



# VICE *and the* VICTORIANS

MIKE HUGGINS

B L O O M S B U R Y

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# INTRODUCTION

This book is about vice, a word we all know, saturated with powerful meanings, though these are often debated. The complex and fluid relationships between vice, virtue and respectability were very significant features of the Victorian period. So there have been many studies of aspects of particular leisure activities then seen as vices, especially in relation to topics such as sex, drink, gambling or the temperance movement. There is, however, no one book which addresses this theme. Much of the recent scholarship in this area is fairly dense and specialized and often heavily theory-laden. Therefore this book has the modest aim of bringing together some of the evidence and insights from this research in a readable and accessible synthesis and it should appeal both to undergraduates taking courses in Victorian history or literature, and to a broader educated audience outside higher education.

In places too, it takes a cultural approach, exploring themes of vice's contested representations and meanings, the expressive language in which vices were described, and the assumptions and judgements about vice which shaped people's lives. It looks at vice in the context of everyday Victorian life and experience, across the classes and for both men and women. As well as contributing to our understanding of the struggles over vice's cultural meanings and significance, the book has much to say about other Victorian themes such as leisure, class, gender, sexuality, crime, print culture, policing, urban history, religion and consumption. Though this is not an economic study, Victorian vice had economic features: significant commercialization, forces of demand and supply, markets, consumers, investment, and technologies, and these are touched upon in passing. It created very significant employment within Victorian society: prostitutes, publicans, tipsters, barmaids, bookmakers and the like. Though heavily reliant on existing secondary studies, its illustrative examples draw on a wide variety of sources: newspapers, magazines, art, literature, sermons, memoirs, court reports, banners and pledges, to mention but a few.

Vice's meanings are not fixed. They regularly changed over time and across place. During the medieval period, Christians attacked certain 'capital vices', or 'cardinal sins', such as wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony. These powerful vices in turn created further sins. Vice shifted meaning as Britain became more secular. By the Victorian period, vice formed a key part of the imagination, common and widespread across its archival remains, something regularly thought about and discussed verbally



and in print, and under constant surveillance. Generally the term applied to those behaviours, actions and habits that by general consensus amongst the respectable were considered immoral, degrading or depraved. Others saw vices as merely something regarded as a fault, a negative character trait or unhealthy habit. For yet others, however, so-called vices were merely pleasurable leisure activities.

More recently, in twentieth-century British law enforcement, vice crimes have tended to refer specifically to prostitution and pornography, as in the case of London's famous Metropolitan Vice Squad, the Clubs and Vice Unit first formed in 1932. In America, usage has often referred more to gambling and alcohol, though the Los Angeles Police Department's Vice Division focused on gaming, bookmaking, pornography and prostitution. Vice crimes were specifically identified as part of the penal code in some countries.

We all disapprove of the public vices of others, but sometimes quite enjoy our own private ones, even if with at least a frisson of guilt. We also 'know' about the Victorians, though the Victorians are seen as either similar or different or both depending on the various lens through which they have been viewed, be that nostalgia, affinity, admiration or condescension. Historians have debated how far a dark and decadent Victorian life existed behind a supposed façade of respectability, and indeed if respectability was less powerful than supposed, or even merely a myth.

Certainly the Victorians, like modern society, were divided both about what vice was, and what should be done about it. People had to locate their behaviour, attitudes and language, and that of others, somewhere on a linguistic continuum: vice or virtue; villain or victim; impure or pure; dirty or clean; sin or salvation; the 'demon drink' or total temperance; sexual dalliance or continence; over-indulgence or abstinence; corruption or purity; disreputability or solid reputation; un-respectability or respectability. Those who virtuously campaigned against vice tried to categorize its repugnant behaviours, and those individuals and groups in Victorian society attracted to them, using such language. By so doing, they felt it would assist and enforce changes in attitudes and behaviour. Yet at the local level such definitions were debated, and laws variously enforced or actions tolerated by police and magistrates.

So this book sets out to examine, deconstruct and reconstitute some of the complexity of Victorian perceptions and representations of vice and explore the cultural contexts of vice-related activity; to look at the many ways the 'war' against vice was waged and evaluate the extent of their success; and to come to tentative conclusions about the relationship between respectability and vices in Victorian life.

## **The book's structure**

Chapter 1 introduces the topic in more detail and provides a context for later chapters. Its main emphasis is on unpacking the various meanings of

vice. It shows that debates over vice already stretched deep into the past. It looks at the inter-relationships of vice and virtue, and those relating to vice, social class and gender. It also provides a brief summary of the more significant fluctuations in British attitudes to vice over the nineteenth century.

Vice had a spatial dimension, a social and moral geography, dealt with in Chapter 2. People had to seek out its public manifestations, to enjoy it or to attempt to regulate it. Cruelty to animals, for example, was really only regulated in areas where public controls could be applied. Fox-hunting, hare-coursing or shooting of game birds on landowners' own property were ignored. Vice was mentally mapped by everyone from social *flâneurs* to social reformers. It was seen as particularly concentrated spatially in distinctive areas, 'immoral landscapes' where it was less easily mastered and controlled.<sup>1</sup> City streets, public houses, brothels, clubs, music halls, fairs and race meetings all came under attack from moral, religious and political groups which saw popular leisure as idleness, to be discouraged and censured especially if associated with vice.

The Victorians, like modern parents, saw opportunities for vice as more common at night. As night fell, lamplighters lit up the main streets and those who had finished work started making their way through the town. Street girls, hiding in the shadows, looked more attractive in the flickering and tremulous gaslight. As evening drew on they became more importunate. Shop girls out on the spree became more light-hearted and sought companionship. Young men roamed the urban streets looking for adventure.

Gambling clubs, public houses, theatres and music halls began to fill up for the evening, and there were more temptations to vice in places like the pleasure gardens. Young men and girls could find themselves caught up in these urban excitements, and their desire could grow as alcohol took more effect. Back streets and slums remained unlit, and there darkness concealed movement and could conceal crime. In London's parks, so-called 'park women' wandered along those paths most frequented after nightfall, consenting to any species of humiliation for the sake of acquiring a little money.

