Sexuality, Press, and Power:  
“Crim. Con.” in the English Regency

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Abstract  
This article explores the political implications of adultery in the English Regency by investigating the radical appropriation of “crim. con.” (“criminal conversation”) literature. Section One looks at the Queen Caroline Affair, in which the private conduct of the royal couple was subject to public scrutiny and the king’s sexual pursuit impinged on his qualification as a monarch. Section Two outlines the literary conventions and legal precedents of crim. con. trials and illuminates the uneasy juxtaposition of erotic titillation and prescriptive moralization in crim. con. anthology. Section Three examines William Benbow’s Rambler’s Magazine in comparison with earlier crim. con. literature to shed light on the rhetorical force of seemingly bland and formulaic legal proceedings in unpacking contemporary assumptions about gender and social hierarchy. While the Queen Caroline Affair and crim. con. literature draw attention to the increasingly domesticated ideal of sexuality, these narratives of extramarital affairs also testify to the prevalent cases of adultery across different social strata. With their strategic appropriation of crim. con. literature, Benbow and his fellow radicals expose high-society hypocrisy and call for parliamentary reform to match all-encompassing articulation of sexuality with political participation.

Keywords  
adultery, criminal conversation, sexuality, radicalism, William Benbow, English Regency
“All time is lost, / That is not spent in love.” A quote from Tasso, the motto of William Benbow’s *Rambler’s Magazine* (1822-25) is deceptively plain and familiar-sounding. Benbow’s publication seems to be yet another imitation of such fashionable predecessors as *The Rambler’s Magazine*; or, *Annals of Gallantry* (1783-90), *New Annals of Gallantry* (1787), *The Bon Ton Magazine* (1791-96), or *The Annals of Gallantry; or, The Conjugal Monitor* (1814). Benbow’s magazine espoused the doctrine of love, for “all is founded on the secret spring of sexual-desire, which nature has implanted in us . . . as creatures of necessity” (1: 2; emphasis in original). For in-the-know readers in the 1820s Benbow’s magazine would certainly have signified more than a concern with erotic pleasuries, since Benbow, a former associate of William Cobbett and a radical publisher, had recently lost a significant amount of his time serving a sentence for seditious libel. Indeed, the shoemaker publisher Benbow and his gentleman collaborator George Cannon declared in the Preface that they not only disdained from flattering “hypocrites and scoundrels” but their narratives were above those “Domestic” or “Moral and Religious Tales” which were mere “pomp of pageantry” (1: iii-iv). In defiance of the Vice Society and their “gang of reverend hypocrites” (1: iii), flaunting an engraving of a bust of Byron as the first volume’s frontispiece and quoting from Thomas Moore, both of them then very famous for their love poems and liberal politics, Benbow’s magazine tactically highlighted its political agenda by situating itself in the mixed heritage of libertinism and enlightened natural philosophy against the hypocrites of the court, the church, and the ministry.

This article explores the intersection of politics and sexuality during the reign of George IV at the height of radical agitation for parliamentary reform. Since the publication of Iain McCalman’s *Radical Underworld* in 1988, critical reappraisal of the “underworld culture” of bawdy squibs and obscene prints in shaping the political landscape of Georgian England has been underway. McCalman’s observation that pirated editions of Shelley’s *Queen Mab* and Byron’s *Don Juan* sold alongside scurrilous cartoons participated in the enterprise of challenging the establishment complicates scholarship of an aestheticized Romanticism (211). With their analysis of irreverent prints and caricatures, Ben Wilson’s *Laughter of Triumph* and Vic Gatrell’s *City of Laughter* highlight the vital role graphic satire played in radical publication in exposing and negotiating the underpinnings of such

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1 The Society for the Suppression of Vice was established in 1802 in London. For more on its history and agenda, see Roberts. The Society was usually referred to as “the Vice Society” in radical publication, playing with the idea that the Society was in fact a manufactory of vice itself.

2 See, for instance, Moore’s *Intercepted Letters* (1813) and *Lalla Rookh* (1817).
cherished values as politeness and the freedom of expression. However, while Peter Wagner’s essay on trial reports of adultery and rape as “a genre of eighteenth-century erotica” has emphasized the cultural significance of this particular branch of writing, the radical way in which this popular genre was appropriated by reformers has remained understudied in current scholarship on sexual politics in the reform movement. Adam Komisaruk’s article on “crim. con.” in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria* and Ann Clark’s monograph on the political ramifications of high-society sexual scandals are among the few which address the value-ridden discourses of formal legal proceedings and mundane sexual gossips. While Gillian Russell’s article discusses the theatricality and sentimentalism of Thomas Erskine’s speech in trials of adultery during the 1790s, the multivalent adaptations of “crim. con.” literature outside the courtroom and its wider cultural ramifications in the succeeding decades stand in need of further explication.

Taking the highly-publicized event of the Queen Caroline Affair in 1820 as a starting point, this article maintains that, in addition to their appetite for sensationalism, common readers’ interest in wide-ranging trial narratives of sexual deviance underlies their fascination with the negotiation of power relations. Public enquiries into the king’s and queen’s private conduct revise the conventional theory of the king’s two bodies and fuel ongoing debates on the correspondence between appearance and reality. The proliferation of scurrilous prints depicting “crim. con.” cases among celebrities and in less distinguished circles of the society testifies to the versatility of these printed materials which articulate the ambiguity concerning sexual license and public integrity. The career of Benbow and like-minded radicals who were prosecuted for publishing seditious as well as obscene prints demonstrates the way that political representation and licentious free expression became conjoined in this period. Investigating the rhetoric of love and freedom in radical publications elucidates the politicization of sexuality and the sexualization of politics during the reign of “the Prince of Pleasure.” By examining the legal articulation and radical reinterpretation of body politics, this study contributes to current scholarship on the sexual underworld of radical movement at the pivotal time leading to the passage of the Reform Act in 1832.

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3 Criminal conversation (crim. con.) was the eighteenth-century common-law term for adultery.
4 The barrister was also renowned for his defense of radicals Thomas Hardy and Horne Tooke in their treason trials in the 1790s.
5 “The Prince of Pleasure” was an epithet by which George IV was commonly known. See David.
The Queen Caroline Affair and the King’s Two Bodies

The measures undertaken by George IV to divorce his consort was the cause célèbre in nineteenth-century Britain. At that time, radicals suffered from the setbacks of tightening government control over radical publication and mobilization following the passage of the Six Acts after Peterloo Massacre in 1819 (Wilson 305-07). Consequently, great caution had to be exercised in publishing criticism of the government. In 1820 the old king died and George seized the opportunity to get rid of his wife while Caroline sped home from her self-imposed exile in Europe in the attempt to claim her rightful place as the Queen at George’s Coronation. George’s decision to try his wife for marital misconduct offered radicals a perfect opportunity to critique royal hypocrisy. At the height of the controversy, from June 1820 to January 1821, more caricatures were produced than would be produced in total over the course of the following five years (Hunt, “Morality” 697); the Crown spent hundreds of pounds in vain to bribe Benbow, Lewis Marks, Thomas Dolby, John Fairburn, and their associates into silence (Gatrell 534-35). Before acceding to the throne, George had been notorious for his affairs with married women, the actress Mary Robinson “Perdita” being his first mistress who came to light. The Prince’s private marriage to Maria Fitzherbert in 1785, a Roman Catholic widow six years his senior, brought about a crisis of succession. The recalcitrant heir reluctantly broke up this engagement to enter into the marriage with his cousin Caroline of Brunswick in 1795 as a last resort to get his father pay off his enormous debts (Plumb 138-39, 168-70). Although Caroline gave birth to Princess Charlotte (who died prematurely in 1817), the Prince regarded his wife with distaste (Plumb 170); thus upon the death of his father, he promptly proceeded to divorce her.

