



Bad Books: Rétif de la Bretonne, Sexuality, and Pornography

Amy S. Wyngaard

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Bad Books reconstructs how the eighteenth-century French author Nicolas-Edme Rétif de la Bretonne and his writings were at the forefront of the development of modern conceptions of sexuality and pornography. Although certain details are well known (for example, that Rétif's 1769 treatise on prostitution, *Le Pornographe*, is the work from which the term pornography is derived, or that he was an avid foot and shoe fetishist), much of this story has been obscured and even forgotten including how the author actively worked to define the category of obscenity and the modern pornographic genre, and how he coined the psychosexual term "fetish" and played a central role in the formation of theories of sexual fetishism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus this book is also about literary history and how it is written: it explores how Rétif, perceived as a bad author in both senses of the term, and his contributions were glossed over or condemned, such that the originality of his texts has still not been fully established.

Placing Rétif's novels and short stories in dialogue with his autobiographical writings as well as with contemporary and modern critical commentaries, the various chapters of the book examine the author's repeated testing of the limits of censorship to define and redefine the boundaries of obscenity; his advancement of the modern form and definition of pornography through a focus on intimacy and (female) pleasure; his detailed narrative explorations of foot and shoe fetishisms that were later appropriated by the sexologists; and his development of theories of eugenics and reproduction in his utopian science fiction.

The history of Rétif's texts and their reception reveals an evolution in the criteria of what is considered to be "good" or "worthy" literature—a category once defined purely on moral grounds that is increasingly seen in cultural terms. *Bad Books* corroborates the recent resurgence of interest in the author by showing the import of his texts, which not only designate a number of firsts in the histories of sexuality and pornography, but which also illuminate some of the defining moments in the history of French literary studies.

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