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Huggins, Mike, Exploring the backstage of Victorian respectability. Journal of Victorian Culture 2016 . pp. 1-8.

Peter Andersson's argument that in recent decades scholars have devoted disproportionate attention to the disciplining, repressive and civilizing discourses of the Victorian period is highly welcome, not least because it reminds us that the sources chosen to be read and the way they are interpreted by the historian always shapes the narrative and resultant images of the Victorian Age. I share his view that an over-reliance on metropolitan, elitist, and, not least, exclusively British sources has done a disservice to the field, as has the overemphasis on the work of canonical writers such as Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault or Pierre Bourdieu, which recognises their strengths while failing to understand their limitations. Despite the long-standing debates over Victorian 'values',¹ their continued sustained and highly selective readings and interpretations, whether liberal and conservative, have seen a continued emphasis on themes relating to aspects of civility, respectability, hard work, repression and self-restraint, and an over-reliance upon literary and more widely-published texts. This has often persuaded many (but not all) early career researchers from exploring other less-studied aspects of what was, as Andersson points out, a multifaceted and complex society and culture.

Many studies have foregrounded the work of those more respectable and civilising Victorian cultural groups who dominated the media, and formed associations and societies to foster their beliefs. Such groups contained members of all classes, and should be conceptualised more in terms of their particular attitude to behaviour, ideology and leisure practice, and had much in common with what Cunningham has called 'leisure cultures', existing in indeterminate and relativized harmony with personal subjectivities.² Groups such as the self-improving rationalist and secular reformist groups and the

religious reformist leisure cultures rooted in nonconformity and the evangelical Church of England were active in emphasising civility and the need for restraint. Their discursive material was certainly dominant, and in forms which are still heavily overrepresented in the British Library and the local archives departments. It should be noted too that much of such source material was produced in or close to London by and for a metropolitan middle class. I suspect that scholars who have tried to stress aspects that resisted or ignored these dominant historiographical discourses, or stressed Victorian pleasure and hedonism, found exactly those difficulties Andersson suggests in establishing themselves on what he calls 'the backstage' of Victorian Studies.

Like Andersson, I have found the same in-balance on a number of occasions, when exploring leisure themes such as horseracing, associated with absenteeism from work, closing of factories for race weeks, gambling, heavy drinking and boisterous crowds, yet a far more popular sport than any other in Britain right through the Victorian period, with crowds drawn from across *all* classes, generations and ages, and far exceeding those at the now more popular soccer or rugby. Horse racing successfully resisted almost all repressive attacks upon it.³ The same in-balance surfaced when I began to research my recent book *Vice and the Victorians* and this provides a useful lens through which to view Andersson's paper.⁴ Despite the current emphasis on disciplining, repressive and civilizing discourses and the many secondary works which address different elements of 'vice', historians hitherto appear to have been averse to bringing these elements together for the purpose of study. This is surprising, since debates about 'vice' were so widespread and common in Victorian archives that it is clear that 'vice' was something regularly thought about, and central to an understanding of the Victorians, both reflecting and affecting their imagination.

Modern secondary studies with 'vice' in the title are conspicuous by their absence, though there are plenty of works whose titles included the words 'vice-chancellor', 'vice-admiral' or 'vice-President'. One Victorian 'secret vice', masturbation, for example, has only been studied through fiction and medical culture.⁵ Vice appears then to be 'the dark side', a place of danger and shame, clearly not fit for historians.⁶ Yet, 'vice' is a fluid and slippery concept, context-dependent, and its discourses and language certainly needed much exploration, as did its relationship to virtue, respectability and social reform. One man's abhorrent licentious 'vices' could be another man's simple habitual 'pleasures'. Perception was all. But in reading the secondary material on vice's themes, however defined, it was clear that the balance of scholarly work has always been on the social and moral reform of 'vice' rather than vice itself, the behaviours associated with it, and the ways in which vice's multiple definitions related to more everyday practices and perspectives during the period.

Across the Victorian period there were regular debates over gambling, the drinking of alcohol, and sexual pleasures outside marriage, all with peaks and troughs. There were regular attempts to discipline and constrain their public forms. But in secondary studies over the past years the predominant emphasis, with comparatively rare exceptions, has been on the various anti-drink movements, from moral persuasion and teetotalism to the Alliance prohibitionists, on Liberal support and the various licencing Acts, the brewing industry, the regulation of drinking space, or the Bands of Hope and other anti-drinking groups.⁷ Contemporary statistics have been heavily drawn upon, but are deeply unreliable with significant yearly variation because of the problems of changing definitions over time, local attitudes, different policing approaches, and the peaks and troughs of reformist pressures. Yet despite the many caveats, such figures are still regularly reproduced. There was much less

on drinking cultures, the popular pleasures of drink and public house conviviality, or its role in occupational identities.⁸

There have been significant secondary studies of the problematics of working-class gambling, governmental anti-gambling reform legislation, or on the work of the National Anti-Gambling League.⁹ By contrast there has been almost nothing on the substantial extent of the enjoyments of gambling by the Victorian middle classes, despite the popularity of the London Stock Exchange Derby sweep, and many other office sweeps on major races, or the existence of legal credit betting offices across Britain from the 1870s catering for middle-class betting, or the significant numbers of the middle-classes attending race meetings across Britain.

