Several years ago I became interested in the traditional sexual customs and beliefs of college students, a surprising number of which have survived into the era of free birth-control clinics and legal abortions. I read a paper on this subject at the fall 1970 meeting of the New York Folklore Society. Most of my audience were also familiar with this material, but no one was able to suggest a source for any historical background material. The early folklorists, who collected masses of material on childbirth, did not mention any of the beliefs concerning conception, contraception and abortion, all of which are of considerable interest to the folk. It had several times occurred to me that some sexual customs and beliefs might be found in Victorian pornography and in sociology, which were the only forms of literature in that period to discuss sex openly.

Consequently I began wading (and I use the term advisedly) through as much Victorian pornography as I could locate. In the oft-quoted words of Francis James Child, they are the original dunghills "in which, only after a great deal of sickening grubbing, one finds a very moderate jewel." However I did turn up a certain amount of traditional material—not only customs and beliefs, but also folk speech, rhymes, songs and narratives. The works of Meyhew and Acton on prostitution and Acton's book on diseases of the reproductive organs were also occasionally helpful. (Henry Mahew was a journalist who published four massive volumes entitled London Labor and the London Poor (1851-1862) based almost entirely on interviews with the people he described. William Acton was a physician who specialized in venereal disease.)

There was, of course, some publishing of erotic folklore as such during the Victorian period—the Kryptasia and the early volumes of the Anthropomphysisa fall into this category. Unfortunately, they contain almost no English material. There was also the volume of Loose and Humorous Songs from the Percy ms. But most of the erotic folklore material can be found in pornographic novels (such as Pandiana) and erotic memoirs such as The Confessions of Nemesis Hunt and My Secret Life. Several journals which include traditional erotica were also published during this period: The Pearl (18 issues 1879-1880), The Cremorne (1882) and The Boudoir (1883). (I have been able to examine most of these books. Some, however, were unavailable and I have taken the word of Frank Hoffman or Gershon Legman as to their contents.) Two sociologists of the Victorian period wrote about prostitutes and included some "occupational folklore" from this group.

The best source of traditional sexual custom and belief was the erotic memoir My Secret Life. This work, which runs to eleven volumes in the original edition, is the account of one man's sexual adventures. The author, who calls himself "alter," knew many prostitutes and described some of their customs. Several times he noted that a "gay" woman would spit on a coin after he paid her—a custom still practiced by many people other than prostitutes. One woman asked for an extra
shilling afterwards "for luck." On another occasion a girl who had broken an oath to her husband in order to meet "Walter" asked him for a sovereign afterwards and threw it down the N.C. to ward off evil. He also notes that a young prostitute "saw" for the first time would not wash after sex and said that it was unlucky to wash on the first night. He knew some traditional beliefs about contraception which are still current: that a woman will not conceive while nursing, that a vinegar-soaked sponge inserted into the vagina will prevent conception and that mutual orgasm is necessary for conception. (The last two beliefs are also found in The Horn Book, a sort of sex manual.) Since he believed that a virgin cannot have an orgasm on her first sexual experience, he therefore must have also believed that a virgin will not conceive the first time — a belief so widespread today that one Buffalo gynecologist specifically warns all his patients that this is not true. "Walter" noted that prostitutes always urinated immediately after sex, probably because they believed, like many American and English students, that this would prevent conception. He also shared the widespread modern belief that sex is debilitating and that cysters are aphrodisiacs. Like Acton, one of the most prominent of the Victorian writers on sex, and many of today's students, he believed that masturbation could cause impotence, illness or insanity. The pregnant girls he knew took strong laxatives in order to produce a miscarriage, as some students still do, despite the availability of legal abortions. Several of the prostitutes he met would carry coins in their vagina, a trick still known by some performers in carnival "girl shows."

