

# Amateur Sexology: Gershon Legman and US Sexual History

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IN 1930s NEW YORK, eighteen-year-old Gershon Legman (1917–99) worked first as a scriptwriter on Broadway and then as a manuscript assessor for a vanity press in the iconic Flatiron Building. Yet he spent as much time as he could researching sexual matters in the reading rooms of the New York Public Library. “There, in that great hall, I worked for hours, for weeks, for months, and finally for years—nearly two decades—on all my dreamlike projects,” he wrote in his autobiography, “all invariably and very intimately connected with sex, sex technique, sexual folklore, its language, its literature, and its immemorably practical and beautiful art.” “Why was it always sex?” he continued. “I don’t know. My motto was and remains Havelock Ellis’s: ‘*Sex is the central mystery and the central reality of life.*’”<sup>1</sup>

When Legman died in France in 1999, his obituary in the *New York Times* described him as “a self-taught scholar of dirty jokes and bawdy limericks and ballads who played a pivotal role in opening up the field of erotic folklore to scholarly study in the 1960’s and 70’s.”<sup>2</sup> Some readers may have heard of Gershon Legman. The Beat writer John Clellon Holmes wrote about him in the progressive journal *Evergreen* in 1966 and then in a collection of essays published in 1968.<sup>3</sup> The *Journal of Sex Research* ran an “In Memorium” article about him in 1999, summarizing his life “as a passionate scholar of sexuality and popular culture.”<sup>4</sup> Larry McMurtry, the screenwriter, novelist, and bookseller who agreed to provide financial backing for Legman’s then-unpublished autobiography, referred to him

<sup>1</sup> He discusses these early days in Gershon Legman, *Mooncalf: Book Two of Peregrine Penis* (Scotts Valley, CA: Createspace, 2017), 85–170, quote at 180, emphasis in the original.

<sup>2</sup> Janny Scott, “Gershon Legman, Anthologist of Erotic Humor, Is Dead at 81,” *New York Times*, 14 May 1999.

<sup>3</sup> John Clellon Holmes, “The Last Cause: Gershon Legman,” *Evergreen Review* 44 (1966): 28–32, 93–101; Holmes, *Nothing More to Declare* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1968), 21–32.

<sup>4</sup> Martha Cornog and Timothy Perper, “Make Love, Not War: The Legacy of Gershon Legman, 1917–1999,” *Journal of Sex Research* 36, no. 3 (1999): 316–17, quote at 316.

in a memoir in 2008.<sup>5</sup> Mikita Brottman discussed him extensively in her 2012 book about the psychopathology of humor.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Susan Davis's impressive 2019 biography has established Legman's importance in the field of folklore.<sup>7</sup> Then, of course, there are the volumes of his autobiography, *Peregrine Penis*, recently self-published by his widow, Judith Legman.<sup>8</sup> But Legman does not feature in histories of twentieth-century sexology and sexual research. The most scholarly attention he has received is a long footnote in Jennifer Terry's book about research on American homosexuality and a few pages in Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy's biography of the famous sexual researcher Alfred Kinsey.<sup>9</sup> When people think of the history of modern American sexology, they most often invoke the names of Kinsey and William Masters and Virginia Johnson.<sup>10</sup>

Sexology, as is well known, emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when sex became instituted in the scientific and medical domains. Sex had its own experts—usually doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, and academics—but awareness of the subject of sex also insinuated itself into wider public discourse. Kinsey's best-selling academic works in particular added to this new public awareness. However, a seldom-acknowledged group that might be termed “amateur practitioners” also contributed to the progress and development of sexology as a discipline. Kinsey's “autoarchivists” (people who formed archives of their personal sexual activities and desires) included a number of unofficial collaborators who provided the researcher with an important entry into participant

<sup>5</sup> Larry McMurtry, *Books: A Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 173–84.

<sup>6</sup> Mikita Brottman, *Funny Peculiar: Gershon Legman and the Psychopathology of Humor* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Susan G. Davis, *Dirty Jokes and Bawdy Songs: The Uncensored Life of Gershon Legman* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 1, 5.

<sup>8</sup> His autobiography, *Peregrine Penis*, appeared in six volumes as Gershon Legman, *I Love You I Really Do: Book One, Part One of Peregrine Penis* (Scotts Valley, CA: Createspace, 2016); Legman, *I Love You I Really Do: Book One, Part Two of Peregrine Penis* (Scotts Valley, CA: Createspace, 2016); Legman, *Mooncalf: Book Two of Peregrine Penis* (Scotts Valley, CA: Createspace, 2017); Legman, *World I Never Made: Book Three of Peregrine Penis* (Scotts Valley, CA: Createspace, 2017); Legman, *Musick to My Sorrow: Book Four of Peregrine Penis* (Scotts Valley, CA: Createspace, 2018); Legman, *Windows of Winter & Flagrant Delectations: Books Five and Six of Peregrine Penis* (Scotts Valley, CA: Createspace, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 456; Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *Sex the Measure of All Things: A Life of Alfred C. Kinsey* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), index; Legman, Gershon.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Paul Robinson, *The Modernization of Sex: Havelock Ellis, Alfred Kinsey, William Masters and Virginia Johnson* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Janice M. Irvine, *Disorders of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Modern American Sexology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Julia A. Ericksen and Sally A. Steffen, *Kiss and Tell: Surveying Sex in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Donna J. Drucker, *The Classification of Sex: Alfred Kinsey and the Organization of Knowledge* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014).

research.<sup>11</sup> Among many such informants, Thomas Painter and Samuel Steward stand out for the sheer extent of their contributions.<sup>12</sup> Painter sent the Kinsey Institute records of his hundreds of interactions with hustlers (male sex workers) captured in letter/journals and photographs, thus creating a resource that Kinsey's colleague Wardell Pomeroy described as "probably the most complete record of human sexual life ever compiled."<sup>13</sup> Steward provided Kinsey with documentary (journals and photographs) and material (whips) evidence of America's BDSM culture, what Jennifer Burns Bright has called a "lived archive" of sadomasochism, as well as quantitative information on his extensive homosexual contacts, including his infamous "stud file."<sup>14</sup> Kinsey was able to harness these archives of sexual pursuits to the cause of his larger research project.

As we will see, Legman, who knew Painter and called him "a Medici prince of sexual studies," was another of Kinsey's collaborators, engaged for his erotic bibliographic and collecting skills.<sup>15</sup> He was an important contributor to Kinsey's erotic library project, seeking out books and purchasing them, on commission, for the developing collection. However, Legman's role as an amateur sexologist extended beyond his brief association with Kinsey. Legman's life was dedicated to sexual research, with a range and diversity of inquiry all the more extraordinary for a self-taught person. This article discusses Legman's multifaceted contribution as an amateur sexologist and assesses his place in the history of modern sexual research.