Though Caroline was not the most refined of princesses and the Prince’s marriage was forced upon him by his father, George’s fiscal opportunism and moral dubiousness incurred scathing ridicule from his subjects. Furthermore, even though the Prince’s perpetual involvement in sexual liaisons was nothing new, his resolve to divorce his consort breached the proper confines of private pleasure and therefore rendered him accountable to the public. Not only did William Hone’s illustrated squib “The Queen’s Matrimonial Ladder” (1820) outsell his own vastly popular “The Political House that Jack Built” (1819) (Wilson 324), but the swarms of prints picturing George as a willful Henry VIII, a would-be cuckold, an instigator of knavish ministers, an incontinent fool, and an exasperated despot were so stinging that the king confined himself to Winsor or his yacht in Brighton during the
controversy to escape censure from the metropolis. After much deliberation, the House of Lords eventually turned out a slim majority of nine supporting the Bill of Pains and Penalties which would effectively dissolve the royal marriage tie and deprive Caroline of her privileges as the Queen. However, Lord Liverpool decided to drop the Bill so as not to provoke further popular uproar (Baker 175; Hunt, Defining 286; Fulford 523-24). The fact that George had to swallow his pride in accepting this frustrating outcome meant that the English constitution had undergone yet another of its radical transformations since the time of Henry VIII. The execution of Charles I, the restoration of Charles II, subsequent disputes over James II’s right to the English throne epitomized in the Glorious Revolution, and the installation of the House of Hanover opened up discussions on a king’s accountability and his right to govern.

Ernst H. Kantorowicz’s seminal work on the theory of the “King’s Two Bodies” explicates the dual capacity of the king as a mortal individual embodying the royal dignity of the Crown. Individual kings are responsible for the continuance of the dynasty and the functioning of the public offices. While a king is elevated as the “head” of the nation, the body politic works like a corporation with the head and its members of the Parliament and civil servants “conjoined and knit together” (Kantorowicz 382). Therefore, the Crown matters to all and is not the private property of the king. The king’s personal deeds have wider implications for his subjects and his kingdom (Kantorowicz 372, 384). Although the distinction of the body natural and the body politic helped the astute Queen Elizabeth I to emphasize the non-corporeal nature of a monarch and consolidate her regal authority (Schulte 3), this distinction also allowed the disaffected subjects of Charles I to justify their act of saving the kingdom from the erring king (Weil 91). By the time of the Regency, the fruit of the Glorious Revolution—the Bill of Rights, which ensured the freedom of speech in Parliament, the right of petitioning the monarch, and the Parliament’s consent to any new taxation—was generally taken to be the cornerstone of the British constitution and British liberty. Monarchy was a human institution, and the Whigs took pride in the Parliament’s role of monitoring the government. All seemed well when peace and prosperity lasted, but who should be held responsible for national distress and hardship? War with France, post-war

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6 See, for instance, Lewis Marks’s “King Henry VIII. Act II Scene IV” (Aug. 1820), “A Struggle for the Horns!” (Sept. 1820), “Justice Miraculously Delivered from the Voracious Jaws of her Crying Enemy” (Nov. 1820); John Marshall’s “Outside View of the Crown Tap” (Sept. 1820); and the anonymous “The Bill Thrown Out” (Nov. 1820). For a discussion of these materials, see Baker 170-77. See also Gatrell 531 for George in the midst of the controversy.
demobilization, poor harvests, and emerging problems of early industrialization contributed to widespread unrest at the turn of the nineteenth century. To what extent were lowly artisans and those politically disenfranchised middle classes justified in churning out and funding invectives against the royal household?

Despite the rage of the reform movement during the post-1815 era, only Richard Carlile and his supporters followed in the footsteps of Thomas Paine to advocate republicanism (Carretta 154). Prominent reformers such as Sir Frances Burdett, Major John Cartwright, and William Cobbett upheld the particular form of the British constitution which functioned through the monarchy checked by the two Houses of Parliament (Epstein 4-6). The present system required not so much overhaul but the pruning of rotten boroughs and the widening of political participation. As the notion of the king’s never-erring body politic retained its hold, one satirical strategy was to target the ministers as the real villains and the king as their dupe. While the disillusioned Thomas Jonathan Wooler called upon his readers to exercise their right of petition not only by the mere words but also by “carr[ying] arms” (40), alluding to the historical precedent of the English Civil War, he nevertheless placed the blame on the few “sleek-headed” (145) ministers who presumed to cheat the monarch and the people by pretending that “all was well, because they happened to be well” (148). Kingship was largely above censure, but the king’s mortal body could have been manipulated by rapacious politicians or swayed by personal obstinacy and blindness (Carretta 253, 267). Toward the end of the eighteenth century, criticism of contemporary politics came to shift attention from the monarch’s political prowess in public transactions to his private pursuits. As the press shifted the blame for the king’s errors in his public role onto his ministers as a way to preserve the impeachable character of the king as King, so the king’s personal misconduct and his body natural took on a discursive primacy, becoming the focal point for both gossip and speculation.

Popular views of the king’s person had seen significant changes during the long reign of George III. In the 1780s before lapsing into the “madness” of porphyria, George III seemed to be experimenting with a new character of ordinariness. Flaunting his private qualification as a lover of farming and exhibiting himself without pomp to curious crowds, he attempted to gain popularity with down-to-earth pettiness. In dire contrast to his prodigal son, “Farmer George” perverted regal propriety by substituting public worth with private virtue (Barrell 105-44). With George III’s publicization of his private character and George IV’s own numerous sexual exploits which easily attracted publicity, the king’s personal acts came to be politicized and his private character impinged on his public role as a
The frailty of George III’s insane body and George IV’s bloated figure drew attention to the king’s mortal body as a site of political competence. 7 While the “science” of physiognomy met with enthusiasm as well as scepticism, the popularity of Johann Caspar Lavater’s Physiognomische Fragmente, or Essay on Physiognomy (1789-98) since its publication testified to the longing for the correspondence between bodily appearance and personal quality, and for outward signs as a reliable index of inward virtue (McMaster 52-53). The art of caricature introduced to Britain in the mid-eighteenth century by well-to-do amateurs from their Grand Tour was initially confined to the mocking of private eccentricities, as the emblematic tradition of pictorial satire was considered more appropriate for critiquing public affairs of universal valence (Rauser 18). However, toward the end of the century, the disillusionment with those dull and pallid generalized types and the renewed interest in physiognomy saw the rise of caricature in political satire as a more effective means of exposing hypocrisy (Rauser 91-93). Even if an uninitiated layman was no expert in physiognomy as the self-proclaimed Lavater, caricaturists rendered the public a good service of revealing their targets’ “truthful” inner worth by, paradoxically, exaggerating or deforming bodily features in their art (Rauser 1). The need of caricature to exaggerate bodily features to illuminate character showed that the body-mind correspondence was more evasive than people had wished for. As the ideas about the positive link between race and physical appearance of skin color and the shape of the skull were gaining ground toward the end of the eighteenth century (Wahrman 296-97), the corporeal body became a critical site of contention which was at once privately individual and public credentials of status, integrity, and civilization.

