

**De Corporis et Libri Fabrica:  
Review of Belinda Starling, *The Journal of Dora Damage***

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**Belinda Starling, *The Journal of Dora Damage*  
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The rich promise of the late Belinda Starling's first and only novel makes her untimely death a serious loss to neo-Victorian fiction. The book's cover, depicting a make-believe business signage with a woman's laced-up corset, subtitled "Bindings of Any Kind", hints at risqué sexual practices with sadomasochistic overtones, implicitly conflating the body of the book with the female body of the titular heroine.<sup>1</sup> Both prove objects of desire, manipulation, and potentially dangerous consumption, implicating the reader in the 'damage' already inscribed in the narrator's name long before Dora risks becoming, in more ways than one, 'damaged goods' through complicity in the Victorian pornography trade.

When the Damages bookbindery faces ruin due to falling sales and her husband Peter's growing incapacity from crippling rheumatism, Dora takes over the Lambeth-based business in contravention of mid-Victorian union restrictions on female employment, which seek to relegate women to the status of handmaidens in the preparatory stages of bookmaking, rather than aesthetic producers themselves. The threat of financial destitution turns Dora into a woman artist with shades of the Pre-Raphaelites, as when she gold-tools the centre of a dark green cover lined with sumptuous scarlet silk with "a beguiling Venus extracting a myrtle leaf and some berries from the garland binding her hair" (p. 160). Yet having attracted the patronage of a group of wealthy bibliophiles of pornography, Dora's craft soon serves to

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beautify, or more accurately disguise, increasingly disturbing subject matter, as she graduates from binding relatively innocuous volumes, such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* (c. 1349-51) and *Fanny Hill, or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748), to more hard-core violent and racist sexual materials.

The finely honed irony of Starling's novel lies in the fact that its heroine becomes both a skilful manipulator of, and profiteer from, the very gender, class, and race based injustices of Victorian society she abhors. The transgressive element that Dora's gender lends to her work, as much as her growing artistic accomplishment, procures her the repeat business of her upper class patrons. Her equivocal relationship with Sir Jocelyn Knightley, who becomes both her protector and nemesis, also provides her with 'free' materials to ply her trade. Eminent physician, adventurer, and member of the pseudo-scientific *Les Sauvages Nobles* society, Knightley (a far cry from Jane Austen's gentlemanly hero of similar name in *Emma* [1815]) repeatedly sends Dora personal gifts, such as a silk dress, feather fan, and even intimate corsetry, many of which she ingeniously recycles as materials for unconventional book covers. Her family too benefits directly, with Knightley providing complimentary advice and medications to temporarily relieve both Peter's suffering and her daughter Lucinda's epilepsy. Yet Knightley also has few qualms about his associates threatening to have the girl declared 'morally insane' and subjected to a cliterodectomy, to force her mother to continue working for the *Les Sauvages Nobles*.

Similarly, Dora adeptly exploits the middle-class pride of her landlady Mrs Eeles, a near-necrophiliac who "delectated in mortification" (p. 5), superbly rendered in grotesque Dickensian vein with hints of a Miss Havisham in black. This class consciousness enables Dora to negotiate preferential terms and crucial extensions on the family's rent payments, which Eeles would never countenance in the case of working-class tenants or that other kind of 'working girl', which Dora at one point fears becoming, whom Eeles summarily throws into the street. To allow the shabby-genteel Damages to descend into destitution would compromise Eeles' obsession with respectability, though at other times class also works against the heroine. Before she attracts the pornographers' custom, Dora unsuccessfully seeks assistance from a variety of philanthropic organisations. The satire of the relevant passage conveys a distinctly postmodern view of Victorian social and moral hypocrisy, as well as resounding with the preferential

policies of present-day welfare systems. After waiting two hours in line at the Institute for the Restitution of Fallen Women, Dora discovers that “my fall being not a moral one, they had no time for me”, while at the Guild of Distressed Gentlewomen she finds that “as I was not a widow, and lacked a whole cartload of children to support, my distress counted for nothing” (p. 42). Paradoxically, at the Society for the Promotion of the Employment for Women, Dora is told that “I had the skills to become a fine governess, and so I could have been, had they not shuddered at my suggestion that my daughter attend me while I worked” (p. 42).

