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Katherine Delony
kdelony@smu.edu

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Scenes of Screens, Scenes of Sodomy: The Role and Impact of the Folding Screen in Eighteenth-Century French Erotic Novels

Katherine Delony

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Introduction

The role of the folding screen in eighteenth-century French erotic novels has long gone unnoticed. While this is a niche subject matter, I am somewhat surprised at the number of times the screen’s presence in these works has been acknowledged without any further analysis or study. As an interdisciplinary analysis, though my primary focus will be on the literary, I find it important to begin such a discussion with an example of an eighteenth-century French folding screen. Paravent à Cinq Feuilles avec Animaux (1720-1739) is, as the title suggests, a five-panel screen designed by the artist Alexandre-François Desportes (1661-1743).\textsuperscript{1} Though somewhat similar in function or medium to a wall or a tapestry (respectively), the screen transforms the flat surface of the wall or the tapestry, into an undulating wave of projections and recesses that alters our perception of the screen’s content. Further, the gaps in the screen mean that, although it can create a semi-private space, the screen is never truly opaque. We should keep in mind this screen’s mutable form and its semi-opaqueness as they relate to my discussions of voyeurism, space, and states of being in the eighteenth-century French erotic novel.

Thesis

While most surrounding fields have done relatively little to discuss the role of the eighteenth-century French folding screen, literary scholars have given it some treatment in past years. Though it is marginal, this attention to the folding screen within the wealth of scholarship on eighteenth-century French novels, highlights a trend in the literature of the period which is hard to ignore, but has yet to be the primary focus of a study. I intend to provide an analysis of the folding screen as a literary agent and signifier which reflects the cultural happenings of the eighteenth century with specific emphasis on new ideas about queerness which arise in France

\textsuperscript{1} “Paravent à Cinq Feuilles avec Animaux,” The Musée du Louvre, https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/c1010114007.
during this period. I will focus primarily on the Marquis de Sade’s (1740-1814) *Justine, ou Les Malheurs de la vertu* (1791) (as well as *La Nouvelle Justine*, 1797) and John Cleland’s (1709-1789) *Le Fille de Joie* (translated 1751) with reference to Jean-Louis Fougeret de Monbron’s (1706-1760) *Margot la Ravaudeuse* (1753), Sade’s *Philosophie dans le boudoir* Jean-François de Bastide’s (1724-1798) *La Petite Maison* (1763). The central arguments of this paper are threefold: first, that the folding screen functions within the narrative of the erotic novel as a means of obscuring boundaries and, ultimately, forcing the reader to confront their own morality. In addition to this, the screen also serves as a signifier of the limitations and capabilities of the novel form in expressing complete truth and influencing the reader. Second, I propose that, through the use of first-person perspective and the folding-screen motif, the reader/viewer is implicated in the acts of sodomy that occur, and are either made more susceptible to the philosophical defenses of homosexuality or made to question the condemnations of homosexuality present in these texts. Third, and finally, I find that the male authors of these novels, in writing first person narratives through the voice of a young girl, are performing what I call an authorial masquerade which necessarily plays with questions of gender and gender expression that are key in eighteenth-century discourse. Notably, in performing this “masquerade” the author is also bringing up questions about sexuality, considering this is the male author writing about a female character having sex with a male character (or in some cases, being attracted to a “homosexual” character).

**Review of the Literature**

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2 In addition to *Justine, ou Les Malheurs de la Vertu*, I also make reference to a later version of the text published by Sade in 1797 titled *La Nouvelle Justine ou Les Malheurs de la vertu*. The two versions are distinctly different and will be referred to separately since the latter is significantly longer and was published along with a number of illustrations not originally included in the 1791 publication. For this reason, I will refer to the 1791 version as *Justine* and the 1797 version as *La Nouvelle Justine*. *Le Fille de Joie* is the popular French translation of the English novel *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* written by John Cleland in 1748-1749. The translation was written in 1751 and was likely done by Fougeret de Monbron (author of *Margot la Ravaudeuse*).
There is a clear lack of writing about the folding screen in the field of French literature. In fact, with the exception of several works by Virginia Fabbri Butera, Diane Barrett Brown, and Katie Scott, and I have found no extensive writing about the French folding screens of the eighteenth century. Given this lack of explicit material about the folding screen, much of my research surrounds theoretical sources on space, readerly voyeurism, and sexuality. In addition to the limited information available from Butera, Brown, and Scott, I look to primary sources like the *Encyclopédie*, the writings of contemporary philosophers, memoirs, and, of course, erotic novels and illustrations, to inform my understanding of eighteenth-century attitudes regarding folding screens.

At the outset of my analysis, I provide a background on the folding screen and its functional and affective properties with reference to the work of Wu Hung and Katie Scott. I then briefly touch on how the screen functions in the erotic literature in the period before diving into a background on sexuality and gender in eighteenth-century France. In this discussion I make significant use of the works of Jeffrey Merrick, Bryan T. Ragan Jr., Mary L. Bellhouse, and Randolph Trumbach. This history focuses primarily on the shift that occurs in the eighteenth-century concerning how sodomy was viewed in society and the advent of a specifically “other” homosexual identity category.

Following this I give a short overview of erotic literature and the novel in eighteenth-century France. I then give a more in-depth treatment to the role of the folding screen in the

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3 See *The Folding Image: Screens by Western Artists of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Katie Scott’s *Screen Wise, Screen Play: Jacques de LaJoue and the Ruses of the Rococo*, and Virginia Fabbri Butera’s “The Folding screen as Sexual Metaphor in twentieth Century Western Art: An Analysis of Screens by Eileen Gray, Man Ray, and Bruce Conner.” Only Scott’s article deals exclusively in eighteenth-century French screens, and even this only speaks about one screen in particular. Butera also notes the lack of writing and research about screens in general in her 2002 dissertation. Brown’s paper *The Female Philosophe in the Closet* is the most significant in its treatment of the screen or partition in the erotic novel. In addition to this there are references to the function of the screen or partition in erotic literature in *Forbidden Texts* by Jean Marie Goulemot.
literature using examples from popular erotic novels like the Marquis de Sade’s *La Nouvelle Justine, ou Les Malheurs de la Vertu* and John Cleland’s *Le Fille de Joie*. Essential to this analysis are the prints from this period both about the erotic novel and within the novel as illustrations. Virginia Fabbri Butera’s work is central to this section of the paper and serves as a transition into my discussion of specific scenes of folding screens in *Justine* and *Le Fille de Joie*. I also make reference to the works of scholars Thomas DiPiero and Clara Orban. I am particularly interested here in the narrative strategies of these two novels which implicate the reader in the “deviant” sex and violence committed, in addition to pushing them to question their own morality.

