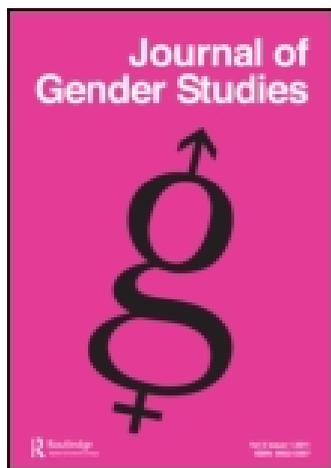


This article was downloaded by: [115.85.25.194]

On: 31 March 2015, At: 19:01

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Gender Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjgs20>

Scandalous women: Gender and identity in top-notch smut

Alyson Miller^a

^a School of Communication & Creative Arts, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

Published online: 31 May 2012.

To cite this article: Alyson Miller (2013) Scandalous women: Gender and identity in top-notch smut, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 22:4, 367-382, DOI: [10.1080/09589236.2012.681186](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2012.681186)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2012.681186>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Scandalous women: Gender and identity in top-notch smut

Alyson Miller*

School of Communication & Creative Arts, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

(Received 25 March 2011; final version received 18 November 2011)

Examining a diverse range of texts offering controversial representations of female sexuality, this paper demonstrates a persistent link between literary scandal and anxieties about women's sexuality. Texts from *Madame Bovary* (1857) to *The Sexual Life of Catherine M* (2001) have provoked various arguments, from debates about the need to restrain the unruly bodies of women to contestations about aesthetic merit, morality, and obscenity. Indeed, the scandalous literature of sexual women is distinguished by efforts to reduce its transgressions into something manageable, whether through naming and categorisation ('chick lit' and 'posh porn'), textual analysis, public censure, or critical excoriation. The desire to manage controversial material signifies a discourse of containment that suggests both women and literature require strict control. As this paper will argue, the relationship between women, literature, and scandal is one marked by both intra- and extra-textual efforts to restrain not only the unpredictability and power of female sexuality, but also the unruly energies of literature itself.

Keywords: gender; sexuality; women; scandalous texts; 'posh porn'; controversy

Introduction

When Earl Adams discovered that his two sons had stumbled upon [Felice Newman's *The Whole Lesbian Sex Book*](#) (1999) in the local library, he asked the city of Bentonville, Arkansas, to pay US\$20,000 in damages to his children and 'to fire the library director for including what he called "pornography" in the Bentonville Public Library collection' ([Prudenti 2007](#)). According to Adams, the text was not only 'patently offensive', lacking 'any artistic, literary or scientific value', but also harmful, causing suffering to his sons who were 'greatly disturbed by viewing this material' ([Prudenti 2007](#)). Adams claimed that his 14-year-old son innocently 'found the book while browsing the library's stacks for books about military academies', but as the literary columnist [Chris Zammarelli](#) notes, *The Whole Lesbian Sex Book* 'would probably be shelved in under the 613.9 section of the Dewey Decimal System. Books on military academies . . . are classified under 355' (2007). In an interview for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Newman scathingly suggested that:

perhaps the book ended up in the military section because the boys hid it there. Or perhaps, having found the book in its proper section, the boys were *reading* it in the military section, where they had told their father they would be researching military academies. Someone catches them smack in the middle of the fistfucking chapter and they make up the story as an alibi. ([Blue 2007](#))

*Email: alyson.miller@deakin.edu.au

The advisory board of the Bentonville Public Library elected to remove the book from access while ‘a suitable book on the same topic’ was found to replace it (Prudenti 2007). George Spence, a board member, argued that ‘a more sensitive, more clinical approach to the same material might be more appropriate for the library’ (in Prudenti 2007), while Adams asserted that ‘God was speaking to my heart that day and helped me find the words that proved successful in removing this book from the shelf ... Any effort to reinstate the book will be met with legal action and protests from the Christian community’ (in Prudenti 2007).

While the clamour over the ‘nefarious lesbian sex guide’ (Blue 2007) signifies a relatively minor upset in the history of literary scandals, it is demonstrative of an abiding anxiety that exists around literature that represents women and sexuality. While the representation of sex in itself is an incendiary topic, capable of producing ‘the most scandalous scandal’ (Cohen 1996, p. 75), there is a persistent link between controversy and narratives concerning female sexuality that suggests a deep-seated cultural anxiety about women and gendered behaviour. Texts from *Madame Bovary* (1857) to *The Sexual Life of Catherine M* (2001) have provoked various arguments, from debates about the need to restrain the unruly bodies of women to contestations about aesthetic merit, each framing female desire in terms of pornography, obscenity, and ideas about moral harm. Indeed, the scandalous literature of sexual women is distinguished by efforts to reduce its transgressions into something manageable, whether through naming and categorisation (‘chick lit’ and ‘posh porn’), textual analysis, public censure, or critical excoriation. The desire to manage controversial material signifies a discourse of containment that suggests both women and literature require strict control. As this paper will argue, the relationship between women, literature, and scandal is one marked by both intra- and extra-textual efforts to restrain not only the unpredictability and power of female sexuality, but also the unruly energies of literature itself.

This paper is divided into two sections. Firstly, it examines the trials of Gustave Flaubert, Radclyffe Hall, and D.H. Lawrence, tracing a history in which literary works trigger controversy because of their portrayal of sexually active women. This section argues that the censorial discussions surrounding Flaubert, Hall, and Lawrence are characterised by a tradition of debate that attempts to remove the influence of literary works that represent sexual women as threats to the security of patriarchal authority. Moreover, the section contends that female sexuality is framed within these defining controversies as inherently problematic, a force requiring containment in order to protect society from ‘moral harm’. Further, the ‘difficulty’ of unruly women is explicitly connected in these trials with the unruly nature of literature per se, provoking ideas about the need to restrain the subversive potential of both women and words.

Secondly, the paper explores the emergence of a genre dedicated to the expression of female sexuality, ‘posh porn’. Denoting the growing popularity of ‘top-notch smut’ (Rees 2004) and the sexual memoir, ‘posh porn’ is a growing collection of works aimed specifically at addressing the sexual exploits of women, with its largely female-authored protagonists seeming to challenge radically the male-centred economies of desire. While the representation of sexual women at the turn of the twentieth century differs greatly from that of the erotic literature of ‘posh porn’ of the twenty-first century, this section contends that there is a continuity between these fictions and scandals that suggests a sustained unease about female sexuality and its portrayal. However, the controversy surrounding ‘posh porn’ also relates to the success – or otherwise – of its liberating conceptualisations of female sexuality.

This paper explores how scandalous works concerned with women and sexuality have provoked an inordinate number of arguments about the interpretative difficulties presented

by the literary text. Women and literature, it would seem, signify problematic cultural spaces, as the desire definitively to read or control an 'obscene' text relates analogously to a broader desire to control and contain women and other subordinate groups.

