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Sex and Text: Teaching Porno-Erotic Literature to Undergraduates

EROTIC LITERATURE AND PORNOGRAPHY have been traditionally designated morally suspect, if not outright criminal, and are therefore excluded from academic analysis within the university system. Erotica and pornography are themselves transgressive sexual acts. Vern L. Bullough, a historian of sexuality, includes pornography in the list of “the more forbidden topics” such as “homosexuality, lesbianism, transvestism, transsexualism, paedophilia, sadomasochism, pornography and so on.”¹ The research that has been done on pornographic or erotic writing is usually a historical analysis of publication and censorship, or sociological studies of the (patriarchal) contexts of sex text production, and its role in the objectification or oppression of ‘others’ (those who don’t produce, but are represented by, this writing), especially women. Literary analysis of the methods and messages of the work itself is scarce. At best, it seems porno-erotic material is designated marginal to the interests of academic inquiry by virtue of its status as ‘popular’ literature (alongside best-selling paperbacks, romance novels, mysteries and other material suspected of being more about lowbrow entertainment and commerce than literary art). Nevertheless, many canonical writers have tried their hands at writing erotica or pornography, and erotica (especially) has come into its own of late, resulting in a volume of highly literary material. If the material itself is read by millions, then is it not worth considering as a subject of

¹ Vern L Bullough, “Sex in History: A Redux,” *Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray and Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1996) 4.

literary research and teaching? And if it is brought into the traditional academic milieu, then what are the pedagogical and professional implications for teaching such 'outlaw' literature to undergraduate students? Based on my own experience of teaching in an undergraduate university, I would like to examine the ways in which academic structures provide opportunities, and create difficulties, when incorporating porno-erotic literature into a standard curriculum in English literature.

Over the past five years, I have taught several undergraduate literature courses that have included material generically defined as erotic and pornographic. Some of this material has comprised only a small part of the reading list: for example, erotic Anglo-Saxon riddles in a medieval literature course, or short stories written by women in a reading list for a women's literature course. Recently, I have twice taught a course on porno-erotic literature in English, including texts from the Anglo-Saxon period to the present. Teaching this material has been terrifying and exhilarating, challenging and rewarding. I would like to review my experiences in this article, as teaching porno-erotic material in the university, at the undergraduate level, reveals some of the most intense aspects of sexuality, textuality, and pedagogy in academia today.

Body of Work: Selecting the Texts

What do I mean by porno-erotic? This is the term I prefer in reference to textual or artistic material that is produced and circulated for the purpose of sexual gratification. When speaking of literary material, I sometimes use the term 'sex text.' To my mind, neither 'porno-erotic' nor 'sex text' should be extended to include material that simply refers to or discusses sexuality, or the human body generally. Many texts discuss sex without engaging in it; that is, the text looks at sex as a subject for discussion, but the writing or reading of the text is not a sexual act in itself. With sex texts the material becomes a sexual object—and a sexual act—and the reader's interaction with it is not only cerebral, but also physical. Porno-erotica is written and read to arouse and satisfy sexual desire; it must, as Dorothy Allison gynocentrically puts it, pass the "wet test."²

² Cited in Susie Bright, ed., "Introduction: How to Write a Best Erotic Story," *The Best American Erotica 1994* (New York: Touchstone, 1994) 14.

When I tell people that I am teaching “a course on the tradition of erotic literature in English,” I am making a conscious decision to avoid the first, most contentious, and ultimately irresolvable debate on the difference between pornography and erotica. Much ink has been spilt on this topic, fruitlessly, in my opinion. But it is often the first question that people ask when they hear about my course: “You mean erotica, right? Not pornography.” The first time I taught the course, one of my colleagues expressed his anxiety that if I were to be found teaching ‘real’ pornography, and not erotica, the university administration might shut down the class (they didn’t—it wasn’t an issue). Another colleague once asked me to speak at a gathering of the University Women’s Association, on the topic of ‘how you teach erotica and make it not offensive.’ Therein lies the real definitional split between erotica and pornography: the latter is assumed to be offensive. But this highly subjective definition, ‘offensive,’ goes unexplained: exactly what is to be designated offensive is not articulated. This makes it very difficult to consider individual texts and decide whether they are erotic or pornographic.

As far as I can see, the qualifications for erotic vs. pornographic tend to fall into three general issues: provenance, form, and content. In terms of provenance, academic and mainstream feminisms provide the most substantial example in the definition of pornography as being offensive or demeaning to women. This definition is ridiculously vague, and often slides right into a form of sexism as constricting and oppressive as cultural misogyny: “Pornography is first and foremost associated with the male, and erotica with the female.”³ This sexist designation restricts the sexual expression of both men and women, and also, I argue, restricts our ability to intellectually engage sex texts from unbiased perspectives. The assumption is that porn is an act of aggression by a male, or producer. Pornography produced by women is often labelled ‘male-identified,’ dismissing the female perspective, and pathologizing the female producer as someone who is merely a puppet of the patriarchy. Female—and feminist—pornographers have become more vocal in asserting their right to produce sex texts at every level of the form—and certainly they cannot all be

³ Susie Bright, *Full Exposure: Opening Up to Sexual Creativity and Erotic Expression* (NY: Harper, 2000) 39.

tarred with the brush male-identified, especially when masculinity is not synonymous with misogyny. Some of the most feminist texts are produced by male authors, and many male readers are more troubled by demeaning representations than many female readers. And again the problem of subjective standards appears: what is going to offend individual readers in respect to representations of women in pornography? In the end, discussions of sexism in pornographic texts are all too often cloaking discussions of class, with the masculine being aligned with the lower class, and the feminine with the middle or upper class.⁴