I then turn specifically to looking at the portrayal of acts of sodomy in *Justine, Le Fille de Joie*, and Sade’s *La philosophie dans le boudoir*. In considering these scenes, I place them in conversation with the works of contemporary philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and consider the works of Diane Barrett Brown, Jacob Stockinger, and William Edmiston. I speak briefly about the role of gender in eighteenth-century understandings of sexuality and cite the work of scholar Terry Castle. In rounding out this section of the paper, I propose the folding screen as a reflection of the novel form using the work of DiPiero and Jean Marie Goulemot.

Beginning the final section, I draw on the works of Joan DeJean, the *Mémoire* of the count Dufort de Cheverny, the life of Marie Anne Deschamps, and François de Bastide’s *La Petite Maison* to discuss the role of privacy and “architectural seduction” in the novel and in the culture of eighteenth-century France. This provides a transition into my argument about authorial masquerade in which I reference Robert Danton’s work, Goulemot’s concept of the “erotic ‘I’,” and Jean-Louis Fougeret de Monbron’s novel *Margot la Ravaudeuse*. Continuing this, I look
specifically at Bressac in *Justine* and consider the implications of Edmiston’s reading on my argument.

After this, I revisit my earlier conversation about sexuality by pointing to the importance of categorization in eighteenth-century France. I rely primarily on Gilles Deleuze’s writings on “environments of enclosure” and Even Kosofsky Sedgewick’s idea of the Universalizing and Minoritizing models. I connect the developing ideas about sodomy and queer identity with the folding screen both narratively and functionally and finally link this to Foucault’s notion of “normalization” and the psychopathologizing of homosexuality.

**The Folding Screen as Image and Object in Space**

In order to fully grasp the complexities of the folding screen, we must first understand it in its simplest form. Scholar Wu Hung writes in his study *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting*, that though the folding screen is indeed a “versatile” form, the most “basic function” of the screen “is to distinguish space.”^4^ While there are many differences in the ornamentation of French and Chinese folding screens, the folding screen’s connection to space remains rather consistent. The centrality of the screen’s function carries over into its name; per Hung, the Chinese terms for screen “are ping and zhang” meaning “shields’ or to ‘shield,” thus indicating the ties between the screen’s function and the surrounding space.^5^ This connection can also be observed in the French term for the folding screen – *paravent* –

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^5^ Hung, 3. Hung’s exact wording reads: “The Chinese terms for such objects [screens] are ping and zhang, both meaning ‘shields’ or ‘to shield’.” In the endnote that accompanies this sentence Hung explains that “Other words for ‘screen’ exist but they are often elaborations of these two basic terms, for example, yanzhang or zhangzi (shields or cover; a single-panel screen), pingfeng, pingmen, or menzhang (a winged screen) . . . shuping (a screen with calligraphy), huaping (a painted screen), and others.” I make note of this here because it seems simplistic to say that the term is this in Chinese as there are a number of Chinese dialects wherein this may not be the case. As I am not fluent in any of these dialects, nor am I fluent in Chinese to any extent for that matter, I am relying on the translations of others in my work.
which means “to protect” or “shield” against “the wind.” In each instance, the screen is fundamentally in relation to some entity existing either in front of or behind it (although which is which – front or back – often remains elusive). This also rings true when we consider the actual practical uses of folding screens in China and in France. For the French, the screen’s official purpose was to block drafts coming in through doors, though, as we will see, their uses do not end here. The Chinese folding screen, as we learn from Hung, might sit “in the palace, surrounding the throne,” (and thereby framing the sitter), “in a household off the reception corridor,” or “in a bedroom” as a means to “maintain privacy.” In each of these scenarios, the screen’s purpose is inextricably bound to its relationship with the space surrounding it.

Functionally, the screen is not only a “shield,” but it is also a distractor, with a visual program, no matter how simple, that both distracts the viewer from that which is shielded (visual or physical), while simultaneously drawing the viewer in for closer observation – and perhaps discovery of that which is hidden. We might too consider how the folding screen exists as both object and image in space — a two-dimensional image projected onto a three-dimensional canvas, giving it the illusion of depth. In this way, it works as painting and as sculpture concurrently, ultimately presenting a compelling image, but one that the viewer can only fully see when engaging with the work by moving about it to observe each side. Katie Scott discusses this concept at length and states that “[screens] constitute the places to either side of themselves,” making them a “meuble, an object that occupies space.” This may seem an obvious statement to

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6 Katie Scott, “Screen Wise, Screen Play: Jacques de LaJoue and the Ruses of the Rococo,” Association of Art Historians 36, no. 3 (2013): 569. Though formally the term is paravent, in eighteenth-century literature and discourse the screen is also frequently referred to as a cloison (partition).
8 Hung, 11.
9 There are some screens which do not have designs on the back, however, in order for an individual to discover this, they still must move about the screen.
make given that, as a piece of furniture, the folding screen clearly takes up space physically, however, unlike the sofa or the table de toilette, the folding screen encourages the viewer to perpetually ponder what could be on the other side – artistically and physically. In obscuring, the screen manifests and engages our desire to see that which is hidden.  

This play of concealing and revealing is central not only to the artistic and literary function of the folding screen, but also to its sexual capacity, and to the sexual intrigue of a great deal of the erotic or artistic content of eighteenth-century France. The Enlightenment interest in seeing and looking, unsurprisingly, translates to a sexual fascination with voyeurism. This is true too for the Enlightenment interest in learning and knowledge which, in the erotic literature of the period, translates to the “libertine” characters’ desire to educate the sexually naïve (often young teens) and induct them into “libertinage” or sexual enlightenment. The folding screen facilitates this sexual enlightenment through voyeurism in the erotic literature and art of the period when it is used as a barrier with which the onlooker conceals themselves while observing, often through a hole or a slit in the screen, a “deviant,” sex act unbeknownst to some, or all, of the participants. The observer is thus the quintessential voyeur.

