

# Taxonomies of Desire in Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* and P. J. Parker's *Roxelana & Suleyman*

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**Abstract**—This paper is a comparative cross-gender inquiry into representations of sexuality in Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* and P. J. Parker's *Roxelana & Suleyman*, since the body, as a constitutive part of social identity and a main site for the economy of pleasure and desire, is simultaneously inscribed in the economy of discourse, domination, and power. While both authors, in representing same-sex desire, borrow from a sizeable storehouse of Victorian literature by employing plots and themes from the sensation novel, the Gothic mode, melodrama, mystery fiction, romance, and pornography, within the framework of historical narrative, they diverge considerably in their textual strategies. Parker draws on the erotic charge of Orientalist fantasies, adopting them as a trans-historical constant, whereas Waters explores sexuality and its articulations by re-imagining the nineteenth century and representing the diverse investments of contemporaneity in historical remembrance, revision, and reconstruction.

**Index Terms**—Body politics, discourse, eroticism, power.

## I. INTRODUCTION

While conceptualizing the body as a site of political and cultural construction, contested meaning, and radical resistance, Michel Foucault explains how it does not stand in an external relation to power but is inscribed by a historically contingent nexus of power and discourse: “The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immense hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” [1]. I intend here to examine two novels that represent erotic desire as a site of body politics, Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002) and P. J. Parker's *Roxelana & Suleyman* (2011), both centering on historical figures and recreating the atmosphere of their respective periods with great detail, both positioning eroticism outside of a conventional heterosexual paradigm, and both utilizing literary genres that took their traditional shape and were popular during the Victorian age. I am interested in how these texts, generated by transgressive energies of forbidden cultural practices, are instrumental in exploring hidden aspects of gender and sexual identity formation, and how they work toward not only transgressing but also transcending and, finally, transforming limited and limiting notions of gender, sexuality, and subjective agency.

## II. HISTORICITY AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN *FINGERSMITH*

In *Fingersmith*, Waters goes back to the great age of the British Empire, which was engaged in redrawing the global map and forging its new social and sexual order, by inventing a “genealogy of lesbian desire that exists only as shadows at the margins of Victorian literature and history” [2]. The novel evokes the ghost of Henry Spencer Ashbee (1834–1900), the indefatigable compiler of *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (1877) and leading authority on pornography in Britain [3]. His fictional doppelgänger, Mr. Lilly, is simultaneously a scientist and a pervert, an antiquarian and an erotomaniac, a formulaic Gothic parental substitute and a wicked uncle, a corrupter of youth and a pedagogue. The novel employs both traditional scenarios and tropes of sensation fiction and the conventions of the classic Gothic genre, both associated with transgressive women and transgressive representations of women's sexuality [4]. Alongside Mr. Lilly's grand, dilapidated countryside mansion, in which an ambivalent drama of dangerous entanglements, clandestine tastes, possessions, and ambient sexuality is staged, an intricately elaborated intrigue of deception and crime is embedded and meticulously planned in the metropolis's criminal underworld. By locating part of the novel in the Borough of London, with its trade and neglect of infants, farming of babies, girls being forced into prostitution, women being pressed into madhouses because their husbands could then automatically gain control over their assets, the author reworks a specifically urban version of terror that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. Like her nineteenth-century precursors, Charles Dickens and Willkie Collins, whom she both imitates and queers, Waters introduces repeated images and events of convoluted complexity that offer variable and thus evasive clues to mysteries involving crime, family, identity, gender, and sexuality. Waters's narrative mobility duplicates generic Victorian-era Gothic conventions wherein such restlessness signified the dissolution of stable identity [5], further contributing to the author's strategies of questioning a coherent and unified subjectivity, with its legislated ideal, by positioning it amid multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, and fluidity.

## III. PARKER'S IMAGINARY ORIENT

Parker's novel takes readers to the Süleymanic period (1520–1566) of the Ottoman Empire, which embraced a vast territory and diverse peoples. It focuses on a historical figure, Roxolana/Roxelana (Nastia Lisovska) (ca.1504–1558), the most cherished concubine of Süleyman the Magnificent, who was captured by Ottoman vassals during their slave raid into

