

## **In another time and place: The Handmaiden as an adaptation**

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### **Citation:**

SHIN, Chi Yun (2018). In another time and place: The Handmaiden as an adaptation. Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema. [Article]

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To cite this article: Chi-Yun Shin (2018): In another time and place: *The Handmaiden* as an adaptation, Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema, DOI: [10.1080/17564905.2018.1520781](https://doi.org/10.1080/17564905.2018.1520781)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17564905.2018.1520781>



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Published online: 19 Sep 2018.



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## In another time and place: *The Handmaiden* as an adaptation

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### ABSTRACT



This article considers the South Korean auteur director Park Chan-wook's latest film *The Handmaiden*, which is the film adaptation of British writer Sarah Waters's third novel *Fingersmith*. Transporting the story of love and deception from Victorian England to 1930s Korea under Japanese colonial rule, the film offers a compelling case of transnational or cross-cultural adaptation. In the process of cultural relocation, the film gives prominence to the ethnic identities and hierarchies in colonial Korea, and in recounting the unfolding lesbian love story between a petty-thief-disguised-as-maid and a noble lady, the film provides a spectacular, visual 'translation' of the novel's approach to the story of same-sex desire. Despite all the changes the film makes to the original novel, the author Waters claims that the film is 'faithful' to her work. Taking her comments as a framework, the article explores the ways in which the film carries over the transgressive allure of the original story, while addressing the issues of history and identity in another time and place.

### KEYWORDS

*The Handmaiden*;  
transnational adaptation;  
Park Chan-wook; Sarah  
Waters; *Fingersmith*

*The Handmaiden* (Ah-ga-ssi / 아가씨, 2016)<sup>1</sup> is the tenth feature film by the South Korean director Park Chan-wook, who is mainly known for his highly stylized and visceral tales of vengeance that includes the Cannes Film Festival prize winner *Oldboy* (Oldeuboi, 2003). An eagerly awaited film since his English language thriller *Stoker* (2013), *The Handmaiden* was very much promoted worldwide as the film by Park Chan-wook, an acclaimed international auteur. 'From the director of *Oldboy* and *Stoker*' is indeed the top line that adorns the film's UK theatrical poster (Figure 1). Upon its international release, the film garnered critical and commercial success. Among its many accolades, the film was in competition for the Palme d'Or at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival, and won the 2018 BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) Award for Best Film Not in the English Language. According to the 2016 Korean Cinema Yearbook, it was also 'sold to a record 175 territories (besting the previous high of 167 for Bong Joon-ho's 2013 feature *Snowpiercer*)' and reportedly grossed over US\$37.7 million (Paquet 2016, 7).

In the UK, *The Handmaiden* enjoyed a particularly successful theatrical release. Over the first six weeks of play, its gross reached £1.25 million and became the best box-office

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**Figure 1.** UK poster of *The Handmaiden* (Curzon Artificial Eye).

performing Korean film by a wide margin, beating Park's own *Oldboy* at £316,000 (Gant 2017, 9). As Charles Gant points out in his *Sight & Sound* report, 'that's a remarkable result', considering the relatively poor box office track record of Korean films as well as the fact that foreign language films rarely hit £1 million in the UK market.<sup>2</sup> Then again, as Gant puts it, '*The Handmaiden* offered an altogether different proposition for UK audiences', and one of the salient aspects for its UK distributor Curzon Artificial Eye was the film's 'connection to Sarah Waters's novel *Fingersmith*' (2017, 9). Indeed, for all intents and purposes, *The Handmaiden* is an adaptation of British writer Waters's third novel *Fingersmith*, even though the film transports a gothic tale of crime set in nineteenth century England to Korea of the 1930s when the Korean peninsula was under Japanese occupation. Furthermore, notwithstanding the cultural relocation, *The Handmaiden* is in steadfast and evident dialogue with *Fingersmith*, and it is this intermedial relationship between the original novel and the film adaptation that is the main concern of this article. In particular, it focuses on the sensual eroticism of the central lesbian couples in both texts.

