

## **“Coming out” with a bang. Rewriting the past in Sarah Waters’s historiographical metafiction *Tipping the Velvet*.**

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Sarah Waters was born in Wales in 1966. She has already won many literary prizes, including the Somerset Maugham Award, and was Author of the Year 2002 at the British Book Awards. She was also put on the list of the most promising young writers in Britain in 2003 by the renowned literary review *Granta*. This recognition is all the more surprising and unusual as Sarah Waters is a lesbian, but a lesbian who has managed to become mainstream and whose books are not relegated to sections reserved for gay and lesbian writing. In fact her first novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, was even adapted by Andrew Davies for BBC drama in 2002 and had a lot of success, even though, as I shall try to show, Waters talks about lesbianism in it in no uncertain terms and seems to use it to “come out” with a bang.

Up to date Sarah Waters has written three novels, *Tipping the Velvet* 1998, *Affinity* 1999 and *Fingersmith* 2002. They are all set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and seem to have many things in common with the literature of that time even though they all deal with lesbian desire, which was a complete taboo in Victorian England. However, like many postmodern writers Sarah Waters uses her fiction to play around with the past and bring the notion of history into question by showing facets which were ignored. As Linda Hutcheon says in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, historiographic metafiction “uses and abuses, installs and then subverts the very concepts it challenges.”<sup>1</sup> She argues that this double movement both presents and undermines the discourses of history and the conventions of literature and makes it clear that

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: Fiction, History and Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 3.

they are just discursive constructs. After seeing how Sarah Waters installs 19<sup>th</sup> century literary conventions and the history of the time, I will try to show how she subverts them to rewrite another story, “her/story”, instead of “his/tory”. I will show how, in *Tipping the Velvet*, she “comes out” with a bang, making the invisible all too visible by putting lesbians in the limelight and not only rewriting history but reinventing it. Finally I shall try to see how this exaggeration does not only reinvent the past but is, in many ways, also about and even more to do with the present.

There is nothing surprising about the fact that Sarah Waters writes about the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as it was a century she really loved. She says in an interview that she was a big fan of 19<sup>th</sup> century literature in general and liked Wilkie Collins, Thackeray and Dickens in particular.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, many young authors in the eighties and nineties, in the wake of John Fowles, were resuscitating, rewriting and re/righting (putting to rights) the Victorian social, sexual and literary conventions. Besides sexuality and literature in the nineteenth century was a subject Sarah Waters really knew about, as her PhD had been on the history of gay and lesbian writing at that time. In fact, as she has often said, it was only a small step for her from writing her thesis to writing her own novels on the subject.<sup>3</sup>

*Tipping the Velvet* is set in the 1880’s and 1890’s and at first sight has a very nineteenth century realist ring to it. The characters and place are introduced in detail in the first chapter and the novel uses many of the literary conventions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. First of all it could even be said to be a kind of three-decker as, although it is written in one volume, it is in three very distinct parts.<sup>4</sup> It is a kind of picaresque tale in which the heroine, Nancy, leaves the country and her family to go to London where she has many adventures and discovers the seedy districts of Soho, and its collection of grotesque, perverse, unsavoury characters worthy of Dickens. This enables Waters to introduce many gothic elements, long dark passageways, winding roads and locked doors which herald, in 19<sup>th</sup> century style, the discovery of Nancy’s hidden desire. *Tipping the Velvet* could also be said to be a kind of *bildungsroman* as Nancy leaves her family in search of her identity and a place in society. The three parts of the novel correspond to different stages in her search and to the typical *bildungsroman* passage from

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<sup>2</sup> In an interview on her official website Sarah Waters says : “Yes, I’m a big Dickens fan. His preoccupations with city life, and with the life of London and the Thames - in particular with class, with desire, with guilt, and with the gothic traumas of maturation and love – still seem enormously resonant to me, and are those I suppose of my own writing.” : <http://www.sarahwaters.com>

<sup>3</sup> An interview on: <http://www.booksense.com/people/archive/waterssarah.jsp>

<sup>4</sup> These three parts are used in the BBC adaptation of the novel.

innocence to experience. In the first book Nancy discovers the world of the music hall and her first love, Kitty Butler, who jilts her. In the second she discovers a world of sexual depravity and becomes the “*tart*” of a rich woman called Diana Lethaby, and in the third she discovers the world of politics and true love, in the form of Florence Banner, and in doing so, her own voice.

