

**Those Very ‘Other’ Victorians:
Interrogating Neo-Victorian Feminism in
*The Journal of Dora Damage***

Caterina Novák

(University of Vienna, Austria)

Abstract:

This paper focuses on Belinda Starling’s *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2006), one of the most detailed and outspoken depictions of Victorian sexuality in recent years, drawing an exaggerated picture of sexual deviance smouldering under a thin veneer of repressed respectability. Focusing on issues such as pornography, rape, child abuse, and the sexual liberation of women in a patriarchal society, it is, on one level, little more than a feminist attack on Victorian hypocrisy and on a social system which fostered an ideal of femininity that denied women access to meaningful economic occupations and sexual agency. On a second level, however, the novel can be read both as a commentary on contemporary debates, and as a critical reevaluation of the validity of offloading such concerns onto the Victorians. Implicating its readers in voyeuristic enjoyment of Victorian perversion, *The Journal of Dora Damage* constitutes a self-consciously parodical interrogation of the feminist politics of neo-Victorian women’s fiction more generally.

Keywords: deviance, feminism, *The Journal of Dora Damage*, neo-Victorianism, parody, sexuality, Belinda Starling, voyeurism.

Few readers would dispute the observation that neo-Victorian fiction abounds in certain stock themes and motifs – a fact already noted by Christian Gutleben in his seminal 2001 study, *Nostalgic Postmodernism*, and popularised by the “Little Professor’s” [aka Miriam Burstein’s] tongue-in-cheek blog-list of ‘Rules for Writing Neo-Victorian Novels’. Yet too strong an emphasis on this point proves highly reductive and hardly does justice to individual works. Nonetheless, it is similarly unprofitable to dismiss the suggestion out-of-hand or to downplay its significance. Indeed, the near ubiquity of certain key tropes is by no means a disadvantage, providing as it does a rich breeding ground for intertextual allusions and metatextual self-parody. Somewhat surprisingly, however, this aspect of neo-Victorian literature has hitherto received scant attention: for instance,

reviews of Gary Dexter's *The Oxford Despoiler* (2009), which features the incongruous Sherlock Holmes rip-off Henry St. Liver and his female sidekick Olive Salter, focus exclusively on the way in which the book parodies its *nineteenth*-century model. In contrast, no mention is made of the unsubtle way in which Dexter's "sexsational" (Kohlke 2006) extravaganza functions as a neo-Victorian self-parody, blatantly ridiculing the passion for prying into the private lives of the Victorians evinced by many neo-Victorian novels.

While offering a rich source of amusement for an audience attuned to the conventions of the genre, such works inevitably also contribute to the ongoing discussion on the gender politics of neo-Victorian fiction. This becomes evident especially in more elaborate and multifaceted parodies, such as Belinda Starling's posthumously published debut novel *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2006). The novel's outspoken, unconventional narrator – a lower-middle-class Victorian housewife (who later becomes a book binder), anachronistically imbued with the tenets of twentieth-century feminism – makes it a noteworthy example of feminist neo-Victorian fiction, which has already attracted a fair amount of critical attention. While my analysis to some extent engages in a dialogue with existing work on the novel, its emphasis lies on the way in which *Dora Damage* can be read both as a straightforward example of neo-Victorian feminist fiction and as a parody of the genre, in the sense of exaggerating and commenting on many of its key characteristics and offering an important contribution to the debate surrounding its feminist political credentials.¹

As Linda Hutcheon argues in her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, "[p]arody is a perfect postmodern form, in some sense, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies", thus allowing "an artist to speak *to* a discourse from *within* it, but without being totally recuperated by it" and offering "a repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (Hutcheon 1991: 11, 35, 26). As will be outlined in this article, such a reading of *Dora Damage* raises a number of questions. Does neo-Victorian fiction really expose the extent to which Victorian views on social and sexual issues have endured into our time (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 107)? Or does *Dora Damage*, by rather pointedly refusing to engage with contemporary concerns (Kohlke 2008: 200), point to neo-Victorianism's failure in this regard? Does the transposition of present-day issues into the

Victorian era provide a valid arena for their discussion, or is it merely an instance of ‘othering’ the Victorians (Moore 2008: 140)? Is it possible to combine the overt political agenda of feminist neo-Victorianism with a shrewd eye for the marketplace? Or are these books merely the work of writers who, like Dora, know “how to make a buck from a book” (Starling 2006: 444), attempting to justify their “sexual touristy” (Loesberg 2007: 364) by a sprinkling of superficial feminist and post-colonial criticism?² While these are fitting questions to ask of the text, their significance extends far beyond *The Journal of Dora Damage* and may be applied to the entire project of neo-Victorian feminism.

1. **Unclothing Dora: Ambiguities, Paradoxes, Layers of Meaning**

On the surface, *The Journal of Dora Damage*³ – narrated by the eponymous heroine – adheres to the well-established neo-Victorian trope of an unconventional woman beating patriarchy at its own game. When Dora’s husband Peter is incapacitated by rheumatism and a growing dependency on the opium he takes to relieve the pain, she takes over his book-binding business in a valiant attempt to rescue her family from impending penury. Her artistic bindings, in which she unites her ‘feminine’ skills in embroidery with more traditional crafts, soon attract the custom of the sinisterly ludicrous Mr. Diprose, a self-styled ‘procurer’ of books to a club of high-ranking noblemen with a predilection for pornography, who call themselves the *Sauvages Nobles*. Dora is initially commissioned to bind relatively innocuous material, such as *Fanny Hill* (1748-49) or the *Decameron* (ca. 1350). However, as their business association progresses, the volumes grow ever more offensive, depicting sadistic practices with an – as Mr Diprose has it – “*ethnographic* [i.e. racist] bent” (Starling 2006: 181, original emphasis). However, when Dora tries to decline further commissions of this kind, it is made clear to her that she is in no position to refuse. The remainder of the book is devoted to Dora’s valiant attempt to break free of the *Sauvages Nobles* and to protect her epileptic daughter Lucinda from falling into their power.

