

A body *undressed* for text: *Trilby* in Parts

George Du Maurier's best-selling novel, *Trilby* (1894) is as important because of its defiance of social and cultural norms, as it is for its apparent compliance with them. *Trilby* is a fiction that, like its eponymous heroine, attempts to negotiate the perilously fine line between the highbrow and the low brow, or to put it another way, between fine art and political commentary on one side, and pornography and sensationalism on the other. This article examines the way that Du Maurier engages his readership in this textual tease, his seduction of the reader by suggesting the possibility of a peep show where everything that Victorian respectability abhors may be on display, and then his narratological dressing of the text, to ensure that where there is sexual non-conformity there is also moralism, and where there is social confrontation there is also historical distance.

Understanding the textual appeal of *Trilby* as a character, the artist's model who enchanted the *fin-de-siècle* reading public, is essential to appreciating how the discourses of pornography and fine art interact and have consequently evolved. This article therefore examines why *Trilby* succeeded with the Victorians where other, similarly sexually active heroines — such as Thomas Hardy's Sue Bridehead — failed. *Trilby*, the novel and *Trilby* the woman are both broken down by their author into manageable parts, a pornographic fetishistic technique that simultaneously eroticizes and makes more palatable the textual and the physical bodies.

Aesthetic, fetish, fin-de-siècle, gender, narratology, pornography, sexuality, Victorian

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Abstract

Key words:

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George Du Maurier's bestselling novel, *Trilby* (1894), depicts a character that captured the Victorian imagination, as much for her purported attractiveness, as for her role in the narrative.

Yet what is the point of a character in prose fiction being beautiful? The pleasure taken in the

written description of such beauty must surely be categorically distinct from the viewing pleasure derived from looking at the beauty of, for example, a person or a painting in the actual world inhabited by the reader. Indeed, the reader's sense of imaginary people, paintings or, still more, music, within a work of fiction as, 'beautiful', may seem as if it can only ever be taken on trust. In the Victorian period especially, the description of a physical body as beautiful generates a particular kind of discursive doublethink, questioning whether beauty denotes the purely aesthetic and/or the visualisation of sexual pleasure.

The risk of transgressing against literary propriety was greater later in the century when aestheticist writers both begin to make a claim to a monopoly – or at least a primacy – on talking about beauty, but also to do so as a means of writing about sexuality in less-or-more coded terms. The decades following the Education Acts of 1870 and 1871 saw a febrile discussion of the possibly harmful effects of reading fiction, especially on the proverbial 'young person' (see Besant et al., 1890). Such overlaid representations of beauty and pleasure as the original 1890 *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* edition of Oscar Wilde's transgressive novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as well as those of other late-Victorian writers such as Sarah Grand and Thomas Hardy, risked scandalising public opinion (Besant et al., 1890: 6-20; Patterson, 2013). At the same time, however, large numbers of British readers were less controversially titillated by representations of beauty, sexuality and aestheticism in such extraordinarily successful literary phenomena as the Bodley Head periodical *The Yellow Book* – which brought a more mass-market, rather sanitised version of aestheticism to the bourgeoisie – and also between the covers of the century's two best-selling novels, Marie Corelli's *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895) and George du Maurier's *Trilby*.

Trilby's eponymous heroine is certainly of striking appearance, yet such beauty as she has to offer to the gaze of the artistic community of the Latin Quarter is from the first of a transgressive nature. She is initially described as 'a strange figure' with a 'very healthy young face, which could scarcely be called quite beautiful at first sight' (Du Maurier, 1893: 14). Nonetheless, her overall appearance ignites pleasure in the assembled male characters and the reader alike, a pleasure derived from the generosity of her physical proportions, and du Maurier's narratological generosity in not only describing but also pictorially illustrating his heroine. In depicting a textual striptease – a revelation of parts of bodily beauty which ought under Victorian codes of proper conduct be secreted under and constrained with textiles if not also by text – Du Maurier satirises whilst seeming to endorse, prudish late-Victorian literary moralising, in uncovering the sex in the apparently aesthetic.

***i.* 'And so dexterously does he weave his story that the young person may read it and learn nothing but good.'**

One of the modes by which late-Victorian popular fiction, of which *Trilby* is an outstanding example, legitimised the reading of novels as a morally licit activity is by attempting to pre-voice its own response: encouraging the reader – as imagined by the narrator – to keep their interpretation of the text within acceptable moral limits (James, 2013). Du Maurier's novel flirts with danger in choosing to portray relations between art, beauty and sexuality, but at the same time defuses this risk, by including within the text what appears to be narratorial guidance on how it should be read. Should the reader make him or herself willing to accept this guidance, they are thus inoculated from the threat of corruption from reading about such transgressive subjects, and the text can be enjoyed in a morally dogmatised way that puts the pleasure derived from it apparently beyond

censure. *Trilby*'s use of this technique to make safe the readerly exposure to such controversial topics as premarital sex, and marriage under hypnosis, was a part of its enormous commercial success in the United Kingdom and the United States, both as a book and an extratextual cultural phenomenon, a 'craze' (Jenkins, 2000). This reception contrasted dramatically to the storm of public criticism that engulfed, say, Hardy's controversial treatment of sexuality in his tale of common law marriage and infanticide only two years later in *Jude the Obscure* (Cox, 1979: 261-322).

