideological pressures at work on the experience of gender identity today” (178). While Mrs Sucksby’s suffering occurs at the individual level, it also speaks to the collective suffering of generations of women which the feminist movement – in its various invocations – has worked to improve. However, both Marianne and Mrs Sucksby’s trajectories also suggest that certain ideological pressures – particularly around the cultural construction of the “good mother” – continue to place motherhood at the centre of women’s identities whilst valorising an unattainable ideal.

Like her maternal double Mrs Sucksby, Marianne Lilly is also incarcerated at the end of her life – in an asylum. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Victorian asylum doubled as a prison for non-criminal breaches of normative femininity. When a heavily-pregnant Marianne arrives at

Mrs Sucksby's Lant Street home, the latter notes "She had no husband – that was her trouble of course," indicating that Marianne's transgression lies in her decision to have extramarital sex (Waters 326). After giving birth to Sue, Marianne tells Mrs Sucksby that she "would rather anyone got her, than him [Marianne's father] and my brother!" (Waters 333). Her desperation suggests that she was subjected to abuse by her male relatives – just as Maud will be – and that the desire to protect Sue from the same fate motivated her escape from Briar. However, Marianne's freedom is short-lived: she is recovered by the Lilly patriarchs and placed in an asylum along with Mrs Sucksby's infant daughter Maud, whom the women pretend is Sue. Like its Victorian counterpart, the neo-Victorian asylum functions as a convenient repository for women who transgress gendered norms of morality and respectability. In her analysis of Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Matus argues that the "novel reveals how Victorian notions of morality and constructions of maternal madness coalesce in defining the 'right' woman by representing her 'other' in terms of a specifically gendered pathology" (335). For Matus, the revelation of Lady Audley's madness has little to do with any individual pathology – indeed, Lady Audley "appears throughout the novel to be perfectly sane" (334). Instead, her diagnosis "serves to displace the economic and class issues already raised in the novel and to deflect their uncomfortable implications" (Matus 334). Waters' novel functions in a similar way, in that Marianne's "madness" diverts attention away from her abusive father and brother and the middle- and upper-classes' ostracisation of fallen women. Marianne's transgression of class-based values – having a child out of wedlock – is thus recast as symptomatic of mental instability. Gentleman's later retelling of Marianne's fate affirms this: he tells Maud that Marianne "was certainly, once they had got her, put in a cell [...] as we know girls are, from time to time, for the satisfaction of gentleman" (Waters 330). As in *Lady Audley's Secret*, the asylum enables the 'wrong' woman to be excised from the bosom of the otherwise morally upright – at least to outward appearances – family. Much as Lady Audley was unable to resist Robert's demand that she be placed in an asylum, Marianne's institutionalisation and subsequent death demonstrates her powerlessness against her father and brother, who confine her for the sake of their own convenience.

In *The Somnambulist*, Fox uses Cissy's trajectory to reconstruct the personal and social ramifications of fallenness in Victorian society. Already associated with licentiousness through her occupation as a music hall performer, Cissy's fall is cemented by her affair with Nathaniel and her subsequent pregnancy. Matus argues that the "fallen woman as mother is

then torn between two natural propensities, one (maternal) toward her child and another (human) away from it when society makes bearing it a burden” (*Unstable Bodies* 4). Initially, Nathaniel planned to leave Lydia and emigrate to America with Cissy. However, Maud puts an end to this plan by informing Lydia of her husband’s affair. Aware of the societal censure she will face as an unwed mother, Cissy renounces her parentage of Phoebe thus allowing Maud to assume the role of Phoebe’s mother. Maud outlines her plan to Nathaniel: “Phoebe will be raised as my own. She will have a decent married mother. She will have a decent legitimate father [...] My sister is upset. She has suffered a great deal. She needs to repent...and receiving gentleman callers like this, well, it is hardly appropriate. We must all think of our reputations” (Fox 210). Maud’s concern with Cissy’s repentance reflects her fervent religiosity as well as broader cultural attitudes toward fallen women as degraded and in need of salvation (Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism* 170) Her motivation for assuming parentage of Phoebe is thus twofold, in that it allows her to preserve her family’s respectability and perform the socially revered role of mother.

While Maud’s adoption of Phoebe preserves Cissy’s reputation, the trauma of losing Nathaniel and Phoebe has long-lasting effects on Cissy’s mental health. Cissy’s grief reflects Milton’s argument about the gendered dimensions of infidelity in George Eliot’s *Felix Holt*. For Milton, Eliot’s novel “emphasizes that while men typically escape their infidelities without any toll, women are left to suffer the psychic and material burdens of illicit affairs alone” (67). The same pattern emerges in Fox’s novel, with Cissy bearing a greater burden for their affair than Nathaniel. When Esther – Nathaniel’s legitimate daughter – dies as an indirect result of their affair it is Cissy, not Nathaniel, who assumes responsibility for her death. While Nathaniel dispassionately describes the loss as a “consequence” of the affair, Cissy “believed Esther’s death was her judgement” (Fox 332). Plagued by guilt over Esther’s death and grief at her inability to mother Phoebe, Cissy suicides when Phoebe is a teenager. Like *Fingersmith*’s Marianne, Cissy leaves a letter identifying herself and Nathaniel as Phoebe’s parents and, just as Mrs Sucksby hides Marianne’s letter from Sue, so too does Maud conceal this letter from Phoebe. The letter evinces Cissy’s internalisation of the Victorian feminine ideal: in it she tells Phoebe “I don’t want your spirit and dreams to be crushed, even if my own are lost. I sinned, and I had to give up what I loved” (Fox 327). Cissy’s “sin” – that of having an affair with a married man and giving birth to a child out of wedlock – contravenes the Victorian demand for women to be pure, innocent, and virginal. By representing death as the only viable option for Cissy – and, when Phoebe later finds

herself in a similar predicament, marriage – Fox rehearses the Victorian view of fallen women as the “pollutants of men” (Matus, *Unstable Bodies* 114). Her death also reinforces the primacy of mothering in Victorian constructions of women’s identities. Cissy cannot perform the role of mother without exposing her sexual transgression, but without this role she cannot inhabit her expected place in Victorian society. As a result, Cissy and the other failed mothers in Fox’s novel are excised from the narrative through death or absence, while in Waters’ novel they are banished from mainstream society. For example, Sue and Maud retreat to the confines of Briar to avoid societal censure of their relationship. While Waters’ novel attempts to recover the outcast women of nineteenth-century culture to move beyond the Victorian reliance on motherhood as the sole marker of women’s societal value, Fox’s novel reasserts normative femininity by representing the non-mother’s existence as ultimately unsustainable.

While Lydia’s marriage grants her the respectability and conventionality Cissy lacks, her relationship with motherhood is equally fraught. Like Cissy, Lydia blames herself for Esther’s death. After the fact, she tells Nathaniel about the confrontation she had with Esther over his affair: “I said things a mother should never say...that you didn’t want her, that she should forget you” (Fox 269). Lydia is convinced that it was these words – rather than the knowledge that her father was unfaithful – that led to Esther’s distressed state and her subsequent decision to venture out into the grounds at night, where she is caught in a fox trap. In an attempt to distract Lydia from her guilt and grief, Nathaniel installs Phoebe as her companion in the hope that she will act as a replacement daughter figure in need of Lydia’s maternal care. Instead, Phoebe acts as a constant reminder of the daughter Lydia has lost, to the point where Lydia struggles to distinguish between Phoebe’s corporeal presence and Esther’s ghostly absence. In her discussion of nineteenth century approaches to disease, Pamela Gilbert notes that “Many writers of the period, medical and otherwise, comment on the liability of the body to disease engendered by “mental shocks” (54) and this certainly appears to be Lydia’s fate. After Esther’s death, Lydia experiences episodes of delirium calmed only by every-increasing doses of opium. Her butler Stephens tells Phoebe “Mrs Samuels may sometimes say strange things. The medication helps to ease her pain, but her thoughts can tend to wander. She misses her daughter, you see” (Fox 177). Phoebe describes seeing Lydia wandering the grounds in only her nightgown, seemingly unaware of having cut her arm on rose thorns before being ferried inside by Stephens and a doctor (Fox 174–75). In another instance, Lydia creeps into Phoebe’s bed and whispers “Don’t be frightened. Mama

is with you. Mama will keep you warm” – a reference to Esther’s death in the snow – but she has no recollection of this the next morning and is merely puzzled as to why Phoebe looks “drawn” (Fox 196, 200). Esther’s death precipitates both Cissy’s suicide and Lydia’s madness, demonstrating the underside of the Victorian maternal ideal, which did not allow for maternal failings – be they actual or perceived – were unacceptable.

As well as casting Lydia’s grief over Esther’s death as a precursor to her delirium, Fox also links this trauma to the manifestation of physical illness. Lydia suffers from a range of symptoms including fatigue (Fox 169), sour-smelling breath (Fox 174), loss of appetite (Fox 258, 264), and difficulty breathing (Fox 250, 260, 264). She keeps the underlying cause of these ailments a secret until one night she seeks out Phoebe while sleepwalking and catches her nightgown on her hand to reveal a wound:

The lace of the collar was dragged to one side, dislodging a bloodied dressing of gauze, exposing the withered flesh of her breast [...] The growth had the look of raw liver, a purplish red, with moist puckering petals that blossomed around the pale bud of a nipple. And beneath the lavender perfume that Mrs Samuels always wore, that rose exuded an odour – a distinctive stench of rot. (Fox 267)

In this passage, Fox juxtaposes the outward signs of feminine decorum – lace, lavender perfume, and floral imagery – with a vivid description of Lydia’s decaying flesh. That this presumably cancerous growth which ultimately leads to Lydia’s death should have its origin in her breast is significant given this organ’s symbolic (and functional) association with sexuality and maternity. This dual association proved problematic given that nineteenth-century gender ideology constructed sexuality and maternity as diametrically opposed:

As in all ages, breast-feeding highlighted the implicit conflict between a woman’s marital and maternal roles, a conflict particularly pronounced in the Victorian era when the ideal of female beauty, with the exaggerated attention paid to the bust and hips, focused on woman’s reproductive powers. (Shuttleworth, ‘Demonic Mothers’ 39)

As Shuttleworth’s analysis highlights, embodying ideal femininity in the Victorian era was a double-bind: women were expected to fulfil the sexual needs of their husbands (while possessing no sexual desire of their own), at the same time as they were expected to display singular devotion toward their children. Lydia’s breast is a symbol of her deviation from the feminine ideal: in its diseased form, it is neither sexually desirable nor capable of nurturing a child. Lydia herself interprets her illness as a punishment for her perceived failings as

mother. She tells Nathaniel “There is no cure for this disease...this punishment is the badge of my shame [...] I was the cause of Esther's death” (Fox 268–69). She goes on to explain that “Esther lay there and froze to death while I seethed in my bed, while I burned with the fire of my jealousy, to think that she cared more for you than me [...] When I knew she was dead, my soul rejoiced, because then I knew you wouldn't leave. And now [...] now I must pay for such wickedness” (Fox 270). Lydia's inability to perform the selflessness demanded by the Victorian maternal ideal is evidenced by the way she competes with Nathaniel for their daughter's affection and rejoices at Esther's death because it binds Nathaniel to her. Indeed, her sexual jealousy of Esther's youth and desirability takes the double-bind of Victorian femininity to its logical conclusion: fulfilling neither the role of asexual, nurturing mother nor passive sexual partner, Lydia's place in society has become obsolete. As a result, she, like fellow “madwomen” Lady Audley and Marianne Lilly must be excised from the narrative in order to reaffirm the “healthy, middle-class self” (Matus, ‘Disclosure as “Cover-Up”’ 335).

Female Betrayal: Meddling Mothers and Double-crossing Daughters

Both *The Somnambulist* and *Fingersmith* portray women who deviate from the Victorian feminine ideal. However, that the majority of relationships between women in these novels are based on competition and betrayal demonstrates that there is little indication that they view their transgressions as part of a collective challenge to normative gender roles. The exception is Sue and Maud's eventual reconciliation, though even this is precipitated by both girls' willingness to facilitate the other's institutionalisation for individual gain: Maud because it frees her from her uncle's clutches and Sue because Mrs Sucksby has promised her riches. While this lack of solidarity is perhaps surprising, “even overtly feminist neo-Victorian novels” tend to display “a curious ambivalence toward women's liberation” (Kohlke, ‘Neo-Victorian Female Gothic’ 222). Perhaps this reflects the ambivalence within feminism itself: despite being a collective movement, it is not immune from division as tensions both between the various waves and within them make clear. I will explore some of these tensions later in the chapter, particularly in relation to feminist approaches to pornography.

In contrast to *Waterland* and *The Painted Bridge* where men are primarily responsible for women's suffering, in *Fingersmith* and *The Somnambulist* it is women who double-cross, lie,

and manipulate each other in order to serve their individual aims. For example, Mrs Sucksby betrays her promise to Marianne to honour the latter's wishes for the distribution of her fortune. Instead, driven by greed, she devises a meticulously plotted, calculated scheme to swap Sue and Maud once more to secure Marianne's entire fortune. Though Marianne's will names the girls equal beneficiaries, it's clear that Mrs Sucksby never intended to honour this bequest. As she tells Maud once they have been reunited: "I got the lady's baby and, what's better, I got the lady's word. –The word's the thing, of course. The word's the thing with the money in it" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 337). Muller argues that the agreement between Marianne and Mrs Sucksby is paradoxical because "Mrs Sucksby defies a patrilineal system of inheritance on the one hand, but also Marianne's will on the other, proving that none of the agencies sought by Sue, Maud, or Mrs Sucksby through the adoption of a masculine role within an established patriarchal system can offer more than merely a sinister liberty" ('Not My Mother's Daughter' 119). Though Mrs Sucksby's display of maternal feeling toward both Sue and Maud appears genuine at times, it's clear that her pecuniary interests outweigh such sentimentality. As she explains to Maud, she "had seen from the first that the only puzzle was, how to get the whole of the fortune when I was only due to have half" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 339). Once Mrs Sucksby has devised the plot, which sees Sue placed in an asylum and Maud returned to her, she is forced to wait until the girls are old enough to execute it, all the while safeguarding Sue not out of maternal love, but because she is integral to the plan's success. Mrs Sucksby's expected ascendancy comes at the expense of exploiting Marianne's vulnerability and betraying the trust of her adoptive daughter Sue. Her actions thus work to "reinforce the status of women as commodities in masculine transactions" (Muller, 'Not My Mother's Daughter' 118). Marianne's will was designed to liberate Sue and Maud from the crippling financial dependence experienced by their mothers – the patronage of her father and uncle for Marianne and the proceeds of petty crime for Mrs Sucksby – enabling them to live independently of patriarchal systems of exchange. Instead, Mrs Sucksby prioritises her individual wealth over the girls' collective financial security and, in so doing, she destroys the feminist potential of Marianne's will.

Mrs Sucksby's betrayal of Marianne sets a precedent for the behaviour of their daughters. While Mrs Sucksby preys on a vulnerable Marianne, the divide between victim and perpetrator is much more ambiguous when it comes to Sue and Maud. Like Mrs Sucksby, Sue is motivated by greed: by helping her adoptive mother steal Maud's fortune, Sue believes she will secure a share of the profits. Unbeknownst to Sue, it is *her* half of Marianne's

fortune that Mrs Sucksby plans to steal, for the benefit of herself and her daughter Maud. Though Sue begins to develop an attraction to Maud after arriving at Briar, she nonetheless remains committed to executing Mrs Sucksby's plan: "I never really thought of telling her the truth, of showing up Gentleman as the villain he was—of doing anything, anything at all, that would spoil our plot and keep us from her fortune" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 136). However, Sue fails to realise that Maud also plans to cheat her: under Gentleman's instructions, Maud prepares Sue to assume her identity so that when they leave Briar it is Sue, not Maud, who is placed in the asylum. In Part 1 of the novel – narrated by Sue – we share Sue's naïve estimation of Maud as a disturbed yet harmless girl. As Mitchell argues, "we, too, have been reading Maud in terms of a set of narrative conventions [as gothic heroine]. The discovery, as Maud begins her own narrative, that she is cruel, wilful and tormenting rather than docile and sweet shifts our terms of reference" (136). It is important to note that Sue's narrative is retrospective: while she may well have thought Maud "too pale, too pure, too simple," this must be couched in the knowledge that by the time Sue recounts her early days at Briar, Maud has already betrayed her and so, too, have they been reunited (Waters, *Fingersmith* 135). Arguably, Sue highlights Maud's innocence in order to make herself seem like less of a dupe *and* because she has fallen in love with her. In Part 2, the narrative is retold from Maud's perspective. Reflecting on her role in the plan to institutionalise Sue and thus secure her escape from Briar, Maud tries to convince both herself and the reader "it is love—not scorn, not malice; only love—that makes me harm her, in the end" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 284). However, the terror she feels at the alternative – remaining with her uncle at Briar – demonstrates that while "desire may exist as the sole point of authenticity [...] self-interest and greed frequently overtake it" (Adair par. 9). Like Sue, Maud is also a victim of deception: she believes she will be married to Gentleman but knows nothing of his plan to return her to Lant Street, where she is held captive until a lawyer can be found to execute Marianne's will. Upon arriving at Lant Street, she also learns that Mrs Sucksby is her mother (Waters, *Fingersmith* 360). Mrs Sucksby thus presides over a complex and hidden network of power which renders the "agency both girls believe to gain from each other's exploitation [...] meaningless by the revelation that Mrs Sucksby has made them both the goods and currencies of her very own transaction" (Muller, 'Not My Mother's Daughter' 118). As with Mrs Sucksby's betrayal of Marianne, Sue and Maud's mutual betrayal "remind[s] us that (patriarchal) oppression need not occur in a male form" (Muller, 'Not My Mother's Daughter' 125). Instead, these patterns of behaviour demonstrate the danger that comes with internalising patriarchal modes of power and exchange – while such modes may appear to

serve the interests of individual women, they come at the expense of those more vulnerable. In this way, Waters' novel demonstrates that "women are as prone to cruelty as men" (Kaplan, *Victoriana* 112). However, Sue and Maud's eventual reconciliation suggests that freedom from patriarchal oppression ultimately depends not only on disrupting unequal power relations between men and women, but between women themselves.

The success of Mrs Sucksby's plan to secure the entirety of Marianne's fortune depends on Sue assuming Maud's place in the asylum. While Gentleman conceals the wider plot from Maud – she is aware that they will marry but knows nothing of Mrs Sucksby – she understands that the freedom he offers her is contingent upon trading identities with Sue. In order to convince the doctors who will certify Sue's madness that she is, in fact, Maud, the bodily and behavioural markers of Sue's working-class identity must be overwritten. In Part 2 of the novel, Maud reflects on Sue's transformation:

Of course, though she does not know it, it is she who must be plump—she who will learn, in time, to sleep, to wake, to dress, to walk, to a pattern, to signals and bells. She thinks she humours me. She thinks she pities me! She learns the ways of the house, not understanding that the habits and the fabrics that bind me will, soon, bind her." (Waters, *Fingersmith* 250)

Maud's reference to binding recalls both her uncle's library of pornographic books and the way in which garments serve as markers of identity and class. As Mitchell argues, "In this doubling and switching of Sue and Maud, the passive, gothic heroine is transformed into the woman of sensation, victimised by an overbearing patriarchal figure but also criminally implicated herself" (136). Maud's complicity is apparent from the moment Sue arrives at Briar, as she "feel[s] myself beginning to give up my life [...] I imagine it settling, tight, about her. She does not know it. She will not know it until, too late, she will look and see how it has clothed and changed her, made her like me" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 246). Just as the corset limited Victorian women's range of movement, so too will Maud's clothing inhibit Sue's ability to enact a working-class identity and prove that she, not Maud, is the servant.

By the time they leave Briar, Maud's life has literally – as well as figuratively – clothed Sue. Sue recalls how Maud "wore the old gown still, that was stained with mud, and I wore the handsome silk one. She would not let me change out of it" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 171). Maud mobilises the physical resemblance between herself and Sue – which she has carefully curated – to secure her escape and Sue's institutionalisation. Underneath the superficial cover

of Sue's silk gown and Maud's stained one, their transformed class identities are also inscribed upon their flesh: while Maud becomes "thin and pale," Sue's hands grow "whiter," her "arm [...] plump and smooth with careful feeding" and "the browns of her hair and eyes are made rich" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 297, 258, 174, 303). This recalls the interchangeability between Laura and Anne in *The Woman in White* where, as Lauren Hoffer and Sarah Kersh argue, the "link between Anne and Laura is registered on their bodies. Their striking physical resemblance [...] inspires Count Fosco's plan to switch one for the other [...] Effectively, their bodies operate as the writing on the wall" (197). In *Fingersmith*, embodied resemblance cements the doctors' conviction that Sue Trinder is Maud Lilly, newly married to Gentleman and that Maud is her maid, Susan Smith.

However, bodily markers alone are not sufficient to secure the successful switch between Sue and Maud. Class identity is not only embodied, but performed, and that performance must in turn be deemed authentic by those in positions of power. When Gentleman introduces Maud to the doctors as his wife's maid Susan Smith and Sue as Maud Lilly, this sets their expectations for what they will find when they interview the girls. Performing the role Gentleman assigns to her, Maud "speak[s], as a servant might" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 299), distancing herself from her true identity by mimicking Sue's working-class accent. Sue's performance, on the other hand, contravenes Gentleman's assertion that she is Maud Lilly and, as such, the case for her insanity is strengthened with every repeated assertion that she is Sue Trinder, Maud's maid. The doctors' take the similarities between the two girls' accounts of their lives as evidence of Sue-as-Maud's delusion: "You hear [...] how well the account matches Mrs Rivers's own? It is quite remarkable!—as if, in making a burden of her life, she seeks to hand that burden to another, better able to bear it. She has made a fiction of herself!" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 300). While the doctors think that the fake Maud (Sue) has rehearsed the contours of her maid's life in order to become her, what they fail to realise is that it is the real Maud – as Susan Smith – who has made a fiction of herself in order to escape her life. Aided by Gentleman's assertion that the fake Maud's latest episode of insanity began on their wedding night, the doctors conclude that she has assumed the identity of a maid as a coping mechanism for her inability to fulfil her wifely duties. They believe that "Maud's" fondness for books and reading has enfeebled her mind and body and is part of a wider "wider *malaise*" borne of "raising a nation of brain-cultured women" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 300; emphasis in original). Coupled with what one of the doctor's describes as his "fear for the future of our race" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 300), this recalls a dominant theme in Victorian

medical texts. These texts “anxiously extrapolated from current trends and predicted dire bodily responses to cultural developments, stressing the body’s tendency to degeneration and responding to feminist attempts to widen women’s educational and vocational sphere with predictions of atrophy and masculinisation” (Matus, *Unstable Bodies* 39). Waters places the materiality – and malleability – of the body at the centre of Maud’s betrayal of Sue. That such a transformation is possible supports Grosz’s conception of the body as “a series of processes of becoming, rather than a fixed state of being” (*Volatile Bodies* 12). This concept of the body as always in flux has both positive and negative connotations for women’s agency in the novel. While Maud’s imposition of an alternative identity onto Sue secures her freedom, it also robs Sue of the capacity for self-definition in the process. Like Mrs Sucksby’s adoption of patriarchal systems of exchange, Maud’s overwriting of Sue’s identity represents the internalisation of another aspect of phallogentric culture – that which gives others the right to define women. While these “others” are usually represented by men, in *Fingersmith* Mrs Sucksby is the author of the scheme which sees both herself and Marianne, and later Maud and Sue, become complicit in perpetuating this culture.

