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Gibbon and sex

A crowd of disgraceful passages will force themselves on the memory of the classic reader.[1]

Sex is all-pervasive in the writings of Edward Gibbon, while sex in his personal life, at least as mirrored in his letters and memoirs, is marked by a cultivated absence. Fertility and abundance characterize both his style and his subject matter, especially in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire;* sterility and a marmoreal anxiety mark his personal existence. He begins his *Autobiographies* with a family history replete with excursions into cadet branches and an extended cousinage, and he closes them as a bachelor only child whose nearest relatives had long been a widowed step-mother and two maiden aunts. Sex is also deeply entangled with history in Gibbon's writings, as opulent cultures of display are richly delineated in an empire of the senses as much as of men and of nations.

Explicit sexual self-disclosure is not something one should expect of an eighteenth-century memoir, and in this respect Gibbon's *Autobiographies* were typically as far removed from the proto-Romantic example of the compulsively confessional Rousseau as it was possible for them to be. It may be possible to make the occasional inference concerning Gibbon's broader views on sexual *mores* from the argument of *The Decline and Fall,* but again this can be achieved only with great caution. Gibbon devoted his life to becoming 'the historian of the Roman Empire', and that is the persona one can be most sure of recovering from his writings, including the *Autobiographies*. Sacrifices may well have been entailed in achieving this ambition, but it is not the place of the historian to assume what cannot be known. An examination of certain of the preoccupations and themes developed in the argument of *The Decline and Fall* serves to demonstrate the centrality of sex to Gibbon's understanding of the past, but it cannot be made to substantiate the inferences regarding his own sexuality which modern critics might otherwise want to make of an eighteenth-century text as richly suggestive as Gibbon's history.

'Of lust and luxury'

The theme of Gibbon and sex is surprisingly underexplored in secondary writing, and this despite his lurid reputation for excessive prurience in *The Decline and Fall*.[2] The theme of luxury, however, is one which historians and literary scholars have identified and commented on at some length in writings concerned with Gibbon's work. It is one of the primary purposes of this article to demonstrate the essential *melding* of sexuality and luxury, both positive and negative, in Gibbon's work. This fusion maintains a central dynamic in the argument of *The Decline and Fall:* pagan virtue activating a creative luxury which is overwhelmed in

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its turn by the sterilities of Christian virtue. This tripartite structure, which informs much of the argument at least of the first two volumes of the work, is announced in the opening chapter of Volume 1 in an economically evocative image of the Roman landscape: 'On that celebrated ground the first consuls deserved triumphs; their successors adorned villas, and *their* posterity have erected convents' (p. 50).[3]

The ambivalent relationships between luxury, power and sexuality are a source of tension throughout the work. Writing of the excesses of the emperor Elagabalus, Gibbon refers to his 'sovereign privilege of lust and luxury' (p. 168), an alliteration that becomes an animated elision for many of the more decadent Romans who people the opening volumes. In a footnote concerned with homosexuality among Rome's precursors, Gibbon likewise lamented the 'luxury and lust of the Etruscans' (Vol. II, p. 837, n. 191). This identification of intimately connected vices is something of a commonplace in the language of virtue which informs much of Gibbon's analysis, an extension of such long-held views as those put into the mouth of Musidorus in Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia,* where the somewhat priggish warrior early denounces love as an effeminate fusion 'engendered betwixt lust and idleness'.[4]

As befits an autobiographer (albeit a reticent one), the private fascinated Gibbon as much as the public, although he was less confident of reconstructing the reality of *l'histoire de la vie privée* than are modern historians. This realm of the private was potentially ever-present in the public world, as Gibbon intimates with typically pregnant reticence:

> but though we may suspect, it is not in our power to relate, the secret intrigues of the palace, the private views and resentments, the jealousy of women or eunuchs, and all those trifling but decisive causes which so often influence the fate of empires, and the counsels of the wisest monarchs.
>
> (Vol. I, p. 563)

Thus, for Gibbon, sex is at least as much a means of explaining other issues as it is an end in itself, a lesson which historians have seemed constantly to need to relearn since.

Discussion of sex was a peculiarly powerful means of demonstrating this link between the private and the public, and therefore marriage was an institution of some moment in *The Decline and Fall.* This was especially marked in relation to the growth of Christianity, since as Gibbon presciently noted, the faith 'has acknowledged its important obligations to female devotion' (Vol. I, p. 558). Following Tacitus, Gibbon rather conventionally praised the 'conjugal faith and chastity' of the ancient Germans, who would come to restore a 'manly spirit of freedom' to a decadent empire. The greatest enemies to such chastity were 'softness of mind' and 'sentimental passion', and its strongest proponents were therefore those women who were prepared to 'emulate the stern virtues of *man'* at the unfortunate cost of 'the charm and weakness of *woman'*. Such masculinized women were, Gibbon assured his readers, neither 'lovely, nor very susceptible to love' (Vol. I, pp. 84, 243–4). In the classically binary moral universe, virtue is not always as immediately attractive as vice, and the supposed virtues of the barbarians were clearly more to Tacitus's taste than to those of many eighteenth-century minds, especially to those as subtle and innately ambivalent as that of Gibbon. Nor yet, however, was primitive Roman marriage any more attractive to minds affected by the cult of sentiment, as Gibbon noted that they had usually 'married without love, or loved without delicacy and respect' (Vol. I, pp. 170–1). Not that modern marriage was always so much to be preferred: Gibbon slyly noticed that, while modern susceptibilities might be adversely affected by the old tradition of the forced removal of the bride from her parental home on the day of her wedding (one preserved among the primitive Christians), 'Our form of marriage requires, with less delicacy, the express and public consent of a virgin' (Vol. II, p. 105). Similarly, he implicitly posits that the relationship between property and marriage was less egregious under the subsequently much-condemned laws of the Germanic tribes than it was in eighteenth-

century society. The Visigoths were praised for legally restraining the size of such nuptial gifts, described as 'the prodigality of conjugal love'. Even more controversially, in his discussion of 'the famous, and often fabulous, right, *de cuissage, de marquette'* Gibbon considerably underplayed the offence it otherwise might have given to sentimental readers by a ready deployment of civilized irony: 'With the consent of her husband, an handsome bride might commute the payment in the arms of a young landlord, and the mutual favour might afford a precedent of local rather than legal tyranny' (Vol. III, pp. 215, 878 and n. 74). Gibbon's own anxieties at his fathers remarriage and the costs that this entailed inform both his letters and, to a lesser degree, his memoirs: the frequently fraught relationship between property, marriage and children was one with which the historian was all too familiar, and self-disclosure seems to make its way in this manner into *The Decline and Fall* at least as much as into the *Autobiographies*.