Meanwhile, the white supremacist attitudes and racist sexual fantasies of upper class female supporters of abolition, like Lady Sylvia Jocelyn – ironically shared with the pornographic discourse produced for her husband – lead directly to Dora’s employment of, and subsequent erotic entanglement with, the African-American ex-slave Din Nelson. Again, Dora profits from what she contests, not least in terms of the practical experience that completes her book-based sexual education (Peter and Dora’s marital intercourse having been confined to a mere three instances, each preceded by relentless scrubbing “with carbolic soap and baking soda” (p. 24) instead of foreplay). In spite of passages of genuine sensuality, Dora and Din’s relationship proves one of the weak points of Starling’s novel, inevitably recycling the black man/white woman fantasy it critiques. Yet insofar as inter-racial love affairs, rather than enforced sex acts between slave masters and their ‘property’, still remain an underrepresented theme in neo-Victorian fiction, the author’s attempt is still commendable.

At times Starling tries too hard for political correctness, as when she has Jocelyn admonish his agent Mr Diprose that the pejorative ‘*kaffir*’ derives from the Arab word for infidel, its provenance “a continent away from those to whom you are referring”, and requests that for his racist abuse Diprose at least “choose a geographically correct” term (p. 106). Later, as Jocelyn reflects on Dora’s use of an ivy image, he turns into a postcolonial spokesperson, anachronistically expressing a very modern-day critique of imperialism’s detrimental effects on its racial others: “*Hedera helix*.[...] A hostile assailant, with quick, hardy runners; it deprives its host of sunlight, with a resultant loss of vigour, and eventual demise. I should recommend it to the Foreign Office as an emblem for the construction of Her Majesty’s Empire.”(p. 140) Here the novel’s neo-Victorian self-consciousness becomes a little too overt. So too upon Dora’s second visit to Jocelyn’s

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home, when she is again “taken aback by the statuary Negro lad,” serving as a coat stand in the hallway, “at whom I nodded by way of apology” (pp. 128-129). Most obviously, the shattering of Dora’s attempted self-delusion that, like “the pearl around the grit in the oyster”, she “was making something beautiful out of something ugly” (p. 163) is too contrived. One look at the depiction of “the prodigious posterior and pendulous labia of the Hottentot Venus” proves sufficient to cure her of any such wishful thinking: “And that was it. In an instant I knew that I would have to find my employment elsewhere.” (p. 213) Starling fails to provide a convincing context for Dora’s heightened racial sensitivity, compared to the vast majority of racist characters in the novel.

Similar problems of credibility attend Dora’s ‘sex consciousness’, as she repeatedly seems to endorse gender restrictions on behaviour and access to sexual knowledge. She is concerned not to be “caught bare-headed” by Sir Jocelyn (p. 138) and responds hysterically to “a degrading glimpse of his navel”, when he exposes his tattoo (p. 146). Recalling Peter’s refusal to let her peruse works on the representation of the human body in art, she admits, “I knew they were unseemly” (p. 57), and later she worries about “unsexing myself, or worse, him” (p. 67) through her efforts to save the business. Hence she seems to side with the reactionary views of Mr Diprose, who reminds Peter of “the dire consequences of exposing literature of that ilk to women [...] It will addle their brains” (p. 95). Dora’s initial reaction to the *Decameron* reads – seemingly unintentionally – like melodramatic farce: “I trembled at the wantonness within and searched for shelter for my soul against the certain apocalypse that would befall them for doing it and me for bearing witness.” (p. 118) Such a repressed sensibility seems distinctly at odds with Dora’s tolerant sympathy for the ‘fallen woman’ Pansy Smith, whom she readily employs as a maid, or for Jack Tapster, the Damages’ apprentice, imprisoned for unspecified homosexual practices.

Likewise, it remains unclear to what extent readers are expected to endorse the heroine’s shock and moral condemnation of the stuff of her daily bread. The frequently simplistic stand Dora takes on pornography as a socio-morally corrosive force harkens back to the 1970s pornography debates and anti-porn feminism, as when she ironically reflects that she cannot recall her husband’s penis ever “throbbing with ammunition like a flesh-coloured trebuchet, or ‘at full cock’ like a loaded gun, or erupting like Vesuvius. But then again, at least, that meant that I had never been the

silent victim of bullets, shrapnel, or lava either.” (p. 185) Although Dora at one point admits “gratitude to the images [...] for helping me to make sense of foundlings and baby-farms and fallen women” (pp. 162-163), the novel never fully incorporates alternative perspectives, such as pro-sex feminism or sex workers’ rights claims, to make for a more nuanced discussion. This has been done somewhat better by other neo-Victorian writers, such as Sarah Waters and Michel Faber, whom Starling has often been compared to by reviewers on account of her feisty heroine and sexually explicit plot. Starling’s novel also contains little in the way of implicit engagement with present-day issues. Dora’s personal pornography debate is framed in such a way as to elide related Victorian issues and their reanimation in twenty-first-century contexts, including paedophilia, sex tourism, human trafficking and sexual slavery. The only real gesture in this direction comes in the neighbourhood’s fears concerning the unmarked coach, from which Kinghtley watches his disowned son and other children playing: “A pederast, they would whisper to each other, or years later [...] we would say a child-snatcher, with the modish hysteria about the white-slave trade, and kidnappers crawling our streets.” (p. 429) And in the epilogue, Lucinda reflects that her mother would have foreseen that the urban ‘clean-up’ of London would simply displace the Hollywell-street trade elsewhere, while pornography would become democratically affordable for rich and poor by the turn of the century, “available from barrows in every market” (p. 445) much as it is today accessible from every laptop

