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The Rites of Man: The British Museum and the Sexual Imagination in Victorian Britain

[article for submission to the Journal of the History of Collections – note that illustrations would be submitted as high quality digital files]

Dominic Janes.

Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which antiquities, both classical and medieval, could be interpreted as having powerful sexual significance. That this was recognised, by, for instance, the curatorial staff of the British Museum in the nineteenth century, can be seen from the creation of a secret cabinet of erotic material. However, it has been less widely acknowledged that this did not automatically sanitise the rest of the collection into being morally unproblematic. The key factor in producing sexualised readings of wide range of antiquities lay in a tradition of comparative religion that had two important characteristics. Firstly, it had a strong tendency to identify many aspects of Roman Catholic practice as being directly descended from the rites of pagan antiquity. Secondly, amongst a group of eighteenth-century authors religion was seen as having originated in primitive fertility rites. At the one extreme we find detailed works of antiquarian scholarship, at the other erotica. But both forms of expression shared a common tradition of implicitly or explicitly abusing 'priestcraft' through imputed obsession with carnality. This radical strain of thought was less congenial to English tastes in the aftermath of the conservative reaction to the French Revolution. A much clearer division was to develop in the nineteenth century as, on the one hand, the emergence of academic anthropology left the study of fertility cults as a marginalised and morally suspect area of scholarly inquiry, and the development of pornography led to the production of erotic matter from which the political had been drained away.

However, I use the evidence of an anonymous early Victorian tract, *Idolomania*, set in the context of other literary productions of its times, to show that the early Victorian wave of anti-

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Catholic moral panic led to claims that the public displays of the British Museum were saturated with morally dangerous material. Although I cannot and do not claim that this was a mainstream view, I do use this tract to emphasise that there is an ongoing tradition of eroticised readings of sculpture galleries, even ones supposedly purged of explicitly sexual material. That this fact is not widely recognised may be to do with dominant conceptualisations of the separation between art and pornography that date from the Victorian age. Much classical and Hindu statuary may indeed have been intended indirectly if not directly to produce erotic responses. And if we want to fully engage with the power of bodily representations in museum collections it may be sensible to openly acknowledge sexual fetishism as a social construction and, therefore, the diversity and unpredictability of arousal.

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The Rites of Man: The British Museum and the Sexual Imagination in Victorian Britain

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In one of her early twentieth-century stories the novelist Elizabeth Bibescu (daughter of Herbert Asquith and wife of a Romanian prince) says that one of her characters ‘always thought it so wonderful to be in London in the very same town as the National Gallery and the British Museum and so much wickedness’.¹ Are we to take this as a teasing suggestion of institutional impropriety? With somewhat less subtlety, the playwright Joe Orton has one of his pompous and ludicrous authority figures declare of the farcical proceedings in a psychiatrist’s office that there had been “an attempt, in fact, to change the order of creation – homosexuality slots in here – dabbling in the black arts! The reported theft of the private parts of a well-known public figure ties in with this theory. We’ve phallic worship here or I’m a Dutchman!”² The use of improbable sexual innuendo as a way of undermining institutional authority has a long history. But if we want to understand minority or counter-cultural viewpoints we need to take the making of such accusations seriously.

In so far as it had a defined mission in its earlier years the British Museum was intended to be a compendious accumulation of materials from a wide diversity of cultures. The question of the wickedness of some of those objects became significant during the course of the nineteenth century. Part of the problem was that, of necessity, many of the prized objects were the product of ‘heathen’ civilisations, thus raising a possible conflict between aesthetics, scientific interest and morality, a situation made more intense by the progressive easing of conditions of public access, such that the less socially prestigious and the poorly educated were starting to gain admittance in increasing numbers. These were people who were thought to be less likely to understand the ‘correct’ modes of viewing, or by virtue of their age, class and gender, were seen as more vulnerable to morally ambiguous experiences. The difficulty of expressing the mission of such an institution in a Christian society can be sensed from the long negotiations over the pediment

sculptures of the Museum which were approved in May 1848 by Lord Aberdeen, Sir Robert Peel and Dean Buckland.³ The sculptor, Sir Richard Westmacott, described his scheme, which was installed in 1851 as follows:

‘commencing at the Western end or angle of the Pediment, Man is represented emerging from a rude savage state through the influence of Religion. He is next personified as a Hunter and Tiller of the Earth, and labouring for his subsistence. Patriarchal simplicity then becomes invaded, and the worship of the true God defiled. Paganism prevails and then becomes diffused by means of the Arts.

