

Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2009; pp.292; RRP \$71.00 paperback; ISBN: 978-1-4128-0819-4

In an age where there is an abundance of pornography, the re-release of Marcus' 1964 publication offers some great insights into the history of pornography and sexuality. This is especially pertinent in a world where definitions of sexuality and censorship are constantly being reconceptualised. The book begins with a preface that explains why this study is still relevant in today's society, which then leads into the original publication.

A major strength of this work is that it begins in generalities and moves into the specifics. The first chapter offers the 'typical' views on sexuality that the Victorians are renowned for and what stands out is that sexuality and pornography were a source of concern in mid-nineteenth century English society. What this highlights are the various misconceptions about and how much the understanding of sexuality has changed, because society has probably always behaved the same behind closed doors.

Once the Victorian viewpoint has been clarified, Marcus moves into describing some of the myriad of texts that he had the fortune to study at the Institute for Sex Research. Marcus uses texts that appear to be good or thorough examples. This includes the focus of the second chapter, a bibliography that outlines the enormous quantity of pornographic texts from the time. This chapter also suggests that even the bibliographer had trouble reconciling pornography in his everyday life because the books 'should be looked upon as poisons ... should be (so to say) distinctly labelled, and only confided to those who understand their potency' (p.48).

The book then becomes even more specific. Marcus devotes two chapters to discussing *My Secret Life*, a history of the sexual escapades of an anonymous individual. Marcus spends a lot of time with this book because, in his opinion:

'*My Secret Life* is the most important document of its kind about Victorian England, we might use it to test the thesis which holds that the writings of a sexual nature are of a unique value or importance as social history. In other words, what in the way of social history do we learn from such a work? Does it contain matters of general importance that have been suppressed, overlooked, or forgotten by historians?' (p.97).

Arguably, this is the whole reason behind Marcus' book and this is one text that highlights universal beliefs (particularly about female sexuality) and gives the reader what they won't generally find in the everyday Victorian novel.

Once Marcus has done justice to *My Secret Life*, he then moves onto other novels and discusses them in reference to how they represent the typical Victorian pornographic text. As he says of one of them:

'Nevertheless the tone of this novel – like the tone of the majority of pornographic works of fiction – is light-hearted, humorous, harmless in intention, and slightly scatter-brained. It is only when one goes beneath the surface that one finds the mechanical grimness, the frenzied repetition, the impotent quest for omnipotence. This is true of pornography in general, but it seems to me no accident that the genre should have flourished most strongly in Victorian England.' (p.251).

From his examples, this statement really does highlight all the texts that are discussed in the book.

In the final chapter, Marcus discusses flagellation because these texts are of a more sophisticated sort than the standard pornographic fiction. He discusses the standard style that these books take. One topic that Marcus touches on is that pornographic texts are aimed at the upper classes, and so these are the major characters in the book. The only instances of any other social class appearing are when they relate to the upper classes. This is an important issue to keep in mind because it is apparent throughout all the literature that is discussed in this book.

The book then concludes with Marcus discussing 'pornotopia', or where pornography existed in Victorian society. He argues that pornography exists but does not exist in a

physical location. While Marcus has focused on Victorian society in this discussion, this argument could be placed in any time.

This was a very interesting look at the Victorian era. The only difficulties in the book were, firstly, the lack of translations of French and Latin, and secondly, that there was a strong focus on Freud and Dickens. Marcus has published books on both Freud and Dickens, but this made the book a little harder to read. It would have made the arguments stronger to have more contemporary authors than just Dickens, while the inclusion of Freud made the study a little too psychological, decreasing its socio-historical value. Overall, however, this book is perfect for anyone that wants to delve a little deeper into Victorian England.

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