Despite Dora’s success, the novel rejects the possibility of a smug feminist interpretation. With “finely honed irony” it defies a straightforward reading of its heroine, or any other woman in the book, as either an innocent victim of or victor over Victorian patriarchy, as Dora remains implicated in and indeed profits from the gender- and race-based injustices she sets out to

combat (Kohlke 2008: 197). However, this is not the only element of ambiguity within the novel. Its playfully parodic subversion of neo-Victorian discourses becomes apparent in the inconsistency with which it approaches its central themes. In particular, the overtly feminist perspective of the narrator clashes with the markedly conservative elements of the plot. The depiction of Dora as a courageous and resourceful woman of strong feminist convictions, who singlehandedly rescues her husband's failing business, protects her epileptic daughter from falling into the hands of the medical profession, and secures the livelihood of her family against enormous odds stands in stark contrast to the climactic scene: abducted by Diprose and kept captive at Sir Jocelyn Knightley's house, the heroine is unexpectedly cast as a damsel in distress who has to be rescued by her African-American lover Din Nelson. In the end, she only manages to rid herself of Diprose with the help of two men – Din, who holds him in check with a spear, and Knightley, who convinces her to chloroform him, knowing that she will inadvertently kill him in the process. Thereafter, she is taken home by Din, who also rescues Lucinda, and subsequently protected from prosecution by Sir Jocelyn.⁴

The epilogue, ostensibly written by her daughter Lucinda in 1902, further undermines the feminist stance of the novel. When Dora's homosexual apprentice Jack and her maid Pansy get married, the reader is told that this "made perfect sense to them and us all", because Pansy's "barrenness is no obstacle to someone of his proclivities" (Starling 2006: 442). Somewhat surprisingly, whether or not "his proclivities" might prove an "obstacle" to Pansy's married happiness remains a moot point. The decision of Dora and Knightley's cast-off wife, Lady Sylvia, to live together "comfortably without the need to seek out a man on whom to depend, by whom to be owned", depicted as a conscious choice in the novel, is reinterpreted in the epilogue as a sign that "neither of them quite got over the men they loved but could not have" (Starling 2006: 431, 442). While the book undeniably presents the bleakest of views of matrimony, for women a sustaining same-sex relationship (though seemingly non-sexual) is cast as a second-best option in the absence of Mr Right. It is also revealed that Dora, in spite of the artistic quality of her bindings, apparently regards her work as an economic necessity rather than as a source of creative self-expression, and she happily hands over the business to her husband's former apprentice after his release from prison. Jack rescues the failing fortunes of the bindery

and manages to stay on the right side of the law in his business ventures, thereby implying that it does indeed take a man to run a business successfully, at least in the Victorian era. Not surprisingly in the light of these contradictions, critics appear divided about the novel's political credentials, either arguing that it "probe[s] the continuity of sexual and social configurations in the present" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 107) and "investigate[s] pornography as a contemporary feminist issue" (Muller 2012b: 115) or, in contrast, asserting that it "contains little in the way of implicit engagement with present-day issues" (Kohlke 2008: 200).

More significant, however, is the extent to which *Dora Damage* appears to invite an approach that focuses on its inconsistencies, self-consciously drawing attention to what ostensibly constitutes its "obvious weaknesses" (Starling 2006: 1). The reader is alerted to the novel's inherent ambiguity in both its opening and closing passages. In the former, Dora notes that her book is open to two different interpretations: it will either turn into a "serious" book, or it may "jump out of my hand, waggle its finger at me and tease me about the events I am trying to make sense of" (Starling 2006: 2). In the closing passages, Dora explicitly describes her book as "a mockery" (Starling 2006: 425); yet even if these words seem to refer only to its binding, the beginning of the novel, with its memorable assertion that "[t]his is my first book, [...] and it will be the first book I have ever written, too" have already prepared the reader not to make too fine a distinction between the book's cover and its contents (Starling 2006: 1). This is reinforced when Dora refers to the legend of St. Bartholomew, according to which the contents and the binding of a book are said to directly depend on each other. Similarly, the contents of the books she is commissioned to bind determine the binding that she will choose.

While the narrator frequently reiterates the notion that a book's cover often reflects its contents, it is also repeatedly stressed that the binding may serve as a disguise. As Mr Diprose explains: "Sometimes [...] I will command the most plain, unobtrusive binding to act as a shackle and protector for the more mischievous literature, to prevent it leaping off the shelf at the less knowledgeable reader" (Starling 2006: 113). This ambivalence is subtly highlighted when, at the end of the introductory chapter, the narrator remarks that the unusual binding of her book "conceals the contents of [her] heart, as clearly as if [she] had cut it open with a scalpel for the anatomists to read" (Starling 2006: 2), an assertion that,

while ostensibly laying claim to the utmost truth and honesty in her presentation of the narrative, also asks the reader to accept the paradox that the book "conceals" its contents "clearly".

