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Between Reality and Contrivance: Body Performance and Class Imagination in Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*

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Abstract

Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002) has been acclaimed for the most suspenseful work within her popular Victorian quasi-trilogy. Full of twists and turns, it soon made the bestseller list and has been serialized on film by the BBC. With its solid narrative structure and precise setting in Victorian England, it is categorized as a historical crime fiction; with its same-sex love plots between two heroines, it is also deemed a lesbian novel. The protagonist is Susan Trinder, an orphan in the care of Mrs. Sucksby whose London slum household hosts a transient family of petty thieves. Susan helps Richard Rivers seduce a wealthy heiress, Maud Lilly, who is raised in a country house named Briar, where she lives a secluded life under the care of her uncle. Susan and Maud are set to change their identities in a treacherous double-cross: they perform, either knowingly or unknowingly, roles of mistress and maid in the contrived performance as well as in their reality of life. Their performances involve an imitation of body gestures and an intimacy of feminine garments. Exploring the confusion between contrivance and reality in the novel, this paper aims to analyze various modes of performance derived from class implications and delves into how Waters complicates the significance of body performance.

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1. Introduction

Shortlisted for both the Orange Prize and the Man Booker Prize, *Fingersmith* (2002) has been acclaimed for the most suspenseful work within Sarah Waters' popular Victorian quasi-trilogy: *Tipping the Velvet* (1999), *Affinity* (2000) and *Fingersmith.*[1] Full of twists and turns, it soon made the bestseller list and has been serialized on film by the BBC.[2] Set in nineteenth-century London and a nearby country house, the novel opens with the seventeen-year-old girl Susan Trinder, an orphan in the care of Mrs. Sucksby whose London slum household hosts a transient family of petty thieves. Susan (shortened as Sue hereafter) helps Richard 'Gentleman' Rivers seduce a wealthy heiress, Maud Lilly. Being raised in a country house named Briar, Maud lives a secluded life under the care of her uncle. The title *Fingersmith* originally designates a slang for a thief, overtly referring to Sue, who acquires the general skills of stealing, including how to "pick a plain lock" and "cut a plain key" (*Fingersmith* 13). In its structure, the novel is composed of Sue and Maud's first-person narratives: Sue speaks in the first section of the novel, and Maud takes over the narrative in the second. The first and second sections contain the same events and plots from different heroines' points of view. In its subject matter, Richard 'Gentleman' Rivers (called Gentleman hereafter) earns money by "thievery and dodging" and plots a swindle: Sue will pose as a lady's maid in order to gain the trust of the heiress and eventually persuade her to elope with Gentleman (*Fingersmith* 22). Once they are married, Gentleman will commit Maud to a madhouse and claim her fortune for himself. Defrauding Maud of her fortune is the goal of the trick. Yet in advance of Sue's contrived disguise as a maid, Gentleman arrives at Briar and familiarizes Maud with a plan to escape from her exile in Briar, a plan involving the deception of a commonplace girl, Sue, who believes she is sent to Briar to trick Maud. Maud agrees to the plan and receives Sue a few weeks later,

1 In an interview with Ron Hogan, Sarah Waters admits the term "faux-Victorian (or neo-Victorian) quasi-trilogy" as an apt description and agrees with "Victorian quasi-trilogy" as a definition for *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*: "... there's something about three—they're not a trilogy, but there's still a sense of completion to having written three and then moving on" (qtd. in Ciocia).

2 The BBC mini-series *Fingersmith* is an adaptation of Sarah Waters' Man Booker Prize nominated novel. Televised in 2005, it follows the meeting of two very different young women and what madness ensues. Directed by Aisling Walsh, it stars Sally Hawkins, Imelda Staunton, Elaine Cassidy, Rupert Evans and Charles Dance. Sarah Waters herself also plays as a maid in the drama.

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pretending to know nothing about the plot. Sue attempts to perform the role of the maid in order to carry out the partial plan taught by Gentleman, whereas Maud imperceptibly assimilates Sue's bodily appearance and manner into the ways Victorian ladies live. The deftly twisting plots and the vivid historical details of the setting stir up both popular interest and academic enthusiasm to the novel.

On account of Sarah Waters' sensational plots and grim nineteenth-century scenarios, scholarly attention has concentrated on her inspiring textual and discursive historiography. Waters herself has also acknowledged her debts to Victorian writers like Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins (Costantini 18).[3] For many critics, Waters situates the plots in "a sense of space and time" (Armitt 119). Abigail Dennis commends *Fingersmith* for reworking elements of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, as "the skilful appropriation of Victorian plotting and stylistic techniques, combined with embedded references to twentieth-century literary, cultural, and queer theory" (41). In favor of "the past it pastiches" (Palmer 87), Waters' sensational novels are characteristic of the "experimental narrative structure and rich intertextual references" of Victorian novels (Boehm 237). On the other hand, the protagonist Sue's obvious physical, for the most part, and spiritual relationship with Maud marks the novel different from mainstream Victorian fiction, in which lesbian relationships are almost disguised as close girlish friendships. While the novel's explicit descriptions of the gloomy world of Victorian pornography highlight its difference from its original model, Waters "speaks back to the nineteenth-century novel's privileging of the heterosexual romance plot" (Moore 632). With its solid narrative structure and precise setting in Victorian England, *Fingersmith* is categorized as a historical crime fiction; with its same-sex love plot between two heroines, it is also deemed a lesbian novel. Thus, Carol Seajay neatly captures the major features of Waters' writing and labels it as "lesbian historical romance" (4).[4] Such categorization outlines Waters' noted explorations of historical, social and sexual politics in her novels.

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3 Sarah Waters's reputation kept rising with her first three novels and was named one of Granta's best British writers under forty in 2003 (Seajay 4). As Kirkus Reviews raves Waters as a "lesbian Charles Dickens," *The Adocate* also praises her with the title "our own Dickens" ("Our Own Dickens" 62).

4 The difficulties of classification, according to Mark Llewellyn, is due to the political energy of Waters' fiction, which reveals a wish to "extend the boundaries of the historical tale by established modes of representation" (213); Kohlke calls Waters' fictions as "a new (meta)realism" (156). Consisting of plural representations of history and fiction, Waters' novels do not fit easily into existing categories and genres (Constantini 19).

