What Pornography Knows: Sex and Social Protest since the Eighteenth Century, by Kathleen Lubey. Stanford University Press, 2022. Pp. 312. $90.00. ISBN: 9781503611665 (Hardcover). $24.97. ISBN: 9781503633117 (Paperback). $23.72. ISBN: B0B72H6LB4 (Kindle).

With the word "fucking" charmingly hiding in plain sight on the front cover, Kathleen Lubey's *What Pornography Knows: Sex and Social Protest since the Eighteenth Century* is a brilliant study that will fundamentally change the way you understand pornography and literary representations of sex. Over the course of four chapters, it "[illuminates] pornography's three-century capacity to generate resistant social commentary across media shifts, and particularly to clarify how cultures imagine, revise, and normalize their attitudes toward gender through pornography" (5). Offering a history of the genre that does not take a pro- or anti- stance, Lubey explores how pornography "contains things in excess of sex" that allow us to explore gender, sexuality, and power in ways that are starkly different from, or are often in direct contrast to, the ways other forms of literature portray them (9). Combining book history, theory, and literary study, Lubey argues that within pornography can be found "feminist protests against social practices of heterosexuality and patriarchy" that we frequently see valorized in other genres (8). What pornography knows, as the title suggests, is social commentary.

In her first two chapters, Lubey examines the "wide web of genital reference" found in literary and visual texts to consider the social, legal, and political implications of representing genital parts and penetrative sex in the eighteenth century (29). With inspired phrases such as "genital traffic" and "genital lives of women," she analyzes the way that these texts not only represent heterosexuality but also question heterosexuality's relationship to safety, equity, and personhood (28,75). As pornographic texts represent sex acts inside and outside of the institution of marriage,

Lubey suggests that these texts "[rethink] which people count as persons, to what degree they can claim property in their bodies, and the correspondence of those bodies to social identity" (16). Whether it is through the depiction of a man ignoring a woman's claim to the property in her body in the pursuit of heteropenetrative sex (as in Eliza Haywood's *Fantomina* [1726]), or through the confusion about who is a person and who is a thing (that results when a wig or a cork stands in for a set of genitals in visual satires), Lubey's first chapter persuasively illustrates how pornographic texts are part of the wide-reaching conversation about the theorization of personhood as a distinctly male property in this period. If genitals can be attached and detached, as Lubey points out in her discussion of dildos, how exactly are we supposed to understand, or even meet, the essentialist requirements of a legal and political personhood that theorizes body parts as property? Building on these questions about gender and personhood, Lubey's second chapter examines a group of eighteenth-century pornographic fictions that focus on penetration—or the lack thereof—and its social consequences for women. A particularly interesting example Lubey discusses is *The Child of Nature* (1774), a work of pornography that contains "zero episodes of penetrative sex" (112). Rather than describing heterosexual penetration in minute detail, *The Child of Nature* describes attempts to access the protagonist Fanny Ramsay's genitals, all of which fail. That failure, Lubey maintains, "prompts social analysis," including explicit critiques of sexual violence, domestic violence, and marriage (114). In this way, this example of pornography—pornography without sex—critiques the very systems, institutions, and behaviors that enforce women's status as nonpersons.

In her third chapter, Lubey continues to explore how pornography does or does not contest Enlightenment conceptions of personhood within the context of the nineteenth-century pornographic conventions. She primarily focuses on Victorian works with eighteenth-century source texts in order to trace how they recycle ethical questions about penetrative sex despite strategic editing. However, her readings of how orientalist texts use Christian and white supremacist beliefs to critique sexual violence at home in sex scenes abroad and her readings of how queer texts "explode any fiction of British sexuality as temperate, domestically organized, or hetero" are important interventions as well (167). A fascinating example she includes is *The Singular Life, Amatory Adventures, and Extraordinary Intrigues of John Wilmot, the Renowned Earl of Rochester* (c.1830). Lubey describes how this work, unlike its predecessors, is an explicit celebration of heterosexual masculine aggression that, at times, still questions the ethics of penetrative sex. In one scene, Rochester decides to have sex with a farmer's wife and he hesitates momentarily to question whether he should force her or try to persuade her to consent. This moment of hesitation is similar to the kinds of discussions that happen in eighteenth-century works which