Like *Fingersmith*, *The Somnambulist* is littered with acts of secrecy and betrayal among women. While *Fingersmith*’s plot revolves around two pairs of female doubles – Marianne/Mrs Sucksby and Sue/Maud – in Fox’s novel a maternal triad – Maud/Lydia/Cissy – is at the centre of the conflict. While Waters’ novel “highlight[s] the cruelty of women to women within as well as across social class” (Kaplan, ‘Fingersmith’s Coda’ 51), cruelty in Fox’s novel occurs at the familial and, specifically, sororal level. As discussed earlier, Maud prevents Cissy and Nathaniel’s emigration by writing to Lydia to reveal their affair. While Maud’s actions undoubtedly affect upper-class Lydia, the intended target of her malice is her sister Cissy. Though the letter is anonymous, Nathaniel had “instinctively known the source of attack, the cunning, wicked, deceitful means by which Maud Turner reclaimed her prize – his lover, his daughter, both stolen as ransom” (Fox 278). Nathaniel’s description of Cissy and Phoebe as “ransom” casts Maud in the role of kidnapper and signals her intention to curtail Cissy’s freedom for her own pecuniary gain. Careful though she is to position her betrayal of Cissy as an act of salvation – “*How else could I be sure of keeping you with me, of saving your souls from the flames of Hell?*” (Fox 313; original italics) – her motives are in fact far more self-serving. By forcing Cissy and Nathaniel apart, Maud reaps the benefits that come from living with Nathaniel’s mistress, including a generous allowance and a house in Tredegar Square in London. Shortly before her death, Cissy alludes to Maud’s role in her

unhappiness in a conversation with Phoebe: “I say she’s committed crimes of her own, with her greed and her scheming, her selfish behaviour, and all that she’s gone on to gain in the process...what she would *never* have had without me” (Fox 51; emphasis in original). Taken together, Cissy and Nathaniel’s observations highlight Maud’s possessiveness – she treats both Cissy and Phoebe as objects who can be used to satiate her greed regardless of the misery her actions bring them. In this way, her approach is similar to that of Mrs Sucksby, whose treatment of Maud and Sue “replicates and reinforces the masculine system of commodification, exchange, and exploitation of women” (Muller, ‘Not My Mother’s Daughter’ 119). By wresting control of Cissy and Phoebe from Nathaniel, Maud attempts to embody the role of the patriarch. While Sue and Maud’s reunion at the end of Waters’ novel suggests the possibility of an alternative system of exchange – one based on female solidarity, queer desire, and freedom of expression – Cissy’s death forecloses the possibility of a reconciliation between herself and Maud. This in turn suggests that the subjugation of vulnerable women will continue as long as other women have something to gain from mimicking patriarchal systems of exchange. The key difference, then, is that unlike Maud Turner, Mrs Sucksby attempts to return to the maternal ideal by sacrificing herself to save her daughter Maud.

(Fe)male Violence

Women’s complicity in the subjugation of other women in *Fingersmith* unsettles any attempt to read them as passive victims of patriarchal power. While Foucault’s conception of power is devoid of a gendered dimension, it is nonetheless important for understanding how patriarchal power operates. As Foucault argues, disciplinary power “individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 146). In this vein, patriarchal power is not an object wielded by men against women. Instead, it is a power structure within which all subjects operate, with each subject’s actions determining their position in the hierarchy relative to other subjects. For example, Christopher Lilly works within this structure to control his niece, Maud, but she in turn uses the same structure to commandeer Sue in her plot to escape. Thus, *Fingersmith*’s women are complicit in perpetuating patriarchal power, as a system of relations that privileges self-interest over the collective good and relies on the creation of marginalised others to shore up its legitimacy. To return to Lilley, there is a clear

relationship between his abuse of Maud and her subsequent decision to betray Sue. Initially, Maud is raised in an asylum: as an infant, Maud accompanies Marianne into the asylum and is raised by the institution's nurses after Marianne's death. However, when Maud is eleven Lilly removes her from the asylum to Briar, the family estate. He plans to enlist Maud's help in managing his extensive collection of pornographic texts by training as his "secretary" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 187). In addition to cataloguing his collection, Maud is forced to read to her uncle and his friends "from foreign texts, not understanding the matter I am made to recite" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 198). For Davies, Maud's professed ignorance regarding the texts' meaning means that she "is not only condemned to act as an unthinking, unknowing vessel for the obscene repetitions, but is mandated into this position by her guardian" (*Gender and Ventriloquism* 157). This view of Maud as an unwitting mouthpiece for male desire is not unlike Tom Crick's understanding of women as "empty but fillable vessel[s]" in *Waterland* (Swift 48). Indeed, Maud herself tells Gentleman that her uncle "considers me a sort of engine, for the reading and copying of texts" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 269). While this demonstrates Lilly's view of a Maud as a machine – not dissimilar to the rumours surrounding Fevvers being an automaton – it also suggests a level of self-awareness on Maud's part for which Davies' does not account. In Lilly's view, and Crick's, women are useful only insofar as they can be made to serve male needs — whether it be for their reproductive capacity in *Waterland* or as a means for gratifying perverse desires as in *Fingersmith*.

The affinities between Mary and Sarah in *Waterland* are also repeated between Maud and Marianne in *Fingersmith*. Both novels conceptualise madness as a form of gendered inheritance. In *Fingersmith*, this is also accompanied by a pseudo-biological link: under the assumption that she is Marianne's daughter, Maud believes she is genetically predisposed to madness (though the revelation that she is Mrs Sucksby's daughter subverts this notion). However, this is not Maud's only inheritance: "with her belief in her inheritance of her mother's blood, she has also inherited her uncle's oppression" (Muller, 'Not My Mother's Daughter' 115). Lilly's denial of Maud's subjectivity is so pervasive that she comes to see herself as an object, indistinguishable from the books in his collection: "The plate bears his emblem, a clever thing of his own design—a lily, drawn strangely, to resemble a phallus; and wound about with a stem of briar at the root [...] 'Sometimes,' I say, not looking up, 'I suppose such a plate must be pasted upon my own flesh—so nearly do I resemble one of my uncle's books'" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 218). Lilly's emblem – a phallic lily with a stem of

briar¹⁶ – bears a striking resemblance to Rosencreutz’s medallion in *Nights at the Circus* which depicts a winged phallus entwined with a rose. While Rosencreutz has the emblem carved into his ceiling and Lilly has it stamped into his books, both emblems symbolise their use of phallogocentric power to gain mastery over their surroundings. I argue that this intertextual reference is intended to cast Lilly in a similar role to Rosencreutz: both men persecute women and, in different ways, they view their ownership of these women as a route to immortality. Rosencreutz believes that if he sacrifices Fevvers he’ll be made immortal and Lilly wants Maud to succeed him as the guardian of his collection after his death. However, this has an unintended consequence for Lilly: after his death Maud uses her familiarity with these texts to express her sexual desire for Sue and to earn an income. According to Davies, this “allows [Maud] some degree of agency to ‘talk back’ to patriarchal and heteronormative discourses of women’s sexuality” (*Gender and Ventriloquism* 161). Kathleen Miller disagrees, positing that the novel “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” (par. 7). While such a culture may well have been transmitted, I argue that so too has a capacity for resistance: not content with remaining her uncle’s mouthpiece, Maud “talks back” to the discourses Davies identifies by assuming the role of author. Through her creation of pornographic content, Maud reclaims her sexual identity and, along with it, the potential for a feminist re-visioning of women’s participation in Victorian print culture.

In Waters’ novel, power and oppression are relative concepts which can be mobilised by subjects of any gender. As discussed earlier, this moves away from the notion of patriarchal power as something that men possess and inflict on women, to a view of patriarchal power as a system of exchange in which anyone can participate – though participation is easier for those in more powerful positions. While Christopher Lilly is undoubtedly an oppressor – first of Marianne and later of Maud – Waters’ novel also depicts abuses of power by some women over more vulnerable others. With regard to the gendered dimensions of power in the novel, Muller argues that “patriarchal oppression [...] becomes a force lingering in the background of female mutual betrayal and exploitation” (*‘Not My Mother’s Daughter’* 125). However, I argue that this minimises the role patriarchal oppression plays in *Fingersmith*: far from

¹⁶ The OED Online defines briar as “A prickly, thorny bush or shrub in general; formerly including the bramble, but now usually confined to wild rose bushes” (“Brier | Briar | Brere, n.1.” def. 1.a.)

lingering in the background, such oppression actively produces the acts of betrayal and exploitation to which Muller refers. Just as Mrs Sucksby repeats the patriarchal commodification of women's bodies in her approach to Sue and Maud, so too does Maud mimic her uncle's violence in her relationships with other women. As a child, Maud is beaten by both her uncle and his servants at his direction. Lilly instructs his housekeeper Mrs Stiles to make Maud "quite tame" and "whip her [...] if she proves troublesome" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 187, 194). Maud then adopts the role of perpetrator in her interactions with her maid Agnes, as she works through the memories of this early trauma:

She reminds me of myself as I once was and ought still to be, and will never be again. I hate her for it. When she is clumsy, when she is slow, I hit her. That makes her clumsier. Then I hit her again. That makes her weep. Her face, behind her tears, keeps still its look of mine. I beat her the harder, the more I fancy the resemblance. (Waters, *Fingersmith* 203)

Just as the child Maud was powerless against those who harmed her, so too does she use the power imbalance between herself and Agnes – she the mistress, Agnes the maid – to inflict cruelty on her. Maud sees in Agnes the innocence her uncle has taken from her and, unable to bear the reminder of her lost self, she tries to rob Agnes of her innocence too. O'Callaghan argues that Waters implicates both men and women in acts of violence to "challenge the misandry of feminist perspectives that focus on patriarchy as the source of all oppression" (*GR* 564). However, it is difficult to divorce Maud's actions from her past trauma and her uncle's past (and present) cruelty towards her. While patriarchy may not be the source of all oppression, it is through patriarchy and its key representative in the text – Lilly – that Maud learns to use violence as a way to process traumatic memories and the distressing emotions they produce. This is not to suggest that Maud's appropriation of violence is excusable, nor indeed is it progressive simply because she has assumed the role of the (male) perpetrator, rather than that of the (female) victim. Instead, Maud's actions illustrate the complexity of extricating oneself from patriarchal models of power and control, as well as the fact that even if a rejection of these models were possible at the individual level, they remain the dominant organising principle of phallogocentric culture.

While Maud's violence toward Agnes appears to give her pleasure, it does nothing to redress the power imbalance between Maud and her uncle. In other words, Maud may become Agnes' oppressor, but this does not release her from being Lilly's victim. However, when Maud redirects this violence toward her oppressors – first by destroying Lilly's library and

later by stabbing Gentleman – she moves toward freedom. Just before Maud’s escape from Briar, she ventures into the library while her uncle sleeps. She removes the first book Lilly gave her – *The Curtain Drawn Up* – from the shelves and takes a razor to it: “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 (Waters, *Fingersmith* 290; emphasis in original). Maud and the books are represented as interchangeable: just as it longs for its own laceration, so too does Maud long for her escape. Taking a blade to the book also prefigures the way in which Maud will later take a blade to Gentleman, in an attempt to prevent him from revealing that she is Mrs Sucksby’s daughter and that Mrs Sucksby always intended to sacrifice Sue. While Maud secures her release from both her uncle and Gentleman through violence, there is no indication that she continues to practice such cruelty in her relationship with Sue at the end of the novel. In Kaplan’s work on the relationship between feminism and Victorian studies, she argues that “In Waters one feels that violence is understood — and even accepted — as a quotidian element of the human imaginary, male or female, even if its particular form and practices in her novels are shaped by the power relations and hierarchies of nineteenth-century society” (‘Fingersmith’s Coda’ 52). If – as Kaplan suggests – we take violence as an essential component of human nature, then it need not be viewed as a solely patriarchal instrument which must be rejected along with patriarchy itself if women are to gain freedom. While the novel indicates that gratuitous violence – like Maud’s abuse of Agnes – is never productive regardless of the perpetrator’s gender, this should not exclude the possibility that other forms of violence – like Maud’s destruction of the library – can be reappropriated as tools for feminist agency.

Though both men and women commit acts of violence in *Fingersmith*, in Fox’s novel men are chiefly responsible for perpetrating violence. The most explicit depiction of violence in the novel occurs when Phoebe and Joseph (Nathaniel and Lydia’s adult son) have sexual intercourse. Though implicitly consensual, the encounter soon turns violent:

And what was worse? That aggressive, cruel thrusting that seemed to last an eternity, or the way his hand clamped over my mouth, hardly able to breathe as he muffled my sobs, or how, when I tried to look back, to look at Joseph's face, I saw it was turned away from me [...] as if I was no more than a lump of meat – as if I was no one, as if I was nothing. (Fox 234–35)

Just as Christopher Lilly treats Maud as a machine for copying texts, so too does Joseph approach Phoebe as an object – “a lump of meat” – which can be bent to his will. Ignorant as

he is of Phoebe's parentage, Joseph believes she is Nathaniel's lover and has come to usurp his mother's place at Dinwood Court (Fox 245). His sexual violence toward Phoebe is both an expression of his hatred for his father and a way to punish her for the role he presumes she has played in the breakdown of his parents' marriage. Joseph's motivation for the attack reveals that O'Callaghan's description of Maud as "little more than an object, created exclusively for men's needs and pleasures" is thus equally applicable to Phoebe ("The Grossest Rakes of Fiction" 563). While seeking revenge for Nathaniel's infidelity by committing adultery himself – Joseph is married – may seem contradictory, it reflects phallogocentric culture's approach to women as objects who can be traded between men, the possession of which confers power onto the owner. Joseph uses sex and, more specifically, sexual violence to affirm his power not only over Phoebe but also over his father.

Unbeknownst to Joseph, he has committed incest as well as adultery because Phoebe is his half-sister. Far from Victorian culture's representation of the fallen woman as synonymous with contagion, Joseph's actions thus suggest a paternal/masculine rather than maternal/feminine model for the transmission of vice. In response to Joseph calling her "clearly no more than whore" (Fox 244), Phoebe holds herself responsible for the attack: "Hadn't I once been too naïve, seduced when I should have resisted, when I should have been moral and righteous, and then The Thing would never have happened: the terrible sin that had damned my soul. No, the spectre of Joseph was always there" (Fox 353). Phoebe, like Muller's description of Maud in *Fingersmith*, is "not only heiress to a matrilineal fiction, but a fiction written by men" ('Not My Mother's Daughter' 115). She has internalised the patriarchal scripts of victim-blaming and equating female sexual desire with the permissibility of sexual violence. While Waters' second-generation women – Sue and Maud – free themselves from the legacy of Marianne's sexual transgression and reject Lilly and Gentleman's fictions, Phoebe's response to Joseph's attack suggest that she is unable to discard Cissy's maternal legacy of sin and shame, which in turn contribute to her acquiescence to marrying Quin.

Maternal Legacies – Fictional, Real, and Imagined

In *Fingersmith*, maternal legacies – whether they be biological, adoptive, or imagined – have a significant influence on Maud and Sue's identity formation. For instance, Maud – who thinks Marianne is her mother – has been brought up to believe she has inherited Marianne's

propensity for madness. She acts out this fictitious legacy by casting her disturbed dreams and laudanum addiction as symptoms of the same malady which plagued Marianne. Maud imagines her fitful sleep is caused by “Madness, my mother’s malady, perhaps beginning its slow ascent in me! That thought makes me more frightened yet. I take, for a day or two, more of my drops: they calm me, but change me” (Waters, *Fingersmith* 270). Maud's fear of inheriting Marianne’s madness reflects the Victorian view of madness as a hereditary condition which was more likely to be transmitted along the maternal line. Mid-nineteenth-century advice books on womanhood and motherhood played a pivotal role in perpetuating this idea: “Although some texts looked at the problems of weak mental or bodily constitutions in both sexes, the emphasis had shifted predominantly onto female weakness. Symbolic associations of women with disease were strengthened by the received wisdom that not only were women more prone to insanity than men, they were also more responsible for hereditary transmission” (Shuttleworth, ‘Demonic Mothers’ 36). While Victorian scientific and medical professionals’ beliefs regarding women’s biological inferiority influenced reproductive discourse, they also had more wide-reaching implications for women’s position in Victorian society. For instance, Victorian biomedical discourse held that “women are governed by a body specialised for reproduction rather than by a rational, highly-developed mind” (Matus, *Unstable Bodies* 164). This was used to justify women’s continued exclusion from vocational, educational and political pursuits which, in turn, preserved patriarchal dominance in the public sphere. Women’s biological inferiority and, in particular, their susceptibility to madness also provided an expedient justification for the surveillance of women’s bodies. As Shuttleworth argues, middle-class Victorian women “anxiously monitor[ed] the slightest aspect of their bodily functions” because they were “constantly under threat of medical intervention” (‘Female Circulation’ 48). After Gentleman and Maud escape Briar, he comments on the way in which the threat of being institutionalised like Marianne causes Maud to be overly attuned to her bodily functions: “And you were certainly kept in fear of following her, Maud. And what did that do to you? –save make you anxious, obedient, careless of your own comforts—in other words, exactly fit you to your uncle’s fancy?” (Waters, *Fingersmith* 330). Perversely, it is Maud’s assumption that she will go mad like Marianne which makes her more likely to experience madness, because it predisposes her to interpret any symptoms of mental distress as the product of a maternal inheritance, rather than a product of Lilly’s abuse. Her fear of being institutionalised also makes her more susceptible to Lilly’s attempts to control her because she understands that her (relative) freedom is contingent upon pleasing him. In their discussion of Sarah Blake's *Grange House*

(2000), Heilmann and Llewellyn argue that “the imprint of trauma on the maternal body [is] reproduced in each generation, and visited on the daughters, literal and adoptive” (*Neo-Victorianism* 42). The same pattern is evident in *Fingersmith*, where Marianne suffers abuse from her father and brother and so too does her adoptive daughter Maud. Maud’s symptoms – which cannot be caused by a biological predisposition because she is not Marianne’s daughter – are thus far more indicative of the intergenerational effects of abuse and trauma than they are of madness.

Like Maud, Sue inherits a fictitious maternal legacy which shapes her identity and behaviour. In order to secure the entirety of Marianne’s fortune, Mrs Sucksby invents a maternal figure for Sue to prevent her from discovering her true lineage. Waters links Marianne to two of the most recognisable forms of female vice in Victorian culture – fallenness and madness – before completing the triad of deviant femininity with Sue’s invented mother – a criminal. Mrs Sucksby tells Sue that her mother left her in Mrs Sucksby’s care while she performed “one last job” before being apprehended and hanged (Waters, *Fingersmith* 11). In contrast to Maud, who invokes Marianne to make sense of her embodied experience, Sue displays a lack of affinity for her imagined mother, describing her as “nothing to me” (Waters, *Fingersmith* 3). I argue that Sue and Maud’s differing attitudes toward their mothers arises because Sue feels she has an appropriate maternal substitute in Mrs Sucksby, while Maud invokes Marianne’s legacy because she has no such maternal figure once she is removed to Briar. Despite Sue’s professed indifference for her mother, Mrs Sucksby invokes the invented memories of this figure as a way to convince Sue to take part in her plot to swindle Maud (though as we learn later in the novel, it is Sue who is being duped). Mrs Sucksby tells Sue, “I know *she* [Sue’s mother] would have done it, and not given it a thought. And I know what she would feel in her heart—what dread, but also what pride, and the pride part winning—to see you doing it now” (Waters, *Fingersmith* 47; emphasis in original). Like Maud’s imitation of Marianne’s madness, so too does Sue take up the mantle of her mother’s criminality. Arguably, Sue’s desire to make Mrs Sucksby proud – rather than her invented mother – is the key motivator in her quest. However, it is this fictional woman, rather than the thought of Mrs Sucksby, to whom Sue returns to steel herself in moments of self-doubt. For instance, upon escaping Briar with Gentleman and Maud, Sue recalls how “All my nervousness had left me, and I was suddenly calm. I thought of my mother, and all the dark and sleeping houses she must have stolen her way through, before they caught her. The bad blood rose in me, just like wine” (Waters, *Fingersmith* 150–51). Much like Maud’s perceived madness,

Sue's reference to the "bad blood" she shares with her criminal mother allows her to frame her part in the plot as a biological inevitability. However, also like Maud, she is in fact acting out a learned role: since infancy, Sue has been surrounded by petty criminals, including Mrs Sucksby herself. While their imagined maternal legacies undoubtedly shape Sue and Maud's behaviour it is important to remember that they are both entirely fictional:

Sue is not the daughter of a murderess and Maud is not the offspring of a madwoman; yet both have performed and fostered identities determined by these matrilineal fictions. Consequently, any generational links established through their belief in the inheritance of their mothers' blood are entirely artificial and illusory. (Muller, 'Not My Mother's Daughter' 123–24)

Sue and Maud's ability to perform these roles so successfully attests to the role societal expectations – rather than biological determinism – play in shaping performances of non-normative femininity. While Sue and Maud's deviance cannot be the result of an inherited trait, it is nonetheless true that they are doomed to re-enact these maternal legacies for as long as they – and those around them – imagine themselves to be the daughters of a criminal and a madwoman, respectively. Interestingly, once Maud's maternal fiction is revealed she casts off any trace of Marianne's madness and instead begins to imitate her biological mother, Mrs Sucksby. The ease with which Maud switches roles suggests that her belief in the heritability of madness was largely one of convenience. By stabbing Gentleman, Maud takes up the mantle of the criminal, not the madwoman. Her ability to transition between these modes of feminine deviance demonstrates that the relationship between maternal legacy and identity is not determined by genetics, but by a complex interplay of social conditioning and individual choice. Far from being the result of "bad blood", Waters positions madness and criminality as roles which can be consciously adopted – or, indeed, cast off – to serve Sue's and Maud's needs. What passes for a biological taint is thus little more than expedience: Maud's "madness" fools an unsuspecting Sue, while Sue's inherited criminality masks her greed.