Vices could be of many sorts, yet in its cultural discourses, and the ideas, beliefs and meanings applied to it, clear clustering was discernable in the ways it was presented and interpreted in the media, Parliament, government commissions and elsewhere. Three central vices dominated discourse: the unholy trinity of drink, gambling and sex.

Chapter 3 explores the drinking of alcohol, its contexts and the issues arising from it. These were continual concerns across the Victorian age. Phrases associating drink and vice were extremely frequent, revealing the assumptions about alcohol's effects that many moral reformers shared. Various described, it was most often the 'vice of drunkenness', or even worse 'the vice of habitual drunkenness', of 'intemperance', 'dissipation', and 'intoxication'. It was almost always applied to alcohol, and the 'vice of opium smoking' or tobacco smoking was rarely attacked before the

1890s. Drunkenness had clear consequences. The report of the Commission on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Poor in 1840 saw the 'vice of intoxication' as a 'fearful vice' leading inexorably to pauperism and crime.<sup>2</sup> The latter was a further dominant theme, and chaplains of prisons, city magistrates and chiefs of police all regularly made explicit connections between the two. Drink was also linked to health, to alcoholism, brain and liver damage. There was even, thought the General Board of Health in 1850, an increased chance of falling victim to cholera, if one drank and had dissipated and intemperate habits.<sup>3</sup>

Yet at the same time, alcoholic drink was all-pervasive, associated with a wide variety of activities in public houses and beer shops, clubs and private houses, and linked closely to some forms of work as well as leisure. Brewers and publicans were powerful interest groups, prominent on local authorities, and able to exert strong parliamentary pressure.

Chapter 4 examines the complex and changing nature of betting and gaming in Victorian Britain. Both were associated with vice and profligacy, most especially when individuals' attachment became obsessive and addictive. Its consequences for families and for tempting theft from businesses were regularly emphasized. Gambling to some was exciting and thrilling, yet, because of its sinful associations, often also shameful. Like the drinking of alcohol, betting could be seen as a popular cultural phenomenon, certainly cross-class and sometimes attractive to both sexes. It was associated with a wide variety of sports, from horse- and dog-racing to football, cricket and rowing, as well as with other gaming activities such as card playing or coin tossing. Attitudes to it were shaped once again by class and gender as much as by the specific nature and extent of the gambling, and whether it was cash or credit. By the 1890s, as interest and support fell away from the temperance movement, moral reformers increased their active opposition to betting, which was portrayed as the 'last and greatest of social evils'.

The theme of Chapter 5 is the sets of discourses and behaviours collected around sexuality and vice. This was an area where the arguments of Victorian moralists were particularly characterized by power relationships, paradoxes, contradictions and inconsistencies. Sex was a topic regularly discussed by the medical profession, portrayed in art and sculpture, and covered in the columns of newspapers, but the thrust of much coverage was on prostitution, its defiling of moral purity and the consequent need to regulate (though not completely suppress) women's sexual experience outside marriage. The term vice was also applied to such topics as premarital sex, same-sex relationships, 'free love', women's sexuality, masturbation, pornography and prostitution. There were associated debates related to the changing basis of knowledge about sex, sexually transmitted diseases, birth control, legislation and censorship, sex education, the separation of pleasure from procreation, and the extent to which abstinence should be or was promoted by women and men.

Chapter 6 focuses on the formal, organized fight against vice. Vice had its corollary in the world of virtue and there were key contexts where virtue was

lent the strongest of support, and moral reformers waged war upon vice. Parents, employers and the community, societies and organizations, chapels, churches and the mechanics' institutes formed part of this world. Preachers, municipal leaders, industrialists and other well-connected guardians of urban respectability all attacked vice. Evangelical groups played a key role. Their faith in God offered a moral absolute and in attacks on vice, discipline, morality and spirituality overlapped. Their world was devoted to saving those who had sinned, and calling them to repentance and redemption. They sought to do this in ways that included argument, education, preaching, lobbying and the formation of a huge variety of organizations and groups.

Chapter 7 brings together notions of vice and respectability, attempting a reassessment of their relationship and the place of vice in Victorian life. For many historians, the ideological power of respectability, despite its complexities and nuances of interpretation, has been a key feature of the Victorian age. Indeed, in 1988 the historian F.M.L. Thompson summarized the period as 'the rise of respectable society'.<sup>4</sup> Yet the extent to which the same homilies against vice were repeated suggests that in the contest between what we can call 'disreputable' and respectable leisure the anti-vice attacks sometimes fell on stony ground. This chapter also explores the limitations of respectability's power. Certainly a counter-discourse supporting more traditional notions of pleasure and hedonism retained its appeal in particular cultural contexts. The social and moral signifiers of vice proved highly complex, while virtue and respectability were rarely identities to be totally assumed. For the middle classes, as for the working classes too, respectability often became a role to be practised and played, although sometimes in a more limited and situational sense, increasingly so in the later nineteenth century. It was context that determined behaviour, and decided whether particular actions were vices or pleasures.

The book ends with a short epilogue, exploring some of the reasons why the Victorian campaigns against vice were only partially successful, and the extent to which these campaigns were different from those in other recent periods of history and successfully carried into and across the twentieth century.

Many of the chapters begin with a short illustrative case study. These case studies provide a useful starting point for discussion and reflection for groups and individuals before reading further. A guide for further reading is also provided at the end of the book.

## Historiography

Vice has had multiple manifestations across the Victorian world. Rather surprisingly, its various dimensions, regulatory responses, popularity, social roles and cultural significance have never been the subject of detailed study. No monograph has brought its examples together to study its meanings,

locations, what exactly it incorporated and its relationship to respectable culture. British academic research has paid much more attention to social and moral reform, to Victorian attempts to curtail vice's evils and to 'respectability'.<sup>5</sup> So the specific historiography of vice is, at present, fairly limited, though so much secondary material touches on it in part that only a few key works can be mentioned here.