'Monkish virtues'

However ambivalently, Gibbon preferred the idea of marriage to the chilly perfections of celibacy, whether enforced or otherwise: hence his intense distaste for the Priscillianists and their opposition to the use of the marriage-bed (Vol. II, p. 39). Accordingly, the Zoroastrians were praised for their abhorrence of fasting and celibacy; theirs were productively benefical virtues:

> The saint in the Magian religion, is obliged to beget children, to plant useful trees, to destroy noxious animals, to convey water to the dry lands of Persia, and to work out his salvation by pursuing the labours of agriculture.
>
> (Vol. I, p. 218)

Sex provides a healthily productive dynamic to societies which celibacy denies. Gibbon early set himself firmly against the 'monkish virtues' which Hume had identified and condemned in the *Enquiries*. Hume had argued that it was the 'delusive glosses of superstition and false religion' which had turned the antisocial vices of celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence and solitude into virtues, concluding that 'A gloomy, hairbrained enthusiast, after his death, may have a place in the calendar; but will scarcely ever be admitted, when alive, into intimacy and society, except by those as delirious and dismal as himself.'[5] Aside from the Church calendar, long fallen into desuetude in Protestant England, only history could wish to disinter such fanatics, and then only as a warning to the uniquely sociable modern reader. The many fanatics who wander through the pages of *The Decline and Fall* are plainly part of this dangerously antisocial 'other' world of late antiquity and early medievalism.

Gibbon's dispraise for female chastity was conventionally less vehement than that which he meted out to male celibacy. It was, after all, an Eastern princess, Zenobia, who (somewhat unsurprisingly) 'far surpassed' her ancestor Cleopatra 'in chastity and valour' (Vol. I, p. 313). Likewise, there was deeply ambiguous praise for Sophronia, an early Christian martyr, who 'preserved her chastity by a voluntary death'—a case of suicide the seemingly anomalous justification of which by Catholic casuists clearly entertained the historian (Vol. I, pp. 418–19 and n. 45).[6] He was quite simply appalled by nuns, typified by 'the credulous maid' who was all too readily 'betrayed by vanity to violate the laws of nature'; and he utterly lamented the condition of 'the useless multitude of both sexes who could only plead the merits of abstinence and chastity' (Vol. II, pp. 417, 511).

Monks, nuns and priests were in every sense sexless. Speech and example were literally their only means of reproduction, as 'The popular monks, whose reputation was connected with the fame and success of the order, assiduously laboured to multiply the number of their fellow-captives' (Vol. II, p. 417). Opposing the

peculiar tales which emanated from the 'lazy gloom of their convents' to the active and usually healthy life of the citizenry, Gibbon made hay with the sexual temptations and preoccupations of the celibate caste (Vol. I, p. 505). In his short excursus on homosexuality, he observed, in a manner common to English critics of celibacy, that 'every vice was fomented by the celibacy of the monks and clergy' (Vol. II, p. 838). Much to Gibbon's mordant taste was a 'strange story' taken from Jerome, an arch-celibate, which concerned 'a young man, who was chained naked on a bed of flowers, and assaulted by a beautiful and wanton courtezan. He quelled the rising temptation by biting off his tongue' (Vol. I, p. 539, n. 65). Gibbon was plainly at least as interested in Jerome's desire to pass on this tale as he was in the tale itself; as he noted elsewhere in *The Decline and Fall,* 'The devils were most formidable in a female shape' (Vol. II, p. 425, n. 64).[7] A similarly potentially compromising instance is given when the heroically orthodox Athanasius, in flight from his Arian persecutors, was left in an 'extraordinary asylum, the house of a virgin, only twenty years of age, and who was celebrated in the whole city for her beauty'. Gibbon's final detailing of the story is yet more studiedly ambiguous, and its deeply sensual elements are by no means cancelled out by its conventional closure:

> As long as the danger continued, she regularly supplied him with books and provisions, washed his feet, managed his correspondence, and dexterously concealed from the eye of suspicion this familiar and solitary intercourse between a saint whose character required the most unblemished chastity, and a female whose charms might excite the most dangerous emotions.
>
> (Vol. I, p. 813)

The self-control of an orthodox idol contrasts with the self-indulgence of a heterodox bishop, Paul of Samosata, who had 'received into the episcopal palace two young and beautiful women, as the constant companions of his leisure moments' (Vol. I, p. 557). Orthodox readers might have settled for these two accounts, but the hint that something is amiss with Athanasius that is not amiss with Paul recurs in another passage where Gibbon refers to the case of Synesius, a briefly and reluctantly co-opted bishop, in terms of implicit approval: 'He loved profane studies and profane sports; he was incapable of supporting a life of celibacy; he disbelieved the resurrection: and he refused to preach *fables* to the people, unless he be permitted to *philosophize* at home' (Vol. I, pp. 754–5, 761 and n. 118). Gibbon insisted, in terms not unfamiliar to Anglican critics of that state, that celibacy was not the same as chastity, a belief he voiced in one of his most mordantly satirical footnotes:

