

Reading Miller's Numinous Cock: Heterosexual Presumption and Queerings of the Censored Text.

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James Donald Gifford

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Reading Miller's "Numinous Cock":
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James Donald Gifford (bio)

In 1988, Gore Vidal reviewed a new edition of the Durrell-Miller Letters, noting “The dust-jacket... shows three protagonists sprawled in a shallow wine-dark sea—Lawrence Durrell, Henry Miller, and Henry Miller’s numinous cock. Needless to say, it is the third that not only rivets attention, but commands nostalgia and, well, let us be honest, pity and awe” (11). Whatever we might make of the “numinous” nature of the phallus on the book cover, Miller’s sexuality is on display as he and Durrell are photographed bathing in the Ionian Sea, and this display continues in his writing. Yet, the homoerotic nature of this dialogue is overlooked—Miller is not lounging with a woman nor is Durrell’s wife Nancy, the photographer, visible. The third musketeer in Vidal’s trinity mediates between Durrell and Miller and ostensibly for the book’s forty-five-year correspondence. Censorship in critical scholarship of this role interests me, in particular due to the overtly erotic and sexual materials that brought both authors fame. In conjunction with this photograph, perhaps the most obvious invocation of the phallus in their works is the cover art to the three volumes of the Villa Seurat Series published by the Obelisk Press with its phallic logo. Are readers, when cradling the most famous Obelisk publication, Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*, unwittingly palming Miller’s “numinous cock” via the obelisk **[End Page 49]** on the spine? This is the first view for the reader when approaching Nin, Durrell, and Miller’s books in this series. Whether approaching the spine on a shelf or a faced copy, the promise of the upright obelisk advertises the books’ nature: erotic arousal of the reader’s interests. The phallic stamp of the press negotiates the interaction between the largely male readership and the pornographic entertainment that allowed the press to fund unknown literary authors. The Obelisk was run by Jack Kahane and was an overtly pornographic business that published literary authors as well, later becoming the Olympia Press famous for publishing Sade, William S. Burroughs, and George Bataille.¹ Yet, its stamp exemplifies some queer problems that continue to plague Miller’s works. With these problems left hanging as provocatively as Vidal’s third musketeer, it seems reasonable

to expect that some portion of the large body of scholarship on this text would have posed such questions by now, seventy years later. The absence of such discussion, a symbolic castration of scholarly enquiry, is the form of censorship with which I am concerned.

Scholarly discomfort with the sexualities presented in Miller's works points to conflict in current theorizations of sexuality: Queer Theory versus Gay and Lesbian Studies here. The past decade has seen an acceleration in definitional excursions in theories of sexuality that generally exposes a tension between increasing inclusivity through the addition of definitions versus the deconstruction of the same stable categorizations, as in Queer Theory and Trans Studies. As Queer Theory challenges stable definitions, it has increasingly conflicted with the political and recuperative aims of Gay and Lesbian Studies, and the two fields increasingly divide from one another as theory alienates practice. Moreover, these definitional divisions are also visible between studies of sexualities based in the Humanities versus the Social Sciences. Hence, my terms here are loosely applied and point to scholarly trends more than to stable categories with agreed characteristics.

In this context, Miller has been repeatedly portrayed as the epitome of stereotypical Western masculine heterosexuality and most forcefully so in queer readings of *Tropic of Cancer*. I contend something different. Despite scholarly failures to notice the overtly queer content of the novel and (even more provocatively) despite queerings of the text that oddly reinforce heterosexist presumption, Miller explicitly endorses and implicates himself in discourses of queerness. This article interrogates the tension **[End Page 50]** between stable and unstable identities in theories of sexualities, primarily using "queerings" of Miller as a case study. I question what investments general literary criticism holds, as well as Gay and Lesbian Studies and Queer Theory, that led to Miller's relative exclusion from literary...

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James Donald Gifford
Fairleigh Dickinson University

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2715 North Charles Street
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