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A Rhetoric of Pornography: Private Style and Public Policy in “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon”

Greta Wendelin

In 1885, William Stead, editor of the Pall Mall Gazette, printed an exposé of child prostitution in London, “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon.” This incendiary article helped pass the Criminal Law Amendment bill, but also garnered accusations of pornography against the “Maiden Tribute.” Using Stead’s four-part article as a case study, I develop a rhetorical understanding of pornography to account for the dynamic political energy and outrage generated by this text. I argue that the pornography of the “Maiden Tribute” managed to create a particular ignorance, one in which sexuality was isolated from material economic realities. Ultimately, Stead’s mission proved politically deleterious to the very women he professed to help.

On July 4, 1885, William T. Stead, editor of London’s Pall Mall Gazette, issued “A Frank Warning” on his front page. “All those who are squeamish, and all those who are prudish, and all those who prefer to live in a fool’s paradise of imaginary innocence and purity,” had best not read the newspaper the following Monday and subsequent three days. Those who would read had better brace themselves for a “story of an actual pilgrimage to a real hell.” Unpleasant as the story was, he assured his readers that it is “an authentic record of unimpeachable facts . . . and its publication is necessary.” He believed publication was necessary because the Criminal Law Amendment bill was stalled in Parliament’s House of Commons. Stead felt the bill, which proposed raising the age of consent from
thirteen to sixteen, would only pass with the assistance of his investigative muckraking.\(^1\) Intending that his report would rescue the bill from its anticipated demise, Stead thus vowed to “publish the report of a Special and Secret Commission of Inquiry...dealing with those phases of sexual criminality which the [bill] was framed to repress.”

As promised, the four-part “Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” was published on July 6, 7, 8, and 10. The “Maiden Tribute” exposed the bribery system safeguarding brothels from prosecution and the entrapment of young females into prostitution, and it also featured a scintillating account detailing Stead’s purchase of a thirteen-year-old girl, Eliza Armstrong (alias “Lily”). The four-day serial dramatized Stead’s investigation of child prostitution, beginning with the “Lily” episode, which was featured in the July 6 edition. The July 7 installment described how young women were recruited or scammed into prostitution. July 8 further detailed how young women from the country or abroad are entrapped in prostitution, while explaining how the law and police facilitated this. On July 9, the newspaper’s articles reflexively considered the scandal created by the “Maiden Tribute,” wherein Stead further explained the motivation behind the report, defended his work from detractors, and printed several pages of letters that both praised Stead’s brave undertaking and condemned him for printing such gross material. The final installment, on July 10, levied a number of accusations against the police force, which Stead viewed as complicit with those who engaged in pimping young girls.

All told, it was an unprecedented journalistic endeavor, one that quickly generated one and a half million reprints of the article (Walkowitz 11). Some letters to the editor published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on July 9 registered the public’s praise. For example, “a Liberal peer” determined that it was “necessary that the iniquity should be proved, exposed, and denounced in trumpet tones.” For this feat, Stead “deserve[d] honour and gratitude from all who [had] at heart the promotion of the cause of humanity.” The brassy acclaim heralded the imminent consummation of Stead’s express wish. The bill, which came to be called “Stead’s law,” was revived in Parliament on July 9 and passed on August 10, 1885 (Walkowitz 103), all of this following the uproar over the “Maiden Tribute”.

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\(^1\)To note several significant sections of the Criminal Law Amendment bill, the legislation made sexual intercourse with a girl under thirteen years of age unlawful and punishable by life imprisonment (section 4). Section 4 also admitted that children under thirteen did not understand the nature of the oath, but still permitted testimony given in court without the oath, a point that had previously allowed for acquittal in rape cases. It is also important to recognize that the law was overwhelming concerned with violation of women: male sexuality was addressed in a very brief section 11, which made any act of homosexuality a punishable offense, although far less severe than crime committed against women: “any male person, who in public or private, commits...any gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour” (Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, 48 & 49 Vict., c. 69.). For further reading on the Criminal Law Amendment bill, see: (Hendrick 60–64; Stafford).
and nearly 400,000 signatures gathered by the Salvation Army in support of the bill (Fisher 70). Stead helped to secure the bill’s adoption in less than a month, but the power of “Maiden Tribute” was far from spent. In two months’ time, Stead would find that the “Maiden Tribute” had made him a criminal, convicted on charges of kidnapping thirteen-year-old Armstrong (Plowden and Corporation 135).

Stead’s highly publicized heroism and subsequent criminality are just two manifestations of the “Maiden Tribute’s” intriguing effects, and much scholarship investigates this tempestuous episode (Campbell; Ehrlich; Gorham; Salmon; Walkowitz). However, I am interested in neither its facile effectiveness in promoting the Criminal Law Amendment bill nor the virulent backlash against Stead. Rather, I believe the infamous episode of the “Maiden Tribute” offers a rich case study of power and knowledge. This incendiary expose offers an opportunity to investigate the spectacular but little understood interplay between politics and pornography, a relationship that has received scant attention within the discipline and is long overdue for a more thorough and grounded investigation.

I argue that the political power generated through Stead’s pornographic text was destructive to Stead’s long-term cause because it isolated sexuality from the material economic structures that shaped the lives of the young British maidens Stead was so intent on saving. To advance this thesis, I develop a rhetorical understanding of pornography. This essay highlights the particular knowledge—and ignorance—that Stead created and unleashed upon the London public in July of 1885. I first offer a discussion of pornography in rhetorical terms—ideology and aesthetics, power and knowledge. Second, I describe the political tensions that prompted Stead to write the “Maiden Tribute” before turning to a reading of the text as pornography. Finally, I address the political implications of Stead’s pornographic knowledge. Through a close examination of both the text itself and circumstances of the scandal, I intend to examine how the rhetoric of pornography shaped a particular form of political power.

In light of this argument, my work contributes to rhetorical studies in two ways. First, my analysis of the “Maiden Tribute” illuminates the politics implicit within a particular stylistic mode, that of pornography. As Stephen Browne deduced from his study of the incendiary American Slavery As It Is, “ideology is style”; he explained, “when it comes to ideology...there can be no ‘behind’ and no ‘beyond’ the style in which it advances its claims on the public consciousness” (Browne 290, emphasis in original). If this is the case, then I would contend that the “Maiden Tribute,” which bears the hallmarks of a pornographic aesthetic, also advances a peculiar political ideology.

