FEMINIST AND LESBIAN STRATEGIES OF READING AND THE NOVELS OF SARAH WATERS AND JEANETTE WINTERTON

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Abstract

This thesis examines strategies of feminist and lesbian reading in relation to the novels of Sarah Waters and Jeanette Winterson, focusing primarily on Waters's Affinity (1999) and The Night Watch (2006), and Winterson's Sexing the Cherry (1989), Written on the Body (1992), and The PowerBook (2000). Three strategies of reading—reading as romance, reading as quest and reading as revision—are developed and explored, one in each chapter, in an effort to address the overarching question of this thesis: how do we read as feminists and/or lesbians? This question generates two subsequent research questions which frame the readings of Waters’s and Winterson’s novels offered in the individual chapters of this thesis. In the case of Winterson’s fiction and particularly in Chapter Two, this question is, how useful is it to continue to read Winterson as a “lesbian writer?” In the case of Waters’s fiction and particularly in Chapter Three, this question is, is Waters’s project really to write the lesbian back into history? Together, these questions reflect a more general research question which draws together the fiction of Waters and Winterson by asking, how can readings of both writers’ work move beyond the expectations placed on the “lesbian author”? This thesis contributes original research to the field of contemporary women’s writing by advancing new ideas and arguments which aim to widen the contexts in which the fiction of these two authors is read. In the case of Winterson’s fiction, an original reading is presented which establishes the significance of her fiction to a literary tradition of narrative romance. In the case of Waters’s fiction, an original reading is presented which establishes the revisionary project of her fiction as a concern to enable the reading of history from a lesbian reading position.
Introduction: Reading as Feminists and Lesbians

This thesis examines strategies of feminist and lesbian reading in relation to the fiction of Sarah Waters and Jeanette Winterson. Three strategies of reading—reading as romance, reading as quest and reading as revision—are developed and explored, one in each chapter, in an effort to address the overarching question of this thesis: how do we read as feminists and/or lesbians? This thesis contributes original readings of Waters's and Winterson's fiction, focusing primarily on five novels: Waters's Affinity (1999) and The Night Watch (2006), and Winterson's Sexing the Cherry (1989), Written on the Body (1992) and The PowerBook (2000). The contribution this thesis makes to original research in the field of contemporary women's writing is not only in the readings of these novels, it is also in the ways in which this thesis demonstrates how, through the development of certain strategies of reading, such readings are made possible. Furthermore, while the thesis' originality is to be found in the ways in which the work of Waters and Winterson is drawn together under the framework of feminist and lesbian reading strategies, in the chapters devoted individually to each author, new ideas and arguments are advanced which aim to widen the contexts in which the fiction of these two authors is received, read and understood.

Further on in this Introduction a more in-depth discussion of the research questions will better outline the terms of critical inquiry of the thesis; at this point it will be helpful to clarify what this thesis understands to be a strategy of reading. Generally, within literary theory or terminology, “strategy” is a term used to refer to the author's method, technique or overall plan which organises her or his work, although a recent dictionary of literary terms acknowledges that critics, too, “have 'strategies’ in the different ways they approach texts.”¹ Adapting this concept to focus attention on the reader, rather than on the author, the critic or, even more specifically, on the critical reader, a strategy of reading is used throughout this thesis to refer to the reader's method, technique or overall approach which guides or

motivates the reading of a text. Feminist and/or lesbian strategies of reading are thus those in which the reader engages with the text from a feminist and/or lesbian position. Further on in this Introduction we will outline in more detail the ways in which the terms “feminist” and “lesbian” are used throughout this thesis; for now, we can consider as examples of feminist and lesbian strategies of reading those which seek to produce a feminist or a lesbian meaning of a text, or, in a related effort, those which seek to uncover a feminist or a lesbian “subtext” of a work and assert such an interpretation as an alternative to a traditional or canonical reading of a text. Additionally, feminist and/or lesbian strategies of reading can take the form of a critique, and they are most familiar within literary criticism or critical theory when used in this way; for example, as in a feminist “images of women” strategy of reading, which enacts a critique of patriarchy via a feminist analysis of the representation of women in literature. For the reader who wishes to subject a text to the scrutiny of feminist or lesbian criticism, all of these examples of strategies of reading are used to expose a patriarchal or heterosexist bias within both literary tradition and the critical discourses used to interpret literary texts.

In this thesis, images of women analyses are performed in each of the chapters in order to examine the ways in which women writers represent female characters and female sexuality in their own fiction. In Chapter One, Reading as Romance, we examine the representation of the female characters in Winterson’s Written on the Body—Louise, Jacqueline and Gail Right—in order to question whether women writers, via the subject positions they create within their texts, can offer alternative reading positions to the readers of their texts. While this use of the images of women analysis as a strategy for reading follows a more traditionally critical approach, in Chapters Two and Three we draw on the underlying principles of the images of women method to examine representations of women as feminist and/or lesbian icons. Chapter Two, Reading as Quest, examines images of women as feminist heroes or allies in Winterson’s Sexing the Cherry, allies for whom the feminist reader might
be searching or seeking as if on a quest. Chapter Three, Reading as Revision, examines the representation of lesbians in Waters's *The Night Watch* in terms of the ways in which Waters draws on a tradition of lesbian literary representation but also adapts or alters this tradition throughout the course of the novel in order to interrogate the notion of lesbian invisibility.

It should be emphasised that these images of women analyses comprise only part of the literary analysis undertaken in this thesis; they form part of the more specialised strategies of reading which frame the discussions of the novels in each chapter. Through the focus on strategies of reading, this thesis continually seeks to draw attention to the material presence of the reader—that is, the feminist and/or lesbian reader of the novels of Waters and Winterson. This thesis does not utilise images of women analyses simply to critique the representation of the female characters in the fiction of Waters and Winterson; rather, it utilises this form of analysis in order to examine the ways in which feminist and lesbian readers are able to make and sustain contact with the text via the representation of the female characters who function as important points of interlocutory access for the reader. The strategies of feminist and lesbian reading developed in this thesis are concerned to explore, among other things, the ways in which the expectations brought to the fiction of Waters and Winterson shape the reading of their fiction, and what “happens” during the process of reading if text fails to meet these expectations. Working from an awareness of the ways in which assumptions of gender and sexuality operate within both literary fiction and the critical discourses used to interpret such fiction, the strategies of reading developed in this thesis aim to both foreground a gendered context in which reading takes place, and reiterate the place and importance of gendered consciousness within interpretive practice. In addition, these strategies of reading have been chosen for their applicability to the fiction of Waters and Winterson. To use one example, in Chapter Two, reading as quest is a strategy of reading which permits us to suggest that the feminist and/or lesbian reader approaches Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* seeking a desired “other,” object or outcome—in this case, a reflection and affirmation of her
own feminist and/or lesbian ideological position or identity. Reading as quest is a strategy of reading which also provides a methodological framework for examining medieval reference, particularly the quest motif, in Winterson's fiction: the actions of the reader operate in parallel to the actions of the questing heroes who are so often the protagonists of Winterson's novels.

Why these authors?
Within the fields of both contemporary women's writing and contemporary British writing, Waters and Winterson are arguably the two most influential lesbian authors of the last two and a half decades. Their status as high-profile, visible or "out" lesbians has, from the outset, shaped the reception of their fiction, and this degree of visibility continues to have an almost singularly determining influence on the perception of their fiction within both popular discussions and academic discourses. This is evidenced by, among other things, the frequently recurring question posed to both Waters and Winterson, "Do you consider yourself a lesbian author?" The implication carried in this question is that, as both an "out" lesbian and a writer of fiction which has dealt with or continues to deal with lesbian content, authorial identity so thoroughly merges with lesbian identity that the one overrides the other; the lesbian author is neither a lesbian who is also an author, nor an author who is also a lesbian, but a union of the two: the "lesbian author."

Mary Meigs addresses the difficulties faced by the lesbian writer when the label "lesbian," which functions as an affirmation when claimed by the writer herself, operates to restrictive or diminutive effect when imposed on her by critics, hostile or otherwise: "a writer who has come out as a lesbian, no matter what the subject of a subsequent book or its percentage of lesbian content ... is forever sealed in her lesbian identity like an insect in plexiglass."² Meigs, drawing on her own experiences as a writer, describes the re/actions of

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those readers who “hope that lesbian subject matter will disappear from the work of a lesbian writer,” but who, simultaneously and contradictorily, “cannot forget that the lesbian is lurking behind everything she writes, and they comb each book for the reassurance that she is still there and can be judged accordingly.” When motivated by this kind of homophobic voyeurism, this obsessive drive to locate—and contain—the lesbian writer within her own text culminates in an act of limitation in which the lesbian label is imposed on the writer, an act in which the writer’s lesbianism is effectively turned against her:

The lesbian who comes out in a book finds that along with the euphoria of sisterhood comes the gradual knowledge that she has been sealed in. She discovers that she has done straight people a favor by coming out; now, whether they are mildly or violently homophobic, they know what to expect. If they once found it difficult to say the word lesbian, they are now unable not to say it. “You wanted to be known as a lesbian, didn’t you?” The prejudicial stereotype in these readers’ minds will from now on color everything I write. In every subsequent book I will be assumed to be writing from a lesbian viewpoint, primarily for lesbian readers.

The lesbian writer, or, more accurately, the writer who chooses to come out as a lesbian and who makes the choice to come out, in some form, via her writing, faces two choices: to resist or encourage the lesbian label. For both Waters and Winterson, coming out as a lesbian in the public arena was coincident with coming out as an author; both authors debuted with a first novel that enacted this two-fold “coming-out.” Indeed, it is largely due to the success of these début novels—Winterson’s Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (1983) and Waters’s Tipping the Velvet (1998)—that their reputations as lesbian authors have been established; as Meigs says, readers now “know what to expect.”

Meigs describes how, once this expectation has been set up, the response among readers tends to fall into two groups: “those who want less (or no) lesbian content in subsequent books, and those (other lesbians) who want more.” Inevitably, though, the

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3 Meigs 33.

4 Meigs 32, emphases in original.

5 Meigs 34.
lesbian author fails to satisfy either group of readers; and, again, drawing on her own experience, Meigs describes how "[i]n the interval between the appearance of my first book ... and my third ... the idea of the audience a lesbian writer is supposed to seek has become narrowed and politicized, and an implicit accusation hangs in the air, 'You aren't writing for me (or for us)." Offering a counterpoint to Meigs is Alison Hennegan, who writes from the point of view of the lesbian reader, describing herself and her actions as a reader through a number of metaphors, which, coincidentally, draw on the very images and concepts on which the three strategies of reading developed in this thesis are based. Hennegan reflects at length on the ways in which she came to define herself a lesbian reader—and like the term "lesbian author," the lesbian reader that Hennegan describes is neither a lesbian who is also a reader, nor a reader who is also a lesbian, but an inextricable composite of the two: a "lesbian reader."

Drawing, like Meigs, from her own experience, Hennegan continually refers to her search for what she describes as "books which would help me recognise, respect and enact my sexuality." Hennegan describes as integral to this process a "curious, instant certainty of knowledge that a particular book, poem, author was one of 'mine," describing, essentially, the very terms on which a strategy of reading as romance is founded: that sense of a text "belonging" to the reader in a privileged, exclusive, even intimate, relationship. Hence, Hennegan first reads as a lover seeking recognition of her sexuality from "her" beloved or chosen text, but soon discovers that, more often than not, she is the one doing the recognising. She comes to rely on a "complex and subtle system of noticing and connecting a myriad of

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6 Meigs 34.
8 Hennegan 166.
facts usually deemed irrelevant or insignificant" as part of this process of recognition. In this way, the text—and what it contains—is recast as her “elusive quarry,” and she adapts her strategy of reading as romance so that it becomes a strategy of reading as quest in which the sought-after object is not only a recognition of lesbian sexuality but those “books which would provide that sense of warmth, comfort, recognition and inclusion,” she so persistently sought. Indeed, Hennegan deliberately uses the word “quest” to describe her actions as a reader, noting its evocation of “perils and prizes, dangers and delights.” These “dangers” include the possibility that the text will ultimately refuse to deliver what Hennegan wants, prompting feelings of disappointment or betrayal, or a sense of disillusionment at the text’s failure to live up to Hennegan’s expectations. Even here, though, Hennegan deploys a strategy of reading which helps her to avoid such pitfalls. When the text is unwilling or unable to deliver what she wants from it, Hennegan changes tactic yet again. Refusing to believe that “books should be unable, or, even worse, unwilling to help me,” she sets out to find a strategy of reading which permits her to “read round those elements [she] rejected whilst discovering a means of reading [her] way to the ones [she] needed and increasingly suspected must be there in some books, somewhere.” This transforms reading into revisionary act, one which she takes to a humorous extreme:

Wherever I scented mutinous tendencies in an author, I helped them along a little by the creation of my own parallel text. ... Fanny Price was obviously never going to come to any good with Edmund so I gave her Mary Crawford instead and ended Mansfield Park properly. Charlotte Lucas had to be saved from Mr Collins somehow and Elizabeth Bennett seemed to me to be the woman to do it. (Sometimes I let Darcy

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9 Hennegan 167.
10 Hennegan 167.
11 Hennegan 169, emphasis added.
12 Hennegan 169.
13 Hennegan 169, emphases in original.
have Bingley instead. If I was feeling really kind I invented an entirely new character for him, someone with Bingley’s integrity and Wickham’s profile.)

To create such parallel texts, Hennegan’s revisionary reading strategy requires her to change the plot, to “counterplot” new narrative outcomes according to an alternative logic which acknowledges the latent homoeroticism of canonical literature; she rearranges the text at the level of narrative in order to make it deliver the affirmation of lesbian sexuality she seeks.

Overall, Hennegan pursues a number of different but interrelated lesbian strategies of reading: she starts out as a reader seeking recognition from the text, so that reading is an act through which she is searching for a reflection of her own lesbian sexuality. This is a position in which she risks ultimately being disempowered and disappointed if the text fails to respond in accordance with her desires. Hence, she moves towards a position of agency, in which she “changes the plot” in order to make the text deliver what she wants from it. Throughout this thesis, we will chart a similar progression through these very same elements of desire, searching and counterplotting.

Hennegan also contextualises her own expectations, desires and efforts as a lesbian reader by measuring them against those of a wider lesbian and gay reading community:

Time and again gay novelists and dramatists whom I interviewed for the original Gay News would complain that gay readers and audiences seemed to expect that each gay character should be perfection, accused authors who depicted them as less than wholly admirable of ‘self-oppression.’ The demand was an index of our earlier deprivation: we asked so much of our precious fictional gay people because we had so few of them.

Indeed, in both their testimonies, Hennegan and Meigs draw attention to the weight of expectation placed on the lesbian writer and the lesbian text by lesbian readers, an expectation driven, Hennegan implies, by the absence of an established or legitimised lesbian literary tradition to which lesbian readers seeking recognition of their own sexuality could readily turn. Yet, Hennegan’s defence of this desire for more images of lesbians in literature, more

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14 Hennegan 175.

15 Hennegan 183.
texts devoted to specifically lesbian themes, concerns, lifestyles or romances, immediately generates a number of difficult questions about the very nature of lesbian literature. How do we define a lesbian literary tradition? This question of definition returns us to the issue of “narrowing” referred to earlier by Meigs. Would a lesbian literary tradition only include works written by lesbian authors? Would it include works written by authors who happen to be lesbians but who resist the label “lesbian author”? Would it include works by lesbian authors but which do not feature lesbian characters? Would it include any work of literature which features lesbian characters, or only works of literature written by lesbian authors who encourage the lesbian label, and which feature lesbian characters? What happens if a lesbian author refuses to conform to the prescriptions of this literary tradition? Does she “betray” her lesbian readers with her refusal to provide them with what they are seeking? Or, to frame these issues in a slightly different way, does the decision to include a text within or exclude a text from a lesbian literary tradition rest with the author, the text or the reader?

Indeed, where does an author like Winterson stand in relation to the notion of a lesbian literary tradition? Winterson is an “out” lesbian, whose début novel Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit tells the coming-of-age/coming-out story of its protagonist Jeanette, a story which is partly based on Winterson’s own life. Winterson’s subsequent works sometimes feature love stories between two women, but do not necessarily situate lesbianism or lesbian sexuality as the primary narrative concern. Furthermore, the weight of expectation carried by the lesbian label is one which Winterson herself actively resists. She reiterates this point in a recent interview, emphatically distancing herself from the very notion of a lesbian literary tradition: “Of course there is stuff written especially for a gay or lesbian audience, no problem with that, but I don’t want to read it and I don’t want to write it.”¹⁶ She further states that “[t]he sexuality of a writer is not the business of literary criticism; to make it so is a cheap

way out of dealing with the work on its terms and in its own right. Oranges is not a ‘gay’ book, and neither is anything else that I have written.”\(^{17}\) While Winterson might resist the labelling of her work as “gay” or “lesbian” on the grounds that such an act restricts or reduces the meaning of the text to the author’s biography, her novels have certainly been read as “lesbian texts,” largely due to the significance of Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit to a particular generation of lesbian and feminist readers.

In her recent book-length study of Winterson’s writing, Sonya Andermahr suggests that Winterson “would rather be known as a ‘writer who loves women’ than as a lesbian who writes ... she is not a writer whose lesbianism defines her work or whose work is ‘by, for and about’ lesbians, in the sense that the discipline of Women’s Studies is ‘by, for and about’ women.”\(^{18}\) Here, Andermahr makes an attempt to separate lesbian identity from authorial identity, to resist the amalgamated union of the two as a category which, to use Meigs’s phrase, “seals” the author within it; and it is Andermahr’s contention that, in this sense, “Winterson is not repudiating lesbianism per se, merely lesbian identity as a restricting identity category.”\(^{19}\) She compares Winterson to Margaret Atwood, whose work shares a number of the concerns of second- and third-wave feminisms, but who, Andermahr claims, rejects the label “feminist writer” as too restrictive. Andermahr validates this writerly standpoint by suggesting that it is “an inevitable, and surely admirable, ambition of writers to wish to speak to readers as a whole and for their work to have a ‘universal’ reach.”\(^{20}\) At the same time, Andermahr also addresses the concerns of those women readers, perhaps feminists, perhaps lesbians, who feel “let down” or disappointed by women writers who

\(^{17}\) Andermahr, Jeanette Winterson, 128.

\(^{18}\) Andermahr, Jeanette Winterson, 22, emphases in original.

\(^{19}\) Andermahr, Jeanette Winterson, 22.

\(^{20}\) Andermahr, Jeanette Winterson, 22.
refuse to affirm a lesbian or even feminist identity as part of their authorial persona or within their writing: “Feminists, or lesbians for that matter, do not need to feel let down or betrayed ... by this positioning on the part of (women) writers.”21 Here, Andermahr is referring in particular to the work of feminist critic Lynne Pearce, who has written, candidly and explicitly, about her disillusionment as a reader of Winterson. Pearce’s disillusionment is rooted, in part, in Winterson’s “refusal” to continue to deliver the things Pearce had come to expect from her fiction. We will discuss Pearce’s engagement with Winterson’s Written on the Body in Chapter One, Reading as Romance, where we will address in particular this phenomenon of feeling betrayed or disappointed by an author or text that refuses to fulfil the reader’s expectations.

In contrast to Winterson’s self-professed repudiation of not only the lesbian label, but any attempt to label, locate or even respond to others who wish to place her work within wider literary or cultural contexts—as she says in an interview, “I don’t do lit crit on my own work”22—Waters responds affirmatively to the lesbian label, and, indeed, elaborates on the “place” of her fiction within a lesbian literary tradition. Waters situates her own fiction as part of a lesbian literary tradition, and specifically as part of a tradition of lesbian and gay historical fiction. In her answer to the question, “Do you consider yourself a lesbian writer?” Waters accepts and affirms the lesbian label, and yet simultaneously reasserts her own authorial identity against it so that it ceases to operate as a restricting category, but rather as one from which the impetus of her fiction is drawn:

"I am very comfortable with the concept of a “lesbian writer” or a "lesbian text." Most of my novels so obviously foreground passions between women that it has made lots of sense to me to invoke the “lesbian” label. I have many enthusiastic lesbian readers who have been with me right from the start – long before I became popular as a mainstream writer – and I am very grateful to them. At the same time, of course, I don't sit down at my desk every morning thinking, “I am a lesbian writer.” Most of

21 Andermahr, Jeanette Winterson, 22.

22 Andermahr, Jeanette Winterson, 130.
my working life is spent grappling with words and stories – and at that point I am simply “a writer,” like any other writer. In other words, lesbian passions and issues are there in my books in the same way that they are there in my life: they are both vitally important to me, and completely incidental.23

Elsewhere, Waters has cited a number of authors whose work has been influential to the development of her own fiction: these include, for example, Ellen Galford and Isabel Miller—authors of lesbian historical fiction—and Chris Hunt—a woman writer of, according to Waters, “fantastic gay men’s historical fiction.”24 Of Hunt, in particular, Waters admits in an interview, “[s]he wrote a novel called Street Lavender, which is a Victorian-set gay novel which is loads of fun, and, to be honest, Tipping the Velvet was a lesbian version of that.”25 Although Waters acknowledges Winterson as an influence, noting in particular Winterson’s interest “in the past, and how [writers] use the past” in fiction,26 she also describes the attempts of reviewers to conflate her (work) with Winterson’s, in spite of the manifest differences in their fiction:

When I was first published a couple of reviewers were keen to put me in the same bracket [as Winterson], but I thought “it’s just we’re the only two lesbian writers they can think of.” I don’t think I’ve got much in common with Jeanette Winterson at all, and I’m sure she’d feel she hasn’t got much in common with me. She’s much more in a modernist tradition, which I don’t feel part of: I like her work, but we haven’t got similar agendas, it seems to me.27

Reviewers might have been tempted to try and draw similarities between Waters and Winterson, not only, as Waters observes, because they were “the only two lesbian writers they

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24 Lucie Armitt, “Interview with Sarah Waters (CWN Conference, University of Wales, Bangor, 22nd April 2006),” Feminist Review 85 (2007) 121. I am grateful to Lucie Armitt for sharing an advance copy of this interview with me.

25 Armitt, “Interview with Sarah Waters,” 121.

26 Armitt, “Interview with Sarah Waters,” 121.

27 Armitt, “Interview with Sarah Waters,” 121.
[could] think of;" but because the successful début of Winterson's Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit created a cultural context within which subsequent instances of "literary lesbianism" could be understood. In others words, the reception of Winterson's work set a precedent for the reception of Waters's.

One critic who has examined the reception of Winterson's earliest fiction and her rise to both literary and popular acclaim is Hilary Hinds, who focuses in particular on the widespread literary success of Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit and its later adaptation for television. The television adaptation was, Hinds suggests, undoubtedly a crucial factor in securing Winterson's "popular success and high media exposure." Although initially commenting, "[t]hat an author who is a lesbian and a feminist should be so successful in such contrasting contexts is seen by other lesbians and feminists as something to celebrate," Hinds deconstructs the terms of Winterson's success, pinpointing as crucial factors those reviewers who perceived Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit as a "quality" text and the fact that the novel was not regarded, at least initially, by the mainstream press as a lesbian text.

Hinds draws attention to those critics who "aspire" to a universal reading of the novel by "suggesting that Jeanette [the novel's protagonist] is a character with whom we can all sympathise, because lesbianism is just another human experience." Hinds notes that this "liberal humanist reading has the advantage of being accepting and inclusive of lesbian experience," but that it has the effect, ultimately, of denying the lesbian specificity of the


29 Hinds 153.

30 Hinds 155.

31 Hinds 157.
novel: "Lesbian oppression, whether in the form of violence, repression, stereotyping or denial, has no part in such a depoliticised reading, and thus remains unacknowledged." 32

In spite of these efforts by mainstream critics to assert a liberal humanist reading of Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, with the adaptation of the novel for television, it was anticipated that the "uncompromising lesbianism of the text" would become a source of controversy amongst viewers. 33 Indeed, Hinds describes how promises of explicit lesbian sex contributed to the pre-broadcast "excitement" generated by critics in the mainstream press.

Once the Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit television drama was aired, however, a number of pre-conceived cultural contexts contrived to once again de-centre the lesbianism of the narrative. Hinds suggests that one significant factor was the broadcasting of the drama in "the Wednesday night 'controversy slot' which regularly features 'quality drama' whose sexual explicitness is mitigated by its status as 'art television.'" 34 This "effectively neutralize[s] the controversy of [the] subject matter by soliciting 'essential humanist readings.'" 35 Working from Hinds's reading, Pearce pursues this point further, arguing that "the popularity enjoyed by Winterson's work is supported by a crucial ambivalence in the texts themselves vis-à-vis the status of romantic love." 36 Pearce suggests that "[t]his is an ambivalence that centres on a tension between the perception of romantic love as a non-gendered, a-historic, a-cultural, 'universal,' and as an 'ideology' which the specificities of gender and sexual orientation

32 Hinds 157.
33 Hinds 157.
34 Hinds 157.
35 Hinds 163.
constantly challenge and undermine." Describing the effect of this "tension" on readings of Winterson's fiction, Pearce suggests that "[b]y attending to the 'universalising' discourses in Winterson's work the (heterosexual) 'general' reader can, of course, see the texts as transcending the particulars of sexual orientation; regard the fact that s/he is reading about lovers of the same sex as incidental and, consequently, a-political."

The issues at stake in these discussions concerning the tension between the "universal" and the "specific" are crucial to understanding why certain expectations are brought to the fiction of lesbian authors such as Waters and Winterson. The tension generated by the question, whether asked explicitly or implicitly, "For whom does the lesbian author write?" positions the lesbian specificity of the author's point of view in opposition to the supposedly more inclusive universal point of view which is often taken as representative of the audience "in general." These issues comprise part of the background context against which the discussion of the five novels in this thesis take place. Indeed, they return us to the points that have been raised in this section of the Introduction so far: namely, Meigs's articulation of the ways in which the lesbian writer feels trapped between two groups of readers, each of whom feels that the lesbian author is not writing "for" them exclusively. This feeling is precisely what drives Hennegan to pursue different strategies of reading in her search for books which she could claim exclusively as lesbian texts. In pursuit of lesbian texts which she can regard as "hers," Hennegan chooses to ignore those aspects of the text which conflict with the lesbian reading she wishes to make; she excludes or "writes out" any details of the text which threaten to stall her efforts to assert a lesbian re-reading of her chosen text. It is in response to readerly expectations such as these that Waters and Winterson are continually asked to define their own fiction; and this thesis examines the effect of such expectations on the reading of their fiction.


These questions concerning specificity of address within the fiction of Waters and Winterson will be examined at different points throughout this thesis via the discussion of the five novels. For example, in Chapter Two, Reading as Quest, we will discuss the issue of exclusivity of address in Winterson's Sexing the Cherry, examining whether or not the text responds to or recognises its feminist readers via the inclusion of feminist interlocutors within the novel. As another example, in Chapter Three, Reading as Revision, we will review Mark Llewellyn's reading of Waters's fiction presented in his essay, "Breaking the Mould?: Sarah Waters and the Politics of Genre" (2007), precisely because his reading depends on separating out the lesbian specificity of her fiction and placing it in a binary opposition to more generalised conceptualisation of narrative politics and storytelling. Llewellyn sets the specificity of lesbian politics in opposition to the supposed universality of what he terms "narrative politics," and thus fails to account for the ways in which the one informs the other, the ways in which they operate together, in tandem, as part of the larger project of lesbian narrative counterplotting which Waters pursues in her fiction.

These discussions also draw attention to the ways in which the specificity of a lesbian point of view is often placed in opposition to a "universal" point of view. When they are placed in opposition, the implication is that this is a hierarchical relationship in which one position will ultimately be asserted over the other. Is the lesbian author obligated to address a "general" readership in an effort to make her writing as widely reachable/readable or inclusive as possible, or is she obligated to address her lesbian readers in an exclusive, conspiratorial form of textual acknowledgement? Although a "universal" point of view is often assumed to be inclusive of all points of view, and to encompass all frames of reference and experience, in its lack of specificity it often, unfortunately, reverts to a dominant heterosexist male or masculine position. Hence, we might challenge Andermahr's suggestion that it is admirable for a writer to wish to reach as broad an audience as possible by suggesting that it is equally as admirable for a writer to wish to challenge this pretence of inclusivity by seeking to reach
as wide an audience as possible while simultaneously refusing to diminish the lesbian specificity of her work. It is, surely, even more admirable when a lesbian writer manages not only to reach as broad an audience as possible but also manages to ask or challenge her non-lesbian readers to align themselves with the lesbian point of view central to her work. And yet, the lesbian writer is in no way obligated to meet the expectations of any of her readers. It should be emphasised that this thesis is not concerned to make a prescriptive case for the actions of the lesbian writer; rather, it is interested in exploring the ways in which the reader brings certain expectations to the work of lesbian authors, and the ways in which these expectations shape and determine the ways in which fiction by lesbian authors is read. Ultimately, this thesis is concerned to present new ways of reading the fiction of Waters and Winterson, and to demonstrate how these readings can move beyond the expectations placed on the “lesbian author.” This section has laid out some of the critical debates that have influenced the reception and reading of Waters’s and Winterson’s fiction. In the next section, the rationale is given for the selection of novels which will be discussed in this thesis. This rationale will demonstrate the relevance of the chosen novels to these critical debates, and will establish the originality of the readings of the novels presented in this thesis.

Why these novels?

This thesis accepts as one of its starting points the formative influence of the lesbian coming-out novel on the reception of Waters’s and Winterson’s subsequent fiction. As the discussion in the previous section outlines, both Waters and Winterson debuted with a first novel that established, for better or for worse, their reputations as lesbian authors. As the previous section has established, this thesis is interested in the ways in which the expectations generated by these début novels continue to shape readings of Waters’s and Winterson’s fiction. More than this, however, this thesis is interested in the ways in which readings of Waters’s and Winterson’s fiction might move beyond the expectations generated by the début
coming-out novel; it is concerned to assert new and innovative readings of the five novels central to this thesis—Affinity, The Night Watch, Sexing the Cherry, Written on the Body and The PowerBook—in order to examine whether these new readings can provide new contexts which will better enable us to conceptualise and assess the feminist and lesbian significance of their work.

The expectation generated by the reception of Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit is that Winterson is a lesbian author whose fiction is therefore best read in terms of its place within or relationship to a lesbian literary tradition. However, in Chapter One, Reading as Romance, Winterson’s Written on the Body is examined in terms of the ways in which the novel alienates the lesbian reader via the dominant reading position presented by the novel’s ambiguously gendered and sexually indeterminate narrator. Unlike the majority of critical writings on the novel, which have focused on the “device of the sexually indeterminate narrator and how this figure is interpreted,” that is, as either female/lesbian or male/heterosexual, this thesis is not concerned with the gender identity or sexuality of the narrator per se. Rather, it is concerned to demonstrate the ways in which the narrator’s point of view is constructed as masculine, and how, through this masculine point of view, the novel reinforces a patriarchal tradition of representation in which the woman is the object of the male gaze. Femininity in Written on the Body is either idealised to such an extent that it replicates patriarchal objectifications of women, or is associated with the abject excesses of the female grotesque, thus further reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes about female sexuality. The reading of Written on the Body presented in Chapter One is unique in its focus on the representation of the novel’s female characters; furthermore, the images of women analysis presented in this chapter is part of the wider discussion of the ways in which the novel refuses to meet the expectations of the lesbian reader. Reading as romance is the strategy of reading used in this chapter to explore the possibility that the lesbian reader will feel disappointed or

39 Andermahr, Jeanette Winterson, 76.
betrayed by the novel's refusal to deliver an affirmation of lesbianism within the narrative. Thus, the reading of Written on the Body in Chapter One is used as a starting point for an exploration of new contexts in which Winterson's fiction might be read.

For example, readings of Winterson's fiction continually overlook the ways in which her novels are distinguished by themes, motifs and narrative devices which originate in medieval romance; indeed, it is the ways in which Winterson incorporates these aspects of medieval romance narratives into her novels that results in a brand of storytelling which is uniquely her own. Winterson's engagement with medieval romance has never before been discussed comprehensively or at length in a critical context; hence, in Chapter Two, Reading as Quest, this thesis provides a new and original reading of her fiction by arguing that this is a context in which her fiction needs to be re-considered, not only because it provides a new way to reflect on the place of her fiction in relation to feminist and/or lesbian literary traditions, but also because references to medieval romance are frequent and sufficiently prominent throughout her fiction to deserve attention in their own right.

Located amongst The PowerBook's foregrounding of virtual reality and cyberspace are references to and retellings of certain episodes from Arthurian legend; Chapter Two, Reading as Quest, will examine, among other things, whether Winterson's treatment of the Arthurian legend can be considered revisionary, and whether a focus on medieval reference provides a new way to assess the feminist and/or lesbian significance of her fiction. Both Sexing the Cherry and The PowerBook employ the quest motif as a guiding narrative structure; both novels refuse a narrative model of straightforward linear progression in favour of one comprising moments of dilation, digression, delay or deferral. Sexing the Cherry and The PowerBook are thus the two of Winterson's novels which are most closely related in terms of an engagement with medieval romance as a narrative tradition, and they provide good starting points for an examination of her fiction in terms of its relation to or derivation from medieval narrative romance; it is at a structural level that the narratives of these two
narrative romance. Chapter Two, Reading as Quest, utilises Patricia Parker’s definition of narrative romance in order to demonstrate this structural affinity between medieval narrative romance and Winterson’s postmodernist “romantic” novels. Additionally, in both Sexing the Cherry and The PowerBook there is a recurrent preoccupation with heroes and ideals or models of heroism; the discussion of these novels in Chapter Two will address the difficulties of reconciling medieval romance’s construction of heroic masculinity with the expectations of those feminist and lesbian readers of Winterson’s fiction who approach these texts seeking images of specifically feminist or lesbian heroes. Reading as quest is a strategy of reading that describes the action of these readers, as reading is transformed into a “quest” for accessible feminist or lesbian interlocutors within the text.

In the case of Waters’s fiction, the expectation generated by the reception of Tipping the Velvet is that she is a lesbian author of specifically lesbian historical fiction, the purpose of which is to “introduce” the lesbian to history. However, Waters’s project is not to write the lesbian into history, but to demonstrate that she has always been there. This thesis is concerned to examine the ways in which, via this specific revisionary stance, Waters’s fiction enables the reading of history from the perspective of “reading as a lesbian.” As a revisionary writer, Waters challenges not only the occlusions of patriarchal history which render the lesbian invisible within its authorised narratives, but also those expectations placed on the lesbian writer which limit her project to the production of endless coming-out narratives. Hence, the two novels of Waters discussed in this thesis, Affinity and The Night Watch, play consciously and deliberately with the central motif of lesbian literary representation—lesbian invisibility—in order to challenge the reader to consider new ways in which lesbian narrative politics might be established by her fiction.

Chapter Three, Reading as Revision, thus establishes the revisionary nature of Water’s fiction in two ways. First, it does this by situating Affinity within a tradition of
historiographic metafiction, a mode of writing which plays consciously and self-reflexively with the representation of the past evoked within the text. Then it suggests that The Night Watch extends or expands upon the interrogative approach of historiographic metafiction not only to retell history from a lesbian perspective, but to demonstrate the ways in which historical or historiographical narration is, in this novel, reorganised according to a “lesbian counterplot.” The interrogative and self-reflexive stance which distinguishes Waters’s fiction as historiographic metafiction requires a similarly interrogative approach to the reading of her fiction: reading as revision is a strategy of reading which describes the actions of the feminist and/or lesbian reader who participates in the revisionary narrative techniques of the lesbian counterplot and engages with the text from a lesbian reading position.

Whereas Winterson’s fiction resists the lesbian label by integrating narrative romance and medieval literary tradition into her postmodern storytelling, Waters’s fiction subverts the lesbian label by refusing to allow it to operate as a limiting or restrictive category. The lesbian coming-out novel emphasises discovery and affirmation as distinguishing elements of lesbian fiction: while the narrative trajectory of the lesbian coming-out novel coalesces around individual moments along the lesbian protagonist’s discovery of her own sexuality, the main purpose or project of the coming-out novel is, in effect, to enable the reader to “discover” the lesbian within the text. Both Affinity and The Night Watch refuse to conform to this prescriptive conceptualisation of lesbian fiction; they allow us to speculate on “where,” exactly, Waters’s lesbian fiction “goes” after the initial moment of coming out.

Feminists, Lesbians and Readers

Before outlining the research questions which will frame the discussion of the five novels in this thesis, it is worth specifying the ways in which the terms “feminist,” “lesbian,” and “the reader” are understood and used throughout this thesis. The easiest to define of these three terms, “the reader,” as conceptualised in and referred to throughout this thesis, is simply the
individual reader, the one who reads the novels of Waters and Winterson. It is important to emphasise that this reader is differentiated from the implied reader of Waters’s and Winterson’s fiction, that is, the reader whom these two writers envision as the reader of their fiction; while there is certainly some degree of overlap between this thesis’ conceptualisation of “the reader” and the implied reader of Waters’s and Winterson’s novels, it is worth stating that they are not necessarily or always the same reader. This individualist position becomes more complicated, however, when joined with or modified by the terms “feminist” and/or “lesbian.” Certainly, this thesis understands that not all feminists are lesbians; nor are all lesbians necessarily feminists. Indeed, some would even argue that not all feminists are necessarily women; nor, certainly, are all women necessarily feminists. There is, however, a degree of overlap between “feminist” and “lesbian,” and this thesis is interested in drawing on the interrelatedness of the two in its deployment of these terms.

To a certain extent, both “feminist” and “lesbian” are descriptive terms which refer to identity categories which have been consciously and deliberately claimed by both individual and collective groups of women within the context of political, social, sexual, economic and other cultural or historical movements or revolutions. Both feminist and lesbian politics are founded in critiques of patriarchy and heterosexuality as institutions, as ideological structures or systems which prescribe and proscribe gendered behaviour and expressions of identity and sexuality. Both feminism and lesbianism question the “naturalness” of the gender order presented by heteronormative patriarchy; both work actively to offer alternative groupings of gender and sexual relations which challenge the hierarchical relationship between men and women on which heteronormative patriarchy is founded.

This thesis thus employs the terms “feminist” and “lesbian” in the light of their rhetorical and analytical potential to bring a critical perspective to the reading of contemporary women’s writing. Rather than seek to assert a definitive conceptualisation of what “feminist” or “lesbian” means, and then rigidly apply those concepts to the ways in
which they are used throughout this thesis, this thesis instead follows the direction of Judith Roof's rhetorically driven and speculative inquiry when attempting to define the relationship between feminist literary theory and lesbian sexuality. Roof suggests that "something that appears to be lesbian sexuality is used rhetorically to found feminist theories of writing and reading. The idea of women together is the rationale, motivation, metaphor, or question that founds and supports investigations of women's writing and what it means to read as a woman."40 Just as Roof suggests that feminist theories of writing and reading are, in fact, rooted in a rhetorical construction of lesbian sexuality, so, in this thesis, are lesbian strategies of reading rooted in an implicitly rhetorical feminist point of view, even if the parameters of this feminist position remain shifting and multiple, rather than stable and precise.

Indeed, Roof acknowledges that any attempt to define "lesbian" will necessarily be "shifting, difficult, contradictory," and she describes in particular the difficulty of locating a place or "point" from which to make such a definition:

How can I begin from a point if I don't know, except from personal experience, what that point is? And even if my own personal bodily experience of erotic interchange with another woman qualifies me to "know" what lesbian sexuality is, how do I disentangle that experience from my distanced rendering of it or from what has already been culturally defined as lesbian? ... Identifying as lesbian already requires a circle where experience and representation define one another. There is no "pure" place unaffected by language and by culture that tells me what sexuality or identity are in the first place; any concept of sexuality I have is necessarily a composite of social imperative, theoretical deliberations, and various philosophical, emotional, and libidinal choices.

Even if I don't know precisely what lesbian is, I look for the lesbian in the text, for what happens rhetorically to eroticized relations among women, finding, perhaps narcissistically, their catalytic function in feminist theories of writing and reading. I begin with this perspective probably because reading, even academic reading, is stimulated, at least for me, by a libidinous urge connected both to a sexual practice and to the shape of my own desire.41

Roof is quoted here at length because her profusion of speculation presents a contrasting approach to the invocation of the lesbian label which Meigs finds so restrictive. Roof seeks to


41 Roof 119-120.
open up the term “lesbian,” to claim and contextualise its usage by locating it in close proximity to women’s writing, to feminist theories of reading and writing, and to personal experience. Thus, Roof’s approach serves as a reminder that even as the labels “lesbian” and “feminist” are invoked to provide a context through which the work of a particular author, or the approach of a particular reader, can be known, their potential to provide such contextualisation is best understood in terms of what is “shifting, difficult [or] contradictory,” rather than what is finite, simple or definitive.

To draw these speculations back into the more concrete realm of usage within this thesis, it is perhaps enough to state that this thesis conceptualises a feminist reader as a reader who actively claims a feminist identity, and who retains a sense of her feminist consciousness throughout the process or during the act of reading. Similarly, a lesbian reader is a reader who retains a sense of her own lesbianism during the act of reading, however mutable, shifting or ultimately indefinable that sense of lesbianism might be. This thesis is interested in examining the ways in which the feminist and/or lesbian reader, as described above, approaches, engages with, and makes readings of the fiction of Waters and Winterson. It is interested in this reader’s position in relation to the text, whether she risks being disempowered if she continually seeks from the text something “feminist” or “lesbian” which it might refuse to deliver; or whether she is able to occupy a feminist or lesbian reading position via the interlocutory devices or narrative strategies offered by the text. It is this distinction between readings and reading positions which leads us to the next section in this Introduction, where further discussion of the research questions lays out more precisely the terms of critical inquiry of this thesis.

**Research Questions**

The overarching research question of this thesis is, how do we read as feminists and/or lesbians? If we open up this main research question, we can chart two distinct courses of
inquiry that will frame the literary analysis of Waters’s and Winterson’s novels in the following chapters. This emphasis on framing the literary analysis is crucial in terms of the thesis’ methodology: rather than pursuing a direct line through the thesis, the research questions which are raised in this Introduction will allow us to map out the fields of inquiry over which the discussions of the novels will take place.

There are two subsequent research questions which are central to this thesis’ readings of the novels of Waters and Winterson. In the case of Winterson, and particularly in Chapter Two, Reading as Quest, the overarching question which frames the reading of her fiction is, how useful is it to continue to read Winterson as a “lesbian writer”? In the case of Waters, and particularly in Chapter Three, Reading as Revision, the question which frames the reading of her fiction is, is Waters’s project really to write the lesbian back into history? In effect, both of these questions aim to address a more general question which asks, how can readings of both writers’ work move beyond the expectations placed on the “lesbian author”? These questions provide a more concrete framework for some of the critical issues that have been raised so far in this Introduction, issues which centre on the notion of the lesbian author’s “loyalty” to her different groups of readers. Expectations concerning lesbian authorship, exemplified by questions such as, “Do you consider yourself a lesbian writer?” and “For whom does the lesbian author write?” presuppose or otherwise imply that the lesbian author will privilege a lesbian point of view in her writing, that her writing will be most relevant to lesbian readers and/or that she will write exclusively for lesbian readers. If such efforts are taken as evidence of the ways in which the lesbian writer privileges and recognises her lesbian readers through some form of exclusivity of address within or via the text, then the lesbian author’s refusal to do these things may be mis/understood by some lesbian readers as a betrayal. Of course, the authorial or artistic choices made by the lesbian writer are neither indications of loyalty nor betrayal; rather, and particularly in terms of the research interests of this thesis, this conceptualisation of reading and writing in such subjective terms points to the
emotional element which underlies readers’ expectations regarding the lesbian author and the lesbian text.

The first strategy of reading discussed in this thesis, reading as romance, is derived from Pearce’s work on reader-positioning, in particular her theory of implicated reading, which can be found in her text, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (1997), an in-depth overview of which is presented in this thesis in Chapter One, Reading as Romance. Here, the main points of her theory are outlined, with particular attention paid to Pearce’s arguments concerning the ways in which the reader is “implicated” within the text—that is to say, the ways in which the reader is drawn into the text at an emotional, as opposed to a purely intellectual, level. Through her examination of “the politics of what it is to be a self-conscious feminist reader, and ... the politics of what happens when that feminism is ‘off duty,’” Pearce creates a model of “implicated reading” which focuses on what she describes as the emotional politics of reading. It is from this model, and in particular, from the strategy of reading central to this model—reading as romance—that the two subsequent strategies of reading formulated in this thesis are derived. This thesis is thus concerned to make a case for the applicability of Pearce’s theory beyond the scope of her own text; this involves, however, ultimately delineating the limits of Pearce’s theory and speculating on how it can be utilised to formulate subsequent strategies of reading.

Earlier in this Introduction, a feminist or lesbian strategy of reading was defined as a method, technique or overall approach which allows the reader to engage with a text from a feminist or lesbian position. A more precise elaboration of this general definition conceptualises the three strategies of reading central to this thesis in the following ways. Reading as romance is a strategy of reading which might be utilised by the feminist and/or lesbian reader who turns to a chosen text seeking affirmation of her own identity or sexuality. This is a strategy of reading which allows her to search the text for a “beloved other” who will

42 Lynne Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (London: Arnold, 1997) 3.
provide recognition and reciprocation of her own identity. Similar to the authentic realist school of literary criticism, this strategy of reading allows the reader to measure her own lived experience against that represented in the novel. Hence, the text will either succeed or fail in its interpellation of the reader via the presence or absence of such interlocutory devices as the characters and their particular points of view, the authorial persona within the text, the overarching narrative plot or storyline, or, even, contextual factors which influence the initial reception of the novel. This is a strategy of reading, though, through which the reader risks disappointment, betrayal or other forms of disempowerment if she feels she has not been recognised by the text or textual “others” whose contact she seeks.

Reading as quest is a strategy of reading through which the feminist and/or lesbian reader deploys similar “seeking” or “searching” tactics. A more precise strategy of reading than reading as romance, this is a strategy of reading that mimics or mirrors the narrative trajectory of the text itself, so that as the reader follows the journey or quest of the novel’s protagonists, she becomes an adventurer on a quest herself, searching for “something” within the text: a happy ending that defies the logic or order of patriarchal narrative traditions; an image of a female hero which affirms a particular feminist or lesbian political or cultural position outside the text; or a feminist or lesbian “ally” or conspirator within the text, speaking only and exclusively to this reader herself. However, like reading as romance, reading as quest is also a strategy of reading through which the reader risks being disappointed, let down or otherwise betrayed by the text, if it refuses to provide the object sought.

If she turns away from these strategies of reading through which she risks disempowerment or disappointment as a result of the text’s refusal to deliver what she seeks, the feminist and/or lesbian reader who employs a strategy of reading as revision instead participates in the text’s own revisionary efforts via the ways in which it opens up or acknowledges feminist and/or lesbian reading positions. Instead of allowing for feminist
and/or lesbian readings of texts to be made on the basis of narrative content, this is a strategy of reading which enables feminist and/or lesbian readers to occupy reading positions that are specifically or exclusively "for" them. These are enabled by revisionary re-scripting or restructuring efforts within the text at the level of narrative organisation and momentum: in lesbian fiction specifically, this involves reconfiguring the narrative trajectories, which ordinarily lead the plot to traditionally heterosexual or patriarchal end-points, to radical, alternative endings, so that, for example, same-sex pairings are emphasised which foreground and "queer" passions between women or between men. This strategy of reading enables the feminist and/or lesbian reader to recognise that although the text might not appear to affirm her own identity or sexuality through the representation of, for example, positive images of women or lesbians within the text, the text nonetheless affirms a feminist or lesbian reading position at a structural level via this kind of narrative counterplotting. Rather than employing a strategy of reading through which she seeks "something" within the text, the feminist and/or lesbian reader who employs a strategy of reading as revision participates in the revisionary elements of the narrative itself. In the speculative examples explored above, strategies of reading allow us to reflect on the conscious and unconscious motivations which underlie all acts of reading. In the final section of this Introduction a summary of chapters is presented, which will give an indication of the ways in which these speculative scenarios of reading will take a more concrete form in relation to the novels of Waters and Winterson.

