Sexualities in Victorian Britain

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Introduction

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Twentieth-century accounts of Victorian sexuality—or of the Victorians and a sexuality they allegedly disavowed—have changed as dramatically as twentieth-century understandings of sexuality generally. What has remained strikingly persistent, however, is the unique prominence that our changing discourses of sexuality assign to Victorian culture. To be sure, many other epochs—classical Greece, early Christianity, and eighteenth-century Europe, most notably—have served as important points of reference, as have a variety of disparate present cultures explored by anthropologists. But it is the nineteenth century that produces the very concept of sexuality as an object of study, as well as the various enterprises of scientific (or quasi-scientific) investigation loosely grouped under the label “sexology.” As a result, Victorian understandings continue to exert an influence on our ways of thinking about sexuality that exceed the effects of sheer historical contiguity; they have a formative place in contemporary discussion, amid all its contention and debate, akin to that of an originary framework, or foundational discourse. Changing accounts of Victorian sexualities, and of their relation to the present, thus place us at the center of ongoing reflection about the nature and history of sexuality.

Through much of this century, the Victorians were notorious as the great enemies of sexuality; indeed, in Freud’s representative account, sexuality sometimes seems to be whatever it was that the middle-class Victorian mind attempted to hide, evade, repress, deny. So prominent was this agonistic construction of Victorian culture that soon after the very adjective “Victorian” came into widespread usage it tended to be sexualized, as a virtual synonym for “repressive.” This emphasis tended toward the self-congratulatory; in Michel Foucault’s arch phrasing, it gratified “something that one might call the speaker’s benefit” (6). In a world increasingly resistant to Whig schemes of history, twentieth-century commentators might still find grounds for a Whiggish account of the development of sexual understanding. Thus Freud famously likened his intellectual advance—and its im-
impact—to those of Copernicus and Darwin. For many critics (including Freud in his more sanguine moods) that advance promised more than intellectual satisfaction; the exposure of Victorian repression became a project of psychic liberation. Yet such triumphalist accounts developed lines of argument already staked out by dissident Victorians. Critics as varied as Matthew Arnold, Mill, and Wilde, for example, all had represented Victorian “respectability” as the opponent of the body, denouncing Victorian moral conventions as a form of “mutilation.” As the Victorians increasingly narrowed the scope of morality to the sphere of sexual regulation—a historical development of great moment in itself—resistance to the authority of Mrs. Grundy likewise became charged with sexual associations, and sexual reference became the most provocative mode of resistance. Hence mere frankness could become a mark of intellectual and moral daring—as in Virginia Woolf’s account of a galvanizing moment in the formation of “Bloomsbury,” Lytton Strachey’s bold utterance of the word “semen” in mixed company (173).

Less picturesque understandings of “Victorian” antagonism to sexuality shaped even the most sympathetic and scholarly accounts of Victorian culture through much of the twentieth century. In Walter Houghton’s landmark study, _The Victorian Frame of Mind_ (1957), for example, “sex” operates in an array of stark, symptomatic oppositions, as a biological force that finds no hint of accommodation in the structures of Victorian society. The index entry tellingly gives the term itself, adds “fear of” and “silence about,” and then includes a list of related topics: “See also Adultery, Censorship, Evasion, Free love, Prostitution, Prudery, Sensuality.” Roughly divided between crippling prohibition and varieties of transgression defined by that constraint, the list leaves no hint of a middle ground of satisfied desire. Moreover, Houghton’s decision to confine every one of these topics to two of his 14 chapters, “Love” and “Hypocrisy,” reinforces the pivotal transition in the chapter devoted to “Love”: “From the fear of sex we pass directly to the exaltation of love” (372).

Despite Houghton’s severe and apparently secure circumscription of sexuality to but two facets of the Victorian “frame of mind,” the relation between love and sex that he sets forth is broadly Freudian. Indeed, in one of Freud’s most famous maxims about sexuality, Houghton’s view of Victorian culture becomes the human condition: “It is not possible for the claims of the sexual instinct to be reconciled with the demands of culture.” This pronouncement, from “The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life,” is turned back on Victorian culture as the epigraph of the single most influential account of sexuality in Victorian Britain before the work of Foucault: Steven Marcus’s _The Other Victorians_ (1966). As his title implies, Marcus set out to complicate clichés about Victorian repression by setting against “the official views of sexuality”—as enunciated by the physician William Acton—the demotic worlds of Victorian pornography and prostitution. As it aimed to recover a sexual culture largely written out of the official story, Marcus’s volume was also true to the Victorian genealogy of its sponsor: _The Other Victorians_ was the first publication in a series sponsored by the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University, founded by Alfred Kinsey, whose work is probably
the most influential twentieth-century descendant of late-Victorian sexology. For all Marcus's careful distancing of himself from Kinsey's empiricism—invoking Lionel Trilling's influential attack on "the Kinsey Report"—the famed "sex researcher" turns out to be a curiously appropriate tutelary spirit for a work whose central exhibit, *My Secret Life*, is an exhaustive and exhausting multivolume recounting of a prodigious number and variety of sexual experiences, by an anonymous author who disdains theory or analysis in pursuit of "facts alone" (Marcus 187).