However, Sarah Waters not only installs many of the 19<sup>th</sup> century literary conventions, she also installs her novel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by referring to people and events of the time and by giving detailed descriptions of places and settings. For example she describes in great detail the Whitsable oyster parlours of Nancy’s youth, the music hall world of London and the districts of Soho and Bethnal Green, naming both the music halls and numerous streets. She also refers to such well known 19<sup>th</sup> century literary characters as Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray and Hardy’s Sue Bridehead and some of Diana’s friends come to her fortieth birthday party dressed up as the Ladies of Llangollen, a famous 19<sup>th</sup> century Welsh lesbian couple.<sup>5</sup> She even introduces the historical figure Eleanor Marx into the story as her photo adorns Florence’s fireplace. Indeed, in the third part of her novel Waters mentions some of the most important political issues of the time such as “The Class question”, “The Woman Question” and “The Irish Question” (226)<sup>6</sup> as Florence, like Eleanor Marx before her, takes an active part in these movements. It is true that at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Britain “The Woman Question” and women’s sexuality was an issue of debate and Eleanor Marx was the typical “new woman” who tried to live by her socialist, political and sexual beliefs. So by using all these different strategies Waters validates the fictional world she is writing about, so as to “convince” the reader of the veracity of her story.

Yet if Waters sets up this historical background and these 19<sup>th</sup> century literary conventions, it is, in true postmodern style, in order to subvert them. As an article published in *le Monde* points out “*On croit partir d’un environnement connu, l’Angleterre victorienne de Dickens ou de Wilkie Collins, et l’on se réveille dans une sorte d’envers du décor parfaitement étrange et transgressif. Un monde sapphique, libertine, decadent, virtuose. Le résultat est unique – un peu comme un tableau de Gainsborough qui aurait été retouché à*

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that Nancy’s first love, Kitty, has the same surname as one of these ladies, that is to say Butler.

<sup>6</sup> All the quotations from *Tipping the Velvet* are taken from : Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998; London: Virago, 1999)

*l'ordinateur par Gilbert et George* ». <sup>7</sup> Indeed, the characters, events and places Waters chooses to mention and the hotch-potch of literary references all underline her playful distance, and if Victorian three-decker novels were destined for family reading this is certainly not the case of *Tipping the Velvet*. The heroine of this *bildungsroman*, is a woman and a lesbian to boot and, far from respecting the accepted norm in the patriarchal, bourgeois society of the time, Nancy's search for identity, a sort of lesbian "rake's progress", leads her to reject heterosexual love and to land up fighting for socialism. She doesn't settle down and marry and become "the angel in the house", as the book finishes with her starting out on a new life with Florence, a happy end which certainly does not correspond to 19<sup>th</sup> century requirements by restoring social order – quite the opposite. <sup>8</sup>

Indeed by giving a lesbian a voice in *Tipping the Velvet*, through the first person narrator Nancy, and letting her tell "her/story" Sarah Waters introduces into her historiographic metafiction new possibilities, creating new norms and bringing into question the nineteenth century's belief in binary gender categories. Nancy, thanks to "her/story" introduces into official history what the record left out and opens up silent spaces to fill them with alternative feminine voices and values. If the voice and values of the *fin de siècle* "new woman" were considered to represent a danger to the patriarchal order and, as Elaine Showalter says, "threatened to turn the world upside down and to be on top in a wild carnival of social and sexual misrule"<sup>9</sup>, it is obvious that lesbians were an even greater threat as they could create a world of "social and sexual misrule" without men at all and they didn't even need the masculine gaze to find their identity.

It is this "wild carnival of social and sexual misrule" which Waters seems to stage in *Tipping the Velvet*, which she goes as far as calling, in a most unvictorian fashion, a "lesbian romp"<sup>10</sup>. Indeed in her first novel Waters "comes out" with a bang and explodes into the 19<sup>th</sup> century world she describes by not only making the invisible visible but by making it all too visible or "overvisible", thus "tipping the scales" by not just rewriting history but reinventing

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<sup>7</sup> *Le Monde* 14/01/05

<sup>8</sup> If male homosexuality was widely acknowledged and condemned in the Victorian period, the existence of lesbianism, as we know it today, was unthought of before the 1880's. Queen Victoria even declined to pass legislation against it as she refused to believe that women would or could give themselves over to such practices. It was accepted that women could form "romantic friendships" but nothing more. Any sexual desire among women was considered impossible or a form of madness.