The worship of the heavenly bodies and their supposed influence, led the Egyptians, Chaldeans and other nations to study Astronomy, typified by the central statue; the key-stone to the composition.

Civilisation is now presumed to have made considerable progress. Descending toward the eastern angle of the Pediment is Mathematics; in allusion to science now being pursued on sound principles. Drama, Poetry, and Music balance the group of the Fine Arts on the Western Side, the whole composition terminating with Natural History, in which such objects or specimens are represented as could be made most effective in Sculpture.’⁴

[plates 1, 2 and 3]

The description makes no explicit mention of Christianity, but it makes it clear that an original state of innocence encountering pure religion becomes ‘defiled’ by Pagan idolatry which is then ameliorated by art and learning. There is no attempt to depict that defiling. The implication is simply that the classical images which echoed those held inside the museum were in some sense morally tainted. Religion, meanwhile, appears well before the development of the classical arts and is shown as an angel, a figure which could be read as Christian, but is not explicitly so. Moreover, Savagery is a beautiful naked male youth and Religion is female, casting the original encounter between Man and God in a potentially erotic light. The style of the sculptures, and their architectural context, were, of course, inspired by pagan Greece and were ‘amongst the

most stringently classical' of Westmacott's career.⁵ The problem for Westmacott was not simply the tainted mantle of paganism but that although the British Museum collected Christian antiquities, the Church of that time was regarded by the British Protestant majority as profoundly corrupt, and the destruction of many of its art works in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as meritorious. It is far from clear, as we will see, that the Museum provided a sanitised and controlled environment in which pagan – and even Christian - objects could be viewed in safety. Not even the expedient of locking away those objects and texts deemed to be obscene was able to prevent the collections being viewed by a minority of scholars and antiquarians with a radical – and phallogocentric - gaze.

The interaction of art and religion occasionally surfaces as an issue in the news reportage of Christian, Jewish and Islamic tensions in the twentyfirst-century Middle East. For example, it was recently reported in a British newspaper that whilst Islam has been overwhelmingly iconophobic Christianity has not. The key reason for this was that 'in its earliest years, the Christian world took the statues of the old gods and goddesses of Greece and morphed them into images of the Virgin Mary and the saints'.⁶ This is not a new suggestion. Indeed, it had been a staple of Protestant abuse against Roman Catholicism for centuries. The term 'idolomania' was used by Calvin to describe an obsession with religious images. 'It is certain', he commented, 'that the idolomania with which the minds of men are now fascinated cannot be cured otherwise than by removing the material cause of their infatuation'.⁷ This, and other related terms, were adopted as slogans by the English puritan tradition.⁸

There was a long and consistent tradition in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of critical commentary on other religions than Christianity.⁹ Most writers pontificated from the comfort of their writing desks and sometimes in the context of their private collections, but occasionally, as was the case with Conyers Middleton in 1742, they published based on their own experiences, in his case in Rome.¹⁰ Clerical opinion was, unsurprisingly, more critical than that of aesthetes who, with Westmacott, believed in the 'diffusing' effect of art. The establishment of the British Museum, however, meant that both pagan and Christian antiquities were available for viewing in London by those members of the general public who could gain access.

The widespread denunciation of Roman Catholics for sexual excess had the unintended result of establishing the Roman system both ancient and modern as a focus for erotic fantasies. The publishing of detailed Christian denunciations could clearly be read as erotic by those who wished to do so, as could supposedly scientific texts. From this it was but a small step to the production of intentionally erotic texts. A key figure was the early eighteenth-century bookseller Curl who was responsible for such publications as 'A Treatise on Hermaphrodites'. In 1725 he printed 'Venus in the Cloister, or, the Nun in Her Smock', which has been seen as a skit on anti-catholic satire.¹¹ This was Robert Samber's translation of Jean Barrin's 'sheet-turning mini-masterpiece' in which an experienced nun explains her heterosexual exploits to an inexperienced nun before initiating her into lesbian pleasure.¹² The prosecution of Curl for publishing this work created the law of obscenity which came to take over from sedition or blasphemy for crimes of this sort.¹³ The gradual development of the crime of obscenity gives us an important clue that the dangers of this kind of publication were initially held to lie as much in radical undermining of authority than in the realms of personal indecency.