> I have somewhere heard or read of the frank confession of a Benedictine abbot: 'My vow of poverty has given me an hundred thousand crowns a year; my vow of obedience has raised me to the mark of a sovereign prince.'—I forget the consequences of his vow of chastity.
>
> (Vol. II, p. 424, n. 57)[8]

Not that the orthodox alone were celibate or chaste. Gibbon noted that Athanasius's opponent, the arch-heresiarch Arius, 'reckoned among his immediate followers two bishops of Egypt, seven presbyters, twelve deacons, and (what may appear almost incredible) seven hundred virgins' (Vol. I, p. 779). Indeed, Julian the Apostate was himself a model of chastity—'the chaste Julian never shared his bed with a female companion'—a state of affairs which was 'voluntary' and, in his own opinion, 'meritorious' (Vol. I, pp. 851, 929, n. 59). In this important respect, Julian provided a strong contrast with Jovian, who yet survived the comparison with Christians since, despite a noted 'taste for wine and women', he 'supported with credit, the character of a Christian and a soldier' (Vol. I, p. 947). Similarly, the emperor Constans, who indulged 'unlawful

pleasures', had still managed to profess a 'lively regard for the orthodox faith' (Vol. I, p. 802). It was of the essence of Gibbon's decision to provide a chronologically driven narrative history that such blatant and inevitable, if telling, anomalies in public and private morals should make their way into the consideration of a knowing posterity.

Equally paradoxical was Gibbon's insistence that chastity was, potentially at least, not without the possibility of sensual or even luxurious rewards. While nuns admittedly 'sacrificed the pleasures of dress and luxury; and renounced, for the praise of chastity, the soft endearments of conjugal society', monks were, potentially at least, rather better rewarded for their pains:

> By their contempt of the world, they insensibly acquired its most desirable advantages; the lively attachment, perhaps, of a young and beautiful woman, the delicate plenty of an opulent household, and the respectful homage of the slaves, the freedmen, and the clients of a senatorial family.
>
> (Vol. I, pp. 985–6)

A more contemporary insinuation may well lurk in a similar reference to another ascetic ideal of the primitive Church, where Gibbon undermined the community of goods mentioned in Acts by stating that 'The community of women, and that of temporal goods, may be considered as inseparable parts of the same system' (Vol. I, p. 490, n. 128). The community of goods was a declared standard of the faith in the thought of John Wesley (which he later abandoned), and Gibbon would not have been by any means the first of his critics to associate Wesleyanism with sexual promiscuity.[9] The same sentiments regarding the implicit ambivalences of asceticism dictated Gibbon's suspicion of allied questions, as when he declared that 'The chaste severity of the fathers in whatever related to the commerce of the two sexes, flowed from the same principle, the abhorrence of every enjoyment, which might gratify the sensual, and degrade the spiritual, nature of man' (Vol. I, p. 479). An implied preference for the older religions shone through when Gibbon mischievously adverted to the fact that 'It was with the utmost difficulty that ancient Rome could support the institution of six vestals; but the primitive church was filled with a great number of persons of either sex, who had devoted themselves to the profession of perpetual chastity' (Vol. I, p. 480).

'The decency of modern language'

It was, then, an ironic act of charity for Gibbon to claim that 'It is a very honourable circumstance for the morals of the primitive Christians, that even their faults, or rather errors, were derived from an excess of virtue'. A contemporary note reappears in an allusion to those moral reform societies which worked, with varying degrees of success, throughout the eighteenth century, as Gibbon adverted to 'the reformation of manners which was introduced into the world by the preaching of the gospel' (Vol. I, pp. 477, 475).[10] Despite the ironic tone his sentiment is undoubtedly not without sincerity, as his concomitant censure of Roman sensuality makes abundantly clear. He condemned Hadrian's passion for Antinous, albeit allowing that 'of the first fifteen emperors, Claudius was the only one whose taste in love was entirely correct' (Vol. I, p. 101, n. 40). Faustina, Marcus Aurelius's notoriously promiscuous wife, was introduced in suitably euphemistic terms: 'The Cupid of the ancients was, in general, a very sensual deity, and the amours of an empress, as they exact in her the plainest advances, are seldom susceptible of much sentimental delicacy' (Vol. I, p. 108). Similar tones betray the faults of a later empress: 'if we may credit the scandal of ancient history, chastity was very far from being the most conspicuous virtue of the empress Julia' (Vol. I, p. 150). Reverting to the Latin of his sources, Gibbon declared of Commodus that he gave way to 'abandoned

scenes of prostitution, which scorned every restraint of nature or modesty; but it would not be easy to translate their too faithful description into the decency of modern language' (Vol. I, p. 116 and n. 29).

This last claim was famously affirmed in his remarks relating to the pious Empress Theodora, an ex-entertainer whose most notorious act involved a swan and corn hidden about her person: 'but her murmurs, her pleasures, and her arts, must be veiled in the obscurity of a learned language.' His note then goes on to lay out a lurid quotation in Greek, a passage which, he mischievously informs his readers, 'a learned prelate, now deceased, was fond of quoting…in conversation' (Vol. II, p. 565 and n. 24). There is something odd about this declaration, the historian quoting a passage at least as much to reveal the prurience of a bishop—identified by some as William Warburton, Pope's editor—as to mask his own. Similarly, Gibbon only declared that 'it must not be forgot, that the bishop of Cremona was a lover of scandal' after he himself had quoted a good deal of that scandal (Vol. III, p. 402). The double standards he imputes to his clerical coadjutors could equally be levelled against him at this point and, as the poem in the Appendix to this article makes clear, they sometimes were. Again, the resort to Greek in writing about Theodora reminds one of the obvious distaste that John Aubrey felt in accusing his hero Francis Bacon of pederasty, an accusation he could only make, for whatever now obscure reason, by using the original Greek characters to signify his alleged vice.[11] Just how many schoolboys (or undergraduates) were encouraged to improve their classical learning in order to appreciate the racier elements of *The Decline and Fall* is surely one of the great imponderables in the history of English education.[12] For Gibbon the sexual is intimately linked with the textual, and constant quotation of classical improprieties, in a variation of the rhetorical figure of *occupatio,* allowed him a licence which the English language could not afford him.

