



# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## Sexing the Victorians

*Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*. Seth Koven. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. 399pp.

*Dickens and Sex. Critical Survey 17.2*. Edited by Holly Furneaux and Anne Schwan. New York: Berghahn Books, 2005. 125pp.

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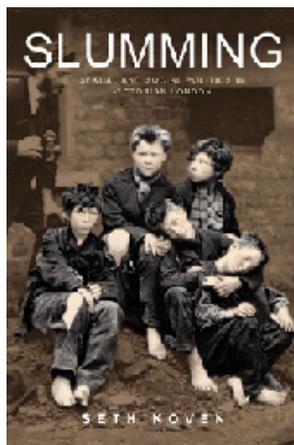
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Issue 3.1



<1> As an adjective describing the best and freshest academic work, “pioneering” is perhaps used over-frequently. Yet it seems an entirely apt term to use in relation to Steven Marcus’s 1964 study, *The Other Victorians*. In the Introduction to his book, Marcus makes clear the striking newness of his venture, at one point conceiving himself as an adventuresome social anthropologist as much as literary critic or historian: “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.”<sup>(1)</sup> Marcus ends his Introduction by generously “look[ing] forward to the publication in the future of other studies, by other hands, which will amend, correct, enlarge, and go beyond such findings as I have been able to make” (xvii).

<2> His wish has been heeded: since the publication of his work, scholarly interest in the sexual life of the Victorians has burgeoned. Critics and writers from a variety of disciplines have deployed a wide range of theoretical perspectives in coming to terms with the subject. Important, post-Marcus studies have included, to name a mere handful from the early 1990s, Judith Walkowitz’s *City of Dreadful Delight*, James R. Kincaid’s *Child Loving*, and Michael Mason’s *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*. According to Walter Kendrick, even as short a time as “thirty years ago,” “the prevailing stereotype was that the Victorians owed their formidable energy to intense sublimation, that as for body contact, they all would have preferred to lie back and think of England.”<sup>(2)</sup> It is thanks to the work done in studies like those named above that such easy scholarly preconceptions have largely disappeared.

<3> Seth Koven’s book *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* and Holly Furneaux and Anne Schwan’s edited collection *Dickens and Sex* further develop the observations and insights about Victorian sexuality produced by this rich, dense body of scholarship in engaging and original ways. Both also look back to the theoretical work of Michel Foucault, an equally important influence on critical work in this area, and perhaps the seminal thinker on issues of sex, desire, and the body. In *Slumming*, Koven outlines explicitly how his approach differs from Foucault’s; his focus, he claims, is generally upon the micro level of individual lives, rather than the macro level of power structures:

The close attention I pay to individual men, women, and children—their actions, thoughts, feelings, and representations—differs markedly from the approach pioneered by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, which is a history largely without historical actors or human agents. (294n)

This specificity and attention to detail is one of the great strengths of Koven’s book. It should be pointed out, though, that he does not dismiss Foucault entirely, admitting instead that “my approach also draws upon Foucault’s work on ‘discourse,’ ‘technologies of power and knowledge,’ and their relationship to sexual and social institutions, ideologies, and identities” (294n). In the Introduction to *Dickens and Sex*, Furneaux and Schwan suggest that the essays in their collection take a similarly qualified response to a Foucauldian “disciplinary thesis” (2). As they observe:

Recently, various critics have begun to perceive ‘disciplinary’ readings of Dickens’s novels...as increasingly constraining...While some of the articles in this collection acknowledge and continue the intellectual productivity of the disciplinary model ... others argue that a departure from this perspective is necessary to open up new critical avenues into Dickens and sex. Others again propose that a compromise between these two positions is necessary to acknowledge both the normalising and the transgressive aspects of Dickens’s work on gender and sexuality. (2)

As this passage makes clear, the volume avoids an overly narrow or polemical approach. The same is true of Koven’s study: both works under consideration here offer often rich and nuanced accounts of their subjects, acknowledging the unavoidable presence of Foucault’s work in the field, but also pushing his theories in new, productive directions.