Priapic imagery was used to discredit Catholics - *Priapus Periclitans* (1690) - and Dissenters alike, - *Priapeia Persbyteriana, or the Presbyterian Peezle* (1720).¹⁴ Meanwhile, there was a lively tradition of anti-clerical erotica in France which crested at the Revolution.¹⁵ Such erotic visions denied elite status to priests who were seen as equally, if not more, bestial than anyone else (the same radical effect was achieved by erotic cartoons of the French royal family).¹⁶ Pornography as a genre that is intended simply for erotic stimulation of the viewer is widely understood to be a product of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ During the early modern period many erotic materials were part of an elite culture of burlesque in which inappropriate arousal on the part of the subjects of the texts was part of a critique of current power relations. Personal sexual pleasure was often mingled with anti-Catholic and, more covertly, anti-Christian messages. There was no clear boundary between religious, scientific and erotic works: 'the readers were the same as those of the clandestine or semi-clandestine erotic book trade, since scientific documentation required the collaboration of collectors of erotica.'¹⁸

One of the most influential respectable texts of comparative religion was produced by Sir William Jones in 1784 (published in revised form in 1801). This argued for strong similarities between classical and contemporary Indian pagan deities. 'The Gothick system', Jones argued, 'which prevailed in the northern regions of Europe, was not merely similar to those of Greece and Italy, but almost the same in another dress, with an embroidering of images apparently Asiatick'.¹⁹ The attraction of such views was that they reconciled the competing claims to cultural prestige of classical civilisation and Germanic antiquity whilst explaining contemporary religious diversity.

Such studies tended to posit a general belief in fertility as a key aspect of 'primitive religion'. The impetus to a specifically phallic interpretation of paganism occurred in the 1780s. William Hamilton (1731-1803), diplomat and collector, heard of a surviving 'phallic cult' north of Naples in which wax images were offered at a local church by women in the hope of ensuring their fertility. He was interested in the cult because it 'offers a fresh proof of the similitude of the Popish and Pagan religion'.²⁰ In May 1785 he travelled to the location and examples of the ex-votos were sent to British Museum.²¹ Hamilton described the cult to Payne Knight who published on the subject. Richard Payne Knight (1751-1824) was the eldest son of the Rector of Bewdley. From 1780-1806 he was a Member of Parliament, sponsored by Charles James Fox. In 1781 he was elected a member Society of Dilettanti, which in 1786 issued his publication, *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus*.²² A trustee of the British Museum from 1814, he left his huge collections to the Museum.²³ Other men associated with these men were Hugues, the self-created Baron d'Hancarville, scholar and publisher of erotic prints, who addressed the Society of Dilettanti in 1781 and Townley, the first European known to have acquired an erotic Indian sculpture group.²⁴ It has been commented of Payne Knight's book that 'lurking on almost every page is some form of scepticism about Christianity' and this implicitly, if not explicitly, was not just about abusing Catholicism.²⁵ It is arguable that Payne Knight desired an enlightened paganism which would give more scope for homosocial expression. His 'libertine' work was read by most critics as erotic, depraving and seditious.²⁶

A vital element in the intellectual world of these gentlemen and rogues was enlightenment deism. The word 'deist' made its appearance first in France when it is described as

referring to a novel threat in 1563.²⁷ There was no such thing as a deist religion or movement, rather deism was a rethinking of the relations between mankind, nature and the divine. The advocates of 'reason' over superstition looked to nature and its laws as a source of answers.²⁸ God, it was thought, could be understood by his evidences but not influenced. Organised worship, for the more radical thinkers, was thus potentially a diversion from true understanding.²⁹ A key theological manifestation was the intense application of 'reason' and critical analysis to scripture. Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* (3 vols., published 1793, 1795 and 1807) was not so much original in its ideas, as in its strident tone.³⁰ The immaculate conception was, for Paine, 'blasphemously obscene', since it saw Mary 'debauched by a ghost'.³¹ The English publisher was duly prosecuted for blasphemy in 1797.³²