Along with the popular erotica and art, the legal and philosophical discourse begins to shape the evolving public conception of the “sodomite” (or the “tribade”) as fundamentally other to, what we would call, the heterosexual norm. Sodomy and its relationship to voyeurism, and,

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10 Scott, 575.
11 Erotic and artistic are not mutually exclusive, but for the structure of this sentence, they need to be presented in this format.
12 For the purposes of this paper, there will be a limited discussion of tribadism as there is far more limited legal discourse on the matter than there is concerning sodomy since, as Jeffrey Merrick notes in his work Bourdet vs. Quentin de Villiers: Tribadism and Propriety in French Legal Discourse, 1783-1785, tribadism could not result in the production of an illegitimate heir. Although this paper is a discussion of art, my argument is centered around the theoretical construction of surveillance and privacy in the othering, control, and prosecution of individuals engaging in sodomy on through the 21st century. For context, tribadism derives from the Greek root meaning “to rub” and is somewhat analogous to the modern concept of “scissoring,” and is linked to the idea of the “enlarged clitoris.” I would be remiss to not point out that, for one, many modern queer communities hold that scissoring is not actually
subsequently, its relationship to the folding screen, are essential to my analysis. Given the significant difference between modern understandings of sodomy and sexuality and those of the eighteenth century, it is essential to make a clear distinction between the two. In seventeenth-century France, same-sex relations were not thought of as an identity category, but more so a set of prohibited acts. While homosexual-sexual relationships were fairly common, these sexual encounters were accompanied by, or assumed to be accompanied by, heterosexual-sexual relations. As Jeffrey Merrick, Elizabeth Colwill, Bryant T. Ragan, Jr., and Mary L. Bellhouse all point out, the eighteenth-century concern was not homosexuality as an identity per se, but the act of sodomy by any individual regardless of their identity. Ragan points out in his work “The Enlightenment Confronts Homosexuality,” that the clerical authorities in particular deemed sodomy to be “the most heinous of sins,” regardless of the gender of the perpetrator. Despite this and the purported extreme legal punishments, the police regularly failed to catch and prosecute sodomites, which Ragan and Bellhouse attribute to it being “too common,” particularly amongst the elite.

The popularity of sodomy within elite groups in France led to the development of what Ragan and Bellhouse both refer to as the “bisexual aristocratic libertine” character who was, generally, tolerated. In the eighteenth-century, however, there is a clear paradigm shift in the public and legal understanding of and approach to gender, sexuality, and “deviant” sex which

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14 See Homosexuality in Early Modern France and Erotic “Remedy” Prints and the fall of the Aristocracy in Eighteenth-Century France.
completely alters this previously accepted model. Drawing on Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, Bellhouse proposes that this change springs from unrest among the lower classes in France and their desire to portray the monarchy and the *petite-bourgeoise* as defunct and weak.¹⁸ This lampooning of the elite and their “unnatural” sexual proclivities plays out in print-culture. Bellhouse points to the “remedy prints” of the eighteenth century which depict wealthy women about to receive an enema from their female servant (often while a man looks on secretly). One example of this is *The Remedy* by Alexandre Chaponnier (1753-1830) after Jean-Frédéric Schall (1752-1825) (figure 2), which Bellhouse notes positions the female figure as “an object to be looked at,” both because she is looking away and does not see our intrusion, and also because of the servant’s signal to the male intruder (and perhaps to us also) to stay quiet.¹⁹ The emphasis on voyeurism is not subtle here, but it does not work so much to sexualize the woman, but instead to embarrass her. We have walked in on her engaging in an act that is simultaneously trivial and shameful (with the flush toilet, excrement is becoming a far more private thing), and also suggestive of sodomy and tribadism.²⁰

What comes out of this, Bellhouse describes as “the production of homosexuality as an exclusive identity category that forms the deviant alternative to normalized heterosexuality.”²¹ Ragan mentions this in his work as well, referencing Randolph Trumbach’s argument that the eighteenth century produced “four mutually exclusive genders…. man, woman, sodomite, and

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¹⁸ Bellhouse, 681.
¹⁹ Bellhouse, 688.
²⁰ It is here that we also see an association developing between the bodily functions and shame. Though images of women urinating or getting enemas remain popular for sexual reasons, the growing desire for privacy and cleanliness are what increase the sexually transgressive aspects of these voyeuristic images (i.e. getting to see something you are not supposed to is the intrigue here). In the public sphere, however, the anus and excrement are now actively thought of as shameful or inappropriate. Along with this, the act of sodomy or the penetration of the anus, is also seen as disgusting or non-normative.
²¹ Bellhouse, 701.
According to Ragan and Trumbach, this structure prescribed that men were people who only had sex with women and vice versa, while sodomites only had sex with other men, and sapphists only had sex with other women. Though this is where our modern conceptions of sexuality and sexual difference begin to emerge, contemporary individuals would not have thought about their own identities or the identities of others in the ways that we do now. There are, as I will soon detail, a number of reasons to call for increased study of the eighteenth-century French folding screen (or the folding screen at all), but it is because of its role in the developing ideas about sodomy through art and literature in the eighteenth century that I find its study so crucial for the field of queer studies in art history.

The Erotic Novel in Eighteenth-Century France

The erotic literature of eighteenth-century France belongs to a particular sub-genre of erotica that was contemporarily deemed philosophical literature or philosophical pornography, which has largely been defined by the works of the Marquis de Sade. In these erotic novels, we often follow a young girl (usually between 12 and 15) who begins her “sexual education” through observing others, and who, following these sexual encounters, engages in or listens to, some form of philosophical discourse. Though these works of erotic literature are about sex,
they are not exclusively pornographic, indicating the strong connection between intellectualism and sex in the eighteenth century. In the process of these narratives, the folding screen emerges as a key player: often unobtrusive, but never passive in its role. Significantly, the first exposures the protagonist has to “deviant” sex are often while she is hidden behind a screen or cabinet, peaking through a small hole or slit to observe the scene at hand. Perhaps the most active engagement of the folding screen in the plot of an erotic novel occurs in the infamous La Nouvelle Justine by (the equally infamous) Marquis de Sade, or again in Cleland’s Le Fille de Joie. Though the latter of these novels is English in origin, its popularity in France during the eighteenth century was such that it is still largely representative of the French tastes in literature, and it certainly contains motifs and scenes of which contemporary readers would have been aware.