In both *Fingersmith* and *The Somnambulist* fallenness, like madness, is constructed as a trait inherited from the maternal line. As discussed earlier, Lilly uses Marianne's institutionalisation as a threat to ensure Maud's continued submission to his will. However, when this tactic fails and Maud elopes with Gentleman, Lilly positions her disobedience as a product of maternal inheritance. In a letter to Gentleman, Lilly writes "*Her mother was a strumpet, and she had all her mother's instincts, if not her face. The check to the progress of my work will be severe; but I take comfort in my loss, from this: that I fancy you, sir, a man*

who knows the proper treating of a whore" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 365; original italics). By drawing attention to their shared sexual deviance, Lilly absolves himself of responsibility for his role in Marianne and Maud's flights from Briar. His letter also reflects the melding of scientific and moral discourses which shaped Victorian attitudes to women. These discourses held that transgressive women passed their vices onto their children and that this, in turn, contributed to the degeneration of the species (King 25). However, unbeknownst to Lilly, the letter also proves that the theory of inherited immorality is a fallacy: the reason Maud's face does not resemble Marianne's is because she is not her biological child. As such, she cannot have inherited Marianne's sexual deviance any more than she can have inherited her madness.

While Waters' maternal fictions provide a counter-narrative to the intergenerational transmission of fallenness, Fox repeats this pattern with Phoebe and her biological mother Cissy. Just as Lilly highlights the (imagined) similarities between Maud and Marianne, so too does Phoebe's adoptive father William think she has inherited Cissy's immorality. In fact, it is William who reveals the secret of Phoebe's parentage. He tells a teenage Phoebe that he "saw Cissy's sin shining out through your eyes" when she was an infant and goes on to proclaim "like mother, like daughter. The truth is bad blood will always out" (Fox 289, 290). William's comment echoes Sue's reference to her invented mother's "bad blood" in *Fingersmith* and suggests that, like Sue and Lilly, he subscribes to a biological view of deviant femininity (Waters, *Fingersmith* 151). Phoebe's choices reinforce this view, as she goes on to repeat her maternal pre-history by having a child out of wedlock. Like Cissy, she is protected from financial – although not social – ruin by the benevolence of a patriarchal figure: Nathaniel. In contrast to Maud and Sue, who deviate from their maternal figures by rejecting heteronormativity and patriarchal modes of exchange, a pregnant Phoebe accedes to Nathaniel's offer to return to Dinwood and live with him (Fox 332). Coupled with her eventual reconciliation and marriage to her child's father Quin – which Nathaniel also orchestrates – Phoebe's trajectory makes for a far more conventional portrayal of Victorian morality than *Fingersmith*. This suggests that Fox's novel is pessimistic toward the viability of non-normative femininity as a strategy for challenging women's position in phallogocentric culture. Instead, Phoebe's trajectory reaffirms the importance of women's submission to the will of their fathers and the primacy of heterosexual marriage as the ultimate goal in women's lives.

In *Fingersmith*, Sue and Maud are portrayed as living doubles while in Fox's novel Phoebe is the living double of Lydia and Nathaniel's deceased daughter Esther. Joshua Adair highlights the interchangeability of Sue and Maud in *Fingersmith*, where "Something as simple as slipping on one's employer's elegant seafoam gown can erase one's identity, at least temporarily" (par. 7). A similar sartorial transformation occurs in Fox's novel when Lydia gives Phoebe one of Esther's gowns. While Phoebe interprets the gift as evidence of Lydia's madness, believing that she can no longer distinguish between the two girls, the card enclosed with the gown suggests otherwise. Lydia leaves the gown on Phoebe's bed the day prior to a visit from Joseph and his wife, together with the card, which reads "*My dearest – for your brother's visit...*" (Fox 198; original italics). While this is undoubtedly an attempt on Lydia's part to resurrect the memory of her dead daughter, it need not be considered the product of a delusional belief that Phoebe is Esther. Instead, I argue that Lydia's gift reflects her tacit acknowledgement that Phoebe is Nathaniel's daughter and Joseph's half-sister. Lydia's knowledge of Phoebe's parentage is confirmed later in the novel, when her butler Stephens tells Phoebe that Lydia "never once doubted who *you* were...the other child. *His* secret guilt" (Fox 382; emphasis in original). Despite knowing that Phoebe is the product of Nathaniel's affair, Lydia adopts a maternal role in Phoebe's life by offering her advice – such as warning her of "men and their curses" (Fox 207) – and demonstrating solicitousness for her wellbeing by asking if she is "homesick" or "unhappy" at Dinwood (Fox 173). The transference of her maternal affections thus reflects Claudia Klaver and Ellen Rosenman's observation about the relationship between different forms of mothering in Victorian culture: "When biological motherhood fails or loses its hold, other forms of maternity, other motherlike forms of nurturance, and other definitions of "family" come into being" (17). Lydia is compelled to fill the void left by Esther because the Victorian maternal ideal demands it of her. By nurturing Phoebe, Lydia becomes the mother of two daughters – one a ghostly absence, the other a corporeal presence.

While Lydia is able to distinguish between Esther and Phoebe, Esther's memory nonetheless haunts the narrative. For instance, on the night of Lydia's death Phoebe conflates her reflection with that of her dead half-sister:

I also saw myself [...] a girl with black hair, white skin, black eyes. Only she wasn't me. Where my mouth was open, the source of a pitiful moaning sound, hers was closed, with the faintest trace of a smile. I knew I'd seen that expression before, in a painting that hung in Dinwood Court, and I already knew the reply when I asked,

'Who are you?' 'Esther,' said the girl in the mirror. (Fox 266; emphasis in original)

This instance of doubling – in which Phoebe refers to herself as Esther before Lydia replies with “Mama” (Fox 266) – demonstrates both the impossibility of a reunion between the sisters as well as their interchangeability. In Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben’s analysis of Peter Ackroyd’s neo-Victorian novel *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, they argue that “the exploitative nature of a patriarchal system causes transgenerational trauma, handed on from mother to daughter” (Kohlke and Gutleben, ‘Introducing Neo-Victorian Family Matters: Cultural Capital and Reproduction’ 34). I argue that this is also the case in Fox’s and Waters’ novels, where daughters embody the trauma of their biological, adoptive, or imagined mothers. In *Fingersmith*, Sue and Maud resolve this trauma by casting off their maternal legacies of patriarchal exploitation to form a lesbian relationship based on mutual care and affection. However, in Fox’s novel Esther is always already lost to Phoebe and is thus unable to provide her with any form of reconciliation. Instead, Phoebe repeats Cissy’s traumatic history by having a child out of wedlock. Her resolution is also achieved through conventional means – marriage – thereby reaffirming patriarchal modes of exchange as she is passed from her father to her husband.

Daughterly Trajectories

Though Phoebe appears to escape the fate of her fallen counterparts, the progressiveness of her trajectory – in that she does not die as a punishment for her “sin” like Cissy, nor is she institutionalised like Marianne – is undermined by the fact that her reunion with Quin is secured through patriarchal intervention. After Lydia’s death, Phoebe returns to Tredegar Square and takes up a role on the stage where she meets Quin, her on-stage and romantic partner. Shortly after Quin proposes, Phoebe learns of his plan to relocate their double act to New York and grows suspicious of his motives. She asks him: “Is *this* a genuine romance, or is it another charade to drum up some more publicity, for the sake of a thousand dollars a night? Is that why you asked me to marry you?” (Fox 366; emphasis in original). Phoebe’s doubts lead her to reject Quin’s proposal and, like Cissy before her, she suffers the trauma of losing her lover. This reflects Kohlke and Gutleben’s observation about the family’s function in neo-Victorian fiction: “the very structure of the family [...] produces self-perpetuating traumas, and it is in the quest for alternative structures that neo-Victorian fiction explores the possibility of eventually breaking the cycle of transgenerational traumatising” (Kohlke and

Gutleben, 'Introducing Neo-Victorian Family Matters: Cultural Capital and Reproduction' 34). However, the possibility of breaking this cycle goes unfulfilled in Fox's novel as Phoebe seeks solace for her loss in the stronghold of the patriarchal family. After breaking up with Quin, Phoebe returns to Dinwood Court to live with Nathaniel before discovering that she is pregnant. Although Phoebe faces societal censure as a result of her pregnancy – she is “increasingly shunned,” with her “position at Dinwood generally viewed as something sordid and sinful” – she is nonetheless protected by Nathaniel's position and wealth (Fox 376). Nathaniel also writes to Quin to reveal the pregnancy which precipitates the latter's return from New York and his reconciliation with Phoebe. Nathaniel's actions emphasise the way in which “the neo-Victorian re-mythologises the traditional self-policing family through structures of reconciliation and normalisation, which tend to dismiss, erase, or undo individual efforts to circumvent the monogamous, heteronormative consensus” (Kohlke and Gutleben, 'Introducing Neo-Victorian Family Matters: Cultural Capital and Reproduction' 10). While Phoebe attempts to circumvent a heteronormative relationship model by refusing to marry Quin, she shows little resistance when Nathaniel intervenes. Instead, she recalls “the little white feather he gave me, and perhaps that was a sign of surrender because, before leaving England, Nathaniel Samuels had written to Quin. While I remained in ignorance, my father had given me away” (Fox 398). By writing to Quin without Phoebe's knowledge, Nathaniel overrides Phoebe's earlier rejection of him. Phoebe's use of the phrase “given me away” is also suggestive of women's historical status as objects to be traded between fathers and husbands. Instead of displacing the heteropatriarchal family model in favour of a non-traditional alternative as Waters does, Fox's novel reinforces the Victorian values that valorised (heterosexual) marriage as the key to women's happiness and a marker of their conformity to the feminine ideal.

Despite their shared histories of maternal and mutual betrayal, Sue and Maud reconcile at the end of *Fingersmith*. Their reconciliation leads to the formation of an alternative family model grounded in queer desire. Central to the development of their lesbian relationship is their ability to cast off the imagined identities – of madwoman and criminal – inherited from their mothers. Instead, Sue and Maud come to define themselves through their relationship with each other, which they express textually through the production of pornography. After Mrs Sucksby hangs for Gentleman's murder her gown is returned to Sue, who discovers Marianne's “last statement,” – or will – hidden inside one of the seams. While Maud learned the truth about her and Sue's biological mothers when she arrived at Lant Street, her love for

Sue leads her to keep Mrs Sucksby's secret. Sue herself comes to this realisation when she discovers Marianne's letter: "I was thinking of Maud, letting me hate her. I was thinking of Maud, making me think she'd hurt me, to save me knowing who had hurt me most..." (Waters, *Fingersmith* 534). If not for the letter, Sue would have remained convinced that Maud – not Mrs Sucksby – was the driving force behind her institutionalisation. However, with the revelation that it was Mrs Sucksby who betrayed her all along, Sue is forced to re-examine her past and her relationships with both Mrs Sucksby and Maud. As a result of this process, Sue learns that "recovery is dependent on a conscious return to the present, when Sue finally decides to find Maud because, unlike the fictions of their pasts, their presents, and hence their future relationship, can still be changed" (Muller, 'Not My Mother's Daughter' 121). Indeed, upon Sue's return to Briar, it's clear that her focus has shifted from her mother(s)' pasts to the present, as she "forgot to think of my mother. What was she, to me? It was Maud I thought of" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 540). Rather than seeking out Marianne's ghostly trace within Briar's walls, Sue seeks Maud's corporeal presence: "To come upon her now—so warm, so real—when I had ached and ached for her—It was too much" (Waters, *Fingersmith* 542). Sue and Maud's shared desire is part of Waters' strategy to "silently insert her depiction of nineteenth-century female homosexuality into our cultural memory of Victorian fiction" as the "spectral lesbian, while remaining spectral to the historical record, is given flesh in the world of the text" (Mitchell 117–18, 128). The novel's ending thus works to destabilise the dominant model of the Victorian family both materially – through Maud and Sue's rejection of Marianne's inheritance – and symbolically as their relationship removes them from the patriarchal family model under which fallen women like Marianne suffered.

While rejecting their matrilineal ties is a key precursor to Sue and Maud's independence, it cannot be fully realised without their participation in the production of pornography. As discussed earlier, some critics present the historical association between pornography and patriarchal systems of exchange as inescapable and, as a result, read Maud and Sue's participation in this medium as inherently oppressive (Kaplan, 'Fingersmith's Coda' 52–53; Kohlke, 'The Neo-Victorian Sexsation' 350), while others take a more measured approach, acknowledging the progressive potential of Maud and Sue's production but cautioning against too optimistic a reading (Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism* 123; Llewellyn, 'Breaking the Mould?' 204–05; Muller, 'Not My Mother's Daughter' 123). While Kohlke claims that Maud is "a lesbian profiteering from male desires by simulating fantastic sex on

paper – presumably mainly heterosexual copulation” (‘The Neo-Victorian Sexsation’ 350), this assumption is not borne out by the narrative. Maud tells Sue that her pornography “is filled with all the words for how I want you,” which indicates it depicts homosexual acts (Waters, *Fingersmith* 547). O’Callaghan argues that the import of Maud’s work lies in its audience not its content:

And, indeed, because Maud reads her pornography to a woman, this confirms the point that the material *is* lesbian pornography – made by lesbians for other lesbians. This cannot be the (re)production of heterosexuality, and to assume so negates the very point of Waters’ portrayal of lesbian sex in *Fingersmith* and all of her novels. (“‘The Grossest Rakes of Fiction’” 573; emphasis in original)

However, even if the intended audience of Maud’s pornography is other women, the fact that she and Sue sell these texts means that their audience also likely includes men. Unintended audiences notwithstanding, I concur with O’Callaghan’s view that pornography is not entirely beyond feminist revision. I argue that it is crucial to privilege the meanings Sue and Maud ascribe to their textual production – in that they see it as a way to express their sexual desire – over and above the assumed content or audience. While they may participate in a historically male-dominated industry (Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism* 161), they inhabit a space “beyond the patriarchal gaze and, as such, are free to create a female space that exists outside the order provided by law” (Mitchell 140). Their residence at Briar – the site of Maud and Marianne’s abuse – is potentially problematic when it comes to the notion of existing beyond the patriarchal order because while they may have rejected Marianne’s monetary bequest, they have not rejected Lilly’s gift of property. Both Sue and Maud make this connection between Lilly’s legacy and Maud’s production of pornography: Sue remarks “And now, to look at you and see you here, still here, with his books about you—!” and Maud responds with “Don’t pity me,’ she said, ‘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” (Waters, *Fingersmith* 546; emphasis in original). While the destruction of Lilly’s books is symbolic of Maud’s transformation of Briar from a patriarchal centre of power to a “newly feminised space” (Mitchell 140), her recognition that “I am what he made me” demonstrates the difficulty of fully erasing traumatic memories. Just as Waters’ novel “challeng[es] the subject [of pornography] as *simply* oppressive or emancipatory” (O’Callaghan, “‘The Grossest Rakes of Fiction’” 573; emphasis in original), I argue that authorship – and its pecuniary benefits –

grants Sue and Maud the freedom to conduct their relationship away from the censure of wider society. This demonstrates that even practices historically associated with women's oppression, like pornography, are not beyond feminist re-appropriation, while also suggesting that there are persistent barriers to wider social integration for same-sex couples.

Whereas the ancestral home in *Fingersmith* is a site of male power that must be reclaimed in order for Sue and Maud to assert their independence, in Fox's novel the home is already entailed on the female line. While Lydia's death imparts a legacy of trauma onto Phoebe, it also leaves a more material trace as her will grants Phoebe sole ownership of Dinwood Court. While the legitimate heiress is Joseph's wife Caroline, Nathaniel tells Phoebe that "some weeks before her death, Lydia had an addendum drawn up, formally acknowledging you as her stepdaughter...taking precedence over her daughter-in-law" (Fox 373). However, the progressive potential of Lydia's legacy, which rejects the tenets of legitimacy and male primogeniture, goes unrealised when Phoebe renounces the will. In their discussion of *Grange House*, Heilmann and Llewellyn argue "the ancestral home, [is] an embodiment simultaneously of mother, womb, and text" (*Neo-Victorianism* 42). In ceding ownership of Dinwood, Phoebe also rejects Lydia's symbolic attempt to posthumously claim Phoebe as her daughter. Instead, Phoebe protects the interests of her father and brother by relinquishing Dinwood to return to her childhood home, Tredegar Square: "Lydia Samuels' legacy had all but been surrendered, the legal papers drafted and signed, with provisos that Joseph should never know of any addendum to the will" (Fox 380). This proviso also conceals Phoebe's status as Nathaniel's daughter, keeping Joseph from the knowledge he raped his half-sister. While Nathaniel "Thank[s] God [...] that Phoebe renounced the will, denying history the chance to repeat itself" (Fox 394), this is the opposite of what the renouncement achieves. By rejecting Lydia's inheritance, Phoebe forgoes the financial independence that comes with ownership of Dinwood. Instead, she returns to the house Nathaniel purchased for Cissy in Tredegar Square. Phoebe's choice makes her dependent on Nathaniel's continued goodwill – like her mother before her – and speaks to extent to which she has internalised Victorian gender norms that enshrined men's power over women. In Fox's novel, property is much easier to relinquish than the phallogocentric cultural discourse that positions women as the property of men.

Conclusion

Both *Fingersmith* and *The Somnambulist* explore mother-daughter bonds at the familial, cultural, and generational level. At the familial level, these bonds are riddled with secrecy, betrayal, and conflict, dominated by mothers – Maud Turner, Lydia Samuels, and Mrs Sucksby – whose self-interest overwrites their ability to conform to the maternal ideal. Even in those instances where motherhood more closely resembles the ideal of an all-sacrificing, all-encompassing love – as is the case with Marianne and Cissy – these women’s misery at being cast out of society as a result of their fallenness is compounded by the loss of their children. That their suffering is alleviated only by death presents a bleak picture of the possibilities for reclaiming motherhood as a source of feminist agency. For Waters’ second-generation women – Sue and Maud – the route to embodied agency lies in the rejection of their matrilineal inheritances and of maternal identities. Mrs Sucksby and Marianne’s appropriation of tools of patriarchal control is represented as regressive because it adopts an approach to women’s bodies as commodities, placing both of their daughters in danger of further exploitation – Sue by Mrs Sucksby, and Maud by Christopher Lilly. In contrast, when Maud and Sue embark on a similar project – that of appropriating pornographic narratives – their energy is directed outward, in that the sale of such material allows them to live independently, as well as inward, in that they transform these texts from instruments of patriarchal control to instruments of same-sex desire. Most importantly, unlike Mrs Sucksby’s plot to betray Marianne and swindle Sue, Sue and Maud’s (re)production of these texts does not come at the expense of the autonomy of other women.

With regard to the possibility of a feminist revisioning of maternal legacies and identities, Fox’s novel is less optimistic than Waters’. Like Mrs Sucksby and Marianne in *Fingersmith*, first-generation mothers in *The Somnambulist* are implicated in acts of secrecy, selfishness, and betrayal. The novel punishes all three women for their failure to embody normative femininity: William forces Maud to leave England for America to establish a mission, Lydia’s grief gives rise to delusions and her breast is ravaged by cancer, and Cissy commits suicide. Like *Fingersmith*’s second-generation women – Maud and Sue – Phoebe rejects her maternal legacies but in so doing she cedes her independence first to Nathaniel and later to Quin. Waters critiques the heteropatriarchal family model that helps to produce – in both Victorian and contemporary culture – a narrowly defined set of feminine norms which focus

on the body's status as a locus for male desire and emphasises its reproductive utility. In contrast, Fox's novel demonstrates the regressive turn in neo-Victorian fiction which, by reproducing rather than revisioning the past, offers little in the way of recovering the body as a site of female agency. While the trajectories of Waters' second-generation characters offer a more positive outlook for non-normative female embodiment, the only women to survive – let alone thrive – in Fox's novel are those who conform.

Chapter 5: Que[e]rying the Sex/Gender System: Contesting the Relationship Between Sex, Sexuality, and Gendered Embodiment in *James Miranda Barry* (1999) and *Pity* (1997)

It is boyhood, rather than manhood, that liberates the girl. Neither a girl denied the right to self-determination nor an adult man burdened with responsibilities, the boy is the embodiment of transgender fluidity par excellence.

- Ann Heilmann, Neo-/Victorian Biographilia and James Miranda Barry

Patricia Duncker's *James Miranda Barry* (1999) and James Buxton's *Pity* (1997) call into question the Victorian reliance on the body as a visual marker of gender through their representations of cross-dressing characters and in so doing challenge the continuation of this practice in contemporary culture. The characters' ability to pass undetected and, moreover, to alter their gendered presentations at will, appear informed by Judith Butler's theorisation of gender as a performative act and the cultural period in which it emerged. Essentialist approaches to gender, which assume an equivalence between gender identity and anatomical sex, are dismantled by *Pity* and *Barry*, who adopt gendered performances which are at odds with their assigned sex. Both *Pity* and *Barry* are treated in accordance with their publicly performed gender identity, rather than their biological sex (in *Pity*'s case) or private gender identity (in *Barry*'s case). That these characters' outward appearance should lead others to make assumptions about their sex and gender is reflective of the way in which "dress codes function in the social world and the world of social hierarchy as structures that simultaneously regulate and critique normative categories like rank (or its civilian counterpart, class) and gender" (Garber 25). *Barry*, who identifies as a woman but adopts the role of a man, is afforded the respect, deference, and status that comes with the position of being a male medical student and, later, a surgeon in the armed forces. In contrast *Pity*, a biological male, is belittled, abused, and denied bodily autonomy because she adopts the role of a woman.

Prior to *Pity*'s non-consensual sex-reassignment surgery, she is anatomically male but publicly identifies and dresses as female, which suggests she may identify as what is now, in the twenty-first century, referred to as transgender. However, in response to the violence she experiences while living as a woman, which culminates in the surgery, *Pity* seeks out the appearance of normative masculinity as a protective mechanism against further abuse.

Duncker's Barry, on the other hand, is anatomically female – or, if the testimony of some characters with a vested interest in her masculinity are to be believed, what we would now designate intersex. In order to access university and, later, preserve her reputation as a medical doctor in the army, Barry identifies as male in public but retains her feminine gender identity in private. On the basis that both Pity and Barry adopt masculine performances for pragmatic – rather than personal – reasons, I use feminine pronouns to refer to both characters. Like the novels themselves, this chapter does not aim to provide a definitive conclusion as to Barry's and Pity's sex, gender, or sexuality, though I consider the most likely possibilities based on my reading of the texts as this necessarily informs my argument. Instead, this chapter aims to demonstrate the privileges afforded to those who (publicly) present as male – regardless of whether this accords with their biological sex or gender identity – and the dangers faced by those who occupy feminine, non-binary, and queer subject positions.

