The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire

David Dillon-Smith
University of Wollongong
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CHAPTER TEN

AN INCONSISTENT MORALIST?

To some of his contemporaries, Gibbon must at best have seemed a very inconsistent moralist. Probably they would not have cast him in the role of moralist at all. They focused on the irreverent or indecent elements in his work for which they condemned him. The attitude of his clerical antagonists was perhaps most strongly expressed in the cry of one who numbered herself among his acquaintance. Hannah More, on hearing of his death, wrote: 'How many souls have his writings polluted! Lord preserve others from their contagion!'

On this entry G.M. Young remarked: 'Hannah More was giving voice to the sentiment of many thousands. And she spoke with the authority of a Mother in Israel who was also a best seller.' In the following century these offensive elements were magnified by his critics who sometimes presented them as typical of The Decline and Fall, so that it was with reluctance that a writer like Emerson felt he 'must give this evil man his due.'

Such a view of the historian certainly gained force from the censures of the greatest critic of the age whose fairness was demonstrated by his vindication of Gibbon's scholarship and accuracy and his flattering praise for his work as a whole. This praise from Porson, whose critical

1. Jan. 19, 1794. 'Heard of the death of Mr. Gibbon, the calumniator of the despised Nazarine, the derider of Christianity. Awful dispensation! He too was my acquaintance.' Cited in Hill's edition of Gibbon's Memoirs, p. 226, n.2.
powers he regarded so highly, satisfied and encouraged Gibbon, especially in view of the numerous attacks on his History. It is therefore wise to quote Porson's 'high encomium' so that the charges against Gibbon may appear in their true context.

'An impartial judge,' wrote Porson, 'I think, must allow that Mr. Gibbon's History is one of the ablest performances of its kind that has ever appeared. His industry is indefatigable; his accuracy scrupulous; his reading, which indeed is sometimes ostentatiously displayed, immense; his attention always awake; his memory retentive; his style just and profound; he pleads eloquently for the rights of mankind, and the duty of toleration.' But then follows the drastic qualification, in which, as Gibbon admitted, 'the sweetness of his praise is tempered by a reasonable mixture of acid': 'nor does his humanity ever slumber, unless when women are ravished or the Christians persecuted.'

After paying tribute to what Gibbon called 'those humble virtues' of industry, accuracy and attention, and commending the historian's style in general, Porson singled out for praise just the sort of moral qualities which we have examined in the preceding chapters: 'just and profound' reflections, a plea for the 'rights of mankind' and for toleration and humanity. It is against this background, an acknowledgement of positive moral values, that the negative criticism is inserted.

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1. 'I consider Mr. Porson's answer to Archdeacon Travis as the most acute and accurate piece of criticism which has appeared since the days of Bentley.' Memoirs, p. 174.
5. 'Though his style is in general correct and elegant', certain particular faults were mentioned by Porson, op.cit., Preface, xxix-xxx.
as an exception to the rule. Taken thus, in its balanced and reasonable context, and from the pen of a learned and impartial critic, the acid comment might seem to give substance to a sentiment expressed by later and lesser critics, that Gibbon, for all his humanity and impartiality had two notable blind spots, namely religion and sex.¹

Unlike other eighteenth-century critics, Porson, for his part, declared that he saw nothing wrong with Gibbon's 'attack on Christianity', allowing that it probably 'proceeded from the purest and most virtuous motive', though exception might be found, he added, to the 'insidious manner' and the 'improper weapons' employed.² It was only when he came to the other objection that he waxed eloquent against the historian: 'A less pardonable fault is that rage for indecency which pervades the whole work, but especially the last volumes. And, to the honour of his consistency, this is the same man who is so prudish that he dares not call Belisarius a cuckold, because it is too bad a word for a decent historian to use. If the history were anonymous, I should guess that these disgraceful obscenities were written by some debauchee, who having from age, or accident, or excess, survived the practice of lust, indulged himself in the luxury of speculation; and exposed the impotent imbecility, after he had lost the vigour of the passions.'³ Little wonder that Gibbon felt 'a reasonable mixture of acid' in Porson's commendation. Yet the critic confessed that 'these few faults make no considerable abatement in my general esteem...I greatly admire the whole; as I should admire a beautiful face in the author, though it were

1. See for example Fuglum, Edward Gibbon, p. 12; cf. also p.111.
3. ibid, xxx-xxxi.
Porson's criticism has been quoted at some length not only because it forms a good starting point for a discussion of the matters raised, but chiefly because of its authority and its same balance which Gibbon himself acknowledged. We should therefore note at the outset its almost unqualified praise for *The Decline and Fall* as a whole, as embodying some admirable moral qualities of the author, to which the defects, the alleged obscenities were merely the exception. It is a judgement which, despite its severe censure of the alleged lapses, at least maintained a true perspective. This cannot be said of some later criticisms.

It is important to remember that nearly all the controversial works provoked by *The Decline and Fall* were concerned with Gibbon's treatment of Christianity and were directed primarily to the famous final chapters of the first volume. That of Davis in particular goaded Gibbon to the one reply he made to his critics. Since the attacks were not much occupied with matters of crudity or indecency, it would seem by implication at least, that the critics must have agreed with Porson that these were comparatively minor offences in Gibbon's work. Nor did Gibbon himself feel any need to defend himself along these lines, though he was aware of some shocked reactions from certain quarters. He did, however, state in his *Memoirs* that he could never understand 'the clamour which has been raised against the indecency of my three last volumes'.
The clamour did not pass with Gibbon's death or the coming of another century, even if it lost some of its immediacy when no longer directed against a living celebrity. There is a strange note from the eccentric William Beckford which is of interest in this regard. Beckford, who in his odd manner had suggested buying Gibbon's library in order to have something to read when passing through Lausanne, made a damning comment in his copy of *The Decline and Fall*. After castigating Gibbon for every kind of fault, he continued: 'in the midst of all the prurient and obscene gossip of your notes - your affected moral purity perking up every now and then from the corrupt mass like artificial roses shaken off in the dark by some Prostitute on a heap of manure.'

It was the effect of Gibbon's notes which roused Emerson's ire to produce his unbalanced vilification of the 'evil' historian. Such extravagant and unrestrained abuse marks the opposite extreme to Porson's rational criticism. But, despite the extreme language of certain individuals, it is indicative of a widespread, if less violent objection to what was seen as an offensive strain in Gibbon's work. This objection was publicly recognised in the five-volume edition in which Thomas Bowdler advertised 'the careful omission of all passages of an irreligious or immoral tendency'. Similar expurgation was carried out by other nineteenth-century editors as can be seen for example in the so-called 'verbatim reprint' published by Frederick Warne and Company of London.

Depending on the attitude of the particular period or the fastidiousness of the individual reader, anecdotes, comments and footnotes can be found in Gibbon which may be thought amusing, drily ironic, risqué, or even offensive. And over the years critics have been ready to affirm such views. Sainte-Beuve, though moderate in his criticism of Gibbon, sensed a delight in reproducing 'quelques passages d'un obscénité érudite et froide'.¹ A recent biographer has written: 'it is undeniable that some of Gibbon's jests have a pruriency which smacks of a morbid compulsion in the author, and the remarks about ravished women that offended Porson are often of a kind which calls for a snigger rather than a laugh.'² Before turning to a detailed examination of the passages which lie behind such an objection as Porson's and which were dealt with by the expurgators, let us notice two general comments on an author's intention. Their evidence seems relevant in the case of Gibbon versus the censors.

We are fortunate in having Gibbon's considered comments on the satires of Juvenal, comments which can throw light upon his own approach to his History. In writing of the Sixth Satire,³ Gibbon showed awareness of the danger that an author might teach vice in the very process of condemning it: 'On pourroit souhaiter seulement de retrancher ces descriptions trop fideles qui enseignent le vice en le condamnant.'

Gibbon's answer is that of the moralist, an answer framed in the form of a rhetorical question: 'Why should the guilty creatures have their infamy concealed from the gaze of posterity?'\(^1\) He then raised the very charge against Juvenal which Porson was later to level at Gibbon himself, namely that of using his descriptions to gratify his own prurience. His answer to such an accusation against Juvenal is a valid comment on his own practice: the ardour of the satirist, he held, was that of indignation not of sensuality - 'Mais l'horreur qu'il en temoigne toujours me persuade assez que c'est la chaleur du genie et de l'indignation, plutot que celle de la Volupté.'\(^2\) Gibbon's further comments on Juvenal are in similar vein, for he declared that he saw in all this writer's work, the tone of a true censor, arraigning vice, exposing absurdity and making the guilty tremble.\(^3\)

The other expression of an author's intent is found in Bayle's *Dictionnaire*, a work to which Gibbon turned very frequently as a young man and for which he retained the highest respect throughout his life. In the section entitled 'Concerning Obscenities', Bayle maintained that if there were some in his work, they were of a kind which could not be justly censured. He then examined under nine heads what people meant when they alleged obscenities in an author. He absolved authors in general and himself in particular from personal involvement in the obscenities which they might be obliged to record and also from any

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1. 'Des malheureux pourront ils cependant se sauver de l'infamie à force de la meriter? Leur seroit il permis de cacher leurs excès aux yeux de la posterité, parce qu'ils en ont comblé la mesure?' *JB, loc. cit.*
2. *JB, loc. cit.*, Gibbon adds that he would be inclined to reproach Juvenal with malignity in seeing vice everywhere, rather than with moral depravity.
3. *JB, 31me Août, 1763, p. 16.*
immoral purpose in so doing. In his final point, Bayle stated 'that the 
author relates Historical facts mentioned by other authors whom he 
carelessly cites, which facts are filthy and immodest, and adds a 
commentary on his Historical narrations to illustrate them by testimonies, 
by reflexions and by proofs &c. in which he sometimes allidges the words 
of certain authors who have wrote freely, some of them as Physicians, or 
Lawyers; others as Gallants, or Poets; but,' concluded Bayle, in 
answer to the allegation, 'he never says anything containing either explic­
itly, or even implicitly, the approbation of impurity; that, on the 
contrary, he endeavours, upon many occasions, to expose it to our abhorrence, 
and to confute loose Morality.'¹ One can be certain that Gibbon was 
familiar with this defence of Bayle's and can be confident that he would 
have been ready to apply it to his own case had he so desired.