Second, careful attention to style and ideology is necessary to develop an alternative understanding of pornographic rhetoric. To date, the only sustained analysis of pornography in rhetorical criticism is the Quarterly Journal of Speech exchange between Lawrence Rosenfield and Robert E. Sanders (Rosenfield “Politics and Pornography”; Rosenfield “A Note from Rosenfield”; Sanders). While this initial discussion has value, the definition of pornography advanced
by Rosenfield and Sanders’s debate is not instructive to the case of the “Maiden Tribute” because of the limited view of pornography presented therein. Rather than starting with the assumption that “pornography is consumed by society’s victims,” which is neither true nor applicable to the “Maiden Tribute,” I have chosen the work of Susan Sontag as a starting point (Rosenfield “A Note from Rosenfield” 374). Sontag studied under Richard McKeon and Kenneth Burke, both of whom she cited as profound influences (Hirsch). Furthermore, her essays “The Pornographic Imagination” and Regarding the Pain of Others provide a better framework by which to assess the “Maiden Tribute.” Both essays are focused on the aesthetic and psychological dimensions of pornography and the political implications of style.

Carnal Knowledge: The Ideology, Aesthetics, and Rhetoric of Pornography

My decision to call the “Maiden Tribute” pornography is grounded primarily in the public reactions of Stead’s readers, which I found in the July 9 issue of the Pall Mall Gazette. Amid the praise for Stead’s endeavor, a number of people called the “Maiden Tribute” “the vilest of vile brothel literature” and a “mass of disgusting detail.” It should be noted that the objections to the “Maiden Tribute” lie not only in the “disgusting detail” and sexualized content of the article, but also in the very public nature of the piece. Some readers believed that the “Maiden Tribute” was truly smutty literature because it was easily accessible to the young and morally weak. Although Stead’s readers did not use the word “pornography,” its absence does not mean that his readers did not have a strong sense of what pornography was. As Lisa Sigel explained, the Victorian conceptualization of pornography “hinged upon access. It was presumed that certain people could look at [sexual] representations with limited emotional, social, and legal consequences while others could not” (Sigel 4). This anxiety over access is clearly evidenced in the reactions to the “Maiden Tribute” and is a strong indication that this work may profitably be read as pornography.

For example, the Plymouth Western Daily Mercury leveled the charge of pornography against the “Maiden Tribute”: “With the object of the print in question all must deeply sympathize. Its object is to arouse public attention so as to compel the Government to pass certain measures affecting the legal age of childhood . . . . But what about the means adopted? Does the end justify the means? Probably not. While righteous indignation might be awakened, morbid tastes are gratified and an immediate stimulus is thus given to evil.” While the upright may respond appropriately to Stead’s clarion call for action, morally weaker persons, such as the young or depraved, were offered nothing but an invitation to degraded gratification.

These “morbid tastes” were most objectionable to a fair portion of Stead’s reading public. The same July 9 issue also printed a number of protests from readers who failed to see the argument for the obscenity that was placed before the public’s
eyes. One objector, J.T. Levett, asserted that “it must be evident to anyone that no good purpose can be served by the publication of the mass of disgusting detail which pollutes your pages, and renders your journal unfit to be received in any respectable or decently conducted family.” Likewise, Lewis Miles fittingly ascribed the very pitfalls commonly associated with pornography to the “Maiden Tribute”: “while recognizing and appreciating the motive, I feel assured you underestimate the enormous influence you possess, and fail to realize the fact that, by the minute details and facilities you so graphically describe, you will strengthen and stimulate and encourage the very vices you abhor!”

Miles’s fears had apparently come true. Mr. Charles R. Warren added in the same issue that he was terribly worried about the young paper delivery boys he saw at his office, who had been behaving very strangely. His report merits full quotation:

“For the past two days these juveniles have been seen eagerly perusing the columns of your paper, which once had the reputation of being written by gentlemen for gentlemen. Much, of course, they failed to understand... But when they did light upon a passage whose meaning was glaring and palpable, a beam of intelligence overspread their youthful countenances, and they speedily hastened to invite their companions to partake of the fair feast provided by your generosity and enterprise. In these days of advance we have witnessed strange sights; but perhaps none have equaled the spectacle presented of small boys traveling on their errands intent on a paper they never perused before... and informing their own undeveloped minds by striving to spell through column after column of what old-fashioned folk might foolishly term the vilest of vile brothel literature.”

Clearly, a portion of the “Maiden Tribute’s” audience did perceive a pornographic text that gratified the “morbid tastes” of society’s weaker members. But, to dismiss pornography as mere obscenity, and therefore unworthy of examination, is to do so at the expense of ignoring a rich message.

This essay takes the complaints of Stead’s detractors seriously. My analysis of the “Maiden Tribute” is hinged on the condition that this text is understood as pornography, insofar as it is a text that focuses on erotic or sexual themes, aims to remove a reader to the margins of acceptable experience, and exploits societal taboos. I use “pornography” to refer to the “Maiden Tribute,” but not to signify obscenity. Ultimately, what constitutes pornography as obscenity is a matter of personal taste. Maurice Charney observed that the term “sexual fiction” is a “more neutral phrase” than “pornography,” but both terms describe the same thing: a text that “focuses on erotic themes” (5).

The reactions of Stead’s more conservative readers are certainly helpful in reading the “Maiden Tribute” as pornography. However, the theories of Sontag, Michel Foucault, and Charney assuage their indignation and advance a more fruitful discussion of pornography as rhetoric, especially its aesthetic dimensions and political implications. First, the “Maiden Tribute” is pornography in that
sexual themes are the obsessive focus of this work: virginity, sexual intercourse, rape, prostitution, lust, perversity, abduction, sadism, and the body of the pubescent female all constitute the foci of Stead’s narrative. Certainly, the sexual is a precondition of pornography, but beyond the smut is a more important function. Second, pornography is concerned with dislocating a reader from her or his previous understanding of reality by privileging and exploiting the secret taboos of a society. I realize that many would ascribe a more explicit function to pornography, but my interest in pornography is rhetorical, not prurient. As Sontag recognized, some pornography aims for that which lies beyond the ostensible task of smut. She noted, “Pornography that is serious literature aims to ‘excite’ in the same way that books which render an extreme form of religious experience aim to ‘convert’” (Styles of Radical Will 38). Charney further explained, “[Pornography] stimulates feelings and excellences of its own that are different from either comedy or tragedy. The most important of these differences is the powerful evocation of a sexual, eroticized reality” (11). Therefore, it is incorrect to think that the sole purpose of pornography is to sexually arouse, as Sontag claimed when she said, “the singleness of pornography’s intention is spurious” (47). Instead, serious pornography “is one of the branches of literature—science fiction is another—aiming at disorientation, at psychic dislocation” (47). This dislocation in sexual fiction takes the reader from the conventional and relocates him or her to the forbidden margins of experience.

