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Joan DeJean, *The Reinvention of Obscenity: Sex, Lies and Tabloids in Early Modern France*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002. xi + 204pp. Notes. \$18.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 0-226-14141-1.

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How many times have historians believed that a particular phenomenon appeared in the eighteenth century only to learn that it saw the light of day one-hundred years before, in the seventeenth? [1] In *The Reinvention of Obscenity: Sex, Lies and Tabloids in Early Modern France*, Joan DeJean demonstrates that sexually transgressive literature was born not in the half-century before the Revolution but in the first decades of the seventeenth century.[2] By analyzing the trials of Théophile de Viau (1619-1623), the burning of *L'École des filles* (1655) and the controversy caused by Molière's *L'École des femmes* (1663), DeJean charts the development of modern obscenity from rebirth to full maturity.

Obscenity certainly flourished in Antiquity but it was, to quote DeJean, "an in joke," limited to a small, male elite. During the Middle Ages, vulgar texts continued to appear, but these occasioned little notice. The church authorities who policed such matters considered unorthodox texts dangerous and took little interest in the sexually transgressive. Then, in 1622, the secular authorities condemned Théophile de Viau's *Parnasse satirique* citing its "filth" and "impiety." Viau's verses celebrated male sexuality—especially the male genitalia—and contained explicit references to homosexuality. Most of Viau's "filth" took the form of proverbial four-letter words, what DeJean calls "the degree zero of obscenity." He was tried not once but twice. DeJean calls de Viau's prosecution "a monument to censorship" and attributes it to two forces: the monarchy's decision to supplant the church as censor and the dangerous spread of obscene texts beyond the elite. "For obscenity to be a problem," De Jean notes, "it must be public" (p. 7).

The monarchy continued to exert pressure on the book trade and its next target was a volume, published anonymously in 1656 entitled the *L'École des Filles*. The *École* made obscenity public in particularly dangerous ways. It appealed to the growing reading public which DeJean characterizes as "bourgeois" and possibly female. It stages a dialogue not between libertine men, but between two honest bourgeois women who discuss female desire and its satisfaction at length. DeJean contends that this switch from male to female sexuality was "perhaps the most dramatic change in the history of erotic literature" (p. 80). It also made *L'École des Filles* a target for the royal authorities. Unable to identify the book's author(s), the authorities burned the volume.

The final section of *The Reinvention of Obscenity* deals with the scandal occasioned by Molière's *L'École des femmes*. DeJean argues that Molière was "the first author to understand the commercial potential of obscenity" (p. 98). Written in 1662, when Molière and his troop were still new to the Parisian scene, *L'École des femmes* was a surprise box-office success. But the self-styled critics took offense at the infamous "it" scene. In this scene, Arnolphe questions the innocent Agnès in order to determine if she has had any sexual contact. Alas, Agnès is so ignorant that she (unlike the audience) is unable to understand that when Rodolphe says "it," he really means "tit." Critics like Donneau de Visé attacked Molière and claimed his play was licentious. Molière did nothing to douse the scandal. On the contrary, he fanned the flames, writing retorts in the form of the *Critique de "l'École des femmes"* and the *Impromptu de Versailles*. The notoriety occasioned by *L'École* made Molière famous and an "author" in the Foucauldian sense. His portrait was painted. His plays were published. His private life attracted attention and Donneau de Visé accused him of sexual misconduct and incest. According to DeJean, Molière had the honor of being the first author maligned by the tabloids. He also had the privilege of

introducing the concept and the word “obscenity” into everyday French. In *La Critique de “L’École des femmes,”* Elise exclaims, “Obscenity, Madame. I don’t know what that means but I find it the prettiest word in the world!” [3]

In Molière’s wake, obscenity and, with it, censorship matured. On July 19, 1791, the word obscene finally appeared in a French law which banned the sale of “obscene images” (p. 126). Henceforth, obscenity would be a matter of images rather than words, a visual rather than textual problem. She also gives Foucault’s notion of the author a fresh twist. She argues that the writer only became a genuine author when he produced transgressive work, when he attracted censorship and with it public notoriety.

DeJean’s vision is broad and historians may doubt some of her assertions. Was the reading public in seventeenth-century France indeed “bourgeois?” Was Molière really the first French “author?” Historians may also wonder why DeJean did not refer to the obscene political pamphlets which circulated throughout the seventeenth century, but particularly during the Fronde. [4] Still, there is much in DeJean’s brief and lucid book to interest historians. For those researching the history of sexuality or pornography, DeJean’s book will be required reading. For those who work on the French monarchy, *The Reinvention of Obscenity* shows how obscenity and its censoring opened the door to state control of the publishing industry. For French historians of all kinds, *The Reinvention of Obscenity* provides a fresh perspective on the *grand siècle*. Who knew that Fouquet, Louis XIV’s opulent finance minister, kept a copy of *L’École des filles* locked away in a secret chest in a secret apartment? Or that audiences roared at the *doubles entendres* which peppered *L’École des femmes*? Or that seventeenth-century France produced along with Cartesian dualism, classicism and Louis XIV, modern smut?

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## NOTES

[1] Among the studies of the eighteenth-century pornography are: Lynn Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography: obscenity and the origins of modernity, 1500-1800* (New York: Zone Book, 1993); Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996); and Jean Marie Goulemot, *Ces livres qu’on ne lit qu’une seule main: lecture et lecteurs de livres pornographiques au XVIIIe siècle* (Aix-en-Provence: Alinéa, 1991).

[2] DeJean is not the first student of seventeenth-century erotic texts. In the first years of the twentieth century, Frédéric Lachèvre devoted several volumes to the tribulations of seventeenth-century libertine poets. The most useful is *Le Libertinage au XVIIe siècle: Mélanges* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1918). More recently see Jean-Pierre Dubost, *Oeuvres érotiques du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1988) which includes the most important obscene texts and Michel Loude, *Littérature érotique et libertine au XVIIe siècle* (Lyon: Aléas, 1994).

[3] Molière, *La critique de “L’École des femmes,”* Scene III.

[4] See Jeffrey Merrick, “The Cardinal and the Queen: Sexual Politics and Political Disorders in the *Mazarinades*,” *French Historical Studies* 18 (1994):667-99,” and Jeffrey Sawyer, *Printed Poison: Pamphlets, Faction Politics, and the Public Sphere in Early Seventeenth-Century France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

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