



Pleasure Bound: Victorian Sex Rebels and the New Eroticism

Deborah Lutz

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A smart, provocative account of the erotic current running just beneath the surface of a stuffy and stifling Victorian London.

At the height of the Victorian era, a daring group of artists and thinkers defied the reigning obsession with propriety, testing the boundaries of sexual decorum in their lives and in their work. Dante Gabriel Rossetti exhumed his dead wife to pry his only copy of a manuscript of his poems from her coffin. Legendary explorer Richard Burton wrote how-to manuals on sex positions and livened up the drawing room with stories of eroticism in the Middle East. Algernon Charles Swinburne visited flagellation brothels and wrote pornography amid his poetry. By embracing and exploring the taboo, these iconoclasts produced some of the most captivating art, literature, and ideas of their day.

As thought-provoking as it is electric, *Pleasure Bound* unearths the desires of the men and women who challenged buttoned-up Victorian mores to promote erotic freedom. These bohemians formed two loosely overlapping societies—the Cannibal Club and the Aesthetes—to explore their fascinations with sexual taboo, from homosexuality to the eroticization of death. Known as much for their flamboyant personal lives as for their controversial masterpieces, they created a scandal-provoking counterculture that paved the way for such later figures as Gustav Klimt, Virginia Woolf, and Jean Genet.

In this stunning exposé of the Victorian London we thought we knew, Deborah Lutz takes us beyond the eyebrow-raising practices of these sex rebels, revealing how they uncovered troubles that ran beneath the surface of the larger social fabric: the struggle for women's emancipation, the dissolution of formal religions, and the pressing need for new forms of sexual expression. 8 pages four-color and 5 black-and-white illustrations

Pleasure Bound: Victorian Sex Rebels and the New Eroticism Details

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From Reader Review **Pleasure Bound: Victorian Sex Rebels and the New Eroticism** for online ebook

Casey says

Since I am going to be the first person to review this book, I'll try to make it good for those of you who are considering picking it up. I ordered it on amazon on a splurge because I knew if I didn't buy it I would never get to read it (my library is prudish in their selection). When it arrived, I must admit I was a little disappointed. It is a small, rather short book (283 pages of text), and being as interested as I am in the subject matter, I was in the mindset of "the longer the better." This being said, however, as I started reading it I came to see that the scope of information is vast. After having finished it, I realize that Lutz's writing is concise, making it shorter but still a wonderful, fascinating read. Her style is not stark, it is extremely colorful. It evokes the times, places, and subject matters in a way that is engaging to read. I don't regret purchasing it at all.

The book's subtitle, "Victorian Sex Rebels and the New Eroticism," is accurate, because that is precisely what it is about. (This may seem like a given, but in my experience it, unfortunately, is not). It focuses on the lives and works of some of the 19th century's legendary creative minds. Especial attention is given to poet/painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, poet Algernon Swinburne, and the early adventurer/anthropologist/author Richard Burton. Their interrelationships, fueled by communal creativity, are examined. Many other figures, some still known and others whose lives and works have become obscure over time, are discussed as well (Christina Rossetti, William Morris, Oscar Wilde, and others). Themes such as erotic melancholy (sex and its association with death in their works), erotic faith (philosophies on religion, or lack thereof, and sexuality), the appeal of androgyny and gender bending, the process of making the study of sex a science, the creation and dissemination of pornography made difficult and dangerous by obscenity laws as well as many other subcategories are examined.

The progressive views of sexuality that were held by the men and women Lutz examines are shown in the context of their lives, works, and relationships with one another. Two progressive groups with a sexual bent, the Cannibal Club and the Aesthetes, make for interesting reading. The members of these clubs would get together and exchange philosophies regarding the sexual boundaries that made up Victorian society and how they wanted to change them and break away from them. Often being charged with obscenity for their works and unconventional sex lives, these people were trail blazers who lived in the margins of society rather than being caged within it.

DeAnna Knippling says

Great! Granted, I'm a fan of the 19th-Century and Richard Francis Burton in particular, but this was a lovely read. If you are looking for erotica, this is NOT it. This covers the mid- to late-Victorian era, and the artists, writers, etc., who ended up affecting a lot of what we think about sexuality today. Recommended.

Shona says

Really enjoyed this look into Victorian life.

Deni says

Not quite finished yet. Just wanted to say that my favorite person in this book (so far) has to be William Morris:

"Making things among and with friends--with its sensuality, sympathy, and openhandedness--fueled Morris's growing socialism. Through handwork, he began to see that the vast majority of the people of England toiled at ugly and repetitive jobs that didn't utilize their best selves: their higher mind or their creative impulses. They made objects for others to use, and the objects themselves were often unshapely and truly unneeded, merely symbols of status. What if the simple work of making household wares could call on the creative mind, on carefully developed craft skills? And then what if the people who made these beautiful items of everyday use got to keep and appreciate them themselves? He imagined a world enlightened by 'art made by the people and for the people, a joy to the maker and the user.' Tight bourgeois houses could open up into free communities of non-possessiveness. Morris's bringing together of design and radical social ideas marked the beginning of the Arts and Crafts movement with its antimachine and pro-workingman aesthetic." p. 168-169.

