IV. Victorian Obscenity/Sexuality Historical & Theoretical Texts

Since the focus of my dissertation will center on contexts of Victorian sexualities, I have chosen a number of modern works that theorize aspects of Victorian sexual and obscene culture. Another feature of this culture that I have incorporated into the works chosen is the emergence of pornography in the Victorian period. Colette Colligan has pointed to Richard Burton’s terminal essay on pornography in his voluminous *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (1885) as “brief and embryonic, but notable for being the first British attempt to theorise pornography” (*Traffic in Obscenity* 67) and I aim to expand upon the discourse of defining pornography, which is as problematic now as it was in the first attempts at defining it. What many of the works listed here offer are ways of framing the Victorian experience — especially the latter part — in terms of not just obscene print culture, which is a major part of my project, but a broader picture of sexual culture. It has, by now, become cliché to point out the Victorians were not as prudish as once popularly thought, but Steven Marcus’ *The Other Victorians* remains a seminal text in debunking the myth of repressed Victorian sexuality. Many of these cultural studies take that conclusion as a matter of course and examine it in various ways that will inform my own work as a scholar of sexuality and obscenity with the intention of coming to some understanding as to the meaning of the neologistic term pornography and even sexuality and obscenity.

Other works in this list focus on obscene book culture and legal cases of the period involving sexuality or obscenity. These are large aspects of my work with Jack Saul and the history of *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain* (1881) and other associated scandals of the period. Much of my dissertation is concerned with the legal issues around the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885) and the Obscene Publications Act (1857) and these laws’ effects on the coteries of people involved in the obscene book trade in and around London. I will use this information as a means of broadening the already existing literature on sexuality legal issues at large as well as focusing
on those that directly link with Jack Saul, the unabashed male prostitute and self-confessed professional sodomite who was the star witness at the Cleveland Street Scandal trial. My aim is to reexamine what it meant for someone like Saul to openly admit to being what would now be called homosexual, but would have at the time been criminal. How did opinions (medical, legal and otherwise) of sexuality affect the outcomes of various trials involving homosexuality or sodomy in the lead up to Oscar Wilde's trial in 1895? Of perhaps even more interest is how these opinions trickled down to the population at large and how they were refracted in the court of public opinion thus garnering specific reactions to sensational trials as well as privately held opinions. All of this social theorizing impacts the main topic of my dissertation on the obscene book trade and will go a long way in answering the question of potential audiences and markets for the clandestine works of erotic and esoteric fiction and debauchery. I will argue, in fact, that the dissemination of information about police raids and sensational trials acted in much the same manner as explicitly ‘pornographic’ material did for those who could afford it. It is my contention that there was a culture of sexual excitement surrounding the condemnation of perversion.


——. “Abominable Crimes: Sodomy Trials in English Law and Culture, 1830-1889.”


