

Justin O'Hearn

UBC English Work in Progress

26 November 2012

**Sins Between the Pages: Scandalous Victorian Persons; Publications; and Sexualities,  
1870 - 1895**

**Introduction**

THE TIME PERIOD I'M LOOKING AT IS 1870-1895. THESE DATES ARE IMPORTANT BECAUSE THEY REPRESENT ~~SO~~ SIGNIFICANT SEX SCANDALS.

To give a brief background to my talk today, I first want to point your attention to <sup>likely.</sup> something you already know: the Victorians were, by and large, voracious readers and the popularization of the novel <sup>in the 19th c.</sup> reached something of an apotheosis in the Victorian period. We have all taken a course in university, most likely, in which we have had to read one of the dreaded three-volume tomes. <sup>BY THE SCOTTISH, SCOTLANDS.</sup> The novel is not the end of the story concerning Victorian modes of writing, which you may also already know. In addition to popular novels and other modes of fictional writing – poems, serial collections, periodicals, penny dreadfuls, pamphlets, and other short fiction – there was a great deal of non-fiction printed in newspapers and various periodicals. Sometimes, the news printed was more tantalizing than the latest three-volume romance.

I want to use this 'truth is stranger than fiction' idea as a starting point. I'd like you to forget everything <sup>you've</sup> ever learned about the Victorians (they were prudish, sexually repressed, and forced to follow a strict social code without question) and think for a moment about what it would have been like to read about sex scandals in the <sup>latest</sup> papers without the benefit of <sup>all</sup> the information <sup>FREELY DISTRIBUTED</sup> about sex that we tend to take for granted. <sup>YET RESERVED</sup> It's this salacious publishing that informs a large part of my work. Today I'll be talking to you not about news reporting of Victorian sex scandals, but rather a sort of amalgamation of both the Victorian modes of writing I listed a moment ago and the ripped-from-the-headlines nature of scandalous publication. The result is a parallel literary tradition in the form of clandestinely published works or, to use a more contentious term, the rise of

\* IT MAY ALSO BE PERTINENT TO NOTE THAT THE INFO WE TAKE FOR GRANTED SIMPLY DID NOT EXIST IN THE VICTORIAN PERIOD OR WAS NOT KNOWN OUTSIDE A VERY SPECIFIC (READ: SMALL) GROUP OF SPECIALIST.

PUBLISHING PORNOGRAPHY

pornography. Now, pornography or ~~pornography publishing~~ wasn't anything new in the nineteenth century. What is of especial interest about it, however, was, like the novel, it reached a (shall we say) climax near the end of the nineteenth century that coincided with a number of significant sex scandals, the new science of Sexology, and, near the end of the century, the turn away from a text-based pornography to a visual one (this is Colligan's contention). I want to explore, and have you help me explore, Victorian pornographic publications, some of the scandals that ~~these~~ publishers exploited, and some of the key players in the communities of producers and consumers that sprang up around such publications. I will discuss ~~a~~ some, but not all, sex scandals and an important figure in both scandals and publishing, a Victorian prostitute called Jack Saul. <sup>see here</sup> His name will become more familiar in a few moments. <sup>\*</sup> First, though, I'd like to extrapolate and question the definition of pornography as opposed to obscenity. It is worth noting here that the explorer Sir Richard Burton was the first Englishman to try and theorise pornography (as an aside: he also went 'undercover' as a Muslim during the Hajj and, to so as not to rouse suspicion, had himself circumcised to complete his disguise).

Obscenity and pornography are terms simultaneously overflowing with meaning which, somehow, manage to remain meaningless. Meaningless in that they are terms which cannot be defined simply, accurately, or universally while their meanings in literary, socio-historical, legal, and political context are established yet debatable. This is not a new revelation in the field of obscenity or pornography studies and many authors and theorists have tried their hand at defining these terms. Lisa Sigel, in *Governing Pleasures* (2002), "consider[s] as pornography works that people wrote, published, printed, legislated, and collected as pornography" and, lest this definition seem opaque, Sigel adds that "pornography varies as a culture and the symbolic meanings in that culture evolve"