The passage also establishes a metaphoric link between body and text that is reiterated throughout the novel, for instance in Mr Diprose's instructions to Dora on how to "clothe" the books he commissions "in suitably pleasing *habillé*" (Starling 2006: 113-114).⁵ Finally, the metaphor is reversed as Diprose offers Sir Jocelyn the opportunity to deflower Lucinda, reminding him that "there's no pleasure like the plowing of a first edition" (Starling 2006: 412). A similar reversal is attempted when Sir Jocelyn sends gifts of clothing and accessories to his bookbinder (Kohlke 2008: 197; Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 133). Dora, however, manages to avoid the trap, just as she will later avoid being made into a gruesome book cover herself; rather than being bound to Sir Jocelyn through his gifts and using them to 'bind' her body to his fancy, she converts them into fanciful bindings for her books.

The conflation of body and text finds its continuance in the cover design of Dora's memoir which, in the novel, is made from an old dress she wore during her courtship: the act of opening the book thus becomes equated with the act of undressing the narrator. The published version adds an even more overtly sexualised twist, featuring a woman's torso, tightly laced into a corset and seen from the back, so that the binding is exposed to the reader's gaze (Kohlke 2008: 196; Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 108). The design, moreover, highlights the ambivalent relationship that is established between the nineteenth-century narrator and the twenty-first-century reader. On the one hand, the symbolic act of opening the corset that is equated with opening the book's cover 'liberates' the Victorian woman within.⁶ On the other hand, however, it also constitutes an act that unsettlingly compounds violation (emphasised through Dora's earlier cited allusion to the surgeon's scalpel) and licensed voyeurism, as the reader opens the 'clothing' of Dora's memoir to gain access to the 'naked' truth about her life. Given this, the novel seems to simultaneously criticise the objectification of women while inviting the reader to vicariously enjoy the pleasures of the Victorian sex trade; the reader is thus from the very outset placed in an equivocal position.⁷ This element of ambiguity and paradox also informs many of the novel's (ostensibly) feminist arguments, and opens

up further avenues of investigation into *Dora Damage*'s – and, by extension, the neo-Victorian novel's – conflicted gender politics.

2. Parodic Exaggeration, Anachronism and Intertextuality

The novel manages its tightrope walk between politically engaged feminist fiction and neo-Victorian parody by “recycl[ing] many recognisable, by now standard neo-Victorian tropes – the oppressed woman, sensationalised sexuality, threats of madness, Gothic villains, slavery” (Kohlke 2008: 201). Starling, however, embellishes these tropes and mobilises them with a lavishness that hints at exaggerated mimicry rather than at some form of adherence to established genre conventions.⁸ In particular, this applies to the extent to which the novel follows the sensationalising and sexsationalising bent of neo-Victorian fiction also evident in the work of other authors such as Sarah Waters or Michel Faber.⁹ However, *Dora Damage* is set apart by the sheer quantity and range of sexual tastes and practices featured in the text, transforming it into a veritable freak show of Victorian sexual deviance: hetero- and homosexuality, sadomasochism, fetishism, sodomy, rape (followed by a botched abortion), and the threat of child abuse and genital mutilation feature along Peter Damage's near-pathological aversion to sex on hygienic grounds. It is in the depiction of the *Sauvages Nobles*, however, that Starling's taste for exaggerated sexsationalism appears most striking. For example, during a visit to Sir Jocelyn's house Starling has the heroine wonder “who had fucked what of the feast that spread between them”, and this query is followed by a detailed catalogue of the Noble Savages' perversions (Starling 2006: 239).

Hence, where other novels offer titillating titbits about the ‘other Victorians’, *Dora Damage* provides a surfeit of sex more likely to cloy than to satisfy the reader's appetite for voyeuristic enjoyment. In addition, the narrator takes evident delight in extensive quotes from Victorian pornography calculated to appear ludicrous rather than lascivious to the twenty-first-century reader. In particular, *Dora* exhibits an evident fascination with the Victorians' unusual euphemisms for sex, focusing on those calculated to strike the modern reader as the most bizarre: “*gamahuching, firkydoodling, bagpiping, lallygagging, or minetting*” (Starling 2006: 163, original emphasis). A similar predilection for the grotesque becomes evident in details such as the book's frequent allusions to the macabre (and historical) Necropolitan Railway, Mrs Eeles's collection

of dead children's portraits, or the gruesome descriptions of Dora's mother's and husband's last illnesses.¹⁰ The fact that most of this information has little or no bearing on the plot further suggests a parodic exaggeration of the sensationalist trope designed to draw attention to itself. As such, this aspect of Starling's novel offers a clever critique of neo-Victorian fiction's tendency to increase its market value and audience appeal by the inclusion of ever more shocking revelations about the Victorians, even as it lays itself open to the same charge.

The novel's sexsationalising tendency is carried over into its depiction of the oppression of women and racial others. Like many other examples of the genre, *Dora Damage* is scathing in its indictment of Victorian hypocrisy, ostensibly exposing and retrospectively righting past wrongs. For example, Sir Jocelyn's vain, superficial and exaggeratedly egotistic wife is a caricature rather than an accurate depiction of a Victorian society woman that appears deliberately designed to deflect the reader's sympathies and serve as a foil for Dora. An even stronger tendency towards exaggeration becomes apparent in the novel's male, white, heterosexual characters, who are uniformly steeped in racist and misogynist ideologies depicted as characteristic of the era. Unlike Sylvia, who is to some extent presented as a victim of her upbringing and circumstances and rehabilitated by her 'conversion' to feminism by the end of the narrative, for the most part men in the novel are utterly devoid of redeeming qualities. Even Dora's husband – the least obviously 'evil' of the white heterosexual men in the novel – proves weak, cowardly, and given to pompous speeches on the innate inferiority of women. Nonetheless, he compares favourably with the ruthless Mr Diprose, his lecherous assistant Mr Pizzy, or the perverted and hypocritical *Sauvages Nobles*.