Femmes fatales: Madame Bovary, The Well of Loneliness, and Lady Chatterley's Lover

In order to historicise the relationship between scandal, women, and literature, it is instructive to begin with three key moments of literary controversy occurring in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – namely, the censure of Gustave Flaubert, Radclyffe Hall, and D.H. Lawrence. As with each of the examples discussed throughout the paper, the trials of each of these authors are associated with debates about the status and function of literature and literary innovation. Indeed, criticism of *Madame Bovary* (1857), *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), and *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) tends to focus on ideas about literary merit, narrowing discussions of censure to technical expositions or ideas about the imbrication of literature and the law. However, the trials and discourses concerning these authors and texts clearly demonstrate an abiding unease with the portrayal of female sexuality, as well as revealing anxieties associated with literature as a medium.

The trial of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* proves particularly useful for examining the relationship between literature, scandal, and women. The novel recounts the romantic adventures of Emma Bovary, the disillusioned wife of a market town doctor who seeks love and excitement through a series of affairs. Accused of glorifying adultery and debasing the sacrament of marriage, Flaubert was indicted with offending public and religious morals; a charge largely based on the ostensible failure of the novel to condemn the wanton Madame Bovary. According to Elisabeth Ladenson in *Dirt for Art's Sake* (2007), the trial of Flaubert was grounded on the assumption that the function of literature was both to uphold the status quo and to affirm the 'moral strictures governing the rest of society' (p. 25) as correct. Indeed, the presiding judges of the hearing contended that *Madame Bovary* warranted 'harsh rebuke, for the task of literature must be to embellish the mind, by elevating understanding and refining the morals' (in Cohen 2005, p. 387). The trial of *Madame Bovary* constituted an exercise in literary analysis as the prosecutor, Ernest Pinard, and the defence counsel, Marie-Antoine-Jules Sénard, engaged in a 'disagreement not over whether Flaubert has the right to depict objectionable truths in the service of art, but over whether or not the depiction of Emma Bovary's adulterous liaisons serves a morally positive purpose' (Ladenson 2007, p. 37). Processes of reading were fundamental to determining the moral transgressions of Flaubert's text; however, Pinard and Sénard shared the cultural assumption that sexual women required punishment and control. Certainly, neither the prosecution nor the defence interrogated the idea that the heroine was perverse, but rather focused their arguments on the moral function of representing such a protagonist. As Dominick LaCapra notes in *Madame Bovary on Trial*:

For Pinard, [Emma Bovary] serves as a positive identity and thus lures the reader into the same temptations and immoral forms of behaviour to which she succumbed. Emma herself is not so much a scapegoat of society as a temptress who gets her way with men ... For him, the novel does not present her suicide as punishment for her immorality. One might almost say that, for Pinard, Emma should be much more of a scapegoat than she is, for she gets away with far too much. For Sénard, Emma serves as a negative identity, providing the reader with an object (and an abject) lesson in what he or – more decidedly – she must avoid. She is a scapegrace who fully gets what she deserves. (LaCapra 1982, p. 35)

Sénard thus frames the text as a tool of patriarchy, emphasising the ‘cautionary’ nature of the narrative and describing it as a fiction to keep the ‘most decent and purest of young women’ steadfast ‘in the fulfilment of their . . . duties’ (in Cohen 1996, p. 341). Similarly, Pinard makes explicit an underlying anxiety about the unruly forces of literature and women that informed the trial, urging the need for regulation and containment in order to uphold moral and social standards: ‘Art without rules is no longer art; it is like a woman who would take off all her clothes. To impose upon art the unique rule of public decency is not to subordinate it but to honour it’ (in Cohen 1996, p. 335).

Importantly, it is not only the representation of female sexuality in *Madame Bovary* that highlights the connection between women, literature, and controversy. The trial of Flaubert also illustrates the gendering of the novel as a literary form and how anxieties about the transformative potential of literature are persistently associated with fears for the corruption of women. Ladenson observes that historically, ‘the novel’ was a genre largely associated with the feminine and concerned with depicting idealistic and historical narratives (2007, p. 26). With the feminisation of the novel form, a sharp divide was established to differentiate between the reading materials aimed at male and female audiences. By the mid-nineteenth century (the time of *Madame Bovary*), the popularity of the serialised novel or *feuilleton* grew, appearing within major newspapers and predominantly intended for a female readership (Ladenson 2007, p. 26). The subject matter of hard journalism was not meant for the more romantically inclined nature of women, whose role remained located within the private sphere. The idea that art should serve a morally uplifting purpose, then, as articulated during the Bovary trial, as Ladenson contends, had ‘everything to do with gender, since women were the target audience of daily *feuilletons* as of most novels . . . whereas the news section of the newspaper, like history and most nonfiction, was taken to be a masculine realm’ (2007, p. 27).

Yet the effects on women of reading novels were widely considered deleterious, a notion parodied in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and ironically exploited in *Madame Bovary*. Emma Bovary is indeed captivated by the worlds offered by literature and is transformed by narrative: ‘She recalled the heroines of the books that she had read, and the lyric region of these adulterous women began to sing in her memory with the voice of sisters that charmed her. She became herself, as it were, an actual part of these imaginings’ (Flaubert 1994, p. 124). When Emma finally dies, she is, moreover, plagued with ‘the frightful taste of ink’ (Flaubert 1994, p. 242), a ‘nauseous reminder’, Ladenson notes, ‘of the books that had intoxicated her’ (Ladenson 2007, p. 28). Indeed, both intra- and extra-textually, the metamorphic effects of literature are repeatedly framed in reference to the vulnerability of women, as also evidenced in Pinard’s prosecution of the text:

The light pages of *Madame Bovary* fall into hands that are even lighter, into the hands of young girls, sometimes of married women. Well then! When the imagination will have been seduced, when this seduction will have reached into the heart and the heart will have spoken to the sense, do you think that a very dispassionate argument will be very effective against this seduction of the sense and the feelings? (in Cohen 1996, p. 333)

Kaplan notes that both the prosecutor and defence lawyer ‘used the nefarious influence of romantic novels to bolster their opposing arguments’, and were ‘of one mind about the damaging effects of the literature of seduction on a sensitive, innocent female mind’ (1991, p. 329). *Madame Bovary* clearly mimics the supposedly detrimental effects produced in women who consume novels, as Flaubert correlates the downfall of Emma with her immersion in and re-enactment of dramatic romance and historical fictions. As the following example demonstrates, Flaubert foregrounds within *Madame Bovary* the

‘idea that excessive novel-reading is poisonous, and should be prevented, if necessary by official intervention’ (Ladenson 2007, p. 28):