(4). Sigel's definition allows for fluidity of the media and cultural interpretation of the pornographic but leaves a desire for an answer to the fundamental question 'what is pornography?'. To begin

\* Even though I am primarily concerned with publication and the text-based issues of Victorian pornography, questions of sexuality are inherent in my project and ~~use~~ some theory-based criticism is used to respond and, in turn, inform some of the project's main questions.

filling that definitional gap Montgomery Hyde's older work, *A History of Pornography* (1964), provides a way of beginning to answer the fundamental question. By first giving the dictionary etymology of the term – from the Greek *pornographos* meaning writing about harlots or prostitutes – Hyde speculates that the “essential characteristic of pornography is its sexuality” and that “in order to come within the category of pornography, the writing or picture or sculpture must have the *power or be intended to act as an aphrodisiac*” (1 emphases mine). Hyde's definition is more or less in line with Sigel's in stating sexuality is its core, except that he does not go so far as stating how sexualities vary based on cultural and symbolic meanings. Hyde's latter claim of the power and intention of pornography is what sets pornography apart from other forms of art or writing. What is even more problematic is to look at these terms through the lens of a particular period in history. In my dissertation I propose to confront this definitional problem in the context of the Victorian period and evaluate the discourse on obscenity and pornography at their intersection of print culture and sexuality. In his seminal study, Steven Marcus likens the literary pornographic fantasy to the utopian fantasy, in that it is not a place that exists – ‘utopia’ literally means ‘no place’. He insists that “to read a work of pornographic fiction is to rehearse the ineffably familiar; to locate that fantasy anywhere apart from the infinite, barren, yet plastic space that exists within our skulls to deflect it from one of its chief purposes” (268) by which he presumably means the drudgery of daily existence that does not consistently include pleasurable things and the rehearsal of “ineffably familiar” and innate sexuality that is not always capable of realization. Marcus calls this (un)place Pornotopia. This is my starting point for thinking about obscenity, sexuality, and especially pornography in the Victorian age.

My dissertation focuses on Victorian reading practices, dissemination of obscene materials, aberrant sexualities and their broader moral and social implications specifically during the period 1870 - 1895. In short, I argue that literary obscenity and pornography are categories that existed in

separate spheres of castigation, the former juridical and the latter moralistic, yet there was a strange symbiosis between the dirty underbelly of the literary Pornotopia and Victorian society at large. The market for obscene publications in London saw continual growth since the popularization of the novel in the eighteenth century. As reading became an increasingly individualized activity the creation of new, more intimate, readerships flourished along with it. Following the popularity of the early 'obscene' novel *Fanny Hill* (1749), many booksellers in London found a steady income source in 'obscene' and esoteric texts to supplement, and in some cases overtake, their more legitimate business (see Colligan). These works included flagellation narratives (*Dolly Morton* 1899), obscure philosophical treatises (*Alcibiades the Schoolboy* 1862), Continental scientific texts (the works of Auguste Ambroise Tardieu ca. 1860), lascivious Orientalist fictions (*The Lustful Turk* 1893), scandalous faux memoirs (*The Sins of the Cities of the Plain* 1881), and homosexual romances (*Teleny* 1893).

The suppression of obscene and pornographic texts produced and consumed clandestinely were major influences on Victorian notions of sexuality, if the scandals that ensued in the period are any measure of cultural normativity. The myth of Victorian sexual repression is, by now, a debunked view of the period that Marcus' work began to dispel. Repressed Victorian sexuality, however, still exists in the background of all critical writing and thinking about sexuality of the period. Victorian reception to certain sexualities cannot be ignored. There is a well-documented history of sex scandals in Victorian Britain and popular media reaction to those scandals, whether reflective of privately held common beliefs, was largely shock and outrage almost to the point of negating any opinion to the contrary. If we were to take popular accounts of these scandals at face value then the hypothesis of the repressed Victorian would hold somewhat more sway. As it is, however, there are other recorded accounts from a more sympathetic contemporary point of view.