In an afterword, Belinda Starling reveals the historical sources for some of the action and characters in her book.¹¹ Implicitly, however, this account, while apparently laying claim to historical authenticity, also highlights the extent to which *Dora Damage* 'improves' on its historical models in what appears to be a determined attempt to 'blackwash' the Victorians. For instance, Lady Sylvia's "Ladies' Society for the Assistance of Fugitives from Slavery" (Starling 2006: 132), criticised (with some claim to historical accuracy) because of its hypocrisy, superficiality and blindness to the lot of the London poor, is also shown to sexually exploit the American slaves it has smuggled to England. Starling's club of high-class

libertines, while modelled on the historical Cannibal Club, is made to appear even more inhuman when Starling renames it with ironic reference to Rousseau (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 131). When Dora's employers threaten to have a clitoridectomy performed on Lucinda if her mother does not continue in their employment, the novel implies that such operations were established medical practice in mid-nineteenth-century England, "increasingly recognised by eminent surgeons in such widely differing cases as dysuria, hysteria, sterility and epilepsy" (Starling 2006: 237-238). The afterword, in contrast, reveals that this was merely an idiosyncratic and isolated suggestion by one Dr. Isaac Baker Brown, and was "vehemently rejected by much of the medical profession, [so that] Dr Baker Brown was vilified and forced out of the London Gynaecological Society" (Starling 2006: 448).

The clitoridectomy episode is emblematic of the exaggeratedly claustrophobic image of Victorian society constructed by the novel. It describes a vicious circle in which Victorian society is governed by two sets of laws, "and curiously enough, they are set by the same people" (Starling 2006: 364), namely people who clearly know how to set off one set of rules against the other in order to keep the narrator in submission. Dora may be acting in defiance of Victorian laws when she binds pornographic texts; however, she still has to conform to the rules set by the Noble Savages, themselves representatives of the law-giving establishment, one being a judge and others politicians. Moreover, discourses about sexuality – both official 'scientific' and illicitly pornographic ones – are shown to be a means of exerting power: the Noble Savages exploit their knowledge about Lucinda's epilepsy, thought to stem from sexual causes, to keep her mother in line. When Dora, appalled at the barbarity of the proposed operation, casts doubts on its legality and declares her intention of alerting the police to the club's pornography racket, she is assured that "the police will be convinced of the necessity of the operation, when they discover her mother's fascination with sordid texts, and will make the appropriate equation that heightened sexuality is an inheritable trait" (Starling 2006: 238). From the outset, Dora shows herself to be keenly aware of the power of patriarchal language to keep women submissive:

[M]en don't often get locked up, not for madness, even though there are more mad men than women. Madness is a

female word. "It's a madness" they say, like it's a governess, or a seamstress, or a murderess. There's no male equivalent, no such word as "madner". I should start saying it, but then they might lock me up. (Starling 2006: 11)

Even Lady Sylvia, initially on the side of the patriarchal oppressors, discovers the might of medical discourses when her husband spreads the rumour that she has gone mad after the birth of a deformed child, effectively isolating her from her former society acquaintances and driving her to seek shelter at Dora's house.

However, Dora's awareness of the means by which a patriarchal society exerts power over women is not confined to linguistic matters. Another major issue is the male gaze which, in the novel, is "harnessed to racial and sexual violence and cloaked in the guise of science" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 106). Once again, however, the novel's treatment of the "Foucauldian theme" common to neo-Victorian fiction is anything but subtle (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 111). Like Nan King in *Tipping the Velvet*, Dora finds London "a city where girls walked only to be gazed at" (Waters 1999: 191). While Nan, however, comments on this issue only briefly, Dora goes out of the way to pinpoint the manifold ways in which women find themselves the objects of the male gaze: "A woman's life could never truly lack visibility, no matter how high or low her rank: women who went to market were exhibits; women who never went to market were exhibited at balls and parties instead" (Starling 2006: 97). Throughout the novel, the narrator records being watched or fears that she may be making 'a spectacle' of herself. Whenever she leaves her workshop, she becomes acutely aware of men watching her as she walks through the streets or rides on the omnibus. Putting on the finery provided by Sir Jocelyn in her own bedroom, she feels herself being observed through the window by a man in the street, while later, she discovers that the Noble Savages employ spies to continually watch the goings-on at the bindery.

However, in a society in which respectability and social status depend on "how folk see you" (Starling 2006: 267), it is not merely the male gaze that determines women's lives: alongside gender, class is an issue addressed through the scopic regime depicted in the novel. Summoned by Lady Knightley, who "expresses a desire to see her" and commands "Let me see you!", Dora finds herself exposed to the objectifying gaze of a woman

significantly above her in social rank (Starling 2006: 129). Later, it is the gaze of her neighbours who, as Dora points out, “read” her body as she conducts her bookbinding business and ironically misread her as a prostitute, that leads to her social isolation (Starling 2006: 392). Even though her preoccupation with seeing and being seen is to some extent justifiable in the context of the plot, and is in keeping with neo-Victorian genre conventions, *Dora Damage* differs from other novels in the degree of attention that the narrator gives to this issue, at times making Dora appear almost paranoid.