Furthermore, and more ominously, the issue of content as a determinant of pornography as 'offensive' tends to reinforce patterns of cultural and social dominance. For example, homosexual, interracial, and fetish material is more likely to be seen as 'offensive' and therefore pornographic. As Pat Califa explains in her introduction to a collection of material stopped by Canada Customs at the border, many of the targeted texts portrayed sexualities that did not reinforce white, male or heterosexist standards.⁵ And in terms of formal designations of erotica and pornography, form intersects with class, especially in terms of literacy and art forms. Poetry and prose texts, especially those that utilize traditional 'literary' qualities of poetic diction, dense metaphor and symbolism, as well as sophisticated narrative structure, intertextuality and theoretical perspectives, tend to be socially sanctioned as 'erotic.' A good example of a text usually identified as overtly erotic, but not pornographic, is Christina Rossetti's juicy "Goblin Market," wherein the fleshy metaphors of eating fruit provide an intense sexual engagement between text and reader. Painting is usually considered more erotic than pornographic, and photography is usually considered more pornographic than erotic. But formal qualities can redefine photographic representations of sexuality: cleverly cropped black-and-white photographs are usually erotic as opposed to flatly lighted amateur snapshots in colour. In short, sexual material that is cheaply produced, or aimed at a less literate audience, is frequently designated pornographic. Sex texts produced by privileged parties, on the other hand, are often accepted as erotic. Feminist

⁴ Bright, *Full Exposure* 39.

⁵ Pat Califa, "Dangerous Tongues," *Forbidden Passages: Writings Banned in Canada* (Pittsburgh: Cleis, 1995) 18.

pornographer and writer Susie Bright sums it up when she notes that the entire, exhausting “non-question” comes down to “grading.”⁶ Yet this non-question is one the instructor of courses on porno-erotic material gets asked repeatedly.

While it is true the many individuals working in the areas of porno-eroticism are challenging these assumptions, the mainstream understanding is still very much as described above. Generally speaking, undergraduates tend to represent mainstream perspectives, and since they are contextualized within a specific class in their very designation as a university students, regardless of their individual backgrounds, the instructor who brings porno-erotic material into the classroom must be prepared to engage some of these debates. Having done so, however, I can also advise that the instructor must be willing to keep such debates brief, even at the risk of shutting down discussion. The pornography-erotica debate is often masking another question: should these texts be produced, circulated or studied at all? This is the censorship question, which can easily take over the class. Since a course on erotic literature is not synonymous with a course on censorship (the latter would have to include non-erotic texts), the instructor has the responsibility to mandate the direction of the course, and then to ensure that mandate is respected. I have found that the students are quick to recognize the problem of confusing a course on porno-erotic literature with a course on the history and legality of pornography: a study of sex texts is a literary, not a legal or historical, project, and if we started editing the course reading list according to conventional censorship theories, in short order we would have no reading list at all.

I have to admit that naming my course ‘Erotics’ was a strategic decision, intended to avoid the type of institutional anxiety that the term ‘pornography’ provokes; I didn’t want the course to be shut down before it began. Pluralizing the noun, I hoped, implied the point that what constitutes ‘erotic’ material is multiple and flexible—and that the course would have an inclusive philosophy. In many ways, however, because I was teaching literature in a literature department, my reading list automatically fulfilled the artistic and social expectations of erotica, as opposed to pornography. Being a scholar of English literature, I tended to focus on

⁶ Bright, *Full Exposure* 36.

prose and poetry texts, so some forms of porno-erotic material, like film, video, song, photography and the visual arts were engaged only peripherally, if at all. I did, however, include a very small segment for the letters section of a popular soft-core 'men's' magazine, and this is material that is conventionally labelled porn, rather than erotic literature. We read the letters as an opportunity to discuss form and narrative structure, since these texts are good examples of a concise, spare style associated with sexual action in text.

In other respects, however, the reading list was definitely 'pornographic,' especially by way of including particular subjects in the literature that are perceived as pornographic. The readings included depictions of some sexualities designated deviant or disturbing: 'unsafe' sex, necrophilia, bestiality, violence (consensual and not) against men and women, BDSM, group sex, incest, and pedophilia. It was not that I sought out shocking or disturbing material—it simply is intrinsic to so much of the material that we have traditionally thought of as erotic. The best example of this is the work of Anaïs Nin, which tops the list of many people's ideas of literate eroticism. But Nin's work, coddled in its highbrow, tradition-sanctioned literary style, contains some of the most taboo-breaking material on the reading list—most obviously, incest. On the more positive side, however, the course also included many stories of passionate sex, marital sex, masturbation, love (in many different manifestations), devotion, reverence, joy, comedy, fantasy (i.e., entirely unrealistic or magical sex) and spirituality (even salvation). The readings attempted, given the constraints of time, to engage as many different scenarios on the very broad spectrum of human sexuality as we could. The only common denominators were that it was all written in English (including Old English), and that it had been originally written (in substantial part) to arouse. There is no doubt in my mind that some of it was offensive—and therefore pornographic—to some readers. Indeed, I assumed that, just as everyone would probably find at least one text to be sexually pleasing, so they would also find at least one to be offensive. As a reader myself, I certainly found that the reading list included both experiences for me. I also decided, however, that the offensiveness of a text, or its 'pornography,' was not sufficient grounds for excluding it from a discussion of sex writing as a genre or a tradition. In the end, I asked the students (and myself) to reject the

question of what is pornographic or erotic in favour of the two questions which I identified as course objectives: How do we represent sexuality in texts, using as examples as many different perspectives as possible? And: How do we use sex writing to explore other aspects of our existence, including the intellectual, artistic, spiritual, historical, cultural and social subjects, to name but a few?

