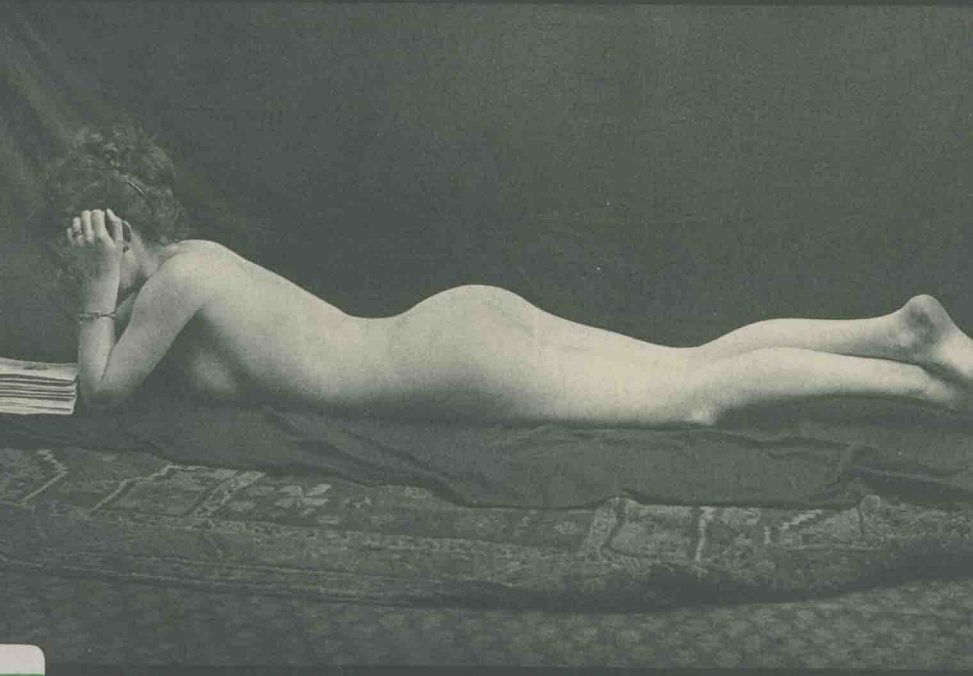
The Traffic in Obscenity from Byron to Beardsley

Sexuality and Exoticism in Nineteenth-Century Print Culture

Colette Colligan



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Homosexuality, and the Arabs', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 25:1 (2003) 1–20. Reprinted by kind permission of Taylor & Francis UK/Routledge. '"Esoteric Pornography": Burton's *Arabian Nights* and the Cultural Discourse of Pornography', *Victorian Review*, 28:2 (2003) 31–64. Reprinted by kind permission of the editors.

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The Traffic in Obscenity

> Obscenity invades our homes persistently through the mail, phone, VCR, cable TV, and now the Internet. This multi-million dollar industry with links to organized crime has strewn its victims from coast-to-coast. Never before has so much obscene material been so easily accessible to minors.
>
> The Internet is perhaps the most pernicious medium for obscenity. The Internet is a double edged sword: on one hand, it is an amazing tool that provides children a wealth of educational resources and gives them access to cultures and ideas that are beyond their everyday experiences. On the other hand, it also serves as a conduit for child exploitation and obscenity that respects no boundaries and recognizes no jurisdictional lines.
>
> (Former US Attorney General John Ashcroft, Federal Prosecutor's Symposium on Obscenity, 6 June, 2002)

> There are several classes of this indecent matter; there are indecent books and pictures and photographs, and then there are offensive postcards [. . .]. The indecent photographs and pictures, and all that kind of matter, which is of the most gross character, is almost entirely sent from abroad. I do not think there is much traffic in it by dealers in this country, comparatively; dealers abroad in Holland, Belgium and Paris deal largely in these things, and no doubt, despite everything that can be done, there is a certain amount that can be transmitted by post.
>
> (*Joint Select Committee on Lotteries and Indecent Advertisements*, 1908)

1 Introduction

This is a book about obscenity and its most significant commercial, legal, and discursive formations in nineteenth-century Britain. Although it focuses

on the nineteenth century, it was conceived in the midst of neo-conservative eruptions of moral panic over Internet obscenity. A recent address by former US Attorney General John Ashcroft at the 2002 Federal Prosecutor's Symposium on Obscenity has driven this panic. His remarks, represented in my first epigraph, are striking for their concentration on the run-away circulation of obscenity. While this book does not examine the contemporary articulations of obscenity, it is profoundly aware that its current digital incursions of far-reaching global consequence started in the age of mechanical printing presses, worldwide postal services, and imperial trade routes. I have juxtaposed Ashcroft's remarks with testimony from the *Joint Select Committee on Lotteries and Indecent Advertisements* from 1908 to show how his panic about an onslaught of obscenity was anticipated almost one hundred years earlier. The fear that obscenity is crossing borders, circumventing media laws and aesthetics, infiltrating communities and homes, and becoming increasingly uncontainable is the legacy of the nineteenth-century global information economy and the emergent print traffic in obscenity.[1]