Marcus's project, moreover, harkens back to a further Victorian enterprise informing the rise of what Foucault would call "scientia sexualis": his book, Marcus explains, is not only an exercise in literary criticism and history, but "an exercise in anthropology as well" (xiv).

The subculture to be studied was "foreign," distinct, exotic; at the same time it was a human subculture and consequently relevant to our own humanity and culture. I could in addition fancy myself as being out "in the field": a new language or dialect had to be learned, preconceptions had to be rigorously put aside, and guidelines had to be laid down where none existed before. (xiv–xv)

This self-construction underscores the extent to which twentieth-century reflection on sexuality derives from the more headlong projects of Victorians like Mayhew and Dickens, who explored the streets and alleys of London in pursuit of what Marcus calls "the very underbelly of the Victorian world," likewise in ostensibly search for a common humanity. Yet the encounter with the "exotic," then as now, is notoriously subject to "preconceptions," as well as to the condescension hinted at in the strange redundancy of "human subculture." Ultimately, Marcus's deference to Freud undercut his anthropological imperative: the glimpse of a more complex and manifold sexual culture crucially inflicted by class is obscured by the characterization of Victorian Britain as "an enduringly arrested world," in which medical discourse and pornography are alike the work of delusion, "worlds without psychology" awaiting the illumination of Freud.

A Victorian sexual culture of more varied and vigorous internal conflict emerged in the work of feminist critics and historians from the 1960s onward. The force of Victorian "respectability" weighed especially heavily on women, and the assessment of that burden and its afterlife became a central task of feminist writing, in and out of the academy. The importance of the Victorians in feminist self-definition is strikingly illustrated by the work of Kate Millett, whose 1968 essay comparing Mill's *The Subjection of Women* with Ruskin's then-neglected essay, "Of Queen's Gardens," was subsequently incorporated in her best-selling polemic, *Sexual Politics* (1970). To be sure, the political imperatives of "women's liberation" often reinvigorated monolithic schemes of sexual repression and political oppression. But feminist social history in the 1970s discovered increasingly intricate and frequently self-divided patterns of regulation at work in shaping Victorian sexual identities. Thus, for example, Nancy Cott's essay on the ideology of female "passionlessness" demonstrated ways in which what had been previously
understood as a repressive imposition of patriarchal power had also been actively embraced and deployed by women.\textsuperscript{2}

It is the work of Michel Foucault, however, that is most widely and influentially associated with the view that sexuality is best understood as a construction of regulatory systems, rather than as an elemental force subject to repression. The first volume of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1977), an “Introduction” to a subsequently reconfigured and never-completed project, sets aside “the repressive hypothesis” to reflect instead, in alternately bemused and excoriating fashion, on the satisfactions that commentators seem to derive from rehearsing it, even as they lament its burdens. Once again, the Victorians and their twentieth-century interpreters loom large. Indeed, Foucault entitles his opening chapter, “We ‘Other Victorians,’” thereby launching a challenge not only to Marcus’s Freudian premises but to the narrative of mastery within which, as we’ve noted, what Marcus frames as an introduction to an unknown “subculture” becomes an occasion to chart our own enlightenment. Herein, Foucault suggests, lies the most encompassing structure and appeal of “the repressive hypothesis”: it postulates that truth is always opposed to repressive power, and hence that by speaking truth one is opposing power. Yet the strangest of the practices in *My Secret Life*, Foucault wryly remarks, is not the abundance and variety of the sexual experiences, but “the fact of recounting them all,” which he takes to be emblematic of our own obsessive preoccupation with speaking “the truth of sex” (56). In this light, Foucault suggests, “this nameless Englishman will serve better than his queen as the central figure for a sexuality whose main features were already taking shape with the Christian pastoral” (22). Perhaps, Foucault continues, our discourse of sexuality is not opposed to power, but is in fact incited by power. From this hypothesis, he proceeds to redefine sexuality as “the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain deployment deriving from a complex political technology” (127). Sexuality thus understood is not a biological imperative but an intricately articulated array of political identities constructed out of imperatives to believe, to feel, to act. As such, the discourse of sexuality will confirm its normalizing force by specifying a variety of “aberrant” identities of increasing specificity; sexuality, that is, will invariably generate sexualities. We have come to assume that all of these varied identities are the manifestation of the fundamental truth that is “sex,” “that agency which appears to dominate us and that secret which seems to underlie all that we are” (155). In Foucault’s account, however, sex is “but an ideal point” within the discourse of sexuality that masks the operation of power in constructing the “truth” of sex. “Sex” as we have come to understand it is not a biological reality, but a construction of nineteenth-century “bio-power”; it is “the most speculative, most ideal, and most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality” (155).