As well as portraying the differential treatment afforded to marginalised subjects, *Pity* and *James Miranda Barry* emphasise the suffering that is produced when subjects are denied control over their gendered embodiment. In both novels, the parents of the titular characters force them to adopt gendered performances which are at odds with their biological sex. While their levels of identification with their new gendered subject positions differ, both eventually become alienated from them and seek out new roles, in an attempt to escape isolation in Barry's case and abuse in Pity's case. While this could suggest a view of gender as essence – Pity returns to masculinity and Barry desires to return to femininity – I argue it is far more reflective of the fact that occupying a feminine subject position comes with significant risk. Regardless of their biological sex, both Pity and Barry desire to be women and yet both ultimately cede their feminine identity in favour of performing masculinity. Both novels also highlight the risks that come with adopting a gendered subject position which is at odds with one's biological sex: Pity dressing as a woman and Barry dressing as a man marks a deviation from, and therefore a threat to, the binary sex/gender system on which patriarchal power depends. As Halberstam reminds us, "Rumors of the demise of hegemonic sex/gender systems [...] have been greatly exaggerated" (10). While Barry and Pity may be free to cross-dress, they are not free from the constraints imposed by the sex/gender binary, wherein masculinity is the privileged subject position. Pity cannot dress as a woman and preserve her bodily autonomy, nor can Barry dress as a woman and pursue a career as a doctor in the army. Both Pity and Barry contend with the threat their corporeality poses to their

performance of femininity and masculinity respectively, including the recognition that with discovery of their sexed bodies will come punishment for deviating from the sex/gender binary. The coercive demand to conform to this binary is felt physically by Pity – Auguste castrates her in an attempt to bring her male anatomy and feminine gender into harmony – and psychically by Barry, who identifies as feminine but is compelled to continue performing masculinity lest she be stripped of her qualifications, career and social standing.

Buxton's novel centres on the relationship between three biological men: wealthy surgeon Giles Bouverie, struggling artist Auguste Coffey, and cross-dressing prostitute Pity. When Giles offers to become Auguste's patron – partly because he is sexually attracted to him – Auguste's shame at his own queer desire leads him to shun Giles in favour of Pity, whom Auguste initially assumes is a cisgender woman. When Pity is revealed to be a man, Auguste adopts a God-like determination to reinscribe Pity's body as female by forcing Giles to perform a sex-change operation. While Pity does express a genuine desire to be a woman, the surgery is performed without her consent. Afterwards, when Pity realises that she will never be afforded the bodily autonomy granted to men and male-identifying subjects as long as she maintains her performance of femininity, she returns to wearing masculine dress. The inclusion of Buxton's novel in a thesis on female embodiment in neo-Victorian fiction may seem incongruous. However, I argue that a gendered power imbalance emerges out of Pity's adoption of a female persona, which in turn enables Giles and Auguste to disregard Pity's corporeal agency as though she really were a biological woman. Through Pity, Buxton intervenes in debates about gender identity politics and the centrality of the body circulating in the mid-late 1990s. In contrast to the novels examined earlier in this thesis, which focus on unconventional presentations of femininity by those with normatively (or at least anatomically) female bodies, Buxton invokes the Victorian period in order to suggest that embodying femininity is not contingent upon possessing a female body. In this way, Pity's gender identification is juxtaposed against Victorian scientific and medical discourses' essentialist approach to gender to reveal the latter's shortcomings. This approach used everything from menstruation to menopause to justify women's inferior position in society (Shuttleworth, 'Female Circulation' 52). However, even though Pity is not biologically female she is vulnerable because she looks, speaks, and acts in ways that invoke normative femininity. Together, these characteristics work to overwrite the advantages she would otherwise receive by virtue of being (anatomically) male. Pity redresses the power imbalance between Auguste/Giles and herself by forsaking her public performance of femininity and

adopting a more normatively masculine persona. However, it is unclear whether she also experiences a change in her gender identity or whether, like Barry, she retains a private feminine identity which is in conflict with her public performance. My analysis of *Pity* speaks to the importance of recognising that it is not only women who are disadvantaged by the binary sex/gender system – which continues to be the dominant model in phallogentric society – by demonstrating that all gender diverse subjects are at risk for failing to uphold the status quo.

Duncker's novel is a fictionalised account of the life of Dr James Barry, a surgeon who rose through the ranks of the British Army and was (posthumously) suspected of being a woman. Ann Heilmann notes that the historical Barry's "original identity" as Margaret Bulkley, the daughter of Irish greengrocers, has been verified by art historian William Pressly and urologist H.M. du Preez (NVB 27). However, the absence of corporeal proof – Barry's body was never examined – has created an environment rife for speculation regarding Barry's sex and gender identity (Heilmann, NVB 27). In her comprehensive monograph on the Barry 'myth,' Heilmann is critical of the fact that Barry is "figured as a woman" in most textual representations, which she argues "indicates that *historical* trans identity is far from being 'mainstreamed'" (6; emphasis in original). Heilmann exempts Duncker's novel from this charge, as she reads Duncker's iteration of Barry as a "gender-variant character" (58). Heilmann's interpretation of the novel is similar to both Letissier's – who labels Duncker's Barry transgender (35) – and Duncker's, who claims her character is "neither man nor woman" ('On Writing Neo-Victorian Fiction' 18). However, these interpretations are distinct from Christian Gutleben's reading of Duncker's Barry as a cross-dressing woman ('An Aesthetics of Performativity' 218). As these differing interpretations make clear, Duncker's novel "renders problematic the desire to pin down past sexualities using present-day identity categories" (Heilmann 224). Notwithstanding the difficulty of applying contemporary identity categories to historical subjects, it may well be appropriate to view the historical Barry as a transgender subject and thus be critical, as Heilmann is, of texts which depict Barry as female. However, given the impossibility of definitively – and retrospectively – assigning such an identity category to the historical Barry, it also seems suspect to hold fictional representations to account for their failure to represent historical "truth," which is in itself a contested concept. While Duncker's refusal to be definitive about Barry's sex – at times the novels represents her as biologically female, at other times intersex – does indeed call into question both the Victorian and contemporary reliance on the sex/gender binary as a

means of classifying subjects, Barry's unease with her masculine masquerade makes it difficult to sustain a transgender reading. As a result, I concur with Gutleben's reading of Duncker's Barry as a cross-dressing woman, with the caveat that this reflects the character's private gender identity, not her public performance. In Duncker's novel, Barry's public performance of masculinity is instigated by her mother Mary Ann who, like Pity, understands the disadvantages that come with being a woman in this period. Mary Ann longs for Barry to experience the freedoms masculinity affords and this same pragmatism motivates Barry to continue this performance for much of her life. However, Barry's desire in later life to bring her public and private gendered selves into harmony by 'coming out' as a woman indicates that she continued to identify as a woman even while dressed as a man. Duncker's decision to leave Barry's desire unrealised constructs Victorian culture as hostile to (queer) women: for Barry to occupy the category "woman," she must relinquish her place as a doctor and (retired) member of the armed forces because both are indivisible from masculinity, not to mention forgoing her relationship with Alice which, if Barry's womanhood became public knowledge, would make them both social pariahs.

In order to understand how Duncker's and Buxton's novels speak to contemporary gender politics by invoking Victorian characters and settings, the academic, social, and political contexts from which they emerged must be considered. The publication of Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* in 1979 served as a flashpoint for the emergence of anti-transgender discourse within some branches of feminist theory (Bettcher and Garry 2). Central to Raymond's work is her emphasis on gender as a biological inevitability, which she in turn uses to facilitate her disparagement of trans subjects (Hines 146). This discourse persisted in the intervening decades between the publication of Raymond's book and Duncker's and Barry's novels – as discussed in Chapter 1, even anti-essentialist scholars like Elizabeth Grosz risked retreating into essentialism in order to participate in the denial of trans subjectivities (*Volatile Bodies* 207). The marginalisation of trans subjects in some circles of feminist debate continues to exist today in the form of trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF), a term coined in 2008 to denote feminists who subscribe to the view that "trans women are not, nor can they ever become, women" (Hines 146).

To return to the 1990s context of Duncker's and Buxton's novels, it's here that a pivotal moment in the debate surrounding sex, gender, and gendered embodiment emerges. As with

the proponents of TERF in the early twenty-first century, Raymond was criticised by trans- and trans-inclusive feminists when *The Transsexual Empire* was first published. However, it was during the 1990s that such critiques came to the fore as a result of the confluence of the emergence of transgender studies as an academic discipline (Bettcher and Garry 1) and the “global, grass-roots transgender political mobilization” that enhanced the visibility of trans subjects in contemporary culture and, by extension, “made living a transgendered life more socially feasible” (Stryker 147). For instance, the deliberate separation of sex and gender proposed by Butler in *Gender Trouble* contests the notion that gender has a biological basis and instead stresses its entirely constructed nature (*Gender Trouble* 9). However, as O’Callaghan notes, Butler also attracted criticism from some trans scholars for *Gender Trouble*’s (1990) perceived inattention to modes of gendered embodiment, a criticism Butler sought to redress with the publication of *Bodies that Matter* three years later (‘Pronouns Are Problematic’ 76–77). Sandy Stone’s influential rebuke of Raymond was published in the same period (1991). In it, Stone charges radical feminists with engaging in the same acts of silencing that they themselves have accused phallogocentric discourse of using to oppress women:

As with men theorizing about women from the beginning of time, theorists of gender have seen transsexuals as possessing something less than agency. As with genetic women, transsexuals are infantilized, considered too illogical or too irresponsible to achieve true subjectivity, or clinically erased by diagnostic criteria; or else, as constructed by some radical feminist theorists, as robots of an insidious and menacing patriarchy, an alien army designed and constructed to infiltrate, pervert, and destroy “true” women. (163)

In an attempt to speak back to such effacement, Stone extends Butler’s theorisation of gender performativity to trans embodiment. Drawing on Butler’s claim that non-heterosexual gender performativity, and more specifically lesbians’ embodiment of “butch” and “femme” identities, have the potential to “operate as sites for [the] intervention, exposure, and displacement” of the masculine/feminine binary, Stone argues that “In the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it” (165). It is this disruptive potential that Buxton and Duncker draw on in their construction of Pity and Barry. Both novels invoke the Victorian period as a way of exploring the dissonances between sex, gender, and the body highlighted in the work of scholars like Butler and Stone. In so doing, these texts suggest that identifying as a woman is not dependent on outwardly visible performance of a recognisably feminine self (*James Miranda Barry*), nor the possession of a biologically female body (*Pity*).

Dressed for Success: Sartorial Choice and the Expression of Gendered Identities

In Buxton's novel, Pity uses clothing as a signifier of her gender identity. She wears typically feminine dress when she wants to be read as female and typically masculine dress when she wants to be read as male. Unlike Giles, Auguste initially fails to recognise the sartorial nature of Pity's double-act: that is, that her feminine mode of dress conceals her male anatomy. Instead, Auguste mistakes Pity for a biological woman and believes he is attracted to her on a heterosexual basis. Auguste's first description of Pity focuses almost exclusively on the elements of her appearance that signal femininity: "A girl of twelve or thirteen – quite tall and thin, and dressed in an array of adult finery. A hat which hid her face, a long full dress of red velvet, rather tattered, a shawl, thrown over her shoulders and gathered over the low breast of the dress. The hands, I noticed this particularly, were gloved and her skin was very clean" (Buxton 37). While Pity's clothing signals femininity and, by extension, femaleness to casual onlookers, the illusion is undone once she takes up residence in Auguste's studio and he sees her naked. In her article on female-to-male cross-dressing in Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*, Cheryl Wilson highlights the connection between sartorial choice and sexuality. Wilson argues "Victorian society validated two gender identities: heterosexual male and heterosexual female, and clothing became an instrument through which these identities were enacted" ('From the Drawing Room to the Stage' 296). While Pity's flesh – flesh that would otherwise give away her secret – is covered by clothes, her clothes also act as a "cover," allowing her to live and work as a woman in Victorian society. The utility of this disguise is not limited to Pity herself: Auguste deliberately – though apparently unconsciously – misreads Pity as female because it allows him to feign heterosexuality. Casting Pity as the object of his desire facilitates Auguste's displacement of his queer sexuality – of which he has been enculturated to feel ashamed – onto a seemingly more socially acceptable target.

From a contemporary perspective, Auguste's struggle to accept Pity as a woman after she reveals her male anatomy is redolent of transphobia. For example, while Auguste is under the impression that Pity is a cisgender woman, he refers to her using exclusively female pronouns. However, after Pity reveals her secret Auguste's pronoun use becomes confused as he switches between "he" (Buxton 216–17, 219), "him" (Buxton 218), "his" (Buxton 216–18, 219), "it" (Buxton 216) and "she" (Buxton 217) when referring to Pity. In an attempt to

resolve his uncertainty and fix Pity's gender as either male or female Auguste reassesses her appearance, but this too proves inconclusive: "My eyes slid desperately from the child's sex to its face and back again, hoping to see something that could confirm an impression either way. But I was not to be spared" (Buxton 216). Wedded though Auguste is to viewing Pity as a girl, his remark demonstrates that he would rather accommodate Pity's maleness and, by extension, his same-sex desire, than embrace Pity's non-binary gender identity. Auguste's unease reflects the way in which Pity's indeterminate gender and ambiguous embodiment – her ability to be 'both' male and female – challenges Victorian understandings of masculinity and femininity as discrete categories which do not, or at least should not, overlap. While Pity may possess male sexual organs, adopting feminine modes of dress allows her to express her feminine gender identity and pass as a woman in society. Pity's desire to pass is in part motivated by the desire to conceal the dissonance between her sex and gender, thereby avoiding the societal censure that comes with presenting as non-binary. This is in contrast to drag, where the dissonance between a subject's sexed and gendered selves is intended to be hyper-visible. Notwithstanding their different intents, both passing and drag are imitative acts. Butler's analysis of drag highlights the relationship between gender and imitation: "*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 187; original italics). As Butler indicates, *all* gendered performances, whether they accord with the sex/gender binary or not, are products of imitation. While this suggests that such performances can be changed – because subjects are capable of imitating differently gendered subjects – it also implies a level of resistance that must be overcome in order for the normative sex/gender binary to be displaced. Auguste is emblematic of this resistance: unable to assimilate Pity's biological markers of maleness with her imitation of womanhood, Auguste determines to bring Pity's sexed and gendered selves into harmony. Once Pity reveals her anatomy to Auguste, she loses the safety that comes with passing; her body both records her failure to conform and acts as the site on which the demand to conform will be exercised.

While Pity's initial act of cross-dressing is orchestrated by her father, Barry becomes a boy at the hands of her mother, Mary Ann, and Mary Ann's triad of male co-conspirators: David Erskine, General Francisco de Miranda and her brother James Barry. However, where Mary Ann is motivated by the potential for enhancing her daughter's prospects, Pity's father directs her to cross-dress for more sinister and selfish ends: "the first time he set her to work was at Epsom Downs when she was nine. She got more trade as a girl and worked with her mouth so

no one knew, and it always seemed right for her, so what started out as a disguise, soon took over” (Buxton 297–98). Though Pity is initially forced to perform as a female prostitute, she continues to wear this disguise after abandoning her father and beginning work in a London brothel. Just as Barry is motivated to maintain her masculine disguise in order to advance her career and later, preserve her reputation, so too is there a calculated element to Pity’s crossing. Poor, young, and unskilled, Pity relies on her body to earn an income and she recognises that adopting a feminine appearance increases her economic value in the prostitution trade. This calculation becomes clear when Auguste asks Pity how she can “bear the obscenity of being a man and living as a woman?” and Pity replies “Like I said, I learned it. It was what I could do that the others couldn’t. I would go with men. I look the way I do. I let my hair grow. Some of them like it” (Buxton 218). Pity’s use of “learned” is important here because it promotes a view of normative femininity as a kind of skill which – provided enough attention is devoted rehearsing its constituent parts – any subject is capable of mastering. Pity’s suggestion that some of her male clients are aware of her biological sex also implies that there is an element of drag to her performance – while she may pass to Auguste, she does not pass to everyone. Pity’s emphasis on gender as a series of learned behaviours echoes Judith Butler’s theorisation of gender as constituted in and by repetition. For Butler, “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 substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender Trouble* 45). The rigid regulatory frame Butler speaks of is the mechanism through which the hegemonic sex/gender system reproduces itself. This frame categorises particular acts as signifiers of masculinity or femininity and, as these acts coalesce, the subject performing them becomes recognisably gendered. For example, Pity’s repeated adoption of feminine modes of dress, appearance, and comportment allows her to appear – to both herself and others – as an intrinsically feminine subject. However, in the process Pity becomes increasingly alienated from her male body because the frame enforces a binary model of gender which cannot accommodate – and indeed actively discourages – the existence of gender fluid subjects.

Unlike Barry, Pity’s cross-dressing cannot be reduced to purely practical motives. As well as the economic advantages that come with being a female prostitute, Pity expresses a personal desire to embody a feminine persona. While cross-dressing is not synonymous with transgender identity, in Pity’s case dressing as a woman is accompanied by a feminine gender identity. Pity’s felt sense of gender is illustrated when she attempts to temper Auguste’s

revulsion after he discovers she is biologically male: she tells him “What spoke to you, what you saw, was the woman in me” (Buxton 219). As this remark indicates, Pity adopts a feminine persona because she conceives of herself as a gender-diverse subject and wants others to recognise her as such. While Pity’s male sex and feminine gender signal transgender identity to a contemporary readership, it is important to exercise caution when ascribing such identity labels to historical (and fictional historical) figures, for whom such terminology did not yet exist.¹⁷ As Koolen notes in her analysis of gender diverse characters in Sarah Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet*, using such labels both “evoke[s] awareness of historical continuities, [and] signals the possible dangers and limitations of applying contemporary terminology to the past” (Koolen 376). Pity recognises that her gender identification is at odds with her biological sex but she does not have the language to describe it. In the absence of a label – like transgender – Pity expresses her gender identity through her sartorial choices and her artistic practice.

Painting Pity as a Woman: Artful Truth or Artistic Licence?

Pity’s use of art as a proxy for bodily transformation reflects Halberstam’s observation regarding the historical barriers to trans embodiment. For Halberstam “Changing sex for me and for many people my age was a fantasy, a dream, and because it had nothing to do with our realities, we had to work around this impossibility and create a home for ourselves in bodies that were not comfortable or right in terms of who we understood ourselves to be” (1). As was the case when Halberstam’s generation came of age, the possibility of routine gender confirmation surgery does not yet exist for Pity. Instead, she uses the visibility of art as a way to transform her fantasy into reality. For instance, after she completes a sketch of herself as a woman, Auguste sees her “cup her hands in front of her chest, as if the bosom [in the sketch] were really there” (Buxton 221). She also appeals to Auguste to paint her because “It’s the only way I’ll be a lady” (Buxton 217). For Pity, art has the capacity to assert the truth of her gender, even as her body belies it. Art in Buxton’s novel thus plays a similar role to the portrait in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where it functions to reveal the essence of Dorian’s character. The portrait’s increasingly grotesque appearance renders

¹⁷ The first recorded use of the term transgender to designate “a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond to that person's sex at birth, or which does not otherwise conform to conventional notions of sex and gender” was in 1974 (‘Transgender, Adj. and n.’)

visible the debauchery behind Dorian's veneer of respectability, while Pity's sketch reveals the feminine identity that is obscured by her anatomically male body.

Auguste's initial attraction to Pity is intermingled with his desire to paint her. Giles recognises this and offers to employ Pity as Auguste's model in the hope that this will lead Auguste to reciprocate Giles' feelings toward him. Giles tells Auguste to "Find her. Make her an offer. We can come to some sort of arrangement. She'll be your Lizzie Siddal or your Annie Miller" (Buxton 42). Comparing Pity to Siddal and Miller aligns her with the feminised role of painter's muse, whilst also elevating Auguste's artistic prowess by casting him alongside the members of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. Like many women who modelled for members of the brotherhood, Siddal and Miller had sexual relationships with the artists (Orlando 620). As such, this comparison also hints at the sexual element which will come to accompany Pity's role as Auguste's lover and muse. Pity refuses Auguste's initial request to become his model because he wants to paint her nude. This would, of course, necessitate revealing her biological sex. Given cross-dressing was taboo in the Victorian period, Pity's desire to conceal her sex is understandable. While cross-dressing was permissible and even encouraged on the Victorian stage, it was "forbidden on the street" (Wilson, 'From the Drawing Room to the Stage' 294). The distinction Wilson draws between stage and street has parallels with the distinction between drag and passing: on-stage cross-dressing is permissible because it denotes the kind of hyper-visible mismatch between the performer's sex and gender seen in drag. That is, both the audience and the performer are "in on it". On the other hand, cross-dressing on the street destabilises the supposed immutability of sexual difference upon which the gendered distribution of power relies because it has the potential – and indeed is intended – to go undetected.

The first time Pity removes her clothes in front of Auguste, the censure she fears her cross-dressing will attract materialises (Buxton 216). Auguste tells Pity "I paint the truth. To paint you as a woman would be an obscenity. It would be a lie" (Buxton 219). In contrast to Pity's view of art as a way to give shape to otherwise hidden realities, Auguste's remark suggests that his view of artistic truth is limited to that which is already visible. While Pity's and Auguste's discussion may be centred on art, it also suggests a key difference in their approach to the relationship between gender, sex, and identity. Auguste believes painting Pity as a woman would be a lie because he ascribes to a binary model of gender where sex and gender are co-constituted; and, as such, the fact that Pity identifies as a woman is of no

consequence to Auguste because she is anatomically male. Pity, on the other hand, does not ascribe to the binary model. Instead, she approaches gender identity as a fluid construct which has no pre-given relationship to sex: if she identifies as a woman, then she is a woman, regardless of whether this identification accords with her sexed body. Auguste's disavowal of Pity's femininity is an example of Heather Love's concept of "queer suffering" (4). Though Love focuses on representations of suffering in literary texts from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, her observation that these texts "describe what it is like to bear a "disqualified" identity" is also applicable to Buxton's late-twentieth century novel because it highlights Pity's struggle for recognition as a woman (4). That Pity eventually abandons this struggle in favour of performing masculinity demonstrates the advantages conferred on subjects who present as male as opposed to female or non-binary.

Auguste's denial of Pity's femininity is short-lived as he soon reverts to viewing – and painting – her as a woman. However, Auguste continues to find the disjunction between Pity's sex and gender difficult to reconcile. While Pity's feminine mode of dress encourages Auguste – and others – to read her as female when clothed, such a reading is more difficult to sustain when Pity is naked because it necessitates a rejection of the sex/gender binary as natural, immutable, and necessary for the functioning of society. In a reflection of Butler's challenge to the validity of binary approaches to sex, gender, and the body, Pity causes Auguste to question the indivisibility of sex and gender. Butler argues: "When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one" (*Gender Trouble* 9; emphasis in original). For Butler, as for Pity, there is no conflict between possessing a male body (as denoted by sex) and being a woman. While Pity's sketches of herself with a woman's body may signal a desire for alignment between her sexed self and her gender identity, this is less the product of an intrinsic need and more a reflection of phallogentric culture's inability to theorise gender as independent of sex. Her sketches reflect her understanding that conforming to the binary would make her far less vulnerable in a culture which perceives gender fluidity as a threat to established gendered power relations; an understanding which is confirmed by the violence Auguste and Giles visit upon her in an attempt to make her body 'match' her gender. In a period before the existence of gender confirmation surgery, and in the absence of Pity's consent, her castration amounts

to little more than the exploitation of a marginalised subject in the service of preserving gendered norms of embodiment.

