Hellfire and Cannibals:

Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Erotic Reading Groups and Their Manuscripts

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Better were it that such literature did not exist. I consider it pernicious and hurtful to the immature but at the same time I hold that, in certain circumstances, its study is necessary, if not beneficial.

-- Catena Librorum Tacendorum

Under the cover of darkness on the 30th of November 1737, twenty-four men from localities as far as Edinburgh and Dundee descended on the small seaside town of Anstruther in the Kingdom of Fife, Scotland. Under their dark cloaks, or secluded in their carriages, the men would have been well-dressed, convivial, and excited—for it was St. Andrews Day. For some of them, this would have marked their fifth year of attendance at a biannual dinner. For a select three, this would have marked their first attendance at this secret feast. Sometime in the early morning the following day, a secretary would have taken his notes for the records of The Most Ancient and Most Puissant Order of the Beggar's Benison of Merryland, Anstruther:

1737.  St. Andrew's Day. 24 met, 3 tested and en-rolled. All frigged. The Dr. expatiated. Two nymphs, 18 and 19, exhibited as hereto-fore. Rules were
submitted by Mr. Lumsdaine for future adoption. *Fanny Hill* was read. Tempest.

Broke up at 3 o'clock a.m.1

More than casual fans of John Cleland will note something quite remarkable—this is nearly a decade before the (public) publication of *Fanny Hill*, and Cleland was in India at the time, a mystery which remains somewhat curious. The likely answer may be that this was an early draft for private circulation, which was common for erotic texts in the eighteenth century. Cleland’s connection with one of the Benison members named Robert Cleland is tantalizing—but as of yet unexplained. What is more remarkable, for historians of reading, is that this is one of the select few ‘reader reactions’ that we have in response to erotic and pornographic material before the twentieth century.2

In the past decade and a half, historians have begun to engage with this material: in manuscript form (Ian Fredrick Moulton, *Before Pornography*; Lynn Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography*), in seventeenth and eighteenth-century developments (the works of Julie Peakman, Sarah Toulalan, and others), in the events of the nineteenth century that created obscene libel (too many to name), or by simply focusing on the history of visual pornography in Hollywood and elsewhere. All or nearly all of these accounts are laser-focused on the content of the manuscript, book, or etching, the authors who wrote the books, the publishers who printed and advertised the product, or the lawyers and officials who prosecuted and censored them. The biggest gap, however, remains in the readership and reception of erotic and pornographic material. How did readers react to these erotic texts? What did they use them for? What did they think of them? How did they engage with them?

There are several reasons for this void—not only are these texts exceedingly rare and scarce, but it is is even more difficult to find information on their readers, especially readers
who did not have a censorial agenda. Yet there were a few remarkably understudied private erotic book clubs that not only purchased and participated in reading erotic material, but were active in funding, authoring, and discussing it. The first were the eighteenth-century libertine clubs, the best examples of which were the masturbatory Beggar’s Benison in Scotland and the similarly inspired and contemporary ‘Hellfire’ and Dilettanti Clubs based around Sir Francis Dashwood in England. The members of these groups, in addition to their rumored sexual improprieties, were responsible for sponsoring The Discourse on the Worship of Priapus (1786–87), and their number included John Wilkes, whose scandalous Essay on Women (1752) sparked trials and debates in Parliament.

Second is the nineteenth-century Cannibal Club based around Sir Richard Francis Burton, which operated under the auspices of the Anthropological Society. This group was responsible for a huge number of erotic works such as the first translation of the Kama Sutra (1885), The New Epicurean: The Delights of Sex (1865), The Mysteries of Verbena House (1886), My Secret Life (1888), and others. Although members of these groups have been touched on in individual biographies, and there have been various studies of these three groups, the clubs as reading institutions and the material they engaged with have not yet been examined in depth. By drawing on letters, diaries, and the erotic texts themselves, this chapter shows, for the first time, how these two groups of readers engaged with the emerging genre of pornography.

It is important to recognize at the outset that pornography as we understand it—“the explicit description or exhibition of sexual subjects or activity in literature, painting, films, etc., in a manner intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings”—is not the same thing as what these groups engaged with, nor would they have recognized it as such. The word itself was only coined around 1850 to describe the material that was being excavated at Pompeii and used
for treatises on what to do with urban prostitutes. Instead, these readers would have recognized their interaction with erotic, or daresay obscene literature that was directly opposed to many dearly-held cultural tenets. Erotic discourse was exactly that, a method of discourse, and it was usually linked with social, political, and religious criticism. It was also literature, not just some titillating woodcuts or some back and forth baldly mechanical depictions.

Indeed, an express tension was manifest in each of these groups and the texts they read. There was, of course, the fear of sexuality—especially uncontrolled sexuality—but by way of long tradition stretching back to Aretino and running through Edmund Curll in England, an obscene book that attacked the church or the state was prosecutable obscene libel. As a result these ‘erotic’ book clubs did not function like regular book clubs (there was no public celebration, circulation, or traveling book clubs for this material) and they were restricted to a certain type of literate gentleman. However, the desire to share, to initiate, to reveal the Playboys under the mattress or to show a trusted confidant the wild positions and creativity of the Kama Sutra was still very present in these groups. The erotic texts that these groups read and speculated about all provided the thrill of transgression and the revelation of something secret, protected, locked away.