In his attempt to avoid Caroline’s recrimination of his own adulterous affairs, George opted for a Bill of Parliament rather than a trial in the Ecclesiastical Court to obtain divorce. However, by doing so, his case was open to public scrutiny and his person susceptible to public ridicule. Another best-selling squib by Hone, “Non Mi Ricordo” (1820), featured an unnamed figure bearing striking resemblance to the king at bar as its frontispiece. This squib parodied the cross examination of an Italian witness testifying to the Queen’s adultery with her courier Bartolommeo Pergami. The witness was suspected of having been bribed by the Crown to perjure as he could vouch for the Queen’s adultery but answered any questions about the details of the Queen’s daily routine with the all-purpose equivocation “non mi

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7 See, for instance, James Gillray’s “Wierd-Sisters [sic]; Ministers of Darkness; Minions of the Moon” (1791) and “A Voluptuary Under the Horrors of Digestion” (1792).
ricordo” (“cannot remember”) (Wilson 327). In the vein of the disarming simplicity of catechism, Hone’s parody uncovered the hypocrisy of the unnamed personage in question (unnamed so as to avoid prosecution for seditious libel against the King). In response to the question “Are you married?” the interrogated answered “More yes than no.” About the question “How many Wives does your Church allow you?” the man answered “Non mi ricordo.” The seemingly solemn legal proceeding was turned into a farce by the man’s perversely persistent disavowal of any deed which might lead to his condemnation. Intimately personal questions such as “Do you drink six bottles,” “What is your favorite fish,” “What is your favorite amusement” were raised alongside questions about debts and government (Hone 199-203). Public knowledge about the King’s consumption of wine and pursuit of sexual adventure showed the monarch to be human, and the unadorned legal language laid bare high-society pretensions. While private conduct was increasingly held to determine public worth, more essentialized views demanding the perfect match between character and behavior, appearance and reality redefined respectability. The Queen Caroline Affair drew attention to the bodily frailty of the royalty, the dangerous blurring of the high and low, public and private, and the rhetorical energy of the legal language in inscribing as well as interrogating the moral and political status quo.

“Crim. Con.”: Sexuality in Context

Marriage solemnizes the union between husband and wife, perpetuating the body politics by legitimizing regeneration. Forming a match involves the consideration of status, resources, and affection. In Britain of the early nineteenth century, obtaining a full divorce allowing one to remarry remained costly and difficult while it was relatively easy to get married in the first place (Stone 9). Requirements of entering into a regular marriage did not undergo significant changes in the eighteenth century (Probert 5), but the need to seek divorce seemed to be rising at the turn of the century (Probert 303; Stone 12). Couples or one of the parties had to take advantage of the loopholes of marriage law to prove that their initial marriage was void and that they were therefore free to leave each other (Probert 285). Otherwise, couples had to reach private agreement of separation, obtain “judicial separation from bed and board” in ecclesiastical courts on account of “life-threatening cruelty” or adultery, or carry out litigation of “crim. con.” in

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8 These questions also toyed with common anti-Catholic vocabulary, calling the Catholics “fish eaters” and accusing them of debauchery.
civil courts (Stone 18-23). As the Queen Caroline Affair had shown, suing one’s spouse for adultery in the ecclesiastical court ran the risk of the defendant’s recrimination; thus for those who resorted to divorce, a suit of “crim. con.” became the necessary step toward applying for an act of parliament which allowed one to remarry (Stone 23; McKeon 143-45).

Court records showed that the jury and the judge reached their decision by considering the couple’s age and condition as well as the suitability of the match (Probert 294). Interpreting a verdict out of its social context would have bypassed the complexity of case law and its wider resonance in shaping family values and sexual mores. Even though the trials of “crim. con.” cases concerned only the litigating individuals and the legal proceedings were confined to the space of the courtroom, the knowledge about the verdict and the mores it shaped and guarded were disseminated to the public through the anthologized trial reports. The ruling of a “crim. con.” litigation quantified the “damages” done to the husband by the transgressing man in terms of monetary compensation. The social status of the parties involved and the circumstantial evidence of the defendant being a stranger to the household, a friend whose act violated the codes of honor and hospitality, a casual affair, or a calculated seduction all contributed to determining the degree of the “damages.” In this secularized interpretation of adultery, the honor of the family, the violation of the sacred vow, affection, obligation, and desire were commodified not only by monetary payments but also by morally dubious publications characterized by edifying warning and prurient voyeurism. The semi-official Old Bailey Sessions Papers and the Account by the Ordinary of Newgate competed with broadsheets and trial reports in documenting rape, incest, and adultery. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, textual description of the trials came to be furnished with tantalizing illustrations to boost the sale (Wagner 121-28). As the popularity of satirical engravings and caricatures rose, and a fascination with pictorial representation of noted individuals grew, social values and family economy were materialized in these salacious snapshots of sexual deviance.

Multi-volume collections of “crim. con.” such as Trials for Adultery (1779-81), Crim. Con. Biography (1789), and The Cuckold’s Chronicle (1793) selected more sensational cases for readers’ entertainment. These trial reports were often framed by the editor’s preface and comments (Wagner 127), and detailed in the third-person past tense, as the court clerk reworked the testimonies into a smooth narrative. Participating in the discourse on sexuality and highlighting legal interpretation as well as cultural assumptions defining acts of sexual deviance, this genre of “crim. con.” reports enjoyed popularity not only as anthologies of selected
cases but also as episodes in a novel or regular features in a magazine. Sexually-oriented publication was not by default subversive and could serve to inscribe existing order (Peakman 2). This section focuses on The Cuckold’s Chronicle to unravel its risky pedagogy of teaching by example and its uneasy juxtaposition of erotic titillation and moral inculcation. The next section will discuss how radical publishers such as Benbow and William Dugdale capitalize on the “crim. con.” genre while repackaging it to their agenda of reform.

