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Some Personal Reflections on The Origin and Value of the Archives of Sexuality and Gender Part III

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In Part Three of the “Archives of Sexuality & Gender” (ASG), Gale-Cengage have published a collection of more than one million pages of text from restricted library collections in Britain and North America. Under the title “Sex and Sexuality, Sixteenth to Twentieth Century,” the archive includes the contents of the British Library’s Private Case, plus nearly sixteen hundred books from the New York Academy of Medicine, plus nearly one thousand books from the Kinsey Institute. Private Case collections such as these are special, restricted, and often secret collections of printed books that are kept separate from the main collection within a library because of their focus on sex and sexuality. These collections have a long history and have gone under a variety of amusing, obtuse and exotic names, such as the Bibliothèque nationale’s “enfer” (i.e., inferno or Hell), Oxford University’s ☐ (*phi*—sounds like “Fie!”) and Cambridge University’s “Arc.” (*arcana*; i.e., secret or mystery).¹

I have been an enthusiastic supporter of this project since the idea for it was first raised in conversation with Craig Pett, a Research Collections Specialist at Gale in Australia. Speaking personally, the idea had deeper roots than this, but they are hard to trace. I was probably aware of the British Library’s Private Case before I read Peter Fryer’s classic exposé *Private Case—Public Scandal* in 1999, but Fryer’s book captured my imagination.² Not long afterwards, Alexander Pettit and I proposed to Pickering and Chatto a five-volume, edited collection of *Eighteenth Century British Erotica*,

based on the Private Case collections at the British Library, the Kinsey and elsewhere. Shortly after the first five-volume set appeared (2002), we were invited to expand the series to ten volumes, and shortly after the last of these volumes appeared (in 2004),³ I expanded my research into the clandestine publication of erotica in eighteenth century London—a project based on the *Checklist of Eighteenth-Century English Erotica* I had begun compiling in 2002 for the *British Erotica* book projects.

In June 2014, after more than a decade investigating the English erotica held in Private Case collections, I explained to Craig just how much difficulty I was still having in gaining access to some of the books I needed, in order to expand, correct, refine—and one day, complete—my *Checklist*. I had located copies of many very rare and obscure works, which had never been reprinted, copied and reproduced, and had spent all of my research funds in obtaining microfilms and digital photographs of them. But with hundreds of works scattered across the Northern Hemisphere yet to examine, my research funds spent, and seasons-long research trips away from Melbourne the stuff of dreams, I expatiated on the need for, the scholarly value—and enormous convenience—of, a virtual collection such as only Gale was capable of constructing.

¹ For more on these collections, see my *The Private Case. Foxcroft Lecture on Bibliography and Book History for 2016* (Melbourne: Ancora Press, Monash University in association with the State Library of Victoria, 2018).

² Peter Fryer, *Private Case—Public Scandal* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1966). Ironically, Fryer’s book was banned by Customs in

Australia in 1966 and 1967; see Nicole Moore, *The Censor’s Library* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2012), 263.

³ Patrick Spedding and Alexander Pettit, eds., *Eighteenth-Century British Erotica* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2002), 5 vols; and *Eighteenth-Century British Erotica II* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), 5 vols.

With rapidly-developing scholarly interest in all historical records relating to sex and sexuality, and rapidly-developing technology, making such a scanning project feasible, this proposal soon found many supporters. I was glad to see the project expand and develop into the ASG, and delighted to act as an adviser on ASG3, once work began in earnest in 2017. I am even more pleased to hear that, if successful, the archive may be further expanded to include texts from a range of archives and Private Case collections. I have recently written at length about thirty-five Private Case collections in Europe and in the European diaspora, so I will not say much about their contents here—except to say that each Private Case collection is unique, and even the smallest collections often contain important works not to be found elsewhere. By facilitating access to so much material held in Private Cases, the Gale project greatly expands our knowledge of those collections, leads to a better understanding of Private Case collections in general, and makes a uniquely-valuable contribution to our knowledge of the past.