Third, perhaps the most intriguing and telling characteristic of the pornographic is that it can elucidate what a society deems secret, or more precisely, forbidden. The secret in pornography is that which dominant ideology places outside the realm of condoned sexual or social practice. But, paradoxically, that which is placed beyond the bounds of convention is simultaneously charged with eroticism. For example, both child molestation and flagellation are prominently featured in Victorian pornography (Perkins 32). James Kincaid offered one explanation for this in Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture. “by insisting so loudly on the innocence, purity, and asexuality of the child, we have created a subversive echo: experience, corruption, eroticism,” an echo that reverberated throughout the Victorian era, especially in pedophilic sexual fiction that was “brought into being by and coordinate with the eroticizing of the child” (4–5). To illustrate further, Karen Halttunen noted that “changing attitudes toward pain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” in Britain coincided with a proliferation of sadistic pornography, to the point where flogging and other sadomasochistic practices like those associated with the writings of Marquis de Sade were labeled “the English vice” (68). This correlation encapsulates the relationship between pornography and the secret: “If pornography is best defined as the representation of sexual behavior with a deliberate violation of moral and social taboos, then the growing violence of it in this period is attributable to the new shock value of pain within a culture redefining it as forbidden and therefore obscene” (Halttunen 69, italics in original).

“Without secrecy,” D.H. Lawrence succinctly speculated, “there would be no pornography” (78). This point is precisely what makes the “Maiden Tribute” a
captivating study: As Stead went to work on the “Maiden Tribute,” he perceived that “sex [was] repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence”; consequently, his boldness in writing pornography had “the appearance of a deliberate transgression” (Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction 6). Consequently, he positioned himself as a privileged voyeur—knowledgeable of the city’s most terrible secrets, and, as editor of the Pall Mall Gazette, more than capable of disseminating those secrets all over the city. As Foucault stated, those who presume to speak of sex frankly invoke a “speaker’s benefit” upon his or her discourse, and the person who does so “places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom” (6). Stead no doubt believed that he placed himself beyond the conventional knowledge and, correspondingly, outside the confines of conventionality, free to speak a truth that spotlighted the horrors of illicit sex and exploitation.

Pornographic knowledge of this sort, though, risks becoming alienated from larger political circumstances. Sontag stated, “for a long time some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in...the insanity of war” (Regarding the Pain of Others 14). However, even with the most graphic depictions of destruction, “to read in the pictures...only what confirms a general abhorrence of war is to stand back from an engagement with...history. It is to dismiss politics” (9). In other words, Sontag argued that when we myopically focus only upon the lurid details of human suffering, whether in the context of war or child prostitution for that matter, we often hazard a kind of blindness—we fail to recognize that such suffering, terrible as it may be, is born of material circumstances, history, and conflicts that make human atrocities not only possible, but also all too common.

As Lawrence recognized the relationship between pornography and secrecy, so too did Stead realize that exploiting pornographic secrecy can result in something volatile on a grand scale; as the first line of the Pall Mall Gazette read on July 6, “The Report of our Secret Commission will be read to-day with a shuddering horror that will thrill throughout the world.” Moreover, Stead fully intended that people should act upon this “shuddering horror” and mobilize to push the Criminal Law Amendment bill through Parliament. While his carefully crafted report of a horrific sexual underworld would, in fact, “thrill throughout the world,” it did so in ways that Stead and his Secret Commission could have never predicted, even to the extent of undermining the potential for true reform.

Context and Controversy: The Making of the “Maiden Tribute”

The circumstances that would create a perfect storm on the front pages of the Pall Mall Gazette in July of 1885 were hardly an overnight happening; the political tensions over governing illicit sexuality had been brewing for at least twenty years prior to the release of “The Secret Commission’s Report.” The impetus for the
“Maiden Tribute” would come from the Contagious Diseases (C. D.) Acts of 1864, 1868, and 1869 and the bitter opposition to these laws posed by feminist and anti-vice groups. Rather than making prostitution illegal, the C. D. Acts attempted to curb spiraling venereal disease rates in the military by screening prostitutes and mandating treatment in a lock-hospital for prostitutes carrying venereal disease. The three acts passed with minimal opposition, bolstered by supporters in favor of regulation and aided by the ignorance or apathy on the part of others as to the legislation affecting two socially marginalized groups: soldiers and prostitutes (Fisher 20).

However, once the C. D. Acts were enacted, an increasingly vocal anti-vice campaign developed to oppose the legislation. One of the most vibrant crusaders for the anti-vice cause was Josephine Butler, a British philanthropist who had worked for years with “fallen women.” Throughout the 1870s and early 1880s, Butler desperately and unsuccessfully lobbied Parliament for legislation that would criminalize prostitution, rather than sanction it as the C. D. Acts did in a brutal and invasive way (Fisher 26). Butler argued for the repeal of the C. D. Acts in her 1871 essay, Constitution Violated. In this tract, she posited that the C. D. Acts infringed upon a number of the rights guaranteed by the Magna Carta because they denied the right to a trial, created a slave-class out of women, and unfairly targeted the urban poor. Quite correctly, she pointed out the grievous wrongs perpetrated by a government without women’s suffrage, so aptly highlighted by these discriminatory laws: “It cannot be expected that due attention will ever be paid to the interests of any class which is not duly represented in the government of the country. If women had possessed the franchise, the Contagious Diseases Acts could not have been passed . . . . These Acts secure the enslavement of women and the increased immorality of men” (Butler 153). As clear and concise as her argument was, she also recognized the deeply entrenched attitudes against her cause. She quoted a writer who frequented one of the “fashionable London Clubs,” who had said, “these women [prostitutes] ought to be ‘treated as foul sewers are treated, as physical facts and not as moral agents’” (176). Butler countered this with her own criticism: “Sewers have neither souls nor civil rights; by admitting into their [C. D. Acts supporters] political theory the idea that any class of human beings . . . may be reduced to the level of an inanimate nuisance for political purposes [demonstrates] to us very clearly the intimate connection between a gross materialism and the most cruel and oppressive despotism” (176).

Butler and her anti-vice allies doggedly petitioned Parliament to overturn the C. D. Acts. When not lobbying for the repeal of the C. D. Acts, the anti-vice crusaders channeled their efforts into promoting the Criminal Law Amendment bill. This bill, first proposed in May 1883, focused on child prostitution by raising the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen, as well as targeting solicitation and loitering (Fisher 52–53). While it initially had some support within Parliament, those uninterested in bending to the demands of anti-vice campaigners soon managed to stifle the bill. It was then redrafted, dropped from debate in 1884, and eventually
reintroduced a third time in 1885, only to be met with “an atmosphere of profound lethargy, and bad-tempered, end-of-term bickering” (Fisher 55).

