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## Undoing Their Masks: An Exposé of Elite Male Power Dynamics in 'Fin de Siècle' Sexuality

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Fall | 16

## Undoing Their Masks

An exposé of elite male power dynamics in *fin de siècle*  
sexuality

Eliza Burr

## Preface

In today's world, sex is everywhere you look. Billboards with buxom women leer out at us from the freeway, TV shows have given up warning us about carnal content, and pornography is one click away. It wasn't always like this—there is a general conception of a time, not too long ago, when a bare leg was a scandal. Sometimes it is easy to scoff at our apparently prudish ancestors in their laced-up dresses and their stiff-backed chairs. However, most of us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century do not know just how similar to our Victorian ancestors we still are, and just how provocative they truly were. Our culture is still willing to shame the future First Lady for baring her body; their culture shamed a woman for having sex out of wedlock. Our culture is apprehensive about legalizing gay marriage; their culture was willing to throw their artists in jail for their sexualities. While the differences between these cases illustrate just how far our society has come, they also display the influence that Victorian prejudices still have today. Our Victorian ancestors have shaped us, both in our prudery and in our underground sexuality. Both the Victorians and the 21<sup>st</sup> century Western world treat sex with the utmost caution, attempting to discuss it honestly yet avoiding some of its most vital components. Jean Baudrillard says, “Transparency is too good to be true... There must be an underlying mystery,” and this statement is certainly accurate regarding the current discourse on sexuality in the Western world; we proclaim transparency yet shroud sexuality in secrecy (188). In order to eventually understand the nuances of contemporary sexuality we must first identify those who paved the way for our stilted discourse on sex.

If the Great Victorians can be identified by their stereotypical obsession with morals and imperialistic gain, the Late Victorians can be identified by the decay of all that is Great. Thus, if the interest in sexuality and pornography ramped up in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the interest in the

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decay of Great Victorian sexual mores is a hallmark of the Late Victorians. The increase in industry and transportation certainly made the movement of pornographic goods much easier, and the skepticism that marks the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century acted as a catalyst for scientific inquiry into sexuality. Specifically, the decay of faith surrounding the church and higher powers inspired the need for a new god: the god of love, the god of sex, the Dionysus, the New Hedonist.<sup>1</sup> The god of pleasure governed the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in England, and could be said to have remained in power in the Western world until the present. With the popularity of this new, confusing, volatile god came vast and various forms of literature on sexuality.

This paper will discuss scientific writings, pornographic fiction, autobiographical works, and theatre, and the choice of form is important in dissecting Late Victorian sexual discourse. The choice of form by the original authors is directly related to respectability politics, and to the taboo nature of sexual discourse. Those who were concerned about their social statuses yet interested in sex managed to don the lab coat and claim their interest to be purely scientific. Writers such as Havelock Ellis, William Acton, and the Cannibal Club men all maintained their good names by turning sex into a science. Behind closed doors they scoured pornography and questioned patients about intimate sexual details, all while producing highbrow literature on their findings. These men were the elites, the aristocracy, and the pornography industry catered to them. The voice of the ego is noticeably invisible in their writings, and even in their autobiographies, on the subject of sexuality. They maintained power and dictated the conversation regarding sexuality. It is to these men that we must look when attempting to parse apart Victorian sexuality.

The pornography in question is another form of sexual exploration, and we often think of porn as sexuality at its most unbridled. In reality, the pornography industry was shaped by men

who catered to the elites of society; thus, what we see of pornography is actually a tiny porthole into a vast, vast sea. This is true of our current pornography culture in the Western world, in which entire identities are sexualized for the benefit of a select few. In order to understand the roots of our pornographic culture, we must identify the mechanisms by which these elite males of the Late Victorian era were able to control the sexual conversation.

We can begin to parse out the mechanisms of control at work in the *fin de siècle* in England by looking to Oscar Wilde, an artist on the fringe both sexually and socially, yet one right at the heart of society. Wilde uses a theatrical form, which actively pushes ideas at viewers through corporeal mechanisms, in order to explore the dominating sexual ideals of his time period, the 1890s. In *Salome*, Wilde is able to create a sexual “other” in the title character. Salome struggles to express herself and identify herself according to her own reality, but her identity is continually silenced and appropriated by the men of the play. Her death represents the inability of alternative sexuality to thrive when existing in a masculine bourgeois society; Wilde is the perfect man to call out the very individuals off of whom he made his money. The lack of critical success in England further attests to the fact that Wilde’s play was perhaps a bit too close to home. It was a bit too sexual, a bit too violent, a bit too *truthful* about the oppression of sexuality occurring in *fin de siècle* England. By identifying the methods by which the English gentleman oppressed alternative sexual actors and by observing these methods at work in *Salome*, we can see just how faithfully Wilde represented the discourse on sexuality.

Yet Wilde himself lived and worked within the bounds of the elite Victorian male. Though he attempts to create a protagonist who embodies the sexual “other,” his representation of Salome is its own appropriation. Wilde transposes his own sexual imaginary, his own fetishes, and his own power and pleasure spirals onto the feminine experience of sexuality through his

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portrayal of Salome; thus, Wilde is complicit in the same game as the elite Victorian male. Wilde uses accepted frameworks to derail those very frameworks, creating an *omphalos* in the oppressed sexual body established by the elite Victorian male. Oscar Wilde is the ideal *flaneur*, and he plays his part beautifully, walking the fringe between accepted sexuality and exposure of its oppression. At least until his imprisonment and subsequent role as a pariah, Wilde chips away at the system from the inside.<sup>2</sup> He is both a maverick and a follower, and this internal struggle can be observed in his earlier poem entitled “Helás.” Wilde begins:

To drift with every passion till my soul  
Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play,  
Is it for this that I have given away  
Mine ancient wisdom, and austere control?

Wilde is the perfect figure to express the repressive qualities of Victorian sexuality and to destroy these qualities. He understands the mask of the elite Victorian male. In “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde sums up the elite male mask: “In point of fact what is interesting about people in good society...is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask. It is a humiliating confession, but we are all of us made out of the same stuff” (5). Wilde shows us the fears driving the creation of the elite Victorian male’s control of sexual discourse.

Thus, it is through his play *Salome* that we will explore the complex structures established by elite Victorian masculinity to control their own sexualities and the sexualities of others. I can only hope that by attempting to understand the masks as Wilde understood them, we as a society can begin to dismantle the power structures surrounding sexuality. I will explore elite masculine control of sexual discourse in the Late Victorian era through three theoretical lenses: the socio-sexual imaginary, concomitant commodity and sexual fetishes, and Foucault’s

power-pleasure principle. Wilde's *Salome* can be analyzed as an exposé of these dynamics as silencing all sexual identities that did not correspond to elite masculine sexuality. Through theoretical and textual analysis, I aim to display the "stuff" lying beneath the masks of Victorian sexuality. The sexual status quo established in the *fin de siècle* is still in place today, and by exposing that this status quo is not representative of sexual realities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, I hope that I might expose the presence of sexual masks in our own society.

### Theoretical Models

A few theoretical concepts are integral to understanding the expression of sexuality as reported by the Late Victorian bourgeois gentleman. In order to begin to study their writings with critical eyes, we must first gain an understanding of the “social imaginary,” the integration of sexual fetishism and the fetishism of commodity, and the power-pleasure dynamics of the Late Victorian elite male. These cultural processes can be seen in non-fiction accounts attempting to understand sexuality, such as those by renowned sexologist Havelock Ellis; they also exist in the autobiographical accounts of such scientists and philosophers, as in the correspondences between Ellis and his lover Olive Schreiner; and finally, these cultural dynamics exist in post-hoc analyses of sexual societies and pornographic movements and texts such as *The Cannibal Club* or *My Secret Life*. We will eventually see that they can be exposed through the theatrical genre when molded deftly by the hands of Oscar Wilde.

Although the lines between non-fiction and the fictional novel were proclaimed absolute during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there nonetheless existed a rationalizing of the real that brought it closer to fiction than Victorian creative culture might have liked to admit. As Lisa Sigel suggests, the Victorian gentleman interested in exploring sexuality was actually attempting to rationalize, and thus obfuscate, his own desires: “As they rationally tried to understand their world, these Victorians inevitably stumbled over their own cultural ambiguities. Instead of confronting their desires, they tried to keep them...under glass and in control” (63). Thus, by exploring the sexual imaginary, concomitant fetishisms, and the power-pleasure complex, we can begin to tease out the points of importance—including the elisions—in the works of Late Victorian authors and artists.