When I began this book, I intended to update Steven Marcus's classic psychoanalytic and thematic reading of obscene writing in *The Other Victorians* by giving greater attention to the historical circumstances of the nineteenth-century British trade in obscene publications.[2] It soon became apparent that the topic was not conducive to positivist historiography. The frontiers of obscenity, then as now, are never clear-cut. It has no stable definition: the surfeit of terms – obscenity, pornography, erotica, and smut – reveals the extent of the confusion and the problem endemic to the field.[3] It has no origins: it thrives on exchange, dissemination, reprinting, piracy, adaptation, translation, remediation, parody, simulation, and resurrection. It has no continuous tradition: obscenity is not institutionalised, but rather deracinated and disowned. It has no recognised influence: except perhaps for de Sade, authors and works are not eagerly embraced and imitated. It has no recognisable form: it is dispersed in print, aural, visual, and now electronic media. It has no fixed market: regulatory authorities continually break it up. It has no reliable readers and viewers: it is too dangerous and volatile for there to be a regular means of consumption. Its self-doubt is also sizeable. After all, the cultural value of obscenity is by no means secure: it is one of the world's most reviled and hunted forms.

This book therefore offers a history of nineteenth-century obscenity that explores its discontinuous trajectories and uneven developments, while recognising that it is one of the most ecstatic and unstable commodities of modernity. Michel Foucault's theory of the archaeology of history, which acknowledges the discursive layers, fragments, segments, and ruptures that make up the past, is helpful for the study of a cultural form like obscenity which defies the positivist pursuit for unity, connection, progression, and monument. However, his theory also immobilises history into a scholar's dig.[4] I instead examine the history of obscenity by showing how it gained

meaning and existence in the nineteenth century in large part through its trafficking. In using 'traffic' as a model for understanding the formation of obscenity as a concept and trade in the nineteenth century, I draw on the word's complex discursive history. The etymology of the word is uncertain, but it arose in the commerce of the Mediterranean and came into use in the sixteenth century during the age of exploration and expanding trade. Over five centuries, the word has had multiple and interlaced meanings: the transportation of merchandise; the transportation of vehicles, vessels, and people; the transmission of messages through communications systems; trading voyages and expeditions; trade in general; illicit trade; and prostitution (OED). The word has thus encapsulated in its history overlapping modes of circulation and exchange. With its associations with commerce, communication, and transportation, it refers to the economic, spatial, and temporal dynamics of culture, which can be measured by flow, volume, speed, or current and hindered by intersection, congestion, or jam. The word also conveys the suggestion of illegitimate activity – the sex trade and drug smuggling. It even carries a lingering Orientalism from its commercial underpinnings in the Mediterranean. Although 'traffic' did not enter into nineteenth-century legislation against obscenity, the term was solidly linked to this new publishing phenomenon by the nineteenth century as morality campaigners and government commissions decried its 'extensive traffic'.[5]

My use of 'traffic' as a model for understanding this publishing phenomenon also draws on recent critical nodes in media theory, globalisation studies, and postmodernism. Print and media culture studies have opened up investigation into the circulation and transmission of material culture in relation to media technologies, hegemonies, and shifts. These include Robert Darnton's work on communication networks in the eighteenth-century French book trade, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's broader theories of mediation and remediation, and the new MIT Press series on Media in Transition that encourages historical studies of media collision and congestion.[6] Globalisation studies, meanwhile, have turned our attention to the geographical scales and market logic of today's global culture, while forcing us to think about material culture in relation to space, time, and movement. In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai describes the new global cultural economy in relation to different disjunctive flows along which ideas and objects move. Increasingly rapid and agitated flows of people, technology, finance, information, and ideology mobilise today's 'run-away world', an intensification of the Victorian industrial process.[7] Jean Baudrillard also offers one of the most innovative theories of circulation and movement with his breathtaking description of a postmodern consumer culture that has abandoned itself to the 'abject principle of free circulation' where there are no interiors, exteriors, boundaries, or borders. He provides an economic theory of unfettered circulation in capitalist societies increasingly preoccupied with the circuitry and velocity of exchangeable commodities. He even

suggests the libidinal investment in these late capitalist cultural exchanges: 'Obscenity is not confined to sexuality, because today there is a pornography of information and communication, a pornography of circuits and networks, of functions and objects in their legibility, availability, regulation, forced signification, capacity to perform, connection, polyvalence, their free expression.'[8]

These critical perspectives on the dynamics of culture, variously explained in terms of technological change, geographical systems, and late-capitalist economics, come together to articulate a larger theory of cultural traffic. A theory of traffic, along with its historical associations with criminality, Orientalism, and even eroticism, is particularly useful for the study of obscenity, which has been on the move and dodging authorities since the nineteenth century. This is the first book to study obscenity in relationship to its trafficking. I show how it was mobilised by changing and interrelated cultural forces during a period of intense global interactivity and innovations in technologies of communication and information. More precisely, I am interested in how obscenity was caught up with the progress of print media, the expansion of empire and global economy, and the heightened disciplining of sexuality in nineteenth-century Britain.