The escalating opposition to the C. D. Acts and the stalled progress of the Criminal Law Amendment bill in Parliament coincided with the slap-on-the-wrist sentencing of Mary Jeffries in the spring of 1885. Jeffries was a wealthy woman who ran several brothels that catered to up-scale clients who had a proclivity for “assorted perversions” like that English vice, flogging (Fisher 58). She had, up until early 1885, avoided prosecution by extensively bribing law enforcement. While the police were hesitant to charge her, the anti-vice campaigners were not (Fisher 58). By early 1885, they were able to mount a damning case against her, but even then the law sided with immorality. Jeffries was instructed to plead guilty in the May 1885 trial; in doing so, she was fined £200 and charged to “keep the peace for two years,” a feckless sentence that infuriated the anti-vice campaigners (Fisher 60).

The Jeffries trial only proved to the anti-vice movement the seemingly impenetrable dominance posed by politicians and law enforcement and served to feed the movement’s growing discontent. Coupled with the on-going struggles of the Criminal Law Amendment bill, the outcome of the Jeffries trial induced Butler and her anti-vice proponent Benjamin Scott to play their only trump card: Stead, the dynamic editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* (Fisher 61). Butler’s campaigning initially caught Stead’s attention in 1876 after he read *The New Abolitionists*, Butler’s tract against the evils of prostitution. Impressed, Stead responded to Butler, offering to write something that would give prostitution its “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” although she did not take advantage of his offer at that time (Walkowitz 96). Nine years later, on May 22, 1885, Scott watched from the strangers’ gallery as the bill floundered in debate and despaired over the increasing apathy and frustration of Parliament (Fisher 55). Scott visited Stead the next day at the *Pall Mall Gazette* office (Fisher 62). After explaining his and Butler’s labors to pass the bill, Scott hopelessly cried, “The Bill is practically lost…. You are the only man in the country who can save it” (Whyte 160). Apparently, Stead’s initial offer to write in support of Butler’s cause was still standing; he needed little time to consider Scott’s plea. Two days later, on Monday, May 25, he began writing. In just a few weeks, Stead wrote a piece that took a private form, pornography, and boldly affixed it before the eyes of London on the front pages of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, to a most devastating effect.

The investigation of the “Special and Secret commission of Inquiry” began in a conventional way. Stead relied on existing evidence, interviewed police and public officials, and verified stories of young girls forced into prostitution. However, a particularly poignant episode turned the investigation into an entirely different entity. Stead asked Scott if he could interview children who had been victimized. Scott took him to see two young girls. One girl,

who was aged four-and-a-half, had been lured into a brothel one evening and had been raped twelve times in succession. Her assailants, though brought to
court, had been discharged absolutely. On seeing the huge, bearded figure of Stead approaching her, [the child] began to scream hysterically, imploring him not to hurt her, and calling out one phrase again and again which he could never bring himself to repeat. Arrogant, flamboyant and sensationalist he may have been, but his compassion, and his love for children, were genuine enough.

He broke down. “I'll turn my paper into a tub!” he roared through his tears. “I'll turn stump orator! I'll damn, and damn, and damn!” (Petrie 245–246)

From this episode, along with his inability to get evidence damning enough to shake the Criminal Law Amendment bill from the grips of Parliament’s increasing indifference, “[Stead] concluded that the only way to prove that children could be bought and sent into enforced prostitution was to do the deed himself” (Fisher 64). He coerced a former procuress, Rebecca Jarrett, to play the part of sex broker in his narrative, and she then arranged the purchase of Armstrong, a thirteen-year-old girl from the Marylebone slum in central London. This exchange would constitute the climactic “Lily” vignette of the “Maiden Tribute.”

To be sure, the “Maiden Tribute” managed to overcome in days what years of arduous campaigning had failed to do: decisively mobilize the public and government toward passing a bill that raised the age of consent and enforced stricter control of prostitution. Given the passage of the Criminal Law Amendment bill the following month, one might conclude that Stead succeeded admirably in his purpose to save the bill from defeat (Walkowitz 103). However, the “Maiden Tribute” also makes an intriguing contribution to our understanding of pornography as rhetoric. In the “Maiden Tribute,” Stead crafted a particular rhetoric that would generate a complex political power and troubling public reaction, one that served to undermine his own mission to save the maidens of London.

The Minotaur, the Terror, and the Maiden: Sadistic Shock in Pursuit of Policy

In order to leverage the debate over the Criminal Amendment Law bill out of its torpor, Stead exceeded the conventions of mere reporting. Indeed, as the self-proclaimed creator of “New Journalism,” Stead unapologetically advanced his personal agenda in the pages of the Pall Mall Gazette, making a bold display of his politics through sensationalism, personal interviews, and his own commentary that made no concession to impartiality. In this respect, the “Maiden Tribute” stands as the high-water mark of his unique showmanship and activism. Throughout Stead’s investigation of child prostitution, he was thwarted by what

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3William Stead stands as the representative of the “New Journalism,” a moniker coined by Matthew Arnold to disparage Stead’s unique, sensationalist, and politically liberal style of reporting that evolved during his time at the Pall Mall Gazette and came to its fullest expression in the “Maiden Tribute.” Many sources detail Stead and his particular brand of reporting, but a few helpful ones may be found in the following: J. O. Baylen; Kate Campbell; J. W. Robertson Scott; Richard Salmon.
he perceived as collusion between law enforcement and those who would exploit young girls for profit. As he stated on July 6, “These crimes flourish on every side, unnoticed and unchecked—if, indeed, they are not absolutely encouraged by the law, as they are certainly practiced by some legislators and winked at by many administrators of the law.” There is no doubt that Stead desired to influence the public, and he was willing to ignore, or rather exploit, cultural taboos to do so.

At this point, I turn to the text of the “Maiden Tribute,” which ran on July 6, 7, 8, and 10, 1885, in the Pall Mall Gazette. Class disparity, sadomasochism, and the innocent child represented formidable topoi in the Victorian pornographic imagination. Stead’s blending of these themes in the “Maiden Tribute” constituted a powerful pornographic text, one that managed to create a vortex of ravaging emotion in his reading public. In sum, Stead assumed the role of the profligate minotaur; in doing so, he created a particular sexual knowledge of the “maidens” of London that would highlight their sexuality, innocence, and ignorance.