In a discussion of the erotic, or “libertine.” novel, I would be remiss not to mention the pornographic illustrations which aided in the novel’s overall effects. While it is somewhat difficult now to find original illustrations from these novels, the role of the folding screen in erotic art is particularly significant in eighteenth-century print culture. The relationship between prints and novels was extremely mutually beneficial; novels were an additional way to sell prints, and erotic prints made philosophical novels all the more titillating. Even outside of erotic literature, the novel itself was already thought of a dangerous thing, because of its capacity to blur the lines between fiction and reality. There was concern that the novel form would make these fictional stories appear to the reader as if they were accurate historical records. In the case of the libertine novel, this confusion of fact and fiction might only further serve to immerse the reader in the sexual scenes they consumed. We can see a clear example of this contemporary

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connection between eroticism and the novel in the print Le Roman Dangereux after Nicolas Laverince (1737-1807) (figure 3). In this print, we see a lady whose head is thrown back, presumably in ecstasy, due to the riveting contents of a novel she has been reading. While this occurs, a man, who was, presumably, not invited, peaks over the top of a small screen which partially covers the door to observe this erotic, and ostensibly private, moment. Notably, this print not only illustrates the connection between sex and the novel form, but it also puts the folding screen in conversation with the erotic effects of the novel. The woman reading has abandoned her literary pursuits as a mere voyeur to the novel’s contents, for more tangible pleasures, thus taking the effects of the novel beyond its pages. We can imagine that the more explicit voyeur here might also trespass the boundary between voyeurism and participation through the use of the folding screen.

Of the French illustrations and other prints that we do have, there are a number that depict people engaging in sexual activities with a folding screen nearby. We can see three examples of this in a print from Le Fille de Joie by François-Rolland Elluin from 1776 (figure 4), a print from Contes nouveaux: Dans un conte parfois la verité se trouve by an anonymous printmaker from 1781 (figure 5), and Copulating Pair in front of a Folding Screen from the Erotic Scenes print series from the second half of the eighteenth century (figure 6). As it is difficult to find full sets of illustrations from erotic novels, it is hard to know exactly how common this type of scene might have been. However, from the images I have found, it seems to have been at least a somewhat regular motif in erotic prints and drawings. Though not all would have access to the erotic literature that I have discussed, prints would have been a far cheaper and easier form of erotica for people to get their hands on. Considering the popularity of erotic prints and the frequency with which we see erotic scenes paired with folding screens, I argue that
many contemporary individuals would have made some level of association between the folding screen and sex.

In each of these instances, we can see how the role of the folding screen in popular culture was definitively tied to the Enlightenment interest in voyeurism, surveillance, and violence, particularly in sexual situations. Further, the folding screen serves to create the division of private and public, voyeur and participant, conscious and unconscious. In dividing space, the screen presents the possibility of something unseen, something, or someone, in a different state of mind or being. In the case of Justine and Le Fille de Joie, when the tension between these two parties becomes too intense, the screen collapses, thereby collapsing the two experiences so that the voyeur is now the participant, the conscious is now unconscious (and vice versa), and the formerly “private” space is now public, although, of course, the private space has never truly been “private.” Virginia Fabbri-Butera proposes that, like the eighteenth-century French home, the folding screen puts forth the illusion of privacy in order to titillate the mind of the viewer as they wonder and yearn to know what it could be that remains out of their sight.

Reader, Voyeur, Participant: The Role of the Screen within the Narrative

The folding screen functions within the eighteenth-century erotic novel as a means of creating distance between the voyeur and the sex act, and simultaneously, between the reader and

27 I have found, as I am sure others have, that this extreme interest in voyeurism which characterizes much of the salacious and philosophical material of the eighteenth century (especially in Europe, but in other areas as well), works hand in hand with the new emphasis on privacy and control in the home. It would seem that, in their desire to establish privacy, the eighteenth-century home owner was also vying for increased ability for surveillance and control within their own home. We might consider, for instance, the albeit English, Naval man Samuel Pepys who is describes in his, now famous, diaries how he “bor[ed]” holes” in the wall of his “closet” (equivalent in this context to the cabinet) as to observe a woman in the opposite room and “pleased himself much” as a result. See Danielle Bobker. The Closet: The Eighteenth-Century Architecture of Intimacy. Princeton University Press, 2020.

28 Virginia Fabbri Butera, “The Folding Screen as Sexual Metaphor in Twentieth Century Western Art: An Analysis of Screens by Eileen Gray, Man Ray, and Bruce Conner,” ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2002, 16. There is also the option, as in François Boucher’s La Toilette, that the individual is being framed by the screen. In Scott’s article, she describes the two individuals in this painting as being “exposed” by the screen they stand in front of as it lays bare the intimate activities of the early stages of the toilette.
the act. However, the physical collapse of the folding screen in the narrative does two primary things to disrupt this separation: first, it, often violently, forces the voyeur into the act itself. In the case of Sade’s *La Nouvelle Justine*, this collapse is a literal one. When Justine and l’Aigle are watching an orgy through the cracks in a screen, l’Aigle begins to rape Justine, the force of which pushes the screen over, creating a “hole in [the] head” of one of the orgy’s participants and introducing the two into the fray.\(^{29}\) Notably, scholar Clara Orban tells us in her work *Body [in] Parts: Bodies and Identity in Sade and Guibert*, that the Marquis de Sade rarely includes details of the room furnishings beyond the instruments of torture needed for the acts of abuse. Thus, it seems significant that Sade would mention folding screens in this way five separate times in *La Nouvelle Justine*. Another notable instance of this occurs in Cleland’s *Le Fille de Joie* when Fanny Hill, by means of a “peephole” in a “partition,” spies on two young men having sex.\(^{30}\) Though she finds the act to be “criminal,” she “ha[s] the patience to see [it] to an end, purely that [she] might gather more facts against them,” and bring them to “justice.”\(^{31}\) Admittedly, this seems to be a rather flimsy explanation, especially since, right before Fanny can “raise the house upon them,” she trips, falling unconscious.\(^{32}\) Though Fanny does not engage in sex with the two young men, her intrusion on the scene only following the conclusion of the men’s activities indicates to the reader a certain unreliability in Fanny’s narration as it would seem that her voyeuristic interests went beyond that of the investigator.

