

## ‘Harlequinised’ in Adaptation: *Tipping the Velvet* by Sarah Waters

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### Abstract

This paper has a double task of analyzing the BBC film adaptation of Sarah Waters’ first novel and a critical examination of certain aspects of the novel’s Polish translation. It will be argued that despite of all the respective differences between the two texts based on Waters’s prose a similar cultural mechanism is at stake. Due attention will be paid to various factors which might have amounted to the aesthetics of those two adaptations. *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) is a lesbian novel set in the Victorian era and very well received by the reading public (it was shortlisted by *The New York Times* and *The Library Journal* for the best book of the year). Waters’ style of writing was also highly praised by literary critics. In Polish literary culture the term –harlequin|| refers to the name of a publishing house and designates a text of popular culture with an unfailingly simple narrative format which is addressed to –female|| audience. Apart from the analysis of chosen traits of the Polish text, a comparative analysis of British, American and Polish book covers of different editions will be carried out. A process similar to what I have tentatively named –harlequinisation|| seems to be taking place in the British television series of the same title (2002). The popularity of the text continues with its last year’s stage adaptation at the Bridewell Theatre in London.

On the webpage of the Harlequin series of romance novels, its editors advertise their 50,000 word books as celebrations of the feminine:

We celebrate women: their lives, triumphs, families, hopes, dreams... and most importantly their journey to falling in love. These are heroines every woman can relate to, root for, a friend you can laugh with and cry with. There should be a sense that the story really could happen to you!

<http://www.eharlequin.com/articlepage.html?articleId=1573&chapter=0>

Who is thus targeted is a female reader who will fully identify herself with the protagonist, regardless of the nuances and particularities of the story. In other words, what might be called a –model reader|| of the story is a ‘normal’ reader, a heterosexual woman who will eventually realize that her life is also a life of a romance. For some reason, the editors endow their protagonists with some strength which stabilizes the norm, which stability grants the world of the stories presented the status of an everlasting being in love:

Behind every strong woman... there’s a strong man. A guy you could meet on the sunniest of days, but who’ll be there for you on the rainiest. Each story delivers 100% pure romance – but happily leaves the explicit detail on the cutting room floor! Readers come to this series to experience the feel-good high of love blossoming!

<http://www.eharlequin.com/articlepage.html?articleId=1573&chapter=0>

What thus seems to be excluded from the field of Harlequin's interest is any disturbance of gender roles, any gender trouble, which could threaten the normalizing dimension of their books, the ideology of fixed and stable identities in which difference is acceptable only as a variation on the essentially repeatable normalcy.

Harlequin editors, as it seems, would not treat any of the volumes of Sarah Waters' neo-Victorian trilogy, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002), as a possible candidate for publication, especially in the light of the alleged affirmation of lesbianism ascribed to it. And yet, in what follows I will try to show that the film adaptation (*Tipping the Velvet*, BBC 2002) of Waters' first novel contains traces of something which may be provisionally termed 'harlequinisation' which, in this case, consists in attempts at straightening the queer so as to minimize the latter's subversive dimension.

One aspect of this straightening is the positioning of lesbianism outside the dominant culture as a subculture of sorts in which men do not participate and perceive it as a fake repetition of heterosexual practices. What is thus straightened is Waters' subversive insistence on the queer aspect of gender roles in which the simple division into men and women is constantly questioned. Thus lesbianism becomes what Judith Butler calls a 'compulsory category' functioning within the masculine order of categorization: 'If to be a lesbian is an act, a leave-taking of heterosexuality, a self-naming that contests the compulsory meanings of heterosexuality's men and women, what is to keep the name of lesbian from becoming an equally compulsory category?' (Butler 1990: 127).

What is performed on the screen under the guise of lesbianism is not gender, but a fake heterosexual activity resulting from the otherwise unquestionable division into naturally determined sexes. In other words, lesbian love is a version of heterosexual love whose performance is literally perceived as staged due to its inauthenticity. A woman impersonating a man on a theatrical stage, which Nan, the narrator of the novel, successfully practiced, always remains a woman within, the performance being but a superficial and artificial manner of fictionalizing the possibility of there being a gender trouble, of the possibility that 'gender is not something one *is*, but something one *does*: a series of acts, repeated over time, which solidify to produce the effect of natural maleness or femaleness' (Jeremiah 2007: 131).