## The Social Imaginary

If we were to take the writings of the Late Victorians—autobiography, scientific exposition, the pornographic novel—at face value, we might imagine a society rife with unchecked prurience and sexual exploration. It is true that the pornography of the time presents sexuality as limitless; *My Secret Life*, with its eleven-volume series, presents page after page of sexual possibilities, and countless pathologies of sexual appetites such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* or Henry Spencer Ashbee's sexual encyclopedia *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. However, this unceasing literature on sexual possibilities is really a symptom of the actions of what Lisa Sigel terms the “social imaginary” (2). The social imaginary is the imaginable world built in the minds of those who inhabit the real world. It is idyllic and at the same time explores social taboos. It is a world of no rules, and when pornography is tied to the social imaginary it becomes the sexual imaginary. Steven Marcus began the discourse on this subject by discussing the relationship between reality and fantasy in pornography of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century:

pornographic fiction cannot as a whole be thought of as a record of experience but must be thought of as a record of fantasy. Since these fantasies do actually exist, it is possible to say that in a certain sense pornography is a ‘realistic’ representation of them—at least they are ‘realized’ in pornographic fiction. But the question of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ ends as a rule right there. (45-46)

Marcus suggests that by creating a discourse on sexuality that encompassed vast possibilities, the Late Victorian author was able to forge his fantasies out of earthly clay. “[Pornography] acts as a mirror,” says Sigel, “—or, more accurately, a series of broken mirrors—that reflects, refracts, and distorts a picture of sexuality. And like people looking into a mirror, those reflected in

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pornography might change their bearing in response to what they see” (2-3). The reflections of Victorian elite sexuality that have survived are nothing if not distorted mirrors; we are able to see what the libertines themselves might have wanted to discover.

This idea of a “sexual imaginary” is evident in the self-titled Cannibal Club of the 1860s-1880s. Officially, this was a group of fairly aristocratic men—containing at least two Lords—who created their own society in which they used science as an excuse to study their sexual imaginings. The writers of this group, such as Algernon Swinburne and Richard Burton, assumed voices of objective and impartial observers in their prolific writings on sexuality and ethnography. They stressed the strangeness of non-Western sexual practices such as the *Kama Sutra*, which they both admired and feared, in order to make their own sexual lives strange. They made the “other” into something exotic in the common imperialistic vein of the time, but the goal was not necessarily to conquer these “other” groups; these aristocratic men were more interested in creating a sexual safe place for themselves in which they could imagine all possibilities as realities. The focus on flagellation and Devil-worship within The Cannibal Club members’ writings is further evidence of their creation of an alternative sexual reality; as Sigel says, “Combining a dash of Satanism, a pinch of sadomasochism, a dollop of science, and a portion of imperialism, these pornographers created a new type of sexual adventurer—a world traveler who indulged his pleasures from above the fray” (55). This imagined character builds on the familiar trope of the *flaneur*, the aloof London streetwalker as a high-class male; instead of being content to walk the streets of London as they had been doing for over a century, these “Cannibals” began to roam the globe in search of the perfect sexual experience, always separate, always alone, always individual and indefinable.

The sexual imaginary did not exist simply on a small scale in private cultural circles—in fact, the 19<sup>th</sup> century was primed for ripe sexual imaginations as pathology and psychology became popular areas of study for the upper-class intelligentsia. Foucault terms this expansion of “purely scientific” interest in sexuality the “*scientia sexualis*.” This field of scientific inquiry regarding sexuality includes the works of members of The Cannibal Club, but it also includes those intended for a more mainstream audience, and more proletariat subjects. In sexual pathologies such as Gustave Bouchereau’s “nymphomania” or “satyriasis,” and in Havelock Ellis’s studies of homosexual practices, these men were creating archetypes, defining specific sexual characters—they were able to invent concrete sexual practices out of diffuse preferences. This invention of the pervert, the homosexual, or the nymphomaniac allowed the bourgeoisie to reinforce its control over the lower orders of society: “it becomes an integral part of the bourgeois order...If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression” (Foucault 5-6). Thus, the creation of the sexual imaginary is tied to the brandishing of power in the elites over the rest of English society. However, the bourgeoisie was not mainly concerned with the control of the lower classes as they created their false realities—they were, at base level, concerned with their subjective sexualities. According to Foucault, “The bourgeoisie began by considering that its own sex was something important, a fragile treasure, a secret that had to be discovered at all costs” (120-121). In attempting to express and discover their own sexual secrets, the elite gentlemen of the Late Victorian era came to invent a discourse on sexuality that had the effect of controlling the masses. Yet, like true individuals, they were simply concerned with exploring the inner realms of their desires, desires that might have been inspired by power, social status, and upbringing.

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This invention of the sexual imaginary through the mode of scientific inquiry is the most commonly observed sexual discourse (aside from more blatant pornography) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the few writers about whom we can speak both scientifically and biographically is Havelock Ellis, the well-known sexologist of the Late Victorian culture. Ellis's writings exist in the scientific method for which he was most known, but they also exist in autobiographical form, in epistolary form, and in second-hand reporting from the autobiography of Olive Schreiner, the woman about whom Ellis is both most candid and least telling.

In his autobiography *My Life*, Ellis spends much of his word count detailing his apparent lack of sexuality in his upbringing and subsequent scientific interest in sexuality. However, as Foucault has said of textual elisions, in the post-structural vein, "Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse...than an element that functions alongside the things said" (27). Ellis discusses his love with Schreiner without going into scientific detail on their sexual interactions, a method that is at odds with his treatment of others' sexual practices, even those of his friends ("Case XVIII," *Sexual Inversion*). Ellis speaks briefly of his sexual life with Schreiner:

She possessed a powerfully and physically passionate temperament which craved an answering impulse and might even under other circumstances...be capable of carrying her beyond the creed of right and wrong which she herself fiercely held and preached...I was not fitted to play the part in such a relationship which her elementary primitive nature craved. (230)

How can we interpret Ellis's interest in sexuality in his scientific writings, yet his clear inability to discuss his own sexuality? Part of this is reconcilable in regard to the time period.

Despite the clear interest in sexual imaginings, respectability politics still continued to rule over the intelligentsia such that, had Ellis's writings veered into personal sexual explication, he might have been written off as a simple pornographer, of a lower class than the consumers of pornography. Yet Ellis's need to remain vague about his own sexual experiences affords him the ability to reinvent the sexual reality of his encounters. His autobiography was written after the death of Schreiner and of his wife—this allows Ellis full control of his readers' understandings of their histories together. Yaffa Claire Draznin reports that Ellis chose to discard and highlight certain elements of his and Schreiner's thirty-five year correspondence: "Some of these omissions were fairly serious and had to do with doctoring the record in order that his image remain untarnished" (9).<sup>3</sup> It is also well known that Ellis published some of Schreiner's letters against her dying wishes. When taking into consideration the silences in between the facts of Ellis's and Schreiner's sexual interactions, and the absence of any information on Ellis's own sexuality, we begin to see that these absences might be more telling than the information within Ellis's manuscripts. Havelock Ellis is a perfect example of the elite, artistic, and masculine spirit of the Late Victorians—he creates a sexual imaginary reality that historians must take for fact as there is no alternative. Ellis's obvious outtakes allow us to glean a better understanding of the dynamic of social imagination that governed the sexual exploration of the Aesthetic and Decadent writers of the Late Victorian time period. But what were they hiding? This brings us to the intersection of fetishisms, the glorification of the sexual combined with the pleasure of the purchase.

### **Concomitant Fetishisms: Commodity Fetish and Sexual Fetish**

When we think of the Great Victorians, we recall the adulation for industrial innovation, perhaps exemplified by the success of The Great Exhibition of 1851; if anything, the British

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were able to prove their superiority as a modern nation. Hand-in-hand with Great Victorian industrial pride is the moral spirit that comes to mind—the Temperance Movement and the Factory Acts are just two examples of the spirit of reform that rushed through England in the early-to-mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, if this Great Victorian spirit represents promise, the Late Victorian industry and culture are marked by decline and decay. This decay of industry and of morality can specifically be observed in the ceaseless pornography market of the late 1800s. Pornography rings, such as those operating from the center of darkest London, were known for their deceit, greed, and consumption-gone-wrong. Porn circulators such as Edward Avery, H.S. Nichols, William Lazenby, Leonard Smithers, and Charles Carrington are chiefly remembered as crooked; Steven Marcus says that Carrington “was a thoroughgoing rogue, and there is no reason to believe anything he said or wrote, except under one condition. Like most publishers, he was chiefly interested in making money” (80). Pornographers knew that they could profit off of the rapidly proliferating dialogue about sexuality. Coventry Street, of London, became a hub for the consumption of pornography by upper class “collectors,” who used the area as a “sexual playground,” in the words of Colette Colligan (222). The rogues of this pornography industry capitalized on Victorian sexual culture, using it to convert sex into currency. They used the well-established industrial culture of Britain to their advantages by fetishizing the fetish; by making sexual desires into a trade of high value, they integrated the commodity fetish with the sexual fetish. It is through these concomitant fetishes that we can continue to tease out Late Victorian subconscious views regarding sexuality.