‘Do you know what your wife wants?’ replied Madame Bovary senior. ‘She wants to be forced to occupy herself with some manual work. If she were obliged . . . to earn her living, she wouldn’t have these vapours, that come to her from a lot of ideas she stuffs into her head, and from the idleness in which she lives . . . Reading novels, bad books, works against religion, and in which they mock at priests in speeches taken from Voltaire . . . all that leads you far astray, my poor child. Anyone who has no religion always ends by turning out badly.’
So it was decided to stop Emma from reading novels. (Flaubert 1994, p. 96)

For Ladenson, the fate of ‘*Madame Bovary*, like that of its heroine, was inextricably bound up with the question of fiction’s failure to perform its assigned role of providing consolation and moral uplift, of serving as an antidote to reality rather than a reflection of it’ (2007, p. 27). *Madame Bovary* thus thematises intra-textually the anxieties about literature raised by its own trial, incorporating cultural concern about the insidious effects of the novel, the vulnerability of women to the intimacies of reading, and the gendering of particular literary forms and content. Interestingly, the imagery of the idea that women are seduced by literature appears to be inherently sexual, suggesting the penetrative nature of the literary encounter in which a female reader is entered and ‘overcome’. This sexualised framing of the meeting between women and text perhaps explains the feminisation of the (passive) victim of literature, who is made vulnerable to the possessive influence – or even force – of fiction.

The question of how to read controversial literature remains a striking legacy of the trial of Flaubert, provoking arguments not only about the moral power of the novel, but also about literature as an aesthetic category. As Jonathan Dollimore observes in *Sex, Literature and Censorship* (2001), a defence of literature on aesthetic grounds often proves pivotal in debates concerning scandalous texts, as demonstrated by the exculpation of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) in the United States, declared as not legally obscene in 1933 (Dollimore 2001, p. 97). Yet the text clearly contains provocative and controversial sexual content, including scenes of transvestism, masturbation, sado-masochism and, importantly, female sexuality. The judgement of the novel drew on an aesthetic defence of art, which Dollimore suggests ‘can be summarised by two claims: first, that the truly literary work cannot, by its very nature, be obscene or pornographic; second, that its effect . . . is always and only aesthetic; in other words, the true work of art does not influence its readers politically, morally or whatever’ (2001, p. 98). It is an echo of John Keats’ notion of ‘negative capability’ and claims that ‘with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration’ (Keats 2004, p. 57). The credo is also found in the preface of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), which states that ‘there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all’ (Wilde 2003, p. 3). Joyce, too, evoked an aesthetic defence, declaring through Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) that:

the feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion (I use the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing. (Joyce 1992, p. 222)

As Dollimore contends, aesthetic defences such as those used by Joyce and Wilde are ‘not only counter-intuitive and implausible, but also tend to rob art of its power, suggesting . . . that essentially art effects nothing, least of all its readers, who, in Joyce’s

terms, find themselves in an arrested, static and transcendent mode of apprehension' (2001, p. 99). Aesthetic arguments also protect men, as the consumers of highbrow literary fiction, from an improper seduction and penetration by the book. What is interesting about an aesthetic defence of literature in the context of scandal, then, is not the philosophy of art per se but how questions about the aesthetic collide with issues of morality to reiterate an anxiety about the transformative potential of text.

The trial of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* is perhaps the best demonstration of a literary scandal that confronts not only issues relating to women and sexuality, but also discourses concerned with the persuasive influence of literature. Set in the late-Victorian period, the novel follows the life of Stephen Gordon, a wealthy English woman whose 'sexual inversion' is made apparent from an early age and who consequently battles to find social acceptance because of her 'otherness'. The scandalousness of Radclyffe Hall, who refused to apologise for her 'sexual inversion' or for challenging heteronormativity in literature, was further compounded by her eloquent description of lesbian sex in *The Well of the Loneliness* as a positive experience. As Chief Magistrate Sir Chartres Biron notes, it gives 'these women extraordinary rest, contentment and pleasure; and not merely that, but it is actually put forward that it improves their mental balance and capacity' (Biron 2002, p. 43). Indeed, the scandal of the text is not only that it alludes to women having sex, but women who have sex with other women – a sexual economy that precludes male power. In 1928, the British government attempted to censor *The Well of Loneliness* largely due to fears that 'it would encourage or legitimate lesbianism' (Dollimore 2001, p. 99). In a *Sunday Express* editorial that precipitated the trial, entitled 'A Book That Must Be Banned' (1928), James Douglas claimed that sexual 'perversion' was 'a pestilence ... devastating the younger generation' and that he would rather give 'a healthy boy or girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel' (Douglas 2002, p. 38).

Indeed, according to Douglas, 'in order to prevent the contamination and corruption of English fiction it is the duty of the critic to make it impossible for any other novelist to repeat this outrage' (Douglas 2002, p. 38). Certainly, the literary merits of *The Well of Loneliness* also added to ideas of its threat. The Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Archibald Bodkin, for example, argued that the book is 'a subtle and insinuating one and more dangerous because of its literary character' (Dollimore 2001, p. 103), while Douglas stated that the 'cleverness of the book intensifies its moral danger ... it is seductive and insidious' (Douglas 2002, p. 38). The idea of sex between women enraged and disgusted censors who objected not only to the homosexual content of the novel but also to Hall's appropriation of Christianity to 'validate lesbian love' (Dollimore 2001, p. 101). The protagonist of the novel, Stephen Gordon, repeatedly empathises with Christ, likening their suffering and 'otherness' in a world that fails to understand difference: 'Stephen ... turned to the *Child's Book of Scripture Stories* and she studied the picture of the Lord on His Cross, and she felt that she understood Him ... [S]he fell asleep, to dream that in some queer way she was Jesus' (Hall 1949, pp. 24–25). *The Well of Loneliness* thus uses, according to Dollimore, a 'religiose and romantic ethic to make lesbians attractive and objects of admiration' (2001, p. 103), which ostensibly had the rather alarming potential to destroy Christianity (2001, p. 38).

The trials in question thus demonstrate a concern with texts that actually reinforce, to varying degrees, traditional gender ideologies. Madame Bovary and Stephen Gordon are, for example, punished for their indiscretions: Emma suffers from the realisation that her fantasies offer no escape from the tedious roles allotted to women and commits suicide in an ignoble death, while Gordon cannot evade her otherness, as she is progressively alienated and forced to live on the social margins. In *Lesbian Images* (1975), Jane Rule notes that

Radclyffe Hall appears to worship ‘the very institutions which oppressed her, the Church and the patriarchy’ (in O’Rourke 1989, p. 106), while Ladenson adds that ‘the world of *The Well*, strangely enough ... is one where men should be men and women women: the former are ideally strong, taciturn, and virile; the latter fragile, emotional, and feminine’ (2007, p. 110). Indeed, while Gordon challenges the assumptions of heteronormativity, *The Well of Loneliness* not only asserts conservative gender expectations, but also repeatedly positions sexual difference as inherently unnatural. In representing Gordon as ‘other’, gender norms are simply inverted, suggesting that lesbianism is stereotypically – and performatively – masculine. Gordon as a child, for example, persistently dresses as Lord Nelson and repeatedly muses on the possibility of transforming into a man: ‘Do you think that I *could* be a man, supposing that I thought very hard, or prayed, Father?’ (Hall 1949, p. 29). Gordon’s opposition to conventional femininity is also conveyed in terms of her physical strength and size, athletic ability, impatience with female clothing, inability to tolerate the domestic realm, and exaggerated masculine gestures, such as ‘rubbing her chin’ (p. 72) and an appetite considered less than ‘dainty’ (p. 55).