Unable to commit to Pity's radical vision of gender as independent of sex, Auguste must find ways to make her sex and gender converge. Before Auguste lands on surgery as a way to 'fix' Pity – in the sense of repairing the link between her sexed body and her gender as well as definitively assigning her to the category woman – he instructs her to conceal her penis when posing naked. This has the effect of masking Pity's anatomical sex, so that she can pass as female: "She sits, legs crossed tightly as I have taught her, trapping her sex" (Buxton 222). The real-life concealment of Pity's sex – through both feminine dress and strategic poses – is mirrored in Auguste's art. He paints Pity in various womanly guises from a mermaid (Buxton 53), to a country girl (Buxton 72), Sleeping Beauty (Buxton 276), and a nymph (Buxton 334). These images encapsulate the contradiction that is 'woman' in Victorian culture: on the one hand, casting Pity as a mermaid and a nymph imbues her with a powerful, mythical quality. As Cooper notes, "mermaid [imagery] was pervasive in Victorian culture, symbolising fear of female sexuality, and dramatising the 'otherness' of women" (192). On the other hand, painting Pity as a country girl and Sleeping Beauty projects an image of a passive figure whose naïve innocence is ripe for corruption and (male) consumption. These images function to enable Auguste's denial of Pity's male anatomy and, by extension, his queer sexuality. Auguste reassures himself with the thought that "I was not deceiving myself – I was believing in her [...] The very fact that I was able to paint her as a woman proved to me that I was submitting to a greater truth than that of mere bodily attributes" (Buxton 220). While these artistic renderings of Pity contradict Auguste's earlier assertion that to paint Pity as a woman would be a lie, this should not be taken as a shift toward tolerance of Pity's gender fluidity on Auguste's part. Instead, it reflects Auguste's inability to grapple with his continued attraction to Pity even once he knows she is biologically male. By painting Pity as a woman, Auguste overwrites – or, more accurately, overpaints – his homosexual desire for Pity as heterosexual.

Auguste's artistic practice increasingly becomes a medium for violence towards Pity. Both Auguste's compositions and the poses he forces Pity to adopt to achieve them enable him to punish Pity for her gender crossing. For instance, while Pity poses for a scene in which a centaur rapes her, she and Giles draw attention to the painful nature of the pose. Auguste is dismissive in response, reminding Giles and Pity that "Hunt made his first wife miscarry

through posing. We are still some way from that” (Buxton 233). Pity’s pain is secondary to both Auguste’s artistic ambition and his anger at having been duped by Pity’s cross-dressing. By comparing Pity to Pre-Raphaelite painter Holman Hunt’s wife, Auguste aligns Pity with the subservience expected of female subjects while also drawing attention to what he perceives as her failed femininity: unlike Hunt’s wife, Pity cannot become pregnant or miscarry. The power imbalance between Auguste and Pity is similar to the relationship between Nan and Diana in Sarah Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet*. When Nan enters Diana’s service as a performer (and prostitute) – much as Pity enters Auguste’s service as an artist’s model – she is treated as little more than an instrument for the gratification of Diana’s sexual desire. As Koolen argues, both Diana and her friends “value Nan solely as an eroticized and dehumanized object of desire” (376). Auguste adopts a similar approach to Pity, describing the rape scene as a piece of “empty carnality” and, as for the form the centaur/rapist should take, Auguste “was enjoying deciding between Giles and myself” (Buxton 260). Auguste uses the pose and painted scene to remind Pity that she cannot dress as a woman without also subjecting herself to the same vulnerabilities that come with being a woman in a culture which values the gratification of male sexual desire more than women’s right to bodily autonomy.

Auguste’s determination to erase Pity’s maleness becomes more desperate as Pity enters puberty and her body begins to change. At this point in the novel, Auguste and Pity have a shared desire for Pity’s bodily transformation, albeit for different reasons. Possessing a female body would allow Pity to avoid the societal censure levelled at gender fluid subjects, whilst also allowing Auguste to disavow the shame he feels at being attracted to an anatomical man. Auguste’s artistic rendering of Pity’s transformation from male to female acts as a precursor to the gender confirmation surgery he will later force upon her:

I was drawing again, a series of pictures called *Work in Progress* in which Pity was transformed progressively from boy to woman. I cannot say what bit of me it satisfied but please me it did to see those thin stretched ribs swell with a young girl’s breasts, to pinch that flat waist into a tiny taper then flare it out into softer, womanly flanks; to erase that terrible rearing sex and replace it with – what? I had never seen; I did not know. (Buxton 299; emphasis in original)

Auguste’s ignorance of the appearance of female genitalia – “I did not know” – demonstrates his lack of understanding of women’s bodies, while his emphasis on breasts, an hourglass figure, and softness evinces his internalisation of the dictates of ideal femininity in Victorian

culture. In her work on anorexia in Victorian literature, Anna Silver draws attention to the changeability of the ideal female form across time. Whereas the Victorians valorised the “hourglass figure,” women in the early twenty-first century are encouraged to pursue the “lean and muscular physique sported by today’s supermodels” (Silver 24). While the makeup of the ideal body may have changed, our attitudes toward it have not: the “wish to adapt to one predominant standard of beauty bridges nineteenth and twentieth-century women’s experiences” (Silver 25). Silver points to women’s participation in various body modification practices – or “disciplinary practices,” to use Sandra Bartky’s Foucauldian terminology (37) – which are designed to bring them closer to the ideal as evidence of women’s internalisation of these beauty standards. However, it is important to note that rejecting the standards at an individual level is not synonymous with freedom of embodied expression. Instead, when a woman fails to internalise these standards – deliberately or otherwise – phallogentric culture steps in to enforce them by imposing sanctions on non-conforming subjects (Bartky 38). As a female-identifying subject, Pity faces the threat of sanctions should her feminine embodiment fall short of the ideal depicted in Auguste’s sketches. The title for this series – *Work in Progress* – reflects the changes from one sketch to the next as well as Auguste’s approach to Pity’s body in life: he views her as an incomplete canvas awaiting the artist’s final flourish. Through this flourish – Pity’s castration – Auguste transforms his artistic erasure of Pity’s male sex into a reality.

The violence Auguste visits upon Pity in artistic form is brought to life in their sexual relationship. At first, this occurs in Auguste’s subconscious as he recalls a dream where Pity “was the mermaid and to enter her I cut a slit in her scales with a knife” (Buxton 165). Like its sketched double, Auguste’s dream elevates Pity to mythical status but it also signals a curious interplay of gendered power dynamics. Imagining Pity as a mermaid imbues her with a peculiarly feminine form of power over men: like sirens, mermaids are “beautiful, deadly creatures” whose “singing lures men to their deaths” (S. Fagence Cooper 192, 189). However, by cutting Pity’s scales Auguste attempts to negate this power by demonstrating that all women – whether mythical or real – are vulnerable to male acts of violence. Auguste goes on to act out the violence in this dream in his sexual encounters with Pity: he derives “pleasure” from gagging Pity with her own hair and he describes how he “made cruel love to her, pinning her down under me” (Buxton 223, 240). Auguste’s sexual violence escalates to the point where he strangles Pity until “she start[s] to choke” (Buxton 315). Given Pity depends upon Auguste’s continued interest in her for shelter, she has little choice but to

accept this treatment. In her analysis of Nan's time as a rent-boy on London's streets in Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*, Jeanette King argues her "experience of the London underworld suggests the vulnerability of those who have nothing but their bodies as a source of income" (150). Auguste is not dissimilar to the underworld figures Nan encounters: all exploit the bodies of vulnerable others in service of their own sexual gratification. While Auguste's association with Giles affords him the illusion of respectability, it also provides him with leverage: should Pity refuse his advances, or protest against his violent treatment, he has the power to make her destitute and homeless. In fact, I argue Pity is more vulnerable *inside* the studio than she was in the brothel; though she serves one man – Auguste – instead of many, Auguste's desires are free to go unchecked once Pity is separated from the community of prostitutes who provided protection from the worst forms of exploitation. Under the watchful eye of the brothel Madam, Mrs Turner, Pity could be "careful" in her selection of clients, turning down those she suspected would be disgusted at the revelation of her male sex (Buxton 216). In contrast, when Auguste discovers Pity's sex he becomes abusive towards her, prompting her to accuse him of "keep[ing] me as a slave" (Buxton 230). Attending to one man's sexual needs rather than many also means that Pity is dependent on one man and, as such, she feels she has little choice but to endure Auguste's cruelty lest she be cast out.

Auguste views Pity as responsible for the violence he inflicts upon her. For instance, after a sexual encounter where Auguste gags Pity to muffle her cries of pain, he muses: "If it was wrong to hurt her, she should say. I have never taken pleasure from hurting anything in my life. It is her; it is something in her talking to something in me" (Buxton 223). Despite the obvious power imbalance – both economic and physical – between Auguste and Pity, he views Pity's lack of protest as a form of consent. By casting Pity as a masochist who invites others' violence toward her, Auguste avoids confronting his own sadistic impulses. While Marie-Luise Kohlke points to how "neo-Victorian sexsation bears risks of inadvertent recidivism and obfuscation, as in [Michael] Faber and [Sarah] Waters' tendency to romanticise prostitution as a means of self-actualisation through performativity" ('The Neo-Victorian Sexsation' 353), in Buxton's novel a different form of recidivism is at play. The violence Pity suffers as a result of her occupation makes no such gestures toward a romanticised reading of prostitution. Instead, Auguste's suggestion that Pity is the cause of his cruelty aligns him with the Victorian view of prostitutes as harbingers of moral corruption (Gilbert 26). Such a view has parallels with the victim-blaming narratives which pervade contemporary rape culture. This culture places the onus for preventing sexual assault onto

(usually female) victims and, as a result, if an assault does occur the victim is held responsible for their perceived failure to adequately guard against such a violation (Cherniawsky and Morrison 2). Buxton's novel thus risks the inadvertent recidivism Kohlke refers to because it does not challenge the supposedly causal link between female-identifying subjects' actions and their vulnerability to violence. If anything, this link is cemented once Pity adopts a male persona named Peter and forces Auguste – who is now dressed as a woman – to have sex with her (Buxton 383). Through his representation of Auguste and Pity's relationship, Buxton constructs Victorian gender relations as inherently hierarchal: the interests of men and male-identifying subjects like Auguste are privileged over those of women and female-identifying subjects like Pity. However, because this hierarchy is socially constructed rather than biologically given, a subject's position within it can change depending on their gendered presentation of self. For instance, though Pity and Auguste are both biologically male, power attaches itself to whichever subject is currently *presenting* as male. In this way, the novel challenges nineteenth-century medico-scientific discourse which posited a biological basis for gender difference and, by extension, gendered power imbalances.

Both Auguste and Pity use art to capture the latter's feminine gender identity. In Auguste's case, this facilitates the denial of his own queer sexuality which, as his relationships with Paul and Giles demonstrate, he experiences as shameful. However, for Pity art is a process of self-discovery rather than self-denial, as she uses her artistic practice to explore her identity as a woman. Pity's first foray into artistic expression is through a self-portrait, which Auguste then critiques: "On a piece of prepared board, she had sketched in her face. While the technique was undeniably flawed, the face was recognisably hers. And the neck. Below her neck, she had sketched in a dress with a plunging neckline. She had given herself breasts" (Buxton 221). Given that the term "transgender" did not exist in the 1860s setting of Buxton's novel, nor does he anachronistically apply the label to Pity, it is difficult to definitively conclude whether Pity identifies as transgender or a male cross-dresser. However, that she sketches herself not only in women's clothes, but with a woman's body, opens up the possibility of reading Pity as a gender-diverse character. Through art, Pity deviates from her lived experience – a boy's body in women's clothes – to create an image where her felt sense of gender and her gendered embodiment align. Like Auguste's desire to bring Pity's body into harmony with her gender through surgery, Pity's artistic attempt to do so reflects the pressure phallogocentric culture places on gender-diverse subjects to conform to

the sex/gender binary. A trans reading of Pity is further suggested by the exchange she has with Auguste in relation to the sketch. Observing the sketched female body, Auguste asks Pity “Is this what you want?” and she replies “Of course.” (Buxton 221). Pity’s response indicates that had both the medical advancements which enabled gender confirmation surgery and the cultural recognition of transgender identities existed at the time, she may have explored the options for bringing her artistically rendered body into reality. Her desire for a woman’s body reflects a key distinction between “transvestite” – or cross-dressing – subjects, whose gender identity broadly conforms to the sex/gender binary but who gain pleasure from wearing clothing typically associated with their non-identified gender and “transsexual” – or transgender subjects – who experience a conflict between their sexed bodies and their gender identities (Garber 3). In addition to representing Pity’s feminine gender identity, this sketch – and Pity’s artistic practice more broadly – reflects her desire to reassert control over her narrative. After viewing a series of Pity’s self-portraits, fellow artist Brownlow critiques them in an art journal. In the review, he refers to Pity as a “precocious artistic talent [...] A Galatea come to life in her paintings? What will poor Pyggy do?” (Buxton 268). By casting Auguste in the role of Pygmalion and Pity as a self-authored Galatea, Brownlow’s remark demonstrates the disruptive potential of Pity’s art with respect to its capacity to defy Auguste’s attempts to define her. Like Pygmalion and his statue of Galatea, Auguste fantasises about bringing his artistic vision of Pity as a woman to life. However, Pity’s artistic portrayals of herself as a girl attest to her capacity for self-determination and her desire to realise her vision of femininity through the medium of the brush rather than the scalpel. for self-determination. According to Gilbert and Gubar, “From Eve, Minerva, Sophia, and Galatea onward, after all, patriarchal mythology defines women as created by, from, and for men” (12). They go on to argue that the key to women asserting their capacity for self-definition lies in “escap[ing] just those male texts which, defining them as “Cyphers,” deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen” (13). If we expand Gilbert and Gubar’s reference to literary texts to encompass visual narratives, Pity’s pencil can be seen as analogous to the pen: by taking up the pencil to produce a self-portrait, Pity challenges Auguste’s definitional power over her. However, her ability to wrest authorship of both her body and gender identity away from Auguste is short lived. Auguste reasserts his power to define Pity when he instructs Giles to castrate her – though the scalpel is but a poor substitute for Aphrodite’s divine intervention.

Bringing Art to Life: Pity's Castration as a Remedy for Auguste's Sexual Shame

Auguste soon grows dissatisfied by the mismatch between the feminine body Pity possesses in art and the masculine body she possesses in life. For example, after Pity sits for a painting, Auguste watches as she “come[s] out of the pose, and her sex, warmed by her thighs, swung free, slightly tumescent. She was *so much a boy*. ‘Get dressed,’ I said, disgusted” (Buxton 261; emphasis added). Interestingly, Auguste uses the feminine pronoun ‘she’ even when making explicit reference to Pity’s male genitalia. The revulsion Auguste feels at the incongruity between Pity’s anatomy and her gender identity reflects both the denial of his own queer sexuality and his inability to fully embrace Pity’s transgender identity. As long as Pity remains in this in-between state – a woman in a man’s body – Auguste finds himself torn between attraction and disgust. In an attempt to reconcile these feelings, he blackmails Giles into performing a Victoria-era version of gender confirmation surgery on Pity without her knowledge – she is drugged prior to the operation – or consent. By forcing Pity to undergo the surgery, Auguste refutes Brownlow’s suggestion that he has become a cowed Pygmalion by bringing Galatea back under his control.

The non-consensual nature of the operation demonstrates the double-bind of Pity’s performance of femininity: she presents as a woman but this makes her vulnerable to the same forms of sexist and misogynistic behaviour levelled at biological women. Prior to the surgery, Auguste challenges Giles to “use your art to match mine [...] Just as I have changed her countless times with the paintbrush, so you must change her with the knife” (Buxton 333). Just as Auguste comes to approach art as a way to render visible the truth of Pity’s gender identity, so too does he suggest that medical intervention shares in this ability to represent a truer form of reality. If art and medicine are the means through which Pity can be changed, it follows that the artist and the doctor have the power to effect this change. With reference to the production of literary texts, Gilbert and Gubar argue that in “patriarchal Western culture [...] the text’s author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (6). I argue that this metaphor of literary production can be expanded to other modes of cultural production, like gendered embodiment. In this sense, Auguste’s paintbrush and Giles’ scalpel share the generative power Gilbert and Gubar ascribe to the pen. Just as the patriarch’s pen confers authorship of the text, so too do these instruments allow Giles and Auguste to position

themselves as the authors of Pity's body, in a microcosm of the way in which patriarchal culture seeks to define what it is to be a 'woman'. Once Giles takes a scalpel to Pity's penis, the effect on Auguste's perception of Pity's gendered embodiment is immediate: "Before Giles put on the bandage, she could have been a young girl, the flesh disappearing into a smooth slide between her closed thighs" (Buxton 343–44). In line with the analogous relationship between the pen and the penis proposed by Gilbert and Gubar, it's clear that Pity's castration is intended to rob her of generative power, thereby conferring authorship of her embodied self onto Giles and Auguste. The operation thus foregrounds the vulnerability of female and female-identifying subjects in Victorian culture by demonstrating the extent to which their bodies are amenable to the whims of their male creators.

After the physical and mental trauma Pity endures as a result of the operation, she re-evaluates her desire to be a woman. Immediately after the surgery, Pity is consumed by a fever which Giles' housekeeper Mrs Tully attributes to "the shock of waking up in the middle of the operation" (Buxton 346). To encourage Pity's recovery, Mrs Tully cuts off Pity's long hair to cool her body and the fever passes (Buxton 347). The operation leaves Pity with an irreversibly altered body: "Where the scrotum was, Pity's filleted penis has been spread and sewn across the wound. The place looks like a face without a mouth; smooth and featureless as the sex of a Greek statue" (Buxton 346). This description of Pity's genitals as a "face without a mouth" foreshadows her refusal to speak for the next two months – a silent but largely ineffectual protest against Auguste's and Giles' violation of her trust and disavowal of her bodily autonomy. Comparing Pity's new body to that of a Greek statue also works to invert Brownlow's earlier suggestion that she is a "Galatea come to life" (Buxton 268). While Pity's own paintings brought her womanly body to life, her reversion to statue status here suggests a fundamental failure in Auguste's attempt to bring his fantasy of Pity to life; a failure borne out by Pity's subsequent switch to presenting as male. When Pity resumes speaking, she tells Auguste he has "ruined" her (Buxton 352). While Pity's despair at the loss of her penis could be taken to suggest that she never truly identified as a woman, this in and of itself is not sufficient to render Pity's professed feminine gender identity a falsehood. Pity's response to her new body must be viewed in light of the operation which brought it into being: the castration leaves her body indelibly marked not only by the scalpel, but by trauma. The non-consensual nature of the operation acts as a stark revelation to Pity of the price of femininity: to live in the world as a woman is to be in possession of a body whose autonomy is contingent and perpetually under threat. Writing on male impersonators and,

more specifically, Diana's mistreatment of Nan in *Tipping the Velvet*, Koolen highlights the importance of consent: "As violent eroticizations involve the appropriation of a person who is used to sexual ends, it is important to consider the issue of consent when studying such dynamics. Does the performer agree to be objectified and/or eroticized upon taking the stage?" (382). Auguste transforms Pity for his own sexual gratification. While ostensibly giving Pity the body she longs for, he denies her right to bodily autonomy and, in the process, reveals the danger that comes with identifying as a woman. Drawing on Foucault's work on the relationship between power, discipline, and bodies, Gayle Salamon argues:

Understanding bodies is necessary if we are to understand power because bodies are both produced by and bear the evidence of a power that is nonlocalized and dispersed; it is recognizable only through its effects, which are often bodily effects...The disciplinary regimes that produce bodies as sexed and gendered may be visible in certain institutions, or particular medical technologies, or instances of bodily violence, but discipline itself is none of these things. (79)

The violence Pity experiences at the hands of Auguste and Giles is one such "bodily effect." In Foucauldian terms, such violence is an outward manifestation of the power regime that governs gender, a regime that is usually hidden by virtue of the fact that subjects internalise its demands (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 178). However, when subjects fail to internalise these demands and instead display non-normatively gendered bodies, the regime makes itself visible in an attempt to impose conformity. The operation on Pity is one such way to produce a normatively gendered subject and it is enabled by Buxton's construction of the Victorian period as an era in which the hostility toward women and woman-identifying subjects was played out through unprecedented levels of surveillance and control directed at the body. By displacing Pity's struggle for recognition as a gender-diverse subject onto the nineteenth-century, Buxton speaks to the mid-1990s cultural context of the novel's publication, where essentialist approaches to gender, sex, and the body were increasingly being challenged by critics like Butler and, indeed, transgender and gender-diverse subjects themselves, because of their exclusionary effects.

Despite now possessing a woman's body, Pity's gendered presentation of self becomes more masculine after the surgery. The disparity between her body and gendered performance thus persists, but in reverse: pre-castration she had a male body and performed as a woman and now she has a female body but performs as a man. The reversal begins when Mrs Tully shaves Pity's head to ease her fever, giving her a more stereotypically masculine appearance.

Then two months after the operation Auguste sees Pity “cutting *his* hair again with a big pair of scissors” (Buxton 349; emphasis added). The change in pronouns Auguste uses to refer to Pity here – from “she” and “her” (Buxton 346–47) to “he” and “him” (Buxton 348–49) – reflects both Pity’s altered appearance and Auguste’s recognition of the change in Pity’s gender presentation from female to male.¹⁸ In a further disavowal of her feminine identity, Pity asks Auguste to address her as “Peter” (Buxton 349) and starts to dress in men’s clothing (Buxton 369). Just as the surgery was an assertion of male control over female and female-identifying subjects, so too is Pity’s adoption of a male persona an attempt to reclaim her capacity for self-definition; a capacity she now realises is only granted to men and male-identifying subjects. Adopting this persona allows Pity to destabilise the power imbalance which facilitated Auguste’s abuse of her as a woman and, arguably, reverse it – Auguste describes himself as “terrified” of Peter (Buxton 353). However, from the perspective of neo-Victorian revisionism Pity’s transformation is problematic because it reinforces the notion that autonomy – bodily or otherwise – is contingent upon identifying as male. It also risks reinforcing the sex/gender binary by suggesting that transgender and gender-variant subjects must eventually conform to their assigned sex at birth. By becoming Peter, Pity is reformed into the biological man she once was. Notwithstanding the cosmetic alteration to her genitalia, Pity is only ‘free’ – by twenty-first century standards – once her gendered presentation of self-accords with her biological sex. Buxton’s exploration of shifting gender identities thus lacks the nuance Claire Westall highlights in Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*, where Eve/Evelyn is imprisoned and forced to undergo “sex-change surgery” (140). For Westall:

Carter’s text holds on to a self-reflexive narrative uncertainty or bewilderment about gender demarcation as the narrative voice articulates its own indeterminacy and refuses to categorize, analyse or diagnose itself beyond a sense of both-ness, rejecting any notion of an answer being found in sex (as sexed bodies) because Eve/lyn has already experienced both. (145)

Like Eve/Evelyn, Pity/Peter experiences multiple gender identities. However, in Buxton’s novel there is no sense that such identities can co-exist. When Pity has a man’s body she presents as a woman and when she has a woman’s body she presents as a man and, as such,

¹⁸ As indicated earlier, I continue to use feminine pronouns for Pity because her change in gender presentation post-surgery is likely the product of external factors – chiefly, the non-consensual nature of the operation and the broader mistreatment of female and female-identifying subjects it symbolises – rather than an intrinsic identification with the subject position male.

gender and sex are clearly demarcated in the text, albeit in an inverse way. While Buxton's text is inconclusive as to whether Pity's decision to publicly identify as Peter represents a genuine shift in her gender identity, her previous assertion of her feminine identity suggests that, like Barry, she has adopted masculinity for purely pragmatic reasons. Her motivation for doing so – reclaiming her capacity for self-definition – uncritically reinforces the notion that femininity and bodily autonomy are mutually exclusive.