Summary of Chapters

This thesis focuses primarily on five novels, two by Waters—*Affinity* and *The Night Watch*—and three by Winterson—*Sexing the Cherry*, *Written on the Body* and *The PowerBook*. Chapter One, Reading as Romance, is the only chapter to discuss work by both authors in the same chapter; the bulk of the literary analysis in the chapter is focused on *Written on the Body*, with a shorter section at the beginning in which both *Written on the
Body and Affinity are discussed. Chapters Two and Three are each devoted to Winterson and Waters individually. The core discussion in Chapter Two, Reading as Quest, focuses on Sexing the Cherry and The PowerBook; brief reference is made to several other of Winterson’s works, namely, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, The Passion (1987), “The Poetics of Sex” (1992) and Lighthousekeeping (2004), for the purposes of framing the argument at the beginning of the chapter. Chapter Three, Reading as Revision, begins by continuing the discussion of Affinity from Chapter One, before moving on to focus primarily on The Night Watch, although Tipping the Velvet and Fingersmith are included in the discussion at certain points, where relevant, for the purposes of comparison and furthering the argument. The primary object of the subsequent chapters is to offer nuanced discussions of the five main novels that are the central focus of this thesis. This takes the form of not only offering new readings of the novels, but also engaging with existing critical readings of Waters and Winterson in an effort to reflect on the ways in which their fiction has previously been read, and how new readings might either challenge or augment existing readings. The discussions of the novels of Waters and Winterson are framed by the specific strategy of reading unique to each chapter as well as in terms of the research inquiries outlined above.

Chapter One, Reading as Romance, is concerned with the lesbian reader’s ability to make and sustain contact with a “beloved” or chosen text. The chapter begins with an in-depth engagement with Pearce’s Feminism and the Politics of Reading, using her theory of implicated reading to frame the discussion of Written on the Body and Affinity; this is a discussion which focuses on the refusal of these novels to deliver an affirmation of lesbianism sought by the reader of these texts. The engagement with Pearce’s text is continued by the chapter’s examination of her strategy of reading as romance, focusing in particular on the account she provides of her failed “readerly romance” with Winterson’s Written on the Body. This serves as the starting point for my own reading of the novel, which utilises both Pearce’s notion of the “failed romance” between the reader and the text and her “personalist” method
of literary criticism to argue that Written on the Body alienates the lesbian reader through the construction of a dominant reading position which is defined as male. Rather than focus on the novel’s sexually indeterminate and ambiguously gendered narrator, as the majority of critical readings have done, the reading of Written on the Body offered in this chapter focuses instead on the representation of the novel’s unambiguously gendered female characters, describing the ways in which they conform to traditional patriarchal images of women, and speculating on the possible problems this might present to the feminist and/or lesbian reader of the text. This chapter suggests that, while it is possible to make lesbian readings of Written on the Body, ultimately, the novel refuses to affirm or confirm lesbianism as a primary narrative concern, thus displacing the lesbian reader from a privileged reading position or engagement with the text. However, this reading of Written on the Body is not intended to suggest that either the novel or Winterson “betrays” the lesbian reader by this refusal to affirm lesbianism within the text; rather, it serves as the impetus for the reading of Winterson’s fiction in Chapter Two, which seeks to establish new contexts in which to place Winterson’s fiction and move beyond the expectations placed on Winterson as a “lesbian author.”

Chapter Two, Reading as Quest, is concerned to establish a case for the reading of Winterson’s fiction in relation to medieval narrative romance. While Winterson’s fiction continues to remain relevant to feminist and/or lesbian literary traditions, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that Winterson’s fiction is equally significant to and relevant within a tradition of narrative romance. This chapter utilises Parker’s definition of narrative romance as a form or mode of writing, one which is distinguished by the ways in which it “simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object;”\(^{43}\) and the readings of The PowerBook and Sexing the Cherry offered in this chapter begin by identifying in these novels a preoccupation with the themes, tropes, motifs and narrative strategies of romance. These

include the quest motif, a concern to construct models of heroism, and a narrative structure which refuses traditional points of beginning and ending in favour of one which is organised according to repeated moments of dilation, digression, delay or deferral. The reading of The PowerBook offered in this chapter demonstrates that the novel can be considered as an example of narrative romance; this leads to an exploration of the difficulty of reconciling the existing characterisation of Winterson's fiction as "feminist," "lesbian" and/or "postmodern" with the demands of narrative romance. This chapter will demonstrate the ways in which romance's primary concern is to construct idealised, gendered subject-positions and identities through which "male" and "female," or "masculinity" and "femininity," are maintained in a hierarchical, binary opposition. This presents a particular challenge to the feminist and/or lesbian reader of Winterson's fiction who approaches her texts utilising a strategy of reading as quest, seeking or searching for images of feminist and/or lesbian heroes, role models or allies within the text. Winterson's treatment of heroism is examined via The PowerBook's retelling of the Arthurian romance of Lancelot and Guinevere, and via Sexing the Cherry's representation of female heroes and models or modes of female resistance to patriarchal authority. The discussion of Winterson's novels in this chapter is concerned to explore, among other things, whether the feminist and/or lesbian reader is able to employ a strategy of reading as quest in order to reconcile the expectations generated by the "lesbian label" with the engendering mechanisms of narrative romance.

In Chapter Two, reading as quest is conceptualised as a participatory strategy of reading which allows us to articulate the ways in which the feminist and/or lesbian reader is drawn into the narrative strategies of Winterson's novels during the act of reading; so that, for example, the feminist reader who embarks on a quest for models of feminist heroism in Sexing the Cherry finds herself encountering certain obstacles which delay or thwart her attainment of this objective. In this same way, in Chapter Three, reading as revision is conceptualised as a participatory strategy of reading through which the feminist and/or lesbian
reader enacts the revisionary narrative politics of Waters’s fiction through the reading of the text; Chapter Three will demonstrate that the revisionary project of Waters’s lesbian historical fiction is, in effect, actualised by the reader who aligns herself with the lesbian perspective of Waters’s fiction and so reads from this “lesbian reading position.”

Chapter Three, Reading as Revision, is concerned to establish that Waters’s revisionary project is not to introduce the lesbian into history, but to enable the reading of history from the perspective of “reading as a lesbian.” This chapter begins with a reading of *Affinity* which continues the discussion of the novel begun in Chapter One. The reading in Chapter Three situates *Affinity* within a tradition of historiographic metafiction in order to demonstrate that the novel’s refusal to articulate lesbianism within its pages is part of its interrogative approach to both patriarchal historiography and a lesbian literary tradition. This chapter will demonstrate that Waters continues to pursue this particular interrogative approach in *The Night Watch*, in which she moves from the neo-Victorian nineteenth-century setting of *Affinity* to the twentieth-century setting of *The Night Watch*. This new historical setting—the years of the Second World War and the post-war period—allows the novel’s exploration of lesbian invisibility as a paradoxical scenario in which the lesbian is simultaneously “seen” and “unrecognised.” The discussion of *The Night Watch* in this chapter draws attention to the historical specificity of Waters’s representation of lesbian invisibility and oppression; namely, the erasure of the lesbian from authorised wartime and post-war narratives as part of a post-war imperative to return to normative gender roles. The reading of *The Night Watch* in this chapter begins with a critique of Llewellyn’s essay on Waters’s fiction, precisely because he enacts the erasure of the lesbian within history that Waters writes against; hence, the reading of *The Night Watch* offered in this chapter will refute Llewellyn’s claims by establishing the lesbian specificity of Waters’s fiction. The lesbian specificity of Waters’s fiction is expressed through, among other things, moments of same-sex fascination between the novel’s characters; this chapter’s discussion of the novel’s moments of same-sex fascination, in turn,
culminates in an analysis of the ways in which *The Night Watch* is organised according to the "counterplot of lesbian fiction." This chapter will demonstrate that, in addition to providing an overarching narrative framework which resignifies the novel’s non-lesbian characters in accordance with a lesbian narrative politics, the revisionary impetus of the lesbian counterplot returns us to and permits the participatory strategy of reading as revision; it allows us to articulate the ways in *The Night Watch* opens up history to a lesbian reading position and thus enables the reading of history from the perspective of "reading as a lesbian."

The Conclusion chapter will draw together the discussions of Chapters One, Two and Three, with the aim of recapping the arguments advanced in the individual chapters, reasserting the originality of this thesis and reaffirming the relevance of this thesis to the field of contemporary women’s writing. The discussion in the Conclusion will summarise the individual chapters, paying particular attention to the concluding points formulated at the end of each chapter. It will reiterate the research questions which guide this thesis in order to further substantiate the rationale for a thesis which draws together the fiction of Waters and Winterson through an interest in the ways in which readings of their work can move beyond the expectations placed on the "lesbian author." Finally, the Conclusion will reflect on the three strategies of reading explored in this thesis in terms of the ways in which they enable the feminist and/or lesbian reader to retain a sense of agency over the reading of the text.

This Introduction has established that readings of Waters’s and Winterson’s fiction have been contextualised by the weight of expectation placed on them as "lesbian authors." The discussion of their fiction in the following chapters thus begins from the premise that Winterson rejects the lesbian label as a limiting paradigm, while Waters accepts the label, if only to push at its limits. In the following chapters, this thesis is concerned to establish that the expectations generated by the lesbian label no longer enable us to produce new readings of

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Winterson’s fiction; hence, new contexts are needed which will allow us to reflect on and assess the significance of her work to feminist and lesbian literary traditions. Additionally, this thesis is concerned to establish that, in order to assess accurately the revisionary project of her fiction, readings of Waters’s novels need to demonstrate an awareness of the ways in which she interrogates the expectations generated by the lesbian label so that it ceases to operate to a limiting or restrictive effect. We turn now to Chapter One, Reading as Romance, in order to frame these discussions via a strategy of reading as romance, which articulates the reader’s desire for Waters’s and Winterson’s fiction to deliver an affirmation of lesbianism within the text; and it precisely the refusal to provide this affirmation to the reader that prompts the new readings offered in this thesis, readings which encourage us to explore how we read as feminists and lesbians.
Chapter One – Reading as Romance

This chapter begins with an examination of the ways in which Jeanette Winterson’s Written on the Body (1992) and Sarah Waters’s Affinity (1999) refuse to deliver an affirmation of lesbianism within their narratives. The strategy of reading explored in this chapter, reading as romance, is derived from Lynne Pearce’s Feminism and the Politics of Reading (1997). As the Introduction to this thesis has outlined, this text is, to use Pearce’s own word, very much “implicated” in the conceptualisation of the strategies of feminist and lesbian reading which are explored throughout this thesis. Specifically in this chapter, Pearce’s model of implicated reading is deliberately and consciously invoked as a point of origin for several lines of inquiry. Pearce’s in-depth engagement with Written on the Body serves as the starting point for the reading of Winterson’s novel offered in this chapter, which utilises Pearce’s “personalist” method of literary criticism to address the ways in which the novel alienates the lesbian reader, ultimately arguing that the novel fails to open up a lesbian reading position. The strategy of reading as romance is useful here because it permits an examination of the expectations brought to Written on the Body by the lesbian reader, and allows for a reading of the novel in terms of its “failure” to meet these expectations.

In addition, Pearce’s model of reading is utilised to do two things: to demonstrate its relevance and applicability beyond the scope of Pearce’s own text; and, as a logical progression of the first point, to delineate its limits. This second point is significant because in demonstrating the limits, or even limitations, of Pearce’s model of reading, we can begin to formulate ways in which we can move beyond a strategy of reading as romance and develop subsequent strategies of reading which allow us to further examine the processes through which feminist and lesbian readings of texts are made. Reading as romance is a strategy of reading that ultimately disempowers the reader, particularly the lesbian reader who approaches the text seeking affirmation or recognition of her sexuality. However, Pearce’s focus on what she conceptualises as the emotional politics of reading enables us to reflect on
the overlap of intellectual and emotional contact with a chosen text, particularly during the process of meaning production. From here, we can begin to differentiate a lesbian reading from a lesbian reading position; what distinguishes the one from the other, as has been suggested above, is the issue of the reader’s agency over her reading of the text. It is this last point, this question of disempowerment versus agency, which allows us to formulate two subsequent strategies of reading which will guide the reading of Winterson’s and Waters’s novels in Chapters Two and Three: these are, respectively, reading as quest and reading as revision. Foregrounding a concern for the reader’s agency over the reading of the text, these are two strategies of reading which utilise the potency of Pearce’s theory of implicated reading—her desire for, as we shall see, an “interactive relationship” with the text—in order to examine different ways in which feminist and/or lesbian readers participate in the narratives and/or narrative strategies of their chosen texts.

I

In Feminism and the Politics of Reading, Pearce is concerned ultimately with what she describes as the reader’s “articulation within the text,” with the ways in which we, as readers, “move about texts.”¹ Accordingly, she retraces her own journey as a feminist reader through a number of different texts, moving from an “interest in reading as an ‘act of interpretation,’ with particular concern for our agency and responsibility as feminist readers ... towards a focus on textual positioning and text-reader interaction.”² This allows her to distinguish a “feminist reading” as one in which “the feminism of the reader is ... produced, sustained and

¹ Lynne Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading (London: Arnold, 1997) 24, 25, emphases in original.

² Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 2.
guaranteed by an interpretive role which is self-consciously defined as feminist in purpose.  

Pearce describes this feminist reader as one who “does not let herself become ‘implicated’ in her texts because she does not let herself become seduced, or led astray, by the textual others she nevertheless glimpses out of the corner of her eye.” This reader is a “professional reader,” and “her relationship both to the text and to the practice of reading is resolutely hermeneutic.” It is within this hermeneutic model of reading that the reader’s feminist politics remain “clearly visible and methodologically unproblematic: in as much as she is reading ‘for meaning,’ she is also reading for ‘feminist meaning.’” Feminism, then, is a “consciousness [the reader] brings to each and every act of interpretation.”

It is with the aim of “decentering” this feminist project that Pearce shifts her attention to the “emotional disturbance of reading” in order to re-conceptualise reading as an implicated process, in which the focus is on “how [the reader] is logistically situated in relation to her textual other(s).” Not only does this render the reader’s feminism more difficult to discern, but the reader herself becomes defined by an increasing insubstantiality, the ghostliness that defines the “plight” of the “ghostly reader.” Unlike the text’s characters who are “fixed in the historical moment of their first inscription ... the reader is free ... to wander: to make her repeated journey through their landscape without ever being able to make herself seen or heard, without ever being able to make the connection between her life and theirs.” Pearce further dramatizes the reader’s “ghostly sufferings” through the metaphoric framework of

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3 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 27, emphasis in original.
4 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 27.
5 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 27.
6 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 27.
7 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 27.
8 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 28, 2, 24.
9 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 24-25, emphasis in original.
“romance,” utilising romantic discourse to “name and specify some of the emotional consequences of reading.”\textsuperscript{10} This leads her to conclude that “a narrative of insatiable despair/unsupportable loss will inevitably continue to be the trope most befitting the conditions of reading/viewing, in as much as it ‘describes’ … a quintessentially unresolvable self-other relation.”\textsuperscript{11} Thus, the ghost metaphor, Pearce suggests, helps “clarify … the nature of the reader’s sense of disempowerment,”\textsuperscript{12} as, increasingly frustrated by the text’s “refusal” to recognise and respond, the reader becomes aware of the voyeurism implicit in all acts of reading, and, consequently, of herself as “a voyeur of action in which [she] cannot participate or intervene.”\textsuperscript{13}

Pearce’s use of the personal pronoun, with its deliberate and evocative confessional rhetoric, allows her to emphasise the intimacy of the reading experience as the distinguishing feature of her theory of implicated reading. It also allows her to focus almost exclusively on the reader’s desire for an “other,” to assert, in essence, that this desire is the primary motivation of an implicated reading: “What I am looking for as a reader, and which I sometimes get but more often fail to get, is intertextual attention: the interlocutory sense (illusion) that – despite my ghostly status – I have been ‘recognized.’”\textsuperscript{14} Pearce’s use of the personal “I” allows her to fully pursue a strategy of reading as a romance: this is a strategy of reading structured around the relation between the self (the reader) and the other (the text). Perhaps more importantly, it is a strategy of reading which allows Pearce to make an intellectual case for the reader’s desire to be recognised by the text. Indeed, without such recognition, Pearce argues, “the reader becomes self-consciously aware of herself as a voyeur

\textsuperscript{10} Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 25, 20-21.

\textsuperscript{11} Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 25.

\textsuperscript{12} Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 157.

\textsuperscript{13} Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 2.

\textsuperscript{14} Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 158, emphasis in original.
of the text rather than an interactive participant, and this becomes a source not only of frustration (what can I do to make the other see me?) but also of alienation."¹⁵ For feminist and/or lesbian readers this threat of alienation is particularly troubling, if we consider that the desire for reciprocity combines such emotional intensity with a sense of political urgency: a "feminist identity" or a "lesbian identity"—or, indeed, some combination of the two—is, for these readers, as much an object of desire as it is an object of identification. Without the sense that she is engaged with a reciprocating "other" during the act of reading, the feminist or lesbian reader struggles to maintain an interactive relationship with a text in which she may have a personal, as well as political, investment.

It is the complex readerly manoeuvres that occur in this interface between "identification with" and "desire for" that most illuminate the relevance of Pearce's theory of reading beyond the scope of her own text. This thesis is concerned not only to acknowledge the influence of Pearce's model, but also to make a case for its applicability within the wider realm of feminist and lesbian literary studies. To do this, we must first delineate the limits of her theory of reading, if only to then formulate ways in which we might work forward from it. Pearce's model of reading asks us to consider how a focus on the emotional dimensions of the reading process might alter the conditions under which feminist or lesbian readings of texts are made. That is to say, what kinds of textual interpretations might be produced by a reader who is conscious of the emotional motivations that underlie each act of reading, and what kinds of strategies of reading might this reader pursue? Most importantly, in terms of the wider issues with which Pearce is engaging, through its focus on text-reader interaction, Pearce's model provides a discourse through which we can examine the reader's desire for ideology to legitimise identity via the text.

Through the interrogation of her former reading selves, Pearce theorises a reading position that is primarily an individual position; indeed, one of the most frequent criticisms of

¹⁵ Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 158, emphasis in original.
Feminism and the Politics of Reading focuses on the fact that, because Pearce’s readerly journey is so manifestly a personal journey, the focus remains exclusively on her experience and her experience alone. Likewise, the ghostly reader, however enigmatic a figure for conveying the reader’s difficulty in receiving affirmation from the text, is also an individualist position. In Feminism and the Politics of Reading, Pearce is essentially re-reading herself; she is her own ghostly reader seeking to make contact with her own past. However, in providing a legitimised vocabulary with which to articulate the intricacies of an emotional engagement with a chosen text, Pearce offers a kind-of “rough guide” to those readers who wish to retrace similar journeys through texts, who wish to revisit former reading positions or interrogate former reading selves. Indeed, it is out of a desire to respond to this implicit invitation or challenge that, further on in this chapter, I pursue a “Pearce-ian” reading of Winterson’s Written on the Body.

In addition, it is the very novelty of Pearce’s project that makes it so compelling in spite of its extreme self-reflexivity. No other work of literary theory has constructed so methodologically detailed a process for examining the “place” of emotional response within critical interpretation. Nor has any other work of reader theory granted the reader such explicit permission to reflect on the intimate stages which mark the development of her identity as a reader. Attending to the emotional consequences of reading allows us to open up the terms of critical discourse to acknowledge the ways in which certain texts play a formative role in the development of the reader’s identity. Hence, we can utilise Pearce’s theory of implicated reading to develop a subsequent theory of reading as a form of identity politics. In this way, it is fitting that Written on the Body and Affinity demonstrate the complexities and intricacies of the process of implicated reading in their refusal to provide the reader with the kind of recognition she seeks. The remainder of this section will address the difficulty of identifying or “naming” Written on the Body and Affinity as lesbian texts, and how these difficulties demonstrate Pearce’s strategy of reading as a romance. This chapter then moves
on to focus exclusively on Written on the Body, in order to consider how, via this strategy of reading, the practice of textual interpretation throws into intimate and complicated contact the processes of meaning production and identity production. Ultimately, this leads the discussion in this chapter to a consideration of the ways in which Written on the Body alienates the lesbian reader via its construction of a dominant reading/viewing position as male-defined. This, in turn, allows us to differentiate a lesbian reading of the text from a lesbian reading position, which would enable the reading of the text from the perspective of “reading as a lesbian.”

Just as Pearce asserts that a narrative of “insatiable despair/unsupportable loss” best describes the reader’s emotional relation to the text with which she is engaged, so do narratives of loss and despair structure the conditions of romance within Written on the Body and Affinity. In Written on the Body, the unnamed narrator’s romance with his/her beloved, Louise, most often takes the form of the narrator’s longing for Louise when the lovers are separated: “There is endless white space where you won’t be. I travel it inch by inch but you’re not there. It’s not a game, you’re not going to leap out and surprise me.”\(^{16}\) In Affinity, longing becomes increasingly indistinguishable from haunting, as Margaret Prior’s desire for the enigmatic Selina Dawes is likewise determined by absence and separation: “I thought that I could make my life into a book that had no life or love in it—a book that was only a catalogue, a kind of list. Now I can see that my heart has crept across these pages, after all. I can see the crooked passage of it, it grows firmer as the paper turns. It grows so firm at last, it spells a name—\textit{Selina}.”\(^{17}\) Pearce’s model of implicated reading is thus analogous to the trajectory of thwarted romance in these two novels, a parallel further emphasised by her suggestion that “writing is the (only?) means through which the reader/lover can effectively


deal with the frustration of his/her own silence/inactivity.” In both novels, the protagonists turn to some form of writing in order to alleviate the frustration of separation from their beloved love-objects.

In Written on the Body, the middle section of the novel comprises a series of descriptions, written by the narrator, of the different parts of Louise’s body; these not only describe Louise as the object of the narrator’s desire, they also inscribe Louise with the narrator’s desire. The narrator attempts to “drown [him/her]self” in Louise through the “clinical language” of medical textbooks and anatomical vocabulary: “I would go on knowing [Louise], more intimately than the skin, hair and voice that I craved. I would have her plasma, her spleen, her synovial fluid. I would recognise her even when her body had long since fallen away.” Here, the narrator’s desire to “go on knowing” Louise through the parts of her body is brought about by the revelation that Louise has been diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukaemia. Louise’s husband, Elgin, a cancer specialist, promises to provide Louise with the best medical treatment available if the narrator will end his/her affair with Louise. As the narrator agrees to Elgin’s terms and withdraws to a position of “silence/inactivity,” he/she constructs alternative, sometimes fantastic, outcomes for Louise, refusing the possibility of her death in order to prolong her “existence” at the centre of the narrator’s romantic fantasies:

... what if Louise were dying? Would [Elgin] tell me? Would he let me see her again? I shook my head. That would be wrong. That would make a nonsense of all of this. Louise wasn’t dying, she was safe in Switzerland. She was standing in a long green skirt by the drop of a torrent. The waterfall ran down from her hair over her breasts, her skirt was transparent. I looked more closely. Her body was transparent. I saw the course of her blood, the ventricles of her heart, her legs’ long bones like tusks. Her blood was clean and red like summer roses. She was fragrant and in bud. No drought. No pain. If Louise is well then I am well.

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18 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 156.
19 Winterson, Written on the Body, 111.
20 Winterson, Written on the Body, 154.
While this refusal of the (narrative) finality of death allows Louise to remain a blank space onto which the narrator’s desire can be projected, in *Affinity*, the blank spaces which play a central role in the evocation and projection of desire are the pages (literally, blank) of Margaret’s notebook and diary: “I remembered the prostitute, Jane Jarvis, who had asked me once for a page of my book, to send a message to her pal White—I never called on her again, after that day. But to want a sheet of paper, only to write one’s name upon it, so that one might feel oneself conjured through it into life and substance—it seemed a very little thing to want.”21 Set in London in the 1870s, the ghostly romances of *Affinity* turn around Margaret’s role as a “Lady Visitor” to London’s Millbank Prison, where she meets Selina, a disgraced spiritualist serving a sentence for fraud and assault. As Margaret is increasingly drawn to the mysterious Selina, Selina’s desire to conjure herself “into life and substance” becomes indistinguishable from Margaret’s desire for Selina; and, at times, it is Margaret who begins to take on the role of the spirit medium, becoming a conduit for the expression of Selina’s desires:

I am writing by candle-light, and the flame is very low, and dipping. ... I look at my own face, that is reflected in my bulging window: it seems strange to me, I am afraid to gaze too hard at it. But I am afraid, too, to look beyond it, to the night which presses at it. For the night has Millbank in it, with its thick, thick shadows; and in one of those shadows Selina is lying—Selina—she is making me write the name here, she is growing more real, more solid and quick, with every stroking of the nib across the page—Selina. In one of those shadows Selina is lying. Her eyes are open and she is looking at me.22

In *Affinity*, the majority of the narrative comprises Margaret’s diary entries, in which a process of description/inscription constructs Selina as both the object of Margaret’s desire and the vehicle through which such desire may be inscribed textually. In both *Affinity* and *Written on the Body*, then, there is thus an attempt to create a text-within-the-text which will deliver to the protagonists the very “other” they desire.

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Written on the Body and Affinity are two novels in which romance is experienced primarily as the failure to connect with or maintain contact with the beloved; and, in Feminism and the Politics of Reading, I am most interested in those passages in which Pearce revisits her “romance” with Winterson’s Written on the Body, passages in which she discloses her failure to connect with the beloved (in the) text. Pearce describes her methodological intent in re-structuring the reading process as an “unresolvable self-other relation” in an attempt to find the best way to imagine how reading is experienced “from the inside.”

Drawing attention to this logistical dimension of the reading process prompts a closer examination of how we, as readers, “voyeuristically explore our textual others from all angles, desperately looking for ways in which we may make them respond to us and include us in their script.”

If we are able to re-conceive of our reader-selves in terms of the ghostliness that Pearce suggests best characterises our interaction with our chosen texts, then the ghostly reader is, indeed, an apt metaphorical conceit which allows us to accompany both the narrator of Written on the Body and Margaret in Affinity as they move throughout their narratives in voyeuristic pursuit of their beloved love-objects, Louise and Selina. It also allows us to make similarly voyeuristic and desperate journeys through the novels themselves in search of what we most desire from them. There is, I believe, a strong desire among feminist and lesbian readers to see both Written on the Body and Affinity deliver an affirmation of lesbianism within their narratives; and it is precisely the refusal of these novels to do this that thwarts, or threatens to thwart, the reader’s romance with these texts.

However, the self-referential reflexivity of this strategy of reading locks us into the “space” of the text only. How might we retain the potency of the “intimacy and intensity” of the process of implicated reading, while widening the terms of textual engagement so that they extend beyond the individualist focus on the self-other dynamic? If we approach this

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23 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 25.

24 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 25.
question from a slightly different angle, we might ask, are there any other cultural or literary contexts in which the “haunting and taunting reminders of the other’s textuality” resonate? Sharing Pearce’s concern with spectral metaphors and issues of ghostly reading, Terry Castle’s *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993) offers a complementary or corresponding approach to understanding the particular ways in which the reader’s romances with *Written on the Body* and *Affinity* are thwarted. Just as, according to Pearce, the reader’s articulation within the text takes the form of a haunting (“As a reader, I am a ghost not only because I return, but because I am returning to a text”), so does Castle describe lesbianism as a “ghost effect” within the “collective literary psyche” of Western tradition. Identifying a persistent “phantasmagorical association” between ghosts and lesbians in Western literary tradition since the eighteenth century, Castle describes the “spectral figure” as the “perfect vehicle for conveying what must be called—though without a doubt paradoxically—that ‘recognition through negation’ which has taken place with regard to female homosexuality in Western culture since the Enlightenment.” Castle argues that “the [spectral] metaphor has functioned as the necessary psychological and rhetorical means for objectifying—and ultimately embracing—that which otherwise could not be acknowledged.” Castle’s *Apparitional Lesbian* thus allows us to further contextualise the inaccessibility of the lesbian “other” sought by the reader of these texts by focusing on the inaccessibility or “apparitionality” of the lesbian within patriarchal culture; the reader’s engagement with the text is reframed in terms of the difficulties of representing the lesbian within patriarchal culture. In both *Written on the Body* and *Affinity*...
on the Body and Affinity it is this haunting, taunting, paradoxical “recognition through negation” which frustrates the reader’s attempts to pin a lesbian identity to any of the characters; and it is the conspicuous indeterminacy of lesbian subjectivity within the text—the refusal to present an “identifiable” image of lesbianism—which comes to dominate the reader’s engagement with these novels.

Just as the romances within Written on the Body and Affinity are defined by the protagonists’ desire for absent or inaccessible love objects, so is the reader’s romance with both novels defined by the inaccessibility of lesbianism within their narratives, and by absent or apparitional lesbian characters. Central to both Written on the Body and Affinity is the exploitation of spectral metaphors in the pursuit of alternative, possibly lesbian, subject positions within the texts; although, as indicated by the contrast between the transparency of Louise’s body and the thickening opacity of the shadows in which Margaret pictures Selina lying, such metaphors are employed for different purposes and to different effect. Unlike Affinity’s ironic use of spectral metaphors which exploit the reader’s assumptions about lesbian textual representation, Written on the Body cultivates a subjectivity of insubstantiality in order to sever desire from a specifically lesbian embodiment. If both novels foreground a paradoxical im/possibility of lesbianism, thus complicating the assurance with which the reader can “claim” either novel as a lesbian novel, or the narratives within them as lesbian romances, not only is Pearce’s model of implicated reading played out by the romance narratives within Written on the Body and Affinity, it is also a model which best describes the conditions of reading these two novels: it provides a ready framework for understanding the reader’s desire to “locate” lesbianism in both Winterson’s and Waters’s novel, and for describing the activity of the reader as she becomes increasingly preoccupied with identifying or defining the lesbian character(s) within these texts. It is when we link up Pearce’s strategy of reading with Castle’s theorising of lesbian literary representation that we begin to move
from the individualist stance of Pearce’s reading position towards a reading position that is
individual on behalf of others.

II

Central to Pearce’s re-conceptualisation of reading as an interactive relationship between the
reader and the text is the presence of the “textual other,” the point of contact around which
this interaction is maintained. She states that it is the “existence of this other, indeed, that has
enabled me to conceptualize the text-reader relationship as a relationship – and as a romance –
and to equip it with an emotional vocabulary that has been noticeably absent from existing
reader and spectator theory.”30 Stressing that “[t]he textual other can … be both a textual and
contextual point of contact for the reader,” Pearce elaborates:

the textual other can be represented by many things as well as a character in the text: it
might … take the form of … an interlocutory subject position (how a character in a
text positions us), an author-function, an interpretive community, or the (covert/overt)
audience/addressee of our own reading. It can even … subsume the last two
categories into an other which is the ‘act of interpretation’ itself.31

The textual other, then, is “whoever or whatever causes us to engage with a text in a manner
that is beyond the will-to-interpretation. It is what … causes us to both ‘fall in love’, and
endure the sequel of our falling.”32 Working from this notion of “falling in love” with a
text(ual other), Pearce recasts the reader as a lover who, as she demonstrates in her own
readings of Winterson’s Written on the Body, will go to great lengths to “discover, define and
defend her [relationship with her] textual other.”33

30 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 17, emphasis in original.
31 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 17, emphasis in original.
32 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 20, emphasis in original.
33 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 20.
Pearce employs the "narrative trajectory and emotional 'dictionary' of Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* (1978) to identify and name the broad spectrum of emotions" produced during the process of implicated reading, dividing the reader's romance with the text into two phases: the moment of first enamoration, *ravissement* (ravishment), and its "sequel."\textsuperscript{34} Identifying her "textual other" as the text's "personalised source of origin: the author, 'Jeanette Winterson,'"\textsuperscript{35} she analyses her changing response to *Written on the Body* through the trajectory of emotions associated with *ravissement* (enchantment, devotion and fulfilment) and its sequel (anxiety, frustration, jealousy and disappointment) in order to disclose the ways in which the novel marks the end of her "special relationship" with "Jeanette Winterson." In her text, Pearce employs two different type faces to distinguish between different acts of reading, using the sans serif font to indicate her original reading position. I will discuss some of the implications of this dichotomising of reader response further on in this chapter; for now, I simply wish to state that the sans serif passages are reproduced here using the Lucinda Sans font, as in the one below in which Pearce writes:

> Without question, this text was the beginning of the end of my special relationship with "Jeanette", though it would take a while ... for me to fully acknowledge it. At this point, at least, she ceased to be my prophet and mediator - but maybe that's because I no longer needed her to be? There have been profound changes in my own personal life between *Sexing the Cherry* ... and *[Written on the Body]*, and a new set of interlocutory relations have opened up for me...\textsuperscript{36}

Although she chooses to withhold the precise details of these "interlocutory relations," Pearce goes on to argue that "our textual others are always in competition with extratextual others (whether 'intimates' or members of various interpretive communities ... ), even though the

\textsuperscript{34} Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, 21.


\textsuperscript{36} Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, 149.
conditions necessary for a successful readerly ravissement requires us to pretend otherwise.”

In effect, the “extratextual” and contextual aspects of our personal lives have just as great a propensity to influence our responses to texts as the texts themselves; hence Pearce’s attempt to acknowledge that, for her, the failure of Written on the Body was never “purely textual.”

As she continues to re-examine her memory of first reading Written on the Body through the framework of the “Barthesian romance,” probing deeper at the extratextual factors that influenced her encounter with the novel, Pearce discovers a number of obstacles that “were put in the way of [her] emotional engagement with [the] novel and the desperate struggles [she] had to put up ... to overcome them.” In particular, it is her previous investment in “Winterson” and Winterson’s earlier novels which prompts Pearce to do what she describes as the “honourable thing” and defend Written on the Body against the “barrage of negative publicity and criticism” which accompanied its appearance on the literary market:

As soon as I had read [Written on the Body] (which I’m remembering now was, indeed, the first weekend it arrived in Lancaster) I did the honourable thing and defended it - and her. ... Such loyalty is the requisite of all 'fans' ... Whatever you might secretly think or suspect, you never let on to ‘others’. And so my memory of my reception of this text is of the public defence I was obliged to give on Winterson’s behalf, and this responsibility is the first obstacle to a more honest emotional re-engagement. Indeed, it must be said that in my re-reading of the text I will be confronting a spectrum of responses that I never addressed at the time because I was still ‘half in love’ with the text’s author.

While this act of loyalty attests to Pearce’s assertion that the reader will go to great lengths to defend her (relationship with her) textual other, in subsequent re-readings of the novel she discovers that it is precisely this gesture of devotion that proves problematic to a successful initial engagement with the text.

Pearce re-evaluates her original response to Written on the Body, re-examining her “involvement in [the novel’s] narrative trajectory,” in order to determine precisely “the extent

37 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 149, emphasis in original.

38 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 149.

39 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 89.

40 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 90-91.
to which the advance publicity surrounding Written on the Body combined with [her] own feminist conscience to thwart [her] enchantment by the text."\(^{41}\) Questioning whether her own "(romantic) involvement with the text [is] in line with that of the protagonists," she concludes, "Not at all. The first fifty pages or so have seen me struggling desperately to make emotional contact - mostly through a (re)construction of the Winterson narrative persona [i.e., a persona I recognize from the previous texts]."\(^{42}\) As Pearce continues her re-reading, what emerges is an awareness of the distance at which she is kept from the text, due, in part, to the problematic sexual politics within which the narrator's romance with Louise is circumscribed. This is a point which will, as we shall see, play a similar and significant role in thwarting my own engagement with the novel, and draws us back to one of the most compelling conditions of ghostly reading: the reader's sense of herself as a voyeur of action in which she cannot participate or intervene. Written on the Body positions Pearce—and myself—in an uncomfortable, voyeuristic relation to it: "I see that in my original reading of the text I was probably faking it: the scenes of passion between [the narrator] Lothario and Louise alienate more than they fascinate. This is possibly because I am unable to find any satisfactory viewing position for myself; unable to achieve any meaningful intra-diegetic relationality."\(^{43}\)

Pearce's desire for "intra-diegetic relationality" is, essentially, a desire for a more participatory engagement within the narrative, for a "fully dialogic, interactive relationship with the text;"\(^{44}\) in short, a desire for emotional, as opposed to purely intellectual, contact with the text. This prompts the question, do we, as readers, need this emotional contact with the text? Do we, as critical, academic or politicised readers, seek to make intellectual contact

\(^{41}\) Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 91.

\(^{42}\) Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 91.

\(^{43}\) Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 91.

\(^{44}\) Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 91.
with texts at the expense of emotional contact? If we lack emotional contact, will we inevitably feel alienated from the text? Much of Pearce's project is concerned with demonstrating how interpretive reading practices maintain a false dichotomy between intellectual and emotional reading positions. By focusing so intently on the emotional dimension of reading, Pearce, in effect, exaggerates this dichotomy for her own purposes; in a somewhat paradoxical way, she separates the emotional from the intellectual in order to show, ultimately, that they are inseparable.

Yet Pearce also exploits and embraces this dichotomising tendency with her use of two typefaces, a methodological gamble which runs the risk of suggesting that the two reading positions cannot be reconciled. If, however, we are able to draw the emotional back into conversation with the intellectual, we can demonstrate how they become indistinguishable, especially in the case of feminist and/or lesbian readings. To do this, rather than continue to comb through Pearce's readings, I want to pick up where she leaves off, and begin my reading of Written on the Body at that point at which Pearce's romance with the novel ends: with her experience of feeling alienated by the romance between the narrator and Louise. As I have already mentioned, one of the criticisms of Feminism and the Politics of Reading is that its theoretical relevance is of limited applicability to other scholars, focused as it is so exclusively on Pearce's own experiences as a reader. However, her awareness of this potential shortcoming prompts her to extend an invitation to the reader of her text: "It is my hope ... that my use of the personal pronoun will work dialogically, as opposed to solipsistically, for readers of [my] text." To this extent, she reflects on the potential feminist utilitarianism of the personalist method: "For autobiographical or personalist criticism to be useful to feminism ... it must dialogically include the other (woman) within its positioning: a condition that seems in some ways easy to fulfil (in as much as the 'I' cannot exist without a reciprocating 'you') and in others impossible (in as much as all dialogues are power-

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45 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 26.
inscribed, and one can never guarantee the effect of one’s address).”46 Thus, working from Pearce’s desire for “intra-diegetic realtionality” foregrounded by the romantic framework and enamoured, myself, by her work on the emotional politics of reading, my reading—emotional and otherwise—of Written on the Body begins at the point where Pearce’s romance with it ends: with her acknowledgement that she is unable to find a “satisfactory viewing position” from which to approach the text.

Just as Pearce differentiates between her past and present reading positions with the use of two different type faces, so do I employ the Calibri font to indicate my original reading position, and hence disclose my re-memory of first reading Written on the Body:

Written on the Body was the first novel by Jeanette Winterson that I’d read, and it failed to sustain my interest in either it or in her as an author. I remember not sticking with it, but putting it down to read other novels and returning to it later, as a sort-of after-thought, a loose end that I wanted to tie-up. Flicking back through a journal I’d kept at that time reveals that Written on the Body appears on a list of books I’d read between November 2004 and January 2005, so I must have returned to it and finished reading it, but to be honest, I don’t remember doing so. What I remember most about my first encounter with Written on the Body was a sense of confusion, as if I knew I was supposed to be waiting for “something” to be revealed to me by this book, even if I didn’t know what that “something” was. I waited, but nothing ever came, and the more I read, the less certain I became of the book’s power to enchant me.

In spite of the fact that I wanted, very much, to be enchanted by Jeanette Winterson and her novel, I was not. Although I agree with Pearce’s assertion that “whenever we open a text ... we are liable to enchantment,”47 with Written on the Body I was incapable, even, of “faking” such a response to this text; I simply felt as if the text had nothing to say to me, that there was no meaningful dialogue—emotional or intellectual—in which I could engage it.

Addressing the question of “who or what the reading subject is likely to be enchanted by,” Pearce highlights two important factors from Barthes’s A Lover’s Discourse that contribute to our readiness to be enchanted by a text: induction by a third party, who “points out the desirability of the other,” and the “scene,” which can take, among other things, the

46 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 26-27.

47 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 86.
form of the "socio-cultural context in which the text is first received." Written on the Body was lent to me by the person who had very quickly become my "extratextual significant other," and such a gift was received as a token of affection from one woman to another; thus, the moment in which I first encountered Written on the Body was inseparably bound up with my emergent lesbian identity. The scene was, indeed, "set" for a whole range of amorous intra- and extradiegetic encounters, in which interpersonal objects of desire would become indistinguishable from intratextual objects of desire. This is where we begin to see how the strategy of reading as romance can be reconfigured as a strategy of reading as a form of identity politics: when the reader's desire for a textual other becomes blurred with the reader's desire for the text to legitimise the particularity of desire itself. And yet, in my case, even this highly intimate psychological climate did not prompt me to try harder to read Written on the Body's meditations on love and devotion as an affirmation of specifically lesbian desire. That I was, so to speak, "primed" to be enchanted by this text, but was not, demonstrates Pearce's assertion that "not only can our pre-textual experiences constitute a Barthesian induction, but in certain instances they are the ravissement." Even if we are "ready and willing" to "fall in love" with a text, as amorous subjects we are not nearly as passive as Barthes's romance framework would have us be.

Indeed, Pearce makes this very same observation in the conclusion to her chapter on "ravissement," when she discusses the "considerable power/freedom" of the reader in "determining her relationship to a text." As our intellectual identities merge with our interpersonal ones, our innermost desires dictate our readerly desires, rendering us the agents of our own textual seductions and, at times, risking to drive us away from the text's embrace. The "something" that I was looking for in Winterson's text was an affirmation of lesbian desire.

48 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 86-87.
49 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 92, emphasis in original.
50 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 132-33.
desire and identity, and the novel’s refusal to gender the narrator female and thereby make
*Written on the Body* a lesbian love story—or, at least, a love story between two women—was
tantamount to a complete disavowal of lesbianism all together. This explains why the
contextual circumstances of the moment of my first encounter with *Written on Body* were in
and of themselves the *ravissement*, and why, when this book failed to meet the expectations I
had set out for it, I simply put it down and went in search of another text that could satisfy
me.

Even if the extratextual setting in which my introduction to *Written on the Body*
ocurred could not guarantee my readerly enamoration with this text, I did not, at this point,
“give up” on Winterson altogether. It was her earlier novel, *The Passion* (1987), which
provided the right “scene” for my transformation from an indifferent to an enchanted reader
of her fiction. As I remember,

> It wasn’t until I read *The Passion* that I was finally excited by Winterson’s fiction, that I found
something—or rather, *someone*—to love: the heroine, Villanelle. Although I now realise that one of
the reasons I was so captivated by this character was because she reminded me of Nan in Sarah
Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), at the time, all I wanted was “to discover” an iconic lesbian
hero/ine, and the cross-dressing Villanelle, who, with her webbed feet and her boat(wo)man’s stealth,
steals her still-beating heart back from her enigmatic lover, gave me, at last, what I wanted from
Winterson. That Villanelle’s romantic adventures were played out in Venice, in a quasi-historical
setting, only helped to create the sense that this text was everything *Written on the Body*—and its
protagonists—was not: sexy, intriguing and romantic in the old, medieval sense of the word. I could
picture Venice’s seductive alleyways, its narrow twisting streets and waterways, and I could use my
own experiential knowledge of this scene/setting to take Winterson’s character and make her “my
own,” my long-awaited textual other, and my enjoyment of the novel was largely due to my
appropriation of Villanelle’s romance with the Queen of Spades and my rescripting of it for my own
readerly romance with her.

This passage reveals just how much of my enchantment with *The Passion* depended on my
efforts as a reader to actively claim this text as a specifically *lesbian* text; the details of the
plotline which involved Henri, his homoerotic infatuation with Napoleon Bonaparte, and the
traditionally masculine-themed scenes of sex, violence and death that depicted the war
threatened to undo all my hard-earned female-oriented pleasure in this text. I remember
vividly the feeling of annoyance at the scene in the novel where the soldier’s feet freeze in the
horse’s entrails and the army marches stoically on, leaving him to die:
They marched into winter and we followed them. Into the Russian winter in our summer overcoats. Into the snow in our glued-together boots. When our horses died of the cold we slit their bellies and slept with our feet inside the guts. One man’s horse froze around him; in the morning when he tried to take his feet out they were stuck, entombed in the brittle entrails. We couldn’t free him, we had to leave him. He wouldn’t stop screaming. 51

It is the last line in particular, “He wouldn’t stop screaming,” that exemplifies exactly the kind of gratuitous detail I had begun to dislike in Winterson’s work.

This “Pearce-ian” exercise in re-memory also reveals what I had been looking for in Winterson’s writing in those months preceding my encounter with The Passion, and begins to explain my inability to identify and maintain contact with a textual other during my reading of Written on the Body. While Pearce was initially able to maintain the illusion of a romantic engagement with Written on the Body because her textual other was not specific to this one text alone, but encompassed the entire body of Winterson’s work, I had no such existent readerly relationship with Winterson, and, therefore, no investment in maintaining contact with either “her” or her work. There was, however, one extratextual factor that indirectly impacted on my first encounter with Written on the Body, one that considerably lessened the initial disappointment I felt with this text. As Pearce, in her re-memory, begins to come to terms with the ways in which Written on the Body marked the end of her “special relationship with ‘Jeanette’,” what she describes is falling out of love with a beloved, idolised other/author: “At this point ... she ceased to be my prophet and my mediator—but maybe that’s because I no longer needed her to be?” 52 In contrast, for me, Winterson never fell from such a position of grace but only because I never needed her to be either my “prophet” or my “mediator.” Was this because I had already found another author who could be those things to me? In recounting my moment of enamoration with Winterson’s The Passion, I discover that my point of contact with this novel was mediated by a separate textual encounter with


52 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 149.
Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet*. The two novels have little in common besides a cross-dressing female protagonist, but it was precisely the figure of Nan King, the hero of Waters’s novel, who enabled me to make a lesbian reading of *The Passion*. It becomes clear, now, that the expectations I brought to Winterson’s fiction were the same expectations that I brought to Waters’s, and it was *Tipping the Velvet, Affinity* and *Fingersmith* (2002) that I turned to during the period when I grew bored with waiting for *Written on the Body* to “say something” to me. When *Written on the Body* failed to “ravish” me, I sought my “textual other” elsewhere, and went and “fell in love” with Sarah Waters and her fiction.

And yet, what this exercise in personalist criticism does not reveal is why Waters succeeds where Winterson fails. Perhaps, it was less the case of another author filling a particular role, and more the case that I never gave either author the “power” to be those things to me. Perhaps acknowledging the emotional motivations of our reading practices does not, in spite of what Pearce argues, necessitate the assumption of a ghostly identity. This is where the question of the reader’s agency over her reading of the text becomes important. As long as the reader seeks “something” from the text, she risks being disempowered; as long as she expects something to be delivered to her through the act of reading, she risks being disappointed by the text, the author or the characters—whatever form her textual other takes—if the expectation is not met. This question of agency is what allows us to differentiate those strategies of reading which enable lesbian readings of texts, from those strategies of reading which open up lesbian reading positions outside the text, which enable the act of “reading as a lesbian.”

Unable, like Pearce, to find a satisfactory reading position from which I can form an “inter-diegetic relation” with *Written on the Body*, I am left to face the uncomfortable possibility that I am not the intended “other” with whom this text seeks to make contact. If I employ the strategy of reading as romance, if I approach the novel in the guise of a lover seeking affirmation, then when it fails to deliver what I need, as it inevitably will, I am left
disenchanted or disappointed by the lack of reciprocity. If, however, I do not locate my need within the text, but retain a sense of agency over the act of reading, then I can begin to examine the dominant reading position constructed by the text’s range of interlocutory and narrative devices. If we move away from the individualist stance of the personalist method, we can examine where the “lesbian reader” or the “feminist reader” is positioned in relation to Written on the Body.