Gill Kirton and Anne-Marie Greene notice that one of the reasons why gays and lesbians have achieved mainstream acceptance is their sympathetic portrayal in TV productions. *Tipping the Velvet*, they write, 'gave out-and-out lesbianism the airing it has rarely enjoyed on TV' (Kirton and Greene 2005: 99). This sympathetic portrayal is an example of the social normalization of transgressive identities, whose excessiveness avoids

simple and clear definitions. The BBC version of the book brings Waters' subversive questioning of categorization of an identity back to the furrows of a melodramatic story. In a sense the film producers re-inscribe Waters' novel within the Victorian melodramatic tradition from which the writer in fact distances herself and contextualizes it as something which might be called a constitutive outside. Lesbianism, in the novel, uses the Victorian setting as a space whose heterosexual binarism is too rigid to take in any ambiguities. Simultaneously however, the setting establishes a network against which transgressive identities write themselves. Hence what Mariaconcetta Costantini sees as –Waters' preference for non-melodramatic modes of representation which is –confirmed by her treatment of gender and sexual matters. The ambiguous identity and the transgressive behaviour of her female protagonists dismantle the binary structures of the Victorian world, which melodrama tended to reinforce (Costantini 2006: 27). The subversion of gender and sex in the novel goes hand in hand with the subversion of literary genres (melodrama, picaresque novel, *bildungsroman*) which are clearly hinted at, though without Waters' participation in them. The text operates in the undecidable sphere of what Jacques Derrida formulated as –the law of the law of genre which is

precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy. In the code of set theories, if I may use it at least figuratively, I would speak of a sort of participation without belonging – a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set. With the inevitable dividing of the trait that marks membership, the boundary of the set comes to form, by invagination, an internal pocket larger than the whole; and the outcome of this division and of this abounding remains as singular as it is limitless. (Derrida and Ronell 1980: 59)

The law of the law of genre is the law which inevitably queers genres, displays them as –unrooted in any natural law, thus opening up not only a critical possibility of questioning genres, but also offering a space for ambiguities and aporias which are inevitably at work in genre constructions. Derrida's –genre trouble is thus in obvious ways translatable into –gender trouble which Judith Butler also reflects upon in terms of a compulsory law in her critique of the normativity of heterosexuality:

[H]eterosexuality offers normative sexual positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody, and the persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence with these positions reveals heterosexuality itself not only as a compulsory law, but as an inevitable comedy. Indeed, I would offer this insight into heterosexuality as both a compulsory system and an intrinsic comedy, a constant parody of itself, as an alternative gay/lesbian perspective. (Butler 1990: 122)

Kitty Butler in Waters's text parodies rather than impersonates them, thus indicating the possibility of masculinity being but –an inevitable comedy. Once such a perspective becomes an alternative, heterosexuality, with its demand for normative sexual positions, also becomes problematized, though along with the problematization of both masculinity and femininity. In this sense Kitty Butler also acts Judith Butler (whose works Sarah Waters, as the author of a PhD on queer historical fiction, knows well), and brings the question of gender trouble to the performative space of both theatrical show and literary fiction.

The filmmakers of *Tipping the Velvet* seem to have fallen into the trap of what Robert McRuer sees as an aspect of –the coming out of the het. evoked in the 1970s by the appearance of

more flexible bodies – gay bodies that no longer mark absolute deviance, heterosexual bodies that are newly on display. The out heterosexual works alongside gay men and lesbians; the more flexible heterosexual body tolerates a certain amount of queerness. The more flexible gay or lesbian body, in turn, enables what I call "heteronormative epiphanies," continually making available, to the out heterosexual, a sense of subjective wholeness, however illusory. (McRuer 2006: 12)

