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A Secretly Sexualized Era

Pornography and Erotica in the 19th Century Anglo-American World

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When Margaret Thatcher, in her election campaign of 1983, made the term “Victorian Values” a household expression, she was met with considerable derision from her Labour opponents and more progressive Britons, who undoubtedly conjured images of ladies in corsets and high collars, gentlemen in white tie, parlous games and high society sitting down to afternoon tea.¹ However, it was also the Victorian period that brought us Dracula, Frankenstein, Jack the Ripper, absinthe, and séances. Clearly, there was a fascination with the forbidden in Victorian popular culture, and a strong undercurrent of eroticism beneath the outer veneer of respectability. One of the elements of the period that best demonstrates this is the overwhelming production and consumption of pornography, made possible largely through the new medium of photography. At the same time, the erotic literature that had scandalised eighteenth-century European culture remained popular, both in the form of the common novel and in more “underground” erotica, such as the works of the Marquis de Sade. Far from being merely amusing to a modern audience, pornography is also a useful

¹ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 3.

historiographical tool, capable of providing us with a unique insight into several aspects of Victorian sexuality and culture, encapsulating everything from popular sexual fetishes to the patriarchal attitude of the privileges towards the poor, the perspectives of many Victorian women on their “gilded cage” existence to the hypocritical nature of this culture of respectability.

Despite the political autonomy that the United States had achieved in the War of Independence, there remained a close economic relationship between Britain and America. More significantly, the two countries maintained close cultural ties, particularly among the white, middle class British-Americans of the northeast, who formed society’s dominant socioeconomic group; that historians even apply the term “Victorian” to nineteenth century America aptly illustrates this point.² The expansion of Trans-Atlantic trade in the nineteenth century and lack of international copyright law meant that Americans were greatly influenced by the values prevalent in Britain during the nineteenth century and the materials that challenged or subverted them, and Victorianism subsequently became the dominant culture throughout the English-speaking world. Consequently, parallel campaigns against obscenity were waged in both Britain and America, although the reasoning behind their shared goal differed somewhat between the two realms.

In 1874, one London studio contained over 130,000 pornographic photographs.³ The extent to which pornography was created and distributed is certainly evidence of the overwhelming demand for it. But how can its creation and popularity be accounted for?

In both Britain and America, the production of pornography and the campaigns against it appear to have resulted primarily from Victorian notions of the domestic and feminine ideal, and consequent fears about the effects of subversive media on the social order. While society sought to suppress feminine sexuality, the production of pornographic media sent different messages to men and women: to men, that pornography was a necessary

² Daniel Walker Howe, “American Victorianism As A Culture,” *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (1975): 508.

³ Matthew Sweet, “Sex, drugs and music hall” (August 2001), *BBC Social History*, accessed July 24, 2004, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/society_culture/society/pleasure_03.shtml.

and acceptable outlet for sexual desire that would allow their wives to remain morally pure. To women, the erotic novel (which was often written from a female perspective) put them on equal intellectual and sexual footing with men; it illustrate and appealed to their emotional and sexual needs, yet the fantastical nature of romantic stories reinforced the message that the characters' actions were immoral, and not to be emulated.

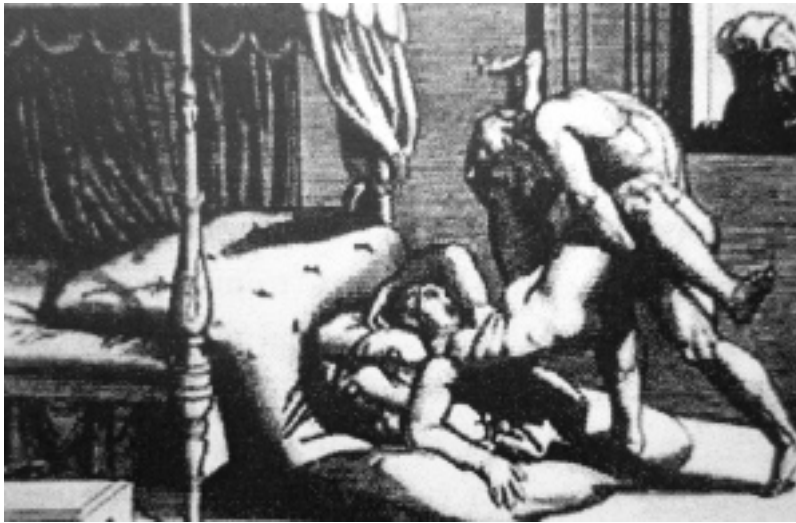
Although the eighteenth century saw the invention of the term 'pornography,' this era cannot be credited with the invention of obscene art in the Western world. Archaeologists excavating the most ancient civilizations have encountered erotic art, some of the most notable being the frescoes painted on the brothel walls of Pompeii, buried for nearly two millennia under a layer of lava rock. The Kama Sutra, written as an instructional manual not long after the demise of Pompeii, also illustrates an ancient human preoccupation with sex and sexuality. It was in the early modern period in Europe, however, that erotic literature and imagery began to take on a new significance, as instruments of political subversion rather than of titillation.

