

Sexual excess of the eighteenth century essay



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Does the 18th century merit its word picture as an age of sexual surplus?

In 1763, a aggregation of four titillating verse forms by John Wilkes and Thomas Potter was published and later declared obscene by Parliament. What added abuse to hurt was that many of them were lampoons of Alexander Pope ' s Hagiographas, which were considered morally and sacredly upholding. The four verse forms were titled: ' An Essay on Woman ' (an obscene lampoon of Alexander Pope ' s An Essay on Man) ; ' Veni Creator ' , or, ' The Maid ' s Prayer ' ; the ' Universal Prayer ' , an every bit detestable lampoon of Pope ' s verse form ; and ' The Diing Lover to his Prick ' , which parodies ' A Diing Christian to his Soul, ' by Pope (Kearney, 1982, p53-7) . These verse forms serve as a reminder of the huge sums of titillating art and literature that were produced in the eighteenth Century, and the century ' s subsequent repute ; as that of an ' age of sexual surplus ' . When looking at the titillating imitations by Thomas Rowlandson is easy to presume that this period " offered a guilt-free sexual resort area peopled by becoming dames and tittuping profligates ready to turn over in the hay at the bead of a handkerchief. " (Tonkin, 1996, p2) . However, Boyd Tonkin warns us against making this, observing that this was " an curiously relentless British myth. " (Tonkin, 1996, p2) However, this is the period for historiographers that means, above all, sex and the organic structure.

However, merely because there was increased look of erotism does non needfully intend an addition in sexual activity. Yet if the pornography was non at that place to show a sexual release, what was it at that place to show? And what does that state us about the existent sexual activity of the clip? In fact, the focal point on this century as ' The Century of Sex ' links

more to alterations in the perceptual experience of the male and female organic structure. Harvey notes that as organic structures were understood otherwise, gender was accordingly 'constructed'. (Harvey, 2002, p900) Furthermore, many historiographers besides argue that the Reconstruction of organic structures resulted in a steady domestication and de-sexualisation of adult females - specifically adult females from higher circles of society. In many ways, when sing adult females, the eighteenth century speculating seems a far call from Roy Porter 's impression that the " libido was liberated " . (Porter, 1982, p278) The historian becomes forced to specify sexual surplus in the eighteenth Century, and see non merely gender, but besides gender. This essay will look specifically at Laqueur 's seminal work ' Making Sexual activity: organic structure and gender from the Greeks to Freud ' (1990) , and historiographical reaction to it, combined with a farther scrutiny of pornography and gender functions in the eighteenth century in order to find whether or non this was so an age of sexual surplus.

Thomas Laqueur 's book has been described as " possibly the most influential work of medical history published in the last two decennaries " . (Jenner, M. S. , Taithe, B. O. , (2000) , p191) . Laqueur postulates that before the Eighteenth Century, the " one-sex or one-flesh theoretical account " was the ruling paradigm in sexual thought. This one-sex theoretical account was demonstrated by conceive ofing construction of male and female genital organ as the opposite of each other. Or instead, the vagina as an inferior signifier of the male genitalias ; the male genital organ turned indoors out: " the vagina is imagined as an interior phallus, the labia as prepuce, the womb as scrotum and the ovaries as testiss. " (Laqueur, 1990,

p4) However, during the 18th century, this became a two-sex theoretical account, whilst the classes of male and female became “ opposite and incommensurable biological sexes ” . (Laqueur, 1990, p154) Laqueur sees this as the budding of modern ideas on sexualisation taking to incorporate “ the history of the organic structure and gender into a modernizing vision of the 18th century ” . (Harvey, 2002, p900)

Such alterations in the manner the organic structure was perceived would besides take to alterations in the buildings of gender, maleness, and muliebrity. Laqueur farther asserts that this alteration extended to sexual desire, and therefore sexual behavior:

“ people engaged in heterosexual activity, progressively their behavior, to signifiers of phallogocentric, acute sexa[^]|. Both work forces and adult females were created as ‘ naturally ‘ and biologically sexed, with an increasing onusa[^]|. to restrict their behavior to a heterosexual norm, and to happen the now ‘ opposite ‘ sex attractive ” . (Hitchcock, 1997, p57)

When viewed against the context of the progressively defined ‘ normal ‘ and ‘ heterosexual ‘ classes, the increased look of erotica takes on new significance ; the titillating images and Hagiographas easy serve to recommend the ‘ normal ‘ heterosexual behavior, and so supply a usher and example of acute intercourse. In malice of this, whether or non an addition in the focal point on acute sex really resulted in the addition of sexual activity is another affair.