### Enter the author: Sarah Waters on *The Handmaiden*

Published in 2002, Waters's *Fingersmith* is an example of Neo-Victorian historical fiction that consciously replicates some of the details of Victorian 'sensation' novels, particularly of Wilkie Collins, which are full of intense melodrama and intrigue.<sup>3</sup> To give a truncated preview of the novel, it tells the story of Sue Trinder, the eponymous fingersmith

(pickpocket), who is roped into helping Richard ‘Gentleman’ Rivers seduce a wealthy heiress, Maud Lilly, sequestered in a big country house called Briar with her uncle. Sue is to pose as a lady’s maid and to gain trust of Maud and persuade her to elope with Gentleman. Once they are married, Gentleman plans to have Maud committed to a lunatic asylum and take her fortune for himself. Unexpectedly, however, the two women are attracted to each other, and there ensues a complicated tale of love and deception that involves Sue’s incarceration in the madhouse. Full of gripping twists and turns, the novel made the bestseller list, becoming a mainstream breakthrough for Waters, and was shortlisted for both The Man Booker and The Orange Prize – two of the most prestigious literary prizes in Britain. A BBC television serialization soon followed in 2005, manifesting its commercial and critical success.

Back in 1998, Waters had made a sensational debut with a novel called *Tipping the Velvet*, which was hailed as signalling ‘a powerful new voice in lesbian fiction’ along with her second novel, published in 1999, *Affinity* (Armitstead 2017). Although she has since written novels set in different times,<sup>4</sup> with her first three novels all being set in the Victorian era – the quasi-trilogy that includes *Fingersmith*, Waters has marked her career with what she calls ‘lesbo Victorian romps’. Of being labelled as a lesbian writer, Waters said, ‘I’m writing with a clear lesbian agenda in the novels. It’s right there at the heart of the books’ (Lo 2006), indicating a pivotal part the topic of same-sex passion plays in her novels. Paulina Palmer, for instance, evaluates ‘her ability to combine the representation of lesbian history with an awareness of the interests and concerns of the lesbian community today’ as ‘one of the most striking and successful aspects of her work’ (2008, 83).

Considering that Waters is one of the most acclaimed contemporary literary heavyweights, it is not so surprising that the established cultural gatekeepers such as *The Guardian* and BBC Radio 4 – who represent a (mainly white) middle-class, highbrow, even elitist, culture sector in Britain – rushed to feature interviews with Waters on the theatrical release of *The Handmaiden* in April 2017. For sure, this phenomenon of soliciting the ‘original’ author’s view has now become a common practice. As Simone Murray notes in her book *The Adaptation Industry*, ‘the author’s role has *not* in fact ceased with the handing over of the book and collecting of money but is, rather, incorporated into the highest profile marketing event for any feature film’ (2012, 26). For instance, the appearance of the author at the adapted film’s red-carpet premiere is almost a ritual in the contemporary celebrity author culture that became prominent from the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> In such an environment, as Murray goes on to maintain, authors ‘function as creative spokespersons and aesthetic guarantors for such trans-format media franchises – reassuring existing and potential audience of an adaptation’s artistic bona fides’ (26–27).

In these interviews, Sarah Waters duly offers her creative blessings to the film. Appearing on BBC Radio 4’s *The Film Programme* (16 April 2017), for example, Waters calls *The Handmaiden* ‘a beautiful, beautiful film’ and tells its host Francine Stock: ‘given that the change of period, change of setting, and change of so much really, nevertheless, it is recognizably my story and my characters, which was wonderful for me.’ When questioned about the film’s lingering sex scenes and a male gaze, Waters defends the film as, although it portrays ‘women trapped by male structures and trapped within the limits of male-authored text,’ it ‘shows them escaping from those things or using them, using bits of them for their own pleasure.’ She continues to reflect that the film has ‘a paradox at the

heart,’ just like her book, and how ‘it knows it and even relishes on its paradoxes and contradictions.’ Similarly, in the *Guardian* interview (8 April 2017), she remarks that ‘though ironically the film is a story told by a man<sup>6</sup>, it’s still very faithful to the idea that the women are appropriating a very male pornographic tradition to find their own way of exploring their desires’ (Armitstead 2017). In fact, according to Steve Lewis, head of theatrical distribution at Curzon, ‘Sarah Waters’s approval’ helped to overcome their ‘concern that the lesbian storyline when combined with a male director might be an issue’ (Gant 2017, 9).

