

*Fragile Minds and Vulnerable Souls: The Matter of Obscenity in Nineteenth-Century Germany.* By Sarah L. Leonard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). Pp. 272. Cloth, \$55.00.

Historians have traditionally focused on either pivotal works or widely acclaimed texts to understand the societal trends and ideas of an era. Such a methodology, however, highlights only the intellectual elites, leaving the majority of the population absent from corresponding cultural and social analysis. In *Fragile Minds and Vulnerable Souls*, Sarah Leonard offers a refreshing perspective by focusing on the “obscene and immoral texts” (*obszöne und unsittliche Schriften*) of nineteenth-century Germany—publications that were unlikely to be passed down to posterity as momentous artistic works. These immoral texts consisted largely of stories portraying illicit romances and speedy courtships, as well as popular books on medicine and prophecy. Rapidly rising literacy rates led to increased recreational reading and writing, and these works became prominent among general audiences. Intellectuals and authorities, however, held such “heart- or soul-destroying” books in disdain (8). The author argues that a dichotomous conception of reading emerged: just as reading could promote health and the knowledge needed to “serve as a good citizen,” the wrong material could lead to a debilitated, socially disruptive life (206). Bringing out the tension between readers and authorities, Leonard traces the evolving definitional and legal characteristics of obscenity. Linking the ensuing legal turmoil to Michel Foucault’s studies on power is, perhaps, the study’s most profound contribution (174).

In the first half of the century, obscenity was linked with “superstition, emotionalism, and irrationality” (39). It was, in effect, a post-Enlightenment conservative backlash against Romanticism. Still reeling from the effects of the French Revolution and anti-Napoleonic Wars of Liberation, the government was concerned with a lack of legitimacy during the *Vormärz* period. Any texts that could cause unrest or social disorder came under the scrutiny of authorities. Thus the category of “obscenity” now included perceived anti-government criticism in addition to the more traditional case of overt sexuality. After the unsuccessful March Revolutions of 1848, a liberal push for the sanctity of individual rights changed the tone toward the protection of social spaces, one of which was literature. Authors sought to “skirt the limits of bourgeois sensibilities without moving beyond,” and police authorities were often at a loss as to how to proceed (107). During the unification period of 1860-80, concern switched again to the explicit protection of individuals from obscene material. Furthermore, the changing face of domestic and international politics induced a heightened need for political legitimacy, particularly in Prussia.

The rise and development of the liberal middle class provided a counterpoint to traditional authorities and plays a central role in the study’s narrative. The first two-thirds of the nineteenth century saw a bourgeois revolt against conservative ideas of restraining individual rights and

censoring obscene reading material. In contrast, the latter third was characterized by increased cooperation between the two groups. This can be attributed to the centrality of sexual honor and family in the bourgeois value system, along with an increase in political power. Now part of the “establishment,” the preservation of the existing system became paramount. Recreational reading was no longer a reward for the hard-working middle class man, but rather a potential source of nervous strain (178). Drawing upon the burgeoning field of empirical science, critics used metaphors from medicine and psychology to declare certain publications “instruments for arousing the senses” (203). A convergence of liberal and conservative definitions of obscenity began over mutual concerns for the safeguarding of participatory citizenship, education (*Bildung*), and private morality-fundamental areas of society potentially endangered by corruptive reading material.

Although Leonard highlights a multitude of illicit texts, she shows continuity best in her frequent returns to the history of the German edition of *The Memoirs of Casanova*. The notoriety and popularity of the publication, as well as its frequent recurrences in legal disputes, provides a compelling extended case study for the evolving discourse. Its subject matter, the promiscuity of the male character, also allows a segue into discussions on masculinity. The author interweaves the topic of sexuality throughout the monograph, especially in regard to the perceived negative effects of obscene texts on women. Leonard increases the depth of her analysis by highlighting the reinforcement of alterity produced by the actual and perceived prominence of Jews in the legal and illicit book trades. Government authorities were forced to balance public anti-Semitism, increased Jewish political rights, and the desire to restrict the illegal book trade.

During the nineteenth-century, German police were charged with finding and confiscating any writings that were considered legally obscene. This led to the destruction of many such books, presenting a shortage of sources for the author. To her credit, Leonard located several archival repositories of police records that contained many intact books, including an especially large collection in Berlin. She notes that an emphasis on the Berlin archive necessitated an analysis heavily weighted toward the Prussian state, but the permeability of borders and mobility of book dealers mitigated the bias (11). This is undoubtedly true, at least as a fair representation of the selection of books available throughout the German lands. Nevertheless, it limits Leonard’s analysis of the perspectives and experiences of readers in other states. In contrast with the challenges of studying police records, codes and laws were widely promulgated, and this lends strength to the author’s treatment of legality. This combination of sources renders the term “obscenity” less ambiguous but also more nuanced.

In short, the author has aided our understanding of evolving values and discourses through a sustained analysis that is neither “top-down” nor simply “history from below.” The tension between censorship authorities, geographic intermediaries, and the common reader provides a compelling theme in support of the notion that groups perceived reading as a potentially transformative act for the self and society. While Leonard’s monograph contributes to the historiography of German immoral texts generally, it also plays a significant role, along with Tom Cheesman’s *The Shocking Ballad Picture Show* (1994), as one of the few English-language publications on the topic. Readers of German will find it a worthwhile supplement to Gerd Forsch’s *Casanova und seine Leser* (1988).

**Christopher Goodwin**

*Norwich University*