The incongruity of Gordon’s masculine behaviour is repeatedly noted throughout the text, as various acquaintances describe her rejection of feminine traits as ‘queer’ (Hall 1949, p. 22), ‘horrid’ (p. 59), ‘all wrong’ (p. 60), and ‘unnatural’ (p. 81). In a climactic moment of vitriol, Gordon’s own mother describes her daughter as ‘a sin against creation ... vile and filthy ... against nature, against God who created nature. My gorge rises; you have made me feel physically sick’ (p. 226). Yet while Gordon refutes the expectation that women must be innately feminine and ‘naturally’ attracted to men, the novel represents less a blurring of gender boundaries than a celebration of patriarchy – as demonstrated by the respect bestowed upon the figures of the father and Christ. Indeed, despite the vilification of Gordon due to her inability to conform to cultural ideas about women, it is the feminine that is most demonised in *The Well of Loneliness*, while the masculine remains a site of privilege. This is rather ironic given the fears of prosecutors who believed that Hall was threatening the patriarchal status quo.

The ambiguity of *Madame Bovary* and *The Well of Loneliness* in terms of their transgression of patriarchy is also present in D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Set in the period following World War I, the narrative describes the life of a young married woman, Lady Chatterley, whose husband has been paralysed during his war-time service and rendered impotent. The sexual frustration of Lady Chatterley leads her into an affair with the gamekeeper, Oliver Mellors, who teaches her that she cannot live with the pleasures of the mind alone. The novel is explicit in its reiteration of normative (hetero)sexual relations, imposing a masculine economy of desire that is made most apparent in the euphemistic language used. Phrases such as ‘her mound of Venus’ (Lawrence 1960, p. 221), ‘a little bud of life’ (p. 219), ‘the keeper of the bright phallos’ (p. 141), and the notorious ‘Lady Jane’ and ‘John Thomas’ (p. 220) align Lawrence with an overtly patriarchal system of sexual coding. Nonetheless, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was a daring publication for the early twentieth century, representing not only graphic sex scenes but also intimately describing the female body – a feature that has come to characterise scandals involving representations of female sexuality. Indeed, the portrayal of Lady Chatterley repeatedly emphasises the reality of the (female) body, ranging from an unflattering description of her ‘rather small, and dropping pear-shaped’ breasts (p. 72) to the gamekeeper’s exaltations about her physicality, giving her a corporeal place in the novel that resists romanticism and abstraction: ‘Tha’rt real, tha art! Tha’rt real, even a bit of a bitch. Here tha shits an’ here tha pisses: an’ I lay my hand on ‘em both an’ like thee for it. I like thee for it’ (p. 232).

Lawrence's representation of the sexual exploits of Lady Chatterley provoked volatile arguments about pornography and the moral value of representing the graphic details of adultery. Like *Madame Bovary* and *The Well of Loneliness*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was also scrutinised for its artistic merit. However, unlike these earlier trials, it brought to the courtroom the expert opinions of literary critics, including E.M. Forster, Dame Rebecca West, Helen Gardner, and Raymond Williams. Involving social commentators, industry professionals (such as publishers and editors), and specialist critics, discussions about the portrayal of female sexuality generally tend to emerge within the arguments of the 'cultural elite', and focus on questions about art and transgression that often directly avoid the source of anxiety. Indeed, scandals relating to the depiction of female sexuality repeatedly struggle to articulate the anxiety of representing women, their bodies, and their sexual proclivities. Instead, discussions are framed in culturally appropriate phrases about art and morality and concerns about 'pernicious literary influences' (Ladenson 2007, p. 57) on the delicate female mind.

As evidenced by the trials of Flaubert, Hall, and Lawrence, the representation of female sexuality is consistently placed in conflict with patriarchy, whether through a transgression of sanctified institutions such as marriage and the church, or a subversion of 'natural' sexual desire. The control of women who attempt to challenge male power, such as Emma Bovary, Stephen Gordon, or Lady Chatterley, occurs not only within the punishments issued by the text, but also extra-textually through public and legal censure and 'correct' readings of the literary work. It is important to note that the 'unruliness' of these women and the challenges they offer to established notions of femininity and female sexuality are markedly different. Stephen Gordon, for example, clearly contests heteronormativity, undermining cultural and religious models that define female sexuality as part of an economy that is only able to function as a counterpoint to male desire. *Madame Bovary* and *Lady Chatterley*, however, signify less a resistance to static ideas about sexual orientation and more a challenge to gender-based norms that work to deny female agency and construct dichotomous social, sexual, and political relationships between men and women. The inevitable unease that accompanies the representation of women and sex means that female sexuality is consistently framed as problematic – imbricating the difficulty of 'uncontrollable' female sexuality with questions about controlling the literary text itself. As Douglas suggests in his attack against *The Well of Loneliness*, works that transgress socio-sexual norms compromise 'literature as well as morality ... Fiction of this type is an injury to good literature. It makes the house of literature fall into disrepute ... It should keep its house in order' (Douglas 2002, p. 38). With the provocative emergence of 'posh porn', discourses have begun to widen, but there remains a reluctance to confront the taboos surrounding sexual women.

Une complicité libertine: reading political correctness in 'posh porn'

Undoubtedly, there is a considerable gap between representations of female sexuality at the end of the nineteenth century and those emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first. Rejecting the euphemistic strategies of Flaubert, Hall, and Lawrence, 'posh porn' is characterised by its penchant for unmitigated physical detail and a sensationalist drive to confess the most shocking sexual 'deviancy'. Asserting a liberatory credo that unsettles not only cultural but also literary norms, the genre aims to reject the 'soft' consolations of romance fiction and 'chick lit', proclaiming a political agenda concerned with celebrating female sexuality. Yet for all the daring of 'posh porn' literature, its emphasis on the socio-sexual roles of women links it most markedly to the trials discussed. Indeed, the scandalous

confessions of the genre often belie conservative narrative underpinnings, reiterating a masculine order that contains women within the expectations of patriarchal culture. A core connection thus remains: ‘posh porn’, like *Madame Bovary*, *The Well of Loneliness*, and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, manifests anxieties concerned with the containment of both unruly women and unruly texts.