The novel also bears witness to Dora’s attempts to subvert the power of the gaze. Throughout the novel, she determinedly looks at things which are deemed unsuitable for female eyes, trying to reverse the power structures implicit in the gaze by transgressing established boundaries. For example, on her way to Diprose’s shop, she is fascinated by pornographic prints displayed in a shop window, and later on she examines Knightley’s anatomical model and, of course, peruses the pornographic texts she is commissioned to bind. During her first meeting with Sir Jocelyn, she looks longer at him than is in keeping with the demands of decorum, and describes him in terms that objectify the scientist as a male sex object. Of her meeting with Lady Sylvia, too, she remarks that “it was her I wanted to see – and not be seen by” (Starling 2006: 129). Later on, she becomes an eye-witness to one of the Noble Savages’ illicit dinner parties, yet as several critics have noted, her attempts to arrogate the gaze ultimately turn out to be unsuccessful and her visual knowledge of the club members’ sexual fantasies gives her no power over them. Rather, their knowledge of her position as an unwilling voyeur fuels their exhibitionist sexual pleasure: like the role of “Mistress Venus”, the Victorian dominatrix armed with birch rods – “just another job for just another browbeaten woman” (Starling 2006: 220) – that of “Mistress Bindress” entails only an “artificially bestowed power” (Starling 2006: 220), accorded to her by men in order to gratify their sexual appetites (Muller 2012b: 127; Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 133).

Towards the end of the text, Dora briefly suggests that the power of the (male) gaze in Victorian society, while it cannot be avoided, might be used for women’s empowerment rather than for their subjugation. After breaking off her business association with Diprose, she considers for a moment giving away the blank silk-bound albums and fancy pocket-books she intended for sale at a high-class stationer’s to the women of the

neighbourhood instead. This passage once again invokes the conflation of body and text and brings together Dora's twin preoccupations with the gaze and the power of language: like "a Victorian H  l  ne Cixous" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 140), she mentally exhorts her neighbours to write:

Your dreams [...]. Your thoughts. Your fantasies. Yours, and yours alone. Not constructed for you by Mr Eeles, Mr Marrow, Mr Bishop and Mr Negley, dead or alive. Author your own body. Walk your own text. Is it not constantly being read anyway, every time you walk up the street? (Starling 2006: 392)

As so often, however, the novel playfully subverts its feminist agenda, as Dora abandons the idea almost immediately and sells the albums instead.

Similarly, the description of Dora's love affair with Din Nelson at first appears to constitute the only viable alternative to the power structures mapped out by the male gaze (Muller 2012b: 128). Din's position as a black ex-slave puts him on par with Dora, especially since both of them are sexually exploited by a member of the Knightley couple. While Dora binds Sir Jocelyn's pornographic books, Din poses half naked for the delectation of Sir Jocelyn's wife, and he is the only heterosexual man in the text not implicated in the patriarchal oppression of women. In keeping with his position on the side of the oppressed rather than the oppressors, Din is also the only man who does not possess the male gaze that conveys power over women. Hence when Dora, on their first meeting, forces herself to look him squarely in the eye in order to assert her authority in the workshop, she finds that he cannot reciprocate because of a permanent injury to his left eye. Nadine Muller argues that in its description of Din and Dora's relationship, "Starling's novel successfully overwrites the male gaze to which Dora is subjected by *Les Sauvages Nobles*" when Din, during sex, "literally shares his view of Dora with Dora" (Muller 2012b: 128, original emphasis). It is worth pointing out, however that *Dora Damage* again subtly undermines its feminist argument, given the wording of the passage: Din "looks back into [Dora's] eyes as if he could transfer the image to [her] that way" (Starling 2006: 373, added emphasis). In other words, this passage already contains an implicit admission of the impossibility of such a reversal. In addition, the apparent overthrow of established power structures is confined to an

individual, very private, and extremely short-lived context, and offers no generally applicable solution.

As outlined above, Dora proves acutely aware of the scopic regime of Victorian society. Throughout the novel, she draws attention to and analyses her own position as the object of the gaze in a way that signals a degree of awareness and familiarity with Foucauldian theory hardly imaginable for a nineteenth-century women. This is only one aspect, however, in which the narrative voice of Starling's novel shows itself to be determinedly un-Victorian, a long-standing tradition within neo-Victorian writing begun as far back as Michael Sadleir's *Fanny by Gaslight* (1940) and continued in more recent examples such as Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1999). Like Sadleir's Fanny Hooper and Waters's Nan King, Dora is markedly 'modern' both in her vocabulary and the freedom with which she speaks about subjects generally presumed to have been taboo for Victorian women. Starling departs from established precedent, however, by repeatedly attributing insights and opinions to her Victorian heroine which are wildly out of keeping with her historical as well as personal background. For instance, Dora's endorsement of established notions of femininity and decorum inculcated by her mother, a former governess, are at odds with her ready acceptance of her employees' sexual aberrations (Kohlke 2008: 199), as well as her admiration for her landlady's transgression of gendered behaviour norms.¹² More generally, she comments on and critiques women's roles in Victorian society in a way that suggests a postmodern rather than a nineteenth-century frame of reference.