Early 19<sup>th</sup> century pornography such as *Fanny Hill* or *The Lustful Turk* often used an epistolary style to speak from the point of view of women. Women were the subjects of dirty literature, which was almost exclusively written by men, and they were thus given voices; it

seems that part of the sexual appeal of this epistolary pornography was the first person narrative of women. This narrative allowed pornography viewers, who were mostly upper class males at the time, to view female sexuality firsthand. Lisa Sigel says, of this trend, “Imagining the nature of female sexuality became one of the primary fantasies of pornography, even while it further obscured women’s own inner lives by making the script stand for truth” (32).

However, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century wore on, popular pornography exhibited the female role not as subject but rather as object of masculine desire. The female is fetishized and robbed of her humanity through her garments and disembodied parts; she is reported as enjoying both giving and receiving flagellation, though, as Steven Marcus makes clear, there is no evidence of this proclivity in primary sources by women (though perhaps because there are very few such sources). Marcus is clear about the lack of female participation in such pornographic masculine desires as flagellation: “a shift in levels of reality occurs, and the masculine sexual fantasy is projected onto women” (61). Examples of this are the various raunchy scenes of *My Secret Life*, in which the anonymous narrator acts out innumerable sexual fantasies. The women are vessels to hold the narrator’s unbridled sexual energy. While practically the whole book is devoted to the woman’s body from the waist down, one chapter particularly illustrates this fetishizing of female parts. When looking up a grate to see under women’s skirts, the narrator says:

For all that, so close to the thighs, do chemise and petticoats cling, that it was difficult to see the hairy slits, which it was our great desire to look at. Garters and thighs well above the knees, we saw by scores. Every now and then either by reason of scanty clothing, or short dresses, or by a woman's stooping and opening her legs to look more easily low down at the window, we had a glimpse of the cunt; and great was our randiness and delight when we did (Chp. 8)

The woman is sectioned off into desirable parts in Late Victorian pornography, first in literature and then later in photography, as in the “full moon” style in which pictures displayed keyhole images of sex organs with nothing else in the picture. The fetishizing of body parts was not necessarily new to sexuality in the Victorian era, but the culture surrounding this worship certainly was exacerbated by the rapidly increasing pornography market. Additionally, the fetishizing of the sexual subject was not simply imposed onto the female body—it also exists in the scientific manifestos of Ellis, as when he turns his friend John Addington Symonds into a nameless sexual body in his Case XVIII report, as well as Krafft-Ebing and Bouchereau (Ledger & Luckhurst). Fetishism of sexuality also exists in the “othering” of Eastern sexual practices. The translators of the *Kama Sutra* accepted much of its teachings except for those that were too “foreign” to their sensibilities. For example, the idea of “mouth congress,” or fellatio, blurred the lines of heterosexuality and was thus, to Henry Ashbee, “disgusting” (Sigel 67).

It appears that as the Great Victorians decayed into the Late Victorians, the pornography industry worked hand-in-hand with the aristocratic male to fetishize any threatening body. The pornography industry of the late 1800s was not made up of aristocrats as in the Cannibal Club; it was constituted by middle class gentlemen risking their lives to produce sexual literature for monetary gain. Sigel illustrates the vast chasm between the ideal pornography customers and the rest of society in the eyes of the salesmen: “Pornography was not created equal and it held no pretensions to egalitarianism. Instead, it stood as an artifact for a specific part of society—those with wealth, education, social advantages, and even some form of political power” (90). The illustration and exposition of certain sexual objects and “perversions” (such as flagellation) act as a potential power mechanism. Of the proliferation of sexualities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Foucault argues that



this concatenation, particularly since the nineteenth century, has been ensured and relayed by the countless economic interests which, with the help of medicine, psychiatry, prostitution, and pornography, have tapped into both this analytical multiplication of pleasure and this optimization of the power that controls it. (48)

Foucault discusses the power that is inherently tied to pleasure, and we will touch on this later on—however, Foucault also illustrates the economic power lent to the pornography industry by its fetishizing of certain bodies. It is in this intertwining of sexual fetish and capitalist commodity fetish that the masculine elitist control of sexuality lay.

Yet the pornography of the Cannibal Club's and Ashbee's upper class elite society feels far-removed from this idea of the fetishism of commodity. In fact, part of the enjoyment of their lasciviousness was its individualism and elitist quality; Ashbee was known to refer to pornographic literature as "poisons [that] should be (so to say) distinctly labeled, and only confided to those who understand their potency, and are capable of rightly using them" (Ashbee qtd. in Sigel 61). How do we move from the elitism of Ashbee to the fetishism of desire as a product?

The answer lies in the mysterious mass-producing pornographers of the late 1800s. Due to the targeting of pornography by morally minded Victorians, pornographers fell into a regimen of secrecy. They distributed their wares by post office drops or used false names, middlemen and fake companies to mass-produce and sell pornography. The risk of pornography transmission existing in contrast to its constant availability (though by indirect means) recalls Michel Leiris' discourse on the definition of the "sacred" from his essay entitled "The Sacred in Everyday Life." Leiris exemplifies this idea of what is "sacred" as the "displacement or gap that still characterizes...the passage from an ordinary condition to one more privileged...the shift from a

profane to a sacred state” (29). The late-19<sup>th</sup>-century idea of pornography as stemming from and serving the elite, yet being involved with the debased and dirty, combines the ordinary and the privileged, giving pornography a “sacred” status, at least by Leiris’ terms. Ashbee unwittingly comments on this desire of the sacred, saying “The desire to possess that which is forbidden...is as strong in the man as the child, in the wise as the foolish” (Ashbee qtd. by Marcus 47). This desire for that which is “sacred,” profane and beautiful, enabled pornography, which dealt with desire, to be incredibly desirable itself. Thus, concomitant desires of possessing sexuality abstractly by defining its alternative fetishes, and of possessing access to this sexuality through pornography, came to control the discourse on sexuality. Sexual fetish and capitalist commodity fetish came to illustrate the Late Victorian elite male sexual mindset.

Discourse around these dual fetishes exists very much in the vein of the Aesthetes of Oscar Wilde’s circle. Sigel highlights, “These texts emphasized the consumption of desire for its own sake, rather than in the quest for ‘liberty’ or the ‘scientific’ truth about sexuality” (93). “Desire for its own sake” rings eerily true to the Aesthete’s mantra of “art for art’s sake,” as seen in Wilde’s introduction to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “All art is quite useless” (Wilde & Murray 48). This focus on blind consumption and creation is at the center of sexuality for the Late Victorian elite and artistic males.<sup>4</sup>

Pornographic works of this time-period integrated ownership and the powerful eye of desire into their narratives. *La Rose d’Amour* focuses on a young man for whom it is his life’s goal to deflower fifty virgins and house them in his mansion. In this narrative the commodity of chastity and its subsequent loss take the central role, joining the fetish of “virgin-hunting” with that of ownership. Another pornographic text, *Teleny*, details a homosexual love triangle of desire, money, and morality, in which a rich character transforms a poor one to meet his sexual

desires. This work has been attributed to Wilde, and it holds more meaning when viewed in tandem with the Cleveland Street affairs, in which older wealthy men paid young messenger boys for sexual activity. Wilde was implicated in this sex ring, and its cross-class theme of monetary and sexual intermingling further demonstrates the role of capitalist thought in sexuality and pornography. Sigel suggests that this comingling of money and sex comes from the idea that “The sexual dream work of the marketplace offered up others to be consumed in the making of the self” (118). Just as the Aesthetes explored themselves through their art, they and their peers also explored themselves through sexual ownership of others’ bodies. Steven Marcus ingeniously points out that the word for orgasm in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was “to spend,” and that semen was viewed as “universal fluid currency” (22). We can thus see that ownership was at the heart of sexuality in the minds of the creators and consumers of pornography. However, the stratifications of Victorian sexual intent do not end at the ownership of sex, for ownership implies a power-play; thus, we turn to the comingling of pleasure and power in the psyche of the Victorian sexual gentleman.