But to bring a new person in was dangerous—it would only take one Puritan or one morally strident citizen to land the whole group in danger, to disrupt the network and expose these middle- and upper-class men to embarrassment, humiliation, or legal consequences, which could mean the end of a political or business career. Then again, there was also the constant need for new blood, new money, and new sources of material. Once a book or poem became tiresome, there was a timeless impulse to search out new material through translation or purchase, or to sponsor the creation of new material, as each of these groups did. There was a thin line to walk
between publicizing the group and protecting the members. The solution, as Jason Kelly and others have identified, was to flaunt the privacy publicly, to allow gossip and rumor to swirl around certain members and hope that the right kind of person would approach a member, be sponsored, and join in the bonds of secrecy and privacy—perhaps after some minor hazing and drinking.6

All of these groups belonged to a common libertine tradition that was symptomatic of a much larger cultural shift that had been ongoing at least since Rochester went on a stroll in St. James Park. They represented an increasingly skeptical and decreasingly religious society which blasphemed and libeled the Church and religiously-inspired societal norms and customs. The members of these groups tended to be conservative or specifically Tory, upper-class, and ‘powerful,’ but they were generally not ‘in power.’ In fact, most of them were out of power due to changes in politics or culture or because they rejected the majority morality. Like so many other Britons, they found solace in coming together around a common association—in this case, the use and discussion of ancient and modern erotic texts as justification for libertinism, free sex, or an attack what they viewed as an oppressive majority.

Clubs were the most distinctively British institutions following the Restoration, and along with the population they saw enormous expansion. By 1755, when Samuel Johnson was writing his Dictionary, the concept of clubs had fully emerged into ‘an assembly of good fellows meeting under certain circumstances,’ which is as good a definition as any.7 The eighteenth century was era of peak-club in the British world—as many as 25,000 different clubs and societies of 130 different types were having regular meetings and events throughout England and her colonies.8 Wherever they came from or whatever their purposes for belonging to the club they were all bound together by the idea of ‘clubness’ in which societal, religious or personal
grievances or differences should be subsumed into the larger group. The idea of clubs, in the words of Peter Clark, increasingly penetrated every nook and cranny of British social and cultural life:

Almost every group or institution, past and present, was reincarnated in associational terms: King Arthur’s knights were described as the ‘original club of Round Table Troopers’, while Edinburgh town council was denounced as the ‘land-market club’. Increasingly, voluntary associations were not so much perceived as miniature exemplars of national society; rather, national society itself was viewed as an untidy aggregation of voluntary societies. Even heaven was visualized in terms of one large friendly society.9

Merriment and gaiety made up the central core of clubs, and the friendships and common interests created an institution that was charged with the advancement of a common cause. It might be as serious as the study of Italian art (the Society of the Dilettanti) or cultural anthropology (the Cannibal Club) in lectures, discussions, and essay-reading, but it could also descend from this lofty highbrow pillar to simpler lowerbrow purposes such as a drinking club. The members of the Beggar’s Benison were largely of “the middling sort,” including educated and literate clerks, schoolmasters, parish priests and military officers—but also included the 2nd Lord Scarsdale, the 5th Baronet Wentworth, and George, Prince of Wales (later George IV).10

Regardless of decorum, nearly every club maintained a series of ritual and mythmaking, which might cover as little as the selection of officers and their founding story, or be as rarefied and arcane as the Freemasons and their secretive codes.

It was this love for initiation and arcana that fed into obsession over hidden erotic material. Ritual is the explanation for that strange notation in the Benison’s records: “24 met, 3 tested and en-rolled. All frigged.” Another entry explains the ritual:
The Recorder [secretary] and two Remembrancers [officers] prepared the Novice in a closet, by causing him to propel his Penis until full erection. . . when thus ready, he was escorted. . . and ordered to place his Genitals upon the Testing-Platter. . . [Thereafter] the new Brother’s health was heartily and humorously drunk. He was told to select an amorous Passage from the Song of Solomon and read it aloud with comments.

After which a hearty banquet followed, where they were shewn Curiosities; Songs were sung composed for the occasion; Sentiments and Toasts were given . . . [and] Ovid’s Art Of Love and Byron’s Don Juan were spouted . . . [and] anatomical Bible texts were freely *anatomized.*

Although some of the surviving records of the Benison are suspect—particularly the 1733-1738 minutes are most likely a creation of a later author—historians of the Benison such as David Stevenson largely agree there was some sort of masturbatory ritual in response to the texts.11 Surviving membership diplomas, objects such as the frigging (masturbation) platter, and the group’s Bible give further support to the rumored rituals.

The Benison Bible in particular is worth analyzing as a surviving record of reader engagement. This particular Bible, which is now privately owned, is a high-quality paper leather-bound issue, printed in Edinburgh in 1744. It has a new spine, with title THE BIBLE. BEGGAR’S BENISON, ANSTRUTHER. On the front is a (broken) lock and keyhole in the style of a vulva, and the words LIGNUM SCIENTIAE and BONI & MALI are engraved above and below. Finally, there are golden hasp plates on the front and back which carry the letters P.B.B.A. and B.B.B.E. respectively—these initials refer to the Parent Benison of Anstruther and the Branch in Edinburgh. The Latin around the vulva roughly translates as “The tree of Knowledge… [of] Good and Evil.” Stevenson describes the rest:
An inscription on the title page reads ‘Beggar’s Benison, Castle of Dreel, Anstruther.