Regardless of the increased look of pornography, the displacement in the perceptual experience of gender would logically ensue in a de-sexualisation

of adult females. Whilst thought to resemble work forces' organic structures, a adult female's topographic point in the sleeping room, every bit good has as her climax, had position to fit a adult male's. However, one time seen as a contrary, but basically different from a adult male's, the adult female's organic structure and hence character became defined as " a separate and oppositional being, by ' nature ' chaste and domestic " . (Thaddeus, 1994, p113) In fact, historiographers such as McLaren argued that " the rights of adult females to sexual pleasance were non enhanced, but eroded " . (McLaren, 1985, pp340-341) This resulted in a devaluation of the female climax and a parturiency to the place as they became progressively domesticated. " While work forces' sexual desire was cardinal to the ' new male heterosexualism ' , adult females were frequently punished for taking sexual enterprise " . (Trumbach, 1991, p322) Surely, historiographers such as Anthony Fletcher argue that " alterations were a merchandise of work forces redefining patriarchate in order to guarantee its continuation and bolster its foundations " . (Fletcher, 1995, pxxii) It became assumed that merely adult females such as extramarital married womans, cocottes and others of a similar low moral standing could show sexual passion. The ill-famed diary of Fanny Hill, a cocotte, absolutely reflected this political orientation, and was, in fact, non written by a adult female but by adult male called John Cleland. The diary describes how, at 15, Fanny had been tricked into fall ining the sex trade by the proprietor of a whorehouse and " initiated in the pleasancess of her new naming by another of the misss, ' whose lewd touches lighted up a new fire that wantoned through my venas ' . Fanny admitted " I was more pleased than offended " . (Rennell, 2007)

As a cocotte, it is absolutely sensible that Fanny would see sexual pleasure, unlike her de-sexed in-between category higher-ups.

Therefore the 'sexual surplus' that might be perceived in pornography, seems entirely confined to the ideological heterosexual adult male, with boundaries for adult females progressively less titillating. That said, as gender was examined more under the scientific lens, against the sexual ideal, other patterns, common to both work forces and adult females, were deemed 'abnormal'. Masturbation was one of these. Outstanding doctors, scientists, philosophers, and spiritual leaders circulated a theory that it caused physical and mental lack. Again, the perceptual experience of heterosexuality that the pornography portrayed had a conservative outlook that was far from a sexual open-mindedness associated with patterns of 'sexual surplus'.

As has now been discussed, it surely appears that Laqueur's one-sex into two-sex theoretical account theory highlights important thoughts about gender that disseminated in the seventeenth century. While a clean displacement from one to the other is obliging, many historiographers, for illustration Martensen and Fletcher have criticised Laqueur for being oversimplistic. Although Laqueur is careful to texture his history, warning that the displacement was by no means a smooth patterned advance, his cardinal thesis, that "the two-sex theoretical account achieved hegemony in the eighteenth century," still justifiably prompts unfavorable judgment.

(Harvey, 2002, p901) For illustration, Fletcher sees the same alterations happening in the sixteenth and 17th centuries, every bit good as the eighteenth. He argues that they constituted a "transitional universe of

neither one sex nor two ” . (Fletcher, 2000, p41) Additionally, through the survey of early modern medical beginnings, Martensen concludes that both one-sex and two-sex theoretical accounts are presented (Martensen, pp107-33) . In add-on, the brief chapters at the terminal of Laqueur ' s book on Freud barely gives justness to his high-profile one-sex theoretical account of male and female genital organ and gender (non merely did Freud claim that the genitalias were structural opposites of each other, but he besides said that adult females had penis enviousness) . If Freud relied on a one-sex theoretical account, how could Laqueur claim that the two-sex theoretical account was grounds of the beginnings of the modernization of gender?

