

# Perversion, Surveillance and the Church of England Purity Society, 1820-1890

*Barbara Harmes*

University of Southern Queensland

*This paper will address responses to the issue of social disorder that was central to many late nineteenth-century concerns in Britain. Supervision of boys and young men became more formalized in the purity movements which proliferated at the end of the century. Perhaps the most notable example was the Church of England Purity Society which was formed in 1880. The Church of England Purity Society represented responses to continued calls for an attempt to redefine masculine ideology. Most importantly, it was a way of aligning the male body with the body of Christ. Moral authority was vested in the Purity Society, which provided exemplars for young men but responsibility for careful supervision was placed with middle-class parents. As an example, physical recreation was widely endorsed, not only as an instrument of spiritual development but also as a medium for training the young to meet with the diverse challenges of a naturally harsh and competitive world.*

During the final decades of the nineteenth century, bourgeois English society reacted to cultural disorder and perverse sexuality by using discursive controls. This paper considers the deployment of processes of normalization among the late-Victorian middle classes. This paper will address responses to the issue of social disorder that was central to many late nineteenth-century concerns in England. This was a time when the English Empire was diminishing in potency and influence. In England itself, it seemed that there was a crisis of certainty. Indeed, it was perceived by many as a time of moral panic. It was, therefore, an occasion for a dominant order to re-assert itself against threats, whether real or imaginary, to its value system. Because the *fin de siècle* period was a time of uncertainty and incipient disorder, and because the need for a secure and prosperous future was overwhelming at the turn of the century, the middle-class youth (the hope of the future) became the focus of an unprecedented range of discursive controls and techniques of surveillance.

The supervision of boys and young men became more formalized in the purity movements which proliferated at the end of the century. Perhaps the most notable example was the Church of England Purity Society which was formed in 1880. The Church of England Purity Society represented responses to continued calls for an attempt to redefine masculine ideology. Most importantly, it was a way of aligning the male body with the body of Christ.

The aims and intentions of the Church of England Purity Society emerged from a context marked by neurosis, guilt and fears of covert sexual activity. In this context, sexual perversion was frequently portrayed as explicitly foreign and Roman Catholic. The eastern European foreign 'otherness' of the men suspected of the Jack the Ripper murders is one manifestation of this convergence between foreignness and perversion in

discourses of the period.<sup>1</sup> Another manifestation, this time making the foreign other a Roman Catholic, is the proliferation of pornographic writings set beyond the sinister walls and portals of Roman Catholic convents and monasteries, in which the religious engaged in depraved practices.<sup>2</sup> Yet in Protestant society of the late-nineteenth century in which conduct – especially sexual conduct – was strictly monitored and notions of normalcy and abnormalcy were shaped by cultural considerations, the discourses on sexuality were the locus of power relations. Two elements of this discourse – the confession and surveillance – suggest how limits were discursively shaped. The impulses behind confession – the spontaneous acknowledgment of transgression – and of surveillance – the monitoring of sexual behaviour – were shaped not only by such concerns as class and social power, but also, as will be discussed below, by the necessity to halt imperial decline.

### **Transgressive Conduct**

The deployment of taboos and the simultaneous existence of transgressive actions were implicit in the normalization of behaviour in the late nineteenth century by both religious and secular authorities. They were part of the sometimes unwritten moral laws which informed bourgeois society of the *fin de siècle*. Georges Bataille contrasts earlier, ‘ethnographically interesting’ cultures, which sanctioned the transgression of taboos during the celebrations of ‘sacred time’ with Western Christian society which allows no space for transgression to be condoned.<sup>3</sup> Peter Bailey relates this more directly to recent English society, citing pre-industrial leisure in both villages and cities:

[C]ertain major holidays evoked the ancient licence of carnival when all social restraints on the human appetite were lifted and eating, drinking, fighting and love-making were celebrated in orgiastic fashion. On such occasions, the authority structure of village society could be temporarily inverted in the time-honoured ceremonies of saturnalia - the common man was king for the day and the world was turned upside down.<sup>4</sup>