Given for use by Thomas Earl of Kellie, at the Initiation of Standing Members’

....Between the title page and the beginning of the text nine sheets of lined paper have been inserted. Both their sizes and the handwriting on them varies. . .and comprise attempts at bawdy wit and inane obscene profundities. . . At the end of the text of the Bible two further sheets of paper (unlined) are glued, and contain miscellaneous anecdotes and reflections relating to sex.

The record-keeping Bible, and by extension the club, shared a heavy fascination with sex, especially prohibited sex. At some point in the club’s existence, a member of the Benison annotated and compiled every sexual event in the Bible, taking particular notice of the forbidden ones—from events as salacious as Genesis 19:4-9 (the city of Sodom and Lot’s daughters’ incest) to as vague as Leviticus 5:3 (concerning priests of God touching the unclean parts of man).12 The creation of personal Bible indexes in preparation for reading aloud was a common practice in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.13

We imagine these rather well-to-do fathers reading selections from the Bible to their families to educate and set moral standards for future generations, but when these gentlemen were secluded in more private environments they were willing to let loose their tongues and their belt loops. So what do the somewhat wild and definitely drunken antics of this particular group tell us about the history of reading? First, it shows that even in private settings ‘out loud’ reading still took on the performative role that was an essential part of sociability among groups of friends and family in the eighteenth century.14 The initiates’ reading and commentary would have been judged on performance, pacing, and delivery—much in the same way that ‘spouting’ club competitions were. 15 Moreover, the very act of this commentary would have marked them
as a member of an in-group: their surviving jokes and anecdotes range from lowbrow double entendres to references to Boccaccio and others. This shows that they belonged to a common libertine and masculine culture—a commonality among all of these erotically inclined clubs. Secondly, their use of the Bible shows that there was simply not as much erotic material available to the Beggar’s Benison as there would be to later groups: they had to make do with what they had. Another conclusion that we can draw from the Beggar’s reading selections and sexual rituals is that the club was essentially reactionary, founded in reaction against changing cultural norms and values. In particular, these gentlemen were reacting in defiance against *Onania*.

*Onania OR, the Heinous Sin OF Self-Pollution, AND All its Frightful Consequences* (1756) is one of those rare books where there is a definite break, with a before and an after. There had always been murmurs against the practice of masturbation by churchmen and moralists, but to set off a true fervor and moral panic required a new perspective, which in this case was provided by an unknown clergyman who conjoined religious arguments against masturbation to the newly emerging field of scientific medicine. The author argued that the practice surely led to disease, injury, disorder, and eventually death. It was an amazing success: by 1760 the book had sold out nearly 20 English editions and had rapidly been translated into French, German, Italian, and Dutch.

At first blush, this would seem to be the worst possible time to form a club devoted to masturbation (if there is ever truly a good time to form such a club). Even allowing for the fact that the members of the Benison in Anstruther were more provincial than Londoners or the members of the Edinburgh branch of the club, it is very unlikely that they were unaware of the onanism scare. In fact there is more than adequate evidence that these gentlemen were up to date
(or even ahead of date in the case of *Fanny Hill*) on all the sexy literature that London had to offer. It is much more likely that they were reacting *against* the crazy ideas coming out of London. As Stevenson notes:

> These were men who were malcontents, muttering subversively on politics, on innovations inflicted on them from above – a new dynasty (possibly), union with England (certainly), customs and excise duties (certainly). Now there was another ridiculous innovation from London which affronted them – the idea that masturbation was harmful. What nonsense: it had never done them any harm. It was an attempt to suppress a traditional – and gratifying – pastime, part of their cultural heritage. So, let's mock the whole silly idea. Make fun of it in a ritual which demonstrates that we don't believe a word of *Onania*.16

Although these were better-off men, who had the freedom to associate in secretive club meetings without fear of public backlash, they were also men out of power, men frustrated by the majority. Many of them shared political (Jacobin) or moral (libertine) opinions that were out of step with the mainstream and were resentful of the moral backlash of the Glorious Revolution, having grown up in the more libertine culture of the Restoration. Like other out-of-power groups they turned to bitter satire and parody, in this case using erotic literature.

The other eighteenth-century libertine club of note is the Hellfire Club, which was a sort of inner sanctum of the Society of the Dilettanti. It shared with the Beggar’s Benison a ritualistic and obsessive phallus-interest as well as a dedication to heavy drinking and partying. Horace Walpole famously described the group as “a club, for which the nominal qualification is having been in Italy, and the real one, being drunk: the two chiefs are Lord Middlesex and Sir Francis Dashwood, who were seldom sober the whole time they were in Italy.”17 The main differences
between the groups is that while the Beggar’s Benison could afford to have knowledge of their
rituals be semipublic and survive, the Hellfire Club was made up of much more powerful and
higher-class members subject to the much harsher glare of London society, who could not
survive once knowledge of their activities had captured the attention of the media. Further, its
members were expected to act like gentlemen, in contrast to earlier libertine rakes. In many ways
the members were reacting to the shift and reprioritization of manly values towards politeness
and moral rectitude, from the sexual to the social, as Philip Carter and Erin Mackie have
documented. However, there still remained an outlet for raffish behavior, as demonstrated by the
Monks of the Order of St. Francis of Medmenham Abbey.