Interpreting Erotica: Sensual Reading

Of course, we have a strong and evolving tradition of researching sexuality in literature, but I have to distinguish between the type of literature and literary analysis I employ when teaching sex texts, and the research that has conventionally been designated as research on sexuality. In literature, sex research has traditionally meant topics such as gender construction, gender rights and privileges, sexual orientation, and the body as subject-text. In short, sex-and-gender research restricts discussions of sex and text to the *represented*—i.e., public—realm. It talks *about* sex; it is not directly sexual in and of itself. Research on porno-erotic literature, however, is somewhat different from these other researches into sexuality, although it often intersects with them. If the baseline definition of sex text is that it is written to arouse, the process of interpreting this material has some unusual implications for researchers, teachers and students. If it is written for sexual stimulation, the implication is that the ‘reader response’ to a sex text will be physical, as well as intellectual or emotional. In this respect these texts are themselves actually sex acts. Erotic material is far from being the only literature that provokes a physical response, of course. Comic literature should make the reader laugh; violent images may produce nausea, and so on. But in terms of privacy, there is something of a difference between a book that makes you laugh out loud, and a book that helps you to achieve orgasm.

In this respect, we might see porno-erotic material as an intensely private, personal realm of sexual textuality. Although many people include sex texts in their sexual experiences with other people, the primary association of porno-erotica is with solo masturbation. We might question the value of bringing such private material into a community-based reading milieu like a classroom. We might also question the construction of an interpretative community that is based on the principle of erotic response to the literature. But how private is porno-erotica really? While reading

and masturbating may appear to be the absolutely private act of an individual, in reality there is the initial link between the author's sexuality and the reader's. This is the most basic type of erotic community. In the world of modern publishing, that community is extended to many others, like editors in particular. As the editor of a course syllabus, the teacher of erotic material has already forged a sexual link, via the shared reading list, with his or her students. Perhaps this idea is not what we are used to or comfortable with as university instructors. But as in any other course, the reading list is meant to establish a communal understanding of a particular subject. Selecting material for a course on sex text begins with the instructor's idea of successful or important work, just as my ideas of medieval literature determine the initial form of a syllabus on the Middle Ages. With both examples, however, I feel that once the course is running, the students should be consulted as to what they feel are the most useful texts. This was especially important for such virgin academic territory as the Erotics course—we don't have a Norton anthology of Erotic Literature (yet), so in order to create a common ground for understanding the canon of porno-erotic literature, I encourage students to make suggestions for the course, even mid-semester. This means leaving some slack in the reading schedule for new material to be added, perhaps more than we are accustomed to in courses on more canonical literature.

The Course(s)

All of these courses were taught at the university where I am a tenure-track Assistant Professor of English. It is a small (approximately 2300 students) undergraduate university in a rural Maritime town in Canada. The school has an excellent academic reputation. The student body is roughly 60% women and 40% men, and is overwhelmingly white and middle-class. Most of our students were raised in Christian environments, which is also the dominant theological perspective of the region. Although there is a strong fundamentalist Christian component on campus, most of our students would probably classify themselves as nominally Christian.

The first time I taught porno-erotic literature, I included a week's worth of sex texts in a course on women's writing. Over the last decade or more there has been a renaissance of women's erotica, and I took advantage of the trend by including a handful of short stories. The material was a natural extension of the thematic

focus of the course on writing and the body. To facilitate comfort and acceptance of the material amongst the students, I chose mostly canonical authors like Anaïs Nin and Angela Carter, and placed the erotica in the spectrum of a larger discussion of representations of the body in women's literature. Therefore, the selections of my first foray into teaching sex text were kept as innocuous as possible.

Perhaps as a result of my trepidation, the texts were never wholly integrated into the course. The readings, and the class discussions on them, were optional. Any student who did not feel they wanted to participate did not have to. The texts were not on the final exam, and although students could choose to include them as essay material, they were not pressured to do so. As it happened, my trepidation was groundless: there were no complaints, nor did any of the students take advantage of the option to avoid the texts (indeed, that week stands out as one of the few where everyone was present in class, and prepared).

Overall, the inclusion of the sex texts in this course was a success. The students responded to it very positively, and although few of them chose to include the material in their term papers (possibly because these were the final texts on the reading list, and papers were due earlier in the semester), most seemed willing to engage the material in class discussions, which were lively and interesting. The students enjoyed working with adventurous material that was off the well-beaten curricular path. Although this employment of porno-erotic material was a much more restricted form than what was to come, given the fact that the stories here were all by established women writers, it was in response to the encouragement by the students in the women's literature course that I decided to offer an entire course on porno-erotic writing.

I have taught two complete courses on porno-erotic literature (both called "Erotics: the Tradition in English"), using essentially the same syllabus. The first half of the course traces erotic writing in English chronologically, starting with Old English riddles. The second half of the course deals with contemporary erotica, grouping texts together according to thematic or formal issues. The first time I offered this course was as an intersession Continuing Education course during May 2001. It was presented as a third-year course, meaning anybody with three courses in English Literature at the first- and second-year undergraduate level could register. The implications of this ranking, and the fact that the course was

offered in a profit-driven continuing education program, meant that I had very little ability to control the enrolment. As a result, many people registered for the course without what I felt to be an adequate background in literary analysis, literary theory, or any of the adjunct disciplines that might have provided a scholarly background appropriate to the discussions I wanted to have about the material. While some of the problem with inexperienced students enrolling in the class was undoubtedly the result of the timing of the class (people just out of first year, who were trying to pick up extra credits, could register), the subject of the course was at least partially responsible for the inappropriate enrolments. Despite my warnings that a third-year standard of research, writing and discussion would be required, students still felt entitled to take the class either because they were 'really interested in sex' (who isn't) or, more ominously, 'the class is only about sex' (i.e., 'so how hard can it be?'). The result was that the class was an uneven mix of neophyte students with only basic interpretative abilities, and advanced students with considerable experience in literary analysis.