Medical sentiments on gender and reproduction in the seventeenth century were still a long manner from any scientific truth, with scientists cognizing really small about menses, fertilization, construct, allow entirely anatomy. However, despite holding about entirely used medical beginnings, Laqueur strongly denies that scientific progresss led to the displacement in wider idea from a one-sex to two-sex theoretical account. He argues that it was the remake of the organic structure that was intrinsic to each of these developments. Despite this acknowledgment, he still “ mostly neglected non-medical grounds about non-professional apprehensions of construct and sexual difference, such as erotica, inexpensive medical treatises and tribunal despositions ” . (Jenner and Taithe, 2000, p194) Therefore, Laqueur ' s modernizing vision of the 18th-century is a teleological survey that overlooks the scientific defects of the epoch, and the subsequent century.

Furthermore, if we examine 18th century pornography in relation to the one-sex theoretical account, we may every bit see that “ a theoretical account of similarity was used when authors sought to do either the act of vaginal

incursion or the procedure of fertilization comprehensible" . (Harvey, 2002, p914) Harvey notes that " bodily similarity facilitated the comprehension of the brotherhood of work forces and adult females " , whilst difference was still emphasised.

Using a scope from medical treatises to titillating imitations as the benchmark, this essay has discussed the end point alterations in gender, gender, and titillating look. However, yet once more one is confronted with the job of whether even the less formal and more widely circulated signifiers of pornography really reflected the ' normal ' sexual activity, and an addition in it. This serves as a perennial job for gender historiographers. For illustration, Shoemaker, in his survey ' Gender in English society, 1650-1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres? ' begins to show how " gender functions as lived were a merchandise of the interaction between ways of believing about gender and societal, economic, and political forces " . (Shoemaker, 1998, p5) However, he still seems " doubting of the impact of political orientation in modeling gender functions " . (Harvey, 2002, p915) Harvey warns that: " The emphasis on the discursive has left the material contexts of gender mostly undiscovered " . (Harvey, 2002, p914) Surely, historiographers such as Roper condemn the organic structure in historical work as " an irritatingly non-physical abstraction^}. We need an apprehension of sexual difference which will integrate, non fight against, the corporeal " . (Lyndal Roper, 1994, p68) The troubles in really measuring the grade to which open erotism, and speculating about organic structures, entered mundane sexual lives of adult females and work forces are evidently multiplex. Historians will ever fight to happen theoretical accounts for

understanding frequently fickle and ever-changing degrees of sexual activity.

How so are we any closer to a decision? Surely one must try once more to specify sexual surplus in the context of the eighteenth century. If the documented sexual norm was male heterosexual activity, one might be impelled to look for such illustrations. Surely at that place existed some Gentlemen ' s Clubs ill-famed for their supposed sordid and sexual feats. For illustration the ' Hellfire Club ' , founded in London in 1719, was rumoured to be the Centre of binges, every bit good as Satan or demon Worship. Contemporary histories note female ' guests ' or cocottes, ' referred to as ' Nuns ' , go toing and leaving meetings. Dashwood ' s Club meetings frequently included mock rites, points of a adult nature, imbibing, wenching and feasting. (Ashe, 2000, p133) However, in many ways the nine advocated the spread of these rumors, meaning to floor the outside universe, instead than really perpetrating peculiarly debauched atrociousnesss. Other nines, particularly in Ireland and Scotland were labelled even more perverse. David Stevenson ' s history of two of the more doubtful, in ' The Beggar ' s Benison: Sexual activity Clubs of Enlightenment Scotland and Their Rituals ' provides an diverting history of the debauched life style. While patterns in these nines may offer an illustration of male heterosexualism as the norm, they besides become a topographic point in which to hold freedom to do one ' s ain sexual boundaries and gender within a community. Either of these attendant behaviors could quite easy be seen as sexual surplus. However, gentlemen ' s nines, although popular in the seventeenth century, were by no agencies sole to the century.