#### SEXUAL PRACTITIONER

Legman's sexual research involved both experimentation and bibliographic research. While still in his twenties, using the name Roger-Maxe De La Glannège, he wrote a book about oral sex. It was based on extensive reading but also on practical experience, with women generally but most specifically with a woman who worked in advertising with whom he had a long-term

<sup>11</sup> Barry Reay, *Sex in the Archives: Writing American Sexual Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 66–97.

<sup>12</sup> For Painter, see Barry Reay, *New York Hustlers: Masculinity and Sex in Modern America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); and Reay, *Sex in the Archives*, 66–97. For Steward, see Justin Spring, *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010); and Reay, *Sex in the Archives*, 66–97.

<sup>13</sup> Wardell B. Pomeroy, *Dr. Kinsey and the Institute for Sex Research* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 169.

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer B. Bright, "Queerest of the Queer: Why Samuel Steward's Masochism Matters," in *Samuel Steward and the Pursuit of the Erotic: Sexuality, Literature, Archives*, ed. Debra A. Modellmog and Martin J. Ponce (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 143–61, quote at 144. For the file, see Barry Reay, "Sammy's Stud File," in *Queer Objects*, ed. Chris Brickell and Judith Collard (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2019), 129–31.

<sup>15</sup> For the quote, see Legman, *World I Never Made*, 566.

relationship—the “inspiration of my first book,” as he put it.<sup>16</sup> He would write notes on index cards after his sexual partner had left.<sup>17</sup> Published in 1940, *Oragenitalism: An Encyclopaedic Outline of Oral Technique in Genital Excitation, Part 1: Cunnilinctus* is a remarkable work, containing everything and more on what one could possibly want to know about the art of cunnilingus.<sup>18</sup> He described techniques (the difference between licking and lapping), postures (“3780 possible positions”), motions, and manipulations, and he discussed the use of liquids, fruits, and seafood while making observations about taste, odor, and the role of atmosphere.<sup>19</sup> It was a prolonged dedication to female pleasure and the role of the clitoris in that gratification; in one section, he explained that what he called “upward” cunnilingus was far more pleasurable for the woman because of the contact and pressure provided to the clitoris.<sup>20</sup> An anonymous woman who read a version of Legman’s book in typescript said that although reading about the intricacies of sexual positions could become tedious, she was so inspired by his book that she “accepted a date immediately with someone I knew to be a cunnilinctor.”<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, in 1940, before the book could be distributed, New York police and postal inspectors seized the copies as obscene material. One of the few remaining copies of the original edition can be found in the library of the Kinsey Institute.

Legman was also a self-proclaimed innovator in the early sexual use of the vibrator. He first encountered the Oster vibrating motor when he had a head massage at the barber’s and immediately realized the erotic potential of vibrating fingers, strapping the gadget to the back of his hand to enhance digital versatility: “My sex life was never the same after that, and neither were the sex lives of a large proportion of the women I knew for the rest of my life.”<sup>22</sup> He reminisced, “I felt like Joshua’s seven brightly-silvered trumpeters with the walls of Jericho coming tumbling down at my flut-terblast vibrato.”<sup>23</sup>

Legman seems to have researched his subject. In 1939 he speculated about attaching a dildo to a new invention, the electric toothbrush.<sup>24</sup> His clipping files contain advertising brochures and magazine cuttings relating to a variety of massage instruments. There is a trade picture of the Vitaphore,

<sup>16</sup> Legman, 457.

<sup>17</sup> Legman, 44–45, 50–51.

<sup>18</sup> Roger-Maxe De La Glannège [Gershon Legman], *Oragenitalism: An Encyclopaedic Outline of Oral Technique in Genital Excitation, Part 1: Cunnilinctus* (New York: Jacob Brussel, 1940).

<sup>19</sup> Legman, *Oragenitalism*, 19 (for licking and lapping), 53 (for number of positions).

<sup>20</sup> Legman, 18.

<sup>21</sup> File: “Oragenitalism,” box 11, Gershon Legman Collection, Kinsey Institute, University of Indiana, Bloomington (hereafter KI).

<sup>22</sup> Legman, *Mooncalf*, 543.

<sup>23</sup> Legman, 544.

<sup>24</sup> Box 12, Legman Collection.

a phallic-shaped vibrating medical instrument invented in the 1920s and marketed in the 1930s to aid menstrual cramps and for use in prostate massage.<sup>25</sup> The publicity leaflet for the Gilbert Vitalator shows it strapped to the hand and refers to its refreshing use on every part of the body—except the sexually obvious ones. It cost \$9.95.<sup>26</sup> The Vibrosan Electric Massage Vibrator claimed to increase blood circulation and regenerate tissue. Its marketing material included a picture of a woman holding the dome-shaped vibrator against her temple.<sup>27</sup> Then there was the “Roaler” Massage Chair, which, among other things, reputedly toned the thighs and buttocks; but its illustration of a woman astride the machine indicated other possible uses that would not have been lost on Legman.<sup>28</sup> The Oster Vibrant Massager was a more powerful version of the hand-strapped Gilbert Vitalator, but at \$25.00 (\$39.50 for an upgrade to the speed-control version) it was more than double the price. Oster’s promotional literature, like that for the Gilbert Vitalator, studiously avoided any mention of the uses to which Legman and doubtless countless others put it.<sup>29</sup> Rachel Maines has claimed that the vibrator had disappeared from public view (advertising), though not use, in the late 1920s—after it moved from medical to commercial use in the early part of the twentieth century—until it “resurfaced” in the obviously sexualized 1960s and 1970s.<sup>30</sup> Legman’s archive fills in some of those supposed silences. His memoirs too have detailed descriptions of clitoral and vaginal stimulation and the suggestion that feminists sponsor a statue to “old John Oster of Milwaukee.”<sup>31</sup>

#### RESEARCH ASSISTANT

Legman eked out a frugal existence working as a research assistant for some of the more notable figures in modern sexual research. He was employed, off and on, by the gynecological clinician Robert Latou Dickinson in the 1930s and 1940s, acting, according to Legman, as “amanuensis, and everything short of ghost-writer.”<sup>32</sup> Legman maintained that Dickinson thought of him as “a marginal character of great ability, with only one foot in professional bibliography and sex science, and the other in god knows what sort of dubious pursuits if not actual crime. . . . My semi-criminal marginality was . . . part of my usefulness to him.”<sup>33</sup> Dickinson supported Legman’s ongoing

<sup>25</sup> File: “Sex Technique,” box 12, Legman Collection.

<sup>26</sup> Box 12, Legman Collection.

<sup>27</sup> Box 12, Legman Collection.

<sup>28</sup> Box 12, Legman Collection.

<sup>29</sup> File: “Sex Technique,” box 13, Legman Collection.

<sup>30</sup> Rachel P. Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm: “Hysteria,” the Vibrator, and Women’s Sexual Satisfaction* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 108–9.

<sup>31</sup> Legman, *Mooncalf*, 544.

<sup>32</sup> Legman, 513. Legman’s early work for Dickinson is outlined on 171–211.