Besides Waters’s approval, what stands out the most in these interviews is the fact that she uses the phrase ‘faithful to the book’ several times. In the aforementioned *The Film Programme*, Waters expresses how astonished she was to find the film being ‘really faithful to the book’ despite lots of changes. In the *Guardian* interview, she mentions that ‘the first thing that struck me was how faithful it manages to be to *Fingersmith* even though it’s in Korean and Japanese and set in a different period’ (Armitstead 2017). This is despite the fact that Waters apparently requested it to be described as ‘inspired by’ rather than ‘based on’, having read the early drafts of the film’s screenplay (Dale 2015). It is actually rather ironic that Waters uses the idea of faithfulness or fidelity in her discussion of the film, in the respect that the question of fidelity – that is to say, ‘when adaptations were being judged in terms of quality by how close or far they were from their “original” or “source” texts’ (Hutcheon 2013, xxvi) – is no longer the critical orthodoxy in the field of adaptation studies. As Linda Hutcheon points out in *A Theory of Adaptation*, ‘today, if “fidelity” is invoked at all in adaptation studies, it is usually ... in the context of fan-culture loyalty rather than as a quality of adaptive strategies’ (2013, xxvi).

To be sure, Waters is not technically making a judgement on the film based on its faithfulness to her book. In fact, she confesses in *The Film Programme* how she ‘could relax and enjoy it more’ when the film’s narrative starts to depart from hers. Rather, it is that the film, to her surprise, manages to be faithful to her novel, despite the cultural transportation. Waters reasons that qualities of excess and madness in the narrative that is ‘tittering on the verge of hysteria, as well as transgressive female characters’ in Park’s film, lead back to her novel that is also an excessive narrative that is full of melodrama and twists and turns, which is in turn inspired by the Victorian novels of sensation. Certainly, the fidelity criticism is not the concern of this article either. What is of interest is the mediated relationship between the ‘source’ novel and adaptation, which is articulated by the novel’s author Sarah Waters. In many ways, Waters’s remarks provide a framework from which to explore the questions as to what has been transformed and yet how it remains ‘true’ to the novel. In the following sections, questions regarding what exactly has been transferred, reimagined and translated from the novel to the film adaptation will be examined. The ‘faithful’ transcoding of the novel’s sensual expression of lesbian sexuality onto cinematic screen, in particular, will be a pivot of this comparative study.

### **In another time and place: from Victorian England to Colonial Korea**

As noted earlier, *The Handmaiden* transplants the Victorian story of love and deception to 1930s Korea under Japanese colonial rule. In the process of cultural relocation, the film gives prominence to the ethnic identities and hierarchies in colonial Korea, conspicuously presented in the household as the Japanese masters (colonizer) and Korean servants

(colonized). Thus, in *The Handmaiden*, a young Korean pickpocket Sook-hee (played by Kim Tae-ri) enters a wealthy Japanese household, pretending to be a maid, in order to help Count Fujiwara (Ha Jung-woo), a Korean conman impersonating a Japanese nobleman, seduce and marry Lady Hideko (Kim Min-hee), who lives in lavish imprisonment on a grand country estate owned by her sadistic uncle, Kouzuki (Cho Jin-woong). According to the film's director Park, it is the producer Syd Lim<sup>7</sup> who came up with the idea of moving the setting to 1930s Korea as a solution to Park's predicament of not wanting to follow in footsteps of the pre-existing BBC miniseries based on *Fingersmith* (Topalovic 2016).<sup>8</sup>

This turns out to be a highly perceptive and effective change, which allows the film to not only deal with the class difference between the characters but also incorporates the colonial aspiration toward the West that was introduced to Korea via Japan. For instance, the mansion, within which much of the film's narrative unfolds, is built in the hybrid style of Japan and Britain, following the instruction of the owner Kouzuki, Lady Hideko's uncle, who ostensibly admires the two countries.<sup>9</sup> (Here, the reference to Britain can be seen as an homage to the original novel as well.) The 1930s was certainly the period of transition when Western style modernization and industrial development, such as the extensive transportation infrastructure, took place in the Korean peninsula under the Japanese colonial authorities, as 'part and parcel of Japan's competition with more advanced powers in the world economy' (Cumings 1998, 223). Although it was mainly to facilitate Japan's interests rather than to benefit the Koreans, in accordance with the peninsula's strategic value to the empire, this development of colonial infrastructure, as Bruce Cumings notes, 'put Korea substantially ahead of other developing countries' by the early 1940s (1998, 222).

A more important point of appeal of the period, however, is the colonial condition that provides a compelling tension between Japanese and Korean identities, adding another layer to the class dynamic of *Fingersmith*. In the novel that Waters describes as being all about 'cons and impersonation,' people are constantly passing themselves off as someone they are not (Stock 2017): Richard Rivers, a working-class crook, masquerades as a gentleman to infiltrate Briar House, and Sue Trinder poses as a maid to help Gentleman's scheme to cheat Maud Lilly. Lady Maud, in turn, later impersonates her own maid 'Sue Smith' (the name Sue Trinder took when she comes to Briar) in front of the medical staff to ensure that it is Sue who ends up being locked up in the asylum as the delusional Mrs Rivers, instead of her, albeit briefly, being forced by Gentleman.