The works of Pietro Aretino in sixteenth-century Italy consisted of pamphlets featuring sexually explicit engravings, accompanied by equally explicit sonnets. It was not simply to sexual nature of these works that made them so objectionable, but rather the characters depicted in them: Aretino frequently insinuated the corruption of the Vatican by featuring prominent politicians, courtesans and clerics in his work.⁴ While the epicentre of erotic literature seems to have migrated to France by the eighteenth century, England also had its first taste of pornographic writing at that time, with the publication John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, commonly known as *Fanny Hill*. The works produced in both England and France in the earlier part of the century served more to subvert social and religious norms than to promote a specific political agenda, although this was to change with the increased restlessness of the bourgeoisie and peasantry of pre-revolution France. In the

⁴ Mariana Beck, "The Roots of Western Pornography, Part 1," *Libido: The Journal of Sex and Sensibility*, accessed July 31, 2004,

<http://www.libidomag.com/nakedbrunch/europorn01.html>.

later years of the eighteenth century, erotic literature and imagery came to fuel revolutionary fervour, by frequently depicting Marie Antoinette and other royals partaking in orgies and otherwise highlighting the excesses of the aristocracy.⁵ Likewise, the pornographic imagery being produced in England at the time lampooned the debauchery of the Georgian court, featuring fat women and men performing humorous, near-acrobatic bedroom antics. In the era of the American Revolution, such images likely also found an audience in the colonies where anti-British sentiment was rife. Although pornographers such as Aretino were frequently arrested for publishing seditious works, it was not until the later part of the eighteenth century that authorities began to specifically attack obscenity: in 1787, King George III issued a proclamation against vice, exhorting the public to “suppress all loose and licentious prints, books, and publications dispensing poison to the minds of the young and the unwary, and to punish publishers and vendors thereof.”⁶



A Giulio Romano print from I Modi, published by Pietro Aretino in the early 16th c. From

<http://www.libidomag.com/nakedbrunch/europorn01.html>

⁵ Beck, “Part 4,” <http://www.libidomag.com/nakedbrunch/europorn04.html>.

⁶ Beck, “Park 4.”

The nineteenth century witnessed major changes to the production and consumption of erotic materials. The most significant change came with the invention of the camera in the first half of the century, which made obscenity accessible to a larger audience. By such means pornography made its departure from erotic literature: books were not only more expensive than photos, but poor education still limited the numbers of those who could read proficiently, and erotica seems to have remained largely restricted to the upper and middle classes. Pornographic photographs, or “French Postcards” as they were commonly known, could be produced cheaply and on a mass scale and, unlike erotic novels and literary pamphlets, were accessible to illiterate working class consumers. Furthermore, because photographs could be taken and printed by the same individual, it was likely easier for its producers to evade the obstacles prevented by later anti-obscenity laws, as the medium did not require collaborations with either outside publishers or printers. Photography thus became the dominant medium for obscene material, and almost certainly had an effect on the waning usage of obscenity as an overt political tool, as it was, of course, impossible to produce photographs of prominent figures actually engaged in obscene acts.

While the literature and imagery remained as explicit as ever, the photographs that appeared in the Victorian period feature anonymous men and women and appear to have been intended purely for the purpose of sexual arousal. While it continued to subvert social and sexual norms, this effect was merely a by-product of the composition of photographs and literature, which was sharply at odds with the day’s rigid sexual mores and notions of propriety. Interestingly, while the medium itself became less political in nature, the link between pornography and political radicalism continued well into the nineteenth century: much of what was initially produced in Britain was distributed by Marxists, who used their profits to publish radical political tracts.⁷ When the expected British Revolution failed to materialise, many English pornographers found that it was quite simply too lucrative an occupation to relinquish, although their target audience shifted somewhat.

⁷ Liza Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 18.

