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Circulating Smut

The Traffic in Obscenity from Byron to Beardsley: Sexuality and Exoticism in Nineteenth-Century Print Culture. Colette Colligan. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 236 pp.

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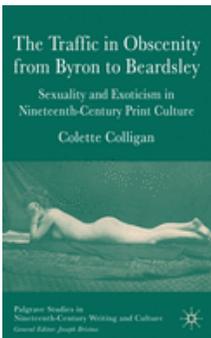
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<1>Colette Colligan's *The Traffic in Obscenity from Byron to Beardsley* is a stimulating, original work. Carefully researched and meticulously detailed, it restores obscenity—a term Colligan wisely declines to define—to material contexts that have been neglected by our emphasis on the discursive histories of medicine, psychology, and literature. Colligan concentrates on two related issues: the effect of burgeoning print culture on obscenity's reach, and the influence of globalization, which provided rich veins of exoticism for British writers and readers. The idea of trafficking is crucial, indicating the circulation and mutation of settings, scenarios, and texts from distant sources to the home front; and of foundational works into multiple variations in meaning, media, and readership as they are adapted by textual descendents. Tracing these complex trajectories, Colligan calls into question our metaphors of "secret lives" and "private parts" (6) to reveal the public, visible, wide-ranging presence of obscene texts. Another strength is Colligan's flexibility on assessing the unpredictable uses of obscene materials drawn from other cultures (or fantasies of other cultures), sometimes to affirm British moral superiority, sometimes to titillate readers with the vicarious experience of unusual sexual practices, sometimes to explore anxieties about British manhood and homoeroticism.

<2>After an introduction establishing the background and general concerns of her work, Colligan begins with a consideration of harem novels, inspired by Byron's *Don Juan* (1819-24) and its many imitations. Byron's poem not only initiated the literary fascination with Ottoman harems, but it also gave rise to intense public debate about the definition and legal status of obscenity, leaving its mark on legal history. The claim that *Don Juan* was so offensive that it lay beyond the pale of copyright law allowed pirated editions to proliferate, extending the reach of harem fantasies into underground print culture and a popular audience. While some of these versions of *Don Juan* depended on the parallel between sexual and imperial power, others offered British readers a chance to explore a fictive world in which the experience of "trespass" was as important as conquest (32), a trope that attracted female as well as male readers. In novels such as *The Lustful Turk* and *Moslem Eroticism*, Colligan traces the unstable intersection of gender and racial hierarchies, while later works replace Ottoman with colonial harems under the control of British imperial subjects, supplying fantasies of safe erotic adventuring. Throughout the chapter, Colligan's argument is equally attentive to concrete detail and broad analysis, tracing publication histories and debates on copyright law while offering equally astute interpretations of the sexual and racial meanings of her texts.

<3>The next chapter, on Richard Burton, *Arabian Nights*, and Arab sex manuals, is equally satisfying in the same ways. Colligan unfolds the complex publication history of Burton's erotic translations, whose market and audience formed an important part of the debate over their status, similar to *Don Juan's* but within a different social stratum. Offered in high-end editions to collectors and armchair anthropologists, Burton's work was defended because of its limited circulation to elite—that is, responsible—readers rather than the masses. Colligan stresses the complex gendering of Burton's authorial and publishing investments: his hyper-masculine defense of sexual frankness (especially in relation to his wife's attempts to control the publication of his writing), his contribution to the discourses of homosexuality, and his anxieties about male potency. She is also alert to the contradictory ways in which Burton and later authors manipulate racial difference, which differentiates deviant eastern sexuality, especially pederasty, from western practices, but also acts as a kind of cover story to address indirectly the emerging issue of British homosexuality.