<sup>33</sup> Legman, 517.

bibliographic and lexicographic labors with never-published books, including an envisaged “Encyclopedic Dictionary of Sexual Speech and Slang,” conceived when Legman was still in his teens and then revived again in the 1960s as “The Language of Sex.”<sup>34</sup> “The scope of the proposed dictionary,” he wrote in a surviving outline, “is to be the vocabulary of sex in its various aspects: ‘normal,’ abnormal, anatomical, physiological, medical, psychological, psychopathic, historical, poetic, theological, curious, and vulgar; with such related terms as might help with the proper understanding of the subject.” He estimated that the dictionary would run to twenty-five hundred pages.<sup>35</sup> It was to be in five languages, when he had only three!<sup>36</sup>

While working for Dickinson, Legman corresponded with the controversial character S. W. Regius (or Kenneth S. Green, as he was also known), a sexual predator who provided measurements of penises for Dickinson and, after Legman introduced them, data on orgasm for Kinsey.<sup>37</sup> Green’s statistics for 317 males are included in the 1949 edition of Dickinson’s *Human Sex Anatomy* as data from the G Series: average penis length, volume of ejaculation, and penis curve.<sup>38</sup> They also appear in tables and text in the chapter “Early Sexual Growth and Activity” of Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, where they are described only as being provided by “technically trained persons who have kept diaries or other records.”<sup>39</sup>

Legman participated in Dickinson’s research into human anatomy. He was involved in Dickinson’s anatomic model-maker’s experimentation in the late 1930s with a rubber dildo attached to a motorized vibrator. Legman had notes and sketches relating to this enterprise.<sup>40</sup> He procured books about sexual positions for Dickinson. As Legman recalled, “More than anything else I did or knew, Dickinson was impressed by my ‘special knowledge’ of the small published literature and large secret literature of sexual posture and technique.”<sup>41</sup> He provided Dickinson with photographs

<sup>34</sup> Legman, 172–74. The versions can be traced in file: “Dictionary of Sex,” box 10, Legman Collection.

<sup>35</sup> File: “Dictionary of Sex,” box 10, Legman Collection.

<sup>36</sup> Legman, *Mooncalf*, 172.

<sup>37</sup> Legman, *World I Never Made*, 524–29, 548; Legman, *Musick to My Sorrow*, 506–7, 521–22. For “Regius” or Green, see Gathorne-Hardy, *Sex the Measure*, 211, 220–26, 478n78. From Legman’s references to punning pseudonyms and anagrams, it is likely that the man’s name was in fact King.

<sup>38</sup> Legman, *World I Never Made*, 544; Robert Latou Dickinson, *Human Sex Anatomy: A Topographical Hand Atlas* (Baltimore, MD: Williams and Wilkins, 1949), vi-a, vi-b, fig. 112.

<sup>39</sup> Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948), 176–80, quote at 177.

<sup>40</sup> File: “Sex Technique,” box 12, Legman Collection. See also Gershon Legman, *Oral-genitalism: Oral Techniques in Genital Excitation* (New York: Bell, 1979), 98–99. First published in 1969.

<sup>41</sup> Legman, *World I Never Made*, 547.

of couples engaged in sexual intercourse for use in his marriage counselling, with Legman photographing his own friends.<sup>42</sup>

The association with Dickinson was not without reservations on Legman's part. He was critical of the doctor's surreptitious sketching of women's genitals while they were undergoing physical examination, referring to "all the rich white ladies discreetly undressed in his private practice in fashionable Brooklyn and later New York City; and all the other races and lesser incomes in the clinics he served."<sup>43</sup> He was scathing about the alleged practice of Dickinson's students' vaginal examinations of poor black women: "Their only sin was being sick and poor and black."<sup>44</sup>

Legman also worked for the researcher George W. Henry, compiling a glossary of homosexuality published in Henry's book *Sex Variants* (1941).<sup>45</sup> He later complained that he was paid a "ridiculously low fee" but accepted it because he thought that publication would advance his professional reputation and garner support for his planned "Encyclopedic Dictionary of Sexual Speech and Slang."<sup>46</sup> Legman's lexicon of homosexuality, "The Language of Homosexuality: An American Glossary," combined fieldwork and bibliographic research (he drew on dictionaries of colloquial speech, for example) and contained a substantial section on slang vocabulary.<sup>47</sup> Focused on terms used in the period from 1930 to 1940, it includes one of the first published definitions of the terms "gay" ("an adjective used almost exclusively by homosexuals to denote homosexuality") and "queer" ("Noun & Adjective: Homosexual") to signify same-sex desires, as well as explanations of terms such as "cock-sucker," "cunt-lapper," and "icing-expert" (a fellator).<sup>48</sup> He later attempted a revised version of the dictionary called "Toward a Standardization of Homosexual Terminology: Provisional Suggestions by G. Legman."<sup>49</sup> This included some additions: "irrumant" (the person fucked in the mouth), "anisuction" (sucking of the perineum or anus), "spermatophagy" (swallowing of semen), "oravulvism" (cunnilinctus), for example, and a disquisition on the lack of a technical terminology for mutual and simultaneous oral sex (sixty-nine, in colloquial language).<sup>50</sup> There were modifications to the slang vocabulary. "Body lover" was expanded to "a male whose method of homosexual gratification and of experiencing orgasm is fondling the body of another male, with bodily contact, and with either mutual, abdominal and genital friction, or friction

<sup>42</sup> Legman, 531–86.

<sup>43</sup> Legman, *Musick to My Sorrow*, 16–17.

<sup>44</sup> Legman, *Windows of Winter*, 253–54.

<sup>45</sup> George W. Henry, *Sex Variants: A Study of Homosexual Patterns*, 2 vols. (New York: Paul B. Hoeber, 1941), 2:1147–79.

<sup>46</sup> Legman, *World I Never Made*, 276.

<sup>47</sup> Henry, *Sex Variants*, 2:1147–79.

<sup>48</sup> Henry, 2:1167.

<sup>49</sup> File: "Dictionary—Homosexual," box 3, Legman Collection.

<sup>50</sup> File: "Dictionary—Homosexual," box 3, Legman Collection.



of the aggressive's penis on the other's abdomen, or between his thighs from the front."<sup>51</sup> But the original *Sex Variants* glossary remained basically intact. The new version was never published.

By means of his association with Dickinson and Henry, Legman worked with the previously mentioned Kinsey informant Painter (also known as Will Finch), producing a bibliography of homosexuality, a study of toilet graffiti (on which more below), and an unpublished study of hustlers that has become a rich source for later historians of American male sexuality.<sup>52</sup> Legman remained perplexed by their failure to get the hustler study published: "You'd think people would care about that. After all, it was their own sons by the tens of thousands, probably, who were prostituting themselves to homosexuals all over the country."<sup>53</sup> Heterosexual male sex work for a homosexual clientele was certainly commonplace in Legman's time.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, Legman was what he termed Kinsey's "original bibliographer" with, as he put it, "a hand in unearthing for him some of the early and basic treasures of his collection."<sup>55</sup> Kinsey and Legman fell out spectacularly over Legman's book-dealing and bibliographic work. The trajectory of the relationship can be traced in the institute's correspondence files: from Kinsey's initial flattery in 1943 ("you and Dickinson contributed more to my education than I have ever gotten in such a limited time before") and Legman's impressively detailed eleven-page advice on book purchase ("If you want a sex library, put yourself in my hands"), to their altercation amid allegations of dishonesty.<sup>56</sup> Kinsey never trusted him again. "I find it impossible to deal with you," he wrote to Legman in 1945.<sup>57</sup>

Legman's often behind-the-scenes sexual research experience was extensive, then, especially in the field of lexicography. His glossary of homosexuality has become recognized as foundational in modern studies of language and sexuality: Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick started their 2006 *Language and Sexuality Reader* with his chapter.<sup>58</sup> He turned his hand

<sup>51</sup> File: "Dictionary—Homosexual," box 3, Legman Collection.