Sontag asserted that one function of pornography is to dislocate the reader to the margins of experience, into the realm of taboo. It is fitting, then, that the pornographic setting is often a site that is removed, “a world apart” that is “hidden, impregnable, self-sufficient, where everything is permitted” (Charney 48). Stead found this world in London: the home of propriety and a godly queen but also the location of a sadistic pornotopia, wherein young women were blithely bought, sold, and ruined beyond repair. Those whom Stead believed should care the most knew of these dreadful activities but were unconcerned about stopping them. In the July 6 edition, Stead printed an interview with a police officer, wherein Stead asked if it was a fact that, should the right inquiries be made, he could purchase a genuine maiden. “‘Certainly,’ [the policeman] replied without a moment’s hesitation,” and furthermore, he had “no doubt it is frequently done all over London.” Stead was appalled: “‘Why,’ I exclaimed, ‘the very thought is enough to raise hell.’ ‘It is true,’ he said; ‘and although it ought to raise hell, it does not even raise the neighbours.’” The police’s unwillingness to interfere was further illustrated in the “Maiden Tribute’s” last installment on July 10: “‘The police are the brothel-keepers’ best friends,’ said an old keeper to [Stead] sententiously. ‘Cos why? They keep things snug. And the brothel-keepers are the police’s best friend, ‘cos they pay them.’” In this lawless place, without regard for any moral strictures, the horrors of virgin abduction and rape were commonplace. If the police would not thwart this indecency (never mind the neighbors), it was up to Stead to do so.

Central to the horrors Stead laid before the public was the “minotaur,” the mythical beast that Stead positioned as modern-day seducer of young girls. The “minotaur” was a prominent feature in the “Maiden Tribute.” In fact, the opening lines of the first installment on July 6 were dedicated to the myth of this dreadful beast. “In ancient times, if we may believe the myths of Hellas, Athens . . . was compelled by her conqueror to send once every nine years a tribute to Crete of seven youths and seven maidens.” This unwilling tribute of flesh was to be
“devoured by the Minotaur, a frightful monster, half man, half bull, the foul product of an unnatural lust.” Typical of a pornographic antagonist, the minotaur was a pervesed creature with a voracious sexual appetite; however, particularly salient to the Victorian pornographic imagination, this minotaur also represented the unchecked privilege of the upper class. The minotaur was to be found in the form of modern man: he walked the streets of London in the guise of gentility and with the security of wealth, both of which afforded him the means to sate his licentious desires with impunity. As Stead proclaimed on July 8, “Here in London, moving about clad as respectably in broad cloth and fine linen as any bishop, with no foul shape or semblance of brute beast to mark him off from the rest of his fellows, is Dr,—, now retired from his profession and free to devote his fortune and his leisure to the ruin of maids. This is the ‘gentleman’ whose quantum of virgins from his procuresses is three per fortnight—all girls who have not previously been seduced.” The minotaur could even be a man of the cloth, as the July 6 installment described a procuress who had “once sold a girl twelve years old for £20 to a clergyman.” Money and status afforded unchecked revelry in perversions with the daughters of the lower classes; if the prices paid for maidens did not shock, the numbers should, as Stead proffered on July 8, “it is possible for a wealthy man to ruin not merely hundreds but thousands of poor women. It is actually Mr.—’s boast that he has ruined 3,000 women in his time,” at an expenditure upwards of £5,000. At the end of that day’s article, Stead was firmly convinced: “The blindest unbelief must admit that in this ‘English gentleman,’ we have a far more hideous Minotaur than that which Ovid fabled and which Theseus slew.”

In a classic pornographic trope, these wretched monsters are not given over to indulging their sexual proclivities in a loving way; the intercourse between the terrifying minotaurs and meek maidens typified the long-standing conceit of wealth, privilege, and pain. For instance, Marquis de Sade’s Philosophy in the Boudoir, first published in 1795, recounted the antics of the depraved aristocrat siblings, Madame de Saint-Ange and Le Chevalier de Mirvel, who terrorize the maiden Eugenie out of her virtue. As Charney characterized de Sade’s writings, “The strong take their overpowering pleasure at the expense of the weak. It is not surprising that in Sade sexual fulfillment comes through pain, oppression, torture and victimization” (32–33). Likewise, Stead capitalized on the dread that pain and torture, in conjunction with sex and affluence, could incite in his audience. This particular combination resulted in a fertile opportunity for the gruesome flair of sensationalism: Stead’s narrative is thick with screams, pathetic emotion, and agony of innocents. For instance, in a section from the July 6 article entitled “Why the Cries of the Victims are Not Heard,” he informed his readers that the padded rooms familiar to the Continent are also to be found in Britain. “‘In my house,’ said a most respectable lady, who keeps a villa in the west of London, ‘you can enjoy the screams of the girl with the certainty that no one else hears them but yourself.’” Stead did not stop at the terror of delighting in
screams; he also incorporated descriptions of pain in his text. The same article reports that flogging is a common occurrence, and, for some men, “the shriek of torture is the essence of their delight.” The same July 6 article also offered a scene typical of any de Sadean fantasy: the restraint of unwilling females. “To oblige a wealthy customer who by riot and excess had impaired his vitality to such an extent that nothing could minister to his jaded senses but very young maidens, an eminently respectable lady undertook that [the girl] should be strapped down hand and foot to the four posts of the bedstead, so that all resistance save that of unavailing screaming would be impossible.” Stead assured his readers that this gluttonous depravity knows no limits; after all, “anything can be done for money, if you only know where to take it.”

Despite the graphic reports of brothel madams and police officers, Stead was not satisfied with mere second-hand knowledge of brothel hearsay. Those writing pornography are “making forays into and taking up positions on the frontiers of consciousness . . . and reporting back what’s there” (Sontag Styles of Radical Will 45). If Stead was “a freelance explorer of spiritual [or sexual] dangers, the artist gain[ed] a certain license to behave differently from other people . . . [in order] to advance one step further in the dialectic of outrage” (Sontag Styles of Radical Will 45). Engaging “the dialectic of outrage” was one end result of Stead’s excursion into the dark underworld of London and pivotal to the rhetoric of pornography. The July 6 installment was central to achieving this effect, chiefly because it detailed Stead’s purchase of thirteen-year-old “Lily,” an episode that constituted the pièce de résistance of the “Maiden Tribute.” In this episode, Stead contracted the sale of the thirteen-year-old through the former procurress Jarrett, had “Lily” certified as *virgo intacta* by a midwife, and then had her taken to a brothel in order to prove the ease by which young women could be bought and ruined.