When we come to examine the basis for the most quoted sentence of 
faint praise in Porson's comments, namely that Gibbon's humanity slumbered 
only when women were ravished or Christians persecuted, what in fact 
do we find? As an example of this alleged indifference to the ravishing 
of women, Porson referred his reader to a note in chapter lvii of The 
Decline and Fall.² The text at this point is concerned with the Seljukan 
domination of the Greeks of Asia Minor and the hardships endured by 
the conquered people. At the end of the list of troubles is the state­
ment that 'many thousand captives were devoted to the service or the 
pleasures of their masters.'³ Here is a general and very broad assertion 
which one might feel needs elucidation before the narrative proceeds.

1. I have quoted here from an English translation, The Dictionary 
Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle, London, 1734, vol. 5, 
p. 837.
2. See Porson's Preface, p. xxviii.
3. DF, lvii, VI, 260-261.
This is given, not in the text, but in a footnote which explains the
text and provides some grim details of a scene in the Turkish camp, a
description, which Gibbon declared, bore the stamp of an eyewitness
account. There follows a fragment of the description, veiled indeed 'in
the obscurity of a learned language', though to Porson, as of course to
Gibbon, a language as lucid as his mother tongue: 'Matres correptae
in conspectu filiarum multipliciter repetitis diversorum coitibus
vexabantur cum filiae assistentes carmina praecinere saltando cogerentur.
Mox eadem passio as filias &c.'

The question we ask ourselves as we follow Porson's finger pointing
to the offending note, is: 'Does the quotation indicate callousness or
lack of humanity?' It seems, like so many of Gibbon's notes to which no
objection could be taken, merely to substantiate, amplify or illustrate
a less specific statement in the text by quotation from a contemporary
source. The details are horrible, but at least for us of the twentieth
century, not beyond what we might expect to find recorded in plain
English in our least sensational newspapers. There we would read them
with the same disgust with which we would assume them to have been
reported. And, despite the increased freedom of our own day, is there
any reason to think Gibbon's reaction was so different? The text with
its mention of 'hard conditions' and oppression seems to suggest a
certain melancholy so often expressed in his scenes of conquest and ruin,
and in the note, phrases like 'in conspectu filiarum' could be taken to
provoke the same distaste which he explicitly admitted in somewhat
similar descriptions elsewhere. And, having begun a second sentence of

1. DF, loc. cit., n.61; Porson numbers it note 54 in Gibbon's six-
volume edition. Gibbon added in parenthesis after 'vexabantur',
'is that the correct reading?'
the quotation sufficient to suggest the unrestrained lust of the oppressors, he cut it short with an ' &c.', as if to say enough of that. On the most censorious reading one could hardly feel this a good example to prove Gibbon's callousness in situations of rape. But Porson had carefully examined the whole work and was well aware of other instances, of which one can find about twenty in The Decline and Fall. It seems necessary to look at these, some of which are deleted in the expurgated editions, to see whether they give more weight to the charge against Gibbon.

One such note, which disappeared from these editions, is that which simply states that Victorinus 'ravished the wife of Attitianus, an actuary, or army agent.' The text, however, leaves us in no doubt about Gibbon's attitude: 'The shining accomplishments of that prince were stained by a licentious passion which indulged in acts of violence with too little regard to the laws of society or even those of love.' In the case of Maximin, his vicious behaviour is that of one of Gibbon's 'monsters'. The narrative involves his cruel treatment of Diocletian and his family, especially his unsuccessful attempt to gratify his lust with Valeria the former emperor's daughter, and the spiteful revenge with which he pursued her. Yet here again the text refers to 'the fierce passions of the tyrant' and the accompanying footnote begins with the general indictment: 'The sensual appetites of Maximin were gratified at the expense of his subjects.' This note, another of those to suffer

1. See for example, his reference to certain errors which Gibbon had still failed to correct in his later edition of DF; Porson, op. cit., Preface, pp. xxxi-xxxii.
2. DF, xi, I, 323, n. 55.
3. DF, xi, I, 323.
4. DF, xiv, I, 461 and n. 93.
expurgation, goes on to instance from Lactantius, the way in which Maximin's creatures forced away from their homes the most charming and physically perfect 'wives and virgins' for the use of their master. There is nothing particularly offensive in the wording, only in the fact of the emperor's depravity, and certainly no indifference or lack of compassion in the historian's treatment of these deeds.

When Gibbon came to deal with Constantine's laws against rapes, there was no levity or absence of sympathy with the victims, but at the same time there was a compassionate condemnation of the barbaric punishments, more horrible than the crime itself. Gibbon regarded these laws as showing 'very little indulgence for the most amiable weaknesses of mankind', since they made no distinction between 'brutal violence' and 'the gentle seduction' which persuaded a young woman to leave her parents' house. Far from being deficient in humanity, however, the historian's reaction is a direct affirmation of it: 'Whenever the offence inspires less horror than the punishment, the rigour of penal law is obliged to give way to the common feelings of mankind.'

Another expurgated passage refers to Christian women's refusal to burn incense to Venus and is probably one that Porson and others saw as lacking sympathy for the persecuted Christians as well as being objectionable on grounds of impropriety. Possibly offence was taken at a sentence expressing the viewpoint of the pagan judge who regarded the violators of the honour of Venus as 'impious'. But the ironic thrust of the following sentence is directed not against the non-conforming Christians but rather against the timely and miraculous intervention which delivered the women from dishonour and especially against the legendary accounts

of their escapes. Apart from this repeated reaction to miracles, Gibbon's scorn is here aroused also by these legends so seriously recorded by ecclesiastical writers: 'The more ancient, as well as authentic, memorials of the church,' he complained, 'are seldom polluted with these extravagant and indecent fictions.' It is interesting to note in passing that while his critics found indecency in any reference to the fact of this persecution, Gibbon saw it in the extravagant and fictitious nature of the tales which masqueraded as genuine history. On the other hand, his attitude to the behaviour of the youths to whom the women were abandoned is perfectly clear from his reference to their 'licentious embraces'.

In the account of the revolt of Gildo, the Moorish leader, we are told that 'the fairest of their wives and daughters were prostituted to the embraces of the tyrant.' Here again the whole tone is one of disgust as Gibbon wrote of 'the passions of avarice and lust' of 'days...terrible to the rich' and 'nights...not less dreadful to husbands and parents'.

In the narrative of the pillage of Rome in A.D. 410, occurs the incident of 'a Roman lady of singular beauty and orthodox faith', who conquered her would-be ravisher by her courage and resolution. After admitting that 'such instances of courage and generosity were not extremely common', Gibbon made a statement which is fairly typical of his reaction in nearly all these cases of women being ravished: 'The brutal soldiers satisfied their sensual appetites without consulting either the inclination or the duties of their female captives.' Such a comment seems a sufficient

1. DF, xvi, II, 103.
2. DF, xxix, III, 245.
3. DF, xxxi, III, 342. Even in his footnotes concerning the 'nice question of casuistry' in the case of suicide to avoid violation of chastity, Gibbon showed no levity or indifference. Augustine, he admitted, 'treats the subject with remarkable accuracy'. See notes 106, 107 on that page.
answer to Porson's objection.

The style of the language, and hence the attitude it reflects, is similar throughout the other instances: 'dissolute youth', 'noble matrons prostituted to the lust of their servants'; men 'inhumanly massacred; their widows and daughters...embraced by the licentious soldiers'; 'the noblest virgins...abandoned to the promiscuous lust of the barbarians'.  

In fact the circumstances of these 'ravishings' are to Gibbon all quite plainly horrible and deplorable: a series of anarchic disorders, a riot of the blue faction in Constantinople, the sack of a city by fierce and unrestrained troops, or the brutal career of an inhuman tyrant. And even where there is no overt expression of the historian's horror or disgust, but merely a plain statement of fact, the 'context of situation' generally supplies their absence. If we read simply that during the Mosaic Jubilee of 1350, 'many wives and virgins were violated in the castles of Italy', this is recorded as part of 'the triple scourge of war, pestilence, and famine'; and the sentence goes on to parallel the violation of women with the pillage and murder of many strangers 'by the savage Romans'.

The chastity of 'the maids and matrons' of Rome was preserved from 'the passions of the hungry soldiers' of Totila: and this, we are told, was because of the humble request of the good archdeacon Pelagius who

1. DF, xI, IV, 236; xli, IV, 307; xlv, V, 80.
2. See, e.g. DF, lxviii, VII, 205: 'In the fall and the sack of great cities, an historian is condemned to repeat the tale of uniform calamity; the same effects must be produced by the same passions; and, when those passions may be indulged without control, small, alas! is the difference between civilized and savage man.'
3. To borrow a useful term from the linguist J.R. Firth which he borrowed from Bronislaw Malinowski.
4. DF, lxix, VII, 257.
gained Gibbon's commendation on this account. A more severe means of preservation is recorded in the proclamation of the death penalty for rape, issued by the crusading leaders in an attempt to save the people from their unruly invading bands. These leaders, the Marquis of Montferrat and the Count of Flanders, Gibbon described as 'the patron of discipline and decency' and as 'the mirror of chastity'. There is also the case of the execution of such a sentence during the revolt of Sicily, when a French soldier assaulted a noble maiden and 'the ravisher was instantly punished with death'. Sexual violation is usually seen in The Decline and Fall as part of the violation of human rights, of respect for personal dignity and of the social order.

There is one case in which Gibbon's attitude might appear ambiguous, perhaps, detached, or even indicative of ironic amusement. It is the incident of the Muslim chief who, during the siege of Salerno, 'sacrificed each night the virginity of a Christian nun' on the altar of a church. As he struggled with one of his victims, we are told, a beam fell from the roof and put an end to the 'lustful emir'. This is the first of three 'anecdotes' selected by Gibbon from 'the hostilities of the Arabs, the Franks and the Greeks', each one being 'expressive of their national manners'. The second is a deed of heroism and self sacrifice by a citizen who gave his life to save his fellow countrymen. The third, the incident of the woman pleading with Theobald to spare the masculinity of their menfolk, is the only one which Gibbon suggested 'may provoke a

1. DF, xliii, IV, 431.
2. DF, lx, VI, 423. Gibbon added that the 'cruelty and lust were moderated by the authority of the chiefs and feelings of the soldiers.'
smile amidst the horrors of war'. Furthermore the context once again helps us determine the tone of the historian in the first anecdote: the intention is to express the manners of the Saracens whose 'amusement' was 'to profane, as well as to pillage, the monasteries and churches'. This is its caption, and the absence of any suggestion of deep feeling or revulsion seems to be due to Gibbon's ironic comment directed against what he elsewhere called 'the seasonable interposition of some miraculous power'. Thus when we disregard general impressions and examine specific instances of the violation of women in *The Decline and Fall*, we find little evidence of lack of humanity.