Published and reprinted in the 1790s during the height of the French Revolution when war, reform, the fear of invasion permeated daily life in Britain, The Cuckold’s Chronicle declared in the Preface its attempts of “divesting . . . the great mass of the people” from their “[p]olitical pursuits . . ., so petulant and inflammatory” by offering instead a chronicle of “wickedness and criminality . . . brutality and lust . . . and farcical absurdities” (iii). Its pages boasted heroes accomplished in the art of seduction who were able British inheritors of French profligacy despite their varying fortunes. The editor claimed that the present volumes improved on its predecessors’ “dull stile [sic] of legal procedure” by enlivening “fanciful scenes” in an “easy mode of Narrative” (iii-iv). Soliciting the patronage of the young, the fashionable as well as “philosophical minds” as fellow well-wishers for the “welfare of [the] country,” it promised to convey “instruction” more useful for “domestic life” than “the most austere dogma of morality” (v).

While the Preface of the Cuckold’s Chronicle professed to “occasionally intersperse . . . lessons of morality” in its narrative (v), its table of contents betrayed an affiliation to erotica. Apart from indexing the names of the litigating personages, the Contents listed such tantalizing cues of “Confession extraordinary,” “Grass-plat Scene,” “Grotto Scene,” “Key-hole Scene,” and “Marks and Stains” alongside more explicit entries of “Copulation and Congress” and “Erection” (n. pag.). The collection supplied readers with generous extracts from the witnesses’ testimonies, garnished with illustrations of key “scenes,” seemingly presenting the care-free gratification of sexual desire as pleasing pastimes. The telling of the act and the clues to its discovery could warn readers against the infamous consequences of adultery, but also allowed readers to indulge in vicarious sensations of being at once the onlooker and the pleasure-seekers. What and whom exactly were the targets of criticism the editorial comments purported to censure? The Chronicle sought to profit from the commodification of the discourse on sexuality while its gesture toward moralization revealed contemporary anxieties about the production and circulation of such discourse. By distinguishing itself from dull dogmas of religious tracts and fictional dramatization of pathos in popular novels, the anthology of
“crim. con.” cases promised to be both edifying and entertaining with useful facts.

Trial reports of “crim. con.” portrayed adulterous relationships from the outside; little was said about the motivating impulse of the guilty pair. By contrast, epistolary novels invited readers to identify with or be critical of the heroine through the characters’ descriptions of their own emotional tumults. Mary Hays’s epistolary novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), known for its audacious assertion of women’s sexual desires, delineated the effusion of Emma’s passions: “I breathe with difficulty—My friend—I will give myself to you—the gift is not worthless” (Hays 2: 68; emphasis in original), offering herself to Augustus Harley prior to forming any marital engagement with him (Ty 54-55). In 1811, Thomas Ashe’s bestselling *The Spirit of ‘The Book’* inspired numerous imitators with its skillful deployment of the epistolary mode of narration to dramatize the emotional anguish of Caroline who sacrificed her love for political expediency and was raped by her supposedly gentlemanly husband, “Prince Albion” (the Prince Regent), on the night of their marriage. Ashe had Caroline recount that the Prince initially “had the goodness to dissemble” but “at length recourse[d] to a violence, which soon gave him dominion over [her] body.” Yet, however overpowered she was physically, the Prince could “in no degree [conquer her] mind” (3: 43). In this light, the Prince appears more like “a Gothic villain” than “a chivalric noble” (Fulford 524), wielding tyrannical power over a helpless Princess who is stranded in a foreign country. Deriving its rhetorical force from the popular genre of sentimental novels, the epistolary foregrounding of emotions enables Hays to voice women’s plight. Despite the fact that Caroline’s “letters” are ventriloquized through Ashe, the Princess is shown to be feeling and brave, facing the assault of the Prince with an independent mind. The dramatization of sentimental interiority, however, became suspect during the revolutionary tumults of the 1790s. Hays’s work met with mixed reception and was condemned by critics who associated sexual liberty with anarchy. Radical reformers in the early nineteenth century had to exercise great caution in interpreting political freedom in relation to sexual freedom. Ashe pictures Caroline as a princess in distress and a caring mother, and Cobbett in his *Political Register* articles downplays her flirtatious liaison with her Italian courier and repackages her as a respectable wife and mother to gain the support of the middle classes (Fulford

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9 Emma proclaims, “I feel, that I am neither a philosopher, nor a heroine—but a woman, to whom education has given a sexual character” (2: 53; emphasis in original).

10 Some editions demurely expurgated the reference to rape. See, for instance, the “first American from the third London edition” (Philadelphia, 1812), which only mentioned that the Prince’s “conduct became altered” (254).
Benbow was to adopt a different approach from that of Ashe and Cobbett when dealing with sexual propriety. The apparently matter-of-fact “crim. con.” narration allows Benbow to highlight the disjunction between respectable appearances and lascivious acts. The testimonies outlined the profession and social standing of the witnesses, and their acquaintance with the accused. Specifying the dates and location of the supposed acts, the witnesses then offered circumstantial information about their hearing or seeing the pair “having the carnal use and knowledge of each other’s bodies” (1: 37), as well as “objective” details about tumbled chairs, ruffled sheets, or traces of “seeds” (1: 27). As the court judged acts of “crim. con.” from the “facts” and determined the sum of damages by considering the social status of the persons involved, psychological intricacies of the cuckold husband, the adulterous wife, the gallant, and the witnessing servants or passers-by could only be inferred. Trial reports of “crim. con.” served up tableaux vivants for readers to savor the “scenes” and left out subjective delineations of passions for readers to work out their inference. What ecstasy, agony, excitement, or curiosity the accused pairs felt could only be imagined, though the anthologist’s editorial persona more often than not obliged readers with his interpretations. Benbow appropriated the “crim. con.” chronicles to illustrate the political and sexual hypocrisy of the upper classes as well as the universal reign of love and desire, the “objective” tone of the “crim. con.” narration being a means to distance his work from the emotional surplus of the epistolary mode.

“The Trial of Mrs. Henrietta Arabin, Wife of William John Arabin, Esq. of Moulsey, in the County of Surrey; in the Bishop’s Court at Doctors Commons, for committing Adultery with Thomas Sutton, jun. Esq. also of Moulsey, in Surrey” made good fodder for the writer of the *Cuckold’s Chronicle* to exercise his sarcastic wit. The trial was introduced to readers as a case of “merited celebrity, in the annals of prostitution, for the audacious scenes of impudent profligacy it contains” (1: 24). The witnesses were James Bradley (“a labouring man”), Maria Haynes (acquaintance of the Arabins), James Poulter (“gardener and footman” to the family), James Lawrence Brown (in the service of Mrs. Arabin’s brother), Elizabeth Dodson (“lived servant” of the family), Thomas Girdler (“footboy”), and Thomas Parker (Major Arabin’s servant).