Some of the most democratic aspects of human sexuality did not, therefore, translate as democratic academics. If academia means to give intellectual relevance to a topic, then it was frustrated where the prevailing opinion seems to be that if everyone has sex, then everyone could take a course in sex texts—even without some basic academic standards. The literary component of the course was lost in the minds of the community. It is also a tragic indicator of our attitude towards sexuality generally—that it's not an intellectual enterprise at all. While I did my best to respond to this perception, and to invest the idea of sex writing with the intellectual power it deserves, some students in the summer class never really changed their dumbed-down perception of sex and sex writing, and some papers were of a disappointing quality.

Another, more contentious problem with the open enrolment in the summer class was that some of the participants were emotionally or experientially unprepared to engage the topics which were being discussed in the literature. Most (although not all) of these unfortunate souls were younger adults in their late teens. Frankly, the problem of what Bright calls our culture's "sexual illiteracy"⁷ in the first Erotics classroom meant that some students per-

⁷ *Full Exposure* 96.

formed poorly academically. They were sometimes not able to recognize sexual acts, particularly 'taboo' acts depicted in highly metaphorical styles, like the anal sex scene in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or the rimming scene in *Beautiful Losers*. In some cases, this led to misreadings, even for basic plot analysis. One student handed in a paper on representations of sodomy that included close readings of only two scenes—neither of which depicted the act. I was, and continue to be, somewhat confused as to how to interpret a problem like this. Is it merely an academic issue: was the student simply a sloppy scholar? I've encountered readings that were as off the mark than this in other English courses, certainly. Or is it related to a broader cultural problem surrounding our ability to talk about sex? In this case, because of some other comments the student had made in class, I strongly suspected the latter, in which case we might consider two parts of the problem: the absence of a clear, accurate and comfortable vocabulary for sex, and the cultural silence that surrounds the details of sexuality in certain communities. Because of the potential for this being the problem, I felt I had to be a bit more generous with this situation than I might have been with such an extreme misreading in another course. Instead of marking the first version of the paper, I returned it to the student and asked her to resubmit it, after having clarified the definition of sodomy, and having directed her towards more appropriate examples from the texts. This encounter was the most extreme example (but not the only example) of some problems that arose from teaching culturally sensitive material which is frequently shut out of, or euphemistically encoded in, everyday discourse. In short, it was dawning on me that in order to feel comfortable, and to function at a respectable academic level in the erotics classroom, 'sexual literacy' would be a necessary requirement.

Sexual literacy does not mean that virgins could not participate effectively in the classroom—indeed, I assume that some of my more capable students were virgins. But it is necessary that students have basic concepts of at least the most common aspects of sexuality before being capable of interpreting representations of sexuality. Sexual literacy may be obtained through direct sexual experience, or through reading, discussion, and fantasy. As Bright points out, "there's a world of sexual learning in everything from anatomy books to *Leaves of Grass* to *Hot Legs* magazine," and many

people avail themselves of these resources long before they start having intercourse with other people.⁸

Another aspect of sexual literacy is the problem of a rather impoverished sexual vocabulary in English. Sexual language tends to be too informal (slang and obscenities) or too formal (medical terminology). Occasionally it is also perceived as too childish, too romantic, too unromantic, and just plain silly or wildly inaccurate. “Hawaiians have a whole dictionary of names for how a rainbow appears in the sky,” comments Bright; “Our English language is not as poetic with the weather, and it’s a total failure at sex.”⁹ There is also a lot of terminology that is itself taboo, or is associated with taboo acts, which some students (and sometimes the instructor) have never heard because these words travel so far underground in terms of social acceptability. The instructor must be prepared to explain unfamiliar terms or acts, and must also be sure to construct a classroom environment where students feel comfortable asking questions. But I believe that it is also reasonable for the instructor to assume a baseline of sexual understanding as a premise for a university level course on porno-erotic literature—because the course is *not*, after all, a sex education course. As the summer course progressed it began to dawn on me that personal maturity might actually be an academic virtue for a topic such as this one.

In the course of my teaching porno-erotic texts I have found that one group of people who are often kept in the dark about sexuality is women. Obviously this is a huge generalization, but my experience matches the experience of other sex researchers. Harriet Lerner actually connects the problem of an absence of sexual language with an absence of sexual understanding in her analysis of the “psychic genital mutilation” of the persistently “misnamed or not named” female genitalia. The starting point in her discussion is the misuse of the word “vagina” as a stand-in for all the parts of the vulva (as in the oft-used explanation to children: “boys have a penis and girls have a vagina”).¹⁰ With a paucity of accurate language to articulate their sexual experiences, women (Lerner hypothesizes) develop a handicapped understanding of sexuality.

⁸ *Full Exposure* 14.

⁹ *Full Exposure* 32.

¹⁰ Harriet Lerner, *The Dance of Deception: Pretending and Truth-Telling in Women's Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993) 52–54.

Bright has made reference to the discrepancy in “sexual literacy” between the genders several times in her work, noting wryly in her introduction to *Herotica 3* that “In the many years of teaching and talking sex, I have never had a man come up and say, ‘I don’t know where my penis is and I’ve never had an orgasm’.”¹¹ While there is no way to verify this conclusively, I suspect that the gendered aspects of cultural silence regarding sexuality may have had an impact in my Erotics classroom, because I saw more women than men who did not seem familiar with certain sexual acts, concepts, or language.