As to his other objection, namely an indifference to the persecution of Christians, Porson found it illustrated in the whole of the sixteenth chapter, 'On the conduct of the Roman government towards the Christians, from the reign of Nero to that of Constantine'. Though Gibbon's religious attitude does not concern us at this point, I think it may safely be said that there is more substance in this objection than in the former. There is in chapter xvi, as in later parts of *The Decline and Fall*, an ironic tone towards the persecutions, or at least the stories of persecutions as traditionally accepted. Part of Gibbon's intention was to question the validity of such accounts, to suggest prejudice and exaggeration, and to vindicate the general tolerance of pagan Rome.

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1. DF, lvi, VI, 179.
2. DF, xvi, II, 103.
4. The moral implications of Gibbon's attitude towards Christianity have been examined in chapter VII.
5. See, e.g. chap. xvi, II, pp. 95 (point 4); 103; 113 ff and 118. In the last of these Gibbon concluded: 'In this mitigated persecution, we may still discover the indulgent spirit of Rome and of polytheism...'
Yet he did censure even Julian for bigotry and unfairness towards the Christians in denying them ordinary human rights. And it can truly be said that Gibbon never shows indifference to human suffering as such even where he may have had little sympathy with those who he thought provoked it.

Whereas Porson observed but 'a few freckles' as a very minor blemish in The Decline and Fall, prudish editors of the following century discovered many more which they felt should be removed in order to present an inoffensive Gibbon to the readers of their day. Dr. Bowdler, the most famous or notorious of these censors, who had already brought out his Family Shakespeare, sought to purge The Decline and Fall of 'improper language and erroneous principles'. His design was prompted by good intentions. He not only recognised the value, even the necessity of a study of history for 'every man of education', but especially admired Gibbon's work. His Memoirs seemed to Bowdler to reveal 'a man of so much candour or so incapable of disguise' that the detailed discussion of his studies and his writing to be found there was such 'as no scholar can peruse without interest and admiration.' And for The Decline and Fall there is almost unqualified praise: 'As an historian, the universal acknowledgement of the literary world has placed him in the very highest rank; and in that rank, had his taste been equal to his knowledge, if his vast powers of intellect could have descended to a simplicity of narrative, he would have stood without a rival.' This work, Bowdler

1. DF, xxiii, II, 487. But compare Gibbon's comment on Julian's edict of toleration: 'the only harshlp which he inflicted on the Christians was to deprive them of the power of tormenting their fellow-subjects' (xxiii, II, 469).
2. As a possible exception to this general rule, see above, chap.VII, pp. 400-1.
4. 'Life and Writings of Edward Gibbon, Esq.', prefaced to Vol. I, pp. xxxviii, xxxix.
was certain, would continue 'to be found from generation to generation, 
not only in the libraries of the learned, but on the reading-desk of 
every student.' With a desire to extend the wide acceptance of so 
indispensable a work even further, the Doctor, in preparing an edition 
especially designed 'for the use of Families and Young Persons', showed 
an understandable desire to spare the blushes and embarrassed questions 
which the book might otherwise provoke in the refined homes of nineteenth-
century England. And he looked forward to the day when his own name 
and other additions might disappear from the title page, so that Gibbon's 
work would stand solely as a monument to 'the exertion of the splendid 
talents of the original author.'

A close comparison of Bowdler's edition with the original shows 
how conscientiously the expurgator had done his work of removing 'anything 
which might be thought objectionable, on account of irreligious tendency 
or indecent expression'. What sort of things had to go? First the 
contentious chapters on the establishment of Christianity disappeared along 
with a number of others, as being not merely irreligious, but also 
'interruptions of the history'. Both in his Introduction and in his text, 
Bowdler seemed more concerned with the 'irreligious' than with the 
'indecent'. Indeed, in dedicating his edition 'To the Christian Reader 
of Roman History', he declared that he would be satisfied if his efforts 
turned out to be 'the means of preventing the mind of one sincere believer 
in divine revelation from being perverted by learned and ingenious 
sophistry.' His only reference to Porson had to do with that critic's

1. Introduction, p.x. 
2. Introduction, pp. xi-xii. 
   Bowdler concluded: 'Satis me vixisse arbitrator, si aliquid a 
   semita speciosae sed falsae philosophiae ad iter coeleste veritas 
   felix direxerim.' (p. vi).
charge that Gibbon seemed to look for an opportunity of insulting
Christianity. Moreover he was far less outspoken than Porson on the
matter of Gibbon's 'indecencies' of which he made comparatively little
in his Introduction. But within the text his scissors were busy
removing offending passages, as a few examples will show.

In the description of the grove of Daphne 'consecrated to health
and joy, to luxury and love', the next sentence was omitted as it was
also by later expurgators: 'The vigorous youth pursued, like Apollo,
the object of his desires; and the blushing maid was warned, by the
fate of Daphne, to shun the folly of unseasonable coyness.' Nothing
very suggestive here, one would think, in comparison with what the
young student would have encountered in ordinary editions of the Greek
and Latin authors. Furthermore, the following sentence, where Bowdler
returned to Gibbon's original text, shows the unmistakable moral point
of the whole paragraph. Here the context and the historian's comment
on the seductive power of the pagan grove underline the wisdom and
manliness of avoiding unnecessary temptation. 'The soldier and the
philosopher wisely avoided the temptation of this sensual paradise:
where pleasure, assuming the character of religion, imperceptibly
dissolved the firmness of manly virtue.' In Bowdler's eyes it was only
the more specific scene, translating the general terms 'luxury and love'
into actuality, which seemed dangerous to younger readers or objection­
able to the refined adult.

Once again, in Gibbon's demonstration of the rigorous chastity
of Julian, Bowdler deemed it prudent to omit certain phrases, those
here shown between brackets: 'In the warm climate of Assyria [which

2. DF, xxiii, II, 492.
solicited a luxurious people to the gratification of every sensual
desire], a youthful conqueror preserved his chastity pure and inviolate:
nor was Julian ever tempted even by a motive of curiosity to visit his
female captives [of exquisite beauty, who instead of resisting his power,
would have disputed with each other the honour of his embraces].' These
textual omissions carried with them, needless to say, that of the
footnote based on Sallust and Quintus Curtius, which referred to the
behaviour of the women in 'the licentious banquets of Babylon'.

In the discussion of Valentinian's alleged polygamy, we find the
deletion of the whole 'fable' as Gibbon himself called it, of the lovely
Justina, introduced by the empress Severa 'into her familiar society',
then by the emperor Valentinian into his bed; and consequent upon this
his edict granting similar marital latitude to his subjects. However,
one might almost say that there is no necessary reflection on Gibbon's
moral sensitivity in this deletion, as the 'fable' could perhaps equally
have been excluded on the grounds of tightening up the narrative, which
is essentially an account of Valentinian's family and immediate successors;
and Gibbon himself admitted the anecdote to have only the slightest
support and to be a 'foolish story, so repugnant to the laws and manners
of the Romans that it scarcely deserves the formal and elaborate
dissertation of M. Bonamy.' Granted that the reference to an emperor's
taking a concubine would be seen by an editor of the Bowdler school as
having both an 'irreligious' and an 'immoral tendency', the actual

1. DF, xxiv, II, 527 and n. 63. See also Bury's addition to this
note. The Warne editor (see above, p. 568, n. 3) retained the three
words 'of exquisite beauty', but deleted all the following clause.
2. DF, xxv, III, 69 and n. 162.
expression in the anecdote is certainly not 'stained with improper language'.

Bowdler carefully excised most references to amorous desires, especially to the consummation of marriage, and to certain amorous adventures like those of the princess Honoria, which in her case, are closely related to the history of the times, as well as having a compassionate and pathetic appeal of their own. The account of the empress Theodora, which Gibbon undertook to defend against his detractors, was severely pruned by Bowdler. And, to take an example from his final chapter, that on the siege and fall of Constantinople, Bowdler expunged scenes of disappointed religious hopes as well as those of attacks on beautiful women and on nuns seeking refuge at the altar. Indeed, in view of the mildness of some of the deleted passages, we are surprised to find others that are left intact: 'the unfeeling critics who consider every amorous weakness an indelible stain', the homosexual assault of the charioteer on a beautiful boy of Constantinople, an unabridged account of the marriage of Arcadius with references to the bride being conducted to his bed, the record of the sale of the noblest maidens of Rome into 'matrimonial prostitution' - though with the strange emendation of 'lust' to 'licentiousness' - and the complete story of 'the ambitious Rosamond'.

2. DF, xxix, III, 251-2 (Bowdler III, 484) is an example.
3. For example, DF, lxix, VII, 42 (Bowdler, V, 314).
4. DF, xxxv, III, 481-3 (Bowdler, III, 456).
7. DF, lxvii, VII, 203-4 (Bowdler, V, 436ff).
8. For other retentions in Bowdler see DF, xxvii, III, 172; xxvii, III, 181; xxxix, III, 235-6; xxxi, III, 346; xliv, V, 13-15 (Bowdler, II, 434; 444; 467-9; III, 94). See also Bowdler, II, 335; III, 99: IV, 268, 288; IV, 240ff, 266 (sections on 'incest, concubines, bastards and pederasty', in the Code of Justinian); V, 20 21; 402 (violent cruelty in the fall of Constantinople), none of which he deleted.
Such are the difficulties of maintaining a consistent prudery, that one case of retention of the text cancels out an equivalent expurgation and the dispassionate reader asks how the criteria of 'decency' are being applied. However, the effect of the expurgator's uncertainty as to what is offensive as distinct from mere plain speech, together with the relatively small amount of material actually deleted, is to leave Gibbon's moral reputation very little scathed even when the bowdlerisers have done their worst.

