

Victorian Print Culture, Obscenity, and Sexuality

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“London is not cursed with the sins of Sodom, or Westminster with the vices of Gomorrah”

This declaration, made by the defense during the sodomy trial of Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park, the (in)famous cross-dressing duo Stella and Fanny, in May 1871, contains within it the central artifact that effected a rupture in the ways sexualities would be interpreted and understood in the late Victorian period. Although Mr. Seymour, the lawyer, argued well and had his client acquitted of ‘conspiracy to commit a felony [sodomy],’ it is difficult to ascertain whether he was aware that his assertion was, in fact, patently untrue: biblical and classical vices were widespread in late Victorian London. While the sins of Sodom and the vices of Gomorrah, the biblical cities of the plain, were often used in reference to a vague series of proscribed sexual acts, they fail as reflections of sexual identities. The sexual milieu of this moment in England, and London in particular, is set apart from earlier eras in the history of sexuality for its distinct and established subcultures, of which Ernest ‘Stella’ Boulton and his co-accused ‘sister,’ Frederick ‘Fanny’ Park were enthusiastic participants. Their habit of dressing as women and accompanying men to West End theatres led to their arrest in 1870 outside the Strand Theatre which set off a flurry of sensation about ‘men in petticoats’ and ‘he-she ladies,’ and brought unwanted attention to clandestine Victorian subcultures.

The mass publicity that engulfed Boulton and Park and later scandals involving same-sex desire, the Dublin Castle Affair of 1884; the Cleveland Street Scandal of 1889 – 1890; and, finally, the Wilde trials of 1895, would prove a catalyst for moral panics and attempted suppression of obscenity – that prickly and ill-defined notion – and proscribed sexualities. Victorian sexual subcultures were resilient, however, and more often than not successfully

skirted legislation designed to entrap and punish members. The production and dissemination of obscene printed materials presented a unique challenge to the moralizing crusades of the late Victorian period. There had been a robust clandestine print culture in London (and Britain, to be sure) since well before the Boulton and Park affair; it had grown alongside mainstream print culture and seemingly benefited from the extra attention placed on sexual dissidence throughout the later Victorian period as it could publish openly, albeit within the confines of selected communities, refracting and presenting the day's events and obscenities in ways mainstream publications could not.

Boulton and Park

Judith Walkowitz has noted that the Victorian "volubility [of sexuality] led to the special privileging of sexuality as the core of a private identity, which was dangerous when made public" (8 - 9) and this is central to decoding the moral outrages of the period. Moral outrage and panicry are usually justified in terms of ostensibly protecting those groups deemed to require special and constant protection; in the Victorian period it was women, children, and the lower classes. Successful orchestration of moral outrage in the face of 'vulnerable' sexualities in Victorian Britain required cooperation amongst politicians, law enforcement, mass media, and interested vigilante groups – such as the Society for the Suppression of Vice. This collusion was necessary in order to deliver the reigning political middle class morality to the masses. The Boulton and Park affair had all the elements of a contrived moral outrage and the timing was seemingly perfect for execution of a didactic sexual scandal.

Sex between men had been a common occurrence in London, especially prevalent after dark in common spaces like public urinals and parks. Generally speaking, this illegal activity was not reported on in newspapers unless the accused hailed from unequal classes; however, “newspaper coverage [from the first half of the nineteenth century] makes it clear that sex between men, and its fallout, was a part of regular public discourse” (Upchurch 2) and it was not until the latter half that the sensationalizing techniques of Sunday half-penny papers were adopted by the father of the New Journalism, W. T. Stead, that scandal reporting became “extended to a more elite readership” (Walkowitz 84) in gentlemen’s magazines that cost a penny. Boulton and Park were not the first men dressed as ladies about London and they were not the first to spark a moral outrage either. The sensation caused by men dressed as ladies and putatively having sex with other men became apparent once it had been forced out of private quarters such as molly clubs, which had been a staple of the homosexual subcultures in the previous century, and ‘came out’ into the streets. The mollies, now walking the streets, “challenged conventional assumptions about gender and sexuality, domesticity and publicity, commerce and pleasure” (Kaplan, *Sodom* 21) and sex between men had become a definitively public and, subsequently, irksome phenomenon.