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Ukraine in 1520 and offered to the Imperial Harem, and who legally married the Sultan and became the first truly powerful woman in the Ottoman dynasty. A brief pre-Ottoman narrative of Roxelana's captivity is set in the Principality of Galicia (western Ukraine), and her native town, surrounded by the Carpathian Mountains, with a castle dominating the landscape, recreates typically Gothic scenery whose sublime tranquility is violently disturbed by the Tatar invasion, turning it into a site of bloody carnage and desolation. However, since the major locus of the novel is Istanbul, and the Imperial Harem in particular, Parker reconstitutes the nineteenth-century fascination with the harem—one of the greatest mystifications of Orientalism, which mirrored Western psychosexual needs and provided the space on which to project fantasies of illicit eroticism. According to Reina Lewis, in the imaginary of the dominant Orientalist discourse, the “harem figures as a polygamous space animated by different forms of tyranny (from despot to women, from eunuchs to women, from mistress to slave, from favorite to rival); of excess (the multitude of women, the opulence of the interior, the passions of the despot); and of perversion (the barbarity of polygamy, the violence of castration, the sapphism of the women locked up without ‘real’ men, and the illicit affairs carried out behind the despot’s back). All these things are found deplorable and enticing by turn” [6]. Thus, *Roxelana & Suleyman* draws on the nineteenth-century pornographic convention in the manner of *The Lustful Turk* (1828), *The Seducing Cardinal’s Amours* (1830), and *Scenes in the Seraglio* (between 1820 and 1830), in which the imaginary harem as a “garden of delight” is featured as a staple concept [7]. The novel seems also to be concurrent with a “fascinating new development in the romance novels,” the burgeoning popularity of another staple figure of Orientalist narratives, the sheikh, which has been “reported in popular news media” since the beginning of the new millennium [8].

#### IV. MAUD’S APPRENTICESHIP AND EMPOWERMENT IN WATERS

While re-visioning and reconstructing the sensibilities of Victorian England, Waters surrounds Mr. Lilly, the only character in the novel that has a historical prototype, with an array of personalities, among whom his niece, Maud, occupies textual centrality and from whose perspective Part Two of the novel is told (Part One is narrated by Sue, who plays a pivotal role in Maud’s sexual awakening). His career as a taxonomist of erotica follows the bibliophilic pursuits of the historical Ashbee, who devoted his life to the exploration of surreptitious literary production and whose work today comprises one of the major collections of pornography in the world known as the Special Case Collection, which is housed in the British Library. It is interesting to note that the authorship of one of the most famous nineteenth-century pornographic texts, Walter’s *My Secret Life: An Erotic Diary of Victorian London* (1888), initially published in Amsterdam in 1888–1894, has been ascribed to Ashbee [9], and Waters talks about this text as one of the sources she uses to re-imagine Victorian sexuality, “tantalizing glimpses of lesbian life, or not even *lesbian* life, but *something* ... that we

might call lesbian” [10]. While studying the “morbid anatomy” of the human mind, Mr. Lilly molds his niece into a classifying, categorizing, organizing, and labeling “tool” to help him catalogue his extensive collection of top-shelf literature. In the landscape of extravagant decline, Mr. Lilly is endowed with uncanny powers as he, not unlike Frankenstein, creates a quasi-monster whom he exiles from the conventionally defined sphere of the feminine, epitomized in the Angel in the House trope of exemplary Victorian womanhood, to the nether regions of sexual impropriety, deviance, and monstrosity.

Under her uncle’s tutelage, Maud becomes both the re-chronicler of male lewd fancies, as she copies his rare texts, and a voice for their “sound-tracking,” as her duties also include reading to Mr. Lilly’s male visitors, who are aroused by her soothing recital of obscene passages. Her peculiar “reading list” includes *The Lustful Turk* (mentioned earlier), whose Oriental sexual fantasies are based on male sexuality of domination, with the exclusive prevalence of “aggressive and sadistic components” [11]; John Cleland’s notorious *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749), which is considered the first erotic novel to be written in English and for which the author was arrested and charged with the corruption of public morals [12]; and *The Curtain Drawn Up, or the Education of Laura*, which was originally published in French in 1788 and appeared in English in 1824, and for the distribution of which, “one of the pillars of the business” was convicted and jailed [13]. The gathering of Mr. Lilly’s gentleman friends is suggestive of the mid-Victorian Cannibal Club that was founded by the “prominent explorer and writer Sir Richard Burton and [which] ran from the 1860s through the 1890s” [14]. It consisted of a group of renowned writers, anthropologists, and lawyers, who were interested in the eroticized forms of domination and submission, from flagellation to erotic anthropology, and “took an anti-orthodox view of censorship and used their connections to import and distribute pornography” [15].