Patriarchal notions about the working classes' susceptibility to corruption, combined with capitalist interests, worked to keep literary pornography inaccessible to all but the more affluent; it would seem that middle and upper class consumers still feared the politically subversive elements of erotica, while pornographers in Britain saw little profit in producing affordable pamphlets for those members of the working class who would have been capable of reading them.⁸ In America, it was believed that "deviance in moral theory was a good index of radicalism in general. The person who questioned ethical standards was also likely to entertain heretical views regarding the efficacy of prayer, the concept of private property, and the benevolence of political parties."⁹ Although Britain and America shared essentially the same cultural ideals, the potential victims of corruption were perceived differently. In Britain and Europe, pornography was seen as a threat to the purity and innocence of girls and young women; in America, where violence was at the forefront of the popular imagination, the fear was of young men becoming morally corrupted and therefore dangerous. Little was made of the possible influence of obscenity on women – it seems rather to have been assumed that women were too pure to be led into the temptations presented by porn. The potential for sexually immoral material to have a corrupting influence on servants however, must have been of particular concern to American slave-owners, who, in the wake of violent slave rebellions throughout the Americas, had very real reason to fear insurrection.

One of the major themes in any discussion of Victorian sexuality must of course be what has come to be referred to as "Victorian Values" – that rigid moral structure, closely tied to America's "Family Values," that dictated everything from domestic life to media to politics. Whilst anecdotes about Victorians covering up the legs of chairs and pianos in the name of decency may be the product of historical exaggeration, the age can certainly be characterized by an over-arching concern with modesty, morality and respectability.

The Victorian era actually began somewhat earlier than the ascension of Queen Victoria herself in 1837; it would seem that in Britain at least, there was something of a

⁸ Sigel, 56.

⁹ Dee Garrison, "Immoral Fiction in the Late Victorian Library," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1976): 72.

conservative backlash against debauchery and obscenity towards the end of the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, it was in the nineteenth century that Victorianism as a culture flourished in Britain and North America. It is generally agreed that in Britain, the Victorian ideal of blissful domesticity was closely linked to the depictions of the close-knit Royal family, imagery that was especially appealing to a burgeoning middle class audience and, coincidentally, probably linked to the advent of photography – the phenomenon of celebrity grew during this time period, as the more intimate medium of photography made real likenesses of people both possible and widespread. In America, the early days of Victoria’s reign also coincided with the growth of the middle class, as well as a strong evangelical revival – both factors that were congruent with a conservative moral ethos and concern for the preservation of the family unit.¹⁰ The female subjects in Victorian pornography are, more often than not, striking in both their boldness and their plainness. Obviously the appeal of these pictures was not that the models were more beautiful or more innocent than the average Victorian woman. Perhaps, in fact, it is actually the opposite that is true. Pornography has traditionally relied on the skewering of moral codes and sexual norms in order to shock, titillate, or enrage. In a medium that aims to exploit the opposite of society’s accepted behaviours, “the powerless morph into the powerful. Pornography becomes a kind of Roschach test reflecting not only political and social discontent, but central cultural taboos.”¹¹ In a society that robbed women of their sexuality, pornography gave women an active role; the depiction of sexually aggressive women was perceived as particularly erotic because of the sheer novelty of such behaviour. At the same time however, the fact that the female subjects of pornography were not particularly beautiful allowed a certain character to be assigned to them, that of the immoral, working-class prostitute or the physically undesirable spinster – an image which was to become commonplace in *fin de siècle* cinema, and which removed from the subjects of obscene entertainment any superficial likeness to pampered middle-class daughters or wives. Women, especially mothers, were ostensibly the “moral guardians” of both the family and society at large and were therefore “protected”

¹⁰ Howe, 513.

¹¹ Himmelfarb.

from anything of a potentially immoral nature: they were not allowed to enter the areas of bookstores where pornography was sold, and even literature such as Shakespeare was sold in sanitised “family” editions, with any objectionable content carefully edited out.¹² The Victorian feminine ideal was of the demure, chaste housewife and mother with little or no sexual appetite, and husbands did not always want to “defile” their wives through regular intercourse with them. To add insult to injury, there was a commonplace notion that love of children and the home were the only passions that women felt, and that if women were interested in sex, it should only be for reasons of procreation.¹³



The female subjects of Victorian pornography are typically average or unattractive in terms of physical beauty; note the costume however, which bears a marked similarity to that seen in modern porn: lingerie, stockings, tall boots.

¹² Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 51.

¹³ Beck, “Part 6,” <http://www.libidomag.com/nakedbrunch/europorn06.html>.