<sup>9</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy* (1991; London: Virago Press, 1992) 38.

<sup>10</sup> Waters uses this expression in an interview given on BBC 4 on Tuesday February 11<sup>th</sup> which can be found on her official website: <http://www.sarahwaters.com>

it. She herself admits that, because of the shortage of material on lesbianism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “she took the chance, intentionally anachronistic, to pinch for women the material she had gleaned about the male, upper-middle-class homosexual circles of the 1890’s and their encounters with ‘rough trade’.”<sup>11</sup> She in fact follows Monique Witting’s famous plea that we should “make an effort to remember, and failing that, invent”<sup>12</sup> and it is an excessive carnivalesque, wild 19<sup>th</sup> century world that Waters invents for her “lesbian romp” in order to underline the relativity of gender and what was considered to be “natural behaviour”.

In carnival time what is banned by society is allowed, becomes visible and part of a spectacle to be seen by the general public. In this respect what H  l  ne Fau says in an article on Jeanette Winterson could be applied perfectly to *Tipping the Velvet* and the strategies used by Waters to stage her “lesbian romp”,

Les termes latins *obscenus* et *ob scaenum*, anc  tres de l’actuel obsc  ne, qualifient respectivement ce qui est de mauvais pr  sage et ce qui est hors sc  ne, c’est-  dire ce qui ne peut   tre l  galement montr   sur la sc  ne (du th   tre). L’obsc  ne serait donc ce qui a   t   contraint de se tenir    l’  cart d’un visible autoris   et de se r  fugier dans les entrelacs d’un invisible « tabouis   ». La contrainte menant    la transgression des interdits, l’obsc  ne entre en guerre contre le d  clar   correct. Au lieu de dispara  tre de la sc  ne et de s’abandonner librement au gouffre d’un invisible trop invisible, il devient encore plus visible que le visible lui-m  me.<sup>13</sup>

This is what happens in *Tipping the Velvet* as Sarah Waters literally puts lesbians on the stage and lets them masquerade so that they become “trop visible”, all too visible, and dethrone the norm. The heterosexual norm, for example, seems to be practically non-existent. Kitty’s marriage with Walter Bliss is not as blissful as his name suggests, but just a marriage of convenience which Kitty accepts as she can’t assume her lesbianism in public. In fact there are very few men in the novel and the male characters play very secondary roles and are, more often than not, homosexuals, or, like Ralph Banner, militants for the socialist and feminist cause, and thus misfits in the patriarchal, bourgeois society. By inverting heterosexual norms and conventions, Waters presents to the reader, to use Bakhtin’s terms, “a world inside out”, and liberates us from the prevailing point of view of the world at that time. What was on the periphery is given an exaggeratedly central place. For instance, it is interesting to note that even the structure of the book reflects this as the most provocative scenes, those which deal with lesbian sexuality in all its excess, those which ban men from the

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from an interview on: [http://www.virago.co.uk/virago/meet/waters\\_extract.asp](http://www.virago.co.uk/virago/meet/waters_extract.asp)

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Patricia Duncker, *Sisters and Strangers: An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 123.

<sup>13</sup> H  l  ne Fau, « A la recherche du correct dans *Sexing the Cherry* de Jeanette Winterson : monstration obsc  ne et inhibition d  cente, » *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines* Num  ro 24, juin 2003, 86.

footlights and make the invisible “all too visible”, are to be found in the second part of the book, that is to say in the middle, as if lesbian sexuality, which had been denied in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is no longer ex-centric but very much central.