Overall, it's enjoyable and fascinating read. I'm loving the discussion/explanation of artistic collaboration and evolution of ideas. Second favorite person (so far) is Richard Burton.

UPDATE: Finally finished it. My only real complaint is that it's frustrating to read about a painting in great detail but have to scurry to Google image search to see it. She did include a few in a color insert but it would have been nice to have them all handy.

David Schwan says

I bought this because of its coverage of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB). This book goes into some of the history of the PRB and also talks about Sir Richard Burton and others who expanded the frontiers of sexuality in Victorian London. Many of the paintings of the PRB carried sexual undertones and this book explains the sexual themes depicted and describes the lives of those who made the paintings.

The sections dealing with Sir Richard Burton presented both he and his wife in a different light. From reading a previous biography of Burton I was left with the impression that Mrs. Burton was a typically Victorian prudish lady, a view that apparently is not true. Mrs. Burton was an active editor of many of his books, later upon her husband's death she burned manuscripts dealing explicitly with homosexuality which she viewed as too controversial to be published.

The author provides some insights about classic British boarding schools and the sexuality of the times.

Overall an interesting book, a bit slow to read in places but still worth the read.

Elizabeth Lister says

A truly fascinating read for someone who writes erotica in the twenty-first century :) It makes me want to read biographies of all the people she writes about: Swinburne, Danté Gabriel Rossetti and Sir Richard Francis Burton. Really interesting and enlightening stuff.

Tori says

Interesting topic, terrible writing. This book read as if it were Lutz's barely-passing graduate thesis. It was riddled with difficult to read and strange grammar non-conventions. (My personal favorite, referring to all characters by all of their names: eg. to Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Rossetti, Gabriel, and Dante, often on the same page). The book is also missing a point. I'm still not really sure what she was trying to prove; it was more of an account of how several artists lived. She definitely could have used an outline. I only kept reading because I wanted to see how the people she discussed contributed to later society, but that was totally missing.

Karen Ireland-Phillips says

One recalls Victorians as people who covered the legs of pianos to avoid sexual allusions.. But Deborah Lutz “. . . took a somewhat divergent stance, one attuned to this culture as not so much ‘more repressed’ than ours, but as profoundly different from it.”[return]I don’t believe she succeeded here. Yes, the Victorians were profoundly different to some extent. But the mores of the era reverberate today, in art, literature, religion and public attitude. [return]This isn’t a 101 book. The author jumps into a description of the life of Gabrielle Rossetti, casting it in a fictional tone. The first part of the book devolved (for me, ymmv) into an alphabet soup of Important Victorian Characters, most of whom I was only glancingly familiar with and some I’d never heard of. It took a while to sort them all out. [return]The author’s contention that the collaboration of these people – Rossetti, William Morris, and explorer Richard Burton, among others – created an atmosphere that eventually became the underpinnings of the gay rights movement is marginally persuasive. Sexual behavior that we think of as “liberated” were, as Lutz tells us, all there in Victorian London. They were just an open secret. And sometimes prosecutable at law, depending upon your politics and patrons. [return]Overall, the writing was not as smooth as I would hope, and Ms. Lutz handles the conflict between thematic narrative and temporal narrative by ignoring it, to the detriment of her work. But there is much to take away from this exploration of Victorian sexuality and the arts.

Leslie Lindsay says

The manuscript I am working on now has a character who is very much into classical studies, and then he moves into a Victorian-era apartment building which may or may not have been used previously as a brothel. Let's just say I read PLEASURE BOUND as a way to "get in character" and do a little reasearch to round out some of the characterizations and "work" of this classic studies scholar.

But you probably don't care about all of that.

PLEASURE BOUND is a conglomeration of several different Victorian artists, poets, writers, and well men of the time including Oscar Wilde, Richard Burton, Dante Gabrielle Rossetti, etc. and almost follows the life of Rossetti through his art, as if we are a fly on his lapel. I found Lutz's writing great at times, engaging almost as if reading a novel, and then sort of "purple-prose-y" to downright bad at times (referring to Dante by his first name and then later just by Rossetti at other times on the same page). Maybe this won't bother you, but I found it a tiny bit confusing...wondering if we were talking about Victorian-era Dante, or the more ancient poet Dante (Rossetti was named after the poet Dante because his father was particularly fond of his work).