Saturated with intricate and plural discursive elements, *Fingersmith* bears, in particular, direct evidence of "a theatrical performance" (Letissier 306). In the beginning of the first section, Sue narrates her fooling around in the theatre:

> The theatre she [Flora] took me to, on the night I am thinking of now, was the Surrey, St George's Circus. The play was *Oliver Twist*. I remember it as very terrible. I remember the tilt of the gallery, and the drop of the pit. I remember a drunken woman catching at the ribbons of my dress. I remember the flares, that made the stage very lurid; and the roaring of the actors, the shrieking of the crowd (*Fingersmith* 3).

By showing outside this embedded play, the main characters are acting a part "without their being conscious of the story" (Letissier 307). The trope of theatre introduces the mainstay of performance for reality or for contrivance concerning the two heroines, Sue and Maud, who might have been acting or living the life that had been destined to the other. Either knowingly or unknowingly, Sue and Maud change places of mistress and maid with "dizzying frequency" (Duncker 51).

Their performance of mistress and maid rests on a prerequisite of class stratification. In the nineteenth-century Britain, class was revealed in everyday life, manners, speech, clothing, education, values, to name but a few (Mitchell 17). Class has a profound effect on the way people live and think of themselves, and everyday material objects, such as clothing, are one of the means to interact with their ways of life. For upper and middle-class ladies, dress is considered "the outer manifestation of an inner feminine essence" (Setnik 18). The way one dresses designates "the person and class" (Langland 35) since dress not only "expresses the true nature of a lady," but also "constitutes the lady" (36). The strict demarcation of status of women and girls is indicated by the variety and complexity of their clothes, as Davidoff explains: "every cap, bow, streamer, ruffle, fringe, bustle, glove or other elaboration symbolised some status category for the female wearer" (qtd. in Langland 34-5). Dress, in short, functions as an indicator of class. As Sue and Maud perform roles other than themselves in a treacherous double-cross, their performance relies on an imitation of body gestures and an intimacy of feminine garments, for instance, "petticoats, stays, crinolines, gowns, stockings, garters and slippers" (Duncker 51). Of the attributes that may present body performance in the novel, dressing is one of the most profound signifying practices closely associated with social standings of the mistress and the maid.

Waters' portrayals of performance and performers illuminate a manipulation of

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social identity through a way of dressing signification. As the sociologist Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) takes all elements of acting or performing into consideration: an actor performs on a setting which is constructed of a stage where the props in settings direct his or her action. The actor has the ability to choose his or her stage and props, as well as the costume he or she would wear in front of a specific audience. What the performance performs and expresses in front of observers is the "front," or "personal front," which is "the expressive equipment of a standard land intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (Goffman 22). Goffman claims that the front consists of three factors: setting, appearance, and manner, among which some coherence is expected from the performer (25).[5] From Goffman's claim, dress, like dramatic costume, serves as a means of acting a part, or performing the role of someone else in one of major themes of *Fingersmith* indicative of feminine traits. Thus the significance of bodily performance is apt and crucial to reveal Waters' strategy for overturning characters. The following questions are to be explored: how are body performances of different class, being the mistress or the maid, carried out? What is the significance of such body performance? How is the relationship between life and performance intermingled? Addressing these concerns, this paper aims to analyze various modes of performance derived from class implications of clothing: the first part takes Sue's maid performance into account; the second is devoted to Sue's unaware performance of mistress; and the last examines a reverse manipulation of performance and its effect.

5 The first element of performance designates the "setting" that involves "furniture, decor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it" (Goffman 22). The performer must use a particular setting and begin their act so as to make himself to the appropriate place. The second element "appearance" refers to those stimuli which function to tell the audience of the performer's social statuses; last, "manner" tends to remind the audience of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation (24). At the same time, the individual who is interacting with is trying to form and obtain information about the individual. The core of Goffman's analysis lies in this relationship between performance and life.

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2. Maid Performance

At the outset, Sue's pretention as a maid to accompany the heiress Maud demonstrates the first mode of performance in the story. Sue is an orphan raised in the hideout of Mrs. Sucksby and Mr. Ibbs; the former runs a baby trafficking operation dealing with illegal adoptions, and the latter keeps a locksmith's shop stocked with stolen goods, "at Lant Street, in the Borough, near to the Thames" (*Fingersmith* 3). Unlike her treatment of other children, Mrs. Sucksby treats Sue as her own daughter and protects her from "prig for fear a policeman should have got [her]" or even prostituting (13). Living together with some coarse yet friendly lodgers, John Vroom and Dainty Warren, Sue grows up as a cockney girl without any formal education. Mrs. Sucksby provides her with living quarters and love; Sue learns nothing and longs for nothing more than marriage "to a thief or a fencing-man (14). Sue describes herself in this way: "People who came to Lant Street thought me slow . . . Perhaps I was, by Borough standards" (14). When Gentleman offers Sue three thousand pounds to assist him in one of his scams, Sue can scarcely resist such temptation.

As a Borough girl, Sue has no knowledge of how a lady's maid should properly act, although information about servant jobs circulates, more or less, among the lower class people in London. A housemaid is a very common position in Victorian households. From 1840s onwards, domestic servants had gradually become the largest group of working class.[6] Girls and women did not make the transition to other occupations as easily since social ideologies decreed that the 'natural' place for women was a private home, and opportunity all conspired to keep them in service positions (Davidoff 417). As mentioned earlier, people of different classes were expected to conform to the rules for their classes in everything "from religion to courtship to the names and hours of their meals" and it was inappropriate to behave like someone from a class above, or below one's own (Mitchell 17). Following Gentleman's command, Dainty starts to tackle Sue's appearance, including her hairstyle and dress, to convey a tidy, clever image of a lady's maid. Sue's hair is restyled since she originally wears her hair "like lots of the Borough girls wore

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6 In 1881, servants of both sexes represented one person every 22 of the population in the United Kingdom. The great majority of indoor residential servants was made up of girls and women (Davidoff 410). The Census in 1891 showed that there were almost two million indoor servants, including over 100,000 children under the age of fifteen (Hayward 1).

theirs" (*Fingersmith* 35). The common hairstyle of the Borough girls is often braids, sometimes with curls on the sides of the face: "my hair . . . divided in three, with a comb at the back and, at the sides, a few fat curls" (36). Gentleman criticizes that the style is too fancy, since a lady's maid's hairstyle must be simple and modest. It takes much time to complete an ordinary hairstyle, pinned in a plain knot at the back of Sue's head: "Dainty and I looked that plain and bacon-faced, we might have been trying for places in a nunnery" (36).