Several women told me that they would be too embarrassed to look at the ‘Erotica’ section of the local bookstore, or to walk up to the counter and purchase a book. One young woman told me she had always avoided reading ‘sexy stuff’ because she was afraid of being offended. She had evidently given no thought to the possibility that some sexual representations might reflect sexual interests similar to her own, and would therefore not be ‘offensive’ to her. She also had not considered the educational value of being challenged with difficult material that does not reflect her own perspectives. While several men also expressed anxiety about such things, it seemed to be an anxiety that had usually been conquered (more or less)—they talked about it as occurring in the past, usually in adolescence. It seems to be a fact of our culture that most men have access to porno-erotic material early in their lives. Indeed, often before they want it or need it, since it seems to be something of a common male experience to have pornography thrust upon them in childhood, usually by older males. Nevertheless, most, if not all, of the men in my class had at least a passing familiarity of various porno-erotic genres (books, magazines, and movies) and many of them articulated (sometimes proudly, sometimes abashedly, sometimes casually) the fact that they were ‘users’ of porno-erotic texts. That is, they engaged the material in the manner that was originally intended—for the purposes of sexual gratification. As a side bar, it is interesting to note the distinction between the verbs employed in the issue of being a reader of sex text: do you *use* erotica? Or simply read it? And what are we doing

¹¹ Susie Bright, ed., Introduction, *Herotica 3: A Collection of Women’s Erotic Fiction* (New York: Plume, 1994) xi.

in this class? Only a handful of women—usually the older ones—would openly admit to any past experience with sex texts.

Fortunately, the class also had a number of experienced third- and fourth-year students of both genders who produced work of a high standard. Unfortunately, their struggling classmates frequently frustrated these more capable students. More ominously, I discovered that an immature attitude towards sex might come out as intolerance or embarrassment in the classroom, which might disrupt the scholarly analysis of the better students. An example of this came when one senior student presented an analysis of the Danish Vibrator scene in *Beautiful Losers*. While constructing a theory of the sexualization of technology, this student mentioned that he had visited a local sex store to look at dildos, vibrators and so forth. I was dismayed to see a small number of his fellow students react with shock or disdain (snickers, rolled eyes, a 'tsk' or two) to the fact that he admitted to what is a relatively tame exploration into human sexuality by visiting a sex store and looking at sex toys. Fortunately, the presenter either did not notice the reaction, or chose to ignore it, and went on with his analysis of the text. But it disturbed me to think that someone might feel embarrassed by their own academic work because of the immaturity and unprofessionalism of other members of the class. The fact that there was also an attempt at sexual shaming of this student frightened me. I feared that a less resilient individual might have been wounded personally by the ignorance of his or her classmates. Through my experience of teaching the summer class, I became convinced that if really good work was to be done with sex texts academically, then some of the academic power structure that I might question generally on the grounds of elitism, might actually be recouped to protect the course and its participants from the anti-intellectual and unprofessional attitude that pervades both academia, and the community at large, towards porno-erotic writing, and sexuality in general.

I decided to run the Erotics course differently the second time I taught it. First, it was incorporated into the regular academic year by being offered as a fourth-year seminar in the winter term of 2002. A letter of application was required to obtain permission to register for the course. I read the letters to ensure that the applicants had sufficient background in literature from different time periods, and some experience in literary theory, cultural studies or

social philosophy. I also wanted to ensure they were confident writers, as I would with any other fourth-year English class. The letters also gave me clear indicators of the students' expectations of the genre of 'erotic' literature. I was looking for warning signs of the sort of sexual prejudice, born largely of ignorance or immaturity, that had interfered with the summer version of the course. Most of the students mentioned texts that they had previously worked with that they felt intersected with the porno-erotic genre. This usually gave me a sufficient idea of their ability to handle the vagaries of human sexuality as it is represented in text. Some of the applicants expressed some trepidation at the reading material, but if they appeared willing to take responsibility for their own emotions on the matter, I considered them for enrolment in the class. I rejected a handful of students who either did not meet the academic requirements, who seemed completely unaware of the nature of porno-erotic literature, or who referred to the literature in exclusively negative terms (one applicant used the word 'erotic' interchangeably with the phrases 'offensive,' 'shocking,' and 'offensive to women'). I wanted the course to be an advanced literary analysis of the material, not a basic introduction to the genre, so I excluded applicants who would have required too much handholding in simply becoming comfortable with the literature. Fortunately, the high level of the course ranking, and the reputation for scholastic rigour that had followed the summer course, ensured that most students themselves prejudged their aptitude for the class, so the number of applicants was reasonable, and most were accepted.

In the end, the class had ten students enrolled. They were all in third or fourth year, and while most were English majors, there was also a philosophy student, a religious studies student and a biology student, which I felt brought some welcome diversity to the group. Like the summer course, the genders were almost equally represented—six women and four men. Only one student—the only one in any of the three classes—was openly gay. The others were either openly straight, or refrained from giving any clear indicators in the classroom context. I might have wished for a little more cultural, sexual or disciplinary diversity, but given the overwhelmingly white, middle-class and heterosexual tenor of our school, the demographic in this classroom was not unexpected. It was in this classroom that the potential for teaching and researching porno-erotic material was achieved most successfully.

I had made a few changes to the reading list from the summer version of *Erotics*—mostly in the way of increasing the amount of reading—but the texts and the structure of the course remained the same. This time, however, the analysis of the texts was what I had hoped for in the beginning, and these senior students presented advanced, responsible work. They also were enthusiastic about expanding the genre of porno-erotic material to subject areas other than literature—work on the erotic in musicology and theology stand out as examples. The discussions were lively and engaged, with no real problems concerning understanding or interpretation. As far as I could see, the students remained professional and respectful in their attitude towards the literature, their peers, and myself. For me, the classroom felt ‘safe’; no student made the academic misstep of treating the course like personal therapy, and some of them did seem to understand that their research would not be interpreted by the rest of the class as a projection of their sexuality. The result was that their research seemed more engaged and more fearless, and therefore more developed than much of the work presented in the previous two courses. I think it is not incidental that this was the course in which both straight and gay students presented research on homosexual texts. In the other classes students had seemed to avoid gay sex texts as research topics, and I wondered if this was due to some sense of insecurity in the first class. In this case, a tolerant classroom atmosphere ensured that research was carried out on important texts like the homosexual novel *Teleny*, which was possibly authored in part by Oscar Wilde, or members of his community.