Trilby does not engage with common *fin-de-siècle* points of concern such as literary morality, the dangers of reading, the representation of sex and self-censorship by omitting reference to such subjects, but rather by engaging with them, as if taking a little of the poison to protect, and not to kill (Derrida, 1981: 70). From the beginning, du Maurier's narrator seems to admit that beauty in art might sometimes really be – covertly or perhaps even overtly – sex in art, making apparently pious claims such as, 'Nothing is so chaste as nudity ... All beauty is sexless in the eyes of the artist at his work' (95). Such assertions, whilst apparently defending the purity of artistry, inevitably also foreground both sex and nudity in the mind of the reader. Consequently, while the narrator employs the discourse of beauty-for-art's-sake in denying that a heterosexual male artist might take pleasure in the sight of an unclothed and apparently attractive female body, he satirically raises the possibility that there might be a sexual element in his gaze. The narrator admits that Little Billee gazes upon Trilby's feet 'with a curious conscious thrill that was only *half* æsthetic' [emphasis mine] (40), the teasing tone begging the question just what the other half might be. In this moment, therefore, Little Billee's gaze as directed at Trilby exemplifies both extremes of the appreciation of human beauty: Plato's Heavenly Aphrodite on one side and the Common Aphrodite on the other (Plato 1993: 11-12). This is a novel about the appreciation of the body in

art both textual and visual, but pure aestheticism is only half of the picture du Maurier paints.

In du Maurier's earlier career as a *Punch* cartoonist, he had lampooned aestheticism for claiming to be wholly about beauty, and not about sex, while the aesthetes themselves were effete, sexually predatory, even degenerate. As an artist of an older generation, turning late in his career from visual art to fiction, du Maurier shows in *Trilby*'s mid-Victorian British artists what a more healthy relationship between art, sexuality and beauty might look like. Taffy and the Laird do not resemble the pale, effeminate specimens that du Maurier features in his cartoons, but are hyper-masculine individuals who box energetically in the morning and paint realistically in the afternoon, as if in response and reproof to the decadence of the *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic movement to come. The text is thus a wilfully anachronistic production, suspended between (and simultaneously of) both the dangerous and aesthetically troubling 1890s of its *production* and the less morally problematic timeframe of its setting. Trilby the character lives in the 1850s, when the sexually charged artistry of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was still largely unknown, and nearly half a century before Oscar Wilde's infamous trial for gross indecency. The time from which Trilby and her three compatriots hail had not yet felt the effects of mass literacy on the reading tastes of a nation, or yet known the tensions and horrors of the Franco-Prussian war. Softened by nostalgia and protected by its geographical and historical distance from the challenges of the decades to come, the novel's issues consequently appear less confrontational to its reading public. The novel's statements on aesthetics, suspended across two temporal periods, initially suggest a hopeful argument for an alternative artistic future, and then despair of it, as a union between producing great art and living a healthy, normal and long life proves to be impossible. In *Trilby* the best art, receiving the society's most enthusiastic critical plaudits, is produced under extreme duress, and

its very best artists all succumb to traumatic lives and tragic ends that would be worthy of any Pre-Raphaelite artist or model.

Thus, to ensure that the experience of the reader on the way to such an ending is educative all the same, the story must be suspended across two time-frames by a narrative mode that is at times overtly and extravagantly diegetic. The defence of *Trilby* and of its eponymous heroine is made possible through a distinctly self-conscious, archly Thackerayan model of direct address and insisted-upon verisimilitude; the narration's digressions look to direct, even coerce the nature of the aesthetic response. The story is voiced in a monthly-serialised contemporary present in which the meaning of acts of reading is constantly worried over, while the plot has already taken place in an idealised historical past. In bizarre pre-emptive strikes on possible hostile reviewers, the narrator asserts the moral uprightness of this story from the past, and his own helplessness to tell any other story than the one that he does, even if it involves such problematic topics as Trilby's lapsed virginity:

My poor heroine ... had all the virtues but one; but the virtue she lacked ... was of such a kind that I have found it impossible so to tell her history as to make it quite fit and proper reading for the ubiquitous young person so dear to us all. Most deeply to my regret. For I had fondly hoped it might one day be said of me that whatever my other literary shortcomings might be, I at least had never penned one which a pure-minded young British mother might not read aloud to her little blue-eyed babe as it lies sucking its little bottle in its little bassinette.

Fate has willed it otherwise. (49)

Described as first coming ‘to grief through her trust in a friend of her mother’s’ (52), Trilby experiences her first sexual encounter as the result of naivety: she has at the very least been seduced by someone older and more experienced, and at worst, been molested. The narrator reassures us, that whilst she has unfortunately lost her virginity, it is because she is the victim of enculturated feminine sexual ignorance. So while she is more sexually experienced than the Victorian reader would like, she nevertheless remains remarkably sexually innocent. The narrator rules that:

She followed love for love’s sake only, now and then, as she would have followed art if she had been a man – capriciously, desultorily, more in a frolicsome spirit of *camaraderie* than anything else. Like an amateur, in short – a distinguished amateur who is too proud to sell his pictures, but willingly gives one away now and then to some highly-valued and much-admiring friend. (50)

Du Maurier seeks to legitimise his heroine’s sexual past by imagining sex as if it were an art form, practised innocently if ignorantly by Trilby, and not for money. Trilby’s sexuality is – in a very common *fin-de-siècle* strategy – supposedly de-eroticised by its being aestheticised. This predicament was foreshadowed in an 1880 cartoon ‘Taking Time by the Forelock’ which played with both the sexual ignorance of young women and the social distinction between the dominant two female professions: a woman having sex for money and a woman marrying for money.

