Anne Lister, an early-nineteenth-century lesbian, wrote in her diary about using Byron’s poetry to seduce – or flirt with – pretty women.¹ She planned to give the fifth canto of “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” (1812) to one young woman, who, when Lister asked her if she liked Byron’s poetry, responded “yes, perhaps too well”; when the girl haunted Lister’s “thoughts like some genius of fairy lore,” she pondered sending her a Cornelian heart with a copy of Byron’s lines on the subject.² Women she knew blushed when they “admitted” to having read Don Juan (1819–1824) and spoke of being “almost afraid” to read Cain (1821).³ To one of her lovers, Lister read aloud Glenarvon (1816), Lady Caroline Lamb’s melodramatic, fictionalized version of her affair with Byron; they found it a “very dangerous sort of book.”⁴ The novel’s heroine cross-dresses, a practice women in Lister’s social circle sometimes used to woo straight women.⁵ Lister even played with performing Byronism in her romantic dalliances.⁶ Like a bold Byronic hero, she gazed on attractive women with a “penetrating countenance,” and looked “unutterable things” at them, which led them to confess to wishing she “had been a gent.”⁷ She tried to “mould” young women “to her purpose,” treating them like toys.⁸ But it wasn’t only Byron who provided Lister with ways to act on her own sexual identity. Like many in the nineteenth century who had little access to information about “deviant” types of sexuality, she read classical texts for their descriptions of same-sex desire, especially Juvenal’s Sixth Satire, with its famous lesbian orgy. She discussed them with other educated women as a covert means to figure out if they were lesbians.⁹

At the other end of the century, two lesbian poets wrote erotic texts, rather than merely reading them – or employing them for amorous purposes. Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, an aunt and niece who considered themselves married, developed a collaborative writing practice under the name Michael Field. As a “man,” they wrote with passion about the

---


² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.
lovely, sensual ways of women. In an untitled poem published in 1893, for instance, they seem to describe a girl’s soul and countenance:

Her soul a deep-wave pearl
Dim, lucent of all lovely mysteries;
A face flowered for heart’s ease,
A brow’s grace soft as seas
Seen through faint forest trees:
A mouth, the lips apart,
Like aspen-leaflets trembling in the breeze
From her tempestuous heart.10

Yet the mystery of the face acts as a double for the girl’s labia, both places linked to enigmatic nature – the deep sea and the shady forest – with an obscurity that beckons. Yopie Prins argues that Bradley and Cooper’s collaboration itself had a sexual element, and that their poetry worked as “an eroticized textual mediation” between them.11 Like Lister, Bradley and Cooper turned to the classical world to find images of their own sexuality. In their collection of lyric poems Long Ago (1889), they consciously imitate Sappho’s fragments. Prins asks a question that will be important for this chapter: “How shall we read these poems written by two women writing as a man writing as Sappho?”12

Lister, Bradley, and Cooper are somewhat special cases, in that we have a strong sense of which texts they found erotic. Discovering what reading material Victorian women – or any historical individuals – used for erotic purposes is a difficult task. Women’s sexuality has historically been subsumed under men’s, which forces the reader to look through or underneath men’s foregrounded desires to locate women’s. While traces do appear in conventional, widely available literature of the period, women’s desires and their bodies are mostly absent in the underground world of pornography, replaced by their representations by men.13 Unearthing a lost library of Victorian women’s pornography remains a dream, but I will try to pick up shadowy clues in this chapter. Terry Castle’s remarks about writing the literary history of lesbianism apply also to women’s erotic literature in the nineteenth century, in that this work means confronting, “from the start, something ghostly: an impalpability, a misting over, an evaporation, a ‘whiting out’ of possibility.”14 But, with the Victorians, this very ghostliness has sexual frisson. With such strict boundaries marking off gender roles, crossing them – making them blur or giving them a misty indeterminacy – took on its own eroticism, as we have seen with Lister performing Byronism, and Bradley and Cooper being Michael Field (being Sappho).
For Lister, books worked as erotic go-betweens; they provided a third element over which desire played between two people. Instead of risking a proposal such as “I desire you,” she used the intermediate step of expressing appetite for a book and then wondered if another woman might also relish the same book (and then perhaps Lister herself). Byron’s and Sappho’s poems came to represent desire, and their role in the real world could be to further lust between two people, to make it manifest – make it, perhaps, physical. Reading space could become erotic or sexual space, as in the famous passage in Dante’s “Inferno” (1314) in which a book draws Francesca and Paolo into bed together, rather than being an impetus for autoeroticism. Francesca explains that

