



**Paris Olympia Press: A Bibliographical and
Sociohistorical Study of The Traveller's
Companion Series and its Readers**

Gina Baber

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“...Bibliography is the discipline that studies texts as recorded forms, and their processes of transmission, including their production and reception...bibliographers should be concerned to show that forms affect meaning...it allows us to describe not only the technical but the social processes of their transmission.” (1)

1.0 Introduction

The following essay is a bibliographical study of the Olympia Press, founded in Paris in 1953 by Maurice Girodias. It will mainly focus on the format and binding(s) of the Olympia Press ‘Traveller’s Companion Series’, as well as discussing examples of other Olympia Press titles — placing the series and other titles in sociohistorical context and illustrating the importance of both bibliographical and paratextual elements. It will also discuss the relationship between publisher and reader, and the impact of social and cultural influences on the production of books and their readers.

2.0 The Cover and Binding: Colour, Symbolism and Association

“Simply the colour of the paper chosen for the cover can strongly indicate a type of book. At the beginning of the twentieth century, yellow covers were synonymous with licentious French books: “I remember,” writes Butor, “the scandalized tone of a clergyman, in a British railway car, who thundered at a friend of mine: ‘Madame, don’t you know that God sees you reading that yellow book!’ That accursed and indecent signification is certainly the reason Aubrey Beardsley named his quarterly *The Yellow Book*.” (2)

Colour-coding by genre was a tool used by one of the earliest paperback publishers, German-based Tauchnitz, in the late 1920s. Originally, coloured wraparound bands were used “... to indicate the genre of the book — red for crime and humour, blue for ‘serious’ books, yellow for novels and short stories of adventure, social life or historical novels, and green for love stories. The colour-coding seems to have been the brainchild of Max Christian Wegner, then Managing Director of Tauchnitz. Two years later, by then in charge of the rival Albatross Books, he developed the idea further, using the entire paperback cover for colour coding by genre, a practice also taken up by Penguin when it launched in 1935.” (3). It is interesting to note that the wraparound band was also used on some pornographic magazines and books from the 1950s, “as a way to indicate a title was unread, making it more enticing to the reader and more valuable to the bookseller.” (4)

3.0 The Cover and Binding: The Traveller’s Companion Series

The binding of the Olympia Press ‘The Traveller’s Companion Series’ is described by Patrick Kearney as “olive-green wrappers, printed in black, and trimmed flush with body of the book. Front cover; within a frame of two borders, the outer consisting of fine linked chain of type device in black, and the inner a thin band of white edged in black” (5) (see also, image 2)

Whilst Tauchnitz used green wrappers on books to indicate Romance/Love Stories (as mentioned earlier), Albatross used green to indicate Travel (6) (see also, image 3). There is no definitive record of why Girodias chose to use green for his ‘Traveller’s Companion’ covers, or why he chose the simple black text within a double border. The style of text within a double border is similar to other French publishers, publishing slightly earlier than Girodias. These include Les Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Française (NRF) (see image 4) and ‘Les Cahiers Vert Series’ published by Éditions Bernard Grasset — here the green paper cover is also similar in style to that of ‘The Traveller’s Companion Series’ (see image 5). The green could be said to

be a slightly provocative appropriation and combination of genre identifiers used by other publishers. It could also be a symbol of sexual and literary freedom *and* a disguise — visible to fans of his brand of literature, and subtle enough to elude the titles' immediate association with pornography. Girodias was able to combine works of literary 'merit' with erotic fiction, blurring social barriers and bringing new authors to readers who would perhaps not have encountered them in the output of an arguably less creative publisher; one more strictly defined by genre and bestselling authors:

“He collapsed the distinction between “high” and “low” culture; he revealed that the “sacred” bond between author and publisher is always a devil's pact; and he suggested with a smile that “dirty books” and their cloaked authors offered a deep but usually unspoken truth about literary culture.” (7)

It is interesting to note that from the first book in 'The Traveller's Companion Series' (No. 1 Henry Jones *The Enormous Bed*, 1955) to the last official title in the series (No. 94 J. Hume Parkinson *Sextet*, 1965), there is no mention of the Publisher on the front or back cover of the books — there is absolutely no information on the back cover, other than the price. The spines, similarly, have only the title and series number, but no author or publisher information, such as the publisher's colophon. It is only when the books are published in the United Kingdom by New English Library, that the allure of the French publishing house, including the green covers of 'The Traveller's Companion Series' and the mystique of Maurice Girodias, become a powerful associative tool for advertising. This association is clear when used on the cover of the New English Library version of James Sherwood's *Stradella*, for example. Here, 'The Olympia Press' is printed above 'Traveller's Companion Series' and followed by 'General Editor: Maurice Girodias' (see image 6). This association is shown, once again, when reading the 'Publisher's

