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Para-:

1. In the sense of “almost” or “beside” denoting a secondary, or modified form
2. In the counter sense of being “against” denoting a form of protection from or prevention of¹

1. Bailey, Peter. 'Parosexuality and Glamour: The Victorian Barmaid as Cultural Prototype,'
in K.M. Philips and B. Reay, eds, *Sexualities in History: A Reader*, New York, 2002, p.222

A Working of Contemporary Parasexuality

Jennifer Katherine Shields

We owe much of our contemporary understanding of sexuality to the Victorian era. During this time a phallogentric system of sexual energy was prioritised, and was to be either totally limited or fully released. Whilst retrospective attention has been focused on the dichotomy of the sexually repressive or sexually explicit nature of the era, there is something to be found in the socially moderated in-between. Parasexuality is a term used by historian Peter Bailey to describe these mechanisms, which allowed for the expression of sexual energy in a channelled and safe manner, in contexts where the usual social rules did not apply.

The concept of parasexuality, while limited by its identification as a historical concept, restrained by the context of Victorian England, could describe similar contemporary experiences and phenomena.

The Victorian era was also when the bar – as a structure – was introduced to pubs, and behind the bar we see the mechanisms of parasexuality become explicit. In a society where women's behaviour was regulated within strict social ideals, the bar created a new zone of conditional power

for the barmaid. Behind the bar, she was in control; behind the bar, she could be as vulgar, upfront, and flirtatious as she liked, with no impact on her moral standing outside of that context.

This zone of conditional power relies on glamour: a fictitious charm, often based on illusion created by distance, which transforms or glorifies a person or thing. The Victorian pubs specialised in this kind of fiction. The bar was covered in polished metal, behind it stood an array of polished glass bottles, and behind that was a mirror reflecting the polish once more. To operate in this space, the barmaid's autonomy comes at the cost of maintaining glamour, considering the physical distance the bar created alongside the social distance she would maintain from her patrons. Parasexuality may provide opportunity to escape the phallogentric sexuality of Victorian England, but it was also complicit in the projection of male hegemony and the objectification of women.

A contemporary working of the parasexuality model could be useful in considering the realm of diverse sexual identities, dominant hegemonies and heteronormativity.

“[Parasexuality] started from a point of acknowledgement and accommodation rather than denial and punishment.”²

Contemporary workings of parasexuality describe specific kinds of relationships between majority groups and marginalised groups or people; relationships where structural power imbalances are at work. As in typical Victorian parasexuality, contemporary parasexuality seems to involve the “gifting” of conditional power to the marginalised group or person. However, it also involves the utter denial and erasure of that group or person’s minority identification. Contemporary parasexuality stems more often from a place of denial and punishment on the part of the majority party rather than the Victorian place of acknowledgement and accommodation.

In terms of sexuality, contemporary parasexuality is in opposition to dominant hegemonic heteronormativity and “conventional sex”.³ As such, contemporary parasexuality allows for sex that does not require

heterosexuality, penetration, or even “completion”.

Parasexuality enables a kind of sex which is definitely not uncommon, but is rarely portrayed in the media we consume, usually unthought of in mainstream pornography and the minds of the general public.

It should be of no surprise then that contemporary parasexuality is especially pertinent to queer communities; those for whom “conventional” penetrative sex is not the default or even necessarily possible or desirable. Those whose bodies may find it difficult to achieve orgasm, those who do not experience sexual attraction or desire in the same way as the allosexual⁴ majority.

Parasexuality can be examined outside of Victorian England in online asexual and related communities. A significant portion of the asexual-spectrum community, contrary to popular belief, experience a form of sexual

2. Ibid, p.223

3. An overarching construct dominant in society that presumes heterosexuality, and disciplines and Others those who deviate. Conventional sex under heteronormativity assumes a man with a penis, a woman with a vagina, penetration (specifically him into her), and culminates in orgasm – primarily his. Dominant hegemonic heterosexuality stems from the Victorian era, which considered sexuality to be entirely phallogentric, masculine sexuality to be uncontrollable and forceful, and feminine sexuality to be negating and resisting.

4. Those who experience sexual attraction to others, ie. not asexual.

feeling that is not necessarily desire or attraction to others, and in fact may only exist due to the safety that the concept of parasexuality – conscious or not – brings. Many ace-spectrum⁵ youth read explicit fanfiction involving various kink-related sexual acts while having little to no desire to partake in these acts themselves. Alternatively and alongside this, many express an interest in kink but hold no desire for – or are even unsettled by – the notion of conventional sex.

Online interactions have become the contemporary counterpart to the Victorian bar; via social media, especially mediums such as twitter where the emphasis is not on connections with people you already know, you may be as flirtatious and as sexual as you like, while the distance protects you from the potential of any physical contact. Just like the Victorian barmaid, online you are able to construct an identity that is

glamorous, positive and holds no sign of personal problems. At the same time, online interactions give the other party the ability to interpret what you say and do freely – they are only able to see you in one context and vice versa, and both parties are able to withdraw at will; glamour is preserved.

The flip side of contemporary parasexuality is the ability for the majority group to co-opt aspects from minority identities without recognition, in the process denying and erasing these identities. This is visible in the absolute extremes of the “no homo” culture amongst otherwise “straight” men. It is most obvious on the craigslist “casual encounters” section, in which many men who self-identify as straight post listings looking for other men to “encounter.” Often, these are mitigated by “curiosity” – a cursory look in the listings shows one describing himself as:

5. “Ace” is a colloquialism for “asexual” used within the community. The spectrum refers to the wide variety of identities that fall under this term.

“good looking very straight but curious to play with the right bloke.”
Notably, he also specifies: *“you must be similar age, masculine. Straight guys even better.”*

While this phenomenon certainly stems from institutionalised and internalised homophobia, it allows men to self-identify as straight, even when their actions may negate that label. Parosexuality allows them to channel parts of their sexuality they would prefer to repress in a safe fashion, not necessarily in physical terms, but in terms of the safety of their own continued identity as “straight”. While these men are not directly interacting with a minority group, they are adopting conditions of that group membership, and the power relations that are part of contemporary parosexuality enter play. While no gay men are explicitly gifted conditional power, this function of channelling sexuality into safe expression is stemming from a place of denial and erasure of a minority group.

Parosexuality has evolved from a concept which gave a minority group a space of conditional power despite simultaneously objectifying and exploiting them, to a concept which, in addition to this, gives the majority group the ability to experience and appropriate minority identities and experiences without taking those identities and experiences on themselves. While some examples of contemporary parosexuality - such as the gifting of conditional power to minority-identified artists in a gallery situation - stems from acknowledgement and recognition, the overwhelming use of this concept has been for repression. There is no recognition as a whole, only denial and erasure. Fortunately contemporary parosexuality holds inherent potential for change and recognition; it is now a matter of questioning *how*.

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