The question of language insinuates itself into much of his discussion of sex. His readers are reminded that the Emperor Elagabalus promoted three ministers, who 'were all recommended, *enormitate membrorum*' (Vol. I, p. 167). He wonders with some deliberation if really is best translated as fornication, speculating in turn whether Christ spoke either the Rabbinical or the Syriac tongue in order to wonder about the true nature of certain sexual injunctions in the New Testament, leaving the historian to remark suggestively 'How variously is that Greek word translated in the versions ancient and modern!' (Vol. II, p. 816). The apotheosis of such linguistic playfulness is reached in his retelling of Origen's disarming of the 'tempter' through a mistaken reading of castration for circumcision, elaborating this point in a more than usually satirical footnote: 'As it was his general practice to allegorize scripture; it seems unfortunate that, in this instance only, he should have adopted the literal sense' (Vol. I, p. 480 and n. 96).

'The effeminate luxury of Oriental despotism'

Origen, an accidental eunuch, is by no means the only representative in *The Decline and Fall* of what Gibbon called 'that imperfect species' (Vol. I, p. 685). Monks, rendered sexless by their vocation, are curiously interchangeable with eunuchs in Gibbon's text: pitied as 'unhappy exiles from social life', he claimed that 'all the manly virtues were oppressed by the servile and pusillanimous reign of the monks' (Vol. II, p. 416, 429). Parallels with the eunuchs are not hard to find, and their corruptions compromised the despotism of Imperial rule as certainly as the ascetic dominance of the monks compromised the sway of the Church. So it was that Justinian II's favourite ministers were decried as 'two beings the least susceptible of human sympathy, an eunuch and a monk' (Vol. III, p. 32). The masculine virtues of Rome were mirrored by the literal emasculation of a cadre of eunuchs in its political and social decline, as 'the use and value of those effeminate slaves gradually rose with the decline of the empire'. Eunuchs were a final luxuriant import from the reign of Elagabalus, when Rome 'was at length humbled beneath the effeminate luxury of Oriental despotism'; their very rise in numbers was 'the most infallible symptom of the progress of

despotism' (Vol. I, pp. 182, 166, 389). Castigating Elagabalus's Syrian effeminacy, Gibbon similarly placed the Eunuchs 'as that pernicious vermin of the East, who, since the days of Elagabalus, had infested the Roman palace'. They were 'the ancient production of Oriental jealousy and despotism…introduced into Greece and Rome by Asiatic luxury' (Vol. I, pp. 177, 208, 684). Their power comprised a 'jealous vigilance'; the Emperor Constantius was 'a prince who was the slave of his own passions, and of those of his eunuchs' (Vol. I, pp. 389, 820). One is reminded of the closing pages of Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes,* in which eunuchs exact a terrible vengeance in harems at the distant behest of their masters, the ambivalently civilized Persian travellers; and there is more than a little of *l'esprit des lois* in Gibbon's contention that 'if we examine the general history of Persia, India, and China, we shall find the power of the eunuchs has uniformly marked the decline and fall of every dynasty' (Vol. I, p. 685, n. 7).[13] A shocking instance of the collusion of despotism and emasculation is given in the story of the Praefect Plautianus's castration of a hundred free Romans, some of whom were married and the fathers of families, 'merely that his daughter, on her marriage with the young emperor, might be attended by a train of eunuchs worthy of an Eastern queen' (Vol. I, p. 146, n. 68). Not all eunuchs were merely presented in order to be routinely condemned, and the often sickly, noticeably short Member of Parliament and former militia officer may have made some sort of tacit identification with Narses, whom he ranked 'among the few who have rescued that unhappy name from the contempt and hatred of mankind. A feeble diminutive body concealed the soul of a statesman and a warrior' (Vol. II, p. 751).

It was not, however, merely eunuchs which Elagabalus introduced at the cost of the well-being of the Empire, and his proclivities were opportunely delineated in terms suggestive of Gibbon's own ambivalent attitudes towards luxury and excess:

> A rational voluptuary adheres with invariable respect to the temperate dictates of nature, and improves the gratifications of sense by social intercourse, endearing connections, and the soft colouring of taste and the imagination. But Elagablus…corrupted by his youth, his country, and his fortune, abandoned himself to the grossest pleasures with ungoverned fury, and soon found disgust and satiety in the midst of his enjoyments.
>
> (Vol. I, p. 167)

It was Elagabalus who played his part in promoting that most luxurious of commodities, silk, whose importance in the sociopolitical dynamics of *The Decline and Fall* cannot be over-emphasized: the silk road is one of the major routes through the historical geography of which Gibbon was a supreme master. A paean to the silkworm, 'a valuable insect, the first artificer of the luxury of nations' is quickly followed by a condemnation of its effects:

> Two hundred years after the age of Pliny, the use of pure or even of mixed silks was confined to the female sex, till the opulent citizens and the provinces were insensibly familiarised with the example of Elagabalus, the first who, by this effeminate habit, had sullied the dignity of an emperor and a man.
>
> (Vol. II, pp. 579–80)

Once again, however, one should not read this as an isolated instance of easily derided excess, although it was one which Gibbon's fellow-historian William Robertson would emphasize in his study of relations between the ancients and the East which he published in 1791.[14] While Elagabalus was derided by Gibbon for what amounted to cross-dressing, the great Constantine himself, a supreme example of a warrior-emperor, stood condemned for the vice of over-dressing in eloquently contemporary terms, as Gibbon denounced the claim

that this was done for the public and not for himself: 'Were this admitted, the vainest coxcomb could never want an excuse' (Vol. I, p. 646, n. 6). That vanity should compromise the first Christian emperor was plainly to Gibbon's mocking taste, and is a natural corollary to his claim that 'For the credit of human nature, I am always pleased to discover some good qualities in those men whom party has represented as tyrants and monsters' (Vol. I, p. 801, n. 111). It is this attempt at balance which informs so much of his discussion both of luxury and of sex.