### **Power and Pleasure**

The repressive nature of Victorian society obviously cannot obscure the glaring presence of sexuality in everyday culture, but to simply discuss imagination and ownership as sexual factors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century would be to do an injustice to the more complex power dynamics roiling Victorian popular culture, specifically within the bourgeoisie. Michel Foucault, among many others, has argued for the importance of what he terms the “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” as integral in the history of Western sexuality (45). The relationship between sexual pleasure and the power that accompanies its standardization, subversion, and discourse can

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elucidate the mechanisms governing the masculine gentleman, the elite bourgeoisie, in the Late Victorian era.

The use of pleasure as a tool to gain power initially helped to bring about the sexual conversation we observe in the rhetoricians and scientists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; however, this connection between pleasure and power also plays out in reverse in pornography, as power dichotomies are experimented with through dominance and submission, the interest in violence for pleasure, and other power-driven sexual acts. This interplay of sex and power is best highlighted by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*:

they function as mechanisms with a double impetus: pleasure and power. The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting.

(45)

Here Foucault illustrates the power inherent in sexual illumination as well as sexual repression; the important mechanism in this argument is *control*, and the Late Victorians were able to control sexual discourse both by teasing out desirable qualities and by repressing the undesirable ones. In this way, the roles of “controller” and “controlled” are often blurred. By allowing visibility for certain components of sexuality while obfuscating others, elite males such as Bouchereau and Ellis exerted power over pleasure. However, by having their own erotic desires that they denied in their scientific discourses, the elite males also became the controlled. We can

observe the power-pleasure dynamic in sexual culture through this removed discourse of the artistic elites as well as within pornographic fiction.

The *scientia sexualis* is the first place in which we can observe the use of pleasure as a means of exerting control over subordinates. The definition of specific sexual states, such as Gustave Bouchereau's "nymphomaniac," or Edward Carpenter's definition of a homosexual male as an "Urning," a heavenly body—these delineations exert power over those who now must be identified as such, and thus control the discourse associated with sexual expression. Another example of the power that comes with definition, or labeling, is Havelock Ellis's "Undine" figure, as discussed in his autobiography *My Life*. An "Undine" is a water nymph without a soul; she must marry a human male in order to live on earth, but if the man is unfaithful to her, he dies. Additionally, a marriage shortens an Undine's life, but is beneficial in that it gains her a soul. Ellis describes the mindset of an Undine as "I loved you to see, but I didn't want you to see if you would have been disgusted" (86). It can be no coincidence that Olive Schreiner titled her autobiographical book "Undine," nor is it coincidental that Schreiner's views on marriage supposedly mirror those of an Undine in their unconventionality. Ellis, in defining an "Undine," typifies Schreiner and the "New Woman" archetype with which she is associated. He asserts power over his past lover by giving her character a name. It is this technique that gave the elite sex researchers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century power over the discourse of sex.

This naming and defining sexual types is just the beginning of science's power over sexual culture. Lisa Sigel is very clear that "Science did not preclude eroticism; the two went hand-in-glove" (Sigel 60). This can be observed in the narrative quality of "scientific" works, a quality that controls readers through by providing evidence for the truth of the "sexual imaginary." William Acton, an early sexual writer and researcher, is mentioned by Marcus as

often being incorrect in his so-called facts. Acton describes the typical masturbating boy in clear Darwinian reverse-evolutionary terms:

The frame is stunted and weak, the muscles undeveloped, the eye is sunken and heavy, the complexion is sallow, pasty, or covered with spots of acne, the hands are damp and cold, and the skin moist. The boy shuns the society of others, creeps about alone, joins with repugnance in the amusements of his schoolfellows...Such boys are to be seen in all stages of degeneration, but what we have described is but the result towards which *they all* are tending. (Acton qtd by Marcus 19)

This description is reminiscent of Hyde in R.L. Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*, and links sexual expression to primitive and beastly imagery. Unfortunately for those given to onanism, Acton's image, crafted in 1857, defines masturbation as a mark of degeneration and gives power to those who purport not to engage, a group that includes much of the Late Victorian intelligentsia (including Acton, Ellis, and Ellis's contemporaries).

Ashbee is another member of the bourgeois artistic community who used a scientific study of sex to exert power over others. While he details pornography extensively in three bibliographic volumes, he claims scientific objectivity as his motive for delving into the impure:

In treating of obscene books...it is self-evident that obscenities cannot be avoided. Nevertheless, although I do not hesitate to call things by their right names, and to employ technical terms when necessary, yet in my own text I never use an impure word when one less distasteful but equally expressive can be found. (Ashbee qtd. in Marcus 43)

Ashbee assigns lascivious behavior to someone other than himself, perhaps to the reader; thus, he acts as the dominant authority, and has asserted his power over anyone who reads his words or

engages sexually. Foucault identifies Ashbee's own sexual repression as affirming his high social status as compared to those who admit to promiscuity: "social differentiation would be affirmed, not by the "sexual" quality of the body, but by the intensity of its repression" (129). Ashbee acts as the repressor of sex but also its giver; his discourse allows him to play the figure of God. Sigel states this use of social hierarchy in a different way: "Playing with social barriers and taboos allowed the transgression of social hierarchies without the reordering of society" (98). Scientific writers on sex who claimed a lack of sexuality were establishing power through a pleasure discourse.

Yet commercial pleasure also dealt with power, perhaps as a reaction to the assertion of dominance by the bourgeois elite. Power roles were represented in pornography through a variety of fetishes; the most common, however, was that of flagellation. The tradition of being whipped into submission was popularized through Britain's infamous public schools, and dates back further to Christian tradition of penance and martyrdom. Being beaten, according to Sigel, "worked as a pedagogical technique to teach masculine self control" (77). The trope of young boys being beaten, women being beaten, or dominant women beating a masculine figure was extremely popular as the upper class male fantasy.<sup>5</sup> In this way, pornography allowed itself to play at power dynamics without actually establishing or revoking privileges.

Such power dynamics intercalated with sexual discourse in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century such that submission and dominance can be observed in the supposedly objective writings of the scientists. Bouchereau, when defining nymphomania, uses hierarchical power language: "When the neuropathic condition affects and dominates her, all the impressions appeal to her morbidly impressionable state, and she often becomes the slave of her instincts" (294). Though the woman is aggressively sexual, these sexual urges dominate her, and she is rendered powerless.

Additionally, Ellis relates the dominance of his first love over him in his autobiography: “I took not the slightest liberty with her...but she, on her part, treated me with an easy familiarity which no woman had ever used with me before, and that fact, certainly, though its significance was then beyond me, undoubtedly had its influence” (88). The theme of a dominant woman is strewn throughout his reminiscences; he mentions a need for a “divinely glorious woman,” and refers to Schreiner as “Lion,” likening her to the powerful “king of the jungle” (158). Clearly, even those who supposed themselves to be establishing the sex power dynamic were also subjects of its sway.

We can see that power and pleasure were entangled in 19<sup>th</sup> century discourse on sexuality—but what does this tell us about our subjects, the tight-lipped gentlemen who are credited with creating this discourse? We see that men like Ellis, Bouchereau, Ashbee, and Acton attempted control but were truly just as controlled as the lower orders of society. Sigel nails the situation of the fragile upper class male in the late 1800s when she says that “The focus on difference, physiology, and rationality obfuscated the very real and very irrational problems these men faced when fitting their own bodies into the social demands placed upon them” (79). The need to maintain a surface-level control of sexual power is betrayed by the existence of subconscious power rhetoric, showing that the role of power in pleasure was actually out of the hands of these elite writers. Marcus sums up the connection among the sexual imaginary, concomitant fetishes, and power/pleasure interplay in his statement about Ashbee: “we can observe how Ashbee’s virtues and predilections go together and how the former work as both mask and sanction for the latter” (51). Their imagined sexualities implicate these elite males in the game of commodity and sexual fetish, which is in its own turn ruled by power and pleasure discourse. We can observe a framework for understanding the writers of the *fin de siècle*, the



artists and Aesthetes and Decadents whose work is perfused with sexual confusion, repression, and elision.