None of the other erotic memoirs or novels can match My Secret Life for description of sexual beliefs. The Horn Book, which is an instruction manual rather than fiction, does mention the still-current belief that only the first ejaculation on a given occasion can impregnate. Acton and Mayhew, who interviewed many prostitutes, did pick up a few beliefs, but it seems logical to assume that a man like "Walter" would learn more about their occupational lore by sleeping with them. Acton reported from France a "superstition prevalent among the lower classes that connexion with a child is a cure for syphilis in the male", a particularly horrible belief which is still known today. Mayhew gives some interesting sidelights on sailors' songs, which tend to portray the prostitute as a harpy. According to his interviews, many sailors on shore leave picked up a woman to whom they considered themselves married pro tem, gave them their pay and lived with them until it was gone. The women, according to Mayhew, generally treated them well. He talked to one girl who had ten "husbands" as well as a lover.

Any one of the Victorian pornographic novels is a good source of erotic folk speech. Again, My Secret Life is generally the best source. However, I have found no term in my reading which was not picked up by J.S. Farmer and W.E. Henley in their Slang and its Analogues, privately published in seven volumes between 1890 and 1904. (They fill two pages with folk terms for the penis alone.) The Pearl, an erotic magazine of the period, is so rich in folk terminology that Legman has suggested that Farmer may have edited it. Frank Hoffman has suggested
the pocket songsters as a source for slang and folk speech.

The limerick was born during the Victorian era — the original fad for clean limericks was started by the reprinting of Edward Lear’s *Book of Nonsense* in 1863 (it was originally published in 1846). The earliest collection of erotic limericks was published in 1846 ( *A New Book of Nonsense* — no known copy exists). In 1870 a group of writers and journalists published *Cymhera’s Hymnal*, a collection of bawdy and sacreligious verse that includes 51 limericks, which are called "nursery rhymes." 65 more limericks were published in *The Pearl* — an erotic monthly magazine which ran for 18 issues in 1879-80. According to Legman, "The 120 limericks included, in all, in these two sources, and in the continuation of *The Pearl* and *The Cremorne* . . . included a large proportion of the bawdy limericks still in oral circulation on both England and America, and these must be considered the classics or old favorites of the genre."

In 1868 Frederick Furnivall published the final volume of the Percy Folio, *Loose and Humorous Songs*. His co-editors Child and Hales refused to allow the use of their names on this supplementary volume and it was privately printed. By modern standards it is pretty tame stuff, although there is a nice version of "The Sea Crab." The most valuable collection of unexpurgated folksongs and ballads in English is John Stephen Farmer’s *Herry Songs and Ballads*, originally published as *Herry, Facetious and Witty Songs and Ballads* in 1895. In 1897 a second edition, in five volumes, appeared. Some of these songs came from manuscripts which Farmer unearthed at the British Museum and at Oxford, others are reprinted from broadside ballad sheets and from the ephemeral drolleries and garlands of the late 17th and 18th centuries. Others are taken from song collections like *Pills to Purge Melancholy* and *The Musical Miscellany*.

Charles Hindley included a few mildly bawdy songs in *Curiosities of Street Literature* (1871). Several British army songs were published in volumes seven and eight of the *Anthropophytes* (1910-1911). Legman states that *Kandiana*, a pornographic novel originally published in 1884, contained a few folksongs in music hall revisions, but the modern reprint has cut all but one. There were also songs in *Cymhera’s Hymnal* which, according to Legman, came from university tradition.

The bawdy songsters are the most interesting sources of erotic songs of the Victorian period. These little "Coal Hole Companions" and "Cabins of Choice Songs" have never been studied in any systematic way — in fact, there is not even a satisfactory list of these publications. Ashbee gives the titles of nearly fifty of them in volume one of *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (1877), Legman mentions another group of fifty similar songsters in the British Museum and there are doubtless many others scattered around in libraries and private collections. The songs are often closer to music hall than to folksong tradition and the poetic level is at an all-time low, even for chapbooks, but they would certainly repay study by folklorists.

Many pornographic novels and short stories of the Victorian period contain traditional motifs, but, unlike songs, there was no publishing of traditional erotic tales as such. However, traditional jokes did often turn up in
erotic publications. The Pearl, The Cremona and The Boudoir followed the widespread format for Victorian periodicals and included joke columns. In his dissertation, An Analytical Survey of Anglo-American Erotic Folklore, Frank Hoffman writes "The modern openly erotic joke . . . begins to take shape in the pages of these magazines. Of course, the genre, in the form of erotic jests and anecdotes, has a long history of publication, going back to medieval and even classical literature, but this is one of the earliest appearances of the brief, compact joke form with a punch line . . . many of them have been reprinted regularly, in both direct and variant forms, in more recent joke collections."²

The following joke, for example, is well-known in modern oral tradition.

