



The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England

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Taking as his point of departure the authors, the audience, and the texts of Victorian writings on sex in general and of Victorian pornography in particular, Steven Marcus offers a startling and revolutionary perspective on the underside of Victorian culture. The subjects dealt with in "The Other Victorians" are not only those to have been "shocking" in the Victorian period. The way these subjects were regarded - and the way our notions of the Victorians continue to change, as the efforts of contemporary scholarship restore them to their full historical dimensions - are matters today of some surprise and wonder. Making use, for the first time, of the extensive collection of Victoriana at the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research, Marcus first examines the writings of Dr. William Acton, who may be said to represent the "official views" of sexuality held by Victorian society, and of Henry Spencer Ashbee, the first and most important bibliographer-scholar of pornography. He then turns to the most significant work of its kind from the period, the eleven-volume anonymous autobiography "My Secret Life". There follows an analysis of four pornographic Victorian novels - an analysis that throws an oblique but fascinating light on the classics of Victorian literature - and a review of the odd flood of Victorian publications devoted to flagellation. The book concludes with a chapter propounding a general theory of pornography as a sociological phenomenon. With the publication of "The Other Victorians", understanding of this period took a giant stride forward. Most of the writers and writings discussed by Marcus belong to Victorian sub-literature rather than to literature proper; in this way the work remains connected to a consideration of the exotic sub-literature. A brilliantly written book in its own right, this work transformed the study of the Victorian period as did no other.

The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England Details

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From Reader Review The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England for online ebook

Kara says

Not what I was expecting - instead of a thoughtful examination of how the Victorians viewed sexuality, it was largely just excerpts from one man's 19th century diary, detailing all the times the times he came. Gross.

James says

This has been on my to-read list since I was an undergraduate, when it was recommended by my cultural anthropology TA, on whom I had a huge crush. Ironic, in a way, since I found Marcus's 'evolved, 'self-consciously 'feminist' prudery highly evocative of the progressively puritan Berkeley I remember from the 80s . Whenever someone starts making distinctions between 'infantile' and 'mature' sexuality, I reach for my revolver. As *The Other Victorians* goes on, Marcus feels less and less constrained to confine his sweeping generalizations about pornography and sexuality to the period under study. This exercise in finger-wagging was written back in the dirty book store era -one can only imagine the vapors such a prig would have gotten from the premium filth now available on the Interweb. Watching a few dirty movies, though, might have alerted Marcus to some of the realities of human sexual response. At four points in this book he is incredulous that Victorians were so sexually clueless as to believe in female ejaculation. "The women themselves believed that they ejaculated, experienced this 'fact,' and described it to and discussed it with [Anonymous]." Since Marcus has never seen it (I would imagine there's a lot he hasn't seen - I get the distinct impression of someone who only does it with the lights off) it can't exist, and a woman who reports such an event happening in her body can only be colluding in an infantile male fantasy.

On the up side, *The Other Victorians* did make me want to read more Freud. And I DEFINITELY want to read *My Secret Life*.

Chris Fellows says

Where have you gone, George MacDonald Fraser? A nation turns its lonely eyes to you...

The title implies this is a wide-ranging study, but it relies unduly on a single source. It is almost entirely composed of extracts from something called "My Secret Life", embedded as nuggets in a starchy matrix of academic commentary; it is like the "Flashman Papers" edited by someone really humourless and prolix.

Now, the anonymous Victorian author of this secret diary may have been the appalling cad and enthusiastic libertine he claims to be; or, equally likely, he may have been a pathetic Victorian dweller in his parents' basement. I am thinking that, even if he was the first, internal evidence suggests he shared the natural human tendency to *make all sorts of crazy stuff up*.

Best to be very careful using this sort of thing to draw conclusions about sexual behaviour in Victorian England.

IMHO.

Rebecca Wright says

This book is an eye-opener for anyone that thinks the Victorian era was all chintz and tea parties;)

Dfordoom says

This is supposedly a study of sexuality and pornography in Victorian Britain but it's immediately apparent Steven Marcus doesn't approve of sexuality and he doesn't approve of the Victorians. Except for Freud and Marx. He approves of them. In fact his attitude towards Marx is closer to hero-worship. Being an American university professor Marcus is of course a good Marxist.

This was an early book by him, originally published in the 60s, but apparently Marcus's enthusiasm for Marxism remains as strong as ever. It's fun being a Marxist when you spend your whole life in the nice safe womb of an American university campus.

If you enjoy dreary and silly Marxist-Freudian blatherings you might get off on this. Otherwise avoid this one like the plague.

Emily Joyce says

As a product of the sixties, *The Other Victorians* really was a groundbreaking study on the history of British pornography from the previous century. It is also incredibly dated in its view of homosexuality and women's sexual experiences.

Jane Davis says

The Sub-title: *A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid Nineteenth Century England*, tells it all. Victorians were deviates? You bet. Some of the most raunchy and bawdy novels ever written came from this period, many authored by Anonimus. These authors didn't use nicetyes like intercourse. List all the crudities you can and I bet their list would be longer. Read the two chapters, *The Secret Life*. Prostitution and rape were common, after all it involved the lower classes.

Not a pleasant read but an eye-opener for most people.

