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Peter Frei and Nelly Labère, eds., *The Politics of Obscenity in the Age of the Gutenberg Revolution: Obscene Means in Early Modern French and European Print Culture and Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2022. x + 380 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$128.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780367537357; \$39.16 U.S. (eb) ISBN 9781003083214.

Review by Hugh Roberts, University of Exeter.

This collection of essays revisits some of the questions and materials studied in *Obscénités renaissantes*, to which the editors of this new volume, Peter Frei and Nelly Labère, contributed and which was co-edited by Guillaume Peureux, Lise Wajeman, and me.[1] Like the earlier volume, *The Politics of Obscenity* is the fruit of externally funded international collaboration.[2] For the sake of full disclosure, the editors invited me to participate in their project but I was unable to accept, although I appreciated their contributions to the earlier project and admired the group they put together for this one. The theme undoubtedly lends itself to collaborative and interdisciplinary research and there is without doubt room for new work on it. Moreover, the proposed approach of this book would be welcome, if it allowed insights into obscenity as a pan-European phenomenon and as a political device or weapon, for instance in satire. Indeed, a section of *Obscénités renaissantes* was on *Politique de l'obscène* and one of the motivations for the earlier volume was to help identify new avenues for research.

Unfortunately, however, *The Politics of Obscenity* fails to make as significant a contribution to scholarship as it promises, given the quality of many of its chapters and the terrific team that came together to produce them. There are four main reasons for this: first, a general if not universal lack of engagement with previous scholarship; second, an absence of obvious attempts to bring the contributions into dialogue with one another; third, a lack of thematic and chronological focus; fourth, a theoretical and methodological approach that tends to obfuscate the object of study.

In terms of bibliography, given the significant attention that obscenity has received in recent years, the overall lack of engagement with, for example, Joan DeJean's *The Reinvention of Obscenity* or *Obscénités renaissantes*, barring a short discussion in the introduction, is disconcerting.[3] It is regrettable, for example, to read a chapter on neo-Latin obscenity that does not allude to the important work of the late Philip Ford on this topic.[4] Similarly, the late Michel Jeanneret's *Éros rebelle. Littérature et dissidence à l'âge classique* does not receive a single mention in the index or bibliography.[5] Many of the chapters would have benefited from building on previous scholarship as, for example, Julien Goeury does when he draws on Cécile Alduy's insights on the *blasons anatomiques* in his chapter on the same texts, to argue, correctly in my view, that a work

could not be considered obscene or otherwise “outside of the discourses that designated (or removed) these qualities nor, indeed, of the marks of reproach within specific contexts” (p. 195).<sup>[6]</sup> The lack of sustained engagement with earlier research is hard to explain given the editors’ familiarity with it. Oversights on the part of individual contributors are understandable at draft stage, but, in my view, editing should have mitigated against them before publication.

Something has also apparently gone awry in the collaborative research process given there is little, if any, sense in which one chapter plays off the observations of another, which would allow the collection to become more than the sum of its parts. Conversely, however, there is, on occasion, unacknowledged duplication of material. For example, the already very well-known staging of the word “*obscénité*” in *La Critique de l’École des femmes*, opens the book and features in François Lecerclé’s chapter as well as in that of Jean-Christophe Abramovici (there may be other mentions, but I note in passing that the index entry on “Molière” is incomplete, which itself raises doubts about the usefulness of the index, and hence the book, as a research tool). In another example, Gilles Magniont and Jean-Christophe Abramovici both allude to similar, but not identical, passages in which Vaugelas expresses concerns about inadvertent obscenity based on the gender of *foudre* and *chose*, which could become obscene *équivoques* if in the masculine. Some covering of much the same ground is perhaps unavoidable and can indeed allow different, but complementary critical perspectives, provided these are recognized. But the absence of acknowledgement means that the reader is not well served and the volume’s capacity to inform future scholarship is once again limited.

My third concern involves a lack of obvious thematic and chronological coherence. Despite the book’s title and the editors’ claim to concentrate on the “Gutenberg Revolution” and its new “mediasphere” (p. 20), the volume ranges from a thirteenth-century manuscript to Sade via Apollinaire. Moreover, there is a chapter on a twelfth-century sculpture, one on theatre, several on manuscript culture, as well as one contributor’s musings on present-day *écriture inclusive* (pp. 292-295), all of which suggest the “Gutenberg Revolution” is a fig-leaf that scarcely conceals underlying incoherence. In their conclusion, the editors advocate what they call, quoting Jacques Rancière, the “anachronies’ of historical thought,” so it seems that the chronological incoherence was deliberate. The opening chapter, by Pierre-Olivier Dittmar and Maud Pérez-Simon, on the thirteenth-century *Les Monstres des hommes* presents an intriguing case study. The text, preserved in a single manuscript, seems to be of interest in inverse proportion to its influence, as it portrays the monsters’ obscenity, seen in the cognate terms *ord* and *vilain*, and deploys an explicit sexual vocabulary. The accusation of monstrosity/obscenity is apparently turned against the elites who would have read the manuscript, hence the “worst of cannibals” are not the monsters but the Western nobility who live off the poor—a striking prefiguration of Montaigne’s famous chapter (p. 43). The chapter is out of place in this volume but deserves recognition beyond it. Moreover, although materials originally in French predominate the collection, some other languages and locations occur, but without any overarching sense of why these and not others. The reader is left with the impression that there was a free-for-all in terms of contributions for which the editors sought some sort of frame after the event, as opposed to a collective and then editorial effort to shape contributions into a coherent volume.