Such assumed names and identities prevalent in the novel are taken one step further in *The Handmaiden* with the colonial power dynamics between Korean and Japanese identities. In the film, Sook-hee, for instance, takes the role of maid with a Korean name Okju, which then is renamed as Tamako, a Japanese name, given to her by a Korean housekeeper. The constantly shifting identities are also reflected in the languages the characters use in the film. Most main characters use both Korean and Japanese languages, and in the theatrical release version, the subtitles of dialogues are colour-coded to show which language is being spoken (Korean in white, and Japanese in yellow).<sup>10</sup> Count Fujiwara, for instance, skilfully uses Japanese to dupe Kouzuki, but when scheming with Sook-hee and/or Lady Hideko, he reverts to Korean. Lady Hideko, who too speaks both languages, being brought up in Korea since she was a child, prefers to speak in Korean with Sook-hee, because Japanese is the language of the erotic literature she is forced to recite publicly to audiences of men.

Most notably, the character of Uncle Kouzuki, a Korean by birth but now a naturalized Japanese, was once an interpreter who bribed his way into translating for Japanese high officials, as revealed in an inset story told by Count Fujiwara. Aspiring to be an 'authentic' Japanese man of letters, Kouzuki had married a Japanese (noble) woman, and he is planning to marry his Japanese niece Hideko. Explaining the convoluted nature of Kouzuki's identity, the film's director Park describes the character as follows:

There's a Korean term, *sadaejui*, that is used to uniquely express this notion, where the people of a smaller nation are so drawn to the power of a larger nation, and become subservient to that power. They internalize it so much that they are not worshiping the bigger power by force, but are doing it voluntarily. Through the character of Uncle Kouzuki, I wanted to paint a portrait of these poor, sad, and pathetic individuals – who are poor, I say – but who become a big threat and a serious danger for the other people of their nation (Topalovic 2016).

Indeed, Japan's annexation of Korea (1910–1945) brought about certain Koreans who not only voluntarily subjugate themselves to the colonial power but who also want to emulate or even 'become' the colonizers. The character of Uncle Kouzuki clearly embodies the confused identity of such individuals. When asked 'why this urge to become Japanese,' his answer is unceremonious: 'Because Korea is ugly and Japan is beautiful.' He adds that 'Korea is soft, slow, dull and therefore hopeless.' Ironically, however, Homi Bhabha's notion of 'mimicry' that has come to describe the ambivalent relationship between colonizer and colonized, can be used here to discern the character's potentially threatening aspect that blurs the boundaries of colonial identities. As Bhabha argues, being 'at once resemblance and menace' (1994, 123), mimicry destabilizes the colonial discourse, including Kouzuki's own blunt assessment of Korea and Japan. As such, the film expands the novel's sense of class and LGBTQ identity politics into the colonial appropriation and blurring of identities in the adaptive process.

### Between literary and cinematic sensuality

Despite such changes evident in the transportation, the film retains many aspects of the novel. In both texts, for example, the acts of impersonation are closely associated with the dress code. In nineteenth-century Britain, clothing was an instant signifier of the person's social standing. From the outset, Sue's appearance as a typical Borough girl, including her hairstyle and dress, needs to be 'tackled' to convey a neat and proper lady's maid during her hastened training. Similarly, in colonial Korea, different costumes would mark the person's ethnic as well as class identity. In *The Handmaiden*, Sook-hee, for instance, wears her plain Korean dress while working as a maid, whereas Lady Hideko and the Count are dressed in either Japanese kimono or Western attire such as dinner jackets and gowns. The rigid dress code of the time and place, however, is being readily appropriated and transgressed in the acts of deception, performed by the mistresses, Maud and Hideko, who cultivate and transform their maids' appearances into a Victorian lady and a Japanese lady respectively, through careful feeding and clothing. In short, exchanging their dresses, they are switching their identities. In the process that is akin to a well-orchestrated cosplay, which involves frequent dressing and undressing, both texts manifest their fascination with the leather gloves and the corsets, and their textures next to bare skin. Sarah Waters aptly comments that

I was very interested in the texture of Victorian life, and the power dynamics were played out in a material way, and I think [Park has] brought a similar interest in artefacts and fabrics. It's such a crowdedly lush film, with all those shoes and gloves and corsets. (Armitstead 2017)

