
James Grantham Turner. *Schooling Sex: Libertine Literature and Erotic Education in Italy, France, and England 1534-1685*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 408p.

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We sang till almost night, and drank my good store of wine; and then they parted and I to my chamber, where I did read through *Lescholles des Filles*; a lewd book, but what doth me no wrong to read for information sake (but it did hazer my prick para stand all the while, and *una vez to decharger*); and after I had done it, I burned it, that it might not be among my books to my shame; and so at night to supper and then to bed.

(Pepys's Diary, 9 February 1668)

Drawn to *L'Escole des Filles* based on the title, Pepys believed it to be a handbook on etiquette which he and his wife could enjoy translating from the French together. Even after realizing its "true nature," his comments as recorded in the journal entry above reveal a continuing perception of the text's importance as an educational tool. At the heart of this reading, then, is evidence of a wider experiencing of erotic texts that emphasize "schooling."

In his most recent study of literary libertinism from the early modern period, James Grantham Turner broadens the scope of his research to include the erotic traditions found in French and Italian texts. *Schooling Sex* is a very important first step in the study of the development of libertine traditions, and the various influences exerted on these literatures as they carry across nations. At the heart of this research, then, are questions of communication and dissemination. By charting the development of erotic fictions in this way, Turner addresses one of the fundamental concepts contextualizing the production of this literature, that of "erotic education."

Most often, this is imagined in the text as a duologue between two female characters, whereby the experience of sexual intercourse is mediated through the fictions of a female erotic awakening. Ironically, of course, these texts are aimed at, and read by, a primarily male audience, and questions as to whose education is being undertaken are necessarily raised. Issues of voicing and textual authority intersect with ideas of sexuality, and the problematics of a movement between private and public spaces is approached. Turner asks, "is libertine representation a parody of teaching, mocking the very idea of intellectual development or self-transformation in a creature so 'naturally' depraved as woman, or is it an *act* of teaching, a 'register' (as Montaigne put it) of what every participant in the game of love must learn?" (33). By considering the pedagogic "nature" of these works, the reader is able to reevaluate the erotic text as a vehicle for wider social and political issues of contemporary society.

The scope of this text is ambitious, stretching over a hundred and fifty years, and charting the literary traditions in three countries, in just three hundred and ninety-six pages. However, there is no point at which the reader is overwhelmed with the scope of the material at the expense of the meaning. The bipartite, chronological structure of the work gives a clear representation of the process of influence. The first part offers an in-depth illustration of the development of the “erotic education” motif in Italian and French texts. The second part provides a more detailed description as to the processes of translation that take place in the adoption and adaptation of these texts. Ultimately, Turner’s broad temporal perimeters allow him to chart this pedagogic erotic “movement” from Italian writers such as Aretino in the early 16th century, to the works of the English authors such as Rochester towards the end of the 17th century. He produces an illuminating synthesis of popular and lesser-known writers through these centuries, in order to chart the influences on early modern English libertine writers.

This text, then, hinges on the construction and significance of the erotic dialogue: a form of communication in erotic literature that all but created the concept of “pornography” with Pietro Aretino’s earliest *dialoghi*. As Turner speculates, the idea of erotic education can be seen to form the basis for much of the drama in the erotic-pornographic literary movement at this time. In this deeply transgressive evocation of the humanist principles of educational practice, then, the idea of an erotic education produced a destabilizing voice of feminine “power” over self and body. Questions as to the “naturalness” of female sexual nature implicitly interrogate the nature of masculine “knowledge,” as extending across social and domestic roles. In adapting the concept of the etiquette book, for instance, erotic literatures are seen as hijacking a specifically feminine domain. With the realization of the “true” nature of these discourses, however, the relationship of public to private becomes problematized in the means for cultural communication and self-identification. In the first chapter, then, we are introduced to the ideas of gender interpretation and voicing within the erotic literatures.

In progressing these literatures from the Italian dialogues to the French audience, however, Turner draws our attention to the difference in reception that the erotic-didactic position of these texts takes. Whereas “Aretino defended his erotic writings as a *jeu d’esprit*, meant only to celebrate his own arousal and display his own *ingegno*,” in France they were taken as part of a serious process of erotic education: Montaigne “assumes that men read Aretino to extract lessons in sexual ‘ability’ (even though the text itself almost exclusively shows women teaching women)” (36). Interestingly, in the works of Tullia d’Aragona, we are introduced to the more didactic approach

that forms the main influence for French reinterpretation, with a renewed focus on “philosophical, aesthetic, and erotic ideas” presented in a discursive manner.

This first part of the book also addresses one of the key concepts behind the construction of early modern sexuality, as “natural” or culturally imposed. Montaigne’s idea that, for women, sexuality is “*une discipline qui naist dans leurs veines*” is used by Turner to interrogate the ways in which female and male sexual identities are constructed in these texts. Turner notes that although “Montaigne offers us the starkly gendered polarity of blood or books. . . in the history of libertine literature, however, the book is by far the more potent organ of instruction. We might even say that libertinism *begins* in a library.” In this, Turner draws our attention to the works of Father Garasse, for instance, where his literary outrage at the erotic texts of Theophile de Viau, “did far more to constitute libertinage as a coherent stance or philosophy than any writing by those he attacks” (44). In thus addressing the literary basis of “libertinism” Turner allows us to approach a new study of the erotic-pornographic traditions that underlie contemporary culture.