This vignette is striking, particularly because Stead fully committed to a position of “psychic dislocation” (Sontag Styles of Radical Will 47). He did not relate the story of “Lily’s” abduction in first person, but couched it in third-person narration. He began relating this incident toward the end of the July 6 article, prefacing it with, “Let me conclude the chapter of horrors by one incident, and only one of those which are constantly occurring in those dread regions of subterranean vice in which sexual crime flourishes almost unchecked,” a horror that he “can personally vouch for the absolute accuracy of every fact in the narrative.” In this subtle move, Stead renounced his own position as the evangelical, pious newspaper editor for that of the libidinous minotaur. He first described the midwife’s examination of “Lily” for a certificate of virginity, and included her grim assessment: “the poor little thing” is “so small, her pain will be extreme. I hope you will not be too cruel with her”—as if to lust when fully roused the very acme of agony on the part of the victim has not a fierce delight.” “The innocent girl” was then conveyed “to a house of ill fame . . . where, notwithstanding her extreme youth, she was admitted without question.” Using chloroform to sedate her,
“Lily” was put in a room to await her part in the climax of Stead’s tale, a scene that merits full quotation:

All was quiet and still. A few moments later the door opened, and the purchaser entered the bedroom. He closed and locked the door. There was a brief silence. And then there rose a wild and piteous cry—not a loud shriek, but a helpless, startled scream like the bleat of a frightened lamb. And the child’s voice was heard crying, in accents of terror, “There’s a man in the room! Take me home; oh, take me home!”

And then all once more was still.

That was but one case among many, and by no means the worst. It only differs from the rest because I have been able to verify the facts.

The “purchaser” was, of course, Stead, and “the facts” were a carefully orchestrated pantomime of abduction and rape. This pathetic interaction of a helpless girl cornered by the lustful stranger, relayed in the sensationalist language of screams, peril, and domination, demarcated the limits of Stead’s own pornographic imagination.

It is important to remember that Stead supported a bill that would change the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen, and the text of the “Maiden Tribute” is constructed to reflect the objective of the Criminal Law Amendment bill. As he stated July 7, “The law at present almost specially marks out such children as the fair game of dissolute men. The moment a child is thirteen she is a woman in the eye of the law, with absolute right to dispose of her person to any one who by force or fraud can bully or cajole her into parting with her virtue.” While she cannot sell her possessions until sixteen, the current law “insists upon investing her with unfettered freedom to sell her person at thirteen.” Therefore, it was critical to Stead’s purpose to represent these young women as incapable of possessing the faculty of consent, both physically and mentally.

Consequently, Stead depicted maidenly innocence as a shocking inverse of brutal depravity. The aforementioned “Lily” episode emphasized physical immaturity, which Stead reinforced with medical opinion on July 8. A doctor recommended to him by Cavendish Bentinck (a major opponent to the Criminal Law Amendment bill) assured Stead that puberty in English girls does not commence “till long after thirteen years of age.” That may be, but even more startling is the titillating ignorance that a girl, deemed a consenting adult, professed in the face of her “seduction,” a term which politely denoted rape. Devoid of education or any knowledge of what sex entailed, Stead related on July 7 that

one of the most touching instances of [ignorance] and the most conclusive was the exclamation of relief that burst from a Birmingham girl of fourteen when the midwife had finished her [virginity] examination.
“It’s all over now,” she said, “I am so glad.”

“You silly child,” said the procuress, “that’s nothing. You’ve not been seduced yet. That is still to come.” How could she know any better, never having been taught? . . . Even when an attempt is made to explain that there will be some physical pain, the information is so shrouded in mystery that . . . if the man had run a needle into the girl’s thigh and told her that she was seduced, she would have believed it.

The extreme ignorance displayed by the child counterbalanced the degenerate wisdom and experience of the seducer. Stead was bent on proving, in a most sensational manner, that thirteen-year-olds could not possibly have the mental capacity to give sexual consent. Simultaneously, Stead’s insistence on the innocence of the young girl was in keeping with the unwavering spotlight on the sexual.

The obsessive focus on the sexual through the dreadful minotaur, innocent child, and the terrible intersection between the two, thick with screams, violence, and secrets advanced Stead’s belief that this kind of sex should be lawfully punished, which was accomplished when Parliament passed the Criminal Law Amendment bill. Through the “Maiden Tribute,” Stead created a particular body—an “object of knowledge” constituted through a pornographic rhetoric—that aimed to support a particular politics (Foucault, Discipline and Punish 28). Stead did more than just write a provocative story; he created a pornographic body politic that would incite an unprecedented reaction. Not only does the text itself reveal the contours of Stead’s salacious vision of “Modern Babylon,” but further insights into the characteristics of pornographic knowledge may be explicated from the swift and fractured reactions of Stead’s reading public.

First, the “Maiden Tribute” represented an authentic account of the truth, as indicated by a portion of Stead’s reading audience who accepted the pornographic portrayals of the “maiden” and the “minotaur” at face value. For some readers, Stead’s story was nothing less than a factual, unvarnished account of reality. This was evident in the July 9 Pall Mall Gazette, which took a break before the last installment of the “Maiden Tribute” to dedicate an issue to the public furor. For example, a bishop wrote, “At present my feeling is one of unmitigated horror and disgust. The facts . . . are worse even than I had been able to imagine. But I know that horror and disgust will not do any good; and the question is, what can be suggested in the way of amelioration?” Others, such as Josephine Butler, indicated that Stead had written nothing less than a fearless expose: “The great end which I personally desire to see, arising out of your courageous unveiling of these horrors . . . is that the rich and aristocratic culprits in this matter should be judged by the people.” This “courageous unveiling” of the “facts” bore an unquestionable veracity for some in Stead’s audience, never mind that Stead had deliberately fabricated key elements of the text. Charney indicated that pornography evokes a sexualized reality, and these reactions reinforce his observation. Through the explicit vignettes, pitiful descriptions, and sensationalist tactics, the
pornographic knowledge generated in the text of the “Maiden Tribute” was true, simply because it cast itself as an unflinching account of horror, brutality, and sex.