Afterword' in *The Best of Olympia*, an anthology of writing from Olympia Magazine published by New English Library in 1966:

“Now that the great battle against literary censorship has been nearly completely won in Great Britain and in the United states, The Traveller’s Companion Series enters a new phase of its existence...From now on, it will be published simultaneously in London and New York with the same famous green cover, and under the editorship of Maurice Girodias.” (8)

Here, Girodias is promoted as founder, publisher and editor, as well as an important sociohistorical figure in the promotion and “movement towards free expression in art and literature.” (9) Girodias himself becomes an icon for the battle against censorship. This more profound and respectable association with literary, social, and cultural progression is emphasized in later titles published in the United Kingdom by Olympia Press, including Merrill Harris’ *Dirty Alice*, 1971 (see image 7) and Keith Kerner’s *The Glass Crotch*, 1971 (see image 8). These books (unlike the earlier Olympia Press titles) provide a blurb on the back cover, as well as an appraisal — here from the New York Times, describing Olympia Press as “a literary enterprise that has profoundly influenced contemporary writing and culture.” It is interesting to note that the genre indicator on the cover is now an explicit description of the text as ‘An Erotic Thriller.’ (see image 9).

4.0 Format and Binding: *Lolita*

"...an acquaintance with the styles of bookmaking associated with specific genres or classes of writing at particular times and locations, enables one to place a given book in a historical setting and to know something of the ways its text was viewed by its producers and its readers....styles

are as informative as are exceptions to the general rule in indicating how the authors and publishers wished to have the texts regarded and how the book-buyers and readers were likely to have regarded them" (10)

The design, format and binding of a book most often reflects the intention of the author and publisher, as well as the reader/owner's required use for the item. For example, a decorative or beautifully bound volume would be aimed at a collector, to be kept in its original condition and hardly used. A more basic, cheap binding and modest design would suit a publication that is handled, carried around or referred to regularly, such as a pocket paperback or chapbook. The Olympia Press 'Traveller's Companion Series' fits this idea in many ways — with its octavo format and plain cover design, with no illustrations or highly decorated elements. It is evident from many contemporary auction sales of Olympia Press Titles, especially sales of the popular or most controversial titles, that the books up for auction were well read, distributed and most probably, very much enjoyed.

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* was first published by The Olympia Press in 1955. It was published as a two-volume edition, housed in the publisher's distinctive green wrappers and octavo format. After much research, it is difficult to find a definitive reason as to why Girodias chose to publish the novel in a two-volume set. It could be viewed as a way to somehow increase the importance of the novel, representing it as a defining moment in literature; or a way of dividing the text into more digestible volumes for readers. On speaking with a rare books specialist, this idea of the length of the novel and reason for its two-volume printing was suggested to be a practical printing and binding solution:

"With regards to the work being published in two volumes, I am not aware of there being a particular motive behind the Olympia Press and its decision. Originally, the volumes

were bound in wrappers, and combining the text blocks into one volume would have resulted in a more fragile/unstable binding.” (11)

The practicalities of binding *Lolita* as a two-volume work have no doubt, however, resulted in the Olympia Press first edition becoming an icon of publishing, being the only work in the history of the Olympia Press to be printed and bound in this way.

The first edition has been re-bound in more expensive bindings, such as leather bindings with a slipcase, and clothbound boxes. A recent copy for sale at a London rare book dealer, has been rebound by an in-house binder. This was undertaken partly to increase the longevity of the original paperback binding, but also to celebrate the literary content; and to transform the original two-volume paperback into a collector’s edition:

“Finely bound by the Chelsea Bindery in black morocco, titles to spine, two raised bands, single rule to boards, twin rule to turn-ins, marbled endpapers, gilt edges. Housed in a black leather entry slipcase...A fine copy.” (12)

The Olympia Press first edition of *Lolita* fetches extremely high prices at auction (sometimes way above the original estimate), even without additional ownership provenance value, or lavish bindings. The value of an original ‘first edition’ in its slightly battered green paper wrapper with “light wear to extremities; short tears at spine ends” (13) is a strong enough selling-point in itself — the physical evidence of a mysterious previous reader’s or readers’ ownership of the book, imbuing it with a greater sense of adventurous life and authenticity. It has become a symbol of provocation and freedom; and with it comes a desired ownership and glamourised association with its printing and publishing history.