Figure 1. ‘Taking Time by the Forelock.’ *Source: Punch* 79, 11 December 1880, 270. Reproduced by kind permission of The Trustees of the National Library of Scotland

Du Maurier was not alone in making a literary stand over the fashion for keeping young Victorian women sexually ignorant, yet where others were criticised for exploring these sensitive issues, his heroine was celebrated. Thomas Hardy's infamous tale of innocence corrupted, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), depicts a heroine whose life is destroyed by a similar lack of sexual knowledge. She complains, sadly too late, to her mother: "“why didn't you warn me about men: I was a child when I left home: I didn't know how dangerous they can be, and you didn't tell me!”" (Hardy, 2008: 24). However, unlike Tess, Trilby does not complete the transition from innocence to experience, to social and self-awareness, until she falls in love with Little Billee and realizes the effect her past sexual generosity might have on him and her potential in-laws. While Tess later attempts to exact revenge on her seducer by murdering him, Trilby remains fragile, vulnerable and prone to excessively generous demonstrations of affection. Trilby thus continues to possess many of the suitable feminine attributes of a heroine of socially acceptable fiction. She does not challenge the culturally acceptable dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' femininity, like Tess or Hardy's later much criticised, heroine, Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*, who continues obstinately 'living in sin' despite the censure of 'good' society. In contrast, Trilby runs away thereby seeking neither to change society nor to attempt become part of it. She is distinct from Hardy's less appeaseable protagonists because she retains many of the marks of a maid even if technically she is 'a maiden no more'.

While some readers may be happy to confine their interpretative course to the one into which the non-omniscient, reminiscing narrator directs them, others, more sceptical, may choose to transgress by disbelieving his whitewashing of Trilby's sexual agency. That such extraordinary discursive effort has been dedicated to the assertion of Trilby's sexual innocence, could be interpreted as an attempt to conceal 'truths' beneath the surface of the text: for instance, that Trilby

might actually enjoy having sex. On her first entrance the only clothing Trilby is wearing, save a petticoat, is the military overcoat of a French infantry soldier. A possible reading of her *dishabille* and her simultaneous urgent appetite for food might be that she has come from a sexual encounter with the coat's owner. The text thereby opens up a space for reading pleasure in which it is possible to believe that Trilby has known perfectly well all along what she has been doing: that she has, in spite of the narrator's denials, experienced sexual desire, and even that Jeannot is not, as the narrator insists, her brother but, more plausibly, her son. Trilby's confession that: "'Besides, all that sort of thing, in women, is punished severely enough down here, God knows!'" (409-10) seems to hint that she comprehends the plight of the fallen woman all too well. As he covertly issues a knowing nod to the erotic reality behind the penitential fantasy, du Maurier simultaneously seems to legitimise Trilby's behaviour (and also chafe at the limits imposed by the *de facto* censorship of Victorian fiction).

Similarly, the novel knowingly exploits the limits of ekphrasis both to imagine, and not-imagine Trilby's nudity in her work as an artist's model. Trilby's nudity is displayed to the artists who paint her, but it is never explicitly described to the reader; nor indeed, of course, does her naked form appear amongst the novel's illustrations. While Trilby's modesty remains technically intact within the pages of the text, by alluding to her nudity and denying its display, du Maurier ensures that the reader *does* imagine the beauty of her body for him or herself in a way that matches the text's assertion of her beauty and sexual attractiveness. The text's terms of mimesis then, seek both to aestheticise and eroticise the body of its heroine: defending the moral purity of the classical nude while assuring the reader of the heroine's sexual attractiveness (see Nead, 1992). The text is thus, consequently, both superficially above censure, and more erotically focussed than it can openly admit.

ii. '[A]s for my cutting you – why, I'd sooner cut myself – into little pieces!'

In *fin-de-siècle* texts such as *Trilby* and H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1888), the sexual desire occasioned by female beauty has a disruptive effect on masculine autonomy. For the text to remain ultimately within stable bounds, once Trilby's beauty has been exposed in this way, it cannot just autonomously be, but must be narrativized: as in Gothic modes of fiction, the thrilling middle of the narrative must be finally and safely contained by its ending. In struggling with the thrill produced by Trilby's beauty, the text remains troubled that the beautiful is not necessarily the morally and ethically good:

Many of us, older and wiser than Little Billee, have seen in lovely female shapes the outer garment of a lovely female soul. The instinct which guides us to do this is, perhaps, a right one, more often than not. But more often than not, also, lovely female shapes are terrible complicators of the difficulties and dangers of this earthly life, especially for their owner, and more especially if she be a humble daughter of the people, poor and ignorant, of a yielding nature, too quick to love and trust. (46)

In both texts, the woman's dangerous beauty must be first exercised, then coded, understood, and eventually contained in some way, and finally broken up or diminished. First of all, Trilby's beauty is civilised by being coerced into a received narrative for sexual experience followed by repentance: the Magdalen. Trilby is associated with Mary Magdalene by du Maurier's quotation (in safely inoculating Latin) from Luke 7:47 'Quia multum amavit!' ([Her sins, which are many, are forgiven]; for she loved much).