The greatest impact of Foucault’s work on historians has centered on its account of the nineteenth-century construction of “perverse” sexualities.\textsuperscript{3} Here, Foucault argues, categories that had previously been attached to specific activities or sexual relations were transformed into designations of an essential identity, a sexuality;
"the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (43). On this view, "the homosexual" is a being which does not exist before the nineteenth century. By the same logic, however, neither does "the heterosexual." Such provocative formulations have made Foucault a central figure in a far-reaching conflict between "essentialist" and "social constructionist" views of sexuality and human identity—between, broadly speaking, the view that human identity is largely or entirely a function of innate attributes, and hence explicable in trans-historical categories, and the view that identity is shaped by social and cultural forces to such an extent that it can only be analyzed in historically-specific terms. The prominence of this dualism in recent debate is a striking development, particularly given the fact that "essentialists" have proved very difficult to find, at least within the human sciences. John Boswell, one of the few historians actually cited as an "essentialist," points out that no one deliberately involved in the controversy identifies himself as such (Stein 133). As Diana Fuss notes, “essence as irreducible has been constructed to be irreducible” (4), and essentialism, similarly, must be constructed as such. Indeed, it often proves difficult even to coherently define the position as it might bear on sexuality. Edward Stein, for example, who as the editor of a volume devoted to “sexual orientation and the social constructionist controversy” tries very hard to be even-handed, claims that essentialists hold that a person’s sexual orientation is a culture-independent, objective and intrinsic property while social constructionists think it is culture-dependent, relational and, perhaps, not objective. (Roughly, an objective property is one a person has from a "god's-eye" point of view, while an intrinsic property is one that a person has non-relationally; i.e., “inside” him or her; in other words, an intrinsic property is one that a person could have even if she were the only person or thing in the world.) (325–26)

But what could it possibly mean to claim that an essentialist view understands "sexual orientation" on the model of a world evacuated of other human beings?

To be sure, if essentialism denotes the persistence of some human categories or concepts throughout history, some element of essentialism inhabits virtually all constructionist arguments. Foucault’s work in this context has provoked a vigorous and ongoing debate about the premises of historical analysis. But given the extraordinary difficulty of identifying a rigorously “essentialist” position, why is its existence so vigorously proclaimed? In many respects the opposition draws on the familiar antagonisms of “the two cultures.” The archetypal essentialist is the biologist in search of a gene that would determine homosexuality, understood as a neurophysiological imperative whose cultural configurations are mere epiphenomena. Over against such a view, the attack on “essentialism” reaffirms the authority of the human sciences by stressing the constitutive force of culture. This conflict is readily translated into the political oppositions associated with the dichotomies of nature and nurture. The embrace of a “constructionist” view, that is, seems to underwrite forms of voluntarism or freedom denied by “essentialism.” In the ringing affirmation of Jeffrey Weeks, constructionist views make plain that “identity is not a destiny but a choice” (Sexuality, 209). To be sure, Weeks (like
most commentators) quickly qualifies the proclamation of autonomy with a classical Marxist acknowledgement of the constraints the world imposes on our choices. But there is nonetheless a powerful and complex political investment informing virtually all invocations of the essentialist/constructionist dichotomy. This is one reason why Foucault’s formulation of “perverse” identity has overshadowed that of Mary McIntosh, whose 1968 article, “The Homosexual Role,” is cited by most historians as the seminal essay in “social constructionism.” As her title implies, McIntosh’s sociological paradigm is dramaturgical, and as such less susceptible of ready extension to other disciplines than the loosely textual paradigm of Foucauldian discourse. But McIntosh’s account of homosexual identity, although it centrally addresses a dynamic of social control, is also less overtly and completely entangled in the structures of power that figure so emphatically in Foucault’s account. As it suggests that all sexuality is a political construction, Foucault’s argument also seems to empower those who analyze the discourse of sexuality, to invest their work with a potentially liberatory effect.