The film, as with the novel, is indeed full of sensuality in the surfaces and textures. A key scene that first displays the physical intimacy between these two women is the bath scene, where Hideko complains about a sharp tooth that is cutting the inside of her mouth. Promptly, Sook-hee files it down with a thimble with a finely serrated surface, but as she works her finger inside the mouth of Hideko, who is naked in the water-filled bathtub, the atmosphere gets distinctly intense. Here, while emphasizing their physical proximity to each other, the camera work mainly follows Sook-hee's point of view and shows Hideko's slightly flustered face and bare chests in a rather fetishistic manner. Reviewing for *The Guardian*, Peter Bradshaw calls it a 'quasi-blowjob scene that sounds bizarre in print. On screen, it was so extraordinary that I almost forgot to breathe' (2017). Undoubtedly, this kind of emotive response makes it necessary to note the risks the film carries with its fetishistic and voyeuristic representation of lesbian sexuality, particularly for the male audiences.

Notwithstanding such contested issues, however, what is striking about the film's treatment of lesbian sexuality is the way it engages with the source novel. The bath scene discussed above, for instance, is accounted twice on the pages of the novel. Firstly, Sue describes the moment in Part One as follows:

I took her to the window and she stood with her face in my hands and let me feel about her gum. I found the pointed tooth almost at once. ... I went to her sewing-box and brought out a thimble. ... I put the thimble on my finger and rubbed at the pointed tooth until the point was taken off. ... Maud stood very still, her pink lips parted, her face put back, her eyes at first, closed then open and gazing at me, her cheek grew *wet*, from the damp of her breaths. I rubbed, then felt with my thumb. She swallowed again. Her eyelids fluttered, and she caught my eye (Waters 2002, 97, italics mine).

In Part Two, Maud recounts the same moment:

She showed me her hand, with the thimble on it ... it makes for a queer mix of sensations: the grinding of the metal, the pressure of her hand holding my jaw, the softness of her breath. As she studies the tooth she files, I can look nowhere but at her face ... Her fingers, and my lips, are becoming *wet*. I swallow, then swallow again. My tongue rises and moves against her hand ... May a lady taste the fingers of her maid? She may, in my uncle's books. —The thought makes me colour (255–256, italics mine).

Besides the sensual and corporeal aspects, particularly of Maud's description of the taste and sense of touch, what is most palpable in their accounts is the 'wetness' both women feel. In fact, wetness is the eminent textual quality of the novel's eroticism, pronounced in such lines as: 'My mouth was wet, from hers' (141) or 'I am wet, still wet, from the sliding and the pressing of her hand' (284). As Waters comments, 'Maud having sex for the first time is a very moist experience compared with the dry experience of a book' (Armitstead 2017). The film's steamy bath scene, in this sense, is an inventive transcoding of the novel's 'wet' moments onto the cinematic screen.

*The Handmaiden's* cinematic rendering of such sensuality offers a fitting case study to discuss the notion of 'translation' Walter Benjamin describes in his essay 'The Task of the Translator' (written in 1932). In the essay, Benjamin 'sees the translation as a strategy that

allows texts to survive and adapt to a new cultural milieu' (Kuhiwczak 2012, viii). Although there is a general understanding that adaptations are to a different medium, from novel to film as in this case, many scholars have started to consider adaptation as a form of inter-semiotic translation. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, quotes Benjamin's argument that translation is 'not a rendering of some fixed nontextual meaning to be copied or paraphrased or reproduced; rather, it is an engagement with the original text that makes us see that text in different ways' (2013, 16). Hutcheon regards that this newer sense of translation 'comes closer to defining adaptation. ... [Because] adaptations are to a different medium, they are re-mediations [which is] translation but in a very specific sense: as transmutation or transcoding ... a recoding into a new set of conventions as well as signs' (16).

Certainly, the ways in which *The Handmaiden* engages with the source novel involve transcoding or translating. In particular, considering that 'the key to a sexuality that is exclusive to women is the exchange of body fluids' (Armitstead 2017), the film offers a visual 'translation' of the novel's sensuality and texture, utilizing highly tangible, even affective, materials, ranging from steamy warm bath water through glittering surface of a deep red lollipop and Sook-hee's glistening face looking up from between Hideko's legs to the oral lubrication of sex toys. In this respect, the film's 'faithfulness' that Waters refers to, is more to do with its 'faithfulness' to the sensation and experience conveyed in the novel rather than a 'literal' cinematic rendering of characters' actions and thoughts.