5.0 Risk of Association: *The Ginger Man*

A reader's assumption that a book format and cover is associated with a particular type of work, shows the power of the series emblem, "...the paratext that most typically derives from and depends on primarily the publisher obviously encroaches on the prerogatives of the author..." (14)

J. P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man* was also published by The Olympia Press in 1955, and underwent a frequently referenced battle between authorial intention (the way in which Donleavy considered himself a 'serious' author, and his intention to publish a text of serious literary worth); the apparent lack of communication with Girodias about the publisher's intention; and the resulting addition of *The Ginger Man* to 'The Traveller's Companion Series':

"Published in the same year as the most famous of all Olympia publications, Nabokov's *Lolita*, Donleavy's debut novel was issued, to the author's horror, as a pornographic novel in the Traveller's Companion Series. Donleavy went to considerable effort to rescue the novel from association with other works in the series..." (15)

6.0 Pseudonyms

"Use of a pseudonym unites a taste for masks and mirrors, for indirect exhibitionism, and for controlled histrionics with delight in invention, in borrowing, in verbal transformation, in onomastic fetishism" (16)

Some of the titles in the Olympia Press 'Traveller's Companion Series' explicitly denote the theme and content of a book, for example, *Roman Orgy* (see image 2), or *The Sexual Life of*

Robinson Crusoe. Often the titles are ambiguous, however, and sometimes altered, as a barrier to the threat of censorship "...endangered volumes would be recalled, and given new titles on substituted wrappers and title-pages..." (17). Author names are also frequently changed or invented, particularly for more erotic titles. This frequently happened with titles published under Girodias' other Olympia Press imprints, including Ophelia Press and Othello Books. Girodias enjoying playing with the idea of the pseudonym as a way to embrace and emphasize the controversial content of much of his publishing output, as well as create a closer association with himself (the publisher) and the mystique of his publishing brand:

"My publishing technique was simple in the extreme, at least in the first five years: when I had completely run out of money I wrote blurbs for imaginary books, invented sonorous titles and funny pen names...and then printed a list which was sent out to our clientele of book-lovers...They immediately responded with orders...I could again advance money to my authors, and they hastened to turn in manuscripts which more or less fitted the descriptions." (18)

7.0 The Ophelia Press and Further Thoughts on Olympia Press Imprints

Olympia Press imprints, including The Ophelia Press, allowed the publication of purely erotic fiction, separate entirely from the mixture of more 'intellectual' literary works and erotic fiction aligned with 'The Traveller's Companion Series':

"Maintaining the initial letter "O" for uniformity and recognition, Girodias added the Ophelia Press, Ophir Books, and Othello Books to his fleet. These imprints were unequivocally down-market — designed specifically for the devotees of onanism..." (19)

Initially the books were bound in peach woven paper, with the title and author printed in black ink within a double border (see image 12). In the late 60s, Ophelia Press covers change to a bright fuschia pink and the dimensions of the format changes to the larger 180 x 130mm (see image 13). An Ophelia Press title, especially the bright fuschia pink titles published in the mid 1960s - early 1970s, are a powerful symbol of the erotic content of the book, as well as possibly denoting a connection with the more disposable nature of magazine publishing. The late-1960s covers also included 'For Adult Readers', printed on the front covers, further sealing the association between format, binding and text. The use of bright pink may also be a nod to the controversial re-publishing of John Cleland's *Memoirs of Fanny Hill*, published by Jack Cahane (Maurice Girodias' Father), in 1950 (see image 14).