As Henry Spencer Ashbee and many later writers have suggested,⁴ part of the scholarly appeal of researching historical erotica often found only in these Private Case collections is the challenge represented by the combined difficulties of either locating copies of works, which have survived persistent forces of suppression and destruction, or uncovering any reliable information about works that were often written, printed, published, sold, collected, catalogued, read, shared, discussed, kept and disposed of in a clandestine fashion. This

⁴ [Henry Spencer Ashbee], *Index Librorum Prohibitorum: Being Notes Bio- Biblio- Icono-Graphical and Critical, on Curious and Uncommon Books* by Pisanus Fraxi (London: Privately Printed, 1877), xxvii–xxviii; David Foxon, *Libertine Literature in England, 1660–1745* (New York:

University Books, 1965), ix; Gershon Legman, "Introduction," in *My Secret Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), xxx.

bibliographic-scholarly appeal—the primary appeal for me—is quite separate from whatever appeal the works may have, or have had, by virtue of their subject matter, or whatever purpose they now serve, or were intended to serve. Likewise, it is separate from the appeal of any study of the historical and contemporary forces of suppression and destruction—by various state, religious, commercial and individual actors—that called, and continue to call into being the *clandestine* circulation of texts. The political alignment of the censorious continues to change, as do the list of targeted works, but forces of suppression and destruction certainly persist. However, since the forces are presently weaker, and focused elsewhere, it is somewhat easier at present to circumvent them, to locate copies of the works that have been forbidden in the past, and information about them.

In this era of informational riches, and relative freedom, it can be difficult for non-specialists to appreciate the extent of our historical loss, and the extent to which the clandestine protections adopted in the past continue to limit our knowledge of sex and sexuality from the sixteenth through to the twentieth centuries. Famously, Samuel Pepys “bought the idle, rogueish book, *L’escholle des filles*” to “inform himself in the villainy of the world.” Pepys bought the book on 8 February 1668 with the intention of burning it after he had read it; and since he carried out his intention, we cannot know for certain which edition he bought, read and burnt the next day.⁵ However, editions of this work survive (and are represented in the present collection),

University Books, 1965), ix; Gershon Legman, “Introduction,” in *My Secret Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), xxx.

⁵ The passages first appeared in *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, edited by Henry B. Wheatley, vol.7 (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896), 261, 290–91; they have been frequently discussed since. See, for example,

and so scholars are at least familiar with the text that “did hazer [his] prick para stand all the while, and una vez to decharger” (*did make [his] prick stand out all the while, and once to discharge*).⁶

Pepys read his book in French, but the text was translated into English in 1680 and appears to have been reprinted many times. It is unclear exactly how many editions of this translation were published, however: advertisements suggest that there were three editions printed in 1744 alone, and records survive of two more editions in the second half of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, only a single copy of the 1680 edition survives in the Private Case collection of the Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek in Munich.⁷ We do not know, and are unlikely to ever know, how many other editions were printed and circulated without being advertised. A similar, but worse, case is that of J. C. Gervaise de Latouche’s *The History of Don B.* — a translation of which was advertised in November of 1742, “Price 5s. Adorn’d with twenty-two cuts suitable to the Work.”⁸ While copies of *Histoire de Dom Bougre, Portier des Chartreux* survive (and are also represented in ASG3), Allied bombing at the close of WWII destroyed

the only known copy of the English translation, which was once held by the Hamburg Staatsbibliothek.⁹ Thomas Cannon’s *Ancient and Modern Pederasty Investigated and Exemplified* (1749)—an original work, in English, for which the author was arrested and imprisoned—was advertised in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, but no copy has survived.¹⁰ Another important and original work in English, is John Wilkes and Thomas Potter’s *An Essay on Woman* (1763). While authentic reprints survive for *parts* of this work, the private printing of the book was disrupted and the author forced to flee the country, and so publication of the book was never actually completed as planned.¹¹

The only thing more frustrating than the catalogue of loss, of which the above is only a small and familiar sample,¹² is our ignorance concerning the readers of these works. As Brian Watson argues, after establishing when a particular text was published, the biggest gap in our knowledge of historical erotica and pornography concerns the readership and reception of that work. “How did readers react to these erotic texts? What did they use them for? What did they think of them? How did they engage with them?”¹³ Pepy’s three

Roger Thompson, *Unfit for Modest Ears: A study of pornography, obscene and bawdy works written or published in England in the second half of the seventeenth century* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 22.