III

Pearce’s recognition that she is unable to find “any satisfactory viewing position” for the scenes of passion between the narrator and Louise resonates strongly with my own reading of Written on the Body. While Pearce’s original engagement with the novel is set against her existing relationship with Winterson’s other fiction, and with the author-figure of “Winterson” herself, this is a contextual factor noticeably absent from my first reading of the novel. In my own memory of first reading Written on the Body, I can confirm what Pearce’s readings already demonstrate: that “the social and psychological context in which a text is consumed (re-produced) may strongly influence our disposition towards enchantment.”53 To emphasise this point, Pearce uses an example which is, again, strongly resonant with my own initial reading experience: “when our ‘being in love’ ... in the material world becomes part of the ‘scene’ which embodies the intratextual love object.”54 As Pearce reminds us elsewhere, “romantic love is a narrative discourse ... for ourselves, as for the characters in romantic fiction, the experience of ‘being in love’ depends entirely upon the stories we find ourselves

53 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 87.

54 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 87, emphasis in original.
able to tell." Hence, not only do our interpersonal experiences predispose us to greater susceptibility to "enchantment" where certain narratives are concerned, but it is precisely because certain narratives have the power to evoke in us the "special sense of having [our] own thoughts and feelings written out for [us]" that our susceptibility to enchantment is particularly strong. In other words, our own experiences influence what we read and how we read, and, likewise, the texts we read influence our own interpersonal experiences and the "sense" we make of them.

This is a significant point where the formation of the reader's personal identity is concerned, especially when the identity in question is one which is likely to be bound up in a particularly concomitant historical or political context, such as the claiming of a lesbian identity or the development of a feminist consciousness. Indeed, Gabriele Griffin situates Winterson's early fiction within these very contexts, describing the significance of her début novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1983) to a rising lesbian feminist cultural consciousness that sought to draw on the gains of the women's and gay and lesbian liberation movements to produce images of lesbians in literature that were "defiant" as opposed to "deviant." Griffin suggests that as "[l]esbians claimed cultural space in tandem with and in the wake of the women's and gay liberation movements," the result was the "construction of lesbian culture(s) which ... increasingly moved towards a position that was assertive, affirmative and celebratory of lesbians." In the fiction produced during this era, lesbian writers began to explore the "opportunities inherent in their historically-conditioned

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56 Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, 89.

situation,” so that, Griffin argues, “one of the new images of the lesbian in literature to emerge in the early 1970s was that of the defiant lesbian hero.”\(^{58}\) All of Winterson’s novels since *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* retain this preoccupation with heroes and heroism; the question of whether this continued interest in heroes draws on specifically lesbian or lesbian-feminist images and traditions or derives from other literary and narrative contexts will be examined via the readings of *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) and *The PowerBook* (2000) in Chapter Two of this thesis.

To return to Griffin’s point above, for a number of second-wave feminists and feminist literary critics, the significance of Winterson’s earliest fiction to a wider feminist context is indeed encapsulated by this kind of historically-situated moment. Lucie Armitt describes her “attachment” to Winterson’s early fiction, and acknowledges that her “own sense of [herself] as a feminist literary critic is bound up in [Winterson’s] moment of emergence.”\(^{59}\) Consider Armitt’s recollection of the socio-cultural context in which she first encounters Winterson’s fiction:

> *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* ... was published the year after I graduated, which was also the year I went to my first women’s writing conference, where I bought it from the bookstall, and, as they say, the rest is history. That moment of ‘becoming’ is crucial because a mixture of nostalgia combined with personal indebtedness encourages me to situate ‘the Winterson of that time’ right at the heart of the story of Second Wave literary feminism – and yet I know this to be a sense of belonging Winterson herself would actively and assertively resist, as well as being one that, from *Written on the Body* ... onwards, I equally feel ill befits her.\(^{60}\)

As both Armitt and Griffin demonstrate, it is this initial critical response to Winterson’s earliest work that establishes her significance to feminist and lesbian literary traditions, and which, in spite of Winterson’s own repudiation of such contextualisation, has been largely

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\(^{58}\) Griffin 62.


responsible for ensuring a continued interest in the relationship between her work and the concerns of second- and third-wave feminisms, lesbian critical and cultural theory, and queer theory. As we have seen in the Introduction chapter, it is this initial reception of Winterson’s earliest fiction, its success within the “mainstream” literary market as a work of lesbian fiction that also manages to achieve a “universal” appeal, that sets in place the expectation that her subsequent fiction will continue to remain relevant to lesbian and feminist literary and cultural interests.

Yet, while for some feminist critics Winterson inspires a complicated mixture of emotions—admiration and affirmation, a sense of collective achievement, feelings of nostalgia, regret and loss—for subsequent generations of feminist readers, Winterson’s “iconic status” is perhaps more precarious. No longer belonging to the same “feminist moment” as the one alongside which Winterson’s fiction emerged, those readers like myself who have “inherited” Winterson as a feminist and lesbian commentator have, to some extent, also inherited the disillusionment and disappointment which has accompanied her presence on the feminist “scene” since Written on the Body. And yet, to suggest that this is an issue of generational difference is to simplify the complicated overlap identified by Armitt between writing by women, feminist writing, and an “attachment” to those texts which play a formative role in the development of the reader’s own feminism. Similarly, the temptation to write off Written on the Body on the grounds of ideological disagreement still does not explain why, to return to a point made earlier, for me, Waters succeeds where Winterson fails. Pearce cautions against this very tendency when she observes that “feminism (or some other political value-system) becomes … the means through which we can scapegoat the text and textual other who has disappointed us, whilst recognizing (as we must) that the failure of the relationship was due to more than an ideological disagreement.”61 If, as Pearce’s model demonstrates, reading can be understood as a romance between the text and the reader, then,

61 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 183-84.
as in other romance narratives, the obstacles that prevent the successful fulfilment of the romantic expectations play a significant role in thwarting the reader's romance with *Written on the Body*. For many feminist and lesbian readers, the biggest obstacle to a satisfactory engagement with *Written on the Body* is presented by the novel's controversial, nameless, ambiguously gendered and sexually indeterminate narrator.

Addressing the issue of the reader's response to the indeterminate narrator is Patricia Duncker, who describes *Written on the Body* as "a clever, duplicitous text," a text which carefully conceals the way it privileges the response of the heterosexual male reader at the expense of a lesbian or feminist politics. Duncker suggests that "by concealing the gender of the narrator, Winterson avoids writing a Lesbian text about the affair between two women shattering a rotten marriage, but a text which gives the (male) heterosexual reader plenty of room to feel smug." For Duncker, this "smug" heterosexual male reader is actually the privileged reader of *Written on the Body*: "I am not like that husband, he can say to himself, I have been let off. The structures of heterosexual marriage are not the issue at stake in the relationship between Elgin and Louise. He can imagine that Louise has chosen a better man." Additionally, although Armitt describes *Written on the Body* as "a watershed novel in Winterson's oeuvre, as it is with this novel that her experiments with ambiguously gendered or incomplete narrators begin," she is circumspect about the long-term effects of Winterson's privileging of "the genderless" in her work from *Written on the Body* onwards: "what still concerns me is the possibility that those generations of women readers (present and future) who already express scepticism about the need for an ongoing feminist debate may

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63 Duncker 82.

64 Duncker 82, punctuation as in original.

look to Winterson’s prioritizing of ‘the genderless’ as proof of feminism’s redundancy.”

Armitt acknowledges that while Winterson’s high-profile cultural status ensures that her role in the “shaping of contemporary literary feminism will certainly remain strong,” it remains to be seen whether “the idea of a primary attachment to women ... will take on renewed relevance” in her fiction.

Pearce suggests that a “successful ravissement “depends upon our ‘entering’ or participating in the text in some way, and [that] this is achieved through a number of (highly creative) reader-strategies, including character-identification.” In spite of Duncker’s suggestion that the absence of gendered pronouns in fact panders to patriarchal sensibilities and heterosexual male preferences, there is nothing to prevent the feminist and/or lesbian reader from claiming a female or lesbian identity for the narrator and pursuing a reading of the novel’s meditations on love as an affirmation of specifically lesbian desire. Indeed, as Pearce recalls with regard to the issue of the narrator’s gender: “women tended to read the narrator as female, while men assumed ‘him’ to be male. For those wishing to make a lesbian reading of the text, moreover, the choice was obvious.” Obvious, perhaps; but ultimately impossible, precisely because as long as the text conceals the narrator’s gender, the reader can never be certain of the nature of the relationship between the text and herself.

Of all of Winterson’s novels Written on the Body is perhaps the one with which it is most difficult to “connect”—as a reader, let alone as a woman, a feminist or a lesbian reader; and this is largely on account of the novel’s ambiguously gendered and sexually indeterminate narrator, who manages to be both the most logical textual other (that “point of contact around which the interactive text-reader relationship is maintained”) and the biggest obstacle to any

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68 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 132, emphasis in original.

69 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 141.
“interactive” engagement with the text. On the one hand, by leaving the narrator’s gender undetermined, Written on the Body allows the reader to entertain the possibility that the narrator is a “she,” and that the romance between the narrator and Louise is open to a possible lesbian reading. On the other hand, precisely because the narrator’s gender is left undetermined, the possible lesbian romance of Written on the Body is continually deferred, signalling, ultimately, the impossibility of a lesbian relationship between the narrator and Louise. In spite of the narrator’s protestations otherwise—“I don’t want to reproduce, I want to make something entirely new”—without, as Pearce says, “confirmation that [the narrator] is a ‘she’, the text’s re-working of heterosexual romance conventions lose their potential transgression: the clichés are reproduced without necessarily being defamiliarized.” The narrator’s ambiguous gender works solipsistically as opposed to dialogically—without any clear sense of “who” is speaking, the reader cannot know if “s/he” is speaking to her. In this way, the feminist and/or lesbian reader’s participation in the novel is instantly rendered voyeuristic, always on the periphery, alienated. The reader becomes, perhaps against her own wishes, a “voyeur of action in which [she] cannot participate or intervene.”

IV

To some extent, Written on the Body encourages the reader to embrace this voyeuristic position; how else to explain the uncomfortable distance at which Louise, the narrator’s beloved love-object, is kept from the reader throughout the novel. Frequently the focus of the narrator’s obsessive, aphoristic gaze, Louise is most often represented as a series of “feminine” images or metaphors: “There was a dangerously electrical quality about Louise.

70 Winterson, Written on the Body, 108.

71 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 159.

72 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 2.
... She was more of a Victorian heroine than a modern woman. A heroine from a Gothic novel ... She was compressed, stoked down, a volcano dormant but not dead.”

Unsurprisingly, this mode of representation often encourages a resistant response on the part of the feminist reader. For example, Armitt’s concern is with the ways in which Written on the Body undermines female subjectivity, “carefully circumscrib[ing] and controll[ing]” its offerings of “female flesh,” and trading in images of women most “palatable to patriarchy.”

In particular, Armitt argues, the real problem presented by the representation of Louise is that “in denying a woman’s voice to the active lover/narrator, the only roles left for the unambiguously female character are the more objectifying ones Louise epitomizes: beloved on a pedestal, femme fatale, … adulterous married woman, dying wraith.” Likewise, Pearce finds that the fetishization of Louise’s body presents yet another obstacle to any meaningful engagement with the novel; for Pearce, Louise remains “a version of femininity which [she] neither aspire[s] to nor desire[s].”

Indeed, with her masses of Pre-Raphaelite hair, her muslin dresses and her petticoats, Louise makes an unlikely potential textual other, offering the reader an exaggerated image of femininity at which to gaze, rather than a possible feminine subject position with which to engage. Through a series of metaphors in which the narrator rhapsodises about Louise’s beauty, Written on the Body attempts to align the reader with the narrator’s point of view, in order to secure the reader’s acceptance of a mode of representation which conflates femininity, female sexuality and, via Louise’s diagnosis of terminal leukaemia, morbidity. The construction of Louise as a beautiful and ultimately unattainable object of desire is

73 Winterson, Written on the Body, 49.
76 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 160.
crucial to this aesthetic discourse; hence, the evocation of what is fleeting or short-lived in the narrator’s descriptions of Louise:

If I were painting Louise I’d paint her hair as a swarm of butterflies. A million Red Admirals in a halo of movement and light. There are plenty of legends about women turning into trees, but are there any about trees turning into women? Is it odd to say that your lover reminds you of a tree? Well she does, it’s the way her hair fills with the wind and sweeps out around her head. Very often I expect her to rustle. She doesn’t rustle but her flesh has the moonlit shade of a silver birch. Would I had a hedge of such saplings naked and unadorned.77

Like the images to which she is compared—swarms of butterflies, leaves rustling in the wind, moonlight on a silver birch—Louise can neither be grasped nor pinned down. Figured in terms of what is evanescent or transient, Louise retreats from the reader, reduced to such ephemera as “a halo of movement and light.” Indeed, so thoroughly is Louise represented as occupying a threshold between the ethereal and the real that she is effectively de-realised. What is most noticeable, and most alienating, about this mode of representation is that Louise lacks the materiality expected of a traditional object of desire; as the above metaphors suggest, most often she is simply an image of desire.

The most obvious reading suggested by this mode of representation is the one offered by Castle’s The Apparitional Lesbian. It is a short step from the etherealising metaphors used to describe Louise to the traces she leaves behind which signal her actual absence in the text:

“I went straight to my flat. I didn’t expect to find Louise there and yet there were signs of her occupation, some clothes, books, the coffee she liked. Sniffing the coffee told me that she hadn’t been there for some time ... I picked up a sweater of hers and buried my face in it. Very faintly, her perfume.”78 Throughout Written on the Body, Louise is increasingly associated with the phantasmagorical, the dream-like, or the ghostly, particularly as the novel moves towards its indeterminate conclusion after the narrator’s searches in London fail to recover her: “I couldn’t find her. I couldn’t get near to finding her. It’s as if Louise never

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77 Winterson, Written on the Body. 28-29.

78 Winterson, Written on the Body, 163.
existed, like a character in a book. Did I invent her?" 79 Just as the intangible faint traces of Louise’s perfume signal her absence, and so counter-act those material signs—her sweater, her books, her coffee—which would indicate her presence, Louise’s startling, wraith-like reappearance in the novel’s final paragraphs seems to confirm rather than refute her presence as spectral figure: she is “[p]aler, thinner, but [with] her hair still mane-wide and the colour of blood.” 80 Ghost-like, these images of Louise demonstrate the contradictory and “paradoxical recognition through negation” or “absent presence” that frames her representation in the text.

The link between absence, images and voyeurism is explored by John Berger in Ways of Seeing (1972). Berger’s claim, “[i]mages were first made to conjure up the appearance of something that was absent,” 81 encapsulates the mode of representation most frequently employed in the depiction of women in Written on the Body. “Trophy wives” are indistinguishable from the jewellery that adorns their flesh, and the text eroticises not the spectacle of the women wearing the jewellery, but the jewellery itself, and, by extension, the different parts of the body on which the jewellery is worn, so that these (body) parts stand in for the whole (of the woman):

On every side we were battered by sequins, dazed with gold. The women wore their jewellery like medals. A husband here, a divorce there, they were a palimpsest of love-affairs. The chokers, the brooch, the rings, the tiara, the studded watch that couldn’t possibly tell the time to anyone without a magnifying glass. The bracelets, the anklet-chains, the veil hung with seed pearls and the earrings that far outnumbered the ears. 82

To some extent, the conflation of women with their jewellery is deliberate and ironic. Written on the Body attempts a critique of the institution of marriage and of the sexual contract on which it is traditionally founded. As Sonya Andermahr notes, Winterson’s “work is

79 Winterson, Written on the Body, 189.
80 Winterson, Written on the Body, 190.
82 Winterson, Written on the Body, 32.
consistently critical of heterosexual and male privilege and ferociously anti-marriage; almost every novel contains a critique of, if not a diatribe against, the institution which she sees as stifling and domesticating love and giving a specious state and church imprimatur to human relationships." 83

Compare, for example, two passages from *Written on the Body*, one in which the narrator launches an acerbic assault on the hierarchical nature of the relationship between men and women in marriage—

I used to think of marriage as a plate-glass window just begging for a brick. The self-exhibition, the self-satisfaction, smarminess, tightness, tight-arsedness. The way married couples go out in fours like a pantomime horse, the men walking together at the front, the women trailing a little way behind. The men fetching the gin and tonics from the bar while the women take their handbags to the toilet. It doesn’t have to be like that but mostly it is. 84

—and one in which the narrator goes to great lengths to demonstrate the difference which characterises his/her romance with Louise:

What did we do that night? We must have walked wrapped around each other to a café that was a church and eaten a Greek salad that tasted like a wedding feast. We met a cat who agreed to be best man and our bouquets were Ragged Robin from the side of the canal. We had about two thousand guests, mostly midges and we felt we were old enough to give ourselves away. It would have been good to have lain down there and made love under the moon but the truth is that, outside of the movies and Country and Western songs, the outdoors is an itchy business. 85

Andermahr argues that *Written on the Body* is an example of the subgenre of lesbian anti-romance writing, which “developed out of and as a deliberate critique of the romance,” and which “consciously eschews both the wish-fulfilment fantasies and romantic clichés of the genre,” 86 but this reading is somewhat contested by the second passage, which imagines a whimsical and fantasy-driven alternative to a traditional marriage ceremony.


Andermahr maintains that *Written on the Body* is effectively a romance written in anti-romance mode, critiquing not only the clichés of heterosexual romance but those of the discourse of romantic love in general:

Winterson's target is heterosexual marriage, but her critique applies to the generic clichés of both the heterosexual and the lesbian romance genres. Her defamiliarizing use of language is striking: whereas romance is a euphoric mode which always speaks in a heightened, poetic language, the anti-romance uses vernacular language to describe sexual experience and reveal the gap between fantasy and reality.  

While the second passage utilises earthy and earthly images and metaphors to playful effect—a simple Greek salad is as substantial as a wedding banquet; the wedding couple are attended by cats and midges, and carry bouquets of weeds plucked from the side of a canal—this subversion of the discourse of romantic love fails ultimately to translate into a critique of the institution of heterosexuality. To reiterate Duncker's point mentioned earlier, the reader—whether lesbian or heterosexual, female or male—can still imagine that Louise has chosen a better man. Indeed, concealed within this "diatribe" targeting heterosexual marriage is an attempt to appease Duncker's "smug" heterosexual male reader: "It doesn't have to be like that but mostly it is." It could be argued, even, that by focusing on critiquing the discourse of romantic love—heterosexual and lesbian—the novel refuses the opportunity to make a case for the uniqueness of lesbian love. The critique of romance is never politicised; lesbianism is never presented as a critique of heterosexuality in its own right.

Further evidence of the novel's failure to critique heterosexuality as an institution is seen in the ways in which the novel continually glamorises images of heterosexual femininity. To return to the earlier point about trophy wives, although the narrator seems to imply that it is women who exchange their husbands for lovers and profit from their marriages, divorces and love-affairs, the description of jewellery worn "like medals" actually reads as a reminder

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87 Andermahr, "Reinventing the Romance," 94.
of the ways in which women exchange sex for material gain of some sort: money, jewellery, a place to live, or even, perhaps, tickets to the opera. It is, after all, at The Marriage of Figaro that the narrator observes the bejewelled women who are accompanied by “amply cut grey suits and dashingly spotted ties,” and it is “[d]uring the interval of The Marriage of Figaro that [the narrator] realised how often other people looked at Louise.” Thus, Written on the Body’s critique of the system of sexual exchange which characterises marital and extramarital relations between men and women is undermined by the fact that the spectacle of Louise’s beauty situates her firmly within this heterosexual economy of exchange; as Louise acknowledges to the narrator:

“He [Louise’s husband, Elgin] knew that I was beautiful, that I was a prize. He wanted something showy but not vulgar. He wanted to go up to the world and say, ‘Look what I’ve got.’”

I thought about Elgin. He was very eminent, very dull, very rich. Louise charmed everyone. She brought him attention, contacts, she cooked, she decorated, she was clever and above all she was beautiful.

Louise, it would seem, is well aware of herself as an object of value, and of the value of her own objectification; as Berger states, “[m]en look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.”

Indeed, in her position as the desired, as opposed to the desirous woman, Louise “offer[s] up her femininity as the surveyed,” as when, for example, she orchestrates her first encounter with the narrator, feigning distress (a stolen handbag) and turning up on the narrator’s doorstep in the rain, with “the rain [running] down her breasts, their outline clear through her wet muslin dress.” Louise confesses that it was “Emma, Lady Hamilton, who

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88 Winterson, Written on the Body, 31-32.
89 Winterson, Written on the Body, 34-35.
90 Berger 47.
91 Berger 55.
92 Winterson, Written on the Body, 85.
gave [her] the idea ... She used to wet her dress before she went out. It was very provocative but it worked on [Admiral] Nelson." 93

This scene in which Louise plays the role of the female provocateur, displaying herself as an erotic spectacle for the narrator's voyeuristic gaze, returns us to that particular moment in Pearce's reading of Written on the Body when she describes being unable to find a satisfactory viewing position for the scenes of passion between the narrator and Louise. This is the point, remember, at which my reading of the novel overlaps with and takes off from Pearce's reading; and by focusing on the ways in which Louise is constructed as an erotic spectacle, we can pinpoint some of the unexplored assumptions concerning viewing privilege and gender positioning in Written on the Body which contribute to the feelings of alienation and exclusion experienced by both myself and Pearce. Framing the discussion of the objectification of Louise in this way, we can expand upon the "images of women" critique offered so far and begin to address the mechanisms of textual positioning through which certain readers are privileged, while others are alienated by the dynamic which exists between the narrator and Louise.

The conflation of the narrator's indeterminate gender, his/her privileged access to (gazing at) Louise, and the fact that the reader's access to Louise is mediated through the narrator's privileged point of view prompts the following questions concerning the dominant reading position opened up by the text: where, and how, is the reader of Written on the Body positioned in relation to the narrator? Which readers are invited to share the narrator's privileged gaze: male or female readers? Lesbian readers? Is the lesbian reader more conscious of herself as a voyeur than a male reader? Does she experience intellectual or emotional conflict about participating in the objectification of a woman? If, as Berger argues, women "watch themselves being looked at," then how can a woman look at another woman?

93 Winterson, Written on the Body, 85.
Laura Mulvey’s influential theory of spectatorship begins with an analysis of the ways in which the sexual objectification of women is a determining structural device within narrative cinema: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease ... she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.” 94 Berger argues that the “unequal relationship” between men, as “spectator-owners,” and women, as objects of sight, is “so deeply embedded in our culture that it still structures the consciousness of many women,” 95 and Mulvey pursues this point further, attributing such inequality to a “world ordered by sexual imbalance, [which splits] pleasure in looking ... between active/male and passive/female.” 96 It is Margaret Atwood’s short prose piece, “Iconography” (1984), that best demonstrates the relevance of these theoretical positions to Written on the Body, because it plays out the ways in which sexual inequality in an iconographic tradition is maintained through conflating the gaze of the spectator with that of the character in the story, who is positioned as male; in this way, it serves as a point of comparison for the ways in which the reader’s gaze is conflated with that of the narrator’s in Written on the Body, and how the narrator’s position is constructed as male.

“Iconography” dramatises the way in which the “determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure,” 97 simultaneously arranging and displaying the woman as a sexual object for the pleasure of the male spectator-owner:


95 Berger 63.

96 Mulvey 27, emphasis added.

97 Mulvey 27.
He wants her arranged, just so. He wants her, arranged. He arranges to want her.

... Once she wasn’t supposed to like it. To have her in a position she didn’t like, that was power. Even if she liked it she had to pretend she didn’t. Then she was supposed to like it. To make her do something she didn’t like and then make her like it, that was greater power. The greatest power of all is when she doesn’t really like it but she’s supposed to like it, so she has to pretend.

Whether he’s making her like it or making her dislike it or making her pretend to like it is important but it’s not the most important thing. The most important thing is making her. Over, from nothing, new. From scratch, the way he wants. 98

In exposing the ways in which the construction of the woman as a sexual spectacle invites an identification with masculine heterosexual desire, “Iconography” also reconstructs the male spectator’s position as one with which it is uncomfortable to identify. According to Mulvey, in traditional narrative cinema, “the woman displayed ... function[s] ... as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium ... [so that] the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude.” 99 Jackie Stacey, working from Mulvey’s model, reiterates this point: “where the woman is represented as the sexual spectacle for the masculine gaze of the diegetic and the cinematic spectator, an identification with a masculine heterosexual desire is invited.” 100 In Atwood’s text, however, the conflation of the male character’s gaze with the reader’s gaze is interrupted momentarily, forcing the reader to confront the voyeuristic nature of the dominant spectator position which allows the male viewer privileged access to and control over the woman on display: “All you see is the skin, that smile of hers, flat but indelible, like a tattoo. Hard to tell [whether she likes it or not], and she never will, she can’t.” 101

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99 Mulvey 27.

Here, Atwood’s use of pronouns is significant: the introduction of “you” into the narrative, which has so far been concerned only with a “he” and “she” locked into an active/passive hierarchy, breaks the narrative momentum which has been leading the reader into an identification with the male character’s point of view. What is exposed is not only the narrative trajectory which encourages this identification, but also the way in which masculine sexual subjectivity is predicated upon the sexual subjection of the woman. This is noticeably different from the dominant spectatorial position offered by Written on the Body, which neither critiques the system of sexual inequality which structures the representation of women in iconographic tradition, nor opens up the text to the possibility of “feminine fascinations,” to what Stacey describes as “the phenomenon of fascination between women.” Searching for an alternative model of spectatorship to the one formulated by Mulvey, Stacey asks, “How might a woman’s look at another woman, both within the diegesis and between spectator and character, compare with that of the male spectator?” While such speculation points to the way in which we might begin to reframe the conditions of spectatorial pleasure in Written on the Body, the ambiguous and indeterminate position of the narrator lacks a deconstructive, feminist (self-)consciousness that might direct attention to feminist and/or lesbian reader of the novel; it is precisely the ambiguity which characterises the narrator that undermines the possibility of the feminist and/or lesbian reader’s pleasure in being a privileged witness to the exchange of the gaze between the narrator and Louise.

Whereas, in “Iconography,” the comparison of the woman with other objects which are arranged for the spectator’s viewing pleasure makes explicit her objectification in a number of iconographic traditions—“This is the arrangement they have made. With strings attached, or ropes, stockings, leather straps. What else is arranged? Furniture, flowers. For

101 Atwood 90, emphasis added.
102 Stacey 114.
103 Stacey 121.
contemplation and a graceful disposition of parts to compose a unified and aesthetic whole"\textsuperscript{104}—in \textit{Written on the Body}, the conflation of Louise with the objects which surround her simply reinforces the unexamined feminine aesthetic through which she is constructed as "that-which-is-to-be-looked-at." Hence, Berger's observation, "a woman's presence ... is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste—indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence,"\textsuperscript{105} reiterates the extent to which Louise is continually framed as the central image of sight, as one among many objects arranged for "contemplation and a graceful disposition of parts to compose a unified and aesthetic whole,"\textsuperscript{106} as in the scene in the novel in which the narrator stands outside Louise's house and, unobserved, watches Louise in her kitchen:

Louise was eating breakfast when I arrived. She was wearing a red and green guardsman stripe dressing gown gloriously too large. Her hair was down, warming her neck and shoulders, falling forward on to the table-cloth in wires of light. ... The white table-cloth, the brown teapot. The chrome toast-rack and the silver-bladed knives. Ordinary things. Look at how she picks them up and puts them down, wipes her hands briskly on the edge of the table-cloth; she wouldn't do that in company. She's finished her egg. I can see the top jagged on the plate, a bit of butter that she pops into her mouth from the end of her knife. Now she's gone for a bath and the kitchen's empty. Silly kitchen without Louise.\textsuperscript{107}

However, in the middle section of \textit{Written on the Body}, such carefully composed unity is undone by a series of descriptions of Louise's body parts. Intended as a sequence of love-poems from the narrator to the absent Louise, these panegyrical, eulogistic meditations attempt to fill the space left by Louise's absence but ultimately achieve the opposite effect: Louise is not remembered, but is literally dismembered, carved up into individual parts which refuse to add up to a unified whole.

\textsuperscript{104} Atwood 89.

\textsuperscript{105} Berger 46.

\textsuperscript{106} Atwood 89.

\textsuperscript{107} Winterson, \textit{Written on the Body}, 48-49, emphasis added.
Split into a number of parts which are then kept separate from one another, Louise is effectively separated from her own body; the narrator imagines Louise “bagged neat and tidy,” and “store[d] ... in plastic like chicken livers.” This focus on these “pieces” of Louise results in an exaggerated materiality which reframes her representation in the middle section of the novel. Previously an icon of high-femininity with its suggestions of bourgeois respectability, Louise “falls” from this elevated status as the text now emphasises the parts of the body associated with the “lower stratum” in a grotesque caricature of female-ness. Correspondingly, there is a shift in the imagery associated with Louise. The ethereal and apparitional metaphors which elevate her to an exalted, almost unearthly position as the narrator’s beloved love-object give way to a contradictory emphasis on the female body as fleshy and fecund; the narrator’s access to Louise is now rooted in somatasensory experience: “The smells of my lover’s body are still strong in my nostrils. The yeast smell of her sex. The rich fermenting undertow of rising bread. My lover is a kitchen cooking partridge. I shall visit her gamey low-roofed den and feed from her.”

The narrator’s increasingly necrophilic fascination with Louise’s body parts is initially offered as proof of his/her attempts to come to terms with the possibility of Louise’s death: “Now that I have lost you I cannot allow you to develop, you must be a photograph not a poem. You must be rid of life as I am rid of life. We shall sink together you and I, down, down into the dark voids where once the vital organs were.” The middle section of the novel foregrounds the narrator’s self-professed obsession with anatomy and medical terminology, which provides a “dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self” and offers a means through which the narrator believes he/she can continue to

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108 Winterson, *Written on the Body*, 120.
"recognise [Louise] even when her body had long since fallen away.” Written on the Body 

thus invokes the grotesque as an alternative discourse through which the narrator’s desire 
seeks expression, a discourse, though, which renders Louise as unattainable as the 
apparitional metaphors which initially frame her representation within the text.

Louise becomes a “foreign body,” a collection of internal cavities, which the 
narrator “explores;” yet, she remains an elusive object of desire, a mirror-space onto which the narrator’s own self-image can be projected:

“Explore me,” you said and I collected my ropes, flasks and maps, expecting to 
be back home soon. I dropped into the mass of you and I cannot find a way out. 
Sometimes I think I’m free, coughed up like Jonah from the whale, but then I turn a 
corner and recognise myself again. Myself in your skin, myself lodged in your bones, 
myself floating in the cavities that decorate every surgeon’s wall. That is how I know you. You are what I know.

In its associations with cavities and cavernous spaces, the grotesque body, and in particular the female grotesque body, evokes the cave or “grotto-esque”—that which is “[l]ow, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, [or] visceral.” Mary Russo observes that as bodily metaphor the “grotesque cave tends to look like (and in the most gross metaphorical sense be identified with) the cavernous anatomical female body.” Thus, in this way does the anatomical language which constructs a primarily clinical view of the body—“FOR DEScriptive PURPOSES THE HUMAN BODY IS SEPARATED INTO CAVITIES”—find metaphorical revision via the narrator’s desire to “open up” and “enter” Louise:

Let me penetrate you. I am the archaeologist of tombs. I would devote my life to 
marking your passageways, the entrances and exits of that impressive mausoleum, 
your body. How tight and secret are the funnels and wells of youth and health. A

111 Winterson, Written on the Body, 111.
112 Winterson, Written on the Body, 116.
113 Winterson, Written on the Body, 120.
115 Russo 1.
wriggling finger can hardly detect the start of an ante-chamber, much less push through to the wide aqueous halls that hide womb, gut and brain.\textsuperscript{116}

As this passage demonstrates, there is an uncomfortable erotic aesthetic at work in the middle section of the novel, one which is constructed around the narrator’s fantasies which cast him/her in the role of adventurer or explorer intent on discovering and plundering the “impressive mausoleum” of Louise’s body. This is compounded by the sense that, in spite of the increasing emphasis on the materiality and internality of Louise, as each anatomical body part is effectively “dissected” and reworked according to the narrator’s prescription of desire, conquest and acquisition, Louise retreats further away from the reader.

Although the image of the body as the “sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self,” which has replaced the earlier, idealised images of Louise, appears to resemble Russo’s description of the grotesque body as the “open, protruding, extending, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change,”\textsuperscript{117} the narrator’s preoccupation with corporeal morbidity inverts the positive—life-affirming, fertile or (re)generative—associations of the female grotesque: “In the old or ill, the nostrils flare, the eye sockets make deep pools of request. The mouth slackens, the teeth fall from their first line of defence. Even the ears enlarge like trumpets. The body is making way for worms.”\textsuperscript{118} The generative power of the figure of the female grotesque is lost as the narrator’s fantasies repeatedly re-enact Louise’s (textual) death. Hence, the reframing of Louise in terms of the grotesque exaggerates the body’s propensity towards decay and disintegration, and characterises the body, above all, in terms of self-destructive excess:

In the secret places of her thymus gland Louise is making too much of herself. Her faithful biology depends on regulation but the white T-cells have turned bandit. They don’t obey the rules. They are swarming into the bloodstream, overturning the quiet order of spleen and intestine. In lymph nodes they are swelling with pride. It used to

\textsuperscript{116} Winterson, \textit{Written on the Body}, 119.

\textsuperscript{117} Russo 62.

\textsuperscript{118} Winterson, \textit{Written on the Body}, 119.
be their job to keep her body safe from enemies on the outside. They were her immunity, her certainty against infection. Now they are on the inside.\textsuperscript{119}

The phrase, "Louise is making too much of herself," evokes Russo's observation that "[m]aking a spectacle out of oneself ... [is] a specifically feminine danger," one which involves "inadvertency and loss of boundaries."\textsuperscript{120} Men, Russo points out, "expose themselves," while women are subject to the constant "danger of an exposure."\textsuperscript{121} Both the apparitional and the grotesque, as modes of representation, subject Louise to systems of patriarchal signification through the ways in which they strip her of any sense of female agency and render her the feminine image or object of the narrator's fascination.

The association of the female grotesque with notions of spectacle are also prevalent in the final section of the novel where Louise's place is filled by a grotesque woman named Gail Right. Gail Right embodies the "corpulent excess" that is the dominant image of the material body within "grotesque realism." Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe how grotesque realism "uses the material body — flesh conceptualized as corpulent excess — to represent cosmic, social, topographical and linguistic elements of the world."\textsuperscript{122} Grotesque realism is "fundamental to the corporeal, collective nature of [Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of] carnival laughter," and is employed primarily to describe the subversive, often humorous, challenge to "high" culture made by the "low" and "dirty" folk humour of carnival. This invocation of the grotesque is consistent with Andermahr's reading of the novel as a romance in the anti-romance mode, in which the abject is reclaimed and eroticised in a deliberately oppositional stance to the heightened, poetic language and imagery of traditional romance. For Andermahr this is evidenced by the ways in which the descriptions of Louise's body in the middle section

\textsuperscript{119} Winterson, \textit{Written on the Body}, 115.

\textsuperscript{120} Russo 53.

\textsuperscript{121} Russo 53, emphasis added.

of the novel push the "limits of sexual imagery and 'good taste' to astonishing effect." My interest in the images and associations provided by grotesque realism is more closely derivative of Russo's reading of the grotesque, and focuses on the ways in which images of abject excess dominant the final section of Written on the Body so that female bodily excess results in a claustrophobic fear of and revulsion towards the body of the female love-object. Russo observes that the "associations of the female with the earthly, material, and the archaic grotesque have suggested a positive and powerful figuration of culture and womanhood to many male and female writers and artists." Russo ascribes the perpetuation of this cultural and symbolic tradition to a "certain archetypal view ... still prevalent in a vein of nonacademic, 'cultural feminism' ... [which] valorizes traditional images of the earth mother, the crone, the witch, and the vampire, [and] posits a natural connection between the female body (itself naturalized) and the 'primal' elements, especially the earth." 

However, it is, Russo also observes, an "easy and perilous slide from these archaic tropes to the misogyny which identifies this hidden inner space with the visceral. Blood, tears, vomit, excrement—all the detritus of the body that is separated out and placed with terror and revulsion (predominantly, though not exclusively) on the side of the feminine—are down there in that cave of abjection." Throughout Written on the Body the narrator's female lovers are often regarded with a mixture of desire and terror, or attraction and repulsion, that reflects a fear of the female body and its devouring, desiring nature implied by the physical excesses of the female grotesque; even Andermahr observes, the "resignifying of

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123 Andermahr, "Reinventing the Romance" 95.
124 Russo 1.
125 Russo 1.
126 Russo 2.
the grotesque does not extend throughout the text."\textsuperscript{127} For example, the narrator's girlfriend, Jacqueline, is a monstrous (in)version of the earth mother-figure:

\begin{quote}
Jacqueline worked at the Zoo. She worked with small furry things that wouldn't be nice to visitors. Visitors who have paid £5 don't have a lot of patience for small furry things who are frightened and want to hide. It was Jacqueline's job to make everything bright and shiny again. She was good with parents, good with children, good with animals, good with disturbed things of every kind.\textsuperscript{128}
\end{quote}

Although docile to the point of dullness, when the narrator begins his/her affair with Louise, Jacqueline refuses to vanish or disappear quietly from the narrator's life, instead viciously trashing the narrator's flat:

\begin{quote}
It was wrecked. \ldots The room looked like a chicken shed. There were feathers everywhere. The pillows had been ripped, the duvet gutted and emptied. \ldots The bathroom looked like it had been the target of a depraved and sadistic plumber. \ldots The walls were covered in heavy felt-tip pen. It was Jacqueline's handwriting. There was a long list of her attributes over the bath. A longer list of my disabilities over the sink. Pasted like an acid-house frieze around the ceiling was Jacqueline's name over and over again. Jacqueline colliding with Jacqueline. An endless cloning of Jacquelines in black ink.\textsuperscript{129}
\end{quote}

This last image offers a grotesque alternative to that which is traditionally emblematic of the primal energy and primary function of the earth mother: instead of the pregnant, maternal body, swelling with future life, there is the "endless," non-generative "cloning" of Jacqueline's own name, disembodied and colliding "over and over again" with itself.

Furthermore, it is not only with ink that Jacqueline leaves her "mark" on the narrator's flat: "Staring blearily back at the bathroom door I saw that it had SHIT daubed across it. The word and the matter."\textsuperscript{130} This overlapping of Jacqueline's name with her own excrement further emphasises the visceral, animal-like quality of her demolition of the narrator's flat—the image of the ravaged chicken shed, the duvet "gutted" like the victim of a kill.

\begin{footnotes}
\item Andermahr, Jeanette Winterson, 84.
\item Winterson, Written on the Body, 25.
\item Winterson, Written on the Body, 70.
\item Winterson, Written on the Body, 70.
\end{footnotes}
Jacqueline’s monstrosity is further represented in terms of the “ideological paranoia [which] surrounds cultural readings of [women’s] mouths, lips and teeth,”\(^{131}\) as when, for example, she returns to the scene of the crime: “There was a hammering at the door. We both jumped. ‘It must be Jacqueline,’ said Louise. ‘I thought she’d be back when it got dark.’ ‘She’s not a vampire.’”\(^{132}\) The implied threat of the vampire’s bite is dramatised by Jacqueline’s attempt to stab Louise with a shard of broken glass: “I tried to persuade her to sit down and have a drink but as soon as she’d taken the glass she threw it at Louise. It missed and shattered on the wall behind. She leapt across the room and took one of the sharpest largest pieces and made for Louise’s face.”\(^{133}\) Although one of the central images of the grotesque body is the gaping, dilating “O” of the mouth (which is paralleled by the similar image of the female genitals), in Written on the Body the fear of being consumed or devoured is extended beyond the specific boundaries of mouth or genitals to the monstrous physical dimensions of the female body itself via the novel’s representation of Gail Right.

In the figure of Gail Right, the material, physical or bodily excesses of the female grotesque are reduced to one definitive trope: a voracious or insatiable appetite that represents the threat of engulfment by the female body. Thus, although she lacks the piercing or penetrative threat of the vampire’s bite, once she has been invited over the threshold, Gail Right refuses to leave:

“Lovely and warm in here,” she said snuggling herself in front of the stove. She had a vast bottom. … She eased herself into the trembling armchair and accepted my offering of cocoa with a leer about Casanova. … I went into the cottage, the door was unlocked, and there was Gail Right half asleep in the chair. The fire burned like a spell and there were fresh flowers on the table. Fresh flowers and a table-cloth. New curtains in the ragged window. My heart sank. Gail must be moving in.\(^{134}\)

\(^{131}\) Lucie Armitt, Contemporary Women’s Fiction and the Fantastic (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000) 67.

\(^{132}\) Winterson, Written on the Body, 85.

\(^{133}\) Winterson, Written on the Body, 86.

\(^{134}\) Winterson, Written on the Body, 143, 188.
The text repeatedly draws attention to the excessive proportions of Gail Right—in particular her “vast bottom” and flabby “bingo wings.” Emphasising the oral nature of her attempt to seduce the narrator, Gail Right admits: “I know, you think I’m a fat old slag who just wants a piece of something firm and juicy. Well you’re right.” Explicitly linking the grotesque to both the female body and female desire, Gail Right’s femininity exceeds the boundaries of normative (diminutive) femininity: “Gail put down her wand of mascara. It said wand on the side of the tube but it looked more like a cowprod.” As the reference to the “cowprod” indicates, the descriptions of Gail Right often compare her to lumpish masses of raw meat, farm animals or misshapen furniture. The narrator confesses: “We hadn’t made love. I’d run my hands over her padded flesh with all the enthusiasm of a second-hand sofa dealer.”

Catching sight of Gail in the bath, the narrator, rather cruelly, describes her would-be lover: “Gail was streaky. She looked like a prime cut of streaky bacon. Her eyes were small and red from the night before.”

It is this emphasis on the grotesque material excess of Gail Right that prevents the monstrous nature of her appetites from being defined by orality per se; although, she is most terrifying in a scene which exaggerates the precise oral nature of the threat of being consumed:

“Hello love,” she said kissing me with a suckering sound. “Got any bacon sandwiches?”

She licked the grease from her lower lip and where it had dripped on to her arm. …

She leered at me over the crusts of her breakfast. “Didn’t you enjoy a bit of home company last night? Those hands of yours got everywhere.”

Her own hands were wedging [the bacon sandwich] between her jaws as though she feared the pig might still have the guts to make a break for it. She had fried the bacon herself then soaked the bread in the fat before shutting the sandwich.

135 Winterson, Written on the Body, 149.

136 Winterson, Written on the Body, 148.

137 Winterson, Written on the Body, 144.

138 Winterson, Written on the Body, 147.
Her fingernails were not quite free of red polish and some of this had found its way on to the bread.\(^ {139}\)

The narrator’s response to the sight of Gail Right devouring the bacon sandwich is to become sick; and as Andermahr observes, “[v]omiting and shuddering are both characteristic responses to abjection and represent extreme attempts to expel the abject image or part.”\(^ {140}\)

Furthermore, the narrator’s revulsion stands in sharp contrast to the way in which he/she is transfixed by the sight of Louise eating soup:

> When she lifted the soup spoon to her lips how I longed to be that innocent piece of stainless steel. I would gladly have traded the blood in my body for half a pint of vegetable stock. Let me be diced carrot, vermicelli, just so that you will take me in your mouth. I envied the French stick. I watched her break and butter each piece, soak it slowly in her bowl, let it float, grow heavy and fat, sink under the deep red weight and then be resurrected to the glorious pleasure of her teeth.\(^ {141}\)

The “glorious pleasure” of being taken into the mouth of the female beloved is only permissible, it seems, if that desire originates with the narrator. As soon as the desire to consume is embodied by the female love-object it becomes monstrous and massive, seemingly out of control, grotesque. This point is underscored by the direction of the gaze in these contrasting scenes. The narrator watches Louise eat, and so constructs him/herself as the desiring subject: “When I ate my own soup I strained to taste her skin. ... I would find her in the oil and onions, detect her through the garlic.”\(^ {142}\) By contrast, Gail Right “leers” at the narrator over the greasy remains of her bacon sandwich and threatens the narrator’s subjectivity by implying that he/she is simply (the next) one among a number of sensual delights: “‘I love a bacon sandwich,’ she said. ‘The way you touched me. So light and nimble, do you play the piano?’”\(^ {143}\)

\(^{139}\) Winterson, Written on the Body, 147-8.

\(^{140}\) Andermahr, Jeanette Winterson, 84.

\(^{141}\) Winterson, Written on the Body, 36.

\(^{142}\) Winterson, Written on the Body, 36-37.
There is another, perhaps more crucial difference between these scenes. The larger-than-life appetites of Gail Right at once both invoke and subvert the heightened sensuousness of the narrator's lunch with Louise, but such hyperbole does more than simply draw attention to the differences between (the narrator's response to) the two women. While Gail Right dominates the narrative with her exaggerated physical presence, Louise remains curiously absent. Although I agree with Pearce's assertion that the "mingling of sexual fantasy with food fantasy" is part of the "glamorous lifestyle" or cultural "commodity" appeal of Winterson's fiction, it is noticeable that the narrator's attention is directed more towards the ingredients in Louise's soup than to Louise herself. That the concern of the narrative is the construction of the narrator as the active subject/desiring lover is emphasised by the reiteration of the first-person pronoun: "I longed to be ... I would gladly have traded ... Let me be ... I envied ... I watched her ..." Thus, we return to the problem of Louise's inaccessibility, to Louise's status as an object or image of desire; and, this inaccessibility or absence of Louise also returns us to the other absence which defines Written on the Body: the absence of lesbianism and lesbian identity.

In her reading of Written on the Body, Leigh Gilmore argues: "the grieving lover has left the wounded beloved and cannot recollect her. Parts and functions of the body become occasions for meditations upon loss without the prospect of reconstruction." Gilmore reads this refusal of reconstruction as a triumphant refusal of naming, as a "signification of desire without sexual identification [which] can be read as a refusal of the patriarchal regime of

143 Winterson, Written on the Body, 148.


145 Winterson, Written on the Body, 36, emphasis added.

names and the identities it compels.”  
Like the majority of critical readings of Written on the Body, Gilmore’s reading focuses exclusively on the narrator in order to make a lesbian reading of the text—even if this is a reading which relies on the paradoxical claim that it is, in fact, the absence of the signifier “lesbian” which permits a “lesbian reading” to be made of the text. Gilmore suggests that “[w]ithout the signifier of lesbian in Written on the Body, the lover’s identity persists through and as the absence of Louise,” but she fails to address the full implications of the narrator’s fetishization of Louise’s body. The different parts of Louise’s body stand in for the body itself, acquiring a significance in excess of the body’s wholeness, so that what they constitute, ultimately, is the creation of a number of female spaces designated “other” onto which the narrator can project his or her own identity. Written on the Body might refuse a patriarchal regime of names and identities, but it nonetheless invokes a patriarchal system of binary relations, in which opposing positions—self/other, male/female, lover/beloved, active/passive—are used to define the narrator’s relationship to Louise. In this way, Written on the Body reverts to a patriarchal system of gender relations concerned to construct a dominant position of masculinity which is determined by the ways in which it is placed in opposition to constructs of femininity defined as abject and “other”: female desire is either rendered monstrous, as embodied by Jacqueline and Gail Right, or is excised from the text altogether, as Louise fails to be recovered or re-anatomised in the final section of the novel.