With her hairstyle simple and unattractive, Sue also needs to be dressed like a neat and gentle maid. Gentleman suggests a plain brown dress, whose color is "more or less the colour of [her] hair" (40). Sue loathes the brown dress from the bottom of her heart: "the walls of our kitchen being also brown, when I came downstairs again I could hardly be seen. I should have rathered a blue gown, or a violet one" (40). The color of blue or violet is certainly suitable for young girls like Sue, yet these two colors give visual prominence to a maid's presence which should not have been emphasized. Gentleman convinces Sue of the brown dress because it is "the perfect dress for a sneak or for a servant—and so all the more perfect for me who was going to Briar to be both" (40). Disguised as a maid with a plain outfit, Sue indeed looks like a maid at first glance.[7]

Sue continues to prepare for what a lady's maid must do at all times: giving a curtsy. Curtsy giving is always obligatory for maids when they meet masters and mistresses or run into quests in the house. Yet it is beyond Sue's imagination since she "had never curtseyed before to anyone" (*Fingersmith* 40). The life of Lant Street is a kind of life "without masters"; thus she feels that the action of curtsying is "harder than it sounds" (40). Gentleman tells her that "curtsying came as natural to ladies' maids, as passing wind" and urges her to stand and try a curtsy. Sue believes

7 As for maids' outfits, most servants did not wear a uniform in the early nineteenth century, yet it became the custom for maid servant to retain a certain type of dress for her indoor duties. By the fifties, black dresses and white aprons were worn for the afternoon; as the practice spread, these became a definite uniform. As maid's work was to clean the public areas, they wore print dresses; "at the end of the morning lunch was laid and served, for which the maids might change into black dresses, with lace caps and aprons" (Hayward 10). Owing to the great strides in the cotton industry, cotton goods became cheap and dresses could be easily washed and were less expensive to buy. The familiar print dress of the housemaid appeared. In 1877, the maid's dress must be "scrupulously clean light print dresses, white thin muslin aprons, neat caps without ribbons " that give a fast look to a servant and "an air of vulgarity" to the house (qtd. in Marshall 21). The print of her dress was advised to be darker as she was not required to be quite spruced up in her appearance (21).

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what Gentleman says: the more practice, the more perfect the curtsy: "if I would only get the trick, I should never forget it" (40) and she may dip a proper curtsey if she cares to. Day by day Sue gains knowledge of a lady's maid's duties as children memorize their lessons:

> I must wake her in the mornings . . . and pour out her tea. I must wash her, and dress her, and brush her hair. I must keep her jewellery neat, and not steal it. I must walk with her when she has a fancy to walk, and sit when she fancies sitting. I must carry her fan for when she grows too hot, her wrap for when she feels nippy, her eau-de-Cologne for if she gets the head-ache, and her salts for when she comes over queer. I must be her chaperon for her drawing lessons, and not see when she blushes (42).

Sue spends three entire days to remember as much as Gentleman taught her about these trivial yet fundamental duties which maids must discharge. Under a great anxiety of slips showing and concerns about her probable failure, Sue wears the plain brown dress and departs for the real stage, Briar.

Right after her arrival, Sue needs to devote her energy to what a lady's maid must do. Even though she makes repetitious practices of a lady's maid's routine tasks in advance, she is a little slow when Maud asks her "to put her room in order" (*Fingersmith* 75). Maud's room is old-fashioned and aged, with a canopy full of "dust and dead flies and spiders" as if "it hadn't been taken down in ninety years" (76). As far as Sue is concerned, the first step of room organizing is "the proper handling of quality goods" (76). While complaining about "so much for maiding" in her mind (76), Sue begins to take hold of the gowns and shakes them out, then lay nicely back on their shelf, and tidies brushes, bottles and pins on the dressing-table (76-77). Later, in a great bustle, Sue helps Maud into her nightgown and brushes her hair before going to bed. Yet she is clumsy in undressing Maud; her previous practices do not come in handy since "it was not much like undressing the chair in our old kitchen, after all" (88). From goods organizing to gown dressing, the labour performance completely exhausts Sue, "I had been at Briar only a day; but it was the longest day of my life. My hands were sore from pulling laces . . . Undressing myself had no fun in it, now I had undressed her" (89-90). A lady's maid's tedious and trivial labour goes much far beyond Sue's imagination.

Not unexpectedly, Sue's disguise and performance as a maid is unfortunately penetrated by Maud and other servants in the house. Knowing the truth of the plan and watching Sue's show, Maud finds Sue to be quite impolite at the first sight, at

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least unlike a young maid who would be acquainted with servants' etiquette. In a clumsy manner, Sue "remembers her training" and "makes a hasty curtsey" (*Fingersmith* 255). Maud notices that Sue is quite pleased with her over-practiced curtsey. Sue's insolence upsets Maud because she "thinks me [Maud] a fool" (255). Under the surface of innocence and tranquility acquired in the Briar days, Maud observes Sue in private as much as possible. She peeps at Sue who sleeps next to her room: "She walks. She sits. She is warm and quick . . . [her arm] is as slender as Agnes's, but hard. I can smell beer upon her breath. She speaks. Her voice is not at all how I have dreamed it, but light and pert; though she tries to make it sweeter" (256). Maud senses that Sue's insolence is not malice but is derived from the environment where she grew up. Sue's bodily gestures and activities, unlike the cold Briar house, stem from an easy, pleasant life, which Maud has never lived and eagerly dreams of.