However, the idea of staging the socially abnormal, that is to say lesbian sexuality, is present in each part – or should we say each act - of the novel. Nan moves from the music hall in part one, to masquerading in the streets and Diana’s “brothel” in part two, to finish on the political platform in part three.<sup>14</sup> She is a born performer and right from the beginning we are told that she has “*a fondness -- you might say, a kind of passion - for the music hall*” (5) and the word “passion” is, of course, very significant. The stage and the music hall have always been linked to the idea of illegitimate power. Like the carnival they are a space of freedom and transgression, a sort of entre-deux where ex-centric people can play the roles they really desire, a space where lesbians, the entre-deux par excellence – girls dressed as men – can perform and create new ways of being. On the stage the “superego” is dethroned and the “id” is allowed to come to the surface and express itself. The intimate becomes public and all forms of modesty are forgotten.

This is obviously the case in *Tipping the Velvet*. Nancy draws us into her intimate world right from the beginning, as on the very first page of the novel she talks to us directly and asks us numerous questions as if she were on stage, addressing an audience. She turns the reader into a spectator and just as she gazes at Kitty on the music hall stage, we gaze at her masquerade, and her cross-dressing. If gender is a social construct in which clothing and appearance play an important role, Nancy’s way of dressing certainly goes to prove this. On stage with Kitty she dresses as a boy in suits and sailor costumes but once out in the streets she perfects her theatrical costume and gets her act down to such a fine art that both men and women take her for a boy (194), which is hardly surprising when we consider the excessive care she takes. She removes the all too feminine tapers from her jacket but also pays attention to the slightest detail of her appearance right down to the underwear, buying “*shoes and socks, singlets and drawers and combinations*” (195), cutting her hair to get rid of her “*old effeminate locks*” (195), bandaging her bosom to get rid of “*the more subtle curves*”(195) and finally wearing at her groin, as a final excessive touch, “*a handkerchief or a glove, neatly*

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<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note that in the BBC adaptation of the book, the political rally does not take place in Victoria Park but in a music hall so that Nancy is very clearly back on the stage. The novel underlines this parallel between the political platform and the stage: “*It’s all the same you know whether it’s a stage or a platform.*” (440)

*folded, to simulate the bulges of a modest little cock*" (195). Half-woman, half-man, she becomes the sort of in-between, ex-centric being that the official established order ignored but that the carnival world relished and made visible.

It is this in-between creature that appeals to Diana Lethaby when she picks her off the street. Nancy becomes Diana's "*tart*" and continues to act, but this time in front of an specialized audience, as she dresses up and puts on *tableaux vivants* for Diana and her lesbian friends. However, she also continues to act for us, the reader, once again making what was normally invisible "all too visible". Indeed, in the second, central part of the book, we become spectators of kind of peepshow, first in Soho where we see her "*cock-handling*" and "*cock-sucking*", and then at Diana's where we are given a very scopic view of the couple's sexual practices. The respectability and the taboos of Victorian society are left in the wings as Waters brings into the footlights scenes of crude lesbian sexuality verging on what Bakhtin called, in *Rabelais and his World*, "*grotesque realism*", that is to say a realism which gives a bawdy, exaggerated, very visual treatment of the human body in order to dismantle all the stifling orthodoxies.

If Diana herself is bigger than life with her almost insatiable desire, it is above all her dildo that steals the show as it "comes out" of a precious locked casket right "bang" slap in the middle of the book as if it were the star turn in the spectacle, and of course it is:

For on top of the jumble, on a square of velvet, lay the queerest, lewdest thing I ever saw. It was a kind of harness, made of leather: belt-like, and yet not quite a belt, for though it had one wide strap with buckles on it, two narrower, shorter bands were fastened to this and they, too, were buckled. For one alarming moment I thought it might be a horse's bridle; then I saw what the straps and the buckles supported. It was a cylinder of leather, rather longer than the length of my hand and about as fat, in width, as I could grip. One end was rounded and slightly enlarged, and the other fixed firm to a flattened base; to this, by hoops of brass, the belt and the narrower bands were all also fastened.