Balance sometimes requires near silence, and it is notable how the issue of homosexuality is often broached from the most oblique of angles. This is apparent even in that section in Chapter 54 which is directly concerned with 'a more odious vice, of which modesty rejects the name, and nature abominates the idea.' This does not prevent Gibbon from making a typically learned and alarming observation which, equally typically, peters out in apparently self-censoring Latin:

> A curious dissertation might be formed on the introduction of paederasty after the time of Homer, its progress among the Greeks of Asia and Europe, the vehemence of their passions, and the thin device of virtue and friendship which amused the philosophers of Athens. But, scelera ostendi oportet dum puniuntur, abscondi flagitia.
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> (Vol. II, p. 837, and n. 192)

Gibbon quietly noted how tolerant opinion in the ancient world had tended to be on the matter, while expressing his wish to believe 'that at Rome, as in Athens, the voluntary and effeminate deserter of his sex was degraded from the honours and rights of a citizen'. A shift in opinion in the early Christian era was deftly delineated, as Gibbon portrayed something very like a double standard with sympathy for heterosexual adulterers being denied to 'lovers of their own sex', who were instead 'pursued by general and pious indignation'. Similarly, the legal reforms of Justinian revealed a sinister element when he 'declared himself the implacable enemy of unmanly lust, and the cruelty of his persecution can scarcely be excused by the purity of the motives'. Justinian's rigour was followed through in a description of the particularly hideous punishments facing those found guilty of this crime, and the cases of two bishops, who may well have been innocent of the crime imputed to them. Again, a suggestive invocation of a conspiracy of silence and moral panic informs Gibbon's discussion of homosexuality when he writes:

> A sentence of death and infamy was often founded on the slight and suspicious evidence of a child or a servant: the guilt of the green faction, of the rich, and of the enemies of Theodora, was presumed by the judges, and paederasty became the crime of those to whom no crime could be imputed.
>
> (Vol. II, pp. 838–9)

Sympathy for the plight of the homosexual is clearly discernible beneath the conventional language of distaste, but it is at least as much sympathy for the victims of Christian puritanism as it is anything as intangible as fellow-feeling which Gibbon voices in these pages. The elusive and often dangerous skill of reading between the lines is obviously necessary in reading as consciously and persistently ironic a writer as Gibbon, but the interpretation of silence, particularly in so personal a domain as sexual identity, is yet more fraught with peril.

'The meaner passions'

There is a fascination with the varieties of human experience in Gibbon, and this clearly includes the sexual and the gendered in a way that was still fairly unusual even among the consciously enlightened scholars of late eighteenth-century England. Strong women, for example, are occasionally presented as a necessary counterpart to effeminate or merely weak men. The empress Pulcheria, whose Christian devotion Gibbon gladly punctures, is none the less praised, since she, 'alone, among the descendants of the great Theodosius, appears to have inherited any share of his manly spirit and abilities'. What a contrast she provides with Theodosius the younger, who was damagingly 'condemned to pass his perpetual infancy, encompassed only by a servile train of women and eunuchs' (Vol. II, pp. 264, 265). Luxury is likewise usually announced as a vice, but it is one which often has the effects of a virtue:

> in the present imperfect condition of society, luxury, though it may proceed from vice or folly, seems to be the only means that may correct the unequal distribution of property. The diligent mechanic, and the skilful artist, who have obtained no share in the division of the earth, receive a voluntary tax from the possessors of land; and the latter are prompted by a sense of interest, to improve those estates, with whose produce they may purchase additional pleasures. This operation, the particular effects of which are felt in every society, acted with much more diffusive energy in the Roman world.
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> (Vol. I, p. 80)

Such realism allowed for a cynically effective comment on the nature of faith and iconoclasm: 'Even the reverses of the Greek and Roman coins were frequently of an idolatrous nature. Here indeed the scruples of the Christian were suspended by a stronger passion' (Vol. I, p. 461, n. 47).

It is clear that Gibbon's real enmities were reserved for the more ascetic Christians. His frequently favourable account of the origins of the Islamic faith demonstrate this with great clearness, as when he notes of the Islamic heaven that the 'image of a carnal paradise has provoked the indignation, perhaps the envy, of the monks', and when he compares Mohammed's uxoriousness favourably with that of a figure more conventionally acceptable to Christians: 'If we remember the seven hundred wives and the three hundred concubines of the wise Solomon, we shall applaud the modesty of the Arabian who espoused no more than seventeen or fifteen wives' (Vol. III, p. 189, 215).[15] Certainly, by the time he comes to write of a Europe in which the Western Roman Empire is effectively dead, Gibbon is less keen to identify private with public vices, and altogether less happy to continue to chart a decline from pagan virtue to Christian denial, as when he characterizes Charlemagne in terms far removed from those with which he vehemently criticized the later Roman emperors:

> Of his moral virtues, chastity is not the most conspicuous: but the public happiness could not be materially injured by his nine wives or concubines, the various indulgence of meaner or more transient amours, the multitude of his bastards whom he bestowed on the church, and the long celibacy and licentious manners of his daughters, whom the father was suspected of loving with too fond a passion.
>
> (Vol. II, pp. 124–5)

For Gibbon, narrating the increasingly erratic course of European and Byzantine history between 800 and 1453, Charlemagne and his ilk were but aggrandized barbarians, ignorant, avaricious, and, above all, superstitious.[16] Even luxury had contracted itself to an inglorious shadow of its former lustre, so that the ambition of the Avignon popes could be seen as having 'subsided in the meaner passions of avarice and luxury', while the celebrated condemnation of one of their number, John XXIII, has about it an air of world-

weary lassitude: 'the most scandalous charges were suppressed; the vicar of Christ was only accused of piracy, murder, rape, sodomy, and incest' (Vol. III, p. 880, 1050).