Another example of the positive and relaxed atmosphere of the classroom was the amount of casual humour thrown about: I remember one woman cracking jokes about the discrepancy between the air-brushed presentation of fellatio in Anaïs Nin’s work, and the less romantic reality of the act. Her amusing and academically important observations on the realism of sex writing might not have been presented in a classroom where she was afraid of being judged for certain sex acts by her fellow students. Laughter can be either negative in the *Erotics* classroom (to indicate embarrassment, for example) or positive (to suggest a component of personal comfort and active analysis, as in this case). I’m happy to say that the fourth-year seminar was filled with the latter: one of my colleagues, whose office was across the hall, said to me once,

wistfully, "I just hear waves and waves of laughter from your classroom, it sounds like so much fun" And it was.

I am convinced that the issue of laughter is related to the strong research that was produced in that course. By vetting students carefully and restricting the enrolment, I was able to ensure that this version of Erotics would be the most successful in terms of the quality of work that was produced by the students and myself. I am of the school that believes that the more personally engaged a student is in the subject and the more fun they are having, the more likely they are to produce work of a professional quality, even at the undergraduate level. The papers submitted for Erotics were some of the best research I have seen to date as a professor. My own research was stimulated and challenged by the students in equal measure, and overall, the class functioned more as a research group than an undergraduate course.

Issues Concerning the Teaching of Porno-Erotic Texts Professional Reputation

One of the first issues that I have had to face about my new research and teaching area is the manner in which it impacts on public perceptions of me as an academic and as an individual. We live in a society that is largely uncomfortable with public discussions of sexuality, and years of 'professional development' training in academia (especially in graduate school in the nineties) had, on some level, convinced me that studying sex texts might attract some negative attention to the course, and to myself as a professional. The general anxiety that professors, especially female professors, feel about any association with sexuality in their professional life may be gleaned from a quick survey of books on professionalism and conduct in academia. I am happy to say that my own perception that my work on sex texts may have compromised my professional reputation was largely erroneous, and that overall my department and the university were nothing but supportive of my project. Certainly, I have suffered none of the sort of direct attacks that Vern Bullough put up with a generation earlier. Nor have I felt it necessary to conceal my research or teaching in this area. Still, the work did not go unnoticed on a broader social level; there were some raised eyebrows, although not for the reasons I had anticipated. These moments bear examining because my experience, I believe, addresses some interesting facts about how the

subject of sex-writing, and perhaps sex more generally, is perceived in our academic culture.

To address the academic 'image' issue first, I would have to say that the biggest problem I have encountered is one that I actually had not anticipated: the conviction that sex texts are inherently unstudy-able, either because of the 'problem' of subjective personal taste, or (more commonly) because they are assumed to be completely anti-intellectual. It was not only some students who had this dumbed-down attitude to sexuality and its materials, but also some of my colleagues. One day I was filling in a friend from the Math/Computer Science department on my new courses and her response was, "Aren't you afraid what people will say about that?" And when I asked her what she meant, she said, "Well it's like one of my colleagues in Math was saying how ridiculous it is to teach a course in food (a course on the history of food was being taught in the history department that year)—there's nothing to it as a subject." Food and sex, both related to the body, are perceived as not being of academic importance. Teachers and researchers of these subjects may be perceived as professional lightweights. Bullough describes how he was similarly perceived by colleagues years ago when he began studying issues related to sexuality: "I was introduced as a specialist in whores, pimps and queers, who occasionally deigned to do real research."¹² Note the focus, too, on sex research as being fixated on the marginal sexual identity—the outlaw—in this homophobic construction. The researcher seems to get conflated with the subject in this respect. Bullough's strategy was to suppress his own work: "I kept my research into sexuality quiet, and by the time my university colleagues knew what I was doing, I was a full professor To protect myself from too much hostile labelling, I downplayed my research into human sexuality as much as possible, and for several years did not list most of it on my official *vita*."

The research that Bullough is speaking of is primarily interested in sexuality as an historical object—legal and social perspectives of sexual behaviour. Fortunately, many of us have found that the more recent attitudes towards such research are positive, and even encouraging. However, porno-erotic material is not merely *about* sex, it *is* sex. Accordingly, the public perception of research-

¹² "Sex in History" 4.

ing it changes when we consider that to engage erotica through this definition is to demand a direct physical response to the text. Therefore, to study a genre built on this basis is to place the sexualized reader's body into the public realm. Similarly, to teach the genre is to place the sexualized instructor's body into the public realm. Both teaching and research use the sexual response of the body as the premise for academic activity. This flies in the face of everything that has been established about academia's relationship to the body and sexuality.

In a way, the fact that I'm a sexual being is a necessary precondition of the Erotics courses. Obviously, in order to become conversant enough to teach porno-erotic literature, I must have read a vast amount of it (which I have), and common sense would dictate that I probably discovered the material through a quest for sexual fulfilment (which I did). In a way that makes a lot of people, sometimes even myself, uncomfortable, the classes are based on the premise that I have a public sexual identity. In a world where sexuality is seen as entirely private and not appropriate in the context of university teaching, this premise is highly transgressive. Also transgressive is the act of reading pornography or erotica at all. Such sexual activity falls outside the heterosexist, procreative premise of western, Christianized sexuality. Pornography—especially the most highly commercialized form of it—is routinely included in the list of common 'perversions' or corruptions of some idealized social standard of sexuality, alongside incest, rape, bestiality, etc. So in presenting myself as the instructor of a course on porno-erotic literature, I run the risk of not only presenting myself in the public and professional eye as a sexual being, but as a (yikes) sexual deviant.