The combination of newly visible sexualities, sensationalizing media, and middle class moral and legislative crusades coalesced around Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park. Stella and Fanny, as Boulton and Park were respectively called in their ladies’ guise, frequented West End theatres, being seen about the Alhambra and the Strand on many occasions; they were also regularly spotted around – and removed from – the shops at Burlington Arcade and Piccadilly. They were frequently seen accompanying men in private theatre boxes and making scenes

that would be today described as 'camp.' Although there had been a long tradition of men dressed in ladies' costume in London, from Shakespeare's Globe to Victorian burlesque, Fanny and Stella presented a quandary to law enforcement by causing confusion and affronting public decency by their insistence that they actually were ladies. The pair had even gone so far as to claim themselves as brides: Boulton was the 'wife' of MP Lord Arthur Pelham Clinton and even had calling cards engraved with 'Lady Stella Clinton.' Both Boulton and Park took part in so-called 'mock marriages' under the pretense of being theatrical pieces. Lord Clinton died before the trial in 1871 so was never called for his testimony on the matter of the marriage or its consummation; however, it is certain that, apart from sodomy charges, the social incrimination of hyponamy for Lord Clinton would have been damning as well. As it was, the marriage of Lord Arthur Clinton and Stella was not made a pressing issue in the trial. The "living together as man and wife...or more properly of lover and mistress" (DPP 4/6 7 - 8) of the co-accused, Boulton; Park; Louis Hurt; and John Fiske, leading to the commission of unnatural offenses was the dedicated focus of the trial. Actions, rather than identities, were on trial.

As such, the defense found themselves scrupulously defending their clients' actions as men dressed as women rather than any essentialist assumption that the accused, perhaps, embodied variations on established gender and cultural norms. Boulton's defense attorney's insistence that the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah were not present in London came as a rebuttal to the prosecution's accusation that Mr. Boulton was influenced by lewd vices imported from the Continent that were a stain on England's national character. At the time of their arrest and later trial "cross-dressing was not yet established in the public mind — or in anybody's professional opinion — as an indication of same-sex sexual desire" but with the charge of

“conspiracy to commit the felony’ of sodomy, rather than the less serious offense of cross-dressing, the prosecutor undertook to establish that link” (Kaplan, “Who’s Afraid?” 282) and he almost succeeded in doing so. All the while, the public was able to keep a close eye on the proceedings, and read with prurient fascination newspaper reports of each day’s events until it was found there was not sufficient forensic evidence to convict Boulton and Park of the alleged unnatural offenses they had been accused of, even after they had been subjected to invasive physical examinations that found physical ‘evidence’ of sodomy by the police surgeon, who stated “he examined Boulton closely, and found the annus [sic] much dilated, and the muscles readily opened” which, he concluded, were “undoubtedly caused by the [repeated] insertion of a foreign body” (“Revolting Disclosures”). The surgeon’s unauthorized examination also found that the genitalia of Boulton and Park were “of an abnormal size, which was often occasioned by improper connexion” (“Revolting Disclosures”).

The acquittal of Boulton and Park in May 1871 has been examined in a variety of ways throughout history of sexuality scholarship. Boulton and Park have been interpreted variously as “‘mostly innocent’...the result of a typically Victorian love of sickly, sentimental romanticism,” or as “homosexuals against whom there was no adequate evidence” (Cocks 106) for conviction. Readings of this sort are necessarily readings of the legal system that accused and then acquitted them. It has further been suggested that the courts willfully “celebrated their ignorance of homosexuality” (106) thus facilitating the refusal of sodomitical (homosexual) subcultures in London. Sodomy and, by association, proscribed sexualities needed to remain closeted so that the middle class establishment could go about its business, blissfully ignorant that anything so immoral existed, let alone occurred frequently throughout

England. Sodomy and other activities were certainly practiced by the disenfranchised lower classes and the perverse upper classes, but these were undeniably the sins which ought not infiltrate the middle classes and it was easy to maintain the cognitive dissonance necessary to suppress acts of sodomy while refusing sexual identities. Even though Boulton and Park were free to walk the streets after their trial, the law wishing to relegate them to a historical footnote at best, their arrest and trial would stand as the touchstone example of homosexual sex scandals in Britain culminating in Oscar Wilde's conviction in 1895 for 'gross indecency.'

Later notorious sex scandals involving same-sex desire similarly confronted middle class morality and tolerance of "unnatural offenses" (DPP 4/6 7 - 8) and sexualities. The Dublin Castle affair of 1884 and the Cleveland Street affair of 1889 - 1890 centered on, like the Boulton and Park affair, sexual inversion and class admixture to the point that it is nearly impossible to overlook the fact that, this late into the century, the sodomite, invert, molly, "Margery," "pooff," Mary-Ann, or any man of effeminate physiognomy came to resemble something more akin to the twentieth-century homosexual identity rather than a more antiquated notion of men who engaged in a series of prohibited sexual acts (*Yokel's Preceptor* 6). If the molly clubs of the eighteenth century had been the beginnings of the homosexual subculture, nineteenth century attempts "to suppress vice actually may have facilitated the expression of homosexuality," effecting the discretion of burgeoning subcultures as a means of self-preservation, which is a "powerful impetus to the formation of a subculture" (Norton 52), and the two significant scandals of the 1880s testify to this fact.