<4> Koven’s book takes as its starting point an examination of the phenomenon of slumming in late nineteenth-century London, “widespread” enough that “slums became tourist sites” in the period (1). Following the “lead” of urban historian H.J. Dyos, and aware of the “fundamental instability of meanings” attached to the term, Koven defines the practice in what he calls “mobile” terms as an activity “undertaken by people of wealth, social standing, or education in urban spaces inhabited by the poor” (9). This flexibility allows him to pay attention to those “men and women who used any word except slumming—charity, sociological research, Christian rescue, social work, investigative journalism—to explain why *they* had entered the slums” (9). Having defined his central term fluidly in the book’s Introduction, Koven goes on to divide his material into two sections. In different ways, both of them illuminate his central thesis: that “sex, sexual desire, and sexuality” are impossible to keep out of the story of the “slummers” that the book tells (4). Part one deftly brings together three quite distinct case studies—on the furor created by James Greenwood’s “A Night in a Workhouse” in 1866 and beyond, on the Barnardo controversy of 1877, and on 1890s accounts of social investigation by little-remembered American journalist, Elizabeth Banks—by discussing the shared theme of the use of “deceptive practices...to reveal ‘truths’ about the poor that they claimed would otherwise have remained hidden” (19). The second part ranges more widely across a variety of “philanthropic and religious institutions and movements in late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century London” (20). Koven’s focus here is not so much on sex scandals, as much of the first part is, but rather upon what he calls the “elusive articulation of sexual desire, sexual subjectivity, and gender ideologies” (20–21).

<5> This barebones summary can only hint at the richness of Koven’s study. In its early pages he describes “immers[ing] [himself] deeply in the sources” (4), and this kind of commitment certainly shows through in his often painstaking and impressive scholarship. As his extensive notes and list of manuscript sources demonstrate, Koven has effectively mined copious sources of archival and manuscript material on both sides of the Atlantic. His efforts result in the rediscovery of almost entirely forgotten subjects. In Chapter 3, on the American investigative journalist Elizabeth Banks, for instance, Koven cites only one “published scholarly assessment of Banks” which is “marred by a variety of historical errors” (332n). His work on her, both in terms of the information it gathers together and the close readings it provides, is therefore an important assessment of a neglected figure. It also offers an interesting comparison to the slum visits made by predominantly male journalists like James Greenwood. His scholarly excavations throw new light too on the book’s better-remembered sources. In Chapter 4, for example, he fruitfully considers the work of Vernon Lee, the subject of increasing critical interest, alongside that of the popular, and less often-studied, novelist L.T. Meads. His discovery of a rare, privately circulated journal called “The Wadham House Journal” also provides striking new information for his assessment of the philanthropic East End venture Toynbee Hall, already the subject of a significant body of scholarship, in his fifth and final chapter.

<6> In his introduction Koven makes quite grand claims about the interdisciplinary nature of his project, promising to “move freely across traditional disciplines including history, literature, art history, and sociology in bringing together men’s and women’s, cultural and political, feminist and queer histories” (18). As it turns out, Koven pays more than just lip-service to this fashionable academic concept; throughout his study he proves himself equally adept at close literary analysis, historical contextualization, and convincing interpretations of visual evidence. The first chapter, on James Greenwood’s “A Night in a Workhouse,” a series of sensational articles published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, is a model performance of Koven’s flexible critical practice. As Koven himself admits, “‘A Night’ has not languished in obscurity...[It] has been studied by historians of journalism and the press, theatre historians, literary critics, and social

historians of the urban poor” (27). Yet Koven brings a fresh interpretation to Greenwood’s work: that within his journalistic exposé, “the male casual ward of Lambeth workhouse” is transformed into a “male brothel,” thus revealing its “homoerotic dimensions” (27–30). He builds this argument through several layers of analysis. He makes searching use first of historical research, even noting at one point the following detail which may have contributed to “A Night in a Workhouse’s” impact:

The day the first instalment of ‘A Night’ appeared, January 12, the streets were blanketed by snow drifting three and four feet high. Under these conditions, even the most hardhearted Londoner would probably have felt some compassion for the homeless poor. (33)

Koven also effectively employs close readings, both of the text itself and of related visual images. The connections he makes with several homoerotic workhouse illustrations from Gustave Doré’s and Blanchard Jerrold’s *London* are particularly persuasive, and form part of the last section of the chapter on the influence of “A Night” on subsequent representations of the male vagrant. As Koven puts it in concluding this chapter, and establishing his overall argument, “Placing ‘A Night’ at the beginning of a tradition of writing about the poorest of the London poor” allows him to make “visible the complex links between sexual and social politics in modern British history, literature, and culture” (86).

<7> This multi-layered approach exemplifies what is so impressive about Koven’s work. He makes it clear in several places that he is keen not to over-generalize about the past, and those who lived in it. As he claims in his conclusion:

Conceptualizing the past in terms of heroes and villains, saints and sinners...does not...make for good history. I have done my best to avoid this trap. In its place, I have tried to produce a portrait, no less dramatic, in shades of gray. Just as slum explorers sought to illuminate the dark corners of the metropolis, this book has cast a critical light upon them, their ideas, their methods, their institutions, programs, and policies. (284)

Koven’s commitment to exploring human complexity and difference is admirable. At the same time, moreover, Koven subtly manages to draw out the general implications of his careful research, and notice connections between his wide range of sources, in creating a narrative of “the intimate, turbulent, and often surprising relationship between benevolence and sex, rich and poor, in Victorian London” (3). Both aspects of his technique—the telling use of detail and the convincing generalizations—make this an important and enjoyable contribution to the fields of social and cultural history, urban history, and gender studies.