The laborer Bradley “well recollected” that, passing by “a place called Littlehale’s Shrubbery” one day, he saw Mrs. Arabin on the ground “with her petticoats up, and Thomas Sutton, Esq. jun. on her, in the very act of Adultery, as he most firmly believes” (1: 24). Haynes, when passing by a meadow one afternoon,
“plainly saw” Mr. Sutton “unbuttoned his breeches, and gently throwing himself upon [Mrs. Arabin] . . . in the act of carnal copulation with her.” Immediately following the two testimonies was the editor’s outburst of indignation: “How shocking must these circumstances have appeared in the eyes of every friend and relative of this Lady’s, by whom she was really respected! to have her conduct become the topic of discussion . . . in every public print, nay, the subject of . . . vulgar merriment among the lowest country boors!” The act of Mrs. Arabin was “vile indecency” and “prostitution” as she, “a Lady . . . checked by every circumstance of her rank and situation,” could have committed adultery “unsheltered by aught but the open canopy of the Heavens!” (1: 25).

What appeared disconcerting to the editor was perhaps not so much the illicit connection of adultery per se as its very visibility to common laborers, “lowest country boors,” and nondescript gossips. The editor’s second outburst of sarcasm followed the servants’ testimonies. He remarked that “the self-appointed censors of morals, who abound so plentifully in every neighbourhood, must have observed the ridings out, the shrubbery excursions, &c. &c. . . . putting a hand into [a Lady’s] pocket-hole to—look for her snuff-box or handkerchief” with “mirth and resentment” (1: 28-29). As to the servants’ testimony of the suspicious wet patch of semen on the floor, he exclaimed:

how admirable an opportunity did [Brown] discover to display a joking drollery, when pointing with his foot towards the arm-chair in the parlour (from whence Mrs. Arabin and Mr. Sutton had just retired) he asked Betty Dodson her opinion of a certain appearance on the floor! and how excellent an occasion did it furnish to shew her skill and knowledge as a married woman, when, attentively considering it, she found herself enabled to reply with so much pointedness to the intimation of the querist. (1: 29; emphasis in original)

These circumstances, the editor teased, “wonderfully serve the cause of subordination,” cautioning that the servants’ “observations on, the principal particulars which come to their knowledge” might generate “happy effects . . . on society, in a wider degree” than expected (1: 29).

Paradoxically, when mocking “self-appointed censors of morals,” the editor’s own comments betrayed uneasiness about the demarcation and containment of overbrimming sexuality. While mocking people’s penchant for sexual scandal, the editor inadvertently mocked his own capitalization on such appetite. Resorting to
“crim. con.” litigation to obtain divorce meant giving up the comfort of respectability. As the defendant and plaintiff themselves were in absentia in court (Fay 408), servants got to speak to testify to the guilt or innocence of their mistress. Servants’ involvement in the trial was thus potentially subversive as their testimonies gave them a legal presence and their remarks showed them to be discerning individuals capable of reasoning. With the proliferation of printed materials which circulated knowledge and gossip, the body and the private conduct of the well-to-do classes were increasingly subject to public scrutiny, blurring and refashioning the old boundaries of respectability and domesticity. Meanwhile, this process of publicization and commodification of desire in turn created the need for a clear-cut last reserve of privacy. In the telling and retelling of the adulterous acts and sexual scandals, privacy and secrecy became all the more prized for the imagination of tantalizing pleasure. Whereas in the earlier eighteenth century, people in Britain made larger allowance for fashionable gallantry and promiscuity (Porter 8-12; Andrews 5; Runge 567), upper-class libertinism and lower-class vulgarity became increasingly problematic for the aspiring middle classes (Kirkpatrick 199, 213).

“Crim. con.” trial reports exposed the glaring mutual dependence of masters and servants. Together with the scandal literature, servants participated in the process of verbalizing sexuality. While the succinct legal documentation only showed traces of the servants’ amused curiosity which stopped short of malicious irreverence toward their employers, the unchecked libido of a lady illustrated the fact that there was little of substance to distinguish her from her maid. What gentility conferred by title and lineage, the aspiring middle classes attempted to earn instead through improved economic condition to cultivate refinement (Kirkpatrick 200). As George III’s stutter and madness and his son’s bloated body showed them to be “nothing but a Man” (Carretta 294), respectability came to be more dependent on cultured taste and decorum. Legal disquisition on an individual’s private conduct and caricature’s delineation of physical particularity manifested the attempt to match the body to inner personality. “Crim. con.” literature enjoyed popularity as it gave vent to the awareness of the unreliability of surface and appearance in conflict with the need for more permanent index of hierarchy in the disorienting age of revolution and commercialization.

The absence of the mistress’s testimony and the editor’s censure of adulterous women in much of the “crim. con.” anthology highlighted the uneven conceptualization of gendered sexuality. While eighteenth-century libertinism remained largely ambiguous toward women’s sexual license (Porter 15), categories
of gender changed “from playfulness to rigidity” toward the later decades of the century (Wahrman 47). Women’s chastity came to be prized in ideal womanhood. To keep up middle-class respectability, the sexuality of a proper lady had to be discreet and hidden away; it could not impinge on her duties as a wife and mother. When tried for adultery in the courtroom, the lady could only be redeemed by being portrayed as a passive victim fallen prey to the predatory seducer (Russell 59).

In his reconceptualization of sexual propriety, the editor of The Cuckold’s Chronicle teased with uneasiness the gallantry of the young man and the audacity of the lady. While the adulterous man is blamed for seducing the woman, his conspicuous love-making nevertheless testified to the power of woman’s charm and his weakness in succumbing to her beauty, leading to his breaking the codes of decorum and hospitality (the male adulterer being the husband’s friend). On the other hand, the assertive femme fatale was all the more threatening as she violated feminine decorum by “openly” bringing her husband to shame, thereby subverting patriarchy and domesticity. In the event, Mrs. Arabin was the one to blame for such barefaced audacity, not Mr. Sutton. Even though the disenfranchised woman asserted her influence by pursuing sexual adventure and the disenfranchised servants did the same by voicing their testimonies, their agency remained circumscribed. The economic reality of being employed by the household compromised the servants’ stance. Furthermore, their testimony leading to the court’s verdict of adultery reinforced patriarchy. Meanwhile, the divorced wife had to face the dire consequences of being separated from her children for good and economically devastated, even though wealthy relatives might help ameliorate the latter condition.