Dublin Castle Affair

In the spring of 1884 the Irish nationalist politician William O'Brien made accusations against a number of Dublin Castle politicians alleging a homosexual ring within the walls of the seat of British rule in Ireland "so *notorious* to the supreme authorities of Dublin Castle themselves that, long before" his accusations "they had set an investigation going with a view to bringing the *criminal[s] to justice*" (18 – 19 emphases added). O'Brien took advantage of his ability reach the wider public and used his nationalist newspaper, *United Ireland*, as the vehicle with which to deliver stinging accusations of sodomy as well as to "draw the attention of the House of Commons to the system under which the law was administered by uninformed Englishmen" (24) in Ireland. Among those accused were head of the Criminal Investigation Department in Dublin Castle, James Ellis French, and the secretary of the General Post Office, Gustavus C. Cornwall. French was the first to be accused by O'Brien and Cornwall was, on 10 May 1884, associated with French in the pages of *United Ireland*. French had begun a libel suit seeking £5,000 in damages against O'Brien and Cornwall would follow with a similar case shortly thereafter. During the French affair, Cornwall had decided to resign his position and O'Brien made an explicit connection that the decision "dates from certain researches we were compelled to make into the heroic past of Mr. James Ellis French" and urged Cornwall to put off his retirement until "after the French difficulty in the Castle is settled" (O'Brien, "Dublin") lest the secretary find himself embroiled in a similar situation. This was the allegation that caused Cornwall to file his own libel suit, which he lost in July 1884.

The evidence presented against Cornwall at the libel trial led to his and arrest on 5 August 1884 for felony (sodomy) and conspiracy to "procure others to commit diverse lewd

and filthy practices" ("Homosexuality in Post Office"). Many of Cornwall's 'co-conspirators,' mostly men of lower class and rank than Cornwall himself, were found guilty and sentenced to hard labour, but Cornwall was acquitted of all charges and decided to appeal the original libel trial. Cornwall was granted an appeal, but ran out of money to continue so dropped the suit. Although he was a free man, his reputation and livelihood were ruined. The General Post Office did everything it could to distance itself from the irreparably tarnished Cornwall and he was denied his pension after forty-four years of service.

The moral outrage orchestrated largely by one man, William O'Brien, whose political aims were never far from the surface of his tactics, places the Dublin Castle affair in a unique spot amongst other moral outrages of the 1880s that used the media as a conduit to play out "morality as melodrama" (Mort 166). After Cornwall's initial libel case had failed, the homophobic backlash that had been created by reports of the evidence against Cornwall meant that the government had no choice but to pursue criminal charges against Cornwall and others. A magistrate ordered the press out of court during the preliminary criminal hearing, arguing that "once would be enough [for the public] to be disgusted by the details" (qtd. in Murphy 183) of Cornwall's case, which would be examined again for the second hearing.

Unlike Boulton and Park, however, Gustavus Cornwall was not effeminate, but rather an archetypically masculine and aristocratic character. Within his masculine physique was a "mind more resolute than the body was strong...Mr. Cornwall was so steeped in vicious criminality that he had no control over himself" (185) and he thus embodied a paradox that was the opposite of Boulton and Park; rather than an outwardly feminization, it would seem Cornwall's was a sodomitical identity expressed through sexual acts that could not be read on

his exterior. Cornwall was not subject to any physical examination 'proving' sodomy had occurred, unlike Boulton and Park, but rather his character was similarly poked and prodded for evidence of unlawful desire. In the case of Cornwall, the work and political ends of one man was enough to spark a moral outcry, even as the courts cleared the secretary's name. It would not be long after the Dublin Castle scandal that the public's ire would once again be inflamed on account of accusations of unnatural offenses being played out by highly respected members of society in media reports. Like any good scandal of the era, it helped if there were a conspiracy involved and one principal character emerged as the star of the case.