<sup>52</sup> Legman, *Mooncalf*; 523–24; Legman, *World I Never Made*, 266, 631. Painter's study of hustlers was an important source for Reay, *New York Hustlers*.

<sup>53</sup> Legman, *Musick to My Sorrow*, 44.

<sup>54</sup> Reay, *New York Hustlers*.

<sup>55</sup> Gershon Legman, "Great Collectors of Erotica," in his *The Horn Book: Studies in Erotic Folklore and Bibliography* (New York: University Books, 1964), 124.

<sup>56</sup> For the quotes, see Alfred Kinsey to Gershon Legman, 26 January 1943, and Gershon Legman to Alfred Kinsey, 28 January 1943, Kinsey Correspondence Collection (hereafter KCC), KI.

<sup>57</sup> Alfred Kinsey to Gershon Legman, 26 March 1945, KCC. The falling out is described in Davis, *Dirty Jokes*, 73–77.

<sup>58</sup> Gershon Legman, "The Language of Homosexuality: An American Glossary," in *The Language and Sexuality Reader*, ed. Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick (New York: Routledge, 2006), 19–32.



to a range of sexual projects, becoming what he called a “grubby secret agent . . . for difficult or slightly illegal errands.”<sup>59</sup> In fact, it was his very amateurism that appealed to the leading sexual researchers of the twentieth century. In reference to his relationship with Dickinson, Legman believed that he “had one foot in each of two worlds—one world scholarly and sincere, and the other the pulsating sexual underground of banned books and peculiar semi-criminal persons.”<sup>60</sup>

#### EROTICA

Legman was a skilled bibliographer of sex—his initial appeal to Kinsey had been his extensive knowledge of the book world and access to its brokers. While still a young man, he moved with ease among New York’s famous book dealers and publishers—Samuel Roth, Jake Brussel, Frances Steloff, and Rubin Bresler—working as a “booklegger” (book dealer) engaged in the varied aspects of the trade, from the shady to the legitimate.<sup>61</sup> Legman knew all the names of the Hollywood and Broadway collectors of erotica.<sup>62</sup> Knowing that Brussel kept a list of approximately eight hundred “gilt-edged” purchasers, Legman believed that doctors and dentists were avid consumers of pornography.<sup>63</sup> Legman became conversant with the erotic art of book illustrators, as his own book on the former Hollywood art decorator and illustrator Mahlon Blaine demonstrates in an archetypal combination of publishing know-how, bibliographic research, gossip, and personal reminiscence.<sup>64</sup> Most significantly, Legman deduced the possible author of the Victorian erotic classic *My Secret Life* (1888–94) some forty years before Ian Gibson argued that the anonymous author “Walter” was the erotic bibliophile Henry Spencer Ashbee.<sup>65</sup> Legman claimed that the authorship was folk wisdom among book dealers, and he was first alerted to the book’s origins by a trader in pornography.<sup>66</sup> Legman was fascinated with this text, mentioning it in many of his writings, and he wrote the introduction to Grove Press’s 1966 edition, which went on to sell some

<sup>59</sup> Legman, *World I Never Made*, 510.

<sup>60</sup> Legman, 509.

<sup>61</sup> Davis, *Dirty Jokes*, 40. For an example of Legman’s knowledge, see his chapters on Brussel and Roth, both in Legman, *Mooncalf*, 283–400, 469–96. See also Jay A. Gertzman, *Bookleggers and Smuthounds: The Trade in Erotica 1920–1940* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

<sup>62</sup> Legman, *World I Never Made*, 32; Legman, *Mooncalf*, 480.

<sup>63</sup> Legman, *Mooncalf*, 330.

<sup>64</sup> Gershon Legman, *The Art of Mahlon Blaine* (East Lansing, MI: Peregrine Books, 1982).

<sup>65</sup> Ian Gibson, *The Erotomaniac: The Secret Life of Henry Spencer Ashbee* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 194.

<sup>66</sup> Gershon Legman, “The Bibliography of Prohibited Books: Pisanus Fraxi,” in *Horn Book*, 43–46.

750,000 copies.<sup>67</sup> Legman noted some decades later that since the Grove Press edition there had been “other candidates suggested for authorship, mostly small Victorian novelists, but none of them with any real probability or any serious proofs at all.”<sup>68</sup>

“Bibliography is the poor man’s book collecting,” Legman once wrote.<sup>69</sup> Despite his poverty he amassed and dispersed several expensive book collections of his own, including a donation to the British Museum’s famous Private Case.<sup>70</sup> It was the books that impressed Holmes when he first visited Legman’s cottage: “Books everywhere, books overflowing the shelves on every available wall, books stacked under the desk, cartons of books, books lining the window sills, books in *back* of books.”<sup>71</sup> It was the books too that struck the folklorist Bruce Jackson when he called in on the Legmans in France in 1975.<sup>72</sup> The remnants of Legman’s libraries can still be traced in the catalog of the online seller Abebooks, where the item’s description will sometimes indicate that it is from the library of Gershon Legman.

Legman was an expert on erotica and pornography, both writing and collecting it himself. Apart from the proliferation of books that so impressed Holmes when he visited Legman’s home, there were the “reams of erotic photographs (some going back to the camera’s earliest years) . . . motif-indexed under such headings as ‘Intercourse—Oral—Homosexual’ and ‘Bondage—Masochist—Female.’”<sup>73</sup> A 1930s scrapbook belonging to Legman, now in the Library of the Kinsey Institute, contains hundreds of pornographic photographs: naked women exposing their genitals or engaged in same-sex activity, explicit male-female interaction, oral sex, dildo sex, a little male-male sexual contact, and even some bestiality. The pictures are mostly commercial erotic imagery (some are duplicated in other collections in the library), but they also include presumably privately made photographs. Some of the images seem to date from the 1930s, and

<sup>67</sup> Legman, 26–45; Gershon Legman, introduction to *My Secret Life*, 2 vols. (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 1:xxi–lxiii; Legman, introduction to *The Private Case*, by Patrick J. Kearney (London: J. Landesman, 1981), 47–49. Legman mentions *My Secret Life* many times in his autobiography: see, for example, *World I Never Made*, 26–30; and Legman, *Windows of Winter*, 303–4. For Grove sales, see Loren Glass, *Rebel Publisher: Grove Press and the Revolution of the Word* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2018), e-book, 2705. First published in 2013.