The erotic elements of comparative religion could be, and were, thus employed in the service of radical politics. Perhaps the most influential study in this vein was written by Dupuis in year two of the French republic. This revolutionary work was strongly anti-Catholic, presenting an unambiguous picture of Christianity as being directly related to solar worship in which the phallus was the emblem of the sun.³³ Dupuis was offered the Chair of Literature in Berlin by Frederick the Great, became French Commissioner of Public Instruction in 1790 and a founding member of the French Institute.³⁴ Meanwhile in Britain his 'atheism' was blamed on his Catholic upbringing, since it is not surprising that 'disgusted by whatever had appeared to him under the form of religion, he should have rejected it altogether'.³⁵

In nineteenth-century Britain, meanwhile, the authorities were to make an intense effort to separate the radical from the erotic. The result was an increasingly narrowly defined genre of 'pornography' which was to become clearly distinguished from scientific, judicial or medical discourses on sexual acts and 'offences'.³⁶ The academic study of ancient fertility cults was relegated to the field of dubious eccentricity, as with O'Brien's determinedly learned attempt to prove that the round towers of Ireland were ancient pagan phalli.³⁷ Typical of such writers is Godfrey Higgins who produced a vast accumulation of antiquarian lore and analysis, a substantial part of which was published as *Anacalypsis, an Attempt to Draw Aside the Veil of the Saitic Isis; or, an Inquiry Into the Origin of Languages, Nations, and Religions* (1836). Inchbald, a

'neighbour', wished that this educated country gentleman had stuck with reforming lunatic asylums as had been his earlier preoccupation.³⁸ His radical assertions, that, for instance, the cross was an ancient symbol meaning regeneration of life and related to a 'fancied similarity to the membrum virile', were buried deep in intractable prose and were not seen as too likely to come to the notice of the vulnerable.³⁹

He believed that the origin of idolatry was the upright stone or 'emblem of the generative or procreative powers of nature', called in India the 'Lingham'.⁴⁰ Like O'Brien, he held that ancient Celtic religion was phallic and, further, that 'the constitution of the order of Druids was in some respects like that of the monastic orders'.⁴¹ He says that we learn from Caesar that in Britain the druids had 'obtained, in a very high degree, what all priests attempt in every state; that is, the control of the civil power and the possession of all real authority'.⁴² His attack on priesthood is aggressively direct:

'of all the evils which escaped from Pandora's box, [the worst is] the institution of priesthood. Priests have been the curse of the world... Look at China, the festival of Juggernaut, the Crusades, the massacres of St. Bartholemew, of the Mexicans, and of the Peruvians, the fires of the Inquisition, of Mary, Cranmer, Calvin, and of the Druids; look at Ireland; look at Spain; in short, look everywhere and you will see the priests reeking with gore. They have converted, and are converting, populous and happy nations into deserts, and have made our beautiful world into a slaughter-house drenched with blood and tears!'⁴³

The works of Higgins and their like tend to mingle disgust with fascination with their subject. Hughes has discussed the way in which two schools of thought on comparative religion developed in the first half of the nineteenth century, the idealist and the positivist.⁴⁴ The first was a romantic development influenced by Kant and Hegel, of which the greatest exponents were Coleridge and F. D. Maurice. This saw religious material forms as representing attempts toward finding the true essence of mind: this had reached its fulfilment in reformed Christianity. The

implication was that other religions were not evil but were simply imperfect. Positivist comparative religion, on the other hand, developed the Enlightenment championing of reason in the direction of viewing religion as primitive attempts at understanding the world. It is this line of thought that would develop into academic anthropology when the subject became established in the university curriculum towards the end of the nineteenth century. Much of the antiquarian work on fertility cults hovered, sometimes uncomfortably, between the romanticising of primitive theistic yearnings and the application of 'scientific' methods of textual and visual analysis in order to explore and implicitly or explicitly denounce pagan (and Roman Catholic) cultures.