In recent years, what might be termed the 'low life' of Victorian Britain has attracted some attention, and two studies of vice in London have addressed the Victorian period as part of a longer study.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, London, especially in terms of themes like slumming, crime or sexual activity, has dominated the bulk of scholarly work.<sup>7</sup> Policing of street behaviour has also been of interest.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, focused studies of urban areas outside the capital are few, though there have been useful studies of Liverpool and Merthyr.<sup>9</sup> Locations associated with vice such as music halls, race-courses or fairs all have their own specialist literature, which for reasons of space cannot be mentioned here.

Studies of alcohol, temperance and its reform movements are dominated by Harrison's *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England, 1815–72* (1971). Indeed, its definitive scope, based on detailed analysis of archival sources and focus on organizational histories, leading individuals, pressure-group politics and legislation discouraged substantial further work. The bulk of work has been on the specific relationship between drink, addiction and social policy,<sup>10</sup> and the various Victorian campaigns against drink.<sup>11</sup> There have been several longitudinal studies of attitudes towards the drinking of alcohol or liquid refreshment more generally which include the period<sup>12</sup> and the Victorian public house has also attracted attention.<sup>13</sup> There are also some useful regional and local studies.<sup>14</sup>

Studies of gambling are fairly limited and are focused on working-class gambling, though its regulation has also been of sustained interest.<sup>15</sup> Social and economic monograph-length studies of its role are few.<sup>16</sup> Scholarship on horse-racing has included its role in sustaining betting, and there have also been some studies of bookmakers and tipsters.<sup>17</sup>

By contrast, a very substantial body of scholarship, from a wide variety of disciplines, has covered sexual vices. The world of Victorian sexual behaviour has been increasingly explored by feminist historians,<sup>18</sup> and there have been a significant number of works on aspects of prostitution, for example, covering urban areas across Britain.<sup>19</sup> Literary critics, sociologists, medical experts, psychologists and specialists in cultural studies have all contributed to the field.<sup>20</sup> There are also emerging interdisciplinary academic fields such as 'queer studies', which explores issues relating to sexual orientation and gender identity.<sup>21</sup> Earlier views that the Victorians were prevailingly ignorant, inhibited, prudish and hypocritical about sex have been increasingly challenged.<sup>22</sup> Most recent work implies a complex picture, while emphasizing that prudery's values always commanded wide assent especially amongst the respectable middle and working classes.<sup>23</sup>

Studies of drink, gambling and sexual vices often include much on social reformers and their strategies and tactics. For temperance, for example, books by A.E. Dingle, Brian Harrison and Lilian Shiman have much on the campaigns, as does Allan Harty's local study of Sunderland.<sup>24</sup> Respectability has been a theme running through many broader studies of the period, ever since the work of Geoffrey Best in the 1970s and F.M.L. Thompson in the 1980s.<sup>25</sup> A number of monographs have also used it as a major focus.<sup>26</sup>

## Finally

Writing this book has had many challenges. Spending five days reading Victorian pornography in the British Library can turn you off, not turn you on. And you have to sit in a special area to access these 'special books' so you are singled out! The voluminous temperance literature, though fascinating, was also serious, earnest and heavy going, usually lacking any humour to lighten it. Reading about vice, and all the Victorian societies dedicated to eradicating it, soon revealed that the word vice constantly changed its tone, its meanings, its audience and its focus, as it was manipulated in its various media-framed discourses. Such complexity will need in the future a more sophisticated, nuanced and in-depth study to do it justice, and avoid the dangers of over-simplification and over-generalization inevitable in an introductory work. The same effort needs to be devoted to unpacking the materials and articles devoted to vice, as has been spent on the Victorian reform movements, politics and religion. Nevertheless, this study provides a first foray into a fascinating area, one that has been really enjoyable to explore.



# CHAPTER ONE

## The Language of Vice

### Introduction

The darker side of Victorian society shocked and provoked people then as it does to this day. For the Victorians, vice was a major obsession, a key point of tension and an important cultural continuity. Vices were less legitimated social practices. Some enjoyed their excitements and pleasures but others felt repulsion and horror at the moral, social, financial and physical impact of vice, and its possibly addictive consequences. The various Victorian anti-vice movements were a highly significant feature of the period. They directly affected the lives of millions. They contributed significantly to the wider cultural landscape.

At the same time vice was, to use a medical term, endemic in British society. It had what historians call a *longue durée*. Its habits of behaviour, attitude and thought were deep-rooted. They were resistant to change. Drink, sexual misbehaviour and gambling were always targets, but every now and then their specific manifestations would be publicized by campaigning groups and the press, and there would be a reaction from police and Parliament, only for public interest to then slowly dissipate. The activities would then tacitly continue once more.

This makes the study of vice a key element of any understanding of Victorian society. Vice was surrounded by vociferous discourses, all demanding attention. It had multiple meanings, ambivalences and contradictions. It was mediated through variables such as social class, gender, age, town and country or specific pastimes. For the historian, the sources available, links with Victorian themes such as purity and respectability, and its difficult chronology all make vice well worth exploring, despite the perils of generalization.

The term 'Victorian' itself, still actively found in popular use, is similarly nuanced. It covers a long and changing transitional industrial, economic, socially and politically important period, whose cultures were dauntingly complex. It was an age of contradictions, variously dominated by Evangelical, utilitarian and imperialist trends. It has been represented in different ways



ever since 1901. It has come to refer to a specific set of attitudes whose influence has extended geographically well beyond the shores of Britain and its empire, and chronologically further by far than the nineteenth century. Sometimes it has been applied to specific 'respectable' characteristics, such as moral rectitude or to so-called Victorian values, but at others to prudishness and hypocrisy. The term 'Victorian' has also been applied, in terms of style, to novels, architecture, art and furniture.