Yet there is a pointed irony in invocations of Foucault to authorize appeals to social constructionism as a path to greater autonomy. For such invocations typically reproduce their own version of the repressive hypothesis. “Essentialism,” that is, too readily figures as yet another hypostatized image of Victorian power implacably opposed to human capacity for self-definition, and to the vitality of human signification. Repeating Foucault’s sardonic terms, what sustains our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of essentialism “is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures . . .” (7). A thoroughly-going Foucauldian might well urge that, on the contrary, the current explosion of work on sexual identity is only a further multiplying of the eminently Victorian project of putting sex into discourse. For Foucault himself, as both Judith Butler and Jeffrey Weeks point out, the ultimate goal seems less the reconfiguration of existing sexual categories than “the happy limbo of a non-identity” epitomized by Hercule Barbin.

Ultimately, however, Foucault’s influence has been in keeping with the highly schematic, provisional, and ultimately unfinished character of his “Introduction.” His notorious inattention to the specificity of female sexuality—he was “a profoundly androcentric writer,” notes Meaghan Morris—has made his relation to feminism especially problematic (26). Criticism of Foucault has been especially sharp in discussions of violence against women and the decriminalization of rape where the central Foucauldian concepts of “power” and “sex” graphically intersect. But the sheer scope and suggestiveness of Foucault’s reflections have prompted feminist revisions and extensions of his work that have generated important theoretical reflection as well as powerful studies of Victorian sexualities. His writing, more generally, energizes current historical work as an especially provocative incitement to reflection on the complexity of human identities, and on the many different arrays of meaning inevitably informing those identities. Thus the contributors to this volume, rather than (wearingly and ultimately unreward-
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Arguing that human identities are constructed, instead emphasize the remarkable variousness of Victorian sexuality, and the complex specificity of those many particular identities—or sexualities—whose interrelations shape Victorian conceptions of themselves and others.

In beginning to distinguish among the mechanisms which recent constructionist practice have seen producing sexual identities, we can sketch out two general processes. The first is a particularly Foucauldian dynamic of normalization and discriminating exclusion by which a norm is produced and its status regulated through the construction of an isolated set of maligned identities. The potency of this form of power in the nineteenth century was part of Foucault’s argument, as was the insistence that its formal consistency across cultural sites, disciplinary ventures, and historical moments only throws into vivid contrast the various sources of its power and the extreme differences within those behaviors qualifying as normative and perverse. Against images of (patriarchal, heterosexual, metropolitan) power as monolithic and oppressive, imposing itself on passive victims, this understanding traces a more intricate network of force and resistance that structures social relations.

Versions of this normalizing rhetoric are studied in many of the essays in this collection, as when Margaret Homans, for instance, argues that George Eliot’s first two novels, set in the early decades of the century, retrospectively imagine the middle class as a natural phenomenon, “immutable and appropriate” (24), untroubled by the crises and contingencies of its actual historical emergence. The role of women in this visionary project is central; their domestic distance from the public world of economic production and their definition “as a natural category” allowed them to be represented as transcending class more readily than men (28). The aim of sexual relations in the culture of these novels thus comes to be the acquisition by men of wives who can occlude the history of class emergence, thereby allowing the ostensible classlessness of women to appear as the signifier of middle-class status. As sexual differences seemingly supersede class differences, characters from the aristocracy and lower classes either are included in the middle-class norm or are defined as aberrant in their sexual practices. As Homans is careful to note, the regulation of “natural” sexual relations is selective: although characters like Hetty Sorel in *Adam Bede*, whose infanticide makes her unrecognizable, are cast out of the final tableau of middle-class harmony, others, like Mrs. Poyser and Arthur Donnithorne are included. To allow this flexibility, the representation of the “natural” varies: in *Adam Bede* it is emblazoned by the awkwardly eroticized spiritual elevation of Dinah Morris; in *Mill on the Floss*, it finds its fullest representation in the consumer lust and commodification of Maggie.

