
This finely researched book examines how *obszöne und unzüchtige Schriften* [obscene and immoral texts] (2) were treated as a category of print in nineteenth-century Germany. In tracing the legal, intellectual, and material history of this multifarious category as it developed within a complicated geopolitical context, *Fragile Minds and Vulnerable Souls* makes an important contribution to the histories of obscenity and censorship, and to the history of reading more broadly.

Sarah L. Leonard argues that the ways in which “exposure to different kinds of texts and images could transform selves and societies” (1) preoccupied authorities throughout the German states during the nineteenth century. Books, pamphlets, and images — which were being produced in increasing numbers and promiscuously distributed between different jurisdictions — were thus subjected to a great deal of scrutiny. A wide range of works, from erotic lithographs to cheap pamphlets recounting local horror stories to Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, were categorized by the police and censors as *obszöne und unzüchtige Schriften*, and thus suppressed.

Much of the book focuses on the definitions of obscenity that such authorities applied, and the views about the relations between reading and interior life that animated them. Chapter 1 examines the origins of secular obscenity law in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In this section, Leonard shows how trafficking obscenity was positioned in relation to other infractions in various jurisdictions, and how obscene works were seen to act on readers by stirring up excitement and inner disorder — conditions that, many authorities worried, inspired social unrest. Here, as in much of the book, Leonard’s evidence is weighted toward the Prussian context: throughout, she draws on the records of the Prussian Interior Ministry and the Prussian Censorship Board more than the less extensive sources extant from other jurisdictions. Because of Prussia’s interest in trans-border trade, though, these records reveal a surprising amount about debates surrounding obscenity elsewhere.

Subsequent chapters examine the category of *obszöne und unzüchtige Schriften* as it was codified in the 1830s and 1840s, and reframed after unification in the 1860s and 1870s. Chapter 4 traces how political and sexual print offences gradually became separate over the century, while Chapter 5 explores how concerns about the physiological effects of print on
the “nerves” replaced earlier concerns about the disordered effects of reading on imagination and reason: with this shift, the threat of obscenity became its power to deplete the social body, in contrast to earlier concerns about its incitement of destructive enthusiasm. These sections reveal important continuities in changing conceptions and treatments of obscenity across the West in the nineteenth century, while highlighting the particularities of the German context.

Other chapters focus more directly on the works themselves. Chapter 3 examines the authors, editors, and publishers of nineteenth-century erotic books and their defences of their wares, while Chapter 2 scrutinizes the material circulation of these and others works labelled *obszöne und unzüchtige*. This, for me, was the strongest and most generative part of the book. Leonard argues, compellingly, that obscenity was not just a matter of words on a page: relatively innocent works distributed along trade routes associated with poverty, crime, and immorality accrued these associations, while works that might, from their content alone, be expected to be censored were often not — due, Leonard suggests, to more favourable trade contexts. This is not a new idea in obscenity studies, but it is understudied, particularly for the period examined here. By positioning the links that authorities (and presumably other readers) made between trade contexts and obscenity both as more extensive and as more central to the practices of censorship than previous scholarship has suggested, *Fragile Minds and Vulnerable Souls* takes obscenity studies in a provocative new direction.

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