Since the mechanisation of print in the early nineteenth century, obscenity has exploited almost every new medium of representation, communication, and transportation for its purposes. In the nineteenth century, these included the printing press, railway, post, and cinema, and they anticipated the more familiar technologies of obscenity of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as the telephone, video, and Internet. Each new technological invention has transformed and accelerated the traffic of obscenity, until it has been stopped and diverted by a new regulation or prohibition. Because obscenity has often 'drive[n] new technology forward while also dragging it through the dirt', as Laurence O'Toole has observed, it has also become intimately associated with new forms of technological media.[9] Since the nineteenth century, obscenity has become so closely tied to its mediation that certain media forms have often acted as a sexual prosthesis, becoming an extension of the obscene, folded into its definition, and anticipating Baudrillard's sense of today's 'cool communicational obscenity' of circuits and networks.[10]

Expanding empire in the nineteenth century also crucially underpinned the development of obscenity as a concept and a trade. Edward Said dates the emergence of Europe's second empire, the sequel to its first empire in the Americas, with Napoleon's invasion and occupation of Egypt between 1798 and 1801.[11] This invasion was just the first-wave of European imperial incursion into Ottoman territories such as Sicily, Malta, the Ionian Islands, and Syria.[12] Informal empire in the guise of commerce and agents eventually gave way to a formal empire of protectorates, colonies, and globalised economies. Between 1875 and 1914, European nations began to engage in

fierce rivalry over territories and spheres of influence in Africa and Asia. Since the Government of India Act of 1858, Britain administered India through a special department of government, but the escalation of British imperialism, some argue, began with the country's suppression of the Arabi Rebellion in 1882 and *de facto* rule of Egypt. Similarly, France had occupied and exploited Algeria since 1830, but its aggressive imperial policies began with the conquest of Tunisia in 1881.[13] New technology, such as the telegraph and the railway, crucially intersected with European imperial projects, shrinking time and space and globalising commercial and libidinal economies. According to Sir Richard Burton, this new empire 'did not improve morals'.[14] These dubious indulgences of British imperialists would lead one unnamed public servant to write an article in 1887 for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 'Is Empire Consistent with Morality?' His answer was no:

> In general the men form relations of an immoral type with the natives, and they come to glory in so doing, or to justify it at any rate. [...] Morality – as the stay-at-home English understand it – they come to regard as a local English institution, which is to be left behind on quitting England [...]. They cap the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount by quotations from the Kama Shastra, and, in short, their minds become as the mind of Sir Richard Burton, that wondrous mind, which has 'informed' the appalling footnotes of the latest and unique translation of the 'Arabian Nights'.[15]

By the end of the nineteenth century, obscenity became fully implicated in the infrastructure of empire, which informed its fantasies and enabled its dispersal around the world via train, ship, and post. As Ronald Hyam observes in *Empire and Sexuality*, 'it can hardly be an accident that all the classics of British erotic literature were written by men who were widely travelled inside and especially outside Europe.'[16]

The heightened disciplining of sexuality in the nineteenth century also drove the traffic in obscenity. In the last 20 years, Marcus's repressive hypothesis has been challenged, albeit still not defeated, by more nuanced studies by Peter Gay and Michael Mason on Victorian sexual discipline and anti-sensualism.[17] The discursive explosion around sex in the nineteenth century, which led to the construction of Britain as a nation of prudes beleaguered by the vices of the French and other exotics, both produced and regulated obscenity. Its construction as a social problem that needed disciplining created an international underground traffic in illicit publications and helped circulate the idea of a deviant cultural form.

In proposing that obscenity was caught up in the global cultural traffic of print technologies, international trade, exotic fantasies, and sexual discourses that led from the farthest reaches of empire back to the metropolis, I offer a novel juxtaposition of nineteenth-century authors, publications, imagery,

and events. One reason for this is to escape the limitations of many of the dominant histories and theories of obscenity. I stress the intersection of obscenity with larger cultural institutions and print markets, while shifting the existing scholarship on obscenity away from the language of 'other Victorians', 'Victorian underworlds', 'private parts', 'secret lives', and 'sexual subcultures'. I am instead interested in how obscenity became a transnational trade and concept dispersed across media, markets, and borders and dependent on new print technologies and complex commercial and fantasmatic global networks for its continuation and survival.