This declaration of a sexual identity obviously is extended to my body: to read sex texts I must have specific sexual responses to particular stimuli. Even if I teach texts that are not personally interesting to me (which I do), I still posit a hypothetical professor-body in the classroom that has at least the potential to be aroused and satisfied by the texts on the reading list. Potentially, there are some intimidating negative consequences to this intimate aspect of teaching the erotic. I occasionally feel that my professional abilities and authority may be compromised by their proximity to my sexual (personal) body and psyche. That could be personally disruptive: it may allow the students to think they have the right to enter my

erotic life in a way I can't control. At least, that was my fear going into the subject area as a teacher, although I am happy to report that I have always found my Erotics students respectful of my privacy. I also feared that my research profile would detract from my authority as a teacher. I feared that some students, following the assumption that the sexual is non-cerebral, might question my professional abilities in terms of grading or classroom discipline. Fortunately, I have had no cases to date of the Erotics students using the pretext of my teaching sex texts to behave inappropriately with me either personally or professionally. In part this may be due to my rigorous policing of the enrolment. I have heard rumors on the campus, however, coming from students who were *not* registered in Erotics (some never being registered in *any* of my courses) to the effect that I was a 'pervert,' and 'obsessed with sex.' But since these students seem to avoid my classes, their judgements are very distant, and don't impact on my work.

While I was relieved to find that my more extreme fears of persecution due to my teaching porno-erotic material did not materialize on campus, it must be admitted that there has been some more benign, but very real, fallout. Overall, the idea that I research sex texts tends to loom a little larger in my overall profile than I had anticipated. While I am officially a the professor of medieval and sixteenth-century literature, among the student body I am often referred to as the 'erotic lit prof.' Sadly, medieval literature just doesn't capture the imagination like erotic literature. The only negative consequence of this is pretty minor: an extremely small number of my students, perhaps uncomfortable with any discussions pertaining to sexuality, seem to imagine that every observation I make is sexually loaded. They misattribute a general human and literary fascination with the topic of sexuality to me personally, and they seem to confuse discussion of gender with discussions of sexuality. (For example, in my course on literary periods, one student thought my lecture on Anglo-Saxon gender roles was 'erotic.') Of course, being willing to discuss explicit sexual representations occasionally will leave one open to this sort of censure from the uninformed and the insecure, but as an educator, I feel I have to cater to the more common profile of student who is comfortable with, and interested in, all sorts of literary topics, including sexuality.

The Erotic Classroom

We have a pervasive fear of sexuality in the classroom—especially those of us from a liberal-feminist background. Sexuality in the classroom has often been interpreted as an abuse of power. Sexuality and power are frequently conflated anyway, and feminist critiques of the established patriarchy of academia have been quite right to point out how (male) professors have used their social patriarchal power to sexually exploit (female) students. A course intended to study some of the most explicit expressions of sexuality, in a medium that has a social history of being used as a form of sexual violence, is surely suspect in the academic realm. But porn-erotica has also accomplished a lot of social good, and such a significant literary impact should surely be recognized by literary scholars. There is no reason why the erotic classroom should employ patriarchal structures when engaging pornographic texts, any more than a course on World War II literature should employ military structures. In fact, I believe that there is less potential for sexual abuse in an Erotics classroom, because by putting sexuality ‘on the table’ as a discussion topic, it becomes the communal intellectual property of all the course participants. Professorial sexual abuse makes sex a covert action, conflating it with other power structures of gender, class and professional hierarchy. In that construction, sex is weapon at the professor’s disposal alone, along with his or her other tools of dominance. In this manifestation of sexuality in the classroom, sex is something that is *done to* the students. But in an upper-level class devoted to the topic of sex texts there is a more active role for students in defining their own ideas of sexuality, which, properly handled, may divest the professor of some individual authority over sexuality as a subject.

I do feel that conventional power structures of academia, be they related to patriarchal structure or not, can be effectively and intelligently critiqued and destabilized by the erotic itself to open up new venues of interpretation. But basing interpretation exclusively on a personal erotic perspective may also prove problematic. As I suggested above, the very sexually prejudiced, inexperienced, or insecure reader may produce poor interpretations, such as a paper on sodomy when sodomy is not actually understood or recognized as either a sexual act or a textual representation. Critiquing and grading such work is fraught with danger; obviously the interpretation may refer directly back to an individual’s

sexual identity, and that identity may be caught in the critical gesture by the marker.

On the other hand, one student from the seminar class told me that she had heard from other students who had taken the class in the summer that the course was 'empowering.' Some students found that the erotic classroom legitimized their previously silenced sexualities. I have mixed feelings about this: on the one hand, is that really the job of a course? What are the moral implications if the course functions like this, even as a positive side-effect? Feminist courses have often functioned with this expectation—and it is part of the larger feminist project of making the personal political. Surely sexuality, as a part of the 'personal,' can and should be made 'political' too. In this respect I'm pleased if the course is perceived as empowering. In the end I, like most teachers of literature, am idealistic enough to hope to impact on students by exposing them to challenging or inspiring material, and if the students consider the porno-erotic reading list a positive influence on their lives, then I think I should be pleased with that. (If only they thought my Chaucer courses were 'empowering'!) But I sometimes also worry that the pressure on students and the professor alike to not just explore or represent particular erotic perspectives, but to actually embody and live them, may be restrictive and oppressive. Nor do I think that a course should consider only the positive or liberating aspects of sexual representation. I try to make this clear throughout the course, and stress to students from the outset that, while their own erotic identity is a crucial interpretive tool, it is only one of many, and personal development in an erotic sense is not really part of the objective of the course. If they choose to make it an objective in their decision to take the course, that is their own personal business.