As Pity morphs into Peter, so too does Auguste undergo a transformation by becoming Pity. Auguste is taken aback by Pity's rejection of her altered body and is horrified by her sexual advances toward him. With Pity now in male dress, it is more difficult for Auguste to deny his queer sexuality. In response to Peter's emergence, Auguste decides to recover the Pity he has lost: "When I had been with Pity, I had no desire to dress like her; now she was gone, I felt nostalgia for that time. In dressing like her, in being her, I felt the pang both sharpen in intensity even as it diminished in scale [...] I had reclaimed her. In me she was reborn" (Buxton 377). While Auguste justifies his adoption of women's dress as a mechanism for mourning his loss of Pity, it also has implications for interpreting his gender identity. Auguste's analogy to birth is interesting here as it aligns him with the explicitly maternal, embodied aspect of reproduction – childbirth – rather than the distant authority typically associated with the figure of the patriarch. While Auguste wears Pity's gown and dons a wig fashioned from the tresses Mrs Tully cut from Pity's fevered scalp (Buxton 349, 365), he is not content with mimicking Pity's external appearance. Naked but for the wig, Auguste observes his reflection in a mirror and says to Peter "I want to be Pity" (Buxton 369), suggesting that he wants his body, not just his clothes, to resemble that of a woman's. In her work on Barry biophilia, Heilmann identifies three tropes associated with the Barry myth: the duel, the mirror, and the bedroom, all of which "focus on the contested body and its liminal state between femininity and masculinity (105). The liminal status of Auguste's body is manifest in the mirror scene in Buxton's novel:

The figure in the glass was both me, and not me. The figure in the room – the not-me in the glass – was both me, and not me. I suddenly became aware of the danger I was in. In neither place did I have an identity. I was two halves in two different places, the one negating the other. I panicked and struck out. The glass fell and broke, and the figure in it disappeared. (Buxton 369–70)

Unable to cope with the dissonance between his naked (male) body and (feminine) hair, Auguste destroys the image of himself as Pity by shattering the mirror. This dissonance is

repeated in a subsequent passage, when Auguste ventures out in public dressed as Pity and notes that while those around him “thought I was a woman; I knew that I was a man. This knowledge, [was] clear-cut and decisive” (Buxton 378). While Auguste’s “knowledge” of being a man points to a reading of him as a male-identifying cross-dresser, rather than a transgender subject, it can also be interpreted as another facet of his stigma toward queer subjects. Now that Pity is presenting as male, Auguste must present as female in order for his desire for Pity to appear heteronormative. In a reversal of Auguste’s earlier disgust at Pity’s male body, Peter now forbids Auguste from dressing as a woman (Buxton 386). Taken together, Pity becoming Peter and Auguste casting off women’s dress work to reinforce the sex/gender binary and the novel’s depiction of Victorian society as hostile toward gender diverse subjects.

Until he starts cross-dressing as Pity, Auguste appears to be in denial regarding his sexuality. Prior to taking up residence at Giles’ house, Auguste lived in a small garret with fellow artist Paul. However, during an argument Auguste beats Paul to death and, by way of explanation, tells Giles that Paul “wanted rather more from me,” in an allusion to Paul’s queer sexuality (Buxton 40). Auguste soon realises that Giles, too, is attracted to him, but his response in this instance is more equivocal. While Auguste describes himself as “disturbed” by Giles’ “attentions” (Buxton 5), his actions suggest that Giles’ advances are not altogether unwelcome: “I remembered his practised fingers unbuttoning my shirt and trousers, and I realised with the dreadful lucidity of a drunk that I had allowed myself to get to this state so that if he were to have his way with me, I would have the excuse of insensibility” (Buxton 50). Auguste’s longing for a way to excuse a potential same-sex encounter indicates that while he may be sexually attracted to men, he is also ashamed of this desire. Auguste’s inability to accept his queer sexuality is a key motivator in his plan to transform Pity’s body, because if Pity is a woman then his desire for her would also be transformed from homosexual to heterosexual. Despite Pity’s pleading prior to the surgery, Auguste remains unwilling to embrace a queer sexual identity:

“If only you could accept – ”

She stopped.

“What? You as a boy?”

“No – the fact that you like me as a boy! It’s what you want...it must be!

Otherwise – ”

I struck out at her. She fell onto all fours. I fell on top of her, raining blows on the body that had betrayed me. (Buxton 263)

That Auguste responds to Pity's overt suggestion of his queer sexuality with violence indicates the extent to which he has internalised Victorian culture's disavowal of queer subjects. His plan to transform Pity into a woman is thus intended as a salve to his fear and shame toward being queer. As Heather Love argues, the "experience of queer historical subjects is not at a safe distance from contemporary experience; rather, their social marginality and abjection mirror our own" (32). The distress Auguste's inability to accept his queer sexuality causes – to both himself and Pity – prompts us to reflect on the politics of shame and exclusion that continues to act as a barrier to a more inclusive society.

After Pity's operation, a contrite Giles threatens to evict Auguste from the studio and bequeath it to Pity instead. Incensed by what he views as Giles' preferential treatment of Pity and afraid of being destitute once more, Auguste develops a plan to nullify Giles' threat, which involves using cross-dressing to secure his future with Peter. Auguste convinces Peter to arrange a meeting with Giles, before going in Peter's place dressed as Pity. During the meeting Auguste reveals his identity, leading a horrified Giles to commit suicide: "According to the evidence, the mystery girl whom Giles met had no weapon and never touched him. All she did was pull the scarf from around her face and smile, and that seemed enough to send the gentleman over the edge" (Buxton 371). With Giles despatched, the next threat to Auguste's plan to live on Giles' fortune presents itself in the form of Giles' fiancé Fanny who, having witnessed Pity's castrated body earlier in the novel, views Auguste as dangerous and tries to protect Pity from him. Auguste, however, engineers another deception: he swaps roles with Pity in order to convince Fanny it was Pity and Giles who conspired to castrate *him*. Pity goes along with the plot: dressed as Auguste, she tells Fanny "I am the victim of a vile conspiracy between this whore and her dead master, Giles Bouverie" (Buxton 393). This deception leaves Fanny unable to determine whether the blame should lie with Auguste or Pity and, in unison, they ask her to "Leave us and we will survive together" (Buxton 393). While it is possible to read Auguste and Pity's relationship at the end of the novel as an affirmation of queer desire – much as *Fingersmith's* ending is – this is an overly simplistic view. Instead, the ending of Buxton's novel is reminiscent of Koolen's observation about queer communities in *Tipping the Velvet*. Koolen argues that the "idealization of "queer" communities as spaces of acceptance and belonging because they provide an alternative to hostile, homophobic environments is dangerous, as it may lead "queer" women to tolerate other destructive forms of exploitation and oppression in these spaces" (388). Extending

Koolen's focus on queer women to the queer men in Buxton's novel, the ending cannot be read as celebratory merely because two queer characters form a relationship. Just as the "history of Western representation is littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants" (Love 1), so too is Buxton's novel, where Giles and Paul meet their deaths as a result of their queer desire and the only surviving queer relationship – that between Pity and Auguste – is built on a legacy of shame and violence. Much like the relationships between women in *Fingersmith*, Buxton's novel demonstrates that belonging to an oppressed group is often synonymous with becoming complicit in the oppression of others. While this may offer the illusion of power, in reality it works to uphold the systems that produce such oppression in the first place. In this sense, it is reductive to view the non-normatively gendered subjects in these novels as victims of patriarchy because, in many instances, they are also its (at times unwitting) agents.

James Miranda Barry: Public and Private Gendered Selves at War

Prior to Barry's tenth birthday when she assumes the role of a young man, Duncker gives conflicting representations of her character's gender identity. For instance, the young Barry's imaginative play, clothing, and bodily comportment align her with conventional markers of masculinity. She is dressed in boy's clothing and repeatedly invents scenarios where she pretends to be in the military. For instance, Barry imagines having a "sword," "assuming battle stations," "losing my army, my horse, my weapons" and becoming "both the gunner and the mountain guard" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 5, 36, 6, 11). While this behaviour is partly a response to her reverence for General Francisco de Miranda – which she expresses through imitation – it also reflects Heilmann's observation regarding another example of Barry biographilia: *With a Silent Companion* (1999) by Florida Ann Town. Heilmann argues that Town's young adult novel highlights "the child's frustration with the limitations of girlhood and her desire for adventure" (60). Barry's preference for combat play is both a product of her socialisation – those around her treat her like a boy – and a reflection of her implicit understanding that the enjoyment of such activities would be deemed suspect in a girl. Francisco encourages Barry's emulation of boyhood rather than girlhood through his mode of address and his demand that Barry displays military comportment. He repeatedly addresses Barry as "soldier" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 20, 28–29, 42) and teaches her to greet him by "salut[ing] formally, legs together, back straight" (Duncker, *James Miranda*

Barry 20). These behaviours coalesce to reinforce Barry's boyishness, in a process akin to Butler's theory of gender performativity, according to which there is no originary or pre-gendered subject who exists prior to the doing – or performance – of gender: “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (*Gender Trouble* 34). With regard to Barry, both her subjectivity and gender identity are co-constituted by these various “doings,” which coalesce to form an outward impression of Barry as a boy.

While I argue that Duncker's Barry is a queer woman masquerading as a man, this should not be taken as a rebuttal of Butler's claim that no subject “preexist[s] the deed” (*Gender Trouble* 34). Instead, Barry's gendered performance is two-fold, in that there is both a public and private dimension to Barry's gendered doings which each suggest a differently gendered subject. In public, Barry performs masculinity for pragmatic reasons, but her discomfort with this performance taken together with her privately performed femininity, indicates that she identifies as a woman. Furthermore, Barry's inability to act on her desire to live as a woman in later life reflects both the rigidity of normative gender roles – one cannot simply switch sides – as well as the social, political, and economic ramifications of existing in the world as a woman. She comes to realise that she cannot be a woman and retain the benefits she gained as a result of the educational and career opportunities that she was afforded as a man and this, in turn, leads her to keep her gender identity concealed. Like many women in the Victorian period, and many gender-diverse subjects today, Duncker's Barry feels compelled to perform a gender she does not identify with in order to avoid the prejudice and marginalisation she would otherwise face in a culture which privileges cisgender subjects.

While Barry's public performance leads other characters to read her as masculine, the narrative fosters uncertainty toward both Barry's biological sex and her gender identity. At age 10, Barry refutes her friend Alice's suggestion that she is a boy. She tells Alice “I'm not a son” before musing “I had never been dressed as daughters usually were and was therefore swaying in limbo between the safe world of either sweet ribbons or breeches” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 36, 37). While Barry's declaration to Alice indicates that she identifies as a girl it also reveals the risk implicit in adopting ambiguous modes of dress. Barry lacks the sartorial markers of femininity – ribbons and dresses – that are used as a proxy for gender and, as a result, those around her struggle to interpret her gendered embodiment within the existing framework of the sex/gender binary. Like all cross-dressing subjects, Barry poses a

threat to the “strict binary delineations of the sex/gender system of masculine and feminine [...] against which the only alternative seems to be uncontainable elasticity and a chaotic and terrifying lack of boundaries within or between human bodies” (Epstein and Straub 14). As is typically the case for subjects whose indeterminacy threatens to destabilise this system and, by extension, the hierarchy implicit in its operation, Barry’s cross-dressing is met with suspicion and a demand to conform to (and confirm) her position in the binary. First, Alice asks Barry “Are you really a girl? Prove it” and when Barry founders – “I couldn’t think how to prove it” – Alice attempts to do so by examining Barry’s genitalia (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 37). However, this too proves inconclusive and Alice is forced to conclude that Barry is “a sort of girl [...] But definitely not like me. Perhaps you’re a girl dressed up as a boy? Or a boy that’s got enough girl for it not to matter too much either way” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 37). Alice’s inability to classify Barry as male or female on the basis of her anatomy highlights the instability of the sex/gender system, as well as raising the possibility of reading Duncker’s Barry as intersex. As discussed earlier, both Heilmann (224) and Koolen (376) caution against the definitive application of contemporary identity categories to historical subjects. Given this category did not exist in Barry’s lifetime, I use the term in a preliminary sense to capture the way the descriptions of Barry’s anatomy given by Alice and members of the armed forces broadly conform to what we now understand as intersex.¹⁹ Heilmann argues that the historical figure of Barry is “paradigmatic of the category of instability because of the very uncertainty of any certainty about his story of gender variance” (3). While Duncker also embraces this uncertainty with regard to Barry’s sex – the testimony of Barry’s colleagues and Alice suggests she is intersex – I argue there is a compelling case for reading Duncker’s Barry as a queer woman. Taken together with her uncomfortable relationship with masculinity and her desire in later life to embrace femininity, Barry’s childhood assertion of girlhood demonstrates that regardless of her anatomical makeup she identifies as a woman but masquerades as a man because of the advantages it affords her.

¹⁹ The first use of intersex to refer to a subject who is “physically intermediate between male and female, having characteristics of both sexes (in a species which normally has two distinct sexes), or having sexual organs which are not fully developed as either male or female or which do not correspond to the individual’s chromosomal sex” was in 1916 (‘Intersex, Adj. and n.’ def. 2.)

Mother Knows Best: Mary Ann's Role in Barry's Transformation from Girl to Man

As Barry nears puberty, her existence in the liminal space between masculinity and femininity is outwardly resolved in favour of adopting an entirely masculine persona. Unlike Pity's gender confirmation surgery, Barry's transformation is reversible because it occurs at the level of appearance and behaviour rather than bodily transformation. However, the transformations share a common feature in that both are initiated without the subjects' consent. Just as Pity's first foray into cross-dressing is orchestrated by a parent – her father – in Duncker's novel it is Barry's mother Mary Ann who instigates her daughter's entry into boyhood. Mary Ann explains her motivations for turning her daughter into a son to her lover Francisco, who goes on to repeat this conversation to Barry after Mary Ann's death:

I was always a man's possession. Even yours. That's why I asked you to do it. You were the three men I had every right to command. I asked you to give my child the life I never had. My child has a position in the world. She will be respected, remembered. My child will have the freedom I never enjoyed. My child will be a gentleman, well-educated, well-travelled [...] What else can a woman desire for her child, but a larger, wider life than the one she has inherited? Oh yes, I wanted to give her happiness and joy, but more than that, I wanted her to have the power to choose. (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 291)

Resentful of the limitations placed on her life as a result of her gender, Marianne is determined that her daughter's life should be free from such constraints. She does not want Barry to be treated as an object to be traded amongst men, or for the whims of those same men to determine the course of Barry's life. Mary Ann's decision does indeed give Barry the right to study medicine at university and pursue a career in the army, but it does so by robbing her of the ability to identify as a woman in public. While Mary Ann experiences her femininity as disempowering, her capacity to wield power over others should not be underestimated: it is this power that she uses to improve her daughters' prospects. Cognisant of her influence over the men in her life – chiefly Francisco, her brother James, and family friend David Erskine – Mary Ann convinces them to take part in her plot to make Barry a man. Carroll argues that both Mary Ann and Alice “appropriate the narrative of James Miranda Barry's life” to such an extent that Barry is “reduced to a vehicle for the desires of others, his gender identity not an expression of his own agency but a channel through which other women's narratives can be acted out” (*Transgender and the Literary Imagination* 101). In this way, Barry's transformation reflects Mary Ann's desire for education and travel, as

well as her belief that femininity and agency – the “power to choose” – are mutually exclusive (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 291). The significance of Mary Ann’s explanation for transforming Barry is heightened because it comes on the eve of her suspected suicide. Conscious of the fact that she will not be remembered posthumously the way the men in her life – including her daughter – will be, her death by drowning symbolises the way in which women’s lives and stories have been submerged in the historical record in favour of those of men.

Though Barry’s gender crossing is Mary Ann’s idea, the transformation scene itself is an exclusively masculine domain. Neither Mary Ann nor David’s sister Louisa – who delivers Barry to Mary Ann’s triad of male co-conspirators – are present during the transformation. Their absence signals Barry’s departure from femininity and her initiation into the world of men. Francisco tells the then ten-year-old Barry “From now on you’re going to be a boy. And then a man. Your uncle and I are giving you our names” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 63). Francisco fails to mention that ‘Barry’ is also Mary Ann’s maiden name because he views the moniker as a signifier of patriarchal lineage. Prior to the transformation scene, Duncker refuses to name Barry either through the narrator or when other characters speak to her. This, coupled with the mixed use of pronouns other characters use to refer to Barry, contributes to the ambiguity surrounding Barry’s gender identification. Reflecting on the late-nineteenth century obsession with naming and classification, from which many contemporary terms for gender variance emerged, Jack Halberstam notes that “having a name for oneself can be as damaging as lacking one” (4). Applying this observation to Barry’s naming during the transformation scene illustrates the damage Halberstam refers to: once Barry is christened ‘James Miranda Barry’ her (public) gender identity is fixed for the rest of her life. During this scene, Erskine welcomes Barry into the male fold: “Welcome aboard, James Miranda Barry. You’d be wasted as a woman. Join the men” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 63). This remark demonstrates Erskine’s awareness of Barry’s aptitude and highlights the fact that if Barry remained a woman, she would – like Mary Ann before her – be prevented from reaching her full potential. Heilmann argues that “Barry biographilia tend to emphasize the role of powerful men, who, keen to launch a social experiment, steered the girl into masculinity and a military career” (28). However, I argue Duncker’s novel contests this trope by placing equal, if not greater, emphasis on Mary Ann’s role in Barry’s transformation compared to her male counterparts. Decades later, an elderly Louisa tells Barry the story behind her transformation: “it was all Mary Ann’s doing. They’d never have dreamed up this

scheme on their own. They wouldn't have dared" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 365). While the men may have naming rights over Barry, Louisa's comment indicates that they were little more than pawns in Mary Ann's plot to provide her daughter with the advantages conferred on male and male-identifying subjects. Indeed, their inability to concoct such a scheme on their own is a product of the power vested in them by virtue of their masculinity. Unlike Mary Ann, or indeed Barry, they have never needed to use their ingenuity to outwit the sex/gender system because this system, and the phallogocentric culture of which it forms a part, actively privileges men.

Barry's transformation from girl to boy allows her to experience the material and social benefits afforded to those who identify as male. As noted earlier, the identity bestowed on Barry at Mary Ann's behest enables her to study medicine at university and pursue an illustrious career in the British army. Engaging in these pursuits then works to reinforce Barry's masculinity: "Given the exclusion of women from British higher education and the professions until the latter part of the nineteenth century, a medical officer's sex was inscribed as male both by his community [...] and through self-presentation (Heilmann 39). Presenting as male is a prerequisite for Barry's entry into university and her acceptance into the medical program confers legitimacy on her gendered self-presentation which her effeminate appearance at times threatens to unravel: women could not study medicine, ergo Barry must be a man. In addition to the institutional affirmation of Barry's masculinity, she also participates in conventionally masculine leisure activities. Barry's friend and fellow medical student Robert Jobson teaches her to box (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 85) and shoot (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 89) and she starts drinking port and smoking cigars on the "advice" of family friend Dr Anderson who tells her "It's the done thing" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 92). Barry is thus a student of medicine *and* masculinity, with the men around her modelling the behaviours she must adopt in order to pass as a man. Again, this recalls Butler's performative model of gender as a series of doings, as it renders visible the typically internalised and invisible process of formulating one's gendered self-presentation. Heilmann draws on Butler's model to argue that the historical Barry "constituted himself through repeated acts of performance within strictly demarcated regulatory regimes" (13). In Duncker's novel, the success of Barry's transformation from girl/woman to boy/man is made clear when she returns to the Erskine estate over a year after commencing university. Barry is introduced as Erskine's "young [male] ward" and goes unrecognised by guests who previously knew her as Mary Ann's daughter (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 95). Instead of

being confined to the relative obscurity of a girl's existence, Barry "took his place among the gentlemen. He drank [...] He smoked a pipe. He went out shooting" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 96). Taken together with her medical degree and subsequent entry into the army, Barry's proficiency in doing masculinity creates a public image of a successful and, more importantly, convincing man.

Banishing Barry's Body: Female Corporeality and the Threat of Discovery

While Barry's career and sartorial choices signal masculinity, her effeminate corporeality continually threatens to derail this performance. While Heilmann argues Duncker "seeks to reflect the ambiguity of Barry's identity through the fluidity of language and form" (112), I argue Duncker's representation of Barry is one of competing, rather than ambiguous, gender identities. Barry's public identity and clothing signal masculinity at the same time as she privately identifies as feminine, so while her public and private gendered selves coexist, the distinction between them is clear. Duncker's descriptions of Barry also invite a reading of her as female, as she repeatedly invokes physical characteristics typically associated with women's bodies. For instance, Duncker emphasises Barry's size: she is "small" (*James Miranda Barry* 69, 224, 278), "too small" (*James Miranda Barry* 69), "tiny" (*James Miranda Barry* 194, 196, 217, 225, 231, 234), "insubstantial" (*James Miranda Barry* 200), "little" (*James Miranda Barry* 197, 202), and "diminutive" (*James Miranda Barry* 239, 281), as well as being possessed of a "slender weightlessness" (*James Miranda Barry* 256). She also describes her "tiny blue knuckles" and "tiny, steady hands," which were "fine, elegant and carefully manicured" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 80, 239, 224). Duncker's focus on Barry's diminutive size and her delicate features recalls dominant constructions of ideal femininity in the Victorian period. As Gilbert and Gubar note, the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of an "aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty – no doubt associated with the moral cult of the angel-woman" which valorised women who were "slim, pale, [and] passive" (25). That Duncker's allusions to this ideal pervade the narrative in spite of Barry's carefully curated performance of masculinity indicates the immutability of Barry's female body and its potential for undermining her public gender identity. Barry's temperament also places her at risk of discovery: she is described as an "irascible," "fiery," "harpy," with a "very short temper" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 196, 208, 228, 203). Taken together, these traits distance Barry from the reason and rationality Victorians

associated with masculinity and align her with the Victorian stereotype of women as “emotionally unstable” (Silver 46–47). The use of the term “harp” is particularly significant because it is explicitly gendered: in Greek and Roman mythology, the harpy is a “fabulous monster, rapacious and filthy, having a woman's face and body and a bird's wings and claws” (‘Harpy, n.’ def. 1.a.). Barry’s weightlessness coupled with her uncontrollable temper makes her an exemplar of the Victorians’ “dual conceptions of women as both angelic and monstrous” (Silver 47). In drawing out the similarities between Duncker’s Barry and Victorian constructions of femininity, I am not suggesting that Duncker’s text validates or legitimises these stereotypes. Instead, I argue that Duncker’s portrayal of Barry’s corporeality and temperament as recognisably feminine indicates her character identifies as a woman – and is also likely to be biologically female – but masquerades as a man because of the freedom this affords her in Victorian society.