Returning to our discussion of *La Nouvelle Justine*, this moment of collapse does not just expose Justine and L’Aigle, but exposes the reader as well who, as Thomas DiPiero notes in his

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\(^{31}\) Cleland, 98.

\(^{32}\) Cleland, 98.
work Dangerous Truths and Criminal Passions: the Evolution of the French Novel 1569-1791, “quickly” identifies with Justine as the sole voice of virtue. Due to this, when Justine is exposed and transitions from the voyeur to the participant, the reader is made aware of their own voyeurism and is made to recognize the transparency of the boundary between themselves and the acts that they consume. Thus, despite the fact that the reader’s identification with Justine initially gives them some “moral footing,” as DiPiero describes it, their morals must come into question when the lines between the voyeur and the participant, the reader and the actor, begin to dissolve.

The second result of the disruption of the screen boundary is the collapse of the distance between the libertines’ philosophical diatribes as hypothetical examples of the furthest extremes of human nature and the reader’s own thoughts and ideas. If indeed, the clear separation which defines vice and virtue, deviant and pure, moral and immoral, in the novel becomes a grey area, then the reader’s sense of removal from the narrative suffering is called into question. For instance, in Justine, the connection that the reader feels to the titular character on the basis of their shared morality is manipulated when Justine continues to use the rhetorical strategies of the libertine characters to reinforce the image of her virtue. If we as readers can observe that Justine’s language throughout her trials is designed to draw emotions from us, we can see that Justine indeed has a level of control over the narrative which I argue parallels the control of the author in so much as she is the narrator, and therefore, the author’s agent in the narrative. This aspect of control allows Justine to exist outside of the bounds of reality, constantly surviving and maintaining her commitment to “virtue,” through the most violent of abuse which could never

33 Dangerous Truths and Criminal Passions, 337.
34 Dangerous Truths and Criminal Passions, 337.
really be sustained by a human being.\textsuperscript{35} Justine’s use of language saves her while simultaneously implicating the reader in the libertine way of thinking, which we are, after all, already enacting in some ways by even reading this narrative and thus, deriving some level of engagement from the story of Justine’s suffering. On the other hand, DiPiero explains that the libertine philosophical discourse, that is a hallmark of the eighteenth-century erotic novel, exists in the narrative because the libertines’ victim must fully understand the reasoning and the impetus behind their abuse in order for the “violation” to be complete.\textsuperscript{36} One might argue that this discourse, though directed at a character, is equally intended for the reader, thus, intellectually violating not only the narrative victim, but the reader as well, who has now become both victim and abuser, voyeur and participant, at once complicit in the violence and a victim of it.

On the basis of these two conclusions, I find there is specific moral tension, particularly within the works of Sade, at moments where the narrator engages in sodomy or is present for discussions of homosexuality. We saw with Sade’s \textit{La Nouvelle Justine} and Cleland’s \textit{Le Fille de Joie} that observing transgressive sexual acts was a popular trope, and also, that these voyeurs, walked a thin line between observing the acts and participating in them. In addition to this, one uniting principle in all the works of erotic literature mentioned thus far, is that the voyeur often witnesses an act of sodomy which is invariably philosophized about after the sex act has finished.\textsuperscript{37} As pointed out by Diane Barrett Brown, this falls in line with Enlightenment Sensationalist philosophy as the inexperienced, young, usually female character is exposed to sex – in this case, sodomy, by seeing it enacted and then later participating in it. According to this logic, the voyeur position of surveillance is necessary prior to the sexual participation of an

\textsuperscript{35} This idea emerged from a conversation with scholar Thomas DiPiero.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Dangerous Truths and Criminal Passions}, 336.
\textsuperscript{37} In \textit{The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France} Robert Darnton highlights that “voyeurism” “distinguished [erotic literature] as a whole.”
individual. Perhaps the most famous philosophical discussion of sodomy, and particularly sodomy between two men, occurs in Sade’s *La philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795) in the speech “Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, If You Would Become Republicans,” delivered by the Chevalier de Mirvel. In the speech the Chevalier writes about sodomy:

> We wonder what savagery could ever reach the point where you condemn to death an unhappy person all of whose crime amounts to not sharing your tastes … let us abide in our unshakeable assurance … that it makes absolutely no difference whether one enjoys a girl or a boy … that no inclinations or tastes can exist in us save the ones we have from Nature, that she is too wise and too consistent to have given you any which could ever offend her.

Stockinger discusses the speech in his work “Homosexuality in the French Enlightenment,” noting that, while the oration must “strictly speaking…be classified as a third-person apology for homosexuality,” as it is the Chevalier who pronounces it, “the narrative veil is so thin” that it becomes apparent that it is Sade who is speaking to us and not the Chevalier. Thus, Stockinger and Edmiston both hold that this defense is “the first authentic … defense of homosexuality … in France.” Prior to this point, philosophers Voltaire, Montesquieu, Hume, and Diderot had all provided some form of defense of sodomy and sodomites, but each was only concerned with the persecution of sodomites in as much as it was reflective of the broader oppression of marginalized groups. Stockinger notes that Rousseau went somewhat farther than the others by “suggest[ing]” in Volume II of *Les Confessions* (1770), that “homosexuality belongs to a continuum on which all forms of sexuality are interrelated.”

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41 Stockinger, 164
42 Stockinger, 168.
According to Stockinger’s interpretation of the Chevalier’s speech, this is a moment at which the separation between the author and the characters seems to lessen, so that it is no longer obvious to us as readers if the speaker is Sade or the Chevalier. In doing this, the reader’s position suddenly shifts from that of the observer to the active participant as the characters are no longer speaking to one another, but instead, the author is now speaking directly to the reader. This is another instance wherein the reader is made self-conscious of their own role in the narrative experience. Further, I argue that this is also a rhetorical strategy in that the reader is surprised by the sudden shift in the text, and subsequently, is more likely to engage with the material than they would if the premise of the work was to defend sodomy.

