

UNAUTHORIZED

Pleasures



ACCOUNTS OF VICTORIAN
EROTIC EXPERIENCE

ELLEN BAYUK ROSENMAN

Unauthorized Pleasures: Accounts of Victorian Erotic Experience, Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, Cornell University Press, 2003, 0801488567, 9780801488566, 231 pages. Recent books and exhibitions have shown that Victorians were not so straitlaced about sexual matters as has been popularly assumed. Ellen Bayuk Rosenman's engrossing and enlightening book proves that the Victorians were extraordinarily articulate and resourceful when it came to expressing their sexual desires. Narratives of erotic experience were written, justified to the conservative culture, and circulated for the pleasure of readers. Rosenman's exploration of masculinity and femininity in Victorian sexual storytelling includes an account of the "spermatorrhoea panic" that terrified the men of Britain, tells of Theresa Longworth's erotic revisions of the romance plot, and takes up the exhaustive, even exhausting, pornographic epic *My Secret Life*. Drawing on social history, court cases, medical literature, popular novels, and the diaries and letters of everyday life, Rosenman looks beyond the usual sexual suspects—homosexuals and prostitutes, for example—to address a range of pleasures that emerged from the ideological structures meant to contain them. She asserts that, however powerful ideology is, it does not script erotic repertoires in definitive or predictable ways, and that individuals can find ways of evading or easing its constraints..

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Touching Distance , Rebecca Abrams, Jul 1, 2009, Fiction, 310 pages. It is 1790. After ten years' training in the great medical schools of Europe, Alec Gordon has returned to Scotland to take up the post of physician in the Aberdeen Dispensary

Love in the Time of Victoria Sexuality, Class and Gender in Nineteenth-Century London, Françoise Barret-Ducrocq, 1991, History, 225 pages. There has been a great deal written on the secret longings and sexual hypocrisy of the Victorian era's upper crust, but almost nothing has chronicled the erotic desires and

Sexuality and Victorian literature , Don Richard Cox, 1984, Literary Criticism, 268 pages. .

Velvet , Carolyn Brown, Dec 1, 2003, Fiction, 186 pages. .

Masterpieces of Victorian Erotica , Major LaCaritlie, May 30, 2007, , 318 pages. There is no shortage of great works to compete for the title "masterpiece of Victorian erotica." Indeed, as readers familiar with Dickens or Trollope can attest, the Victorians

Elizabeth Gaskell Mary Barton-North and South, Alison Chapman, 1999, Literary Criticism, 192 pages. In this Readers' Guide, Alison Chapman introduces and discusses the patterns of critical attention that Gaskell's work has attracted across the past hundred and fifty years

The Collector's Edition of the Lost Erotic Novels , Major LaCaritlie, Sep 30, 2005, , 608 pages. The history of erotic literature is long and distinguished. It holds valuable insights and lessons for the general reader, the sociologist and the student of sexual behaviour

Imagining Sex Pornography and Bodies in Seventeenth-Century England, Sarah Toulalan, Sep 6, 2007, History, 323 pages. 'Imagining Sex' examines a variety of material from 17th century England to argue that, unlike today, pornography was not a discrete genre, nor was it usually subject to

The Collector's Edition of Victorian Lesbian Erotica , Major LaCaritlie, Apr 5, 2006, , 590 pages. The Victorian era offers an untapped wellspring of lesbian erotica. Indeed, Victorian erotica writers treated lesbians and bisexual women with voracious curiosity and tender

The Women of Victorian Erotica , Major LaCaritlie, Jan 1, 2008, , 254 pages. Victorian erotica is remarkable for offering some of the bawdiest, most creative and most arousing stories in the history of the English language. Even more remarkable is the