There is a substantial secondary literature on the regulation and disciplining of prostitution, on the Contagious Diseases Acts, W.T. Stead, the vigilance associations, and on Oscar Wilde's problems. In recent years there have been approaches from feminist and 'queer studies' scholars exploring issues relating to sexual orientation and gender identity. Likewise Arthur Munby's diaries have been over-heavily and are still trawled for his sexual relationship with Hannah Colwick, the Shropshire-born maid of all work whom he secretly married, and are regularly claimed as providing key historical information about the lives of working-class Victorian women, despite their actual voices usually remaining unheard.¹⁰ We still know very little about prostitutes' clients too, and even less about actual sexual lives during the period.

All this supports Andersson's relatively modest suggestion that the research agenda needs to be widened and the source base extended, with a better awareness of its limitations. I share Andersson's view that the ways in which the sources have been used offer 'a skewed perspective' but would also

want to push it a little further beyond his argument that the sources used 'prohibit the possibility of reaching the underdog perspective' or those of 'marginalised groups' (445). The Victorian press gave much coverage in its columns to sermons, anti-vice organizations, activities, publications, reports and political meetings, attacking and attempting to repress behaviours deemed problematical, and regularly reported the prosecutions of evil-doers. The reformist groups were culturally powerful, vociferous and possessed cultural capital and much assertive zeal, even where assertions often avoided evidence and reasoned argument. They had a clear and confident belief in moral absolutes and their own moral superiority though evidence of their active membership suggests that such supporters were relatively few in number. It was their loud voices and domination of print and literary sources that gave the impression of widespread support, a view now accepted as the norm. A wider trawl for material might allow an exploration not just of the 'underdog', but of those aspects of culture that went on largely unseen, those people who might have drunk, gambled or simply enjoyed their sexuality, or lived lives of wily opportunism in ways that reformers might have disapproved of, but were unwilling to enter into a print debate where the reformers occupied the moral high ground. These were never explicitly marginalised but were less often heard.

That is why, for example, anything seen in print by others was usually phrased in a manner calculated not to cause offence to readers, most certainly, though that did not stop editors or novelists addressing such material in careful ways. Where readership was largely middle class, vice was projected as something found only amongst the lower working class and the upper class. Writers were unwilling to expose themselves to attack without good reason. We certainly too need better insight into the ways uncritical use of police

statistics and prosecutions can skew interpretation, and not just in terms of slum dwellers, as Andersson mentions, but far more widely. The Victorian police might appear to have been active in imposing certain types of values, but they saw working-class behaviour through working-class eyes and the practical realities of policing meant that they responded to behaviour contingently. A particular response would be situational, but also highly dependent on the changing attitudes of senior officers and the local bench to particular legislation, or pressure coming from complaints in the press. There are also many examples where surviving divisional police responses to a reformer's letter to the press offered a very different cultural reading of the same set of experiences, behaviours and appearances, and argued that the complaints were highly exaggerated. The police might well have been defending themselves but it is equally possible that reformers were often cultural outsiders bringing in interpretative frames that had no understanding of local context. We need to do much more to disentangle, compare and contrast such differences of interpretation. Local policemen had their own understandings of their locality.¹¹ The policeman's gaze was highly selective, choosing what might be sensibly ignored for a wide variety of reasons, and what should be responded to. And middle-class misbehaviour was often treated differently by police. Middle-class drunks, for example, might be put in a cab and sent home after a tip was proffered, rather than arrested.