Curiously, the questions of love and affection were left out in this Chronicle of cuckoldry even though it featured scenes of sexual transactions. What mattered seemed to be the external circumstances of the act and the appearance of status and respectability. Being reduced to quantitative records, the relationship between Mrs. Arabin and Mr. Sutton was measured by the frequency they met and the factual details of their adulterous acts. Emotion and affection are seldom mentioned in the servants’ testimonies. Only once did a servant note that Mrs. Arabin “appeared particularly well pleased” (1: 26) when meeting Mr. Sutton and another that Mr. Sutton gave his mistress “a peculiar satisfaction” (1: 29) while the maid Elizabeth observed that Mr. Arabin was “a good husband,” being “ever particularly indulgent” toward his wife (1: 27). It appeared that adultery had to be distinguished from the ideal of companionable conjugal relationship by downplaying the reciprocity of the adulterous pair in the supposedly edifying Cuckold’s Chronicle. In contrast, the
celebrated speech of Thomas Erskine in the “crim. con.” case between the two litigating aristocrats Bernard Edward Howard and Richard Bingham characterized the husband as the real seducer by prioritizing Lady Elizabeth’s love for Bingham previous to her forced marriage to Howard for “heraldry” (Russell 63). That Erskine’s sentimental reinterpretation of “crim. con” was praised for its moving pathos and yet also criticized for its “meretricious effeminacy” showed that even the apparent “objective” legal discourse was implicated in contemporary re-imagination of sexuality (Russell 64). In the ongoing attempt to match outward appearance with inner virtue, reinstalling love in the center of the body-mind dichotomy conformed to contemporary foregrounding of private virtue in the body politics. While romantic love offered another reading of adulterous relationship in the balance of material gains and “damages,” love-making as well as love remained contingent and performative in “crim. con.” literature. When such an enterprising radical as Benbow picked up the genre of “crim. con.” narration to join in the ideological warfare of the reform movement, both he and the adulterous protagonists were to grapple with the consequences of negotiating sexuality and realpolitik.

Love, Lust, and Human Nature Are the Same Everywhere: Benbow’s Radicalism

In 1822, the indefatigable printer William Benbow hung a portrait of Lord Byron outside his shop in Leicester Square, London, to attract more seekers of freedom and free love to his bookshop “The Byron’s Head” (St Clair 328). In the same year, Benbow launched his Rambler’s Magazine with the expressed aim to offer “Fashionable Emporium of Polite Literature” characterized by “wit, truth, and humour” (title page). By holding up the head of Byron, Benbow cashed in on the public appetite for the poet’s work, foremost with his piracy of Don Juan (St Clair 333, 676), signaled the affiliation between sexual adventure and radical politics, and underlined artisan remodeling of elite culture. Benbow’s steadfast sales of radical pamphlets alongside scandalous and obscene prints were a chronic nuisance to the government and thus incurred constant harassment from its agents (McCalman 169-70). “Cuckold CUNNING**M Frighten’d at his Wife’s CARICATURE” (1820), referring to George IV’s affair with Lady Cunningham during his divorce proceeding against the Queen, unabashedly flaunted the subversive might of Benbow’s shop by depicting Lord Cunningham disconcerted by the numerous scurrilous prints displayed at Benbow’s counter that made fun of the king’s sexual exploits (McCalman 171).
Sold for less than a shilling, Benbow’s *Rambler’s Magazine* sought to reach a new group of literate and yet disenfranchised readers like artisans and shop workers (St Clair 321, 676). As he pirated books to disseminate knowledge to a wider readership, his magazine laid claim to and appropriated fashionable “politeness” in the service of “truth” for the benefit of the less well-off. The medium of the “magazine” itself grew out of the need of the middle-class professionals and tradesmen for more reading materials under the government’s heavy tax on knowledge (St Clair 308). Magazines, the word originally meaning a warehouse or cartridge containing ammunition, offered a compendium of summaries and extracts of anecdotes and stories at affordable prices. *Annals of Gallantry* (1783-90), the predecessor of Benbow’s *Magazine*, has an identical title to Benbow’s publication and assumed the respectability of such elegant periodicals as Samuel Johnson’s *Rambler* (1750-52) and Richard Steele’s *Tatler* (1709-11). *The Rambler’s Magazine* in the 1780s took up the character of a “rambler” to “shift [his] place like a bird, to change [his] appearance like a cameleon” so as to observe and report on “pleasant amorous Histories” for “the Entertainment of the Polite World” (1: 3, 63). The virtually ubiquitous presence of the Rambler which enabled him to detect political and sexual intrigues was likened to the power of the press. Benbow’s fellow radical Thomas Jonathan Wooler took up the persona of an omnipresent Black Dwarf to expose government corruption, while Benbow’s Rambler informed readers of upper-class hypocrisy by uncovering the mismatch between their private profligacy and respectable front.

Unlike anthologies of “crim. con.” trials, Benbow’s *Magazine* juxtaposed “Cuckold’s Chronicle” with “The Fine Art” (book reviews and poems), the section of “Fashionable Gallantry” with that of “Politics.” Despite its announcement in the Preface of its intention to expose “the scenes of debauchery that are daily laid to entrap the unwary, in order that the prudent and virtuous may be placed upon their guard” (1: iv), the ensuing narratives did not so much evince the vice of sexual liaisons as show that the pursuit of pleasure saw no boundaries of class or gender. Sexual intrigues, being only one aspect of the “Gay Variety of Supreme Bon Ton,” made up part of the “Polite Literature.” Benbow’s collection included trials of rape, seduction, divorce, “crim. con.,” and marital quarrels. Contrary to Isaac Robert Cruikshank’s “All My Eye” (1821), showing the iris of an eye reflecting a portrait of Queen Caroline on a printing press.

Wooler’s *Black Dwarf: A London Weekly Publication* (1817-24) is one of the longest-running radical periodicals in post-1815 Britain. Friends and foes alike identified Wooler with his mouthpiece. See George Cruikshank’s “Coriolanus addressing the Plebeians” (1820) which pictured Wooler as his Black Dwarf (Wilson 314).
Chronicle discussed in the previous section, cases of adultery in Benbow’s Magazine were treated in light-hearted humor. What appeared the more censurable was not the act of adultery itself, as it was only natural to gratify sexual desire, but the pretense of moral superiority based on higher social status.

An episode of “Crim. Con.” which was not tried in court but cited as an amusing anecdote concerned “a gentleman holding a situation in the Excise, and the wife of a respectable tradesman.” Benbow’s editorial persona noted that the case did not seem to be seduction and placed the blame on the husband instead, for the accused was merely rendering himself “agreeable” to the wife who could “no longer carry on an harmonious commerce” with her husband, a “jealous-pated monopolizer.” Benbow seemed to advocate a free-market mechanism for the guilt-free “indulgence in extra gratifications” (1: 48). It might have been a graver matter had the wife eloped with the man and left her three children destitute, but what remained striking was the absence of criticism of both the wife and the “charitable” man.