Other servants also perceive Sue's discourteous manners and mistrust her previous maid experiences. After Sue's arrival, Maud asks the housemaid Margret if Sue is qualified for the position of a lady's maid. Margret is a little conservative in remarking, "[she] seemed rather low in her manners" (*Fingersmith* 254). Aside from Margret's opinions, Mrs. Stile, the housekeeper in the Briar, takes an indifferent attitude towards Sue because Mrs. Stile is vexed by Maud's dogmatic decision to hire a lady's maid by herself:

> The servants don't trouble her, for the servants answer to me. I should have said I had been a housekeeper long enough to know how to secure a maid for my own mistress—but there, even a housekeeper must do as she is bid, and Miss Maud've gone quite over my head in this matter. Quite over my head. I shouldn't have thought that perfectly wise, in a girl of her years; but we shall see how it turns out" (62).

When Sue does not follow the household rules and appears ill-mannered, Mrs. Stiles despises her more and gets ready to see what will happen to Maud's presumptuous decision: "Here is the girl you sent for, to London. She is about good enough for you, I think" (255).

Sue's performance could not successfully fool the other servants since a lady's maid's employment, unlike that of other housemaids, is far from laborious. In most instances, a lady's maid's duties involve her taste and include her services "rendered more connected with the toilette and the wardrobe, as well as the personal ornament, dress, and decoration of her mistress" (qtd. in Kobayashi 97). In *The Servants' Guide*

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and Family Manual (1832), the principal duty of a lady's maid is her personal attendance on her mistress: she ought to "possess the qualifications of propriety and polite behaviour; and her conduct should be uniformly influenced by correct principles" (qtd. in Kobayashi 97). A lady's maid ought to be well-educated and to have considerable share of ornamental branches of female acquirements; in that sense, "neatness and gentility of person and address will be great recommendations; and cheerfulness of temper and mildness of manners will ensure her the esteem and respect of her superiors" (qtd. in Kobayashi 97). The maid should be "industrious, truthful, civil, good tempered," and her task is "never to be careless or sluttish or to waste her mistress's goods" (Marshall 15). If judged by the above standards, Sue's fake identity is easily exposed because Sue apparently falls short in regard to these qualities.

Sue's maid performance is absolutely a bungling contrived performance. Sue has been hastily trained as a maid: her appearance decorated, her manner corrected, and her duties to serve the mistress recited and rehearsed. However, the short-term training of maids cannot mould her bodily gestures and behaviours beyond partial preparation. Dissimilar to servants' dispositions, Sue has an atmosphere of unrestraint, innocence and easiness due to her background of hustle and bustle on Lant Street. Despite her ostensible maid's outfits, Sue is unable to conceal the real nature of her body, a body accustomed to a crowded house with the smell of beer and meat. The ever exposed slips in Sue's performance refers to nothing but Sue's own body, a spontaneous body which has absorbed London's lower-class atmosphere and style. Whether in appearance or manner, an inconsistency occurs between a maid by occupation and Sue's maid performance. The assumption that identity may be based on attire and decoration is doomed to fail since fellow servants are very likely to see through Sue's pretended performance. On the basis of superficial contrivance, Sue's maid performance is disclosed to all of them.

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3. Mistress Performance

Sue's contrived performance is of little significance to Maud. It is Sue's coming to Briar that launches the core of the whole plan: Sue's performance as Maud, the mistress. As far as Maud's background is concerned, she was raised by the nurses in the mental asylum where her mother died, and later taken by her uncle to Briar serving as his secretary at the age of eleven. Maud is then trained to read pornographic books and made to constantly wear gloves to preserve the surfaces of the rare books. While tiring of laboring with her uncle in his library, she is denied food. Maud has been educated as a typical Victorian lady in many ways except for her uncle's engaging her in poisonous books. She is helpless in her life since she resigns herself to serving her uncle's obscure ambition, when Gentleman arrives at Briar. Thus Sue must be a substitute for Maud so that Maud may escape from her uncle and the youth-devouring Briar prison. Maud covertly undertakes this task to have Sue resemble a lady just like herself. Cultivating a lady's body requires long-term work and is no doubt a tough task. Victorian ladyhood, as with any other class of social hierarchy, encompasses a variety of etiquette and social manners (Horn 29). There are a lot of guides to the regulations of conducting their bodies and manners. In order to make Sue a lady like Maud, Maud endeavors to "civilize" Sue's body through an example of herself, although Sue herself is unaware of it.

First of all, hands have a primary significance in the making as well as performing of a ladylike body. Maud's hands, were originally "plump at knuckles" (*Fingersmith* 194), dark nails with madhouse dirt, so her uncle harshly commands Mrs. Stiles to have Maud put on the gloves so as to "keep [her] fingers smooth" for the precious books (198). Maud suffers tremendously when her uncle uses metal beads to hurt her fingers. Maud learns the lesson that if she had not worn the gloves, she might have received even more physical punishment. Her hands increasingly turned into white and soft. Maud's hands remain as they are when she comes to Briar at the age of eleven: "Her nails were soft and perfectly clean, and grew quickly, like a child's nails" (98). The gloves are accessories for a lady, who should not have done any domestic labor and represents the leisure class. Maud's gloves literally signify such protection of the hands since her uncle keeps her hands clean so as not to damage the rare copies. Sue is also conscious of the importance of Maud's hands, which are "too smooth to be right," and learns to take care of them: "at first she wouldn't let me touch her bare hands, in time—since I said I would be gentle—she began to let me" (98). Maud realizes how greatly different between her hands and

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other servants' are and the importance of a lady's hands.

On the first day they meet, Maud instinctively stares at Sue's fingers, "which are bitten, about the nails—are cold and hard and perfectly steady in mine" (*Fingersmith* 255). If Maud's hands are cold and secure under the protection of gloves, Sue's are stiff and rough due to lacking any particular care. As a free and loose girl, Sue never cares about her hands, with nails bitten due to her habits of chewing nails (260). She also sits casually "picking over some old dry cut upon her knuckle" (266). Sue does not need to do coarse jobs in her Lant Street home, yet her hands require more whitening and smoothening to resemble a lady's hands. To avoid more cuts in Sue's hands, Maud always patiently comforts Sue while Sue is lacing the shoes or cutting nails: "Be slower. Why should we hurry? There is no-one to hurry for, is there?" (83) Maud cautiously observes how Sue's fingers become softer as days go by: "I look, again, at her hands. They have grown whiter, and are healed about the nails" (272). Maud examines the shape of Sue's hands to verify the delicacy of Sue's hands: "nice and small"; their fingers "in gloves will seem smaller; and then will resemble my own" (272). In two weeks, as Gentleman returns to Briar, he is surprised to discover that "the whiteness of [Sue's] fingers" is dissimilar to a maid servant's (274).