Written on the Body ends with a ghostly image, as Louise’s face appears at the narrator’s kitchen door: “Paler, thinner, but her hair still mane-wide and the colour of blood. I put out my hand and felt her fingers, she took my fingers and put them to her mouth. The scar under the lip burned me. Am I stark mad? She’s warm.”  
Paradoxically, narrative

147 Gilmore 124.

148 Gilmore 140, emphasis added.
fulfilment is only offered by an ending that refuses closure: “This is where the story starts. ... I don’t know if this is a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields.” The romance of Written on the Body can only ever be a “ghostly” romance, constituted by an exorcism of the beloved’s female body, and haunted by the terrifying form of the female grotesque.

Written on the Body is not so much a novel in the mode of the anti-romance, as it is a novel about the deferral of romance, and about the displacement of lesbian romance, as female embodiment remains problematic within its narrative. The novel’s final lines, which refuse to confirm a “happy ending” between the narrator and Louise, and which assert a narrative interest in returning to the beginning—“The is where the story starts”—reflect one of the most distinguishing features of Winterson’s fiction: a preoccupation with narrative strategies of delay or deferral. Indeed, this is precisely the starting point for the readings of The PowerBook (2000) and Sexing the Cherry (1989) offered in the next chapter, which demonstrate the structural and thematic affinities between Winterson’s novels and medieval narrative romance.

In this chapter, Pearce’s theory of implicated reading has served as the starting point for an exploration of how we read as feminists and/or lesbians. It has enabled a discussion of the ways in which feminist and lesbian readers turn to chosen texts seeking affirmation or confirmation of their own identities as feminists and/or lesbians, and has explored the ways in which readers are able to maintain such an interactive engagement with the text via the presence of a “textual other.” It has allowed us to examine what “happens” if the text refuses to provide what the reader seeks from it; namely, it has allowed us to utilise both Pearce’s personalist method of literary criticism and her notion of the “failed romance” between the reader and the textual other to examine the ways in which Written on the Body fails or refuses to single out the lesbian reader in an intimate form of address, one in which she is

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149 Winterson, Written on the Body, 190.
150 Winterson, Written on the Body, 190.
privileged to the exclusion of all other readers. In this way, the reading of *Written on the Body* offered in this chapter has sought to build on Pearce’s emotional response to the novel by examining the ways in which *Written on the Body* alienates the lesbian reader via the creation of a dominant reading/viewing position constructed as male. The novel’s refusal to affirm images of lesbians and lesbianism or to privilege the lesbian reader suggests that a new context is needed in which to place Winterson’s fiction, that there is a need to move beyond the expectation that Winterson’s fiction is most relevant within a lesbian literary tradition. Hence, the reading of *Written on the Body* offered in this chapter has not intended simply to critique the novel for its “failure” to conform to certain expectations concerning lesbian fiction; it has sought to establish a precedent for the reading of Winterson’s fiction offered in the next chapter, which addresses the research aims of this thesis—to explore how readings of Winterson’s and Waters’s fiction can move beyond expectations placed on the lesbian author. It aims to draw attention to those aspects of Winterson’s fiction that have long been overlooked in critical discussions and to offer new readings of her novels in an effort to expand the contexts in which her fiction is received, read and understood.

It is from Pearce’s theorising of an emotional politics of reading that, in Chapters Two and Three, the notion of “implicated reading” is extended beyond the strategy of reading as romance. Utilising Pearce’s concern with the ways in which feminist and/or lesbian readers are “implicated” in the text—that is, the ways in which they engage with the text in a more participatory manner, in a manner which goes beyond the conceptualisation of reading as an interpretive practice concerned primarily with meaning production—two new strategies of reading are formulated which frame the readings of the novels of Winterson and Waters in the subsequent chapters: as stated in the Introduction, these are, reading as quest and reading as revision. These strategies of reading allow us to continue to describe the feminist and/or lesbian reader’s engagement with the text as an interactive process of reading, one which enacts, via the reading of the text, the narrative strategies of the text itself. Hence, in Chapter
Two, Reading as Quest, the discussion of the relationship between Winterson's fiction and medieval narrative romance leads to an exploration of the feminist and/or lesbian reader's "quest" for alternative models of heroes and heroism which might contest the traditional or canonical construction of heroic masculinity central to medieval romance and still influential within literary tradition today. We turn now to Chapter Two, Reading as Quest, in order to begin this discussion with an examination of Winterson's fiction in terms of its narrative organisation according to strategies of delay, deferral, dilation or digression.
Chapter Two – Reading as Quest

The postmodernist storytelling of Jeanette Winterson takes a unique form in its engagement with medieval narrative romance. Winterson’s fiction is recurrently preoccupied with heroes, models or ideals of heroism, and the quest motif, in which the hero pursues or searches for a beloved love-object or object of desire; all of these demonstrate an interest in medieval romance at the level of narrative content within Winterson’s novels. Furthermore, at a structural level, the narrative trajectories of her novels often follow the organising principles of narrative romance as a literary mode, one which is characterised by moments of dilation, digression, delay or deferral, and one which, in these ways, simultaneously reaches towards and postpones the achievement of a particular object, objective or end. This extends the preoccupation with medieval romance beyond the level of narrative content, integrating its narrative strategies into the very fabric of her novels themselves; this suggests that there is, throughout Winterson’s fiction, an interest in utilising the narrative devices of romance for the purposes of postmodernist storytelling. Working from the research question which frames the reading of Winterson’s fiction in this thesis—how useful is it to continue to read Winterson as a “lesbian writer”?—this chapter seeks to establish a case for a reading of Winterson’s fiction in terms of its relationship to medieval narrative romance. In addition to providing an original reading of Winterson’s fiction, this will also address the wider research aims of this thesis, which seek to examine ways in which readings of both Winterson’s and Waters’s fiction can move beyond the expectations placed on the “lesbian author.”

The concluding remarks in the previous chapter drew attention to the difference between producing a lesbian reading of a text and the reader’s ability to approach the text from a lesbian reading position, arguing that the structural devices within Written on the Body (1992) construct a dominant reading/viewing position as defined as male; in effect, this amounts to a refusal to single out the lesbian reader in a privileged form of text-reader address. This chapter continues this line of inquiry by drawing attention to the ways in which
the feminist and/or lesbian reader of Winterson’s fiction is addressed by the interlocutory narrative devices of her novels. The narrative motif of “the quest” is central to the research aims pursued within this chapter: it guides the discussion in this chapter by enabling a critical scrutiny of Winterson’s fiction in terms of the “obstacles” encountered by the feminist and/or lesbian reader as she seeks to engage with the text in a more participatory manner.

Additionally, as indicated in both the Introduction to this thesis and in the conclusion to the previous chapter, the quest motif allows us to conceptualise a strategy of reading as quest which best describes the actions of the feminist and/or lesbian reader of Winterson’s fiction; this is a strategy of reading through which we can articulate the feminist and/or lesbian reader’s desire to seek and find feminist and/or lesbian heroes, icons or allies within her fiction.

The readings of The PowerBook (2000) and Sexing the Cherry (1989) offered in this chapter demonstrate new and innovative ways to move beyond the expectations generated by the lesbian label by establishing the thematic and structural proximities between these two novels and medieval romance. This first section of this chapter briefly outlines some of the themes, motifs and narrative devices that are common throughout Winterson’s novels, and which are also characteristic of medieval romance. This establishes the rationale for the next section, where the case is made for a reading of Winterson’s fiction in terms of its relationship to narrative romance and medieval romance tradition. This frames the discussion of the novels in the subsequent sections of this chapter, which proceed by first presenting an original reading of Winterson’s The PowerBook as an example of narrative romance, and then by examining Winterson’s treatment of the Arthurian legend, particularly in terms of the ways in which The PowerBook replicates the gender order of medieval romance and whether this treatment can be considered revisionary. The final section of this chapter will continue with a focus on Winterson’s treatment of heroes, heroism and the quest motif, and will examine
whether the feminist and/or lesbian reader of *Sexing the Cherry* is able to employ a strategy of reading as quest in order to seek and find feminist and/or lesbian heroes within the text.

I

Similar to medieval romance, in which the narrative does not progress in a straightforward linear direction, but is structured around moments of dilation, digression, delay and deferral, Winterson’s fiction often challenges expectations of narrative linearity or refuses to lead the narrative to a final end-point. This is demonstrated, for example, by the ways in which the closing lines of *Sexing the Cherry* contest the stability of “the future” as a point in time at which the narrative will naturally arrive:

> The future lies ahead like a glittering city, but like the cities of the desert disappears when approached. ... We speak of it with longing and with love. The future. But the city is a fake. The future and the present and the past exist only in our minds, and from a distance the borders of each shrink and fade like the borders of hostile countries seen from a floating city in the sky.¹

This conceptualisation of the future, the present and the past blurring together until they are indistinguishable constructs an image of a dilated threshold and emphasises the ways in which the narrative trajectory of *Sexing the Cherry* simultaneously moves towards and postpones the novel’s ending. This is, in essence, the definition of narrative romance which will be utilised later on in this chapter to demonstrate the ways in which *The PowerBook* is organised according to the principles of narrative romance; the definition comes from Patricia Parker’s study of narrative romance, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (1979), in which she describes it as a “form which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object.”² While this chapter focuses on the ways in which this narrative


organisation is most fully realised in *The PowerBook*. Winterson’s interest in suspended narratives or in delaying the moment when the narrative reaches its end is evident in her fiction as early as *Sexing the Cherry*.

Narrative strategies of dilation and delay are also reworked in Winterson’s fiction so that they often express a refusal to name or “limit” the protagonists to the end-point of identity. Hence, Winterson’s fiction is also characterised by a refusal of identity categories, offering, instead, a re-conceptualisation of identity as unfettered by the material confines of the body; *The PowerBook* opens with the invitation to …

Undress.

Take off your clothes. Take off your body. Hang them up behind the door. Tonight we can go deeper than disguise. It’s only a story, you say. So it is, and the rest of life with it - creation story, love story, horror, crime, the strange story of you and me.³

This reference to the “strange story of you and me” gestures towards the ways in which a romantic relationship between the protagonists is a central preoccupation of Winterson’s fiction; and the ways in which the pursuit of this romance is often negotiated via the narrative strategies offered by medieval romance is examined in this chapter.

The narrative strategies of medieval romance—these tendencies toward dilation, digression, deferral or delay—are most consistently expressed throughout Winterson’s fiction via the notion of “beginning again.” The final section of Winterson’s *Lighthousekeeping* (2004) opens with the line “Part broken part whole, you begin again.”⁴ The notion of “beginning again” is already a central preoccupation of Winterson’s earlier novels, but it takes on particular significance with regard to *Lighthousekeeping* because Winterson intends the novel to mark the beginning of a new “cycle” of fiction. She states that after finishing *The PowerBook* she had a “strong sense of a cycle of work ending,” and she elaborates on the nature of this shift in her writing: “That cycle began with *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*


... and felt more like a carpet I was weaving than a series of separate texts. I would cut the thread at the end of a book, only to take up the strands again, continuing a pattern, working new symbols, testing the symmetry, but with a sense of returning to work rather than starting again.”

Indeed, in Lighthousekeeping this notion of “cutting threads” as a means of severing from a point of origin is played out early on in the novel, when the young protagonist Silver describes her mother’s death. Silver lives with her mother “in a house cut steep into the bank [of a hill],” so that mother and daughter have to “rope … together like a pair of climbers just to achieve [their] own front door.” One day, climbing up the hill on their way home the mother slips, dragging Silver down the cliff with her; at the last minute, the mother releases herself from their rope in order to save her daughter’s life: “My mother had gone. The rope was idling against the rock. I pulled it towards me over my arm, shouting ‘Mummy! Mummy!’ The rope came faster and faster, burning the top of my wrist as I coiled it next to me. Then the double buckle came. Then the harness. She had undone the harness to save me.”

The finality of severance which characterises the death of the mother in this scene can be read as signalling a dramatic departure from the thematic trajectories of Winterson’s previous cycle of novels, but Silver is not the first of Winterson’s protagonists to struggle with the dangerous pull and tug of a maternal bond; she is, however, the first whose separation from the mother is “instant and irreversible.” While Jeanette, the protagonist of


6 Winterson, Lighthousekeeping, 3, 4.

7 Winterson, Lighthousekeeping, 6-7.

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit contemplates the ways in which, even after leaving home, she remains “tied” to her mother, never able to separate herself fully from their difficult mother-daughter relationship—“There are threads that help you find your way back, and there are threads that intend to bring you back. Mind turns to the pull, it’s hard to pull away. I’m always thinking of going back … she had tied a thread around my button, to tug when she pleased”—after her mother’s death, Silver is orphaned. Adopted by the blind lighthouse-keeper, Pew, Silver learns that lighthouse-keeping involves both the literal and metaphorical “keeping of the light.”

Just as the lighthouse itself is “a known point in the darkness,” so, in Lighthousekeeping, do stories become “guiding lights” in the midst of storms, offering comfort, hope or, even, salvation as needed. Pew tells Silver the story of a sailor, who, to keep himself from drowning during a shipwreck, tells himself stories “like a madman” for seven days and nights, “so that as one ended another one began.” On the seventh day, having run out of stories, the sailor ...

began to tell himself as if he were a story, from his earliest beginnings to his green and deep misfortune. ... [W]hen night fell, he saw the Cape Wrath light ... and he knew that if he became the story of the light, he might be saved. With his last strength he began to paddle towards it ... and in his mind the light became a shining rope, pulling him in ...

Later ... he told anyone who wanted to listen what he had told himself on those sea-soaked days and nights. Others joined in, and it was soon discovered that every light had a story - no, every light was a story, and the flashes themselves were the stories going out over the waves, as markers and guides and comfort and warning.

However, just as Lighthousekeeping is not the first of Winterson’s novels to employ a thread or rope motif to represent the difficulties of achieving a separation from one’s maternal

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10 Winterson, Lighthousekeeping, 38.

11 Winterson, Lighthousekeeping, 40.

12 Winterson, Lighthousekeeping, 40-41, emphasis in original.
origins, this emphatic foregrounding of the metafictional “pull” of storytelling is not unique to
Lighthousekeeping, but recurs throughout Winterson’s fiction with an increasing urgency
from The Passion (1987) onwards. Silver’s repeated plea to Pew, “Tell me a story,” recalls
the plaintive but reassuring, “I’m telling you stories. Trust me,” recited alternately by both
Henri and Villanelle in The Passion. Although Winterson’s interest in “storytelling [as] a way
of navigating our lives,” 13 is a metaphorical conceit perhaps most suited to
Lighthousekeeping’s maritime setting, it has an earlier, equally suitable relevance in the two
novels which are the main focus of this chapter, The PowerBook and Sexing the Cherry.

Set in cyberspace, in The PowerBook notions of navigation and exploration acquire
additional meaning within the context of the technological innovations of the Netscape
Navigator web-browser or the Internet Explorer. Ali, the main protagonist of The
PowerBook, is, indeed, an “internet explorer,” who uses storytelling as a means to construct
virtual selves to navigate the virtual worlds of cyberspace. Ali’s oft-repeated mantra—“What
is it I have to tell myself again and again? ... I can change the story. I am the story—
”14 encapsulates The PowerBook’s interest in narrative re/invention; and, in effect, confirms
that this interest in “beginning again” is both a narrative strategy and thematic motif
consciously deployed throughout Winterson’s fiction prior to Lighthousekeeping. Indeed,
even earlier in Winterson’s “first” cycle of fiction than The PowerBook, Sexing the Cherry
contests the narrative logic of a single point of origin by the ways in which the novel moves
fluidly between two historical settings—the late-twentieth century and the seventeenth-
century “Age of Exploration”—in a narrative momentum that reflects the novel’s emphasis on
the shifting, rather than stable nature of reality: “The fog came from the river in thin spirals
like spirits in a churchyard and thickened with the force of a genie from a bottle. The
bulrushes were buried first, then the trunks of the trees, then the forks and the junctions. The


14 Winterson, The PowerBook, 4-5.
top of the trees floated in the fog, making suspended islands for the birds."¹⁵ This emphasis on "floating" or being "suspended" in time and space, rather than being bound by time or place, is also conveyed by the Dog-Woman, one of the novel's four main protagonists, when she provides an account of naming her adopted son, Jordan:

I call him Jordan and it will do. He has no other name before or after. What was there to call him, fished as he was from the stinking Thames? A child can't be called Thames, no and not Nile either, for all his likeness to Moses. But I wanted to give him a river name, a name not bound to anything, just as the waters aren't bound to anything.¹⁶

Although this "origin narrative" has a logic of its own—"I wanted to give him a river name"—it is, ultimately, a logic which defies the certainty of identity often provided through the act of naming—Jordan's is "a name not bound to anything."

In effect, Winterson's protagonists often reflect her own belief that "to read ourselves as fiction is much more liberating than to read ourselves as fact. ... If we read ourselves as narrative, we can change the story that we are. If we read ourselves as literal and fixed, we find we can change nothing. Someone will always tell the story of our lives — it had better be ourselves."¹⁷ It is worth noting that Winterson's interest in exerting a sense of agency over our lives through reading and storytelling resonates with this thesis' concern for the feminist and/or lesbian reader's agency over her reading of the text. Implicit in this thesis' formulation of feminist and lesbian strategies of reading is the underlying question, does the feminist and/or lesbian reader employ a strategy of reading through which she risks being disempowered by the narrative devices within the text, or does she retain a sense of agency during the process of reading? In particular, we will return to this issue of agency in the Conclusion chapter in order to examine whether the strategies of reading conceptualised in

¹⁵ Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, 9.
¹⁶ Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, 11.
this thesis “fix” the reader in a particular position in relation to the text or invite her to occupy, and thereby allow her to refuse, a particular reading position.

To return to the relationship between agency and narrative in Winterson’s fiction, in *Lighthousekeeping* the refusal to remain “literal and fixed” is embodied by Silver’s guardian, Pew, who asserts his place at the lighthouse both according to historical tradition or precedent and against the linear logic of his own lifetime or “timeline”: “‘There’s always been a Pew in the lighthouse at Cape Wrath.’ ‘But not the same Pew.’ Pew said nothing.”¹⁸ Yet, just as a preoccupation with storytelling is not new to Winterson’s fiction, neither is this refusal of fixity nor its dependence on strategies of severance and disengagement. Like Silver and Jeanette, Ali struggles to sever herself from the threads that bind her to a maternal origin:

> Here’s my life, steel-hitched at one end into my mother’s belly, then thrown out across nothing, like an Indian rope trick. Continually I cut and retie the rope. I haul myself up, slither down. What keeps the tension is tension itself – the pull between what I am and what I can become. The tug of war between the world I inherit and the world I invent.¹⁹

This tension between “the inherited” and “the invented” is precisely what makes Winterson’s fiction so unique. Through the continual deployment of strategies of severance and disengagement, Winterson’s novels repeatedly “refresh” themselves; they “begin again” at multiple points within the narrative and often reiterate a refusal to be bound by conventional narrative end-points of “beginning” or “ending.” As we have seen, though, this narrative capacity for reinvention is not without precedence elsewhere in literary tradition.

Characteristic of both medieval romance and Winterson’s fiction is a narrative tendency towards dilation, digression, deferral or delay. We now turn to *The PowerBook* as the starting point for a reading of Winterson’s fiction in terms of its engagement with medieval narrative romance, precisely because the novel’s unique blend of postmodern and medieval literary


traditions challenges us to rethink the characterisation of Winterson's fiction as "lesbian" or "feminist" fiction.

II

Fusing "inherited" medieval literary tradition with "invented" postmodern literary innovation, The PowerBook transports quest motifs and narrative romance's tendency towards delay and deferral to the realm of cyberspace, where a transience of identity is ensured by the ways in which "virtual reality" contests the presence of the material world; as Ali states: "When I sit at my computer, I accept that the virtual worlds I find there parallel my own. I talk to people whose identity I cannot prove. I disappear into a web of co-ordinates that we say will change the world. What world? Which world?" Lucie Armitt observes that "[s]earches for the self framed as quests for others run throughout Winterson's fiction," and not only is this recurrent structuring of the narrative around the binary of "self/other" derivative of the strategies of narrative romance, it is often characterised by a refusal to engage with those aspects of medieval romance which have proved most resistant to feminist recuperation. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the unnamed, ambiguously gendered narrator of Written on the Body might be "free" from the confines of gender identity, but the idealised status of Louise, the narrator's beloved object of desire, recalls the elevated status of women in chivalric and courtly-love fictions, and thus re-inscribes the love story of Written on the Body within the gendered and engendering narratives of medieval romance. Although the narrator's moment of rhetorical self-doubt—"Who do I think I am? Sir Launcelot? Louise is a Pre-Raphaelite beauty but that doesn't make me a mediaeval knight"—appears to invoke

20 Winterson, The PowerBook, 94.

iconic masculine and feminine identities of Arthurian romance ironically, and, hence, subject them to the kind of critical scrutiny we might expect from a postmodern, feminist revisionary text, romance tropes, motifs and narrative strategies remain, on the whole, unchallenged throughout Winterson’s fiction.

For example, in a move that seems inconsistent with its insistence that “there is always a new beginning, a different end,”23 The PowerBook re-directs the reader to a traditional model of romance, one which reaches back to the medieval Arthurian romances of Lancelot and Guinevere, and Tristan and Isolde, and one which is presented as an overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, heterosexual dyad:

These are the great and ruinous lovers.

- Lancelot and Guinevere.
- Tristan and Isolde.
- Siegfried and Brünnhilde.
- Romeo and Juliet.
- Cathy and Heathcliff.
- Vita and Violet.
- Oscar and Bosie.
- Burton and Taylor.
- Abelard and Heloise.
- Paolo and Francesca.24

As with the references to Launcelot and Guinevere in Written on the Body, this list of “great and ruinous lovers” raises the question of irony in Winterson’s fiction. Some would argue that the use of a list so obviously foregrounds the clichéd nature of all romance narratives, thus offering a commentary on the supposed universalising or heterosexualising tendencies within narrative romance or romantic fiction. Indeed, as we have seen in the previous chapter, this is precisely the point Sonya Andermahr makes about Written on the Body. Andermahr argues that Winterson’s fiction is consistently critical of heterosexual romance, in

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particular the "dominant political discourse of normative if not compulsory heterosexuality."\textsuperscript{25} For Andermahr, \textit{Written on the Body}, in particular, "undertakes a simultaneous critique and celebration of romantic love, deconstructing and reconstructing the tradition of romance writing in order to remake it both stylistically and ideologically."\textsuperscript{26}

However, a reading of this passage as an ironic critique of romance requires the reader to recognise such underlying irony and thereby enact, through the reading of the text, the critique of romance which the passage suggests. What happens, though, if the reader fails to recognise the irony; how effective is this as a critique of romance? Lynne Pearce presents a contrasting point of view to Andermahr, in her reading of \textit{The PowerBook} in which she observes an increasing emphasis placed on the "central humanist message" of romantic discourse. Romance, Pearce suggests, is "a 'story' that everyone knows," and, in its adherence to this message, there is little to distinguish \textit{The PowerBook} from any other text concerned with "the story of how two lovers meet, become estranged, and are then reunited under the aegis of an 'unconquerable love.'"\textsuperscript{27} Thus, there is the possibility that irony is ultimately undermined by ambiguity, if the overall message of the text is one which is as likely to appeal to a universalising discourse of romantic love, as it is to critique it. Indeed, we shall return to this point further on in this chapter, when we examine how ambiguity undermines the feminist and/or lesbian reader's quest for female heroes in \textit{Sexing the Cherry}.

This tension between irony and ambiguity, and the ways in which it affects the reader's ability to extract meaning from the text, is further complicated by the gender politics of medieval romance itself. Ultimately, it is the refusal to acknowledge narrative romance as a gendered and engendering set of discourses which inscribe the reader within them that


\textsuperscript{26} Andermahr, \textit{Jeanette Winterson}, 80, emphasis in original.

proves most problematic to reconciling Winterson's incorporation of romance tropes and strategies within her fiction with the characterisation of her fiction as "feminist fiction" or "lesbian fiction." Recent studies of medieval romance remind us that the main concern of narrative romance is to construct an emergent masculinity in relation to the otherness of femininity. They also reflect on the ways in which this construction of gendered subjectivity within narrative romance affects the reading of the narrative itself; in this way, these studies can also be used to draw our attention to the issues under consideration when examining the parallels between Winterson's fiction and narrative romance, particularly in terms of the ways in which gender identity is constructed both within the narrative and through the reading of the text itself.

Roberta L. Krueger describes precisely how medieval romance "engenders" its readers through the construction of a "narrative audience," which "consists of the male and female readers who suspend their disbelief to enter into the 'marvelous' fictional world conjured up by the romance." 28 The reader of The PowerBook is invited to suspend her or his disbelief to enter into the fictional world of adventure conjured up by the narrator, and to construct her of himself as the hero of the tale, but s/he is also invited to elide romance's (en)gendering of heroism in the fulfilment of this fantasy:

In this life you have to be your own hero.  
By that I mean that you have to win whatever it is that matters to you by your own strength and in your own way.  
Like it or not, you are alone in the forest, just like in all those fairy tales that begin with a hero who's usually stupid but somehow brave, or who might be clever, but weak as straw, and away he goes (don't worry about the gender), cheered on by nobody, via the castles and the bears, and the old witch and the enchanted stream, and by and by (we hope) he'll find the treasure. 29


29 Winterson, The PowerBook, 155, emphasis added.
If, as Krueger suggests, the narrative audience is “the one we become as we heed the narrators' [sic] voice and believe the story,” so that “at this level ... reading is engendered as masculine or feminine, ... [and] male and female readers are invited to construct themselves as men and women,”\(^{30}\) then this seeming offer of assurance—“don’t worry about the gender”—in effect disempowers The PowerBook’s feminist and lesbian readers by refusing to acknowledge the ways in which women are traditionally excluded from models of heroism within the narrative romance literary tradition.

Krueger asserts that medieval romances “repeatedly address themselves to women, as patrons, dedicatees, listeners, readers, or beloved objects of desire. To fail to consider women’s ambiguous subject-position within the courtly tradition would be to deny women any participation in a literature expressly addressed to them.”\(^{31}\) In effect, “[s]uch a gesture ... disempowers not only those medieval women who may have served as readers or listeners; it also disempowers women readers today who seek to understand how romance engenders the subjectivity of its readers.”\(^{32}\) The PowerBook’s address of its readers enacts this very gesture of disempowerment which Krueger cautions against; it fails to consider the ways in which the place of women within narrative romance tradition impacts upon the female reader’s engagement with the narrative itself. If the claiming or, even, re-claiming of a gendered identity is integral to both personal and politicised self-concepts of “the feminist” and/or “the lesbian,” then, for those feminist and/or lesbian readers who turn to a chosen author like Winterson precisely because they expect to find an acknowledgement of their gender identity or sexuality within her fiction, this dismissal of the ways in which identity is engendered via the reading of the text is particularly disempowering. The PowerBook’s address of its reader neither acknowledges women’s traditional exclusion from heroic subject-positions, nor

\(^{30}\) Krueger 27, emphasis in original.

\(^{31}\) Krueger 24.

\(^{32}\) Krueger 24.
formulates specifically female models of heroism which might be sought by a feminist and/or lesbian reader.

Krueger draws attention to the role of women in the production of medieval romance, pointing out that “the presence of women in the audience and as dedicatees [of individual romances] does not prove either that individual female patrons exerted a formative influence upon the composition of particular romances, or that the genre promoted women’s interests.”33 Situating his own argument in relation to Krueger’s and to those of other critics like Krueger who have challenged “romance’s apparent idealization of women,” is Simon Gaunt, who dispels the notion “commonplace in medieval studies since the [nineteenth] century” that medieval romance or “courtly literature simultaneously ‘discovers’ the individual, woman and love,” and that “[t]hese discoveries [are] a positive departure in western civilization, particularly for women.”34 Gaunt argues that “an engagement with femininity [is situated] at the core of romance, but ... [this] paradoxically focuses attention on masculinity ... ‘women’, or more accurately femininity in these texts, is a metaphor men use to construct their own subjectivity.”35 It is interesting to note that this is, in effect, precisely the schema of gender relations that operates in Written on the Body and which results in the “ambiguously gendered” narrator occupying a male-defined or masculine subject position within the text. The narrator’s “apparent idealization” of Louise is the means through which the narrator discovers himself; so thoroughly is she rendered the object of the narrator’s desire that Louise is, ultimately, little more than a metaphor the narrator uses to construct his own subjectivity.

33 Krueger 3.


35 Gaunt 71.
Drawing attention to the discursive nature of gender in medieval romance, Gaunt argues that, “[i]f ... men evolve and assume new identities through love and their relations with women, it follows that what this engagement with femininity articulates is the construction within a male discourse of masculinity through its relationship with femininity constructed as the other.” 36 Gaunt suggests that “[r]omance does not ‘discover’ women, or femininity, or the individual, it constructs models of them, which need evaluating in their historical context. 37 This last point is a valid one; however, for the late-twentieth- or twenty-first-century feminist and/or lesbian reader who finds herself engaged by Winterson’s “postmodern” approach to narrative romance, questions of historicity are complicated by the ways in which her incorporation of medieval narrative romance tradition into her “postmodern” fiction is contextualised by the expectation that her fiction is most meaningful within or to a feminist and/or lesbian literary tradition. Hence, Winterson’s incorporation of medieval romance tradition needs evaluating in relation to this existing feminist and/or lesbian literary context. What models of men and women, masculinity and femininity, hero(ism) and other(ness) are constructed in Winterson’s fiction; and what are the implications for the reading of her fiction as “feminist” or “lesbian” fiction? Is the feminist and/or lesbian reader able to participate in the narrative or will she discover that the gendered models of heroism she encounters in Winterson’s fiction are, ultimately, obstacles that prevent an engagement with the text?

Feminist practices such as “reading against the grain” or the deconstructive stance offered by “images of women” criticism offer potentially recuperative reading strategies for those feminist and/or lesbian readers who find themselves simultaneously drawn to and alienated from the gender constructs within both medieval narrative romance tradition and Winterson’s reinvention of narrative romance. Indeed, Krueger argues that “[t]o so read

36 Gaunt 72.

37 Gaunt 72.
against the grain of romance’s dominant ideological structures is not to deny the historicity of these early fictions. It is rather to show the enduring power of romance to elicit not only complicitous pleasures, but also resistant and self-critical scrutiny among all its levels of readership, female and male, medieval and modern.”

Krueger focuses attention on the agency of the reader, noting that “the contemporary feminist reader who encounters the alternately enticing and misogynistic strategies of [medieval] romance fiction may find herself at once intrigued and dismayed.” This is a claim that is equally applicable to the feminist and/or lesbian reader of Winterson’s fiction who finds herself similarly “intrigued and dismayed” by the strategies of narrative romance which guide her through Winterson’s texts; and this chapter aims to elucidate the “alternately enticing and misogynistic” strategies of narrative romance within Winterson’s fiction and the possible obstacles they present to the feminist and/or lesbian reader who seeks to retain a sense of agency over her reading of The PowerBook and Sexing the Cherry.

Indeed, with these complexities in mind, an examination of Winterson’s fiction in terms of its engagement with medieval romance is long overdue. Since the “feminist success story” of Winterson’s début novel, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, her fiction is most often read in terms of its currency within feminist, lesbian or postmodern debates, and, indeed, more often in terms of a convergence of these three positions. Furthermore, where romantic narratives are concerned, the figuring of “romance” in Winterson’s fiction has often been in terms of its simultaneous distance and derivation from contemporary “popular” romance. For example, Pearce observes that even as Winterson’s fiction rewrites well-known “popular” romantic discourses most familiar from the “Mills and Boon” romance, the “end-product” found in Winterson’s novels most resembles the very clichés and conventions under revision:

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38 Krueger 32.

39 Krueger 31.
Winterson’s highly popular novels may easily be thought of under the heading of ‘popular romance’ notwithstanding the fact that they are also classified as ‘literary,’ ‘postmodern,’ and – rather more controversially – ‘gay’ or ‘queer.’ What distinguishes them, and similar titles, from the ‘Mills and Boon’ class is that small, but crucial, twist of “knowingness” with which the romantic/sexual adventures are described. What is striking about a text like [The] PowerBook, however, is that – in terms of its key “ingredients,” and the way in which they have been marketed – this product is not very far removed from romance in its more “degenerate” form. 40

Pearce argues that “romance of the ‘degenerate’ kind is now a staple point of reference for any amount of postmodern ‘literary’ fiction and film, and its ‘ironic but not’ treatment in such texts is … a measure of the extent to which contemporary culture is as obsessed with this particular ‘Ur’-narrative as ever: the story of how two lovers meet, become estranged, and are then reunited under the aegis of an ‘unconquerable love’ has lost none of its appeal.” 41

Although Pearce is interested in the ways in which Winterson’s “popular romances” reveal the endurance of the story of “how two lovers meet, become estranged, and are then reunited under the aegis of an ‘unconquerable love,’” in her exploration of the differentiation between Winterson’s postmodern fiction and popular romance fiction, she focuses only on these examples of contemporary fiction; hence, she does not explore the fact that Winterson’s interest in this particular “romantic narrative” is indicative of a preoccupation with medieval narrative romance.

Thus, in the readings of Winterson’s novels in this chapter, these romantic impulses, these enduring stories of romantic love are traced back to their medieval origins, to the gender order on which narratives of romance frequently depend, and to the gender identities romance configures within its narratives, in order to examine the ways in which Winterson’s fiction reincarnates postmodern romantic heroes for new generations of feminist and lesbian readers. Winterson’s protagonists are often characterised by their “love of playing the hero;” does this imply that her readers are searching for new conceptualisations of heroes within her fiction?


On the whole, Winterson’s fiction does not so much strive to interrogate the origins and endurance of romantic discourses—and by “romantic” I mean both stories of (falling in) love, and (medieval) romance narratives concerned with heroes and adventures, quests and their associated dangers—than it does seek to employ them for metafictional purposes; just as Winterson’s novels are so often stories about storytelling, so are they, as Pearce observes, “love stories about love.”

If Winterson’s metafictional romances simultaneously entice and frustrate her feminist and lesbian readers with their deliberate disregard for gender positioning, they nonetheless return us to the issue of her fiction as “lesbian” fiction, a categorisation which concerns the specificity of lesbian desire within her narratives. Critics have suggested that Winterson’s fiction stands apart from other works of lesbian fiction in its “achievement ... [of] an affirmation of female agency and autonomy grounded not in history but in a metafictional utopian space, a space bound neither by temporality nor by limiting paradigms.”

Focusing on Winterson’s “historical” novels, Sexing the Cherry in particular, certain critics have framed their readings of her work via the following questions:

[O]n what terms does history appeal to the lesbian writer and how is the past negotiated in lesbian literary production? 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? Should we read lesbian historical novels as “performative” rather than “descriptive” texts – as indices to the myths and fantasies through which lesbian culture is maintained and reproduced?

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44 Doan and Waters 13.
These critics focus on the ways in which Winterson, as a lesbian writer, incorporates historical narrative and the historical past into her fiction, and on the significance of Winterson’s treatment of history within a lesbian literary tradition. In this chapter, the focus is on the ways in which Winterson incorporates medieval narrative romance into her fiction; hence, we can reframe these questions in order to ask new ones, such as: “On what terms does medieval romance appeal to Winterson as a ‘lesbian writer’?” and “Does the preoccupation with medieval reference suggest, in fact, that we need a new way of reading Winterson’s fiction?” Indeed, these questions return us to the guiding research question which frames the reading of Winterson’s novels in this chapter—how useful is it to continue to read Winterson as a “lesbian writer”?—and suggest that it is precisely on account of the frequent and integral presence of medieval reference within her fiction that we do, indeed, need to explore new ways of reading beyond the expectations imposed on Winterson as an author of “lesbian fiction.”

One way to approach these issues is to examine the relationship between heroism and lesbianism in Winterson’s work. Integral to the quest motif of medieval narrative romance are obstacles through which the hero is tested, and which he must overcome as part of the period of trial through which he achieves his heroic identity. Readings of Winterson’s fiction which assert a lesbian interpretation will note the ways in which lesbian desire is often linked to any number of obstacles which prevent the successful fulfilment of romance between the protagonists, and which constitute a series of trials through which the protagonist achieves her identity. Throughout Winterson’s fiction there is a preoccupation with thwarted, delayed or suspended romance; and often the thwarting of romances is implicitly linked to the specificity—or possibility—of lesbian desire. Lesbianism is demonised in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, when the young protagonist, Jeanette, is “exorcised” by Pastor Finch and subsequently expelled from her mother’s Evangelical-Christian religious community. Among Winterson’s other novels, The Passion, Written on the Body, and The PowerBook all feature a
love story between the main protagonist (usually, or possibly, a woman) and a married woman, comprising a cyclical preoccupation with this particular kind of thwarted romance.

However, Winterson’s novels are not concerned primarily with the difficulties of “lived” lesbian romantic experience; lesbian desire is more often incidental, rather than specific, to the narratives of Winterson’s novels, and rarely provides any impetus to send the protagonist on a specifically “lesbian” quest or move the narrative towards a specifically “lesbian” end. The specificity of lesbian desire receives little more than a passing mention in, for example, The Passion, when Villanelle admits that her love for another woman was not “the usual thing.” Indeed, the relationship between lesbianism and heroism is further complicated by the fact that, in utilising the heroic quest motif, Winterson often fails to address the ways in which the primary concern of the quest is the construction of heroic masculinity; further on in this chapter we will explore the difficulties of reconciling medieval romance’s conceptions of the hero and the quest with the reader’s expectations of the feminist and/or lesbian narrative politics of Winterson’s fiction.

There is, however, at least one instance in Winterson’s fiction where female heroism is explicitly linked to lesbian desire. In “The Poetics of Sex” (1993), Sappho is initially invoked as an archetypal lesbian “answer” to a series of questions expressing patriarchal attempts to identify, define and contain lesbianism:

Picasso was an unlikely mother but I owe myself to her. We are honour-bound, love-bound, bound by cords too robust for those healthy hospital scissors. She baptized me from her own font and said, ‘I name thee Sappho.’ People often ask if we are mother and child.

I could say yes, I could say no, both statements would be true, the way that lesbians are true, at least to one another if not to the world. I am no stranger to truth but very uncomfortable about the lies that have dogged me since my birth. It is no surprise that we do not always remember our name.


In "The Poetics of Sex," Sappho no longer serves as the end-point at which the journey for lesbian ancestry culminates; instead, there is a concern with the ways in which the past is encoded within the present consciousness through language. Hence, Sappho is displaced from her position in the Western European literary tradition as historical lesbian foremother, the point of origin to which all lesbian desire can be traced, and is reinvented as a postmodern lesbian hero who promises to free women from their dependence on existing narratives:

> I like to be a hero, like to come back to my island full of girls carrying a net of words forbidden them. Poor girls, they are locked outside their words just as the words are locked into meaning. Such a lot of locking up goes on on [sic] the Mainland but here on Lesbos our doors are always open.

> Stay inside, don’t walk the streets, bar the windows, keep your mouth shut, keep your legs together, strap your purse around your neck, don’t wear valuables, don’t look up, don’t talk to strangers, don’t risk it, don’t try it. He means she but not when He means Men. Mainland is a Private Club.

> That’s all right boys, so is this. This delicious unacknowledged island where we are naked with each other. The boat that brings us here will crack beneath your weight. This is territory you cannot invade.\(^{47}\)

Winterson’s (re)visions of the competing worlds of “Mainland” and Lesbos offer a rare instance of feminist, lesbian polemic often absent from her fiction, where the emphasis is often on the liberating possibilities of storytelling and the creation of new, alternate, often fantastic worlds. Armitt describes Winterson as being “at her best when offering competing worlds, for it is in the interface between these versions of possibility that, in her hands, history becomes magic."\(^ {48}\) Indeed, it is in frequent turns to fantasy that Winterson manages to incorporate medieval literary tradition into her postmodernist storytelling, which results in the creation of fictional worlds that are an amalgamation of the modern and the medieval.

We turn now to the “marvelous worlds,” to use Krueger’s phrase, of Winterson’s fiction, in order to examine the strategies of delay and disengagement that order her narratives, and the ways in which they establish a preoccupation with and derivation from

\(^{47}\) Winterson, “The Poetics of Sex,” 418.

medieval narrative romance which challenges the primary categorisation of Winterson’s fiction as lesbian fiction. This leads to an examination of Winterson’s treatment of chivalric masculinity via the ways in which the Arthurian romance of Lancelot and Guinevere is incorporated into The PowerBook; the examination of heroic masculinity, in turn, sets the stage for the reading of Sexing the Cherry in the final section of this chapter, which focuses on the relationship among images of heroes, models of heroism and the novel’s potential feminist and lesbian politics. It is in this last section that we return to the strategy of reading as quest in order to distinguish feminist and lesbian readings or interpretations of the novel from the feminist and/or lesbian reader’s engagement with or reading of the novel.

Ultimately, the reader who turns to Winterson’s fiction seeking feminist or lesbian heroes finds herself facing a number of obstacles which threaten to delay or thwart her attainment of what she seeks from the text. Like the reader who employs a strategy of reading as romance, the reader who employs a strategy of reading as quest—the reader who takes up The PowerBook’s invitation to “be [her] own hero”—risks being disempowered or disappointed through this mode of reading if she is unable to find the “object” or “ally” she seeks within the text.

III

Published in 2000, The PowerBook is situated on the threshold of the new millennium, and, as such, it looks to the possibilities offered by the interactive realms of cyberspace and virtual reality in order to plot a narrative intent on redefining our understanding of romantic experience. In The PowerBook the narrative is structured—however loosely—around a series of emails exchanged between Ali and her/his lover, the story “begins again” with each new email exchange, and it is, indeed, this capacity for reinvention that distinguishes the novel.
Assuring us, "[t]his is a virtual world. This is a world reinventing itself," the PowerBook is quick to exploit contemporary debates surrounding those scientific and medical technologies which promise to reconceptualise our understanding of the body’s coherence and biological reproductive capacities. Significantly, though, it is not the actual mechanics behind the manipulation of genetic material that prove most central to The PowerBook’s digital romances. Rather, "information technology" becomes a discourse through which the narrative contests and restructures notions of bodily integrity and intelligibility: “Time is downloaded into our bodies. We contain it. Not only time past and time future, but time without end. We think of ourselves as close and finite, when we are multiple and infinite.”

Such assertions allow us to locate Winterson among a number of “postmodern writers [who] are exploring the reconceptualisation of the body under the influence of information technologies.” Anne Cranny-Francis differentiates these postmodern writers and theorists from those “politicised writers working on the bodily inscription of social markers such as gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity and age,” and she further emphasises the diversity of project amongst postmodern writers themselves, noting that “the body is not only part of or ‘in’ their own texts, but is also inscribed by the texts of the markers and practices—social and technological—they are exploring.” Cranny-Francis observes that although “[n]o central concern draws all these theorists into some kind of ‘grand narrative’ of the body ... they all contribute in different ways, and for different reasons, to the dissolution of conservative notions of the body as a coherent and unified entity, defined and regulated by a range of


50 Winterson, The PowerBook, 103.


52 Cranny-Francis 112.
hierarchised dualisms." Winterson’s fiction not only participates in or contributes to these efforts to dissolve such dualisms as “male/female or human/machine,” her fiction is unique in the ways in which it does so through blending or collapsing the distinction between the (post)modern and the medieval.

In The PowerBook, the construction of the body via the inscription of identifying markers such as gender, naming and, even, material reality itself are refused in favour of a shifting multiplicity of subjectivity defined by this very refusal of identity categories:

You said, “Who are you?”
“Call me Ali.”
“Is that your real name?”
“Real enough.”
“Male or female?”
“Does it matter?”
“It’s a co-ordinate.”
“This is a virtual world.”

In particular, The PowerBook utilises the potentially liberating strategies of information technology in the pursuit of freedom from material, physical or narrative origins. This is evident in the novel’s opening, which begins with Ali seated in front of a laptop, opening—or, as The PowerBook would have it, “unwrap[ping]” an email, which reads, “Freedom, just for one night.” The email message, both a request and an invitation, sees Ali poised on the threshold of a futuristic scenario, a storytelling adventure entirely of her/his own invention.

Curiously, though, the narrative is immediately redirected to an earlier point in time, specified only by the phrase “[y]ears ago,” but evoking a scene of Gothic intrigue complete with the promise of mystery and disguise:

Years ago you would have come into my shop at the end of the afternoon, telling your mother you had an errand for the poor.

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53 Cranny-Francis 112.


At the tinkle of the bell you would have found yourself alone for a moment in the empty shop, looking at the suits of armour, the wimples, the field boots, and the wigs on spikes, like severed heads.

The sign on the shop says VERDE, nothing more, but everyone knows that something strange goes on inside. People arrive as themselves and leave as someone else. They say that Jack the Ripper used to come here.

You stand alone in the empty shop. I come out from the back. What is it you want?56

In this easy slippage between the present, future and past the novel frames identity as a “tug of war” between two competing notions of the self: a traditional conceptualisation of the self as an already known entity, already inscribed within a particular narrative, and Winterson’s reinvention of the self as an unknown, “unactualised” subject about to be written.57

The promise of transformation offered by the range of costumes on display is quickly “upgraded” to something more interactive than mere costuming or role-play can provide; in the world of The PowerBook, we soon learn, the body itself can be altered: “This is where the story starts. Here, in these long lines of laptop DNA. Here we take your chromosomes, twenty-three pairs, and alter your height, eyes, teeth, sex. This is an invented world. You can be free just for one night.”58 To enter the narrator’s shop—and, by implication, to open The PowerBook—is to cross over a threshold and enter a world in which the impossible becomes possible, a world ordered by the belief that “[o]nly the impossible is worth the effort.”59

The PowerBook is filled with such moments when a threshold is about to be crossed, and often places more emphasis on the im/possibility of such crossing, rather than on the actual crossing itself. This renders the narrative increasingly dilated, and fragmented into moments of anticipation and expectation, rather than fulfilment or consummation. This image of the dilated narrative, continually approximating to but never achieving closure, suggests

that *The PowerBook* accords with Parker’s definition of narrative romance, which is, as mentioned earlier, defined as “a form which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object.” Drawing on Fredric Jameson’s observation that romance, “from the twelfth century, necessitates the projection of an Other, a project which comes to an end when that Other reveals his [sic] identity or ‘name,’” Parker is less interested in the content of narrative romance than in its “form or ‘design.’” This definition of romance, Parker argues, has “the advantage of comprehending historical difference even as it reveals certain structural affinities.” As such, it is particularly useful for a reading of *The PowerBook* because it takes into account the novel’s status as a work of specifically postmodern fiction in terms of its similitude to different aspects of medieval narrative romance, as evidenced, for example, in its aversion to narrative closure: “Stop. There is always the danger of automatic writing. The danger of writing yourself towards an ending that need never be told. At a certain point the story gathers momentum. It convinces itself, and does its best to convince you, that the end in sight is the only possible outcome.”

Particularly with regard to issues of “ending” in narrative romance, Parker identifies three different narrative “ends” associated with a corresponding mode of romance:

When the “end” is defined topographically, as a Promised Land or Apocalypse, “romance” is that mode or tendency which remains on the threshold before the promised end, still in the wilderness of wandering, “error,” or “trial.” When the posited Other, or objective, is the terminus of a fixed object … “romance” is the liminal space before that object is fully named or revealed. Finally, when the end is not, typologically, an apocalyptic fulfillment but rather abyss or catastrophe … “romance” involves the dilation of a threshold rendered now both more precarious and more essential.

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60 Parker 4.


62 Parker 4.


64 Parker 4-5.
Each of these three “romantic” outcomes crop up in The PowerBook, often on more than one occasion. Cyberspace becomes the “wilderness of wandering” through which Ali and her/his beloved will pursue a number of romantic adventures or “trials;” and quantum reality offers an infinite topographical threshold of space and time in which Ali remains, awaiting a paradoxical future/ending:

In quantum reality there are millions of possible worlds, unactualised, potential, perhaps bearing in on us, but only reachable by wormholes we can never find. If we do find one, we never come back.