On closer investigation of a collection of Ophelia Press titles, some of the pages contain the text 'Whipping 2' printed on the foot of the page (see image 15). Initially this could be seen as a possible 'catchword' (the first word of the next page) or as a possible indicator to the reader about lascivious content on that page (!), but on further investigation, it is most probably a signature mark, used to identify a section (gathering) of a book to ensure it is bound in the correct order. (20)

8.0 Final Thoughts

"...Printed books generally pass through roughly the same cycle. It could be described as a communications circuit that runs from the author to the publisher...the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader. The reader completes the circuit, because he influences the author both before and after the act of composition. Authors are readers themselves. By reading and associating with other readers and writers, they form notions of genre and style and a general sense of the literary enterprise, which affects their texts." (21)

Girodias seems to have a great understanding of the needs and desires of his readers, anticipating the demand for his subversive brand of literature; and often creating titles and pseudonyms for authors, in order to create more demand. His use of format (the practicality and portability of the octavo paperback) and binding (including the symbolic use of the understated green paper wrapper and more risqué later use of coloured papers) are of particular significance. Girodias' understanding of censorship and the effect this could have on production and demand, alongside the physical association with the book as object and carrier of text, are all important factors in the life of the Olympia Press. As well as becoming ubiquitous with placing writers of high literary merit alongside writers of erotic fiction, Girodias has created paperback symbols of resistance and freedom, fighting the battle against censorship and literary obstination. His books have ultimately become objects of great social and cultural significance, this reflected through the constant desire for ownership by contemporary booksellers, collectors and readers.

Images:

