

Pleasure Bound: Victorian Sex Rebels and the New Eroticism

Review Number:

1126

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 September, 2011

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ISBN:

9780393068320

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£19.99

Pages:

331pp.

Publisher:

W W Norton

Place of Publication:

New York, NY

Reviewer:

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The poor Victorians, they've been constantly rebuked for their sexual repression by daring rebels. Somehow, these rebels became the archetypes of Victorian culture – such as the beloved Pre-Raphaelites. Of course, Michel Foucault valiantly tried to dismiss the myth of Victorian sexual repression by arguing that instead there was an explosion of discourses about sex, but even he admitted that there were many silences on the everyday level – the discourses came from experts such as psychiatrists and other doctors.

Instead of the experts, Deborah Lutz emphasizes the sexual discourses and dialogues among artists, poets, and explorers in the intertwined circles of the Aesthetes (growing out of the Pre-Raphaelites) and the Cannibal Club. Written in a lively, vivid style, she conveys the sheer sensuality of their art and poetry – the tactility of Morris's craftsmanship, the feel of rich velvets on the skin.

The strength of Lutz's book is her insightful analyses of the compelling combination of spirituality, eros, and death in much Victorian writing. For instance, instead of seeing Christina Rossetti's remarkable poem 'Goblin Market' as simply expressing female eroticism, as its characters suck on ripe, juicy fruit, she concludes that the 'genius of 'Goblin Market' is making Christian self-sacrifice as lusciously delightful as the sinful fall itself' (p. 66). She also depicts the members of the Cannibal Club as rebels against not only the sexual conformity, but against the religious traditions of their time. As she notes, they wondered if 'a worship of the senses could replace a belief in God' (p. 76).

Lutz provides some wonderful insights into the poet Algernon Swinburne's and the painter Simeon Solomon's fascination with hermaphrodites, and she asserts that Rossetti sometimes portrayed Jane Morris as both masculine and feminine. However, as Wendy Doniger has written, a culture's obsession with

hermaphroditism and gender fluidity in spirituality and art can be quite congruent with a highly patriarchal social order, as in India.⁽¹⁾

Instead of focusing on trying to pin down the sexual identities of these men, Lutz fruitfully explores the complexities of their relationships with each other. Her account of Richard Burton is nuanced, reflecting on the dynamics of his personal power through his magnetic, dominating personality, so attractive to Swinburne. She is very good on what might be termed Swinburne's polymorphous perversity. However, she asserts that between 1830 when the death penalty was usually no longer applied to sodomy, and 1885 when the Labouchere amendment criminalized 'gross indecency' between men, she asserts 'for the most part, if one was private about it, one could do what one would with one's body'. However, Charles Upchurch has found that between 1825 and 1827 legislation actually criminalized attempted sodomy and attempts to persuade others to commit sodomy.⁽²⁾ The police tried to keep offenses between men quiet, but they did arrest and prosecute men who had sex with other men. Blackmail was also a huge danger. A respectable man's reputation could be ruined by such accusations, although many refused to believe that a respectable man could engage in such activity – quite different from not caring if men indulged in sex with other men. At the same time, a subculture was emerging even before sexologists gave it a name. However, Lutz is correct that most of the men she discusses were not involved in such subcultures, but rather, enjoyed a more diffuse eroticism of comradeship with each other.

Lutz is probably at her best writing about flogging, the obsession of so many Victorians, and its roots in Victorian public schools such as Eton. Swinburne was most notorious for his obsession with 'le vice anglais' and as generations of historians of sexuality have noted, flagellant brothels were common in Victorian London. Going beyond this titillation, Lutz characterizes flogging as writing on the skin, as a form of poetry.

Instead of just recounting the adventures of the anonymous author of 'My Secret Life', Walter, she suggests that his desire to get inside the bodies of his sexual partners (both male and female), was not just a search for pleasure, but a quest to inhabit their subjectivity. At the end, Lutz does admit that Walter and Burton were both turned on by categorizing and labeling sexual acts, unlike the erotic spirituality of the aesthetes and pre-Raphaelites. More might have been made about the contrast between these two strands.