In addition to putting Maud on display for male spectators, Mr. Lilly indulges in a perverse delight in turning her thirteen-year-old body into a site where innocence and corruption collide by dressing her as an ageless child. His dress code preferences may draw on the popular appeal of what was termed as “child-woman,” which embraced “all levels of respectability” in Victorian England and found its expression in existing legislation, according to which, until 1875, the age of consent for girls was twelve, and thirteen between 1875 and 1885 [16]. It is ironic that, even though Mr. Lilly’s designs for his niece’s future presuppose from the start her work with sexually explicit texts, he waits until Maud reaches legal age to initiate her into his venture, as if obeying the law, albeit in a very bizarre way. The conflicting concoction of purity and vice contrived by a “curator of poisons” [17] becomes instrumental in activating transgressive energies. They enable Maud, now an expert in illicit fictions, to redefine societal taboos and norms, and, in a covert way, to appropriate and reverse gender specific literary practices and representations, in which woman has been conventionally assigned the role of a responsive and willing object of male imaginings. Having developed her own

vocabulary to articulate sexual subject matter, she turns into an autonomous subject of erotic desire, who is capable of delineating her own territory for manifestations of both creativity and sexuality. When Sue returns to now decrepit Briar, she secretly observes Maud sitting in the library at her late uncle's table: "She was writing, writing. She had an elbow on the desk, a cheek upon her upturned hand, her fingers half-curved over her eyes. ... Her brows were drawn into a frown. Her hands were bare, her sleeves put back, her figures dark with smudges of ink. ... Then she lifted the pen, and turned and turned it, as if not sure what to put next. Again she murmured, beneath her breath. Then she wrote again; and then she moved to dip her pen in a jar of ink" [18].

Having reclaimed her personal space, Maud can explore and traverse it in any direction and has the freedom to renegotiate its borders. It is Maud's transgression that is instrumental in opening up a supplementary and indefinite site for proclaiming lesbian sexuality. Such generative potentials and powers resulting from the violation of diverse compulsory boundaries are incisively explained by Foucault: "Transgression is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside ... Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time" [19]. While her uncle is a pedantic classifier, systematizer, and consumer of his secret collection, Maud transcends her instructor both by becoming a writer of pornography herself, who transgresses conventional heterosexual scenarios, and by exploring her erotic persona with Sue in a private feminized space, without the male "protector" figure. By the end of the novel, as Kathleen Frederickson observes, "pornography has been defanged of its capacity to act as an instrument of male domination and positioned as a means of sustaining both the finances and the erotic imaginations of its two queer, female protagonists" [20].

#### V. MASTERY AND EROTIC ASSEMBLAGES IN *ROXELANA* & *SULEYMAN*

Similarly to Maud, Roxelana also undergoes erotic schooling by the Sultan and transcends it to use her sexuality as an instrument of power to "manipulate the greatest man on Earth through ... [her] subtle and feminine ways" [21]. Although Roxelana's and Suleyman's mutual passion, which is ignited at first sight [22], forms the novel's backbone, Parker, like Waters, produces an extensive novelistic narrative, bringing readers to different locations while following a variety of characters and plot lines. Thus, in addition to characters who draw on historical figures, he introduces Dariusz, a young boy from Roxelana's hometown, who follows his beloved Roxelana (called Aleksandra in her pre-Ottoman life) to Istanbul in the aftermath of the fateful Tatar raid, and who miraculously survives, regardless of the fact that he was "killed" and mourned twice prior to his voyage to the center of the Ottoman Empire. In Istanbul he is selected to become a janissary and ends up in the personal service of the Sultan. However implausible Dariusz's survivalist abilities are, his successful career does not look all

that bizarre, since the ranks of the Sultan's palace administration and janissary guard were filled with young boys from conquered Christian territories [23], in 1438 Süleyman formed the janissaries "into a *corps d'élite* at the personal command of the Sultan, and throughout the sixteenth century they became a feared and favoured army open to talent and sensational promotion" [24]. It is in Dariusz that the specter of homoeroticism begins to shadow his grand heterosexual passion for Roxelana; upon his arrival in Istanbul, he is even ready to be castrated in order to obtain the position of eunuch in the Imperial Harem. Passing through various narrative twists and turns, he finally lands in a scenario of triangulated desire; in addition to being in love with Roxelana, he also falls in love with Suleyman, and is loved by both of them. Dariusz enjoys their ménage à trois, sacrifices his life to protect Roxelana and, presumably, his child during the Grand Vizier's attempt at a coup d'état, and dies in the arms of the grieving Sultan and Roxelana. What is utilized in the novel is not exactly a Girardian type of erotic triangle, in which women are assigned peripheral roles, because the real focus of the triangle is on male rivals. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains, the "triangles Girard traces are most often those in which two males are rivals for a female; it is the bond between males that he most assiduously uncovers" [25]. While both Girard and Sedgwick examine homosocial desire, with woman as conduit for the two men's cravings, in Parker's case Suleyman and Dariusz, renamed Davud, have an explicitly homoerotic liaison. At the same time, they both have a heterosexual relationship with Roxelana, who feels "secure between the warmth of the two men of her life. She was the diamond between the two emeralds of Europe and Asia. She was Istanbul" [26]. This sexual metaphor that effeminizes Istanbul, once possessed by the Europeans, then conquered by the Turks, later to be inseminated by both cultures, clearly articulates the interimplications of sexuality and power in Parker's (and Western) constructs of the East.