It was, in short, a dildo. (241)

"In short" is hardly the right term as we are given a very minute, long description of this amazingly intricate article, which we discover by following Nancy's gaze, and moreover it isn't as short as all that being "*rather longer than the length of [her] hand*"! Men and above all the penis, that male claim to fame, are brought down with a burlesque bump here because Nancy, as her fascinated scopic gaze shows all too well, obviously prefers the substitute to the real thing! This preference is made clear straight away as our peepshow includes different close-ups of Diana and Nancy making love with it and their hot, sweating, moaning bodies

seem very full of life and movement compared to the inanimate dildo:

At first I held her hips, to guide them; then I returned a hand to her drawers, and let the fingers of the other creep round her thigh to her buttocks. My mouth I fastened now on one nipple, now on the other, sometimes finding the salt of her flesh, sometimes the dampening cotton of her chemise.[...]I saw myself as from a distance, straddled by a stranger in an unknown house, buckled inside that monstrous instrument, panting with pleasure and sweating with lust. Then in another moment I could think nothing, only shudder; and the pleasure – mine and hers - found its aching, arching crisis, and was spent. (243)

In the second part of her novel Waters's peepshow doesn't only make "overvisible" certain crude aspects of lesbian sexuality, it also includes very crude language to go with it. As Elisabeth Angel-Perez points out in an article on immodesty in contemporary British drama, staging the invisible is not only seeing and showing but hearing : "*A un theatre de geste, s'adjoint un theatre de la parole. A l'appui de cette sémiotisation, de ce "voir", de ce "gestus" visuel de l'impudeur, s'élabore une langue dont la crudité résulte paradoxalement d'un travail sophistiqué. [...] Quoiqu'inflationniste, cette langue argotique restitue la coupure, le manque à dire, la privation propre à la litote ne serait-ce que parce que parfois, on ne comprend pas tout.*"<sup>15</sup> The shy Nancy of the first part of the book who talks about sexual desire as "it", now knows a thing or two about life, and talks about her love-making, or rather fucking, in no uncertain terms:

"You're the boldest bitch, with the cleverest quim. If fucking were a country – well fuck me you'd be it's queen ...!"

These were the words which, pricked on by my mistress, I used now – lewd words which shocked and stirred me even as I said them. I had never thought to use them with Kitty. I had not *fucked* her, we had not *frigged*; we had only ever kissed and trembled. It was not a *quim* or a *cunt* she had between her legs – indeed, in all our nights together, I don't believe we ever gave a name to it at all..."(267).

As part of her research on gay and lesbian literature, Waters had read a fair amount of 19<sup>th</sup> century pornography and used dictionaries of slang and vulgar words. She seems to introduce a vast number of words from these dictionaries into her novel using such "specialized" words as *masher*, *knocking shop*, *rent boy*, *toms*, *queens*, *uncles*, *mary-annes*, *fairies*, *a horgy* etc and a whole series of vulgar, bawdy words such as, *bugger*, *cock-handler*, *cock-sucker*, *trollop*, *strumpet*, *slut*, *hussy*, *a poke*, *a prick* and so on and so forth. Her lesbian heroine Nancy is definitely given a voice, and what a voice! Once again the introduction of a new voice, especially such a voice, is destabilizing for the established order. The Word with a

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<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Angel-Pérez, « Le théâtre anglais contemporain : la scène impudique », *Etudes britanniques contemporaines* Numéro 21, décembre 2001, 10

capital W is no longer holy but has definitely and definitively come for a fall, or gone out with a bang!

Not only is the vocabulary crude and surprising in *Tipping the Velvet*, but Sarah Waters also uses language to spin metaphors with sexual connotations throughout the novel. Nancy is called a “mermaid” on several occasions no doubt because she comes from the seaside but also because she is a funny sort of girl, a half-breed, a hybrid sexual being. The most recurrent metaphor, however, that of the oyster, corresponds particularly well to the idea of making the invisible all too visible. The meaning is pretty obvious right from the start, but Waters makes it clearer and clearer for us as the book goes along. Nancy was born in an oyster parlour and her mother even told her “*they had found [her] as a baby in an oyster-shell*” (4). She certainly “comes out” of her shell during the book and reveals what is hidden inside. Nancy, the oyster girl, knows all there is to know about oysters and teaches Kitty to open them, telling her not to spill the liquor as it is “*the tastiest part*” (48), and, just in case the reader doesn’t understand, her father ironically makes everything very explicit to Kitty when she visits the shop, without realising that what he says concerns Kitty and his daughter directly: “*Don’t let the beards mislead you. For the oyster, you see, is what you might call a real queer fish – now a he, now a she, as quite takes its fancy. A regular morphodite, in fact!*” (49). Considering all this, it is not surprising that Nancy cooks oysters for Florence when she tries to woo her and that the BBC adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet* begins each episode with scores of open oysters in the sea being washed onto the shore. Waters plays around with her reader<sup>16</sup> and at the end, we can certainly understand the full import of Nan’s first question, which opens the novel: “*Have you ever tasted a Whitstable oyster? If you have, you will remember it.*” (3)