actively question the behaviors that facilitate women's status as nonpersons. While Rochester decides in favor of force, thereby treating the farmer's wife effectively as a nonperson, the text still raises questions about his actions. However, it seems some readers ignored this philosophical moment. One of the reasons Lubey's discussion of this work is fascinating is because she found an annotated copy in the British Library in which the annotater wrote things like "fucks strong" and "fucks strong again" in the margins (150). Evidently, the annotator (whose annotation adorns the front cover) is seriously invested in the display of heterosexual masculine aggression and has no interest in considering the ethics of what Rochester is doing. *The Singular Life*, Lubey contends, is representative of the tension between the eighteenth-century convention of questioning sexual ethics and the Victorian shift toward centering heterosexual male pleasure. Like its counterparts, *The Singular Life* seems to leave questions rather than to actively question.

In chapter four, Lubey considers how pornographic works from the eighteenth century are published in the context of women's liberation in the twentieth century. In particular, she scrutinizes the works published by Peter Fryer who was "eager to align his work with the rising tide of feminism" (187). Despite this eagerness, Fryer displays the more insidious misogyny that inspired women such as Robin Morgan and Shulamith Firestone, to leave the New Left and found radical feminist groups like New York Radical Women. In his introduction to *The Man of Pleasure's Companion*, for example, Fryer claims that middle-class women are singlehandedly responsible for the chastening of literature which he likens to castration. Clearly, Fryer was still thinking about pornography through the Victorian lens of men "fucking strong." Alongside her discussion of the republication of eighteenth-century works, Lubey takes up the subject of the porn wars. She questions why feminist discussions of pornography assert that it is "coextensive with [patriarchal] institutions rather than critically attuned to them, capable of scrutinizing collisions of world and body" (197). In an insightful reading of anti-pornography feminist arguments, Lubey elucidates how they use history to make an ahistoricist argument and use history selectively just like Dugdale and Fryer. Instead, Lubey advocates for a reparative reading of pornography that would look at genital action within the context of the social conditions that give them meaning.

One of the most thought-provoking elements of this work is how Lubey charts the publication history of the bawdy novel *The History of the Human Heart: or, the Adventures of a Young Gentleman* (1749). Perhaps the most persuasive evidence of her argument, three chapters detail the editorial changes made to this text across time and how those changes reflect pornography's ability to broadcast critiques of the systems, institutions, and behaviors that govern gender and sexuality. In chapter two, Lubey explains how *The History of the Human Heart* is part personal history, part scientific

treatise, and part bawdy prose. Camillo's sexual history is detailed through scenes of both penetrative and non-penetrative sex, including scenes that emphasize genital parts like Lubey discussed in chapter one. Under the descriptions of the hero Camillo's sexual adventures appear fifteen lengthy footnotes debating, among other things, the existence of hymen and modesty—debates that were directly related to questions about women's personhood and sexual egalitarianism. The footnotes actually reduce Camillo's sexual history to one or two lines of printed type on the page. Lubey reads this editorial decision as evidence that the text is perhaps equally, if not more, invested in questioning women's status as nonpersons than in depicting a man having sex. In chapter three, Lubey details how William Dugdale's edition from the nineteenth century, retitled *Memoirs of a Man of Pleasure* (1844), expunges the introduction and most of the footnotes, particularly the one about modesty in discussing sexual egalitarianism, in an effort to accelerate the narrative and center men's heterosexual pleasure.

In chapter four, Lubey describes the pulping of the *Human Heart* (1968) in the twentieth century by Peter Fryer (using the alias James Graham), which, in direct contrast to Fryer's supposedly feminist goals, expunges the content that would attract feminists: he removed even more non-erotic scenes, any of the hero's ambivalence about sexual ethics, and critiques of sexual violence. He also flattened the women characters. Lubey's history of *The Human Heart* illustrates how a historicist approach not only allows us to locate social commentary within pornography but also to see how social pressures shape pornography.

What Pornography Knows is a wide-ranging study that provides fresh and exciting new interpretations of pornography and literary representations of sex. Across a preface, introduction, four chapters, and coda, Lubey reveals how pornography did convey messages of social protest, how it still might today, and how it still could in the future.

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