The miscellaneous Magazine interspersed stories and “Life” (contemporary term for biography) with crim. con. cases. Despite its claim that the “genuine sketches of life and character” readers found in its pages were more edifying than “novels and romances” (1: 50), its rewriting of crim. con. cases into anecdotal narratives blurred the line between the fictional and the realistic. It became increasingly difficult to tell whether art imitated life or vice versa. Two anecdotes of strikingly similar plot appeared respectively in Benbow’s Magazine (1823) and The Rambler (1824) printed by T. Holt. Under the heading of “Corduroys v. Buckskins” in parody of the “crim. con.” trial reports, which were almost always headed by pairing the family name of the plaintiff against that of the defendant, Benbow’s story depicted “a respectable Liverpool merchant, and a subscriber to the Society for the Suppression of Vice” committing adultery with “the wife of a labourer” (2: 71). The liaison was discovered when, the merchant having hurried away in the wrong trousers, the laborer was surprised to find one sovereign (20 shillings), almost the equivalent of two weeks’ earnings, instead of one shilling coin in “his” pocket; hence the story’s droll title. The story in Holt’s magazine was purportedly supplied by “Correspondent Q” in Hertford in 1822, entitled “The Hertford Comedy—Whose Are the Breeches.” In Benbow’s Magazine the disputing pair turned out to be “Sovereign Tim” versus “Tobacco Stopper” (1: 10).

The solemnity of the court shaded into the drama of life and the comedy of daily peccadilloes. Objects such as upset furniture and mismatched trousers functioned as the metonymy for disrupted social order and hierarchy. Benbow’s
particular fashioning of the “Corduroys v. Buckskins” anecdote poked fun at the moral pretension of the “respectable” members of the Vice Society who assisted the government in suing and molesting radical publishers. Apparently even such exalted personages as the subscribers to the Vice Society, like their humbler counterparts, had extra needs to gratify. The merchant’s pretension to moral probity was punctured by the mistaken trousers, which implied the vulnerability of “respectability” to the carnivalesque misrule of the lower bodily parts. The ease with which external paraphernalia such as “buckskins” and “sovereigns” constructed and undermined one’s character revealed the contingency of social status. As the king himself could stoop to a hated marriage to pay off debts, respectability seemed exchangeable with commodified assets. While Benbow did not go so far as to advocate revolt or to overthrow social hierarchy per se, the adulterous cases nevertheless exposed the material underpinnings of rank and mores.

Narratives of adultery were potentially subversive as the act belied the increasingly cherished ideal of the perfectly matched appearance and inward virtue. Whether sexual chastity was a necessary criterion of virtue remained debatable, but the public reaction to the Queen Caroline Affair and the editorial framing of The Cuckold’s Chronicle as discussed in our previous sections testified to the development of a paradoxical trend which prioritized private morals as the epitome of one’s public integrity and at the same time upheld outward appearance to be the reliable indicator of inner worth. Benbow’s Magazine participated in this ongoing negotiation of emerging new mores. As the obscene prints sold and displayed at his shop showed that kings and lords were nothing but a man, the droll humor of “crim. con.” cases in his Magazine illustrated the prevalence of love and lust which cut across social strata. Following the logic of the new moral, were not the artisan and laboring classes worthy members of the society and indeed sensible enough to vote for their parliamentary representatives? After all, they seemed less hypocritical than many of their superiors.

Like its gallant predecessors, Benbow’s Magazine was decorated with engravings of various erotic “scenes.” The first illustration of the first volume showed the cuckold Vulcan trapping the embracing Venus and Mars in a net, with Jupiter and other gods looking on amused. Subsequent engravings included pictures of contemporary settings as well as those in the classical age such as Jupiter visiting Leda (2: 432+) and Venus bathing (2: 480+). These graphic representations and textual expositions of love emphasized its all-encompassing nature across time and class. Benbow did not offer learned disquisitions on the fine distinction between
corporeal love-making and emotional attachment but appeared to represent overflowing passions as a form of free expression. He toyed with the idea of respectability by furnishing his *Magazine* with graphic allusions to classical art and mythology. While these elegant engravings exalted the *Magazine* as part of polite culture, they also illustrated that gods, goddesses, kings, queens, clergymen, politicians, merchants, and laborers alike were not above the natural calling of love.

In 1822, the recently erected statue of the Duke of Wellington funded by his female supporters to celebrate his victories in the Napoleonic Wars\(^\text{13}\) offered Benbow a perfect chance to mock sexual prudes and political hypocrites at large. The essay “Mr. Achilles; or, The Ladies’ Man” was introduced with a drawing of the said statue for the benefit of country readers who were not in London to witness the object of controversy. Benbow’s editorial persona defended the ladies’ choice of a naked Achilles as the model for the statue on three accounts. First, it was “natural” for ladies to delight in the view of well-made male figures. Second, “a fine model of nature would be estimable at all times” while statues “decked in the peculiar costumes of an age, might one day become objects of ridicule” as “posterity might take the dress of a Field Marshal for the livery of a footman, or the trappings of a merry-andrew” (1: 339-40). Last but not least, since the ladies “paid for the thing,” “who will deny their right to raise a monument according to their own taste?” The commentator remarked that some men objected to the “NAKED” statue because they were “jealous” and “afraid” that the statue would cause women “to choose none but the most large, fine made, and robust men for their husbands” in the future. As it was the women who paid and as they had already compromised by having their “fancy-man . . . castrated” with a “fig-leaf” (1: 342; emphasis in original), “must man for ever be lording it and domineering it over them?” (1: 340).

While Benbow like his fellow radicals might be opportunistic in presuming to speak for the wronged sex just as they had done in the Queen Caroline Affair, he adopted a comparative mode of reasoning which exposed the pretension of moralizing men who, similar to George IV, delighted in dalliance with fine women while condemning their womenfolk’s erotic pursuit. Benbow strategically engaged with the Enlightenment discourse on nature and identity in arguing for reform. The defense of the statue’s nudity indicated that human nature of love was universal

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\(^{13}\) See “Statue to the Duke of Wellington, &c. in Hyde Park,” in the Arts and Sciences column of the *Gentleman’s Magazine* 92 (1822): 70-71. The writer offers a detailed account of the height, weight, and other attributes of the statue. The inscription on the statue’s pedestal reads, “To Arthur Duke of Wellington and his brave companions in arms, the statue of Achilles, cast from cannon taken in the battles of Salamanca, Vittoria, Toulouse, and Waterloo, is inscribed by their country-women” (70).
whereas dress codes and social propriety artificial and subject to change. The article entitled “The Influence of Love on Society and Manners” drew on the mid-eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism and theories of human progress (1: 149). Referring to the high-society custom of dispelling women from the main hall after the second glass of wine at dinner parties, the narrator commended middle-class liberality that “they have not arrived at that pitch of refinement which excludes rational women from the table” (1: 150). Praising the genius of Madame de Maintenon and Madame de Staël, he applauded Switzerland as a “society . . . free and unbiased,” maintaining that “in no country does more happiness exist than in that where woman reigns predominant” (1: 151).