While the praise of the “Maiden Tribute” acknowledges the text’s representational power, the criticism lobbed against the “Maiden Tribute” also tellingly reveals a second characteristic of pornography: just as it may seem like an uncensored report of the truth, the pornographic knowledge generated in the “Maiden Tribute” exploited taboo at the risk of alienating the audience. This was clearly indicated by a number of letters protesting Stead’s campaign. Alongside those objections mentioned earlier from the Plymouth Western Daily Mercury, Messrs. Levett, Miles, and Warren, other responses included in the July 9 edition of the Pall Mall Gazette aired readers’ opprobrium of Stead’s efforts. A letter from a “person whose name we cannot decipher” declared, “Anything more disgusting I never read. I consider it a disgrace that such matter should ever be allowed to be published in any newspaper that calls itself respectable.” Mr. Lewin Hill explained, “I have given orders to discontinue the Pall Mall Gazette to my house in consequence of the publication which you began last evening.” He added, “I believe my strong disapprobation with what you are doing is shared by a large number of your readers, however much it may be enjoyed by people of depraved appetites.” Another letter of criticism from Mr. T. May stated, “Having read your articles on Modern Babylon, &c., allow me to add my voice to protest against your publishing to the world the horrible details we have been treated to for the last two days.”

In effect, the “Maiden Tribute,” at least for an unhappy portion of the audience, represented a perilous exposure to the destructive knowledge of the forbidden, taboo, and sexually unseemly. The abject abhorrence voiced by Rev. Frank Soden in the July 9 issue spoke most clearly to this, remarking, “I cannot sleep since I read the revolting story—the faces, the voices, of those children haunt me.” Stead deliberately exploited sexual and societal taboos when he brought the thrilling account of the “maiden” and the “minotaur” before the eyes of the public. The “Maiden Tribute” was quite titillating, but many would have rather not seen it. This is precisely the point expressed a few pages later in the same issue, as Dr. Harvey noted, “it seems a pity that innocent people who know nothing of these crimes should have them brought prominently before them.” This astute observation reveals a key insight about pornography. The knowledge generated in the “Maiden Tribute” was more than just a report of abuse and violence—it was nothing less than a dangerous knowledge, one that some in Stead’s audience read as a threat to innocent or weak members of society.

“Modern Babylon” Hot and Bothered: Political Implications of Pornographic Rhetoric

Whatever danger the “Maiden Tribute” may have posed to the more delicate members of London society, the power of the episode was not in question. On July
10, the front page of the *Pall Mall Gazette* boasted, “disaster has now . . . been decisively averted, and in the second reading of the Criminal Law Amendment bill in the House of Commons last night her Majesty will see . . . the harvest of good that is certain to be reaped whenever the truth is spoken courageously in the cause of the helpless and oppressed.” This “harvest of good” happened in short order, as Judith Walkowitz stated, “popular indignation forced the government to act,” and act it did when the bill passed Parliament on August 10, thus accomplishing Stead’s expressed goal (103).

Ironically, Stead himself became one of the first criminals punished under the newly enacted Criminal Law Amendment bill. Stead recounted: “I publicly stated on the platform of St. James’s Hall that I had abducted Eliza Armstrong, and that she was very well cared for. This led to my immediate prosecution” (Whyte 183). Once charged with kidnapping and indecent assault, Stead knew that he had no chance of appeal. While he had fairly purchased Eliza from her mother for £5, he had not gotten her father’s consent: “The judge ruled that the consent of the mother was nothing, that the consent of the father was everything, and . . . the case against me was so clear I wanted to plead ‘guilty’ the moment that the judge ruled the consent of the father was essential” (Whyte 184).

Stead’s willingness to make London a safer place for young virgins extended all the way to accepting his own guilt under the very law that he helped to pass. Reflecting on the case of the “Maiden Tribute,” there is no doubt that Stead was passionate about saving the young maidens of Britain from sexual depravity and ruin. But I have doubts as to whether Stead’s bold pornography actually rescued any maidens from the fearsome maw of the minotaur, a view which others in Stead’s reading public also held. For example, Dr. John Harvey commented on July 9 that after having read the “Maiden Tribute” articles, he deemed “them of such ‘prurient nature’ that they will do more harm than good, and although no doubt written with every good intention, cause the ruin of many they propose to protect.” I happen to agree with Dr. Harvey, insofar as Stead’s unwavering focus on the sexual blinded him to the other factors that contributed to prostitution at that time.

It is this fundamental tension between the sexually explicit representation of pornography and the corresponding ignorance such representations generate that is particular to the “Maiden Tribute.” The aftermath of the “Maiden Tribute” demonstrated the volatile and destructive power of pornography in public and serves to disclose the deleterious political implications inherent in pornographic rhetoric. In the previous section, I focused on the knowledge that Stead’s pornographic rhetoric generated in the text, and the troubling public reception of the “Maiden Tribute.” Yet it is critical that the corresponding limitations of his knowledge also be recognized; Stead’s text ignored virtually all other factors that shaped the lives of young women living in industrial Britain, aside from the precarious state of her maidenly virtue.

At its core, Stead’s text recalls Sontag’s famous teacher Burke and his equally famous claim: “if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature
as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality” (45). George Lakoff and Mark Johnson similarly argue that any metaphor “allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another,” yet “will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept,” to the point where we will ignore characteristics at odds with the metaphor (10).

Browne notes as much in his investigation of Theodore Weld’s *American Slavery as It Is*, observing that the particularly grotesque, sensationalized depiction of slavery “bracketed out other ways of knowing,” to the point where it constrained subsequent representations of race (290). Likewise, Sontag’s focus on pornography both builds on her teacher’s insight and goes a step further: not only does pornography create a particular knowledge, but both pornographic knowledge and its corresponding ignorance “are suspect and dangerous” (*Styles of Radical Will* 73).

Sontag’s keen awareness of how pornography reveals and conceals, as well as the implications thereof are clearly evidenced in the “Maiden Tribute.” For Stead, the maidens of London offered up to the minotaurs were young women whose honor and virginity deserved legal protection. However, Stead did not recognize that these same maidens were also those who labored for their living in the industrial milieu of Britain. To illustrate, in the July 7 installment, Stead recounted an interaction with a sixteen-year-old maid who had been procured for him. Acting as a determined charity worker, Stead tried to describe for her all the unsavory consequences that would come of being “seduced”—pregnancy, loss of virtue, loss of money—and promised her £1 if she would simply leave with her virginity intact. Yet, the girl insisted on being seduced for the £2, and with that, “she burst into tears, ‘we are so poor.’” Stead asked, “Could any proof be more conclusive as to the absolute inability of this girl of sixteen to form an estimate of the value of the only commodity with which the law considers her amply able to deal the day after she is thirteen?” What he did not consider is that this pitiful interaction could also be proof that the young woman was, in fact, very capable of estimating how a quick £2 might ameliorate the equally deleterious circumstances she faced working in a millinery sweatshop for five shillings a week. Stead and many of his readers only saw this young woman as “virgin,” but by that same token, it eliminated the possibility of seeing her also as “laborer.” Burke observed, “much that we take as observations about ‘reality’ may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms” (46). Just as Stead was keenly fixated on the screams of the ravaged virgin, those screams also made him deaf to the plaintive cry of poverty.