A related issue is Dora's occasionally surprising erudition: she quotes widely from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English literature, confesses to a passion for history and philosophy, possesses unexpected facts about opium and has even read Cardinal Manning on the subject, gives an anachronistic, mock-Freudian interpretation of Jack's homosexuality, knows enough Latin to solve the mystery of her employers' pen-names and the gruesome secret of the 'leather' (actually human skin) she is instructed to use for a special binding, and recognises passages from Ovid.¹³ Even though we are told that her mother was a governess, some of these accomplishments certainly do not rank among the usual requirements for this profession. In other words, again Starling exaggerates a standard neo-Victorian trope, namely that of the bookish, over-educated and emancipated heroine that is intended to facilitate readerly identification in a way

glaringly at odds with the dictates of strict historical realism or psychologically consistent characterisation.¹⁴ By refusing to give a credible explanation for Dora's opinions and education, Starling's novel foregrounds the question of historical authenticity raised by this technique, and highlights the extent to which novels like hers present a picture of the Victorian era that appears deliberately constructed to hold up a mirror to contemporary society, rather than to faithfully depict nineteenth-century aesthetics, gender politics, social codes, mores and so forth. *Dora Damage*'s anachronistic dimensions are particularly apparent in the novel's treatment of race and gender. Dora's decision to give up working for the Noble Savages after seeing a depiction of Saartje Baartman (infamously labelled the 'Hottentot Venus') is one of the examples where "Starling tries too hard for political correctness" on issues of race and imperialism, attributing a heightened sensibility to her characters which Victorians were unlikely to have possessed, or to have expressed in the terms used in the novel (Kohlke, 2008: 198).¹⁵ The same is true of the even more numerous instances which over-emphasise the novel's feminist leanings, giving scope to Starling's evident delight in incongruous anachronism. The most noticeable case is the novel's playful referencing of twentieth-century feminist theory.¹⁶ While it is certainly not unusual to find echoes of Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous or Luce Irigaray in neo-Victorian fiction, *Dora Damage* is notable for the extent to which its Victorian narrator herself comes to share these theorists' insights and positions.

While it may be something of an over-interpretation to regard the novel's many blatant inconsistencies as a nod in the direction of Cixous and the unashamedly self-contradictory nature of her work, there are a number of surprising links between *Dora Damage* and the French feminists. The theme of the female body as text (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 108 and 133-139), which dominates Dora's narrative, is reminiscent of the close connection between women's writing, female sexuality and the female body that pervades the writings of Cixous and Irigaray (Moi 1985, 121 and 145f.; Tong 1989, 225; Irigaray 1985b: 28-29). Moreover, the link between identity and sexuality is underlined in fairly un-Victorian terms when Dora, speaking of her clitoris, says: "This was the seat of my new-found sexuality. [...] This was where I had found myself" (Starling 2006: 407).

On the other hand, the novel's "intertextual exuberance" (Kohlke 2008: 200) features a ludic subtext that jars disconcertingly with its

Victorian setting, constructed of what appears to be a range of tongue-in-cheek allusions to the work of renown French feminists. For example, in a love scene between Din and Dora, Starling takes up Irigaray's notion of the speculum as an instrument of patriarchal philosophy incapable of providing men with insight into women, because it relies on a concave mirror, which only ever reflects the beholder (Irigaray 1985a: 133ff.; also Tong 1989, 227). Fittingly and somewhat subversively then, when Din places a candle between the narrator's legs and gazes at her most intimate parts, it is not he who sees himself reflected in her, but rather she who attempts to see her own reflection in his eyes. Even while she has to concede that "I learnt [...] that men have the better view" (Starling 2006: 373), the scene counters Irigaray's argument that men, following the Freudian tradition, inevitably regard women as the sex defined by the absence of the penis, the sex with, as she famously put it, "*rien a voir*" (Irigaray 1985b: 54, original emphasis). Moreover, Dora's account of their love-making also deconstructs the opposition, so dear to the French feminists, of male sexuality as unified and goal-oriented and female sexuality as cyclic and diffuse. Exploring the many ways in which her touch gives delight to her lover, Dora observes that she "learned that there is always one more part of the body for the tongue to probe, for the fingers to engage" (Starling 2006: 373). The highly ironic implication, of course, is that a woman can avoid many of the sources of discontent voiced by Irigaray on philosophical and psychological grounds, by finding a sufficiently sensitive sexual partner.

The sex scenes between Din and Dora also take up speculations on the unspeakability of female sexual pleasure made by Jacques Derrida, Irigaray and Cixous, while additionally providing Starling with an opportunity to highlight the crucial difference between the pornographic volumes commissioned by the Noble Savages and 'true' love. When Dora, during her first sexual encounter with Din, tries to use the language of the pornographic books she has been reading in order to express her feelings, she ends up feeling nothing instead. The passage certainly reveals, as Muller has argued, "*pornography's* feminist failures" to embrace women's experience (Muller 2012b: 122, added emphasis). However, it goes a step further, exposing, in fact, a failure of phallogocentric discourse (to use Derrida's rather than Dora's term) in general, not only showing it to be incapable of expressing female *jouissance*, but even to be its enemy. In *Dora Damage*, female sexual pleasure can only be experienced in the

absence of its linguistic expression, because language is controlled by a male establishment which denies even the possibility of its existence on any terms other than as fuel for men's voyeuristic enjoyment. This is why Dora's exaggerated mimicry of the discourses of Victorian pornography fails to achieve its desired effect. It is only when Din convinces her to accept the inexpressibility of her feelings and to lie still instead of attempting to verbalise them that the encounter turns into a positive, indeed ecstatic, experience: "I do not have a name for what we did [...]. It was ferocious, and it was lyrical, and we did it, wordlessly and without name, [...] long into the afternoon" (Starling 2006: 62).