Yet Bataille maintains that the lack of a sanctioned lacuna for transgression merely leads to a more complex relationship between taboo and transgression: all taboos exist in order to be transgressed, and society functions through ‘the reconciling of what seems impossible to reconcile, respect for the law and violation of the law, the taboo and its transgression’.<sup>5</sup>

### **Confessional Literature**

The confession had been the province of the Church since the Middle Ages

---

<sup>1</sup> Donald Rumbelow, *The Complete Jack the Ripper*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1975, p. 239

<sup>2</sup> A.N. Wilson, *The Victorians*, London, Hutchinson, 2002, p. 301

<sup>3</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism* (trans. Mary Dalwood), London, Marion Boyars, 1987, p. 257

<sup>4</sup> Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885*, London, Methuen, 1987, p. 2

<sup>5</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, p. 36

but by the final decades of the nineteenth century, the act of confession had entered the domains of education, religion, medicine and law, especially confessions of deviant sexuality among men. As Marian Shaw notes, the homosexual confessions published in Havelock Ellis's text *Sexual Inversion* 'are paradigmatic of the scientific confessions which abound during the last years of Victoria's reign and in which dark, perverse, transgressive yet nevertheless true secrets are apparently discovered and brought into 'normal consciousness.'<sup>6</sup> Foucault maintains that at the same time the confession became more widely dispersed: with the emergence of Protestantism, the Counter Reformation, and nineteenth-century medicine, it became less ritualistic and more diffuse. Appearing in a series of relationships, it has gradually taken a variety of forms: 'interrogations, consultations, autobiographical narratives, letters; they have been recorded, transcribed, assembled into dossiers, published, and commented on.'<sup>7</sup>

The confession, as a formal instrument of restraint by the Church, diminished particularly in Protestant countries where the individual was situated 'in a more immediate epistemological and ontological relation to God, providing fewer ... opportunities for the faithful to inform upon themselves.'<sup>8</sup> Yet the concerns about immorality and the need for individual and public control were as great in Protestant as in Catholic cultures:

increasing attention was brought to bear on 'licentious' behaviour as an affront both to the precepts of religion and to the security of the state. Drunkenness, prostitution, violation of the Sabbath, gambling, swearing, and other 'corruptions of manners,' were believed to abound; their unchecked proliferation seemed to testify to a loss of authority by the society's great institutions and to undermine the culture's very foundations.<sup>9</sup>

On entering the domain of secular discourse, the confession remained a valuable technique for producing the 'true discourse of sex' and thus a part of the normalizing regime of truth.<sup>10</sup> Traditionally, confession had been regarded as an act that liberated, purified and healed, and its supposed therapeutic power remained after its appropriation by secular discourses, including Freudian psychoanalysis. Yet Foucault warns against 'the internal ruse of confession', the notion that confession liberates the subject: 'The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us'.<sup>11</sup> The author of the confessional text *My Secret Life* (c. 1888) cites reasons for so freely disclosing his sexual adventures, but at no stage does he attribute the memoirs to a duty to

---

<sup>6</sup> Marion Shaw, 'To Tell the Truth of Sex': Confession and Abjection in Late Victorian Writing', in Linda M. Shires, ed., *Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History and the Politics of Gender*, London, T. Werner Laurie, 1992, p. 90

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol.1 (trans. Robert Hurley), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990, p. 63

<sup>8</sup> Morton N. Cohen, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography*, London: Papermac/Macmillan, 1995, p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, *Lewis Carroll*, p.109.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 63

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 60

confess imposed by his society. He fails to see that the production of truth 'is thoroughly imbued with relations of power.'<sup>12</sup>

