

When is pornography not pornography?

Investigator: Sam J Bailey (s.bailey4@ncl.ac.uk 170373120) Supervisor: Dr James Harriman-Smith (james.harriman-smith@ncl.ac.uk)
School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics— Funded by Summer Research Scholarships

Homosexuality, conspiracy and voyeurism

Love Letters between a late nobleman and the famous Mr. Wilson (1723) is a text that has invited **conspiracy** and **speculation** since its publication. Published anonymously, *Love Letters* advertised a **voyeuristic** experience through the reading of 'found' letters between an aristocrat and the forgotten celebrity Beau Wilson, who rose to fame in 1693, and was murdered in 1694. *Love Letters* alleges that this rise was funded by his lover, a homosexual aristocrat. *Love Letters* was rediscovered in 1986 and has been studied as **homosexual pornography** ever since (see Traumbach (1990), Rousseau (1990), Norton (1992) and Battis (2017)).

The aims of the project

Aim: To establish whether the claim that *Love Letters* is an example of authentic homosexual pornography is valid and therefore if it can be used to understand queer life.

Questions: Was the writer, publisher or distributor of the text connected to queer subculture? Were any of the real figures implicated in the text (Sunderland, Stanhope and Wilson) connected to queer subculture? How pornographic is *Love Letters*? What attitudes towards queerness are presented in the text?

By answering these questions, I aim to show that *Love Letters* is better understood as salacious conspiracy journalism than authentic homosexual pornography, it is not only anti-pornographic, it is anti-queer and a product of a reactionary heteronormative culture.

What is pornography?

Roland Barthes *The Pleasure of the Text*: Pornography generates pleasure through "intermittences", moments of preparation or slippage that imply or lead up to a sex act. Descriptions of the act itself are vulgar, but the flashes of skin, and suggestions of sexual organs before are erotic.

Julie Peakman: *Mighty Lewd Books*: Pornography was not a separate genre in the eighteenth century to "erotic" texts more broadly concerned with sex such as political satires and lewd ballads. Like the Georgic or the Pastoral, the erotic can feature in a text without defining its genre.

The erotic features in *Love Letters* to attack queerness by parodying pornographic tropes.

Literary analysis

Title

Pornographic advertisement

The title advertises a **pornographic premise** through the **voyeurism** of reading another's love letters. Advertisements featured only the title, connecting the text to genuinely pornographic epistolary works such as *Found in the Cabinet of the Great Almanzor* (1706). Upon release, the *Love Letters* would therefore likely have been bought by those seeking a pornographic text, as readers would have been aware of popular epistolary pornography.



Bottom" (4), this presents an erotic text, focusing on hands, bottoms and mouths to evoke **onanism**, **sodomy** and **fellatio**. Erotic excitement is often derived from taboo and mock condemnations of sexual behaviour. The preface engages with this by describing how "dead Languages are full of luscious Pictures of this Kind" (5), the homosexuality of the letters is "an **abhorrence of Sin**" (5) but it is also **exotic** and ancient.

cooler Sport, devour it with greedy Kisses" (10), even here the use of the term "it" to signify the phallus and -- to signify 'fuck' (as was done in other pornographic texts such as *A Spy on Mother Midnight* (1748)) demands the reader supply an implicit reading of the act. While Barthesian pornography does not require explicit descriptions of sex acts to be erotic, the notable lack of implicit sexual activity is apparent after the lacuna between Letters One and Two, in which the lovers arrange a sexual encounter which is never described to the reader. It is at this point that the reader realises this is **not a pornographic text**, and is mobilising the erotic to portray homosexuality as immoral.

references to the eroticism suggested by the letters. In the last third of the observations, the author reveals that the Aristocrat took a country woman, Cloris, into his household to rape and then abandon her. When Cloris returns to the Aristocrat to demand he take her back, he shows his "inhumanity" through the numerous "kicks and blows" he delivers to her (46). After this point the observer moralises about the "barbarous" nature of a **woman-hating homosexual libertine** (47), and the reader is invited to consider this **a moral resolution** to the depravity of the letters. The sex left in the lacunae of the letters is not allowed to blossom in the observations, as the text connects the Aristocrat with the worst of **anti-Molly stereotypes**, particularly misogyny and lack of feeling. Where the other sections of the text present the Aristocrat's homosexuality as scintillating, the observations provide **rational condemnation** for readers shocked and disgusted by the letters, while shaming readers who enjoyed the eroticism of the text.