These scenes provide a mocking commentary on the central tenets of second-wave feminism yet, in both cases, it is only by relying on male assistance that Dora is able to escape the feminine subject position mapped out for her. It is worth noting, moreover, that these passages offer surprisingly facile solutions to problems addressed by the French feminists, and a similar tendency becomes apparent in many of the areas where Dora's life intersects with that of twenty-first-century women. Hence, for example, the problem of reconciling the conflicting demands of parenting, housework, carer responsibilities, and a career in the novel is solved by the almost miraculous appearance of Pansy, Dora's devoted and highly efficient maid-of-all-work. The way in which Starling makes short shrift of Dora's more mundane problems, while devoting extensive scope to the solution to those less likely to provide points of identification for contemporary readers – such as being abducted by a ring of high-class pornographers and forcibly tattooed across the buttocks preparatory to being made into a book cover – seems calculated either to deny the reality of these concerns, or the suitability of neo-Victorian fiction to address them.¹⁷ Only at the end of the novel does Dora truly learn to speak for herself, as she begins to write in the first book she has ever bound. It is "a mockery of leather, silk and gold", enigmatically entitled "MOIV BIBLL" – ironically, the accidental result of her first attempt to engrave the title of one of the master narratives of Western patriarchy, the *Holy Bible* (Starling 2006: 425). The title is symbolic of her initial unwilling rebellion against patriarchy, which is to say that, just as she does not intentionally attempt to 'unwrite' the Bible, she does not initially intend to subvert Victorian gender roles. At the same time, the unusual title indicates that she has finally found words that lie outside the constraints of patriarchal language and control. What initially appears a

feminist triumph, however, once again is given a subtle twist when the reader learns that *Dora's* memoir is finally published only after her death in 1902, so that rather than finding a means of speaking out against the race- and gender-based injustices of the Victorian period, *Dora's* voice can only be heard in post-Victorian times when many of these injustices, the epilogue implies, have already become a thing of the past.

3. Conclusions: The Politics of Parody

Taking these various textual elements into consideration, it becomes clear that *Dora Damage* invites two utterly different but complementary readings. The first of these would identify with a courageous feminist heroine and relish her triumph over Victorian patriarchy, while willing to discount the novel's inconsistencies as the forgivable faults of an otherwise commendable first effort.¹⁸ However another, perhaps more knowing reading would be alert to the many double-edged ironies contained in the narrative, such as the many intertextual allusions and metatextual games that *Dora Damage* plays with the reader. These include the way in which the novel raises issues that might well resonate with contemporary readers, only to undermine its own ostensible political engagement by offering incongruous or unlikely answers to the same. These ironies also comprise the novel's anachronistic referencing of twentieth-century feminisms, its exaggeration of stock neo-Victorian tropes and themes, and its approach to characterisation that sometimes comes close to caricature. They further comprise an afterword that ostensibly lays claim to historical authenticity while paradoxically exposing the novel's many inaccuracies and exaggerations, and finally its partial deconstruction of its own feminist argument.

By means of such ploys, *Dora Damage* takes a significant step beyond the critique of isolated aspects of neo-Victorianism implicit in Michel Faber's treatment of the Victorian sex trade or Tasha Alexander's metatextual musings in her *Lady Emily* series (2005-2013) about "neo-Victorianism's 're-production' of the nineteenth-century past" (Muller 2012a: 106). Starling's novel, like Alexander's crime series or Angela Carter's much earlier *Nights at the Circus* (1984), certainly "provid[es] a tongue in cheek comment on the ever-frustrated desire about authenticity that neo-Victorianism invokes" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 108). I would argue, however, that it also has much more far-reaching implications

for the political aspects of this desire. The novel's incongruously 'modern' narrator demonstrates that neo-Victorian fiction can assume political responsibility only at the cost of reinventing the Victorians, back-grounding real personal and political concerns of the era, and addressing problems from perspectives much more relevant to our own century. As such, feminist neo-Victorian fiction, while undeniably giving a voice to those marginalised in the Victorian period, gives them a voice they would never have possessed and risks transforming them into faux-Victorian ventriloquist dummies for the concerns and opinions of a twenty-first century audience (Davies 2012: 7 and 18f.).

As *Dora Damage* shows through its replication of the discourses that it ostensibly sets out to critique, even the most self-critically parodic texts remain implicated in the literary practices they denounce. As Hutcheon pertinently reminds us, "[p]arody is fundamentally double and divided" (Hutcheon 1988: 35). The novel demonstrates that parody is a form of "textual dialogism", which constitutes "one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity" (Hutcheon 1985: 22, 2). Taking this definition to new heights, *Dora Damage* proves both a feminist neo-Victorian novel and a "general parody" of the feminist neo-Victorian novel (Rose 1979: 17). As a meta-neo-Victorian commentary on its own genre, *Dora Damage*, in true metafictional fashion, could be said to "includ[e] and constitut[e]" its "own first critical commentary", and can only do so by deliberately incurring its own criticism (Hutcheon 1985: 3). The novel directly confronts this paradox, placing its narrator in a similarly ambiguous position as she simultaneously criticises and profits from the exploitative practices of the Victorian pornography market.

By parodying the very neo-Victorian trends to which it at the same time adheres, *Dora Damage* confronts the possibilities and pitfalls of politically engaged neo-Victorianism, highlighting the double act of appropriation that it performs in adapting the Victorians to its own political and commercial ends. Studded with anachronisms and exaggerations, Starling's elaborate parody forces readers to acknowledge that politically engaged neo-Victorian fiction inevitably becomes caught between the conflicting demands of historical authenticity, marketability and its political agendas. Its parodic dimension does not invalidate the novel's – or, by extension, neo-Victorianism's – feminist credentials. It does, however, draw attention to the tensions and contradictions underlying its project, calling for

a self-critically metatextual dimension within neo-Victorian feminist fiction that denies itself a sense of smug satisfaction at our supposed superiority over the Victorians, or at the success of such writing's political mission.