It is true that the field of obscenity studies has recently attracted compelling scholarship that has shifted the critical terrain from the notion of 'Other Victorians' that dominated the 1960s and the intractable feminist debates that dominated the 1980s. Linda Williams, Laurence O'Toole, and Frederick S. Lane importantly examine the relationships between obscenity and technological media, such as hard-core films and cyber pornography.[18] There has also been some recent groundbreaking work on historical obscenity. Peter Mendes's bibliographical study of clandestine erotic fiction, which builds on Patrick Kearney's work, has deepened our knowledge of the figures central to the production of obscene publications from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[19] Moreover, as the critical study of print culture and book history has consolidated in recent years, so have useful cultural histories of illicit literary relations and practices. Robert Darnton and Lynn Hunt have examined the French underground book trade in obscenity from the *ancien régime* and revolutionary France.[20] Iain McCalman's study of obscenity's emergence from underground political literature in early nineteenth-century Britain is also a pioneering work on the formation of obscenity as a print trade. His work has been even more recently supplemented by solid historical studies of British obscenity by Lisa Z. Sigel, Allison Pease, Lynda Nead, Bradford Mudge, and Julie Peakman.[21]

However, while obscenity studies has become a serious area of interdisciplinary scholarship, the field is dominated by bibliographical lists, legal histories, and Marcus's Freudian-inspired repressive hypothesis that obscene publications were the outgrowth of Victorian culture's abrogation of sexuality. Even more worrisome, though, is the prevailing assumption that obscenity is a fixed and obvious historical phenomenon when it is in fact volatile and continually changing – qualities that have been central to its survival and social menace. This is the problem with Pease's innovative explanation for how modernist writers like James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence wrote about explicit sexuality while avoiding the charge of pornography. In arguing that these writers destabilised the traditional binary between aesthetics and pornography, she overdetermines both categories and their complex and uneven histories. While McCalman's investigation into the transition from radical populism to obscenity among artisan publishers of the period is more sensitive to the irregular formation of the trade, his

primary interest is in political history, and he peremptorily dismisses the 'counter-culture' pretensions of a trade that eventually 'popularised debased versions' of de Sade.[22] I believe a more relational approach to the study of obscenity, one inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's understanding about how culture is shaped by relational forces of power, helps break down preset ideas about obscenity as unambiguously sexually rebellious, or politically motivated, or masturbatory fodder, or nationally determined.[23] Such an approach instead reveals how obscenity emerged chaotically and moved widely in different, but overlapping print communities, which shared surprisingly consistent colonial and technological trajectories.

Therefore, in my book, I delineate four fields of cultural traffic that illustrate the larger formations of nineteenth-century British obscenity alongside the pressures and opportunities of developing print technologies, overlapping print communities, and intensifying globalisation. The method behind what may appear to be a selection of heterogeneous primary sources was largely experiential. It began with an examination of clandestine literary works in Henry Spencer Ashbee's three-volume bibliography of historical obscenity (1877–85).[24] The list readily revealed titles like the *Lustful Turk*, the *Kama Shastra*, and the *Khan of Karistan*, which underlined the exotic thematics of these underground works. Further investigation soon revealed clusters of publications that shared similar imagery and settings, underwent numerous reprints, adaptations, and remediations, and revealed frequent and sometimes parodic crossovers with mainstream authors, publishers, writings, and images. It soon became clear that there was sustained interest in the sexual capital of Oriental harems, Arab erotic handbooks, slave plantations, and Japanese erotic art. My interest thus turned to the fields of cultural traffic that mobilised and sustained these topics.

My study begins in Chapter 2 with the Oriental harem, the favourite landscape of Orientalist painters and purveyors of obscenity. Although the harem had been a European fixation since the eighteenth century, the rapid improvements in the mechanical reproduction of print in the early nineteenth century also made it one of the most repeated subjects of obscenity. In this chapter, I not only show that in the early nineteenth century pirated copies and spurious imitations of Lord Byron's harem episodes in *Don Juan* (1819–24) became a fulcrum for legal debate about obscenity, but I also demonstrate that by mid-century, many of the same radical publishers who pirated *Don Juan* for the common reader produced obscene harem novels for a wealthy clientele, a genre that fed fantasies of empire and survived until the end of the century.[25]

Chapter 3 draws attention to the traffic in Eastern literature that arose among the British elite, particularly Sir Richard Burton's circle and followers, and was likely influenced by the underground interest in the harem. An infamous explorer and linguist, Burton translated a series of Indian and Arabic texts that had an enormous impact on the British understanding of