The Cleveland Street Scandal

As noted above, the shift in visibility of homosexuality from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century was apparent as the subcultures became more visible after being forced from private to less private and, ultimately, public spaces. It is difficult to determine for certain if the incidence of same-sex desire grew with the Victorian publicizing of sex between men, but it had definitely become a topic no longer possible to ignore with the larger dissemination of newspapers and punitive legislation. Before assessing the impacts of mass media and legislation on bolstering sexual subcultures, however, it is necessary to look at the consequences of moral outrage when they penetrate ostensibly private space. 19 Cleveland Street is an address that no longer officially exists in the London neighbourhood of Fitzrovia. Mere footsteps away from Charles Dickens' childhood home, 19 Cleveland Street would not enjoy such romanticized notions as the former lodgings of high Victorian authors; it is, rather, besmirched in the annals of London geography as a scandalous address where men, of significant class stature, went to have sex with other men, usually of lower class, for money,

thus making it doubly reprehensible to Victorian morality. Suspicions about 19 Cleveland Street were aroused when a telegraph boy stopped by police was found to be carrying what amounted to two months' wages and the boy admitted he had been sleeping with men for money at number 19. Scotland Yard set up a watch on the alleged male brothel, run by one Mr. Charles Hammond, and confirmed that "a number of men of superior bearing and apparently good position" (qtd. in Gwyther) were seen patronizing the establishment.

Class barriers had, in a manner of speaking, never been impediments to same-sex desire in England; however, the late Victorian period is marked by a traversing of the traditionally segregated east and west divides of London. Boulton and Park's effeminacy was shocking and there was an undertone of disgust in the reporting that people of such low moral fibre could be found in the West End. The same disgust was present in public reaction to the Dublin Castle scandal, with Gustavus Cornwall having allegedly procured lower class boys for lewd activities. In the West End scandals, as the press christened the ensuing fallout from 19 Cleveland Street, this class admixture was taken to extremes when, among those alleged to have been patrons of the brothel, were Lord Arthur Somerset and the Earl of Euston, Henry James Fitzroy. There was also some speculation that the eldest son of the Prince of Wales, Prince Eddy, had visited the brothel. Of these three distinguished gentlemen, only Euston's patronage of the place was examined in a court case and, similar to the Dublin Castle affair and foreshadowing the Wilde trials, he had drawn a libel suit against Ernest Parke, editor of the *North London Press*, for alleging that he had given custom to the house. Unlike in Dublin Castle and the Wilde trial, Euston won the libel case and the editor was sentenced to twelve months in jail; however, like Cornwall, the libel trial of Euston became an examination of his character

rather than physical scrutiny of any potential sodomitical predispositions. To this end, the defense mustered witnesses that would testify to Euston's criminality in visiting the house on Cleveland Street for the purposes of procuring sex with young men. The star of the trial would prove not to be the defendant himself, but rather a witness called against him who, like Boulton and Park almost twenty years prior, caused a stir for his appearance and unabashed manner of delivering self-incriminating testimony. The moral outrage over the West End Scandals "was now directed against those who had accused pillars of Victorian society of patronizing the place" (Kaplan, *Sodom* 200) in the press and on the witness stand. The focal point of the outrage was the self-confessed "professional sodomite," (187) Jack Saul.

Little is known about John (Jack) Saul except that he was supposedly a male prostitute in London, originally from Ireland. Known as 'Dublin Jack' he was, by his own admission, involved in at least two scandals involving male homosexuality and prostitution in the late nineteenth century. As witness for the defense in the Earl of Euston's libel complaint, Saul told the court that he had been involved in the Dublin Castle affair of 1884. Saul claimed he was brought to Dublin from London to testify for the Crown in the libel case against William O'Brien and *United Ireland*. It is difficult to know whether to take Saul's word at face value on the stand. It has long been claimed that "all court records [of the Dublin Castle scandals] were destroyed in the Irish civil war" (Hyde, *Love* 132), but this has turned out not to be the case; the court records that do survive list nobody of the name John (or Jack) Saul or anyone fitting his description as giving evidence in the cases of Gustavus Cornwall because it was found, again by Saul's admission on the stand, that his information was deemed too old to be of use in Cornwall's prosecution. For now, no record of Saul's involvement in the Dublin Castle affair

survives except in brief allusions from his statements and testimony in the West End scandals trial. Saul is on record in the latter admitting to living the “same kind of immoral life in London as he had previously done in Dublin” (Hyde, *Cleveland* 146).

The Earl of Euston won his libel suit even though Saul, an avowed male prostitute and ‘Mary-Ann,’ admitted to having been privy to a number of incriminating acts with the Earl. Saul’s openness in testifying left him open for prosecution, though he was never charged, much less prosecuted, to the surprise of the presiding judge in the Cleveland Street case who “marvelled that no mention had been made of prosecuting...[that] loathsome object” (“The West End Scandals”). Henry Labouchere, the MP whose eponymous amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 broadened the scope of prosecutable sexual acts between men in public or private, was also upset that Saul was allowed to go free after the trial. The Labouchere amendment was key to Oscar Wilde’s prosecution for ‘gross indecency’ in 1895. Saul, the aging Irish common prostitute, was perhaps not the best fit to be made an example of under Labouchere’s law. The extreme class disparity in the West End Scandals meant that they “became vehicles for the continuation of the aggressive middle-class morality that sought to define the national character” (Kaplan, “Who’s Afraid?” 293) and prosecuting a brutish sodomite such as Saul would have simply not sent a strong enough message.