> One day, to pass the time away, we read of Lancelot – how love had overcome him.
> We were alone, and we suspected nothing.
> And time and time again that reading led our eyes to meet, and made our faces pale,
> and yet one point alone defeated us.
> When we had read ow the desired smile was kissed by one who was so true a lover,
> this one, who never shall be parted from me,
> while all his body trembled, kissed my mouth.  

Seduction happened as a transfer: beginning with hunger for a book, and then from book to a second body. H.J. Jackson explores the regular practice in the nineteenth century of writing marginal notes in books in order to woo another reader – the handwriting (the “voice”) of the writer seduced the reader as she read it alone. The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge penned intimate comments in books he gave or lent to women, a romantic overture, a kind of whisper in the ear. Byron added marginalia in books for his lovers, such as Madame de Staël’s Corinne, in which he professed his love for the owner of the book, Teresa Guiccioli. John Keats wrote in an amorous letter to Fanny Brawne that he was “marking the most beautiful passages in Spenser, intending it for you.”

The theme of literature as a sexual device – to indoctrinate, flirt, tempt – runs through many nineteenth-century British novels. In Charles Dickens’s Our Mutual Friend (1865), for instance, two men compete to teach the working-class beauty Lizzie Hexam to read. Another pretty girl, Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot’s Mill on the Floss (1860), meets Philip Wakem among the Scotch fir trees, in a place called the Red Deeps. Even though she has given up books in order to subdue her will to her narrowed life, Maggie is convinced by Philip to borrow his novels, like those by Walter Scott and
Madame de Staël. He yearns to stir her passionate nature with literature, hoping to convince her to entertain his love. The young Catherine Linton in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) taunts and harasses her cousin Hareton Earnshaw with his oafish illiteracy. He steals away some of her beautiful books to learn to read, but she humiliates him when she discovers his clumsy efforts. Before long, the fighting becomes flirting over books. Eventually, the stranger Lockwood observes their growing desire:

The male speaker began to read … His handsome features glowed with pleasure, and his eyes kept impatiently wandering from the page to a small white hand over his shoulder, which recalled him by a smart slap on the cheek, whenever its owner detected such signs of inattention. Its owner stood behind; her light, shining ringlets blending, at intervals, with his brown locks, as she bent to superintend his studies; and her face – it was lucky he could not see her face, or he would never have been so steady.¹⁸

Passages in pornographic literature, as will be discussed shortly, make the book a vehicle for seduction more directly – an obviously stated link between body, book, and body.

If women who fancied other women found Byron’s poems erotic, as Lister and her lovers did, then one wonders: what other literature excited these women? The most visible relationships that stirred women readers in mainstream novels and poems involved charged, heterosexual love narratives. Evidence in women’s letters, diaries, and albums shows that Lister’s was part of a wide-scale fixation on Byronic heroes, both in Lord Byron’s poems such as “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” (1812–1818) and *The Corsair* (1814), and as represented in popular novels such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Anthony Trollope’s *The Eustace Diamonds* (1872).¹⁹ In fact, sensual agitation in response to Byronism became so commonplace that it developed into a stereotype by the middle of the nineteenth century. Blanche Ingram of *Jane Eyre* tells Rochester that a “man is nothing without a spice of the devil in him” and that she desires something of a “wild, fierce, bandit-hero.”²⁰ “An English hero of the road,” she goes on, “would be the next best thing to an Italian bandit; and that could only be surpassed by a Levantine pirate.”²¹ While Brontë intends for the reader to understand that Blanche is “showy” and “not genuine” – “she was not original: she used to repeat sounding phrases from books” – her Jane also falls for the Byronic Rochester – who isn’t exactly a bandit, but has his devilish, Bluebeard-ish side.²² Trollope’s Lizzie Eustace wants a lover who will “be rough with her” and have “fine Corsair’s eyes, full of expression and determination, eyes that could look
love and bloodshed almost at the same time.”  They long for “manly properties – power, bigness, and apparent boldness” and to be “treated sometimes with crushing severity, and at others with the tenderest love.” Female characters in Benjamin Disraeli’s *Venetia* (1837), Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871–1872), Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and many other Victorian novels yearn for similar men with mysterious and potentially cruel selves, who might be redeemed by a true love (usually the heroine who longs for him). Tales of attraction to a Byronic hero are generally interlaced with failure – either the hero loses his Byronism to become a proper mate (Rochester in *Jane Eyre*), death interrupts (Catherine Earnshaw/Linton in *Wuthering Heights* and Byron’s heroines in *The Giaour* [1813] and *Manfred* [1817]), or the Byronic hero turns out to be little more than a cad (*The Eustace Diamonds* and Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* [1848]). Byronic eroticism involves hopeless longing – for what one can’t have or what never existed.