Touching on academic discourses, and the usurpation of rhetorical models for the erotic literary voice, Turner takes Pallavicino’s *Retorica delle puttane* (1642) and Rocco’s *Alcibiade fanciullo a scola* (1652) to discuss how the classroom situation is incorporated and eroticized. In Pallavicino, for instance, the education of the courtesan is presented as a course in rhetoric. This is then constructed as the intersection of art and persuasion within the text. The conjunction of self, sexuality, and art, belies an artificiality that the erotic text imitates and demands within its very artistic construction. The eroticisation of *persuasion* is then figured more clearly in Rocco’s text: “*La retorica delle puttane* explains it, but *L’Alcibiade* performs it. . . . Wave after wave of reason-objection-refutation are punctuated by caresses that also serve as object-lessons” (90). This physicalizing of rhetoric within the text addresses broader issues of authority, and the scandal of the work can be seen not only in its representation of sodomy, but more so in its usurpation of the discourses of pedagogy. Indeed, Turner claims that it is the “queer” eroticism that “underlies the ostensibly heterosexual tradition” (104). In this, the authors consciously problematize the concepts of knowledge acquisition and transmission through the invocation of these pedagogic terms. In moving onto a consideration of one of the best known texts of this genre—*L’Ecole des Filles*, 1655—Turner then notes the importance of environment for the erotic text, with the emphasis on the “cell” being central to the construction of “place” for the reader. In contextualizing erotic processes within spatial limitations, the political and social significations of the private and public are again invoked.

Turner considers that it is with *L'Escole des Filles* that we can see “the shift from Italy to France, as the principal source of libertine discourse and ideology” (106). Clearly influenced by Aretino in the use of a dialogue through which a young woman’s sexual initiation is imagined, “this French text changes the characters and the motivation dramatically, effectively turning Aretino inside out: descriptions of delirious coupling, rare in the *Ragionamenti*, become the principal subject...the protagonists are no longer butts of satires of figures of extremity but didactic models, embodiments of normative lust” (107). Moving on from Pallavicino’s rhetorical constructions, *L'Escole* disposes of the bawd in favour of a young confidante. In *L'Escole*, then, Turner sees the nexus between the issues that surround the construction of the didactic-erotic texts that in turn formed the basis for the libertine literary traditions of the 17th century.

In Chapter Four, Nicholas Chorier’s *Aloisia Sigea* is subjected to a close reading in order to progress the reading of this body of literature onto an understanding of its position in constructing fictions of female authorship. Whereas the implied female speaker has been central to this literary tradition since Aretino, it is only with Chorier that we see a genuine attempt to imply actual female authorship. The incorporation of various paratextual devices seeks to support the claim that this text is translated by a female. Here, the final chapter of the first section of Turner’s work draws together the ideas of literature, education, and sexuality across these early continental texts, in order to provide the context for a subsequent analysis of the transmission of these ideas into the English “libertine” tradition.

In the second part of the volume, Turner considers the reception of the texts examined in the first section, as they enter into the English traditions (as represented by Wycherley and Behn, for instance). In this, he also considers the erotics of “response” within the literary traditions. He draws on his earlier work to consider how masculinity is then fashioned in relation to a textual tradition predicated upon the destruction, removal, and re-application of the “masculine” elements of social communicative means: “Men fashion or (in Pepys’ word) ‘inform’ their own identities as they fabricate unsettling images of women teaching women. The didactic pretext...conceals a dialectic of emulation and rejection that runs throughout the new canon and its critical reception-history” (224-225).

By looking at how the texts from Italy and France make their way into popular English translations, Turner considers the very act of translation in terms of a cultural debate as to the ability and authority for textual representation: “Like Rochester and Dryden, Oldham participated in the debate between literal and loose translation that raged in the 1670s...in contemporary usage, the freedoms taken by translators who modernize and adapt the classics, the wild leaps sanctioned by the Pindaric

mode, and the intrinsic licence of poetry itself, could all be conveyed by the word ‘libertine’—and thus strongly associated with sexual transgression” (304). It is this idea of “libertine” translation that he looks at in chapter seven, in relation to texts such as *Whores Rhetorick*, *The School of Venus*, and *Venus in the Cloister*. Turner recognizes the process of transformation that comes as part of these translational exercises, and notes that this process “involves ‘libertine’ emulation, even violation, of the original, especially when that author(ity) is perceived as female” (309). In this way, then, we can see the processes by which masculinity is constructed upon the reworking of an initial “feminine” authority.

In *Schooling Sex*, Turner makes significant inroads to an important study of the dissemination of texts in the erotic literary tradition, as cultivated over the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe. Turner demonstrates how popular texts are integral to a study of society and culture, even in their position of unorthodoxy. Indeed, in many ways, these apparently peripheral literatures enable us to open up the gaps in mainstream literary culture, thereby enriching our understanding of the early modern mind. ✱