Ed Koch's notorious declaration of his being evidently heterosexual (–I am heterosexual) or Magic Johnson's comment on his HIV-positive status (–I am far from being a homosexual) indicate the consolidation of what McRuer calls –heterosexual community (McRuer 2006: 12). What makes the body of this community more flexible is its seeming tolerance of queerness whose flexibility, in turn, enables the heteronormative epiphanies to posit any kind of homosexuality as oppressive. The gesture of heterosexual coming out parodies the homosexual one and posits the latter as a kind of discourse which undermines the stability of heterosexual norms and involves them in the process of continual crisis. This paradoxical re-normalization, quite ironically, posits the heterosexual community as minority, within which there appears a minority within minority. As McRuer notices:

The spectacle of homosexuality or disability may have obscured a potentially fracturing masculinity or heterosexuality in 1964, but the situation had changed considerably by the late 1990s. Indeed, 1998 might be seen as the Year of the Spectacular Heterosexual. The ex-gay movement, previously a marginal movement at best within the Christian Right, suddenly achieved national prominence, not only with the placement of full-page ads promoting its agenda in newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* (the ads depicted men and women "cured" of their homosexuality), but with unprecedented coverage (of the ad campaign and the movement in general) in the mainstream media. (McRuer 2006: 13)

By positing homosexuality as a kind of curable illness, or disability, the return of the heteronormative through epiphanies creates the out heterosexual bodies which are simultaneously –able-bodied sexual subjects|| (McRuer 2006: 13), the epiphanic moment consisting in the rediscovery of one’s solid identity comparable to an unexpected, or miraculous, overcoming of a disabling illness.

A disabled body is incapable of performing certain activities, and the film version of *Tipping the Velvet* clearly disables lesbian women as incapable of having a ‘normal’ intercourse in which penis penetrates the vagina. In the novel, when Nan learns that Kitty is going to marry Walter, she compares what they did in bed to fucking:

‘I know,’ he said slowly, ‘that you were – sweethearts of a kind’  
 ‘Of a kind. The kind that – what? Hold hands? Did you think, then, that you were the first to have her, in this bed? Didn’t she tell you that I *fuck* her?’ (Waters 1998: 173)

This dialogue is repeated in the film almost word by word. Then there follows Walter’s short reply, which points to the deficiency of the female bodies that makes them unable to ‘normally’ fuck. What the film is silent about is that Nan, in the novel, fully realizes that –fucking|| is not an appropriate word in that context and admits that –the word sounded terrible: I had never said it before, and had not known I was about to use it now|| (173). From her perspective, the relationship with Kitty is not a fake repetition of the standard heterosexual norm, but something which evades naming, even as regards the names of sexual organs. What she finds to be fake is the sex which she practices with Diana in which ‘fucking’ is practiced with a dildo and which posits Diana as a fake heterosexual. The use of the prosthesis of a penis again points to the disability of the female body to function outside the heterosexual model of sexuality. At the same time, however, Diana, by way of making Nan use the fake male sexual organ, also alludes to the fakeness of heterosexual practices, and thus to the crisis of masculinity pure and simple. In this predicament Nan quite gladly uses the terribly sounding words, simultaneously pointing to their inadequacy to the relationship with Kitty:

‘You’re the boldest bitch in the city!’  
 ‘I am!’  
 ‘You’re the boldest bitch, with the cleverest quim. If fucking were a country – well, fuck me, you’d be its queen ...!’  
 These were the words which, pricked on by my mistress, I used now – lewd

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

Lesbian eroticism is not confined to particular bodily parts, and perhaps Waters's –it all...|| is the aptest term that can be given to it. The affinity between lesbian and heterosexual relationship, which the film version of Winterson's novel evokes, creates, as Pauline MacPherson notices, –a space for male heterosexual desire to be placed onto the two women and questions the legitimacy of lesbian desire; it takes away the agency and power of the two women's desire for each other|| (MacPherson 2008: 271). This effect is also achieved through the translation of the lesbian love scenes into a comedic show which Mac Pherson infers from the use of the camera in the film:

[T]he third time the audience sees Nan and Kitty make love, it is interspersed with both women on stage dressed up in red soldiers' uniforms. When the camera looks at the two women making love, the viewer is provided with a speeded up version of events in an unrealistic time frame, and this turns their love-making into a farcical romp. (271)

The comedic tone of the scene de-realizes lesbian love-making while the appearance of the women in red uniforms, farcically, introduces the already mentioned promise of the Harlequin editors saying that –behind every strong woman...there's a strong man|| (see above). The fake soldiers accompanying the women deprive the relationship of any strength, translating lesbian love-making into a fake stage performance of women without strong men. By showing the troubling gender performance in a comedic manner the film –finds itself easily incorporated into the male heterosexual voyeurism in which, as a novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, does not participatel (MacPherson 2008: 274).