Yet Byronism, as we have seen with Anne Lister, also came to represent same-sex desire – as did Sappho, by the end of the nineteenth century, for both men and women. Byronic literary characters found glory in transgressing codes of respectable behavior, especially those governing sexuality. In *Childe Harold*, the hero not “in virtue’s ways did take delight / But spent his days in riot most uncouth / And vex’d with mirth the drowsy ear of Night.” What finds favor with him is “revel” and “ungodly glee,” and he delights most in “concubines and carnal companie.” In *Don Juan*, the hero commits adultery, and when he dresses like a woman, men try to cajole him into sex. From its publication until today, *Manfred* has been rumored to be about incest, a reflection of Byron’s own sexual relationship with his half sister. But even deeper sexual “sins” are implied in many of Byron’s poems, the heroes ciphers on which to project one’s own outlawed desires. Andrew Elfenbein explores how homosexuality became part of the popular legend of Byron, with the belief that he had “committed the most unspeakable sexual crimes.”

Rumors about Byron being a sodomite connected his name and dandyism to deviance and scandal, although this stance had a certain attraction for many. Men like Benjamin Disraeli and Edward Bulwer-Lytton performed Byronism as a potentially risky way to climb socially, to draw attention to their literary raciness and drama. Lister knew all of this; indeed, Byron’s poem about the Cornelian heart that she planned to use was originally written to attest to his love for John Edleston. Lister found Byron’s representation of same-sex love broad enough to include her own desire for her sex.

Somewhat paradoxically, the near-compulsory gender roles of the Victorian era encouraged same-sex physical intimacies, especially between women, so representations of these bonds proliferate. Victorian women
were expected to develop close, devoted friendships with each other; expressions of the deep sentiment thought to be natural to their gender. In her exploration of female friendship, Sharon Marcus contends that anxieties about homosexuality did not emerge until the twentieth century, and the Victorians “saw no contest between what we now call heterosexual and homosexual desire.” A broader range of ways for women to be intimate with other women flourished. It was normal for women to kiss each other on the lips, to walk with their arms around each others’ waists, to sleep with their limbs entwined, and to have lifelong partnerships – often described by them and others as marriages. Through her study of hundreds of their diaries and letters, Marcus charts Victorian women’s passionate closeness to each other – their enjoyment with female friends of an amorous freedom not allowed with men who weren’t their husbands.

Thousands of depictions of erotic fascination between women dot Victorian narratives, especially the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, and Wilkie Collins. Whether or not Victorian women readers felt this erotic heat themselves is unclear, but characteristics of these relationships were borrowed by pornographers of the time, who recognized their capability to excite sexually. Some of these passages also found their way into twentieth-century anthologies of lesbian literature, so they provide a fruitful intersection of literary eroticism and lesbianism. One significant example, used by Sharon Marcus as an exemplary text of female romantic
friendship, is Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849). The novel focuses for much of its plot on two women smitten with each other, even though they ultimately marry men. Shirley’s fellowship with Caroline fuels the story with a vitality absent from the heterosexual romances. Like Bradley and Cooper’s interest in inhabiting male gender roles, Shirley (usually a man’s name at the time) calls herself “Captain Keeldar” because she was given “a man’s name; I hold a man’s position.” She goes on to say: “It is enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood … I feel quite gentlemanlike.” The two young women share a bed, gaze into each other’s eyes, kiss, and grasp hands. Caroline informs Shirley that “no passion can ultimately outrival” their love for one another: “I am supported and soothed when you – that is, you only – are near, Shirley.”