In those other worlds events may track our own, but the ending will be different. Sometimes we need a different ending.

I can’t take my body through space and time, but I can send my mind, and use the stories, written and unwritten, to tumble me out in a place not yet existing – my future.  

Sitting at her/his computer, Ali lingers in a liminal space, anticipating the sexual consummation that is the projected or promised end of her/his new romantic relationship:

“The screen was dimming. The air was heavy. You and I, separated by distance, intimate of thought, waited. What were we waiting for – fingers resting lightly on the board like a couple of table turners?”

Ali’s affair with an unnamed, married woman leads, ultimately, to a “catastrophic” ending when the woman makes clear her decision to return to her husband. When Ali accompanies her/his lover to Paddington Station in London, the end of their affair, although imminent, is increasingly delayed as Ali begins to bargain with the beloved, asking the woman to give up her past in exchange for a future together. Paddington Station is a liminal space easily recognisable in our modern age, a place of temporary stasis occupied by those either journeying away from a prior starting-place or towards a new or anticipated end-point:

“Railway station. Point of arrival. Point of departure. A transit zone.” In this limit-place

where past confronts future, the woman’s suitcase is the locus-point of the tension between known past and possible future(s), and becomes, in effect, the symbol of the movement between these competing thresholds: “I looked at the suitcase, suddenly heavy, too heavy to carry, and I realised that she could never drag it with her. She was right – it would have to be let go, or taken home and unpacked again.”\(^{68}\) The image of the woman’s suitcase growing bigger and bigger as Ali desperately pleads with her/his beloved thus enacts the dilation of this “precarious and essential” threshold, generating an emblematic metaphor for this particular mode of romance:

“If you’ll give up your past, I’ll give up mine,” I said.

(She looked at her suitcase.)

“I’ll bring clothes, books and the cat. That’s all.”

(Her suitcase was getting bigger.)

“We can start again with furniture. We can make new friends.”

(The suitcase was filling up the coffee house.)

“We’ll rent an apartment overlooking the river.”

(The suitcase was pressing against the walls.)

“With a bed and a chair and the morning sun.”

(The suitcase was pressing against my chest.)

“When we open the windows, we’ll be like birds.”

(The suitcase was in my ribcage.)

“Our happiness will be like the flight of birds.”\(^{69}\)

Just as the final paragraphs of Written on the Body leave unclear whether the narrator is reunited with his/her beloved, Louise, The PowerBook refuses to confirm whether Ali’s lover leaves her past—her suitcase, her husband—for a new life with Ali. The possibility of a happy ending is increasingly delayed until it becomes an impossibility, the narrative reiterating the necessity of beginning again: “Starting again, as clean as I can, is the only way I’m going to make sense of it. The train, the station, the noise, are meaningless. Your leaving is absurd.”\(^{70}\) The romance between Ali and her/his beloved vacillates between two possible outcomes, with both ultimately refusing the limits of temporal reality itself. Just as in one

\(^{68}\) Winterson, The PowerBook, 203.

\(^{69}\) Winterson, The PowerBook, 204.

\(^{70}\) Winterson, The PowerBook, 205.
ending there is "still time, still time. Then there's a moment when time is so still it stops and the train moves ahead for ever," so in the alternative ending the train "is gathering speed now, taking time with it, and we've found a second where there is no time. The second that beats between your life and mine. Then the clock is ticking again, but we're together. The train moves ahead without us."\(^71\)

*The PowerBook* issues a direct, almost challenging invitation to the reader to participate in this deferral of narrative finality: "Here are two endings. *You choose.*"\(^72\) This self-reflexive, deliberate address of the reader collapses the boundaries between the world of the text and the world outside the text, just as the intimacy of Ali's first-person "I" at times fails to distinguish the beloved from the reader:

I warned you that the story might change under my hands. I forgot that the storyteller changes too. I was under your hands. ...

You thought, didn't you, that you could start something and stop it when you pleased? Pick it up, put it down. A little light reading. A bedtime story.

Freedom just for one night.

The story is reading you now, line by line.
Do you know what happens next?
Go on, open it.
Open it ...\(^73\)

Dismantling the distinction between the ordinarily opposed positions of storyteller and reader—"The story is reading you now"—*The PowerBook* implicates the reader within its own narrative, and seems to urge the reader to engage with the text in a participatory manner, to enact through the reading of the novel the text's own narrative strategies. This is one of the ways in which the feminist and/or lesbian reader who takes up the novel's invitation to envision herself as the "hero" might find herself employing a strategy of reading as quest. If


\(^73\) Winterson, *The PowerBook*, 83-84, emphasis in original.
we read The PowerBook as an example of narrative romance, then we can begin to examine the obstacles the feminist and/or lesbian reader might face when she encounters the novel’s conception of heroism, namely its construction of heroic masculinity.

In its opening line, The PowerBook declares itself an example of narrative romance by situating upfront a interest in pursuing strategies of delay: “To avoid discovery I stay on the run. To discover things for myself I stay on the run.”74 Observing that the “connection between naming, identity, and closure or ending remains a persistent romance phenomenon,” Parker argues that for those authors for whom the “recovery of identity or the attainment of an end is problematic, or impossible, the focus may be less on arrival or completion than on the strategy of delay.”75 Both the recovery of a unified identity and the attainment of an end are precisely what The PowerBook refuses; thus, although we can map the different modes of romance onto specific moments in The PowerBook, it is these strategies of delay that most determine the novel’s organisation according to the principles of narrative romance. These strategies of delay, however, also undermine The PowerBook’s potential feminist and/or lesbian intervention into the dominant structures of narrative romance; thus, they become obstacles which the feminist and/or lesbian reader encounters during her reading of the text.

Parker notes the “capacity of romance to generate metaphors for its own descriptions,”76 and The PowerBook is excessively proficient in this regard. Its narrative is constructed almost entirely in terms of digressions and deferrals; its pages are filled with images and tropes emblematic of romance’s propensity to suspend (narrative) fulfilment. Consider Ali’s description of her/his lover: “She wanted me because I was a pool where she drank. I wanted her because she was a lover and a mother all mixed up into one. I wanted her

75 Parker 5, emphasis added.
76 Parker 7.
because she was as beautiful as a warm afternoon with the sun on the rocks.” 

What is striking about this passage is not the way in which it draws on lesbian-feminist paradigms of woman-identification and sexual-sameness as the root of lesbian desire—indeed, the description of the beloved as “a lover and a mother all mixed up into one” evokes Winterson’s previous use of this trope to describe Sappho and Picasso in “The Poetics of Sex”—but the way in which it replicates the association of “the feminine” with the “dangers” of romance.

The “knight errant” of medieval romance is “errant” not only because he is an adventurer or wanderer, but also because he “errs” or strays from the “right path.” Eric Auerbach discusses the “ethical significance” of choosing the “right” path in the pursuit of knightly adventure. Auerbach draws on an episode in Chrétien de Troyes’s twelfth-century Arthurian romance Yvain, in which a knight, Calogrenant, “had ridden away alone in quest of adventure, armed as befits a knight, and he had come upon a road leading to the right straight through a dense forest.” Auerbach suggests that rather than indicate locality, the designation of the road as “right” is used relatively, so that Calogrenant discovers the correct or appropriate path to adventure: “the road is arduous, as right ways are wont to be; all day long it leads through a dense forest full of brambles and thickets, and at night it reaches the right goal: a castle where [he] is received with delight, as though he were a long-awaited guest.”

Parker describes how “error” refers to a wide range of notions of deviation where romance narratives, and particularly their heroes, are concerned. Just as the digressive structure of narrative romance was regarded by early critics as a deviation from the more direct narrative structure of the epic poem, so is the “knight errant” of romance characterised


79 Auerbach 129.
by an interrelated “mental and geographical ‘wandering.’”\(^{80}\) This errant wandering often involves an encounter with some aspect of the archetypical feminine: usually, either a period of delay or dalliance in a dilatory “female” space, or an encounter with an “enchanting” female figure or character. In *The PowerBook*, the female beloved is simultaneously the object which lures Ali away from the “right” path and the place (in)to which s/he is led, as Ali’s confession on the morning after s/he and the beloved have consummated their relationship makes clear: “I felt as if I had blundered into someone else’s life by chance, discovered I wanted to stay, then blundered back into my own, without a clue, a hint, or a way of finishing the story. Who was I last night? Who was she?”\(^{81}\) Here we can begin to see how *The PowerBook* incorporates the organising principles of narrative romance into its plot along with the gender order or schema of narrative romance. Ali, although an unspecified female or male hero, nonetheless begins to take on a male-defined role, as s/he plays the persona of the knight errant to the beloved’s female enchantress.

Romance tropes of wandering abound throughout *The PowerBook*, as the novel both promises and postpones a happy ending for Ali and her/his lover. Hearts, maps which lead the hero through the wilderness, buried treasure, and even Ali’s own name—“My parents called me Alix because they wanted a name with an X in it, because X marks the spot. I was the one who would find the buried treasure”\(^{82}\)—are overly-representative of the digressive nature of Ali’s romantic wandering, foregrounding a desire for romance that is in excess of the desire for the romantic end itself:

My search for you, your search for me, is a search after something that cannot be found. ... What we seek is love itself, revealed now and again in human form, but

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\(^{80}\) Parker’s reading of “error” in romance is drawn, to some extent, from the linguistic ambiguity of the Latin verb “errare,” which can mean both “to wander” and “to err” (20-21). In conversational contemporary English, too, both “to stray” and “to wander” retain a sexual connotation, further linking error, femininity and the dangers of romance.


pushing us beyond our humanity into animal instinct and god-like success. ... Love is worth death. Love is worth life. My search for you, your search for me, goes beyond life and death into one long call in the wilderness. I do not know if what I hear is an answer or an echo. Perhaps I will hear nothing. It doesn’t matter. The journey must be made.  

Auerbach argues that in courtly or chivalric romance “trial through adventure is the real meaning of the knight’s ideal existence.” In The PowerBook, Ali’s mother instils in her child the desire for “trial by adventure” in the manner of the romance hero:

“So the only way to the Promised Land is through the Wilderness, and when you get to the Promised Land, what do you find?”
“The buried treasure.”
“And what do you do with it when you’ve found it?”
“I don’t know.”
“Why don’t you know?”
“Because I’ve never found it.”
“Have you seen the Promised Land?”
“No.”
“Then how do you know there is one?”
“It’s shown on the map.”
“What map?”
She thumped her heart.

Here, the heart as a map is an over-laden symbol of wandering, and of wandering in the pursuit of love, as suggested by the phrase “to follow one’s heart.” Ali’s heart leads her/him to places of testing or trial, where trial by suffering proves the worthiness of the romantic pursuit and her/his worthiness as the active, desiring, romance hero/lover: “The tamer my love, the farther away it is from love. In fierceness, in heat, in longing, in risk, I find something of love’s nature. In my desire for you, I burn at the right temperature to walk through love’s fire. So when you ask me why I cannot love you more calmly, I answer that to love you calmly is not to love you at all.”

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84 Auerbach 135.
These examples demonstrate the ways in which, through the evocation of the tropes and motifs of medieval narrative romance, The PowerBook shares or replicates narrative romance’s concern to construct specific, idealised, gendered subject positions which exist in opposition to each other, for example, “the Lover” and “his Beloved,” “the Knight” and “his Lady.” For Ali, “romance” is the period of trial or testing during which her/his meditations on the “adventure” of suffering provide the basis of a constitutive subjectivity, a means through which Ali can prove her/himself “the Hero” of the tale:

I suffer. I intentionally put myself in the way of suffering as a test, as a measure, to see what will be drawn up — to stop myself from closing up. I don’t want to close the wound.

Love wounds. There is no love that does not pierce the hands and feet. Love’s exquisite happiness is also love’s exquisite pain. I do not seek pain but there is pain. I do not seek suffering but there is suffering. It is better not to flinch, not to try and avoid those things in love’s direction. It is not easy, this love, but only the impossible is worth the effort. 87

Just as Auerbach assures us that in medieval romance trial by way of adventure is the ideal expression of the knight’s existence, so he reminds us, perhaps unintentionally, that this existence is a definitively masculine one. Although Auerbach is not interested in how subjectivity is gendered and engendered within medieval romance, he nonetheless emphasises that “the very essence of the knight’s ideal of manhood is called forth by adventure.” 88

The shifting, ambiguous nature of Ali’s gender, when considered in terms of The PowerBook’s significance to postmodern narrative tradition, is understood as evidence of the ways in which the novel collapses those boundaries which maintain “male” and “female” as separate terms in hierarchical relation to each other. However, given the novel’s structural affinities with narrative romance, the frequency with which Ali is cast in the role of the active lover or questing hero suggests not a triumphant redundancy of gender to the construction of heroic subjectivity, but a disregard for the specific ways in which gender difference is

87 Winterson, The PowerBook, 188.

88 Auerbach 135, emphasis added.
produced and maintained within medieval romance narratives. Far from “marking the spot,”
the “X” of Ali’s name “crosses out” her/his gender; just as an “X” was used in place of a
signature by those unable to spell or write their own name, “X” takes the place of the “name”
that would indicate Ali’s gender(ed) identity. Gender ambiguity or indeterminacy becomes an
elision or erasure of gender altogether.

IV

This failure to engage with the ways in which gender difference is actively constructed within
chivalric romance is evidenced through the manner in which Arthurian romance is
incorporated into the stories Ali writes for her/his beloved. In a chapter of The PowerBook
titled “Search,” Ali casts her/himself in the role of Lancelot du Lac, who, in Arthurian
romance, is the definitive embodiment of chivalric masculinity. However, this iconic
masculinity is initially incorporated into The PowerBook’s schema of gender fluidity:

My fighting arm is sinew’d to your shoulder. Your tiny feet stand my ground. In full
armour I am wearing nothing but your shift, and when you plait your hair you wind it
round my head. Your eyes are green. Mine are brown. When I see through your
green eyes, I see the meadows bright with grass. When you creep behind my retinas,
you see the flick of trout in the reeds of the lake.89

The ease with which masculine and feminine subject positions merge until they become
almost indistinguishable is further emphasised by the way in which Lancelot is feminised,
constructed in terms of the water imagery suggested by his name. “Lancelot of the Lake”
becomes “Lancelot the Lake,” as Ali/Lancelot describes himself: “I was the place where you
anchored. I was the deep water where you could be weightless. I was the surface where you
saw your own reflection. You scooped me up in your hands.”90


90 Winterson, The PowerBook, 68.
Ostensibly retelling several episodes from Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur* (1469-70) in which Lancelot rescues Guinevere on a number of occasions, “Search” dislocates the Arthurian romance narrative from its medieval source material, condensing a series of interrelated adventures into a loose collection of fragmented images describing only Guinevere’s adulterous affair with Lancelot. Narrated from the point of view of Ali/Lancelot, heroic subjectivity in *The PowerBook*’s “Arthurian” episode is proven by two types of test or trial: Ali’s/Lancelot’s continued defence of Guinevere against charges of adultery—

You were faithless. You were treacherous. You would be burnt. Many times has your lord and my King, with a heavy heart, committed you to burning. Many times have I rescued you, through combat with your accuser, for the King, who is judge of all, cannot fight for his own wife. 91

—and, as we have seen elsewhere in the novel, the extent or endurance of her/his suffering in the name of love:

I saved you from the fire, but the fire I could not put out was burning at our feet. Many times have you and I turned away from each other, our faces proud, our hearts seeming cold, and only our feet, which smothered the clean stone where they trod, betrayed us.

My feet, bare and clean on the cold floor of my penance, left charcoal marks where I walked. The flagstones of your heart have become hearthstones. Wherever we stood, there was a fire at our feet.

“One day this will destroy us,” you said, your lips like tongs, moving the burning parts of me.

But I wondered how it could destroy us when it was us? We had become this love. We were not lovers. We were love. 92

Winterson is not the first post-medieval author whose interest in the Arthurian legend focuses on Lancelot and Guinevere’s adultery to the exclusion of the wider themes and concerns of the Arthurian tradition. To give one example, in William Morris’s poem, “The Defence of Guenevere” (1858), Guenevere delivers a long monologue to a group of “knights and lords” before whom she stands accused, it is assumed, of infidelity to Arthur. 93 The charges against

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which Guenever makes her defence are never stated; her refrain, "Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie/Whatever may have happened through these years,/God knows I speak the truth, saying that you lie," simply indicates that she refutes the charges brought against her. The reader's assumption that they concern her adultery with Lancelot depends on intertextual references to Malory's *Morte Darthur* and Chrétien de Troyes's twelfth-century Arthurian romance *The Knight of the Cart*. In the final stanza of Morris's poem, Lancelot's arrival is imminent, reaffirming the extent to which the archetypal roles of hero and heroine are subject positions out of which these characters cannot break, so integral are they to Arthurian tradition.

However, focusing on the Lancelot-Guinevere adultery plotline to the exclusion of all other Arthurian material obscures the primary concern of Arthurian romance: that is, the construction of chivalric *masculinity* as determined not only by the knight's devotion to his lady, but also by his relationship to other knights. The bonds between men are, ultimately, what matter most in the feudal, chivalric world of Arthurian romance. Guinevere's "crime" in the *Morte Darthur* is not that she has been caught with Lancelot in her room, but that, in the battle that ensues as Lancelot escapes, "good knights" are killed; Guinevere is a "destroyer of good knyghtes." In the *Morte Darthur*, Arthur's bitter lament is not for the loss of his queen, but for the loss of his knights when the unified fellowship of the Round Table is broken up into factions at war with each other: "And much more I am soryar for my good knyghtes losse than for the losse of my fayre quene; for quenys I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company." In invoking a

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hero/heroine dichotomy, Winterson’s treatment of Arthurian romance de-emphasises the homosocial order of the Arthurian world, and, consequently, overlooks the ways in which this order depends on the exchange of women.

In the Morte Darthur, devotion to Arthur’s queen is inseparable from devotion to Arthur himself. The Round Table around which Arthur’s knights gather is a wedding gift from Guinevere’s father to Arthur; as a symbol around which chivalric masculinity coheres and eventually disintegrates, Guinevere is interchangeable with the Round Table. Hence, on more than one occasion, Lancelot’s service to Guinevere solidifies the bond between himself and Arthur:

“My lorde,” seyde sir Launcelot, “wytte you well y ought of ryght ever [to be] in youre quarell and in my ladyes the quenys quarell to do batayle, for ye ar the man that gaff me the hygh Order of Knyghthode, and that day my lady, youre quene, ded me worship. And ellis had I bene shamed, for that same day that ye made me knyght, thorow my hastynes I loste my swerde, and my lady, your quene, founde hit, and lapped hit in her trayne, and gave me my swerde whan I had nede thereto; and ells had I bene shamed amonge all knyghtes. And therefore, my lorde Arthure, I promysed her at that day ever to be her knyght in ryght othir in wronge.”

In the bonds that exist between Arthurian men, Guinevere is at once both “my (Lancelot’s) lady” and “your (Arthur’s) queen.” In The PowerBook, the complex system of feudal chivalry idealised in the Morte Darthur is reduced to a single romantic sentiment: “It began with a promise: ‘While I am living I shall rescue you.’” This oversimplification of the Arthurian legend promotes a universalised discourse of romantic love, one which is, to

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96 Malory 685, lines 29-32. “And much more am I sorry for the loss of my good knights than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have again, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in such company.” (My translation).

97 Malory 620, lines 21-30. “My lord,” said sir Launcelot, “you should know that I will always be on your side and on my lady the queen’s side, for you are the man who gave me the high Order of Knighthood, and on that day my lady, your queen, did me a great honour. If not for her I would have been shamed, for on the same day that you made me a knight, through my hastiness I lost my sword, and my lady, your queen, found it and wrapped it in the train of her dress, and gave it to when I had need of it; otherwise I would have been shamed among all knights. And therefore, my lord Arthur, I promised her on that day always to be her knight whether in right or wrong.” (My translation).

borrow Pearce’s phrase, “a ‘story’ that everyone knows,” and one which is, furthermore, disengaged from exploring the complex mechanisms through which gender identity is created by and maintained within the binary, hierarchical oppositions central to narrative romance. In the light of this treatment of the Arthurian legend, the assurance offered to the reader—“don’t worry about the gender”—translates into a deliberate refusal to confront or interrogate the gender order of narrative romance. This contests the novel’s own assertion to “[r]efuse all the stories that have been told so far ... and try to tell the story differently,” 99 and, in reverting to a conceptualisation of romance as a structured by self/other, hero/heroine dichotomy, it also contests the characterisation of Winterson’s fiction as belonging to a trend of postmodern work interested in collapsing the system of binary oppositions which confines and defines identity to a “range of hierarchised dualisms.” 100 This raises the question, if The PowerBook is not interested in revising the Arthurian legend, then what does it seek to offer by incorporating its romances into the narrative?

However, just as Parker’s definition of narrative romance emphasises its form over its content, so the significance of Arthurian romance to The PowerBook is not determined by how far Winterson’s treatment of the legend strays from the medieval source material. Rather, the story of Lancelot and Guinevere functions as a digression from the fictive present of Ali’s main narrative, demonstrating the ways in which The PowerBook returns to the Arthurian past as a strategy of delay. After Ali and her/his lover have spent the night together in Paris, the beloved has “run out on the story. Run out on [Ali].” 101 Ali “set[s] one of the search engines [of her/his computer] to find [her/his lover],” 102 but to no avail. In the chapter title, “Search,” the “new” meaning this word has acquired in the context of information


100 Cranny-Francis 112.


technology—a practical function performed by a computer—contains within it the word’s earlier meaning in its association with quests, desire and longing. As Ali admits, “I’m looking for the meaning inside the data … looking for you, looking for me, trying to see through the disguise. I guess I’ve been looking for us both all my life.”

This movement between “the technological” and “the traditional” is what gives The PowerBook its particular narrative momentum, the way in which it strives towards endings which take place in the future, even as it lingers in spaces of the past. A love story written according to the strategies of narrative romance, it freely incorporates tales of other lovers into the tale of Ali and her/his lover: “The characters and the scenery change. … We go back and back to the same scenes, the same words, trying to scrape out meaning. Nothing could be more familiar than love. Nothing else eludes us so completely.”

There is, however, the possibility that the feminist and/or lesbian reader is likely to find something unsatisfying about the easy conflation of Ali and her/his lover with “great and ruinous lovers” like Lancelot and Guinevere, especially as the distinctions between different love stories—and lovers—collapse altogether. Arthurian romance is stripped of its specific, distinguishing features, so that it offers a vision of the universal appeal of romantic love: “My armour off, it lay like an effigy of myself on the floor. I was naked with you, carapace of hero put aside. I was not Lancelot. I was your lover.”

The PowerBook’s meditations on love are thus disquietingly familiar, repeating a particular message about love throughout the novel, but also recalling earlier versions of this message that have already appeared elsewhere in Winterson’s fiction. As Armitt observes, “even as [the] reader [of Winterson’s fiction] moves from book to book, moments from

103 Winterson, The PowerBook, 64.


previous novels tug at one’s consciousness, pulling us back to what has gone before.”

Hence, Ali’s belief that “[b]eyond time, beyond death, love is,” echoes Villanelle’s assertion, in The Passion. “[s]omewhere between fear and sex passion is.” Likewise, just as Jeanette, in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, desperately believes that “[s]omewhere [romantic love] is still in the original, written on tablets of stone,” so Ali continually seeks proof that “[t]his love exists. Perhaps it is the only thing that exists.”

This mode of intertextual repetition divides feminist and lesbian readers of Winterson’s fiction into two groups: those who argue that the universalising tendency of Winterson’s fiction is challenged by the specificity of same-sex desire represented within her novels, and those who express concerns about the subordination of lesbian specificity within the increasingly universalised romantic narratives of Winterson’s fiction. For example, Andermahr argues that far from “effacing sexual difference,” Winterson “uses the particular and the specific experience … to express something universal about what it is to love.” Indeed, Andermahr maintains that while Winterson’s fiction is primarily concerned with “desire per se,” it is often “grounded in lesbian experience, using that experience as a take-off point, continually reaching beyond particular bodies, selves and actions for the universal.”

In her reading of Winterson’s early novels, Pearce argues a similar point, claiming, “these are texts in which the desire to believe that, somewhere, Romantic Love ‘is still in the original,

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109 Winterson, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, 165.


112 Andermahr, Jeanette Winterson, 23.
written on tablets of stone' ... is constantly undercut by the 'Gross Reality' ... of the
historical moment in which age, class, gender – and, not least, sexual orientation – matter
desperately. In her recent reading of The PowerBook, however, Pearce is more
circumspect, drawing attention to the ways in which the novel’s "central humanist message"
effectively diminishes these earlier concerns with specificity of experience by upholding a
universalising view of romantic discourse that was not as evident in Winterson’s earlier
fiction.

Emphasising romantic love as a discourse with which everyone is familiar, The
PowerBook is a novel about the desire to believe that love is a universal, ahistorical or
transhistorical constant that can overcome time and space, as well as the gendered specificity
of the historical moment. Curiously, although the narrative continually gestures towards
future possibilities in the form of stories that have yet to be written, The PowerBook cannot
imagine a future for romance. The final paragraphs see Ali dropping her/his watch into the
Thames, letting go of time, before returning to her/his computer to "write the story again."
Ali’s exhortation to “[b]reak the narrative. Refuse all the stories that have been told so far ... and try to tell the story differently," perhaps offers the most useful message within the
novel for feminist or lesbian reconceptualisations of romance; this position displays sympathy
with feminist and lesbian efforts to revise traditional romance narratives. But if, as The
PowerBook would have us believe, the refusal of narrative ending can be liberating, it can
also be limiting, in that it disrupts momentum that might lead the narrative to new and
challenging romantic outcomes. The feminist and lesbian potential of The PowerBook
remains “unactualised” within the novel, suggested but never fulfilled.

113 Pearce, ""Written on Tablets of Stone,"" 148.
115 Winterson, The PowerBook, 243, 244.
In spite of the frequent return to the past within its pages, *The PowerBook* moves towards a narrative space unbound by conventional notions of beginning and ending. The vision of the future offered by *The PowerBook*, however, is not one characterised by the capacity for reinvention associated with virtual reality. Rather, it is one which is haunted by the material remains of the past, as evidenced by the detritus of lived history that accumulates on the banks of the Thames, dislocated from its specific historical moment: a "fridge with its door off," a "shopping trolley," and a "hospital bed with its rubber castors missing" pile up alongside a rusted and barnacled ship’s anchor and a "sea chest, still padlocked." At the end of the novel, Ali temporarily exchanges the fluidity of "logging on" to her/his computer in order to "surf" the Internet for the "hard crunching" of a walk along the water-logged shores of the Thames at low tide, where s/he discovers a "collection of found objects washed up through time."

Hidden amongst the sand and the silt are "bottle stoppers, ... marbles used as bottle stoppers in the nineteenth century." Ali "put[s] them in [her/his] pocket, little capsules of the past, and walk[s] on." Taking these bits of the past with her/him, Ali no longer "trawl[s her/his computer] screen like a beachcomber;" instead s/he wades out into the river towards a shaft of light coming from the depths of the river: "The light is there but it’s not shining down, its shining up. It’s in the silt, in the red of the river, making a vertical shaft from the bottom to the surface." The conventional understanding of history as a linear, horizontal timeline is thus bisected by this image of time stacked "vertically ... in

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121 Winterson, *The PowerBook*, 64.
simultaneous layers of reality."¹²³ Even this reconceptualisation of history, though, is contested by an additional image of history as “a madman’s museum,” a jumbled disorder of past, present and future, of reality and fantasy. This is precisely the vision of history offered by Sexing the Cherry, which moves fluidly between the sometimes fantastic, sometimes factual, historical past and the equally fantastic narrative present.

V

Set in seventeenth- and twentieth-century London, and narrated in turns by the fantastically gargantuan Dog-Woman, her foundling son Jordan, and their twentieth-century “alter-egos,” an unnamed female environmental activist and a young male Naval recruit named Nicholas Jordan, Sexing the Cherry explores the dynamic interrelation of place, space and time through the different kinds of journeys or quests—material, metaphorical and metaphysical—made by its protagonists. In The PowerBook, the narrative moves between the medieval world of Arthurian romance and the modern world of the Millennium, as set in cyberspace and virtual reality. In Sexing the Cherry, the narrative also moves between a historical and a “present” setting: in this case, the early-modern world of the Age of Exploration and the late-twentieth century, which is contemporaneous with the time period of the novel’s publication. Even though the historical setting of Sexing the Cherry shifts “forward” from the medieval to the early-modern era, the novel nonetheless draws on the themes, tropes and narrative strategies which originate in medieval narrative romance. In particular, it is the ways in which Sexing the Cherry employs the quest motif which allows us to continue to read Winterson’s fiction in terms of its relation to narrative romance.

Obsessed with voyages, exploration and discovery, Jordan is a romance hero on a quest with no discernible “end” in sight: “Every journey conceals another journey within its

lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle. These are journeys I wish to record. Not the ones I made, but the one I might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time.”

Yet, although it is Jordan who actively seeks new worlds, who journeys to floating worlds, and who is the novel’s hero in the most traditional sense of the word, for many of the novel’s feminist readers it is his mother, the Dog-Woman, who offers a laudable and readily accessible model of heroic female resistance. Like her son Jordan, the Dog-Woman seems to exist without origin: “I had a name but I have forgotten it. They call me the Dog-Woman and it will do.”

This sense of boundlessness is further emphasised by the Dog-Woman’s massive physical proportions; not only does she offer an image of the female body as “out of the bounds” of traditional femininity, the Dog-Woman defies the physically binding constraints of gravity and weight: “When I was a child my father swung me up on to his knees to tell me a story and I broke both his legs. … But my mother, who … was so light that she dared not go out in a wind, could swing me on her back and carry me for miles.”

As a specifically feminist hero, the Dog-Woman’s physical proportions are crucial to the model of female heroism she represents to the feminist and/or lesbian reader. For example, Armitt admires the Dog-Woman’s “utter refusal to pander to patriarchal sensitivities.”

Describing the Dog-Woman as “[a] complex caricature of villainy, sexual naivety, brutality and endearing charm,” Armitt argues that the Dog-Woman’s “primary virtue”—indeed, her primary feminist virtue—“is her willingness to take responsibility: for her actions, for her foundling ‘son’ Jordan, for her cause.”

This notion of responsibility has, Armitt observes, important implications for feminism: as one of the novel’s first-person

124 Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, 9-10.
125 Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, 11.
126 Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, 25.
point-of-view narrators the Dog-Woman “tell[s] her own tale – one detailing the power of the female form.”

Echoing Armitt’s assessment of the Dog-Woman’s significance to feminism and feminist narratives, Jane Haslett argues that the Dog-Woman offers a particularly liberating model of empowerment to contemporary female readers: “Twenty years after Winterson published Sexing the Cherry … [it] can still be empowering for a female reader to read about Dog Woman’s grotesque body.”

Like Armitt, Haslett locates the feminist significance of the Dog-Woman with the ways in which she represents the transgressive power of the female body: “Uncontrollable, flowing, enormous, ugly, violent, tender, loving, energetic, smelly, noisy, rough, dirty, Dog Woman’s body is everything the female body is not supposed to be. It is an absolute escape from the image of the proper feminine body, overcontrolled by the notion of femininity, prevalent in our white Western world.”

For both Armitt and Haslett, the Dog-Woman is precisely the kind of empowering female “ally” within the text so often sought by the feminist reader. As we shall see, it is the presence of this kind of ally which enables us to regard certain fiction by women as feminist fiction, as fiction which reaches out to the feminist reader in a conspiratorial mode of interlocution or address. To draw on the terminology of Pearce’s theory of implicated reading discussed in Chapter One, the Dog-Woman is for many feminist readers the most readily accessible “textual other” of Sexing the Cherry, the point of contact through which the feminist reader maintains her engagement with the text.

Yet, as a number of existing critical readings of the novel will demonstrate, the Dog-Woman is not the only point of contact through which feminist readings of the novel are made. Perhaps more so than The PowerBook, Sexing the Cherry has lent itself to a number of

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131 Haslett 42.
feminist readings, particularly to those that welcome the fusion of feminist or lesbian political interests with postmodernism’s playful reinvention of narrative structure in the pursuit of alternative identities and sexualities. In her reading of *Sexing the Cherry*, Laura Doan describes Winterson’s “project” as one which “envisions the contours and logic of a lesbian postmodern that collapses binarisms and creates a space not just for lesbians but for productive, dynamic, and fluid gender pluralities and sexual positionings.”\(^{132}\) Doan champions Winterson’s efforts to overthrow or overturn the gender binary and supplant it with a notion of gender fluidity. Keen to reconcile postmodernism’s “political ambivalence” with lesbian-feminism’s “oppositional politics,” Doan argues that Winterson’s fiction “demonstrates clearly what lesbian theory and cultural practices might offer postmodernism … [i.e.,] a sexual politics of heterogeneity and a vision of hybridized gender constructions outside an either/or proposition, at once political and postmodern.”\(^{133}\) Hence, according to Doan, “[f]iction, for Winterson, is the site to interrogate, trouble, subvert, and tamper with gender, identity, and sexuality … [and] to imagine the emancipation of “normal” and “natural” from the exclusive and totalizing domain of patriarchal and heterosexual authority.”\(^{134}\)

Paulina Palmer likewise emphasises the ways in which *Sexing the Cherry* envisions a number of strategies through which alternative female and lesbian sexual identities achieve emancipation from patriarchal authority, arguing that while the “relevance of *Sexing the Cherry* to the topic of lesbianism is open to question, … [o]n certain occasions … it does assume prominence.”\(^{135}\) While, according to Palmer, lesbianism might not enjoy a privileged


\(^{133}\) Doan 153.

\(^{134}\) Doan 153-54.
status throughout the novel on the whole, being represented "in a manner resembling the approach adopted by the lesbian sexual radicals and the supporters of Queer Politics, as one of a variety of sexual identifications and positions," some episodes "either refer to [lesbianism] directly or treat themes and motifs which play a central part in the lesbian cultural tradition." Palmer discusses in particular "Winterson's innovative version of the story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses," in which "lesbian and woman-identified relationships take on a political significance, denoting female courage and resistance to patriarchal power." Palmer argues that "[i]n rewriting the fairy tale, Winterson portrays the princesses as liberating themselves, in some cases by violent means, from their husbands' control. Instead of living happily ever after in marital bliss, as convention dictates, they set up home together in a female community." Just as the Dog-Woman refuses to conform to conventional patriarchal expectations of femininity and the female body, the Twelve Dancing Princesses refuse to conform to patriarchal narrative expectations via the ways in which they "transgress the conventional role of object of exchange by forming sexual relationships with one another."

Approaching the novel from a slightly different perspective is Marilyn R. Farwell, who observes the ways in which Winterson's version of the story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses demonstrates a revisionary feminist politics with significant implications for a lesbian narrative tradition. Starting from a similar point to Palmer, Farwell suggests that *Sexing the Cherry* does not "trade directly on lesbian images and themes," and even seems to

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136 Palmer, *Contemporary Lesbian Writing*, 104.

137 Palmer, *Contemporary Lesbian Writing*, 104.

138 Palmer, *Contemporary Lesbian Writing*, 104-05.

139 Palmer, *Contemporary Lesbian Writing*, 104-05.
“avoid making lesbianism a narrative concern.” The novel’s significance to a tradition of lesbian-feminist, as well as postmodernist writing comes instead, Farwell argues, from its interrogation and eventual suspension of narrative closure, particularly in its deconstruction of woman’s traditional role in male heroic narratives as the point around which narrative closure is achieved. Jordan might be the hero of Sexing the Cherry, but Fortunata, the youngest sister of the Twelve Dancing Princesses with whom he is captivated and who “becomes the fixed point for his heroic adventures,” refuses to be the reward that would complete his years of questing. Like Fortunata’s “refusal to be the closure of [Jordan’s] story,” the Twelve Dancing Princesses, Farwell argues, refuse the narrative end-point of marriage. Farwell describes how the Princesses’ stories “recount the time after the marriage of each princess to a prince. Traditionally, this is the point of narrative quiescence because the situation after marriage is unnarratable. But for these twelve princesses, marriage becomes the boundary space that they cross on their way to their home together. Each, in fact, claims to be the subject of her own story.” Indeed, as the eldest Dancing Princess relates, “we were all given in marriage, one to each brother, and as it says lived happily ever after. We did, but not with our husbands.”

Through a combination of postmodernist and feminist or lesbian-feminist strategies, then, Sexing the Cherry foregrounds the liberating potential of storytelling long before Ali urges the reader to “[r]efuse all the stories that have been told so far.” In focusing their


141 Farwell 181.

142 Farwell 180.

143 Farwell 182, emphasis added.

144 Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, 48.

readings of *Sexing the Cherry* on the stories of the Twelve Dancing Princesses, both Palmer and Farwell implicitly link the novel to a tradition of women’s writing which enacts a feminist critique of patriarchy via a revisionary approach to its most canonical and enduring narrative traditions—for example, fairy-tales, classical mythology or Biblical narrative. However, while modes of refusal and resistance are thus foregrounded within *Sexing the Cherry*’s multiple narratives, so that the Twelve Dancing Princesses become the subjects of their own (fairy)tales, the novel’s revisionary feminist approach to patriarchal narrative traditions is undermined by the ways in which the quest motif and its associated constructions or conceptualisations of heroism are not part of the revisionary project of the novel. Thus, while the readings from Doan, Palmer and Farwell attest to the ways in which feminist and/or lesbian readings of the novel can easily be made by focusing on the narrative content of the novel, if we take a more interactive or participatory approach to the text, we begin to uncover certain obstacles that that operate at the level of narrative organisation or narrative structure. These obstacles threaten to frustrate the feminist and/or lesbian reader who seeks images of female heroes within the novel, who employs a strategy of reading as quest in search of feminist and/or lesbian “allies” within the text.

Mary Eagleton formulates an interactive and participatory strategy of feminist reading through a theorisation of women’s silence. Eagleton suggests that the refusal of patriarchal authority is not only found in the revisionary narrative content of feminist fiction, but that it is enacted through the reading of the novel by the feminist reader of the text. She considers silence and secrecy as possible sites of pleasure for women, arguing that a conspiratorial secrecy between women makes silence so pleasurable and, ultimately, so powerful in subverting patriarchal authority. Eagleton’s argument draws on an episode in *Sexing the Cherry* where Jordan discovers a “conspiracy” among women:

> I watched women flirting with men, pleasing men, doing business with men, and then I watched them collapsing into laughter, sharing the joke, while the men, all
unknowing, felt themselves master of the situation and went off to brag in barrooms and to preach from pulpits the folly of the weaker sex.

This conspiracy of women shocked me. I like women; I am shy of them but I regard them highly. I never guessed how much they hate us or how deeply they pity us.¹⁴⁶

For Eagleton, this image of the women who “collaps[e] into laughter” demonstrates the ways in which feminist pleasure in silence and secrecy is located not within the text alone, but with the feminist reader who is a privileged participant in this “sharing [of] the joke.” The conspiracy of women which so dismays Jordan offers a model for a parallel conspiracy between the female reader of Sexing the Cherry and the female characters within the text; Eagleton suggests that “we endow them [the female characters] with a superiority they themselves don’t want; we also feel good about ourselves ... in belonging to the ‘conspiracy of women’ that Winterson mentions. We enjoy being privy to this secret circumvention of male power and, perhaps, remember with some glee our own similar circumventions.”¹⁴⁷

In Eagleton’s reading, the women in Sexing the Cherry are envisioned as allies of the female reader of the novel. Eagleton’s reading both depends upon and describes an “exclusivity of address” between the text and the female reader. Pearce suggests that it is this specificity of address that helps to distinguish certain women’s writing as feminist writing. Feminist fiction, for Pearce, is “writing which enacts or describes a dialogue between women as allies: a dialogue in which the meaning of any utterance depends upon, and is defined by, reciprocity of address within the consciousness of a gendered context.”¹⁴⁸ In a similar fashion to Eagleton, Pearce reads Jordan’s exclusion from the women’s conspiratorial dialogue as illustrative of this feminist strategy of text-reader address: Jordan observes, “I noticed that women have a private language. A language not dependent on the constructions of men but

¹⁴⁶ Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, 31-32.


¹⁴⁸ Lynne Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading (London: Arnold, 1997) 74.
structured by signs and expressions and that uses ordinary words as code words meaning something other."\(^{149}\)

However, these moments in *Sexing the Cherry* which privilege an exclusivity of address between women are not communicated directly to the reader but are mediated through Jordan’s masculine point of view; conspiratorial female activity operates at an almost subtextual level within the novel. Pearce suggests that it is, in fact, at the level of subtext that such “code words” may be “taken as a distinguishing feature of dialogic activity in feminist texts: a form of address that suggests a private conspiracy between one woman and another, a dialogue whose interests remain hidden, unseen by the outside world.”\(^{150}\) An alternative reading, however, might focus on the ways in which the narrative foregrounds Jordan’s exclusion from the women’s private realm, and thus frustrates the immediacy with which the female reader is able to access or participate in a feminist subversion of male authority. At an equally subtextual level, the narrative displays sympathy with Jordan’s point of view:

> I like women; I am shy of them but I regard them highly. I never guessed how much they hate us or how deeply they pity us. ... Then my heaviness was at its limit and I could not raise myself up from where I was sitting. But I did look around me and I saw that I was one in a long line of unfortunates sitting like crows on a fallen tree. All were wailing piteously and none could move on account of their sorrows.\(^{151}\)

Jordan’s astonishment and dismay at discovering a collective hatred of men among women anticipates the response of the potentially injured male reader of *Sexing the Cherry* and focuses on redressing any sense of exclusion or alienation “he” might experience. Like Patricia Duncker’s “smug” male reader of *Written on the Body*, the “sympathetic” male reader of *Sexing the Cherry* can recognise himself in Jordan’s response: “I, too, like women,” he might say in his own defence. Just as Jordan views himself as a sympathetic, if reticent, ally to the women he meets—“I am shy of them but I regard them highly”—so is the

\(^{149}\) Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 31.

\(^{150}\) Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, 71-72.

\(^{151}\) Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 31-32.
(heterosexual) male reader invited to position himself as the sympathetic ally of Winterson’s text. A polyphonic novel, Sexing the Cherry invites feminist alliances with its female readers, but it does not single out the feminist reader in a privileged form of address to the exclusion of all other readers.

Sexing the Cherry further complicates its own address of the feminist reader by rendering its female characters the objects of the masculine quest, and this undermines the novel’s own interest in offering images of female heroes to the feminist and/or lesbian reader. Because she is also a comic figure, the Dog-Woman is perhaps a more easily accessible feminist ally for the reader than her twentieth-century alter-ego, the unnamed, female environmental activist: “I am a woman going mad. I am a woman hallucinating. I imagine I am huge, raw, a giant.”

Lacking a name, the environmental activist gestures towards the collectivised rather than individualist “identity” of feminism, lending her body a collective significance: “I was fat because I wanted to be bigger than all the things that were bigger than me. ... It seems obvious, doesn’t it, that someone who is ignored and overlooked will expand to the point where they have to be noticed, even if the noticing is fear and disgust.”

Evoking the Radicalesbians’ vision of the lesbian as the “rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion,” through her “woman’s movements” the female environmental activist becomes an agent of radical feminism:

When I am a giant I go out with my sleeves rolled up and my skirts swirling around me like a whirlpool. I have a sack such as kittens are drowned in and I stop off all over the world filling it up. ...
First Stop: the World Bank. ...
Next Stop: the Pentagon.
I smash through the maximum security doors, past the computers, the secrets, the army of secretaries, and burst into a band of generals ... talking about defence and

152 Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, 121.

153 Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, 124.

peace and how to eliminate nuclear threat by ordering more weapons. ... I grab them by their medals and drop them in the bag. ...

I snatch world leaders from motorcades, from mansion house dinners, from embassies and private parties ... I force all the fat ones to go on a diet, and all the men line up for compulsory training in feminism and ecology. Then they start on the food surpluses, packing it with their own hands, distributing it in a great human chain of what used to be power and is now co-operation. 155

Often refusing to ground her novels in realistic historical moments, Winterson rarely offers her readers a mirror-space for the contemporary feminist or lesbian self-image like the one portrayed here by the female environmental activist. Via this female subject-position, Sexing the Cherry utilises one woman's fantasy to envision an image of collectivised feminist resistance that will be most relevant to the novel's late-twentieth- or early-twenty-first-century reader. The presence of the feminist mirror-image within the text is likewise played out by the female environmental activist's secret conspiracy with the Dog-Woman, who reflects back to the environmentalist her own idealised self-image: "I had an alter ego who was huge and powerful, a woman whose only morality was her own and whose loyalties were fierce and few. She was my patron saint, the one I called on when I felt myself dwindling away through cracks in the floor or slowly fading in the street. Whenever I called on her I felt my muscles swell and laughter fill up in my throat." 156

Disappointingly, however, opportunities for further feminist alliance between the text and the reader diminish towards the end of the novel. The female environmental activist's narrative is increasingly punctuated by isolating moments of self-doubt; feminist reciprocity is replaced by rhetorical questions addressed to no one in particular: "Why don't I take the share option and company car and the pension scheme and the private health care and the reassuring salary? Why am I camping by a river and going mad? My skin is flaking off." 157 Ultimately,

155 Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, 122-23.
156 Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, 125.
157 Winterson, Sexing the Cherry, 125.
it is Jordan’s twentieth-century alter-ego, a young naval recruit named Nicholas Jordan, who seeks out the female environmental activist’s company. Just as Jordan’s is the narrative voice through which the novel mediates female conspiracy, so Nicholas Jordan becomes the commentator on the female environmentalist’s actions, supplanting feminist dialogue with a masculine articulation of heroism: “Surely this woman was a hero? Heroes give up what’s comfortable in order to protect what they believe in or to live dangerously for the common good.”  

Male-defined, female heroism becomes subsumed within a masculine narrative of quest: “I felt I knew her, though this was not possible. ... I would find her.”

Reframing the female hero as the object or end-point of the masculine heroic quest, *Sexing the Cherry* fails, ultimately, to intervene in the sexual politics of narrative romance. Jordan’s quest might not end with the “discovery” of Fortunata, but in remaining just out of his reach, she is as mysterious and as sought-after as the traditional object-of-desire in narrative romance: “She will elude me, she and this island will slip sideways in time and I’ll never find them again, except perhaps in a dream.” Indeed, the final image of Fortunata sees her “fading” from the text: the Dog-Woman says, “I thought I saw someone standing beside [Jordan], a woman, slight and strong. I tried to call out but I had no voice. Then she vanished and there was nothing next to Jordan but empty space.”

Mysterious and elusive, but inhabiting a realm outside the reach of patriarchy; silent and secret, but deliberately so; alone and unheard, but possessing a transforming rage, the ambiguous subject-position of the female hero in *Sexing the Cherry* hints at an underlying ambivalence which characterises the novel’s incorporation of medieval narrative romance tropes, themes and motifs. Equally, this ambivalence characterises the novel’s construction of female heroism and further frustrates

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159 Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 138, emphasis added.

160 Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 103.

161 Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 144, emphasis added.
the feminist and/or lesbian reader’s quest for female heroes in *Sexing the Cherry*: the novel’s female heroes struggle against this quality of elusiveness, which threatens to reduce images of female resistance into “[e]mpty spaces and points of light.”

In this chapter a new and original reading of Winterson’s fiction has been presented. This reading has not sought to deny the significance of Winterson’s fiction to feminist and lesbian literary traditions. Rather, it has demonstrated that, by examining the preoccupation with medieval romance—that is, the themes and tropes of the quest motif, the concern with constructions of heroism, and the strategies of dilation, digression, delay or deferral which distinguish romance as a narrative mode—which is prevalent in a number of her novels, Winterson’s fiction is equally significant to a literary tradition of narrative romance. By demonstrating that *The PowerBook* can be understood as an example of narrative romance, the reading of the novel offered in this chapter both utilises and augments Parker’s definition of romance as a form or mode of writing with transhistorical applicability. This definition contrasts to the traditional conceptualisation of romance as a historically situated genre typified by the literature of the medieval period; hence, it accommodates “postmodern” novels like *The PowerBook* and *Sexing the Cherry*. By widening the contexts in which Winterson’s fiction is read, this chapter has sought to bring a new perspective to an author whose work has so often been read as “feminist,” “lesbian” or “postmodern.” This has addressed the research aims of this thesis, which are concerned to interrogate the perception of Winterson as a “lesbian writer” and to demonstrate ways in which readings of her fiction can move beyond the lesbian label.