<8> One critic has claimed that “It is due, perhaps in part, to Dickens that so many people believe that the Victorians were totally ignorant of the by-ways of sexual behaviour.”<sup>(3)</sup> Despite the steady flow of revisionist academic studies of the sex lives of the Victorians produced since the late 1960s, this association of the work of Charles Dickens with a stereotypical Victorian prudery on sexual matters seems to have endured. Even Peter Ackroyd’s major biography *Dickens*, published in 1990, stresses the novelist’s non-sexuality: “His was a passionate nature kept severely under control, and there was a sense in which he was always too *hard* and too *driven* a man to be also a sensuous one.” Extending his reading of the man to the work, he goes on to argue that “In his novels sexuality remains unconscious but everywhere apparent; when directly expressed it tends to be thwarted or blocked off.”<sup>(4)</sup>

<9> The editors of *Dickens and Sex*, a special issue of the journal *Critical Survey* which has its origins in a conference held at the University of London in 2004, introduce the essays by noting this fundamental conservatism in Dickens criticism, both in relation to sex and more generally. They forthrightly claim that:

Dickens studies, especially in Britain, remain dominated by a conventional criticism too often reluctant to acknowledge the diversity of this alleged champion of ‘respectable’ fiction...a chimera persists of Dickens as foremost proponent of Victorian ideologies of marriage and domesticity. (1)

Aligning themselves instead with such critics as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Joss Lutz Marsh, and William A. Cohen, the contributors provocatively set out to consider what Ackroyd assumes is

“thwarted” or “blocked off”: “the still underrepresented topics of sex, erotics and desire in the work of Charles Dickens” (1). Given the collection’s basis in a broad topic for conference discussion, one might assume that the connections between the seven essays would be loose and fairly arbitrary. In fact, while each might be read as an isolated critical intervention on a particular aspect of the larger theme, they also cohere well together. One of the collection’s overall aims is to “draw upon and suggest new points of convergence between a wide range of theoretical perspectives” (1). This is far from an overstatement: all of the papers engage in what is aptly described as “a rich dialogue” (4) with one another.

<10> Several of the essays use queer studies as a lens through which to view Dickens, following the influential example of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. None, however, merely follows her lead: instead they take her readings and push them in new, and often exciting, directions. Sedgwick is an especially important influence on Holly Furneaux’s essay, which “is strongly committed to demonstrating the fallacy of [Sedgwick’s] influential paradigm that the homoerotic emerges most strongly in Dickens’s work through violence” (34). With particular reference to scenes of male-male nursing in *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Great Expectations*, Furneaux convincingly pursues her argument that “other, gentler ways of touching also had highly erotic connotations during the period of Dickens’s career” (34), claiming that Dickens’s “anxious, homophobic responses were balanced by a more positive interest in exploring, and even celebrating, such ‘deviant’ desires” (36). In his piece Vybarr Cregan Reid also reacts to Sedgwick, making an intriguing (if, for me, ultimately unconvincing) reinterpretation of the final death-embrace of Rogue Riderhood and Bradley Headstone as “one of restful permanence”: “Their death, like Quilp’s is a deserved punishment for criminality and immorality, but it is simultaneously a permanent embrace, like that enjoyed by the drowned siblings in *Mill on the Floss*” (29). Cregan Reid’s main focus, however, is on the queering of the trope of drowning in Dickens’s later novels and journalism more widely. Deftly tracing “the pervasive [Victorian] cultural concept of water as embodied agent of destruction” (24), he argues that, in texts like *David Copperfield* and *Our Mutual Friend*, “concepts and anxieties of gender, sexuality, degeneration and the oblivion of identity, all... connect with the trope of drowning” (21).

<11> Other essays in the collection belong in the broader category of gender studies. Jenny Hartley ingeniously connects the secret histories of working women that Dickens took down at Urania Cottage, the Home for Homeless Women in Shepherd’s Bush which he ran with Angela Burdett-Coutts, with the “women’s papers and letters, sometimes read but not responded to, sometimes not even read” that proliferate in *Little Dorrit* (64). Through sensitive close readings of the novel and some illuminating attention paid to Dickens’s working practices “as a self-checking writer at this time” (68), she shows that “[k]nowing women’s stories, secreting and mystifying them—‘becoming a party to their mystery’—constitutes one of the narrative conditions of *Little Dorrit*, and the source of its underground energy” (64). One particular woman’s story, that of Florence Dombey, is the focus of Kristina Aikens’s essay. Aikens energetically takes on still-prevalent notions of Florence as a stereotypically angelic Dickensian heroine. Casting Florence in this light, Aikens claims, “necessarily overlooks the subtle, often vexed traces of Florence’s sexual agency that appear in the text” (77). Aikens suggests, more specifically, that the novel “speak[s] of the heroine’s sexual energy in coded, barely perceptible forms while constantly asserting her innocence” (79); this, like many in the collection, is an intriguing premise, but one that is not, to my mind, convincingly demonstrated by evidence from the text.