Wilde’s Trials

Saul, while an intriguing rogue, did not have the cultural cachet of somebody like Oscar Wilde, famous wit, aesthete, and ‘posing sodomite [sic],’ (qtd. in Bristow 17) as his blackmailer, the Marquess of Queensbury, would ignorantly interpellate him. Wilde, it would seem, was just the right fit for making an example under the Labouchere Amendment. Bristow

has suggested that “Wilde [was] the ultimate victim of a culture that had, for quite complicated reasons, become more and more intolerant of male sexual types whose very being was thought to undermine the moral fabric of society” (19) and I would add that Wilde, unlike the other sodomites discussed in this study who were acquitted, was a perfectly poised scapegoat for overzealous legislators looking for a trophy prosecution in an age when the culmination of previous homosexual scandals had put sexualities and dissidence front and centre in public morality. Wilde’s “socialist politics, Irish national identity, and homosexuality...were entirely antithetical to the dominant order of the day” (19) and would have serious repercussions for him.

Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde’s petulant young lover, alleged in 1896, the year after Wilde’s conviction and sentencing to two years’ hard labour, that the decision to convict was part of a conspiracy by the Liberal Prime Minister, Lord Rosebery, to avoid creating “a damaging impression among the voters at the next General Election” and that the party was liable to threats against its own homosexual members from so-called “maniacs of virtue” (Hyde, *Tangled* 207) if Wilde were not found guilty. Douglas’ conspiracy theory is intriguing but, ultimately, cannot be proved. It was, however, in the government’s best interests to prosecute Wilde, whose effeminacy and theories of aestheticism and decadence had brought into question “the manly purposefulness of industry and empire” (Sinfield 97 – 98) and who, in 1895, was enjoying the high point of his fame with the opening of his most successful play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, on Valentine’s Day of that year. The reason that Wilde’s trial is treated as a climax in Victorian sex scandals and trials is that the events had played out before in the other scandals and trials discussed above. Wilde’s trial “replicated [the pattern] of the

Boulton and Park and Cleveland Street trials, where rather dubious middle-class men featured, but the prospect of an unspecifiable member of the aristocracy lurked in the wings" (123) and, in Wilde's case, the accused brought with him the cachet of an aristocrat with none of the consequences to British hierarchy when convicted. For a nation beleaguered by he/she ladies, sodomites, Mary-Anns, and other sexual fiends – many of whom, it should be noted, were members of the aristocracy – it was a matter of pride to put a recognizable, though not thoroughly respectable, name to these scourges and orchestrating a moral panic designed to suppress abnormal sexualities..

Legislation & Mass Publicity

Despite the mass publicity generated by the above scandals throughout the period 1870 – 1895, hyped by the media to frenzied masses whose newfound moral outrage was fuelled by legislation designed to outlaw obscenity and expressions of sex and sexuality, attempts to suppress expressions of sexuality were a resounding failure. Britain has a history of suppressing acts, namely sodomy, and the first statute goes back to King Henry VIII's 1533 statute, which outlawed all forms of sodomy – regardless of gender or species – and was amended sometime in the eighteenth century to reflect more specifically the proscription of same-sex acts. Nineteenth-century legislation would, beginning in the 1830s and culminating with the Labouchere amendment in 1885, shift from legislating single acts to legislating morality and suspicion of crimes that could not be proved to have been committed. By the time of Wilde's trial, "any homosexual act came to be regarded in law as an attempt to commit sodomy, and hence fell under the jurisdiction of the 1533 law" (Cocks 17) which, until 1861, was punishable by death, but carried a two year sentence with or without hard labour by 1885.

Legislation that laid the groundwork for health and morally sanitized legislation in the later Victorian period were the “ad hoc and piecemeal” (Mort 20) attempts to ferret out and eradicate the social and moral causes of the cholera epidemic. The cholera legislation was the beginning of social disease causation discourse that would later morph into a “discourse of social medicine with sexual immorality as one of its component concerns” (20) regarding venereal diseases, especially syphilis. The two key pieces of legislation discussed herein, the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s, which ostensibly began as an attempt to eradicate the scourge of venereal disease in prostitutes and soldiers, and the Obscene Publications Act of 1857, which was an earlier attempt at legislating morality and suppressing sexual expression in the print trade.