The image of hands or fingers is intertwined with the role of servants as well as the title of the novel *Fingersmith.* In Victorian class imagination, the assumption that "all servants were prone to *dishonesty*" meant that everything in the household must be locked and under supervision by their employers (Flanders 154, my italics). The idea that servants may steal their master's property is apparently ineradicable. After three days of watching, Sue sees how servants really work: "A servant says, 'All for my master', and means, 'All for myself'. It's the two-facedness of it that I can't bear. At Briar, they were all on the dodge in one way or another, but all over sneaking little matters that would have put a real thief to the blush" (*Fingersmith* 96). For instance, Margaret, the housemaid, pulls the pearl buttons from Maud's chemises and claims that they are lost; Mrs. Cakebread, the cook, holds off the fat from Mr. Lilly's gravy to sell to the butcher's boy (96). Grown up in a household of petty thieves, Sue does not prig very well as other children (5); she still possesses simple skills of unlocking, which is later used to pick the lock of Maud's secret box. The image of a fingersmith, referring to the dexterous hands of maids who may filch something without notice, implies a more profound underlying significance of stealing and switching.

The second attribute of a ladylike body to which Maud pays attention is appetite. In the Victorian era, the obsessive and ubiquitous pursuit of thinness was prevalent among fashionable Victorian women. Slimness was the main attribute of

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beauty. Since her girlhood, a Victorian woman was preoccupied with the fashion requirement of slenderness. One of the most eminent features to characterize slenderness as the Victorian ideal of feminine beauty is "a small waist" (Silver 48). The reason that the waist plays the pivotal place within the beauty imperative is its correlation with its interior counterpart, the stomach. Through the popular apparel of the corset, women restrain and conceal the size of their abdomen "so that it would not become disproportionately large" (qtd. in Silver 45). In this sense, the waist serves as a visible and conspicuous measure of, not only how svelte a body appears, but also how much a woman eats. Appetite suppression grew into both a means and an end of this beauty imperative.

Cultivated as a typical lady, Maud is anxious about food provided by the cook. The food is associated with her uncle's punishment, and it terrifies her. She has a particular disgust for eggs. Maud seldom has a good appetite while growing since she is strictly disciplined in regard to maintaining a lady's figure in terms of both dining and wearing clothes. In company with Maud, Sue very soon realizes Maud's likes and dislikes related to food: "I knew all that she liked and hated. I knew what food she would eat, and what she'd leave—and when Cook, for instance, kept sending up eggs, I went and told her to send soup instead" (*Fingersmith* 97). Sue instructs the cook to send clear soup, "clear as you can make it," instead of high protein food; as expectedly, "Maud ate it all up" (97). By virtue of anorexia, Maud's body remains slender and slight, her countenance pale and weak, her skin "a troubling kind of paleness" (88). The most apparent trait of her body is the small waist, as Sue notes: "Her waist, as I think I have said, was narrow: the kind of waist the doctors speak against, that gives a girl an illness" (88). Opposite to Maud's anorexic body marked by the small waist, Sue seems to enjoy food very much. At the lunch on the first day they meet, Maud is stunned to see that Sue has such a good appetite for food and great interest in eating:

> She might be an auctioneer, a house-agent: she holds each item of cutlery as if gauging the worth of the metal from which it is cast. She eats three eggs, spooning them quickly, neatly into her mouth—not shuddering at the yielding of the yolk, not thinking, as she swallows, of the closing of her own throat about the meat. She wipes her lips with her fingers, touches her tongue to some spot upon her knuckle; then swallows again (259).

Sue's real appetite for food astonishes Maud, who never ponders the enjoyment of

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eating. Sue's genuine appetite is closely connected to her voracious desire for money and pushing Maud to the insane asylum, as Maud imagines, "You have come to Briar, I think, to swallow up me" (259).

It is difficult to regulate Sue's appetite like a lady's within a couple of months. It turns out that Maud's ideas take a different direction. After eloping with Gentleman, Maud and Sue stay in the cottage a few miles from Briar. Gentleman and Maud pretend to get married under the witness of Sue and Mrs. Cream, the woman in care of the cottage, where Maud acts helpless and refuses to dine despite her poor appetite. The sudden change makes Maud ever paler than before: "Her cheek never grew rosy. Her eye stayed dull" (*Fingersmith* 173). In front of Sue, Gentleman asks Mrs. Cream to "make her every kind of nourishing dish, and what she brought were more eggs, more kidneys, livers, greasy bacons and puddings of blood" (173). Sue interprets Maud's fasting action as her inability to adapt to the new environment and her new identity as Gentleman's wife. With a cordial liking of food, Sue is reluctant to waste food and eats it inasmuch as Maud does not: "Maud could eat none of it. I ate it instead—since somebody must. I ate it, and she only sat beside the window gazing out, turning the ring upon her finger stretching her hands, or drawing a strand of hair across her mouth" (173). Those foods change Sue's body figure after a few days: "I gazed at my sleeve of silk, and at my own arm, that had got plump and smooth with careful feeding" (184). This change of body, beyond Sue's expectation, is expected by Gentleman and Maud. It is unfeasible for Maud to control Sue's appetite. What Sue eats nurtures her physical shape. Her skin gradually smoothens, like that of a wealthy girl born to an upper-class family.