<12> The ongoing critical interest in Victorian masculinities impinges on other articles. In response to prevailing critical definitions of masculine identity in the period that conceive it in terms of bourgeois respectability and self-discipline, the material here pays refreshing attention to “deviant” forms of masculinity. Tara MacDonald’s insightful consideration of that “haunting presence” (60) in *David Copperfield*, Uriah Heep, reads him as an intriguing marginal figure in terms of the representation of his race as well as his gender and class identities. As she cogently shows, therefore, “In demonstrating Uriah’s particular villainies...Dickens draws on the long history of anti-Semitic associations and stereotypes. Uriah’s appearance, his lust for money, and his dangerous sexuality all resemble the ‘anti-semite’s Jew’” (49). MacDonald’s reading is particularly original in the way that it traces the associations of Heep’s red hair with both Jewishness and an excess of sexual energy, making surprising and well-sought-out reference to Dickens’s private uneasiness with red-headed men like his one-time groom, William Topping. In the closing essay of the collection, Anne Schwan also makes reference to Dickens’s novels, especially *Dombey and Son*, as “a rich source of diverse models of masculinity” (94). She is

particularly interested in exploring the ways in which the character of Paul Dombey Jr., who is “relatively marginal to most [previous] readings that address the range of male gender identities in the novel” (95), functions as “one of the key emblems through which a critique of Dombey’s hegemonic model of masculinity is played out” (95). Schwan’s Foucauldian claim that Paul Dombey is “linguistically coded as a queer body” (100) is a daring one, if at times overstretched. Her piece is also helpful in the way it brings together several of the key strands that unite this series of essays; she closes by provocatively, claiming that as well as “acknowledg[ing] Dickens’s complexity in dealing with...modes of gender or sexual discipline,” we must also “recognise the limits of his vision” (103) and the implications of such limits for the “political dimension” of “our own contemporary critical practice” (103).

<13> William A. Cohen begins his essay for the collection by eloquently asking: “Is there sex in Dickens? To some readers, even to pose this question is to indulge in vulgar indiscretion. To others, it is so predictable a form of inquiry that it seems utterly banal” (5). Perhaps feeling chastened by recent, rather acerbic criticisms of his work by Valentine Cunningham,<sup>(5)</sup> Cohen opts for an answer that seems relatively conservative: “I would say that there is sex in Dickens, but that it might productively be understood within a range of other practices, experiences and ideas” (17). There are points in the *Dickens and Sex* essays where readings are over-extended. Vybarr Cregan Reid’s reading of Dickens’s description in *Our Mutual Friend* of the “ooze and scum” of the Thames as “a colloquial synonym for semen” (30), despite the fact that it did not become one until the twentieth century, comes to mind as does Kristina Aikens’s interpretation of a stormy scene in *Dombey and Son* as “an erotic, orgasmic, masochistic aural background for Florence’s obsession” (85). In the main, however, the articles gathered together by Furneaux and Schwan do follow Cohen’s lead, and “productively” attempt to understand sex as he proposes. The same can also be said of Seth Koven’s subtle attention to the detail of human lives in *Slumming*. In revising the simplistic notion that the Victorians “were prudish, squeamish, and hypocritical about sex,” both works considered here avoid the similarly strong temptation, noticed by Walter Kendrick, “of merely flipping [the stereotype] over into its opposite, the equally crude notion that the Victorians seethed with lust and wasted no time arranging its indulgence, so long as superficial propriety was maintained.”<sup>(6)</sup> In adopting instead a mature attitude to Victorian sex and sexuality they continue the tradition inaugurated by Steven Marcus, and offer new insights and interpretations which future scholars in the field will continue to benefit from in years to come.

#### Endnotes

(1) Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964), pp. xvi–xvii. (△)

(2) Walter Kendrick, “T’Otherest Victorians,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 22 (1995): 304. (△)

(3) Pamela Hansford Johnson, “The Sexual Life in Dickens’s Novels,” in Michael Slater, ed., *Dickens 1970: Centenary Essays* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1970), p. 173. (△)

(4) Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 96. (△)

(5) See Valentine Cunningham, *Reading After Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), esp. pp. 99–105. (△)

(6) Kendrick, “T’Otherest Victorians,” 304. (△)