The friends marry two brothers, thus linking them forever as family. Caroline also participates in a second highly charged same-sex connection: Shirley’s governness Mrs. Pryor showers a tender adoration on Caroline. Since neither the characters nor the reader know until the last quarter of the book that the older woman is Caroline’s long-lost mother, their relationship appears to be an obsessive infatuation. With a typical gesture, Mrs. Pryor “swept Caroline’s curls from her cheek as she took a seat near her [and] caressed the oval outline.” In a passage that closely mirrors heterosexual marriage proposals in other Victorian novels, Mrs. Pryor wants to set up her life with Caroline: “With you I am happier then I have ever been with any living thing … your society I should esteem a very dear privilege – an inestimable privilege, a comfort, a blessing … I hope you can love me?” She wishes to buy a house of her own and have Caroline “come to me then.” The eroticism of these passages manages to be both platonic and subversive, both revealing and cloaking a relationship that is unassailably pure and yet fully “queer.”

The fervent physicality and gender flexibility of Shirley and Caroline’s relationship had its counterparts in Victorian pornography. Steven Marcus, in his groundbreaking study *The Other Victorians*, explores pornographers’ poaching of conventions from mainstream literature, such as sensibility from Jane Austen’s novels, what he calls “Byronic trappings,” and plot and characterization from Dickens and Thackeray. His argument can be extended to include representations of same-sex desire, especially women’s. A passage from the pornographic *A Romance of Lust* (1873–1876), for instance, closely mirrors one from Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” (1862), a popular poem written for children and adults. In the former, a girl describes her sexual experience with an older woman: “she glued her lips to it [her clitoris], and after sucking a while began to play with her tongue … She licked me most exquisitely … She sucked it for some time … Her lips were wet with the moisture that had escaped from me … and I could not help licking the creamy juice from off her lips.” In the latter, Rossetti tells the
story of a girl who becomes addicted to sucking the juices of fruit bought from sexualized goblins. She can only be saved by the sacrifice of her sister, who forces the goblins to cover her body with the sinful nectar. She runs home to her sister, who has been wasting away for the addictive drink, and calls to her to embrace her: “Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices/ … Eat me, drink me, love me; / Laura make much of me.” The caressing consumption of this stickiness off skin works as an antidote to the girl's wasting illness. In pornographic texts, women also lick, kiss, and suck each others’ bodies, but the context of sacrifice and addiction is replaced by the easy giving and receiving of pleasure.

In some cases, pornography also influenced the activities and writings of women who desired other women. Annamarie Jagose argues that Anne Lister, in her means of seducing women and in the language she used to describe her sexual activities in her diaries, draws on a “conventionally masculine pornographic tradition.” Lister had pretentions to being a writer, so she carried literary tropes – pornographic and otherwise – into her accounts of her love affairs. Yet, despite Lister’s seeming access to it, almost all of the pornographic literature of the time that can be traced – either because copies still exist or we have descriptions of it in bibliographies such as Henry Spencer Ashbee’s three-volume, approximately two-thousand-page list of erotic literature, which provides extensive plot summaries of many of the titles – was written for and by men. These volumes’ ephemerality – with their printing, publication, and sale heavily prohibited and policed, and authorities destroying them whenever they could (for instance, more than one-third of the titles on Ashbee’s list no longer exist) – makes it even more difficult for us to know how many female readers had access to them. If they did, did they enjoy them? Under what conditions did they read them? We have some evidence that men read such texts aloud in pairs or larger groups, but did women (like Lister with Glenarvon)? And if so, with whom? The only evidence I have been able to find of this is in pornography itself, where sophisticated women read aloud from pornographic works, usually in the company of men with whom they will then have sex. In *The Power of Mesmerism* (1880), for instance, Madame G. sits with two men and reads the Marquis de Sade’s *Justine* (1791) and *Juliette* (1797) “in ten volumes, with their one hundred steel plates”; *Philosopie dans le Boudoir* (1795); *Fanny Hill* (1748); *The Romance of Lust*; and others. A recurring character named Helen in the anonymous multi-volume memoir *My Secret Life*, published in the 1880s and probably mostly fictional, enjoys reading “baudy books” while the narrator, called Walter, “gama-htches” her. Further on, Walter revels in “one or two chests full of the best and baudiest books in English and French” with a female lover.
serial story in The Pearl – the complete title of which is “My Grandmother’s Tale or May’s Account of her Introductions to the Art of Love: From an Unsophisticated Manuscript Found Amongst the Old Lady’s Papers After Her Death, Supposed To Have Been Written About AD 1797” – two young, inexperienced women on a ship spring a secret drawer in a man’s cabin and pull out books “full of coloured pictures of the most lascivious evolutions of love,” in which they read about “a doctor’s exploits with a buxom young widow.” They fondle each other, although the reader knows that a man watches through a panel in the wall. Since the author of the work and its likely readers are also men, this “watching” resounds in many ways.

