Sex, Scandal, and the Novel

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From Chapter One, "Sex, Scandal, and the Novel"

Victorian Britain is mainly remembered for two things: sexual prudishness and long novels. This book considers the relationship between these two achievements -- the one, which inhibited the Victorians from speaking, and the other, which occasioned their extraordinary volubility. The period from 1860 to 1900 witnessed both the consolidation of modern sexual categories and the height of the long novel's cultural authority. In these years, prudishness drove fiction in contradictory directions, compelling it to generate and to prohibit discussion of sexuality. Sex scandals, both as they appear in novels and as they form a cultural context for literary production, supply the clearest means of making legible these conflicting tendencies. Newspaper scandal stories show the nineteenth-century imagination of sexuality at its most dramatic and public. In so doing, they elucidate the operations of the novel, which offers a formally structured and covert aspect of this imagination. Through the combined effects of newspapers and novels, sexuality in the nineteenth century became the subject routinely and paradoxically signalled by its ineffability -- a subject that consequently produces volatile effects at the moments when it approaches explicit articulation. Like the novel, the scandal story, which publicly broadcasts information ordinarily kept secret, supplies a rich vein of cultural material through which to investigate language about sexuality.

Sex scandal is a Victorian phenomenon, but anyone within range of the mass media today needs hardly be told that it is not only Victorian. Nineteenth-century scandals establish the terms for, and supply the history of, the manifest absorption of contemporary Anglo-American culture in sensational stories of sexual exposure. Our own press tends to ignore the fact that scandal even has a history, treating each new case as if it sprang up sui generis. The moment of scandal is a long one, and if its origins reach back in Europe and America at least to the eighteenth century, scandal stories continue today to propel mass aesthetic forms and popular press reporting. While the discursive status of sexuality has indisputably changed in this period, sexual transgressions still provoke the most sensational media spectacles. Even if, as we often imagine, we have become inured to hearing news about sex, we are still shocked -- or, at least, we are told that others are shocked -- by sexual disclosures. Media reports insist that the public is outraged by the revelation of sexual secrets not necessarily because people are outraged, but because a consensus that sex ought not to be talked about in public continues powerfully to hold sway.

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The readings I undertake in this book show that sexual unspeakability does not function simply as a collection of prohibitions for Victorian writers. Rather, it affords them abundant opportunities to develop an elaborate discourse -- richly ambiguous, subtly coded, prolix and polyvalent -- that we now recognize and designate by the very term literary. Like other restrictions upon expression, the conventions of sexual unspeakability serve writers as a productive constraint, contributing to a certain historical formation of the literary. Literature in turn supplies a culturally privileged repository for the production, and recognition, of sexuality as unspeakable.

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If the requirements for discretion about sexuality supply a resource for literary writers, the same might also be said of scandal-mongering journalists, who must convey the sexual content of their stories without offending their readership. Given all the fanfare of revelation and indignation associated with scandal, it may seem odd to argue that it makes anything less, rather than more, speakable. One might propose that the Victorians were in some full sense capable of talking about sex -- and nowhere would this garrulousness be more evident than in a sex scandal. But in bringing forth sexual activities for public consideration, scandal announces them in such a way as to establish their status as private, rather than -- as scandal discourse itself encourages us to believe -- radically to violate that status. However pious and disciplinary the public narrative scandal produces about private sexual transgression, though, its effects cannot be predicted according to formulas for ideological containment. While it inculcates an understanding of normative behavior in its audience, scandal also provides the opportunity to formulate questions, discuss previously unimagined possibilities, and forge new alliances. A social drama that enhances the power of one group may at the same time disempower others; while it gratifies some, it terrorizes others. And while scandal teaches punitive lessons, often deliberately intended to induce conformity in its audience, its thrilling terrors always pose the danger of inciting disobedience to the norms they advertise.

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In the Victorian period, scandals of all sorts proliferated in the popular press. In part as a result of the repeal of the stamp tax in 1855 and the paper duty in 1860, the number of newspapers in Great Britain multiplied, and they became cheaper, more widely available, and more national in scope. This burgeoning medium generated stories for popular consumption on a scale that had not been possible before, and the character of both newspapers and news itself changed significantly. The papers' greater availability, coupled with increasing literacy, made scandals publicly accessible in new ways. As much as scandalous news may have exploded in the second half of the nineteenth century, however, this is not to argue that there were no scandals before 1855, nor that, characteristic as it is of this era, scandal is uniquely Victorian. Events from earlier periods, such as the South Sea Bubble, the Queen Caroline affair, and numerous notorious divorce cases, certainly fall under the rubric of scandal. Such antecedents notwithstanding, I suggest that scandal assumes its modern form only once several conditions are met: that news media are national and accessible; that they distance the subjects of their stories from their audience enough to effect a divide between the exposed private life and the anonymous public
reading about it; and that the audience itself is conceived in terms sufficiently capacious to encompass a wide range of class, gender, and geographical positions.