Founded by Sir Francis Dashwood, 11th Baron le Despencer, the Monks of Medmenham,
known colloquially (and here) as the Hellfire Club, shared membership and heavy connections
with the Dilettanti, but took their interest erotic and obscene material to a new level. At some
point in the later 1740s Dashwood and other notoriously rakish Dilettanti members began to
meet, first at the George & Vulture, then at The King’s Arms, and later at Dashwood’s estate in
West Wycombe, a leisurely day’s ride from London. The members would spend up to a week at
the Palladian estate, passing under the Mercury-capped door where their motto ‘fay ce que
voudras’ (do what you will) was inscribed. The rumors of the Monks’ activities first spread
amongst their fellow nobles, as attested by Horace Walpole:

Whatever their doctrines were, their practice was rigorously pagan. Bacchus and Venus
were the deities to whom they almost publicly sacrificed; and the nymphs and the
hogsheads that were laid in against the festivals of this new church, sufficiently informed
the neighbourhood of the complexion of those hermits.
The club meetings, whether in private rooms at The King’s Arms or on Dashwood’s estates, followed the same general pattern of donning pseudo-Franciscan monk’s robes, extreme consumption of alcohol, the reading of pornographic literature, the singing of bawdy songs, and the hiring of prostitutes. At some point the famous rabble-rouser John Wilkes joined the club, likely through the mentorship of Thomas Potter, who was Wilkes’s lifelong friend and initiated him into libertinism. He quickly became the club librarian and the locus through which obscene or titillating books passed, for we find Sir William Stapleton writing on September 5, 1761:

I unfurnished my library at Twickenham last week and sent the pious books to Mr. Deards [the bookseller] with orders to send them to George Street [Wilkes’s address]; if the Chapter think them worthy of the Abbey. I shall be extremely glad, hoping they will now and then occasion an extraordinary ejaculation to be sent up heavenward.20

This demonstrates that the Hellfire Club had increased access to erotic material relative to the Beggar’s Benison, but also that the availability of sexual literature was still limited, which will become very apparent when we discuss the Cannibal Club. The Hellfire Club was following the same changes that more pedestrian reading clubs were, in that they were associating with a certain type of material and accumulating it, but they had not yet become a substantial audience for it.

This is evident when one considers the age and contents of the books in the club’s library: nearly all were a century or more old, and they concerned social, political, and religious criticism more than just straight pornography. They included Aretino’s *Ragionamenti* (1536), a dialogue between an older and more experienced prostitute with a much younger one, and one of the mainstays of literary erotica which Dashwood purchased on his Grand Tour in Italy. There was also Nicolas Chorier’s *The School of Women* (1660), which Dashwood had displayed in his
portrait by William Hogarth (another Hellfire member). Libertine poetry made a strong showing too, especially the poems of Lord Rochester, as another member (Lord Sandwich) was his grandson, and of course François Rabelais, from whom the club’s motto came. The common threads uniting this selection of material was its emphasis on critiquing and satirizing Western Christian sexual morality from a male and free-love point of view. The School of Women, for example, focuses largely on two women discussing how to please their husbands in the best way possible, and (conveniently) how men might convince women to sleep with them.

These books were stored in the main chapter room of the house, from which the member’s “cloisters” or individual bedrooms branched off, where they could retire for private recreation with the women they had brought to the event. A 1779 tell-all, Nocturnal Revels, by ‘a MONK of the ORDER of St. FRANCIS’ describes what the meetings were like:

They however always meet in one general sett at meals, when, for the improvement of mirth, pleasantry, and gaiety, every member is allowed to introduce a Lady of cheerful lively disposition, to improve the general hilarity….The Ladies are not compelled to make any vows of celibacy upon their admission, any more than the Monks….Disquisitions of an amorous and Platonic kind sometimes are introduced, in which full liberty of speech is allowed. . . In case the topics should unexpectedly become too warm and passionate, the use of fans is allowed, to prevent the appearance of the Ladies’ blushes; and under these circumstances, some female seize this opportunity for a temporary retreat with their paramours.21

Nocturnal Revels should not be taken for the literal truth in all cases, but its descriptions of the parties were not very far off from how meetings of the Beggars Benison were conducted, and indeed how Wilkes himself described the meetings. In strong contrast to the Benison, though,
Wilkes heavily emphasized the heterosexual nature of the Hellfire Club: he disavowed the casual bisexuality that had been practiced by aristocrats since the Elizabethean era.22

In addition, we have an example of the literary work that was produced by club members and read aloud at their meetings—the *Essay on Woman*, a satire of the highest order against Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man*. While the *Essay* is not a pornographic work in the modern sense, it targeted and criticized the pretentious morality of Pope line by line. Where the first stanza of Pope ran

Awake, my St. John! leave all meaner things
To low ambition, and the pride of kings.
Let us (since life can little more supply
Than just to look about us and to die)
Expatriate free o’er all this scene of man;
A mighty maze! but not without a plan;
A wild, where weeds and flow’rs promiscuous shoot;
Or garden, tempting with forbidden fruit.