Lutz insists that she wants to strip away our modern 'isms' – 'feminism, post-colonialism, post-Marxism' and see these men as they were or how they saw themselves (p. 15). But this results in some startling omissions. Although she briefly acknowledges Richard Burton's racism, she fails to explore in depth the radical racism of the Cannibal Club and its public face, the London Anthropological Society, and how that might have inflected its view of sexuality. In fact, the London Anthropological Society broke off from the more humanitarian Ethnological Society because it wanted to insist on a more extreme biologically-based racism. As Lisa Sigel has written, the members of the Cannibal Club produced pornographic writings that reflected this racism, deriving pleasure from reading accounts of slave women being whipped. While its members wanted to explore every possibility of sexual knowledge and pleasure, as Sigel notes this was a way of dominating and consuming imperial subjects.⁽³⁾

Although Lutz points out that Richard Burton insisted on the importance of female sexual pleasure, this is a book about male subjectivity; Lutz makes little effort to access the sexual subjectivity of women, with the exception of Christina Rossetti. The sources, of course, are very difficult for this task, but other historians have at least attempted it.

Historians of sexuality and Victorian culture will find no new information in this book, despite its insights. Lutz relies heavily on published biographies and occasionally cites printed collections of letters and dissertations rather than closely analysing the texts produced by these men (with some notable exceptions). There is no archival work. She cites very little of the large scholarly literature on Victorian sexuality, such as the work of Jeffrey Weeks, Hera Cook, Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, Matt Cook or H. G. Cocks, although it may have informed her larger perspective. The chapter on prostitution is rather conventional, unlike Judith Walkowitz's great work, *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (1980). Similarly, the section on Oscar Wilde is quite familiar. At times this lack of documentation and research can lead to astonishingly exaggerated

claims. For instance, she alleges that ‘the London master binder Joseph Zaehnsdorf was kept busy by doctors, lawyers, and others using unclaimed corpses of the poor’ to bind books and that ‘most Victorians would not find this practice depraved, but rather thrifty’. There is no citation. While a google search finds that Zaehnsdorf did indeed bind a book in human skin, there is no evidence that this was a widespread practice, or at least, she cites none.

In an effort to make her writing visual, Lutz begins many sections by painting a word picture of these Victorian rebels striding through the London fog. While this succeeds the first few times, there are all too many foggy nights in this book, and the writing is often repetitive and overlapping in its analysis.

This book successfully explores the ‘dark side’ of Victorian sexuality from a very traditional cultural history perspective, but it is really an exaggeration to call her subjects sexual rebels. Artists have always used prostitutes as models and many poets have drunk themselves into an early grave, and imperialist explorers have often exploited native women. Lutz briefly mentions another member of the Cannibal Club, Richard Bradlaugh, who really rebelled against Victorian culture by openly publishing birth control information, along with Annie Besant, and faced prison as a result. A richer book would have deployed Lutz’s considerable critical abilities to explore emotional nuance to get at the challenges of such true rebels rather than re-hashing familiar anecdotes about Victorian artists, poets and explorers.

Notes

1. Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (Chicago, IL, 1999), p. 292.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Charles Upchurch, *Before Wilde: Sex between Men in Britain’s Age of Reform* (Berkeley, CA, 2009), p. 99.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Lisa Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815–1914* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002), p. 51.[Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

History Today

<http://www.historytoday.com/blog/2011/08/pleasure-bound-victorian-sex-rebels-and-new-eroticism> [2]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/pleasure-bound-victorian-sex-rebels-and-the-new-eroticism-by-deborah-lutz-2289433.html> [3]

Times Higher Education

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp> [4]

Scotsman

<http://news.scotsman.com/entertainment/Book-review-Pleasure-Bound-Victorian.6753408.jp> [5]

Powell's Books

http://www.powells.com/review/2011_04_08.html [6]

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