Attitudes to vice varied culturally across Victorian Britain, with strongly Calvinist or Free Church-dominated areas most strong in their opposition. As foreign visitors noted, the British attitudes to vice contrasted with those found in Paris, Vienna or Rome, where modernity took different forms.<sup>1</sup> So an exploration of the Victorian ideas about vice can offer insights into the way issues such as pleasure and its consequences, reason and respectability or freedom and liberty were viewed across the United Kingdom. This was particularly significant in relation to topics such as strong drink, gambling and sex.

## ***Chapter outline***

This chapter provides a context for later chapters. It begins by showing how debates over vice already stretched deep into the past by 1837. During the Victorian period, the word 'vice' was exploited in many different topics and debates. It was found in different contexts, in speech and in various print media, but most commonly it was used by moral and social reformers to attack socially-disapproved-of leisure activities, especially those of the poor. The material such reformers produced has been heavily exploited by historians. Consequently, we know more about the reform movements than about those who took part in vice-related activity. The biases of such material distort attempts at analysis.

What Victorians defined as vice was related to the ways in which they defined virtue so these inter-relationships are next explored, before the chapter introduces the complex relationships between vice, social class and gender. These are themes that reoccur throughout the book. Finally, a succinct summary of the more significant fluctuations over the nineteenth century is attempted, in the context of changing practices, ideas and global influences.

## **Vice debates had a long history**

To understand where debates about vice fitted into the Victorian world perhaps we should begin in June 1837. The young queen, Victoria, quickly issued a Proclamation against Vice for the 'encouragement of piety and virtue' and the discouragement, suppression and punishing of 'vice,

profaneness, debauchery and immorality'. These, said her Proclamation, were 'highly displeasing to God' and 'a reproach' to religion and government. All 'persons of honour or in place of authority' were to provide good example by their own virtue and piety. This Proclamation became a fixture, regularly read out during her reign in churches, council chambers, courts and other national institutions.<sup>2</sup> Readings were highly solemn, ritualistic and symbolic acts.

To some, it reflected a judgement about earlier Georgian immorality, aristocratic debauchery, excess and dissolute behaviour. It appeared to embody a new morality, a deliberate attempt by the Queen, the head of the Church of England, to call people back to a life of piety and virtue. Others saw it as a response to concerns over Chartism, male suffrage demands, or fears of moral decay associated with urbanization and industrialization.

In reality, the roots of her Proclamation went deep into the past. Victoria followed a tradition long heavy with symbolic meaning and impact. It told the British that moral concerns were being addressed. Polite language had shifted away from earlier Puritan and biblical images of 'odious and loathsome sinnes' and 'temptations'. The focus had become more secular, using vices and evils to symbolize immoral behaviour. In 1660, King Charles II, privately a lover of more sinful pleasures, had issued a solemn public Proclamation against drinking, swearing and debauchery, perhaps to gain support from subjects with strong Puritan sympathies. One of the first Acts of Queen Anne's reign was a Proclamation against Vice and Debauchery, to suppress 'profaneness' and 'immoralities'. She imposed a strict court morality.

By the 1780s, reform of manners movements had begun to attack the perceived immorality of the upper and lower classes, and the more boisterous, bawdy, convivial and pleasure-seeking aspects of Georgian life. In 1787, George III issued another Proclamation Against Vice, and 'the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue', urging his subjects to suppress 'excessive drinking, blasphemy, profanation of the Lord's day, and other dissolute, immoral or disorderly practices' such as 'all public gaming houses'.

The founding of the Proclamation Society, dominated by fervently religious Evangelical groups, quickly followed. Its purpose was to 'enforce a stricter execution of the laws against vice and immorality' and 'to afford the Magistracy such assistance in the discharge of their duty as the nature of the case may require'. The Society issued legal proceedings against blasphemous and indecent publications, and aimed to suppress prostitution, swearing and abuse of the Sabbath. Its successor, the Society for the Suppression of Vice and the Encouragement of Religion, was founded in 1802. It wanted the complete suppression of Sabbath breaking, blasphemous and licentious publications and private theatricals, fairs, brothels, dram-shops, gaming houses and fortune-tellers. In its first two years, 623 of its 678 prosecutions were for Sabbath breaking. It paid little attention to the sex industry. The issue was perhaps too close to home for some of its upper-class financial

supporters, and such vices were important to London's economy and to its businessmen.

There was also a moral reaction against the scandals associated with the Prince of Wales, his mistresses and illegitimate offspring, and upper-class libertines, excessive drinkers and gamblers. Consumer demand for vice, however, was simultaneously fostered by the socially aspirant middling sort of people – manufacturers, merchants, wealthier tradesmen, lawyers, doctors, teachers and other professional men. They had surplus wealth to spend and free time to enjoy it, a demand driven most of all by the capital city, London, a popular venue for many forms of commercial leisure. It had sufficient forms of vice to satisfy everyone. London was a centre for prostitution, turning over perhaps about £20 million a year (about £1.5 billion today), from girls offering a 'three-penny upright' to high-class courtesans retained by rich aristocrats.<sup>3</sup>

Many people were strongly opposed to such behaviour, on the grounds of religion, morality or social conscience. During the Evangelical revival, flourishing from the 1790s to the 1840s, sin became particularly identified with specific activities like excessive drinking or fornication. The reformist High Church Oxford Movement, with its strong views on sin, had a similar major impact within Anglicanism in England in the 1830s.

The Evangelical revival was a complex phenomenon, taking different forms in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. It provided an anti-vice vocabulary, philosophy and moral force. Its power was limited, thanks to doctrinal and social class differences, but there was substantial co-operation amongst groups aiming at moral change and religious conversion. Social and political pressures brought such concerns to a peak. Strong objections to vices and related social abuses came from within the growing numbers of the middle classes, a small minority but growing in numbers. Even here, *active* middle-class reformers were always a small, highly vociferous, minority. Some aspired to ape upper-class life and mingle with them socially; others were keen to distance themselves from the *working* classes but they also wanted to demonstrate that they were socially and morally superior to the *upper* classes, their supposed wasteful luxury, endemic bribery and corruption, and the way government sinecures could be given to cronies and hangers on.