The challenge for Westmacott, therefore, was how to represent the moral evolution of mankind in such a way as to demonstrate that the pagan and Christian antiquities of the British Museum were morally improving rather than being dangerous for private morality or public order. One method that was used to try to ensure the perceived respectability of the Museum as an institution was the separation of some of the more problematic texts and objects into reserve collections to which access was very severely restricted. The earliest surviving catalogue of books kept in the private case was begun c. 1840. This catalogue was maintained until 1868 when the items were transferred to a locked cabinet in the principal keeper's office, but the contents had been segregated since 'at least' the 1830s.⁴⁵ The original list was largely composed of erotic material from the eighteenth century, but the occasional modern medical work was included, pre-eminently George Drysdale's *Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion*, which was, by 1886 to have gone through 25 editions, albeit with the title amended to the more opaque *The Elements of Social Science*.⁴⁶ In 1895, Edmund Buckley published his Ph.D. Dissertation at the University of Chicago on 'Phallicism in Japan'. He stated that previous work was unreliable, having found such works in the 'reserve shelves, to which only special students are allowed access' (as they often are today) at the British Museum, where one Dr. Reid said that 'as soon as one begins to study phallicism he goes crazy'.⁴⁷

The same process of segregation and regulation was used for objects which were placed into the 'Secretum', which was officially founded in 1865 after the acquisition of the substantial Witt Collection of 'Symbols of the Early Worship of Mankind'.⁴⁸ This became part of the new

Department of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography under A. W. Franks.⁴⁹ One inspiration for this collection, and for a new generation of scholars of erotic art, was the establishment in Naples in 1819 of the Gabinetto degli oggetti obsceni (Cabinet of Obscene Objects) to hold items from the local excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum. This collection has had a complex history but through to the present day has always been subject to public access limitations. The collection was first catalogued in 1860 and given its modern title, the *Raccolta pornographica* (Pornographic Collection). But it has long been popularly known as the Secret Museum.⁵⁰

One problem of this approach was to lend an air of mystique to the overall collection, such that the British Museum as a whole could appear as a chamber of dangerous secrets. In Sir Walter Besant's novel, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, of 1882 there appears the character of Daniel Fagg, a sometime shoemaker. Years of obsessive study in the British Museum and its library have left him penniless. He is obsessed with his supposed discovery of a universal alphabet behind all the ancient inscriptions in the Museum, which he says are in fact in Hebrew. He thinks that the professional scholars are shutting him out, refusing to subscribe to his book and ignoring him in the galleries. In an echo of reformation claims against priestly secrecy and the Latin Bible he argues that with his new system ancient wisdom would be open to all: 'now young lady, with this in your hand [the alphabet], which is the key to all learning – and the Hebrew dictionary – there is nothing you can't manage'.⁵¹ The implication was that this could bring radical changes, moreover, it is hinted that these would be in the direction of sexual morality:

“mind, it's a secret”. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “There's cuneiform inscriptions in the Museum wih David and Jonathon on them – ah! – and Balaam and Balak – Ohoo!”, he positively chuckled over the thought of these great finds – “and the whole life of Jezebel – Jezebell! What do you think of that? And what else do you think they've got only they don't know it?”⁵²

The gothic image of curators as secretive priests needs to be seen in the context of fin-de-siècle decadent preoccupations with the delights of deviance, however, there is evidence that the public displays (supposedly purged by the authorities of dangerous items) were being read decades before in ways which, inspired by radical and libertine traditions of comparative religious studies, implied that the obscene permeated heathen and medieval cultures (even if it spared the noble savage, as in Westmacott's design). What was distinctive now, was the explicit claim that pagan and pagan-influenced antiquities were an immediate peril to public morality.

In the 1850s there was a tremendous bout of anti-Catholic agitation brought on by the restoration of the Roman Catholic hierarchy of Bishops in England under the newly ordained Cardinal Wiseman of Westminster. The British Museum, with its newly installed Westmacott sculptures was to be the inspiration for an attack on Anglo-Catholicism as the pollution of the purity of Protestantism by phallic worship. This was the argument of 'Investigator Abhorrens' in the tract *Idolomania; or, the Legalised Cross not the Instrument of Crucifixion, being an Inquiry into the Difference between the Cross Proper and the Symbol of Heathen Processions*.⁵³ This was published by the radical house of Effingham Wilson, an important publisher with a very large output which, if a little past its prime, was still an important firm.⁵⁴ Moreover, I have used the word 'tract' deliberately. This was not cheap erotica, nor was it a weighty work of antiquarian scholarship. Save for its subject matter it was in exactly the same format as an ordinary mass-circulation religious tract.