### From one narrative to another: intertextual dialogues

This section offers a cross reading of the novel and the film on the level of narrative, focusing mainly on the film's deviation from the original narrative structure. Before delving into the way the film's narrative departs from the novel, however, the first thing to say is that the film retains the novel's triptych structure and much of the storyline of Part One that follows the narration of the pickpocket-turned-maid character. In both texts, at the end of the first act, the maid accompanies her mistress to the asylum to carry out Gentleman's/Count Fujiwara's scheme as planned, despite unfolding feelings for her. In a treacherous double-cross, however, the identities of mistress and maid are switched, and it is the maids – Sue and Sook-hee, not intended ladies – Maud and Hideo – that are incarcerated in the madhouse. The final lines the maids utter convey their shock at the sudden twist of event and realization of what has been going on. Sue narrates, 'You thought her a pigeon. Pigeon, my arse. That bitch knew everything. She had been in on it from the start' (Waters 2002, 175). In the film, Sook-hee notes: 'I'll tell you that from the start Lady Izmi Hideko had been a rotten bitch.'<sup>11</sup>

While a heavy scent of betrayal still hangs in the air, Part Two begins. In both novel and film, the second act tells the mistresses' story from their perspectives – their traumatic childhood upbringing in their uncles' household and the reasons why they are eager to escape from the clutches of their uncles, even through the devious scheme of the conmen. Indeed, it is revealed here that the uncles' precious book collection is all pornographic material, and that Maud/Hideko had been made to recite them to the uncles' male guests. Hideko's story in *The Handmaiden*, however, starts to veer away from the novel by the second half of Part Two. The decisive moment is when Hideko attempts to hang herself from the same cherry tree that her aunt had used to commit suicide. She is unable to cope

with the pressures of the situation in which Sook-hee carries on encouraging her to accept the Count's marriage proposal, in spite of their growing feelings for each other and their intimate lovemaking, albeit done under the pretext of Sook-hee educating Hideko on how to please a man. Before she falls to death, however, Sook-hee appears, holding her by the legs, and confesses her part in the scheme to steal her inheritance. Hideko too reveals the plot to commit Sook-hee in her place. From that moment of revelation, they make plans together to take revenge on both Kouzuki and Count Fujiwara. An important part of their action is for Sook-hee to learn to read and write, which enables her to enlist the help of the woman who raised her, Boksun, and her family of thieves later in Part Three. This is indeed a distinct divergence from the novel, in which Sue's illiteracy prevents her from proving her 'real' identity when incarcerated.

As in the novel, the two heroines of the film leave the estate as planned. Notably in the film, however, they go into Kouzuki's library together before their escape. There, deeply offended by what Hideko had been forced to do, Sook-hee wilfully starts to tear the pages of pornographic books. Hideko joins in the spectacular attack on the material, destroying the books, scrolls and tapestries, hurling inks on them and dumping them into the indoor ponds underneath the floorboards. In contrast to this exuberant scene of the film, in the novel, Maud goes to the library alone and does the deed quietly:

There is only one thing I mean to do, before I go: one deed – one terrible deed ... as the hour of our flight nears, as the house falls silent, still, unsuspecting, I do it. Sue leaves me ... I go stealthily from the room. ... I am queasy with fear and anticipation. But time is racing, and I cannot wait. I cross to my uncle's shelves and unfasten the glass before the presses. I begin with *The Curtain Drawn Up*, the book he gave me first: I take it, and open it, and set it upon his desk. Then I lift the razor, grip it tight, and fully unclasp it. ... It is hard ... to put the metal for the first time to the neat and naked paper ... [but] my cuts become swifter and more true (Waters 2002, 288–290).

Cutting up the first pornographic book her uncle gave her, Maud is finally able to express her anger at the very thing that has defined her life – a secretary to the library of erotica. Using none other than her uncle's razor, Maud here is severing the link with him, breaking off from the life she had been forced to lead. Unlike in the film, however, it is Maud's solo action. In fact, Sue does not even find out what Maud was forced to do until the very end of the book.