If Winterson’s fiction does not necessarily privilege feminist or lesbian literary, cultural or political interests—and the range of critical responses amongst feminist and lesbian literary critics suggest that her fiction does not situate them as the primary narrative concerns—it nonetheless often reveals a concern to construct models of heroes and heroism,

162 Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, 144.
which, at times, take on feminist, lesbian or woman-identified significance. In this chapter, we have seen that while Winterson’s fiction features female heroes—such as Sappho, the Dog-Woman and the Dog-Woman’s unnamed twentieth-century radical feminist alter-ego—and employs revisionary techniques which open up opportunities within the text for female characters to resist patriarchal narrative outcomes—as in Sexing the Cherry’s version of the story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses—it also upholds the main objective of medieval narrative romance: the construction of a dominant heroic subject-position as masculine or male-defined. In this way, alternative models of female heroism in Sexing the Cherry are undermined by an ambivalence which is integral to the novel’s narrative trajectory. Via the quest motif which guides the narrative, the novel replicates the ambiguous subject-position of women in medieval romance and subsumes its female heroes within the politics of narrative romance which seeks to maintain masculinity and femininity in a hierarchical relation, with femininity and women designated the objects of the male quest. Additionally, like the sexually indeterminate and ambiguously gendered narrator of Written on the Body, in The PowerBook Ali’s gender identity is unspecified, but her/his relation to the married female beloved, when interwoven with the medieval romances of Lancelot and Guinevere, suggests that Ali occupies a male-defined subject-position: the Knight, the Lover, the Hero. While both The PowerBook and Sexing the Cherry encourage the reader to participate in the narrative strategies of the text through the foregrounding of either a direct or indirect address of the reader, the feminist and/or lesbian reader is likely to find herself simultaneously “intrigued and dismayed” by the incorporation of medieval narrative romance within these novels; the tropes, themes, motifs and narrative strategies of medieval romance that distinguish Winterson’s fiction as unique at once draw the reader into the narrative and alienate her by refusing to acknowledge the engendering mechanisms of narrative romance. Reading as quest is a strategy of reading that allows us to utilise this particular thematic motif of medieval narrative romance to examine the effect of narrative romance’s engendering
mechanisms on the reading of the text. Namely, it is a strategy of reading which permits us to articulate the actions of the feminist and/or lesbian reader of Winterson’s fiction who seeks a reflection or affirmation of her gender identity or sexuality within the text via the presence of feminist or lesbian heroes who function as readily accessible interlocutors during her engagement with the text.

As part of the narrative impulse to "begin again," the historical past is often invoked in Winterson’s fiction, whether this is, as we have seen in this chapter, the medieval past of Arthurian legend, as in The PowerBook, or a fantastic version of the historical past, as in Sexing the Cherry’s seventeenth-century London. In spite of the influence of the lesbian label, the past, in Winterson’s fiction, is rarely invoked as a place to “discover” antecedent lesbian “foremothers,” lesbians hidden from history or marginalised within authorised historical narrative or historiography. Yet, The PowerBook’s insistence on “beginning again” and telling the story differently in fact expresses one of the main concerns of lesbian historical fiction: the reinvention of history as a place to which contemporary lesbian readers can turn in search of “lost” lesbian ancestors. There is, even, something “heroic” about lesbian historical fiction’s desire to “rescue” lesbians from patriarchal history. If, in the case of Winterson’s fiction, moving beyond the lesbian label requires us to leave behind or let go of the label because it no longer enables us to produce new readings of her fiction, in the case of Sarah Waters’s fiction, moving beyond the lesbian label requires us, initially, to return to the label. Thus, in Chapter Three, Reading as Revision, we engage in our own form of “beginning again” by returning to the research question which unites the two authors in this thesis—how can readings of both authors’ work move beyond the expectations placed on the “lesbian author”?— in order to examine the specific and subtle ways in which Waters’s fiction embraces the lesbian label, if only to push at its limits.
Chapter Three – Reading as Revision

The revisionist project of Sarah Waters’s fiction envisions a specifically lesbian past, a past not only teeming with untold lesbian stories, but one inhabited by lesbians with stories to tell. Chapter One, Reading as Romance, examined the ways in which, in both Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* (1992) and Waters’s *Affinity* (1999) lesbianism is never clearly articulated nor materialised, thus complicating the certainty with which the reader can claim either novel as a lesbian text. However, this chapter will demonstrate that as a work of neo-Victorian historiographic metafiction, *Affinity* challenges the gendered occlusions of patriarchal historiography and nineteenth-century social-realist fiction specifically by opening up historical narration to a lesbian perspective. In addition to this revisionary approach to the Victorian past, *Affinity* also plays consciously with late-twentieth-century feminist and lesbian literary and critical theory in order to address a reader whom the nineteenth-century realist novel could not address: the lesbian reader. In this way, and in spite of its refusal to provide “proof” of lesbianism within its pages, *Affinity* can be understood as a “lesbian text” in a way that *Written on the Body* cannot, precisely because, in opening up historical narration to a lesbian perspective, *Affinity* not only revises history, but enables the reading of that history from the perspective of “reading as a lesbian.”

Working from the research question outlined in the Introduction and which frames the reading of Waters’s fiction in this thesis—is Water’s project really to write the lesbian back into history?—this chapter seeks to establish that the revisionary project of Waters’s fiction is not to “introduce” the lesbian to history, but to demonstrate that the lesbian was always already “there,” always already located within history, even if relegated to the margins of its authorised narratives. Hence, this chapter is concerned not only to demonstrate the ways in which Waters’s fiction revises history so that the lesbian is relocated from the margins to the centre of historical narrative, it is also concerned to demonstrate the ways in which the revisionary narrative strategies of her novels enable the reading of history from the
perspective of "reading as a lesbian." This is achieved in *The Night Watch* (2006) through the use of the "lesbian counterplot," a form of narrative rearrangement that subverts the "male-female-male" triangular model which distinguishes the plot of canonical Western literature as primarily concerned to solidify the bonds between men via an exchange of women. The lesbian counterplot subverts this patriarchal narrative order by re-plotting the narrative according to an alternative "female-male-female" triangular model which foregrounds female desire and bonding between women. It is, according to Terry Castle, this arrangement of "subverted triangulation" which distinguishes lesbian fiction as lesbian;¹ and this chapter draws on Castle's theory of subverted triangulation in order to demonstrate the ways in which the overarching narrative structure of *The Night Watch* is organised according to the lesbian counterplot. Furthermore, it is the lesbian narrative counterplot that enables the strategy of reading as revision in relation to Waters's fiction: the reader who participates in the novel's revisionary narrative politics aligns herself with its lesbian perspective so that she engages in a reading of the text from a lesbian reading position.

The first section of this chapter continues the reading of *Affinity* begun in Chapter One by exploring how the representation of lesbianism as an immaterial, unarticulated and apparitional presence within the novel is part of the novel's interrogative approach to both a patriarchal tradition of historiography and a lesbian literary tradition. This chapter then proceeds to a reading of *The Night Watch*, in order to examine the ways in which, even when she shifts her narratives to a different historical time-period, Waters is still concerned to open up history to a lesbian reading perspective. The reading of *The Night Watch* in this chapter begins with a critique of Mark Llewellyn's essay on Waters's fiction, precisely because in his reading he enacts the erasure of the lesbian within history that Waters writes against. In *The Night Watch*, Waters continues to engage with both patriarchal narratives of history and

traditions of lesbian representation by interrogating the apparitional as a representational mode, in order to expose lesbian invisibility as a paradoxical scenario in which the lesbian is simultaneously “seen” and “unrecognised.” The reading of The Night Watch offered in this chapter addresses the wider research aims of this thesis, which seek to demonstrate how readings of both Winterson’s and Waters’s work can move beyond the expectations placed on the “lesbian author,” by outlining the ways in which Waters refuses to confine her lesbian narratives to the traditional end-points of the lesbian coming-out novel. In contrast to the coming-into-awareness narratives of Tipping the Velvet (1998) and Fingersmith (2002), which culminate in a recognition of lesbian identity and an affirmation of lesbian desire between the central characters of these novels, the realisation of lesbian identity in The Night Watch is the point from which the narrative begins. The Introduction to this thesis established that, as a writer, Waters accepts the lesbian label; this chapter pursues this point further to argue that Waters embraces the lesbian label in order to push at its limits so that it ceases to operate to restrictive or limiting effect. This chapter will demonstrate how, in The Night Watch, Waters extends the lesbian narrative beyond the moment of “coming out” so that the revisionary project of her fiction operates at a structural level via novel’s lesbian counterplot. As has been outlined above, it is this last point—the revisionary impetus of the lesbian narrative counterplot—that returns us to the participatory strategy of reading as revision, and allows us articulate the ways in The Night Watch opens up a lesbian reading position, acknowledges the lesbian reader, and enables the reading of history from the perspective of “reading as a lesbian.”
Lesbian historical fiction is distinguished by a “particular urgency” among lesbian writers eager to create “both a new historical and a new historiographical model.” Writing academically on gay and lesbian historical fiction before writing her own lesbian historical novels, Waters traces this impulse back to late-nineteenth-century lesbian and gay writing, in which the “literature and artefacts of ancient Greece” provide a “primary reference point” for both lesbian and gay male retrospection. However, while late-Victorian gay male writers were able to exploit the “obvious androcentrism of Hellenic society,” lesbian writers found themselves without the surfeit of historical models available to their gay male counterparts. Waters argues that lesbian historiography is thus “imaginative and empathic” in its focus on “rescuing ... isolated ancestors from the interstices of male history itself.” She describes, for example, the efforts of fin de siècle writers Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney, who subvert and revise dominant nineteenth-century masculine discourses in the pursuit of a lesbian erotic and historical model. This project takes an explicit feminist form with the recuperation of Sappho and the island of Lesbos. Locating a lesbian ancestry which originates on Sappho’s isle, Vivien and Barney refigure the island of Lesbos as a “site of distinctly female pleasures,” as part of their efforts to direct “new attention towards the female, specifically lesbian, past.” Sappho’s significance to Viven’s and Barney’s lesbian historical and mythological model is to be found in the crucial role she plays in “bring[ing] adult women into harmony with their

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latent lesbian desires,” and in their reclamation of Sappho from patriarchal interpretation
Vivien and Barney present a feminist lesbian alternative to the masculine exclusivity of
classical culture. It is interesting to note that, notwithstanding the difficulties of describing
Winterson as either a lesbian writer or a writer of lesbian historical fiction, in Winterson’s
“The Poetics of Sex” (1993) there is a similar feminist lesbian effort to reclaim Sappho and
the island of Lesbos from patriarchal narrative. Winterson’s Lesbos is an “island full of
girls,” to which Sappho returns “carrying a net full of words forbidden” to them.8
Winterson’s re/vision of Lesbos as a “delicious unacknowledged island where [women] are
naked with each other,” can be read as continuing Vivien’s and Barney’s efforts to recreate
Lesbos as a site of “distinctly female pleasures”: for Winterson, as for these and other lesbian
writers, Lesbos is a “territory [men] cannot invade.”9

However, while Vivien’s and Barney’s recuperation of Sappho allows the projection
of an “original” erotic lesbian aesthetic onto a suitable icon(ograph)ic space, Waters is keen to
emphasise that “Sappho’s role for lesbians was consistent only in as much as it galvanised
them into sexual debate; within that debate she took no standard iconographical form.”10
Indeed, Waters describes how, during the twentieth century, Sappho’s “authority over lesbian
culture ... was contested by a new gallery of historical icons,” as the decades between the two
world wars saw “the emergence of a distinct, organised lesbian historiography, a quest for
lesbian precedent ... [that] surpassed the merely Sapphic.”11 In particular, Waters describes
how “the Amazons, Queen Christina of Sweden, the Ladies of Llangollen – figures we have

come to think of as the *grandes dames* of lesbian history – all were recovered for the first time for an explicitly lesbian feminist agenda in the 1930s, [so that] … the shape of lesbian retrospection of the 1930s hints at a distinct underlying topography of knowledge, experience and myth."¹²

Significantly, in her own fiction Waters does not simply replicate these practices of retrospective imagining, even as she draws on the “topography” of accumulated lesbian myth and experience identified above. Waters neither reiterates the elitist position of those lesbian writers whose desire for a prestigious ancestry led them to the classical era as a period to which lesbian origins could be traced, nor does she allow the coherence of lesbian cultural tradition to remain un-interrogated, often challenging the assumption that the cultural repository of lesbian icons, myths and experiences is readily accessed by all lesbians across history. She complicates these earlier models of lesbian historiographic tradition, subjecting them to a self-reflexive scrutiny at the very same time as she draws upon the historical, cultural and literary referents they provide, so that, for example, the “*grandes dames* of lesbian history” receive a parodic invocation in *Tipping the Velvet* when upper-class Diana Lethaby throws a “Sapphists Only” fancy-dress party, as the narrator, Nan, relates:

Diana’s friend Evelyn arrived as Marie Antoinette – though, another Marie Antoinette came later, and, after her, yet another. That, indeed, was one of the predicaments of the evening: I counted fully five separate Sapphos all bearing lyres; and there were six Ladies from Llangollen – I had not even heard of the Ladies from Llangollen before I met Diana. On the other hand, the women who had been more daring in their choices risked going unrecognised by anyone at all. “I am Queen Anne!” I heard one lady say, very cross, when Maria failed to identify her – yet, when Maria addressed another lady in a crown by the same title, she was even crosser. She turned out to be Queen Christina, of Sweden.¹³

This is the kind of “critical return to history and politics through … metafictional selfconsciousness and parodic intertextuality” identified by Linda Hutcheon as characteristic


of postmodern and historiographic metafiction, which Waters employs for specifically lesbian purposes throughout her fiction.

Set in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, the first three of Waters’s novels—Tipping the Velvet, Affinity and Fingersmith—construct lesbianism against the backdrop of the Victorian era. The nineteenth century is a period of history preoccupied with ghost stories and apparitional phenomena, and of Waters’s three “Victorian” novels, Affinity is the one which plays consciously and critically with traditions of apparitional representation and spectral motifs in terms of the ways in which they relate to a specifically lesbian literary tradition. In particular, in its engagement with lesbian textual representation, Affinity at once invokes and challenges Castle’s theory of the “ghost effect” of lesbianism within patriarchal literary tradition. The lesbian, Castle suggests, “is never with us … but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind … She is far away and she is dire.” However, Affinity subverts this tradition of apparitional representation, challenging the occlusions of patriarchal history and historiography which relegate the lesbian to the “shadows” or the “margins,” while also exposing the mechanisms through which the lesbian is marginalised; in other words, Affinity’s interrogation of the apparitional as a representational mode enables the novel to tell the story of the erasure of the lesbian within patriarchal historical narrative and literary tradition.

Throughout Waters’s fiction, lesbian invisibility is often signalled through the motif of a character standing at a window, seeing but not seen; like Lynne Pearce’s “ghostly reader,” the lesbian in Waters’s texts is, at least initially, a “voyeur of action in which she cannot participate or intervene.” However, unlike the voyeuristic subjectivity constituted by the


15 Castle 2.

16 Lynne Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading (London: Arnold, 1997) 2.
narrator in Winterson's *Written on the Body*, which engenders a dominant position of spectatorship as masculine, the structural "affinity" between Waters's protagonists and Pearce's "ghostly reader" is complicated in *Affinity* by the novel's interrogation of apparitional subjectivity. While the reader is the only one who can "see" this "unseen" character, she is also invited to share this lesbian vantage point, to approach the text via the particularity of the lesbian gaze, and Waters exploits the credulity and conceit of the reader who assumes privileged access to the text in order to unsettle the reader's assumption that "seeing is believing."

Indeed, *Affinity* refuses to privilege one particular viewing position over another, continually drawing on and subverting notions of spectator ownership, in order to simultaneously align the reader with and alienate the reader from the upper-middle-class point of view of the novel's principal narrator, Margaret Prior. On Margaret's first visit to Millbank Prison as a "Lady Visitor," she gazes at the "queer and impressive sight" of the women prisoners as they walk around the prison yard during their daily exercise: "I gazed at the circling women, saying nothing, thinking my own thoughts. 'You like to look at them,' Miss Haxby said then. She said she had never had a visitor yet that didn't like to stand at that window and watch the women walk. It was as curative, she thought, as gazing at fish in a tank. After that, I moved from the glass." 17

As Margaret watches the women prisoners from her privileged vantage point in the prison matron's office, she receives strict advice regarding her role as a Lady Visitor from the chief matron, Miss Haxby:

I must tell them nothing of the world beyond the prison walls, nothing of what happens in it, not even so much as a notice from a newspaper—especially not that, she said, indeed, "for newspapers are forbidden here." She said I might find a woman seeking me out as an intimate, a counsellor; and if she does that, then I must counsel her "as her matron would—that is, in thinking shamefully on her crime, and in making her future a better one." But I must make no woman any kind of promises while she is

kept in the gaol; nor must I carry objects or information between a woman and her family or friends outside. 18

Margaret is advised, in effect, to keep her distance from the prisoners and to guard against intimacy by maintaining a careful distinction between public duty and private or personal exchange. However, on her first visit to the disgraced spirit-medium, Selina Dawes, Margaret is rebuffed by Selina’s sullen responses to her questions; consequently, Margaret becomes increasingly fascinated with Selina. She offers “herself” to Selina, providing details of her own life in an effort to win Selina’s trust: “I said, well, there was a variety of things I was forbidden, by Miss Haxby, to discuss with her; but so far as I knew, myself was not one of them. I would tell her any little detail she cared to hear.” 19 In effect, Margaret’s disclosure blurs the distinction between public duty and personal interest and demonstrates its ultimate precariousness; moreover, it risks collapsing the strict division of public from private altogether.

During Margaret’s visit to Selina’s prison cell, Selina refuses to subordinate herself to Margaret’s higher social status. Selina neither stands and offers Margaret her chair, nor curtseys and submits to Margaret’s inquiries about her life or her crime, as the other women prisoners do; instead, she challenges Margaret to reveal information about herself:

She had been blinking at me. Now, at last, she turned her face away and smiled. ... She began to talk with me, then, more naturally. She asked me, how long had I been a Lady Visitor? And, why did I want to do it? Why did I want to come to Millbank, when I might stay idle in my house at Chelsea ...?

I said, “You think ladies should stay idle, then?”

She would stay idle, she said, if she was like me.

“Oh,” I said then, “you would not, not if you were really like me!” 20

Unwittingly alluding to a “lesbian” desire for sexual similitude, Margaret encodes this reference to her own lesbianism in her conversation with Selina and so “gives herself away.”

18 Waters, Affinity, 16.
19 Waters, Affinity, 46.
20 Waters, Affinity, 46.
Accordingly, the difference between the two women gradually diminishes until their positions are all but reversed; Selina possesses the privileged gaze, while Margaret feels herself to be the object of scrutiny: “My words made her blink ... She ... sat carefully watching me; and I wished, then, that she would turn her head, for her gaze was very still and somehow unsettling.”

This shifting ownership of the gaze plays consciously with notions of a “lesbian perspective” as it is constructed through metaphors of sight and insight within lesbian critical theory. Influenced by a cultural tradition “that privileges sight as a metaphor for knowledge,” the literary representation of lesbian experience can be understood as part of wider political efforts to resist marginalisation and/as invisibility. As Bonnie Zimmerman recounts: “One might say that the basic ‘insight’ of lesbian critical theory was that the particularity of lesbian experience leads the writer to produce texts with a unique lesbian perspective on reality, and the reader/critic to see and therefore decipher encodings of lesbian experience in those texts.” Although drawing on this critical heritage, Affinity ultimately refuses a definitive model of lesbian experience unified through sexual semblance or “likeness.” While, in her fascination with Selina, Margaret obscures the differences between them, Selina exploits this presumed desire for sameness and “affinity;” echoing Margaret’s earlier words, Selina declares, “Look at any part of you—it might be me that you are looking at! We are the same, you and I ... our flesh is the same, and longs to leap to itself. It must do that, or wither! You are like me.”

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21 Waters, Affinity, 46.


23 Zimmerman 2.

24 Waters, Affinity, 275, emphasis in original.
This tension between distance and proximity, between sight and insight, is crucial to the way in which the reader engages with **Affinity**. Observing how, in Waters's Victorian novels, "history is not just revisited but revised," Lucie Armitt and Sarah Gamble identify an "ironic, knowing and interrogative distance" that is employed in the reproduction and reworking of the Victorian past. With the thematic concerns of Waters's novels derived most fully from late-twentieth-century literary and cultural theory—namely, second-wave feminism, feminist literary theory and queer theory—the relocation of such issues to the fictive nineteenth century requires a similarly ironic "knowingness" or "insight" on the part of the reader, who becomes an active participant in Waters's project. Deriving its political impetus from lesbian and feminist cultural criticism, **Affinity** shares with other works of lesbian historical fiction a concern to legitimise women's lives and relationships with each other as points of origin for the rewriting and rethinking of history.

Although in her reading of **Affinity**, M.-L. Kohlke initially draws attention to the political efficacy of women's historical fiction, noting how the "genre implicitly challenges the continuing marginal status of women's history in the disciplines of history and historiography," she ultimately fails to address the ways in which the authority of masculine historiographic tradition is thrown into question at the opening of the novel, arguing instead that "[Margaret's] female voice ... lacks the masculine social status to comment authoritatively on historical events." Kohlke identifies in women's historical fiction an "oppositional, self-conscious focus on its gendered subjectivity, ... its political writing practice, the textual 'reality' of the past it claims not so much to represent as to create, and the

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27 Kohlke 157.
provisional nature of any claims to knowledge gained thereby.” Kohlke observes that this contrasts with traditional, male-centred historical narrative, which “elides its own gender, race and class biases under the guise of scientific objectivity and impartiality … [and] fails to reflect on its own aesthetic criteria … or on the selectivity and exclusions involved in shaping the past into a coherent, unified, and legible text.” Yet, in her reading of Affinity Kohlke suggests that Margaret’s “would-be historical subjectivity stages itself in the shadow of her dead historian-father,” and claims that Margaret’s “ability to write a quasi-social history of Millbank Prison and its inmates founders on … her gender, which occasions self-doubt as to her suitability for the task.” Likewise, although Mark Llewellyn acknowledges that “Affinity is not to be read as a ‘straight’ historical novel … but rather as a modern interpretation of gendered Victorian social norms which looks backwards for its setting but also to the present for its wider implications,” he nonetheless claims that “Margaret’s hankering for her father reflects her desire for ‘masculine’ mental empowerment.” Llewellyn locates Affinity within an emergent literary tradition of neo-Victorian historiographic metafiction, identifiable by an intense self-reflexivity with regard to historical context and narrative, but neither he nor Kohlke considers that such self-reflexivity is precisely what characterises Margaret’s “foundering” meditations on how to begin her own historical narrative. Unable, it seems, to “see through” Affinity’s “more-than-Victorian opacity,” Kohlke’s and Llewellyn’s readings lack the critical insight required to recognise

28 Kohlke 155.

29 Kohlke 155.

30 Kohlke 157.

31 Mark Llewellyn, “Queer? I should say it is criminal!’: Sarah Waters’s Affinity,” Journal of Gender Studies 13.3 (2004): 204; 207.

32 Kohlke 156.
the novel’s generic and political motivations—namely, its status as a work of lesbian historiographic metafiction.

Foregrounding the interrelatedness of history and fiction as narrative constructs, historiographic metafiction challenges the linear progression towards knowledge or objective reality assured by both the realist novel and narrative history. Jeanette King situates *Affinity* within the historiographic metafictional tradition when she observes that the novel’s critique of “scientific knowledge and authority” is “implicit in the form of *[Affinity]*, which [is] as resistant to the formal conventions of the mid-Victorian realist tradition as [it is] to the assumptions ascribed in [realist novels].”33 In contrast to the nineteenth-century realist tradition evoked within its pages, which, as King points out, “assumes the existence of objective truths which, through careful observation, can be accurately represented and shared with the reader... *[Affinity]* continually refuse[s] to grant the reader any such certainty.”34 A historiographic metafictional text like *Affinity* thus invokes the historical past within its fictional narrative in order to “specify the ideological implications of historical representations.”35 Via Margaret’s point of view, then, *Affinity* situates a gendered context for narrative production, and asserts the necessity of bringing a gendered consciousness to both the (re)construction of historical narration and the reading of the text itself.

Employing a “self-conscious focus on ... gendered subjectivity,” to borrow Kohlke’s phrase, Margaret’s diary entries, which comprise the bulk of *Affinity*’s narrative, begin with the following passage:

Pa used to say that any piece of history might be made into a tale: it was only a question of deciding where the tale began, and where it ended. That, he said, was all his skill. And perhaps, after all, the histories he dealt with were rather easy to sift like


34 King 71.

that, to divide up and classify—the great lives, the great works, each one of them neat and gleaming and complete, like metal letters in a box of type.\textsuperscript{36}

Here, Margaret's invocation of "scientific objectivity and impartiality" is undermined by Affinity's ironic and interrogative relationship to the historical period recreated within its narrative. In the process of invoking her dead historian-father as a point of authoritative and authorial origin, Margaret paradoxically strips him of such authority by signalling her distance from his method of history-writing. Margaret's narrative contests the authority of dominant Victorian historiographic discourse by foregrounding its unsuitability to the tale that will unfold in the pages of her diary; summarily dismissing its expectations of narrative order, her diary entry continues: "Would he start it with the building of the gaols themselves? I cannot do that, for though I was told the date of it this morning I have forgotten it now; besides which, Millbank is so solid and antique, I can't believe that there was ever a time when it did not sit upon that dreary spot beside the Thames, casting its shadow on the black earth there."\textsuperscript{37}

As the central point from which Margaret's narrative begins, Millbank Prison itself likewise refuses the masculine logic through which knowledge is acquired and accordingly categorised: Millbank has "so many separate lives in it, and is so curious a shape, and must be approached, so darkly, through so many gates and twisting passages."\textsuperscript{38} If history is traditionally understood as the lives of great men and their works, "neat and gleaming and complete"—and, indeed, this is how Margaret appears to understand it—then the history of Millbank Prison and its inhabitants recorded by Margaret in her diary signifies a different story altogether.

Affinity plays on the expectations the reader brings to the text; and by appearing "more Victorian" than a "real" Victorian novel, Affinity deceives the reader, tempting her to

\textsuperscript{36} Waters, Affinity, 7.

\textsuperscript{37} Waters, Affinity, 7.

\textsuperscript{38} Waters, Affinity, 7.
read it as a Victorian novel. This explains, to some extent, the inconsistent readerly manoeuvres through which Kohlke and Llewellyn situate Affinity within a distinctly late-twentieth-century literary tradition of neo-Victorian historiographic metafiction, but then read it as one would read a nineteenth-century realist novel. For example, Kohlke takes Margaret’s dismissal of the intimate details of women’s domestic life at face value so that, in her reading, “[w]omen’s private sphere, their fashions, hairstyles and mundane affairs, such as dealing with servants, are designated irrelevant to history,”\(^{39}\) when, in fact, these are the very points of origin from which Margaret’s history of Millbank begins:

> Before I can [step across the grounds towards the prison proper] ... I am obliged to pause a little to fuss with my skirts, which are plain, but wide, and have caught upon some piece of jutting iron or brick. I daresay Pa would not have bothered with the detail of the skirts; I will, however, for it is in lifting my eyes from my sweeping hem that I first see the pentagons of Millbank—and the nearness of them, and the suddenness of that gaze, makes them seem terrible.\(^ {40}\)

Hence, what Margaret’s narrative establishes is not the marginality of women’s private affairs within masculine public discourse, but the necessity of bringing an “ironic, knowing and interrogative distance” to the narrative as it is read. If, in Affinity, seeing the words on the page does not necessarily mean believing them, then Margaret’s statement, “[Pa] might begin [the story] at seven this morning, when Ellis first brought me my grey suit and my coat—no, of course he would not start the story there, with a lady and her servant, and petticoats and loose hair,”\(^{41}\) in effect, affirms that this is precisely the place from which she will start her story. Furthermore, this image—“a lady and her servant, and petticoats and loose hair”—is, in many ways, the central erotic image of Waters’s three Victorian novels; situating it upfront in Affinity emphasises, in essence, that history, in Waters’s fiction, is lesbian history, and that it begins from these intimate, eroticised moments between women. Locating as points of

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\(^{39}\) Kohlke 157.

\(^{40}\) Waters, Affinity, 8, emphasis added.

\(^{41}\) Waters, Affinity, 7.
origin precisely those details of women’s lives designated irrelevant by masculine
historiographic discourse, *Affinity* opens up historical narration to a lesbian perspective via
Margaret’s narrative; and, provided she maintains a “knowing” distance from the sudden and
terrible “nearness” of the subject matter, the feminist and/or lesbian reader is invited to align
herself with this alternative point of entry into narrative history.

*Affinity* situates lesbianism as both a narrative concern and a narrative construct
within history, but how, precisely, is it constructed within the novel itself? If, throughout the
novel, lesbianism is constituted predominantly in terms of its absence—Castle’s paradoxical
“recognition through negation”—how can the lesbian be articulated through textual
representation? As a “ghost effect” within the text, lesbianism is “conjured up” as a spectral
presence; for Margaret’s mother, Margaret’s lesbianism is an im/possible subject, one which,
denied articulation, fills the silence in which it is not addressed:

> I should never have said ... that Mother had any opinion on the matter of my feelings
for Helen. I should not have thought that she had ever watched me gaze at her, or
listened when I said her name, or seen me glance away as she kissed Stephen. Now ... I
saw the look upon her face—not quite relief, nor satisfaction—and I knew at once
that she had done all those things. I knew she had been doing then for two years and a
half.

And I wonder now how differently it might have been between us if I had only
kept my love more hidden; or if I had never felt it at all.

But if *Affinity* seems to draw on Castle’s theory of the “ghosting” of lesbianism within
patriarchal culture, it does so, to some extent, ironically. Hence, Margaret paradoxically
“sees” herself as an apparitional figure: “I gaze at my own flesh and see the bones show pale
beneath it. They grow paler each day. My flesh is streaming from me. I am becoming my
own ghost!” Moving beyond the use of the ghost metaphor as a representational form of
lesbianism within literature, *Affinity* addresses the problem of articulating the lesbian as a

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42 Castle 60.


writing/written subject. Like Castle, Elizabeth Meese describes the lesbian as a shadowy presence—"Why is it that the lesbian seems like a shadow—a shadow with/in woman, with/in writing?"—but she also suggests that it is this shadow(y) self that provides the basis of lesbian subjectivity: "The lesbian subject is not all I am and it is in all I am. A shadow of who I am that attests to my being there, I am never with/out this lesbian." 45

This "shadow self" is evoked in a letter Margaret writes to Helen towards the end of the novel. Margaret’s former lover, Helen is now married to Margaret’s brother. In her letter, Margaret continually alludes to their past lesbian relationship, suggesting but never fully articulating its existence; the narrative gestures towards but never "names" its lesbian subject(s): "I wish that, if anyone should look for faults in this, then they will find them with me, with me and my queer nature, that set me so at odds with the world and all its ordinary rules, I could not find a place in it to live and be content. That this has always been true—well, you of course know that, better than anyone." 46 Cryptically referring to her plans to "elope" with Selina to Italy, the letter implicates not Selina but Helen within the production of its lesbian subject matter: "you of course know that, better than anyone." Situating Helen as the recipient of her lesbian/love letter, Margaret thus attempts to reclaim Helen from the "authorized" narrative recited by her mother, sister and brother:

"Helen attended Mr Prior’s lectures," [Margaret’s mother] said, "and Margaret meeting her there, she was brought to the house. She was always a great guest of ours after that, and always a favourite with Mr Prior. Of course, we did not know—did we, Priscilla—that it was all on Stephen’s account that she came here.—You must not blush, Helen dear!"

I stood by the fire, and heard it all. I watched Helen colour, but my own cheek stayed cool. After all, I have heard the story told that way so many times, I am half-way to believing it myself. 47


46 Waters, Affinity, 316.

47 Waters, Affinity, 102-03.
Margaret’s relationship with Helen is thus un-written by this traditional, patriarchal romance narrative of Stephen’s courtship with Helen. This is representative, perhaps, of the way in which, paradoxically, lesbianism remains un-written within Affinity, continually eluding definitive presence or form in spite of the novel’s multiple narratives in which it is evoked in a number of (dis)guises.

Margaret’s diary entries are interspersed within Selina’s, which were written before her incarceration at Millbank, but the reader is denied privileged access to either narrative; hence, it is only at the end of the novel that Vigers, Margaret’s servant, is revealed as Ruth Vigers, Selina’s maid and lover, and as yet another “lesbian ghost” within the text—and, as the lesbian reader within the text who brings the two narratives together. Vigers, although little more than a shadowy figure throughout the narrative of Margaret’s diary entries, ultimately refuses the terms of ghostly insubstantiality through which the lesbian is often (dis)articulated within literary representation. While Vigers’s gaze is voyeuristic—“I seemed to see the smears of Vigers’ gaze upon the pages, sticky and white”48—she refuses the position of inactivity through which the lesbian remains “a voyeur of action in which she cannot participate and intervene.”49 As a (working-class) servant, Vigers exists in the margins of Margaret’s narrative; from the upper-middle-class perspective (bias) of Margaret’s point of view, Vigers is “out of sight [and] out of mind.”50 But if Vigers is “hidden from history,” she is not, to continue to borrow Castle’s phrasing, “far away.”51 Working “behind the scenes,” Vigers is Selina’s accomplice in a number of crimes and deceptions—materialising as the spirit “Peter Quick” during séances, encouraging Selina’s manipulation of Margaret in order to obtain the money, passports and clothing needed to maintain the false identities under

48 Waters, Affinity, 348.

49 Pearce, Feminism and the Politics of Reading, 2.

50 Castle 2.

51 Castle 2.
which she (Vigers) and Selina will flee to Italy once Selina has escaped from prison. It is Vigers who has the “final say” on the novel’s last page, the only character within the novel to directly address her lover and approximate an articulation of her own lesbian desire; in her diary, Selina records Ruth’s final words: “‘Remember,’ Ruth is saying, ‘whose girl you are.’”

Affinity requires the reader to resist the de-realising manoeuvres of the apparitional as a representational mode in order to see that the lesbian is always—and has always been—in front of her. Yet, the novel’s ironic and interrogative approach to the historical past evoked in its pages refuses to make this task of recognition easy for the reader: notions of “likeness” or “affinity” are granted no privileged significance to the novel’s representation of lesbianism, but neither is difference nor its “opposite.” In the slippage between the self and its shadow, the difference between the two becomes increasingly unclear; Margaret thinks of “all the times [Vigers] must have sat, in her dim room above my own, writing of her passion as I wrote of mine. How did that passion seem, upon the page? I cannot imagine it. I am too weary.” As Meese suggests: “The question of which is thing and what is shadow depends upon where I stand, or how I regard the letter. And is it the case that the body is always more substantial than the shadow it casts?” Offering, perhaps, an answer to this question, the final entry of Margaret’s diary suggests not:

Where is Selina now? ... I send my thoughts into the night, I reach for the cord of darkness that once seemed to bind her to me, quivering tight. But the night is too thick, my thoughts falter and are lost, and the cord of darkness—

There never was a cord of darkness, never a space in which our spirits touched. There was only my longing—and hers, which so resembled it, it seemed my own.

52 Waters, Affinity, 351.

53 Waters, Affinity, 350.

54 Meese 71.

55 Waters, Affinity, 348, emphasis added.
This notion of the “shadow self” moves us to the reading of The Night Watch offered in this chapter, and to an examination of the ways in which The Night Watch continues the interrogation of the apparitional as a representational mode begun in Affinity; in The Night Watch, lesbian in/visibility is constructed as a paradox through which the lesbian is “seen” but not “recognised.” In The Night Watch, Waters leaves the Victorian era behind and shifts the historical time period “forward” to the 1940s, setting the novel in bombed-out London during the Second World War and in the years immediately after the war. The next section of this chapter examines the ways in which The Night Watch’s lesbian characters struggle against increasingly oppressive post-war normative gender roles, and the ways in which this represents a different kind of “ghosting” of lesbian identity to that explored in Waters’s “Victorian” novels.

Indeed, if we situate The Night Watch in relation to Waters’s “Victorian” novels, we can consider how, in relocating her lesbian narratives to a new period of history, she continues to draw out those issues significant to a lesbian literary tradition while also exploring the possibilities opened up by a new historical context. In line with the research aims of this thesis, the remainder of this chapter demonstrates that The Night Watch moves beyond the restrictions of the lesbian label via the ways in which its lesbian narratives refuse to culminate at the traditional end-point of the coming-out novel: The Night Watch is a novel about “older, more established lesbians … who [ha]ve had relationships with women and are,” as Waters puts it in one interview, “just getting on with things.”56 Thus, Waters’s revisionary project in The Night Watch surpasses the interrogative approach to historical narrative begun with Affinity. The reading of The Night Watch first examines the ways in which the novel continues to push at the limits of apparitionality as a representational mode by foregrounding the paradox of lesbian in/visibility. It then moves on to describe the ways in which the novel

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engages in acts of narrative counterplotting, which reconfigure patriarchal relations between men and women in order to assert an overarching narrative framework in which the novel’s non-lesbian characters are subsumed within the novel’s lesbian counterplot. This, in turn, allows us to speculate on the novel’s continual emphasis of same-sex fascination and to conclude the chapter with a discussion of the ways in which the reader who engages in the strategy of reading as revision participates in the novel’s revisionary narrative lesbian counterplot by reading from a “lesbian perspective.”

II

In contrast to Waters’s “Victorian” novels, which are narrated from the first-person point of view of the principal lesbian protagonists, the third-person omniscient narrator of The Night Watch follows a number of different characters whose narratives overlap and criss-cross with one another, just as the characters themselves seem to zig-zag their way over London to either disastrous or fortuitous effect. Various connections between each of the different characters are revealed slowly, as the novel traces their experiences during and after the war, moving backwards through time, beginning in 1947 and ending in 1941. When the novel opens, there are four pairs of characters whose stories unfold one after the other: Kay and her friend Mickey, who are drivers with the London Auxiliary Ambulance Service during the war; Helen, Kay’s girlfriend, who leaves Kay to start a relationship with Julia, a writer of detective fiction who also shares a past with Kay; Helen’s colleague, Viv, who has been having an affair with a married man named Reggie since the beginning of the war; and finally, Viv’s brother, Duncan, who spent time during the war in prison and who, upon release, lives with Mr Mundy, a retired officer from the same prison. Into the narrative of this last pair comes Robert Fraser, Duncan’s former cell-mate, imprisoned for being a conscientious objector during the war. There has already been a tendency among some critics to read the shift
“forward” from a nineteenth- to a twentieth-century setting as indicative of a change in Waters’s more overtly political or specifically lesbian agenda, as if in departing from the “lesbo-Victorian” historical setting she so successfully mastered in her previous novels, she has likewise parted company with the more clearly delineated lesbian concerns of these novels. 57

One critic to take this view is Mark Llewellyn, who, when situating The Night Watch in relation to Waters’s “Victorian” novels, writes:

Ultimately, Waters’s latest fiction does not sit comfortably with the previous three because the wider themes of social change, class division and the realization and assertion of lesbian identity are passed over for a narrative concerned with the complexities of love in a more generalized sense: the story of Duncan is that of an adolescent first homosexual love, while the narrative of Duncan’s sister Viv is firmly located in the sphere of heterosexual desire. In this tale, female lovers do not come together in the historical moment but rather drift or are torn apart, like their male counterparts and the pairings of opposite sexes. This, though, is part of Waters’s point because history in this novel is far more personal than political. 58

Llewellyn’s reading condenses the novel’s nuanced engagements with sexual identity into a near elision of sexual difference altogether; and in the reading of The Night Watch offered in this chapter, two points of Llewellyn’s in particular are challenged and refuted. Duncan’s story is not explicitly homosexual: his interest in and attraction to Fraser is better conceptualised in terms of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s paradigm of “male homosocial desire,” in which boundaries between men blur to permit a form of bonding that falls along a continuum between homosocial and homosexual. Neither is the story of Viv’s affair with Reggie “firmly” located in the “sphere of heterosexual desire;” we shall see how the novel’s lesbian counterplot reframes heterosexual femininity within a lesbian butch/femme dyad, so that Viv emerges as the “femme” counterpart to Kay’s “butch” persona. In effect, this chapter

57 “Lesbo-Victorian” is a term coined by Waters to describe her own fiction and has been subsequently used in interviews with Waters by journalists. For example, in Lisa Allardice, “Uncharted Waters,” The Guardian [London] 01 June 2006: G2 suppl. 8.

will demonstrate that both Duncan’s and Viv’s narratives trajectories are subsumed within and resignified by the novel’s lesbian counterplot, thus attesting to the overarching reach of the novel’s lesbian narrative politics.

Llewellyn’s assessment of The Night Watch’s contribution to the field of historical fiction—indeed, his assessment of Waters’s fiction to date—is, on the whole, pessimistic and simplistic, largely because he dismisses the potential political efficacy of lesbian historical fiction. He writes: “Putting lesbian characters into the sphere of Victorian fiction might explode a few clichés in the popular imagination, but it does not, ultimately, change history or the way in which the majority of us view the past.”\textsuperscript{59} Here, Llewellyn invokes a binary logic—majority/minority; us/them—to provide a “corrective” alternative to that sense of “knowingness” which often guides our reading of Waters’s fiction; the “majority of us,” Llewellyn implies, “know better” than to believe (in) fiction, no matter how authentically it has attempted to re-create the past. Llewellyn thus relegates lesbian history to the realm of minority history, as the lesbian political significance of Waters’s fiction—its relevance to contemporary lesbian narrative politics—is passed over for an emphasis on “the narratological impulse to create histories in pluralistically gendered and sexed terms” in his reading.\textsuperscript{60}

Particularly with regard to The Night Watch, Llewellyn downplays the lesbian specificity of Waters’s writing in favour of under-theorised claims about the novel’s relationship to history “in general.” Although he observes that Waters’s “work develops from the same impulses as that of many other contemporary women writers,”\textsuperscript{61} Llewellyn neither specifies exactly what these impulses might be nor elaborates on whom these other writers are; nor does he consider how Waters’s fiction might differ from that of other contemporary women writers. In particular, he fails to consider how, within the field of women’s writing,

\textsuperscript{59} Llewellyn, “Breaking the Mould,” 208.

\textsuperscript{60} Llewellyn, “Breaking the Mould,” 209.

\textsuperscript{61} Llewellyn, “Breaking the Mould,” 208.
lesbian historical fiction has frequently sought to renegotiate the past in the pursuit of a “lesbian genealogy” which affords lesbians the “serious pleasure of repossessing their own lost histories.” Together with Laura Doan, Sarah Waters argues that “the location of a lesbian genealogy is a project that has impelled women’s writing since the emergence of self-identified lesbian groups,” and to which “urgent, feminist agenda[s]” have been attached throughout the twentieth century.

Doan and Waters discuss the ways in which lesbian historical novels position their readers as allies, often through the use of prologues, “Afterwords” or author’s notes, in order to engage the reader in a project they refer to as the “making up of lost time.” They argue that “the authors of recent lesbian historical fiction both invoke and abjure the authority of ‘fact,’” and they emphasise the ways in which lesbian historical fiction prioritises the “political charge of lesbian imagining” over an “appeal to historical record” or accuracy. They suggest that these practices “recruit the reader into a community of shared lesbian interests understood to extend across history, and across the border separating history from fiction.” Lesbian historical fiction thus “offers fantasy and wishful thinking as legitimate historiographical resources, necessary correctives or missing links to the impoverished lesbian archive.” In this way, Doan and Waters argue, lesbian historical novelists “echo Monique’s Wittig’s famous plea that we should ‘[m]ake an effort to remember, and failing that,

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63 Doan and Waters 13-14.

64 Doan and Waters 16.

65 Doan and Waters 15-16.

66 Doan and Waters 15.

67 Doan and Waters 16.
Llewellyn has, however inadvertently, touched upon these defining characteristics of women’s and lesbian historical fiction: namely, the question of who possesses the authority to write about the past; who possesses the authority to construct historical narratives in the name of “history,” “fact,” or “knowledge;” who, ultimately, possesses history.

Women’s historical fiction, as Waters herself has argued, “though frequently dismissed as romantic, escapist or historically naive ... often constitutes a radical rewriting of traditional, male-centred historical narrative.” If, in her academic writing Waters makes clear that the construction of an alternative historiographical model is part of the implicit project of lesbian historical fiction, then, as we have already seen with regard to Affinity, her own novels not only operate within this tradition, they also make visible the means by which alternative lesbian historical narratives may be written. Throughout her fiction, Waters uses references to other literary texts to introduce, as Paulina Palmer notes, “issues that assume prominence on the present-day lesbian agenda;” and Waters anchors such intertextual references into her texts through the metafictional trope of depicting the reading practices of her novels’ characters.

In The Night Watch, the first of such references occurs when Kay, whom we meet in the novel’s opening pages, pays a visit to her friend Mickey at a garage where, after the war, Mickey has found work. Kay finds Mickey “in the forecourt of the garage,” “lounging” in a “canvas chair ... reading a book.” Mickey, we are told, reads “the books that people left in their cars, when they brought their cars to the garage to be fixed,” and the book here turns out

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68 Doan and Waters 16.


70 Paulina Palmer, “‘She began to show me the words she had written, one by one’: Lesbian Reading and Writing Practices in the Fiction of Sarah Waters,” Women: A Cultural Review 19.1 (2008): 80.

to be a copy of H. G. Wells’s *The Invisible Man* (1897). When Mickey serves a customer, Kay takes Mickey’s place in the canvas chair and opens the book “at random” to the following passage:

“But you begin to realise now,” said the Invisible Man, “the full disadvantage of my condition. I had no shelter—no covering—to get clothing was to forgo all my advantage, to make of myself a strange and terrible thing. I was fasting; for to eat, to fill myself with unassimilated matter, would be to become grotesquely visible again.”

Kay’s glance might fall “at random” on these words, but there is nothing random about Waters’s selection of this particular passage from Wells’s novel; as Palmer neatly summarises: “Waters ingeniously utilises Wells’s account of the difficulties experienced by his protagonist … to signal to the reader the problems relating to image and dress that women who identified as lesbian encountered in the post-war period.” The full impact of this intertextual reference to *The Invisible Man* depends on the reader’s ability to recognise the parallel between the plight of Wells’s protagonist, a scientist who has made himself physically invisible, and the situations in which lesbians like Kay and Mickey find themselves after the war. In post-war Britain, where returning soldiers are welcomed home as heroes, the heroic contributions to the war-effort made by women like Kay and Mickey are effectively written out of post-war narratives seeking to re-establish normative gender roles, an erasure of which Kay is only too aware: “‘Did we really do all those things we did?—you and I, when the war was on? … We carried stretchers, for God’s sake! I remember lifting’—she spread her hands—‘I remember lifting the torso of a small child…” For those women who, like Kay and Mickey, affirm a lesbian identity via masculine dress or a “boyish” external

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72 Waters, *The Night Watch* 95.


74 Palmer, “Lesbian Reading and Writing,” 82.

appearance, their refusal of normative femininity is met with derision and hostility aimed at effacing their presence from the social order: even though the garage is “one of the few places where a woman could work and wear trousers,” the driver of the car whom Mickey serves tips her a threepence and tells her to “buy a lipstick with it.”

