

- no. 2 (2001), <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/603762>; “Bibliography,” compiled by Marcella Fultz, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 10, no. 2 (2009), doi:10.1353/cch.0.0074; “Bibliography of Books, Chapters and Journal Articles on Colonialism and Imperialism Published in English in 2016,” compiled by Marcella Fultz, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 18, no. 2 (2017), doi:10.1353/cch.2017.0025.
19. Jared van Duinen, “The Borderlands of the British World,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 15, no. 1 (2014), doi:10.1353/cch.2014.0008.
20. van Duinen, “The Borderlands of the British World.” To date, there have been six published print collections of “British World” scholarship. The first was Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, eds., *The British World: Diaspora, Culture, and Identity* (London: Frank Cass, 2003) and the most recent was Kent Fedorowich and Andrew S. Thompson, eds., *Empire, Migration, and Identity in the British World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013). Work in the new imperial history is exemplified by Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). See also Stephen Howe, ed., *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2010).



## Sexuality

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THE common view that modern sexuality was invented through science, and especially by sexologists and social scientists such as Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing, has encouraged an understanding of sexuality and desire through classificatory frameworks and models of measurable ab/normalcy. While Steven Marcus made famous the view that Victorians hid their bounty of sexuality under bustles of decorum and denial, Michel Foucault proposed no less than a macrostructural system tapping into the power of sexuality through institutionalizing discourses.<sup>1</sup> While offering crucial insights, these formulations have also tended to encourage a devaluing of the

amorphous spirit of attractions and affections that we today appreciate, as did many Victorians, for invigorating our senses and moving our bodies. As Vernon Lee complained in 1905 about driving past a landscape rather than feeling the soles of her feet scrambling in it, the former lacks “the tangible joy, working deep into our nerves, of the massive real . . . the mark of complete possession working deep into the soul, which belongs to desires that struggle for their accomplishment.”<sup>2</sup> Desires, as Lee suggests, surface in the most surprising places and through quite unexpected modes of contact.

Prior to the Victorians, there is no record of the term “sexuality” being used to refer to an awareness of having such sensual desires, and it was not until the twentieth century that the notion of sexual identity became a familiar concept in western society. Thus, when we today speak of a shift of the primary understanding of sexuality from the heteronormative, individuated standpoint to the ungrounded experience of the fluid, queer, postqueer, and posthuman, we champion a vocabulary and collective imagination more sympathetic to the phantom-like desires that Victorians themselves experienced and engaged.

“Sexuality” refers to one’s own urges for other sentient beings, other things, and one’s self, as well as to one’s eroticism as it is projected by and appeals to others. These drives are both general and specific, unconscious and conscious, human and otherwise. As nineteenth-century authors repeatedly demonstrate, sexuality operates as a shared, mediated resource, some participants taking a greater stake in it than others. Victorians were particularly aware of the ways in which such multi-directional and often uncontrollable forces—with their astounding moral and cultural potency—might at any moment as easily undermine as reinforce institutionalized systems of analysis and control. Literary representations of sexuality often served as moral edicts aimed at harnessing and channeling passions toward a middle-class directive, but just as likely (and even simultaneously) they articulated anxieties around the inevitable escape of energy, the leakage of desire. The eponymous subject of Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” (1842) is murdered because she “liked whate’er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.”<sup>3</sup> In Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s short story “Eveline’s Visitant” (1862), the heroine withers away because her desires are obsessively drawn toward “a phantasm of [her] romantic brain,” a haunting ideal disinvested from the power and control of the established order.<sup>4</sup> The servant in Algernon Swinburne’s poem “The Leper” (1866) is scorned by the afflicted heroine herself because his devotion affirms the social ostracism

that she can never imagine accepting.<sup>5</sup> In Vernon Lee's "Oke of Okehurst, or The Phantom Lover" (1890), meanwhile, Alice Oke is shot dead by a husband driven mad by the trans-historicity of her affections.<sup>6</sup> In Victorian literature, sexuality is repeatedly rendered, enjoyed, and squelched precisely because it does not simply rest within the individual, but pulses forcefully through diverse channels of relationality.