Still, there were some great passages and some equally good descriptions, education, too. Bear in mind that this is not an exhaustive history (what is?) but a great survey of how Victorian art was presented along with the Victorian fascination with death and sex. But, shhh...we won't tell Queen Mum.

Alex says

Well-written, fun story about this one little clique of English libertines - Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Charles Swinburne, Richard Burton and a cast of supporting characters - who remind me that there have always been radicals.

From this Salon interview, some stuff I didn't know:

"Something like 50 percent of the pornography of the time was flagellation pornography. There are lots of different theories about that. One is that these gentlemen who went to private schools like Eton were whipped for punishment as kids. If they did something wrong they would be publicly birched -- a collection of birch branches tied together would be used. The boy's pants would be taken down and he'd be bent over this special block and it would be public. Any schoolboys who wanted to could come and watch. For many of these boys, of course, it was traumatic, but for other boys it's an erotic experience. It developed into this masochistic eroticism.

"Another aspect is that middle-class and upper-class men were expected to be very controlled -- to control their emotions, their servants and their women -- and women were expected to be submissive. So I think a lot of men found themselves wanting to lose control, wanting to be the one who was controlled."

Interesting, right? Not that there's a shortage of bondage porn nowadays (or that's what I've heard from, y'know, other people), but it's not 50%. Weird-ass old Brits.

Jillian says

It lost a bit of its steam at the end, but it was still a really great read. Very informative.

Alexis Hall says

Unlike the *Dangerous Lover*, this seems to be a more self-consciously accessible piece of writing (no Heidegger to be seen) which means it's kind of got the neither fish nor fowl thing of being neither usefully academic or quite as salacious as one would like for a book called 'Victorian Sex Rebels.'

In practice, Victorian Sex Rebels are always the same group of arty perverts: Swinburne, Burton, Rossetti, Wilde etc. And there's such a body of writing about them already, it all feels a little stale and familiar. Though one never gets tired of reading about an inebriated Swinburne (who was tiny and ginger, btw) sliding naked down banisters.

Also it's kind of a sausage party.

Were the Victorian sex rebels really all men? Not a single lesbian in Victorian England? Come on.

Also I'm not sure there isn't an inherent contradiction in the central thesis which is that Lutz insists that Victorian England HAD ALL THE REPRESSION ALL THE TIME while simultaneously contriving to write an entire book about Victorian shagging.

Kathy says

A rather fascinating book, especially for those interested in the Pre-Raphaelites: reading about artists like Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, and Holman Hunt and their experiments in living and art reminded me that these upright Victorians were actually the first real hippies, advocates of free love, communal living, art for art's sake, and a sense that all objects can be both useful and beautiful. I also have a life-long crush on Sir Richard Francis Burton, who figures prominently in this book. He was a truly amazing personality, a scholar whose defiance of social conventions and intense curiosity about foreign cultures (including their sexual practices) remains unmatched, even in our own century. These industrious Victorian gentlemen who wrote constantly and produced huge bodies of work never cease to amaze me -- when did they sleep? How did someone like Burton even have time to also learn Arabic, be the first white man to enter into the holy city of Mecca, embark on a dangerous trip seeking to discover the source of the Nile River AND translate thousands of pages of "Tales of the Arabian Nights"? There just aren't people like this walking the earth any longer!

This book IS also about sex, of course, and the Victorian fascination with pornography, but it's also about people who were pioneers in the way they viewed the world and lived their lives. I am definitely going to look up this author's other works.

Julai says

This book didn't exactly smash open any new avenues of thought--while an interesting premise, it seems as though the author either stretched a very interesting essay or condensed a very boring thesis, creating this work focused on the Aesthetic and Cannibal groups of the Victorian era. Spoiler: Dudes who get bored with

the current socially accepted mores tend to flirt with homosexuality. See: late 90s outbreaks of "bisexuality." The chapter on Christina Rossetti was enlightening, as was the information on Richard Burton, but I didn't learn anything new about Oscar Wilde. For some real sexual movers and shakers, read something about Natalie Barney's lesbian literary group in Paris, which included Dolly Wilde, Oscar's niece. She used to enjoy dressing up as him for parties. That's drag before drag existed, baby.

Helen Murray says

Picked up for pleasure, but actually turned out to be really useful for my research, especially Chapter One, 'Erotic Melancholia', which talks in a very interesting way about the enduring image of Elizabeth Siddal. While this book is bound up in Victorian eroticism and the pioneers of sexual pleasure in the nineteenth century, I also found it valuable for its exploration of the interconnecting circles of letters, friendships and collaborations between the aesthetes and decadents of the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Elucidates the place of the Pre-Raphaelites amongst the different movements and developments in art, literature and criticism.