The difficulties experienced by Wells’s invisible protagonist are thus reworked metaphorically in the 1947 section of The Night Watch. Having lost her neat, little “bachelor flat” to a fire caused by a fallen bomb during the war, Kay has “no shelter,” no place to call home. After the war, she lives in an attic flat at the top of a dilapidated house—“the last surviving building in what had once, before the war, been a long terrace; it still had the scars, on either side, where it had been attached to its neighbours, the zig-zag of phantom staircases and the dints of absent hearths.” Likewise, her refusal to “fill herself with unassimilated matter” is expressed by her physical revulsion to food: “the greasy, saccharine look of the bun had made her start to feel almost queasy; but now, for Mickey’s sake, she picked the thing up and began to nibble at it. The sensation of the dough on her tongue and in her throat was horrible; but Mickey watched until she’d eaten it all.”

It is, therefore, telling that in his reading of The Night Watch Llewellyn mistakenly attributes the scene in which Kay reads The Invisible Man to the 1944 war-time period of the novel. Observing the novel’s references to ghosts and haunting, Llewellyn writes: “for Kay, the cross-dressing lesbian in a post-war world, ‘it seemed ... that she really might be a ghost’ ... as she slips through the streets in her own form of night watching, or when she takes a break during her work as an ambulance driver during the war and picks up a copy of The Invisible Man.” However, as we already know, Kay does not “pick up a copy” of The

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76 Waters, The Night Watch, 98; 96.
77 Waters, The Night Watch, 7.
Invisible Man “during her work as an ambulance driver during the war,” and, again, not because there is anything random about the use of intertextual references in Waters’s fiction, nor about the representation of the characters’ reading practices in her novels. There would, quite simply, be no point in referencing Wells’s novel during the 1944 section of The Night Watch because Kay and Mickey are not rendered socially invisible as a result of their masculine appearance during the war. Llewellyn’s oversight is all the more extraordinary simply because he claims to draw his reading of Waters’s fiction from an awareness of its intertextual and referential nature; he writes: “Repeatedly, Waters signals that her novels are not only acts of writing but also responses to and results of acts of reading. ... It is these acts of reading and their importance in the construction of both historical narrative and individual identity which I want to follow in Waters’ novels.”80 This is precisely what Llewellyn fails to do; and this failure can be attributed to the ways in which he denies the lesbian specificity of Waters’s fiction, thus, in effect, dismissing its importance to the construction of individual identity within the historical narrative of The Night Watch.

Rather, in terms of gender presentation, the wearing of trousers, particularly when worn as part of a uniform, had the effect of normalising women within a war-time context. A service or military uniform identifies its wearer as part of a recognisable national, social or political group, and often implicates the wearer in an assumed shared commitment to the pursuit of a common, usually patriotic, goal. There is thus a paradoxical reversal of the logic of lesbian invisibility at play in the war-time setting, in that the masculine features of women’s uniforms (trousers, a jacket, a tie, boots) do not necessarily signal difference in the form of lesbianism or cross-dressing, but can instead emphasise sameness, uniformity, or even conformity, thus subsuming lesbian identity into, for example, national identity. Indeed, in an

79 Llewellyn, “Breaking the Mould,” 208, emphasis added.

article in which she describes writing *The Night Watch*, Waters suggests that the war provided lesbians with opportunities to “do things they had always enjoyed doing but which, until then, they’d had to do more or less illicitly — such as cutting their hair, wearing ties and trousers, driving cars.” At the same time, however, there is a certain ambiguity associated with women’s uniforms, and *The Night Watch* touches upon a cultural anxiety not exclusive to, but certainly prevalent during the years of the Second World War: namely, that women’s work outside the home would un-feminise them, that the wearing of a uniform was, after all, too much like cross-dressing, and that it might, in fact, “give way” to or somehow encourage lesbianism among women.

This ambiguity is played out when Kay and Helen go for a walk in Hampstead Heath, where Kay is not the only woman dressed in a uniform or wearing trousers. Unlike the other uniformed women who are accompanied by their boyfriends, Kay and Helen, as two women, stand out among the other couples, rendering themselves, and the nature of their relationship, not exactly visible, but vulnerable to the suspicious glances of others. When, against Helen’s protestations, Kay kisses Helen, their embrace is almost immediately interrupted by a woman who walks past them and who is visibly confused by what she thinks she might (or might not) have seen occur between them: “As the woman passed, Kay caught her eye and smiled. The woman smiled back—but smiled uncertainly, Kay thought. She must have glimpsed the end of their embrace, but was doubtful: puzzled and embarrassed.” Lesbianism becomes “grotesquely visible” when embodied in a physical act between two women and, yet, is also somehow unintelligible because it is immediately rendered impossible, “doubtful,” even when seen.

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The woman's confusion at being unable to "read" the interaction between Kay and Helen—and which is encapsulated by a glance that "takes in" but does not "see"—is replicated by Llewellyn's reading of The Night Watch, in which the lesbian specificity of the novel is rendered insignificant, "doubtful," by his conviction that "it is ... questionable whether Waters is able to add anything to our perception of the 1940s period." It is, according to Llewellyn, "commonplace ... when writing about gender in relation to both the Second and First World Wars that boundaries became more fluid and even sexual desires or behaviours outside the 'norm' were, if not accepted, at least not as harshly persecuted as at other times." Such unreflecting commentary follows the trajectory of Llewellyn's initial assertion that it would be an "over-reading to identify [The Night Watch] with the label 'historiographic metafiction.'" Although he identifies the backwards movement of the novel as "a device which seems to play consciously with acts of reading backwards and the retracing of human stories within a larger series of historical events," Llewellyn remains unconcerned with the ways in which the lesbian specificity of The Night Watch's historical narrative both converges with and contests received knowledge which makes the 1940s a "familiar" period of history.

The lengths to which Llewellyn goes to argue against the lesbian specificity of The Night Watch recall, of course, Castle's assertion that "[w]hen it comes to lesbians ... many people have trouble seeing what's in front of them." There is a certain irony, then, that in his reading of The Night Watch Llewellyn re-enacts the very erasure of lesbian existence the characters themselves struggle to resist. For all The Night Watch's foregrounding of issues of

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84 Llewellyn, "Breaking the Mould," 208.
85 Llewellyn, "Breaking the Mould," 196.
86 Llewellyn, "Breaking the Mould," 197.
87 Castle 2.
lesbian in/visibility, Llewellyn seems unable—or unwilling—to consider how such issues are signalled by a number discursive and contextualising factors, including at the level of authorial commentary. Waters suggests that it is precisely with the aim of defamiliarising earlier periods that she returns to the past in her fiction: “because a big agenda for me is writing lesbian stories, I’m still very much aware that the past is absolutely teeming with untold gay stories, or stories that aren’t popularly known. For me, entering the past via telling queer stories is a great way of finding a slightly new way of talking about familiar periods like the Victorian era or wartime.”

That Llewellyn is able to disassociate The Night Watch from a tradition of lesbian fiction draws attention to the precarious nature of the process of recognition, and points to the “danger” of appropriation to which lesbian texts are subject upon entering the mainstream. Speaking in an interview shortly after the publication of The Night Watch, Waters describes the type of reader for whom she writes as someone “who will ‘get’ the lesbian stuff.” The “lesbian stuff” to which she refers includes “hints at other lesbian texts or traditions of representation,” although she acknowledges that these are things “most of [her] readers won’t necessarily pick up on,” and she recognises that her novels can be read successfully in a number of different ways. But Waters’s ability, as a writer, to cross the divide between seemingly opposed groups of readers—lesbians and “straight” readers, academic readers and “general” or popular audiences—should not be taken as proof of the eventual irrelevancy of lesbianism to her work, and there is a danger in assuming that because Waters’s fiction has received “universal” acclaim, the lesbian specificity of her writing may be de-emphasised to support readings that favour a broadly liberal humanist point of view. What is interesting

89 Armitt, “Interview with Sarah Waters,” 117.
90 Armitt, “Interview with Sarah Waters,” 117.
about Llewellyn’s reading of The Night Watch is that he reiterates the point of view of the “(heterosexual) ‘general’ reader” of Winterson’s work described by Pearce and referred to in the Introduction to this thesis. This is a reader who can, Pearce argues, “[attend] to the ‘universalising’ discourses in Winterson’s work ... [and therefore] see the texts as transcending the particulars of sexual orientation; regard the fact that s/he is reading about lovers of the same sex as incidental and, consequently, a-political.”

Yet, while this reader of Winterson’s fiction can transcend the potential lesbian aesthetic of her work by focusing on the “universalising discourses” of her novels, the reader of Waters’s fiction who pursues a liberal humanist interpretation of her work has to work much harder to resist the lesbian specificity of her narratives. Unlike Winterson’s fiction, no “crucial ambivalence” characterises Waters’s treatment of romantic love, and yet, in interviews and reviews, critics of Waters’s fiction continue to subsume the lesbian aesthetic of her fiction within a universalising view of romantic love. Sarah Broughton suggests that it “is a mark of Waters’ ability that she appeals to the broadest audience – you care deeply about her characters and their fates whatever their sexual proclivities.”

To emphasise her point, she cites one reviewer of Fingersmith who comments, “it’s also a love story – a sexy, passionate and startling one. I hesitate to call it lesbian, because that seems to marginalize it far more than it deserves. Suffice to say it is erotic and unnerving in all the right ways.”

What readings such as Broughton’s and Llewellyn’s demonstrate, ultimately, is a reluctance to consider the ways in which Waters’s novels succeed in their interpellation of the reader not via a discourse of romantic love as a “universal” experience to which “the majority


of us” can relate, but by aligning the reader with the point of view of her lesbian characters. “Interpellation” means, literally, “calling by name,” and describes not only the process by which individuals recognise themselves within an ideological system, but also the ways in which individuals respond to the different ways in which they are addressed by that system. Resistance to the lesbian specificity of Waters’s fiction, therefore, is perhaps indicative of an anxiety among those readers who find themselves aligned with the “marginal” lesbian position. This perhaps begins to explain Llewellyn’s limited assessment of The Night Watch, his eagerness to assert a masculine and heterocentric interpretation which emphasises the “universal” appeal of the novel, wherein, for example, the inclusion of a romance between male and female characters is taken as evidence of a “narrative concerned with love in a more generalized sense.” That such resistance impedes recognition of the centrality of lesbianism to Waters’s narratives is disappointing for those readers for whom Waters’s nuanced engagement with lesbian and feminist issues ensures the continued importance of her fiction to current discussions about women’s and lesbian history, historiography and traditions of representation. In The Night Watch, it is not the sexual “identities” of the novel’s characters that are of significance in themselves, but the ways in which the novel explores the construction of identity within the wider narrative contexts of the war-time and post-war settings. In the rest of the chapter, we continue to develop the discussion of The Night Watch’s exploration of the paradox lesbian in/visibility in post-war London; this discussion leads, in turn, to an exploration of the novel’s emphasis of same-sex fascination specifically in terms of the ways in which such fascination is crucial to the novel’s revisionary lesbian counterplot.


95 Llewellyn, “Breaking the Mould,” 207.
At the opening of *The Night Watch* we are in familiar territory, as Waters employs a trope used in her earlier novels to signal the plight of lesbian invisibility: the lesbian character standing alone at a window, looking out on the world below:

> So this, said Kay to herself, is the sort of person you’ve become: a person whose clocks and wrist-watches have stopped, and who tells time by the particular kind of cripple arriving at her landlord’s door.

For she was standing at her open window, in a collarless shirt and a pair of greyish underpants, smoking a cigarette and watching the coming and going of Mr Leonard’s patients. Punctually, they came—so punctually, she really could tell the time by them: the woman with the crooked back, on Mondays at ten; the wounded soldier, on Thursdays at eleven. On Tuesdays at one an elderly man came, with a fey-looking boy to help him: Kay enjoyed watching for them. She liked to see them making their slow way up the street: the man neat and dark-suited as an undertaker, the boy patient, serious, handsome—like an allegory of youth and age, she thought, as done by Stanley Spencer or some finicky modern painter like that.96

As with *Affinity*, the reader is invited to enter the text through the vantage point of the displaced lesbian character and to revisit history from this “lesbian perspective.” The reader’s alignment with this point of view requires her to look not just with the character at the scene unfolding, but beyond the character as the scene unfolds, in order to consider precisely how history is being referenced and revisited. In its opening pages, *The Night Watch* takes us back not only to the post-war landscape of 1947—still populated, as Kay observes, with wounded soldiers—but to Waters’s own, and unique, fictionalised Victorian past.

One reviewer of *The Night Watch* suggests that Kay is a “1940’s version of the woebegone lover last seen so horribly keening towards the end of *Fingersmith*.97 As far as “woebegone lovers” are concerned, however, there are striking similarities in setting, and in the characters’ motivations for seeking out such particularly depressing surroundings, which suggest that Kay is, if not exactly a “1940’s version” of Nan from *Tipping the Velvet*, then a


sort-of literary descendant of this first lesbian protagonist of Waters’s fiction. Just as Nan
seeks obscurity in the grimmest of surroundings after she has been betrayed by her lover Kitty
Butler, Kay has likewise withdrawn from the world after betrayal and loss into the bleak
anonymity offered by a rented room in Mr Leonard’s attic:

The room was dim. Some of the window-glass had been lost, and Mr Leonard [the
landlord] had replaced it with lino. The bed was high, with a balding candlewick
bedspread: the sort of bed which turned your thoughts, not pleasantly, to the many
people who must, over the years, have slept on it, made love on it, been born on it,
died on it, thrashed around on it in fevers. It gave off a slightly sour scent, like the
feet of worn stockings. But Kay was used to that, and didn’t notice. The room was
nothing to her but a place in which to sleep or lie sleepless.

This room, and in particular the rank, sour-smelling bed within it, turns our thoughts, and not
exactly pleasantly, either, to the lodging-house adjacent to the Smithfield Meat Market, where
Nan rents a room that contains a bed with “a horrible old down mattress, yellow at the edges
and blackened in the middle with an ancient bloodstain the size of a saucer.” Perversely,
Nan initially finds that the bed “for all its rankness, seemed at that moment wonderfully
inviting,” but the room remains a place for her solely “to sleep or lie sleepless”: “For a week –
and then another – and another, and another – I did nothing but slumber, and weep, and pace
my chamber; or else I would stand with my brow pressed to the dirty window, gazing at the
Market, watching as the carcasses were brought and piled, and heaved about, and sold, and
taken away.”

Kay, however, eventually turns from her window-gazing and dresses in a shirt and a
pair of “tailored slacks,” adding silver cuff links and a pair of polished men’s shoes to her
ensemble, to the effect that “[p]eople seeing her pass in the street, not looking at her closely,
often mistook her for a good-looking [male] youth.”

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98 Waters, The Night Watch, 4-5.
100 Waters, Tipping the Velvet, 184.
both Kay and Nan, further strengthens the affinity between them, as do a number of subtle allusions to music-hall songs and female cross-dressers scattered throughout The Night Watch. Kay’s girlfriend, Helen, pictures her, when idle, whistling or humming “old songs from the music-hall.”\textsuperscript{102} The reader is invited to share in the joke at the expense of the characters when Kay responds to Helen’s fear that they will be caught embracing in public with the exclamation, “Oh, so what? It’s not the nineteenth bloody century;”\textsuperscript{103} to those familiar with Waters’s earlier fiction, Nan’s sexually explicit escapades in Tipping the Velvet have already demonstrated the possibility of re-conceiving a nineteenth-century lesbian sensibility as anything but prudish or sexually repressed.

These subtle, almost teasing references to Nan and Tipping the Velvet amount to more than just a clever authorial conceit, however, and by echoing her own work Waters flags up those particular themes and concerns which recur throughout her novels. This demonstrates the lesbian specificity of her historical fiction, while at the same time emphasising the specificity of the historical moment in the construction of lesbian identity. In The Night Watch, the issue of lesbian in/visibility, and its convergence with female masculinity, is complicated by the “emergence in the post-war years of a distinct lesbian subculture located in predominantly ‘lesbian’ bars and clubs.”\textsuperscript{104} Rebecca Jennings observes the formative role of such venues in the development of a shared identity among lesbians who were able to take advantage of the relative economic and social freedoms offered by urban spaces in the decades following the second world war: “Dominated by a coherent group of core members, this subculture possessed a network of communication; a unique collective style and codes of

\textsuperscript{101} Waters, \textit{The Night Watch}, 5.

\textsuperscript{102} Waters, \textit{The Night Watch}, 265.

\textsuperscript{103} Waters, \textit{The Night Watch}, 301.

\textsuperscript{104} Rebecca Jennings, \textit{Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-War Britain, 1945-71} (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007) 113.
behaviour used to distinguish its members and regulate relations within the community; and a 'shared sympathy' caused by a sense of exclusion from mainstream ideals of heterosexual femininity.”

Jennings suggests that inclusion within this lesbian community was circumscribed by strict expectations to conform to “butch” and “femme” codes of dress and standards of behaviour, to the extent that “a butch or femme identity was the only option available to women wishing to be accepted in the bar subculture.”

The exclusivity of this lesbian subculture, and its lack of accessibility and visibility to outsiders, protected members of the lesbian community from hostile and unwanted attention, but could likewise prevent interested lesbians from gaining access to its spaces, as the story of one woman’s efforts to locate a lesbian club reveals: “I was living in Chelsea, and I knew that the Gateways [a lesbian club] existed but I didn’t know where it was, and I couldn’t find out where it was. … But I used to walk up and down the King’s Road looking for tall, handsome women with cropped hair … going down into what I assumed would be the entrance to the Gateways.”

This anecdote addresses the inherent paradox of lesbian in/visibility, which is that while lesbianism is understood to be socially marginalised or invisible within patriarchal culture, lesbians can nonetheless be identified by their external appearance—most often a “masculine” one—and, what is more, they will be identifiable to each other. “You can’t always tell,” one of the characters in Valerie Taylor’s lesbian pulp fiction novel, The Girls in 3-B (1959), warns another: “Sometimes they dress in men’s clothes. But other times you can’t tell them from ordinary people.”

Thus, the “butch/femme” lesbian dyad encapsulates

105 Jennings 113.

106 Jennings 119.

107 Jennings 116-7.

this paradox of in/visibility: “feminine” lesbians, as Esther Newton points out, “become identifiable lesbians by association with their masculine partners.”

It is to this emergent “butch/femme,” urban, lesbian subculture that Mickey alludes, when, concerned about Kay’s isolation and loneliness, she implores her friend: “…Or come out, some time! We could go for a drink. We could go to Chelsea. There’s no one there these days, the crowd’s all changed.”

Likewise, the notion that a “shared sympathy” allows lesbians intuitively to recognise one another through encoded behaviour or language is evident when Helen and Julia run into an acquaintance of Julia’s during an outing in the park: “She said the word ‘friend’, Helen thought, in a special sort of way—as if to say: We understand one another, of course. As if to say, in fact: We’re all ‘friends’ together.”

In its representation of lesbian experience in post-war London, The Night Watch thus converges with historical, “factual” or other narrative accounts of lesbian history like the ones which inform Jennings’s study. It also draws, if anachronistically, on images of lesbian identity and notions of subculture or community depicted in the pulp fiction novels which were popular during the decades after the Second World War.

However, if, as Doan and Waters persuasively argue, authors of lesbian historical fiction at once both “invoke and abjure the authority of ‘fact,’” then the appeal to historical record is significant insofar as it attests to the “political charge of lesbian [historical] imagining.” This is evident throughout Waters’s fiction, and is perhaps most playfully demonstrated in Tipping the Velvet when Florence takes Nan to a ladies’ room in the basement of a pub. Literally “underground,” the contemporary lesbian reader might well


110 Waters, The Night Watch, 103.

111 Waters, The Night Watch, 54, emphases in original.

112 Doan and Waters 15-16.
recognise this subcultural urban space as a "late-Victorian version" of a present-day lesbian bar, complete with rowdy clientele grouped around the pool table:

She turned to where I pointed, and gazed with me at the billiard players. They were rather rowdy, and half of them were clad in trousers and waistcoats, and sported prison crops. But as Florence studied them, she laughed. "Blokes?" she said again. "Those are not blokes! Nancy, how could you think it?"

I blinked, and looked again. I began to see ... They were not men, but girls; they were girls — and they were rather like myself ...

I swallowed. I said, "Do they live as men, those girls?"

Florence shrugged, not noticing the thickness in my voice. "Some do, I believe. Most dress as they please, and live as others care to find them." She caught my gaze. "I had rather thought, you know, that you must have done the same sort of thing, yourself ..."

"Would you think me very foolish," I answered, "if I said that I had thought I was the only one...?"\(^{113}\)

This scene exploits the deliberately anachronistic potential of historiographic metafictional speculation to produce an image of lesbian community that will be most familiar—and most relevant—to contemporary lesbian readers, readers who will appreciate the transhistorical connection between the historical and the present moments. This is precisely the kind of "‘making up’ of lost time" described by Doan and Waters which "recruits the reader into a community of shared lesbian interests understood to extend across history, and across the border separating history from fiction."\(^{114}\)

This combination of deliberate anachronism and self-reflexive speculation points to the advantage lesbian historiographic metafiction has over lesbian historiography and historical scholarship when it comes to conceptualising lesbian identities and interests throughout history. Drawing attention to certain limitations in late-twentieth-century lesbian historical scholarship is Judith Halberstam, who takes issue with "contemporary lesbian historians [who] cannot extricate themselves from contemporary understandings of lesbian identity long enough to interpret the vagaries of early same-sex desire."\(^{115}\) Halberstam's

\(^{113}\) Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 417.

\(^{114}\) Doan and Waters 16.
contention is with those historical studies “claiming to find lesbians or protolesbians in any number of different historical periods without proper consideration of the sexual and gender forms in question.” 116 Deploring the tendency of lesbian scholarship to “generally understand same-sex nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century desire as either in the model of romantic friendship or along the lines of mannish identification,” Halberstam asks, “If it seems both obvious and undeniable that probably many models of same-sex desire did exist, then why have we not busied ourselves in imagining their variety?” 117 Halberstam’s challenge is directed mainly at influential studies like Lillian Faderman’s *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981), Emma Donoghue’s *Passions Between Women* (1993), and Castle’s *The Apparitional Lesbian*, studies which, according to Halberstam, seek “to find what they think they already know.” 118 Indeed, Waters herself is also conscious of this particular shortcoming of lesbian historiography. She notes that “lesbian historians have presented themselves as safeguarding a past that is unproblematically theirs – a lesbian past that does not just prefigure modern lesbianism, but which would have been modern lesbianism had it had the chance. ... [T]he pasts recovered by such historians, which appear so reassuringly to anticipate modern lesbian models, often simply replicate them.” 119 This, however, is precisely what gives lesbian historiographic metafiction its particular impetus, what makes it most exciting to its contemporary readers: its “status and meaning as historical fantasy,” 120 as opposed to its claims for historical accuracy. Indeed, in often appearing more historically accurate than historiography itself, historiographic metafiction offers speculative and spectatorial pleasure.

116 Halberstam 50.
117 Halberstam 50.
118 Halberstam 54.
to the reader, and begins to answer Halberstam’s call to imagine a greater variety of historical models of same-sex desire. Thus, Nan’s discovery of a wider lesbian community where other girls “like [her]self … dress as they please, and live as others care to find them” gestures towards the liberating potential of lesbian historiographical speculation; it sees her inclusion in a social milieu in which lesbian masculinity is only one of a number of possible models of same-sex desire. In terms of the research issues addressed by this thesis, this is, in essence, further evidence of the ways in which Waters’s project is not simply to write the lesbian back into history, but to address a lesbian reader who will engage in enable the reading of history from a lesbian perspective.

In the fin de siècle-set *Tipping the Velvet*, the androgynous spectacle of the female cross-dresser is the central erotic image to which the novel attaches its aesthetic and political agenda, and the novel revises dominant late-nineteenth-century discourses of sexual and social decadence so that they provide an alternative narrative of lesbian self-definition. Nan’s sexual adventures as a girl dressed in boy’s clothes see her acquire a new vocabulary of street slang and a knowledge of diverse sexual practices, as reflected by the novel’s title, “*Tipping the Velvet,*” which is a euphemism for cunnilingus; and this acquisition is linked to her success at male impersonation and cross-dressing. Nan discovers the streets of London on her own and claims them as her own through the (dis)guise of male dress: “With every glance that came my way I flinched; at any moment I expected the cry to be let up: ‘A girl! There is a girl here in boy’s clothing!’ But the glances did not settle on me: they only slithered past me, to the girls behind.”

121 So effectively can Nan pass for a male that she is solicited by a prostitute on her first trip out dressed in men’s clothes: “a woman with a frizzed fringe put her hand on my arm, and tilted her head and said, ‘Well now, pretty boy, you look like a lively one. Fancy payin’ a visit, to a nice little place I know…?’”

121 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, 194.
This incident is echoed in *The Night Watch*, although, crucially, not in reference to Kay. When Julia and Helen go for a walk at night during the blackout, Julia, although not described as masculine elsewhere in the novel, dresses in trousers, “a black double-breasted jacket with polished buttons, like a sailor’s coat,” and a “soft black corduroy cap” under which she tucks her hair. Although, before they leave, she asks Helen if she looks “like a male-impersonator on the stage”—again, another reference to *Tipping the Velvet*—to which Helen replies, “More like an actress in a spy-film,” Julia then reassures Helen that they will be safe walking alone through the dark streets because anyone they might meet would mistake them for “a boy and his girl”: she continues, “Last week I went out in this coat and cap, and a tart in a doorway thought I was a chap and showed me her breast—flashed her torch at it.”

However, being mistaken for a boy is not quite the same thing as “passing” as a male and enjoying the social—and sexual—privileges masculinity affords. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nan is not simply absorbed into the activity of the street, but is granted the right to be there and to pass through undisturbed, protected by her male attire and masculine appearance. In contrast, Kay’s masculine appearance signals her difference from both the women and the men she encounters, and prevents her from being re-absorbed into post-war London society:

> “Don’t you know the war’s over?” the man behind the counter in the baker’s shop asked Kay.

He said it because of her trousers and hair, trying to be funny; but she had heard this sort of thing a thousand times, and it was hard to smile. When he caught her accent, anyway, his manner changed. He handed over the bag, saying, “There you are, madam.” But he must have given some sort of look behind her back because, as she went out, the other customers laughed.

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As Palmer observes, Kay’s “resistance to post-war dress codes causes her to suffer paradoxically from an excess of visibility.” 126 Halberstam describes how “[a]mbiguous gender, when and where it does appear, is inevitably transformed into deviance, thirdness, or a blurred version of either male or female. ... Not-man and not-woman, the gender-ambiguous [person ...] is also not androgynous or in-between; this person is gender deviant.” 127 The glances of strangers and people on the street do not “slither past” Kay but settle on her with a mixture of hostility and suspicion; in The Night Watch, lesbian invisibility is understood as social marginality, and this departs from its treatment in Waters’s earlier novels, where it is frequently expressed as a denial of lesbian sexuality.

For example, in Tipping the Velvet, Walter makes no reply to Nan’s outburst when she discovers that he and Kitty are engaged, but Nan intuits his response from the look on his face:

His gaze, however, remained steady: I saw, with increasing misery, that he knew it all, and did not care; that perhaps – who knows? – he even liked it. He was too much the gentleman to make me a foul-mouthed reply, but his expression – a curious mixture of contempt, complacency, and pity – was a speaking one. It said, That was not fucking, as the world knows it! It said, You fucked her so well, that she has left you! It said, You may have fucked her first, but I shall fuck her now and ever after! 128

Walter might be “too much the gentleman” to articulate his contempt of lesbian sexuality or to admit a voyeuristic, titillating interest in it, but Gentleman, in Fingersmith, has no such qualms: “Laugh? You might be glad I don’t do worse. You’ll know—you’ll know, if anyone will!—the sports to which gentlemen’s appetites are said to be pricked, by matters like this.” 129 Simultaneously dismissing lesbianism as a “trifling thing” and rendering it the object of masculine speculation, Gentleman continues to taunt Maud: “You have been too long

126 Palmer, “Lesbian Reading and Writing,” 81, emphasis in original.

127 Halberstam 20-21.

128 Waters, Tipping the Velvet, 173, emphasis in original.

among your uncle’s books. Girls love easily, there. That is the point of them. If they loved so in life, the books would not have to be written.” Gentleman’s derision is prompted by the fact that he catches Maud gazing at Sue and intuits from the intensity of her look the nature of her feelings and the full measure of her desire:

I suppose he studies me. I suppose the brush in my fingers drops paint—for I find it later, black paint upon my blue gown. I do not mark it as it falls, however; perhaps it is my not marking it, that betrays me. That, or my look. Sue frowns again. I watch, a little longer. Then I turn, and find [Gentleman’s] eyes upon me.

“Oh, Maud,” he says.
That is all he says. But in his face I see, at last, how much I want her.

Although lesbianism initially appears to be framed within the gaze of the male voyeur, it is precisely this patriarchal narrative of lesbianism as a pornographic spectacle that Maud exploits in her own seduction of Sue: “And at first, it is easy. After all, this is how it is done, in my uncle’s books: two girls, one wise and one unknowing … I say my part, and she—with a little prompting—says hers.” In Fingersmith, as in Tipping the Velvet, the lesbian aesthetic of the text is thus constructed via the process of mutual sexual awakening between the protagonists. The discovery of desire and the “initiation” into lesbian sex are integral parts of the “coming-out” narratives of these novels, and depend, largely, on the relative youthfulness and innocence of the protagonists as a precondition for the terms of seduction; as when Nan describes the realisation of her desire for Kitty: “I was eighteen, and knew nothing. I thought, at that moment, that I would die of love for her.”

In The Night Watch such moments of initial sexual awakening are no longer instrumental to the construction of lesbian sexuality, nor are they employed in the representation of lesbian invisibility. In fact, the initial—and illicit—excitement of lesbian

130 Waters, Fingersmith, 276.
131 Waters, Fingersmith, 274.
132 Waters, Fingersmith, 281.
133 Waters, Tipping the Velvet, 117.
sexual awakening so central to Waters's previous novels receives an ironic revision in The Night Watch: “It’s all right when one is young. It’s positively thrilling, when one is twenty! The secrecy, the intensity—being keyed up, like a harp. Girls were fabulous things to me, once—all that flying into rages over bits of nonsense; threatening to slash their wrists in the lavatories at parties, that sort of thing. Men were like shadows, like paper puppets, like little boys! compared with that.” Lesbian romance in The Night Watch is no longer prefigured by coming-out narratives common to and commonly expected in lesbian novels. Instead, coming-out narratives precede the events of the novel, forming an implied context of background assumptions about the characters and their relationships to each other. This is underscored by the ways in which the characters construct their own lesbianism as the subject of a narrative, as something described “after the fact” and in the past tense, as, for example, when Helen recounts the beginning of her relationship with Kay: “I’d never met anyone like [Kay] before. I’d been in London less than six months then. She made such a—such a fuss of me. And she seemed so certain of what she wanted. That was terribly exciting somehow. It was hard to resist, anyway. It never felt strange, as perhaps it ought to have done ...”

There is, furthermore, a reversal of the logic of lesbian romance narratives which traditionally depend on the “othering” of heterosexuality to sustain the “peculiar intimacy” of the lesbian relationship; as one lesbian character laments to another: “But one gets to an age where one sees the truth of it. ... You wait till you’re my age”—she was forty-six—“and wake every morning to gaze on the vast tract of uncreased linen that is the other side of the divan. Try being gallant to that...” The anxieties of lesbian romance in The Night Watch  

134 Waters, The Night Watch, 241, punctuation as in Waters.

135 Waters, The Night Watch, 256.

are not concerned with the initial problems of realisation, reciprocation and consummation, but are those characteristic of the “sequel” of romance, and detail the “demise of intimacy” between lovers.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the relationship between Helen and Julia, which begins in what Pearce terms the “twilight state,” an “emotional impasse which both creates the necessary conditions for the lightning bolt that follows and heightens the impact.”¹³⁸ The opaque darkness of the blacked-out London streets creates a backdrop against which the heightened impact of romance is signalled metaphorically through the way in which the two women are illuminated by flashes of light which accompany the explosion from falling bombs:

I’ve fallen in love with you! she’d cried into the darkness ... Perhaps Julia opened her mouth to answer, Helen wasn’t sure. For in the next instant they were lit by a flash: a flash like lightening, brief but unnaturally lurid, so that a thousand little details—the stitches in Julia’s collar, the anchors on the buttons of her coat—seemed to spring from her body into the air, to leap into Helen’s eyes and blind her. Two seconds later, the explosion came—fantastically loud, not terribly close ... but close enough for them to feel the shock of it, the freakish beating against them of a gust of airless wind.¹³⁹

As a perpetually dilating threshold of desire, the “twilight state” operates as a mode of romance suited to The Night Watch’s emphasis on the uncertainty of the future in wartime, an uncertainty which is exacerbated for the novel’s lesbian characters in the post-war era by the pressure to conform to normative gender roles.

Llewellyn describes Helen as “insecure in her relationship [with Julia] though not with her sexuality,”¹⁴⁰ but, once again, he misses the point. Helen’s jealousy at what she imagines to be Julia’s interest in other women is inseparable from her sense of invisibility as a lesbian:


¹³⁸ Pearce, “After the Twilight,” 215.

¹³⁹ Waters, The Night Watch, 348, emphasis in original.

"For what was Julia to her, after all? She couldn’t lean to her and kiss her. What could she
do, to say to the world that Julia was hers? What did she have, to keep Julia faithful?" At
times Helen expresses outrage at lesbian social marginality: "‘I wish—I wish the world was
different. Why can’t it be different? I hate having to sneak and—’ She waited, while a
woman and a man went silently by, arm in arm. ... ‘I hate having to sneak and slink so
grubbily about. If only we could be married, something like that.’ Overall, though, her
sense of invisibility is increasingly internalised, so that the overall emphasis within the
narrative is an accumulated sense of helplessness and inadequacy, an inability to articulate a
lesbian identity and assert herself as Julia’s lover.

This is emphasised when Helen is cast in the role of the lesbian voyeur. In a scene in
which she resembles Margaret in Affinity standing at her window and watching Mr Barclay,
hersister’s fiancé, come to pay a visit to her sister, Helen looks out of the window and
speculates on the social permissiveness which encourages courtship between men and
women: “She let her head sink, until her brow met the varnished glass. How easy it was, she
thought unhappily as she did it, for men and women. They could stand in a street and argue,
flirt—they could kiss, make love, do anything at all—and the world indulged them. Whereas
she and Julia—.” Helen’s ruminations are prompted by the fact that the intimate
conversation she has been enjoying with her colleague, Viv, is interrupted by the unexpected
arrival of Robert Fraser. Helen realises “just how fond she was of Viv, and how much she
liked doing this—just this—sitting out here, talking, on this rusting metal platform. ... She
wanted, suddenly, to be able to say, Listen to me, Viv. I’m in love with Julia! ... She felt her
breath rising, until it seemed trapped within her chest. ... ‘Viv—’ she started.”


142 Waters, The Night Watch, 304.

143 Waters, The Night Watch, 113.
confession Helen has been about to make rises within her and remains, like the breath she takes before speaking, “trapped in her chest,” suspended in its almost-spoken state: “She thought of what she’d been meaning to do, out on the fire-escape. I’m in love with Julia, she’d been going to say. And my love is almost killing me! She couldn’t imagine saying it now. It seemed an absurd thing to say, now!”

Poised on the threshold of non-speech, this thwarted articulation renders Helen’s lesbianism spectral, internally echoing, “absurd.”

Helen’s sense of helplessness at being unable to disclose publicly the nature of her relationship with Julia is further exacerbated by Julia’s growing success as an author, which places her increasingly in the public eye. Not only does this put pressure on Julia and Helen to maintain secrecy about their relationship, when Julia’s photograph appears in the Radio Times, Helen finds herself thinking of all the “ordinary people who must have picked up the Radio Times and opened it to Julia’s face and said to themselves, idly and admiringly, ‘What a handsome woman!’ She’d pictured them as ... quarrelling birds, pecking at Julia, taking her away, crumb by crumb.”

Helen’s dismay at the way in which her lover is thus made visible to the public gaze is compounded by the way in which the photograph features Julia with “her face tilted, her eyes downcast, her hands raised and pressed together at the side of her jaw,” and makes her look, Helen thinks, “marriageable.” Julia’s availability as the object of the gaze is signalled by this prim, self-contained pose, which veils her sexual difference behind a conventionally feminine, and heterosexual, image. The demure femininity and middle-class respectability captured by the photograph nonetheless entices the gaze of the male spectator-owner: the downcast eyes imply a modesty that refuses to challenge or return his look.

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This image, and the casual voyeurism it invites, contrasts sharply with the image of Julia standing naked in front of her fireplace after she and Helen have been in bed together: "[S]he straightened up, and drew in smoke—putting her head back, savouring the taste of the tobacco. She was quite naked, and stood with one hip raised: relaxed and unembarrassed in the firelight, as though at the edge of a pool of water in some lush Victorian painting of Ancient Greece." The allusion to Ancient Greece suggests a coded "lesbian" reference to the late-Victorian Sappho reclaimed by Vivien and Barney, and the erotic overtones of the "pool of water" further underscore the lesbian symbolism of this image; the female body is removed from its rigid containment within patriarchal culture, and opened up to the gaze of the lesbian viewer: "Helen lay and watched her, as she had before. It seemed extraordinary that she should be able to, incredible that Julia should offer up her own beauty like this to Helen's gaze." This scene refocuses the gaze on the lesbian body, usurping the position of the male spectator owner by granting spectatorship to the lesbian viewer. Replacing the voyeuristic longing of lesbian spectatorship, the text—and, the reading of the text—is thus opened up to the "phenomenon of fascination between women." As we saw in Chapter One, this derives from Jackie Stacey's model of spectatorship, in which the "fascination of one woman with another ... contradicts the dominant convention ... whereby the spectator is said to be inscribed within the look and desire of the male protagonist." Drawing on Stacey's model, The Night Watch offers an account of women's spectatorial pleasure by

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149 Waters, The Night Watch, 392.


151 Stacey 115.
foregrounding Helen’s fascination with Julia, so that the reader is “invited to look or gaze with one female character at another, in an interchange of feminine fascinations.”

This interchange of fascination between women is precisely what distinguishes the novel’s organisation according to the lesbian counterplot, to which we now turn in the final section of this chapter. In this last section, we will examine a number of instances within the novel which foreground same-sex fascination, in order to demonstrate the reach of the lesbian counterplot, that is, the extent to which it subsumes and resignifies the novel’s non-lesbian characters according to the impetus of a lesbian narrative politics. The final points of discussion in this chapter will return us to the strategy of reading as revision; this is where we can delineate the full extent of the effect of the lesbian counterplot on the reading of the text. The lesbian counterplot is, in effect, enacted by the reader who engages in this participatory strategy of reading, and who actualises the novel’s revisionary project by reading from a “lesbian perspective.”

IV

If we return to the opening passage of the novel referred to earlier, we can see how The Night Watch continues to draw on the trope of the voyeur at the window to signal not only lesbian invisibility, but to turn the gaze back on the voyeur herself, so that the “one who sees” now becomes the “one who is seen.” Whereas, in Tipping the Velvet, Nan enjoys being watched as she poses all over the streets of London during her career as a “rent ‘boi,’” Kay finds no enjoyment in her awareness of the frightening effect her ghost-like presence at the window has on a small boy who visits Mr Leonard’s house with his mother: “Kay guessed it wasn’t Mr Leonard’s lurid Edwardian angels that frightened him, but the thought of encountering

152 Stacey 115.
her. He must have supposed she haunted the attic floor like a ghost or a lunatic. Unlike her nineteenth-century predecessor, it never occurs to Kay that any other kind of glance might be turned her way or that she is the object of another's particularly queer, admiring gaze.

As Kay stands “at her open window ... watching the coming and going of Mr Leonard’s patients,” her gaze is returned by, if not exchanged with, the “Stanley Spencer couple” who look for her at the window each time they approach the house:

“No sign of Colonel Barker today, Uncle Horace,” said Duncan, looking up at the attic windows as he and Mr Mundy drew closer to the house.

He was rather sorry. He liked to see Mr Leonard’s lodger. He liked the bold cut of her hair, her mannish clothes, her sharp, distinguished-looking profile. He thought she might once have been a lady pilot, a sergeant in the WAAF, something like that: one of those women, in other words, who’d charged about so happily during the war, and then got left over. “Colonel Barker” was Mr Mundy’s name for her. He liked to see her standing there, too.

There is a certain affection in Duncan’s appraisal of Kay: her hair-cut is “bold,” her profile “sharp and distinguished-looking,” and there is an expression of sympathy in his speculation on the details of her present circumstances. In contrast to the first-person narrative of Tipping the Velvet, in which Nan communicates to the reader her own secret pleasure in cross-dressing and disguise, the third-person narrator of The Night Watch frustrates this kind of intimate access to Kay’s own thoughts about her identity in the novel’s opening pages; thus, although we “meet” Kay twice—first in her own narrative and next via Duncan’s—she still remains distant, isolated in her loneliness, and yet, because of our distance from her, she cuts a more romantic, more desirable figure, as evidenced by the way in which she captivates Duncan’s imagination.

It is tempting to read almost too much into the way in which Duncan looks at Kay, especially as one is mindful of a malicious undertone to Mr Mundy’s nickname of “Colonel Barker” for her. “Colonel” Barker was a woman “who was prosecuted in 1929 for

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 impersonating a man and marrying another woman.” 155 This reference to Colonel Barker in
*The Night Watch* seems to stem from Waters’s claim (made elsewhere) that “female soldiers
of all varieties were attracting considerable attention in the [period between the two world
wars].” 156 Waters does not elaborate on the nature of such attention, however, and the
possibility that Kay is being mocked by Mr Mundy underscores the combination of aggressive
confusion and covert misogyny which characterises the responses of others to Kay’s
masculine gender presentation in the 1947 post-war period of the novel. It is worth drawing
attention to the fact that Colonel Barker is not an obviously familiar figure to a “general”
twenty-first-century reading public. Thus, we can regard this reference to a woman who
“passed” as a man for a considerable portion of her/his life, married another woman, and
received military medals for service (as a man) in the British Expeditionary Forces, 157 as one
example of the “lesbian stuff” Waters includes throughout her fiction. Via such coded
references to “other lesbian texts or traditions of representation,” 158 Waters singles out the
lesbian reader of her fiction in a conspiratorial, exclusive form of address. Additionally, this
reference to Colonel Barker foregrounds a narrative interest in alternative forms of
masculinity, and is one of the starting points for an exploration of the ways in which these
alternative masculinities and the same-sex fascination to which they allude prove essential to
the lesbian counterplot which distinguishes the novel.

The queer, erotic longing in Duncan’s observation of the details of Kay’s masculine
appearance thus foreshadows his more obvious fascination with his ex-cell-mate Robert

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Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Dressed as Men in the Pursuit of


157 Halberstam 91-95.

158 Armitt, “Interview with Sarah Waters,” 117.
Fraser. When Duncan and Fraser are unexpectedly reunited, Duncan is fixated on Fraser’s physical appearance—and particularly on the clothes Fraser is wearing:

[H]e was as different from Duncan as it was possible to imagine: broad-shouldered, where Duncan was slender; tanned, and madly healthy-looking and fit. He was dressed in corduroy trousers, an open-necked shirt, and a brown tweed jacket with leather patches on the sleeves. He carried a satchel like a hiker’s bag, with the strap across the his chest. His fair hair was long—Duncan, of course, had only ever seen him with it cropped—and quite ungreased: every so often, because of the vigour of his gestures, a lock of it would tumble over his brow, and he kept putting up a hand to smooth it back. His hands were as suntanned as his face. His nails were cut bluntly, but shone as if polished.159

Duncan’s captivation with Fraser combines an unacknowledged (homoerotic? homosexual?) desire for Fraser with an equally unexamined desire to identify with Fraser; Fraser offers an image of “madly healthy-looking,” upper-middle-class masculinity to which the working-class, slightly effeminate Duncan aspires. After his encounter with Fraser, Duncan devotes careful consideration to the details of his own appearance, modelling his outfit on Fraser’s, wearing a shirt left open at the neck, “just as Fraser wore his.”160 Although overwhelmed when he is in Fraser’s presence, in his fantasies Duncan transforms Fraser into a blank space onto which Duncan’s own, idealised self-image can be projected:

Duncan ... began to imagine how it would be if he went round [to Fraser’s]—say, one evening. ... He thought of the particular clothes he’d wear—not the clothes he was wearing now ... but a nice pair of trousers he had, and an open-necked shirt, and a smart jacket. He imagined how he’d be with Fraser when Fraser opened his door. “Hello, Fraser,” he’d say, nonchalantly; and Fraser would cry in amazement and admiration: “Pearce! You look like a proper man at last, now that you’ve left that wretched factory!”161

However, even as Fraser provides Duncan with an image of masculinity on which to model his own, Duncan is cast in a traditionally feminine role when he anticipates a visit from Fraser, bathing and dressing just as a woman might prepare for a visit from her suitor, and then waiting for the suitor to arrive: “Duncan had come home from work that night and heated

159 Waters, The Night Watch, 39.
161 Waters, The Night Watch, 43.
a kettle full of water; he’d taken the kettle up to his room, stripped down to his vest, and washed his hands, face and his hair … wanting to look his very best for his evening with Fraser … He sat in the parlour, at the very front of his chair, ready to spring up the moment he heard Fraser’s knock.”

The ambiguous nature of Duncan’s desire for Fraser suggests that it falls within Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s conceptualisation of “male homosocial desire.” In Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (1985), Sedgwick observes that “homosocial desire” is itself “a kind of oxymoron” within a patriarchal culture anxious to police the bonds between men and so construct male homosocial bonding in opposition to male homosexuality. Sedgwick suggests that to thus “draw the ‘homosocial’ back into the orbit of ‘desire,’ … is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual.” Sedgwick theorises a geometric model for this continuum of relations between men, a model, which, in her reading of Sedgwick, Castle describes as an “erotic triangle of male homosocial desire.” This triangulation is achieved by a patriarchal exchange of women, so that the continuum running from male homosocial to male homosexual bonding is interrupted by the presence of a “female term” which comes between the two men; homoerotic “male-male” bonding is thus safely suppressed by the “erotic paradigm” of the “male-female-male” triangular arrangement.

In The Night Watch, the differentiation between homosocial and homosexual breaks down, as early instances of male bonding between Duncan and Fraser give way to erotically-charged scenes in which the narrative is opened up to potentially homosexual desire. Early in

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162 Waters, The Night Watch, 148, 149.
164 Sedgwick 1.
165 Castle 68.
the novel, seemingly "straightforward" (homo)socialising between Duncan and Fraser is unsettled by the previous relationship between the two men. Trying to forge a tentative friendship with the reticent Duncan, Fraser's attempts at conversation are increasingly stalled by Duncan's uneasiness. Maladjusted to post-prison life, Duncan experiences a wave of panic, thinking he has been seen by someone who knows about the time he spent in prison. The experience leaves Duncan shaken; he interrupts Fraser, so that Fraser's sentence breaks off, alluding to something which has happened between the two men but which remains unspoken: "'I suppose you must think me a bit of a fool.' 'Don't talk tripe! Don't you remember—?'" Duncan spoke over his words. 'I'm not used, you see, to going out about like this, on my own. I'm not like you.'"^{166}

As *The Night Watch* moves backwards through time, Duncan and Fraser's narrative is relocated to Wormwood Scrubs Prison, where the two men share a cell during the war. During an air raid, Duncan and Fraser listen as the other prisoners call out from their cells, alternately shouting abuse at each other and singing vulgar songs: "Give me a girl with eyes of black, / Who likes it on her belly but prefers it on her back!" one prisoner sings.^{167} This rough, raucous camaraderie has an unsettling effect on the prison, leaving a heightened atmosphere and a "queer" restlessness in Duncan and Fraser's cell:

> The matey, mischievous feeling that had gripped them all, ten minutes before, was losing its hold. The silence was deepening, growing daunting, and to try to break into it, now, was to make it seem worse. ... He could still hear the words of the songs ... *Give me a girl,* he could hear in his head. *Give me a girl* ... over and over.