The fluidity of this formal dynamic of normalization and discriminating exclusion, its availability for a range of social purposes, is central to its power. If Eliot’s early novels reveal this process enabling “the representation of the middle-class as eternal, not outdated, and the equation of its particular values with the universally human” (18), in Dickens’s narratives of mid-century, sexual normalization is a
project for the present and future, not the past, a means of escaping and redeeming a contagious social and maternal inheritance. As in Eliot’s novels, the representation specifically of female sexuality allows the occlusion of class differences, but, in Dickens, as Deborah Nord argues, the occlusion of class by sexuality is perceived as a menace identically moral and physical. “The threat of disease from unsanitary urban conditions,” specifically from the conditions of urban poverty, “and the spread of epidemic illnesses merged with the threat of disease and degeneration from exposure to infected female sexuality” (39). The hidden links between classes are made visible in diseases which must be regulated and redeemed; the expulsion of debased womanhood in *Little Dorrit* and *Bleak House* defines an uncorrupted womanhood which subsequently has, as its task, the expiation of the sins of those who have fallen. In this social vision, female sexuality is both the strongest contagion affecting the social body and its most potent corrective.

Taken together, the essays by Homans and Nord demonstrate the varied powers of constructivist theory when put to use by feminist literary criticism. Examining especially resonant texts, the essays understand female sexuality as both a symptomatic convergence of immediate social contradictions and as a nexus for the culture’s understanding of historical possibilities. Their rhetorical analyses of isolated textual moments and large narrative patterns tease out the logical problems, social dangers, and moral hazards which mid-Victorian writers addressed and avoided as they imagined sexuality. At the same time, both critics are attentive to the specifically literary nature of their texts; for both the intersection of the formal demands of romantic plots with social anxieties about female sexuality create generative narrative and ideological tensions. Feeling her attraction to Adam Bede, for instance, the angelic Dinah Morris resists being understood sexually. As Homans acutely observes, her repeated blushes mark both her awareness of her own sexual power and her ambivalence about it—and they allow the narrative suspense which culminates in her marriage to Adam. Like Dinah and Maggie Tulliver, Dickens’s Esther Summerson must transcend sexuality and yet be the erotic object of desire. For both Eliot and Dickens, specific female sexual characteristics are essential traits of the middle class. But that sexuality is self-conscious and internally divided, a narrative opportunity and problem, a social hazard and possibility.

If these two literary essays, then, describe various forms of power produced by the social mechanisms of normalization and discriminating exclusion, Ornella Moscucci’s “Clitoridectomy, Circumcision, and the Politics of Sexual Pleasure in Mid-Victorian Britain” describes a second process of social validation, one similarly capable of organizing a range of ideological categories around the polarization of sexual traits. Victorian narratives of cultural progress chronicle sexual difference as an explicitly historical phenomenon; here, the progressive development of culture, rather than the recuperation and defense of normal characteristics, constructs the differences between the sexes and regulates their behaviors. Tracing the mapping of the female body by medical discourse, Moscucci argues that Victorian concepts of sexual difference organized representations of female genitalia:
claimed in 1871, in his *Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, then it followed that civilization depended on women repressing their ‘man-like’ clitoris. The hypertrophied genitals of ‘primitive’ races,” and the similar hypertrophy found in prostitutes, “stood as a warning that the whole process of evolution might go into reverse if gender roles were threatened” (72). Within this context, clitoridectomy could be seen to extend and support the evolutionary development of the race; if evolution was, as one writer remarked at the end of the century, “trying to do away with the clitoris” (72), then clitoridectomy was advancing this project. At the same time, however, the more numerous opponents of the practice also invoked evolutionary narratives to affiliate the operation with barbaric rituals: the doctors of London were by this light seen to “touch hands with the aboriginal spayers of New Zealand” (73). An evolutionary narrative, then, provides the armature for arguments both in favor of and against medical treatments for the “deviant” practices—masturbation and lesbianism most prominently—understood to derive from overdeveloped genitals. Sexual difference again is seen to establish norms of social behavior, but the construction of that difference is achieved through more distinctly evolutionary arguments.

Secure distinctions between these two narratives of social formation, the evolutionary and the normalizing, are difficult to sustain, and this difficulty is especially visible within Darwin’s evolutionary narrative itself. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin adopts anthropological narratives which understand normative human behavior as a progressive development from uncivilized sexual behaviors understood as “savage”; again, the development of civilization, rather than the immutable verities of nature, is understood to form and authorize contemporary social and sexual arrangements. At the same time, however, Darwin attempts to forge a continuous biological narrative, one which again turns on sexual difference, stretching from animal activity through the behavior of savage populations to the sexual relations of contemporary human society. This biological narrative, like the literary tales told in Eliot’s novels, naturalizes middle-class sexual relations by projecting them backwards in time; the continuity between animal and man centers on an anthropomorphic apprehension of animal sexual practices. Thus, as Rosemary Jann argues in chapter 5, the “patently ‘unnatural’ sexual behavior of primitive societies” proved to be a troubling and destabilizing phenomenon for Darwin, the category which displayed the tensions between the disciplinary narratives of biology and anthropology most acutely. More advanced than animals, according to the naturalizing narrative of biology, savage practices varied from what that narrative posited as natural behavior present in both civilized man and in animals.