We certainly will remember it as Sarah Waters has made it’s meaning all too visible. She seems to be quite a virtuoso and her spectacle is spectacular in all the senses of the word. We have action, costumes, dialogue, noises, lights, wit and drama. It is clear she wants to give lesbianism the place it should have had in the history of the nineteenth century, but it is also clear that she provokes, exaggerates and reinvents history to do so. Her artifice, and her exaggeration are typically postmodern and underline the fact that she is writing fiction, and that history is also just discourse, which can vary depending on who is speaking and when. However, we can wonder if Sarah Waters’s real aim doesn’t go further than just “coming out”

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<sup>16</sup> She no doubt plays around with her own name as the importance of the sea and oysters seems a significant choice for a lesbian called Waters.

and putting lesbianism back on the map. Why does she invent and exaggerate so much? What about the humour? Can't the novel be said to be writing as much, if not more, about the present than the past? Can't she be standing back and looking at the present from a distance as well as the past? Sarah Waters hints at this herself when she asks the following question in an article she wrote with Laura Dean significantly called "Making up lost time: contemporary lesbian writing and the invention of history", "*Should the popular novel be a site to recuperate the names and lives of "suitable" or famous lesbians of the past, or is it better approached as a starting-point to invent a "history" haunted by the present and understood to take its authority from the imperatives of contemporary lesbian identities?"*"<sup>17</sup> In fact can't her "lesbian romp" be an exaggerated, amused look at lesbians and lesbian writers and literary critics and schools of thought today? Can't she be to a certain extent making fun of herself and her kind, and the ideas of the average reader?

It is obvious that in *Tipping the Velvet* Sarah Waters is having fun. Her crude sexual scenes and language could be pornographic if Nancy didn't enjoy them and if Waters didn't poke fun at the same time by her word-play and linguistic wit. The "in short" for the dildo, and her first question about oysters are good examples. She also often uses double entendre for her crude words either emptying them of their sexual content or adding it, as, for example, when she says Diana "pricks her on" (267). She plays around with names and this creates a playful postmodern distancing effect, as they are so obviously chosen by Waters for all their double connotations, their in-betweenness. The name Nancy foreshadows Nancy's instability concerning her sexuality and gender. Right from the start Nancy could be said to be, not so much a nancy boy as a new hybrid being, a nancy girl.<sup>18</sup> Her lovers' names are also hybrid. The name Kitty is very feminine whereas her surname Butler is male<sup>19</sup> and the same can be said for Florence Banner.<sup>20</sup> As for Diana, it is the feminine name of the very masculine goddess of hunting who imposed her will on others.<sup>21</sup> However, it is no doubt the word "queer" which Sarah Waters plays around with most as it appears on nearly every page and

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<sup>17</sup> Laura Doan and Sarah Waters, « Making up for lost time: contemporary lesbian writing and the invention of history », 2000, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Nancy even takes on a stage name, Nan King which once again links the feminine and the masculine and underlines both her quest for her real identity and the hybrid carnival world of disguise where things are not what they seem to be.

<sup>19</sup> It was also the name of one of the Ladies of Llangollen

<sup>20</sup> Florence's very feminine Christian name could refer to Florence Nightingale who while performing the very feminine job of being a nurse nevertheless fought to transform society, and Florence's surname Banner does indeed suggest her very unfeminine political activities.

<sup>21</sup> Diana's surname, Lethaby, suggests she is as hard as old leather and reminds us of the leather strap of her masculine dildo.

always has a double meaning as, for example, when Nancy says; “*I must have been a queer sort of tenant for Mrs Best*” (183). Waters laughs at the word, and at herself at the same time, but empties it of its derogatory meaning by associating it with her heroine’s attributes of strength, independence and self-assertiveness. She writes a sort of “Queer Manifesto” but a celebratory carnivalesque one.<sup>22</sup>