At a time when industrialization and urbanization were placing traditional certainties under threat, there was a whole litany of further beliefs about a decline in British behaviour and values. Society needed to govern its impulsive behaviour. People needed to exercise more self-control and restraint. Concerns often mirrored those reflected in the tabloid press in the twenty-first century. The expanding industrial towns were filled with the poor and vicious, threatening a breakdown of law and order and the social fabric. Some were viewed as the 'idle' poor, failing to find work, or doing nothing constructive with their free time. Others were 'wasting' what little wages they had on folly, extravagance, pleasure, intemperance and

distraction, or on dress and clothing. They demonstrated their irresponsibility in the streets rather than working hard to improve their poverty-stricken lives and taking care of their homes and families. Unitarians, for example, believed drink, moral destitution and parental neglect largely caused poverty, not economic or political structures.

The battle against vice was a battle to raise standards, to move towards a more civilized, orderly and polite society. Vice threatened social order, good government and respectable life. For reformers, society needed a stronger and healthier work ethic. Vice was often associated with commercial forms of leisure, such as public houses and brothels. Such enjoyments were viewed as an unacceptable use of the time of the Victorian workforce.

So when Victoria became queen in 1837, parts of British society welcomed her Proclamation. The word 'vice' provided a culturally-significant target to overthrow. Evangelical and Enlightenment thinking encouraged increasingly genteel behaviour, and moral and sexual earnestness amongst more respectable and responsible sections of the middle classes, artisans and working-class radicals. New sets of manners and codes surrounded personal behaviour. Social distancing and anti-vice persecutions had increased. Many Britons were becoming more respectable, sober, orderly and restrained, more censorious or hypocritical.<sup>4</sup> As Lord Melbourne, Victoria's first prime minister, gloomily observed to the young queen: 'Nobody is gay now; they are so religious.'

Yet in the very month in which Victoria's Proclamation was issued a new London periodical was produced. This was *The Town*, described by editor Renton Nicholson in its preface as 'one of the most racy, spicy and figging productions of literature ever produced'. 'Figging' was a word bearing a variety of usually vulgar meanings, from the insertion of a prepared piece of peeled ginger root into the anus to increase sexual or sadomasochistic pleasure (a possible meaning here), to thieves' slang for pocket picking. *The Town* was prurient and pornographic, indecorous and indecent. Its gossip, titillation and *double entendres* covered a bawdy London world of nocturnal pleasures featuring peers and policemen, prostitutes and pickpockets and the sporting 'Fancy'. Sold at two-pence an issue, and aimed at the urban artisan market at a time of considerable social fluidity, *The Town* found sufficient metropolitan readership for commercial success, despite the Proclamation against Vice.<sup>5</sup>

## The language of vice

So what did this word 'vice' in Victoria's Proclamation mean? It was a well-recognized theme, yet its definition was problematic. The Victorian middle classes spent much time in attempting to map, categorize and classify unacceptable 'vicious' behaviour and what was respectable and proper, especially in relation to what they saw as a declining aristocracy and

sometimes degenerate working class. So vice discourses exerted a powerful influence on Victorian culture. Yet the word 'vice' was elusive, difficult to pin down and subject to huge variation in its social categories, purposes, metaphors and meanings in different cultural contexts. Vice was like quicksilver. It constantly changed its nuances, its audience and its focus as it was manipulated. Vice was opaque, not transparent, with diverse readings, meanings and interpretations. We cannot access what people felt directly, but we *can* explore the meanings and issues most broadly and prominently circulated, and the ways they were framed. Vice elicited strong feelings, powerful emotions and extreme reactions.

Queen Victoria's Proclamation's specific examples of vice were largely linked to three dominant themes: sexual immorality, gambling and the drinking of alcohol. It contrasted vice with 'proper' Sunday behaviour and thus provided support for the Sunday Observance movement. 'Playing on the Lord's day at dice, cards or any game whatever, either in public or private houses' was blasphemous and to be discouraged. 'All public gaming houses and places, and lewd and other disorderly houses' were to be suppressed. The selling of 'wine, beer or other liquors or receiving or permitting guests' at taverns or other public houses during 'the time of divine service' was also mentioned. The Proclamation also linked vice explicitly with 'dissolute, immoral and disorderly conduct'. Such activities were clearly offences against good order and Christianity, hinting vaguely at sexual misbehaviour.

The deceptively simple questions about vice, its definition and its Victorian meanings are not easy to answer. One man's abhorrent licentious 'vices' could be another man's simple habitual 'pleasures'. Perception was all. What is very clear, immediately, is the sheer number and variety of voices and perspectives on vice throughout the Victorian age. There was *no* consensus. Texts addressing vice were written with different intentions, for different audiences and from almost unique perspectives. They were read and used differently, and with different meanings, according to context.<sup>6</sup> Equally, individuals adopted very different projects of moral regulation.

The term was regularly appropriated by moral and social reformers with an absolute confidence in moral absolutes, their own moral superiority and the immorality of those needing moral improvement. They believed that virtue and vice were knowable, instantly recognizable and universal. Certain actions were, by their very nature, totally abhorrent symbols of immorality, evil and degeneracy. Though drinking, 'fornication' outside marriage or gambling were dominant themes, constantly under attack, they stood alongside debatable 'minor vices' such as smoking tobacco or opium taking. Young girls were 'rescued from vice', but so were the pupils of Ragged Schools, those charity organizations which sought to provide free education to destitute, vagrant and very poor children. The major 'sins' like drinking, almost automatically linked people to further vices, beginning with the 'vice of improvidence', a word applied to those 'wasting' their money in non-rational forms of recreational pleasure. They could then be 'tainted with the

vice of pauperism', which an assistant Poor Law Commissioner discerned in 1841.<sup>7</sup> This in turn created another vice, appalling to the better-off: the vice of 'dependence on the rates'. So there were many forms of 'temptations to vice'. Governors of prisons and reformatory schools claimed crime and vice were closely associated. Young criminals were 'schooled in vice' before embarking on 'careers of vice'. The slums were full of 'dens of vice and infamy', as were drinking houses. A whole range of activities offered 'encouragement to vice'.

