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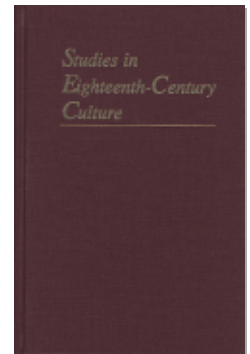
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Sexual Intention in Pornography

KATHLEEN LUBEY

Did eighteenth-century people intend to have sex? We have known at least since Frances Ferguson's "Rape and the Rise of the Novel" that volitional states do not tell the whole story of subjects' relationships to the sex acts their bodies engage in. For women in particular, whose bodies are regularly sexually instrumentalized irrespective of their intention, the potential disjointedness between consciousness and embodied sex act can be seen as proof of an "ongoing condition of the impossibility of consenting," an injustice whose exposure becomes Clarissa's singular mission after Lovelace's penetrative rape.¹ Sandra Macpherson has shown this form of sexual harm to extend to masculine persons in her discussion of Frances Sheridan's *Sidney Bidulph*, where "erections are, or might be, accidental," emblematic not of mindful commitment to perform a sex act but of a body that can be put to sexual use regardless of its owner's mental state.² Broadening the unstable link between consciousness and sex to include the non-harmful and ostensibly voluntary, I ask here if intention is the primary condition through which minds perceived their bodies to be moved to sexual postures—states of arousal or pursuit of another body upon which to act.

Like eighteenth-century characters, we regularly seem to attribute intention to libidinally poised bodies. "Don't stand dilly-dallying," Mrs. Jewkes chides Mr. B as he pins his maidservant down in bed. Even though he claims verbally only to want "One Word" with Pamela, Mrs. Jewkes (like the rest of us, who regularly speak of this encounter as a rape attempt) believes that his intention is to sexually assault, an intention that he mercifully

(or, in Jewkes' view, foolishly) abandons in the face of Pamela's chastity.³ But what if penetration is an ancillary possibility accidentally facilitated by setting (bedchamber) and posture (Pamela prone, held still), a secondary meaning awkwardly cast across Mr. B's primary goal of talking to Pamela about his proposal to make her mistress? Perhaps Mr. B's apprehension of sexual possibility is more like that of the sailor in *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, who is content to put his penis in "any port in a storm" at a moment's notice—if an opportunity presents, bodies might make use of one another, but minds are not primarily occupied with sexual premeditations or stipulated outcomes.⁴ The vaginally penetrative practice that ascended in popularity in midcentury, which Henry Abelove has dubbed "sexual intercourse so-called," has increasingly come to look like an unpremeditated happenstance in sex plots, especially in comic pornographic fictions.⁵ *Woman of Pleasure* has conditioned us, erroneously I think, to see the genre as a narrative pattern dependent on something like intention or directed appetite, such that men will always call for mistresses and prostitutes, undergo transactions to obtain them, and sexually instrumentalize their bodies.⁶ But, other kinds of pornography—looser, less organized bawdy fictions—reveal sex to be what we have come to consider action and consent: amorphous, unanticipated, extra-subjective, and products of "externalism."⁷ Rather than consciousness driving a subject to penetrate other things, sex seems to penetrate consciousness.

The practice of vaginally penetrative sex seems to come under scrutiny in midcentury pornography concomitantly with a cultural intensification of heterosexuality and companionate marriage as normative. These fictions represent this increasingly naturalized model as potentially illogical. For example: Camillo sees his sister's genitalia as they play together in an orchard, and cries over the wound he believes she has sustained. He lacks an articulated goal in his first adolescent experiments with a girl; he "has no Thoughts of entering the sacred Circle, but content[s] himself with beating the Bush." During his grand tour, he sheepishly skulks about after a striptease, fumblingly accepting the services of two prostitutes, even though he finds "no great Stomach for two of them at a time."⁸ Miss Forward dreams of a rough posterior sensation, and wakes up ecstatically to find her body being penetrated from behind by a man she cannot see. Her friend Polly tries to use a dildo, but can't make it fit.⁹ These examples come from pornographic novels published anonymously in the 1740s, and one aspect of the observation I am making is simple and perhaps unsurprising: sex does not appear to be a single thing, and penetration is not naturalized as its outcome.¹⁰ Eighteenth-century pornography is certain that narrative descriptions of sex acts necessarily co-exist with other forms of experience;

and it does not conceive of persons as sophisticated sexual subjects who can translate intention into action. It can tell us something particularly illuminating about intention because it often removes inward desire from a model of sexual causality. Usually lacking a named author, pornographic fictions pair the murkiness of an intentional model at the level of theme with anonymity in the field of publication. As Mark Vareschi argues more broadly about anonymous publication, an “expanded” understanding of intention allows us to see the “collective agencies” that give meaning to literary production.¹¹ Thinking about anonymous publication as a form of intention, Vareschi shows that anonymously published novels marshal forms of authority that exceed the author and even the human, extending to cultural contexts like medium, verbal expression, and literary lineage. Intention defined as the literary “action” performed by the anonymous text diverts our attention radically away from the individual human creator or her character, and toward a matrix of material and ideological creators.¹² This model has implications for pornography, which we typically assume was published anonymously only because authors intended to avoid arrest.¹³ But understood as Vareschi does, anonymous publication makes explicit a collective model of action that seems thematically and intellectually related to pornography’s project of connecting sex acts to myriad points of origin and to cultural vectors that facilitate, impinge, and otherwise shape desire. If pornographic sex has an origin in intention, then, it might reside not in the minds of characters or in their libidinal drives but in anonymous printed book publication that necessarily drew on a collective model of knowledge and meaning in circulating its ideas. In other words, authorial anonymity might be an enabling condition for a pornographic sexuality that cannot point to concrete origins, singular practices, or stipulated outcomes. This kind of sexual intention—a literary action with dispersed points of origin—might be the unique achievement of the eighteenth-century pornographic text.

NOTES

1. Frances Ferguson, “Rape and the Rise of the Novel,” *Representations* 20 (1987): 106.

2. Sandra Macpherson, *Harm’s Way: Tragic Responsibility and the Novel Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2010), 135.

3. Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, ed. Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 203.

4. John Cleland, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, ed. Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 141.
5. Henry Abelove, "Some Speculations on the History of Sexual Intercourse during the Long Eighteenth Century in England," *Genders* 6 (1989): 127; reprinted in *Deep Gossip* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2005).
6. See also Bernard Mandeville, *A Modest Defense of the Publick Stewes* (London, 1724), 22–24, 50.
7. Jonathan Kramnick, *Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2010), 6.
8. *The History of the Human Heart* (London, 1749), 30–31, 42, 141.
9. *The Progress of Nature* (London, 1744), 93–95, 84.
10. On the variety of heterosexual activity, see Tim Hitchcock, *English Sexualities, 1700–1800* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), esp. chap. 3.
11. Mark Vareschi, "Motive, Intention, Anonymity, and *Evelina*," *ELH* 82 (2015), 1136.
12. *Ibid.*, 1137.
13. On the relationship between pornographic writing and legal authorities, see Hal Gladfelder, "Obscenity, Censorship, and the Eighteenth-Century Novel: The Case of John Cleland," *Wordsworth Circle* 35 (2004): 134–41.