<4>Chapter Four, "The English Vice and Transatlantic Slavery," examines the intersection of American slave narratives and flagellation scenarios, a staple of British public school culture and pornography. As Colligan observes, slave narratives feature scenes of brutality and sexual violation far beyond what could be represented in any other respectable outlet and so attracted pornographers looking for new models in the 1880s. As with treatments of a fantasied Arab sexuality, these materials engage complicated sexual and racial displacements. *The Secret Life of Linda Brent*, based on the now-canonical *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1862), offers a particularly complex scenario in which a white man watches a black overseer beat and anally rape a black slave woman. Male sexual violence against women; the moral inferiority of the black man to the white man, who does not participate in the beating; and displaced inter-racial homosexuality, figured in the anal rape, are layered in this scene. In the early twentieth century, Colligan notes a further mutation in pornographic scenes of white women being beaten. While this textual history is plausible, it is not fully demonstrated. These scenes represent whipping fantasies "outside the context of the historical slave system" (122), but they may owe as much to the flogging fantasies and between-men *ménages-a-trois* that are common in other forms of Victorian pornography, such as convent literature. In establishing a self-contained genealogy, Colligan may have narrowed her analysis of specific texts, but this problem is an inevitable—and minor—consequence of her approach. Overall, this chapter is original and persuasive.

<5>The final chapter focuses on Japanese erotic prints, particularly as adapted by Aubrey Beardsley. Again, Colligan carefully traces the development of a textual tradition, providing striking images of Beardsley's illustrations and E. T. Reed's parodies in *Punch*, which, she argues convincingly, revel in the art's seductive pleasures even as they seek to satirize its appeal. In examining Beardsley's impact, however, her tight interweaving of textual history and orientalist obscenity unravels a bit. Although her copious quoting of Beardsley's critics is meant to demonstrate their conflation of aesthetic and sexual criteria, this conflation is not always obvious. The attacks frequently focus on Beardsley's departures from artistic conventions without singling out either sexuality or foreign influences. While Colligan convincingly discusses the inseparability of Japanese influence and Beardsley's eroticism—which Colligan calls his "libidinal" and "libertine" line—the critics she quotes do not always make this association, nor do references to Japan figure consistently in these quoted passages. In terms of Beardsley's more popular reception, her argument again gathers force, as she demonstrates the dissemination of the *Salomé* illustrations as individual prints independent of the original text, reflecting an overriding interest in their exotic sensuality. Tying in erotic novels and sociological studies of Japanese prostitution, Colligan shows the extent of this influence beyond the aesthetic elite usually credited with fueling the *fin-de-siècle* Japanese craze.

<6>The least satisfying part of this impressive book is its brief coda, which attempts to bring the argument into the present day. Colligan's careful tracing of specific publication histories seems at odds with this over-generalized leap into the late-twentieth- and early- twenty-first century. Colligan uses the terms "extreme realism" and "graphic realism," effects which are supposedly made possible by photography and digital media, to assert that we have arrived at a new frontier of the obscene in which issues of circulation and globalization must be rethought. However, she does not define these terms nor discuss the apparently boundless potential for manipulation inherent in these media: we might just as easily consider their effects an extreme *unrealism*. Her use of Baudrillard further complicates this discussion when she links his terminology of "the real" to hers of "graphic realism" (170). Surely Baudrillard's "the real," however elusive its meaning, does not refer to specific representational conventions, unlike "graphic realism" in its common-sense meaning. The use of Baudrillard derails the materialist approach to texts and history, instead calling forth an abstract moralistic diagnosis of our post-modern condition, in which the "array of breasts, asses, and genitalia has no other meaning but to express [what Baudrillard calls] the useless objectivity of things" (171). Colligan clearly intends this coda to be suggestive rather than definitive, but its confusing associations and sweeping assertions compromise its credibility. Also, one misses a summarizing overview that would draw together her individual analyses, assessing the relationship between obscenity, print culture, and globalization at the end of the nineteenth century. To this reader, at least, such a conclusion would be more useful than her hasty move into contemporary culture. Though admittedly a tall order, it would be more in keeping with the spirit—and the substantial virtues—of the book.

<7>Leaving aside this unfortunate ending, *The Traffic in Obscenity* makes a major contribution to the history of obscenity. Its extensive research, complex analysis, and attention to the contexts of print industries and global relations fruitfully enlarge the already extensive body of work on

print magazines and glossy tabloids naturally change the way we think about sex and
British sexuality.