The world of vice spread its tentacles widely. The Victorians were 'tempted' by vice. They 'fell into' it. They acquired 'vicious' habits. At the annual general meeting of the National Temperance League in 1865 public houses were denounced as places where 'every sort of viciousness was engendered'. At a weekly gospel temperance meeting in Central Hall, Newcastle, in November 1891, a 'vicious exhibition' was described by Colonel W.L.B. Coulson. He had seen miners with their whippets held on leashes, carrying rabbits in a sack, which were then given twenty-five yards start before being chased by the dogs.<sup>8</sup> The event linked to the further vice of betting.

By the 1840s tobacco was being attacked as a wasteful and stupefying vice, a 'tobacco mania'. Thomas Cook, the entrepreneurial travel agent, tried to start an anti-smoking movement in the 1840s, and Thomas Reynolds founded the British Anti-Tobacco Society in 1853. Its *Anti-Tobacco Journal* remained strong from 1850 to 1870. Amongst doctors a 'Great tobacco controversy' raged in *The Lancet* in 1853, and there was continued opposition to smoking as 'the source of unnumbered evils' through the century.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1860s, slumming journalists published the first sensationalist and mythologized accounts of supposedly mysterious and evil opium dens in London's East End, especially in Shadwell, titillating and creating anxiety in equal measure about the 'vice of opium smoking'. They painted a picture of such dens as commercial organizations in which depraved people gathered together to enjoy opium communally. There were claims that 'distinguished members of the nobility and aristocracy of Great Britain, and, it is rumoured even that royalty has condescended to visit'.<sup>10</sup> In reality, they catered almost entirely for the small Chinese community but the stories journalists spawned, and their use by Englishmen seeking new experiences, were soon being picked up in popular fiction, such as Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). Increasingly, such fiction drew on racist sentiments and the broader late-Victorian sensationalization of the Orient, suggesting that the small Chinese community in the East End and their supposed addictions and dependency on opium were a social evil, a bad influence. Novelists exploited images of addiction and drug dependency, fear and desire, decadence and immorality, excessive inhuman pleasures and even a sinister Oriental underground.

There were many other potential vices. Preachers often targeted the 'inordinate vice of ambition'. According to the *Daily News* of 3 September

1851 the 'vice' of the yachting system was carrying too much canvas. To the *Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser* of 3 December 1857, the chief cause of the Indian Mutiny was the 'vice and cruelty of heathenism'. Even young children could fall into vice. Long after the late century education acts, in some areas of London, such as Tower Hamlets, the 'vice of truancy' was apparently ingrained.<sup>11</sup>

Churches and churchmen sometimes became the target of accusations couched in terms of vice. One witness to the Select Committee on the Sale of Liquors on Sunday in 1867–8, for example, attacked the churches for displaying their 'vice of hypocrisy'. At a select committee of the House of Lords in 1874 the Earl of Harrowby attacked the 'vice of simony in church'.<sup>12</sup> The involvement of churches in educational provision led to 'the vice of denominationalism' according to the Royal Commission enquiring into the working of the Elementary Education Acts in 1886. Even eating could not escape censure. Augustus John Harvey's pamphlet on *Intemperance in Food: A National Vice* (1876) prefigured more recent debates about obesity in attacking Britain's excessive appetites for food. To engineer and social commentator Thomas Wright (1839–1909), selfishness and love of money were vices.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the ubiquity of the word, the language of vice was a powerful leitmotif. It allowed reformers to create self-serving binary identities – 'refined' and 'rough' – within a polarized world of absolutes: virtue and vice, morality and immorality, good and evil, sanctity and sin, purity and impurity, Puritanism and pleasure, even while disputing the relative evil of particular vices.

For the Victorians, views, visions and representations of vice, sometimes luridly hysterical and sensationalist and embodying fears of moral panic, helped define social life. They illuminated Victorian society. They shed interpretative light on gender, class and identity. In the world of vice, social and moral categories overlapped. Their polarized moral struggles were represented in Victorian paintings and posters, literature and theatrical melodrama, sermons, pamphlets, tracts and investigations, newspaper court reports, Gothic romances, or magazines and periodicals. Vice was discussed in Parliament, reported on by Select Committees, or addressed in legislation. These generated and circulated particular notions of vice, often locating them as on the borders of social imagination to point up the 'true path' of virtue, morality and goodness. The respectable middle classes emphasized the character-building attitudes described by Samuel Smiles in his 1859 *Self-Help* book: the Protestant work ethic, thrifty saving, self-discipline and self-denial. They sought to transfer these to the new and expanding leisure market, and encourage the working classes to embark on moral and social improvement and more 'rational' recreations.

Notions of 'dangerous vice' were also linked to specific fears of an uneducated, vice-ridden and improvident proletariat. Campaigners were concerned about the potential costs to ratepayers, potential violence and



political instability, and by fears of degeneration. Earnest, pious churchmen, driven by their sense of sin and guilt, were afraid for the immortal souls of their charges. Industrialists stressed the impact of drink or gambling on production and profit. Such themes gripped Victorian social scientists such as Weber and Freud, and challenged and threatened society. The reformers stressed their moral mission and civic duty to address vicious behaviour, not the economic and structural forces that made it difficult for the poor to cope. Newspapers generally gave prominence to the vices of individuals, not the structural and systemic circumstances that sometimes forced them into vice.