According to Louise France, ‘posh porn’ is essentially a genre ‘about women who seem to like getting down to it and see no reason to justify their behaviour’ (2006). A ‘new kind of graphic literature’ that explores ‘women’s fantasies and shows them to be acceptable’, ‘posh porn’ makes available an erotic body of texts focused on female desire (France 2006). The initiation of the phenomenon is commonly attributed to the publication of Catherine Millet’s *The Sexual Life of Catherine M* (2001), the confessional narrative of a Parisian art critic who recounts her many and varied sexual encounters: ‘Today I can account for 49 men whose sexual organs have penetrated me. But I cannot put a number on those that blur into anonymity’ (p. 11). While the works of Anaïs Nin, Pauline Réage, and Erica Jong demonstrate that graphic sexual fictions and memoirs are hardly new, an explicit female-centred ‘erotica’ is beginning to emerge within a mainstream focus. France further notes that recent publications indicate a provocative transgression of traditional mores, given the release of ‘a memoir by a winsome-looking ballet dancer with a predilection for sodomy; a semi-autobiographical novel by an anonymous Muslim woman about her sexual coming of age; a confessional account of teenage proclivities in Catholic Italy; a candid career guide to life as a Manhattan prostitute; and a novel centred on a single act of fellatio’ (France 2006). Indeed, ‘posh porn’ is renowned for its detailed explorations of subversive sexual behaviours, a feature that has ensured it is a genre increasingly marked by controversy and unease.

The anxieties surrounding the genre, however, are less related to the graphic representation of sex itself than to questions about ideology. Indeed, while the release of texts such as Jane Juska’s *A Round-Heeled Woman* (2003), Emily Maguire’s *Taming the Beast* (2005), and Hitomi Kanehara’s *Snakes and Earrings* (2005) has been celebrated as an exciting development in the erotic fiction aimed at, and authored by, women, the radicality of the genre is debated by critics who suggest that its ‘pro-sex feminism’ (Rees 2004) is more indicative of financial than political interests. As Danuta Kean argues in *The Independent*, ‘in publishing, where there’s muck there’s brass. Robust declarations that match literary aspirations with taboo-breaking feminism are a tried-and-tested publicity ploy’ (Kean 2009). According to Kean, pretensions of a feminist agenda are part of a trick to attract a female audience, while the genre panders to male fantasy under the guise of a liberating sexual credo for women – a credo that has proved economically advantageous.¹ Indeed, Kean argues that the scandal of ‘posh porn’ is not its penchant for pornographic representations of female sexuality, but the ways in which it disguises the objectification of women as emancipation (2009). Interestingly, works that have attracted controversy – by no means representative of the range of erotic texts available to women – are heterosexual in focus and mimic the memoir form characteristic of ‘chick lit’ fictions, suggesting that anxieties about the content of ‘posh porn’ also concerns a transgression of a popular genre.

While France argues that the genre uses pornographic images as a means of undermining repressive sexual economies, the editor of *Front & Centre* magazine, Matthew Firth, suggests that modern sex writing for women is not ‘about depicting sexual situations most of us can only dream of. Sex fiction is writing about sex by accurately portraying how people fuck. The goal is authenticity’ (in France 2006). The ‘authenticity’ of the genre is an image in part created by the number of memoirs that make up ‘posh porn’, as authors such as Melissa Panarello, Catherine Millet, Toni Bentley, and Jane Juska claim

to write about real encounters and often present their works in the form of a confessional diary. But if the aim is indeed truthfully to replicate ‘how people fuck’, the difficulty encountered by ‘posh porn’ is its ability to liberate female sexuality – which it claims to do – from the cultural frameworks in which it is produced. As a result of the propensity of ‘posh porn’ fictions to involve narratives of violence and exploitation alongside explorations of desire, the genre has come under scrutiny from readers conflicted about whether its representation of women offers sexual liberation. *The Serpent’s Tail* publisher Pete Ayrton, for example, has named the trend a ‘continuation of feminism’ (in Rees 2004), while the critic Louise Kaplan (1991) has commented on erotic literature more generally that pornography cannot offer women sexual emancipation until society itself transforms. As Kaplan contends, pornography ‘depends for its vitality on the gender stereotypes that support the fundamental structures of our social order’ (1991, p. 343); thus until the systems of the order itself are reformed, ‘erotic literature, pornography, the erotic life itself will be what it has always been – a reflection of those structures but never a potential underminer of them’ (1991, p. 343).

Certainly, despite appearing to engage with the social construction of female sexuality and the repressive effects of patriarchy, the content of ‘posh porn’ fictions is more aligned with the conventional structures of romance and ‘chick lit’ texts than with a radical feminist vision. The mainstream popularity of de Jour, Juska, and Gemmell is logical in this context, as ‘posh porn’ functions as an extension of a genre already associated with titillation and the correct cultural ‘rules’ for the expression of female sexual desire. ‘Posh porn’ fictions tend to frame women, for example, as passive objects who are made ‘real’ only through their encounters with men, and to structure sexual discovery around the need to gratify male lust. Women rarely obtain the autonomy they appear to seek, but are more often exploited and returned to positions of weakness and uncertainty. Nikki Gemmell’s *The Bride Stripped Bare* (2004), for instance, a modern retelling of *Madame Bovary*, contextualises the sexual liberation of its protagonist – a wife who is disenchanted with her marriage and so seeks pleasure in a series of affairs – solely in terms of her desire for acceptance by men. Melissa Panarello’s *100 Strokes of the Brush Before Bed*, the diary of a promiscuous teenager, readily embraces the fairy-tale myth, evident from the title itself – a link to an idea about the grooming habits of princesses – to the heart-warming conclusion that neatly provides Prince Charming. Toni Bentley’s *The Surrender* (2004) even manages to make a narrative concerning a ballet dancer’s predilection for sodomy a ‘romantic’ exercise, a search for the great ‘A-Man’ (p. 71) who will ‘complete’ the narrator. Indeed, while the processes of courtship differ (marriage replaced with orgasm), the basic framework of ‘posh porn’, ‘chick lit’, and romance novels seems interested in the bringing to order of female sexual desire. *The Surrender*, for example, repeatedly emphasises how freedom, fulfilment, and even spiritual understanding can be achieved through submission:

If you can let a man ass-fuck you ... you will learn to trust not only him but yourself, totally out of control. And beyond control lies God ... It is through this physical surrender, this forbidden pathway, that I have found my self, my voice, my spirit, my courage – and the cackle of the crone. This is no feminist treatise about equality. This is the truth about the beauty of submission. The power in submission. (Bentley 2004, pp. 9–10)

In these texts, women continually succumb to the demands of male desire while ideas about female subjectivity remain firmly situated within the expectations of a masculine culture. Perhaps most disturbingly, the genre often utilises violent and sometimes abusive encounters in its efforts to proclaim a ‘liberatory’ agenda, textually framing physical pain as a means through which to achieve sexual emancipation.