Foucault widens and refocuses the discussion on confession, drawing attention to a metamorphosis in literature: '[W]e have passed from a pleasure to be recounted and heard, centring on the heroic or marvelous narration of 'trials' of bravery or sainthood, to a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage.'<sup>13</sup> Foucault describes the transformation of sex into a discourse which encourages the detailed confession of thoughts as well as deeds: 'The confession ... is no longer a question of saying what was done - the sexual act - and how it was done; but of reconstructing it, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it.'<sup>14</sup> As is so often emphasized in the works of sexual therapists such as Havelock Ellis or Richard von Krafft-Ebing: 'Exact knowledge of the causes and conditions of sexual aberrations ... is the prerequisite for a rational prophylaxis of [them].'<sup>15</sup> Yet, as Ruth Brandon points out in her discussion of Havelock Ellis's work, exact knowledge was all there was: 'What is so strange to the twentieth-century mind is the absence of theory. The emphasis is wholly upon categorization: taxonomy is all.'<sup>16</sup> The lesson provided by Foucault is that it is not easy to discriminate between 'real sex' and discourse, since ways of talking/writing about sex establish horizons of both perversion and normalcy which have directly behavioural consequences. 'Sexuality' is never a free-floating subject: it has become discursively shaped, and therefore susceptible to social control and monitoring.

### Surveillance

Surveillance – of physical and sexual development, of thought and of actions – was a known capacity of middle class parents. The anxiety and antagonism expressed by the respectable middle classes could only be intensified by the confessional literature of the 1880s and 1890s which seemed to indicate a rise in decadent behaviour and actions, especially in urban areas. The final decades of the century were conspicuous for a number of sexual scandals, including the Boulton and Parke case in 1871, in which Earnest Boulton and Frederick William Parke were charged with 'conspiring and inciting persons to commit and unnatural offence', although the case was largely unproved. As Ronald Pearsall comments, 'What was left? Merely that a couple of men had dressed in drag.'<sup>17</sup> The Cleveland Street affair of 1889-90 was more worrying. It involved adolescent boys

---

<sup>12</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 60

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 59

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 63

<sup>15</sup> R. von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis, with especial reference to Antipathetic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Legal Study* (trans. Charles Gilbert Chaddock), 7th ed., London, F.A. Davis, 1893., pp. vii, viii

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Brandon, *The New Women and the Old Men: Love, Sex and the Woman Question*, London, Flamingo/Harper Collins, 1990, p. 130

<sup>17</sup> Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality*, London: Pimlico, 1993, pp. 461, 465

selling sexual favours at a homosexual introduction house and brothel in London. One of the clients was assistant equerry to the Prince of Wales. It was suggested that the Prince himself intervened to 'cover up' the incident because the Heir Apparent may have been implicated in male-male sexual scandals.<sup>18</sup> The unease engendered by these episodes was further heightened first by other noteworthy and much-reported aspects of *fin de siècle* society. Oscar Wilde's flamboyant lifestyle and then by details of his life were both revealed in sensational newspaper accounts of his trials. These sanctioned his labeling and condemnation by a largely homophobic society. The classification of Wilde as a decadent and then a homosexual encouraged the respectable Victorians in their belief that they could understand and control aberrant behaviour.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg insists on the importance of social order to the late-Victorian middle classes, and likewise in *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* Foucault most clearly outlines the desire of any regime to eliminate 'disorder and confusions'. Throughout this text Foucault asserts that within society surveillance is 'a specific mechanism in the disciplinary power' and analyses the constant surveillance of individuals in such apparently different yet fundamentally similar institutions as factories, hospitals, schools and prisons.<sup>19</sup> Within such organizations, power comes from 'general visibility';<sup>20</sup> at a more sophisticated level the same principle operates within society. Panopticism, the general scrutiny of a wide sector of society, may not be possible throughout the community but the structured nature of nineteenth-century bourgeois society facilitated the deployment of techniques of surveillance.

Foucault maintains that the aim of surveillance and the punishment of improper behaviour are neither 'expiation' nor 'repression'.<sup>21</sup> The effective functioning of institutions, and by extension, of society, is dependent upon normalization, which became 'one of the great instruments of power at the end of the classical age.'<sup>22</sup> The 'power of normalization', which is still deployed, has a dual function; as well as imposing homogeneity, it also individualizes 'by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another.' In this way, the social body is classified, hierarchized and ranked.<sup>23</sup>

Foucault's analysis of surveillance is extensive and detailed; it does not, however, specify the provenance of surveillance. Robert Gray's study of bourgeois hegemony in Victorian Britain is useful in its contextualization of this social power in late-nineteenth century England, arguing that while '[h]egemony is located in the bourgeoisie'<sup>24</sup>, its locus is in fact 'historically problematic and may show complex shifts and displacements within the

---

<sup>18</sup> Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*, Chapel Hill, University of Carolina Press, 1990, pp. 206-7

<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (trans. Alan Sheridan), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1991, p. 175.