This persistent focus on the maiden reinforced Stead’s pornographic vision of London. As he wrote on July 6, the scores of victims were virgins “of a tender age.” They were “too young in fact to understand the nature of the crime of which they are unwilling victims,” and who only served to satiate the “lust of London.” Naïve and innocent as she was, it seemed the helpless virgin could not also be engaged in the backbreaking system of labor. Yet even the unworlly girl of Stead’s
narrative was engaged in worldly matters, and evidence of the maiden’s place in a very adult system glares out at readers from Stead’s own observations. The same July 6 issue recounted Stead’s conversation with a procuress. She described how a frequent client would go “down to the East-end and the City, and [wait for] when the girls come out of shops and factories for lunch or at the end of the day.” It was easy pickings for a “minotaur” there. The procuress explained, “He sees his fancy and marks her down,” winning the young lady’s confidence until she agreed to “go on a little excursion.” After the client had “outraged” the girl, he deftly dropped her off at the procuress’s lodging and was “off with another girl.” While Stead was appalled at the dreadfulness of the blithe seduction and ruin, he did not wonder why so many young girls were spilling out of factories in the first place, made easy prey for those who had “a great penchant for little girls.” Once again, Stead’s own observations highlighted the deftness by which pornography revealed and concealed its subjects. The “maiden” only emerged when the impoverished, laboring girl became the target of the degenerate “minotaur.”

Stead’s refusal to engage the concrete history, systems, and culture of Britain alongside the maidenhood of its young women marked what Sontag deemed a dismission of politics. Even when Stead saw the poverty of industrial Britain, he continued to treat sexuality as a discrete entity, and his advocacy reflected this. While Stead’s deployment of pornography in service of an agenda was effective in the sense that it quickly rushed the bill through Parliament, the changes failed to truly effect the system that made young women prefer a seduction for £2 to a £1 gift. Under the steady gaze of the concerned editor, the sexuality of the pubescent female was removed from the rest of her being, and this rhetoric was reflected in the bill as well—a way to address child prostitution without disturbing the deep structures of industrial life. The economic system of the day frequently necessitated the prostitution committed by young women, whether of their own volition, or by virtue of birth made easy pickings for those who would profit from the sale of impoverished bodies. Middle- and upper-class Victorians grappling with the heady intoxication of industrialization would not have been especially interested in eradicating the very poverty that fueled their factories and generated a robust economy. To recognize the complicated economic and societal factors contributing to the life of the young woman who insisted on seduction (although very likely was sent along un-seduced, £1 in hand) really would have been, as Stead promised of his report on July 6, a “social revolution” “strong enough to wreck the Throne.” It probably would have gone unheeded, as well.

Commenting on the outrage already blustering through London by the third day of the “Maiden Tribute,” Stead declared on July 8, “If we had only committed these crimes instead of exposing them not one word would have been said.” Of course, Stead chose to write about it instead, and in a form that deployed the rhetoric of pornography. He could have predicted the ensuing fury; indeed, he, Scott, and Butler counted on it. However, the problem with pornography in
public is not that it may be obscenity, but this: the “Maiden Tribute” brought about a new and destructive understanding of reality, a new knowledge. As Sontag argued, “There’s a sense in which all knowledge is dangerous, the reason being that not everyone is in the same condition as knowers or potential knowers . . . . It may be that, without subtle and extensive psychic preparation, any widening of experience and consciousness is destructive for most people” (Styles of Radical Will 72–73). While dramatic, Sontag has a good point—all knowledge is dangerous not just because it may evoke disgust, but because it is complicit with its own corresponding ignorance. In Stead’s case, this danger of pornographic knowledge and its parallel ignorance clearly manifested itself in the pages of the “Maiden Tribute.”

Conclusion

We knew that we had forged a thunderbolt; but even we were hardly prepared for the overwhelming impression which it has produced on the public mind.

—Pall Mall Gazette, July 8, 1885

Powerful and problematic, the “Maiden Tribute” and its aftermath offer a dynamic exemplar of the paradox of pornography deployed for political purposes: both the terrible effectiveness of pornography in service of legislation and the destructive politics inherent in the text. In my analysis, I aimed to offer a satisfactory explanation for the political implications of the “Maiden Tribute” while generating a rhetorical understanding of pornography. At the same time, I hope to have demonstrated that Sontag offers important insights into pornography’s rhetorical nature, which warrant further attention. Using an analytic framework generated both from the public reactions to “Maiden Tribute” and the theories of Sontag, Foucault, and Charney, I offered a summary of the circumstances that contributed to the “Maiden Tribute” before turning to an analysis of what could be considered the Deep Throat of 1885. Just as Sontag cautioned, if viewing the atrocities of war does not prevent war, then neither did Stead’s obsessive focus on the sexuality of “Modern Babylon’s” maidens foil their ruinous seduction. This case potently demonstrates that pornography deployed on behalf of politics may be destructive to others, as it myopically ignores other systemic factors inherent to material conditions and risks a deleterious psychological odyssey to the margins. In short, Sontag’s aphoristic assessment of pornography—“It oversimplifies”—also seems a fitting judgment of the implications of the “Maiden Tribute” and the bill it supported (Styles of Radical Will 45). Seeing only the underage girl as sexual prey for London’s “minotaurs” meant not seeing the same maiden in the factories, sweatshops, and mills of Britain, laboring as an adult.
The exploitation of private style and public policy in the “Maiden Tribute” stands as a powerful example of how pornographic rhetoric may create a particular form of knowledge and power. Until the end of his life, Stead regarded the “Maiden Tribute” as his ultimate political, journalistic, and personal triumph. In his assessment, he secured the passing of “Stead’s Law,” altered the field of journalism thereafter, and celebrated his subsequent fame until his legendary demise within the hulk of the Titanic. As critics, we must temper Stead’s grand self-assessment with a more troubled understanding of the wild destructiveness possible when pornography is unleashed in the service of a political agenda. Sontag was right—serious pornography does more than just excite a lone auditor into orgasm. It can also be a rhetoric that engages a collective audience, incites a new understanding of reality, rouses a public to action, and imparts a political knowledge. A “thunderbolt” may be quite effective in shocking the masses. However, the unintended and devastating implications rendered in the subsequent tempest indicate that, at times, knowledge and its corresponding ignorance is better left un-forged.

References


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