Figure 2. ‘Repentance’. *Source:* Du Maurier, 1893, 119.

As Patricia Kruppa has commented:

Mary Magdalene was a favourite subject of Victorian painters ... The subject reflected contemporary social concerns, offered an opportunity for art to serve a moral purpose, and provided one of the few ways for artists to treat human sexuality in a socially acceptable form ... In her Victorian incarnation, Mary Magdalene’s attributes are essentially feminine ones. In her role as penitent, she is remembered for her physical beauty, her touching remorse, her tears, and her emotional nature. (Kruppa, 1992: 125)

In her penitence Mary Magdalene has throughout history been depicted as naked or partially attired, a portrayal that both asserts her eschewing of worldly goods but also her profound eroticism, human passion rerouted as religious devotion. By presenting Trilby as a penitent like Magdalene, her sexual experience becomes a part of her lesson, and as such becomes acceptable to show.¹

The pleasure taken from Trilby’s beauty is also restricted by the likelihood of its diminishing over time. The narrator of Thackeray’s *The Virginians* (1859) opines that, ‘Tis hard with respect to Beauty, that its possessor should not have a life enjoyment of it, but be compelled

¹ Bare feet are also an artistic symbol of penitence, as exemplified in Rossetti’s *Mary Magdalene Leaving the House of Feasting* (1857) – although, in order to show Trilby’s spiritual change visually, following her repentance her feet are shown to be now encased in shoes.

to resign it after, at the most, some forty years' lease' (Thackeray, 2013: 579). Trilby's beauty is made safer by its historical distance: by the time of the plot's narration, she would have faded anyway. While she recovers from having been the famous singer La Svengali, she acquires grey hair and wrinkles around her eyes and her skin becomes transparent – but such is Trilby's visual effect that even the passing of time is not quick enough to contain fully the disruptive effects of her physicality. Svengali's prophesises ““what a beautiful skeleton you will make”” (130), and even as she hastens towards becoming a corpse, her beauty endures: ‘Day by day she grew more beautiful in their eyes, in spite of her increasing pallor and emaciation – her skin was so pure and white and delicate, and the bones of her face so admirable!’ (319).

Ultimately though, the pleasure of looking at her body must be controlled through the body's wholeness being disrupted, towards the final process of death and decay. One of the novel's several new linguistic coinages is Trilby's own phrase ‘the altogether’ to signify the nude – as if implying that when Trilby is naked, she is complete – both *all woman* and in possession of masculine attributes; as it were, whole, undifferentiated, a singularity. Early on in the novel, posing in ‘the altogether’ Trilby is, like Haggard's Ayesha, too much woman for any man to hold safely, especially the physically puny, effeminate hero of this book, and so she must be restrained. Nina Auerbach has connected Count Dracula, Svengali and Freud as the three key mesmeric male figures of the 1890s, leaning over female bodies, seeking to control them (1982: 15-17). The scene of Svengali peering into Trilby's mouth recalls Lacan's reading of Freud's dream of Irma as an overpowering vision of the wholeness of female corporeality, the ‘altogether’ indeed:

Having got the patient to open her mouth ... what he sees in there, these turbinate bones covered with a whitish membrane, is a horrendous sight. This mouth has all the

equivalences in terms of significations, all the condensations you want. Everything blends in and becomes associated with the female sexual organ, by way of the nose. ... There's a horrendous discovery here, that of the flesh one never sees, the foundation of things, the other side of the head, of the face, the secretory glands *par excellence*, the flesh from which everything exudes, at the very heart of the mystery, the flesh in as much as it is suffering is formless. (Lacan, 1988: 154).

The mode in which du Maurier's narrative voice actually characterises Trilby's physical beauty is in terms of excess: she is beautiful because she is large (the women in his cartoons were notorious for being Amazonian, oversized: Ormond, 1969: 311). What the novel ultimately does to master this singularity, to give it form, to contain it, is to break Trilby apart; as if (such monstrously oversized) female sexuality can only be containable in bits. To comprehend her beauty is thus to mutilate the text within which she exists in order to determine the sum of its parts.

Trilby's first appearance is characterised in the following anatomical terms: 'a very healthy young face, which could scarcely be called quite beautiful at first sight, since the eyes were too wide apart, the mouth too large, the chin too massive, the complexion a mass of freckles'. The narrator then confesses that the meaning of her beauty is not realisable until it is aestheticized: 'Besides, you can never tell how beautiful (or how ugly) a face may be till you have tried to draw it.' He then, characteristically for the scopophilic Victorian gaze, singles out a part of real flesh from within the cultural enclosures of her (masculine) clothing:

But a small portion of her neck, down by the collar-bone, which just showed itself between the unbuttoned lapels of her military coat collar, was of a delicate privet-like whiteness that

is never to be found on any French neck, and very few English ones. Also, she had a very fine brow, broad and low, with thick level eyebrows much darker than her hair, a broad, bony, high bridge to her short nose, and her full, broad cheeks were beautifully modelled.