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 171

<sup>21</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 182

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 184

<sup>23</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 184

<sup>24</sup> Robert Q. Gray, *The labour aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976, p.74

dominant class'.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, Gray locates the ideological organization of society in the urban gentry, the writers and readers of the quarterly press, and the organizers of charity and social discipline.<sup>26</sup> Reiterating the 'complex shifts' in social structures, Gray notes that: 'The last two decades of the nineteenth century ... were characterized by social transformations which eroded the forms of domination ... with consequent shifts and dislocations in the patterns of hegemony'.<sup>27</sup> These dislocations may well have intensified the feelings of disorder but they failed to diminish the potency of surveillance.

During these decades, surveillance was formalized in the purity movements which proliferated at the end of the century: the Church of England Purity Society and the White Cross League were formed in 1880 and The National Vigilance Association for the Repression of Criminal Vice and Immorality in 1886. These societies emerged from the intersection of two preoccupations in middle class society: the Protestant character of English virtue; and the supposed foreign origins of depravity. Commentators have reconstructed the foreign dimension given to sexual illness. In his introduction to *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, Brian Massumi comments that 'there is always horror at the body as pleasure site',<sup>28</sup> yet this horror and the accompanying fear of disease appear to have had significant, although perhaps unexpected, consequences. In an essay which considers visual arts specifically and attitudes to sexuality generally, D.H Lawrence was able to authoritatively comment on these views. He argued persuasively that with the introduction of syphilis into England at the end of the fifteenth century came a dread of the physical self and a 'horror of sexual life'. Its spread to the Continent was followed by similar, though less intense feelings of unease. Commenting on the reaction in England, Lawrence maintained: '[T]his extra morbidity came, I believe, from the great shock of syphilis and the realization of the consequence of the disease.' The terror of infection, he claims, has poisoned English consciousness since Elizabethan times.<sup>29</sup> It may convincingly be argued that this terror intensified because of the increase in syphilitic infection during the nineteenth century; yet the righteousness which has been a consequence of dread has led merely to an increase in guilt and neurosis, and to convert - and perhaps more aberrant - sexual activity.

An incident from the early nineteenth century suggests the anxiety which stemmed from any possibility that English Protestantism and foreign depravity could converge. In 1822 the Hon. Percy Jocelyn, Bishop of Clogher, was sent to trial for committing 'an Abominable Offence' with a soldier. The trial was well attended and the report, read by a scandalized public, was 'a narration that caused our human nature to shudder, and our very blood to boil in our veins'.<sup>30</sup> The practice of sodomy reinforced the long-held fear of Continental pollution. Press narratives, revealing the

---

<sup>25</sup> Gray, *The labour aristocracy*, p. 78

<sup>26</sup> Gray, *The labour aristocracy*, p. 75

<sup>27</sup> Gray, *The labour aristocracy*, p.90

<sup>28</sup> Brian Massumi (ed.), *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, vii

<sup>29</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Essays*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978, pp. 307-311

<sup>30</sup> John Fairburn, *The Bishop!!*, London: John Fairburn, 1822, p.9

Bishop's activities, expressed anxiety over 'the great facility with which the corrupted manners of the Continent are introduced', especially into the milieu of a bishop of the Protestant Church of Ireland.<sup>31</sup> The Bishop of Clogher's conduct underlines the notion of foreign perversion, made all the worse in this case by a Protestant bishop's participation in the act of depravity. By the 1880s, the Protestant Church in England stood in opposition to foreign sexual perversions.