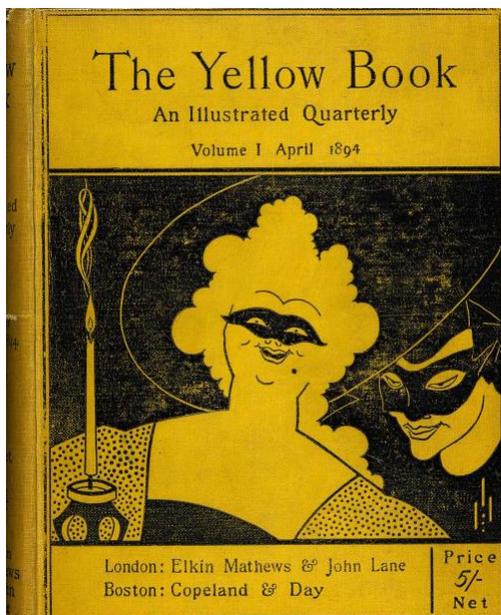


Image 1

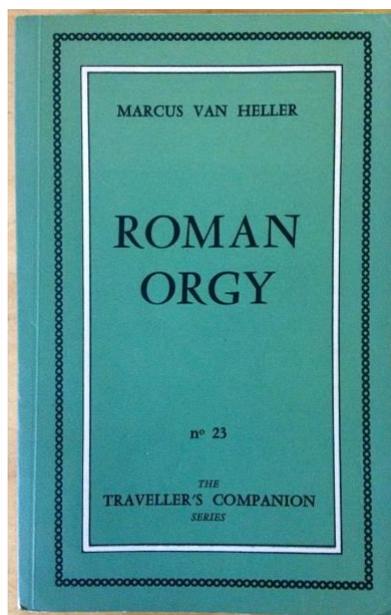


Image 2

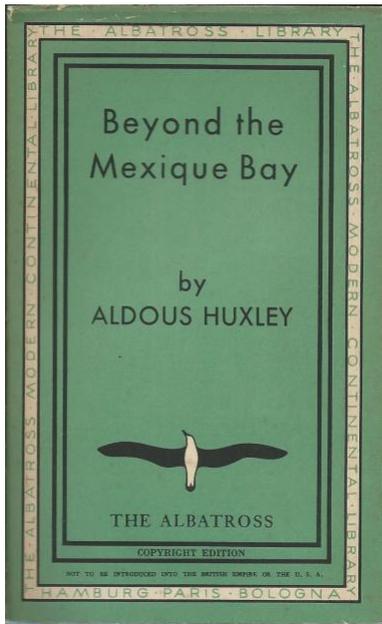


Image 3

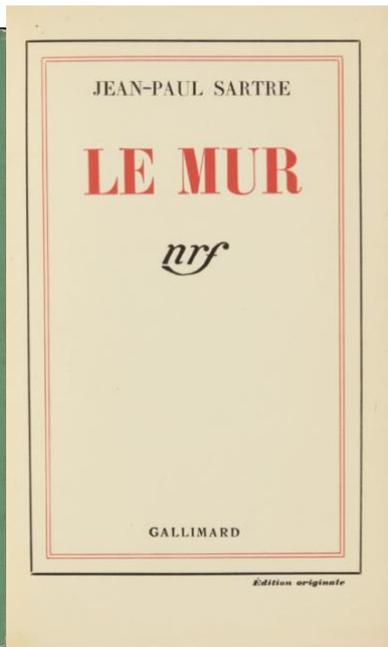


Image 4

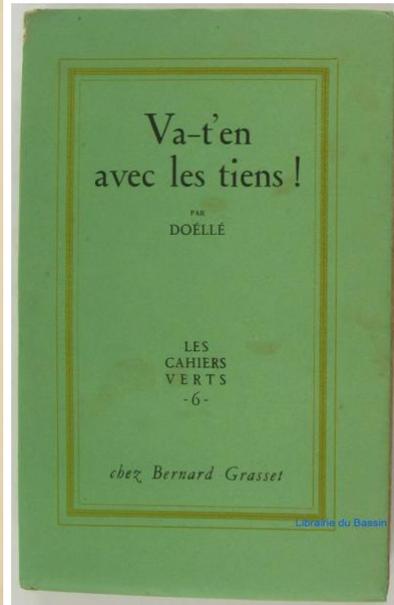


Image 5

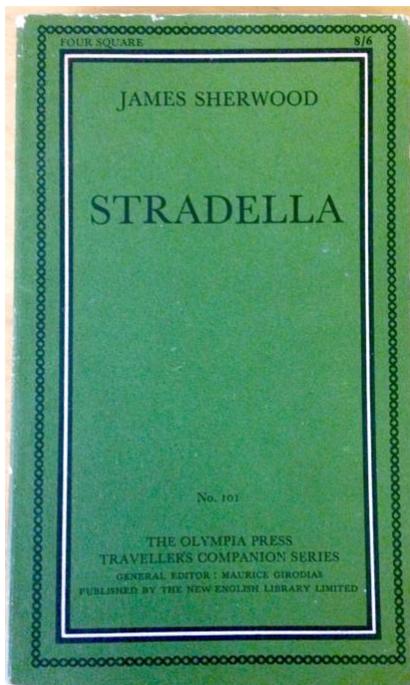


Image 6

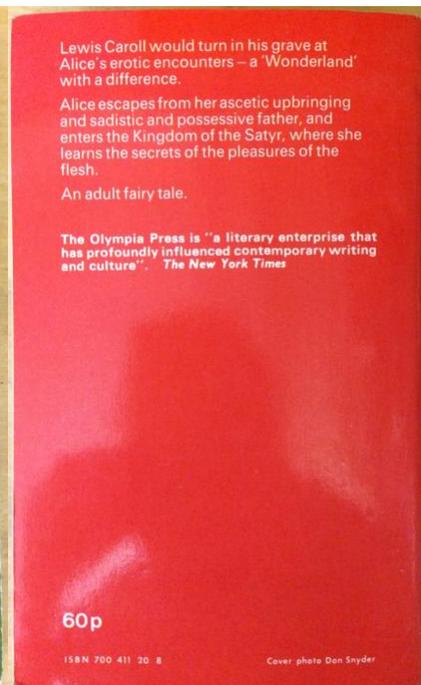


Image 7

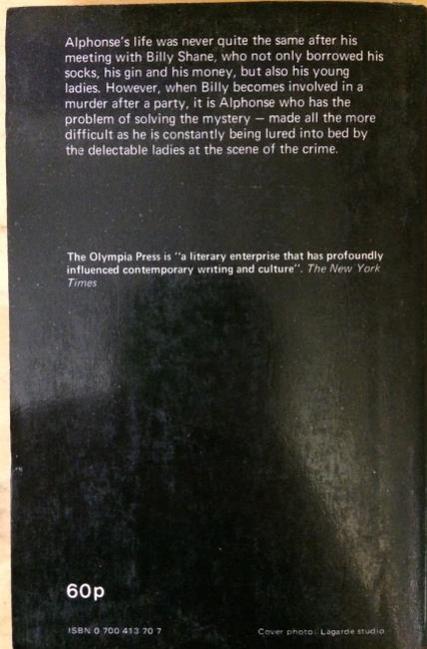


Image 8

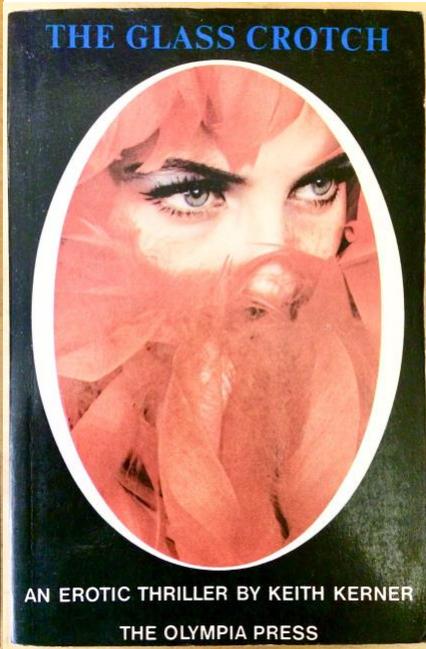


Image 9

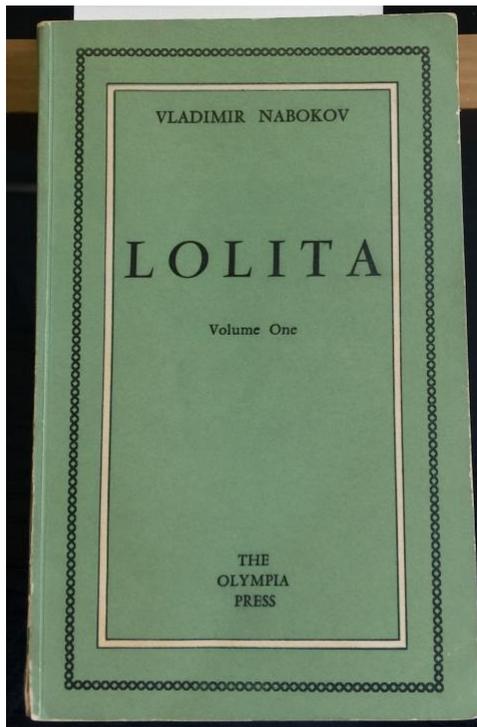


Image 10

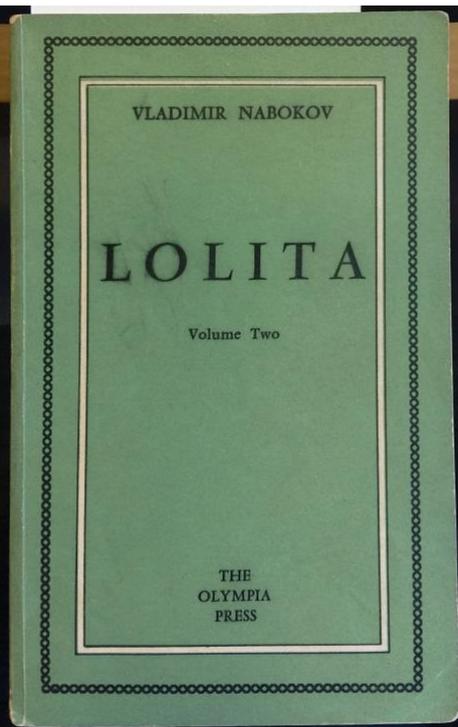


Image 11

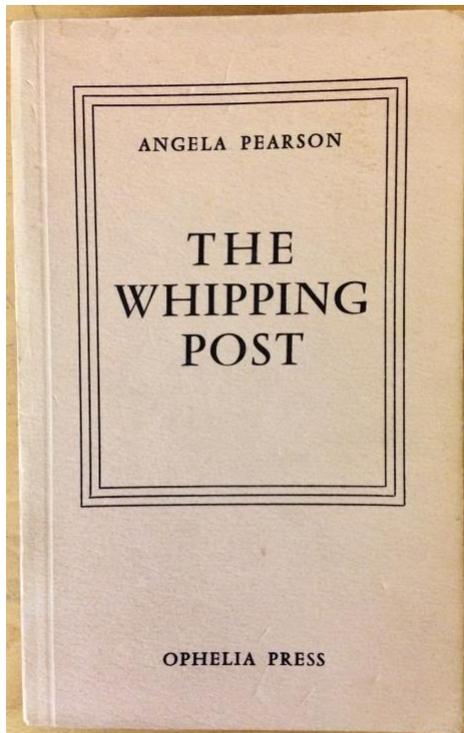


Image 12

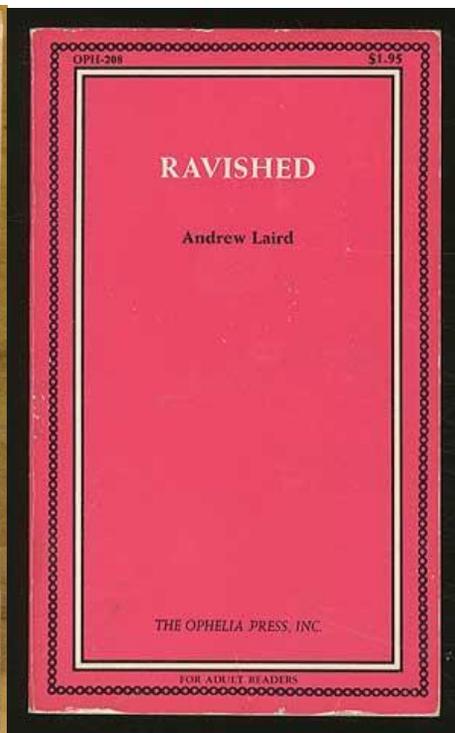


Image 13