The most influential factor to fulfil Sue's mistress performance is an exchange of dresses. As mentioned in the introduction, a Victorian lady's apparel betokens her ladyhood, thus her clothing is often multilayered: "After the corset came a camisole, and after that a dicky; then came a nine-hoop crinoline, and then more petticoats, this time of silk" (*Fingersmith* 38). Maud confesses her own situation which exemplifies a shackle on her body: "I have grown used to my gloves and my hard-boned gowns, and flinch at the first unloosening of the strings. Undressed, I seem to feel myself as naked and unsafe" (212-3). Before the day Gentleman will return to Briar, when Sue assists Maud in her coordination of welcoming outfits, Maud suggests that Sue should take off the brown dress, which seems to be too plain and shabby to suit Sue's complexion. Maud studies Sue's figure and then gives her an orange dress, "a queer thing of orange velvet, with fringes and a wide skirt. It looked like it had been blown together by a strong wind in a ladies' tailor's" (107-8). For a Borough girl like Sue, used clothing and rough, ready-made clothes called "slops" might have been her best outer garments (Graham 50). Sue never has her own dress. The brown dress is merely a backup garment prepared by the stingy

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Gentleman. Sue is surprised at Maud's generosity and soon puts on the dress. Since a lady's dress needs assistance from the maid, Maud is excited to help dress Sue up by stating "I am your maid, and you are the mistress!" (108); as Sue narrates, "[Maud] had tugged my old brown dress off me and put the queer orange one over my head, and she made me stand before the glass while she saw to the hooks, 'breathe in,' she said. 'Breathe harder. The gown grips tight, but will give you the figure of a lady'" (108). The dress is unfit for Sue as she has never put on a lady's dress, and her body does not get used to its cut: "My dress showed all my ankle. If a boy from the Borough had seen me then, I should have fallen down and died" (108). Yet Sue adores the dress very much and gently touches its texture and design: "And it was a very good velvet. I stood, plucking at the fringes on the skirt" (108). Later, Sue immediately re-fixes the dress by "letting out the bodice" and contends that "I wasn't about to do myself an injury, for the sake of a sixteen-inch waist" (109). Fond of beautiful attires, Sue begins to envision that she may have Maud's belongings after the plan is done: "anyway, I was to get the pick of all her dresses and her jewels, in the end. I was only starting early" (109).

When Maud and Sue are busy with changing dresses, there comes a knock from the housemaid Margaret on the parlor door. Margaret steps in, then misrecognizes Sue as Maud, and says facing Sue: "'I have just come for your tray, mi—'"(*Fingersmith* 108). Margaret suddenly stops for she sees the one in a bright dress is not her mistress, but Sue: "Oh! Miss Smith! Is it you, there? I should never have known you from the mistress, I'm sure!"(108) Margaret does not recognize who the girl in the dress is for no one, except the mistress, would dress so elegantly in the house. As Sue describes, Maud and she do not resemble each other: "My hair was the darker. We did not look like sisters, we just both looked like frights" (108). Maud and Sue are of similar age, their body shapes and silhouettes are quite similar to each other despite a bit of height. Maud is taller and thinner, whereas Sue is a little shorter and plumper: "Of course, her own waist was narrow, and she was taller by an inch" (108). Yet the dress defines the appearance of the lady. It is natural for Margaret to treat the one in a gorgeous dress as her mistress. Maud also jokes about how Sue becomes quite respectable in the dress: "suppose Mr. Rivers were to do what Margaret did, and mistake you for me?" (108) When Maud greets Gentleman, just as expected, he looks over Sue's formal velvet dress, then states: "I should have supposed her a lady, I am sure!" (111). The naïve Sue feels complacent with such praise: "For it was something, wasn't it, to be taken for a lady?" (109) More than clarifying who the wearer is, the dress gives scope into "individuals and their desires" (Hustvedt 42). Sue is satisfied with being taken as a lady by virtue of the velvet dress as a symbol of ladyhood and respectability. Under Maud's influence in

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Briar, Sue gradually becomes a true maid who handles Maud's personal attire and "puts her room in order" (75). Sue is naturally assimilated into the life of lady's maid. Nevertheless, her accommodation is part of the plan. With her hands changing from coarse to soft, her skin from rough to delicate, her dress from plain to respectable, Sue's mistress performance comes, in secret, to form the whole scheme of the trick.

4. A Contrived Performance Ever

With Sue's substituting as the mistress, Maud must then perform as Sue's lady's maid in the last phase of the plan since the mistress and the maid are meant to complement each other. During Sue's rehearsal, her friend Dainty questions why a lady cannot dress herself: "'Why don't she wear the kind of stays that fasten at the front, like a regular girl?'" (*Fingersmith* 38) In answer of this question, Gentleman's elaboration is intriguing: "Because then, she shouldn't need a maid. And if she didn't need a maid, she shouldn't know she was a lady" (38). As Gentleman remarks, a lady is always in need of a maid. Technically, performing as a lady's maid would be much easier for Maud than for Sue to perform as a mistress. Intentionally after a long time of fasting, Maud's countenance turns gaunt and peaky, "Her hair was dull as her eyes. She would not let me wash it—she would hardly let me brush it, she said she couldn't bear the scraping of the comb upon her head" (174). Maud acts indifferent to everything, and looks "with a soft, odd, distant kind of gaze" (170). Maud's negative attitudes, depression and will of surrender, reveal her loss of vigor and beauty; as Sue describes, "every morning, when I went in to her, she seemed paler and thinner and in more of a daze than she had seemed the night before" (175). Maud makes herself coarse and untidy, far from an image of a respectable lady, abandoning her gloves in particular: "her hands were bare" after her fake consummation with Gentleman (170). Her slovenly appearance and dejection successfully eliminates Sue's suspicions.

Maud's performance also hinges on the dress she must wear—a plain dress. During the awful days of waiting for her departure, Maud wears "the gown she had travelled from Briar in, that had mud about the hem" and gives her best gown to Sue: "Her best gown—a silk one—she gave to me" (*Fingersmith* 174). Sue feels pity for Maud and considers that Maud will not need beautiful clothes when sent to the asylum; in spite of her guilt, Sue still takes the dress, "sitting letting out the waist; and [Maud] seemed to like to watch me sew it" (174). Maud seems pleasant when she beholds Sue in the beautiful dress: "'How well you look!' she said, her blood rising. The colour sets off your eyes and hair. I knew it would. Now you are quite

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the beauty—aren't you? And I am plain—don't you think?'" (174). Sue interprets Maud's words as evidence of Maud's fear and despair concerning her unknown future life that is manipulated by Gentleman. The dress looks so elegant that Sue considers "wearing it back in the Borough," fully ignoring how a disaster may occur when it comes to a conventional connection between the dress and the one in the dress (181). At the day Gentleman and Sue escort Maud to the asylum (in Sue's mind), as usual, Maud does not have her breakfast of eggs and meat. She looks as if she is deprived of spirit and breath: "Her face was thin, her hair was dull. Her dress was worn with use, like a servant's dress. Her eyes were wild, with tears starting in them; but beyond the tears, her gaze was hard. Hard as marble, hard as brass" (184). Sue would like to make Maud clean or bright as least for the moment by changing her dress, but "[Maud] would not let me change out of it, even for travelling, though I knew it would crease" (181). When it comes to the departure, their attires are switched as such: "[Maud] wore the old gown, that was stained with mud, and [Sue] wore the handsome silk one" (181).