Stacy says

Interesting survey of a few key figures and works in Victorian-era pornography. Steven Marcus is clearly anti-pornography, but in a witty and snarky manner that gave an amusing edge to an otherwise fairly dry academic-styled text. Lots of useful information, so long as you can take the author's biases with a grain of salt.

DoctorM says

One of the pioneering looks at the Victorian underworld and at how the Victorians dealt with with erotica. Marcus looks at a series of authors--- Dr. Wm. Acton, medical man and social reformer; Henry Spencer Ashbee, bibliographer of pornography; and the anonymous author of the multi-volume "My Secret Life" --- and how sex was presented to audiences both official and clandestine. He discusses Acton's strange (and yet perfectly Victorian) blend of willful ignorance about female sexuality and deep commitment to reforming the way society treated prostitutes and prostitution and then moves on to the world of high-end erotica, a world where lavish, privately published and clandestine editions of works like "My Secret Life" or Ashbee's baroquely erudite annotated bibliographies of classic porn ("lost" or "forbidden" books) might cost the equivalent of three or four months' wages for a skilled worker. Marcus' style is witty, dry, and incisive, and his long essay on "My Secret Life" and its obsessions and layers of truth and fantasy is a classic. "The Other Victorians" is a classic of social history, and an old favourite. Very much worth finding. (After all--- where else would you learn that "Rosa Fielding, Victim of Lust" was a pastiche of Dickens?)

Lorraine says

It's frankly remarkable that a seminal work in the study of Victorian porn, which goes to great lengths to critique the sexual blind spots of the authors it studies, should be so phenomenally locked into the sexual and artistic preconceptions of its author. Among these: there is a specific definition of "literature" to which porn does not belong. Porn is unilaterally written by and for men, and any representations of women, in any pornographic setting, are male fantasies that oppose actual womanhood. Marcus mentions the existence of female porn writers - only once, if favourably - in a footnote in the conclusion, but doesn't do us the service of naming them, nor is he able to offer anything more than the not unreasonable but far from certain assumption that the anonymous authors in the texts he mainly analyzes are male. Women are inherently less sexual than men. Also, they don't ejaculate in any way, shape, or form.

I strongly recommend this book to people interested in the sexual hangups and prejudices of the 1960s as well as the 1860s.

Thorlakur says

Mr. Marcus presents a rather unremarkable piece of writing. He recounts the plots of some pornographic literature, chosen at random as it seems, and throws a bit of Freud around to add depth. His work is poorly lacking in research, and gives little indication how pornography was at odds with common morality of the Victorian era.

Chavaleh says

THE OTHER VICTORIANS by Steven Marcus (1967)

Jadin says

This one starts off kind of slow but once he gets into the discussion of pornography, literature, and society, it perks right up. Some amazing insights and a must-read for the grad student and the casual student of Victorian era.

Beatrix Conti says

As a historical study of Victorian sexuality, this work is lacking in many departments. It jumps around without any continuity and often divulges into purely literary criticism instead of contextualizing pornography in the Victorian period. The only chapters of worth are the first two, as they contextualize the history thoroughly.

Bill FromPA says

Marcus looks at Victorian sexual attitudes and practices by considering a series of books from the period: William Acton's "The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs", H. C. Ashbee's 3 volume bibliography of pornographic literature, the 11 volume anonymous sexual memoir "My Secret Life", and several pornographic novels. In this work from the 1960s, reprinted in a second edition of 1974, Marcus' own sexual attitudes, heavily influenced by Freudianism, can seem almost as antiquated as those he discusses, but fortunately the text primarily concentrates on understanding the beliefs and practices of the Victorians in their own terms, with only limited attempts at providing a "modern" understanding of their behavior.

Marcus seems most taken with "My Secret Life" and devotes 2 of his 7 chapters to this work. He sees it as a basically truthful memoir (overusing the word "authentic" and its derivatives in his discussion of the book) which in its frankness provides information about what is happening behind the scenes and between the lines of canonical Victorian novels by Dickens and Eliot, information about human sexual and excretory behavior of necessity known to the novelists but incapable of being presented in direct descriptions. Marcus makes "My Secret Life" sound very interesting in its presentation of otherwise hidden behavior, but I can only imagine that actually reading the work would be tedious in the extreme. Marcus' chapters on this and on Acton's medical treatise constitute the most worthwhile part of the book in that these analyses contribute to our understanding of the great works of Victorian fiction. The chapters on the more frankly pornographic works may add something to our image of the era but do little to enhance our understanding of its literature, which is Marcus' main interest. Contrasting "Rosa Fielding, or, A Victim of Lust" with the works of Dickens and Thackeray to which it alludes, throws no light on the works of the greater authors, but only highlights the obvious faults of the anonymous work of pornography.

I have seen the final chapter, titled "Pornotopia", published as a separate essay. In it, Marcus pretty much leaves the Victorians and attempts to create a literary definition of pornography, a sort of semi-objective alternative to the "I know it when I see it" approach. This does not form a satisfying conclusion to the book; although this chapter is apparently the fruit of Marcus' extensive reading of Victorian pornography undertaken as research for "The Other Victorians", its arguments apply generally to pornography as a literary product and it contains very little on specifically Victorian matters.