The *Essay on Woman* proclaimed

Awake, my Fanny, leave all meaner things
This morn shall prove what rapture swiving [fucking] brings.
Let us (since life can little more supply
Than just a few good Fucks, and then we die)
Expatriate free o’er that lov’d scene of Man;
A mighty Maze! for mighty Pricks to scan;
A wild, where Paphian thorns promiscuous shoot,
Where flow’rs the monthly Rose, but yields no Fruit.23

In much the same way as the Beggar’s Benison or the *Priapus* manuscript, the text mocked and abused Christian ideas and a newly developing public morality, and promoted the Hellfire Club ideology of free sex.

While usually credited to John Wilkes, the *Essay* was largely a production of the minor politician Thomas Potter, another unrepentant Hellfire rake. Wilkes seems to have had some input into the poem, but he was more involved in its printing and distribution to Hellfire members before he was interrupted by the constables. Whatever his role in the production, the text doubled down on social and religious critique by including footnotes supposedly authored by Bishop Warburton, who had written a high-minded and pious paratext for Pope’s *Essay*. George III and the Tory government, already deeply suspicious of and outraged at Wilkes for his political criticism in the *North Briton*, issued a highly controversial general warrant for the arrest of Wilkes’ and his publishers.24 Wilkes was vulnerable to a charge of obscene libel, a newly minted (1728) legal concept, so the government tampered with the text of the poem to make it more blasphemous and increase their chance of a successful prosecution. While one line had originally read “Immortal Honour, endless Fame, / Almighty Pego! to thy Name; / And equal Adoration be / Paid to the neighb’ring Pair with Thee”, which would seem blasphemous enough, the government decided to up the ante by adding the line “Thrice blessed Glorious Trinity!” to the end.25 The result was one of the strangest moments in Parliamentary history: Lord Sandwich, a Hellfire Club member, read into the parliamentary minutes an obscene Hellfire Club poem, written by one Hellfire Club member as a piece of evidence against another Hellfire Club member. Things were getting too hot for Dashwood, and the club avoided further publicity, the
obscene pictures were torn off of the walls, and the member’s outfits were removed and possibly destroyed.

There are some suggestions that there continued to be one-off meetings over the course of the next few years, but they never managed to reclaim their regular meetings afterwards, and former members went on to disavow or deny their involvement with the group. In retrospect, like the Beggar’s Benision, the group made a business of flaunting their secrecy and rakishness in a public manner to attract the right kind of person to their members, but as soon as the gossip became too much and former members were taking to the press to stoke the coals, the remaining members had to retreat from the limelight. Moreover, the political winds had shifted with the ascension of George III and Lord Bute. Suddenly, the men who had formerly found themselves bitterly dispossessed and out of power, whiling away their time with dirty books and mistresses found themselves swept into power as members of the Tory government: Dashwood became Chancellor of the Exchequer and Sandwich became Northern Secretary and then Postmaster General. They had to put away young men’s things; they had become respectable.

While the Hellfire Club never revived, there still remained enough of a trade in erotic books and licentious material that George III felt it necessary in 1787 to issue a blistering Royal Proclamation For the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue, and for the Preventing and Punishing of Vice, Profaneness and Immorality discouraging 'loose and licentious Prints, Books, and Publications, dispersing Poison to the minds of the Young and Unwary and to Punish the Publishers and Vendors thereof. A prosecutorial Proclamation Society of largely upper-class political and religious men was set up in the weeks following the Proclamation to enforce and punish the vice, profaneness, and immorality of the lower classes, but not the morals of its upper-class membership—of course. It was later rolled up into the Society for the Suppression of Vice
and helped to bring about the Obscene Publications Act of 1857, the first really comprehensive and effective anti-pornography legislation—an act that would lead to the British government taking on the duties of prosecuting perceived obscenity (even to the current day, as illustrated by 2012’s *R. v. Peacock* decision and ‘violent’ pornography bans).27

During this time, male clubs, ideas of masculinity, and indeed standards of acceptable behavior and taste were undergoing a dramatic transformation. The elite libertinism that tied a man’s success and prowess to his sexuality, ability, and honor was in decline.28 By the dawn of the nineteenth century, as heralded by the Proclamation and enforced by the Vice Society, middle-class respectability was on the rise. By mid-to-late nineteenth century it was seen as boorish, immature, and uncivilized to boast of sexual conquest. The cult of domesticity and virtuous self-control held increasing sway, and a man’s honor and (more importantly) his credit and chances for advancement became increasingly dependent on his public behavior.29 To put it another way, in 1786 a duke’s mistress could be introduced to the Queen, but by 1802 Charles James Fox had to marry his before she could be introduced in polite society.30 However, elite interest in prurient literature, imagery, and history continued unabated, although slightly more restricted and confined, buoyed by the crescendo of Victorian pornography that continued to rise throughout the nineteenth century.