The preface begins by telling us that the final decision in the ecclesiastical law case of *Liddell v. Westerton* had spurred the author to put pen to paper and that he wrote in a situation of emergency to strengthen the resolve of the bishop of London. *Liddell v. Westerton* was a case centring on St. Barnabus, Pimlico (London) and concerning Catholic ritual innovation in the Church of England. The case was appealed from the judge of first instance, Dr Lushington, to the Privy Council. One anonymous critic of Lushington's judgement seized upon the judge's use of the word 'meretricious', as in his comment that 'what is lace and embroidery [as employed on the Anglo-Catholic altar cloth] but a meretricious display of fantastic and unnecessary ornament?' The counter claim was that this equated pleasing decoration with defilement and prostitution.

'Hear it, ye ultra-Protestants of Pimlico', thundered the anonymous writer, 'revilers and despoilers of that beautiful Temple, raised, by the piety of priest and people, amid a dense and long neglected population, only becoming the most depraved of outcasts – a common HARLOT'.⁵⁵

The suggestion that ornament in church was evocative of prostitution, in other words of guilty and illicit sex, was reframed by 'Investigator Abhorrens' into a theory based on comparative religion that argued that paganism was based on phallic worship and Catholicism was developed from such heathen practices. Defending himself from possible accusation that he in his writings was being obscene, the anonymous writer declared that 'if it be culpable to tell the simple truth of indecent symbols [what] is not the guilt of those who not only display them to the unsuspecting as objects of love or adoration, but... compose hymns to the cross to be sung by Christian ladies, and not only that, fill them with smutty ideas?'.⁵⁶

He argues that Jesus was crucified on a single stake, and the horizontal was a pagan symbolic interpolation derived from the phallic worship that was supposedly universal in the ancient world. The cross became so widespread because 'it prevailed among the first Christians soon after the crucifixion'.⁵⁷ Catholicism was then taken over by phallus worship, which our author illustrates by reference to such scenes as witnessed by the hardline Protestant M. Hobart Seymour when on Good Friday 'the pope and cardinals crawl on all fours along the aisles of St. Peter's, to a cross which they glorify, embrace and kiss'.⁵⁸ A parallel is drawn with the 'lingga' (phallus) that Hindus place upright in their temples (which are, in another interesting parallel, described as being of 'Gothic architecture').⁵⁹ The 'candle and its stand is the upright lingga... obscene representations of that which may not be described'.⁶⁰ The crossed-keys of Peter are particularly lewd since 'the key itself is a complex phallus, with its circle of Venus'.⁶¹ It is all a devilish plot, since it is not for nothing that we find this 'foul image... lewdly exhibited upon the backs of Puseyite theurgists'.⁶² Ritualism does nothing other than 'bring the animal organization and sensations into undue prominence' and 'the Tractarian churches are but temples of Bacchus and Venus'.⁶³

The author of *Idolomania* tells us that, apparently unlike himself, the evangelists 'had anything but a phallus on their minds'.⁶⁴ The aim of his paper was intended to dissociate Christ

from the pollution of impropriety, although the effect may have been quite the opposite. In fact, there was clearly a complex dance of desire and repulsion taking place in which the author could not avoid being implicated (which is why he remained anonymous). There appears to have been a particular fear (and, perhaps, excitement) of thinking about Christ in passive terms as being penetrated for 'how else have we learnt that Jesus suffered on the disgusting image of a phallus'?⁶⁵ Moreover, since impalement was, as Brock put it, an 'Oriental punishment', Christ, who was typically depicted as being white, was being male-raped by the sinful east.⁶⁶ This confusion of roles in the context of sexuality was confirmed by his insistence that the clergy were 'satyrs in women's habiliments'. He explains that 'the priest is the human symbol of male nature, always ready to be worshipped by women, for which reason his garments are the garments of women'.⁶⁷ Since 'whatever has the property of receiving, containing... is symbolical, throughout Asia, of the female nature', the priest in his enveloping robes was the walking embodiment of sexual penetration.

The use of erotic associations for criticising Catholicism was, in itself, problematic in that it potentially furthered the supposed infectious leakage of the carnal by bringing it into public discourse. It was crucial for the writer that he established his authority and a sense of lucid distance from his material so as to avoid the danger of being seen as in any way complicit or compromised. To that end detailed textual sources for his interpretation were given. Moreover, frequent reference was made to antiquities in the British Museum, by viewing which it was implied that the reader would find these views confirmed. Reference was made to items in the museum ranging from 'Egyptian rosaries' to a meretricious image of Isis which 'with an oval ring and cross of Venus in her hand appears to invite, solicit, or beckon some person to approach', Hindu images of the lingam and yoni (phallus and womb), an Osiris standing with arms outstretched (supposedly a precursor to the 'phallic image' of Christ on the cross) and a Venus and Eroses.⁶⁸ This then led our author to identify Phallic imagery outside and inside a range of medieval and new churches and at Merton College, Oxford.

