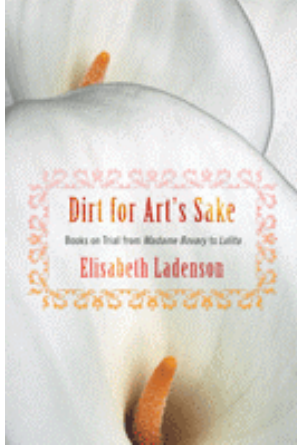


***Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita*, by Elizabeth Ladenson. Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2007; xxiv + 272pp., Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$17.95 (paper), \$29.95 (cloth).**



In the Preface to this engaging volume, the author recalls how her computer alerted her to the fact that she was using "language which might be considered offensive by the average reader" (ix). The warning system turned out to be highly selective, sexist, subjective and ultimately, amusingly instructive. The offending word was "Lesbos", which the professor had emailed one of her students in correspondence about Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*. Baudelaire's allusion to lesbianism, along with a good deal else in his collection, had caused such outrage that in 1857 at his trial it was cited for its "vulgar realism offensive to decency" (73). In the first decade of the twenty first century Professor Ladenson realised, after some reflection, she was being warned that she may be offending lesbians by using, in the plural, the pejorative slang "lesbo".

One of the lessons – admittedly, not the most original of lessons – of this well-researched book is that when the establishment seeks to adjudicate in matters of artistic taste and public decency – particularly when it invokes the law – it can look excruciatingly asinine. The outcome of the Baudelaire trial was that six poems in *Les Fleurs du mal* were removed and the defendants fined. It was not until 1946 that the poems were re-instated and the author, publisher and printer posthumously exonerated. 1857 also saw the trial of Flaubert for his novel's alleged extolling the delights of adultery and denigrating marriage – he was acquitted. It was thus a landmark year in French cultural history, but perhaps no less so in Britain, where the

first Obscene Publications Act was passed. Revised 102 years later, it provided the overture for the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial of 1960 and marked a dramatic extension of what could be legally published.

The seven key texts addressed in this book are *Madame Bovary*, *Les Fleurs du mal*, *Ulysses*, *The Well of Loneliness*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer*, and *Lolita*. The discussion revolves primarily around the interplay of perceived obscenity and artistic merit. It also analyses certain film versions of *Madame Bovary*, *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer* and *Lolita*. Along the way we have copious reference to other germane *belles-lettres* and the overall result is an important contribution to our understanding of European/American cultural history. One wonders what similar books concentrating on, say, East European or Asian literary mores might reveal.

The 1857 Obscene Publications Act was inadequate in terms of definition: "obscenity" was viewed as pretty much anything that might stimulate prurient or lustful emotions. Crucially, no allowance was made for artistic merit or that a given work should be considered in its entirety, not simply castigated for occasional snippets or even individual words that might cause offence. In this connection, one recalls that Charles Dickens's novels, which seek to provide a root-and-branch indictment of all manner of social ills in Victorian Britain, never once (?) even *mention* one of the most salient of these: prostitution. In Dickens, child sexual abuse features only very obliquely (the occasional arranged marriage involving a girl barely pubescent), while the gay scene was on the other side of the moon.

It was the impact of Modernism and the exploration of the individual writ large (with all his/her psychological meanderings and intimate bodily functions) that would eventually force legal change. Reading Professor Ladenson's book, one is reminded of what a battle it was. In America "The Motion Picture Production Code" of 1930 stated for instance that "No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it" and that "Correct standards of life [...] shall be presented" and that "Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed". Adultery "must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively". Our author concludes that "under these circumstances it is surprising that the Hollywood version of *Madame Bovary* was made at all" (39). The Production Code office deemed Lana Turner too sexy for the leading role. In this film version, directed by Vincente

Minnelli in 1948, Flaubert's narrative is framed as a flashback from his trial.

Much of the debate in this whole area centres on the issue of artistic merit, with a fair few writers insisting on "art for art's sake" and arguing that they are not subject to any currently prevailing social precepts. Indeed, a work of literature did stand more of a chance of being tolerated if it was "difficult" and/or laden with literary reference. *Ulysses* and *Lolita* fall into this category. In the case of the former Ladenson points out that much of the reference to private body parts was more likely to discourage than arouse the sexual impulse in the reader: "the grey sunken cunt of the world", "the snotgreen sea", "the scrotumtightening sea". Efforts to pass moral judgments on literary works can degenerate into the absurd: the judge at the trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* asking the jury if they would let their wives or servants read the book; surprisingly, Ladenson does not record perhaps the most absurd of moral judgments – Adolf Eichmann declaring *Lolita* to be "unwholesome".

Trust Nabokov to trump all the other writers, for *Lolita* is indeed a special case. The book is undoubtedly "literary", laced as it is with Nabokov's customary recondite literary allusions and in-jokes (Flaubert and Poe in particular peek in at the windows). Yet at the same time it is highly readable. Pretty much devoid of the obscene linguistic registers that Lawrence, Miller or Joyce deploy, it treats a subject that is still largely taboo. While reminding us of the author's forthright "art for art's sake" position, Ladenson argues that in at least one passage in the novel "we [the readers] have been hornswoggled into sympathizing and identifying with a self-identified murderous pedophile with an admittedly very fancy prose style" (198). Ladenson places Lawrence and Hall among the moralists, Baudelaire (and de Sade) among the immoralists and Nabokov, along with Flaubert and Joyce, among the amoralists. *Lolita*, according to Ladenson, is created in such a way as to preclude a realistic (and therefore moralising) reading. The whole *Lolita* affair generated more comedy than did any of the other major texts discussed: Nabokov was afraid that the book's publication might cost him his university career. As it turned out, sales became so good that he was able to give up teaching voluntarily. Sue Lyon, who played the lead in the first film version, was unable to attend the Los Angeles premiere because she was not eighteen. We have already noted Eichmann's verdict on the book.

The Epilogue to *Dirt for Art's Sake* turns to some texts, which the author deems indubitably pornographic, despite the efforts of some scholars and commentators to claim otherwise: Cleland's *Fanny Hill* and the works of the Marquis

de Sade. From the late twentieth century such writing has become permissible and publishable, especially if it was produced a couple of hundred years earlier. Ladenson addresses Simone de Beauvoir's reading (but sadly not Angela Carter's in *The Sadeian Woman*) of de Sade and concludes her impressive study with words that strike this reviewer as wholly convincing:

The figure of Sade returns to us inedulcorated form as reassurance that ours is a culture that has shed the pointless repressions of the past and fully embraced transgression as an absolute – and therefore empty – value. Our age is all for subversion, as long as the ideas subverted are other than our own (236).

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