Moving from the wider social domain to the domestic sphere, the responsibility for careful supervision was placed with middle-class parents. Dr William Acton suggested that 'many of the evil consequences following [incontinence] could be prevented by wisely watching children in early life.'<sup>32</sup> Dr John B. Newman had already articulated this command clearly in 1870, counselling parents to 'look well to their [children's] diet, exercise, habits, and study, and keep them under as close surveillance as possible'.<sup>33</sup> The purpose underlining the Church of England Purity Society is highlighted by these injunctions and their middle-class, domestic targets. Moral authority was vested in the Church of England Purity Society, which provided exemplars for young men but responsibility for careful supervision was placed with middle-class parents. As an example, physical recreation was widely endorsed, not only as an instrument of spiritual development but also as a medium for training the young to meet with the diverse challenges of a naturally harsh and competitive materialistic world.

The anxieties of the *fin de siècle* are clearly representative of a society which is materialistic as well as patriarchal and firmly class-based. In Mayhew's formulation, the destructive effects of materialism are obvious: 'Commerce is incontestably demoralizing. Its effects are to be seen more and more every day.... seduction and prostitution, in spite of the precepts of the Church, and the examples of her ministers, have made enormous strides in all our great towns within the last twenty years.'<sup>34</sup> Fears of disease and social decay at the *fin de siècle* led to strong responses but some of these had already been foreshadowed by Matthew Arnold's critique of materialist society. Writing in the 1860s, Arnold clearly articulates his concerns: in an age marked by intimations of the darker side of human nature, it was not only economic strength which was vital to the middle classes, for their moral superiority could not be questioned. Indicting the materialism of Victorian England, Arnold raised the issue of maintaining 'high ideals' in a democracy faced with moral and spiritual decline: 'Our society is probably destined to become much more democratic; who or what will give a high tone to the nation then? That is the grave question.'<sup>35</sup> His answer of course was education of male youth. In the 1880s, education continued as a discursive control for the respectable bourgeoisie; Richard Le Gallienne, a friend of Oscar Wilde, wrote that

---

<sup>31</sup> Fairburn, *The Bishop!!*, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age and Advanced Age*, London, J.A. Churchill, 1875, p.40.

<sup>33</sup> John B. Newman, *The Philosophy of Generation; Its Abuses, with their Causes, Prevention, and Cure*, New York, Samuel R. Wells, 1870, p. 53

<sup>34</sup> Henry Mayhew in Peter Quennell, ed, *Mayhew's London Underworld*, vol. IV, London, Century, 1987 [1882], p. 112

<sup>35</sup> Super, 1963, p. 18

'Matthew Arnold, as late as 1888, was still preaching 'sweetness and light' to a world of Philistines.'<sup>36</sup> Religious decline was also addressed by legal sanctions such as the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, partly aimed at increased protection for young girls and at the suppression of brothels.

The discursive controls which functioned as normalizing devices were part of a larger framework of surveillance. Drunkenness, prostitution, violation of the Sabbath, gambling, swearing, and other 'corruptions of manners,' were believed to abound; their unchecked proliferation seemed to testify to a loss of authority by the society's great institutions and to undermine the culture's very foundations.<sup>37</sup> Le Gallienne wrote: 'The theological conceptions of our fathers had suffered serious disintegration, and the social sanctions and restrictions founded upon them were rapidly losing their authority.'<sup>38</sup>

Authority had also, for nearly two hundred years, been vested in the various Purity Movements which had proliferated from the seventeenth century. The Societies for the Reformation of Manners appeared 'after the medieval ecclesiastical jurisdiction over moral offences had broken down and before the secular authorities were capable of filling the breach.'<sup>39</sup> Members of the Societies encouraged individuals to report and urge the prosecution of 'moral transgressors', including 'prostitutes, keepers of bawdy houses ... and homosexuals.'<sup>40</sup> Later during the moral and social panics of the Jack the Ripper murders in 1888 members of the Church of England Purity Society were called upon to closely monitor the streets of London and to coordinate attempts to report suspicious behaviour.