Despite these shifts in the majority morality, the culture of elite male libertinism continued to operate and function nearly among the same lines as the clubs founded over a century beforehand. Like the Society of the Dilettanti, the Anthropological Society of London became the host for the Cannibal Club. In 1863, Sir Richard Francis Burton, the famous adventurer and linguist, began hosting private dinner parties at Bertolini’s restaurant in Leicester Square with members of elite British society that considered themselves as connoisseurs of fine
pornography, as well as experts on race and worldwide sexual practices. Just as their host, the conservative Anthropological Society, doubted that ‘negroes’ could be the same as white men, the Cannibal Club was suspicious of Western sexual practices and sought to promote others. Bertolini’s, a mixed Italian and French restaurant, was the perfect location for this sort of meeting. It occupied a part of town that had once been fashionable but was now a congregation point for prostitutes and rougher types—Tennyson called the location ‘Dirtolini’s’ and Dante Gabriel Rossetti took models of a decidedly ‘loose’ type there.31

The Club was named such because Burton had always been interested in cannibalism, and was bitterly disappointed that he never managed to witness it— and perhaps participate in the ritual. This fascination was not limited to Burton: another Cannibal begged Burton to acquire the skin of an African girl so he might bind his volumes of the Marquis de Sade in it.32 This particularly grotesque detail points to the men’s shared interest in nonwestern ritual and sexual practices, as well as their sadistic tendencies, but the interests of all of the members sprawled in the same way the British Empire did.

Like the Benison and Hellfire clubs before them, the meetings of the Cannibal Club, jokingly called ‘orgies’ by Burton, were excuses for the members to get rip-roaringly drunk with a group of likeminded men—and no topic of conversation was taboo. The membership included Richard Monckton Milnes, 1st Baron Houghton, the conservative politician and poet whose erotic literature collection was only surpassed by another member of the club; Edward Sellon, a translator and author of several erotic works; James Campbell Reddie, an openly homosexual translator of French and Italian erotic novels, and a pioneering erotic bibliographer; Frederick Hankey, a major Conservative politician; George Augustus Sala, the famous reporter and erotic novelist; Algernon Charles Swinburne, the taboo poet and playwright; and of course Henry
Spencer Ashbee, the erotic bibliographer and encyclopedist who helped to tie all of these disparate counterculture threads together. Despite their countercultural tastes, many of the Cannibals also belonged in the conventional culture culture—many of them also belonged to the Royal Geographic Society, the Ethnological Society, and the Royal Society,

Also like the two clubs before them, the Cannibals delighted in constructing an erotic and fictional backstory and ritual items. The chairman was supposed to keep order with a mace carved in the shape of an African chewing on a large bone, presumably human. They also mocked Christianity by uttering their very own ‘catechism’:

Preserve us from our enemies
Thou who art Lord of suns & skies,
Whose meat & drink is flesh in pies
And blood in bowls!
Of thy sweet mercy, damn their eyes,
And damn their souls!
[ . . .]
Glad tidings of great exultation
Proclaim we to the chosen nation; [ . . .]
They are going to damnation
And we to glory. . .
Roast all brown faces that were pretty,
All black even blacker,
Strip off the trappings of their city. . .
Give thou their carcases to fill
The so-called “Cannibal’s Catechism” was written by Swinburne and read aloud by the group at every initiation and meeting. This poem would go on to provide the members with the code and allusions they would use in letters to each other. For example, Swinburne wrote to J. Fredrick Collingwood in 1868, ‘Dear Brother, By the grace of Satan I will be with you—Deo Nolente—with a friend—on Tuesday. Yours in the faith, A. C. Swinburne.’

Just like the Beggars and Hellfire clubs, the meetings of the Cannibals provided a fertile breeding ground for collaboration and cooperation. Nearly every member, at one time or another, would turn his hand towards the creation pornographic material. Thus, while the Beggar’s Benison and the Hellfire Club had a limited supply of erotic/pornographic literature, the Cannibal Club never ran into this problem. They made themselves an audience for erotica. Some works even became collaborations between two or more members, such as the *Mysteries of Verbena House* (1882), a novel that focuses on the flagellation and birching of schoolgirl after schoolgirl by a headmistress. The work was started by Sala but was completed by Reddie when Sala either lost interest or failed to finish. Reddie also took up the completion of *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain* (1881), the work of another Cannibal, Simeon Solomon, the homosexual Pre-Raphaelite painter, when Solomon was convicted of public indecency and disgraced in 1873. The work was supposedly the ‘true’ biography of a Victorian rentboy named Jack Saul, likely based on the real-life John Saul in Ireland, but recounts a number of homosexual encounters in graphic detail. Ashbee also notes in his bibliography that the *Romance of Lust* (1873-1876) is not the produce of a single pen, but consists of several tales, “‘orient pearls at random strung,’ woven into a connected narrative by a gentleman, perfectly well known to the present generation of literary eccentrics and collectors,” referring of course to himself and the Cannibals.
The members also took the opportunity of the meetings to buy, sell, and recommend erotic literature to each other, much of which was available from a friend of the club, the publisher William Dugdale, or Swinburne’s publisher John Camden Hotten. Indeed, in the 1860’s Hotten joined the Royal Geographic Society and Royal Ethnographic Society solely for the purpose of using of building a closer relationship with Cannibals by loaning out his decidedly indecent catalogue to members in order promote his wares. It seemed to be successful: in the days after Club meetings we see Ashbee, Swinburne and others writing for copies of new or rumored works, such as *The Romance of Chastisement, Exhibition of Female Flagellants*, or the satirical opera *Lady Bumtickler's Revels*, all published by Hotten.