### Established Sexual Themes Applied to Wilde's *Salome*

The artist through whom we observe the unspoken sexual expression of the *fin de siècle* most clearly is Oscar Wilde. Wilde's fiendish wit, his celebrity status, and his decadence all contributed to the public's view of him as a special and different individual. And, indeed, Wilde supports the necessity for an artist's isolation and individualism. In "The Critic As Artist—Part I," Wilde asserts what appears to be his mantra, or one of them: "there is no art where there is no style, and no style where there is no unity, and unity is of the individual" (254). Wilde maintains that true art stems from style, which comes from within the individual. Wilde is both a self-defined individual and an individual in the eyes of society, and the latter can largely be ascribed to his aesthetic uniqueness and his alternative sexuality. Though Wilde never expressly wrote about his homosexuality, it permeates almost every text of his and certainly every account of his life; in fact, Wilde helped to create the modern-day stereotypes regarding the homosexual effeminate male. Wilde's status as an outsider both intellectually and sexually resulted in his exile from society, yet his position also afforded him the ability to comment on the trends of those accepted in elite society. In some ways, Wilde speaks about himself in "Critic" when Gilbert discusses the role of the individual: "behind everything that is wonderful stands the individual, and that it is not the moment that makes the man, but the man who creates the age" (254). In this instance we can see Wilde naming himself, the constant critic and *flâneur* on the fringe, as the man who shaped and recorded, criticized and parsed apart, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically regarding elite sexuality, Wilde's vast body of literature questions certain accepted sexual ideas by making the conventional into something strange. Wilde's work is a meta-critique

of elite male control of sexuality, and though all his pieces incorporate such critiques, it is in his play *Salome* that we can observe Wilde's challenges to the sexual imaginary, concomitant fetishes, and power-pleasure dialogues.

*Salome* was originally published in 1893 in Paris in French, and was subsequently (poorly) translated into English by Wilde's lover Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas. The publication in Paris lends itself to the overtly sexual nature of the play, as Paris was viewed as a pornographic hub in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The reception drastically shifted as the play migrated from Paris to London; the *London Times Review* referred to it as "morbid," "bizarre," "repulsive," and "offensive" (Black). The upper-class public in England was not prepared for the topic of sexuality in an uncontrolled context; as we have seen, sexuality was dealt with only through scientific study or secretive pornographic consumption, and the latter had its own intellectualist component. The elites were certainly not equipped to handle *Salome's* conspicuous commentary on the sexuality that they, the men of the upper classes, had so carefully crafted into obscurity. Donohue sums up the situation when he says,

Salome must have seemed to them almost a betrayal; the idiom was too unfamiliar, too threatening, and Wilde's models, dramaturgical and characterological, were too far afield from the West End repertoire of dramas and comedies of modern life and romantic costume plays, peopled by upper-class Londoners or their surrogates. (123)

The Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays, E.F.S. Pigott, referred to the play as "half Biblical, half pornographic": this reference to both the Bible and pornography is extremely important in understanding the reception of Wilde's play (Donohue). The play enters the discourse on sexual imagination, fetishism, and power-pleasure interplay from an external and individual place,

probing these unspoken techniques to cause the audience to look more deeply into their own mechanisms of desire.

*Salome* loosely follows the biblical tale in which Herodias convinces Herod to cut off the head of John the Baptist. Herodias' motivation is John's suggestion that Herodias' marriage to Herod is unlawful and sinful due to her prior marriage to Herod's brother. Herod commits the beheading of John only because of Herodias' daughter. The bible vaguely mentions Salome's complicity in her mother's wish for the death of Saint John: "the daughter of Herodias danced before them: and pleased Herod" (St. Matthew, 14:7). Wilde's play takes this brief and nameless mention of the obedient daughter and expands her character into the central figure of the play. Because Wilde takes the most creative licenses in creating Salome's character, we can be sure that she is the integral piece of Wilde's message. Salome acts as a blank canvas that Wilde is able to mold to represent anything he wishes. Only by understanding the changes that Wilde has made to the biblical tale can we begin to understand what his message about sexuality might be.

First and foremost, one must consider the format of the tale as a play as intentional in Wilde's mind. The play has a long and rich history in England, beginning with the medieval mystery plays. These plays ran from some time around the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the subject matter was primarily constituted of artistic renderings of biblical stories that sought to teach Christianity to the general population. These shows began as liturgical plays and evolved into comical tales of the everyday lives of biblical figures such as Noah or Abraham. The plays were popular up until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, during which time King Henry VIII banned all biblical plays. This ban of biblical subject matter existed primarily for theatrical arts, bypassing poetry and prose, both of which certainly addressed biblical tales throughout the centuries following the

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1500s. With the prohibition of biblical material in the theatre as well as the discomfort regarding sexuality in mind, Wilde's choice to write *Salome* as a play takes on a whole new lens.

Wilde took an admirable risk in addressing sexuality and religion through the theatrical lens. The word "theatre" comes from the Greek word *theasthai*, meaning "to behold," and thus has roots in corporeality that other literary forms do not. Mark Fortier, in aiming to meld theatre and theory, says, "theatre has a practical and sensuous side which contemplation should not be allowed to overwhelm" (6). Theatre thrusts itself and its subject matter into existence; it forces the audience to see it, to literally confront it. By creating *Salome* as a play, Wilde forces the audience to confront their own sexualities through material that is, according to Pigott, both biblical and pornographic. The style of the play can be identified as French symbolist theatre, making use of synesthesia, or multiplicity of the senses, and *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or all-encompassing art. Petra Dierkes-Thrun suggests that symbolist theatre "sought to provoke a cumulative overflow of sensual impressions, so that linear reason could give way to free-floating, sensual responses rather than cognitive ones and could transport the audience into a strange, fascinating aesthetic universe of emotional excess" (62). In *Salome*, Wilde managed to use corporeal feeling in order to make the audience aware of their sexual truths—these truths being, namely, the sexual imaginary, commodity and sexual fetishism, and the power-pleasure principle.

### **The Sexual Imaginary in *Salome***

Almost all of the characters in *Salome* make use of the social imaginary for sexual or erotic benefit in a way that mimics the fantasy of 19<sup>th</sup> century pornography. Just as Ellis created his own image of Schreiner, and the Cannibal Club members formed the fantasy of a dominant flagellant female, Wilde's male characters, excepting Iokanaan, all create a sexual imaginary out

of Salome's body. Throughout the text, the Page of Herodias, the Young Syrian, and Herod all liken Salome to the moon, and then attribute whatever quality they might desire to the moon, thereby appropriating Salome's identity for their own personal gains.

The Page of Herodias sees the moon, and therefore Salome, in the least sexual light of these three characters, perhaps because he is the homosexual character of the play. To him, the moon is representative of death, a symbol that Salome will come to uphold as she causes the death of the Young Syrian and Iokanaan. Upon first noticing the moon, he says, "She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. One might fancy she was looking for dead things" (301). By creating a reality for the moon, he is also reforming his own reality; thus, we cannot be surprised when, later on, the Young Syrian dies and the Page says, "Well I knew that the moon was seeking a dead thing, but I knew not that it was he whom she sought" (310). The Page identifies the moon and Salome as cold killers from the outset of the play, and by objectifying both the moon and Salome, he creates the plot. He even creates a meaning for Salome's infamous veils, the veils that she eventually uses to her own advantage in her dance. He refers to the moon as looking "Like the hand of a dead woman who is seeking to cover herself with a shroud," thereby investing the moon, and we can infer Salome's veil's as well, with a negative connotation (307). Thus, the Page creates his sexual imaginary and it comes to life, though his fantasy is by no means sexual, nor is it even desirable.

Herod, on the other hand, opposes the Page's desexualized view of Salome, for Herod sexualizes the moon and thus sexualizes Salome. He sees the "she" of the moon as "a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked, too...The clouds are seeking to clothe her nakedness, but she will not let them...She reels through the clouds like a drunken woman...I am sure she is looking for lovers" (311-312). Where the Page viewed the

moon as a dead woman, Herod sees a lively and lascivious lover. The Page's moon seeks to cover her body, but Herod's moon will not let herself be covered. Herod's sexual imaginary is inherently sexual, a fantasy that is easily applied to his image of Salome; he consistently looks at and lusts over Salome's body. If Herod's moon is true to his vision of Salome, he views her as a sexual body desirous of throwing off her veils. And just as the Page's imaginary moon inspires reality, so too does Herod's moon. Right before Salome dances, Herod notices a change in the moon: "Ah! look at the moon! She has become red. She has become red as blood" (322). The red blood of the moon can be observed as the blood after a virgin is deflowered, and Herod is perhaps observing Salome's dance as her giving herself to him. If this is the case, Herod's fantasy of Salome as a promiscuous woman is certainly about to come to fruition, at least in his own mind. Thus, Herod creates a reality for himself and is able to inhabit this reality until Salome forces him to confront her true nature by demanding the head of Iokanaan.