As with “My Grandmother’s Tale,” Victorian pornography is rife with the conceit that the author is a woman who describes her sexual experiences with men – and often also women. The male author speaks in a gendered “female” voice, and what the female speaker does and has done to her tells the reader what men want to do to, or with, women. Injecting male desires into a female voice and body is a commonplace convention of pornography, with one of the most famous examples being Fanny Hill, which takes the form of a woman’s letters to a female friend. Yet, by the early nineteenth century, such narrative cross-dressing had also become so conventional in literature of all sorts as to be almost invisible. Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders (1722) and Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress (1724) are “autobiographies” by women whose lives are full of sexual scheming. Defoe’s novels can be seen as proto-erotic when placed in the larger history of narrative gender play and erotic writing. Similarly, in Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded (1740) and Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady (1748), Samuel Richardson wrote letters in the guise of pretty young women. Many of his contemporaries saw these books as licentious, and their heroines are unrelentingly pursued by lecherous men – a theme exhaustively treated by pornographers of the time.

In some Victorian pornography, these cross-gender narratives can become so complicated that they call to mind Bradley and Cooper writing as a man writing as a woman. Layers of gender play appear most often in flagellation pornography, a formula so popular that most Victorian sub rosa texts include the birching, whipping, or beating of men, women, boys, and girls. The complexity of flogging narratives extends to their generic richness: novels; plays; poems; “histories,” like A History of the Rod; “lectures,” such as the “Experimental Lecture by Colonel Spanker on the Exciting and Voluptuous Pleasures to be Derived from Crushing and Humiliating the Spirit of a Beautiful and Modest Young Lady; As Delivered By Him in the Assembly Room of the Society of Aristocratic Flagellants”; “memoirs,” such as The Spirit of Flagellation or The Memoirs of Mrs. Hinton, Who Kept a School Many Years at Kensington … ; epistolary works, such as Sublime of
Flagellation in Letters from Lady Termagant Flaybum, of Birch-Grove, to Lady Harriet Tickletail, of Bumfiddle-Hall; and medical and scientific tracts. Byronic tropes appear in these texts more than in other pornographic writing – especially the cruel, aloof, and potentially abusive aspects of the Byronic character. Admirers in these tales exhibit a willingness to accept, and even enjoy, this dark side. Most often, female characters wield the rod and display Byronic masterfulness and aristocratic pride alternating with tender love. For instance, when the young charges of a flagellating governess in Romance of Lust first see her, they “marked the determined character of her countenance, and at once dreaded her becoming our governess, as we felt we should not only have one who would master us, but who would also be severe in every way.”46 The male speaker comments with fervent lust that she is “too stern and firm of purpose not to have bent any boy’s will to her bidding.”47

Many flogging narratives follow a formula that doesn’t lead to intercourse – the use of the “rod” becomes the central interest. Erotic fascination focuses on the buttocks of the man, woman, or child being chastised, rather than the genitals of either sex. Lingering descriptions of the exposure and vulnerability of the “white angelic orbs” proliferate, and their preparation and uncovering follow ritualistic steps. A serial narrative in The Pearl that purports to be a woman confessing her experiences with other women serves as one example out of thousands: “Unfastening her drawers, Jane drew them well down, whilst Mrs. Mansell pinned up her chemise, fully exposing the broad expanse of her glorious buttocks, the brilliant whiteness of her skin showing to perfection by the dazzling glare of the well-lighted room.”48 This obsession with a part of the body that doesn’t vary much between the genders (men’s buttocks garner the same type of description) allows for a gender mobility – readers can identify with and embody a wide array of characters, and their sexual enjoyment can move more fluidly among genders and body parts.