While Fanny Hill’s treatment of explicitly male homosexuality as a criminal and sinful act is a distinct contrast to Sade’s impassioned defense, both works include this content which seems to belie an at least sexually voyeuristic interest in sodomy amongst men. Much has been written about Cleland’s own sexuality and its potential impact on the novel and this scene in particular. However, I find that the inclusion of this scene can also be read as an indication of the more general cultural interest in scenes of male sodomy. Though publicly denounced on many different occasions, the scene exists in this narrative because it is something that the eighteenth-century individual would have been curious about or even enthralled by, given its subversion of the supposedly “natural” gender roles. It should come as little surprise that this would be intriguing to someone in the eighteenth century given the clear interest in gender, intersex people, and the manipulation of gender expression in a way that confuses “reality.” This is a hallmark of the highly popular masquerades of the era wherein individuals might wear a costume split down the middle with one side showing “women’s dress” and the other side “men’s dress.” For examples of this, see a detail of a Fresco from the Castle of Cesky Krumlov (1748) by
Joseph Lederer (figure 7) and figure 8, a print of *Masemoiselle de Beaumont, or the Chevalier D’Eon* (1777).\(^{43}\) Additionally, wearing costumes of the opposite gender was common.\(^{44}\) All of this is of course tethered to the eighteenth-century idea that an individual’s inner characteristics (whether that be their sex, their virtue or lack thereof, etc.) would be reflected in their external appearances. Thus, in subverting this supposed truth, the eighteenth-century person is transgressing a boundary which is not only titillating but also begs the participant to consider their own moral judgements. Just as Sade’s defense of homosexuality in *La philosophie dans le boudoir* engages the reader in a way that makes them more apt to listen and consider his point, Cleland’s inclusion of homosexuality in this sexually voyeuristic way calls on the reader to question Fanny’s subsequent villainization of it.

**Language, Space, and Truth: The Folding Screen as Signifier of the Novel**

Within the erotic novel’s narrative, the folding screen is a tool for the confusion of the binary structures that separate the characters from one another and from the reader. This complication of identities leads the reader to question their own morality as well as the morality of the characters who they observe. Perhaps there was some truth to the eighteenth-century concern that the novel would confuse the reader’s understanding of fact and fiction. The ability of the erotic novel to bring about such strong feelings in the reader that they are driven to actions outside of its pages, is what makes this genre form so powerful. Jean Marie Goulemot writes in her book *Forbidden Texts*, that, for the erotic novel in particular, inspiring a “desire for physical

\(^{43}\) The Chevalier d’Eon is a notable figure in the eighteenth-century French culture. The Chevalier was a soldier who originally presented as male, but about whom many rumors circulated proposing that they were a woman. In the 1770’s when the question of the Chevalier’s “true” gender was all the rage in the news and gossip, they began to present as a woman. For more information on this see Nina Ekstein’s *The Maiden of Tonnerre: The Vicissitudes of the Chevalier and the Chevalière D’Eon*.

\(^{44}\) For information on this and the split dress costumes see Terry Castle, Masquerade and Civilization (California: Stanford University Press, 1986), 44-60.
pleasure in the reader” is, of course, the central aim. To create, as Goulemot says, “an illusion that has all the power of reality,” is no small feat, and yet, DiPiero reminds us that the novel is an inherently “limiting” form in the libertine pursuit to “tell the truth” in its entirety. Constricted by language, but expansive in its powers of influence, the erotic novel is rather like the folding screen in its abilities. Though both the erotic novel and folding screen aim to reveal to the individual that which was previously hidden from them, by their very form, they can never fully reveal all to the reader/viewer.

As I have already discussed, the folding screen draws the viewer in by presenting to them the prospect of discovering that which is concealed by its panels. Whether the contents of the other side of the screen are a shocking decorative program (like that in Jacques de LaJoue’s (1687-1761) folding screen housed at the Petit Palais), a surprising scene (like that in Le Fille de Joie), or simply nothing at all, the viewer must move about the work or manipulate it in some way in order to determine this (figure 9). In this way, the screen is able to exert a power over the viewer despite its inanimate form. At the same time, however, the viewer can never fully appreciate the folding screen’s imagery all at once, because they cannot see both sides at the same time; their view of the work will always be incomplete.

Considering then, the abilities of the erotic novel, it is unsurprising that Goulemot finds that “it is rare that the erotic novel does not depict its own power at some point” in the course of the narrative. In her discussion, Goulemot is referring to scenes in an erotic novel where the influence of an erotic novel is shown through its influence on one of the characters. I aim to extend Goulemot’s argument by proposing that another manner in which the erotic novel

46 Dangerous Truths and Criminal Passions, 335; Goulemot, 116.
47 Goulemot, 116.
expresses its own prowess is through the presence of the folding screen as a signifier of its “extra-literary” potential. For example, at the beginning of *Le Fille de Joie*, Fanny observes two people having sex through a “crevice” in a “partition” and then has a sexual encounter of her own with her fellow brothel worker Phoebe on the other side of the screen. While this homosexual encounter does make Fanny’s later denouncement of the two men having sex rather hypocritical, she does continually express a feeling of unfulfillment with her trysts with Phoebe. To the point, however, Fanny’s experience watching Polly and the “young Geones merchant” through the “slit” in the screen, motivates her to engage in a stimulating activity as well. In this scene, the folding screen or partition facilitates Fanny’s sexual experience and education just as the erotic novel is intended to do to the reader. Thus, the folding screen functions in this text as a reminder of the power of the novel and also of the purpose of the erotic novel at its most core level.

**La Petite Maison and Architectural Seduction**

One of the most sexualized spaces of the eighteenth-century French interior was the boudoir, which DeJean tells us was conceived of originally as a place for “recueillement,” or meditation on God “free…from worldly thoughts.” The initial intention for the boudoir changed in the mid-eighteenth century, when, as DeJean notes, it became a room purposed “solely for seduction.” This is due in large part to the notorious boudoir of the “kept woman,” Marie-Anne Deschamps, whose “lover Louis-François de Bourbon” seems to have paid for her

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48 Cleland, 33.
49 Cleland, 39.
50 Cleland, 33.
to remodel a home on the “Rue Saint-Nicaise” near the Louvre in the 1750s.\textsuperscript{52} Once the boudoir was redone in her own style and covered entirely in mirrors, Deschamps invited a number of guests to visit her new home — including the count Dufort de Cheverny who recorded the interior in detail in his \textit{Mémoires}.\textsuperscript{53} Deschamps’ infamy, combined with the raciness of her boudoir, catapulted the space to notoriety, and when she was forced to sell her furniture in the 1760s, thousands flocked to her home to get a glimpse of the fabled “pink and silver boudoir.”\textsuperscript{54}