What is also straightened in the film is the moral ambiguity of Nan's decisions and actions. As Costantini puts it,

Waters creates an atmosphere of moral ambiguity that escapes classification. It suffices to think of the narrative role assigned to a thief in *Fingersmith* or of Nancy's questionable morality in *Tipping the Velvet*. (Apart from working as a prostitute, Nancy constantly betrays the trust of her family and friends, and looks to them only when she is in dire straits). (Costantini 2006: 29)

The moral ambiguity of the novel is nullified in the film through a hint to the possibility of both Nan's and Florence's seeming acceptance of the heterosexual ideal of domestic life. The final dialogue in the film is quite telling in this respect:

‘Are you ready to meet the family?’

‘If you are.’

What seems to be hinted at is the girls’ return back to the normal, to the family life, to where Nan once belonged. Nan chooses family as the space of belonging, thus making the film’s end into a happy-ending of both melodramatic and comedic kind. The point of Nan’s destination in the novel is different and, as Costantini rightly notices,

After wandering for months in the streets of London without a clear destination, Nancy finds a point of reference in Florence and her cohort, whose relational model is based on mutual assistance and respect for diversity. (Quite significantly, many of the Banners’ friends are lesbians, who do not hide their sexual inclinations.) (Costantini 2006: 30)

The hetero-patriarchal turn in the BBC production may result (as MacPherson sees it comparing the film with the film version of Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*), from the fact that the production team of *Tipping the Velvet* was mostly masculine:

[O]ne of the ways in which *Oranges* can work as a more successful text in subverting cultural notions of societal values is in the way that it was produced by a team of women. When it comes to analysing *Tipping the Velvet*, its predominantly male production team and the influences of postmodernism have made this production more ‘difficult’ in terms of functioning as a subversive format. (MacPherson 2008: 271)

The masculine gaze dominating the film and imposing itself on the viewers may also be seen as resulting from Waters’s attempt at indicating that Victorianism is still strongly present within the contemporary social practices and ideologies. The politics and poetics of the Harlequin series is quite clearly a continuation of the Victorian melodramatic vision of sexuality, which is governed by the phallic vision of the social order in which womanhood is confined to the holy trinity of cooking, cleaning, and care providing. Perhaps ironically, the penis point of view, which the authors of the film explicitly declare in the scenes showing Nan’s practices of oral sex with men, are seen through men’s trouser flies. It is the point of view from which girls may be easily taken for boys, given that the performance satisfies the masculine desire.

One more aspect of the book which the film seems to overlook is the significance of Nan’s origin as an oyster girl from Whitstable. Each of the three parts of the film begins with showing oyster shells on the beach, yet what Whitstable stands for is mainly the indication of Nan’s lower class roots. Nan’s identification with the hyphen in the advertisement which she reads (–Respectible Lady Seeks Fe-Male Lodger... there was something very appealing about that Fe-Male. I saw myself in it—in the hyphen, Waters 1998: 211) locates her within the sphere of androgyny which earlier in the book is ascribed by her father to the oyster. An

oyster –is what you might call a real queer fish—now a he, now a she, as quite takes its fancy. A regular morphodite, in fact! (Waters 1998: 49). Subverting the genre of the novel itself, Waters might be moving toward a more allegorical representation of androgyny as an originary natural state, a state in which ambivalence constitutes the only thinkable epistemological position. Perceiving Nan as a siren, Kitty does not so much raise her to the aesthetic sphere of seductive beauty, as she reminds us of the Victorian return of the question of androgyny through either its divination (Swinburne’s fascination with Blake’s eternal androgyny and the primordial sexlessness in man), or through the Darwinian hypothesis that we all, like oysters, might have come from the sea. Such possible links between Victorian understandings of androgyny and contemporary transgender identities, which Waters also explores in her novel, do not constitute the celebration of women offered by the Harlequin series. They do not seem to be of much interest to producers of the film either.

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