'The standard of modern times'

It would take the deeply compromised age of Augustus fully to engage its eighteenth-century analogue: each were societies in which issues of luxury and sexuality preoccupied a great many moralists, both public and private.[17] It is very much as if Tacitus's concerns that the Romans had effeminized the ancient Britons by 'civilizing' them were being critically reconsidered by modern Britons.[18] This was Gibbon's more sceptical point of entry, and the moralists he condemned and praised as occasion demanded were to be found in both cultures, a point that was also made, albeit in a more firmly moralizing manner by Adam Ferguson, whose own work on Roman history implied a more self-congratulatory perspective than that allowed his readers by Gibbon:

> The manners of the Imperial court, and the conduct of succeeding emperors, will scarcely gain credit with those who estimate possibilities from the standard of modern times. But the Romans were capable of much greater extremes than we are acquainted with.[19]

It was greatly to Gibbon's credit that he estimated the extremes of the Romans a little more charitably than his severely judgemental contemporary. Gibbon's ambivalence and subtlety in approaching sex clearly demarcates his work from the firmly masculine inclinations of 'civic humanism',[20] as well as from the style of conjectural history developed by Ferguson and other representatives of the Scottish Enlightenment. Allied with the suspicion of his religious views entertained by Christian contemporaries, the legacy of his laconically tolerant approach to the history of sex was something which served to separate him from such occasionally solemn representatives of nineteenth-century proprieties as Macaulay, who famously declared that 'I have always thought the indelicacy of Gibbon's great work a more serious blemish than even his uncandid hostility to the Christian religion'.[21] Macaulay here echoed the tones of Thomas Bowdler, who introduced his expurgated edition of *The Decline and Fall* by claiming to 'have endeavoured to avoid the insertion of any thing which might be thought objectionable, on account of irreligious tendency or indecent expression. From defects of this nature, it is extremely desirable that historical composition should be as strictly guarded as possible'.[22] As Norman Vance has recently shown, Bowdler actually retained a great deal of sexual material, including the notorious sections regarding the Empress Theodora: it was Gibbon's animadversions directly concerning Christianity which Bowdler most severely pruned.[23] For Macaulay, then, it was Gibbon's innuendo which most offended a sensibility nurtured in Evangelicalism, while for Bowdler his critique of Christianity was the historian's major fault. For Gibbon himself, the serious playfulness of sexual innuendo was very much part of his criticism of Christianity, a strategy which was clear to most of his contemporaries, not least the anonymous poet whose address to Gibbon supplies the Appendix to this article. No easy separation could be made either for Gibbon or for his contemporaries between the frequent indulgence of compromisingly sexual imagery and an implied, and occasionally more explicit criticism of Christian morality.

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Notes

1 Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* ed. David Womersley, 3 vols (London, 1994), Vol. II, p. 838, n. 195. Citations to this edition will henceforth be made in the body of the text, citing volume and page number. I am grateful to Mishtooni Bose, Heather Montgomery, Karen O'Brien, John Robertson and David Womersley for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

2 For some discussion see W.B.Carnochan, *Gibbon's Solitude: The Inward World of the Historian* (Stanford University Press, 1987), and Lionel Gossman, *The Empire Unpossess'd: An Essay on Gibbon's Decline and Fall* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

3 For a valuable discussion of the structure of the first volume of the text, see David Womersley, *The Transformation of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

4 Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia,* ed. Maurice Evans (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 133; *The Old Arcadia,* ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985), pp. 17–19. For an invaluable discussion of the intellectual context of this text and its concerns, see Blair Worden, *The Sound of Virtue: Philip Sidney's Arcadia and Elizabethan Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996).

5 David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals,* ed. L.H.Selby-Bigge, 3rd rev. edn, ed. P.H.Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), X.i.219, p. 170.

6 A stray comment in Augustine's *de Civitate Dei* likewise exercised Gibbon's occasionally and conveniently literalist imagination, as he noted the saint's 'curious distinction between moral and physical virginity' (Vol. II, p. 203, n. 103). For a parallel case with that of Sophronia, see Brent D.Shaw, 'The passion of Perpetua', *Past and Present* 139 (1993):3–45.

7 On Jerome, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity* (London, Faber and Faber, 1988), pp. 366–86; Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (London, Penguin, 1988), pp. 89–96. For a more sympathetic reading, see John Oppel, 'Saint Jerome and the history of sex', *Viator* 24 (1993):1–22.

8 For the wider apologetic context of Gibbon's views, see B.W.Young, The Anglican origins of Newman's celibacy', *Church History* 65 (1996):15–27.

9 John Walsh, 'Methodism and the mob', *Studies in Church History* 8 (1972):213–27; Walsh, 'John Wesley and the community of goods', in Keith Robbins (ed.) *Protestant Evangelicalism: Britain, Ireland, Germany, and America c. 1750–c. 1950: Essays in Honour of W.R.Ward* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 25–50; Henry Abelove, The sexual politics of early Wesleyan Methodism' in Jim Obelkevich *et al.* (eds) *Disciplines of Faith: Studies in Origins, Politics and Patriarchy* (London, Routledge, 1987), pp. 86–99; Abelove, *The Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the Methodists* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

10 Tina Isaacs, The Anglican hierarchy and the reformation of manners movement, 1688–1738', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 33 (1982):391–411; Joanna Innes, 'Politics and morals: the reformation of manners movement in late eighteenth-century England', in Eckhard Hellmuth (ed.) *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 57–118; Shelley Burtt, 'The societies for the reformation of manners: between John Locke and the devil in Augustan England', in Roger D.Lund (ed.) *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 149–69.