Most interestingly, novelist Jean-François de Bastide appears to have been one of the many Parisians who was aware of Deschamps’ boudoir, as Joan DeJean claims it makes an appearance in his well-known novella, \textit{La Petite Maison}.\textsuperscript{55} This short story chronicles the interior of Monsieur Trémicour’s home as he shows it to the beautiful Mélite in an attempt to overwhelm her so entirely that she agrees to have sex with him. When Mélite continues to withstand the “charms” of Trémicour’s home and attempts to leave through one of the doors, Trémicour “step[s] on her dress” so that when she mistakenly goes into the boudoir “she would not see the place she was entering” and be all the more dazzled and overwhelmed.\textsuperscript{56} This boudoir, which does indeed surprise, and tragically trap, Mélite, DeJean proposes is based on the real boudoir of Marie-Anne Deschamps. DeJean substantiates this claim by noting the similarities between the details we have from Chevrny’s \textit{Mémoires} and Bastide’s description of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{53} Dufort de Cheverny, 270-273. Yve-Plessis, et al., 94-97.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Dufort de Cheverny, 272. “Nous arrivons enfin dans un boudoir meublé en couleur rose et argent; le plafond était en glaces, ainsi que l'endroit où était fixé l'ottomane, garnie de coussins de duvet à crêpines d'or. C'était là qu'elle nous attendait. J'avoue qu'accoutumé à voir ce qu'il y avait de plus beau, je fus ébloui et stupéfait d'une pareille réception.”
\item \textsuperscript{55} \textit{The Age of Comfort}, 183.
\end{itemize}
Trémicour’s boudoir. She points to the fact that they even have the same “crépines d’or,” for instance.\textsuperscript{57} DeJean’s theory is enticing, and, if true, raises a question, about eighteenth-century male authors masquerading as women through their novel’s narrative structures. For Bastide to have Trémicour take ownership of Deschamps’ creative, intellectual property in order to win over Mélite proves an interesting, but somewhat different, form of masquerade than that which we find in the more explicit erotic literature of the era discussed later in this paper. However, the question remains whether or not this is true since DeJean does not provide extensive enough evidence to be wholly convincing in her argument.

It should be noted that the subtitle of \textit{La Petite Maison} is “an architectural seduction.” As in the novel, so in the eighteenth-century French interior, the social seduction which I have described worked in tandem with the furniture (like the folding screen) and the architecture to entice, astound, and trick the visitor. In addition to \textit{La Petite Maison} we might think of Dominiquie Vivant Denon’s (1747-1825) \textit{Point de Lendemain} (1777) in which Damon, the story’s protagonist, exclaims, “It was no longer Madame de T— that I desired, but her cabinet.”\textsuperscript{58} The seduction of and by the interior space is a direct result of the new found capacity for \textit{vie privée}. Consider that as a visitor is shown through the home, the most private parts of the building will be gradually revealed to them as they traverse the passages and penetrate the most intimate spaces. My language here is clearly suggestive, but the language of eighteenth-century works like \textit{La Petite Maison} is equally, if not more, explicit.

It is interesting to consider that, as Robert Darnton points out in his work \textit{The Forbidden Best Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France}, a majority of these novels were “first-person

\textsuperscript{57} Joan DeJean, \textit{The Age of Comfort} (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 183.
narrative[s]” written “in an ostensibly female voice.”59 Given that these novels were almost always written by men, we are faced with an intriguing authorial masquerade wherein the male writer describes the young girl’s sexual experiences with a man as if he were the young girl. Considering this, the many scenes of exclusively heterosexual intercourse which take place in Justine and Le Fille de Joie are thus called into question as each highly descriptive, first-person account, was conceived of and brought forth by a man. For example, in Fougeret de Monbron’s Margot la Ravaudeuse, when Margot has been discovered behind the screen watching Madame Thomas and Frère Alexis have sex and is brought into the action, she describes her ecstasy at length, stating that “I had crossed my legs over his hocks, and squeezed his loins so tightly with my two arms…without taking breath, he made me taste thrice distinctly the joys of … paradise.”60 The use of I here, which Goulemot refers to at the “erotic ‘I’,” gives the impact that the narrator and the writer of the text are one and the same, and thus, that the author has experienced this as well.61

Perhaps even more pertinent to our discussion are instances wherein the female protagonist is engaged in anal sex with a man as described by the male author. In Justine, when dom Severino and Clément cruelly sodomize Justine, the rape is described in terms of “I” and “me,” once again as if it is the author who experiences these blows. Later in the novel, we encounter Bressac, who Edmiston describes as being the most “exclusively homosexual in the modern sense” of all of Sade’s characters. Justine’s interactions with Bressac are distinctly interesting as Bressac identifies and emphasizes his own “otherness.” Eventually, Justine finds

61 Goulemot, 120.
herself attracted to Bressac describing him in detail as one with “the charms of youth and the most attractive face.” She goes on to say that Bressac has the “attributes” and “tastes” of the “female sex,” and “yet what a soul was wrapped up in those feminine charms.” In writing about Bressac in such a way, Sade is using his own language to describe through Justine, a woman, the attractiveness of a feminine man, Bressac. Within the plot of the novel, Justine who is a woman, finds herself attracted to the femininity in Bressac. On a broader level, as a character who takes on a gender role which is other to that which is expected of him, we can see a parallel between Bressac and Sade, who, as the author, is masquerading as Justine. Bressac’s character and the language Sade uses in relation to him is more complex than with many of his other characters, not only because Bressac is seen as and describes himself as other than a man, but also because he is one of Sade’s only characters who stresses his exclusive preference for same-sex intercourse.