Du Maurier then adds as a condition for Trilby's admittance to the homosocial coterie of the *trois anglisches* the hypothesis that 'She would have made a singularly handsome boy' (15-16) – as indeed she later does when 'passing' as a male fleeing the *trois Angliches*.

Figure 3. 'Poena pede claudo'. *Source:* Du Maurier, 1893: 375.

iii. "[T]he strange delight of tenderness that somehow filled his manly bosom"

Initially, the sexual predilections of the texts are not focussed on the beautiful body of its heroine, but in the vibrantly passionate intensity of the friendship between the three British artists. Little Billee is described in infantilised terms, 'small and slender' with white skin indicating feminine gentility and 'very small hands and feet' (6); he is also unworldly and extremely close to his mother and sister. Little Billee's admiration of Trilby even becomes narcissistic when he looks at her eyes 'which seemed for a minute only to reflect a little image of himself' (40). By contrast, Taffy is a hyper-masculinised, Yorkshire 'Man of Blood ... bare armed ... and twirling a pair of Indian clubs around his head ... perspiring freely ... looking fierce ... very big' (3). When at his lowest and succumbing to tears, the stereotypically feminine mode of grieving, Billee finds solace after being invited into Taffy's bed and lies holding his friend's hand. After Little Billee's death, Taffy marries his friend's sister, who we are told so closely resembles Billee that Trilby 'knew her for his sister at once' (188). The illustration deliberately Homericly mis-captioned 'Ilyssus' (Ulysses) puts a

classical fig leaf over what could easily be interpreted as a scene of homosexual assignation between the novel's three male protagonists.²

Figure 4: 'Ilyssus'. *Source:* Du Maurier, 1893, 97.

The three men's affections for each other are intense and playful in equal measure. Their relationships with the opposite sex outside of the family never develop satisfactorily in the narrative, and Trilby is the only woman to whom they develop a plausible erotic attachment. Trilby is associated both with a heteronormative Victorian erotic ideal, the infantilised, doll-like, yet still erotically accessible woman, but she also epitomises the homoerotic ideal of Plato's *Symposium*, a beautiful boyish-looking girl that can be enjoyed sexually by men legally and without social censure.³

When Trilby makes her initial entrance to the studio of the *trois Angliches*, she is not appreciated by the assembled men for her womanliness; rather, her gender is remarked upon as an aside and she is admired as a catalogue of parts held together by an evidently borrowed man's overcoat and a 'huge pair of male slippers' (14). Trilby is from the first, something other, existing in a locale between definitions, which is precisely where her sexual appeal is also situated. She enters the room as a 'fully-developed female' (14) but in parts, hung with men's and women's apparel.

² See Barthes (1964) on the caption as the means of containing the meaning of an image.

³ A bizarrely surreal illustration of numerous versions of Trilby's head topping a wall of violins in a music shop is captioned 'Platonic love'.

Figure 5. ‘The Soft Eyes’. *Source:* Du Maurier, 1893, 94.

Once the female body has been rendered discontinuous, male desire can then attach itself to a fragment as fetish, rather than to the terrifying uncontainable whole, (Daly, 2005: 14). Both Taffy and Little Billee believe themselves in love with Trilby, yet it is not the whole woman they seem to admire but a fragmented fiction, a fetish centred on her feet. As feet are common to both genders they enable the owner of the gaze to appreciate her erotically, and aesthetically, regardless of their sexuality. Freud argues that the fetish ‘saves the fetishist from being a homosexual, by endowing women with the characteristic which makes them tolerable as sexual objects’ (Freud, 1961: 154). As historians of Victorian dress have pointed out, Victorian dress technologies such as the hooped skirt and the bustle create the appearance of a hyper-feminine body but without flesh in it (Kortsch, 2009: 60-1). Consequently the Victorian male gaze falls upon, and fetishises, the extreme ends of the actual body, the feet and the hair. The foot or shoe owes its preference as a fetish – or part of it – to the circumstance that the inquisitive boy peered at the woman’s genitals from below, from her legs up (Freud, 1961: 155; see Jenkins, 1998: 255 on why the foot and not the shoe). For Freud, the foot as fetish represents a trade-off between one body part and another: ‘the substitution for the sexual object’ for ‘a part of the body but little adapted for sexual purposes such as the foot, or the hair’ (Freud, 1910: 18). Auerbach notes the excessive focus on body parts at the expense of the whole endows the mutilated biology with an almost mystic power, and she writes of ‘the totemistic aura parts of a woman’s body acquire in disjunction from the woman herself’ (Auerbach, 1982: 48). Trilby’s feet are described as ‘astonishingly beautiful feet, such as one only sees in pictures and statues’ and Little Billee, who ‘knew what the shapes and sizes and

colours of almost every bit of man, woman, or child should be ... was quite bewildered to find that a real, bare, live human foot could be such a charming object to look at, and felt that such a base or pedestal lent quite an antique and Olympian dignity to a figure that seemed just then rather grotesque' (17). The reader's attention to Trilby's beauty is first directed and illicitly (in terms of polite English society) revealed in terms which break the foot down into even further subcategories: 'her bare white ankles and insteps, and slim, straight rosy heels' (14).⁴

Although Trilby is seen as beautiful and poses on numerous occasions for the *trois Angliches*, it is above all her feet that they prize as fetishised, aestheticised and commodified works of art. It is their recognition of Trilby's feet that finally convince them she is one and the same as the celebrated diva, La Svengali.