Yet it is hardly possible to gain from Bowdler's edition an accurate estimate of the extent of what he felt obliged to delete on the score of 'indecency'. As has been shown, he was influenced even more strongly by purely religious considerations and also by his ideas of relevance to the actual aim and title of the History. In this way not only did he omit the two chapters on the rise and progress of Christianity, but also those on its establishment under Constantine, its heresies and controversies, the final destruction of paganism and the introduction of the worship of saints and relics, the monastic life, the doctrine of the incarnation, images and iconoclasm, the Paulicians and later sects, and the final chapters on Rome and the papacy. These chapters, eleven in all, seemed to the editor, 'for the most part immaterial', as being part of the history of the church and the pontificate, rather than that of the declining empire. Since Bowdler omitted seventeen complete

1. Chapters xv, xvi, xx, xxi, xxvii, xxxvii, xlvi, xlix, liv, lxix and lxx.
2. See Bowdler's Introduction, p. viii and Vol. V, pp. 449-450. Apart from the question of relevance of chapters up to lxxviii, he stated: 'The taking of Constantinople is obviously the conclusion of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire'; and though he had once intended to include the final chapter, he felt it to be somewhat dated by 1825 in view of new discoveries and new views on ancient Rome.
chapters and these include the three in which the later expurgated edition published by Warne & Co. made the greatest cuts, one can only surmise what and how much he would have censored in these chapters.

It is therefore safer to base a comparison with the original work on this later edition which is described on its title page as a 'verbatim reprint', and which reproduces every chapter and every footnote except those notes or parts of them which are considered objectionable. The anonymous editor offers no introductory explanation, and no prefatory remarks other than those of Gibbon appear in the three volumes. Some of the passages or sentences omitted by Bowdler are also omitted in this 'reprint', but the editor is far less squeamish about indelicacies than his predecessor. Yet even a word or a short phrase has been removed in a number of places, showing that nothing seemed to escape the editorial scrutiny. Taking this edition as a more useful example of an expurgated Gibbon, let us see how far the historian's work still gave offence.

Religious objections lay behind a number of cuts, but unless we confine our attention to a few pages of chapter xv, this number is certainly small, for in the work as a whole there are probably not more than seventeen of such deletions amounting in all to about two full pages. Some of these were obviously seen as slurs on Christianity or on the clergy, or as the scornful innuendoes of a sceptical historian; some must have seemed to be unfair judgements or erroneous statements which should be removed; some again are purely questions of theology, like the reference to the doctrine of the Millenium or the illuminating example of the theological discussions to be heard in the market-places of Constantinople, an example taken, in fact, from one of the church
fathers.  

There were certain passages, also in a religious context, but where the objection was quite clearly to the sexual suggestions, while the rest were felt to be guilty of introducing matters of sex too explicitly or too suggestively, or at any rate of containing indelicacy of expression. The bulk of these, which reflect Bowdler's point of view in a less extreme form, consist of just a very few lines, even a phrase, though the section on Mahomet's relations with women and the anecdote of the wife's plea to Theobald, which Gibbon felt 'may provoke a smile amidst the horrors of war' necessitated extensive cuts. It is necessary to consider the tone of some of these passages in order to judge how far it might be inconsistent with that of the moralist or, indeed, of a 'decent historian' as Gibbon described himself.

In the first place there are those already referred to amongst Bowdler's deletions, such as the description of the seductive vale of Daphne, Julian's avoidance of his female captives, the 'fable' of the lovely Justina, and the many references to the charms and the

1. It is, as Bury pointed out, from Gregory of Nyssa (see DF, III, App. No. 8, p. 523), though Gibbon took it from Jortin's Remarks on Ecclesiastical History, having been unable to trace the original reference.
2. For example, DF, xv, II, 39-40; xvi, II, 103, 123.
3. DF, 1, 402-5. The Warne editor cut 54 lines from this part of a chapter which suffered the heaviest pruning of all.
4. DF, xvi, VI, 180; this anecdote occupies 32½ lines in Bury. The 'smile' freezes in the Warne edition, as the next sentence merely informs us of the 'wanton cruelty' of Theobald and leaves the matter there.
5. DF, xli, IV, 358, where Gibbon avoided 'an appellation which may not drop from the pen of a decent historian', an excuse which Porson, in a paragraph on his 'rage for indecency' found highly incongruous: 'this is the same man who is so prudish that he dares not call Belisarius a cuckold...' (Preface, xxx). In the austere style of the Histories, Tacitus also sought to avoid 'vulgar words and the usages of common speech,' e.g. 'brothels', (II.93). See M. Grant, The Ancient Historians. London, 1970, p. 293, n. 33.
promiscuity of Theodora. But there are also other like the following:
the mention of the women on the ramparts during the siege of Amida,
revealing to the attackers 'their most secret charms', a scene
interpreted by the Magi, we are told, as an omen of success;¹ a too
detailed reference to the scandalous conduct of a patriarch of Alexandria
and the females he entertained in his palace;² the suggestion that the
mature age of the empress Zoe was 'less favourable to the hopes of
pregnancy than to the indulgence of pleasure' and her disappointment
in not finding her second husband 'a vigorous and grateful lover';³
the discussion of the sexual prowess of Charlemagne and his ambiguous
relationship with his two daughters;⁴ the nefarious behaviour of Pope
John XII;⁵ the gallantries of 'the great Bertha';⁶ the emir's nightly
sacrifice of the virginity of the nuns of Salerno;⁷ or the enumeration
of 'the deeds of darkness' alleged by Innocent III against the pilgrims
in Constantinople and the certainty that the Eastern capital 'contained
a stock of venal or willing beauty, sufficient to satiate the desires
of twenty thousand' of their number.⁸ In none of these instances, nor
in fact in any of the deleted passages, does one find any 'indecencies'
of language, however offensive the sentiments might have been to some
readers.

The Warne editor, though retaining a number of passages too strong
for Bowdler, nevertheless took offence at certain terms for which there

1. DF, x1, IV, 276.
2. DF, xlvi1, V, 133 and note 64. This chapter on doctrine, was
omitted by Bowdler.
3. DF, xlvi1, V, 232.
4. DF, xlv1, V, 303 and notes 101, 102.
5. DF, xliv, V, 318; the Latin source in note 141 is also omitted.
6. DF, liii1, VI, 92.
7. DF, lvi1, VI, 178-9.
8. DF, lx, VI, 423.
is hardly any real alternative. Thus he deleted all references to Theodora as a 'prostitute' as well as the more daring allusions to her behaviour; and the reference to 'the mother of Antonina' as 'a theatrical prostitute' is changed to 'an actress'. By the same rule, not only does his text omit the record of Theodora as 'a prostitute who had danced upon the stage', but also in a description of a scene of 'sacrilege and mockery' enacted by the crusaders in Constantinople, the record of another 'prostitute' who was 'seated on the throne of the patriarch'. So, too, the names of sins or crimes with which Innocent III charged the pilgrims, or those which the Council of Constance heard against John XXIII — fornication, adultery, incest, rape and sodomy — are carefully expunged from these records, though not from the Code of Justinian, which, with the exception of two-and-a-half footnotes, is printed unabridged.

Such an editorial attitude and policy throws light on the uncertainties of those who by allegation or expurgation brought against Gibbon's *History* charges of indecency or of lapses from moral rectitude.

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1. A synonym such as 'harlot' is not a real alternative, and euphemistic periphrases would be awkward. He retained the phrase 'youthful harlot', IV, 230 (Warne II, 462). Surprisingly he was not offended by a metaphorical use in the nickname for the 'political verses', 'those common prostitutes, as from their easiness, they are styled by Leo Allatius' (iili, VI, 113, n. 119; Warne, III, 316, n. 2).

2. DF, xI, IV, 230, 233; and cf. reference to 'the naked scenes' which she exhibited in the theatre as related by Procopius; also to a fragment of the *Anecdotes*, 'somewhat too naked' and suppressed in some editions; see p. 227 and n. 24.


6. DF, lx, VI, 423, and lxx, VII, 300.

7. DF, xliiv, IV, 512, 535-6; in Warne, II, 650 and 666. The notes in question are numbers 120 and 200 on pp. 508 and 536. In note 201, p. 536, Warne printed the reference to the abolition of 'the subterraneous brothels of Rome', but deleted the following phrase, 'in which the prostitution of both sexes was acted with impunity.' (Warne, II, 666, n. 3).
Was it the record of an act or merely its name which gave offence? Should a reprobate pope be charged with lesser crimes but not with those which had earned him his evil reputation? It seemed impossible for the censors to follow consistently even the rather doubtful principles they espoused. Nor can this inconsistency be due to their overlooking an offending passage in one place which they had deleted in another. The eagle eye of the Warne editor, for example, never failed to perceive the unacceptable word or phrase even in a footnote.

This lack of consistency is thus to be found between different editors and between different parts of the same edition. Some passages which Bowdler retained intact, the Warne editor, though on the whole much more faithful to the original text, carefully removed. In one such case, dealing with the long and absolute control of Antonia over her husband, he dropped the words, 'and if Antonina disdained the merit of conjugal fidelity', before the main part of the sentence, 'she expressed a manly friendship to Belisarius, whom she accompanied with undaunted resolution in all the hardships and dangers of a military life.' Yet he had admitted in the preceding sentence that the chastity of 'the fair and subtle Antonina' has been stained with the foulest reproach, and somewhat further on that 'the evidence of facts' is such 'that the fame, and even the virtue of Belisarius, were polluted by the lust and cruelty of his wife'. A similar inconsistency shows

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1. As Gibbon remarked in connection with the policies of Augustus: 'mankind is governed by names', DF, iii, I, 78.
2. He removed from the text the word 'successful' before 'ravisher' in the laws of Constantine (xiv, I, 468) and the phrase 'and had perhaps debauched' from a note stating that Francis Philadelphus 'married...the daughter of John' (Ixvi, VII, 120, n. 82). The references in Warne are I, 326 and II, 672, n.5.
4. DF, xli, IV, 294; Warne II, 504.
5. DF, xli, IV, 358; Warne II, 548.
itself in other types of context. Silk garments, which exposed 'to the public eye naked draperies and transparent matrons' and 'which showed the turn of the limb and the colour of the skin', might, we are told in this edition, 'gratify vanity', though not, as we might also expect from this context, and as Gibbon went on to add, 'provoke desire.'¹

Still, apparently without a blush, this editor included the story of Aglae, the pious Roman lady who 'mixed love with devotion' and reputedly admitted her favourite steward, Boniface, 'to share her bed'.² It is hard to predict what one will find and what will be missing from the text.