The performative aspect continued to be important: members would read erotic works they had discovered or written to the club. For example, at one meeting in 1865, Swinburne waxed poetically about a new edition of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* that included several poems celebrating sensual and romantic love between men. Additionally, they shared the eighteenth-century Benison and Hellfire fascination with the history of phallus worship: Edward Sellon read ‘On the Phallic Worship of India’ before the Anthropological Society, a work that draws on *Priapus* and orientalizes it within an Indian context. He was also the author of *Ophiolatreia* which was an account of ‘the rites and mysteries connected with the origin, rise, and development of serpent worship’, the whole of which formed ‘an exposition of one of the phases of phallic, or sex worship’. A final continuance between the Cannibals and their eighteenth-century brethren is that they flaunted the private publicly—by “using scholarly apparatuses [to] emphasize and even expand these works’ eroticism…Like “warnings” pornographers often included in their advertisements, such notes actually highlight the “offensive” content.” This allowed both Hotten and the late Victorian erotic publisher Charles
Carrington to harness the language of the Cannibals in advertising and promoting their books to a new generation of men in the libertine tradition, often going so far as to form new clubs.

Unlike the Benison or Hellfire members before them, there is no outright suggestion that these men engaged in sexual activities at their meetings. This was partially due to the fact that the Cannibals met largely in public spaces, but may also have been a result of the increasing privatization and regulation of sexuality by the 1824 Vagrancy Act and the 1864 Contagious Diseases Act. The irony of course, was that there was an increasingly rising tide of erotic literature, illustrations, and eventually postcards and photography besieging the metropolis. Part of it was enabled by these men, especially Hankey, as he illegally used the diplomatic bags of the British Embassy (which were protected from search and seizure) to smuggle flagellant novels into the country for publication by Dugdale or Hotten.39

There was also the very real threat of prosecution by the Society for the Suppression of Vice, or later the full fury of the British government. The entire year of 1885 Isabel Burton was convinced that she was being watched by members of the censorial Society for the Suppression of Vice. When one of them took lodgings in the same building as her, she demanded that the landlord throw him out or the Burtons themselves would be forced to move (the landlord obliged the Burtons).40 This contrast—insistent profession of public manners against a background of vice and immorality—did not go unnoticed and provided one of the stereotypical critiques of the late Victorian age (and indeed modern critiques of the Victorians). Ashbee in particular savaged the society he lived in, writing that “the English nation possesses an ultra-squeamishness and hyper-prudery peculiar to itself, sufficient alone to deter any author of position and talent from taking in hand so tabooed a subject.”41
Henry Spencer Ashbee was on the surface a respectable and wealthy international businessman. At a young age he impressed his father-in-law, married into the textile manufacturer Charles Lavy & Co., and went on to make a fortune for himself and the company. His success was largely attributable to his fluency in languages ancient and modern. But with a little bit of scratching, Ashbee emerges as the stereotypical Victorian gentleman with a secret life. Through a series of chance meetings, Ashbee fell into a friendship with both James Campbell Reddie and Francis Hankey, who introduced him to their secret hobby of collecting and publishing erotic literature. By this point Reddie had written *The Adventures of a Schoolboy; or, The Freaks of Youthful Passion* and *The New Ladies Tickler* (both 1866). Ashbee seemed somewhat bemused by these works, later describing them as ‘well written, worthy of a less silly title and better illustrations. . . all [scenes] are forcibly told and very voluptuous.’

At some point in the 1860s, faced with a midlife crisis, Ashbee began collecting these works, a hobby that would eventually become an overwhelming obsession. Something about these works electrified Ashbee. Was it that they were ‘naturally and powerfully written tale[s]’ in which sex ‘from the most refined voluptuousness to the grossest sensuality are richly and lusciously depicted’, or were these works ‘vile. . . exceedingly licentious [with] no literary merit whatsoever’? Anyway, he could simply not tear himself away. The tension within Ashbee, like the tensions throughout all of these clubs, was never fully resolved. In one of his introductions he remarked "better were it that such literature did not exist. I consider it pernicious and hurtful to the immature.” Ashbee was obviously both repulsed and enticed, and despite the wishes of his better self, he would go on to collect enough of the material to become the leading erotic book collector in the world and go on to write a study of these works.
Ashbee emerges as the penultimate reader of erotic literature, becoming both the presenter and the definer of it. By the time of his death he retained a separate London apartment just for his erotic library and had amassed thousands of erotic novels, illustrations, and short stories in French, English, Spanish and other languages. He had inherited the collections of other Cannibals and had written a masterpiece of bibliography in three volumes: *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Index of Prohibited Books, 1877), *Centuria Librorum Absconditorum* (A Hundred Hidden Books, 1879) and *Catena Librorum Tacendorum* (A Series of Silenced Books, 1885). These volumes categorize and analyze works in much greater depth than a regular bibliography would. Ashbee often remarks on the quality of the plates inserted into a book, giving his opinion on how well the text is written, and in many cases provides large excerpts, some of which are the only surviving fragments we have of the referenced works. But even in the depths of his discussions, Ashbee’s works retain a communal quality to them: he often cites from Sellon or from letters of authors that he knew on a personal basis to provide greater context.