By contrast, Sook-hee in *The Handmaiden* is markedly the initiator of the very act of dismantling the library that is full of pornography – male narratives and images about the female sexuality. This affords the character of Sook-hee an agency to become a saviour as Hideko calls her, despite her lowly social status. In some ways, this kind of action counterbalances the film's fetishistic rendering of Hideko's recital scenes that subject her to male guests' gaze. Indeed, Hideko's performances, which include her spectacular simulation of sex on a wooden mannequin, suspended in the air, are all done for the male audiences' gratification. Nonetheless, or because of this, Sook-hee's destruction of Kouzuki's insidious library is a highly cathartic as well as transgressive moment in the film. This, however, distinctly leads back to the source novel, pointing toward an interesting intertextual dialogue between them: When finally figuring out the horrid nature of the books, Sue thinks: 'I gazed across the shelves; and wanted to smash them' (546).

Another striking example of the intertextual dialogue can be found in the following passage from Part Two of the novel that describes Maud's thoughts soon after she had sex for the first time with Sue:

*Everything*, I say to myself, is *changed*. I think I was dead, before. Now she has touched the life of me, the quick of me; she has put back my flesh and opened me up. *Everything is changed*. I still feel her, inside me. I still feel her, moving upon my thigh. I imagine her waking, meeting my gaze. I think, 'I will tell her, then. I will say, "I meant to cheat you. I cannot cheat you now. This was Richard's plot. We can make it ours."' – We can make it ours, I think: or else, we can give it up entirely (283).

In the following morning, however, Sue does not meet her gaze. She looks away and tries to pretend nothing happened. When Maud tells Sue that she was in her (sweet) dream, she dismisses it by saying it must have been Richard who was in her dream, not her. Unbeknownst to Maud, however, Sue had thought the same thing, as narrated in Part One:

She kept her eyes on mine ... if I had drawn her to me then, she'd have kissed me. If I had said, *I love you*, she would have said it back; and everything would have changed. I might have saved her. I might have found a way—I don't know what—to keep her from fate. We might have cheated Gentleman. I might have run with her (143–144).

Sue too thought of telling Maud the truth, but she is afraid that Maud would 'find [her] out for the villain [she] was' (144). Moreover, Maud was 'too good' for the Borough, the only place she knows and can go back to (144). She just cannot imagine how she would do in the Borough with Maud by her side either. So, Sue 'swallow[s] and [does] nothing' (144–145).

Sue's distant ways make Maud feel confused and dejected, and she also gives up revealing any of the things she thought of. Then, as Sue narrates, 'it was too late to change anything' (145). The film's heroines, unlike their counterparts in the novel, who could not tell the truth to each other, manage to make the conman's plan theirs. This is certainly one of the film's own twists and turns, but it is clear that the above passages have provided the springboard for the film's 'new' narrative. This is the case that the 'what-could-have-been' moment of the novel is actually realized in the film.

Part Three, the final act of the film, then takes on an overtly different narrative path from the novel. Notably, the film completely foregoes the novel's jaw-dropping twist regarding the secrets of the women's real parentage, virtually writing out the role of Mrs Sucksby, who turns out to be Maud's mother and the person behind Gentleman's plot. Instead, the film shifts its focus on the plight of Count Fujiwara. Believing that their plan has worked, Fujiwara (or, the man who pretends to be Count Fujiwara) now attempts to seduce Hideko so that they can have a real relationship. Hideko, however, tricks Fujiwara, using the opium he gave her as a wedding gift, and leaves alone to meet with Sook-hee, who had been rescued by her family of thieves in a planned fire heist. Unfortunately for the Count, when he wakes up in the hotel room, Kouzuki's henchmen are waiting for him. Taken to Kouzuki's basement, he is tortured and his fingers are cut off. As another body part is to be cut off imminently, he persuades Kouzuki to let him smoke with a promise to reveal the details of his wedding night with Hideko that he is desperate to hear. With the cigarettes laced with mercury, however, Fujiwara poisons the air, which kills both of them. Just before he dies, Fujiwara quips about his penis being intact at least, which ironically underlines the impotency of the male characters in the film.

In the meantime, the reunited couple board a ferry to Shanghai, with Hideko disguised as a man to evade her uncle's search for any 'two young women travelling together.' The final scene of the film shows the coupling of these two women in their stateroom, safely en route to Shanghai. Here, celebrating their newfound freedom, they are both completely naked, like new-borns in a way. This is in a stark contrast with the dinner-jacketed male guests at the Kouzuki's auctions, who were hiding their perverted and pernicious desires underneath their formal attire. Under the conspicuous full moon, they are indeed luminous. Of the scene, director Park comments that

with the moon, the ocean, and the clouds, with the colours that I used in the last scene, I wanted to imbue it with that kind of beauty. Even if it's a fairy tale, I wanted to end on a note where we're dreaming about this type of idealized world. (Topalovic 2016)