11 Aubrey writes of Bacon, 'He was a ' ('Francis Bacon', in *Brief Lives,* ed. Andrew Clark, 2 vols (Oxford, 1898), Vol. 1, p. 71).

12 For an earlier instance of the relationship between the classical education of boys and tales of sexual excess, see Marjorie Curry Woods, 'Rape and the pedagogical rhetoric of sexual violence', in Rita Copeland (ed.) *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 56–86.

13 The shocking denouement of Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* is aided by the apparent spirit of tolerance of his main protagonists, especially as this is rather conventionally illustrated in their general suspicion of clerical authority: Montesquieu, *Oeuvres completes,* 2 vols (Paris, Pléiade, 1949–51), Vol. 1, Lettres CXLVII-CLXI, pp. 362–73. They are both puzzled and amused by clerical celibacy, especially as represented by what are satirically referred

to as 'Le grand nombre d'eunuques…. Je parle des prêtres et des dervis de l'un et de l'autre sexe, qui se vouent a une continence eternelle: c'est chez les Chrétiens la vertu par excellence; en quoi je ne les comprends pas, ne sachant ce que c'est qu'une vertu dont il ne résulte rien' (Lettre CXVII, pp. 305–7). Gibbon also noted, in an interesting association of ideas, that the military campaigns of the Persians 'were impeded by a useless train of women, eunuchs, horses, and camels' (Vol. I, p. 228).

14 William Robertson, *An Historical Disquisition Concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients Had of India* (London, 1791), pp. 54–5.

15 On Solomon's standing in Christian culture, see Mishtooni Bose, 'From exegesis to appropriation: the medieval Solomon,' *Medium Aevum* 65 (1996):189–210.

16 On the changing nature of the later volumes, see Peter Ghosh, The conception of Gibbon's *History,* in Rosamond McKitterick and Roland Quinault (eds) *Edward Gibbon and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 271–316.

17 On the critical identification of ancient Rome by eighteenth-century writers, see Howard A.Weinbrot, *Augustus Caesar in 'Augustan' England: The Decline of a Classical Norm* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

18 Tacitus, *Agricola,* ed. R.M.Ogilvie and Sir Ian Richmond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), especially the conclusion of section 21, at pp. 106–7: 'inde etiam habitus nostri honor et frequens toga; paulatimque discessum ad delenimenta vitiorum porticus et balineas et conviviorum elegantiam. idque apud imperitos humanitas vocabatur, cum pars servitutis esset.' Note how Tactitus, like Gibbon, makes much of clothing as an indication of moral and social change.

19 Adam Ferguson, *The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic,* 3 vols (London, 1783), Vol. 3, p. 563.

20 J.G.A.Pocock, 'Between Machiavelli and Hume: Gibbon as civic humanist and philosophic historian', in G.W.Bowersock *et al.* (eds) *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 103–19.

21 Macaulay, letter to an unknown recipient (31 March 1849), in Thomas Pinney (ed.) *The Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay,* 6 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974–81), Vol. 5, pp. 41–2.

22 Thomas Bowdler, (ed.) *Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: For the use of families and young persons. Reprinted from the original text, with the careful omission of all passages of an irreligious or immoral tendency,* 5 vols (London, 1826), Vol. 1, p. ix.

23 Norman Vance, *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 203.

Appendix

Anon, *A Poetical Address to Edward Gibbon. Esq. Occasioned by His History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: R.Falder, 1786). *Illa, quis & me, inquit, miseram te perdidit?—Virgil.*

Whether reclin'd, secure, 'mid Alpine snows,
Thou courtest liberty and learn'd repose,
Or steer'st thy course across the fretful main,
Eager thy Country's gale to breathe again;
GIBBON, no more thy potent pen employ,
Thus to embitter a fond Fathers joy.
Alas, my Daughter! dear lamented name!
Once my sole pride, now source of grief and shame!
Why did I listen to that tuneful tongue,
Attracted, GIBBON, by thy Syren Song?
Thy thoughts magnificent, thy diction bold,

Through my full soul, like Roman TYBER, roll'd.
Thy principles, I'll own, I disapprov'd;
But who e'er scann'd the faults of those he lov'd?
Not so my Daughter; she, poor heedless maid!
Caught by thy style, was, by thy sense betray'd.
Her Mother, long ago to death consign'd,
To piety had formed her infant mind;
And easy elegance, and polish'd taste,
Her brilliant wit and vivid fancy grac'd.
One blemish e'en my fondness could descry,
The sweet deceiver, learned vanity.
She lov'd to speculate; nor thought it wrong,
In reas'ning high, to leave the vulgar throng:
Nor strange, if, thus prepar'd, thy specious page
Should in vain doubts her spirit soft engage,
Till faith relaxing gently sunk away,
And rising vapours hid the face of day.
Perplex'd, bewilder'd, with a sceptic sight
She follows, step by step, thy glimm'ring light.
Thus some belated hind the wand'ring fire
Misleads, and plunges in th'unfathomable mire.
Meantime, a Youth, won by my Daughter's charms,
With soft attention woo'd her to his arms.
His mien was noble, lively was his mind,
And Fortune had her gifts to Nature join'd:
But underneath a frank and gen'rous face,
A soul he cover'd, profligate and base.
Alarm'd I saw the danger of my child,
And wrought by reason on her temper mild.
Obedient, to my Villa soon she went,
In silent solitude to live content:
There under gloomy shades she oft would rove,
While studious thought supply'd the face of love.
But how shall I the sequel dare disclose,
And publish to the world my secret woes?
Among my Servants, one, EUGENIO nam'd,
Was for his elegance of manners fam'd.
With graceful air he touch'd the lute, and sung,
With soft persuasion smooth'd his flatt'ring tongue.
His strains melodious sooth'd my Daughter's ear,
And plaintive oft beguil'd her of a tear.
Too conscious of his power, the wretch survey'd
With eyes of wantonness the blooming Maid;