The 'moral' criteria employed bear no apparent relation to the tone or intent of the passage as a whole. Strangely the Warne editor felt it incumbent on him to remove a number of references to women being 'ravished' or 'embraced', even some which gave no offence to Bowdler.³ Yet the historian's language is innocuous and his tone in these passages is usually one of horror and disgust. Stranger still is the deletion of passages of clearly moral tendency in which the expurgator and his prudish readers apparently failed to look beyond the surface of what strike us as quite harmless expressions, to the underlying intention. That on the wearing of silks might be one such, or the salutary examples of Julian and of Belisarius, untempted by the beauty of their female captives,⁴

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¹. DF, xl, IV, 244, cf. Warne, II, 472.
². DF, xvi, II, 140; Warne I, 426. Contrast his omission of the two bracketed words in 'the palace was [adorned or] polluted by the visits of his female favourites', lxii, VII, 91.
³. DF, xxvi, IV, 14, a sentence on Avitus; xli, IV, 307, a reference to widows and daughters 'embraced by the licentious soldiers'. Both references, deleted in Warne, had been retained by Bowdler (see his chapters xxx, xxxiv, III, 268, IV, 23). Similar passages which Warne omitted are li, V, 460, n. 88, where only the second half of the note is dropped; and lxix, VII, 257; cf. Warne, III, 200, n.1; III, 761.
⁴. DF, xxiv, II, 527 and xli, IV, 357 (Warne, I, 691; II, 548).
the oblique and condemnatory reference to the horrors inflicted by Gildo, Justinian's moral blindness in the choice of a consort, or the virtuous resistance of Baldwin to the temptations of an amorous queen.

One might with equal justice perceive an instance of the moral obtuseness of such editors in the deletion of an important sentence in Gibbon's discussion of the dangers encountered by 'the virtue of chastity' from a highly civilized, polished and luxurious way of life. The context is the strong preservation of this virtue amongst the Germanic peoples, especially as reflected in the 'honest pleasure' of Tacitus who contrasted it with the dissolute behaviour of the ladies of Rome. Seeking the 'probable causes' for the weakening of chastity in civilized society, Gibbon suggested 'softness of the mind', 'refinements' which 'polish' but also 'corrupt ... the intercourse of the sexes; the elegance of dress, of motion, and of manners, which gives a lustre to beauty', but also 'inflames the senses through the imagination'; and finally the 'luxurious entertainments, midnight dances, and licentious spectacles' which 'present at once temptation and opportunity to female frailty'. All this the Warne editor included, yet deleted the equally moral and equally inoffensive sentence which continues the argument from 'the intercourse of the sexes', and which lays an essential explanatory basis for the causes which are to follow: 'The gross appetite of love becomes most dangerous, when it is elevated, or rather disguised by sentimental

1. DF, xxix, III, 245 (Warne, II, 128).
2. DF, xl, IV, 233 (Warne, II, 464, end of paragraph).
3. DF, lxI, VI, 444 (Warne, III, 533). He might have been expected to have omitted merely the last part relating the brutal punishment inflicted on Baldwin.
passion.' On what possible ground of decency or even delicacy was this sentence removed? One might suggest that it is not only a necessary unit in the sequence of Gibbon's exposition, but also a necessary warning for his young readers, exposed to the elegant 'disguises' of a superficial society so familiar to Gibbon from his experiences in both London and Paris. The sentence in question reminds us of the historian's description of his own early love in Lausanne. Recalling this episode, he was most careful to distinguish the 'pure and exalted sentiment' from that 'grosser appetite' which we share with the animal creation, and was equally careful to avoid any connotation of 'gallantry...which has originated in the spirit of chivalry and is interwoven with the texture of French manners'.

His early experience of love was not lost on the moralist historian or on the author of the Memoirs.

We have seen that the material deleted from The Decline and Fall by the inconsistent zeal of the expurgators was in most cases very brief and hardly what any fair-minded modern reader would class as 'indecent'. In passages of licentiousness and lust, these vices are shown for what they are, and even the social disguises are stripped off romantic love in the interest of truth and moral awareness. Where the passages concern the character of an individual or the life of a people, the author's broad aim is to throw light on as many aspects as possible in order to reach a deeper understanding of them. Even the deleted sections on Mahomet, his sexual and religious fervour, his relations with women, and his regulations on such matters for his followers, all form part of a

1. DF, ix, I, 245 (Warne, I, 179).
2. Memoirs, p.84; and see above, chap. II, p. 54.
serious and objective treatment of Islam and its founder. The study of social life and manners was to Gibbon a very important and most interesting part of history as both his assertions and his practice show. These particular sections on Mahomet and the Arabs are part and parcel of his treatment of peoples and manners in The Decline and Fall, though here the subject is sexual manners. Under the same heading could be included the offending 'anecdotes' of 'the lustful emir' and the wife's plea on behalf of her husband's masculinity, which Gibbon selected as 'expressive of national manners'. Or again, a more individual example of manners and attitudes can be found in the omitted note on the outstanding chastity of Zenobia, a historical figure who seemed intensely interesting to Gibbon. The note gives point to the general assertion of the text, by informing us in a very matter of fact fashion that 'she never admitted her husband's embraces but for the sake of posterity', only repeating the experiment in the following month 'if her hopes were baffled'.

The few remaining examples of expurgation fall mainly into two classes: comments by the historian, dry, ironic or perhaps whimsical, and those more daring and frequently untranslatable quotations. Both these groups are almost confined to footnotes, but one, probably the earliest in the text to catch the eye of the bowdlerisers, has often been referred to by later writers on Gibbon. No objection was taken to the main point of the particular sentence, namely the varied inclinations of the younger Gordian, exemplified by his 'twenty-two acknowledged concubines and a library of 62,000 volumes'; but the comment which must

1. This objectivity was on occasions influenced by his sources and by a strain of polemic; see above, chapter VII, p. 383.
2. DF, lvi, VI, 178.
3. DF, xi, I, 325, n. 63.
ions have appeared gratuitously naughty, had to go: 'and from the productions which he left behind him, it appears that both the one and the other, were designed for use rather than for ostentation.'¹ It is this type of passage which a recent biographer calls 'civilized entertainment'² even if it did not strike some earlier editors in this way.³ Then there is the footnote which quotes from Hume's History of England the account of the punishment of castration performed by order of Geoffrey of Normandy on the whole chapter of the cathedral of Sées. It was cited by Gibbon as a tyrannical and 'singular act of cruelty', but it is capped by an additional observation which he went on to make: 'Of the pain and danger they might justly complain; yet since they had vowed chastity, he deprived them of a superfluous treasure.'⁴ It is a philosophical observation, perfectly logical and perfectly fair. There is not even a definite tone of sarcasm. It is simply one of those remarks that the genteel might have described as 'unnecessary', an epithet strictly applicable in a more literal sense to the note as a whole. But it is one of those peripheral pieces of information which go to make Gibbon's History what it is. We might almost imagine the historian replying to anyone who took exception to the note, 'Honi soit qui mal y pense.'

But such a note seems to lead on naturally to that notorious group which hostile critics might seize on with perhaps more justice. They

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¹ DF, vii, I, 191. The comment is deleted together with a mere three words in the accompanying note: 'His literary productions [though less numerous] were by no means contemptible'. (n. 23) The descriptive phrase, 'the saints who had forgotten the distinction of the sexes', is likewise erased from a reference to the only males not excluded by the pious Pulcheria and her sisters, xxxii, II, 406.

² Michael Joyce, Edward Gibbon, p. 166.

³ Cf. also Virginia Woolf's reaction to it in 'The Historian and "The Gibbon"', The Death of the Moth and Other Essays. London, 1943, p.59.

⁴ DF, lxix, VII, 225, n. 15.
are mainly of the type which Gibbon admitted 'may be transcribed but cannot be translated', and of which the example cited by Porson, is one. Amongst these we find a bracket of three on the empress Theodora, consisting of a few lines from Procopius and a line of Latin, all 'somewhat too naked' for translation. In a passage referring to the proscription of unnatural vice, Gibbon endorsed a very moral and very severe judgement against this 'degeneracy', but his note referring to the treatment of the subject by the Roman writers was expurgated. It simply stated that 'a crowd of disgraceful passages will force themselves on the memory of every classic reader', of which a couplet from Ovid, untranslated, provided a single illustration.