<sup>68</sup> Legman, *Windows of Winter*, 303–4. Other scholars have been less convinced: Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 81n3; Vern L. Bullough, “Who Wrote *My Secret Life*? An Evaluation of Possibilities and a Tentative Suggestion,” *Sexuality and Culture* 4, no. 1 (2000): 37–60; John P. Pattinson, “The Man Who Was Walter,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30, no. 1 (2002): 19–40.

<sup>69</sup> Legman, “Bibliography of Prohibited Books,” 10.

<sup>70</sup> For the British Library gift, see Davis, *Dirty Jokes*, 150, 271–72n53.

<sup>71</sup> Holmes, *Nothing More to Declare*, 21.

<sup>72</sup> Bruce Jackson, “Legman: The King of X700,” *Maledicta* 1, no. 2 (1977): 113.

<sup>73</sup> Holmes, *Nothing More to Declare*, 23.

others are much older. Legman had cut out captions from magazines and newspapers to render the interactions humorous. Overall, it is a substantial cache of pornographic visual material.<sup>74</sup>

Legman knew the writer Henry Miller and, while working for Brussel, was involved in the clandestine US publication of Miller's banned work *Tropic of Cancer* (1940); he physically helped to print the book, injuring himself in the process.<sup>75</sup> He also knew Miller's lover Anaïs Nin, and for a brief period he was involved with them in a literary syndicate in the 1930s and 1940s that produced pornography for an oil millionaire from Oklahoma, who paid for regular unpublished erotic manuscripts.<sup>76</sup> First Legman and then his friend Robert Sewall contributed at \$50 a story; it should have been \$100, but the intermediary, the book seller Barnet Ruder, kept half.<sup>77</sup> Legman soon tired of producing erotica for hire: "I wrote any number of these manuscripts, but eventually found it impossible to continue, as it was making me just as impotent sexually as it was presumably making the customer super-virile. I felt I was being cannibalized."<sup>78</sup>

Several notables in the New York literary and artistic scene were involved in this erotic production line, though the accounts of Legman and Nin differ on the details about precisely who initiated the project, and it is likely that contacts were running in tandem.<sup>79</sup> Nin recorded that this collaboration of impecunious writers and artists prompted "an epidemic" of erotic journals as the group recorded and recounted their sexual experiences or "researched from Krafft-Ebing and medical books. . . . All of us need money, so we pool our stories."<sup>80</sup> Nin wrote about their little coterie, describing herself as "the Madame of an unusual house of literary prostitution."<sup>81</sup> "The homosexuals write as if they were women. . . . The timid ones write about orgies. The frigid ones about frenzied fulfillments. The most poetic ones indulge in pure bestiality, and the purist ones in

<sup>74</sup> Gershon Legman, "Ye Scrap Book," 1934, Legman Collection. From documentation in the box, the album was sent to the Institute in 2005 by Judith Legman.

<sup>75</sup> Frederick Turner, *Renegade: Henry Miller and the Making of "Tropic of Cancer"* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011). *Tropic of Cancer* was first published in France in 1934. For Legman's involvement, see Legman, *World I Never Made*, 1–23, 190–200.

<sup>76</sup> See the useful summaries in "The Celebrated Stable of Clandestine Erotica Writers Part 1: The Man, His Plan," *FineBooks & Collections*, 26 May 2009, <https://www.finebooksmagazine.com/blog/celebrated-stable-clandestine-erotica-writers-part-i-man-his-plan>; and "The Celebrated Stable of Clandestine Erotica Writers Part 2: The Perp Walk," *FineBooks & Collections*, 29 May 2009, <https://www.finebooksmagazine.com/blog/celebrated-stable-erotica-writers-part-ii-perp-walk>. We hope to write about this in more detail on a later occasion.

<sup>77</sup> Legman, introduction to *The Private Case*, 53.

<sup>78</sup> Legman, 52–53.

<sup>79</sup> Compare Legman, *Mooncalf*, 487; and Legman, *World I Never Made*, 128–35; with Anaïs Nin, *The Journals of Anaïs Nin: Vol. 3: 1939–1944* (London: Quartet, 1974), 60–61.

<sup>80</sup> Nin, *The Journals*, 73.

<sup>81</sup> Anaïs Nin, *Little Birds* (New York: Pocket Books, 1979), 8.

perversions.”<sup>82</sup> She recorded Miller’s predicament as “almost like in Dante’s *Inferno* . . . condemned to write about sex.”<sup>83</sup> “More realism! More realism!” she was told by Ruder.<sup>84</sup> “Leave out the poetry and descriptions of anything but sex. Concentrate on sex.”<sup>85</sup> In Legman’s words, their rich patron wanted “good hot fucking, and lots of it—plenty of sucking too—but no sadism, and not too much plot, background fill, or flowers of poetic diction in the erotic vein.”<sup>86</sup>

Legman’s pornography lingers on in his voluminous memoirs, including claimed sexual interactions with Nin and an encounter with a woman in London that in true pornographic style begins with both parties reading erotica (her: “Sometimes it makes me wet right down to the back of my knees”).<sup>87</sup> His autobiography should arguably be included in any discussion of his pornographic writing. As he described it to a friend, “Peregrine Penis” was “*My Secret Life*, with laughs.”<sup>88</sup> Indeed, it could be argued that Legman’s autobiography was inspired by Walter’s *My Secret Life*. As he once remarked to a curious Jake Brussel: “All I can do for you is, when I’m ninety years old I’ll write it all up like *My Secret Life*.”<sup>89</sup> Both texts were explicit, of course, and both authors insisted that their goal was sexual honesty. “I determined to write my private life freely as to fact,” wrote Walter, “and in the spirit of the lustful acts done by me, or witnessed; it is written therefore with absolute truth and without any regard whatever for what the world calls decency.”<sup>90</sup> Legman likewise championed frank reportage: “I am just candidly unfolding my tale: The whole history of the Sexual Revolution as seen by a minor actor, who kept notes.”<sup>91</sup> They shared an attention to detail. Walter said that his memories included not just the bodies of the women he fucked but their clothing and the interiors of the rooms in which the action took place: “I had from my youth an excellent memory, but about sexual matters a wonderful one.”<sup>92</sup> Legman’s retelling of sexual encounters shows the same proclivity for memorizing space and feeling. His account of sex with Nin includes the sounds she made, her eye movements, the color of her undergarments, the fact that her place of assignation was without

<sup>82</sup> Nin, *The Journals*, 157.

<sup>83</sup> Anaïs Nin, *Mirages: The Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin 1939–1947*, ed. Paul Herron (Athens, OH: Sky Blue Press, 2013), 56.

<sup>84</sup> Nin, 63.

<sup>85</sup> Nin, *The Journals*, 61.

<sup>86</sup> Legman, *World I Never Made*, 41.

