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## Review of Sex Scandal, The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction

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*Duke University*

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**William A. Cohen, *Sex Scandal, The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction*  
(Duke University Press, 1996)**

I feel I should begin with a warning: 'this review contains material which some readers may find offensive'. I apologize, but it is not my fault.

The book centres on the relation between sex scandals and literature. Cohen believes that Victorian England was a 'culture of scandal' - a culture in which we still live - in which people were preoccupied with sexual behaviour but at the same time unable to admit it. Sex was simultaneously fascinating and unspeakable. The result was the evolution of a sort of double-think or linguistic code, through which sexual matters could be at once discussed and disclaimed. He examines two famous Victorian scandals - the Boulton and Park trial, in which two young homosexuals were prosecuted for transvestism and sodomy, and the Oscar Wilde case. He is able to show that in both the combination of prurient interest and puritanical prudery led to a coded language which enabled the public to read between the lines and understand what was going on while pretending not to. He relates this ambivalent (and hypocritical) attitude to two sex scandals in fiction, those of Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (she is innocent but public opinion condemns her without anything being clearly expressed) and of Lizzie Eustace in Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* (where the heroine is not innocent).

But what really interests Cohen is the light this sheds on Victorian fiction in general. Is it possible to find coded references to sexual practices (especially aberrant sexual practices) in works which have so far been taken to be about quite other matters?

Indeed it is. And here Mr Cohen, the bit between his teeth, leaps over the top and is soon deep in a quagmire fighting for his life. Sex, it turns out, is absolutely everywhere. 'One of the nineteenth-century novel's *principal accomplishments* is to formulate a literary language that expresses eroticism even as it designates sexuality the supremely unmentionable subject' (italics mine).

The first example he chooses is *Great Expectations*. Under the pretence of writing about a young man growing up, meeting people and coming to understand himself, he maintains, Dickens is really writing about masturbation and homosexuality. All we need to do is to discover the code used by Dickens and we shall be able to read this concealed meaning correctly. ALL allusions to bulges in trousers (ostensibly caused by bread and butter being taken to the convict Magwitch) are meant to suggest erections. And since hands play an essential part in masturbation, any mention of hands has a covert meaning, especially when put into the pocket. Masturbation can be rather messy, so any case of dirt or fluid or embarrassment or shame clearly has the same meaning. The way male characters touch each other (note how often they shake hands!) is erotically charged. Magwitch is a pederast, and the boxing match between Pip and Herbert Pocket is a disguised sexual encounter. And so we come to realize that, if read in the right way, *Great Expectations* is 'a contest between the overtly heterosexual (though largely abstemious) tale that is told, and the frenzied non-normative thematics

inscribed in the narrative voice' (this phraseology, by the way, is typical of Cohen's style).

Is any of this remotely plausible? I think not, for the following reasons. First, a total lack of evidence. If Cohen could quote a single writer of the nineteenth century (as Dickens might have written privately to Forster) saying anything like: 'I have managed to talk about a taboo subject by using a symbolic language that only the initiated will understand' - then we should have a reason to look for clues. But there is not a whisper of such a statement. On the contrary, writers often complain that they are unable to mention certain topics because of convention and censorship (e.g., Dostoevsky was bitterly frustrated at not being able to say that Stavrogin in *The Possessed* was a child-rapist. Stendhal wanted his readers to know that the hero of *Armance* was impotent, but couldn't tell them). If a symbolic language had been available would they not have used it? Or were Russia and France less advanced in this respect than England?

Secondly, it would mean a complete revision of everything we know about Dickens, who was exceptionally reserved on the subject of sex and did not even use what license was allowed him, let alone seek to challenge it. Thackeray was more interested in sexual behaviour, and managed to tell his readers a lot more.

Thirdly, the use of any code or symbolic system of reference presupposes that it is shared by the encoder and the decoder. There is no such thing as a private code (except, say, in a diary which is not meant to be deciphered). Dickens was highly optimistic if he expected his readers to guess that there was a code at all, let alone what it meant (*Great Expectations* indeed - perhaps the title was the signal; Mr Cohen missed that one).