Other notes in this category are one containing two lines in Greek of the evidence heard against the patriarch by the Council of Chalcedon, with the addition of an epigrammatic couplet from the Greek Anthology; another three lines of Greek from the Acts of the second Nicene Council, documenting the incident of the monk and the demon of fornication, and designed to show the 'superstition...ignorance...falsehood and folly' of these Acts; the Latin original from Liutprand, of the evil deeds of John XII, the substance of which is given in the text; and a mild line of Latin from one of Gibbon's major sources, Ammianus Marcellinus, concerning the 'libidinous complexion' of the Arabs. Certainly the

1. DF, Ii, V, 424, n. 2, a phrase referring to the salutation between Mahomet and a prophetess.  
3. DF, xliiv, IV, 536 and n. 200.  
4. DF, xlvii, V, 133, n. 64.  
5. DF, xlix, V, 296, n. 80.  
6. DF, xlix, V, 318, n. 141.  
7. DF, 1, V, 403, n. 171.
most blatant note goes much beyond this general assertion, in its
description of the sexual 'gifts' of Mahomet, though it is necessarily
veiled in the Latin of Gibbon's authorities. With this must be grouped
the note next but one, which discusses in plain English the thirteenth
labour of Hercules.¹ But there is also a note which, despite its rather
different ring, was nevertheless deleted. It consists of two lines
of Latin from Liutprand referring to the trade in eunuchs and it called
forth from Gibbon a cry of moral indignation: 'The last abomination
of the abominable slave trade!'²

On this class of notes Gibbon wrote in his own defence in the
Memoirs what he had already written by way of explanation in the History:
they 'are left in the obscurity of a learned language'.³ First as mere
footnotes and secondly as being left untranslated, that are doubly
unobtrusive and therefore presumably inoffensive. In some cases he
could also plead that he was simply citing, not just an original source,
but an ecclesiastical author. A rather dubious remark of Manomet regard­
ing his caresses for his daughter was not only veiled in Latin, but as
Gibbon informed his reader, 'has been communicated to the public by the
Reverend Father Maracci, in his Version and Confutation of the Koran'.⁴

In his note on the comparison of Mahomet's sexual vigour with the
thirteenth labour of Hercules, Gibbon wrote: 'I borrow the style of a

¹. DF, 1, 404, n. 175 and 405, n. 177.
². DF, iii, VI, 82, n. 39. Other such notes are that on Hugo's three
favourite concubines (iii, VI, 92, n. 69); a line of Greek in which
Gibbon felt that Anna Comnena 'somewhat too wantonly' praised her
betrothed (i, VI, 202, n. 76); the description of a Turkish camp,
cited by Porson as an obscenity (i, VI, 261, n. 61); and a seamy
piece of court evidence from the Council of Constance (i, VI,
272, n. 6).
³. Memoirs, p. 193; DF, xi, IV, 228 ('veiled in the obscurity of a
learned language').
⁴. DF, xxxiii, III, 418, n. 2. The reference in the text is to
Constantius and his sister Placidia.
father of the church', namely Gregory Nazianzen. For both the untranslated Latin of the charges heard against Conrad's wife at the Council of Constance, and for the 'anecdote' of 'the lustful emir', included in the text, Gibbon was able to express his indebtedness to Cardinal Baronius. In defence of what he knew some would consider a 'licentious' anecdote, taken, like so many other references, from Liutprand, he suggested he might 'exclaim with poor Sterne, that it is hard if I may not transcribe with caution what a bishop could write without scruple! What if I had translated?' he asked, referring to an indelicate Latin phrase from the bishop's record of the anecdote in question.

Similarly, in an ironical tribute to an English bishop with whom he had engaged in literary controversy, Gibbon confessed that 'without Warburton's critical telescope' applied to a particular reference, he would never have seen 'in the general picture of triumphant vice, any personal allusion to Theodora'. Was this the same bishop he had in mind a few notes earlier, when, after citing some untranslatable lines from Procopius, he referred to 'a learned prelate, now deceased', who, he had heard, 'was fond of quoting this passage in conversation.'

Probably the first real publicity given to these 'obscene' footnotes was in the opening pages of the Gentleman's Magazine the month after the publication of Gibbon's final volumes. Without editorial comment and

1. DF, 1, V, 405, n. 176.
2. DF, lviii, VI, 272, n. 6 and lvi, VI, 179, n. 11. Cf. Baronius on Theodora, xl, IV, 233, n. 40.
3. DF, lvi, VI, 180-1, n. 15. Yet Gibbon did admit that 'the bishop of Cremona was a lover of scandal' (liii, VI, 92, n. 69).
5. DF, xl, IV, 227-8, n. 24. Warburton, who died in 1779, seems the most likely candidate.
simply under the heading 'Selections from Mr. Gibbon's learned and
text of Mr. Gibbon's Notes to the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Volumes of the
DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE,' the first three pages of the
June issue were devoted to the spiciest of these offending footnotes.\textsuperscript{1}
It was something of a test case and Mr. Urban had set the cat among the
pigeons. A correspondent in the next issue, expressed in strangely
archaic language, the grief of the editor's 'constant readers and well-
wishers' that he had sullied his pages with 'those filthy extracts from
a silly book called "The History of the Declension (sic) and Fall of
the Roman Empire"' and pointed to certain texts of scripture forbidding
indecent communication.\textsuperscript{2} Other writers echoed these sentiments of
indignation at the pure pages of the Magazine being 'for the first time
defiled with the filthy rakings of a celebrated Historian.'\textsuperscript{3} One
correspondent came forward with a moderate defence or extenuation of
Gibbon, and though admitting concern that he had 'infringed on the dignity
of history by the introduction of indecency,'\textsuperscript{4} denied that these notes,
even when printed in the vernacular, would be likely to corrupt any
virtuous woman. The debate smouldered on in the columns of the Magazine,\textsuperscript{5}
though soon the theological issues reappeared with a trinitarian defence
defended of the disputed 'Three Heavenly Witnesses' text and a review of Porson's
demolition of it in his \textit{Letters to Mr. Archdeacon Travis}.\textsuperscript{6}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Apart from a few quite innocuous ones on the gross appetite and
greed of Charlemagne and a caliph, two brutal or bloodthirsty
references, Alp Arslan's epitaph and a few uncomplimentary comments
on Dr. Johnson. The selection, however, contained the offensive
note cited by Porson. See pp. 571-2 above.
\item \textsuperscript{2} \textit{Gentleman's Magazine}, Vol. 58, Pt. II, July, 1788, pp. 599-600,
unsigned.
\item \textsuperscript{3} \textit{ibid.}, Supplement for the year 1788, Vol. 58, p. 1157.
\item \textsuperscript{4} \textit{ibid.}, Vol. 59, July 1789, p.610.
\item \textsuperscript{5} e.g. J.M.'s (Milner) return to the attack, Aug., 1789, Vol. 59,
pp. 709-710 and Caroloman's retraction of a phrase to humour his
\item \textsuperscript{6} \textit{ibid.}, Vol. 58, Aug., 1788, pp. 700-2; Vol. 60, Oct., 1790,
pp. 919-920.
\end{itemize}
Such was the beginning of that 'clamour' against the indecency of his final volumes, which Gibbon claimed he could never understand. Yet, as with the religious clamour against which Hume had warned him, he might have had his suspicions in view of the defence he had already built in for some of these contexts. And against the possible imputation of the 'indecency', or at least the 'freedom' of some of his notes, he had taken the opportunity of showing that he had good ecclesiastical support for their inclusion. He probably felt secure in the company of the Church Fathers, bishops and learned Catholic scholars.

But whatever defence he or his supporters might make, this small group of 'doubtful' footnotes should be seen as simply part of the numerous and many-sided collection which exhibit the author's keen and lively interest in an encyclopaedic range of odd and interesting topics: natural history, sociology, geography, classical erudition, etymology, religion, exploration, philosophy and sometimes sex. The host of innocent, odd, scholarly and informative notes remind us of Gibbon's remark about Bayle to whose work he so often sent his reader: 'The sceptic of Rotterdam exhibits, according to his custom, a strange medley of loose knowledge and lively wit.' A similar delight is shown by Gibbon in his own 'medley' of footnotes, always learned, often curious and intriguing, and occasionally perhaps a trifle indelicate. He wishes to share with his reader some 'odd particulars' he has learned

2. Ibid., p. 168.
3. See e.g. above, pp. 593 & n.2, 594 & n.5, 595 & n.3, 596 & nn. 2, 4.
4. This is shown quite clearly in the example cited above from Liutprand's Legatio (DF, livi, VI, 180-1, n.15); and cf. Memoirs, p. 193, with its reference to the Rev. Mr. Joseph Warton.
5. DF, xxv, III, 17, n. 47.
from Malaterra about the introduction of camels and carrier pigeons into Sicily, about the flatulence allegedly produced by a tarantula bite, and throws in an equally odd etymology. ¹ There is the surprising incident in which Martin of Tours 'imprudently committed a miracle' simply because he 'once mistook (as Don Quixote might have done) an harmless funeral for an idolatrous procession';² or there is a 'whimsical' piece of information on the origin of the name Picards.³ Gibbon's zest for such notes is felt again and again in his invitations or asides to his reader to enjoy an illuminating trifle: 'Read, if you can, the life and miracles of St. Louis';⁴ 'I must not conceal a piece of ancient scandal concerning the origin of this ulcer' said to have been inflicted by the devil on the thigh of St. Simeon Stylites;⁵ 'I cannot overlook a stupendous and laughable blunder of Rienzi', arising from a confusion of meanings and etymologies;⁶ 'I had forgot another popular and orthodox protester', the emperor's 'favourite hound' which usually lay quietly at his feet, but which 'barked most furiously' on hearing the reading of an act of union which might compromise the Greek creed;⁷ and there is that slightly apologetic afterthought: 'I have disdained to mention a very foolish, and probably a false report, of Honorius' alarm at the supposed loss of a favourite chicken named 'Rome', till he discovered it was 'only the capital of the world, which had been lost'.⁸

¹. DF, livi, VI, 200, n. 70.
². DF, xxviii, III, 207, n. 36.
³. DF, liviii, VI, 269, n. 1.
⁴. DF, lix, VI, 374, n. 104.
⁵. DF, xxxvii, IV, 80, n. 73.
⁷. DF, lxvi, VII, 117, n. 71.
It is not just in the light of the serious purpose of the work as a whole, but also in the context of such innocent and interesting addenda as these, illustrating the full spectrum of Gibbon's informative notes on a vast range of subjects, that those allegedly indecent exceptions should be judged. It is perhaps hard, he might have objected that 'the historian of the Roman Empire' should be singled out for including 'with caution' these very few notes of a sexual nature which clerics 'could write without scruple'.\(^1\) And, of course, it was the clerics who made up the front line of the attack.

It is an unfortunate thing, and particularly unfortunate for writers like Gibbon, that in traditional Christian thinking, sex too often appeared perilously like sin, and the euphemisms, 'moral' and 'immoral' came to be narrowly identified with chastity. It may have seemed to him that his detractors had concentrated on the 'freedom' he took with religious matters in his earlier volumes and had then discovered another cause for attacking his later volumes. Yet he claimed to be no more guilty of indecency in these than in the first part of his work, while his treatment of church history and councils was just as free in the second part as had been his handling of primitive Christianity in chapters xv and xvi.\(^2\) In fact, it seems as if the twin charges of 'irreligion' and 'indecency' continued to be almost inseparable, and both these qualities in his writing were felt to be equally corrupting.\(^3\) However, in one aspect the two can be viewed together, that is, when

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1. In terms of his objection in DF, lvi, VI, 180-1, n.15.
2. Gibbon could claim that these chapters offended all sections of the church including Protestants, whereas much in the later chapters would be offensive merely to Roman Catholic readers.
3. As seen from Bowdler's words to the reader and Introduction; cf. Gibbon's Memoirs, p. 182: 'a religious clamour was revived; and the reproach of indecency has been loudly echoed by the rigid censors of morals.'
we examine the matter of Gibbon's integrity in his treatment of 'the pure and austere morals of the Christians', which he put forward as one of 'the secondary causes of the rapid growth of the Christian church'.