Letters

Erotic disappointment

The letters fail to deliver on the pornographic premise of the text, while they are often concerned with sex, they leave the reader **puzzled** and **disappointed**. The Aristocrat briefly describes in Letter Three how he would like Wilson to "Wrestle with it, and pit, and pat it, and — it; and then for



Observations

Rational condemnation

The observations read as objective, sober **investigative reporting**, and contain few

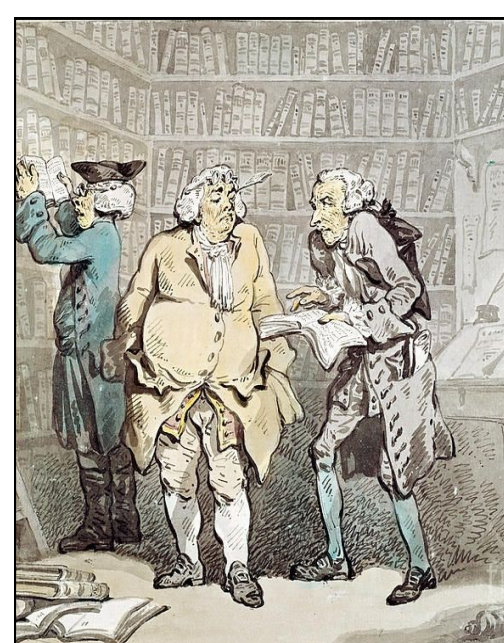


Historical evidence

Love Letters features a great number of real figures of the early eighteenth century. Below, I identify those most directly implicated by the text, and evaluate their connections to both the text and to queer life. **To see my full analysis of the network surrounding the text scan the QR code on the bottom of this poster.**

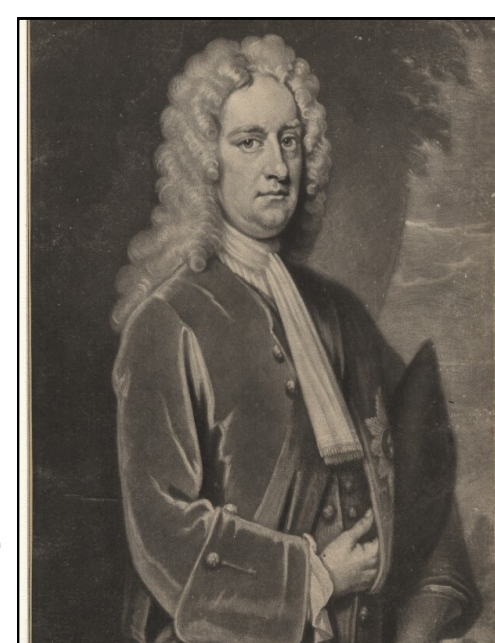


Edward/ Beau Wilson
The titular Mr. Wilson. Dead before the publication of *Love Letters*, truth mostly forgotten. 'Beau' implies a bisexual libertine, but no evidence of any relationships exists. **Verdict: Unlikely *Love Letters* is a true account of the real Wilson.**



A. Moore

The publisher and bookseller. Archival research shows Moore is an unremarkable and unspecialised publisher. *Love Letters* is Moore's only surviving erotic text. **Verdict: No tangible connection to Molly culture. Appears to be part of dominant publishing world.**



Charles Spencer, 3rd Earl of Sunderland

A credible candidate for the Aristocrat. Accused of being a catamite (a form of homosexual), although there is no substantial evidence to prove this. Died in 1722 so was a 'late' aristocrat. **Verdict: Text evokes this hated, late, alleged homosexual, but this is unlikely to reflect reality.**



James Stanhope, 1st Earl Stanhope

A credible candidate for the Aristocrat. Had a semi-public homosexual relationship. Died in 1721 so was a 'late' aristocrat. Was in Spain at the time Wilson was in London. **Verdict: Credibly queer, but no substantial link to what the text alleges.**

Conclusion: Anti-pornographic and anti-queer

My historical analysis demonstrates the only link between this text and queer lives is its **attack on queer men**. My literary analysis shows the text is **neither pornographic nor written for a queer audience**. The text is best understood in the context of a culture out to destroy homosexuality by ideological and martial means. In 1726, three years after the publication of *Love Letters*, Mother Molly's Clap House (a gay bar and lodging house in London) was raided by constables, and forty men were arrested, many of whom were executed or died in prison. Reading authentic queer texts is vital to understanding the experience of persecuted queer lives in this period, as it is in any other, so identifying *Love Letters* as a **reactionary text** is vital to finding truth about historical queer experience. Insofar as we rely on literature to teach about the past, it is key that we are critical about the few sources detailing queer lives to ensure real stories are told accurately and without prejudice.

Select Bibliography

- Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Cape, 1976.
Norton, Rictor. 'The Birth of the Subculture'. *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700-1830*, GMP, 1992, pp. 32-53.
Peakman, Julie. *Mighty Lewd Books: The Development of Pornography in Eighteenth-Century England*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
Rousseau, G. S. 'An Introduction to the Love-Letters: Circumstances of Publication, Context, and Cultural Commentary'. *The Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1990, pp. 47-92.
Traumbach, Randolph. 'Sodomy Transformed: Aristocratic Libertinage, Public Reputation and the Gender Revolution of the 18th Century'. *The Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1990, pp. 105-24.
Love-Letters between a Certain Late Nobleman and the Famous Mr. Wilson: Discovering the True History of the Rise and Surprising Grandeur of That Celebrated Beau. 1723. Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