We have to remember that then as now what people said publicly, and how they behaved privately, were not the same. Rules and codes of conduct often vary with context. Andersson talks about 'civilizing masks' (452). Peter Bailey, who described himself as 'working on the margins' by exploring the meanings of popular pleasure, talked more about roles and performances, of people calculatedly adopting the surface trappings of appropriate behaviour

and appearance for a particular context.¹² Many people had the ruses and stratagems to easily move in or out of role. Either way, historians need to do more to explore the backstage of Victorian life. We need to think far more broadly than we do at present. This means cutting right across the spectrum of class and other forms of identity, including gender, generation, Tory or Liberal political orientation, attitude to faith, and ethnicity. As Andersson says, 'plebeian women were seldom given a voice... in Victorian studies' (442) but the same goes for middle-class unrespectable women. We need to do more to identify which groups might have been repressed and constrained and to what extent, and when and where they were and were not. The existence of the rhetoric of restraint is clear, but its actual impact is much less so. Some people may have ignored it, too bound up in their own concerns and agendas to challenge it, or dismissed such views as prudish, old-fashioned and hysterical, and there may have been larger numbers of regenerates that at first appear. We know a great deal about the domestic culture of some of the middle classes, because they wrote about it in some detail. But how typical that was is much less clear.

My own view is that the issues of civility and restraint were situational, most effective in certain occupational contexts, amongst members of a church congregation or in respectable homes with respectable neighbours. Yet these issues were culturally contested, incorporating contradictions and involving multiple, diverse and individual responses and interpretations. There were, for example, many spatial contexts where repression had far less effect. These included not just the slums, so often discussed, but music halls and variety theatres, sports and pleasure grounds, racecourses and fairs. People also behaved differently when away from home, in distant towns, and the seaside or foreign lands.

Andersson makes another appeal, for Victorian studies to extend its toolbox of methodologies and sources to place more emphasis on visual material, and non-verbal culture. This would certainly help expand the archive which is still text-dominated. This is the more surprising since from the 1990s onwards the visual arts have been the preferred media used by post-modern approaches, yet the vast majority of visual sources have, as he points out, yet to be explored by historians. Many Victorian magazines, from *The Day's Doings* to *Punch*, include many pictures and cartoons which hold up to readers' amusement the less civilized behaviour of their middle-class readers, yet Victorian cartoons are still an under-exploited source, though Foucault surfaces even here.¹³

Likewise, Victorian narrative paintings, such as Frith's *Derby Day*, like many of the painters themselves, often subvert the dominant discourses. Frith's *Derby Day* shows the large crowd bent on gambling, eating and drinking, flirting and other sensual pleasures, with no sense of moral danger, even if he also draws on ideas of physiognomy, phrenology and social types in his painting.¹⁴ There is a wide range of available methodologies available for exploitation, including semiology, discourse analysis, content analysis, psychoanalysis, content analysis or audience and reception studies, alongside the more usual use of visual sources as empirical evidence. There is much out there waiting to be explored: early film, advertisements, book illustrations, flags, standards, paintings, photographs, engravings and cartoons and material objects such as gravestones or clothing. Victorian cartoons, for example, adopt a variety of codes, involving features such as satire, irony, playfulness or paradox, and were often open for ambiguous interpretation. They captured the attitudes, foibles and prejudices about behaviour of their readers (and the cartoonists) and open up new insights into the Victorian world.¹⁵ Since reading

Andersson's material I can feel the enthusiasm building to revisit this material and read this much more against the current grain.

Yet the agenda could and should be pushed a little further still. In this digital age the toolbox of Victorian Studies should also be expanding in other ways too. Certainly there are many acknowledged pitfalls and drawbacks to using digital archives. But they can extend the boundaries of research in powerful new ways, ask new questions and make new links and arguments, as the Digital Forum in this journal made clear in 2012.¹⁶ Older studies can be re-examined with fresh data and perspectives.¹⁷ The mechanics of newspaper research, for example, are now changed as more Victorian data bases, such as *Gale's 19th Century British Library Newspapers* or the *Times Digital Archive* come on line, searchable by keyword.¹⁸ Other material such as the *Database of Mid-Victorian Illustration* or *Google Books* all expands the amount of print culture available. It has become easier to move beyond the exclusively British and often London-based sources to explore other material on-line. Non-commercial newspaper projects such as *Chronicling America*, New Zealand's *Papers Past* or Australia's *Trove*, are now appearing. More importantly perhaps, court records are beginning to come on-line. The *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, for example, allow the historian to hear the voices of the past, and open a fresh window into popular culture. New forms of text mining and more aggressively quantitative content analysis focusing on the counting of culture, dubbed 'culturomics', are also beginning to spread.¹⁹ Fred Gibbs and Dan Cohen have been using the titles of millions of books in the long nineteenth century to examine changes in Victorian attitudes to topics such as crises of faith, science and industry, and argue that it should be possible to move seamlessly between traditional and computational methods as demanded by our research interests and the evidence available to us.²⁰

Finally, we need to avoid the danger of imposing our own views of deviance and misbehaviour on the Victorians and seeking out only those sources that support them, severely constraining our understandings. While Andersson lists a number of 'received notions' and 'unfounded misapprehensions' about the Victorians that still 'insufficiently challenged', or need qualification (442), there are many others to be included. The multiple discursive representations of respectability, for example, and the ways in which the term was used, subverted and exploited in Victorian life, cry out for far more work than hereto is the case. This journal has already begun to make a contribution to such studies. I look forward with real hope for its continuance.