The infamous male prostitute named Jack Saul who was the very embodiment of what was

antithetical to British sexual normativity. Saul was involved in at least two homosexual scandals involving and his self-confessed position as a “professional sodomite” (Kaplan 187) is well documented. Saul achieved further notoriety by (purportedly) authoring the 1881 memoir *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain*. This text allegedly records Saul’s sexual escapades from the time he was a boy until the cross-dressing Boulton and Park scandal of 1870. Although there is no documented evidence of Saul’s involvement in the Boulton and Park scandal, his profession lends itself well to the place and time of the major event the ensuing trial hinged on, the ball at Haxell’s Hotel where Boulton and Park ‘entertained’ gentlemen while dressed as their female ‘characters’, Stella and Fanny, respectively. *Sins* offers an extended behind-the-scenes or, rather, through-the-keyhole, version of events at the hotel that is decidedly more explicit than that reported at the trial or recorded in the newspapers. This scene in *Sins*, whether true or not, took a well publicized titillating event and added a level of erotic stimulation by using Saul as a way into the pornotopic. *Sins* ends, after the Boulton and Park material, abruptly with two hastily compiled essays defending sodomy and tribadism (lesbianism). There is no good evidence that Saul *actually* penned or provided the information for the memoir published under his name, but its appearance a decade after the Boulton and Park scandal and eight years before the Cleveland Street brothel trial (1889), at which he was an astonishing presence on the stand, indicate that his name carried a certain cultural cachet with audiences for works such as *Sins*. The events contained in the book details of the goings on in London’s homosexual community, in addition to focusing on Boulton and Park in particular. The work contains many allusions to London’s underground homosexual and publishing communities which are of interest as a geographical companion to the ‘sins’ of London which is, of course, a stand in for the book’s biblical reference to the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Little is known about Saul apart from his Cleveland Street testimony, but there are records held in the British Postal museum on an 1884 Irish scandal in which Saul was involved not

referenced in the dearth of Saul scholarship. Even if Saul's involvement in *Sins* is spurious, which it likely is, the use of his name and notoriety as a selling feature is worthy of literary and cultural analysis in its own right. My aim is to bring Saul's backstory to the forefront through my archival work in order to more acutely judge the cultural and literary importance of a work such as *Sins* in its original underground and homosexual contexts and as an important cultural document which shows another side of Victorian sexualities that was not covered in popular media.

I will trace Saul's associations in the worlds of 'obscene' literature and notorious sex scandals to study Victorian London's underground communities. As the putative author of *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain* (1881) and star witness in the criminal trial that followed the Cleveland Street scandal (1889), Jack Saul will be the focal point in the analysis of the literary, legal, and social networks that came to be understood as Victorian homosexuality. Drawing from court records and other archival material from the British Postal Museum and the British Library, I will connect Jack Saul as a participant of a clandestine print culture as both 'author' and sexual outlaw. He courted infamy by publicly acknowledging his engagement in proscribed sexual activity, thereby posing a unique challenge to new laws which sought to suppress aberrant sexualities. Saul openly flouted the restrictions of the Labouchere Amendment to the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act that would later be used to convict Oscar Wilde of 'gross indecency'. Although Saul never had the cultural cachet of Wilde, his participation in the early unofficial homosexual rights movement in Britain is an integral print culture component of sexuality. My dissertation seeks to correct this critical oversight. I will argue that there were networks of men like Saul who produced materials that allowed Victorian readers to reside, imaginatively, in Marcus' Pornotopia. Saul acts effectively as a bridge between the world of the written world and the physicality of London's underground homosexual communities.

The men producing pornographic texts were not all necessarily homosexuals (or sodomites)

but, like Saul, were members of a movement which ran counter to normativity, hetero and otherwise. What is most important to point out is that the producers and consumers of such materials were working for a common goal through a loosely organized social network. How these texts were classified by producers, consumers, and legal powers is a key question I will consider. In many cases, texts like *Sins* are unquestionably deemed pornographic as often they are mainly comprised of detailed descriptions of sexual encounters and copious sexual slang not common in other kinds of texts. Supplemental to these pornographic texts at the time were quasi-medical texts, essays, and treatises on sexuality that were not necessarily intended to be arousing but were classified as pornographic nevertheless and some were, inevitably, pornography posing as science which problematizes the classification of what counts as pornography. It is these sorts of ambiguities and fluidities in classification of materials which makes the study of such texts the rich source it is in Victorian sexuality.