Contagious Diseases Acts

The Contagious Diseases Acts were “the most important legislative intervention addressing sexuality throughout the nineteenth century” (Mort 53) because they were the main catalysts of sexuality and, by association, morality, in official discourse and the social purity movement of the late Victorian period. The Acts “were designed not to prevent prostitution but to provide a degree of state regulation, with the aim of curtailing venereal disease” (Weeks 85) especially in garrison towns. The social aspect of state control, discernible yet inconspicuous, was an important consequence of such legislation. “One of the effects of the Contagious Disease Acts was to define more sharply the categories of acceptable social and sexual behavior,” (90) which had immediate ramifications for working-class women who may have been mistaken for prostitutes, but also for men like Ernest Boulton, Frederick Park, and Jack Saul who, it should be noted, existed outside the manifest purview of the Contagious

Disease Acts but were nonetheless susceptible to the same discrimination from law enforcement and the public in the name of social purity. By delineating proper social and sexual behavior – under the guise of public health and safety – suspicion was aroused in anyone who possibly deviated from ill-defined norms and, with lack of concrete physical boundaries for discrimination, perceived immorality became the measure by which people, mostly lower class women from poor parts of London, were set apart for unique forms of discrimination. With the scandals during this period discussed above, however, it cannot be said that women engaging in illegal acts were the only victims, or indeed targets, of the Contagious Diseases Acts. The Acts were significant starting points for locking down any expressions of sexuality that would offend public or moral decency, and two of the earliest victims were Boulton and Park, whose morality was questioned based entirely on over-the-top behaviour, hearsay, and medical ‘evidence’ of degenerate sex that was not only disproven but likely the result of one man’s preoccupation Continental theories on the forensics of vice.

Legislation that was passed from the mid Victorian period until the end of the century had nationalistic and class stratifying overtones: this was not a new phenomenon. Vices imported to Britain from abroad and with biblical precedents were chief amongst a host of morally reprehensible sins that were not to be named in public. During a debate on the Contagious Diseases Acts, MP J.W. Henley, expressed in the House of Commons the hope that Britain had “not become so corrupt that we cannot bear to look in the face or name the vices around us” (“The Hermaphrodite Clique”) which, naturally, was a reaction to the extremes gone to in the name of eradicating sins. The moratorium on naming vices led to what Cocks has termed the “paradoxical public discourse about a nameless crime” (3) that ensued – and

flourished – in spite of the forced absence of such discourse in public. The ‘nameless crime’ was, of course felony (sodomy) between men, though its legal definition would expand the more/less it was discussed and subcultures for whom nameless crimes was a stock in trade would benefit from increases in banned speech.

Obscene Publications Act

The imposed “silence about sex [did] not produce an absence, but merely incite[d] other, richer languages of description” (2). Apart from reporting on sex scandal trials, which could provide as much salacious detail as certain books procured in Holywell Street, keeping private identities, like the homosexual, in check was a distinct focus of legislation from the time of Lord Campbell’s Obscene Publications Act of 1857 until well into the twentieth century. The Act sought to curb “breaches of public peace and order” (Nead 157) through the policing and confiscation of printed materials deemed obscene, many of which were sold openly in the shop windows of Holywell Street, also known as Booksellers’ Row. Private morals, Lord Campbell, encouraged by the Society for the Suppression of Vice, reasoned, could be kept relatively in check with legislation such as this act. Rather than its manifest focus on obscene printed materials, the Obscene Publications Act had legislative authority over morality and sexual expression. The self, sexual or otherwise, ought not to be displayed publicly lest it threaten social hegemony and established forms of morality, power, and being. In order to keep morality in order, a show of force must be made, especially against those whose “private identities” made public are of a new, unpopular, or unrecognized form – such as Boulton and Park in their petticoats or Jack Saul’s fearless admissions of sin – so as to exist on the social periphery. The fear of the socially peripheral is that it is

so frequently *symbolically* central...the low-Other is despised, denied at the level of political organization and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoire of the dominant culture.

(Stallybrass qtd. in Walkowitz 20)

The unintended corollary of the Obscene Publications Act and any other which sought to sweep aside socially peripheral sexualities was that it assisted in the creation of a market place for licentious printed materials. The refusal to name certain crimes in newspapers led to the creation of pamphlets and books purporting to give an inside look at various criminal proceedings, most notably the Boulton and Park and Oscar Wilde trials. In the case of the former, a memoir published in 1881, putatively Jack Saul's entitled *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain*, contains a prolonged first-person account of a sexual encounter between Ernest Boulton and Lord Arthur Clinton. Although sodomy was never proved in the Boulton and Park trial and the verisimilitude of *Sins* is seriously in question, it is nevertheless apparent that there was a market for salacious print matter that had at least a tenuous basis in fact. Producers and consumers of obscene print depended on social and sexual prohibition for titillating subject matter and, although it was a business like any other with a distinguishable profit motivation, nonetheless effected and operated under its own brand of politics.