However, the doctors of the asylum apprehend Sue on arrival and call her "Mrs. Rivers" (*Fingersmith* 183), instead of Maud. Sue suddenly understands from the cold reactions of Gentleman and the seemingly innocent Maud that they had conned her. Maud and Sue's body images have been dramatically reversed: for Sue, in Maud's dress was ready to go back to her sweet Borough home, Maud in a dirty gown was being sent to the asylum. It suddenly turns out that Maud, in Sue's dress is ready for a house in Chelsea as Gentleman promised her, while Sue is Maud's substitute. During the process of their role exchange, the two girls, especially Sue, have undergone drastic psychological transformations. In Briar or in the cottage house they stay, Sue has strong compassion for Maud, who might have been imprisoned in the asylum for the rest of her life. Sue prepares everything Maud may need "in a thick, miserable kind of trance, shrinking from thought and feeling" (174) and "with tears" (179), reminds the doctors of Maud's dislike of eggs. Nevertheless, the reversed roles of Sue and Maud, of mistress and maid astound and overwhelm Sue: "You thought her a pigeon. Pigeon, my arse. That bitch knew everything. She had been in on it from the start" (184). In retrospect of Maud's words and behaviour in the cottage house, Sue eventually grasps what "desperate slyness" in Maud's gaze means (174). Sue expects nothing changed since she assumes that the task of a maid performer is completed. As the main victim of such a wicked and vile swap, Sue becomes hysterical, comprised of the sense of betrayal, anger and fear.

Maud, on the other hand, in unnatural silence, slowly waits like a predator in the dark shadows. Getting used to her role as a maid, Sue cherishes and takes care of Maud as those abandoned babies in Lant Street: bringing flowers to Maud's room,

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adding extra coals for Maud's fires to drive seven winters coldness, and chafing Maud's feet with her hands. All is "for [Maud's] sake" (*Fingersmith* 267). They grow to love each other. In the wake of their physical intimacy, Maud desires to elope with Sue and decides to confess all about Gentleman's plot, "we can make it ours . . . I need only escape from Briar: she can help me do that—she's a thief, and clever" (300). Maud's confession is not yet made; Maud cannot draw back from the plot because she sees very clearly that she is likely to be the one to be left: "to my uncle, to the books, to Mrs. Stiles, to some new meek and bruisable girl . . . without Richard, without money, without London, without liberty. Without Sue" (302). Maud frets, struggles and hesitates to the very last minute. Thanks to Gentleman's ceaseless severe reminders, Maud mechanically performs her maid role. After Sue is taken and gripped by the madhouse nurses, Maud's hands cannot stop trembling and what follows, is her unease, self-hatred and innermost regrets for Sue. Regardless of their ambiguous affection for each other, each girl has her own axe to grind. Sue and Maud's contrived body performances as mistress and maid, whether voluntary or involuntary, is accomplished with an exchange of roles as well as dresses. The delicate trick is finally brought to completion.

The key to the whole trick is ascribed to Maud's perfect performance either as an innocent mistress, or as an abused maid. The core of her performance lies in her manipulations of her own emotions and preferences. Maud has been maliciously treated by her uncle and servants for her wildness and disobedience in her childhood. She surrenders herself to her uncle's mania, whose substance is that of "the darkness and the silence . . . like water or like wax," which will drown her should she struggle (*Fingersmith* 203). She learns to conceal and endure what she suffers, pretending to be a docile girl on the surface. Life is conflicting and even contradictory to her. Under great cruelty and restraint, Maud's sadistic tendency has developed: giving the kitten the name of Mrs. Stile's dead daughter and often calling it loudest (206); acting to kiss her mama's portrait to torment Mrs. Stiles (in fact, she whispers I hate you) (207); bruising the young lady's maid, Agnes's arms with pinches, even beating her to weep (213). Through mistreating servants, Maud somewhat releases her feelings of suppression and despair. Masquerade is essential and necessary to Maud's survival in Briar, which makes her as strange as "a thing of points and hooks, a burr, a splinter in the gullet of the house" (243).

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Sue is of different character and disposition compared to Maud. Maud has been educated as a proper lady, yet as she marks, there is "quick, corrupted blood" beneath her innocent paleness. Sue is, instead, a gentle, bright and natural girl who is depreciated as neither over-scrupulous nor clever (*Fingersmith* 238). At first Maud acts friendly to Sue so as to slacken Sue's alertness. After getting along with Sue for months, Maud grows used to Sue's warmth; for her, Sue becomes "a girl with a

history with hates and likings," rather than "the gullible girl of a villainous plot" (273). Maud marks, "[Sue's] notion of intimacy is not like any lady's maid's. She is too frank, too loose, too free" (266). Maud seduces Sue to her way of life, imagining "how it has clothed and changed her, made her like me," regarding dining, dressing, and living with servants (260). Maud's seduction is derived from both love and envy for Sue, despite being accompanied with a sense of guilt. Maud also takes advantage of Sue's simple-mindedness and makes her believe in that Maud leaves all her belongings to her. The struggle between deception and honesty tortures Maud. Nevertheless, Briar makes Maud aware of a discrepancy in appearance and reality, training her into a girl who settles on the confusion between both in everyday life. Maud states, "But I could not want a lover, more than I want freedom" (253); she makes up her mind to continue her role of performance and the plan that harms Sue in exchange of her own freedom. Her lust for freedom is deeply concealed and profoundly supports her performance; specifically, it is internalized as part of her repressed self.