If Sarah Waters plays around with words and their sexual connotations, it seems obvious to me that in *Tipping the Velvet* she also plays around with lesbian ideas. The novel can be read not only as a hotch-potch of 19<sup>th</sup> literary ingredients but also as a stereotyped hotch-potch of what various lesbian writers and groups think today. The three different parts of her novel, for example, seem to be based on the three main schools of thought among lesbian writers and critics. Some think lesbian writing should deal with the psychological difficulty of “coming out”, of recognizing and then assuming one’s sexuality, which Waters writes about in part one, others think, as in part two, it should talk about lesbian sexuality and eroticism, and the third group think it should talk about the political dimension of lesbianism and this is what the final part of the novel is about. Waters not only seems to make fun of these differences by bringing them all together but by doing so she also gets rid of rifts and divisions.

Linked to these different issues is the debate about what being a lesbian means and the nature of lesbian relationships. Are lesbians more caring, sensitive and gentle than their heterosexual counterparts and less fraught by tensions and imbalance of power? Are they to be seen in an ideal light or are they equally prone to power struggles? In *Tipping the Velvet*, Sarah Waters seems to give examples of many different kinds of relationships. Her lesbianism is not a utopian alternative to the difficulties and violence often associated with heterosexuality. She wants to show that lesbians are not so very different from heterosexuals and that relationships can be both based on mutual love and understanding or on relations of power, as is the case with Diana, who symbolically reproduces the model of male domination with her dildo. So in true postmodern spirit Waters favours the idea of the multiple and, playing with the readers’ stereotypes no doubt, she gives us a whole range of different types of lesbians from different social classes. Her novel begins with Nancy, the naïve, innocent, romantic young girl who discovers her lesbianism, and with Kitty, the lesbian who can’t

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<sup>22</sup> The activist gay and lesbian group Queer Nation founded in New York in 1990 to help people suffering from AIDS and to eliminate homophobia in all its forms did the same thing. They wanted to reclaim the word “queer” by turning it from a negative into a positive term, a symbol of power and pride.

assume her sexual difference. It then moves onto the dominating Diana, and the political activist, Florence, before finishing with Nancy who, at the end, has become the fully-fledged, street-wise, self-assuming lesbian. These different stereotypes, with all their qualities and failings, are often associated with different clothes or costumes worn to suit the part they want to perform and all the exaggerated play around clothes could also be read as a rather exaggerated pastiche or even parody of feminist writing and feminist ideas on role play, masquerade and on gender being a social construct.<sup>23</sup>

However, if Sarah Waters makes fun of her sisters and underlines certain failings and contemptible sides, it is just poking fun, not harsh criticism. After all she does give her book a happy end, as Nancy does fight her way through the jungle and find her identity and a balanced sort of love at the end with Florence, in the same way as a heterosexual girl would do. No one is perfect, we are all human beings with our qualities and our failings and our sexual desires, and we should all be able to stand back as Sarah Waters does and look at ourselves from a distance. It is her sense of fun and her refusal to idealize which no doubt helped Sarah Waters to become a popular mainstream writer. By putting us in the know, she takes the drama out of lesbianism and, by laughing at herself and her sisters and at our own representations of lesbians, she tips the scales in its favour.

To conclude I would like to say that in her historiographic metafiction, *Tipping the Velvet*, even if Sarah Waters does rewrite history, or rather reinvent it, by making the invisible all too visible, I can't help feeling that what she is really doing is talking about the present and introducing us to lesbianism today. In fact, by "coming out with a bang", she is in a way taking the drama out of female homosexuality which is still, whether we like it or not, very much a taboo. This is a real *tour de force* and it is quite normal therefore that Waters should finish her novel by "going out with a bang", and she goes out with a double one. First she symbolically marks the end of Nancy's and our initiation by revealing the meaning of the title which is, hey presto, a Victorian expression for cunnilingus (416). Secondly she finishes her novel with a kind of celebration, the socialist rally. At this rally all the main actors in her spectacle, Kitty, Diana, Zena, Diana's lesbian maid, and of course Florence and Ralph, take their final bow, and the novel ends, as a true spectacle should, with an ovation: "*From the speaker's tent there came a muffled cheer and a rising ripple of applause*" (472). Sarah Waters too takes her final bow, and she also deserves applause for putting on her extravagant,

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<sup>23</sup> This exaggeration is underlined in the BBC adaptation.