AN ECCENTRICITY

A gentleman was in the habit, whenever attending a public dinner of always, when called upon for a toast, giving, "The Church." His wife, who was rather deaf, got tired of this continual repetition, and told him that the next time he gave it she would expose him. The husband taking the hint upon the next occasion gave, "The Ladies." The wife, mistaking this for the old toast, astonished the company by rising and saying—"I told my husband that if he again gave this toast I would expose him — I assure you he has not been in one for a very long time, and the last time he was he came out before it was half over."³

Some British army jests from India were printed in volumes seven and eight of the Anthropophytes. In The Confessions of Nemesis Hunt, an erotic memoir written by an actress and published in three volumes from 1902 to 1906, the author constantly interrupts her narrative to exchange jokes with her secretary. Unfortunately, these are not included in the modern one-volume reprint.

Henry Mayhew picked up a good many stories from the prostitutes he interviewed and at least two of them are, I believe, traditional.

Pimps are frequently spoken of, and pimping is a word very generally used, but I doubt very much whether many of them exist, at least of the male gender. The women do most of the pimping that is requisite to carry on the amours of London society, and pander is a word that merges into the other, losing any distinctive significance that it may possess for the eyes of the lexicographer. A woman when she introduces a man to a woman is literally pimping for him, or what I have said about keepers of introducing houses must apply generally to the panders and the pimps. I may add a story I heard of a bully attached to a brothel, who on one occasion acting as pimp, went into the streets to pick up a woman who was required for the purposes of the establishment. He went some way without success, and at last met a 'wandering beauty of the night,' whom he solicited; she yielded to his entreaties, and followed him to his brothel. When they
reached the light in the passage she raised her veil, when he was horrified as a man in his position and with his feelings could be to perceive that he had brought his own sister to an immoral house: he had not seen her for some years. His profligacy had killed his father, had brought him to his present degraded situation, and in a great measure occasioned his sister's fall and way of living.

Ex unum -- the proverb says -- a lesson may be taught a great many.4

An anecdote was told me illustrative of this sort of thing that may not be out of place here.

A lady of intrigue, belonging to the higher circles of society, married to a man of considerable property, found herself unhappy in his society, and after some time unwillingly came to the conclusion that she had formed an alliance that was destined to make her miserable. Her passions were naturally strong, and she one day resolved to visit a house that one of her female acquaintances had casually spoken about before her some time before. Ordering a cab, she drove to the house in question, and went in. There was no necessity for her to explain the nature of her business, or the object with which she called. That was understood. She was shown into a handsome drawing-room, beautifully fitted up, for the house was situated in one of the best streets in May Fair, there to wait the coming of her unknown paramour. After waiting some little time the door opened, and a gentleman entered. The curtains of the room were partially drawn around the windows, and the blinds were pulled down, which caused a "dim religious light" to pervade the apartment, preventing the lady from seeing distinctly the features of her visitor. He approached her, and in a low tone of voice commenced a conversation with her about some indifferent subject.

She listened to him for a moment, and then with a cry of astonishment recognized her husband's voice. He, equally confused, discovered that he had accidentally met in a house of ill-fame the wife whom he had treated with unkindness and cruelty, and condemned to languish at home while he did as he chose abroad. This strange encounter had a successful termination, for it ended in the reconciliation of husband and wife, who discovered that they were mutually to blame.5

Thus it can be seen that there is a fair amount of traditional material in Victorian sexual literature. It is probable that a thorough search would turn up a good deal more; the research for this paper was limited to books which are presently in print or available through inter-library loan. Since there are still many books which have not been reprinted or which have been reprinted only in cut or condensed form it is obvious that some time spent in the British Museum or the library of the Institute for Sex Research in Bloomington should prove rewarding.
NOTES


