



The Reinvention of Obscenity: Sex, Lies, and Tabloids in Early Modern France

Joan DeJean

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The concept of obscenity is an ancient one. But as Joan DeJean suggests, its modern form, the same version that today's politicians decry and savvy artists exploit, was invented in seventeenth-century France.

The Reinvention of Obscenity casts a fresh light on the mythical link between sexual impropriety and things French. Exploring the complicity between censorship, print culture, and obscenity, DeJean argues that mass market printing and the first modern censorial machinery came into being at the very moment that obscenity was being reinvented—that is, transformed from a minor literary phenomenon into a threat to society. DeJean's principal case in this study is the career of Molière, who cannily exploited the new link between indecency and female genitalia to found his career as a print author; the enormous scandal which followed his play *L'école des femmes* made him the first modern writer to have his sex life dissected in the press.

Keenly alert to parallels with the currency of obscenity in contemporary America, *The Reinvention of Obscenity* will concern not only scholars of French history, but anyone interested in the intertwined histories of sex, publishing, and censorship.

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