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Hugh Roberts, Guillaume Peureux and Lise Wajeman, eds., *Obscénités renaissantes*. Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance N° CDLXXIII. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2011. 493 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$142.80 U.S. (cl); ISBN 978-2-600-01466-3; \$95.20 (digital file).

Review by Jeff Persels, University of South Carolina-Columbia.

This, quite simply, is a magnificent, bilingual anthology of and about smut, and I mean that in the very best and truest sense of the word: *that which soils*. It was collaboratively constituted by a working group of early modern specialists, both dedicated and perverse (which I also mean in the very best sense, i.e., "turned away" from accepted norms), who manifestly share an equally magnificent obsession with obscenity as practiced and appreciated primarily by the French, that nationality whose stereotype is most often associated with it. This association has historically and most emphatically been stressed with a mixture of censoriousness and envy by that nation across the Channel, one of whose citizens, Hugh Roberts, arguably bears the lion's share of responsibility for airing this heteroclite collection of dirty linen in public. And not just any public, but one which would appreciate this 473rd volume of Droz's prestigious, invariably meticulously prepared and sumptuously bound, Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance series. Knowing what a convinced fan and superlative editor of (often obscene) medieval farce the Genevan publishing house's founder Eugénie Droz was, this reader would be hard pressed to think of a more fitting printer's mark for this anthology to bear.

Underwritten by the UK's recently established AHRC (Arts & Humanities Research Council), among whose stated objectives is "to promote and support the production of world-class research in the arts and humanities," this volume is a genuinely collaborative effort of which the AHRC can be proud. It was preceded, one could even say heralded, by an earlier collection (2010) from the same collaborative, volume fourteen of *EMF: Studies in Early Modern France*, edited by Anne L. Birberick and Russell J. Ganim, and guest edited by Obscenity in Renaissance France ringleader Hugh Roberts, a volume referenced frequently in *Obscénités renaissantes*.<sup>[1]</sup> The project even continues, and in interactive fashion, online, including a very useful "database of rude words," at [www.groups.exeter.ac.uk/obscurity/](http://www.groups.exeter.ac.uk/obscurity/), to which interested and knowledgeable parties may contribute. There may well be other similarly multi-faceted and multimedia research groups, but this one, by its quality and productivity, certainly sets an excellent standard and announces what may well be a model for one possible and devoutly to be wished for future of academic exchange.

What the specific anthology under review amounts to, essentially, is a beautifully, erotically--okay, even pornographically--illustrated 400+ page exposition of both a term and an idea, but also of a panoply of early modern productions of and reactions to "provocation," which is how editors Roberts, Peureux and Wajeman essentially define the obscene. Each contribution nuances the historical development of the *obscène* around the moment of its first French vernacular appearances, together with a host of closely related notions (e.g., scandal, censorship, blasphemy, impiety, propriety and impropriety). A volume to be read, as historian Robert Darnton similarly reminded us years ago regarding Sade, "with one hand," aroused by an index in which the longest entries are for *corps*, *pénis*, *vagin*, *sexualité* and *coït* (followed closely and wiltingly, it is true, by *pudeur* and *censure*). But the authors' hope is evidently that the otherwise occupied hand will be at least partially engaged in taking notes on, and contributing in turn

to, the fortunes of an extraordinarily slippery term, how it "plays out in French Renaissance culture," to use Roberts' phrase (p. 100); how to "sériér au plus près la notion d'obscénité à une époque donnée" / "classify as clearly as possible the notion of obscenity in a given period" (p. 167), to use Cécile Alduy's.

What they succeed in doing is most usefully reminding the reader that although s/he may well claim to know the obscene when s/he sees it, this is perhaps actually the toughest hurdle to its accurate assessment, when it is, to quote Patricia Simons but echoing many of the authors, "mistakenly taken to be fixed rather than historically contingent and socially shifting" (p. 115). The entire volume is really about that, even down to its contributors' frequent and persuasive attempts to shift and make more historically contingent the conclusions of a monograph that looms perhaps largest of any recent works over their efforts: Joan DeJean's *The Reinvention of Obscenity: Sex, Lies and Tabloids in Early Modern France*.<sup>[2]</sup> I provide the Norberg review reference as she opens with a version of the question about shift that informs *Obscénités renaissantes*: "How many times have historians believed that a particular phenomenon appeared in the eighteenth century only to learn that it saw the light of day one hundred years before, in the seventeenth?" *Obscénités renaissantes* seems to argue, in a respectfully nuanced fashion, that the sun rose even earlier than DeJean was able to perceive.