The unfortunate Young Syrian acts as Salome's and the moon's consumer in such a way that he is situated in between the views of the Page and Herod. He creates a sexual imaginary in which the moon is a relatively innocent and joyous character, full of true love; this image also represents his idealized view of Salome. He refers to the moon as "a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. One might fancy she was dancing" (301). It is clear that the Syrian loves Salome, for he looks upon her as he does the moon: "How pale the Princess is! Never have I seen her so pale. She is like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver" (302). In referring to the moon as a dancing princess, the Syrian demonstrates a pure love for Salome similar to his adulation for the moon. The Syrian even refers to the moon as having a veil, further connecting the moon with Salome. He says, "She has a strange aspect! She is like a little princess, whose eyes are eyes of amber.

Through the clouds of muslin she is smiling like a little princess” (307). His fixation on Salome’s eyes and smile will eventually be his undoing, however, for even his positive fantasy of Salome still turns her into the object of desire. As innocent as the Syrian’s affections may seem, his statements still echo some of Herod’s own clamorings. Herod says to Salome, later on, “Thy little feet will be like white doves,” and he also echoes the Syrian in the refrain of “Never have I seen her so pale” (322, 313). Thus, the Young Syrian’s sexual imaginary of Salome is just as harmful as Herod’s, as it turns Salome into something she might not want to be. These males’ gazes rid her of her identity, and we know that identity is important both to Wilde and to elite Victorian males. However, whereas the elite male’s individual identity relies on the identities of the crowd matching his own in a type of anti-individual individualism, Wilde’s individualism can be seen as exactly what Salome has lost: uniqueness, self-ness.<sup>6</sup>

But what is the reality behind the imagined versions of Salome? Wilde does not actually allow us to see Salome’s truthful conception of herself; instead, we see only the Salome who is invented by the males of the play and the Salome who invents her own identity as a reaction to the male gaze. Salome is introduced from the start of the play as a child of her mother, and is consistently associated with the rampant sexuality of Herodias, who is supposedly guilty of being “she who...gave herself up unto the lust of her eyes” (307). Iokanaan confers this label of sexuality and sin onto Salome without even glancing at her; he objectifies her by association alone. Iokanaan refers to them both as “daughter of Babylon,” with “golden eyes” and “gilded eyelids” (308, 317). Salome is tainted with her mother’s sexual taboo, a taboo of which Iokanaan reminds her. She says, during her final monologue to Iokanaan’s head, “I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire” (328).

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Iokanaan, by associating her with her mother and turning her into a sinful and sexual entity,

causes Salome to embody the identity that the other characters thrust upon her. He takes the virginity that she wishes to embody and forces her to become a sexual object.

Perhaps the desire to evade her forced sexuality inspires Salome to create her own identity for the moon, and therefore for herself. Salome remarks, "How good to see the moon!...She is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin. She has the beauty of a virgin. Yes, she is a virgin. She has never defiled herself. She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses" (303-304). Salome acts similarly to the other characters in the play by creating her own sexual imaginary, and in this fantasy she is no longer a sex object. In Salome's sexual imaginary, she and the moon are chaste. Thus, even Salome obscures her own reality, or is even unaware of the reality of her identity. She instead objectifies Iokanaan as a part of her sexual imaginary: "He is like a thin ivory statue. He is like an image of silver. I am sure he is chaste, as the moon is. He is like a moonbeam, like a shaft of silver. His flesh must be very cold, cold as ivory....I would look closer at him" (308). Her ideal self and her ideal of Iokanaan are very similar, connected by the thread that is the silver moon. Salome imagines Iokanaan's virginity as part of the reality in which she is not a sexual object, and she thus seeks to possess him.

The only character who does not confer a sexual imaginary onto Salome is her mother, Herodias. While the other characters anthropomorphize the moon, Herodias asserts strongly that "No; the moon is like the moon, that is all" (312). Herodias gives Salome a chance to search for her own reality and to perhaps escape the fate that befell Herodias, the fate of being a sinning sexualized woman. We see that Herodias does not approve of any imaginary, as she claims to the Page, "You have a dreamer's look. You must not dream. It is only sick people who dream" (316). In this statement she is condemning all of the characters of the play who create sexual imaginaries, and her statement is similar to Wilde's assertions from the preface to *The Picture of*



*Dorian Gray*: “Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming” (48). Wilde’s characters see whatever they want in Salome, objectifying her and therefore fetishizing her. By criticizing them, Wilde can be seen as commenting on the overuse of the sexual imaginary, and criticizing those who ruin beauty and true sexuality by attempting to control it and own it.

### **Concomitant Fetishes in *Salome***

The idea of sexual ownership over a body is also present in *Salome*, and Wilde weaves sexual fetish and commodity fetish impressively into the narrative. It is almost as if Wilde mimics the keyhole images of pornography, so closely is he able to focus on and sexualize body parts. Herod is the initial perpetrator of the fetishizing of Salome’s body. Herod’s gaze is constantly trained on Salome, a power move that we will discuss in the following section. He continually asks her to use her body to please him: “Dip into it thy little red lips, that I may drain the cup...Bite but a little of this fruit, that I may eat what is left” (313). When he finally asks Salome to dance for his pleasure, he is committing the ultimate act of ownership over her body—she will exert herself, will use up creative energy, all for his benefit. He pleads, “Dance for me, Salome,” to which she responds, “I have no desire to dance, Tetrarch” (319). Herod then offers a bargain: “If thou dancest for me thou mayest ask of me what thou wilt, and I will give it thee” (320). In this instance, Herod is trading his sexual ownership of Salome’s body as a commodity; Wilde links sexuality with a bartering system. Herod’s request recalls a pornography consumer on Coventry Street who is willing to pay any price for sexual satisfaction.

Despite being subjected to Herod’s fetishizing gaze, Salome is not an innocent in this play. Salome actually mimics Herod’s behavior in her quest to gain ownership over Iokanaan’s body, using some of the same language: “thou wouldst not suffer me to kiss thy mouth,

Iokanaan. Well! I will kiss it now. I will bite it with my teeth as one bites a ripe fruit” (327). This likening of Iokanaan’s mouth to a fruit to be consumed is an exact mimicry of Herod’s vernacular regarding Salome’s own mouth. This desire to actually devour Iokanaan by eating his mouth combines sexual fetishizing of body parts as well as the fetishizing of commerce and consumption. Salome goes on to fetishize Iokanaan’s different body parts in succession, moving on to the next one and denouncing the last one when she is rebuffed:

I am amorous of thy body, Iokanaan! Thy body is white, like the lilies of the field...The roses in the garden of the Queen of Arabia are not so white as thy body...nor the breast of the moon when she lies on the breast of the sea....There is nothing in the world so white as thy body. Suffer me to touch thy body...Thy body is hideous...It is of thy hair that I am enamoured, Iokanaan...The long black nights, when the moon hides her face, when the stars are afraid, are not so black as thy hair...Suffer me to touch thy hair...Thy hair is horrible...It is thy mouth that I desire...There is nothing in the world so red as thy mouth....Suffer me to kiss thy mouth. (309-310)

Salome desires to touch and therefore have ownership over different body parts, yet does not care to listen to Iokanaan’s message of salvation as a whole. As she whispers to Iokanaan’s head in her final monologue, “I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body; and neither wine nor apples can appease my desire” (328). Salome wants to possess Iokanaan’s body, and eventually kiss his mouth, and she can do this while he is either dead or alive. She is willing to bargain, just as Herod is willing to bargain, and once she has Iokanaan’s head, she is happy. She exclaims, “thou art dead, and thy head belongs to me. I can do with it what I will” (327-328). It is clear that Salome is concerned with Iokanaan’s body parts, not the whole, and she wants to

obtain ownership of these disparate parts. In this way, we can see the concomitance of fetishes peeking through two of Wilde's characters. Wilde shows the negative side of too much desire to own pieces of a whole being.