⁶ Even when writing in shorthand, Pepys resorted to a polyglot pidgin code to record sexual matters. Here, he employs French, Greek and Spanish: *hazer* (or *hausser*) being French for *raise*, *para-* being a Greek prefix for *beyond* or *beside*, *una vez*, being Spanish for *once*, and *echarger* (or *décharger*), being French for *discharge*. This passage is omitted in Wheatley’s edition, and—although it was included in the Robert Latham and William Matthews edition published in the 1970s—it is not glossed and so it remains almost as difficult to understand as Pepy’s shorthand.

⁷ Michel Millot, *The School of Venus, Or The Ladies Delight Reduced into Rules of Practice. Being the Translation of the French L’Escoles des filles. In Two Dialogues* (“Anno, 1680”) [Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek, Rem.IV 795].

⁸ *Daily Advertiser*, 13 November 1742.

⁹ Hugo Hayn, Alfred N. Gotendorf and Paul Englisch, *Bibliotheca Germanorum Erotica et Curiosa*, vol.3 (Munich: Georg Müller, 1913),

581: “Expl. dieser eminenten Seltenheit in Hamburg, Statbibl.” [*An exemplar of this eminent rarity is in the State and University Library of Hamburg*].

¹⁰ See Hal Gladfelder, “In Search of Lost Texts: Thomas Cannon’s *Ancient and Modern Pederasty Investigated and Exemplified*,” *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 31, no. 1 [(Northern] Winter 2007): 39–61.

¹¹ See Arthur H. Cash, *An Essay on Woman by John Wilkes and Thomas Potter: A Reconstruction of a Lost Book* (New York: AMS Press, 2000), 57–58.

¹² For a more comprehensive account, see Donald Thomas, *A Long Time Burning: The History of Literary Censorship in England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

¹³ Brian Watson, “Hellfire and Cannibals: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Erotic Reading Groups and Their Manuscripts,” in *The Edinburgh History of Reading: A World Survey from Antiquity to the Present*, edited by Jonathan Rose and Mary Hammond (forthcoming, 2019).

diary entries, brief, private, in shorthand and partly in code, stand almost alone in the early modern period as records of the experience of those who bought and read such “idle” and “roguish” literature. A similar “secret” diarist of the early eighteenth century, William Byrd of Virginia, separately chronicles his constant and varied whoring and his daily reading (mostly in Greek and Hebrew, but also of newspapers) and visits to booksellers.¹⁴ Although we know that he had a large and varied collection of erotica, including an illustrated edition of John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (aka, *Fanny Hill*; also in ASG3), there is no mention of his reading contemporary erotica in his diaries.¹⁵ Even James Boswell, who wrote at enormous length about himself later in the century, and is similarly open concerning his sex life, left no account of his reading of erotica in his journals.

The rarity or absence of the objects of study (Pepy’s copy of *L’escholle des filles*, Byrd’s copy of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, any copy at all of *The History of Don B. — or Ancient and Modern Pederasty*), and the lack of detailed accounts of how such works were bought, shared, read, discussed, etc., has—as mentioned—contributed to the mystique that works on sex and sexuality naturally have by virtue of the taboo topics they treat. It is a curious fact that a very high proportion of those scholars who have been attracted to this area of book history, who have dedicated some proportion of

their lives in attempting to overcome the scarcity of reliable information on their subject, have contributed to that ongoing scarcity by publishing their works—in they published them at all—in very limited editions. And, to make matters worse, these works of scholarship were often kept in the same special, restricted, and secret collections as the works they discuss.¹⁶

Publishing and distributing their bibliographies of erotica in private or limited editions may have been a necessary precaution for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers such as Ashbee, William Laird Clowes and—possibly—Alfred Rose, since these writers also felt the need to publish under pseudonyms (“Pisanus Fraxi,” “Speculator Morum” and “Rolfe S. Reade”).¹⁷ A few of the important unpublished works that are frequently cited, were compiled in this period too, including *Bibliographical Notes on Erotic Books in H. S. Ashbee’s collection*, a pre. 1872 manuscript by “J. Campbell,” i.e., James Campbell Reddie, and *A Study in Erotic Literature in England Considered with Especial Reference to Social Life*, a 1943 typescript by Charles Reginald Dawes, both held at the British Library.¹⁸

It is less obvious that later writers needed to take similar precautions. Nevertheless, Terence J. Deakin’s *Catalogi Librorum Eroticorum; A Critical Bibliography of Erotic Bibliographies And Book-Catalogues* (1964),

¹⁴ See, *William Byrd of Virginia The London Diary 1717–1721 and Other Writings*, edited by Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

¹⁵ Byrd collected a number of erotic classical texts, particularly Petronius; but for his copy of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, see Kevin J. Hayes, *The Library of William Byrd of Westover* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1997), 596 [C2].