This anonymous writer was not alone in a tendency to read a wide range of decoration schemes as being composed of symbols of the genitalia. A prominent medical expert, Dr Thomas

Inman (1820-1876) did the same. He became a Member of the Royal College of Physicians in 1861, before practising at the Royal Infirmary, Liverpool and becoming president of the Liverpool Literary and Philosophical Society.⁶⁹ He wrote a number of medical works, but appears to have devoted his final years to the study of antiquities. He was if anything, even more explicit than his anonymous predecessor, declaring that 'anything upright, longer than broad, became symbolic of the father'.⁷⁰ Typical of his analysis is his discussion of a decorative motif by Pugin: 'in the two forms of the Maltese cross, the position of the lingam is reversed, and the egg-shaped bodies, with their cover, are at the free end of each limb, whilst the natural end of the organ is left unchanged'.⁷¹ Another detail was described as 'an unmistakable bi-sexual cross' [plate 4].⁷² It is clear that he was not the author of *Idolomania*, because he argued that 'England will be as upright, and as civilised, when she has abandoned the heathen elements in her religion, as when she hugs them as if necessary for her spiritual welfare'.⁷³ He represented a radical postivist position to comparative religion rather than a sectarian attempt to discredit Catholicism through antiquarian research. He says that the people should be the judge of who they wanted to believe.⁷⁴ A thoughtful public will choose between priests, doctors and other authorities. Speaking for himself he says that he no longer respects the judgement of even the 'most sensible' clergyman he has ever known because the man insisted on sticking to his creed rather than agreeing with what everyone else thought obvious.⁷⁵

The anonymous writer, however, took a position which was much more representative of his times in regarding fertility cults as being a foreign and primitive pollution that must be resisted at all costs. His examples ranged widely from classical Greece and Rome to modern Asia. It was widely believed that the latter represented a source of pre-eminent debauchery in the contemporary world. Hargrave Jennings, a late Victorian phallic enthusiast, wrote that 'in no country on the face of the earth has phallic worship prevailed so extensively, and for so long a period, as India. Our Queen is said to rule there over at least a hundred millions of pure phallic worshippers'.⁷⁶ The evidence was there in stone. One lecturer fulminated in 1864 that 'there is not temptation to dwell at length at the sculpture of Hindustan... (They) usually consist of monstrous

combinations of human and brute forms, repulsive for their ugliness and outrageous defiance of rule and even possibility'.⁷⁷

Even in the final years of the Raj the same notions of sexual obsession were being repeated, as in the comments from 1940 that 'India can be truly called the land of the lingam and the yoni, for very little else is thought about by millions of hindus'.⁷⁸ According to the same author, 'temples in India are decorated with such indecencies – to European eyes – that it is impossible to take a white woman into them'.⁷⁹ For another writer of this period India was in the grip of 'sex hysteria'.⁸⁰ This had 'given India eighty-seven per cent of syphilis, a large portion of the world's insanity and social and economic conditions with which no government can cope'.⁸¹ Even Hindu ascetics were affected by sexual sickness. This same writer reports seeing a holy man begging in the streets of Bangalore. The man had the sign of the lingam on his forehead. He moved and 'disclosed his member, swollen to many times its normal size, and covered with insects and sores'.⁸² Clearly this is part of a racist characterisation of the orient as a place of decadence, that was sick and weighted down with dangerous sexual opportunity.⁸³ A post-war Indian attempt to put some perspective into the debate, whilst agreeing that there was a moral issue to be addressed, argued that such images were placed outside the temple to indicate the outer world, which the worshipper must transcend and that the most bestial images were near the base.⁸⁴ The most orgiastic friezes represented, for him, an attempt to purge the most intense desires.⁸⁵