Finally, the nature of obscenity itself poses methodological problems for this book. The editors are correct to state, as they do at the outset, that what constitutes obscenity is uncertain. But this observation leads them to adopt a vague theory of obscenity, as a “malaise of interpretation,” which “challeng[es] the boundaries of the signifier in its capacity to signify anything beyond its

own brute materiality stripped of any meaning” (p. 3). This theoretical stance is self-defeating, for there could be no “politics of obscenity” to obscene texts that are somehow stripped of meaning. The stance seems to be that since there is no absolute standard of obscenity, there are absolutely no standards. Yet this misses the point: it is the fact that standards were constantly in question that allows for the dynamism of obscenity.

Some contributors appear to adopt this self-defeating theoretical approach. For example, Georges Van Den Abbeele, in the conclusion to his chapter on Calvinist “Pathways to the Obscene:” “the matter of obscenity is a political one with not all obscenities being the same, or [...] even judged to be obscene” (p. 247). This suggests that there is such a thing as obscenity outside of things judged to be obscene in some way, which in theory could be anything at all. Hence there are chapters in which the obscenity involved is unclear. For instance, Peter Frei’s contribution, “Villon’s Imprint: Obscenity and Vulgarity in the Early Age of Print,” considers the first print edition of Villon and especially his *Ballades en jargon* as intersections of “vulgarization” and the obscene, although quite what was considered obscene in this material is obscure. Similarly, while there is much that could be said about obscenity in Rabelais, the chapter in this volume does not consider sixteenth-century judgements, but instead considers views drawn from modern scholarship tangentially related to obscenity.

Fortunately, however, not all chapters adopt this dubious theory, but instead recognize that if no content or representation is intrinsically obscene, then obscenity cannot be considered outside of value judgements that assign or deny the category, which most obviously happens in forms of censorship or reproach. Such critique might be the authors’ tongue-in-cheek provocation of the censor, for example, in their use of *praeteritio*. Julien Goeury cites characteristic examples in his chapter on the *blasons anatomiques*, including Jacques Le Lieur’s reference to “la pelote/Je n’oserais dire la motte” (p. 198), as well as, more generally, in Marot’s presumably ironic criticism of the genre he founded. On the other hand, an appendix to this chapter, an edition by Guillaume Berthon of a *contreblason* in a manuscript in Soissons, “Le vit renversé faict par une jeune dame contre celluy qui a mal parlé du tetin,” is a fascinating addition to the *blason* corpus, not least because it purports to invert the “male gaze” that such poems adopt as standard. Even if the Spanish *novelas* that spread throughout France and Europe contain no taboo terms, the widespread criticism of them by moralizing writers justifies Véronique Duché’s insightful discussion of them. Similarly, the Protestant satires gathered in the Grenet manuscript, which are the subject of Estelle Doudet’s chapter, range from pieces by Marot to lewd poems on Catholic clergy, are a clear and compelling example of the “politics of obscenity.” They also illustrate that manuscript and print were “strongly interconnected” (p. 231), not least in the collections of figures like Pierre de L’Estoile.

In short, while many of the excellent team of authors have made significant contributions that advance our understanding of early modern obscenity and will be of wide interest, the volume fails to cohere. The translators of articles originally written in French have done sterling work, but understandably some mistakes linger, e.g. unlike the French *déshonnête*, “dishonest” does not have “obscene” as one of its meanings, hence “dishonest vulva” (p. 56) is a mistranslation. I would recommend that specialists consult the table of contents to identify relevant chapters to purchase separately but would say that if research libraries want coherent and focused work on obscenity they would be better off investing elsewhere.

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#### NOTES

[1] Hugh Roberts, Guillaume Peureux and Lise Wajeman, eds., *Obscénités renaissantes* (Geneva: Droz, 2011); the Droz volume was preceded by Anne L. Birberick, Russell J. Ganim and Hugh Roberts, eds., *Obscenity, EMF: Studies in Early Modern France* 14 (2010), to which Nelly Labère also contributed an article; both volumes were produced by a research network funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council.

[2] The research group was supported by a Thomas Jefferson Fund award by the FACE Foundation in 2018, which allows for Franco-American collaboration.

[3] Joan DeJean, *The Reinvention of Obscenity: Sex, Lies, and Tabloids in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[4] For introductions, see Philip Ford, "Comparative Obscenity: Some French and Latin Examples," *Obscenity EMF: Studies in Early Modern France* 14 (2010): 1-16, and "Obscenity and the *lex Catulliana*: Uses and Abuses of Catullus 16 in French Renaissance Poetry," *Obscénités renaissantes*, pp. 48-60.

[5] Michel Jeanneret, *Éros rebelle. Littérature et dissidence à l'âge classique* (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 2003).

[6] Citing "Archéologie d'un gros plan: sémiologie du sexe imprimé dans les *Blasons anatomiques du corps féminin* (1539-1568), in *Obscénités renaissantes*, pp. 163-192 (see, in particular, p. 167).

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