The tension between civilizing narratives of progress, which construct sexual behavior according to norms of culture, and the normalizing process of discriminating exclusion returns in Jonathan Dollimore’s “Perversion and Degeneration” which, like Moschucci’s work on clitoridectomy, attends to the devolutionary trepidation inspired by sexualities labeled deviant. Arguments concerning fin de siècle degeneracy theory, like those popularized by Max Nordau’s *Degeneration*, were based on the fear that the excessively civilized would fold over and into “the ex-
cesses of the primitive” (97); the primitive, either retained vestigially within us or developing through the decay of an overripe civilization, thus propels both the narrative of development and the mechanisms of discriminating exclusion. What Dollimore has called the “perverse dynamic,” in which “perverse deviation discloses something within or about (in proximity to) the normal which the latter must disavow in order to remain itself,” describes in detail these mechanisms of discriminating exclusion. “The original proximity (or identity) of the perverse with the normal,” he writes, “enables the latter to displace its own contradictions onto the former” (101). This displacement makes visible in the “perverse”—whether it is the “unspeakable” activities of Conrad’s Kurtz, the homoerotic desire of Aschenbach in Death in Venice, the primitive sexual behaviors of savage cultures or unlicensed female sexuality—the displaced contradictions within behavior and identities understood as normal. The contradictions of middle-class ascension, of male social power, and of civilized refinement, are transposed onto the aberrant characteristics against which they oppose themselves, allowing critics to see in those perverse elements the rifts within Victorian sexual norms.

These two broad lines of constructionist theory, marked by the attention to the construction of primitive and of perverse sexualities, have allowed, by a reflux action, a reconsideration of monolithic understandings of normative and dominant Victorian masculinity. The Angel in the House, cited by writers from Virginia Woolf on to exemplify the institutionalized inequalities of Victorian sexual difference, appears as a fundamental statement of what Joseph Bristow calls “the appalling absorption of femininity into a masculinist fantasy of mastery.” While the angel in the house has as her task the moral elevation of man, her own value, status, and pleasures are both subordinate to and dependent upon his. The complex effects of naturalizing rhetoric seem reduced here into a more convenient narrative of simple male narcissism and self-aggrandizement. But, as Bristow indicates in chapter 7, Patmore’s writing does not simply “bolster a punishing masculinity by denying the autonomy of its female object. Instead, the point would seem to be that the masculine subject can only retain his poetic identity by grounding it upon a principle of feminine grace” (132). Denying actual women the status of men, Patmore’s verse nonetheless sees an ideal masculinity incorporating femininity within it. The Angel is, then, an “attempt by a male poet to be more feminine than any woman in his midst” (133). Patmore’s frequent rewriting of the poem and the uncertainty and obscurity of its diction are seen in this light as effects of the destabilizing proximity of that femininity against which the male poet ostensibly defines himself.

The reconfiguration of normative masculinity by the incorporation of feminine traits during the 1860s proceeded in a graphically different fashion in the art and literary criticism of Swinburne and Pater. Understanding homosexual desire in relation to other forms of social practice, Thaïs Morgan analyses the writing of both figures as elements in what she calls, following Eve Sedgwick, an “aesthetic minoritizing discourse” or “a minoritizing discourse.” Morgan writes, “is one in which the solidarity—and the essential alikeness—of a group that perceives itself to be in a minority position is presupposed and invoked at the same time as it is
being constructed in the discourse itself” (141). For Swinburne this solidarity is built on an ideal of masculine androgyny which “incorporates qualities culturally associated with femininity while subordinating them to a fundamentally masculine figure” (143). For readers interested in expanding the “possibilities for gender identifications and sexual practices for men,” as Morgan writes (143), Swinburne associates the image of the androgyne with the poetry of the French avant-garde (and Baudelaire in particular), thus presenting forms of sexual identity in aesthetic terms. Heterosexuality is displaced by this aestheticizing maneuver and male-male desire made central within an inclusive hierarchy of gendered traits. In his writing of the same period, Pater, by contrast, tactfully encourages his readers to imagine a “diaphanous” form of male beauty which, while reminiscent of Victorian femininity in its modesty and “moral expressiveness,” ostensibly transcends sexuality. Like the ideal of Victorian femininity seen in Dinah Morris, this ideal uses sexlessness to allow a reconfiguration of gender; but that reconfiguration finally is one which exalts “diaphanous” beauty above the beauty of women and places a specifically homoerotic sexuality above a heterosexual one. In this fashion, Morgan’s essay usefully demonstrates the rhetorical means by which the tensions that form around sexual discourses—here the tension between the aesthetic and the moral—can be exploited by minority groups to expand and render more flexible the normative standards of behavior.