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matters as has been popularly assumed. Ellen Bayuk Rosenman's engrossing and enlightening book proves that the Victorians were extraordinarily articulate and resourceful when it came to expressing their sexual desires. Narratives of erotic experience were written, justified to the conservative culture, and circulated for the pleasure of readers. Rosenman's exploration of masculinity and femininity in Victorian sexual storytelling includes an account of the "spermatorrhea panic" that terrified the men of Britain, tells of Theresa Longworth's erotic revisions of the romance plot, and takes up the exhaustive, even exhausting, pornographic epic *My Secret Life*. Drawing on social history, court cases, medical literature, popular novels, and the diaries and letters of everyday life, Rosenman looks beyond the usual sexual suspects—homosexuals and prostitutes, for example—to address a range of pleasures that emerged from the ideological structures meant to contain them. She asserts that, however powerful ideology is, it does not script erotic repertoires in definitive or predictable ways, and that individuals can find ways of evading or easing its constraints.

"This most original book is impressive for its penetrating research, thoroughness, scope, objectivity, and personality" The last a rare feature in such a scholarly book. A feminist critic, Rosenman focuses on texts, fiction and nonfiction, that exemplify some aspect of the Victorian attitude toward sex, examining the interplay between gender roles, class, cultural norms, and literary conventions."—Choice, November 2003

"Unauthorized Pleasures is engaging, at times fascinating. . . . As a resource for the authors who would like to paint a richer, more nuanced picture of Victorian sexuality, I would recommend this book, which packs a world of fascinating detail in its two hundred pages."—Lisabet Sarai, Erotica Readers and Writers Association

"Oh, those wacky Victorians. No other culture has ever had so many neurotic anxieties with sex (except possibly their own). Ellen Bayuck Rosenman traces the most prominent of these issues. . . . through the written evidence, and proposes some fascinating theories to explain not only how and why these issues exist, but also what service the 'issue-ization' of them performs for the culture as a whole. What these issues reveal about cultural anxieties, how they marginalize (or maintain the divisions between) genders, races and classes, and how they challenge simplistic notions of Victorian prudery are all explicated brilliantly by Rosenman's analysis. . . . As a final note, I must commend Rosenman for her remarkable honesty. . . . as well as for her refreshing sense of humor—without sacrificing any academic or intellectual integrity. What Rosenman has done in this volume is what she claims is the work done by the texts she analyzes. . . . It seems that the more we understand about the Victorians, the more we understand about ourselves."—Julianne White, English Studies Forum

"Rosenman's book . . . conveys an unflinching enthusiasm for often ignored varieties of Victorian sexual expression. . . . The texts Rosenman discusses allow her to demonstrate her major themes: that men, like women, also felt threatened by sex and an objectifying gaze, that women found ways to express their sexuality, that men found ways to express homoerotic desires, and that pornography opened up possibilities—at least on the imaginative level—for female sexual agency and egalitarian sex between men and women."—Deborah Epstein Nord, *Victorian Studies*, Summer 2004

"In her lively revisionary account Ellen Rosenman demonstrates the richness and variety of Victorian sexual practice and discourse. . . . The most rewarding parts of this highly astute book are perhaps her dashing entertaining accounts of the Yelverton marriage case (chapter 4) and of *My Secret Life* (chapter 5). Rosenman is wonderfully sure-footed in tracing the complex ambiguities and contradictions thrown up by Theresa Longworth's deployment of literary and melodramatic tropes in her legal and sexual pursuit of the attractive, shallow and devious Charles Yelverton in a legal case spiced with issues of sexuality, class and female 'self-fashioning'. She is also equal to the endless erotic tableaux rehearsed by 'Walter' in *My Secret Life*, of which she offers a most enjoyable and pertinent account. In general, *Unauthorized Pleasures* builds energetically upon earlier work on Victorian sexual identities, and is expert at stressing the provisionality and fluidity of those identities, offering the reader indeed a variety of pleasurable subject positions."—Roger Ebbatson,

"I found this an extremely engrossing book, unflaggingly intelligent, lucid, and witty. Timely and distinctive in its analysis of Victorian sexuality, it draws on a broad array of prose representation, familiar and obscure, literary as well as more broadly social and legal. I think it will be greeted, both in and out of academia, as an exciting and important contribution to an area of tremendous current interest."—James Eli Adams, Cornell University

