

Born-Again Porn and Antiquity

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Viewers of "I, Claudius" take a kind of scholarly chauvinistic pride in pitting today's excesses of decadence against those of ancient Rome. Decline-and-fall scores are the latest TV parlor game. The consensus is that the 20th century leads in inspired minor outrages. Those TV orgies have a provincial ponderousness about them: everyone is working very hard at being very bad.

Decadence has advanced in subtlety in 19 centuries. We don't make a special production of vice anymore; we make it the order of the day. It is the cool switch, the perverse as normal, that makes the difference. Consider the inspired notion of swingers' clubs on credit cards. Or the recent stirrings of Larry Flynt. His skin magazines are banal. The titillation comes with his religious conversion and the promise of the new Hustler—or born-again porn. And now he has bought the newspaper in Plains, Georgia, home of the President. Will reports of peanut sales, church socials and water board meetings give way to gamier stories of frontal politics?

● Obviously, it isn't what you do, it's how you do it.

Smoking marijuana doesn't raise an eyebrow now, but the stuff is still illegal. Eugene, Oregon, recently seized eight tons and used it as fuel for a municipal boiler. That may have given Eugene the highest-priced heat or the biggest high in history. It beats the hunderd outrage of lighting cigars with hundred dollar bills. This is dealing with vice with flair.

● The Romans in "I, Claudius" come equipped with togas, British accents, and endless cups of wine. The togas look uncomfortable, the accents are unconvincing, and drunkenness by itself is unexceptional debauchery. But one theory of history has it that the Romans declined and fell because they drank their wine in lead-lined vessels and succumbed in great numbers to lead poisoning. Recent news accounts relate that corrosive water in the lead water pipes of a number of American cities is slowly poisoning us in similar fashion. Going out with wine versus going out with water: In ultimate decadent bravado, the Romans win, hands (and thumbs) down.

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