If ‘posh porn’ has taken a leap from its *fin de siècle* predecessors Flaubert, Hall, and Lawrence, it is in the use of violence as a ‘natural’ component of female sexuality – homage, perhaps, to the brutality described in Pauline Réage’s 1954 erotic classic, *The Story of O*.² Bentley, for example, asserts that ‘pain and pleasure ... are inseparable’ (Bentley 2004, p. 145) and advises women that ‘receptivity [is] activity, not passivity’ (p. 7). Panarello paradoxically demands to be raped (Panarello 2004, p. 127) and proudly claims that she wants ‘violence, violence beyond endurance ... Violence kills me, wears me down, dirties me and feeds on me, but with and for it I survive, I feed on it’ (p. 129). While this is not to argue that masochism is an illegitimate expression of female sexual desire, the violence of ‘posh porn’ does provoke the question of whether it is possible for representations of sexual women – even when authored by sexual women – to evade patriarchal norms.

As the scandal surrounding the publication of Panarello’s *100 Strokes of the Brush Before Bed* attests, ‘posh porn’ is clearly a genre provoking anxieties about the context in which female protagonists celebrate their sexual liberation. A confessional memoir, the text attracted significant controversy among Italian audiences when publishers revealed not only the autobiographical nature of the explicit content, but also the age of the author – a 19-year-old student whose sexual exploits (and exploitation) began at the age of 14. With the release of the ‘erotic diary’ (Rees 2004), critics engaged in debates about the age of the author/narrator, and the shocking scenarios in which Panarello offers herself as both provocateur and prey (Rees 2004). Constructed as a diary, *100 Strokes of the Brush Before Bed* describes two years of Panarello’s amorous encounters, framed as a de-romanticised exposé of the sexuality of a young woman. Indeed, Panarello forces the memoir into daring territory, combining a discomfiting element of youth with sexual experience akin to the transgressive confessions of Catherine Millet or Anaïs Nin.³ Panarello argues that ‘I don’t think of sex as intellectual or philosophical. I believe sex is flesh and blood’ (in Lawless 2004). She also firmly situates the text in the genre of literary pornography. As Andrew Lawless notes, Panarello ‘considers her own book pornography. She has quite a different conception of pornography, though, from that of any so-called “moral majority”’ (Lawless 2004). Indeed, Panarello claims to find ‘a sincerity in pornography ... and purity of intent. Not everything that is pornographic is by definition superficial or vulgar. When pornography has an idea behind it, it can be profound and introspective, as much as any other work’ (in Lawless 2004).

Yet the sincerity and ‘purity of intent’ that Panarello claims to observe in pornography is undermined by the text itself, which recounts an endless narrative of sexual degradation, phrased in what the literary critic Lenora Todaro describes as ‘cringe-inducing euphemisms’ (2004). Indeed, the language employed by Panarello is a tribute to Lawrence, with its use of coded terms such as lance, stake, sceptre, Secret, River Lethe, and erupting volcano. Yet despite moments of coy elision, the novel does not recoil from the details of Panarello’s exploits, as it describes her experiences with oral sex, group sex, prop-sex, gay sex, a Lolita fantasy, and a violent episode of revenge sex. Lawless asserts that ‘there are different layers at work’ (2004) as the novel raises questions about sex and identity – ‘for example, to what extent is the degradation of her body a degradation of her identity. It paints a complex picture of sexual politics and sexual identity’ (Lawless 2004). However, like other works in the genre, it is difficult to avoid questions about the extent to which ‘posh porn’ narratives reiterate harmful stereotypes. The problematic relationship between feminist and patriarchal discourses is one that Panarello appears to delight in perverting, claiming to be ‘a pure *maschilista*, a shining knight, a defender of the masculine world that’s mistreated and misunderstood, and at the same time envied by those women that don’t have any real conception of the word “liberty”’ (in Lawless 2004).

While Lawless reduces the assertion to an amusing effort by Panarello to ‘come across like a young Johnny Rotten of the literary world . . . ready to provoke on cue’ (Lawless 2004), it is a disturbing reminder of the tendency of ‘posh porn’ to support male-defined norms, and to position subordination as an enviable model for behaviour that promises women sexual liberation.⁴

Yet it is not simply the vivid anti-feminist descriptions of promiscuous sex that motivate the anxieties surrounding ‘posh porn’. Equally controversial is the attention given to the female body, ranging from anatomical detail to ruminations about the joys of onanism. Female-authored erotica is characterised by its fascination with the body and a language to describe it, combining the euphemisms and clichés that denote ‘chick lit’ and romance fictions with an intimately photographic – if not pornographic – approach. Millet, for example, explicitly recounts being aroused at an art exhibition, describing ‘the slimy patch on my tights alternately against the lips of my vagina and the swell of my inner thigh, shifting as I walk’ (Millet 2001, p. 76), while Bentley details how ‘a pussy is a wild and watery landscape of hills and valleys and ravines and mighty holes that suck one in like quicksand’ (Bentley 2004, p. 56). Yet there is nothing particularly feminist about the descriptions offered by Millet and Bentley, which fit with patriarchal discourses that figure female genitalia as alien or threatening. Important, too, is how ‘posh porn’ echoes the interest in the female body offered by authors such as Lawrence and, indeed, how the genre mimics the language of *Lady’s Chatterley’s Lover* in its descriptions of female sexuality. Panarello, for instance, vacillates between euphemistic and explicit language, telling of an orgy in the phrases of a Harlequin fiction: ‘When a finger slowly slipped inside my Secret, I felt a sudden warmth and realised that reason was abandoning me. I surrendered to the touch of their hands’ (Panarello 2004, p. 52).

An emphasis on the bodily is a feature particularly notable in Roche’s controversial *Wetlands* (2009), a novel that confronts notions about women and the abject by fusing sexual desire with a ‘fetishisation of filth’ (Kean 2009). Kean notes that in Roche’s text ‘every orifice is explored, every fluid tasted, leaked or smeared . . . Dirty toilet seats are rubbed against, avocado seeds pumped out of her vagina like Thai ping-pong balls and her labia . . . stretched in a way guaranteed to make women want to cross their legs’ (Kean 2009). Indeed, Decca Aitkenhead (2009) claims that ‘people have fainted’ at readings of *Wetlands*, given its uncensored approach to the female body and its candid discussion of subjects such as masturbation, genital depilation, vaginal fluids, and excrement. Roche’s narrative, unlike the works of Bentley, Panarello, and Millet, does not offer a range of ‘real world’ confessions, but is entirely – if not mischievously and ironically – fictional, self-consciously playing upon cultural anxieties about the abject. The narrative begins in unflinching terms – ‘As far back as I can remember, I’ve had hemorrhoids’ (Roche 2009, p. 1) – and continues on graphically to describe the relationship between the protagonist, Helen Memel, and her body. After announcing that ‘hygiene’s not a major concern of mine’ (p. 12), Helen proceeds to instruct the reader on the ‘all-important flora of the pussy’ (p. 12), why ‘the smell of plain old shit or piss is better than the disgusting perfumes people buy’ (p. 13), how to savour the joys of ‘smegma’ (p. 20), and the benefits of using pre-loved tampons (p. 114). According to Helen, she is her ‘own garbage disposal’ (p. 121), and there is little that she has not – or will not – explore, taste, or share with others. Arguably, the graphic confrontation with the body in *Wetlands* is a means of breaking down cultural conventions that have proscribed the physical in public discourse, most particularly in terms of women and menstruation. Critics such as Anis Shavani, for example, describe the hyperbole employed by Roche as a technique with which to subvert polite discussions about women and to confront the reality of the body. As Shavani argues,

