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The Queer Pornography of the Classical Imagination: An invitation to view some etchings.

The fin de siècle is an important time in the history of sexuality. It represents a moment when protean sexual identities mingle, grapple, and renegotiate themselves. It is a time that is fertile with possibilities. It is within such an environment that I wish to locate a reading of classical motifs in some late 19th-century pornographic etchings that circulated widely in Britain and the United States.

This paper focuses on a collection of 20 pornographic images that circulated under the title 'Metamorphoses of Venus'. There is nothing 'straight' about any of these images. The accompanying plates depict rampant heterosexual orgies, bestiality, S&M sex, lesbians with strap-on dildoes, and paedophilia. All these scenes are set in surroundings that evoke classical antiquity. In their plurality of extreme pleasures, these images resist the tendency of pornography to create distinct and ever increasingly specialised taxonomies of pleasure. Straight/gay, vanilla/raunch are simultaneously satisfied and repulsed by these images. The classical gives licence to queer imagination.

In the economy of pornography, the classical world turns out to be a very strange place indeed. These images facilitate the destabilisation of a number of dominant discourses. They overthrow notions of classical restraint and purity. Moreover, they empower their viewers by providing them with a vocabulary to critique imperialising discourse.

They provide an alternate realm of pleasure in which to negotiate with the classical past. In the games of power predicated on who knows best the Greeks, the pornographic discourse threatens to overturn established hierarchies. Knowledge of sex becomes collocated with power. In conclusion, these images provide an ideal opportunity to revisit and explore the history of deviance and queer identity. They locate the important role that classicism played in the imaginary of sexual dissonance. They allow us a place to explore the tangled relationships set up between knowledge, power, history, science, sex and gender.