Milman, one of the most honest and most scholarly editors of The Decline and Fall, in a note on this section wrote: 'These, in the opinion of the editor, are the most uncandid paragraphs in Gibbon's History.'

It would be hard for any but the most naive reader to disagree with such a judgement. Indeed, the temperate ironist wrote more than these paragraphs with tongue in cheek. Can we, especially in view of Hume's warning, be convinced by Gibbon's expression of surprise at the way churchmen reacted to his chapters on the rise of Christianity? The stance of the ingenuous inquirer, he knew, was sometimes more effective to promote a thorough revaluation or to undermine a complacently accepted position than was an outright exposure or a head-on assault. But it was and is alleged that Gibbon actually made these 'uncandid' paragraphs as well as other parts of his work, the vehicle of scorn even for certain virtues themselves. Thus Parkinson claims: 'Gibbon's arguments against asceticism are used to ridicule the practice of chastity, temperance, economy, and all the sober and domestic virtues. He makes it a source of reproach to his devout predecessors that they disdained, or affected to disdain, every earthly or corporal delight; and he

1. DF, xv, II, 3, point IV and pp. 34ff.
3. Hume's letter (18/2/1776) expressed his feeling both before the publication of Volume I and more especially after it, that its final chapters must inevitably involve their author in suspicion - 'and you may expect that a clamour will rise', he added. (Memoirs, p. 168).
implies at the same time that they were hypocritical in merely pretending
to this purity.' Indeed Parkinson sees in Gibbon's approach here not
only an 'air of stoic superiority' but also a humour 'touched with
salaciousness'.

Ho- far is this true? No careful student of Gibbon, even in a
century which has completely reinstated him, would labour to acquit him
of all charges brought forward by competent and scholarly editors or
modern biographers. Even so, despite the tone of certain chapters with
their possibly disingenuous and special pleading, he never seems to
ridicule chastity as such, however he might deplore an imposed asceticism,
which was sometimes esteemed at the expense of real virtues, and which
he saw as singularly unproductive both physically and socially.

Temperance and the 'domestic virtues' he valued highly and he lamented
their comparative rarity amongst the rulers of the earth. But above all,
his main thrust, as Parkinson hardly acknowledges, was directed against
hypocrisy whether he found this in the chastity and asceticism of the
primitive church or, as was more often the case, in the life of later
ecclesiastics. He certainly regarded asceticism and enforced celibacy
as misguided and he could easily have supported this view by an appeal
to the New Testament with which he was so familiar. But a pretended
or a falsely practised asceticism provoked his irony and scorn. If the
bishops at least were celibate and chaste, 'the loss of sensual pleasure
was supplied and compensated by spiritual pride'. Parkinson cites this

2. Not only Milman, but Bury: 'Neither the historian or the man of
   letters will any longer subscribe, without a thousand reserves, to
   the theological chapters of "The Decline and Fall".' (Preface
3. DF, xx, II, 346; cf. a similar verdict concerning 'the Greek
   superstition', liii, VI, 72.
4. e.g. I Tim. 4; 1-4.
as a disingenuous comment by Gibbon,\(^1\) while Bury, who saw in Gibbon a
cynicism 'not inconsistent with partiality, with definite prepossessions,
with a certain spite', saw also that this quality 'supplied the antipathy'
which went into the production of 'his most effective colours'.\(^2\) Never­
theless, the compensatory spiritual pride referred to is shown clearly
enough in some of Gibbon's bishops, even if he tended to generalise on
the strength of these. He could still appreciate the steadfastness of
an Athanasius or the sincerity of an Ambrose, though the mere mask of
sanctity was treated with irony, perhaps sometimes with a touch of
'salaciousness'. If some of his tilts at religion seem to show him
carried away by his pet aversions, even irritated by what he understood
only imperfectly - a genuine religious experience - it is equally true,
as Parkinson admits in his criticism, that Gibbon's 'humanitarian
sentiments have a truly philosophic nobility'.\(^3\) And this humanity, to
echo Porson, rarely slumbers as he 'pleads eloquently for the rights of
mankind, and the duty of toleration'.\(^4\)

Since the work of Bowdler and his successors, the 'objectionable'
element has sometimes seemed much larger than it really is, and any
close consideration of the offending passages, as has been made here,
runs the same danger of making a mountain out of a molehill. For a
molehill it is. Even Bowdler, though for other reasons he reduced the

\(^1\) Edward Gibbon, p. 58.
\(^3\) Edward Gibbon, p. 106. Parkinson qualifies this judgement, adding:
'but he, like most of us, is irritated by what he cannot understand,
and attempts therefore to explain it away.' Such a view may be
found, in one form or another, in a number of Gibbon's biographers
and critics, however they may differ in their final assessment
of his precise religious position. cf. Michael Joyce, Edward
Gibbon, p. 146.
\(^4\) Porson, Preface, p. xxviii.
number of chapters considerably, still brought very few charges of indecency against *The Decline and Fall*. Thus our first question in coming to an informed and just verdict must be: What is the extent of these 'indecencies' or 'indelicacies'? 'A few freckles', was Porson's judgement, and these few insufficient to make any great difference to his esteem for the work. Indeed, if a few anecdotes and footnotes were removed as well as a small number of comments, all that would remain of these 'indecencies' would be the occasional ironic or bizarre twist of a sentence and the occasional cheeky use of a verb or modifier, in most instances not very shocking to the most decent reader of today.

When all the cuts have been made the amount affected is surprisingly small. It is instructive to discover that the Warne editor deleted no more than 307 lines of text, roughly equivalent to 10 pages out of a total of almost 3,500. Of these deletions, just over two pages are on religion or doctrinal matters, and if we include also those on popes and councils and those which make a distinctly moral point, we are left with a mere seven-and-a-half pages which gave the expurgator any concern on grounds of propriety. It is perhaps also interesting to note that of these, two pages come from the chapter on Mahomet and one-and-a-quarter from the two anecdotes 'expressive of national manners' which have already been considered.

Gibbon's original six volumes contained 7,842 notes. Only about 52 are affected by the cuts in Warne's edition: 14 full notes in English

and 21 in Latin and Greek on the basis of indelicacy, 8 or 9 on religious grounds, and about another 8 from which some material had been deleted. Sometimes the criteria of religion and decency overlap and it is hard to say which was uppermost in the editor's mind; in some cases a Latin or Greek note expands or merely substantiates the passage in the text and thus certain notes simply disappeared along with the deleted section of the text to which they referred. So when such allowances have been made we are looking at perhaps less than 50 out of a total approaching 8,000. To the charge that Gibbon lived his sex life in his footnotes, one might reply that it must then have been very sparse and moderate and also that the tone of these few notes is usually frank and straightforward rather than prurient.

It was the greatness, and indeed the historical and moral value of The Decline and Fall, which led the more prudish editors to expunge a few offending passages in order to preserve the work as a whole for readers of a more fastidious age than our own. That they found so little to remove is a testimony to the wholesomeness of such a voluminous work. But is it worth remarking that the Victorian cleric, Dean Milman, did not feel it incumbent upon him to purge Gibbon's text in this way.

1. I have not counted the few omitted notes which are simply references to the authorities used in the text, nor the note in which Gibbon merely defended his inclusion of an anecdote later to be deleted by the Warne editor.

2. It is impossible to be more specific or exact since English notes often contain Latin or Greek quotations; notes in a religious context or concerned with religious characters sometimes contain 'indelicate' material; and an amended note is occasionally reduced by no more than a few words.

3. Milman's 12 volume edition appeared in 1838-9, the 2nd 'carefully revised' edition, in 1846. McClay saw this editor as 'a man singularly rich in the qualities essential to an historian, with liberality, candour, sympathy and fairness'. (Gibbon's Antagonism to Christianity, p. 317).
Nor did another clerical editor, described on the title page of the edition brought out a few years later by Henry Bohn, simply as 'An English Churchman'.¹ Like Milman, he sought in his ample notes to be scrupulously fair to Gibbon.² He even received the commendation of J.M. Robertson who, after taking a number of quotations from this edition, drew a comparison between its critical comments and those of the biographer, Cotter Morrison, whom he accused of blindly following Comte in his interpretation of Christian history. Referring to the Bohn editor's very sympathetic note on Julian, Robertson remarked, 'Once more we find the priest juster than the positivist.'³ Like Milman, this editor had something to say in his Preface about Gibbon's failure to do justice to Christianity, but we look in vain both there and in the individual notes for any reference to 'indecencies' or 'indelicacies'. Of this there is nothing; the text is Gibbon's own and no comment was felt necessary.

Our second question in arriving at a just verdict is: What is the author's general intention in his work? Gibbon's intention and approach have been the subject of the preceding chapters of this thesis - from his development of moral independence and assurance, and his assertions of moral principles in his earliest work, through his application of these principles both in his search for a worthy subject and in his actual writings, to the consummation in The Decline and Fall with its inescapable moral viewpoint continually making itself felt.

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¹ The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, with various notes...London, Henry Bohn, 1853. (7 volumes). The title page shows 6 volumes as originally planned.
² See, for example his defence of Gibbon's use of Tertullian's evidence against Guizot's objection to this. (volume I, p. 21.n.)
³ Edward Gibbon, p. 82.
Prima facie it is scarcely possible that an author whose major theme is moral and political corruption in the ancient world, who repeatedly deplores the 'degeneracy' of the Romans, who arraigns the 'vice and follies' or rulers and 'the depravity of mankind', should knowingly, or even carelessly, write in such a way as to corrupt or deprave his readers. His passing criticism of 'the historian Sallust, who usefully practised the vices which he has eloquently censured', is an incidental testimony to Gibbon's insistence on the need for integrity both in the man and in the History. It is well to affirm this in view of the long-standing impression to the contrary. 'For a century', says his best biographer, 'it was the habit to follow up ridicule of his person with persistent denigration of his character. Since then more sober evaluations of his qualities have demonstrated to those who will take the trouble to listen that while we may still laugh at the man's oddities, ...we must assert that Gibbon was a man of moral as well as intellectual integrity. He was a man of warm humanity as was recognised by his intimate friends, and these qualities pervade his history'.