### **The Power/Pleasure Principle in *Salome***

We see that Salome herself gives in to dual fetishes in her lust for Iokanaan's body. However, we can only explain why she has this lust for Iokanaan by exploring the interplay of power and pleasure in *Salome*. The play is marked by what Katherine Brown Downey refers to as "scopophilia," or sexual pleasure derived from the act of looking. Herod and the Syrian cannot stop looking at Salome, prompting Salome to wonder about the male gaze: "Why does the Tetrarch look at me all the while with his mole's eyes under his shaking eyelids? It is strange that the husband of my mother looks at me like that. I know not what it means. Of a truth I know it too well" (303). Salome implies that she knows that Herod's gaze is sexual in nature. There is an obvious power dynamic in a stare; it is one-sided in nature, and implies an object and a subject. Thus, a sexualized gaze is an effectual way of dominating someone, and it is with this method that Wilde's characters attempt to dominate Salome. The whole play operates on the idea that Salome is the object of the gaze, the fantasy, and the fetish of the men who sexualize her.

However, Salome is not a passive victim. The power dynamics of *Salome* are much more complicated than simply subject-object ownership. In using her body as the object of a sexual gaze, Salome is able to use the male gaze to her advantage. The first instance of this in the play is the point when Salome convinces the Syrian to release Iokanaan: "Thou wilt do this thing for me, Narraboth. Thou knowest that thou wilt do this thing for me. And on the morrow when I shall pass in my litter by the bridge of the idol-buyers, I will look at thee through the muslin veils, I will look at the, Narraboth, it may be I will smile at thee. Look at me, Narraboth, look at

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me” (307). Salome directly invokes the power of the gaze and reverses the stereotypical power dynamic, controlling those who would control her. In this way she becomes a dangerous woman for those who will look upon her, as the lovers of those who gaze seem to see. Herodias notices Herod’s looks and admonishes him: “You must not look at her! You are always looking at her!” (311). While we can attribute Herodias’s chastising to jealousy, how can we read the Page’s warning to the Syrian, which is much more worried for the Syrian’s safety: “You are always looking at her. You look at her too much. It is dangerous to look at people in such fashion. Something terrible may happen” (301). These characters sense the power that Salome holds if she is looked upon. So, while Salome is like the moon in that they are both gazed upon and appropriated for the gazer’s own use, Salome has agency to flip the power roles, while the moon in the play inevitably becomes what each character first observes. She is more lethal than the moon, but the characters continually make the mistake of identifying her with the moon.

However, Iokanaan, by not giving Salome his gaze, does not give her power. Iokanaan reduces Salome’s importance when he denounces her: “Who is this woman looking at me? I will not have her look at me. Wherefore doth she look at me, with her golden eyes, under her gilded eyelids? I know not who she is. I do not desire to know who she is. Bid her begone” (308). If the reduction of her importance is not enough to reduce Salome’s power, Iokanaan also refuses to even look at her: “I will not look at thee. Thou art accursed, Salome, thou art accursed” (311). By refusing to objectify Salome with his gaze, yet still judging her in accordance with her mother, Iokanaan is able to damage Salome’s *femme fatale* figure. He becomes dangerous, and she must possess him in order to gain power over him. Salome fears Iokanaan: “It is his eyes above all that are terrible. They are like black holes burned by torches in a tapestry of Tyre. They are like the black caverns where the dragons live, the black caverns of Egypt in which the dragons make

their lairs. They are like black lakes troubled by fantastic moons” (308). In Iokanaan’s eyes Salome sees moons; she observes his ability to create fantasies, and yet he will not create a sexual fantasy about her. After receiving Iokanaan’s head, Salome moans, “Ah! wherefore didst thou not look at me, Iokanaan?...If thou hadst seen me thou hadst loved me” (328). She laments her need to resort to murder when she cannot obtain power through more peaceful means, yet she must have sexual power to reverse her powerlessness at being sexualized and objectified.

Ultimately, Wilde creates in *Salome* the typical victim of elite masculine sexuality. Salome is entirely a product of masculine assumptions about female sexual desire; she is poked and prodded out of her virginity by the association with her sexualized mother; she is not allowed to explore her own sexual self, but is typified at every turn. Salome is the classical *femme fatale*, to be sure, but she is also the woman underneath the stereotype of the *femme fatale*. She is Olive Schreiner struggling to escape the bonds conferred upon her by Havelock Ellis, and she is the flagellant female speaking out in the darkness against her forced domination.

If Salome were allowed to live at the end of the play, Wilde might perhaps be stating that the sexual “other” has a chance to survive and gain power over domineering elite sexuality. However, Salome’s death offers us a bleak outlook. When Salome is shown to be much more complicated than Herod anticipates, Herod’s sexual imaginary is shattered, and thus, Salome must die. Herod initially believes Salome to be “charming,” and is shocked at the morbidity of her request for Iokanaan’s head (323). He refuses to believe her complexity at first, assuring himself that “It is not meet that the eyes of a virgin should look upon such a thing. What pleasure couldst thou have in it. There is no pleasure that thou couldst have in it. No, no, it is not that thou desirest” (324). However, when Salome asserts that “It is for mine own pleasure that I ask the head of Iokanaan in a silver charger,” Herod is forced to change his opinion of her (323). He

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admits that “She is monstrous” (328). Thus, Salome dies at the hands of Herod’s soldiers. However, she is illuminated by moonlight just before she dies; and here we are in a full circle, as Salome reclaims the moon and her power over herself by claiming Iokanaan’s mouth. Wilde shows us with this conclusion that those in society who are sexually “othered” cannot thrive. They must exist, like Salome, to dance for the eyes of others or to die for themselves.

### **A Voice in the Margins: Schreiner’s Side**

This discussion has focused on the breakdown of elite Victorian male patterns of control over sexuality through literary discourse, as explored and challenged by Oscar Wilde. Olive Schreiner was briefly mentioned as an example of one of the sexual voices being silenced by oppressive elite sexuality. I would like to explore Schreiner’s voice amidst the clamoring of elite Victorian males, not as representative of the elusive “others,” about whom we know very little, but as one of many silenced voices. When I say “others” I refer to those individuals marginalized for their sexual identities and silences due to their deviations from the ascribed norm. These people are those about whom Wilde would write without a satirical lens, people such as the Olive Schreiners, the Symonds, the un-exoticized individuals of lands far from the dominion of the English Crown. The little information about sexuality that does exist from these “othered” bodies has been sequestered away in dark corners or has not survived the ages, most likely due to the influence of the oppressive elite male’s control over posterity’s view of Victorian sexuality. However, there are glimpses of truth here and there, from sources who were luckily not silenced. Olive Schreiner is one such source, and she deserves to have a voice in this discussion.

Olive Schreiner’s legacy as a human has been much affected by Ellis’s treatment of their shared past; however, Schreiner’s work continues to this day to be a direct piece of her experience, and one that nobody can doctor (without notice, at least). Her semi-autobiographical

novel *Undine* is a sobering *bildungsroman* about a young and willful little girl who is eventually crushed by life and love. As Wilde does in *Salome*, Schreiner uses the moon as a motif throughout this novel—the moon is beauty and love, icy and cold and truth-telling. Schreiner mentions “moonlight thought” briefly, and this term’s definition is laid out within the first few pages of the novel as Schreiner gives a description of the African setting in which Undine grows up:

All these parts compose a picture in which, when looked at by daylight, it were hard work to find the slightest trace of beauty; but tonight, penetrated in every nook and corner by the cold white light of an almost full moon, there is a strange weird beauty, a beauty which the veriest sheep-souled Boer that ever smoked pipe or wore vel-skoen, might feel if he had but one ray of light left in him. (1-2)

Her lover Albert Blair will later on be compared to the moon:

[His eyes] were of a pale cold blue, and would not have been small had he not habitually kept the lids more than half closed. There was nothing lost by that proceeding certainly, for when now and then on rare occasions he lifted them, the gleam shot forth was as icy and chilling as a moonbeam falling on a glacier. (104)

This “moonlight thought” is certainly beautiful and also dangerous; it is love and sexuality. The moon marks Undine’s ruin as she gives herself fully to Albert, as he rejects her, as she tries her fortunes and is continually beaten down by life. And, as in *Salome*, it is by moonlight that we last glimpse the dead Undine. For Schreiner, the moon is what holds her character captivated, but what also holds her back. In this way, we can understand Schreiner’s view of sexuality as beautiful but damning and difficult.