Another article, “Love in Japan; Or, Beauty Unadorned,” was purportedly written by a seaman reader who wished to contribute to the Magazine’s “originality.” The opening lines of Dr. Johnson’s “The Vanity of Human Wishes”—“Let observation, with extensive view, Survey mankind from China to Peru” served as the editorial motto to signal its allusion to the once fashionable speculation on the noble savage.\(^\text{14}\) While the traveler set out in expectation of finding depravity in savage countries, he discovered that “in every kingdom and country where fate has thrown me, I have found human nature the same, love, lust, hatred, and malice, being the prevailing passions” (1: 155). The traveler’s delight in the “Japanese” custom of men freely sharing their wives in the community certainly betrayed a willful Orientalism in its indulgence of a western male exoticized sexual fantasy. However, just as Wooler had to turn his narrator, the Black Dwarf, into a Japanese to criticize British corruption more effectively,\(^\text{15}\) the very attraction of such liminal space as Japan and the illicit venue of adultery in radical discourse expressed frustration with the status quo as well as deficiency in normative means of expression. In the Continent where women’s prominence brought about happiness rather than tyranny and in Japan where the practice of “the ladies [being] the suitors to the gentlemen” saved infinite trouble of courtship (1: 158; emphasis in original), Benbow’s readers in “this very sanctified country” of Britain had little to

\(^{14}\) I would like to thank the reviewer for pointing out the reference to Johnson’s poem.

\(^{15}\) Taking the name “Black Dwarf” from Walter Scott’s eponymous novel, Wooler characterized his Dwarf as mysteriously supernatural as well as exotic who had the power to travel freely across the metropolis to detect evil “at the portals of the temple, under the canopy of the throne, and in the gallery of the lower house” (1: n. pag.). Wooler drew on the literary convention of Montesquieu’s Persian Letters, employing the imaginary Oriental correspondence to puncture British pride and to illustrate the transnational values of truth and liberty through his mysterious foreign persona Black Dwarf. For more on this, see my article “Rethinking Britishness in the Fictional Japanese Letters of T. J. Wooler’s Black Dwarf,” forthcoming from The Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies in 2013.
be complaisant about but had to rise to the cause of reform (1: 342).

The anthologies of “crim. con.” proceedings reminded readers of the material context in which the universal passions of love and lust were acted out. Benbow’s *Magazine* went a step further by situating these erotic transactions in a larger context of socioeconomic and political implication. This article shall conclude by looking at Benbow’s ingenious parody of the “crim. con.” report by recasting himself as the defendant against the Vice Society in his recent trial for seditious and obscene libel. In the five-page extracts, the Vice Society acted as the prosecutor on behalf of the general readers and the country at large against the sexual assaults of Benbow’s publication. The noted Irish barrister Charles Philips spoke in Benbow’s defense. Philips’s speech pointed out that the Vice Society was a false guardian of national morals, for its members prosecuted only “fathers of families, [and] humble tradesmen” but turned a blind eye on the profligacy of “the titled, the wealthy, and the great” (1: 350). They were like a “gang” of jealous husbands who were “Christians only in name,” as “there was scarcely ever a book published in which [their] depraved mind could not find impure images,” seeing every gesture and glance as uncontroverted evidence of illicit gratification (1: 352).

In response to the prosecutor’s objection against the print of Venus and Mars gracing the opening of Benbow’s *Magazine*, Philips remarked that the print was but a “personification” of the famous episode in the classics which he doubted not the polite classes, including the members of the Vice Society themselves, “had read at school.” On the one hand, if such scenes had to be expurgated, then “the whole course of education must be changed” (1: 353). On the other hand, drawing parallel between the ancient and the modern, Philips maintained that “this Venus, like many ladies of the present day, was fond of a red coat, and Mars, the god of war, presented more attractions to her, than the cross old husband” (1: 353). It was but natural for women to be attracted to well-endowed military men. Acting like Vulcan who “collected the gods that they might also behold” the loving pair, the Vice Society was an active producer of modern sexuality in the Foucauldian sense by “search[ing] for obscenity, and then publish[ing] it to the world,” mastering the art of “detecting hidden meanings and obscene allusions” (1: 353-54). Addressing the jury, Philips asked, “let him that was not guilty throw the first stone; but let not men whose only virtue was in their purse assume to themselves a power the law gave them not” (1: 354). Philips’s defense skillfully alternated between the particular and the universal. Just as any fair assessment of crim. con. should not be made out of its context, the so-called obscene passages should not be “isolated” from the book, for, by doing so, even “the Bible might be pronounced to be a heap of obscenity and
sedition” (1: 352). Meanwhile, by challenging anyone who presumed to be guilt-free to cast their vote against Benbow’s work, he borrowed the Christian concept of sin to argue for the universality of human desire. He pointed out the logical fallacy of adoring and elevating the classical art of “naked statues” in the collection of many titled men while condemning the same scene of women and men gratifying their desire as vulgar and therefore offending.

The genre of crim. con. report was a powerful and versatile means of expression. Since Lord Mansfield’s declaration in the crim. con. trial between Lord Grosvenor and the Duke of Cumberland in 1771 that “a man of the first rank and quality . . . is entitled to no greater damages than the meanest mechanic” provoked criticism of “court-policy” (A. Moore, 1: 10), crim. con. cases had been the fault line where law, politics, personal privacy, and social norm met. By modeling their narratives on this genre, Benbow and Philips consciously engaged in the production and redefinition of gender politics. Like The Cuckold’s Chronicle, the Magazine participated in the fabrication and commodification of sexuality during the volatile time of revolution and reform.

On the other hand, Benbow’s Magazine treated extra-marital gratification with light humor, representing sex as unabashedly natural rather than tempting and yet guilt-ridden. Even when they reiterated moral prescription by showing their subjects’ glaring deficiency in conforming to such norms, obscene prints and crim. con. reports remained creatively subversive as they operated from sidelines to articulate conflicting values of sexual license and universal principles. The Queen Caroline Affair, crim. con. trials, and Benbow’s publication highlighted the contingency of sexual mores in socioeconomic contexts while coming to terms with the increasing demand for essentialized and reliable indicators of social hierarchy. In comparison with earlier anthologies of crim. con. trials which generally focused on the scandal of titled celebrities, Benbow’s Magazine illustrated the ubiquitous presence of love and lust with its diverse selections of sexual dalliance involving gods, nobles, tradesmen, and laborers. He spoke for the disenfranchised women and mechanic classes not by condemning sexual transgression—for by doing so he would have replicated moralizing bigotry of the Vice Society—but by exposing sexual hypocrisy to ridicule.

The passage of the Reform Act in 1832, however, made explicit the exclusion of women from vote with its inclusion of more “male” members of the society from industrialized cities in Britain. Some reformers like Cobbett and Hone were at most ambiguous about sexual politics in radical discourse while others struggled to keep their business afloat by publishing more of the expensive illustrated erotica for
profit by catering to the affluent upper- and middle-class customers. At the time when respectability increasingly hinged on feminine passivity and sexual chastity, Benbow eventually had to change his rhetorical strategy to advocate for reform (McCalman 216-17). Despite its relative short span of some half a decade, Benbow’s Magazine actively participated in the ongoing refashioning of modern sexuality. Remodeling the genre of “crim. con.” literature in the context of political agitation and socioeconomic disorientation, Benbow’s work illustrated with wit and humor the universal validity of sexual drive and political participation.

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