<sup>87</sup> The first mention by Legman of a sexual encounter with Nin is in Legman, *I Love You I Really Do*, 409–10. The two encounters themselves are detailed in Legman, *World I Never Made*, 148–52, 154–55. For the reading of pornography leading to sex, see Legman, *Windows of Winter*, 462.

<sup>88</sup> Davis, *Dirty Jokes*, 229.

<sup>89</sup> Legman, *Mooncalf*, 420.

<sup>90</sup> *My Secret Life*, 1:7.

<sup>91</sup> Legman, *World I Never Made*, 588.

<sup>92</sup> *My Secret Life*, 1:8.

a bed, and the explicit details of oral and copulative sex, including what happened to his semen.<sup>93</sup>

We cannot know how much of this reconstruction of memory was invented. Legman was critical of Miller's use of dialogue and monologue in his erotic writing: "It is not technically possible for elephantine 'quotations' of this kind to be authentic, or to be produced even five minutes after the fact, unless done by stenography or film tape-recording equipment—something that even Henry Miller doesn't claim to have toted on his back throughout his sex life. These extended mock quotations are simply morning-after disquisitions and show that at least his later erotic books [such as *Sexus* and its companions] are fiction. They cannot be a true record of things said, though perhaps done. If offered as true, they are lies."<sup>94</sup> Legman referred to this as "fictionalized or 'reconstituted' autobiography" and admitted that he employed the same method himself.<sup>95</sup> Did Legman, for instance, really recall his dialogue with the French woman Odette during their brief encounters and his oral, anal, and vaginal ministrations?<sup>96</sup> One cannot be sure, though he did take notes about his activities. After sex with Odette, he wrote: "I started gathering my professional notes together in mind, especially about the artistic way Odette had sucked me off."<sup>97</sup> He had regular sex with Sonia, the Fortuny Press secretary, and noted that he kept "my erotic diary-notes on what we did."<sup>98</sup> During the same period, he was involved with Marion: "With two girls now, I was filling up my notebook on sex technique very fast. It was getting to be a diary, which wasn't what I wanted."<sup>99</sup> He wrote that "in those days I kept morning-after sex diary notes, crazily, sinfully, ungallantly . . . and know in some detail what I was feeling subjectively."<sup>100</sup> Sex with Nin, or rather his account of the sex Legman claimed they had, prompted musings on his "long morning-after erotic notes, those years and decades after, as to just about every affair I had, and on three-by-five index cards."<sup>101</sup> Clearly, then, he used both memory prompts and probable poetic license in writing his memoirs.

At the very least, it feels as though Legman's *Peregrine Penis* had been written in the spirit of *My Secret Life*. Although Legman's memoir is a vehicle for his claims to fame and his opinions on people and books, its focus on sex and descriptions of sexual encounters (as well as its length) evoke *My Secret Life* in a way that is surely not coincidental. Was Legman trying to create another notorious classic?

<sup>93</sup> Legman, *World I Never Made*, 148–52, 154–55.

<sup>94</sup> Legman, 170.

<sup>95</sup> Legman, 172, 173.

<sup>96</sup> Legman, *Windows of Winter*, 550–53, 614–20.

<sup>97</sup> Legman, 620.

<sup>98</sup> Legman, *Mooncalf*, 150.

<sup>99</sup> Legman, 153.

<sup>100</sup> Legman, *World I Never Made*, 342–45.

<sup>101</sup> Legman, 152.

## FOLKLORE

Legman is primarily known as an accomplished folklorist. He collected, located, and published vast quantities of limericks, jokes, folksongs, and other folklore, and his two-volume collection of examples of sexual humor is nearly two thousand pages long, including the one about the moron who “cut off his prick because it got in the way when he made love.”<sup>102</sup> Then there was a book of limericks—which he termed the folklore of the educated—containing seventeen hundred examples. He called this “the largest collection of limericks ever published, erotic or otherwise,” and he included the following example from 1952, which we suspect he penned himself:

There was an old phoney named Kinsey  
Whose ideas of fucking were flimsy.  
He knew how to measure  
A penis for pleasure,  
But he came much too quick in a quim, see?<sup>103</sup>

Legman edited, introduced, and annotated the volumes of Ozark folksongs and ballads that Vance Randolph had collected in Arkansas and Missouri between 1915 and 1955 and that had previously been rejected for publication because of their sexual explicitness.<sup>104</sup> Legman’s war against censorship was unrelenting, embracing the suppression of sexual folklore and, as we shall see, mass culture more generally. He explained that the censored folk material had been concealed by folk collectors and publishers rather than by the folk themselves (unless in self-censorship in reaction to the perceived sensibilities of those doing the collecting): “The idea that there is a special kind of folklore that is sexual, as differentiated from all other kinds, is an optical illusion caused by the operation of a purely literary censorship. No such separation exists in fact.” He continued, “In the field, the sexual material is offered with all the other material.”<sup>105</sup> The division, the winnowing, occurred later.

Legman had always had an interest in the ethnography of popular culture. During his youthful stint on Broadway in the 1930s, he studied what he termed “urban folklore,” the sexual sayings of show business, such as: “You show me a man that won’t go down on his wife, and I’ll show you how

<sup>102</sup> Gershon Legman, *No Laughing Matter: An Analysis of Sexual Humor*, 2 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 1:161.

<sup>103</sup> Gershon Legman, ed., *The Limerick: 1700 Examples, with Notes, Variants and Index* (London: Jupiter Books, 1974), lxxv, 99 (for Kinsey). He discussed limericks, including the term “the folklore of the educated,” in Gershon Legman, “The Limerick: A History in Brief,” in *Horn Book*, 439.

<sup>104</sup> Vance Randolph, *Roll Me in Your Arms: “Unprintable” Ozark Folksongs and Folklore*, vol. 1, ed. Gershon Legman (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1992); Randolph, *Blow the Candle Out: “Unprintable” Ozark Folksongs and Folklore*, vol. 2, ed. Gershon Legman (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1992).

<sup>105</sup> Gershon Legman, “Problems of Erotic Folklore,” in *Horn Book*, 237–88, quote at 240.

to bust up a marriage!”<sup>106</sup> Years later, Legman wrote, “My uncle George Freems and all the other comics and actors had a slew of these delectations always on tap, which they’d stream out endlessly, sometimes as proverbs on the wisdom of life, and sometimes frankly as jokes. The line between the conscious jokes and the abject superstitions wasn’t always clear.”<sup>107</sup> He collected gags from the performers at the numerous burlesque shows around 42nd Street: “Did you notice how she rolled her R’s?” the straight man would say as a chorus girl walked by, with the comic “poking one hand in his pocket forward to look like the bulge of a hardon.”<sup>108</sup> When Legman took notes—“in the half-dark”—he had to be careful lest the performers think that he was a rival trying to steal their material. Alternatively, he simply remembered their performance and then transcribed it after he had left the show.<sup>109</sup> He accumulated “toilet epigraphs” from “all the grimier public shit-houses around midtown, in burlesque theatres and hotels and subway-stations—always very fertile in inscriptions demanding homosexual assignations.”<sup>110</sup> He assembled these observations into an unpublished typescript, “Homosexuality and Toilet Inscriptions and Analysis,” now held in the Kinsey Institute. He collected examples of what he described as the “terrible grimness of desire,” such as the inscription: “Drop your pants all the way if you have room. I like to be fucked a lot tonight.”<sup>111</sup> He insisted that any collector of such messages and fantasies, any toilet sociologist, “must be as handy with magnifying glass and obliquely held flash-light as any scholar poring over palimpsests.”<sup>112</sup>