As these examples make apparent, sexuality does not rely on the human. Its drives and pulls can operate with little awareness of the sentience of the subjects and objects engaged in the networks that give shape to being and self-understanding. Oscar Wilde's 1885 poem "The Harlot's House" offers a succinct rendering of not only the common tendency to try to homogenize and direct the powers of sexuality into normative discourses, but also sexuality's inability to stay within such prescribed channels. To date, the work has primarily been read as a critique of lust and female prostitution (prostitution itself personified as female) against the backdrop of a male narrator's purer love of his female beloved. But there are certain curious ambiguities in Wilde's poem—the fact that Love herself is drawn to enter the brothel of lust, or that a "puppet" is gendered female in one stanza, while a "marionette" is referred to as "it" in the next.<sup>7</sup> The characters are all highly stylized and most are indeed puppets of desire in the tradition extending from E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" (1816), with its seductive automaton Olympia, to Rachilde's *Monsieur Venus* (1884), published a year before "The Harlot's House." Wilde's subjects come across primarily as mechanical dolls who do not possess their sexuality but have it cast upon them like shadows upon a screen.

And yet this relatively brief poem also goes out of its way to problematize a crisply constructionist reading of sexuality. Love enters into lust. Pleasure is orgiastic rather than individuated. The characters embody the sound of musical instruments that run through the piece, themselves becoming waves of aural pleasure. They are also lost elements of nature such as "black leaves wheeling in the wind." While elsewhere, they are "shadows," "ghosts," and "phantom lover[s]."<sup>8</sup> Various, multidirectional, evanescent—the characters are not individuals but, rather, whirling exchanges of passions and sensations. "The Harlot's House" operates principally as a series of urges, compulsions, and attractions driven by movement and sensuality. Perhaps not so remarkably, then, the sincerest emotion in this imaging of sexuality is that of the environment that comes to encompass the scene. The poem ends not with Love, not with the self-distancing narrator, not with a singular character at all—but with the anthropomorphized rising dawn who, "with silver-sandalled feet, /

Crept like a frightened girl.”<sup>9</sup> Enrobing all with its poly sensuality, Wilde’s dawn is not the curtain falling on the night-stage of desire but the cautious yet inevitable permeations that characterize Victorian sexuality itself.

#### NOTES

1. Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (1964; rpt. London: Routledge, 2009); Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (London: Allen Lane, 1979).
2. Vernon Lee, *The Enchanted Woods, and Other Essays on the Genius of Places* (London: John Lane, 1905), 99–100.
3. Robert Browning, “My Last Duchess,” in *Poems*, Vol. 2 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1849), 258–60, 259.
4. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, “Eveline’s Visitant,” in *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Short Stories*, ed. Dennis Denisoff (Peterborough: Broadview, 2004), 205–14, 211.
5. Algernon Swinburne, “The Leper,” in *Poems and Ballads* (London: A.C. Hotten, 1866), 137–43.
6. Vernon Lee, “Oke of Okehurst, or The Phantom Lover,” in *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (London: John Lane, 1906), 109–91.
7. Oscar Wilde, “The Harlot’s House,” in *Selected Poems of Oscar Wilde* (1885; London: Methuen, 1919), 140–43, 141, 142.
8. Wilde, “The Harlot’s House,” 140, 141.
9. Wilde, “The Harlot’s House,” 143.



## Soul

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TO many in the twenty-first century, “soul” is a residual concept—a remnant of metaphysical discourses gradually displaced in the nineteenth century by the vocabulary of the new sciences of mind such as psychiatry, psychology, and neurology.<sup>1</sup> Yet when poetry scholars Susan J. Wolfson and Herbert F. Tucker explored Romantic and Victorian gendering of soul nearly two decades ago, they opened up the concept and