The broad reach of the power of these regulatory mechanisms is graphically revealed in Herbert Tucker’s study of the gendering of the soul by a series of nineteenth-century poets. As both the inspiring source of these representations and their object, the soul turns out to share the desires of mainstream heterosexual Victorian culture. In poems by Mary Tighe, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Emily Brontë, and Patmore, “the soul’s gender finds ultimate expression in imagery of heterosexual union, which (perhaps because it is heterosexual, certainly because it is imagery) represents the soul’s reintegration with itself on terms of hierarchically structured difference rather than conceptual identity. . . . If imagining the soul meant putting it into a body, then by the same token embodying it meant putting it into a system of cultural power” (164). The means by which this imagining was achieved differed; Tucker distinguishes between a fundamentally dualist allegorical position (characteristic of Brontë, for instance), in which the soul inevitably remains at a distance from the body and from perceptual representation, and a symbolic position (as in Patmore) which sees the soul as an “indwelling principle” (168), immanent and inevitably embodied. In either case, however, the soul was understood as feminized, either a besieged, vulnerable spirit trapped within the alien material of the body or harmoniously engaged in middle-class domesticity. And with this feminizing of the soul comes a sexualizing of the process of its poetic representation.

This sexualization of representation, visible both in the embodiment of the soul and in the ways that, through practices either abrasive or tactful, Swinburne and Pater negotiated among the various readerships in order to reconfigure sexual desire, is the methodological focus of the final two contributions to the volume. These essays, by Martha Vicinus and Camilla Townsend, attend to the responses to and
consequences of masculine impersonation as it was performed on the stage and in the streets of Victorian England. Vesta Tilley, the most famous male impersonator, epitomized turn-of-the-century respectability, carefully pruning away questionable material from the poignant roles of male vulnerability she performed in the music hall. The beautiful youths she portrayed—distantly recalling the diaphanous beauty Pater imagined—would have attracted the subculture of male homosexuals, but, as Vicinus notes, her strongest admirers were women who insisted upon seeing her in character; her sexual undecidability was the main source of her attractiveness for them (195). Sarah Bernhardt articulates an alternative erotic image, affected, overstated and more readily available to varied interpretations; while male homosexuals also saw in her a cult figure, her lesbian fans, including Natalie Barney, imitated her in dress and manner. There was a “dense web of cross-references between . . . lesbians and male homosexual” aficionados (201). Finally, in Sarah Grand’s Heavenly Twins, the erotic, if unfocused, love between the cross-dressed female Tenor and “The Boy,” as the Tenor’s companion is dubbed, expresses a desire either man-boy or lesbian. The convoluted erotics of their scenes together, like the cross-dressed performances of Tilley and Bernhardt, produced a range of responses from readers. For each of them, as Vicinus demonstrates, the possible consequences of the sexual roles they adopt are diverse but not indefinite, and each distinct role carried with it its own valences, produced its own varied responses.

The subversion implicit in the varieties of cross-dressed women depicted on stage and in novels became explicit when they exited onto the street; the rhetoric with which turn-of-the-century reporters described “mannish” suffragists, associating them with lesbians, demonstrates these writers’ fear that suffragists were usurping male power. An equally complex reception of a non-theatrical cross-dressed role is recovered in Camilla Townsend’s chapter on Sarah Geals, a working-class Londoner of the 1860s. Living as the husband of a woman known only as Caroline, Geals’s cross-dressing was detected by her employer, a shoemaker who, on making the discovery, forced her to dress as a woman—and then himself married Caroline. When, some months subsequently, Geals fired a gun at her former employer, the entire drama entered the criminal records. One fascination of the narrative Townsend reconstructs lies in the lack of interest exhibited by reporters in the violence which was the immediate cause of Sarah’s fame; maintaining a respectable working class and Christian mode of living until her attack on Giles, Sarah was of interest primarily as a woman living as a man. The attitude adopted by members of the press towards her cross-dressing varied sharply, depending on the readership of the newspaper: large respectable middle-class papers like the Times condescended and condemned her, while local working-class papers like the Shoreditch Observer and Shoreditch Advertiser explicitly sanctioned her actions.