It is also worth remembering that not only in his conversation and his correspondence was he delicate, and sometimes a little prim, but in none of his other writings do we find the least suspicion of 'indecency'.

1. See, e.g. DF, xxi, III, 347: 'the manners of Italy exhibited a remarkable scene of the depravity of mankind.'
3. D.M. Low's Introduction to his Abridgement of DF, London, 1960, p. xiv. Low may safely be called Gibbon's best biographer in virtue of being the fullest, perhaps the most scholarly and most balanced. See Bonnard's reference to his work, JB, Preface, VIII ('la plus solide...la plus substantielle aussi, des biographies de l'historien.' Cf. JC, Preface, vi).
5. See also Low's affirmation of the fact, Edward Gibbon, p. 266.
He was reticent in referring to his own fatal ailment and the same reticence of language which, to Porson's surprise, avoided a word unfit 'for a decent historian' showed itself elsewhere in *The Decline and Fall*: 'I touch with reluctance and impatience a more odious vice of which modesty rejects the name and nature abominates the idea.' In the same way he referred to 'the vague commerce' of Theodora when he meant sexual promiscuity. But his restraint in the choice of language never turned into prudery and his frankness in recording unseemly behaviour was sometimes responsible for earning him the accusation of 'indecency' from some members of the public.

The main point at issue, however, is not the author's intent, but the tendency of his work as a whole. What, then, in view of the 'reproach of indecency' levelled against the *History* 'by the rigid censors of morals', is the effect of the book on its readers? Obscenity trials are notorious for bringing out latent inhibitions and hallowed prejudices. Gibbon's work was never dragged through a court of justice but nonetheless suffered a de facto judgement against it from these 'rigid censors' who were offended by some of the material and some of the observations it contained. In the terms of the now classical common law definition laid down eighty years after the appearance of Gibbon's final volumes, the test of obscenity is found in 'the tendency to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral

2. Cf. the practice of his model, Tacitus, referred to above p. 586, n. 5.
influences and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall.'

One clerical witness, Thomas Bowdler, seemed to look at The Decline and Fall in some such terms, though his fear of its readers 'being perverted' was largely confined to the sphere of divine revelation as distinct from moral attitudes and behaviour. However, since his edition was specifically intended for 'young persons', there was no doubt in his mind about those into whose hands it might fall, and he therefore deleted not merely the 'irreligious' but also the 'indecent'. Yet over the years from Gibbon to Bowdler, 'young persons' of both sexes had been accustomed and encouraged to read in all its plain and explicit language, the unexpurgated Authorised Version of the Bible, even if certain parts were rarely discussed. For it was well known to all that the Bible, which recorded and commented on circumcision, castration, sexual intercourse, concubinage, prostitution, rape and sundry perversions, was a book with a profound moral intent and effect.

Yet as far as the tendency to corrupt is concerned, a more recent view has been that the test should be applied not so much to young persons - 'a fourteen year-old schoolgirl' - as to the general adult public. On this test, said Justice Stable, in his celebrated summing up:

1. Cockburn, C.J., in R.v. Hicklin (1868 L.R. 3Q.B. at 371). In the Lady Chatterley trial, the judge directed the jury in this regard to bear in mind that the book was 'to be put...upon the market at a price of 3s.6d. a copy' (The Trial of Lady Chatterley, ed. C.H. Rolph, Penguin Books, 1961, p. 201) while DF, we remember, 'sold like a three-penny pamphlet'; 'my book was on every table, and almost on every toilette' (Memoirs, p. 157).


3. The defender of 'the inimitable Mr. Gibbon' in the Gentleman's Magazine, Vol. 59, July, 1789, p. 610, made a similar point with regard to the Book of Common Prayer.
'A mass of literature, great literature, is wholly unsuitable for reading by the adolescent'. This fact, which has nothing to do with their intrinsic greatness as literature, is no reason, the judge implied, for not 'making those works available to the general public'. A similar view is exemplified in another clerical witness to the greatness of *The Decline and Fall*, in an edition which appeared about a decade after Bowdler's. Milman, far more liberal and scholarly than his predecessor, found no occasion to refer in his Preface to anything indecent or indelicate nor to expurgate the text of the work. On the contrary, despite a few strong criticisms, he found, just as Porson had found, very positive moral values expressed in it.

It is instructive to note the evidence of the clerics, since they are usually called during obscenity trials. And, as we have seen, Gibbon was not averse to calling clerical witnesses, or at least to citing clerical precedents to justify his own practice. For a number of notes and some passages in the text which might have involved him in accusations, he could thank his ecclesiastical sources, Jerome, Liutprand, Baronius, Warburton, as well as Maimomides, the Christian writer Lactantius, and Salvian, 'the preacher of the age', as Gibbon called him. So too, in later years, when offering a brief defence of his work, he took the opportunity of pointing to a delicate omission from his text. This gap, he noted, had already been supplied by an English clergyman, whose *Essay* on Pope dealt with the 'indelicate' subject of the Abelard's

castration: 'The most naked tale in my history,' Gibbon claimed, 'is
told by the Rev. Mr. Joseph Warton, an instructor of youth.'\(^1\) In a
more positive sense, however, Gibbon could point to the well-known
acclamation of his entire work by the celebrated Scottish cleric and
historian, William Robertson, who raised no eyebrow in his almost
unqualified congratulation of the author of *The Decline and Fall.*\(^2\)

In the most publicised trial of a book, whose central theme is
sexual relationship, churchmen were called to give evidence, as to the
ethical and moral qualities of the work. Canon Milford, Master of the
Temple, saw *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as making a positive contribution
to the recognition of 'the proper place of sex in human life'; the
Bishop of Woolwich considered it a book which 'Christians ought to read';
Prebendary Hopkinson said that 'it was a book of moral purpose'; and
Canon Demant of Christ Church, Oxford, thought the publication by Penguin
'was for the public good'.\(^3\) And what has that to do with the case of
Edward Gibbon? One might imagine such a question from the lips of Lord
Mansfield who retired as Chief Justice in the year that Gibbon's
final volumes first appeared. The answer is that not only would the
author have been able to rely on churchmen such as those just quoted to
secure his acquittal had his case been heard in the Old Bailey in 1960,

1. Memoirs, p. 193. The reference to DF, is lxix, VII, 229-30, where
Gibbon merely alluded to 'the famous and unfortunate Abelard'
as 'the lover of Eloisa'. Warton, in his *Essay on the Genius and
Writings of Pope*, 1756, admitted the difficulty of treating the
catastrophe 'with any dignity and grace; in which there is still
something indecise, notwithstanding all the dexterity and
management of our poet.' (Vol. I, p. 325).
2. See Robertson's letters LXXVIII (15/3/1776) and CXLIX (12/5/1781)
in *MW*, II, 159, 249-251; cf. also Rev. Dr. Joseph Warton's highly
but that he could equally have called 'enlightened' clerical witnesses to vindicate *The Decline and Fall* before Lord Mansfield in 1788.¹

In Australia, following the *Lady Chatterley* decision, a group of academics at the Australian National University made a statement which seems directly applicable to Gibbon's work. They claimed that far from being an immoral work, as it was sometimes superficially held to be, the novel was 'animated by a profound concern with the moral issues raised by the situation with which it deals'.² The situation with which Gibbon's *History* deals is one of decline, corruption, depravity and often monstrous crime. Readers of earlier days, though their tribe is not extinct, sometimes failed to appreciate the distinction between being shocked and being corrupted, and failed to remember than an action or description which disgusts may have a cathartic effect rather than a tendency to deprave. In Fuglum's words, 'Gibbon does not dwell on his vicious characters because he is secretly attracted to them, but because he is so intensely aware of the power of evil.'³ He was however, attracted by genuine goodness and, in a narrative where vicious characters seemed to abound, he welcomed the occasional appearance of the virtuous. It was his expressed delight to seize a rare opportunity of 'discovering a single action which may be ascribed to...virtue',⁴ and to turn aside from violence and bloodshed 'to gather some flowers of science and virtue' exemplified in the life of a revered sultan who displayed justice, magnanimity and humility and who 'wept the instability of human greatness'.⁵

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2. A.D. Hope et al. in a letter to the Minister for Customs and Excise, Melbourne Age, 27/2/1961, p. r.
4. DF, xiv, I, 444.
5. DF, lvii, VI, 236.
The Decline and Fall outlived its detractors and buried its hostile critics. Even the expurgating editors who deplored its anti-Christian sentiments and improprieties, responded to its grandeur and its positive values. In the nineteenth century many readers 'found their morale fortified by the contemplation of Gibbon's tremendous spectacle. The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire became an active moral force in Victorian England.' If Coleridge and Lamb saw little to admire, others such as Landor agreed with the historian's friend and laureat, Hayley

that Gibbon had stripped off the false forms and disguises of churchmen, kings and nobles:

Through which men saw the murderer and the cheat
In diadem and cowl. Erectly stood,
After like work with fiercer hand perform'd,
Milton, as Adam pure, as Michael strong.

After quoting Landor's tribute in a lecture in 1935, Edmund Blunden declared that apart from 'the sheer pleasure of passing an hour...in thoughts of Mr. Gibbon,' his purpose was 'to find him in his devotional character.' This he discovered in those 'Observations' concluding the history of the Western Empire, from which he read to his audience the historian's instructive application of the 'awful revolution' to his own age and his speculations on the past and the future. Blunden brought his lecture to a close by declaring: 'Out of the age of "stalled theology" now forgotten, his lay sermon has become the voice of our time. A little more,' the lecturer confessed - and we can imagine the ironic smile on the face of the historian at the strange vicissitude of his fortune, 'a little more and I should be suggesting that Gibbon aspired to a pulpit.'

4. ibid., p. 37.