

# The Collector's Edition of Victorian Erotica

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As the introduction explains, this collection embraces not just fiction and poetry, but also 'dramas, sex guides and books of perversion'. This, according to the compiler, only claims to scrape the surface of the underground culture of Victorian erotica. In keeping with the convention, all thirty-four contributions are anonymous. This is probably appropriate – some of what passed for erotic in Victorian times would make PC pundits of the 21st century very hot under the collar ... and that in a distinctly non-sexual way.

However, back to the 19th century. On the surface was the veneer of the straight-laced, bourgeois mores of Victorian society – and beneath there bubbled an erotic subculture which both titillated and shocked the Victorians themselves. (Let's remember that these were people who, out of deference for their bereaved monarch, embraced a convention of draping the legs of their grand pianos in fabric – to dress these overtly suggestive wooden limbs in some sort of modesty befitting a nation in mourning. One can only speculate as to what erotic stirrings piano legs might provoke...)

Flouting this starchy moral convention, sadomasochism and flagellation are recurring themes, but if this collection is representative of the ethos, there were unusual standards of feminine attraction at work. Voluptuousness and well-rounded curves one can readily understand – but excessive hairiness tends to be a quality most of us go to some lengths to avoid. The 'tribadic' pairings (and threesomes, foursomes, etc) are not represented as lesbianism, but rather as enthusiastic appreciation of and indulgence in other women's bodies. Groups of girls, with or without a single man, are common scenarios – even mother/daughter pairings, often with one 'procuring' or luring the uninitiated into the delights of their own bi-sexuality.

Master/servant themes also recur, with a robust smattering of voyeurism, spanking, restraint, humiliation and deflowering of virgins – however, it's notable in the latter case that even the most religious and modest of ex-virgins emerge pink-cheeked and grateful, no matter how reluctant their original submission. In one tale, the principal of a ladies' college supplies a virgin student

as a 'secretary', who is instructed by her master in 'obedience', and eventually unburdened of her maidenhood – as she, as procuress, and several paying spectators watch the spectacle concealed behind a two-way mirror.

In modern erotic/pornographic literature there's an accustomed vocabulary to portray sex graphically in all its forms – and these Victorian writings are the same – but the glossary is quite different. Words long out of fashion – 'coynite', 'cunny', 'bubbies', 'quim', 'tribadic', and, most spectacularly, the unwieldy 'gamahuche' (not in the current Chambers, but obvious in meaning through context) appear throughout. To one accustomed to the modern erotic terminology, these can seem rather quaint, but are an essential element of the Victorian erotic ethos, which also extends to include the ribald, satiric and even the comedic, as the protagonists cavort and copulate. Sex outside the conventional bounds of marriage wasn't so much furtive and illicit as essential recreation ... and why not, eh?

There are widely ranging settings – Paris, Ancient Rome, girls' schools/convents – and there are dominating women, rampant and rapacious men exercising their *droit de seigneur* over their servants, girls in groups –

and the one impression left by all this enthusiastic rumpy-pumpy is that the leisured Victorians spent one hell of a lot more time that we can spare today in indulging their lusts and peccadillos and acting out their fantasies.

A fascinating insight into the underground culture of a bygone age with some unusual (and some quite unpleasant!) tales – an interesting 'dip-in-and-out' read.

**I'd give 6 out of 10 – quite a specialist read!**