For reformers, the battle against vice lent meaning and gave order to their daily lives. We can see how the dominant themes of vice were actually employed by looking at one reformer's life in more detail. Francis Close (1797–1882) was the son of a vicar, a former student at St John's College, Cambridge, a man who spent his life concerned about and fighting against 'the follies and vices of society'.<sup>14</sup> In his early youth he had experienced an evangelical conversion and soon became a leading radical, strongly opposed to National Society education, ritualism in the Church of England, Romanism and Popery, and a thorn in the side of race meetings, theatres and other places of 'idle play'. He believed firmly in total abstinence from drink. He was strong on Sabbath observance as a day of rest. Any breach was a 'national evil'. Sunday papers were 'for the most part of an evil, polluting, ungodly and licentious character', a 'pernicious literature'.<sup>15</sup> Ungodliness was the ultimate vice, and in 1842 he had Manchester atheist G.J. Holyoake imprisoned for libelling Christianity.

Close became perpetual curate of Cheltenham in 1826, and his popularity grew rapidly. He was a big man, with a commanding voice, and a forceful and effective preacher without notes. Opponents saw him as a bigot, but his strong views and forceful personality, general geniality and humour attracted large congregations and the support of leading local figures. He was adept at raising money and managing publicity, and was the prime mover behind the formation of the *Cheltenham Chronicle*. It publicized his views and attacked his enemies.

The local races provided an early target. According to Close, they were filled with licentiousness, prostitution and drunkenness, a 'torrent of vice'. Their consequences were 'deadly', evil and ruinous, and they were supported by the leading local aristocratic family, the Berkeleys, whom he condemned for their wild orgies and escapades.<sup>16</sup> Profligacy and pleasure were sinful. His sermons, tracts and lectures against Sabbath-breaking, theatres, drink and smoking were regularly printed. Cheltenham gained a reputation as one of the most sober and religious towns in Britain.

He became Dean of Carlisle in 1856. Arriving in Cumberland, he perceived Carlisle as a wicked city, full of temptation and a morally blind population. Working with his bishops he made the area more protestant and Low Church, and introduced Bible classes and adult night schools. Close



was a committed teetotaler, a leading figure in the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Church of England Temperance Society. He linked himself with the United Kingdom Alliance, which in the 1860s helped circulate his long sermons such as 'Teetotalism: A Christian's Duty or Why I Have Taken the Pledge'. Temperance became his major crusade. He travelled the country in support of the cause, telling Glasgow abstainers in 1861 that alcohol was 'mischievous, deleterious, injurious to your constitution, to your health, to your mental powers and your moral character'.<sup>17</sup> He wrote papers for the International Temperance and Prohibition Convention.

Close's antagonism to vices extended even to tobacco smoking, which he saw as far more than an impure habit. Excessive youthful smoking was a 'great national evil', with 'the most serious and distressing consequences'.<sup>18</sup> To combat the 'moral evils' of smoking he became President of the Anti-Tobacco Society in the 1850s.

Despite or because of his popularity with female members of his congregation, he was reluctant to discuss sexual sin. He was happily married, had a large family and, unusually for the time, was opposed to double standards. No breath of scandal ever touched him, even if his strong opinions made him enemies, sometimes from within the clergy. Even so, Close saw society as divided into the 'virtuous classes' and the 'dangerous classes', predominantly working-class, with many illegitimate children. Sin and crime were almost universal amongst them, and children were 'trained in vice' by their parents.

Although drink and gambling were seen as vices by reformers like Close, there was little evidence that their views were those of a majority, even when, as in the case of ready-money gambling, this was against the law. Reformers' views did not always go unchallenged. For example, on 4 August 1866 a letter to *The Wrexham Advertiser* wrote:

Sir,

Allow me . . . to call the attention of the authorities to the demoralising practices indulged in on the outskirts of this town on Sunday afternoons, by persons whose delight (apparently) is the desecration of the Sabbath. On Sunday last . . . we found the thoroughfare nearly blocked by a number of young men busily engaged in the unlawful game of *pitch and toss*. This is by no means the only instance that these degrading practices have been witnessed by us. Being under the impression that the police authorities are not aware of this fact I have taken the liberty of trespassing on your valuable space.

The complaint, from the anonymous 'B', could have been made directly to the police but, in general, pitch and toss, a game involving the toss of coins, was rarely prosecuted and the writer presumably hoped to get more action by giving it publicity. And clearly the offence, however 'demoralising' and 'degrading', was made greater by being on a Sunday even if it was in the

afternoon after divine service. It was 'young men' who blocked the writer's route instead of courteously letting him through, and there was often a generational aspect to reformers' complaints.

However, the writer's views met with resistance. The very next week a letter from 'XYZ' argued strongly against 'B's view, claiming that 'on the whole it is a very innocent amusement' and that 'XYZ' 'could not help regretting that [his] indignation is not vented on something more serious'.

### ***The media***

Such vice discussions and exchanges caused debate, distress and strong feeling. This forced the Victorian media into difficult positions. Victorian newspapers generated substantial coverage of vice, because they catered for readership demands, but were very careful in their presentation. They tried to sound disapproving even when editors' personal lives were disreputable. Many editorials were written in a manner that conveyed the assumption that all a paper's readers were reticent, reserved and restrained. They avoided being explicit. Wherever their main readership was perceived as the more literate, better-educated and respectable, the voices of articulate moral reformers dominated their columns, raising their voices in opposition to vice and demanding action. For editors, a mixture of delicacy, squeamishness, modesty, dignity, concerns about possible offence to listeners or readers, or of putting ideas into people's heads, and a consciousness of possible complaints if they went into too much detail all meant that some vices were *not* described. Indeed, they might not even be named. Instead, words such as 'unspeakable' or 'unnameable' mixed hints of horror, shame and disgust.

Reticence accompanied tacit understandings of what could or could not be voiced. Much comment was carefully coded, brief and guarded. The knowing reader would comprehend exactly what was being discussed by reading between or beyond the lines. The unknowing, naïve or 'too delicate' would be sheltered from unseemly contamination.