"In this engaging book, Ellen Rosenman takes us on a lively tour of the erotic byways of Victorian Britain. Adopting an idiosyncratic approach to her subject, Rosenman acquaints her readers with a rich and multifaceted continuum of desires. With specific and memorable detail, Rosenman gives us a new appreciation for the amatory exuberance and excess of the age."—Elizabeth Langland, University of California, Davis

Ellen Bayuk Rosenman is Associate Professor of English at the University of Kentucky. She is the author of *The Invisible Presence: Virginia Woolf and the Mother-Daughter Relationship* and *A Room of One's Own: Women Writers and the Politics of Creativity*. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In the introductory chapter to *Unauthorized Pleasures* Ellen Bayuk Rosenman remarks that she was drawn to the noncanonical and, in some cases, obscure texts she has chosen to write about because of their "exuberance and excess" (14). Rosenman's own book possesses these same qualities: it conveys an unflinching enthusiasm for often ignored varieties of Victorian sexual expression and occasionally carries to excess its claims for the unacknowledged liberatory potential of the sexually conservative ethos of the age. Rosenman enjoys her subject, confesses to being aroused by the female autoeroticism in G. W. M. Reynolds's *Mysteries of London* (1846), and dissents from the opinions of those readers who find *My Secret Life* (1888-94), the 2,300-page classic of Victorian pornography, a bore. Her goal, in keeping with the recent efforts of Richard Dellamora, Jonathan Dollimore, Michael Mason, Peter Gay, and others, is to explore the Victorians' resourcefulness in finding loopholes in the code of sexual respectability in order to experience, imagine, and write about heterodox forms of sexual pleasure.

The texts Rosenman discusses allow her to demonstrate her major themes: that men, like women, also felt threatened by sex and an objectifying gaze, that women found ways to express their sexuality, that men found ways to express homoerotic desires, and that pornography opened up possibilities—at least on the imaginative level—for female sexual agency and egalitarian sex between men and women. In the category of male anxiety, she gives us the "spermatorrhea panic" of the 1840s to the 1870s and the urban experience of the male spectator, who finds himself the nervous object of female boldness and seductive attentions on city streets. The sickly spermatorrheic male was understood to be suffering from an excessive discharge of sperm, mainly as the result of masturbation and illicit sexual intercourse. This fictive disease, taken seriously by real surgeons and quacks alike, exemplifies what Rosenman calls an "epidemic of ambivalence": men had abundant opportunities for sexual experience outside of marriage, but they also faced a punishing cultural response (not to mention their own superegos) if they took advantage of them. One important version of manliness demanded self-control and a disciplined level of continence; and if impotence was considered a disabling infirmity, so too did potency—and easy arousability—have its costs. Rosenman's observation that case studies of spermatorrhea patients favored happy endings and thus authorized successful sexuality, even as they also demonized sex, is persuasive. Less so is her speculation that when doctors handled men's penises they were affording men generally the opportunity to relive the homoerotic joys of boarding school.

In a chapter entitled "The Man on the Street: Gender, Vision, and the City," Rosenman writes counterintuitively about the threat to men's sexual self-confidence posed by urban seductresses. Analyzing Wilkie Collins's *Basil* (1852), Alexander Walker's *Beauty in Woman* (1836), and Arthur Munby's diaries, she focuses on male sensations of vulnerability, whether riding on an omnibus, facing the intimidating powers of the female body, or negotiating sexual shame, and on the strategies used to compensate for that vulnerability. As Rosenman puts it, these texts do not so

much "oppose or contradict the model of the sovereign [male] spectator as unearth the anxieties that produce him as a compensatory figure" (86). I found the focus on male anxiety here both apt and refreshing but, in the end, wondered if Rosenman weren't ignoring the power dynamics between men and women. Embarrassment, anxiety, and even humiliation are not comparable to fears of bodily harm or real physical danger; and men of a certain class, however nervous, still controlled the social institutions (the law and the family, to name but two) from which the realities of sexual life were inseparable.

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