Nonetheless Starling’s appropriation of pornography to figure the opposite of its typical subject matter – namely a woman’s intellectual, political, and sexual awakening rather than her objectification – proves largely successful. There are evident echoes of Waters’ *Fingersmith* (2002), which ends with a lesbian female protagonist earning her independent living by writing (rather than packaging) pornography, thereby circumventing the exigencies of heterosexual union and legal and financial dependency. Similarly, the scene where Jocelyn feeds Dora exotic ‘*lokum*’, better known as Turkish Delight, may be intended to echo the scene in Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) where the meaning of the titular euphemism is revealed as cunnilingus. As Dora struggles with the cloying perfumed taste, Jocelyn whispers to her that the sweet “may be pressed between the outer lips of a woman’s nether orifices by her lover, then licked out of her. It drives them both mad with untold delight” (p. 150). With equal intertextual exuberance,

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Starling earlier has Dora try “to imagine Jane *firkytoodling* with Rochester, which was not hard, given that they only made love once he was a cripple” and envisage “Cathy and Heathcliff, with Edgar watching, or, better still, a *ménage à trois*” (pp. 189-190).

According to the epilogue, Starling’s heroine, like *Fingersmith*’s Maud and Sue, opts for a female partnership, though not apparently due to any lesbian leanings but on account of the proto-feminist Dora having learned from experience that she’d “rather have no one than an unsatisfactory lover” (p. 443). After Jocelyn’s death in Africa, she retires from the metropolis to Gravesend in Kent, living out her days with her former patron’s widow and son, amused by the resulting “tittle-tattle” of the neighbours (p. 443). As her daughter remarks wryly, “the fact they were from London gave them something of a shady patina anyway, as if sapphism, or tribadism, or whatever you want to call it, was *de rigueur* anywhere north of Clapham” (p. 443). Meanwhile Jocelyn’s book collection is donated to the British Library, “who were possibly too confounded by its contents to refuse” (p. 443), evoking shades of Henry Spencer Ashbee, who also modelled for Maud’s uncle, Christopher Lilly, in *Fingersmith*. While points like these constitute possibly too blatant efforts at postmodern self-consciousness, they also indicate a significant but still germinal neo-Victorian literary trend to engage intertextually with contemporaneous neo-Victorian works as well as nineteenth century texts.

In spite of its imperfections, much of Starling’s novel is as exquisitely crafted as Dora’s finely tooled leather covers. Although it recycles many recognisable, by now standard neo-Victorian tropes – the oppressed woman, sensationalised sexuality, threats of madness, Gothic villains, slavery – Starling manages to deploy them in new and unexpected ways, as in the case of female domesticity. Dora’s inept housekeeping, her endless futile fight against all-pervasive dirt, not only comes to stand for the ‘dirty’ business in which she engages, but also resonates strongly with the stressful pace and conflicting demands of the lives of today’s professional women, expected to consummately multi-task and balance often irreconcilable demands of career and family. Starling’s novel can be expected to continue to attract critical attention, lending itself as it does so well to popular discussions of gender performativity and the role of the market on patterns of cultural production and consumption. For it is, of course, that same marketplace, with prestigious literary prizes like the

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Booker and the Pulitzer, which has contributed significantly to bringing neo-Victorian fiction to cultural – and academic – prominence.

The prologue to *Dora*'s narrative opens with the metafictionally inflected statement, "This is my first book, and I am rather proud of it, despite its obvious shortcomings." (p. 1) *Starling*'s readers are left contemplating in vain what further neo-Victorian fabrications she might have produced had she lived. Inadvertently, *Starling*'s first line provides a fitting epitaph for her swansong.

### **Notes**

1. In 'Written on the Body: Sexual and Textual (Re)Inscriptions', a keynote speech presented at the Adapting the Nineteenth Century conference at Lampeter, Wales, UK (22-24 August 2008), Ann Heilmann persuasively argued that *Starling* plays on the equivalences between female-body-as-text and text-as-female-body.