It would surpass this reviewer's talent for synopsis, just as it would exhaust the reader's appetite for same, to attempt to do separate justice to each of the twenty-five articles collected here. They stretch chronologically from antecedents and influences both classical (William McKenzie and Philip Ford on those usual suspects, Ovid and Catullus respectively) and medieval (Nelly Labère and Helen Swift on the inescapable *Roman de la Rose*) to early seventeenth-century libertinism (Guillaume Peureux on the vogue for *poésie satyrique* and Russell J. Ganim on pornographic prints). They come at the obscene from a wide variety of primary sources running the gamut of artistic and scientific expression, including something all too often neglected in considerations of the early modern, music (e.g., Jeanice Brooks on the *chanson lascive*). In fact, this represents yet another strength of this anthology, its comprehensive, almost encyclopedic nature: Latin and vernacular verse and prose, certainly, trotting out the expected French line-up of sixteenth-century smutty all-stars—Brantôme, Marot and many authors of the *blasons anatomiques*, Montaigne, Ronsard, Verville, and, of course, Rabelais. But they also treat emblem books (Roberts, Rebecca Zorach), medical texts (Simons, Dominique Brancher), travel narratives (Grégoire Holtz), theology and religious polemic (Lise Wajeman) and demonology (Marianne Closson).

The long-term collaborative approach allows a thorough, even voyeuristic, gaze into what contemporary public record remains of the hidden recesses of the early modern mind and body. The contributors' critical approaches are as varied as the materials they interpret, yet all scrupulously avoid the pitfalls of anachronism. The conclusion to Ariane Bayle's elegant cross-examination of the dominant critical readings of Rabelaisian obscenity offers an excellent representative case study of the critical discipline this collection promotes and practices, even as it condenses, not to say aphorizes its objectives: "Lire Rabelais aujourd'hui, c'est donc aussi oser l'actualiser en pensant l'obscénité de son époque avec les outils théoriques de la nôtre" / "To read Rabelais today is thus to dare to update him by interpreting the obscenity of his time by means of the theoretical tools of ours" (p. 392).

Among other useful and ingenious features, this volume incorporates frequent editorial intervention in the form of brief bilingual prefaces and postscripts to let the reader know where s/he's been and where s/he's headed. The contributors are, moreover, in constant dialogue with each other, making for not simply the usual assemblage of discrete academic treatments of an agreed-upon topic of interest, but rather a genuine colloquy. Admittedly (and in the interest of full disclosure) I have the personal advantage of the memory of actual discussion as I attended one of the early gatherings of the Obscenity in Renaissance France working group which led to this volume and the *EMF* issue previously mentioned, but in reading the final project I am still struck by the unusually strenuous workout the

adverb *infra* undergoes. Like all good exercise routines, it makes for a more flexible and muscled body, the manifest appeal of which I cannot help but wish we could see more of in literary and cultural scholarship.

The volume's twenty-eight page "Bibliographie Générale" of primary and secondary sources, which, the editors note, represent a "selection" of those cited *infra*, is undeniably a gold mine. It thus seems both greedy and ungrateful to express the wish they had hewn closer to the ideal of the collaborative and worked up a more comprehensive directory of works, whether cited or not. That, however, is perhaps best left for an online database that, much like the one for early modern rude words, can be perpetually updated and never frozen in print and time. At any rate, I blame the editors and contributors for whetting such an insatiable appetite for obscenity, and for so vigorously and learnedly increasing the blood flow to our minds, as well as to other body parts at which so many early modern French authors invited us to take a provocative peek.

## NOTES

[1] Obscenity in Renaissance France was an international research network which operated between 2007 and 2009 and explored the notion of obscenity in Renaissance France.

[2] Joan DeJean, *The Reinvention of Obscenity: Sex, Lies and Tabloids in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) and reviewed by Kathryn Norberg in H-France, 5/83(August 2005): <http://www.h-france.net/vol5reviews/norberg2.html>.

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William McKenzie, "Ovidian Obscenity in Renaissance France"

Philip Ford, "Obscenity and the *lex Catulliana* : Uses and Abuses of Catullus 16 in French Renaissance Poetry"

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Jeanice Brooks, "Singing the Courtly Body : the Chanson lascive and the Performance of Obscenity"

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