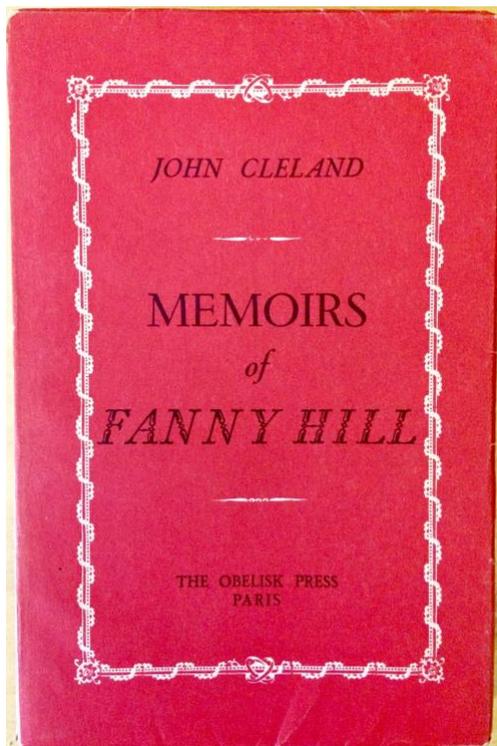


Image 14

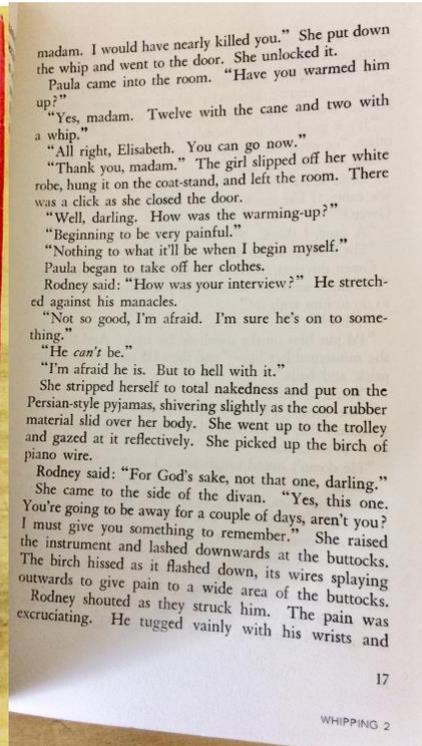


Image 15

Image Credits:

1. Beardsley, A. *The Yellow Book* Available from: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-yellow-book>
2. Van Heller, M. *Roman Orgy*. Paris: The Olympia Press, 1956 Photo by Anon. 2018. (Taken at the Studio and Library of Jim Pennington).
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7. Harris, M. *Dirty Alice* London: The Olympia Press, 1971. Photo by Anon. 2018. (Taken at the Studio and Library of Jim Pennington).
- 8-9. Kerner, K. *The Glass Crotch* London: The Olympia Press, 1971. Photo by Anon. 2018. (Taken at the Studio and Library of Jim Pennington).
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14. Cleland, J. *Memoirs of Fanny Hill*. Paris: The Obelisk Press, 1950. Photo by Anon. 2018. (Taken at the Studio and Library of Jim Pennington).
15. Pearson, A. *The Whipping Post*. Paris: The Olympia Press, 1959 p 17. Photo taken by Anon. 2018. (Taken at the Studio and Library of Jim Pennington).

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- (13) See: <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/books-manuscripts/nabokov-vladimir-vladimirovich-lolita-paris-6171289-details.aspx?from=searchresults&intObjectID=6171289&sid=374803dc-17f8-4e08-884a-7211d794bd2c>
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