¹ Eric M. Sigsworth (ed.), *In Search of Victorian Values Aspects of Nineteenth Century Thought and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); Gordon Marsden (ed.), *Victorian Values: Personalities and Perspectives in Nineteenth Century Society* (London: Addison Wesley Longman, 1990); Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

² Hugh Cunningham, 'Leisure and Culture', in F. L. M. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950 Vol. 2. People and Their Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.279-340.

³ Mike Huggins, *Flat Racing and British Society 1790-1914* (London: Frank Cass, 2000).

⁴ Mike Huggins, *Vice and the Victorians* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁵ Diane Mason, *The Secret Vice: Masturbation in Victorian Fiction and Medical Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

⁶ Drew D. Grey, *London's Shadows: The Dark Side of the Victorian City* (London: Continuum, 2010)

⁷ Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England, 1815-1872* (first published 1971; 2nd. edn., Keele: Keele University Press, 1994); A. E. Dingle, *The Campaign for Prohibition in Victorian England. The UK Alliance 1872-1895* (London: Croom Helm, 1980); W. R. Lambert, *Drink and Sobriety in Victorian Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1983); Lillian Lewis Shiman, *The Crusade against Drink in Victorian England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988); R.G. Wilson and T.R. Gourvish (eds), *The Dynamics of the International Brewing Industry Since 1800* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); John Greenaway, *Drink and British Politics Since 1830: A Study in Policy Making* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003); David W. Gutzke, *Pubs and Progressives: Reinventing the Public House in England 1896-1960* (DeKalb Il.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006).

⁸ John Burnett, *Liquid Pleasures: A Social History of Drinks in Modern Britain* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Susan Margaret Kling, "Spare Time: Pub Culture in Nineteenth Century London: A Social and Cultural History of Working-Class Pub Patronage" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2001). Paul Jennings, *The Public House in Bradford 1770-1970* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1995).

⁹ David Dixon, *From Prohibition to Regulation: Bookmaking, Anti-Gambling and the Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). Roger Munting, *An Economic and Social History of Gambling in Britain and the USA* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); David Miers, *Regulating Commercial Gambling: Past Present and Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004);

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- ¹⁰ See for example, Cathy Carter, "Arthur Munby and Hannah Cullwick: The Collision of Culture, Psychology, and Story" (Ph.D. University of Louisiana, 2009); Diane Atkinson, *Love and Dirt: The Marriage of Arthur Munby and Hannah Cullwick* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).
- ¹¹ Guy Woolnough, 'Bloodsports in Victorian Cumbria: Policing Social Change', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 19, 3 (2014), 278-294.
- ¹² Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp .ix, 30-46.
- ¹³ Alan Mckinlay, 'Following Foucault into the archives: clerks, careers and cartoons', *Management & Organizational History*, 8,2 (2013), 137-154.
- ¹⁴ Mary Cowling, 'The Artist as Anthropologist in Mid-Victorian England: William Powell Frith's *Derby Day*, the *Railway Station* and the New Science of Mankind', *Art History* 6, 2 (1983), 461-77.
- ¹⁵ Mike Huggins, 'Cartoons and Comic Periodicals 1841-1901: A Satirical Sociology of Victorian Sporting Life', in Mike Huggins and J. A. Mangan (eds), *Disreputable Pleasures: Less Virtuous Victorians At Play* (Abingdon: Frank Cass, 2004), pp. 124-152
- ¹⁶ See James Mussell, 'Nineteenth Century Newspapers in the Digital Age', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 17,2 (2012), 221 and articles following by Lauren Brake, Dallas Liddle and Bob Nicholson.
- ¹⁷ See for example Patrick Leary, 'Googling the Victorians', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 10, 1 (2005), 72-86.
- ¹⁸ See Dallas Liddle, 'Reflections on 20,000 Victorian Newspapers: Distant Reading The Times using The Times Digital Archive', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 17,2 (2012), 230-237.
- ¹⁹ Bob Nicholson, 'Counting Culture: or How to Read Victorian Newspapers', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 17,2 (2012), 238-46.
- ²⁰ Fred W. Gibbs and Daniel Cohen, 'A Conversation with Data: Prospecting Victorian Words and Ideas', *Victorian Studies*, 54, 1, (2011), 69-77; See also dancohen.org/2010/10/04/searching-for-the-victorians/ accessed 13.7.2016.