Evocation of a fairy tale aside, the explicit, yet highly stylized, content of the film's final scene also has recourse to the final pages of the novel. In it, Sue finds Maud back at Briar, the country house where they met and fell in love. Maud finally tells Sue about the pernicious nature of her uncle's book collection and her reciting of them, as well as how she has been making a living since she got back to Briar – by writing pornographic books herself. Sue, who is still illiterate (unlike Sook-hee who learns to read and write), asks: 'what does it say?' to which Maud replies: 'It is filled with all the words for how I want you ... Look' (547). The very last paragraph of the novel is Sue's narration:

She took up the lamp. The room had got darker, the rain still beat against the glass. But she led me to the fire and made me sit, and sat beside me. Her silk skirts rose in a rush, then sank. She put the lamp upon the floor, spread the paper flat; and began to show me the words she had written, one by one (548).

Here, the passage is brimming with furtive yearning, arrestingly invoked in the 'words' Maud had written. The Sapphic desire portrayed in the film's denouement is a visual 'translation' of the eroticism evident in the novel, albeit rather ironically done in a more 'literal' and prolonged manner.

Furthermore, what is highlighted in the film is that the two women from completely different backgrounds – a Korean thief and a Japanese noble lady – are coming together as equals. Strikingly, the film ends with the two women facing straight each other in the nude and on the level in every possible way. Through such coupling, intertwined with the fraught and compelling historical setting, *The Handmaiden* offers, as Sarah Waters puts it, a 'transgressive and exciting story' (Armitstead 2017), despite the lingering issues around the film's jarring fascination with the pornography itself, along with Park's identity as a male director. According to Waters, *Fingersmith* 'was about finding space for women to be with each other away from prying eyes' (Armitstead 2017). In recounting the same lesbian love story, the film carries over the transgressive allure of the original, and in turn provides a captivating example of transnational and cross-cultural adaptation that is in a constant intertextual dialogue with the original novel on the big screen.

## Notes

1. The Korean title of the film *Ah-ga-ssi* / 아가씨 translates as 'Lady' or 'Miss'. English title *The Handmaiden* counterbalances its Korean title as well as underlining the fact that the two characters are equal. Interestingly, it was released in France under the title of *Mademoiselle*.

2. Gant points out other factors that helped the surprising success of *The Handmaiden* in the UK such as the BFI Distribution Fund, which contributed £150,000 to release costs and the immersive film event organizer Secret Cinema. For more details, see Gant's *Sight & Sound* report (2017, 9).
3. *Fingersmith* especially shares kinship with Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), in which a young drawing master is drawn into a conspiracy when he is hired to tutor two women (half-sisters) who live in a country house, owned by their hypochondriac uncle who lives mostly in his library. The novel is widely considered to be one of the first mystery novels as well as a first in the genre of 'sensation' novel.
4. For instance, her 2006 *The Night Watch* is set in post-war Britain, while the 2014 novel *The Paying Guests* has the 1920s as its backdrop.
5. Sarah Waters attended the film's Gala screening during the 60th BFI London Film Festival at Embankment Garden Cinema on 7 October 2016, and photographed with the director Park Chan-wook.
6. Incidentally, Park's screenplay is co-written with his long-time collaborator (since *Lady Vengeance*, 2005) Chung Seo-kyung, a woman writer, the fact that is often overlooked.
7. It is apparently Syd Lim's wife who read *Fingersmith* and thought that it would make for a great movie. See Topalovic (2016).
8. In *The Film Programme* (Stock 2017), Waters describes the TV miniseries as 'done in the tradition of good-quality BBC TV adaptation with high-production values with great acting.'
9. The hybrid character of the mansion's exterior was achieved through CGI (computer generated imagery) by a Korean visual effects studio 4th Creative Party that previously worked for many notable Korean features, including Park's *Oldboy*. The film's production designer Ryu Seong-hee won the Vulcan Award of the Technical Artist at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival for her art direction.
10. For the Japanese audiences, the Korean cast's apparent struggle to deliver sophisticated old-world Japanese dialogue reportedly hampered the enjoyment of viewing. Reviewing for *The Japan Times*, James Hadfield, for instance, advises that 'viewers who wince at clumsy Japanese dialogue may want to give this a miss' (1 March 2017).
11. In Korean: '우리 이즈미 히테코 아가씨로 말씀드릴것 같으면, 그분은 처음부터 그냥 나쁜 년이다.'

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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