Possibly what may be termed sexual surplus was the eighteenth century in comparing to the nineteenth century. The paradigm of the sexual attitude of the latter is epitomised by the Victorian businessperson practise of covering the legs of expansive pianos because were thought to be an obscenity. However, despite this utmost outlook, this century, possibly precisely the antonym to an age of sexual surplus, in fact had much in common with the eighteenth century. Quite apart from anything else, the eighteenth century was in no manner wholly accepting of its titillating civilization. The 4 verse forms by Wilkes and Potter were infamously the lone titillating poesy to be read to Parliament in their entirety before being banned and the memoirs of Fanny Hill were described by London bishop Thomas Sherlock as “ the lewdest thing I of all time saw ” . (Rennell, 2007) At a governmental and spiritual degree, the intolerance of pornography may good reflect a less than broad attitude towards sex. In add-on, many thoughts ab initio developed in the eighteenth Century became strands taken to utmost lengths in 19th Century Victorian England. For illustration, the image of the adult females as domesticated and pure, as ensuing from the two-sex theoretical account identified by Laqueur, peaked in the nineteenth Century. Many adult females became confined to being an ‘ Angel in the house’R, conditioned to act as neuter existences that no sexual pleasance. There was every bit an hysterical crescendo in the moral panic refering onanism in the nineteenth Century. This sparked the innovation of a assortment of devices and innovations designed to forestall self-abuse. Laqueur argues that this attitude stemmed in big portion from the philosophical environment of the Enlightenment that allowed societal attitudes to germinate in a manner that put onanism in an entirely new visible radiation. In add-on, the nineteenth

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century besides brought about the shaping of different and multiple sexual classes, and a farther definition of the 'normal' heterosexual male, a construct once more that Laqueur argues is cardinal to the eighteenth Century two-sex theoretical account. However, in a subject that is capable to sudden and distinguishable alteration, placing a clear line of development poses a wealth of jobs. Indeed, non merely does it coerce the Laquerian narrative under examination, but it besides prompts one to inquire whether historiographical methods are good plenty equipped to cover with affairs that rely on corporeal significance.

Upon analyzing the tendencies in two-sex and one-sex theoretical accounts and alterations in gender, it becomes clear that it is impossible to state for certain that the eighteenth century was a clip of sexual surplus. Whether focussed on the sexual similarities or differences of work forces and adult females, erotica rather clearly focussed on a treatment of the functions of the genders in sex, supplying illustrations, counsel and aid. Indeed, in the BBC Documentary 'Age of Excess', Matthew Sweet purposes to demo that the Godheads of this titillating enlightenment were detecting new ways of understanding human subjectiveness, instead than merely being sleazy porn merchants. Therefore, it would look that surplus of the sexual came partly from the surplus of ideas of the sex. This is no uncertainty the instance in the concerns of many historiographers, as the beginnings show a grade of liberalism and freedom of sex, more expressed than in other centuries. Indeed, it seems that much of the erotism is focused in peculiar on female organic structures. However, despite the preoccupation with female organic structures in the authorship, the concern that governs these thoughts "

associate much more straight to modern-day arguments about work forces ' s organic structures and genders " , (Harvey, 1990, 915) and are written by work forces. Harvey argues that the bulk of work written by historiographers on the subject of gender and gender is " truly about maleness and that the history of female gender has yet to be written " . 916 Therefore, this essay would reason that, far from being an the age of sexual surplus, the eighteenth Century constitutes a complex web of thoughts and definitions of maleness, muliebrity, gender and normalcy, of which it is impossible to state how much it affected modern-day sexual activity. This does not, in itself, represent sexual surplus. Rather, the looks of pornography available state a narrative of involvement and probe into a comparatively unknown construct - the organic structure. Surely the true age of sexual surplus would come from a comprehensive scientific apprehension of each organic structure ' s biological demands, complex gender buildings and sexual desires, that was merely not possible to accomplish in the eighteenth Century. The eighteenth Century, whilst surely a affair of sexual and bodily involvement can not be said to be an age of sexual surplus.