Ashbee’s services were invaluable to the Cannibal Club. For example, when Burton and Indian civil servant Forster Fitzgerald Arbuthnot tried to publish Bhagwan Lal Indraji’s English translation of the *Kama Sutra* that Bhagwan Lal Indraji, they were rebuffed by printer after printer. Ashbee’s correspondence campaign to individuals as far as France and the Netherlands won essential support for the publication. Tucked into Ashbee’s manuscript copy of the *Kama Sutra* in the British Library is a letter from Dutch publisher R. C. d’Ablaing of Giessenburg—whose erotic publishing and reading activities seem to have gone unnoticed as of yet in Dutch scholarship—promising that he would send Ashbee a number of pornographic works, and praising the Hindu work for its insight into the erotics of theology. Another letter signed “J
Knight,” tucked into the same volume, promises that he will draw up a handsome jacket for the *Kama Sutra* and laments that these works could not be published without great public outrage.

The letters and friendships among members of the Cannibal Club and others involved in the erotic book trade proved essential for authors and publishers writing and catering to these audiences. For the first time, such a club emerges as a profitable and secure audience for erotic material. The friendships and connections generated the money to fund Burton’s *One Thousand and One Nights, Perfumed Garden*, and *Kama Sutra* by subscription. When Ashbee wrote the first volume of his bibliography, there only existed four manuscript copies of the *Kama Sutra*, but by the time he wrote the second volume copies and were circulating through London. In many ways the Cannibal Club was the *ne plus ultra* of the clubs that came before it. Not only were they involved in the publication of dozens of erotic novels, poetry, and images, they also curated a farflung network of erotic publishers, authors, and translators. They brought foreign texts such as the *Kama Sutra* into western awareness and circulation. They were more or less responsible for singlehandedly popularizing the genres of homosexual and flagellatory pornography. They reintroduced the works of the Marquis de Sade into intellectual conversation, with dramatic consequences for twentieth-century culture. All three of these clubs used erotic literature to justify forms of sex that were in direct opposition to majority morality, though their members were largely conservative, and many of them became important figures in the Tory party. However, in private, behind closed doors or in letters to each other, they were often advocates for free love and anti-Christian moral ideas—especially for upper-class men like themselves.

In the end, I come back around to the epigraph taken from Ashbee’s third book: ‘Better were it that such literature did not exist. I consider it pernicious and hurtful to the immature but
at the same time I hold that, in certain circumstances, its study is necessary, if not beneficial.’ As is hopefully abundantly clear by now, the study of erotic literature is both necessary and beneficial, though it arouses more suspicion and prejudice than any other field of historical research. As Lisa Sigel has said, erotica is important because it “illustrates the wealth of desires woven into European history: desires about empire, about nation, about self and other, about plenty and dearth, about mechanization, democracy, wandering, stability, offspring, pain, pleasure and politics. Pornography loads these longings onto the fragile frame of the human body to detail the petty and grandiose pleasures wrought from sex.” 44

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Notes


2 Records of the Beggar’s Benison, 1892. See note 10 below regarding the authenticity of this material, although Stevenson and others have concluded that the mention of Fanny Hill is not a red herring and it was likely circulating in manuscript format before its publication.


9 Ibid., pp. 5.


11 Julie Peakman, in *Mighty Lewd Books: The Development of Pornography in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 28-29 argues that ‘the Beggar’s Benison Supplement was probably a money-making scam by the nineteenth-century pornographer, Leonard Smithers, the minutes a fabrication of Smithers himself.’ Stevenson agrees that the records should be treated very skeptically, but makes the case that the masturbatory rituals were real; I find his argument convincing.

12 For annotation and memorization, see Abigail Williams, *The Social Life of Books: Reading Together in the Eighteenth-Century Home* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 87. For the list of the facetiae see pp. 89-91 of the *Beggars Supplement*.

13 Williams, *Social Life*, 87.

14 Ibid., pp. 37-63.

15 Ibid., pp. 22-25, but chaps 1 and 2 in general.

16 Stevenson, *Beggar’s Benison*, ch. 3.

17 Walpole, quoted in Clark, *British Clubs*, 78.

18 Mercury was associated with commerce in general, but in the context of the Monks was a symbol of sexual commerce specifically. The motto translates to “do what you will,” an allusion to Rabelais, who was undoubtedly read at meetings of the Monks.


25 Ibid.


37 Anonymous [Edward Sellon], *Ophiolatreia: An Account of the Rites and Mysteries Connected with the Origin, Rise and Development of Serpent Worship ... the Whole Forming an Exposition of One of the Phases of Phallic ... Worship* (Privately printed, 1889), title page.

38 Bull, "Reading, Writing, and Publishing," pp. 239.


42 Ibid., 436.