¹⁶ Ashbee’s *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* was, for example, held in many of the Private Case collections; but a significant proportion of

all the works held in these collections was comprised of serious scholarly works on sex and sexuality, in all its branches. For more details, see my *Private Case* (2018).

¹⁷ Clowes, *Bibliotheca Arcana seu Catalogus Librorum Penetralium Being brief Notices of Books that have been Secretly Printed* (London: George Redway, 1885), was published by subscription, but was reprinted in 1971—in a limited edition.

¹⁸ For Reddie, see BM Add. MS 38828–29; for Dawes, see Cup. 364.d.15.

Patrick Kearney's *The Private Case: An Annotated Bibliography of the Private Case Erotica Collection in the British (Museum) Library* (1981) and the same author's *The Private Case: A Supplement* (2016), were printed in limited editions. Other works of erotic bibliography, while not formally limited, were nevertheless circulated in tiny numbers, and only briefly. For example, Susan Matusak's *Bibliography of the Eighteenth-Century Holdings of the Institute for Sex Research Library* (i.e., the Kinsey) was prepared for—and copies were distributed at—the 1975 Midwest Regional Meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies. Only ten copies of this typescript bibliography appear on OCLC's WorldCat, all but two of them in North America.

Although it was clear to me in the late 1990s that some of these reference works would be indispensable for my research into the publication, distribution and availability of erotica in the eighteenth century, many of them were as difficult to locate as original editions of *L'escolle des filles* and *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. Both the works themselves and the scholarship that related to them were not available locally, were very difficult to locate elsewhere and prohibitively expensive to buy personal copies of. As a result, a few important reference works remained on my "Wants list" for almost a decade; and I had to beg, borrow and ... engage in extensive subterfuge, to get copies of others.

¹⁹ Gershon Legman, *The Horn Book: Studies in Erotic Folklore and Bibliography* (New York: University Books, 1964), 10.

²⁰ There is always the possibility that "lost" works will be discovered again. In 2004, a copy of the wildly-pornographic *Sodom, or the Gentleman Instructed*, printed in London dating from the first quarter of the eighteenth century, appeared at auction—no printed copy, and no record of this edition, previous being known. And in 2017, I located copies of *The Adventures of An Irish Smock* (1782–83), in Oldenburg

It may not be very surprising, then, that it appeared to me to be more than just ironic for these scholars to choose to publish their accounts of clandestine works or collections, the contents of which were known to few scholars, in such a way that continued to limit access to information about these works and collections. In fact, it seemed downright perverse that a scholar would simultaneously remove and set up fresh impediments to research in this way. Such an act could only be motivated, it seemed to me at the time, by a desire to maintain the mystery surrounding historical erotica, and (as Gershon Legman suggests¹⁹) to collect and hoard knowledge about these books as a proxy for collecting and hoarding the books themselves. That is, limiting the circulation of knowledge about these texts seems to be motivated by a desire to signal membership of, and to support the ongoing and separate existence of, a small community of dilettantish scholar-collectors who had access to the primary materials. Fortunately, over the last two decades many of the works I have mentioned have become readily available online (on Google Books and elsewhere), along with a significant and rapidly-growing body of serious scholarship that supplements or replaces them.

As I hope these reflections make clear, the need for Gale's ASG3 has long been felt; and—while it cannot replace what has been truly lost²⁰—the massive expansion in access to this substantial body of primary

and Seville, a twice-lost erotic it-narrative. For details, see, John Vincent, "For Sale: Last Surviving Copy of 'Quintessential' English Pornography" *The Independent*, 26 November 2004; Patrick Spedding and Tania Marlowe, "The Adventures of An Irish Smock: A Lost It-Narrative, Found," *Notes and Queries*, 65, No. 3 (September 2018): 307–10.

texts, previously immured in special, restricted, and often secret collections, is particularly welcome. Moreover, just as ASG3 is a product of recent technical, academic and social changes, the collection is likely to herald further changes by facilitating access to both primary and secondary texts. In particular, it is likely to contribute to the rapid expansion of scholarship on sex and sexuality and the rapid development in this important area of research.

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