Both the sympathetic attention paid by local papers and the censorious remarks in the national press provide little information about the sexual relation between the two women. Townsend divides her analysis of Sarah’s case between an empirical narrative of Sarah’s life and a systematic cultural analysis of the gender rela-
tions involved in mid-century cross-dressing. But neither of these analytical models allows for the recuperation of the specifically sexual relation between the two women. Other social historians have similarly remarked on the "huge evidentiary gaps and absences" that beset the historical study of sexuality (Seidman 55); "the bedroom," as F. M. L. Thompson remarks, "is a largely unrecorded area" (57). The practical reasons for this elusiveness—the limitations of the historical record—are compounded by the methodological debates which we have charted through this introduction. As Carol Vance writes in reference specifically to gay and lesbian history,

to the extent that social construction theory grants that sexual identities and even desire are mediated by cultural and historical identities, the object of study—sexuality—becomes evanescent and threatens to disappear. If sexuality is constructed differently at each time and place, can we use the term in a comparatively meaningful way? More to the point in lesbian and gay history, have constructionists undermined their own categories? Is there an "it" to study? (quoted in Chauncey, 6)

As the topics included in this collection suggest, the highly visible elusiveness of sex as a discursive production and historical topic has stimulated responses from scholars working in a wide range of disciplines. Because sexuality is a topic which, in the current intellectual discourse, escapes easy classification, a range of discourses are being deployed to trace out its nuances; and those discourses then must negotiate their own differences, speaking to each other across disciplinary boundaries, comparing methods and conceptual assumptions. Sexuality encourages multidisciplinary ventures, and this collection of essays, like the special issue of Victorian Studies from which it emerged, was inspired not only by a desire to bring together some of the best work being done on this particular subject but also because we recognized that the subject, more than many others, offered an opportunity to consider current work in a range of related topics and through a variety of methodologies. Of course the topics represented in the essays that follow do not exhaust those being considered by critics of Victorian sexuality; the practical and conceptual difficulties which we have detailed make even claims of representativeness impossible. While the methods of some fields, English and Cultural Studies most notably, dominate work being done, there remain several topics which have only begun to get the attention they merit: studies of sexuality as represented by colonial or "hybrid" subjects; studies of lesbian history; gay history in the mid-Victorian period; working-class sexuality. We hope that this collection will encourage further study in those fields.

NOTES

1. In On Liberty, Culture and Anarchy, and Picture of Dorian Gray, respectively.

2. In addition to Corr's essay, see, for instance, that by Davidoff and the collections by Vicinus, and Hartman and Banner.

3. For a variety of histories specifically responsive to Foucault's account of the construction of the homosexual, see Weeks, Dollimore, and Cohen; for studies of Victorian sexu-
alities more generally indebted to Foucault’s reconfiguration of sexuality as discourse, see Walkowitz, Nead, and Mort.

4. See Padgug for an initial and influential statement of the constructionist position; Halperin and Stanton provide more recent arguments and valuable sets of references. Steven Heath’s famous suggestion that essentialism must sometimes be “risked” provides perhaps the earliest suggestion that the theoretical purity of constructionism obstructed immediate political ends. Similarly, in reviewing the work of the Subaltern Studies group, Gayatri Spivak wrote of the value of “a strategic use of positive essentialism in a scrupulously visible interest” and associated such a strategy with Foucault, among others (205). Finally, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick presents her categories of “minorizing” and “universalizing” discourses as an attempt to reformulate the terms of the constructivist/essentialist impasse.

5. Wayne Dynes similarly notes that “the odd thing is that this is a battle in which only one army is engaged” and this leads him to suggest that the “essentialist” may be a construction of the social constructionists (Stein 217).

6. See Plaza and Woodhull.

7. The contributions to Feminism and Foucault, for instance, are remarkable in their generally admiring attitude toward Foucault’s work. For an early and more critical view, see Balbus.

8. For various views on the scarcity of documentation, see Chauncey, Freedman, Stearns and Seidman.

9. The arguments within lesbian history around Lillian Faderman’s Surpassing the Love of Men underscore this point: the varying political stakes in defining lesbianism as an affective and romantic relationship or as a specific collection of sexual and physical acts are clarified (though not resolved) by considering the issue historically. See Vicinus’s useful essay, “‘They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong’,” and Jeffries.

WORKS CITED