The final decades of the nineteenth century saw a strengthening of similar endeavours to curb illicit sexual activity and confirm the importance of the family. The members of the Societies for the Reformation of Manners 'actively encouraged individuals to watch for and report violations among their neighbors and friends.'<sup>41</sup> These particular societies were no longer in existence in the final decades of the nineteenth century. They had been superceded around 1880 by such organizations as the Purity Society and the White Cross League, responses to continued calls for a return to moral purity, both of which attempted to redefine masculine ideology, linking it with purity, and aligning the male body with the body of Christ. Thousands of men pledged themselves to chastity, encouraged to 'reject all non reproductive, non-marital sexual desires in order to reassert their larger patriarchal privilege.'<sup>42</sup> Like the traditional confession, these leagues relied on self-examination, but they also encouraged self-surveillance, particularly among men: '[W]hereas men had heretofore been supposed to look to women as the guardians of moral rectitude, the pledge shifted the burden of

---

<sup>36</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, *The 'Romantic' Nineties*, London, Robin Clark, 1993 [1926], p. 10

<sup>37</sup> Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Towards a Genealogy of Discourse on Male Sexualities*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993, p.109

<sup>38</sup> Le Gallienne, *The 'Romantic' Nineties*, p. 129

<sup>39</sup> Edward J. Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in England Since 1700*, Totowa, Rowan and Littlefield, 1977, p. 3

<sup>40</sup> Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance*, p. 2

<sup>41</sup> Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side*, p. 111

<sup>42</sup> Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side*, p. 87



moral responsibility to men themselves.<sup>43</sup> The increasing pressure placed upon men again intensified the potential for neurotic conditions, partly because the burden of guilt could not be displaced onto an authority figure. The image of male athleticism and vigour implicit in the symbolism of the White Cross League - that of St George on his steed - was counterpoised by the homoerotic representations of the crucified or flagellant Christ and St Sebastian pierced by arrows. These images were popular at the time and St Sebastian was to become the favourite martyr of homosexual men. These culturally approved figures showed a masochistic delight in torment.

Also functioning through surveillance activities, but controlled largely by women, the National Vigilance Association for the Repression of Criminal Vice and Immorality was established in 1885, one of a number of vigilance associations. One 'sister society' was the Central Vigilance Committee, characterized by a reforming zeal which emerged from the hierarchy of the Church of England; on 13 October 1885, the *Pall Mall Gazette* reported on its annual meeting, presided over by the Bishop of London. He noted the improvement in public opinion on the subject of immorality: 'There was unquestionably ... a very great change in the feeling among the great body of the people in this matter within the 1st dozen years. The feeling was now very widespread and very deep, and was certain to increase rather than to diminish. They were doing their best to stem the current of immorality'.<sup>44</sup> Much of the support for the Vigilance Associations came from late-Victorian 'feminists', including Josephine Butler, outraged at the subordination of women in this patriarchal culture. Prostitution was perhaps the major target of their members, but they were equally disturbed by the lack of sexual rights afforded to married women. Yet in spite of their promulgation of repressive sexual codes and attempts to limit sexual opportunities, and their early optimism, the Associations were largely unsuccessful in effecting their stated aims of suppressing vice and improving public morality. 'Walter' comments in the final chapters of *My Secret Life*, written in the 1880s: '[P]ublic improvements and public purity!!! have destroyed most of the best central [bagnios], public morals being seemingly not much bettered.'<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

In his detailed examination of the regulation of sexuality, Jeffrey Weeks underlines the accuracy of this assertion and takes it a step further. Weeks claims that there is 'a strong case to be made that the moralistic campaigns around sexuality encouraged ... as a response a more radical position on sexuality' Sexuality was given a positive value, becoming 'a subversive force which challenged the tyranny of respectability.'<sup>46</sup> As Foucault argues, '[d]iscourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.'<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side*, p. 87

<sup>44</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1885, p.10

<sup>45</sup> 'Walter' (pseud), *My Secret Life*, London, Arrow Books, 1994 [1888-1892], p. 1842

<sup>46</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1880*, London, Longman, 1981, pp. 91-92

<sup>47</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 101