



Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters

Kate Thomas

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In 1889 uniformed post-boys were discovered moonlighting in a West End brothel frequented by men of the upper classes. The Cleveland Street Scandal erupted and Victorian Britain faced the possibility that the Post Office—a bureaucratic backbone of nation and empire—was inspiring and servicing subversive sexual behavior. However, the unlikely alliance between sex and the postal service was not exactly the news the sensational press made it out to be. *Postal Pleasures* explores the relationship between illicit sex and the Royal Mail from reforms initiated in 1840 up to the imperial end of the nineteenth century. With a combination of historical details and literary analyses, Kate Thomas illustrates how the postal network, its uniformed employees, and its material trappings—envelopes, postmarks, stamps—were used to signal and circulate sexual intrigue. For many, the idea of an envelope promiscuously jostling its neighbors in a post boys bag, or the notion that secrets passed through the eyes and fingers of telegraph girls, was more stimulating than the actual contents of correspondence. Writers like Anthony Trollope, Eliza Lynn Lynton, Henry James, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Conan Doyle, and others, invoked the postal system as both an instrument and a metaphor for sexual relations that crossed and double-crossed lines of class, marriage, and heterosexuality. *Postal Pleasures* adds a new dimension to studies of the era as it uncovers the unlikely linkage between the Victorian Post Office and the queer networks it inspired.



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