Voyeurism and Sexuality

The sexual obsession with voyeurism in the eighteenth century has been a matter of great theoretical debate over the past three centuries. Part of this fascination, as I have pointed out already, seems to have stemmed from the newfound desire for privacy, because, as we moved further away from exterior spaces, the intrigue of what was going on inside the enclosed interior increased. Gilles Deleuze discusses this move towards the interior in his “Postscript” to Michel Foucault’s Societies of Control, stating that Foucault’s societies of control “initiate the organization of vast spaces of enclosure.” These enclosures – “the family … the school… the barracks… the factory… the hospital and … the prison” – all have their own laws and means for

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control; in a society of control, we “never cease passing from one closed environment to
another.”64 In moving from enclosure to enclosure, in an increasingly interior based society, the
potential for surveillance of the body, and thus control of the body, is far greater than otherwise.
Within these enclosures, categorization, and particularly categorization of the “other,” becomes a
central tool for control, therefore, it is unsurprising that, as Mary L. Bellhouse pointed out, the
advent of the private space leads to a gendering of public spaces as masculine and private spaces
as feminine.65 According to Bellhouse, we can observe this in the art of the period which
increasingly depicts the female figure “in the home” (specifically “in the bedroom”), and the
male figure in exterior or supposedly public spaces.66 Further, DeJean notes that within these
private enclosures, there is additional gendering of rooms (the cabinet de toilette as a room style
is feminine) as well as gendering of areas (one wing for the master of the house and one wing for
the mistress).67 Although, these so-called “private spaces” were not necessarily private
(Bellhouse reminds us of the rituals of the waking process), the female figure depicted in these
spaces, as in François Boucher’s La Toilette, is necessarily private and therefore sexualized.

In considering all of this, we should return to scholar Wu Hung’s writings and note that,
like this categorization of the interior, the screen too serves to divide and classify space. Hung
states that “the screen transforms space into places that are definable, manageable, and
obtainable. The concept of place is thus political.”68 Just as the folding screen creates politicized
places, the architecture of the period also forms new, specified rooms and activities which
control the body and the identity of the body. In these conversations about control, space, and

64 Deleuze, 3.
65 Bellhouse, 638.
66 Bellhouse, 682.
68 Hung, 11.
eroticism, the folding screen emerges as a reflection of the new architecture as well as a signifier of the “deviant” erotic novels of the eighteenth century.

I have endeavored to show through an abundance of primary-source evidence that the folding screen would have been associated with the contemporary interest in “deviant” sex and sodomy between men. Yet, it is not just that the folding screen would have been associated with transgressive or “deviant” sex in the eighteenth-century imagination, but also that the popularity of folding screens reflects the broader cultural interest in categorization and the physical separation of people and spaces. Earlier in this paper I proposed that the folding screen was connected to the burgeoning desire for privacy, which, in turn, resulted in increasingly specified spaces within the home. In a similar way, the folding screen is connected to the contemporary attempts to reconceptualize sodomy and same-sex interactions.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick proposes that there are two models of homosexuality which emerge from the eighteenth century: a “universalizing” one and a “minoritizing” one.69 Edmiston describes the universalizing model saying that it views “homosexual behavior as a matter of prohibited acts (in which anyone might engage).”70 This is certainly the dominant understanding of homosexuality prior to the eighteenth century, as it focuses on individual acts of sodomy as opposed to homosexual identity. The universalizing model also represents the conception of the “bisexual aristocratic libertine” which Bellhouse describes. Under this mode of thought, there is, as Edmiston says, "bisexual potential,” in that any individual might engage in sodomy regardless of their own sexual interests. The second of the two models develops out of the eighteenth century and embodies the beginnings of the more modern notion of homosexuality as

70 Edmiston, 146.
definitively “other” to heterosexuality, with homosexuality being an exclusive preference for the same sex. According to Edmiston, the “minoritizing” mode that Sedgewick proposes is based on “the third-sex model” and, thus, it both implies this “specifically gay identity” while also conflating “same-sex desire with cross-gender behaviors.” This third-sex model, which Randolph Trumbach describes, holds that there are “three sexes (man, woman, and hermaphrodite), but only two genders.” In opposition to Foucault’s idea that this universalizing model is replaced by the minoritizing model in the eighteenth century, Sedgwick believes that the two continued to exist together after the eighteenth century. I would have to agree with Sedgewick given the number of accounts even in the late eighteenth century, which refer to sodomy as both something everyone does and something specific and different. For example, in 1789, a short text entitled “Dom Bugger to the Estates General” is published, wherein the author states about anal sex that “there are very few men who haven’t done this once in their lives,” but also that there is a difference between those who “butt-fuck males” and those who engage in anal sex with “their wives” or “prostitutes.”

The inception of each of these models follows along with Foucault’s idea of “normalization” that comes out of the eighteenth century, wherein the “criminal” is judged for their ability to comply with the norm as opposed to the earlier model of the accused being judged on the legality of their individual actions. It would seem, then, that the shift to, or the occurrence of, the minoritizing model of sexuality reflects these broader changes in the legal system. Further, this “normalization” stems from the “Birth of the Asylum” and the

psychopathologizing of what were previously seen as “moral” failings like sodomy. The classification of people as “normal” or “abnormal” is perhaps one of the most significant categorizations for control that occurs in the eighteenth century. As a result of this, Jakob Stockinger writes that “sin became sickness and the role of the ecclesiastical authorities as consulting partners to the civil authorities was passed on to the medical community.” The “curative” model of homosexuality that arises in the eighteenth century continues on for the next three centuries and survives even today.

Conclusion

The folding screen played a role in the development of public conceptions of sexuality, and particularly queer sexuality, through their role in the erotic literature and illustrations of eighteenth-century France. The popularity of the folding screen as a luxury object and as a literary device reflect the cultural changes occurring at that moment, specifically in the move towards increased categorization and control of space and the body. As a tool within the erotic novel, the folding screen confuses the very boundaries it creates and ultimately forces the reader to reflect on their own morality. Further, the folding screen was in and of itself a signifier of the novel and a reminder of the tenuous separations between fiction and reality, appearance and truth, voyeur and participant. The many scenes in these erotic novels which deal explicitly with sodomy between men along with the authorial masquerade being played out reveals to the modern reader a contemporary interest in explicitly same-sex sexual encounters.

Considering the interdisciplinary implications of this study, and the abundance of evidence both literary and otherwise to support my conclusions, I find it bewildering that so little

has been written about the folding screen in French erotic culture up until this point. That being said, there are an abundance of potential avenues for further study concerning this topic. My hope is that we can begin, as a discipline, to turn a more focused and questioning eye on the folding screen and its intriguing role in French literary history. In its appearances in eighteenth-century French texts, the folding screen is at once an object which facilitates the division of space and also that which collapses the boundaries between spaces inscribed with specific (often gendered) identities. In this way, the folding screen reflects the broader moment in time when it flourished, a time on the precipice of great change – between two states of being.
References


“Paravent à Cinq Feuilles avec Animaux.” The Musée du Louvre.