Politics of Clandestine Print Culture

The structure of the clandestine publishing industry in the mid to late Victorian period was robust. While the practices and many of its early practitioners, most notably William Dugdale, whose publications dominated the pornographic print market until the 1870s, came from an older clandestine print culture that was overtly political in nature, the bulk of

noteworthy obscene materials in the period covered by this study can be classified, albeit problematically, as pornography. The politics of this clandestine print culture were diverse and not necessarily manifest; however, the traditions of the radical publishers who found there was profit to be made in publishing pornography were the foundation of the early print culture. As the politically radical aspects of the trade in pornography tapered off, there were three key aspects that made clandestine print culture concomitant with the sexual subcultures in Victorian London discussed above: class stratification/admixture, sales structure, and the way the medium of obscene print relied upon suppression in order to foster its business and, perhaps unintentionally, lent support to the growing discourse legitimizing abnormal sexual identities. This runs counter to the idea that pornographic print was “too commercially expedient to be a subversive cultural force” (McCalman 235).

There is enough evidence to counter romanticized neo-Victorian attitudes to pornographic print culture. The “masturbatory fantasies for frustrated upper-class males” (235) may have been a part of the earlier epoch, but this was not the case as the industry gained momentum and mirrored the open trade in books. As all printed materials moved from the sphere of luxury items to more commonplace possessions, “price structuring, reflecting class structures, kept certain price formats beyond the pocket of the lower classes” (Weedon 160) and this was paralleled in the market for pornographic texts. In the latter case, however, it was not simply *editions de luxe* that were prohibitive to lower class readers but the stratification was also content-based. The unnamable crime that linked Boulton and Park, Gustavus Cornwall, the Earl of Euston, and Oscar Wilde represented *la crème de la crème* of pornographic writing. Controlled access to acts was a limiting factor of the trade in

pornographic texts. There was a “two-tier system of access [that] limited the poorer patrons to streamlined versions of libertinism” (Sigel 47) which all but excised anal eroticism and flagellation (the so-called ‘English’ vice) from within their pages. Cheaper reprints of the pornographic ‘classic’ *Fanny Hill*, for instance, usually excised the infamous buggery scene the title character witnessed through a keyhole. That the trade in pornographic materials was, by the century’s end, a thriving industry with products to suit many budgets can be explained in the same terms as the rise in the popularity of any printed matter. The rise of the middle class during the nineteenth century certainly accounts for a great deal of growth in print. In a twenty-year period, the number of people in Britain earning over £160 *per annum* more than doubled, from 280,000 in 1860 to 620,000 in 1880 (180). This rise in standards of living coupled with lower production and material costs – in roughly the same period “paper costs were reduced by approximately two-thirds” (Weedon 67) – meant that clandestine print culture grew as mainstream print culture grew. Increased availability of pornography meant producers had to reflect various stratifications in their product offerings lest pornography become the great equalizer.

The politics of admixture and erasure of class boundaries that would be recognized everywhere else but within a shared secret space is mirrored in clandestine print culture in the ways its subjects violated their “categories of being” and themselves “appropriat[ed] aesthetic objects” (Sigel 151). Of particular importance in terms of pornographic book trade is the bridging of class divides in Victorian London between east and west parts of the city. Scholars have placed significance on this widening of the social sphere for things such as drag balls and molly houses that brought typically low class people from the east end of the

city together with wealthy patrons in the west end. Middle class women had recently traversed the same east-west divide of London and found a new form of power within consumerist practices. To this end, Walkowitz has noted the tendency for “one marginal group after another [to endeavour] to establish its place and viewpoint in the urban panorama” (80) which is not to say there exists a clear cause and effect relationship between burgeoning women’s rights and the pornographic print trade, but rather that temporary suspensions (or disregarding) of social barriers led a geographical expansion of previously marginalized materiality and outward expression of identities, even if it was through covert means. A successfully transgressive marginal group “often found its example emulated, or incorporated, by another constituency” (80). Yet, “Victorian pornography neither fulfilled the promise of liberation nor guaranteed complete subordination” (Sigel 13) of its subjects: women (mostly of low or domestic class), minorities, and, in some cases, young men and boys. The trade was still not open to all and even the cheapest editions had to take a circuitous route to find their way into consumers’ hands.