The erotic, as Audre Lorde says, is a source of power and of creative energy.¹³ This is as true in the classroom as in any other space. Here the energy is intellectual, scholarly. In the second manifestation of 'Erotics' the work that many of my students produced, as well as my own, was certainly driven by an eroticized intellectual passion. And I believe that the high quality of the research in the class was a direct consequence of that passion. Furthermore, the erotic classroom is a place that may disrupt the con-

¹³ "The Power of the Erotic," *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: Crossing, 1984) 53–59.

ventional academic power structure in a good way—the decentralizing of authority forces the students to be responsible for their own ideas, scholarship, and behaviour in the classroom. It also practises several feminist (and other) precepts about mutuality and exchange in the classroom. This understanding of the ‘erotic’ is expanded beyond (but never disconnected from) the sexual or the physical. As bell hooks notes: “Understanding that eros is a force that enhances our overall effort to be self-actualizing, that it can provide an epistemological grounding informing how we know what we know, enables both professors and students to use such energy in a classroom setting in ways that invigorate discussion and excite the critical imagination.”¹⁴

Finally, another positive implication of having an overtly sexual identity built into my professional character is that I no longer have to defend myself against the issue of ‘exposure’ like so many of my colleagues feel they must. Most would feel their professional reputation to be compromised by situations in which their sexual identity was publicly revealed. But by teaching these classes I can take the offensive and declare my sexual identity on my own terms. This sort of self-outing is often used by queer academic/activists. If the content of my courses assumes a complex and active sexuality without shame, then that particular weapon of social shaming and oppression is taken out of the arsenal. Where I was once made anxious about campus rumours or comments about my sexuality, my reaction is now amusement or interest, not shame or fear. In this way, also, I can provide a positive example for my students who wish to get out from under sexual oppression of various forms.

Conclusions

My experiences of teaching porno-erotic literature have been pivotal for me as instructor because, in bringing such conventionally taboo material into a traditional academic setting, I have been forced to reconsider some aspects of teaching generally. On the subject of the taboo itself, approaching these texts in a scholarly fashion has proven that they are not anti-intellectual or ‘simple’ at all, but that they are the vessels of many more complex interrogations of our

¹⁴ “Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process,” *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 195.

cultures and societies represented in story. That has led my students and me to question the agenda behind retaining the taboo on porno-erotic material in the classroom: what is it in porno-erotica that is potentially dangerous to intellectual traditions? What is our investment in keeping sex texts outside the academic centre? The Erotics classes are beginning to construct responses to these questions, some of which impact on pedagogy directly. As these discussions evolve, I'm now more inclined to include sex texts and other popular or marginalized literatures on reading lists in other courses I teach, thereby expanding the textual resources that we use to explore literature from a variety of cultures and communities.

Similarly, anxieties regarding the sexualized profiles of professors and students have been diminished by these experiences. All of these classrooms, and the Erotics classrooms in particular, have destabilized some of the more traditional precepts of undergraduate teaching, particularly in regard to conventions around sexuality and authority. Where I once feared professional disempowerment through the sexualization of my public image, I understand that the source of that fear is not sexualization per se, but the question of sexual representation being taken from one's own control, and being used pejoratively. I am more confident in my professional representation now that my existence as a sexual subject is a forgone conclusion, not a shameful professional secret.

The subject of porno-erotic texts is in some ways ideal for advanced undergraduate teaching, in that there is such a large and diverse (and growing) body of work out there for them to use as the basis of their research. In the crowded tradition of criticism in English, it is rare for an undergraduate researcher to have so much material to work with, without first having to defer to volumes of previous research. I found that, given this open field, the students—especially in the fourth-year seminar—were energized and inspired in their research, and felt that they were genuinely making new contributions to scholarship. My senior undergraduate researchers who completed work in the Erotics seminars have broadened my vision of the tradition considerably, and in this respect: these courses have fulfilled some of the best potential of the academic milieu, where the instructor is taught as well.

Teaching porno-erotic literature, however, has not only provided the means to test the limits of academic structures. In some

instances, it has taught me the value of academic structures as means of constructing a productive intellectual space for scholarship. I learned from the open-door policy of the summer version of the class that in the face of what Bright calls our cultural “sexual illiteracy,” the mechanisms of the academy—stringent admissions requirements, for example, along with advanced research skill requirements and limited enrolment—may be employed productively in order to protect a subject and its researchers from intellectual invalidation and social prejudice. As long as some subjects of literature—in this case sex, but it could be extended to other things—are culturally devalued, the ability of the academic tradition to bestow legitimacy on the work of authors and readers should be employed without excessive apologizing. This provides the university with the opportunity to live up to its historical ideal (albeit not always its reality) as an institution of enlightenment.

Finally, my experiences teaching sex texts have permitted me to witness some of the positive and negative implications of trying to blur the distinction between the public and the private, the personal and the academic. As noted above, sex text itself is an ambiguous space in these respects—simultaneously associated with the most intimate and private aspects of our lives, while at the same time inherently public in its production and dissemination, and in the fundamental relationship between the reader and the writer. This ambiguity is mirrored in the Erotics courses, as representations of the most intimate sex acts are discussed in a public forum, and a personal reading experience becomes a public academic analysis. As the teacher, I have seen how the link between the private and the academic can galvanize undergraduate research so that it meets some of the most exacting standards of the discipline. On the other hand, I have also seen how the link can restrict a student’s analysis, such as the case of the misbegotten sodomy paper. In order for students to do good work in the field of sex texts, they must feel confident about their critical abilities—which includes feeling confident about their opportunities to ask questions, obtain clarifications, and to respect the insights and limitations born of their own and others’ experiences. The course instructor must not abdicate her responsibility as a leader in constructing and maintaining a learning space that is safe, but challenging. If this means acting the role of gatekeeper or arbitrator for the course, then so be it. If students feel safe in the seminar, then

they can engage the texts fully, and in so doing, are likely to perform at a higher academic level. Ultimately, my experiences teaching porno-erotic material have caused me to interrogate my pedagogical role in all my teaching. In the final analysis, most of the literature we teach has the potential to be offensive or redemptive in some respect: sex texts are extreme examples that serve to heighten our responsibilities as instructors. If I can bring the same amount of professional consideration, social responsibility, and ethical sensitivity to teaching *Beowulf* as I have to *Fanny Hill*, then I am functioning at an optimal level as an undergraduate teacher.