Figure 6. ““Oh, Don't You Remember Sweet Alice, Ben Bolt?””. *Source:* Du Maurier, 1893, 363.

(Here too, post-metamorphosis, she is anatomized: 'Her lips and cheeks were rouged; her dark level eyebrows nearly met at the bridge of her short high nose. Through her parted lips you could see her large glistening white teeth': 246-47). Once the men realised that La Svengali is Trilby, rather than immediately rushing to be reunited with their former love, they instead purchase promotional replicas of her feet, which have achieved a celebrity status quite independent of Trilby herself; and even after her death, Taffy returns to the studio and buys the wall with a sketch of her foot on it.

⁴ Interestingly, *She* also devotes a lengthy passage to the necrophiliac adoration of a mummified foot: Haggard, 1887: 112-3.

iv. '[B]ound hand and foot...by a kind of slavish adoration'

Although Trilby's shockingly unshod feet suggest her lack of morality, as does her ability to pose, '[n]aked and unashamed – in this respect an absolute savage', it is the very appearance of her feet as the perfect incarnation of fashionable and restricted feminine beauty, that simultaneously elevates her above such savagery. As Christine Bayles Kortsch states:

One of the favourite uses of the rhetoric of 'savage' versus 'civilized' during this period involved Chinese footbinding, and in *The Story of An African Farm* (1883), Lyndall complains that British women have been trained to 'fit our sphere as a Chinese woman's foot fits her shoe, exactly, as though God had made both.' (Kortsch, 1991: 90).

Trilby's impossibly slender feet achieve naturally the effect of beauty which the Chinese sought to achieve artificially by methods of deformation and constriction. The narrator scorns women's contemporary fashions which might similarly constrict Trilby's feet, as opposed to the men's slipper, which let the feet expand and develop, inconceivably blemish- and callous-free.

And in truth they were astonishingly beautiful feet, such as one only sees in pictures and statues – a true inspiration of shape and colour, all made up of delicate lengths and subtly-modulated curves and noble straightnesses and happy little dimpled arrangements in innocent young pink and white.

Conversely, when Mother Nature has taken extra pains in the building of it, and proper care or happy chance has kept it free of lamentable deformations, indurations, and discolorations

– all those grewsome boot – begotten abominations which have made it so generally unpopular – the sudden sight of it, uncovered, comes as a very rare and singularly pleasing surprise to the eye that has learned how to see! (17-18)

Yet the fashions the narrator critiques are the very same fashions that would render Trilby respectable. Du Maurier consequently suggests that in order to *be* respectable, one must also assume a certain artifice that is comparable to the socially disreputable act of foot-binding. Trilby's 'savage' blemish-free feet constrain her as much as those of a shod 'civilised' woman. They are not the feet of a free working woman but rather the feet of a doll, a statue or a woman who never walks or works; and so for all of the claims of woman's supposed 'lordship' (18), the preternatural perfection of Trilby's feet weds her to a particular biological destiny. In a post-Darwinian age (du Maurier refers to her feet as the result of 'happy evolution', 19) which looked to biology to dictate rights and privileges, such an assertion – albeit subliminal – indicates that Trilby has been born to be admired for her bodily perfections and the pleasures they might offer above all else.⁵ The narrator may seem to praise Trilby for spurning the life of a nude model and becoming a washerwoman, but such a profession would ensure her feet's encasement in the kind of footwear which would surely lead to the calloused, chilblained, misshapen working feet he despises. Her feet are only valuable as an asset as long as they are never put to their proper use. They can only remain in this state of valuable 'perfection' by being kept in a state of, by Victorian standards, *dishabille*, without shoes and stockings and also without the movement for which they were originally intended. Trilby's feet, applauded by the male gaze of the narrator and praised by their

⁵ On du Maurier's elevation of the beautiful as valuable beyond all other values, see Kelly, 1983: 55, Wood, 193: 43, du Maurier, 1952: 94).

aesthetic and fetishistic value to the male artists of the Quartier Latin for their liberty from the shackles of fashion, no more enable her freedom of movement than the bound feet of Chinese tradition, so distasteful to Victorian social mores.

v. ‘Nothing is so chaste as nudity’