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Schreiner writes similarly on the moon in her tale “In a Far-Off World” in her collection of allegorical stories entitled *Dreams*. The moon is what illuminates the fleeing of the narrator’s lover; it also shines upon the narrator’s acceptance that love is made of loss and sacrifice. *Dreams* touches upon love and sexuality in this nostalgic way, mentioning love and loss, and, more importantly, hope for the future. Schreiner wishes for gender equality and, specifically, love for all individuals by all individuals. She suggests a happy future in which women can love other women, and envisions heaven as a sexless place: “In the least Heaven sex reigns supreme; in the higher it is not noticed; but in the highest it does not exist.” Schreiner might do away with sexuality entirely if only to be happy. These writings are representative of the “other”—they show more truths than those the sexologists claim to elucidate. By seeking out writers such as Schreiner, we can more fully understand sexuality in the Victorian time on an ontological level.

It must be noted that there is much research to be done to understand these sexual “others.” There is little-to-no understanding of the sexualities of people of color in the Late Victorian era, and the queer writing that exists is mostly made up of fetishized pornographic tales like those we have discussed. If sources from these marginalized voices do exist, and I certainly hope that our forefathers did not destroy them in the name of “science,” we are under an obligation to, if not understand, at least listen to these voices. Only by listening to sexual history as a whole can we begin to understand the truth behind the Victorian sexual imaginaries that have been presented as truths.

### Concluding Thoughts



This essay has sought to clarify the state of sexuality in *fin de siècle* England. It was not, as so many people think, an aggressively repressive environment—at least, not for everyone. For the elite males of society, the sexual playground was whimsical and exciting; for so many others it was not a playground but a battlefield. For most of his life, Oscar Wilde was a tightrope walker between elite sexuality and the sexuality of the other. We see what occurred when he was completely exposed for his sexual preferences—his position as an artistic genius was taken from him. Wilde shows us the risks of being true to non-normative sexual desires in the Late Victorian era, and he also shows us how the mindset of the few elite men dominated the discourse on sexuality. We are lucky to have the thoughts of Wilde today; so many others were silenced or destroyed. This is the true state of sexuality in the Victorian era, known both for its raunchiness and its repression. What we see now is, as Wilde says in *De Profundis*, but “a mere mask for the hiding of weakness.”

And the mask continues today, where a select few dictate and silence the desires of many. Sexual discourse is improving in niche pockets such as online forums and with those who study sexual theory; however, mainstream pornography continues to assume desire where there is none, and continues to objectify everyone except the heteronormative, white male gaze. This trend was set in motion by the Victorian elite, and by understanding its nuances in this paper, I want to be part of an attempt to dismantle it. Wilde says, again in *De Profundis*, that “Those who want a mask have to wear it.” Our Victorian forefathers might have survived by using Wilde’s mask, but in our globalizing world we should seek to break through masks of the Wildean sort. As a woman, I identify with Salome, and I identify with the sexual object. I identify with Olive Schreiner when she says, in her preface to *Dreams*:

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*To a small girl-child, who may live to grasp somewhat of that  
which for us is yet sight, not touch.*

We can take Schreiner's words a step further and include, not only women, but also all identities that have been sexually oppressed and repressed. For these marginalized individuals, and for the numerous other nameless ones, we must work to understand history, criticize the present, and improve the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Lord Henry of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a firm believer in "New Hedonism," in which one lives only for worldly pleasure. Wilde is satirizing those late 19<sup>th</sup> century Aesthetes and Decadents of whose group he is a (more enlightened) part.

<sup>2</sup> Wilde is also purported to have an authorial role in *Teleny*, the homosexual pornography of unknown origins. If he was indeed involved in *Teleny*'s writing, Wilde's persona as internal provocateur is even more complicated. Clearly, Wilde was willing to test the boundaries of defined sexuality through accepted literary forms such as the poem and the play; however, the mystery shrouding Wilde's pornographic career further implicates him as a "both/and" figure. He may have expressed alternative sexual ideals, but if so, he did it anonymously.

<sup>3</sup> Draznin also suggests that the tenor of Schreiner's persona in the Schreiner-Ellis letters is so markedly different from her other writings and correspondences that "one can only postulate that Schreiner and Ellis were engaged in a form of epistolary role-playing, an assumption of assigned stances that was quite deliberate" (7). Where Schreiner appears outgoing, intellectual, and unconcerned with her own problems in correspondences with others, she "appears excessively introspective, not very learned in art, only slightly more so in music, cognizant of but not very perceptive about the great writers of Western civilization, and without many political opinions other than a wavering sort of Socialism" when writing to Ellis (7). Ellis' letters appear to play along with Schreiner's: "His need to appear as a wise instructor and pillar of support comes through constantly" (7). Thus, if we can assume that the two were engaged in a sort of unspoken role-play, we can see the sexual imaginary at work. The two "lovers," if we are to call them that, created a relationship through correspondence that was beneficial to their needs, or at least Ellis' masculine desire to feel protective. If Schreiner is indeed relinquishing some of her agency for Ellis, we might be led to believe that she is experiencing a phenomenon experienced by Undine in Schreiner's novel of the same name, after Undine meets unfortunate love-interest Albert Blair:

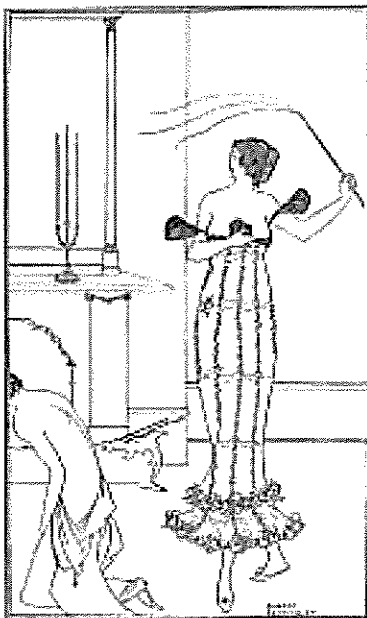
she had been born with strong and determined ideas on every subject, sub- and superlunar, and not one step of her sixteen years' journey had she walked in the happy mediate road. It was too late to change now. They had told her that the day would come when she would repent having done nothing to try to conform herself, at least outwardly, to the views of others; and she did repent it as she sat there that evening. She would have parted with all that was highest and best in herself to become a little less Undine, a little more like anyone else. Who was this man, what was he, that he should make her grovel so? (138)

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*Undine* is known to be a semi-autobiographical novel, and there is certainly more than a little of Schreiner in the title character. Perhaps we can interpret Schreiner's complicity to Ellis' sexual imaginary through the lens of her character's narrative.

<sup>4</sup> The focus on possession as central to sexuality has been suggested as ontological in nature. Georges Bataille writes, in *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, that "Love reiterates: 'If only you possessed the beloved one, your soul sick with loneliness would be one with the soul of the beloved.'" (20). He goes on to argue that eroticism is marked by the desire to transgress a taboo. Taboos are social rules of which the main purpose is to forbid the actor to commit a certain action. Examples of this are incest or murder. Bataille suggests that sexuality is created by the attraction to a taboo, something repulsive; he says, "At first sight sexual objects excite alternate attraction and repulsion, hence the taboo and its suspension" (72). The desire to transgress something societally repulsive in order to conquer it is capitalistic in nature, and implies that the sexual preoccupation with ownership can be traced to the individualistic human desire to transgress the social body. Once again, the desire for individualism in the elite Victorian male shows through the fabric.

<sup>5</sup> The obsession with flagellation is touched upon in multiple various pornographic texts, but can be typified in Aubrey Beardsley's "Design for Frontispiece of *Earl Lavender*." In this image, a woman with her dress slipping down, exposing her breasts, flogs a young man on his knees, whose head is out of the frame. In this image, the woman is the focus, and her sultry eyes display pleasure and dominance. However, the image was designed by a man and intended for the elite male gaze; this image, therefore, represents the power exerted over women and their sexualities by elite male desire and their discourse surrounding sexuality.



(image taken from flickr)

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<sup>6</sup> Refer to Wilde's *De Profundis*, specifically:

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People used to say of me that I was too individualistic. I must be far more of an individualist than ever I was. I must get far more out of myself than ever I got, and ask far less of the world than ever I asked. Indeed, my ruin came not from too great individualism of life, but from too little.

Wilde's obsession with the human as an individual is also visible in his essay entitled "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," in which he preaches for socialism as a way to cater to individualism.