Steven Marcus remarks that, in flagellation pornography, “anybody can be or become anybody else, and the differences between the sexes are blurred and confused … The ambiguity of sexual identity seems in fact to be part of the pleasure that this fantasy yields.”49 More than any other type of Victorian literature, these texts are peopled with characters who cross-dress, display androgynous or opposite-gender traits, or parade an unreal hypersexuality. A performative aspect pervades these stories, with both the flogger and the one being chastised taking on different roles, usually self-consciously so. A passage from My Secret Life provides a useful example. Set in a flagellation brothel in London, the scenario is arranged in advance by the narrator, Walter, with the “abbess” of the establishment. Masked, Walter enters a room in which a half-masked man, kneeling on a large chair, bends over the foot of a bed. The man
wears a “woman’s dress tucked up to his waist, showing his naked rump and thighs, with his feet in male socks and boots. On his head was a woman’s cap tied carefully round his face to hide his whiskers.” A woman standing behind him is dressed as a topless ballet dancer, and another – called Miss Yellow for the color of her hair, and naked except for boots and stockings – wields the rod. The man asks to see Walter’s penis; Walter complies with this, but not with the man’s desire to touch it. The abbess says to the man, “Now she shall whip you, you naughty boy.”50 As the man is being flogged, Walter sexually stimulates him with his hand, until he has an orgasm. A fourth woman in the room (Walter’s current lover) watches, and later repairs to a different room with Walter for further sexual escapades.

What does this passage perform? For the first-person narrator Walter, the sexual tourist and voyeur, it is a theatrical tableau; he pays to watch the man being chastised perform his desire, which involves dressing up like a woman in a humiliating situation and being controlled by paid women who take masculinized roles (Miss Yellow, whom Walter describes as “a bold, insolent looking bitch,” and the abbess; the ballerina is strongly feminized, but seems to signal the theatrical aspect of the whole). The “client” arranges to be watched by a man, who takes a masculinized, controlling role, and to interact with him sexually. Gender here feels dream-like, a magic lantern show that can be overlaid, like colored lights, onto bodies. The fourth woman holds an especially evocative place. Her position as a watcher on the sidelines of a drama not about her works figuratively for women’s minimal role in the sexually explicit book trade. But Anne Lister also comes to mind, as a reader who transforms what she finds in books into an active identity, thus becoming an agent of her own desire.

As other critics have pointed out, Steven Marcus ignores women’s desire in his writings on pornography.51 He comments that the “entire immense literature of flagellation produced during the Victorian period, along with the fantasies it embodied and the practices it depicted, represents a kind of last-ditch compromise with and defense against homosexuality.”52 By this he means male homosexuality, of course, leaving out at least half of the population. Another odd quality about this argument – that flagellation pornography is a desperate attempt to mask, even while it represents, homosexuality – is that in much of the pornography of the period, same-sex acts – both male and female – flourished, completely unmasked. While most Victorians would not have understood these passages as “homosexual” – as defined in the twentieth century – they enjoyed them as titillating gender-cross play, similar to the pleasure found by Lister, Bradley, and Cooper with their gender-fluid writings and activities. In stories in The Pearl, for instance, two men have sex between each other’s thighs while looking at pictures in
Erotic Bonds Among Women in Victorian Literature

*Fanny Hill* (which has a famous passage of women having sex with each other); there is “An Adventure with a Tribade [lesbian]; Related in a Letter From A Young Lady to Her Sister”; and women use strapped-on India rubber dildoes (which they call “godemiches”) that are “charged with a creamy compound of gelatine [sic] and milk” to penetrate other women at an all-female orgy. The *The Romance of Lust* is an especially rich source for same-sex activity. One Miss Frankland has a heavy pelt of hair covering her thighs and most of her torso, and such a large clitoris that she uses it to penetrate other women. The main character of the book has a sexual relationship with his uncle, who prefers men’s anus to any other sort of orifice: “Of course this was an old letch of his [anal sex with men], which his position as schoolmaster had given him so many opportunities of indulging in, and the still greater pleasure of initiating others in it.”