Legman lived for a while in Harlem, seeking out the fortune tellers’ shop-front displays and the “sub-erotic” patter of the Holiness preachers and the responses of their audiences, commenting that “the little store-front churches were the greatest anthropologist’s paradise of all.”<sup>113</sup> He wrote about the erotic potential of bookshops, which he called “one of the easiest places there is to pick up girls . . . like an intellectual cocktail party, but without drinks.”<sup>114</sup> During the war, he collected songs from servicemen who were puzzled that he only wanted songs from them and was not approaching them for sex.<sup>115</sup>

It is important to realize just how innovative his approach was. “What does sexual folklore consist of?” he wrote in 1964. “Language, lore (which

<sup>106</sup> Legman, *Mooncalf*, 290.

<sup>107</sup> Legman, 290.

<sup>108</sup> Legman, 233.

<sup>109</sup> See Legman, 237–38.

<sup>110</sup> Legman, 208.

<sup>111</sup> Gershon Legman, “Homosexuality and Toilet Inscriptions: An Analysis,” New York, 1940–41, T5, Legman Collection.

<sup>112</sup> Legman, T4.

<sup>113</sup> Legman, *Mooncalf*, 298.

<sup>114</sup> Legman, 536.

<sup>115</sup> Legman, *Musick to My Sorrow*, 8.



included customs, superstitions, proverbs, games and toys, initiations . . .), and the various oral arts in which people express their feelings about the subjects of sex and scatology: songs, tales, jokes, toasts, recitations, . . . and a small group of verbal entertainments, such as riddles, puns, proverbial comparisons."<sup>116</sup> It was a wide cultural definition of sexual folklore, comprising, he continued, graffiti, "erotic drawings and photographs," "erotic toys," and, of course, "a pornographic literature."<sup>117</sup> Davis is quite correct to see Legman's work as anticipating later histories of the book and popular culture.<sup>118</sup>

#### CULTURAL COMMENTATOR

Legman took mass culture seriously. He was a commentator and critic, outlining the hypocrisy of Americans' censorship of sex while they permitted and valorized the crudest depictions of violence, especially in pulp fiction and comics. His polemical pamphlet *Love & Death* (1949) lists some seventy comic-book super heroes and over a hundred crime comics available in 1948.<sup>119</sup> "Murder," he wrote, having "replaced sex in the popular arts, . . . we are faced in our culture by the insurmountable schizophrenic contradiction that sex, which is legal in fact, is a crime on paper, while murder—a crime in fact—is, on paper, the best seller of all time."<sup>120</sup>

*Love & Death* was initially serialized in the avant-garde magazine *Neurotica*, a self-proclaimed "lay-psychiatric magazine" that during the years 1949–51 published a mixture of experimental writing, poetry, criticism, sociology, and psychological analysis.<sup>121</sup> *Neurotica* was critical of society. "We want needle-nose analysis of a culture clearly going insane," its editors wrote at the start of issue 5. It was humorous in its approach: "Neurotica does not assume any responsibility for anything that happens to anyone who answers any of its ads," the editors headed their Classified section at the end of issue 4. Issue 5 contained an amusing series of replies to one BDSM advertisement that Legman himself had placed: "Strapping young woman interested in works of Marquis de Sade would meet young man interested in Sacher-Masoch. State height and weight."<sup>122</sup> Legman reminisced that "the replies never stopped coming in to the 'strapping young woman' ad. Each one soberly giving the required height and weight, obviously your true masochist's submission to authority."<sup>123</sup>

<sup>116</sup> Legman, "Problems of Erotic Folklore," 247–48.

<sup>117</sup> Legman, 248, 249.

<sup>118</sup> Davis, *Dirty Jokes*, 166, 167, 239–40.

<sup>119</sup> Gershon Legman, *Love & Death: A Study in Censorship* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1963), 39–40, 54. First published in 1949.

<sup>120</sup> Legman, 18–19.

<sup>121</sup> See Jay Landesman, ed., *Neurotica, 1948–51* (London: Jay Landesman, 1981).

<sup>122</sup> See the relevant issues in Landesman.

<sup>123</sup> Legman, *Windows of Winter*, 273.

Legman's touch was pervasive. He was involved in the journal as both a writer and an editor, along with its founder, Jay Landesman, and an impressive list of other contributors, including Leonard Bernstein, Lawrence Durrell, Allen Ginsberg, John Clellon Holmes, Marshall McLuhan, Kenneth Patchen, Larry Rivers, and many others. As Holmes explained, the famous used *Neurotica* as an outlet for ideas they might not express elsewhere, and the not-so-famous and upcoming published in the magazine material that other outlets would not accept; Legman bragged about the more than thirty publishers who had turned down *Love & Death*.<sup>124</sup> Though the subjects covered in *Neurotica* were eclectic, sexual matters had a presence, as one might expect from a "lay-psychiatric magazine": marriage, homosexuality, fetishism, obscenity, and sadomasochism.

Legman's archives chart his interest in mass culture, with copious clipping files containing extracts from comics, magazines, movie publicity, advertisements, clothing catalogs, greeting cards, cartoons, and ephemera such as bubble gum wrappers. Legman's "Cowboyification" file looks at the ways that the iconic cowboy took hold in American popular culture in the late 1940s and 1950s, with its marginalization of women, rampant masculinism, and glorification of guns.<sup>125</sup> "The US Is Going Cowboy Nutty" was one 1950 headline from *Look* magazine in one of his clippings.<sup>126</sup> As his marginal scribbling and underlining indicate, Legman was also alert to the homoerotic hints in cowboy culture.<sup>127</sup>

Then there is his "Cunt" file, which employed a similar range of artifacts (magazine and star publicity pictures, advertisements, comics, erotic photography) to track various representations of that part of the female body.<sup>128</sup> It has to be said that Legman seemed to see cunt everywhere: in pictures of cats (pussy), fern-like objects, triangles, any female crotch shot, even a cooking photograph of opened sweet potatoes and an aerial shot of contour ploughing!<sup>129</sup> Some images, of uncertain provenance, managed to combine both themes, cunts and cowboys, one with a picture of a scantily clad cowgirl on a fence, the other with the woman on horseback, with her legs wide apart but with a horse's head strategically positioned.<sup>130</sup> Legman also included a typed-out extract from Miller's *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939) about the variability of cunts ("There are cunts which laugh and cunts which talk"), a wise choice, given that Miller's text mentions the "unmentionable" article on hundreds of occasions.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>124</sup> John Clellon Holmes, introduction to Landesman, *Neurotica*, 7–13. Legman's claim is on the inside back cover of *Love & Death*.