This is not to say that the literature of the past is not full of sexual innuendo and *double-entendre*. That is obvious. These innuendoes, however - even those of Sterne, which are the closest parallels - are always expressed according to an accepted convention, whether for comic or erotic effect. But (fourthly) the symbolic language postulated by Cohen is anachronistic and in my opinion unthinkable before Freud. What is being appealed to here is Freudian symbolism of the *unconscious*. In dreams, in slips of the tongue, in involuntary images (said Freud) we reveal the sexual preoccupations which our conscious minds repress. The food down the trousers, the hands in the pockets, could well figure (perhaps they do) in a Freudian case-history. But they would have been impossible for anyone in 1860 to formulate and deliberately employ. (This seems to me to be true whether one believes Freud or not.)

One might add a fifth reason, one which is suggested by Cohen's own book, which documents at great length the way sexual scandals were reported in the press, and which refers copiously to literature on sexual topics (in one footnote he cites five books on masturbation). So sex was not all that 'unmentionable'. Even discounting pornography, which was published in huge quantities (though surreptitiously), medical texts would have been available to those who wanted them, and such writers as Havelock Ellis dealt with sexual matters for a fairly general public. To the student of history or literature very little was actually forbidden. In 1867 the Rev. Alexander Dyce could happily edit and publish the works of Christopher Marlowe includ-

ing his translation of Ovid's *Amores*, as explicit as anything in *Playboy* today. True, these books were not read aloud in the family circle, but if you wanted to read seriously about sex you could.

After *Great Expectations*, the chapter on *The Mill on the Floss* comes as rather an anticlimax. Cohen has interesting things to say about the role of public opinion - its prejudices, its injustices and its lack of moral discrimination. He draws attention to the contrast between the public opinion within the book and the public opinion of Eliot's readership. One can agree with him too about the blurring of gender roles, the 'feminization' of Stephen and 'masculinization' of Maggie. But he oddly fails to grapple with the issue of sexuality in the novel, where some of us feel Eliot could have said rather more than she does. Clearly, no symbolic code occurred to her. Instead, Cohen is more interested in the fact that Eliot, a woman, is writing under a male pseudonym and adopting the stance of a male narrator. 'Who has not felt the beauty of a woman's arm', he (she) asks. Does this indicate a lesbian side to Eliot's nature? She certainly had lesbian admirers. Cohen is intrigued by the possibility, but lets it drop.

The chapter on Trollope has much of interest to say about the equation of sex with property, a woman's attractions being a commodity whose value is controlled by legal and social sanctions. Lizzie's jewel box (you will not by now be surprised to hear) stands for the female genitalia.

The chapter on Wilde is the best in the book because at last Cohen finds a subject that matches his inclination and insights. In the Wilde 'scandal', as nowhere else, sex and literature, symbol and reality, encoded message and decoded meaning, come together. For Wilde really did encode sexuality in his works. His readers were meant to understand it, and they did understand it. At the trial *The Portrait of Mr W. H.* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were used as evidence against him, and much turned upon the question of what was art and what was fact.

The excellence of this chapter makes it all the harder to comprehend the absurdities of the one on *Great Expectations*, the longest and most substantial of the literary chapters, which induces the panicky feeling that one is alone with a madman in the grip of a delusion. Every argument that one produces to bring him to reason is incorporated in the delusion and becomes part of his evidence. Surely we hear the authentic voice of obsession in the very first sentence of the book: 'Victorian Britain is mainly remembered for two things: sexual prudishness and long novels.' Encountering that, spoken with an expression of intense earnestness at (say) a university seminar, would one not instinctively back away?

When *Sex Scandal* was first being reviewed, Fritz Spiegl wrote to the *Independent* quoting a number of passages (not noticed by Cohen) which were even more suggestive. One of them was: 'She touched his organ, and from that bright epoch, even it, the old companion of his happiest hours, incapable as he had thought it of elevation, began a new and deified existence' (*Martin Chuzzlewit*). Does this carry a sexual connotation? And if not (I think we are entitled to ask), why not?

**Ian Sutton**