Treac'rous he tried the weaken'd citadel,
Till in some fatal hour subdued it fell.
Her guilt and shame, betray'd by symptoms clear,
To me a busy friend was prompt to bear.
Appall'd I heard the news; and, prone to ire,
In vain I stifled the collected fire.
Indignant through the house aloud I rave,
'What, is my Daughter strumpet to a slave?'
Then rushing enter'd, where she sat reclin'd
In her lov'd room, with fav'rite volumes lin'd.
'Abandon'd Prostitute!—Stop, Sir!' she cry'd;
'Condemn me not till I am duly try'd.
'Where,' she continued, 'where am I to blame?
'How do I merit that opprobrious name?
I've Nature follow'd, our unerring guide:
'Her dictates who shall rashly dare deride?
'See my authority; 'tis GIBBON sage,
'GIBBON, *the glory of th'historic page*.
'Such was your eulogy—Following this I read,
'By words sublime and beauteous, captive led.
'From him I learn'd, that to indulge my sense
'(BBy Priests and Churchmen styl'd Concupiscence)
'Is venial, nay, is spotless innocence:
'From him I learn'd to scorn imperious man,
'By diff'rent rules.—GIBBON, more just and kind
'To the weak texture of the female mind,
'Pities HONORIA'S undeserved pain,
'Who sought the arms of her lov'd Chamberlain.
'GIBBON with lenient eye HONORIA saw,
'Because obsequious to kind Nature's law,
'Though vengeful she to marriage-rites could urge
'E'en ATTILA the Hun, her Country's scourge.
'My arguments, I see, have had their weight;
'That show relaxing is no counterfeit;
'That glist'ning eye—'She paus'd. Her troubled soul,
Contending passions could no more controul.
Sighs, sobs, and shrieks, come rushing on amain,
While from her eyes descends the briny rain.
Her speech returning—'Father, kindest Friend,
'And canst thou pity to a wretch extend;
'A wretch like me,' she cry'd, 'who've brought disgrace
'On thee and all the honours of thy race?
'Think not, a real part I undertook,

‘When fix’d and firm I met thy dread rebuke:
‘That moment keen remorse congeal’d my blood,
‘And self-condemn’d, before thy face I stood.
‘Ill-fated day, when, emulous and vain,
‘And proud to deviate from the vulgar train,
‘GIBBON’S seducing pages I perus’d,
And on his system philosophic mus’d.
‘I reverenc’d no more Religion’s laws,
‘For which th’Historian finds a human cause.
‘That antidote remov’d, my soul sank deep
‘The luscious potion, drugg’d with deadly sleep.
‘Lull’d and deluded, I to Nature gave
‘The reins, from principle vile Passion’s slave.
‘Alas, my Father! I have both destroy’d;
‘Render’d thy life one dismal, dreary void;
‘Myself degraded; so that all around
‘From tattling tongues my infamy shall sound,
‘While prudent matrons bid their daughters shrug
‘Infectious converse with a wretch undone.’
She paus’d. The red her trembling lips forsook,
And every limb a death-like horror shook.
Such are thy trophies:- but time draws near
When for these trophies thou shalt pay full dear.
Yet why, alas? GIBBON, that heart of thine
Was never dug from th’adamantine mine:
’Twas kind Religion’s soil, most kindly given,
Meet to receive the genuine plant of Heaven,
True Charity; which, if thou cultivate
(Hark! Something whispers—‘Tis not yet too late.’)
Shall bloom eternal in a better state.
’Tis that, forbidding vengeful thoughts to rise,
Makes me regard thee, for they own and others’ welfare, wise.
The meagre, famish’d wretch, wouldst thou deprive
Of the poor crumbs that bid his soul revive?
Far hence the thought!—Thy mind benevolent
Is, as my own, on acts of mercy bent.
Why then from him who sinks oppress’d with grief,
Why wouldst thou snatch his spirit’s sole relief;
Leave him to comfortless despair a prey,
Till, sick of life, he throws the gift away?
Let cavil cease:- such is the consequence,
When the sight is dimm’d by evidence
On which Religion stands; when doubts succeed,

And into air dissolves th'unsettled creed.
Ah! how could I this torture undergo,
This poignant anguish of a Daughter know,
But that another life of endless bliss,
And promis'd succours through the pain of this,
Renew my force? Though waves on waves assail
My shatter'd bark, I will not dread the gale,
That to the wish'd-for port directs my swelling sail.
Return then, GIBBON, dare to be a Man,
A Martyr: dare reverse thy former plan.
Awake a sleeping world; assume the rod,
The rod of eloquence, and cause of God:
Thy witness doubly strong, when all shall know
That thou'rt a Friend, who once wert thought a Foe.
The hand which dealt the blow with hostile hate,
Shall pour the balm, the pain to mitigate;
Shall mitigate the pain, shall health restore,
Nay, vigour to the limb, not felt before.
Lo! future volumes Albion's land adorn,
With wisdom fraught for ages yet unborn.
And, as the tide historic rolls along,
Purg'd and refin'd, Earth's various tribes among,
Th'admiring Nations shall behold imprest
Heav'n's sacred image on thy lucid breast.
Pursue then, GIBBON, thy well-chosen theme,
Till dawning Silence dissipate the dream
Of Superstitions night, and brightest rays
Of meek Religion gild th'improving days.
Illustrious task with radiant eloquence
To trace the wondrous ways of Providence,
And blazon Truth, despight of Sceptic Insolence
Nor let the jest oblique, the scornful sneer,
Nor of loquacious tongues th'unmanly fear,
Arrest thy course; but still push boldly on,
(The steady eye fix'd on th'immortal Crown)
And midst the mock of fools thy Saviour dare to own.