Understanding her pecuniary and social value once fetishised in this way, Trilby never even sees herself as a whole woman, but as an artistic assemblage of useful and marketable *objets d’art*. When she is pressed to explain posing ‘for the altogether’ she says ‘*l’ensemble*, you know – head, hands, and feet – everything – especially feet’ (17). *Everything* here implies the whole body, including the body part that dare not speak its name, Trilby’s vagina. The English-French meaning of *ensemble* is given in the OED as: ‘All the parts of anything taken together so that each part is considered only in relation to the whole; the general effect (of a person’s appearance, a whole work of art, etc.).’ The term, then, is not suggestive of a whole/altogether but rather more *all together*, a sum of mutilated, fetishized body parts (and indeed, the coming together of two or more people). She lists the extremities of her body that appear outside of lady’s clothing and deliberately omits any mention of what lies beneath, as if there is nothing there, both denying her sex, and also what the Victorian woman was most prized for, her reproductive capacity. By suggesting there is nothing more than ‘head, hands and feet’, that they present a complete picture and constitute ‘everything’, Trilby inadvertently refers to her vagina – her femaleness – as nothing. This foreshadows Angela Carter’s description of the gendered aesthetics of pornography:

Pornography involves an abstraction of human intercourse in which the self is reduced to its formal elements. In its most basic form, these elements are presented by the probe and the

fringed hole ... The hole is open, an inert space ... The male is positive ... Woman is negative. Between her legs lies nothing but zero, the sign for nothing, that only becomes something when the male principle fills it with meaning. (1979: 4. Cf. Miller 2012: 4)

Her *nothing* then, by implication and omission, suggests both the thing she denies, her sex and her nakedness, which is also both a *nothing* and a *something*. The absence of clothing entailed by the state of nakedness means that no social position can be read on the surface of the body; thus what is shown by the naked body is something that cannot be named and so linguistically for the Victorian lady *does not exist*. Trilby's denial by omission of the bodily parts under her clothes highlights her nudity and the logical extension of that which is here referenced as, 'the altogether'. Furthermore, as Carter describes, the vagina as zero is the symbolic approximation for femaleness, and states that therefore 'my symbolic value is ... a dumb mouth' (5). Trilby's value is also as 'a dumb mouth', or rather, a mouth which has incredible potential, potential that is only seen by Svengali, and then only because he can fill it with meaning, breathing into her a hypnotic musical performance.

Her body, thus catalogued as parts but also reduced to its biology is simultaneously hypersexualised and de-eroticised. As Alan McKee *et al.*'s influential, *The Porn Report* comments, pornography can be interpreted as 'a script that reduces women to sexual objects for the pleasure of men and reduces their humanity to so many body parts and orifices' (2008: 19). In the same way that pornography isolates erogenous zones for titillation to the point where the breasts or buttocks or genitalia may as well be separated from the person as a whole, the avid attention lavished on Trilby's feet makes them erotic, highly sexualised, and therefore hyper-corporeal whilst at the same time robbing them of their life source, and of their ability to function by

separating them uncannily from the body of which they are necessarily a part. The emphasis in the description of Trilby as, not one complete person, but an assemblage of body parts, enables the narrator to focus on her sexual femaleness and his appreciation of her in that context in a way that, in spite of the narrator's animadversions against the purveyors of pornographic pictures ('some of us look at them and laugh, and even buy. To be a purchaser is bad enough; but to be the purveyor thereof – ugh'), begins to resemble the psychology of pornography (209). The narrator appears to ignore the more obvious female erogenous zones, yet at the same time indirectly draws readerly attention to them. Svengali speaks of her 'beautiful big chest' with its 'big ... lungs', both of which phrases can be interpreted as alluding to her breasts. Crucially he dwells upon her large mouth and throat, commenting: 'the roof of your mouth is like the dome of the Pantheon; there is room in it for 'toutes les glories de la France,' and a little to spare! The entrance to your throat is like the middle porch of St. Sulpice when the doors are open for the faithful on All Saint's Day ... and your little tongue is scooped out like the leaf of a pink peony' (71). Lacan writes of the terrifying vision of female corporeality: 'the back of this throat, the complex, unlocatable form, which also makes it into the primitive object *par excellence*, the abyss of the feminine organ from which all life emerges, this gulf of the mouth, in which everything is swallowed up' (Lacan 1988: 164). Carter asserts in *The Sadeian Woman* that the mouth can be seen as symbolic of female genitalia, particularly the entrance to the vagina (1979: 4)

Figure 7: "Himmel! The Roof of Your Mouth". *Source:* Du Maurier, 1893: 69.

Since Trilby is not a virgin, and perhaps even a mother as well, Svengali's comment that her mouth/vagina is huge suggests that it has been stretched through frequent use. His additional

remarks further suggest her sexual promiscuity, indicating that she has perhaps admitted all of the wealthy men in France and the kind of human traffic seen at the doors of St Sulpice on La Touissant to her genitalia. Interestingly, Svengali is the only man amongst the visitants of the studio who is interested in looking into her mouth, and indeed, to admire what he finds, even down to the little pink tongue, perhaps in this context a reference to the clitoris. Despite du Maurier's assertion that the relationship between Svengali and Trilby was as a father and his daughter (Pick, 2000: 27), Svengali's desire to penetrate her mouth/vagina, his delight at looking deep within her throat, his admiration over her sizable chest and his disregard for her physical health show him to be the only male character in the novel that takes a heteronormative sexual interest in her. Svengali's frequent remarks upon Trilby's death, especially in French, suggest *la petite mort*, the little death of orgasm and he is known to consort with, and exhaust ladies of dubious repute, such as Honorine, even if her appeal is ostensibly vocal. Svengali's "'you shall see nothing, hear nothing, think of nothing but Svengali, Svengali, Svengali!'" (72) indicates his jealous desire to possess Trilby alone, thereby preventing her further generous sexual giving, her thinking only of 'Svengali, Svengali, Svengali', as an orgasmic cry of pleasure. He addresses her as La Svengali and describes her in a way that makes her appearance seem more feminine and conventionally sexually attractive, and under his influence she is transformed from a boyish *grisette* to a star deemed more 'magnificent or seductive' (304) than the celebrated Ellen Terry.