I am not arguing that the British Museum's main collections were automatically seen as erotic by a public that rarely dared to reveal its true desires. The crucial point was that they could be viewed in a wide range of moral lights. It was perfectly possible for a book to be written the aim of which was to show how the collections demonstrated the absolute truth of Protestant Christianity.⁸⁶ But if we view pornography as being the product of a gaze which constructed images as pornographic in the context of their public consumption as erotic objects then *Idolomania* represents a stage in the origins of this category of material. The failure of its call to arms showed the general desire to limit the perceived erotic to an exceptional class rather than a generality of objects. The British Museum made available to the general public a range of objects which in previous centuries would have restricted to the private cabinets of noblemen and

connoisseurs. By such a public display of past and present heathen, or supposedly heathen-influenced cultures, the Museum could appear, not as a morally upright scientific institution, but as one which was propagating dangerously primitive ideas in a seductively melodramatic context. The potentially depraving effects of some antiquities were clear from the recognition that certain objects in the collection must be shut away from general view.

However, one may also compare the Museum's collections with those of London Zoo, where the dangerous animals, such as the snakes, were not simply freaks controlled and disciplined by science. The audience was also a problem. On 17 May 1869 a letter to the Times denounced the 'monster reptile maintained and thus feasted for the pleasure of the English'. The feeding of snakes with live animals was denounced as producing bestial responses in the audience which included 'nursemaids and children'.⁸⁷ The response of the scientists was to assure the public that this was simply natural behaviour, but the scenes in the zoo were felt by some to be depraving and corrupting because of their effect on the morals of the viewers, which was to encourage them in sadistic pleasure. It was in 1868 that R. V. Hicklin established the 'deprave and corrupt' test as the standard by which to determine illegal obscenity. The anonymous author perceived exactly this aspect of obscenity in many of the Museum's artefacts and in aspects of the contemporary Church of England.

Inman appears to have regarded, although not with opprobrium, Pugin as a sexual obsessive whose aim was to spread images of genitalia across the walls of Parliament and the nation. The result of the marginalisation of such obsessively sexualised, but unerotic readings has been to leave texts such as these generally undisturbed by serious scholars. On the one hand, we may not want to indulge in moral readings such as that of Nathaniel Hawthorne on galleries of renaissance pictures in Rome. In his *The Marble Faun* (1860) he derides 'Venuses' and the likes as 'impure pictures' because they were purely sensual and, since they were executed by the same artists who painted religious themes, they simply exposed the use of the same 'brazen trollop' as the model for both.⁸⁸ Nor would we, I think, wish to base our readings of decorative motifs on analyses such as this:

'The interior designer who wrought the mural designs of the Lincoln Hotel at Indianapolis must have been a very close student of ancient art, for in the general scheme he used for decoration, phallic or Priapic and yoni symbols... The fig-shaped vase, which is a female symbol, is reproduced all over the openings in the lobby, while the figure of a woman worshipping before the altar of Priapus is to be seen everywhere on the walls, in bas-relief. The entire decoration of the walls carries one back to the beginning of the myth-making age, and what was certainly foremost in the artist's mind was the reproduction of an ancient Priapic shrine.'⁸⁹

[plate 5]

There is a danger in dismissing the author of this statement along with Inman and 'Investigator Abhorrens' as being a crank. However, there are two key points to be made. Firstly, such 'phallic' readings have been made on a regular basis over the centuries and, as such, this provides a potential, if minority, field for inquiry in the history of the reception of art. But, secondly, and more importantly, the production of the category of 'pornography' as it was widely understood in the twentieth century can be seen as resulting from a sustained attempt to limit the range of objects which are publicly regarded as pertaining to the erotic, so divorcing bodily desire from political subversion. One radical challenge to this is to suggest that it is up to the individual to decide what turns them on and whether they wish to mingle politics and bodily desire in a way that challenges authority and the boundaries of the public and private spheres. The creators of Classical, Hindu and even Catholic antiquities can be understood as sometimes seeking to elicit erotic (but not pornographic) responses. We do not, like the author of *Idolomania*, need to see such objects as a threat to a fragile modernity, but can view them as providing possible means by which we may reconnect with diverse forms of sexual expression.⁹⁰ If fetishism is seen as a cultural construction then the erotic is in the eye of the viewer. We do not need to find sexual imperatives everywhere, but we should not pretend that such things only lurk in the locked cabinets in which the authorities keep them ostentatiously concealed.

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