Walter, the narrator of *My Secret Life*, can hardly believe it when he meets a “sod,” who tells him that some men are “fond of a bit of brown” and use dildos on each other. But eventually he develops an obsessive craving to handle, “frig,” and eventually suck another man’s penis. Becoming acquainted with a young house painter in need of money, Walter suspects he is “an overfrigged bugger, who could no longer come,” which bothers him. But then he indulges anyway, and “could not sleep for having frigged a man.” Despite a feeling of queasiness with these acts, Walter continues to pay the man for sex. He dresses him in silk stockings, and eventually, in a sort of mad swoon of desire, “buggers” him. At first Walter loathes himself and the painter, but for a long time his “mind ran on anus and nothing else,” and he has sex with numerous men. One of Walter’s earliest erotic experiences is spying on women having sex with each other. As a young man, he begins to understand that, just as he enjoys his cousin’s penis, “some women find similar pleasures with their own sex.” He soon develops an interested knowledge in “the Lesbian games,” especially what he calls “flat fucking.”

Sometimes, when he meets women, he feels that his “observation, experience, and almost instinct” tells him that “they were tribades.” Unsure about the morality of such activities at first, he ultimately decides that pleasure has its own rules: “Why should not men have each other’s bums if they liked, why not women rub cunts together if it’s pleasure to them?”

The libertine philosophy espoused by Walter runs through most Victorian-era pornography. This utopian vision of gender and sexuality – that gender and genitalia don’t matter when it comes to pleasure – fits within Stephen Marcus’s theory of “pornotopia.” In this utopia, men always have erections when they want, women enthuse and are at all times ready for anything, and orgasms occur at the perfect moment (and repeatedly and simultaneously). While situations, places, and persons might vary, sameness and
repetition of acts and experiences rule. What is to be found in entering into
the woman’s (or man’s) body should not be mysterious and unplumbable,
but always more or less the familiar and expected. This literature of the
finite and known contrasts sharply with the yearning for the unknowable
that is part of Byronism. With the former, desire is satiated; but with the lat-
ter, desire remains open, variable, and constant. In some ways, the utopia
of pornography is matched by the homoeroticism of what Sharon Marcus
calls the “plot of female amity” in Victorian novels, which runs alongside
and promotes the heterosexual marriage plot. Compared to the misunder-
standings and obstacles that spring up between the heterosexual lovers –
which in some cases follow the dystopia of Byronism – “the bond between
female friends, in contrast, is either established before the novel begins or
coalesces almost instantaneously, intensifies almost effortlessly, and can be
expressed clearly and openly.” Yet all three of these literary representations
followed pre-established formulas, and readers consumed them to encoun-
ter the plots and emotions they already knew.

Victorian women who did read pornography probably found themselves
identifying with a range of characters, genders, and positions – as did Lister,
Bradley, and Cooper. Some creativity and imagination would have been
needed to assume a part in this male world. Such active reading and gender
mobility would not have been hard to sustain with Victorian pornography,
with its active transgression of such rules and other taboos (such as incest).
Equally important, however, are the passages of female homoeroticism to be
found everywhere in Victorian novels, which didn’t subvert social norms. As
Sharon Marcus puts it, they were ways of exploiting the play of the system,
openly and without subterfuge. If the library of Victorian women’s erotic or
pornographic fiction could be found, would it be dystopic? What role would
friendship and collaboration play in it?

NOTES

1 Annamarie Jagose warns of projecting our understanding of lesbian identity
onto nineteenth-century people or literary characters. She discusses Anne Lister
in this light, and Miss Wade from Dickens’s *Little Dorrit*, who sets up house
with another woman and has been read as a lesbian by numerous literary critics.
See Annamarie Jagose *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of

2 Anne Lister, *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister 1791–1840*. Helena
Whitbread, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 42. See also *No Priest
(Otley: Smith Settle, 1992) and Jill Liddington, *Female Fortune: Land, Gender and
Authority: The Anne Lister Diaries and Other Writings, 1833–36* (London: Rivers
For instance, Lister tells of her friend “putting on regimentals and flirting with a lady under the assumed name of Captain Cowper” (290). See also 293.