As the crusading editor of the *Liverpool Mercury* recognized in 1856, informing readers about the moral evils that reigned unchecked in their streets was an 'arduous and repulsive task'. Reporting gave publicity to 'much we would gladly have withheld from the eyes of our readers'. But he felt that such 'morally repulsive facts' helped put 'imperilled innocence on its guard'. They deterred offenders and encouraged better administration of justice. In short, 'informed and awakened opinion' would 'purify and regenerate Liverpool life'.<sup>19</sup> The dilemma for 'decent' reformers was that publicizing vice might imply that it was appealing and raise awareness of how to purchase vicious pleasures.

Like vice, the related term 'impurity' covered a range of actions, always sinful yet often tempting. So impurity too was rarely defined in any detail. *Tempted London's* 1882 warning to young men about impurity, seen as

doing 'more than any other sin to injure and destroy them', indicated the difficulty reformers faced. It left much 'under the seal of silence', and accepted the need to be guarded and reserved. The book's examples of impurity included 'obscene conversation', 'loose reading', 'the influence of theatres, music halls, etc.', and 'drink'. Two further topics, masturbation and sex with young women, were described in very brief and guarded terms, since, the writer believed (or hoped) that 'the interpretation will not be found difficult by those it is meant to reach'. Masturbation was the 'secret vice', a 'ruinous practice', with apparently awful results. Pre-marital sex was 'the social evil', even more vaguely addressed, taking almost two pages to warn of 'glib male friends' before women were actually mentioned, followed by a page showing how young women might 'pick up' foolish youths, and then a short paragraph discussing women 'plying a hideous trade'. Its advice to young men was to 'never . . . enter a doubtful house', 'leave drink alone', 'cultivate good company' and learn 'the awful results of immorality', such as disease, ill health and accelerated death.<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, when a staunch supporter of the Social Purity Alliance, Rev. E. Lyttelton, headmaster first of Haileybury and later of Eton, wrote his *Causes and Prevention of Immorality in Schools* in 1887, it was a very carefully guarded and phrased attempt to provide advice to young boys. 'Of all the sins to which a boy is tempted at school', he announced, 'the most prevalent, the most alluring and the most enduring and deadly . . . is impurity', caused by 'dirty talk' and 'curiosity'. His lack of clarity about what exactly 'impurity' entailed probably stimulated curiosity rather than curtailed it.

Advice to women was even more guarded, since male double standards suggested it was a measure of a woman's personal virtue to lack knowledge (or pretend ignorance) of the wider world. Many men expected their wives and daughters to know nothing of vices such as prostitution, and by no means to get involved in helping to remedy them. But some female social reformers attempted this, a point made forcibly in one letter, apparently from a woman, to *The Times* in 1857:

We have been told that, in virtuous women, it is a breach of feminine delicacy even to suppose the existence of certain outcasts of our own sex, or of certain exemptions in regard to vicious indulgence assumed by yours; in short, that, as women of virtue, we have nothing to do with such questions, though we know, too well, how deeply they affect us, how terribly near they approach us personally, how the far-reaching contagion of such covert vice involves in some form or other the peace of our 'virtuous' homes, the fidelity of our husbands, the health and morality of our sons, the innocence of our daughters. We have been allowed, indeed, to patronize penitentiaries, to read chapters of the Bible, and distribute lugubrious tracts to wretched, sullen, disordered victims; but, meantime, we are told – I have myself been told, half pityingly, half sneeringly – that for every one unhappy creature we rescue out of the streets two will be at

once supplied to fill up the vacancy; that this 'state of things' is a necessary social evil; and that we virtuous women had better not meddle with it, lest worse befall us.<sup>21</sup>

In newspaper reportage, the presence of prostitutes at events that middle-class husbands might attend was usually passed over in silence to avoid any potential domestic disharmony, or tactfully hinted at for those who could interpret the allusion. A reporter at one Manchester race meeting in 1867, describing the scene to his readers, simply asked rhetorically: 'Shall we describe to you the numerous ladies in numerous barouches? . . . They do not belong to the most respectable families in Manchester'.<sup>22</sup> The following year *The Star* equally carefully described prostitutes as 'that unhappy class for which we have no name one does not shrink from writing'.<sup>23</sup>

But if some newspaper editors were careful not to offend their respectable readers, there were also popular papers whose editors were well aware that providing their readers with a diet of material related to vice would encourage sales. As the reading public expanded, the popular Sunday press, such as *Reynolds's News* or *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, increasingly filled their columns with sensationalist 'human interest' stories, personalizing good and evil, vice and virtue. They drew heavily on police court reports, using criminality, and themes such as sex and drunkenness. This displayed for the moral instruction, delectation and imaginary worlds of readers the comfortably-distant immorality and evil of others. The popularity of the penny weekly, *Illustrated Police News*, founded in 1864, hypocritical and sensationalist, full of descriptions of the sexual misconduct, criminality and vice it campaigned against, likewise demonstrated public appetite for its material.

By the 1880s, newspapers had realized that signalling such reports with a caveat against reading them would actually simply draw more readers in. The *Pall Mall Gazette* of 4 July 1885, for example, began its sensational report with 'A frank warning'.

We have no desire to inflict upon unwilling eyes the ghastly story of the criminal developments of modern vice. Therefore we say quite frankly to-day that all those who are squeamish, and all those who are prudish, and all those who prefer to live in a fool's paradise of imaginary innocence and purity, selfishly oblivious to the horrible realities which torment those whose lives are passed in the London Inferno, will do well not to read the Pall Mall Gazette of Monday and the three following days. The story of an actual pilgrimage into a real hell is not pleasant reading, and is not meant to be. It is, however, an authentic record of unimpeachable facts.

There were even more unrespectable newspapers throughout the Victorian age that used delicacy as an ironic critique of respectability. *Town Talk*,