The disjuncture between Barry’s hypermasculine choice of career and her gendered embodiment attracts considerable attention from those around her and with this comes the threat of exposure. Heilmann notes how the historical Barry’s “ambiguous body [...] encouraged rumours about his sex” (39). History repeats itself in Duncker’s novel, where rumours that Barry is a hermaphrodite – first circulated by the Erskine’s cook when Barry is a child (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 95) – follow her as she moves through her career in the army. For example, when Barry is posted to a Greek-speaking colony she befriends the Governor and his seventeen-year-old daughter Charlotte, regularly attending their estate to take part in performances of Shakespeare’s plays. One evening after performing *Macbeth*, Charlotte praises Barry for her convincing performance of Lady Macbeth:

“But you understood Lady Macbeth. You know what it is to be a woman.”
For one terrible second Barry feared that Cape Town gossip concerning his identity and origins had followed him east with the steady accuracy of a carrier pigeon returning home. (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 213–14)

Barry is relieved when she realises that Charlotte is not referring to any such gossip, but to her own feelings, in particular her attraction to Barry (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 214). However, taken together with Barry’s nightmare about a doctor examining her body (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 89), the terror Charlotte's remark incites strongly suggests that Barry is concealing a female body. While Barry’s physical characteristics will always invite a degree of suspicion because they are not stereotypically masculine, she distances herself from others in order to evade discovery: “I am like my mother, a *woman* of secrets. I

have been forced to hide from others' eyes. I am a ruthlessly private person. I have locks on all my doors, yet I am required to perform, with all the candles lit, day and night, upon the public stage" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 148; emphasis added). Barry's fierce guarding of her privacy ensures that she continues to be publicly perceived as an effeminate man, rather than a cross-dressing woman. However, her affinity with Mary Ann and her emphasis on being *forced* to hide and *required* to perform suggests that Barry privately identifies as female and that, were the stakes lower, she would cast off her masculine performance. While this passage highlights the burdensome nature of Barry's isolation, she knows it is nothing compared to the cost of her gender identity and biological sex becoming public knowledge. As I will discuss in more detail later, Barry's priorities change as she gets older and she no longer feels the need to conceal her femininity. However, at this point in her life Barry is terrified by the prospect of losing her career and reputation should her secret be exposed. In contrast to cross-dressing stage performer Nan in *Tipping the Velvet*, Barry is never off-stage: she keeps up the act "day and night" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 148), and lives in fear of her defences being breached while she sleeps. Whereas Nan's on-stage persona is made to look recognisably female in order to avoid the "social danger of actually passing as male" (Koolen 380), Barry's intention is to pass and she does so successfully.

Barry's resentment toward the necessity of isolation and, more broadly, the public masculine identity such isolation is designed to protect indicates that Barry identifies as a woman and possesses a woman's body – or, if Alice's early investigations are to be believed, an intersex body with enough recognisably female characteristics to justify concealment. Contrary to Duncker's assertion that she "decided to create a character that was neither man nor woman" ('On Writing Neo-Victorian Fiction' 18), I argue that her portrayal of Barry conforms to the "predominant gender identity that Barry is assigned in Victorian and neo-Victorian biographilia [which] is that of a woman" (Heilmann 10). In Part 2 of the novel, when Barry is studying medicine at university, the narrator confirms that Barry was born female: "All his life, he had watched, as if from the inside of a closed jar, the adult world of sensations, passions and desires shut out by his innocence. Now he was shut out forever by the very fact that enabled him to move, to act, to meddle with the privilege to which *he had not been born*" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 86–87; emphasis added). As discussed earlier, women were not permitted to study medicine in this period. As such, the above passage's reference to Barry's ability to "meddle with the privilege to which he had not been born" indicates she is biologically female. Adopting a masculine identity in public affords Barry many privileges

but it also bars her from experiencing intimate relationships because she cannot risk being betrayed by a lover who uncovers her sex. In and of itself, Barry's biological sex precludes neither the non-binary character Duncker claims to have created nor the "transgender identity" Heilmann assigns to Duncker's Barry (59). However, taken together with passages where Barry describes her gender identity, Barry's biological sex makes it difficult to sustain a transgender or non-binary reading. For instance, shortly after the transformation scene Barry tells Alice "I don't think you can become something you're not," suggesting that her masculine persona is little more than a disguise for her felt sense of femininity. Further evidence of this occurs in Part 5 of the novel, which takes place decades later. A middle-aged Barry reflects on Mary Ann's role in shaping her public performance of gender: "she gave me an identity within which I could never be anything other than an imposter. Who is James Miranda Barry? No one but *her* mother knows" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 312; emphasis added). Barry's use of the feminine pronoun "her" and reference to being an "imposter" highlights the dissonance between Barry's public and private gender identities. Her discomfort with this dissonance problematises a reading of her as transgender: if Barry identified as male, she would be unlikely to experience her publicly performed masculinity as fakery or pretence. In this way, Duncker's novel can be read as an inversion of the transgender narrative: where the sex/gender binary places pressure on transgender subjects to identify with the gender corresponding to their biological sex, Barry is pressured to adopt a gendered performance which is at odds with both her biological sex and gender identity. As Halberstam notes, transgender subjects have suffered from having to "create a home for ourselves in bodies that were not comfortable or right in terms of who we understood ourselves to be" (1). While Barry feels at home in her body and understands herself to be a woman, what she shares with transgender subjects is the experience of a society that will not affirm her gender identity or validate her existence. She suffers not because her sex and gender are in conflict, but because Victorian society will not permit the categories of woman and army doctor to coexist. While Barry's performance affords her many opportunities she would otherwise have been denied, it acts as a crucial reminder of what women and gender diverse subjects must sacrifice in order to succeed in cultures where heterosexuality and binary sex/gender systems are the norm.

Mary Ann's Feminine Discontents

Unlike Barry, Mary Ann depends on men for economic security and social standing throughout her life. While Barry resents Mary Ann's role in consigning her to a life of secrecy and solitude, she does not fully understand the lived experience of gender inequality which motivates Mary Ann to effect the transformation because she has never been recognised as – and therefore treated like – a woman. In contrast, Mary Ann is acutely aware of the way in which her identity is circumscribed by her role in various men's lives. Reflecting on her life, she asks Francisco: "What was I? A rich man's wife, a drunkard's poor widow, another rich man's mistress. Always a man's possession" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 291). Mary Ann's struggle for self-definition is not attributable to an individual lack of agency or ambition, but to a social structure in which women's interests and desires are considered secondary to those of men. Barred from receiving a formal education and forbidden from travelling by her father (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 34), sixteen-year-old Mary Ann is forced to choose between becoming Jeremiah Bulkeley's wife or Francisco's mistress. She marries the respectable-cum-drunkard Bulkeley, only to be left destitute by his premature death when his estate is entailed to his cousins (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 8). Unable to afford a house of her own and with a young child to support, Mary Ann assumes the role of Francisco's mistress to secure her own and Barry's economic future. Mary Ann reflects on this decision decades later, in particular her determination that her daughter should never be forced to make such a choice. After Mary Ann's death, Francisco repeats her words to Barry:

You said that it [making Barry a man] was a masquerade, a lie. How could anyone think that, Francisco? I have acted a part every moment of my existence [...] What is my role here? I am the famous general's pretty mistress [...] My life has been made safe by your money, and your fame. My child has protected herself, fought for herself, made her own life, earned her own name. And that was my doing. I set her free. (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 291–92)

Mary Ann's criticises Francisco for his failure to recognise that she is just as much an actress as her daughter. While her roles – wife, mother, mistress – may align with the dictates of normative femininity, her insistence on having "acted a part" reveals that they are no more an intrinsic part of her identity than her daughter's performance of masculinity (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 291). Mary Ann sees all gendered performances as an act however, she recognises that some gendered self-presentations – namely normative masculinity – confer

more freedom on the actors than others. As Barry's recollections make clear, Mary Ann understood that her (relative) freedom was contingent upon performing normative femininity and adhering to feminine beauty standards. However, no matter how convincingly she embodied the feminine ideal, her value was dictated by others: "this woman had a double existence. She lived entirely in her own reflection [...] Oh yes, she was beautiful. But she treasured her own beauty. It was a commodity, the only one she had to sell" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 311). This passage draws attention to the similarities and differences between Mary Ann and her daughter. Both live a "double existence" which is at odds with their desired identity and yet Barry – by virtue of being made a man – is freed from the constraint of being defined solely by her appearance. By casting Barry in the role of a man, Mary Ann grants her daughter access to the opportunities – an education, a career – that she was unable to secure for herself. With regard to Duncker's novel, Jana Funke argues that Mary Ann's "primary act of resistance is not deciding that her child should live as a man, but resisting the masculine time of history by obscuring Barry's paternity and by embracing her own obscurity when she commits suicide by drowning" (Funke 221). However, I argue that Mary Ann's decision about Barry's outwardly gendered self *is* her main form of resistance because it gives her a life she would otherwise have been denied. Despite the fact that the positive effects of Mary Ann's choice for her daughter are more obvious than those of Pity's father's for his son, the non-consensual nature of Barry's transformation has parallels with Pity's experience. Mary Ann may claim that Barry has "made her own life" (Duncker 292), but it would be more accurate to say that Barry has made a life in Mary Ann's image. She may be free from the constraints Mary Ann experienced, but her mother's decision imposes new constraints which tie Barry to masculinity for the rest of her life. Mary Ann's suicide may relegate her to obscurity as Funke claims, but her choices leave an indelible mark on Barry, which constitutes her legacy. Furthermore, figuring Mary's Ann's suicide as an act of resistance is problematic on several levels. Firstly, the text refuses to be definitive regarding the accidental – or otherwise – nature of Mary Ann's death (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 289). Secondly, much like the notion of madness as protest discussed in Chapter 3, it is problematic to equate an act of silencing – be it through institutionalisation or death – with resistance because it reinforces women's absence from the historical record, an absence feminist neo-Victorian fiction purportedly aims to redress.

Mary Ann's relationship with her brother, the artist James Barry, provides further evidence of men's attempts to objectify her. As James makes clear to his niece Barry, he both credits himself for Mary Ann's upward trajectory and resents her rise out of jealous possessiveness:

But it was through me that she met both Erskine and Miranda. Damn her. She'd never have been anything if it hadn't been for me...

I made her what she is, child. But I never made her a whore. She did that all by herself. The woman survives by trickery. Disguises. (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 34)

James' assertion that he made Mary Ann "what she is" is paradoxical: it denies the existence of any agency on Mary Ann's part at the same time as accusing her of straying from his vision by becoming a whore (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 34). James' disdain for Mary Ann's presumed sexual proclivity must be read in context of the rumours which abound of a sexual relationship between the pair, a rumour James appears to confirm on his deathbed (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 141). While Letissier claims that James forces Mary Ann into a sexual relationship and that this, in turn, is evidence of "sexploitation" (3), I argue that Duncker leaves open the possibility that their relationship was consensual. For example, after Mary Ann's death Barry foregrounds her agency in her relationship with James: "She was never powerless. If she posed naked for him in his studio, it was because she wanted to do it. If she lay down beneath him [...] then it was because that was what she had desired [...] She was not his victim" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 367). While Mary Ann consented to her relationship with James – at least in Barry's version of events – this does not erase his cruelty toward her in both art and life. Like Auguste's paintings of Pity in Buxton's novel, James uses his art to punish Mary Ann for slighting him:

I put her in every painting. As Juno, Pandora, Cordelia, Eurydice...I painted her as Chastity, as Fertility, as Artemis, as Aphrodite, as the Angel or the Maenad. In *The Education of Achilles* you can just see her beyond the Centaur [...] excluded and envious [...] You can't see her face, it's her body I've painted. (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 34)

By casting Mary Ann in the roles of these archetypal women – at turns virtuous, mad, or vulnerable – James reduces her to an object which can be melded to his will. Obscuring her face in *The Education of Achilles* while rendering her body visible reflects phallogocentric culture's obsession with defining woman as body. It is this reduction of women's identity to the body and the roles prescribed by mythology that Mary Ann hopes to spare her daughter by transforming her into a man.

For the Love of Alice: The Limits of Queer Desire

Barry's lifelong relationship with childhood friend Alice Jones – a maidservant in Erskine's household – illustrates the tensions between her public and private gender identities, as well as the limits of Victorian society's acceptance of queer sexuality. Barry and Alice meet just prior to the transformation scene, when Barry is aged ten and Alice fourteen. At this point, Barry's gender identity – in both public and private – is recognisably, though not normatively, feminine. For instance, when discussing Barry's future with Mary Ann, her uncle refers to Barry as “she,” while Alice's mother describes her as “Mrs Bulkeley's tomboy daughter” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 16, 56). Barry also describes herself as being “in love with Alice Jones” and wants to be her date to the Erskine's ball (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 47). As the following exchange with Mary Ann indicates, Barry views her love for Alice as a product of queer desire:

“You ought to wear a dress to the ball, dear. People do talk.”
[...]
“I can't ask Alice if I don't wear trousers,” I protested. “We'd be two girls.”
My mother was baffled.
“But you must wear a dress [...] You're growing up now. It's not correct otherwise.”
“I won't.” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 58)

Though Barry and Alice are both biologically female, Barry does not want to be seen as a girl at this stage in her life. Her reaction to Mary Ann's demand that she wears a dress indicates that she views her femininity as a barrier to her relationship with Alice. Furthermore, Barry's wish to avoid her and Alice being seen as “two girls” courting each other demonstrates her internalisation of Victorian culture's hostility toward queer subjects (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 58). Mary Ann's insistence that Barry adopt feminine dress because she is “growing up” reflects the rigidity of cultural approaches to dress as a signifier of gender, as well as the greater freedom children are afforded with regard to gender expression (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 58). While childhood provides a licence for experimentation – both in terms of dress and gender – conformity to the sex/gender binary is enforced as puberty approaches in order to avoid social ostracism. In the novel, Barry is instructed to relinquish her tomboy identity and with it her opportunity to play at being a boy and courting Alice. In her analysis of Angelica – a tomboy who cross-dresses as her twin brother – in Sarah Grand's novel *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), Heilmann argues that it is “boyhood, rather than manhood, that liberates the girl. Neither a girl denied the right to self-determination nor an adult man

burdened with responsibilities, the boy is the embodiment of transgender fluidity *par excellence*” (84; emphasis in original). Like Angelica, Barry experiences boyhood as liberatory because it frees her to engage in modes of play, education, and other pursuits that were considered inappropriate for girls. While Barry succeeds in wearing trousers to the ball, her stubbornness unintentionally provides Mary Ann with the inspiration for her daughter’s permanent transformation. On the surface, such a move should enable Barry’s continued courtship of Alice: by adopting the role of a man, their relationship takes on the appearance of heteronormativity. However, in reality Barry’s transformation forever separates her from a romantic relationship with Alice, at first because her career in the army conflicts with Alice’s desire for independence and later – when Barry reveals her desire to live as a woman – because Alice fears the stigma they would attract as a “Sapphist” couple given Barry’s high profile (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 374).

While Barry’s adoption of masculine dress allows her to publicly court Alice in childhood, this same performance of masculinity leads Alice to reject her in adulthood. After several years apart Barry resolves to find Alice and, recalling her ambition to be an actress, begins by searching London’s theatres. When the pair are reunited Barry proposes to Alice, only to be rejected because of the threat her career poses to Alice’s ambitions: “You can’t marry an actress, James. You’re in the army. I’ll get contracts that take me all over the place [...] You’ll be posted overseas. You can’t marry a woman who has no intention of following you wherever you go” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 181). Though Alice professes her love for Barry, she is unwilling to relinquish her career and the freedom it offers her, by becoming the wife of an army doctor (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 182). While she uses the incompatibility of their respective career paths to justify her refusal, Alice also expresses a fundamental opposition to the institution of marriage. This suggests that even if Barry were not in the army, Alice would not have accepted the proposal. She tells Barry: “If I were to marry anyone it would be you. But I want my life. I want what every woman wants, if she’s honest with herself. Money and independence [...] I want my life. For me. And I don’t want to share it with anybody else. I will never marry. Neither you nor any man” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 182). Though Funke acknowledges the feminist potential of Duncker’s portrayal of Alice, this is chiefly in relation to her status as the author of Barry’s story, rather than her beliefs about marriage (222). Letissier, on the other hand, reads Alice as the victim of a “sexploitative plight [...] who, in spite of her constant desire for self-emancipation, finds herself at the mercy of men” (30). In making this claim, Letissier is presumably referring to

Alice posing naked for James Barry and his friend, fellow artist Mr Haydon (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 186), as well as her relationship with the wealthy Adolphus, whose fortune she inherits upon his death (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 338). However, Letissier's claim rests on the assumption that any exchange involving the female body is necessarily exploitative, thus ignoring the calculated and pragmatic nature with which Alice pursues her goals. Given that the female body is always already an object of exchange in phallogentric culture, the question is less whether such an exchange should be resisted, and more whether the exchange is conducted on an equal and consensual basis. Like Mary Ann before her, Alice poses as an artist's model because she chooses to, not because she is forced to. Unlike Pity's relationship with Auguste, neither Mary Ann nor Alice depend on their artists for survival. Alice describes her relationship with her male patrons to Barry thus: "I don't fall in love with any of my patrons [...] That's not the point. I need them. They like me. The contract is perfectly clear. And if they stop liking me, or I stop needing them, the deal's off" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 182). From the theatre director who falls prey to Alice's savvy negotiating, to the drunken colleague who propositions her for sex only to be rebuffed when Alice responds "no, decisively, with the aid of a warm poker," or even Adolphus, who Alice "would never have allowed [...] to be swept to his reward if he hadn't left me well set up and comfortable," Alice repeatedly demonstrates that, if anything, men are at *her* mercy (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 177, 338). In contrast to Barry, who abandons her feminine gender identity (at least in public), Alice mobilises the markers of ideal femininity – like beauty and sex appeal – and reworks them so that they serve her own, rather than men's, interests.

In response to Alice's rejection of her proposal, Barry leaves England for some three decades, only to return to at Alice's request. On Barry's return, she invites Alice to live with her before confessing her desire to live as a woman. She tells Alice: "I've spent my life in disguise. I don't know who else I could have been [...] I had a public life. But what else did I have? I had no one there at the end of the day. I didn't have you" (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 376). As this quote demonstrates, Barry feels a profound sense of loss for the woman she could have been and the years of intimacy and connection she imagines she would've had with Alice were it not for her masculine disguise. Alice, on the other hand, is scathing of Barry's desire to publicly embrace her feminine gender identity:

And what is genuine? This genuine inner soul you say you want to discover?

Nothing's absolutely genuine! You aren't the same person with everyone you know. You act out different roles. I've acted every minute of my life. I'm always on stage. We all are. It's all a performance [...] And you got the breeches part, James [...] You've played the part with verve and gusto [...] Now, do you want to speak the epilogue – where you turn up in skirts to point to the moral before being booed off the stage? You're mad! (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 374–75)

Much like Mary Ann, Alice rejects the existence of an authentically gendered self. She views all gender identities – whether they accord with the sex/gender binary or not – as performative and, as such, from Alice's perspective Barry's privately held feminine identity is irrelevant, if not non-existent. As Alice reminds Barry, she been cast in the “breeches part” and, just as Mary Ann and Alice have publicly performed femininity, so too must Barry go on performing this masculine role (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 374). As Heilmann makes clear, Alice “cares nothing about the ‘truth of the body’; what matters, she affirms, is [...] the material benefit of appearance” (180). It is these material benefits, more than any philosophical belief in the fallacy of authenticity, which motivate Alice's rejection of Barry's womanhood. For example, Alice is at pains to remind Barry of the economic and reputational consequences of “coming out” as a woman, including the loss of her army pension, public speculation regarding the legitimacy of her medical qualifications and, most critically for Alice, the rumours such a move will incite about their relationship (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 374). She tells Barry: “I don't want to live with a public scandal. Think what they'd say about me. They'd say that I knew all along and was some sort of Sapphist” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 374). Alice's aversion to being seen as a Sapphist – or lesbian – echoes the childhood Barry's fear of courting Alice as a girl. While Barry – who arguably has more to lose in the court of public opinion – is willing to accept the consequences of making her private gender identity public, Alice is not. That her predominant concern is not for Barry's wishes, but her own reputation, demonstrates the “painful reality” of lesbian desire in a “culture committed to its impossibility” (Mitchell 132). Unlike Maud and Sue in Waters' *Fingersmith*, who retreat from society and earn a living writing pornography, Duncker's portrayal of a lesbian relationship is more akin to Waters' *Affinity*, which refuses to “project a fairytale world of lesbian desire that managed to survive despite the odds” (Mitchell 132). Instead of the fairytale ending, Alice forbids Barry from coming out – both as a woman and as a lesbian – only to expose her posthumously when she deems it advantageous to her own position.

Skin in the Game: Alice and the Army Duel Over Barry's Body

While Barry accedes to Alice's wishes by continuing to publicly perform as a man, her sex and gender identity is contested upon her death. Inadvertently, it is Alice who first exposes Barry to posthumous scrutiny when she reneges on payments owed to one of their maidservants. In an attempt to obtain her dues, the servant blackmails Alice by threatening to reveal her knowledge of Barry's female anatomy to Major D.R. McKinnon, the Staff Surgeon who authorised Barry's death certificate. The fictional debate over Barry's sex plays out as it did in the nineteenth century – through a series of letters – though the novel contains both reproduced and invented correspondence (Heilmann 36). That many of these letters should come from Barry's colleagues and superiors in the armed forces is testament to the threat her private gender identity – and her likely sex – poses to the legitimacy of the institution. For Gutleben, who reads Duncker's Barry as a cross-dressing woman, the military's scramble to defend Barry's masculinity and, by extension, the establishment itself is evidence of “the political potency of any act of deviance in gender matters” (‘An Aesthetics of Performativity’ 219). Some of Barry's colleagues are unequivocal in their assertion of her maleness, with Jobson – now a retired Surgeon General – pronouncing Barry a “perfect gentleman and a courageous man” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 383). James Loughlin praises Barry's generosity for sparing him in a duel as he praises Barry's “expert marksman[ship]” and goes on to recall “had his magnanimous generosity not spared my life I had been a dead man. No woman would be capable of such a deed” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 383). With regard to the historical debate, Heilmann draws attention to the way in which “senior army officers engaged in complicated mental acrobatics to assert that, while Barry had been singularly dysfunctional in masculinity, he had still been an anatomical man” (36–37). In Duncker's text, these acrobatics are performed by Major McKinnon and Edward Bradford, the Deputy Inspector of Hospitals, who both raise the possibility that Barry was intersex all the while reaffirming her essential maleness. When the Registrar-General George Graham asks McKinnon to verify the rumours surrounding Barry's sex, McKinnon responds “I thought he might be neither [male or female], viz. an imperfectly developed *man*” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 381; emphasis added). Bradford, for his part, pens a letter to the editors of the *Medical Times* attesting to the fact that “There could not have been any doubt, among people who knew him, on the subject of his physical constitution which was really that he was a *male* in whom the development of the organs of sex had been arrested from the sixth month

of pregnancy” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 382; emphasis added). Bradford’s remark reflects a common belief about hermaphroditism in the Victorian medical establishment, which held that the condition was often caused by trauma – especially emotional trauma – during pregnancy (Dreger 70). This has the effect of shifting the blame for Barry’s condition onto Mary Ann, who is viewed as having failed to protect her innocent son from harm.