Andrew Elfenbein, in his work on Lister, discusses her Byronic performances in the context of men signaling their desire for other men by being Byronic. See *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 247–9.

Lister, 74, 78.

Ibid., 72, 192.


Ibid., 74.


Quoted in Jackson, 182.


William St. Clair explains that the majority of commonplace books of the period have excerpts of Byron’s poems, showing that he was treasured, by women especially, as the poet of “long-suffering constant tragic love” (10). “The Impact of Byron’s Writings: An Evaluative Approach,” *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, Andrew Rutherford, ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 1–25. See also Elfenbein; Francis Wilson, ed., *Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); and Deborah Lutz, *The Dangerous Lover: Gothic Villains, Byronism, and the Nineteenth-Century Seduction Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006).

Ibid., 247.

29 Sharon Marcus, 58.


32 Brontë, Shirley, 243.

33 Ibid., 391.


36 Jagose, 14.


This policing occurred in multiple ways. Most Victorians accessed their books through subscription services, the most famous being Mudies. Such services developed a great power over publishers, and thus authors. If Mudies and similar companies refused to order a newly published book, it would have a difficult time reaching the public, leading publishers to carefully mark what Mudies preferred before they agreed to publish a manuscript. Mudies had a narrow sense of what was morally sound. Additionally, various laws and groups, especially the Society for the Suppression of Vice, led to publishers being prosecuted and even jailed for printing “indecent” material. See Sigel, especially chapters 1 and 3, and McCalman, chapter 10.

Erotic Bonds Among Women in Victorian Literature


For instance, Algernon Charles Swinburne describes reading de Sade's La Nouvelle Justine aloud to Dante Gabriel Rossetti and George Boyce. See the letter Swinburne wrote to Richard Monckton Milnes (Lord Houghton) dated August 18, 1862, in The Swinburne Letters, Cecil Y. Lang, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), vol. 1, 54. A good deal of collective reading and collaborative writing of pornography happened among this group.


In another passage of My Secret Life, the narrator tries to seduce a young woman by showing her the frontispiece of Fanny Hill (with its sexually explicit pictures) and then lending the whole book to her (589).


A few examples, of many, are Memoirs of a Russian Princess: Gleaned from her Secret Diary (1890); Love and Safety; or Love and Lasciviousness with Safety and Secrecy: A Lecture, Delivered with Practical Illustrations by The Empress of Asturia (The Modern Sappho), Assisted by Her Favourite Lizette and Others, To many Ladies, From Youngest to Oldest ... (1896); The Convent School, or Early Experiences of A Young Flagellant, By Rosa Belinda Coote (1898); and Confessions of Madame Vestris in a Series of Familiar Letters to Handsome Jack (1899).

Potter, 153.

Ibid., 219.

The Pearl, 48.

Steven Marcus, 257, 259.

My Secret Life, 2196–8.

See especially Sharon Marcus, 142.

Steven Marcus, 260.

The Pearl, 41, 296, 198–203.

The Romance of Lust, 255. Other Victorian pornographic texts that depict same-sex sexuality openly include Letters from a Friend in Paris (n.d.); The Sins of the Cities of the Plain (1881); Teleny, or the Reverse of the Medal (1893); Rosa Fielding, or A Victim of Lust (1867); Randiana, or Excitable Tales: Being the Experiences of an Erotic Philosopher (1884); and the periodical The Boudoir (c.1880s).

My Secret Life, 1151.

Ibid., 1562–3.

Ibid., 334.


My Secret Life, 2155.

Ibid., 2155.

Steven Marcus, 268.
See Kate Flint for a discussion of late-nineteenth-century short stories and poetry written by New Women, some of them lesbians, about one-sided same-sex desire on urban streets. “‘The hour of pink twilight’: Lesbian Poetics and Queer Encounters on the Fin-de-Siècle Street,” *Victorian Studies* 51.4 (2009), 687–712.

Sharon Marcus, 82.