Notes

1. This reading relies on the definition of parody proposed by Margaret A. Rose, which is based on the presence of intertextual allusions creating a sense of "comic incongruity" that "contrast[s] the original text with its new form of context by the comic means of contrasting the serious with the absurd, [...] the ancient with the modern" (Rose, 1991: 33) – or, in this case, the modern with the Victorian. Incidentally, both Rose and Linda Hutcheon stress the importance of the reader's ability to perceive these allusions – rather than the author's intention – as crucial (Rose 1979: 26ff. and 1991: 36ff; Hutcheon 1985: 19). It is also worth noting that parody, as Hutcheon repeatedly demonstrates, is not necessarily comic.
2. As Nadine Muller argues, in novels like *Dora Damage*, "we are also forced to face our contemporary readerly desire for such politically correct critiques, and, therefore, indirectly, for the sensational (and mostly sexsational) illustrations of the acts and practices under scrutiny" (Muller 2010: 146). Muller highlights the extent to which the novel, through its treatment of the Victorian pornography market, inevitably "participate[s] in the sexualised consumerism which [it sets] out to explore and critique" (Muller 2010: 256), catering to the reader's voyeuristic enjoyment even as it appears to condemn that of the Victorian *Les Sauvages Nobles*. For a sustained discussion of the theme of pornography in the novel and the way in which it can be read as a commentary on present-day issues, see also Muller 2012b: 122-129.
3. Hereafter referred to as *Dora Damage*.
4. In addition, the novel suggests that Din has sacrificed himself for Dora, precipitately returning to America so that Diprose's murder could, if necessary, be blamed on the runaway ex-slave. Along similar lines, the novel undermines its overt critique of Victorian racism: in its treatment of Dora's love affair with Din the book "inevitably recycl[es] the black man/white woman fantasy it critiques" (Kohlke, 2008: 198). Even more strikingly, in its account of Sir Jocelyn's mixed Algerian-English parentage (his mother having been raped by a black man while accompanying her diplomat husband on a mission to Algiers), the novel implies that Western fears of black men out to rape white women are to some extent founded in fact. Actually, however, *Dora Damage* does not reference a historical case here; instead, as

Heilmann and Llewellyn show, it re-inscribes the Orientalist fantasy of an authentic nineteenth-century work of pornography, *The Lustful Turk* (1828) (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 138).

5. For detailed discussion of this point, see Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 108 and 133-134; also Kohlke 2008: 196.
6. I owe this point to an anonymous reviewer.
7. A similar mechanism that conflates critique and voyeuristic pleasure also informs *The Crimson Petal and the White* (Kohlke 2006: 2).
8. For exaggerated mimicry as a key ingredient of parody, see *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, s.v. "parody".
9. For the "sexsational" nature of much neo-Victorian fiction, see Kohlke 2006, from whom I also borrow the term. Other noteworthy examples are Sheri Holman's *The Dress Lodger* (2000) or Linda Holeman's *The Linnet Bird* (2004).
10. For more information on the Necropolitan Line see <http://londonparticulars.wordpress.com/2011/06/29/the-necropolitan-line/>. For a discussion of Peter Damage's illness and the themes of disability and the monstrous body in the novel, see Arias 2011: 353-359.
11. For the neo-Victorian novel's tendency to "concentrate on the various victims of the past", see Gutleben 2001: 169. For a detailed discussion of the factual background of Starling's novel, see Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 131-140.
12. She admires her landlady for sitting "perched on her back porch, knees up outside her hitched skirts, smoking on a pipe" (Starling 2006: 7).
13. Incidentally, it is never made clear by what stretch of the imagination (as well as Latin syntax and grammar) Dora manages to translate *De humani corporis fabrica* as "made from human skin" (Starling 2006: 387). In a magnificent display of (arguably unintentional) self-irony, however, the novel precludes speculation in this direction by acknowledging that she "knew enough of how the brains of these gentlemen worked to sidestep logic and accuracy" (Starling 2006: 385).
14. Another noteworthy instance is the unaccountably bookish prostitute Sugar in *The Crimson Petal and the White*.
15. Kohlke draws attention to the scenes in which Sir Jocelyn rebukes Mr Diprose for applying a geographically incorrect term of abuse to a black man or acts as an incongruous spokesman for a postcolonial critique of imperialism (Kohlke 2008: 198; for the corresponding scenes in the novel, see Starling 2006: 106, 140).
16. A number of critics have picked up on the anachronistic dimension of Dora's narrative, and on the strong links between her own discontents and those thematised by second- and third-wave feminism. For instance, Kohlke

comments on the link between Dora's response to pornography and that of the 1970s feminist pornography debates (Kohlke 2008: 199). In a footnote to her analysis of *In the Red Kitchen*, Adele Jones recommends a Kristevan approach to the novel (Jones 2009: 105), and Muller, in her doctoral dissertation, reads the book through the lens of contemporary feminist theories on female sexuality and pornography.

17. Similarly, when fears of child abuse spread amongst Dora's neighbours because of the repeated appearance of an unknown carriage in the street, these are quickly exposed as groundless, the carriage sheltering nothing more sinister than Sir Jocelyn attempting to get a surreptitious glance at the son he has cast off.
18. As it turned out, *Dora Damage* was also to be the author's last novel, as Belinda Starling died unexpectedly at the age of thirty-four a few weeks after its completion.

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