Ironically, both girls, Sue in the mental asylum and Maud in the Borough, undergo the loss of their identities as they perform each other's earlier roles of mistress and maid. When Sue screams to the asylum doctors that she is not Mrs. Rivers but her maid Susan, they ignore her defense, as Gentleman sets Sue up as the 'mad Mrs. Rivers,' his troubled wife. Sue's illiteracy means difficulty in proving her identity. The doctors regard Sue as fantasizing the whole fraud story and mistake her illiteracy as a serious symptom of madness because most ladies seldom have problems reading and writing. Being subjected to beatings and taunts on a regular basis, Sue is devastated by Maud's betrayal and furious that Gentleman double-crossed her, yet she is sustained by the belief that Mrs. Sucksby will find and rescue her, and thus plans to escape. Meanwhile, Gentleman takes Maud into Sue's Lant Street home and warns Maud of her position now: "you have nothing: no friends in London, no money to your name—why not so much as a name!" (*Fingersmith* 361).

While Sue's and Maud's contrived performances proceed from beginning to end, Waters doubles the confusion between performing and living that is so present through the two heroines in the last part of the novel. Mrs. Sucksby reveals the ultimate truth to Maud: it is Mrs. Sucksby who orchestrated the entire project about a pregnant lady, Marianne Lilly, who wandered to Lant Street seventeen years earlier. When Marianne discovers her cruel father and brother will find her, she begs Mrs. Sucksby to take her newborn child and give her one of her farmed infants to take its place. The truth is: Sue is Marianne Lilly's true daughter, Susan Lilly, and Maud, viewed as one of the many orphaned infants; yet eventually she is Mrs. Sucksby's

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own daughter. By the decree of Marianne's will, both girls are entitled to a share of Marianne Lilly's fortune. Mrs. Sucksby enlists the help of Gentleman to bring Maud to her and by having Sue committed to the madhouse, they can intercept her share. Thus the result of the artifice was planned as follows: Sue will be Maud as "Mrs. Rivers" in the madhouse and Maud will be Sue in Mrs. Sucksby's.

This project, which spins and dismisses both Sue's and Maud's identities in their real lives, shocks and terrifies Maud. Maud completely falls apart: "I have bitten down rage, insanity, desire, love, for the sake of freedom. Now, that freedom is being taken from me utterly, is it to be wondered at if I fancy myself defeated?" (*Fingersmith* 366). Mrs. Sucksby looks Maud up and down as if she is her masterpiece: "You're a lady, ain't you, and handsome? Why, I shall need a handsome lady, to show me what's what when I comes into my fortune" (360). Mrs. Sucksby is also proud of her task, to "make a commonplace girl of [Sue]" to accomplish the plan and boldly claims: "What use will a commonplace girl be to me, when I am rich?" (365) For Maud and Sue, their everyday lives, either intolerable or impoverished, are transformed into a sort of contrived performance manipulated by Mrs. Sucksby. In a series of twists and turns, Sue and Maud have been living each other's lives: Sue performs Maud, and vice versa. Mrs. Sucksby plots Sue and Maud's reality as a stage performance: Susan Lilly born of an upper class family, performs a commonplace girl; Maud Sucksby, originally a Borough girl, performs a lady in her growth. As Gentleman coldly says to Maud, "Your life was not the life that you were meant to live, but Sue's; and Sue lived yours" (355). The miserable Maud describes herself, "My life was not lived . . . it was a fiction" (357). At the end of the story, Sue successfully escapes from the asylum and travels to London, with the intention of returning to Mrs. Sucksby in Lant Street. After the confrontation of both sides, a scuffle between Maud, Gentleman and Mrs. Sucksby occurs; Gentleman is stabbed by the knife Sue takes up to kill Maud. Mrs. Sucksby is at last hanged for killing Gentleman.

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5. Conclusion

Fingersmith complicates expressions of body performance and renders the signifying process of dress problematic in the heroines' manipulations of body performance. A trick of Sue and Maud's reverse body images primarily concerns itself with costumes of performance in collusion with conventional beliefs in the dress as the very façade of identity. Fundamentally, the dress plays a pivotal trigger in the switch of identities. The dress turns to be the only means and end of their

identification, their inherent bodies thus being invisible or intangible. In this sense, their identities are put on and taken off, literally, through the dresses for their "selves are shed like clothes" (Spooner 366). After they exchanged and individually dressed in the roles of mistress and maid, their body images are switched. They are recognized by their dresses, and their new identities are then accepted. Without their initial dresses, their original identities are denied or disappear. While Sue and Maud work to perform the roles of someone else through the dress strategy, Mrs. Sucksby schemes the strategy even more thoroughly on the two girls' ways of living. Sue and Maud's real lives are, at an underlying level, made as models of contrived reality. The significance of "performance" which Mrs. Sucksby maneuvers is much more than Sue and Maud's contrived performances of the mistress and the maid, but of their own identities. This manoeuvre destabilizes the ostensible solidification of social ladders in Victorian society and designates indistinguishable relations between performance and life. The contrived performance, the contrived reality, and the confusion between contrivance and reality all constitute the most captive tension of the novel.

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真實與謀劃的游移——莎拉・華特斯《荊棘之城》的身體扮演與階級想像

葉 雅 茹*

摘 要

《荊棘之城》被譽為莎拉・華特斯「維多利亞三部曲」中最傑出的作品，入圍英國文學柑橘獎和曼布克獎，奠定了華特斯在當代文壇的重要地位。以英國維多利亞時代的倫敦為背景，刻畫當時的階級流動與性別關係，具備嚴謹的敘事結構與詳實的時代考據，歸類為歷史犯罪小說；亦因小說中兩位女主角的曖昧情愫，或被定位為女性同志小說。兩位成長環境迥異的少女，蘇珊與莫德陷入身份調換的多重陰謀：她們謀劃隱瞞真實身份，以模仿動作舉止與服飾穿著，企圖扮演女主人與侍女身份；然而扮演的角色與原本身份在扮演中一再逆轉，真實與謀劃的身份撲朔迷離、游移不定。本文試圖分析小說中各種形式的身體扮演，探究華特斯筆下身體扮演的意義，以及其中所呈現出的階級想像。

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關鍵詞：身體　階級　扮演　莎拉・華特斯　《荊棘之城》

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