'novelists, germ-phobics all, sell us ethical narratives, as clean as hospital rooms. We need the Helen Memels to mess up the joint' (Shavani 2009).

Yet while *Wetlands* offers challenging representations of the physical realities of female sexuality and the body, it is, I would argue, ambiguously caught up within feminist arguments about sexual liberation versus a reiteration of patriarchal norms. *Wetlands* and other 'posh porn' fictions clearly eschew the distaste associated with the female body. However, by appropriating the language of 'muck', as Kean describes it, there is the risk of reinforcing the association of women with the abject and the obscene. Nonetheless, as it dares to confront the physical realities of women, 'posh porn' highlights a cultural anxiety about the female body and the impetus for women – and society – to control the distasteful self. The critical response that urges Roche to restrain the unruly body of her unhygienic protagonist is one often issued to the graphic writings of 'posh porn'. It is a call to reign in unseemly texts in feminine contexts that echoes James Douglas' demand that literature keep its house in order.

Interestingly, for all its radicality, 'posh porn' is keen to attain a literary cachet and to reject suggestions that its fictions are the equivalent to the narratives found in *Hustler* and *Penthouse* magazines. As the 'posh' suggests, the genre aims to achieve a 'high-brow' class status, to add 'a gloss of sophistication' to the 'relentless repetition of sex act after sex act' (Kean 2009). In this way, publishers of 'posh porn' attempt to use literary status to mitigate controversial material, a strategy – as demonstrated by the trial of Radclyffe Hall – that merely provokes anxieties about the category of literature. Nonetheless, the literary pretensions of the genre have bolstered the idea that a text from this category represents more than just 'common' pornography. As the publisher Patrick Janson-Smith notes, 'the people walking into shops to buy a book like *Catherine M* feel a bit less concerned about being seen buying an explicit book if it has a literary cachet' (in Kean 2009).

Further, it is difficult to ignore the efforts of 'posh porn' writers to attain literary respectability. Bentley's book describes her understanding of philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard, for instance, as well as the writers D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, and Henry Miller. Panarello repeatedly refers to Homer, Dante, Sylvia Plath, and Vladimir Nabokov, while Millet, the Parisian art critic already gifted with cultural credibility, describes complex and abstract connections between art, space, and the body with meticulous, analytical detail. In a self-conscious effort to demonstrate their cultural capital, the authors of 'posh porn' fictions and memoirs arguably work to cultivate 'literariness', flaunting complex metaphors and literary allusions whilst mocking Oedipal complexes, Lolita fantasies, and feminist anxieties. At times overly contrived, the link that 'posh porn' appears to seek with 'Literature' is nevertheless reminiscent of the trials of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, wherein aesthetic defences of art sought to mitigate charges of obscenity and offence to public decency.

Yet the scandals surrounding the publication of 'posh porn' literature also display a curiously literary character, primarily involving, like the trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, critics from the social elite. Indeed, the antagonists contesting the ideological frameworks and subversive strategies of 'top-notch smut' (Rees 2004) are largely comprised of cultural commentators and literary critics – unusual, given the propensity of scandal to involve voices from a wide social spectrum. As noted in the context of the trials of Flaubert, Hall, and Lawrence, there remains a considerable unwillingness to address representations of sexual women in terms that confront the subject matter. Criticism of 'posh porn', however, marks a departure. Indeed, as this paper demonstrates, critical explorations of 'posh porn' narratives engage in debates explicitly about the representation of female sexuality.

But these discussions, relegated to the analyses of a cultural elite, fail to engage broader public participation, suggesting that while discourses have widened, the literature of sexual women remains deeply problematic.

The controversies surrounding the publication of ‘posh porn’ literature thus signal both a continuation and a departure from the discourses emerging from the trials of Flaubert, Hall, and Lawrence during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In its graphic confrontation with female sexuality, ‘posh porn’ is in many ways a descendant of earlier scandalous texts, interested in women, their bodies, and the ideological interests associated with their sexual identities. However, contemporary erotic fictions and memoirs also mark a significant departure from past portrayals of sexual women. Involving a ‘post-feminist’ political spin that claims ‘posh porn’ texts are attempting to free female sexuality, the genre is keenly attuned to sexual and gender politics. While the censure of Flaubert involved a defence proclaiming the loyalty of *Madame Bovary* to a patriarchal norm, ‘high-brow smut’ celebrates its rejection of patriarchy – often regardless of how blatantly its narratives maintain normative roles. Thus while ‘posh porn’ confronts female sexuality in unflinching terms, its representation of women remains problematic – raising questions about the possibility of stepping outside of restrictive sexual and gender structures in unruly and unconventional ways.

The full circle? Representing sexual women

From Flaubert to Roche, the controversies surrounding literature and female sexuality reiterate concerns about the social position of sexual women and the threat they pose to patriarchy – concerns that have been repeatedly voiced and debated in relation to the function and responsibilities of literature as a cultural medium. Both intra- and extra-textually, the literature and scandals discussed seek to place boundaries around the representation (and thus, perhaps, the reality) of female sexuality. Interestingly, within these debates, literature itself is rendered curiously female, a form that requires strict guidelines in order to meet expectations of its socio-cultural role. Indeed, ideas about the literary are repeatedly caught up with anxieties about women, from the feminisation of the novel form to a connection between arguments about the aesthetic value of literature and the unruly nature of the female body.