Trilby's assumption of Svengali's name and thus being identified as his wife, and consequently sexual property, renders her enslavement socially legitimate. Her hypnotic relationship with Svengali can be seen as an exaggeration of Victorian marriage, supported by Hilary Grimes's contention that the illustration of Svengali and Trilby bowing together shows 'a balance of influence' between them, and the cherubic boys collecting flowers connote 'innocence,

stripping the image ... of its possible manipulative connotations'. The pair 'absorb one another's identities. In becoming "La Svengali", it seems that Trilby is consumed by Svengali' (Grimes, 2011: 79). Such a discursive merging of spousal identity is akin to Swedenborg's popular concept of the conjugal angel: one flesh and one spirit, who would logically speak with one voice (Swedenborg, 1768: 40). Once Trilby is known by Svengali's name, her enslavement is placed within acceptable bounds. Although Svengali apparently manipulates Trilby into marriage, union with a man that can offer her social inclusion, expensive gifts, a home and celebrity, would be seen by some 'fallen women' to have its advantages. Even Svengali's potential sexual relationship with Trilby whilst under the influence of hypnosis was unlikely to disconcert the greater part of a country where, as a wife became her husband's property after they were joined in matrimony, he could not be tried for raping her (Lyndon Shanley, 1989: 184).

Trilby, who 'could no more sing than a fiddle can play itself' (440) does not seek her own voice and indeed is never given the opportunity to use it. Trilby's size in the illustrations appears to diminish after she has repented: she is thus the human transformed to doll, an inverse of the celebrated ballet *Coppelia* (from E. T. A. Hoffman's 'The Sandman', 1816). Her story also reflects, albeit in a less confrontational manner, popular tales of female awakening such as Hans Christian Andersen's 'Red Shoes' (1845). Andersen's tale tells of a curious young girl, eager to grow up, who, unbeknown to her guardian, chooses red shoes to go dancing in and is punished for her implied sexual fall, condemned to dance forever, unable to remove the external sign of her sin. (In this context the blood red shoes are indicative of not just pleasure but also the perforation of the hymen through sexual intercourse). Trilby too is obliged to use her feet to go off on adventures. Karen elects to have her feet cut off by the executioner, and on crutches assumes residence in a convent, her fetishized feet removed from sight and her ability to wander curtailed. Trilby cannot

be assimilated back into Victorian society, and although she undergoes a symbolic mutilation when her voice is destroyed, she is condemned to death, only the artistic representation of her feet remaining, unblemished and unchanging forever as a testimony to her desire to remain suitably feminine, faithful and immobile. As in Browning's poetic description of the portrait of 'My Last Duchess' (1842), whose subject turns out to be dead, perhaps murdered, the artistic depiction of a beautiful woman is much easier to appreciate aesthetically and to confine appropriately, than the physical reality.

Trilby then was so widely enjoyed because it neatly encapsulates the sexual double standard but does little if anything to challenge it, du Maurier succeeding where Hardy and others failed in making the Victorian public love a fallen woman. *Trilby* remains unpunished by society: first considered innocent in her naive early sexual encounters and her nude modelling because of her ignorance, and then in her manipulation by Svengali for her hypnotic suggestiveness. In an apparent inversion of the fate of Sue Bridehead, *Trilby*, whose passion, appetite for pleasure and, for a time, success, strongly suggests the healthy advantages of transgressing against Victorian morality, is not vilified but, for a time, celebrated. She defies the wishes of Little Billee (and also, surprisingly, his mother) in fleeing marriage but is ultimately punished: Jeannot, *Trilby* and finally Little Billee himself all succumb to death. The *Trilby* of the novel's historically distant halcyon scenes in the bohemian artist studios, however, became literally a Victorian icon through the novel's subsequent remediation on stage, in photographs, consumer products and advertising. While the older *Trilby* at the end of the novel is cut up in order for the meanings of her body to be coerced into normative Victorian categories, her earlier undifferentiated self achieves a life outside the pages of the novel. As the Svengalis' violinist Gecko claims, '*there were two Trilbies*' (440), but the earlier incarnation of the heroine could only remain whole as a myth in the enduring public

imagination because the later Trilby was dismembered and destroyed. Committed to the past bodily as a corpse, her legacy could gain in strength. Ultimately this is not so much a novel intent on the division of Trilby's power but the insurance of it: she might be undressed and divided for dissection in the text, but this serves to remind us of just what we lose when we focus on the body at the expense of the brain. Du Maurier's heroine may be admired for her beauty but by focussing first on the pleasure of that aesthetic, then committing textual violence on her corporeality, du Maurier invites us to consider the pornographic reality of the whole, complete Trilby, head, hands, feet, everything: in short, 'the altogether'.

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