> Perhaps Fraser could hear it, too. He changed his pose, rolled on to his back, kept fidgeting. Now the place was so quiet, when he passed his hand across the stubble on his chin—when he rubbed his eye, even, with his knuckle—Duncan heard it ... He blew out his breath.

> "Damn," he said, very softly. "I wish I had a girl, Pearce, right now. ... Do you know what I'd do with her, Pearce?"^{168}

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Fraser describes, in detail, the kind of girl he would like to have—"a plain, stout, stupid, girl. A plain, stout, stupid, grateful girl"\textsuperscript{169}—and what he would like to do to her—"I'd have her, fully clothed"\textsuperscript{170}—attempting, in effect, to conjure up a fantasy woman to fill the "female space" of the male-female-male arrangement here rendered absent by the all-male environment of the prison. The effect, however, is to foreground more starkly the absence of women, to emphasise, rather than counteract, the easy slippage from homosocial to homoerotic: "He wasn't talking to Duncan, really; he was talking to the darkness, to himself. ... But the effect was more intimate, somehow, than if he'd been whispering into Duncan's ear."\textsuperscript{171} Without the "female term" to mediate the interaction between them, the space between Duncan and Fraser seems to collapse and bring them closer together: "There was a depthlessness to [the dark] that was so queer and unnerving, he put up his hand. He wanted to remind himself of the distance between his and Fraser's bunk: he'd begun to feel as though Fraser was nearer than he ought to have been; and he was very aware of his own body as a sort of duplication or echo of the one above."\textsuperscript{172}

The heterosexual masculine subjectivity ensured by the male-female-male erotic triangle is replaced by something altogether "queerer" via a male-male "sex scene," in which Duncan and Fraser simultaneously masturbate. The "exchange of women" on which the patriarchal order of triangular arrangement so desperately depends here works inversely so that, as Fraser shares his crude, sexual fantasy with Duncan, both men become sexually aroused, the distance between them diminishing as Duncan grasps the wire underside of Fraser's bunk:

\textsuperscript{169} Waters, \textit{The Night Watch}, 285.
\textsuperscript{170} Waters, \textit{The Night Watch}, 285.
\textsuperscript{171} Waters, \textit{The Night Watch}, 285.
\textsuperscript{172} Waters, \textit{The Night Watch}, 285.
He had put his hand, Duncan knew, to his cock; and after another moment he began, with a subtle, even motion, to stroke it.

It was a thing men did all the time, in prison. ... Now, however, in the utter darkness of the cell, and in the queer, uneasy atmosphere raised by Miller’s and Atkin’s singing, he found himself horribly aware of the stealthy, helpless, purposeful, half-ashamed motion of Fraser’s hand. ... he found that the stillness only made his senses more acute: he could hear the slight thickening, now of Fraser’s breath; he could smell him as he sweated; he could even catch, he thought, the faint, wet, regular sound—like a ticking watch—of the tip of Fraser’s cock being rhythmically uncovered ... He couldn’t help it. His felt his own cock give a twitch and begin to grow hard.

But his other hand, he raised. He found the wires of Fraser’s bed again and ... worked one of his fingers about them—clinging to them, almost, with the tip of that one finger; bracing himself against them, as he tugged with his other hand at his cock.173

This scene reaches its “climax,” when, evidently troubled by his participation in this homoerotic act, Fraser reacts homophobically. Projecting his self-disgust outwards, he taunts Duncan—“I suppose you liked that. Did you, Pearce? Hey?”174—and flicks his semen into Duncan’s face: “something warm and light had struck him, in the face. He put up his hand, and felt a sticky kind of wetness on his cheek. Fraser must have leant over the edge of the bunk and flicked spunk at him. ‘You liked it all right,’ said Fraser bitterly. His voice was close, for a moment. Then he moved back beneath his blanket. ‘You liked it all right, you blasted bugger.’”175

The brutality of this scene is counteracted later in the novel, when, during another air raid, Fraser becomes terrified that the prison will be hit by a bomb. Seeking comfort, Fraser asks if he can share Duncan’s bed: “‘Let me come in with you, Pearce, will you?’ he said. ‘Let me share your bunk. I mean.’ And when Duncan didn’t answer, he added simply, ‘It’s this bloody war. I can’t bear to lie alone.’”176 Unlike the “queer,” “uneasy” atmosphere of sexual tension left by prisoners’ song, in the aftermath of the bombing raid, tension seems to

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When Fraser remains in Duncan’s bed after the bombing has stopped, the two men move “closer together,” blurring and eventually collapsing all distinctions between homosocial, homoerotic and homosexual:

It ought to have been strange, to be pressed so close to another person now; but it wasn’t strange. ... He said, in a whisper, “Are you all right?” And Fraser answered, “Yes.” “Don’t you want to go back up?” Fraser shook his head: “Not yet ...” It wasn’t strange, at all. They moved closer together, not further apart. Duncan put up his arm and Fraser settled himself so that the arm could go beneath his head. They settled back into an embrace—as if it were nothing, as if it were easy; as if they weren’t two boys, in a prison, in a city being blown and shot to bits; as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Together, these two air raid scenes approximate a kind of sexual consummation between Duncan and Fraser, one, however, that cannot be easily or explicitly identified as homosexual. This exploration of the slippage between homosocial and homosexual desire is perhaps better understood, then, within the wider scope of the novel’s lesbian counterplot.

Utilising Sedgwick’s erotic paradigm of male homosocial desire, Castle formulates an alternative narrative model of female homosocial desire in which female bonding “destabilizes the ... triangular arrangement of male desire ... and ultimately—in the radical form of lesbian bonding—displaces it entirely.” Castle argues that “the male-female-male erotic triangle remains stable only as long as its single female term is unrelated to any other female term.” Describing the break-down of this “canonical” erotic triangulation, she suggests that “[o]nce two female terms are conjoined in space ... an alternative structure comes into being, a female-male-female triangle, in which one of the male terms from the original triangle now occupies the “in between” or subjugated position of the mediator.”

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179 Castle 72.
180 Castle 72.
181 Castle 72.
For Castle, it is the replacement of the “male-female-male” erotic paradigm with the alternative “female-male-female arrangement” of “subverted triangulation” which distinguishes lesbian fiction as lesbian. 182 This creates a “new female homosocial structure, [in which] the possibility of male bonding is radically suppressed: for the male term is now isolated, just as the female term was in the male homosocial structure.” 183 Castle argues that “[i]n the most radical transformation of female bonding—i.e., from homosocial to lesbian bonding—the two female terms indeed merge and the male term drops out. At this point … not only is male bonding suppressed, it has become impossible—there being no male terms left to bond. 184 Indeed, The Night Watch takes this notion of “erotic counterplotting” to its furthest point, forming a “female-female” dyad or “lesbian bond” in which the heterosexual “male term” is radically suppressed and then displaced from the narrative altogether.

Organised according to this alternative model of female desire, the first indication of lesbian counterplotting in The Night Watch occurs with the “interruption” of Kay into Viv and Reggie’s narrative. Returning to London after a picnic in the country, their car becomes stuck in a traffic-jam. Viv, gazing “wistfully” out of the window at a queue of “girls and their boyfriends … husbands and wives” outside a cinema, 185 is startled when she unexpectedly catches sight of Kay. Distressed, Viv forces Reggie to turn the car around. This interrupted momentum, as Reggie “re-plots” an alternative route along the road, indicates a corresponding narrative “re-plotting,” as Viv’s attention is drawn away from her lover and towards Kay, now “lit up” or “spotlighted” by the flame from her cigarette lighter:

He looked over his shoulder and began, laboriously, to turn the car. …

Viv kept her head down; but looked back once. Kay had joined the line of people outside the cinema: she was holding a lighter to her cigarette, and the flame of

182 Castle 74.

183 Castle 72.

184 Castle 72-73.

185 Waters, The Night Watch, 71.
it, springing up, through the twilight, lit her fingers and her face. Hush, Vivien. Viv remembered her saying. The memory was stark, after all this time—stark and terrible—the grip of her hand, the closeness of her mouth. Vivien, hush. 186

Viv’s memory of Kay is suggestively, if distressingly, erotic. It returns to Viv with a heightened urgency and is characterised by a degree of intimacy absent from Viv’s romance with Reggie. Indeed, the sexually evocative image conjured up by the memory of the “grip of her hand” and the “closeness of her mouth” presents a “stark” contrast with description of the joyless sexual encounter between Viv and Reggie while on their country outing: “The seams of his underpants were taut against her wrist and made her clumsy; after a moment he reached and brought himself right out, then put his hand loosely around hers. He kept the hand there as she was doing it, and had his eyes shut tight the whole time; in the end she felt he might as well be doing it himself.” 187

In terms of narrative outcomes, Reggie’s adulterous affair with Viv will not end, as traditional heterosexual romance narratives often do, in marriage; hence, Viv “gazes wistfully” at the couples queuing outside the cinema. Often clumsy and awkward, Reggie is characterised by an inability to measure up to standards of masculine courtesy or gallantry. During the war, when small luxuries are scarce, he brings Viv a gift of hairgrips, and also “three wilting snow-drops.” 188 These wilted flowers are suggestive of an impotent, rather than a virile masculinity: “He fixed the flowers to her hair. He did it rather fumblingly; she felt the point of the grip cut slightly into her scalp. ... The stems of the flowers had got crushed by the grip and hung rather limply.” 189 This is indicative, perhaps, of the critique of heterosexuality and heterosexual masculinity implicit in the lesbian counterplot, a critique which the novel pursues to its furthest point via the displacement of heterosexual masculinity.

186 Waters, The Night Watch, 71-72, emphases in original.
188 Waters, The Night Watch, 171.
189 Waters, The Night Watch, 172.
from the narrative altogether. Reggie’s position as the “isolated male term” is demonstrated by the way in which he shrinks into the background when Viv begins to haemorrhage from a botched abortion and leaves her to the care of an elderly woman summoned from a neighbouring flat for help; while she sits with Viv, waiting for an ambulance, Reggie “[stands] in the bathroom doorway, as pale as ash: biting his fingernails, too awed by the old lady to come in.”190 Kay and Mickey’s arrival in the ambulance further isolates Reggie; taking control, they work quickly and confidently, and at first Viv mistakes them for men: “He [Kay] spoke calmly, comfortingly. She wanted to give herself up to his arms.”191 Although Viv’s confidence fades when she realises they are “not men … but simply short-haired women,”192 this invocation of difference suggests that, according to the terms of the novel’s counterplot, lesbian masculinity displaces and then replaces normative, heterosexual or male-defined, masculinity. In one swift narrative manoeuvre, Reggie is removed from the scene altogether: “Viv struggled and sat up. She said, ‘Wait. Where’s Reggie? ‘Reggie?’ said Kay. ‘Her husband!’ said the old lady. ‘Lord, I clean forgot him. I saw him slip away and——’”193 The combined presence of Kay, Mickey and the old woman comprises a new geometric arrangement dominated by women; and this gives way to a lesbian configuration which surpasses even Castle’s model of subverted triangulation as the novel’s lesbian counterplot replaces traditional romance narratives which typically coalesce around moments of heterosexual fulfilment or consummation.

When Reggie abandons Viv, heterosexual desire in *The Night Watch* is perpetually suspended and left “floating,” just as Viv. having lost “so much blood, [feels] she must be

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190 Waters, *The Night Watch*, 381.


beginning to float."¹⁹⁴ Hence, Viv’s gaze is re-directed towards Kay, who, instead of Reggie, is now erotically “bonded” to Viv: “she felt her fingers held and squeezed. Kay had taken her hand. ... Viv clutched harder, so as not to float away. She opened her eyes, and gazed into Kay’s face. She gazed into it as she had never gazed into any face before; as if gazing could keep her from floating away, too.”¹⁹⁵ This exchange of “feminine fascinations,” in which Kay is the object of Viv’s desperate gaze, culminates in a radical dislocation of heterosexual desire altogether, when Viv realises she has lost the “gold-coloured ring” needed to “prove” that she is married. Ordinarily the symbol of sanctified heterosexual union, The Night Watch appropriates and revises the traditional romance “marriage plot” for a subversive lesbian end: Viv’s “wedding ring” is replaced with a ring of Kay’s, offered to Viv in an act of intimacy in which men do not figure at all:

“Here’s your ring!” said Kay, suddenly. “Here’s your ring. Look.” She had drawn away from Viv and put her own hands together; she worked them as if wringing them for a second, then produced a little circle of gold. She did it so swiftly and so subtly, it was like magic.

“You had it, after all?” asked Viv, in amazement and relief; and Kay nodded: “Yes.” She lifted Viv’s hand, and slid the ring along her finger.¹⁹⁶

Viv is bonded to Kay in an exchange between women which replaces the traditional “end” of romance narratives—a male-female union—with a daring, “butch/femme” dyad born out of The Night Watch’s sustained exploration of same-sex fascination. Just as the novel dislocates masculinity from a specifically heterosexual or male-defined subject position, so heterosexual femininity is opened up to alternative signification via the lesbian counterplot.

Constructed throughout The Night Watch as an object of heterosexual male desire, “glamour girl” Viv emerges as the “femme” counterpart to Kay’s “butch” lesbian persona:

[Viv] was wearing a light cotton dress and a plum-coloured cardigan, and sunglasses with pale plastic frames; instead of a hat she had a white silk scarf, which she’d tied in

¹⁹⁴ Waters, The Night Watch, 386.
¹⁹⁵ Waters, The Night Watch, 386.
¹⁹⁶ Waters, The Night Watch, 388.
a knot beneath her chin. The scarf and the sunglasses looked striking against the dark of her hair and the red of her lipstick. She ... wound down her window and sat with her elbow on the sill, her face in the draught—like a girl in an American picture ...\textsuperscript{197}

Like the indeterminate nature of the bond between Duncan and Fraser, the lesbian eroticism of the “butch/femme” dyad formed by Kay and Viv eludes an explicitly sexual designation. Nonetheless, it draws on a powerful model of lesbian desire, one—however contested—through which lesbian sexuality and identity have been articulated at different points during the twentieth century; and one which is used within the novel to demonstrate the full extent of the lesbian counterplot’s ability to resignify its non-lesbian characters according to the alternative model of female desire. The Night Watch’s “butch” lesbian characters are distinguished by a certain sexual “intrigue” which the novel’s heterosexual male characters so conspicuously lack, and which further attests to the novel’s eroticised representations of same-sex fascination between women.

For example, Mickey is described as “standing rather nonchalantly, one hand on the roof of the car, the other tense about the trigger of the petrol-gun, her eyes on the dial on the face of the machine. She was not quite handsome, but carried herself with a certain style; and it was extraordinary how many girls—even normal girls—could be intrigued and impressed by a pose like this.”\textsuperscript{198} The Night Watch is filled with such moments which invite the reader to “look or gaze with one female character at another, in an interchange of feminine fascinations.”\textsuperscript{199} Indeed, by continually foregrounding moments of same-sex fascination as points around which its narrative politics cohere, the novel’s lesbian counterplot leads the narrative to an end which asserts the lesbian perspective central to the novel; and it is the centrality of this lesbian perspective within the novel that permits the participatory strategy of reading as revision and enables the creation of a lesbian reading position.

\textsuperscript{197} Waters, The Night Watch, 57-58.

\textsuperscript{198} Waters, The Night Watch, 96, emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{199} Stacey 115, emphasis added.
The final lines of the novel describe how Kay "moved her hand to the curve of Helen’s jaw and cupped it with her palm—not wanting to leave her, after all; gazing at her in a sort of wonder; unable to believe that something so fresh and so unmarked could have emerged from so much chaos." Culminating in an acknowledgement and assertion of the particularity of the lesbian gaze, *The Night Watch* offers this moment of same-sex fascination as final proof of its revisionary project. This description of the way in which one female character gazes at another "in a sort of wonder" signals to the reader that it is precisely via such exchanges of "feminine fascination" that the novel continually asserts a lesbian perspective which signifies the dominant reading position as female and as lesbian. Hence, Fraser’s failed attempt to draw Viv back into the realm of heterosexual desire, to reclaim her according to the patriarchal convention of spectatorship in which the woman is constructed as the object of the male gaze:

[Viv] felt capable of anything! She finished her coffee, her mind racing. She was thinking of all the things she could do. She could give up her job! She could leave Streatham, take a little flat all to herself! She could call up Reggie! ... She could find a telephone box, right now. She could call him up and tell him—what? That she was through with him, for ever! ... The possibilities made her giddy. Maybe she’d never do any of these things. But oh, how marvellous it was, just to know that she could! She set put down her cup and started to laugh. Fraser laughed, too. His smile had a frown mixed up in it; and as he looked her over, he shook his head.

‘How extraordinarily like your brother you are!’ he said.

In effect, Fraser’s words allude to the fact that, like Duncan, Viv has been “queered” by the narrative counterplot’s alternative models of same-sex desire. What is “extraordinary” about Duncan, of course, is the fact that he is “queer,” not because he is identified specifically within the novel as homosexual, but because his desire for Fraser occupies an indeterminate space that falls in between homosocial and homosexual. In a sense, Fraser’s words return us to Llewellyn’s reading of the novel, to his refusal to recognise that the novel expresses a lesbian narrative politics via the overarching framework of the lesbian counterplot. The

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"frown" which is mixed up in Fraser's smile is, perhaps, a signal to the reader of *The Night Watch* that Viv is no longer simply what she seems to be: that is, the object of desire for the male heterosexual gaze. She is, after all, "giddy" at the possibility of being "through with [Reggie], for ever."

It is in this way that the feminist and/or lesbian reader who engages in a strategy of reading as revision can see what Llewellyn refuses to see: that the alternative narrative model of the lesbian counterplot re-signifies both the narrative content of the novel and the reading of the novel itself. Hence, reading as revision is a strategy of reading through which the subtle nuances of the revisionary lesbian counterplot are most fully realised by the feminist and/or lesbian reader who recognises and participates in the novel's overarching narrative politics. In addition, reading as revision is a strategy of reading that allows for a reciprocity of recognition between the lesbian reader and the text: in opening up a lesbian reading position, *The Night Watch* acknowledges the lesbian reader, situates her as the implied reader of the text, and invites other readers to engage with the text from the particularity of the lesbian point of view.

This chapter has demonstrated that the revisionary project of Waters's lesbian historical fiction is to enable the reading of history from the perspective of "reading as a lesbian." The readings of *Affinity* and *The Night Watch* presented in this chapter have addressed the research question which has guided the reading of Waters's fiction in this thesis—is Waters's project really to write the lesbian back into history?—by establishing the ways in which Waters's fiction demonstrates that the lesbian has always already been located within history, even if relegated to the margins of its authorised narratives. Hence, it is through the ways in which her novels acknowledge the lesbian's presence within history that Waters pursues a revisionary project which is concerned to open up the reading of history to this lesbian perspective.
As a work of historiographic metafiction, *Affinity*'s ironic and interrogative invocation of the apparitional as a representational mode requires the reader to in fact resist the erasure of the lesbian usually signalled by this trope; in effect, *Affinity* challenges the reader to see the lesbian within the text, even if the text itself refuses to name, identify or materialise the lesbian within its pages. Like the novel's seeming invocation of patriarchal historiography, *Affinity*'s invocation of lesbian apparitionality indicates that it is precisely these traditions of narration and representation which will be subjected to self-reflexive, critical scrutiny throughout the novel; in other words, *Affinity* re-writes the "story" of the invisibility of the lesbian within patriarchal narrative by exposing the means through which the lesbian is erased within patriarchal history and traditions of representation. *The Night Watch* both continues this revisionary project and surpasses the interrogative approach foregrounded in *Affinity* by establishing an overarching lesbian narrative politics in accordance with the counterplot of lesbian fiction. Through its representation of lesbian invisibility as a paradoxical scenario in which the lesbian is simultaneously "seen" and "unrecognised," *The Night Watch* emphasises the interrelatedness of historical specificity and lesbian specificity within Waters's fiction. The representations of the frustrations experienced by the lesbian characters in the novel's post-war setting indicate that different historical time periods provide different ways of exploring the erasure of the lesbian within patriarchal narrative. In particular, when framed by the post-war return to normative gender roles, the apparitional motifs used to represent lesbian invisibility in the Victorian era are no longer as suitable to this twentieth-century setting; lesbian invisibility in *The Night Watch* emerges as a paradoxical excess of visibility. *The Night Watch* also interrogates the expectation that lesbian fiction is primarily concerned to construct coming-out narratives. Thus, the novel interrogates the restrictions of the lesbian label, pushing at its limits in order to speculate on the problems of lesbian romance which inevitably follow the triumphant affirmation of lesbianism which is typically the end of the lesbian coming-out narrative. This interest to
extend the narrative of lesbian fiction beyond the moment of coming out is most fully realised by the novel’s lesbian counterplot, which attests to the ultimate revisionary concern of Waters’s project: that is, the opening up of a dominant lesbian reading position from which the reader—whether feminist, lesbian or “other”—is invited to approach the text. It is via the revisionary strategy of reading that the feminist and/or lesbian reader of The Night Watch finds herself able to participate in the narrative strategy of the lesbian counterplot; and, as the privileged reader of the text, the lesbian reader sees, in essence, what other readers cannot see: the alternative system of signification which draws the narrative into alignment with the centrality of its lesbian point of view.

In many ways, both Affinity and The Night Watch demonstrate that the lesbian remains present after she comes out, that she refuses to fade into the shadows or the margins of history or fiction once her coming-out story has been told. By demonstrating that both Affinity and The Night Watch refuse the traditional narrative trajectory of the lesbian coming-out novel, this chapter has addressed the research aims of this thesis, which are concerned to explore how readings of both Waters’s and Winterson’s fiction can move beyond the expectations placed on the “lesbian author.” Affinity and The Night Watch demonstrate Waters’s interest to explore “where” lesbian narratives “go” after the initial moment of coming out. This chapter has suggested that, in effect, Waters returns to history in order to use the past as a means to explore the ways in which we re-write and re-read history in the present.

In this chapter, reading as revision has been presented as a strategy of reading which opens up a lesbian reading position. This contrasts to reading as romance and reading as quest, which permit the feminist and/or lesbian reader to make lesbian readings of the novels of Waters and Winterson, but do not acknowledge her or single her out as the privileged reader of these texts in an exclusive form of text-reader address. While all three strategies of reading have been conceptualised as interactive processes which allow the feminist and/or
lesbian reader to engage in a reading of text which enacts the narrative strategies of the text itself, not all of these strategies of reading permit the reader to maintain a sense of agency over her reading of the text. It is in the Conclusion, to which we now turn, that these discussions of the three strategies of reading and their relation to the novels of Waters and Winterson will be drawn together to consider the issue of the feminist and/or lesbian reader’s agency over her reading of the text.
Conclusion

This thesis has examined strategies of feminist and lesbian reading in relation to the fiction of Sarah Waters and Jeanette Winterson. It has contributed original research to the field of contemporary women's writing by drawing together the fiction of Waters and Winterson through an examination of the ways in which readings of their fiction can move beyond expectations placed on the "lesbian author." Hence, this thesis has presented new readings of selected novels of Waters and Winterson and has also conceptualised strategies of feminist and lesbian reading which enable the reader to engage with these novels in a way that permits a more participatory involvement within the narrative strategies of the novels themselves; via this two-fold approach, this thesis has not only offered original readings of the fiction of Waters and Winterson, it has also demonstrated how such readings are made possible. The strategies of reading which have been formulated in this thesis—reading as romance, reading as quest and reading as revision—have been chosen for their applicability to the fiction of Waters and Winterson; they have allowed us to describe the actions of the feminist and/or lesbian reader of Waters's and Winterson's novels in the terms of the narrative strategies of the novels themselves: romance, the quest motif and revisionary writing.

This Conclusion provides a summary of the thesis chapters, which briefly recaps the discussions of the novels and the conclusions drawn in each chapter. It reaffirms the relevance of this thesis to the field of contemporary women's writing, reiterating the research questions which have guided this thesis and stating how the research aims have been addressed in each chapter, in order to further substantiate the rationale for a thesis which draws together the fiction of Waters and Winterson. This Conclusion will reflect on the three strategies of reading explored in this thesis, drawing the overall discussion to an end by considering the ways in which the strategies of reading formulated in this thesis enable the feminist and/or lesbian reader to retain a sense of agency over her reading of the text.
The Introduction has established the rationale for a thesis which focuses on the fiction of Waters and Winterson, has stated the reasons behind the selection of novels chosen for discussion in the thesis chapters, and has outlined the fields of inquiry over which the discussion of these novels has taken place. The fields of inquiry have been framed by research interests which seek to explore the ways in which we read as feminists and/or lesbians. More specifically, this thesis has been guided by a concern to examine the ways in which readings of the fiction of Waters and Winterson have been determined by expectations placed on the "lesbian author;" and one of the main concerns of this thesis has been to demonstrate the ways in which readings of their fiction can move beyond such expectations. Hence, the Introduction has contextualised the fiction of Waters and Winterson by drawing attention to the "weight of expectation" placed on the lesbian author by readers who expect her fiction to conform to certain prescriptions about lesbian authorship, prescriptions which are often determined via the lesbian author's début novel through which she comes out as both a lesbian and an author.

Lesbian fiction is primarily assumed to affirm lesbianism. This can take the form of confirming the author's own lesbianism, as it is presumed that the lesbian author writes from a "lesbian point of view," which is her own, or, to make the point in a slightly different way, that her fiction is autobiographical. Additionally, this affirmation of lesbianism can also take the form of portraying affirmative images of lesbians or lesbianism via, for example, the representation of lesbian characters who function as textual reflections of contemporary lesbian identities or ideological positions; and, by providing images of lesbian characters which function as role models or objects of desire for the lesbian reader, or as reflections of contemporary lesbian identities, this kind of lesbian fiction in turn affirms the reader's lesbianism. This thesis has been interested in the ways in which the fiction of Waters and
Winterson has either refused to affirm lesbianism in these ways, or has subverted such expectations in order to push at the limits of what lesbian fiction is expected to do; hence, the novels selected for analysis in this thesis have been chosen because they challenge, subvert or otherwise seek to exceed the “lesbian label” as a limiting paradigm or a definitive, restrictive category.

Chapter One, Reading as Romance, has been concerned to begin the discussion of the ways in which we read as feminists and/or lesbians. Lynne Pearce’s theory of implicated reading has been used to describe the actions of the reader of both Winterson’s *Written on the Body* (1992) and Waters’s *Affinity* (1999); this is a reader who seeks an affirmation of lesbianism from these novels, and who employs a strategy of reading as romance, in which she seeks to make and maintain emotional contact with the text via the presence of a “textual other.” However, although *Written on the Body* and *Affinity* are often read as lesbian novels, neither novel affirms images or representations of lesbianism, nor confirms the identities of their potentially lesbian characters within the narrative. From the “refusal” of these two novels to meet these readerly expectations, two distinct lines of inquiry are thus presented which set the stage for the readings of Winterson’s and Waters’s fiction which have been offered in Chapters Two and Three. In the case of Winterson’s fiction, *Written on the Body*’s refusal to affirm lesbianism or, even, to affirm a primary attachment to women, suggests that there are other contexts in which her fiction might be read. In the case of Water’s fiction, *Affinity*’s interrogation of the apparitional as a mode of lesbian textual representation suggests that Waters’s project is not to introduce the lesbian into history, but to open up historical narration to a lesbian perspective and thus enable the reading of that history from the perspective of “reading as a lesbian.” Chapter One thus established the difficulty of “naming” *Written on the Body* and *Affinity* as lesbian texts, before moving on to focus exclusively on *Written on the Body* in terms of the ways in which the novel alienates the
lesbian reader through the construction of a dominant reading position which invites an identification with masculine heterosexual desire.

The reading of Written on the Body which has been offered in Chapter One has contrasted to the majority of existing critical readings of the novel, which have focused on the novel’s sexually indeterminate and ambiguously gendered narrator, through its focus on the representation of the novel’s female characters. This reading has demonstrated that Written on the Body replicates patriarchal images of women and systems of gendered signification, with the result being the construction of a schema of gender relations structured around the binary oppositions of self/other, masculinity/femininity. The narrator’s beloved “other,” Louise is continually rendered the object of the narrator’s desire; her function within the novel is to provide a “blank space” designated “feminine” against which the narrator’s subjectivity is constructed as “masculine.” Hence, the discussion of Written on the Body in Chapter One has concluded by distinguishing a lesbian reading from a lesbian reading position. By examining the engendering mechanisms which structure the narrative, the reading of Written on the Body offered in this chapter has demonstrated the ways in which the novel replicates a patriarchal system of gender relations and how this is, in essence, indicative of the novel’s refusal to open up a lesbian reading position. This would take the form of either a dominant reading position constructed as “lesbian,” which would invite both lesbian and non-lesbian readers to align themselves with this point of view and so read from the perspective of “reading as a lesbian,” or an acknowledgement of the lesbian reader as the implied reader of the text, as the one who is singled out in a form of text-reader address to the exclusion of all other readers.

Chapter Two, Reading as Quest, has addressed the research question which has framed the reading of Winterson’s fiction in this thesis; that is, how useful is it to continue to read Winterson as a “lesbian author”? This chapter has demonstrated that once the reader lets go of the expectation that Winterson is a “lesbian author” whose fiction is most significant to
and meaningful within a lesbian literary tradition, new contexts emerge which widen the ways in which her fiction might be read and thus establish the significance of her fiction in relation to other literary traditions. This chapter has demonstrated that new readings of Winterson’s fiction can be made by drawing attention to the ways in which her novels incorporate the narrative strategies, themes and motifs of medieval narrative romance. In particular, Chapter Two has utilised Patricia Parker’s definition of narrative romance as a mode or form of writing which “simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object,”¹ in order to demonstrate that The PowerBook (2000) can be read as an example of narrative romance. To date, no existing critical study of Winterson’s fiction has addressed the preoccupation with medieval reference and narrative romance within her novels. Hence, this chapter has established that the preoccupation with medieval reference and narrative romance challenges us, as feminist and/or lesbian readers, to re-examine the existing characterisation of Winterson’s fiction as “feminist,” “lesbian” and/or “postmodern;” and, it has also established that references to medieval narrative romance are sufficiently prominent throughout Winterson’s fiction to demand critical attention in their own right.

The readings of The PowerBook and Sexing the Cherry (1989) offered in Chapter Two have begun by establishing the thematic and structural proximities between these two novels and medieval narrative romance; namely, a concern to construct models of heroism or heroic subjectivity, the quest motif and narrative strategies of dilation, digression, deferral or delay. The discussion of these novels has proceeded by first establishing a case for a reading of The PowerBook as an example of narrative romance, with particular attention paid to the ways in which the engendering mechanisms of narrative romance impact upon the reading of the text itself, and thus affect the feminist and/or lesbian reader’s engagement with the text. The discussion has then moved on to examine Winterson’s treatment of heroism in both The

PowerBook and Sexing the Cherry, with particular attention paid to the difficulty of reconciling narrative romance’s concern to construct idealised, gendered subject-positions with the existing characterisation of Winterson’s fiction as “feminist,” “lesbian” and/or “postmodern.” This discussion has been concerned to explore whether the feminist and/or lesbian reader who turns to Winterson’s fiction seeking images of female heroes, feminist and/or lesbian models of heroism, or other means of feminist and/or lesbian interlocution is able to locate them. Hence, the discussion of Winterson’s fiction and narrative romance in Chapter Two has concluded by arguing that the gender order of narrative romance presents a significant obstacle which frustrates the feminist and/or lesbian reader’s “quest” for these feminist and/or lesbian heroes, allies or interlocutors. Ultimately, both The PowerBook and Sexing the Cherry replicate the gender order of narrative romance, in which femininity is constructed as the sought-after “other” necessary for the articulation of a model of heroism which is definitively masculine. Thus, it is at the level of narrative organisation that the feminist and/or lesbian reader is undermined in her search for accessible interlocutors, allies or role models within these novels: as in medieval narrative romance, masculinity and femininity in The PowerBook and Sexing the Cherry are constructs which are determined according to the narrative order which maintains them in a hierarchical, binary opposition.

The readings of The PowerBook and Sexing the Cherry which have been offered in Chapter Two have brought a new perspective to an author whose work has typically been framed as “feminist,” “lesbian” and/or “postmodern.” If this reading of Winterson’s fiction has demonstrated the need to move beyond the expectations placed on Winterson as a “lesbian author,” in order to expand our understanding of the contexts within which her fiction is meaningful, the reading of Waters’s fiction offered in Chapter Three has demonstrated that we need to return to the lesbian label. This allows us to examine the ways in which Waters’s novels challenge and subvert the expectations generated by the label, thus extending the parameters of the concept of “lesbian fiction” itself.
Chapter Three, Reading as Revision, has addressed the research question which has framed the reading of Waters’s fiction in this thesis; that is, is Waters’s project really to write the lesbian back into history? This chapter has demonstrated that the revisionary project of Waters’s lesbian historical fiction is not simply to write the lesbian back into history; it is to enable the reading of that history from the perspective of “reading as a lesbian.” The readings of Affinity (1999) and The Night Watch (2006) which have been presented in Chapter Three have established that, in her fiction, Waters relocates the lesbian from the margins to the centre of historical narrative. Waters’s novels thus situate a central lesbian perspective within their narratives, one which is concerned to align both historical narrative and the re-reading of this narrative with a lesbian point of view; or, to make the point in a slightly different way, Waters’s novels are concerned to open up historical narration to a “lesbian perspective,” and, consequently, to create a lesbian reading position from which the reader may engage with the text.

The reading of Affinity which has been presented in Chapter Three has situated the novel within a tradition of lesbian historiographic metafiction, in order to demonstrate that Affinity engages in an interrogative and self-reflexive scrutiny of both patriarchal historiography and lesbian apparitionality as a representational mode. This reading has continued the reading of Affinity which was begun in Chapter One and which examined the novel’s refusal to deliver an affirmation of lesbianism within the text. Chapter Three has argued that Affinity simultaneously invokes and interrogates the apparitional as a mode of lesbian textual representation in order to challenge the reader to see the lesbian within the text, even if the text itself refuses to materialise the lesbian within its pages. Chapter Three has thus argued that Affinity’s interrogative and self-reflexive narrative stance requires the reader to approach the text from a similarly interrogative point of view in order to recognise that the novel’s main concern is to make visible the means through which the lesbian has been rendered invisible within patriarchal historical narrative and literary tradition.
The reading of *The Night Watch* which has been presented in Chapter Three has demonstrated the ways in which this novel is similarly concerned to expose or “make visible” lesbian invisibility as a historically situated construct. This reading has demonstrated that *The Night Watch* constructs lesbian invisibility within the post-war setting of the novel as a paradoxical scenario in which the lesbian is at once “seen” and yet remains “unrecognised.” This de-legitimising of the lesbian within history is replicated by Mark Llewellyn in his reading of *The Night Watch*; and the discussion in Chapter Three has outlined the ways in which he dismisses the lesbian specificity of Waters’s revisionary project, and has challenged and refuted the claims made by Llewellyn through a reading of the novel which maps out precisely the interrelatedness of lesbian politics and narrative politics in *The Night Watch*. In particular, the reading of *The Night Watch* in Chapter Three has drawn attention to the ways in which the revisionary project of the novel is expressed at a narrative level in the form of the “counterplot of lesbian fiction.” As Terry Castle has demonstrated, the lesbian counterplot seeks to subvert the narrative interests of patriarchal, canonical literature, which is concerned to solidify bonds between men via an exchange of women. The lesbian counterplot emphasises or foregrounds moments of same-sex fascination, alternative models of female desire, and homosocial bonds between women, which, in their most radical form, take on a specifically lesbian designation. The reading of *The Night Watch* in Chapter Three has explored the different ways in which the novel evinces such moments of same-sex fascination to foreground alternative models of homosocial desire. The discussion of Waters’s fiction in Chapter Three has concluded by demonstrating that the lesbian counterplot generates the strategy of reading as revision, which, in turn, constructs a dominant reading position as lesbian. This is a participatory strategy of reading that invites all readers to occupy this lesbian position and so read from the perspective of “reading as a lesbian.”

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who, in effect, actualises the revisionary project of Waters's fiction by recognising Waters's concern to extend the lesbian narrative beyond the limitations of the lesbian coming-out novel. More specifically, though, the discussion in Chapter Three has argued that the lesbian reader who engages in a strategy of reading as revision is singled out by the text as the one who will recognise the ways in which the alternative models of same-sex desire opened up by the lesbian counterplot re-signify the novel's non-lesbian characters so that they are accordingly "queered."

The reading of *The Night Watch* which has been offered in Chapter Three has suggested that the novel surpasses the interrogative approach central to *Affinity*, and has demonstrated that *The Night Watch*'s revisionary approach to history is established by an overarching lesbian narrative politics in form of the lesbian counterplot. The readings of both *Affinity* and *The Night Watch* in Chapter Three have demonstrated that history, in Waters's fiction, is lesbian history; hence, reading as a revision is a strategy of reading which allows us to recognise Waters's revisionary project as a concern to enable the re-reading of history in order to demonstrate that the lesbian has always been part of history, has always been present within it. Thus, reading as revision is a strategy of reading through which the lesbian within the text is made visible or recognised by the reader who enacts the revisionary narrative strategies of Waters's novels; and, just as the lesbian is relocated to the centre of historical narrative in Waters's fiction, so is the lesbian reader (re)located to a central, privileged reading position in relation to Waters's novels.

II

The research inquiries of this thesis have been framed by the overarching question, how do we read as feminists and/or lesbians? As has been laid out in the Introduction, this thesis has accepted as one of its starting points the premise that the expectations generated by their début
coming-out novels have exerted a formative influence on the reception of Waters’s and Winterson’s subsequent fiction. The conceptualisation of the figure of the “lesbian author” involves an act of labelling which has the potential to affirm the significance of the writer’s work to a lesbian literary tradition; in this way, the work of the lesbian author is seen to contribute to efforts to establish and assert a lesbian literary tradition as a necessary corrective to the marginalisation of lesbians within patriarchal and canonical literary texts. Thus, when claimed by the lesbian author herself, the lesbian label draws its impetus from the same kind of radical political efforts central to the late-twentieth-century women’s and gay and lesbian liberation movements, and shares with these wider cultural efforts a desire to challenge the authority of normative heterosexuality and patriarchy. This act of labelling, however, when imposed on the writer’s work can operate to a limiting or restrictive effect. In this case, it can have the opposite effect to that described above; namely, it can risk marginalising the writer’s work, so that it is not seen to have significance beyond a lesbian literary tradition or, to make the point in a slightly different way, to be of interest to non-lesbian readers.

These scenarios give an indication of the extent to which the lesbian label has exerted its influence on the ways in which the fiction of Waters and Winterson has been read. They suggest, in effect, that one of the ways in which we read as feminist and/or lesbians is under the influence of the lesbian label, and that, as feminist and/or lesbian readers, we have approached the fiction of Waters and Winterson expecting it to be most significant within lesbian, feminist or lesbian-feminist literary traditions. Hence, the readings of Waters’s and Winterson’s fiction which have been offered in this thesis have originated in an awareness of the effects of the expectations generated by the lesbian label, and have been guided by the research question, how can readings of both writers’ work move beyond the expectations placed on the “lesbian author”? In the case of Winterson’s fiction, this question has taken a more specific form which asks, how useful is it to continue to read Winterson as a “lesbian writer”? In the case of Waters’s fiction, this concern to move beyond the expectations
generated by the lesbian label has prompted the question, is Waters’s project really to write the lesbian back into history? Hence, the arguments advanced in the chapters of this thesis have addressed these research questions by offering nuanced and original readings of the fiction of Waters and Winterson, as summarised above. The readings of their novels which have been presented in this thesis indicate the relevance of this thesis to the following fields of study: the field of contemporary women’s writing; feminist and lesbian literary criticism; and to discussions of the “place” of lesbian fiction within the mainstream literary arena.

For example, Sonya Andermahr’s recent study of Winterson’s writing makes no mention of medieval reference in Winterson’s novels. Andermahr offers a comprehensive account of Winterson’s writing to date, which re-establishes the feminist, lesbian and postmodern contexts within which Winterson’s fiction has been placed, and, in effect, confirms Winterson’s continued significance to these fields of literary study and to the fields of contemporary women’s writing and contemporary British writing. However, while Andermahr’s study provides a survey of the existing debates which have framed discussions of Winterson’s work, and augments these discussions with her own contributions, it misses the opportunity to examine medieval reference in Winterson’s fiction, which, as this thesis has established, comprises a significant portion of the narrative attention. In effect, this thesis has argued that if we wish to produce new readings of Winterson’s fiction, one way to do so is to examine the preoccupation with and reference to medieval narrative romance within her novels; thus, this thesis has contributed original research to the field of contemporary women’s writing by drawing attention to a major aspect of Winterson’s fiction which continues to be overlooked in critical studies of her work.

A similar concern to restore attention to a particular aspect of Waters’s fiction which is in danger of being overlooked or dismissed within critical studies of her work has provided the basis for the critique of Llewellyn’s essay on Waters’s fiction offered in Chapter Three. Llewellyn at once mistakes the project of Waters’s fiction as a concern to introduce the
Lesbian into history and summarily dismisses the significance of lesbian historical fiction to the field of contemporary women's writing; according to his assessment, "[p]utting lesbian characters into the sphere of Victorian fiction ... does not, ultimately, change ... the way in which the majority of us view the past."³ Llewellyn, in effect, misreads Waters's fiction by failing to consider the ways in which her novels refuse the narrative limitations of the lesbian coming-out novel in favour of establishing a revisionary lesbian narrative politics which seek to open up historical narration to a lesbian perspective, and thus enable a re-viewing of history from a lesbian reading position. In this sense, Llewellyn's reading is influenced by the expectations generated by lesbian label: namely, that lesbian fiction is understood only as fiction which affirms lesbianism through the representation of lesbian characters, and that it follows the narrative trajectory of the coming-out novel in order to deliver a revelation and affirmation of lesbianism expected by the reader. In effect, Llewellyn has "missed the plot;" or, rather, he has missed the counterplot, that is, the ways in which Waters's fiction seeks to exceed the limitations of the lesbian label by pursuing a lesbian narrative politics within her novels via the structural organisation offered by the lesbian counterplot. Thus, this thesis has established that Waters's novels are not to be understood as examples of "lesbian fiction" simply because they relocate lesbian characters to different historical periods; their significance to a lesbian literary tradition is to be found in the ways in which they engage in lesbian narrative strategies, such as of counterplotting, which, in turn, enable the reading of her texts from a lesbian reading position. Hence, the scope of this thesis encompasses the new and nuanced readings of Waters's and Winterson's fiction which have been offered in the individual chapters of this thesis; and it is further evident in the ways in which the discussions pursued in the individual chapters extend beyond the specific concerns of the thesis via their

contributes to research on contemporary women’s writing in general and to readings of Waters’s and Winterson’s fiction in particular.

III

This thesis has been about feminist and lesbian readers seeking dialogue with their chosen texts. The three strategies of reading which have been formulated in this thesis share a concern to articulate different ways in which the feminist and/or lesbian reader interacts with the novels of Waters and Winterson. This conceptualisation of reading as “interactive” is derived from Pearce’s concern to formulate a theory of reading as an implicated process, as opposed to a hermeneutic practice; as we have seen in Chapter One, Pearce develops a strategy of reading as romance, which reconceptualises reading as a relationship between the reader and the text. More specifically, the strategies of reading formulated in this thesis have heeded Pearce’s desire for “intra-diegetic relationality” with a chosen text; this is, essentially, a desire for a more participatory engagement within the narrative of the text itself. Hence, in response to these “implications” of Pearce’s theorisation of reading as an interactive process which is concerned to examine “the reader’s articulation within the text,” this thesis has formulated two strategies of reading which utilise the narrative strategies of the novels of Waters and Winterson in order to conceptualise the feminist and/or lesbian reader’s participation within the narratives themselves: the quest motif of medieval narrative romance, and the revisionary motivations of lesbian historiographic metafiction.

These strategies of reading are concerned, ultimately, with the issue of the reader’s agency over her reading of the text. Again, this concern is first articulated by Pearce through her conceptualisation of the figure of the “ghostly reader;” as outlined in Chapter One, this

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4 Lynne Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (London: Arnold, 1997) 91.

5 Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, 24, emphasis in original.
describes the precise nature of the reader’s “sense of disempowerment.” \(^6\) Hence, reading as romance is, by Pearce’s own admission, a strategy of reading through which the reader struggles against this determining quality of “ghostly insubstantiality.” \(^7\) Reading as quest and reading as revision are strategies of reading which thus seek to move away from this position of inevitable disempowerment by framing the discussions of Waters’s and Winterson’s fiction in terms of a differentiation between lesbian readings and lesbian reading positions.

Reading as quest has been formulated as a strategy of reading that permits the feminist and/or lesbian reader to approach Winterson’s novels from the active, participatory position of the “questing hero.” Like the hero of medieval narrative romance, however, this reader encounters obstacles which thwart or undermine her attainment of what she seeks from the text during the process of reading. These obstacles are generated by the form of narrative romance itself and by Winterson’s refusal to engage with narrative romance as a gendered and engendering set of discourses which inscribe the reader within them; as a result of this refusal to address the engendering mechanisms of narrative romance, the feminist and/or lesbian reader finds herself disempowered. Ultimately, Winterson’s incorporation of narrative romance within her fiction fails to address the structural impossibility or paradox of the subject-position of the female hero: if, within narrative romance, women are the means through which men, as heroes, achieves heroic subjectivity, then how can women—as feminist and/or lesbian readers—occupy the subject-position of “the hero”? 

Like reading as romance, reading as quest is a strategy of reading which permits feminist and/or lesbian readings of texts, but fails to create feminist or lesbian reading positions from which the reader may approach the text. Reading as revision, in contrast, has been formulated as a strategy of reading that permits the feminist and/or lesbian reader to utilise the interrogative and revisionary strategies of lesbian historiographic metafiction,

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\(^6\) Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, 157, emphasis added.

\(^7\) Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, 24.
which open up historical narration to a lesbian perspective, in order to enable the reading of the text from the perspective of "reading as a lesbian." In this way, reading as revision is a participatory strategy of reading through which the reader—whether feminist, lesbian or "other"—occupies a lesbian reading position in order to enact, through the reading of the text, the revisionary narrative strategies of the text itself. Because she does not seek affirmation or reciprocation from the text, the feminist and/or lesbian reader who engages in a strategy of reading as revision is able to maintain a sense of agency over her reading of the text.

Furthermore, the reading of The Night Watch offered in this thesis suggests, ultimately, that the novel's potential to communicate its revisionary narrative politics depends on the reader who recognises the alternative system of signification generated by novel's lesbian counterplot, and who draws out that system of re-signification so that it encompasses the reading of the novel itself. As lesbian fiction, Waters's novels thus exceed the limitations of the lesbian label by acknowledging the lesbian reader in exclusive text-reader relationship, and by constructing a dominant lesbian reading position which invites non-lesbian readers to engage in the act of "reading as a lesbian."

So long as she remains aware of the structural positions suggested by the narrative strategies of her chosen texts, the feminist and/or lesbian reader will be able to maintain a sense of agency over her reading of the text. These reflections on the issue of the reader's agency provide an appropriate ending for a thesis that has been concerned to examine how we read as feminists and/or lesbians. Ultimately, the feminist and/or lesbian reader is free to chose the particular strategies of reading through which she engages with the text; and, so long as she seeks to develop feminist and/or lesbian strategies of reading which allow her to interrogate or reflect on the ways in which readings of Waters's and Winterson's fiction are made, the feminist and/or lesbian reader will play an active role in continuing to bring new perspectives to and generate new readings of the novels of Waters and Winterson.
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