Yet, this is not the only case of the author's variations in taxonomizing desire to create the allure of erotic plentitude. Suleyman has sexual relationships with his childhood friend, Ibrahim, whom he appoints as Grand Vizier and who betrays him; with Hafsa, his mother, thus breaking the taboo on incest; with Davud and Roxelana, being in love with both and forming heterosexual as well as homosexual duets and mixed trios; and with the odalisques in the harem. In addition to her incestuous liaison with Suleyman, which he ends upon becoming sultan, Hafsa has sex with Ibrahim, thus crossing the generational line and creating another triangle, etc. While the novel's action devolves into a series of heterosexual and homosexual encounters, homoeroticism reigns supreme among them, as the manifestations of male erotic desire occur pervasively in the palace, on battlefields, in military pavilions, in parks and gardens, and on waterfronts. The overabundance of these encounters and overinflated descriptions of various types of hardening "manhoods" exemplify what Joseph Allen Boone sees as the "phantasmic intensity with which Western imaginations have associated the Muslim world with male homoeroticism," adding that "no other geographical domain into which the Anglo-European gaze has fixed its sometimes imperial, sometimes covetous, sometimes simply curious eye

has been so associated with the specter of male-male sexuality over the centuries” [27].

Despite the profusion of male erotic bodies in Parker’s text, they seem to lack exemplary hypermasculinity. It is ironic that his Suleyman is not so much a warrior on the battlefield—war episodes are replete with details of homoerotic temptations and lust—or a mythical Oriental despot, but a paragon of magnificence, immense wealth, and exquisite splendor. Furthermore, he does not fit perfectly into the topos of the Lustful Turk either; rather, he belongs to what I would call the Amorous Turk type. In representing the Sultan this way, Parker, on the one hand, follows the eighteenth-century turquerie tradition, which “served not to establish European superiority over Ottomans, as later representations would; on the contrary, ... turquerie gained its power from a deep admiration for the Ottoman elite” [28]. On the other, the author seems to “effeminize” his Suleyman representing him as weak and inherently susceptible to his mother’s and wife’s influences in shaping state politics. It is his mother, Hafsa, who questions Suleyman’s greatness, regardless of the fact that historical Süleyman not only undertook unprecedentedly successful military campaigns but also “oversaw the development of what came to be regarded as the most characteristic achievements of Ottoman civilization in the fields of law, literature, art, and architecture” [29], and claims that most of the Ottoman expansion “was engineered by ... [her husband] Sultan Selim. Suleyman inherited an empire that was well on its way to becoming the centre of the world. Any fool could have stepped into his sleepers and looked just as powerful and invincible” [30]. She bluntly predicts that the Sultan’s faith in Ibrahim will lead to his demise, and her gloomy prognostications prove to be correct. While the Ottoman part of the novel starts as a romance of a fragrant and sumptuous quasi-idyll and great promise set in a place of unimaginable luxury and sensual opulence, it ends with scenes of bloody carnage and devastation that become a backdrop for sentimental proclamations of the Sublime couple’s and the dying Davud’s eternal love.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Although both authors choose the issue of sexually explicit representations as their subject matter, they approach it in distinctly different ways. At the end of her quest, Waters’s Maud, as an exemplary disciple, transposes into the text both her peculiar bibliographic apprenticeship and personal exploration of desiring, deferring, and possessing. Thus, while *Fingersmith* can be described as a work of historiographic metafiction because it is about woman’s empowerment by her access, through various sociocultural, literary, and linguistic registers, to public discourse, history, and the right to signify, Parker’s novel is a highly eroticized Oriental fantasy wherein numerous graphic episodes of sexual encounters prevail over historical background and character development, and are expected to produce frissons of sensual pleasure. However, in spite of these essential differences, each text, in its own way and to a different extent, solicits complex responses and provokes illuminating and often unsettling discoveries related to previously unarticulated

aspects of social identity: *Roxelana & Suleyman*, by responding to the rapidly changing and vigorous current sexual scene that demands both revisiting “archetypal” mythologies of erotic pleasures and their re-inscriptions on desiring bodies; and *Fingersmith*, by retracing the unseen and unsaid of culture, creating a new signifying system for lesbian sexuality, and constructing another imaginary line in women’s literary tradition.

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