As the military attempts to contain the threat posed by Barry’s femininity, another woman emerges to undermine them: Alice. Ever expedient, Alice capitalises on the public interest in the rumours surrounding Barry’s gender by arranging a tell-all interview with Henrietta Stackpole, an American journalist. That Stackpole is also the namesake of Isabel Archer’s friend in Henry James’ *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) is a nod to the ambiguous relationship between truth and fiction in both Duncker’s novel and the Barry story more broadly. Alice expects the *New York Post* to pay a handsome price for the piece provided she tells a “good enough story” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 388). The interview with Stackpole denotes Alice’s attempt to inscribe her fictional account of Barry’s sex and parentage as historical fact. Alice describes herself to Stackpole as the “leading lady, much deceived, [who] became the heroine, nay, the lover, in this version of the tale, consumed with an enduring childhood passion for the bastard *son* of David Steuart Erskine, Earl of Buchan” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 387; emphasis added), before reminding herself to “*Be definite about that. This is being written down for history*” (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 387; original italics). However, the novel closes by emphasising the performative elements of Alice’s interview, which suggests that her insistence on Barry’s maleness is, in fact, a lie: “She flung herself into the *role* of revelatory angel. And at this point, Alice tells all. Well, not quite all. But she presents a marvellous *narrative*, filled with secrecy, passion and adventure, the *story* of the actress and the doctor, the obsession that stretched across decades, continents, the love that never died (Duncker, *James Miranda Barry* 388; emphasis added). Alice’s refusal to acknowledge Barry’s womanhood during the latter’s life or death is unsurprising given that in both instances her denial secures her economic position and wards off suspicion that she is a lesbian. For example, during Barry’s lifetime her pension provided for both of them and any exposé would likely have led to its cancellation, while in death casting their relationship as a heterosexual love story protects Alice’s reputation and offers a handsome pay-off. Alice’s denial of Barry’s womanhood also signals – as with Auguste’s denial of Pity’s maleness – her internalisation of dominant cultural norms which attached shame to queer relationships. For Heilmann, by “Giving Alice a life and a career that can rival Barry’s and presenting her as the

author of his life, Duncker's feminism is expressed in the reparative and revengeful use of historical fiction" (222). While Alice is presented as the author of Barry's life – she has the "last word" on Barry's gender – she is untroubled by the fact that her overwriting of Barry's femininity goes against Barry's express desire to be seen as a woman. As such, while positing Alice as author may be construed as a feminist act, it is also problematic from the very feminist perspective it supposedly illustrates because it comes at the expense of silencing another woman – Barry.

Conclusion

While Pity's and Barry's experiences differ markedly – the former is dependent on selling her body to survive, while the latter's concealment of her body enables her illustrious career – both are endangered by the same element of their existence: identifying (privately in Barry's case) as women. Pity, a biological man who desires to live as a woman, expresses this desire first through cross-dressing and, later, artistic practice. However, her gender identification comes at significant personal cost because it enables Auguste's abuse of her, which culminates in her castration. While inferiority, disempowerment, and the denial of bodily autonomy are not intrinsic features of femininity, Buxton's construction of Victorian culture's treatment of subjects who belong to the category "woman" means that this is Pity's reality. She performs as a woman and, as a result, Auguste feels entitled to treat her like one. Buxton refuses to offer a hopeful resolution to the trauma Pity experiences as a woman: instead of locating the cause of Pity's vulnerability in misogyny and male violence toward women and women-identifying subjects, Buxton identifies the cause – and thus the resolution – in womanhood itself. Pity is thus "saved" not by rejecting Auguste, but by forgoing her feminine gender identity to instead perform as a man.

In contrast to the vulnerability Pity attracts as a woman, Barry leads a privileged existence by suppressing her feminine gender identity in favour of identifying as a man in public. However, like Pity-as-woman, the dissonance between Barry's sexed body and her public gender identity makes her vulnerable in a society which privileges subjects who conform to the sex/gender binary. The threat of discovery is ever-present for Barry as her career and reputation depend on the continued concealment of her female body. The differential treatment Barry and Pity experience as a result of their portrayal of masculinity and

femininity respectively emphasises the advantages phallogentric culture affords to those who present as male. Barry receives the benefits afforded to men despite being biologically female – or, possibly, intersex – while Pity is denied them because he presents as feminine. By portraying characters who are treated in accordance with the gender suggested by their outward appearance, Duncker and Buxton undermine the Victorian belief in gender difference as biologically given rather than socially ascribed.

Pity and *James Miranda Barry* foreground the social construction of gender by demonstrating that both cisgender women and women-identifying subjects face similar levels of structural disadvantage, regardless of their anatomical makeup. They also demonstrate the costs of identifying with marginalised subject positions – be it in relation to gender identity or sexuality. From a contemporary perspective, Pity’s male body and feminine gender identity aligns her with transgenderism and the concomitant stigma such subjects continue to face. In the novel, this stigma is expressed through Auguste’s ire at Pity’s failure to present a harmoniously sexed and gendered self, a failure he attempts to correct through enforced castration. Barry, on the other hand, is forced to publicly perform a gendered subject position which is at odds with her privately held gender identity and which prevents the expression of her queer sexuality. As a (queer) woman in the Victorian era, Barry does not have the same freedoms to pursue an education, career, or romantic relationship as her cisgendered, heterosexual (male) peers. Instead, Duncker represents Victorian culture’s commitment to the ideology of separate spheres and its hostility toward same-sex desire as impassable barriers for her protagonist’s desire to live as a woman in public. This chapter has sought to expand the range of non-normatively gendered neo-Victorian subjects considered in this thesis to include women-identifying subjects (*Pity*) and subjects whose public and private gendered selves are in conflict (*Barry*). By displacing mid-1990s critiques of the sex/gender system onto the Victorian period, Buxton and Duncker frame it as an outdated concept that does little more than enable the exclusion of non-normatively gendered subjects. Furthermore, these authors use their protagonists to suggest an alternative relationship between sex and gender, one where embodying femininity is not dependent on either possessing a female body (*Pity*) or being outwardly recognised as female (*Barry*). Both *Pity* and *Barry* are feminine subjects, but their trajectories differ because the former is publicly perceived as a woman while the latter is not. The coercive demand to conform to the sex/gender binary and the heteronormative ideal which shape *Pity* and *Barry*’s experiences of their identities remains

salient for the ways in which non-binary and/or queer subjects navigate gender and sexuality in contemporary society.

Conclusion

This thesis is the first sustained engagement with the representation of women's bodies in neo-Victorian fiction. It demonstrates the genre's desire to contribute to contemporary debates about gender by calling into question the extent to which sexsational and political categorisations of neo-Victorianism can be considered mutually exclusive. In the eight novels examined here, this desire is expressed through the representation of non-normatively feminine subjects and their experiences of exclusion and oppression. Defining women by their bodies is a hallmark of both Victorian and contemporary Western culture. While this definitional impulse is also evident in other eras, I have argued that historical novelists' consistent return to the nineteenth century in particular reflects the extent to which Victorian attitudes toward women reverberate in contemporary constructions of femininity. In part this is because the Victorian period shares with the contemporary an intensification of cultural anxieties surrounding the stability of traditional gender norms. During this time, women agitated for greater political, social, and educational equality only to be met with resistance from a culture wedded to the notion of "separate spheres". This notion was in turn bolstered by medico-scientific theories about women's biological inferiority (King 19; Poovey 77). While women's bodies and, in particular, their reproductive systems were held as evidence of their unsuitability for any pursuits beyond the confines of the home, this was not to say that women's confinement to the domestic sphere nullified the threat their bodies posed to the existing social order. Instead, women were encouraged to be hypervigilant toward their bodily functions in an attempt to exercise control over their inherently unruly bodies, at the same as time as being subjected to unprecedented levels of external surveillance (Shuttleworth, 'Female Circulation' 48).

Some 150 years on, we are again at a critical juncture where gender norms are concerned. Social media campaigns like #metoo that emerged in response to high profile cases of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence highlight the hypocrisy of contemporary Western culture's approach to normative femininity.²⁰ This culture encourages women to conform to a narrow aesthetic ideal premised on phallogocentric notions

²⁰ The #metoo movement gained traction when the phrase was used by actresses to disclose instances of sexual assault and harassment in Hollywood, but has since provided a platform for many women to share their experiences of gender-based violence.

of sexual attractiveness, at the same time as it places the onus on them to prevent gender-based violence by modifying their appearance and behaviour so as to be less attractive to (predominantly male) perpetrators.²¹ In late-twentieth and early twenty-first century culture, the Victorian feminine ideal of ethereality and sexlessness is transformed into one typified by hypervisible sexuality. However, the emphasis on women's bodies as defective and in need of correction remains. While the Victorians looked to ovariectomies or clitoridectomies to treat women's aberrant sexuality, postfeminist media culture prescribes consumer spending as the key to attaining a sexy body. This culture posits women's participation in body-altering technologies – be it through beauty products, fitness regimes, cosmetic surgery, or the increased array of digital tools designed to monitor the body – as evidence of their empowerment, yet it is curiously silent on the fact that genuine empowerment is unlikely to produce such a uniform aesthetic. Given the centrality of the body to defining womanhood in both Victorian and contemporary culture, this thesis found that representations of non-normatively gendered bodies in neo-Victorian fiction constructed continuities between the Victorian period and our own by pointing to the ways in which contemporary constructions of womanhood had both progressed from and remained dependent on Victorian gender norms.

This thesis contributes to debates about the feminist potential of neo-Victorian fiction by drawing together previously disparate foci on freakery, madness, sexuality, and embodiment. In so doing it moves discussion on from what had become an unproductive focus on the political valency (or otherwise) of (feminist) neo-Victorian fiction. A significant body of neo-Victorian criticism addresses the genre's penchant for representing marginalised figures, especially those excluded from mainstream society on the basis of their gender or sexual identity. Unlike their Victorian counterparts, contemporary novelists were less constrained by social taboos when it came to discussions of female sexuality, queer subjectivity, and non-binary gender identity. While changing social mores have thus enabled more overt portrayals of these subjects, critics are divided on the utility of such representations. This debate had become polarised around the issue of whether such narratives revictimise historically marginalised subjects in order to satisfy their readership's desire for access to a salacious

²¹ The social media campaign #shewaswalkinghome and accompanying series of protests that emerged in response to the murder of British woman Sarah Everard in 2021 aims to highlight the inadequacy of attempting to prevent gender-based violence by focusing on women's actions.

version of the Victorian past (Kohlke, 'Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel' 55, 70) or whether their commitment to enhancing the visibility of these subjects formed part of a larger project aimed at creating a more inclusive society (S. J. Carroll 198). By constructing a false dichotomy between literary and sexsational narratives (Muller, *Ladies, Lunatics and Fallen Women* 35), this debate limited discussions of the genre's political valence to female-authored and/or feminist texts. Furthermore, while critics had explored the relationship between gender and particular categories of marginalisation in neo-Victorian fiction, such as madness (Muller, 'Hystoriographic Metafiction'), freakery (Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery*), and queer sexuality (O'Callaghan, "The Grossest Rakes of Fiction"), these had not yet been brought together to examine how such experiences are enacted in and through the body.

This thesis significantly expands debate about the feminist potential of neo-Victorian fiction by extending this discussion to male-authored texts. Despite an initial reluctance on the part of neo-Victorian critics, contemporary feminist theories have become more commonplace in analyses of the genre. However, such engagements have largely been limited to single-author studies and analyses of women's writing. Understanding the genre's role in contemporary debates about gender was necessarily limited by attending only to explicitly feminist texts. As my analysis of *Pity* has demonstrated, narratives that foreground the experiences of female and/or female-identifying characters were not the sole purview of women writers. Furthermore, even in instances where male-authored, male-narrated texts perpetuate constructions of femininity that aligned with normative gender roles – as in Swift's *Waterland* – it was nonetheless possible to locate instances of female agency by shifting the critical focus from Tom's narrativising impulse to Mary's embodied actions.

In order to analyse how a wide range of neo-Victorian novels engaged with normative femininity and gendered embodiment, I developed a theoretical framework that brought together neo-Victorian criticism, scholarship on nineteenth-century scientific, medical, and gender discourses, and contemporary feminist theory on the body. This framework facilitated my examination of how freakery, madness, maternity, queer sexuality, and non-binary gender identity are embodied by women and women-identifying characters in these texts. Using the body as the focal point for attending to the resonances these novels construct between the operation of gender norms in Victorian and contemporary culture enabled a more complete understanding of the precise operation of the "legacy in our own time of the sexual violation of the human and especially the female body" identified by Ann Heilmann and Mark

Llewellyn (*Neo-Victorianism* 142). In the first chapter of this thesis, I outlined this framework and its application to the novels discussed in the remainder of the thesis. In particular, this chapter advocated for a hybrid approach that combined Heilmann and Lewellyn's and Jeanette King's focus on analysing feminist neo-Victorian fiction using nineteenth-century gender discourse and the more recent uptake of contemporary feminisms by neo-Victorian scholars like Antonija Primorac and Claire O'Callaghan. In addition to this, it demonstrated the need for neo-Victorian critics to incorporate feminist theory on the body in their analyses of the genre's engagement with contemporary gender and sexual politics.

The remaining four chapters were devoted to textual analyses of eight neo-Victorian novels published between 1983 and 2012. Chapter Two explored representations of freakery in Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and Hall's *The Electric Michelangelo*. While both novels present freakery as a strategy for escaping the dictates of normative femininity, in Carter's novel this utopian vision is undercut by a conventional resolution to Fevvers' non-conformity – heterosexual marriage – whereas in Hall's novel non-normative femininity remains impervious to intervention. Chapter Three examined the relationship between nineteenth-century scientific, medical, and gender discourses and the representation of madwomen in Swift's *Waterland* and Wallace's *The Painted Bridge*. Swift avoided detailed depictions of asylum life in favour of focusing on the visible markers of non-normative femininity that enabled Sarah Atkinson and Mary Crick's designation as mad. In contrast, Wallace's focus on the minutiae of asylum life highlighted the way in which treatments for madness targeted the body under the assumption that if the body could be made to conform to the feminine ideal, then the mind would follow. However, in both novels the female body emerged as a site of resistance against the imposition of normative gender roles. In Chapter Four, I analysed mother-daughter relationships in Waters' *Fingersmith* and Fox's *The Somnambulist*. Both novels are interested in the legacy of maternal failure and the extent to which such legacies can be overcome. In Waters' novel, maternal death is presented as the key to the next generation of non-normative women's ability to thrive, while Fox's novel positions conformity to the feminine ideal as the only viable form of redress for past transgressions. Chapter Five focused on the gendered embodiment of non-binary and queer subjects in Duncker's *James Miranda Barry* and Buxton's *Pity*. Both novels present their titular characters' vastly different trajectories – Barry, a highly-esteemed doctor in the British army and Pity, a vulnerable prostitute – as a product of their publicly performed gender identities rather than their biological sex. In so doing, I argued that Duncker and Buxton critique the

validity of the Victorian belief in sexual difference and its contemporary counterpart, the sex/gender system.

By exploring how their characters fare when they transgress normative femininity, these novels demonstrate the damaging effect such norms have on women and women-identifying subjects as a marginalised group in both Victorian and contemporary culture, regardless of an individual subject's level of conformity or resistance. While these novels suggest that the operation – if not the appearance – of gender norms in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century culture is the logical extension of Victorian-era ideas about the role and function of women's bodies, I argued that their representations of non-normative female bodies also had the potential to challenge prevailing gender norms; that is, that the novels suggest that this legacy is not immutable.

While all the novels in this thesis reflect Victorian society's intolerance toward women who failed to embody normative femininity, this is the starting point for, rather than the conclusion of, their renegotiation of gender norms. Women and women-identifying characters who exist outside the confines of these norms are dealt with in one of three ways: reform, removal, or tacit approval. Both reform – denoting characters who shift from non-normative to normative gendered presentations – and removal – denoting non-normative characters who are excised from the narrative through imprisonment, institutionalisation, or death – ultimately consign non-normative femininity to the realm of non-existence. After an initial period of suffering – indeed, suffering unites all the representations of non-normative femininity considered in this thesis – the final group of characters are granted tacit approval for their rejection of normative femininity by virtue of the fact that they are permitted to survive and, in some cases, thrive, without further limits being placed on their embodied agency. While the co-existence of these three approaches suggests that there is still some way to go in making space for non-normatively gendered subjects in mainstream society, the survival of some of these characters allows the novels to position resistance as a viable strategy for revisioning the legacy of the Victorian past. If it is possible – albeit difficult – to permanently reject the tenets of normative femininity without vanishing from the narrative record, then it follows that continuing to rehearse Victorian-era gender norms in the present is not the only way forward.

The narrative representations of non-normative women considered in this thesis emphasise the shared nature of the harms experienced by marginalised subjects in the Victorian past and the contemporary present. While this has been touted as evidence of the genre's ability to advocate for societal change, the conventional resolutions to non-normative femininity offered by several of these novels demonstrate that while they may signal a desire for change, they are also relatively silent on the means through which such change could be achieved. For instance, while Essie Fox's *The Somnambulist* explores the damaging effect the 'good mother' ideal has on women, fallen or otherwise inadequate mothers are excised from the narrative through death or prolonged absence. In contrast, the fallen woman who conforms to normative femininity by marrying the father of her child is permitted an apparently happy ending. In contrast, Waters' *Fingersmith* attempts to bridge the gap between representation, advocacy, and change by excising some non-normative female characters while granting others the space act out their non-conformity in relative freedom. In Waters' case, this takes the form of a generational sacrifice: Mrs Sucksby's and Marianne's failure to embody ideal femininity results in their deaths, while their daughters Sue and Maud are free to pursue a lesbian relationship and reclaim the male-dominated medium of pornography. Hall's novel takes this commitment to providing a blueprint for change one step further: unlike the other novels in this study, there are no non-normative women relegated to the realms of reform or removal. Instead, the focal female character's defiance of feminine beauty ideals and knowing challenge to the power of the male gaze is represented as the key to dismantling rigid gender norms.

While it was beyond the scope of this thesis to examine the representation of non-normative feminine embodiment on the screen, this could prove a fruitful area for future research. Antonija Primorac's recent work demonstrated the importance of analysing examples of neo-Victorianism on screen as cultural products in their own right, rather than as derivatives of Victorian or neo-Victorian texts (*Neo-Victorianism on Screen* 2). However, her study of the "figure of the Victorian heroine" analysed through the lens of postfeminism as antifeminism necessarily produced a focus on characters who largely conform to the dictates of normative femininity (Primorac, *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* 4). This focus aligned with Primorac's argument that such characters satiate contemporary audiences' desire for "nostalgic fantasies of the past," a desire she attributed to postfeminist media culture (*Neo-Victorianism on Screen* 7). However, if textual neo-Victorianism is so invested in non-normative femininity and the ways it is lived in and through the body, the question that arises is whether such

bodies are truly absent from neo-Victorianism on screen, or simply yet to be studied? Presumably, the very medium of screen adaptations presents a unique opportunity to make non-normative gendered embodiment visible and tangible. If such an opportunity has not been taken up, does this suggest that neo-Victorianism on screen is subject to a sanitising impulse not found in its textual counterparts? For instance, Kohlke's analysis of the BBC adaptation of *Fingersmith* (2005) noted its "striking sanitisation of Waters' treatment of taboo subjects," particularly with regard to the minimisation of Lilly's physical abuse of Maud and the erasure of Maud's indecorous attire ('Abominable Pictures' 161). While Kohlke cites this as evidence of "self-policing," Primorac's argument about the connection between nostalgia and neo-Victorian women on screen also provides a possible avenue of explanation ('Abominable Pictures' 161; *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* 7). Giving uncensored visual form to the non-normative bodies analysed in this thesis would necessarily disrupt a nostalgic view of the Victorian era and may indeed prompt uncomfortable realisations on the part of viewers regarding the restrictive nature of gender norms in contemporary culture. If this sanitising impulse is more widespread (indeed, one might ask why *Nights at the Circus* has never been adapted despite its popularity and critical acclaim), then the politics of rendering such bodies invisible on screen – just as they were rendered invisible, or at least disguised, in Victorian literature and culture – should be interrogated.

Future research could also engage with the emerging subfield of neo-Victorianism focused on men and masculinities. As Heilmann and Llewellyn noted in their introduction to the 2015 special issue of *Victoriographies* on neo-Victorian masculinities, critics of the genre have largely neglected representations of men ('Introduction' 97). Several critics responded to this call by examining neo-Victorian masculinities on screen (Boehm-Schnitker; Martin; Mustafa), but there has thus far been a lack of specific attention to how masculinity – normative or otherwise – is embodied. In addition to examining representations of gendered bodies on screen, this thesis' focus could also be extended to include how other categories of marginalisation such as criminality, race, sexuality, and class intersect with gendered embodiment in neo-Victorian fiction. While Davies' analysis of how these categories coalesce in constructions of the freak body included a discussion of gender, her primary focus involved using disability studies and freak studies to redress the critical inattention toward disability and embodied difference in the genre (*Neo-Victorian Freakery* 5). Furthermore, neo-Victorian critics often discuss how these categories of marginalisation intersect with gender without attending to their embodied dimensions, a gap that could be addressed by

integrating feminist theories of the body into future studies. In this thesis, feminist theories of the body formed a key part of the framework that enabled me to demonstrate neo-Victorianism's engagement with socio-cultural discourses about gender, sexuality, and the body. These findings have implications for assessing the genre's political valence in relation to not only gender, but other categories of marginalisation as well.

While this thesis built on a larger body of criticism interested in neo-Victorian representations of gender and sexuality, its specific focus on non-normative femininity elucidated the ways in which the genre positioned contemporary culture's obsession with women's bodies as a legacy of the body's role as the locus for Victorian anxieties about shifting gender norms. The novels examined herein were published over a thirty-year period and encompassed both lesser-known and canonical examples of the genre by both male and female authors. Each novel engages with the question of what it means to possess a body that has been marked abnormal – and therefore lesser – by virtue of its deviation from the norms of gendered embodiment that prevail in any given period. By highlighting the range of subjects to whom this designation has been applied, these texts demonstrate the narrow scope of normative femininity and, in so doing, critique Victorian and contemporary culture's use of rigid gender norms to exclude particular subjects whose bodies are viewed as a threat to the existing social order.

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