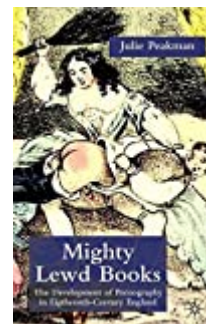


Julie Peakman. *Mighty Lewd Books: The Development of Pornography in Eighteenth-Century England.* Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 256 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-1500-9.



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Julie Peakman's rich account of eighteenth-century English erotica and pornography is replete with nuggets sifted from a copious literature of poems, prints, trial reports, medical advice manuals, scandal sheets, memoirs and fictional tales that range from the merely lascivious to the thumpingly hard core. Pornography—defined by her as “material that contains graphic description of sexual organs and/or action ... written with the prime intention of sexually exciting the reader” (p. 6)—as a sub-genre of eroticism developed first in sixteenth-century Italy and seventeenth-century France. With the significant exception of John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749), homegrown English pornography only began to take off in the 1770s.

The growth of erotica in the eighteenth century owed much to the expansion of literacy in an increasingly urban and commercialized society, and Peakman includes a useful chapter on the spread of the erotic book trade. Printers, quadrupling in number in London during the course of the century, responded to a burgeoning interest in printed works stimulated by greater education, rising numbers of the middling sort with more disposable income, and the growth of reading clubs and subscription libraries. A number of these printers, particularly in Grub Street, produced erotica, some of it cheap enough to be broadly accessible. If the occasional erotica in Restora-

tion England, imported from France in expensive, calf-skin-bound volumes, was accessible only to well-off gentlemen like Samuel Pepys, a century and more later a substantial democratization had taken place. Penny ballads and shilling pamphlets ensured a much wider audience, including women (Peakman demonstrates that the production, selling and readership of erotica was by no means a male preserve), and even the illiterate could be read to, or look at graphic illustrations. Little erotica was published outside London, but Peakman plausibly speculates (albeit with scant evidence) that itinerant hawkers would have seen to the distribution of scandal sheets, bawdy ballads, lewd chapbooks and pornographic pamphlets across the country.

The meat of Peakman's book lies in a succession of chapters analyzing the content of the erotica—all of it concentrating on heterosexual sex since, although the occasional fantasy concerning a tribade or a sodomitical act made an appearance, she has discovered no examples of porn aimed at homosexual readers before the nineteenth century. She begins with a revealing account of bodily fluids. The prevailing Galenic orthodoxy concerning the humoral body held that bodily liquids needed to be balanced and contained. Pornographic material, conversely, celebrated the wild, uncontrolled emission of blood, semen and female ejaculations as a sign of unleashed emo-

tions and shredded taboos. The more pornographic the material, the greater the flow of fluids. And yet Peakman demonstrates that it is not quite so straightforward as that. Taking issue with scholars like Peter Wagner, Robert Darnton and Lynn Hunt, she repeatedly emphasizes the point that in Britain pornography was not unequivocally or even predominantly subversive but could reinforce aspects of orthodox gender roles and conservative understandings of male and female bodies. This is not a particularly surprising or original observation, but she marshals considerable evidence to buttress the argument and interprets it in a compelling, nuanced fashion.

Another of Peakman's main arguments is that erotica did not inhabit a disconnected fantasy world but drew heavily on contemporary attitudes and events. She walks us through a succession of erotic responses to such happenings. Linnaeus's sexual classification of plants in the 1730s, findings about the reproductive process published by the Royal Society in the 1750s, electrical experimentation in the 1770s: all stimulated the creative juices of erotic writers. So did the discoveries of explorers, fictional travelogues, the new vogue for landscaping estates and gardens, and the neoclassical revival: all feeding the reimagining of sexual utopias. Again, the messages were mixed. For example, although men tended to be depicted as controllers—pleasers/farmers/travelers—within unwieldy, untamed female landscapes, pointing to male anxieties about the passion and power of nature/woman, this was a considerable distance from an ideology of domesticity that increasingly saw women as passive and non-sexual.

The depiction of women as passive victims came out much more strongly in anti-Catholic erotica, and it is in this literature that conservative elements are more unambiguously to the fore—though even here, once the innocent, powerless female was sexually initiated, she became as lascivious as in other forms of erotica. Peakman describes how virulent anti-Catholic propaganda, using the alleged sexual debauchery of priests and nuns as a weapon, developed into outright pornography, de-

signed to arouse the reader, losing its polemical, political purpose. And it was this anti-Papist material that nurtured some of the key themes for a specifically English pornography, such as submission, domination, blood, incest and, most notably, flagellation. To take an example of the type of material she dissects (p. 178), the pornographic novella, *Venus School-Mistress, or Birchen Sports*, published in the first decade of the nineteenth century, contains a letter from a customer setting out terms and anticipated delights in a visit to Theresa Berkeley's brothel: "1) To be well secured to the horse with the chains I bring. 2) One pound for the first drawn blood. 3) Two pounds if the blood runs down to the heels. 4) Three pounds if it reaches the heels. 5) Four pounds if it flows on the floor. 6) Five pounds if you cause me to faint away."

Drawing on French examples of pornography in intimate settings, and reflecting frequent depictions of household floggings and schoolhouse birchings in mainstream plays, novels and poems, this sanguinary flagellation literature and the incest theme increasingly played out in private space, in the confines of the family home. Whereas in France pornographers' linkage of sexual debauchery and the Church was truly transgressive (part of a radical underworld in the prelude to the French Revolution), in Protestant England the radical equivalent was the violation of the sacred, secular space of the family. Perhaps Peakman is a little too nuanced here. Her evenhandedness in the "radicalism versus conservatism" debate that she herself raises leaves an inconclusive, indecisive taste. If, for example, pornography really aimed at violating the family, it proved to be spectacularly unsuccessful as the ideology of domesticity established its hegemony in English society for the next two centuries, and this, perhaps, is worthy of comment. But this is to quibble. The strength of the book is in its research, detail and description rather than in grand theorizing, but it is a fine, well-written, copiously illustrated study and an important contribution to the history of pornography and of eighteenth-century sexualities.

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