As the literature of ‘posh porn’ suggests, there remains significant unease attached to sexual women. Indeed, while feminist arguments about the efficacy of the genre in overturning traditional sexual economies and critiquing male-defined norms are of utmost importance, the scandals of ‘posh porn’ remain fascinated with the representation of sexual women and the shock factor of their public accounts. Undoubtedly, ‘posh porn’ attempts to challenge ideas about female sexuality. It is perhaps unsuccessful, but in its own terms – to provide a female-authored, literary pornography – is a provocative development in writing by and for women. Despite the apparent impossibility of representing female sexuality in ways that defy patriarchal structures, these texts raise questions about the shape of female desire, confronting taboos about the body, the nature of sexual violence, and female agency. But there remains, it would seem, a reluctance to accept the sexual behaviour displayed by women, whilst social norms exult in the sexual rights of men. It is an imbalance demonstrated, for instance, by the ridicule of a figure such as Paris Hilton, but the public celebration of the playboy promiscuity of Hugh Hefner. Indeed, while contemporary illustrations of female sexuality may have become more adventurous, the complexity of depicting sexual women has intensified – a ‘problem’ of representation that is made increasingly synonymous with a ‘problem’ with women.

Notes

1. Melissa Panarello's *100 of the Brush Before Bed*, for example, sold 850,000 copies in Italy alone and has been translated into 24 languages (Todaro 2004), while *Belle de Jour's Diary of an Unlikely Call Girl*, originally an on-line blog, was bought by publishers for 'a six-figure sum' (France 2006).
2. *The Story of O* was written by the French author Anne Desclos, under the pseudonym of Pauline Réage. The novel recounts the tale of O, who is taken by her lover to Chateau Roissy, where she is taught the 'art' of sexual submission. O is chained, whipped, branded, and pierced as she is willingly transformed into a sex object. The novel has been seriously critiqued for its representation of women's sexuality as submissive and masochistic, but has also been a source of intrigue: for many years it was believed that the book could only have been written by a man (Bedell 2004). Réage/Desclos has been credited as one of the first women to write frankly about sex.
3. Millet's *The Sexual Life of Catherine M* (2001) is credited with reigniting the contemporary interest in 'posh porn' writing. A Parisian intellectual and art critic, Millet shocked readers and publishers by candidly revealing the graphic details of her promiscuous sex life. Anaïs Nin, a French-Cuban author, is largely known as a diarist, but is also considered one of the best female Western writers of erotica. Her journals recount affairs with figures such as Henry Miller and Gore Vidal, and, most scandalously, an incestuous relationship with her father in *Incest: From a Journal of Love* (1992).
4. See Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (2006).

Notes on contributor

Alyson Miller teaches Literary Studies at Deakin University in Geelong, Australia. She has recently completed a PhD on scandalous texts.

References

- Aitkenhead, D., 2009. The vagina dialogue. *The Age*, 14 March, 20–21.
- Bedell, G., 2004. *I wrote the story of O* [online], *The Observer*. Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/jul/25/fiction.features3> [Accessed 15 November 2011].
- Bentley, T., 2004. *The surrender*. New York: ReganBooks.
- Biron, C., 2002. Judgement. In: L. Doan and J. Prosser eds. *Palatable poison: critical perspectives on The Well of Loneliness*. New York: Columbia University Press, 39–49.
- Blue, V., 2007. *No (lesbian) sex in the stacks, please* [online], *San Francisco Chronicle*. Available from: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/g/a/2007/05/03/violetblue.DTL> [Accessed 21 January 2009].
- Cohen, M., ed., 2005. *Madam Bovary: contexts and critical reception*. London: W.W. Norton.
- Cohen, W.A., 1996. *Sex scandal: the private parts of Victorian fiction*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- De Jour, B., 2006. *Diary of an unlikely call girl*. New York: Warner Books.
- Dollimore, J., 2001. *Sex, literature and censorship*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Douglas, J., 1928. A book that must be suppressed. In: L. Doan and J. Prosser eds. *Palatable poison: critical perspectives on The Well of Loneliness*. New York: Columbia University Press, 36–39.
- Flaubert, G., 1994. *Madame Bovary*. Ware: Wordsworth.
- France, L., 2006. *Bedtime stories* [online], *The Observer*. Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/mar/05/fiction.features2> [Accessed 5 July 2009].
- Gemmell, N., 2004. *The bride stripped bare*. London: Harper Perennial.
- Hall, R., 1949. *The well of loneliness*. London: Hammond.
- Joyce, J., 1992. *A portrait of the artist as a young man*. London: Penguin.
- Juska, J., 2003. *A round-heeled woman*. New York: Villard.
- Kanehara, H., 2005. *Snakes and earrings*. New York: Dutton.
- Kaplan, L.J., 1991. *Female perversions: the temptations of Emma Bovary*. New York: Doubleday.
- Kean, D., 2009. *Are these taboo-breaking novels art or porn?* [online], *The Independent*. Available from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/are-these-taboo-breaking-novels-art-or-porn-1501292.htm> [Accessed 27 January 2009].

- Keats, J., 2004. *The letters of John Keats*. H. Buxton Forman, ed. Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing.
- LaCapra, D., 1982. *Madame Bovary on trial*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Ladenson, E., 2007. *Dirt for art's sake: books on trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lawless, A., 2004. *The punk pornographer* [online], Available from: http://www.threemonkeysonline.com/als_page2/_melissa_p_one_hundred_strokes_of_the_brush_before_bed_100.html [Accessed 26 January 2009].
- Lawrence, D.H., 1960. *Lady Chatterley's lover*. Ringwood: Penguin.
- Levy, A., 2006. *Female chauvinist pigs: women and the rise of raunch culture*. New York: Free Press.
- Maguire, E., 2005. *Taming the beast*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Millet, C., 2001. *The sexual life of Catherine M*. London: Serpent's Tail.
- Newman, F., 1999. *The whole lesbian sex book*. San Francisco: Cleis Press.
- Nin, A., 1992. *Incest: from a journal of love*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- O'Rourke, R., 1989. *Reflecting on The Well of Loneliness*. New York: Routledge.
- Panarello, M., 2004. *100 strokes of the brush before bed*. New York: Black Cat.
- Prudenti, R.D., 2007. *Man threatens legal action against city* [online], *The Morning News*, 19 April. Available from: <http://www.nwaonline.net/articles/2007/04/19/news/042007bzsuterfolo.txt> [Accessed 21 January 2009].
- Réage, P., 1965. *The story of O*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Rees, J., 2004. *Posh porn* [online], *Telegraph*, 19 July. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3620903/Posh-porn.html> [Accessed 27 January 2009].
- Roche, C., 2009. *Wetlands*. New York: Gove Press.
- Shavani, A., 2009. *Wetlands by Charlotte Roche* [online], *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 May. Available from: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/01/RVU216IBAR.DTL> [Accessed 12 July 2010].
- Todaro, L., 2004. *Oops! I did it again* [online], *New York Times*, 7 November. Available from: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9400E3D6123DF934A35752C1A9629C8B63> [Accessed 9 February 2009].
- Wilde, O., 2003. *The picture of Dorian Gray*. London: Penguin.
- Zammarrelli, C., 2007. *Many sleepless nights indeed* [online]. *The Book Slut*, Available from: http://www.bookslut.com/banned_bookslut/2007_06_011198.php [Accessed 26 January 2009].