

# Sex in the 1700s

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Prostitutes, perversions and public scandals – the stuff of the 21st century tabloids was familiar to readers three centuries earlier, according to new research from the University of Leeds.

The reading of erotic literature was already a social activity 300 years ago.

Jenny Skipp's three-year PhD study examined, catalogued and categorised every known erotic text published in eighteenth-century Britain: "I tried to get a grip on just how many were published, detail the various types of sexual behaviour portrayed and find out who was doing what – and to whom." It proved a surprisingly rich field: "Most people have heard of Fanny Hill, but there was a huge amount of erotic literature published in the 18th century."

And despite earlier work suggesting that these texts were only for solitary consumption – at home, alone, and behind closed doors – Skipp's work throws up a surprising image of how these works were used. "They would be read in public – everywhere from London's rough-and-ready alehouses to the city's thriving coffee houses, which weren't quite the focus of polite society in the way we sometimes think," she explained. "Some texts even came as questions and answers and were clearly intended for groups of men to read together, with one asking the questions and the others answering them."

Much of the work is derogatory in its references to women. They are subordinates, courtesans, prostitutes, carriers of venereal disease and

bearers of deformed children. "When men write this way, or read these texts, it gives them a context for asserting their authority over women," Skipp added. Yet some texts portray women altogether differently, discussing the nature of female sexuality or describing lascivious aristocratic females.

One group predominant in this literature is the Libertines – whose all-in hedonistic, smoking, drinking, swearing, pleasure-seeking lifestyle was typified by their subjugation of women. Literature aimed at this group, encouraging men to assert their dominance, translated the repressive attitudes of Libertinism further down the class structure.

And Skipp's analysis of the pricing of these works revises earlier studies to show that rather than being solely targeted at the gentry, much of this work was cheap and widely available. Though many from the poorer sections of society are considered illiterate because they were unable to sign their name, they may still have been able to read: "Many more people could read than write," she said. "In London, for example, we believe about 70 per cent of men could read."

The works range from books, down to single-sheet pamphlets. "The price and content of this material suggests it was available to merchants, traders, skilled and semi-skilled men and even labourers," Skipp went on. Its accessibility allowed sexual attitudes to percolate down the social strata.

Dr Simon Burrows of the University's school of history, one of Skipp's PhD supervisors, described the study as "pioneering work." He said: "Jenny has shown that erotic texts are about much more than sexual fantasy. They can give us genuine new insights into cultural attitudes, sexual norms and social customs."

And Skipp describes a literary quality to the writing which you might

struggle to find in modern erotic fiction or top-shelf pornography. "It is very different to today's erotica," she said. "It is more humorous, more literary and more engaged with the wider issues of the life and politics of the times." Its metaphors mirror the passions of the age: "At a time when military power was equated with virility, armed conquest is often used as a metaphor for sex – in phrases such as 'unsheathing the weapon', 'storming the fort' and 'releasing the cannon'."

By the 1770s, the transcripts of adultery trials became a new source of titillation. To secure a divorce, a man would first have to successfully sue a rival for 'violating his property', before petitioning Parliament to dissolve the marriage. "There is something rather voyeuristic about these trials," said Skipp. "Often servants would give evidence while innkeepers would testify about lovers taking rooms together."

"The appetite for this kind of material shows readers were interested in gossip about their social betters and fascinated by the sordid details of marital breakdown – just like modern-day readers scanning the tabloids for a juicy scandal.

"The production of erotica was frequently stimulated by intrigues in the lives of well-known public figures – the aristocracy, politicians, writers, playwrights and actresses and occasionally the monarchy. The wives and mistresses were both celebrated and derided in erotic texts – they were the WAGS of their day."

As Skipp said: "Eighteenth century readers were just as fascinated with public figures as we are today – especially when they had skeletons in their closet!"

Source: University of Leeds

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