One of the most likely explanations for the explosion of pornography therefore, is that like modern porn, that of the Victorian era could be used as a alternative sexual outlet for those who were not experiencing much of the real thing. The decline in marital fertility rates in both Britain and America in the nineteenth century certainly suggests that many couples were practicing abstinence even within marriage, although historical studies from the 1970s and 1980s raised new questions about the use of contraception and abortion as well.¹⁴ In light of the probably efficacy of nineteenth century contraceptive methods however, it seems particularly likely that sexual restraint was common within marriages, whether to prevent pregnancy or in response to the repressive attitudes that sought to regulate and control women's sexuality. Furthermore, the phenomenon in the United States is observed primarily among white, Protestant, middle class families in the northeast – precisely those who would have been most influenced by British cultural trends. Among immigrants, southern whites, and blacks, fertility rates remained high.¹⁵

It must be questioned whether the inaccessibility of pornography to women was in fact for the protection of the women themselves, or rather more for the protection of men from women. Pornographic depictions of sexually aggressive women inverted established gender roles and while they might have fulfilled the sexual fantasies of many men, the fictional power wielded by the women in pornography presented a potential threat to the patriarchal social order; male hegemony might come into question if “real” women were to become privy to such notions. What many men did not realize, perhaps, was that much of the women's fiction found in American libraries already promoted feminine sexual and intellectual equality.

¹⁴ Estelle B. Freedman, “Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century American: Behavior, Ideology, and Politics,” *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (1982): 196.

¹⁵ Freedman, 208.



While many men found depictions of sexually assertive women arousing, the idea of independent women was highly threatening to the patriarchal social order.

Image from http://www.virtual-boxon.com/c5_2.htm

Erotic literature had long preceded the advent of erotic photography, but it was in the eighteenth century that it proliferated in the Anglo-American world, with Cleland's *Fanny Hill* "setting the standard" for pornographic literature in Britain well into the nineteenth century and beyond. Women are a particularly important topic for discussion in a study of Victorian erotica, as the impact of the pornographic novel on women's sexuality was twofold: firstly, while most erotica was penned by male authors, it was frequently written from a female perspective, thereby fictionalizing women's sexuality by presenting them as assertive and autonomous, when in reality there were traits that were actively suppressed by Victorian society.¹⁶ As these novels (like photographic pornography) were intended for a

¹⁶ Sigel, 28.

male audience, the assumption of a female persona by a male author also served to warp already hazy male perceptions of female sexuality by forcing masculine sexual fantasies upon it. A common theme in the pornographic literature of the day was the “deflowering” of virgins, upon whence they themselves become obsessed with sex, and fall into a downward spiral of promiscuity and, often, prostitution.¹⁷ Often, as in the famous novel *The Lustful Turk* (or even Thomas Hardy’s classic novel, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*), the virgin is raped; the female character is thus victimized twice, first when the rape occurs, and against when she willingly becomes sexualized and experiences the dire consequences.



Despite the depiction of lesbian activity, it seems likely that such images as this were produced for the benefit of a heterosexual, male audience. As women were not generally considered sexual beings, there seems to have been little concern over the incidence of lesbian activity in the real world. Picture from http://www.virtual-boxon.com/c4_3.htm

¹⁷ Beck, “Part 4.”

The second effect of erotic literature upon female sexuality was that its abundance made it considerably more accessible to women than it had been in earlier times, thereby affecting their own perspectives of their sexuality and including them in the previously male-dominated audience of sexualized media. Not all erotic fiction in the Victorian period was penned in the sadistic vein of *The Lustful Turk*, of course; *Fanny Hill* ended with Fanny's upward mobility, getting married and settling into a life of comfortable middle-class respectability. As the century wore on however, more and more novels of a sexual nature were actually written by and for women. Because these novels were somewhat less sexually overt they were classified as "romance" rather than "pornography" and thus readily available in spite of successful anti-obscenity legislation such as Britain's 1857 Obscene Publications Act or the American Comstock Laws of 1874.¹⁸ In many respects however, they were just as explicit as many suppressed materials, but the obscenity was carefully worked into a discernible plot. There were, of course, those who questioned their nature and content and sought to bar them from the shelves of public libraries – librarians were constantly torn between responding to popular demand and maintaining their role of "genteel guardians" – yet over the objections of the few, the shelves were typically stocked to meet the demands of the many.¹⁹

While many unabashedly pornographic novels, such as the aforementioned *The Lustful Turk* were consumed more by men and could be difficult to acquire thanks to the efforts of Anthony Comstock of Britain's Society for the Suppression of vice, romance novels were consumed by women in the tens of millions.²⁰ Despite the shared emphasis on sex, there were obviously some major differences between the two genres that can account for this disparity in readership. The common thread between them is the depiction of independent female characters brimming with sexual desire, which in the pornographic novel translated to sexual satisfaction for men. In the romance novel, feminine liberation was depicted in terms

¹⁸ Bradford K. Mudge, *The Whore's Story: Women, Pornography and the British Novel, 1684-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 117.