The Sale of Clandestine Literature

Methods of obtaining books in the Victorian period evolved as the trade grew and, as it did, more booksellers found themselves a robust side business fulfilling the niche for pornography. Perhaps the most well known market for pornography was Holywell Street, destroyed in 1900 in order to widen the Strand, where “windows and front shelves [were] packed with vicious and gaudy literature...whose sort [was] hardly to be matched in the lowest quarters of Paris” (Blumenfeld 107). The demolition of Holywell Street signified a break from “disordered, crumbling, [and] labyrinthine” old London to “straight, singular, and purposeful”

(Nead 179) modernity. Holywell Street's somewhat secretive curvature had lent itself to clandestine trading, yet it was no secret what types of wares were available there. A mid century bookseller who ran a stall admitted he was "not infrequently asked...by respectable people, for indecent works," to which he would promptly recommend they "go to Holywell Street themselves" (Mayhew 295). Holywell Street housed the London pornographic book subculture for a good portion of the nineteenth century, but those who could not go there in person, for one reason or another, relied on means of procurement which did not involve face to face contact with booksellers.

Catalogue sales provided a way for booksellers to reach a wider market and more 'respectable' clientele to avoid being spotted amongst notorious parts of the city. Booksellers knew their catalogue clients' tastes, it would seem, as many who engaged in mail order would place the more risqué titles at the end of the catalogue and "to any that he thinks wouldn't much admire seeing his 'Facetiae,' he pulls the last leaf out, and sends his catalogue, looking finished without it" (293) so as not to offend or bring unwanted attention to this genre of trade. The language of mail order trade was often, like the language of the sexual subcultures it represented in its pages, codified to reach specific members of pornographic book market. The late Victorian publisher Leonard Smithers, who had published the Wilde-attributed homosexual romance *Teleny* in 1893, catered to collectors of fine editions as well as erotica, mainly via catalogues or "circulars" (Nelson 116) and utilized the language of the esoteric to entice customers. Keywords such as 'rare,' and 'curious,' or any adventurous references to the Continent, the Orient, or other kinds of exotic others were usually a good indication that the works in question likely contained some sort of explicit content. In addition to catalogues,

booksellers also advertised their wares in newspapers, using the same types of codes to differentiate from the latest novels from mainstream publishers. For adverts contained within pornographic literature itself, publishers did not need to be as careful with their choice of language, making it quite clear exactly what was on offer. In the 1882 pornographic periodical *The Cremorne*, works from the same publisher are listed on the back cover. In one instance, simply the title is given with little need for guesswork: "*The Bride's Confession, a most racy account of her wedding night, in verse*" (97). This kind of explicit language was not the norm, however, within the more 'public' trade in pornography; it was reserved for contexts less likely to accidentally catch the gaze of authorities.

The constant threat of prosecution, however, was an impetus for the growth of pornographic print. As mentioned above, attempts at suppression aided formation of subcultures and the silence imposed by those attempts created a space to be filled with "other, richer languages of description" (Cocks 2). What clandestine print culture achieved by not only surviving but thriving in the face of laws such as the Obscene Publications Act and later legislation that forced production overseas, was the creation of a social network that had, whether intentionally or not, entered sexuality discourse and become an ally to the persecuted such as Boulton and Park, who would themselves become characters in later fantasy versions of events from their lives. Since obscene literature was illegal, there was no need for producers to bother with censoring content. Even when the contents were of poor quality, the medium still served as a way to share information unavailable outside of highly specialized professional circles. Bits of the latest Continental sexology made their way into pages of pornography and, perhaps more importantly, as the century wore on, pornography reflected the vast array of

emergent sexual identities and increasingly advocated, in a Darwinian vein, biological essentialism of sexuality and desire.

This and other information amounted to a shared secret amongst producers and consumers of pornographic materials. The act of seeking, possessing, and consuming 'indecent' books had the, perhaps unintended, consequence of bringing together like-minded individuals to perpetuate the cycle of clandestine literature in the face of suppression and under threat of criminal punishment. Moral panicry, orchestrated by legislators and media, that sought to stamp out the representation of sex and its dissemination were wholly unsuccessful in their efforts since the object of scorn, though ubiquitous, was also nebulous and adaptable. Threats to public decency and middle class morality were personified in characters such as Ernest Boulton, Frederick Park, Gustavus Cornwall, Jack Saul, and Oscar Wilde and the public's fascination with these new species of deviant was prurient and demanding. In the late Victorian period the news media fed public sexual fascination as much as the pornographers did, except they were seldom charged with corruption of morals to the extent of Holywell Street booksellers. Victorian London was something quite apart from a modern Sodom and Gomorrah; for the new sexual epoch it helped spawn, it was the beginnings of a Promised Land.

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