Although Michel Foucault is widely acknowledged as the progenitor of historically-based scholarship about male sexualities, more recent work such as David Halperin's *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (2004) and Matthew Cook's *London and the Culture of Homosexuality 1885 – 1914* (2006) have supplemented Foucault. These texts, which rework Foucault's troubled historiography of sexuality, inform my own practice as an archival scholar working with primary source material. I base my methodology on the Foucauldian principle that the late Victorian period marks a significant shift in moral, medical, and legal understandings of sexualities, while at the same time I rely on archives-based and historically-informed forms of analysis to elucidate Victorian constructs of gender, sex and sexuality, including the New Woman, the New Man, and the Third Sex. I will draw upon archival materials (court/police records, newspapers) and writing from the period (suppressed and underground literature) as textual evidence to investigate the late nineteenth century's ruptured sexual categories. By framing my dissertation around significant British sex scandals and scandalous

texts from the 1870s onward. I aim to show how disparate social networks composed of males with 'obscene' tastes were, like Jack Saul, the progenitors of a new sexual epoch. The project's temporal focus begins in 1870 with the Boulton and Park scandal in which two female impersonators – Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park, known as Stella and Fanny, respectively – were arrested in drag in London's West End and charged with "conspiracy to commit [the] felony [of sodomy]" (Hyde 96), but ultimately acquitted. Oscar Wilde's conviction in 1895 marks the ending point of significant Victorian sex trials, although I acknowledge a broader history both before and after this period. These cases and others, like the Cleveland Street male brothel trial, became public sensations that ignited debates about sexuality and morality in courtrooms, newspapers, and Victorian popular culture evidenced in the written record of letters to the editor and the publishing of penny pamphlets detailing the trials. W.T. Stead's 1885 child prostitution expose "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" in the *Pall Mall Gazette* serves as a notable example of the public influence of scandalous writings. Though the Boulton and Park scandal trod new territory for English law and marks the first in a series of notorious British sex scandals of the late-nineteenth century, Stead's articles not only captured public attention, but actually influenced the Labouchere Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which made any sexual contact between males, in public or private, a criminal offence. These legal examples provide a way to read the literary subcultures that existed outside the publicly documented world of records. Underground publishing was influenced and even emboldened by scandals; the networks producing and disseminating obscene materials took advantage of the public appetite for scandalous printed materials and produced texts accordingly, although texts such as *Sins* and its sequel *Letters from Laura and Eveline* have little basis in fact.

The Victorian concern with 'obscenity' meant that the law and the court of public opinion were trying hard to suppress sexually dissident material and uphold normative British society.



Simultaneously, a number of collaborative communities emerged to continue servicing a niche audience who shared the secrets of the social networks circulating obscene materials and information. These communities produced a significant parallel textual history. Some exploited scandals of the day while others filled a niche for a purely fantasy-oriented type of reading material. This parallel textual history shifts the focus to what was deemed appropriate for readers and what (paying) readers demanded as producers were in the business of making money and not necessarily partaking in a literary social movement. This study focuses on London specifically because it was the epicentre of the world of booksellers, publishers, writers, and consumers who constitute the sexual and textual communities. By the time of Wilde's 1895 conviction, the trade in pornographic and other types of obscene material in London was robust, as has been shown by Colette Colligan in *The Traffic in Obscenity from Byron to Beardsley* (2006) and Greg Mackie in "Publishing Notoriety: Piracy, Pornography, and Oscar Wilde" (2004) which both establish the broad scale of trade in obscene materials. My dissertation will show not only the extent to which the trade in obscene works was established by the end of the nineteenth century but how normative Victorian sexual mores were refracted textually and practically by producers and consumers of such material.

- o POETOGRAPHY AS OBSCURITY?
  - CATEGORIES?
  - "HOW IT WORKS"
  - VICTORIAN RELATION TO POWER DYNAMICS.

- o CONNECTED TO CLASS?
  - LEADING

- o 1870s / 1880s U.S. POETRY.
  - ROSE TERRY COOK (CONNECTICUT).

- o SCOTLAND OF DE SADE.