¹⁹ Garrison, 72.

²⁰ Garrison, 73.

of strong, intelligent women triumphing over weak or cruel husbands; in romance novel marriages, “the real psychological and intellectual power is firmly held by the wife.”²¹ Once again, the politically subversive elements of erotic literature become apparent, as the romance novel becomes a tool of an early feminist movement of sorts – obviously many women resented their culturally prescribed role as passive and decorative housewife, and found ways to relieve themselves, if only temporarily, of their frustration.

It would seem then, that the intent of romance novels was probably to provide an *emotional* escape for women in dreary situations, unlike the photographic or literary pornography that provided *sexual* escape for men. The dichotomy between the two forms of media illustrates the dichotomy between the perceived needs of males and females at the time. The popularity of both suggests also that it was in fact *actual* needs that were being fulfilled by salacious media, not just *perceived* needs: women’s lives were often unfulfilling in many ways due to their “gilded cage” existence, and it seems likely that they would have required more emotional fulfillment through salacious media than would their husbands, who were more likely to be satisfied in other aspects of their lives. Furthermore, the consistence sexual content suggests that romance novels were popular among women for another reason as well, which calls into question the conviction of many historians that women truly were believed to be devoid of sexual desire.²² The scale on which literature featuring sex in addition to romance was produced and consumed suggests that Victorian culture merely portrayed women in an asexual manner – that society in fact perceived absolute chastity as more of an ideal than a reality.

It would seem that pornography is one of many ways in which the hypocritical nature of Victorian values and culture is made readily apparent. While there was opportunity for, and ample indulgence in, every sort of debauchery imaginable, it was imperative in these morally conservative times that such scandalous behaviour be outwardly condemned by

²¹ Garrison, 74.

²² See Himmelfarb, “Household Gods and Goddesses,” in *The De-Moralization of Society*, Michael Mason’s discussion of sexual hypocrisy in *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, or “Strong Men Over Orderly Women” in G. J. Barker Benfield’s *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America*.

respectable gentlemen, and more importantly that it *not be visible* when they indulged in it. Pornography and erotica allowed Victorians a discrete way in which to indulge their sexual desires: explicit materials were cheaper and easier than engaging prostitutes and could easily be kept hidden from wives and associates. For women, the erotic romance novel could adequately fulfill sexual as well as emotional desires in socially acceptable manner, through the guise of popular culture. It is difficult to say whether the proliferation of romance novels lessened the double standard for the consumption of erotic material, or if it actually gave women the upper hand. By the late nineteenth century, the efforts of moral crusaders in both Britain and America had succeeded in having anti-obscenity legislation drafted and enforced. Moral reform associations in nineteenth century Britain and America “attacked male licentiousness, waged a war on ‘seducers,’ and called for female control over the nation’s sexual mores . . .” while young male clerks and college students in America were targeted as the source of immorality, and attempts were made to “place community controls over their sexual autonomy.”²³ Erotic literature of the sort consumed by millions of frustrated housewives however, was simply disregarded as pulp fiction and allowed to proliferate.

In addition to legal biases based on gender, much of the policing of obscenity in the Anglo-American world was skewed in favour of the upper and middle classes. Simple possession of obscene materials has never been illegal in Britain, only their public display; the wording of the Comstock Laws indicate that the same held true in America. It has been suggested that “this is in part a symptom of traditional British – and American – respect for private property, but it also reflects a subtle prejudice at work in both countries in favour of those who have the means to obtain whatever they desire through private channels.”²⁴ Furthermore, it was proposed that works considered of “artistic merit” that would have been of particular appeal to gentlemen should also be exempt from confiscation.

Despite the success of Anthony Comstock and his ilk, pornography is now an accepted, and often celebrated, part of sexuality in the Western world. While debates over its relationship to feminine emancipation, sexual violence and moral well-being continue to

²³ Freedman, 208.

²⁴ Kendrick, 118.

rage, it seems as though the right to free speech which is the hallmark of democracy has won out – or perhaps it is simply capitalism that has won out. Pornography is, after all, a highly lucrative industry. Regardless of the controversy that continues to surround it however, it cannot be denied that erotic media continues to be an excellent barometer of the sexual climate of our time, a reflection of our most private desires, and an important symbol of just how far our culture has come.

***Catherine J. Rose** was a student at Simon Fraser University at the time of the original publication. The 2005 edition of *the Atlas* was a joint venture by UBC and SFU undergraduates; for more detail, please see the Chairman and Editor's Notes.

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