<sup>125</sup> Files: "Cowboyification," box 3, Legman Collection.

<sup>126</sup> Files: "Cowboyification," box 3, Legman Collection.

<sup>127</sup> Files: "Cowboyification," box 3, Legman Collection.

<sup>128</sup> File: "Cunt," box 3, Legman Collection.

<sup>129</sup> File: "Cunt," box 3, Legman Collection.

<sup>130</sup> File: "Cunt," box 3, Legman Collection.

<sup>131</sup> File: "Cunt," box 3, Legman Collection. For the passage, see Henry Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn* (London: Harper Press, 2011), 194–95.

The cowboys and cunts files are remnants of uncompleted work. But *Love & Death* and *Neurotica*, Legman's foray into the counterculture, represent his brief moment of fame. Holmes described *Love & Death* as "that intemperate, brilliant, purging classic that became something of a personal cause to a few of us in the cultural underground of those years." Landesman told Holmes: "This stuff is dynamite! This guy's a crazy genius!"<sup>132</sup> Legman would hold cultural discussion nights in his cottage in the Bronx (what Landesman and Holmes dubbed "The Purification"). Holmes claimed that young men would take their girlfriends with them in the knowledge that the intellectual stimulation and liberation of the evening would make them "pushovers for the pass when they left."<sup>133</sup>

#### CONTRADICTIONS

Legman was a man of contradictions. This compiler of a respected lexicon of the sexual language of homosexuality and claimed sexual partner of several lesbians was demonstrably homophobic. "I was never able to think of homosexuals & lesbians as anything but emotionally sick and abnormal," he reflected in his autobiography.<sup>134</sup> Although he obsessively collated homosexual toilet graffiti, he described it as the product of "the twisted tortured mind of the frustrated and abnormal sort of creature who scratches furtive homosexual inscriptions on toilet walls."<sup>135</sup> Although hustling is not homosexuality, Legman's homophobia also conflicted with the same-sex encounters he had had earlier in his life. He agreed to model nude and have sex with the artist Laurent Stracke in exchange for a piece of art, an encounter that ended almost before it began after Stracke's premature ejaculation: "I didn't feel a bit like a prostitute walking home up Vine Street that evening. But years later, when I had to sell Laurent Stracke's drawing for money to eat, for Beverley and me, then I realized that I had indeed prostituted myself."<sup>136</sup> A life living "at the raw edge of necessity," said Legman, "brought me only too quickly to plain prostitution, both physical and mental. To tell the truth, I felt a lot less bad about the fairly venial venality of having set my prick up for rent, by the half hour, at the main Meat Market for boy-ass on the corner of Eighth Avenue and 42nd Street, for whatever homosexual wanted to suck it, than I felt then—still do—about my moral prostitution the summer before out in Coney Island [expurgating the *Memoirs of Fanny Hill* for Brussel]."<sup>137</sup>

<sup>132</sup> Holmes, *Nothing More to Declare*, 20.

<sup>133</sup> Holmes, 27.

<sup>134</sup> Legman, *I Love You I Really Do . . . Part Two*, 61.

<sup>135</sup> Legman, "Homosexuality," T5.

<sup>136</sup> Legman, *I Love You I Really Do . . . Part Two*, 463, 465.

<sup>137</sup> Legman, *Mooncalf*, 498. For further descriptions of the Meat Market, see Legman, 497–98; and Legman, *Musick to My Sorrow*, 48–49.

This extoller of sexual freedom hated BDSM yet once said that his orgasm was heightened when his sexual partner “beat me wildly on the loins and upper buttocks with her heels at the moment I was about to come.”<sup>138</sup> His files in the Kinsey Institute contain a whole folder of Irving Claw’s 1950s photographic plates featuring women in bondage; Legman ordered at least one (dated 1957) of a blonde on a bed spanking a bound model.<sup>139</sup>

This detector of misogyny in popular culture also had extremely gendered views about the roles of men and women in society. Women, he believed, existed only to nurture and reproduce.<sup>140</sup> Brigid Brophy, a reviewer for Britain’s *The Listener*, criticized him mercilessly for his outdated views of women in a 1969 review of his book *Rationale of the Dirty Joke*.<sup>141</sup> The writer Harriet Sohmers was equally scathing when she met Legman at a museum in Amsterdam in the 1950s. “What a phony!” she wrote in her diary. “Poor Legman, so unattractive and knowing too much about things to be interesting. His wife must despise him. Women have contempt for men who understand them too well and worship them too much.”<sup>142</sup>

As we have seen, the original version of Legman’s first book, *Oragenitalism* (1940), was genuinely radical. But the expanded *Oragenitalism*, first published in 1969, is a sexually conservative text in ways not true of the original. He described women as naturally passive: “What many women want . . . is for something to *happen* to them, something for which they are not really responsible, and of which they do not take the direction: a sort of glorious but friendly rape.”<sup>143</sup> Cunnilingus, he argued, is best seen as a preliminary to vaginal intercourse rather than as an end in itself: “Observe that cunnilinctus is not necessarily or even usually taken to the point of the woman’s orgasm. It is principally used as the most exciting possible preliminary for the woman, to be completed by vaginal intercourse.”<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, Legman claimed that it was the (male) oral partner rather than the (female) genital partner who derived the most pleasure from this form of oral sex, because he believed that orality was an essential psychological urge.<sup>145</sup> Irrumation (fucking the mouth) was a more natural form of penile orality than fellation because “in irrumation, the man will find himself acting the part of a man, being active and penetrating, not passive and engulfed; and the woman will be excited by being dominated and penetrated.”<sup>146</sup>

<sup>138</sup> Legman, *World I Never Made*, 348.

<sup>139</sup> File: “Fetich,” box 13, Legman Collection.

<sup>140</sup> Davis is alert to Legman’s attitudes and treatment of his wives in this respect. See Davis, *Dirty Jokes*, 91, 183, 189, 209, 232.

<sup>141</sup> Brigid Brophy, “Superman’s Trousers,” *The Listener*, 11 September 1969.

<sup>142</sup> Harriet Sohmers Zwerling, *Abroad: An Expatriate’s Diaries 1950–1959* (New York: Spuyten Duyvil, 2014), e-book, 2923–36.

<sup>143</sup> Legman, *Oragenitalism* (1979), 20. Compare to *Oragenitalism* (1940), 9.

<sup>144</sup> Legman, *Oragenitalism* (1979), 21. Compare to *Oragenitalism* (1940), 9.

<sup>145</sup> Legman, *Oragenitalism* (1979), 12–13.

<sup>146</sup> Legman, 257.

"Sex is, or should be, a matter of male penetration and female ensheathing [*sic*]: of violence and acceptance."<sup>147</sup> None of this material appeared in the original version of Legman's book. It is ironic that he was sexually radical before the sexual revolution but conservative by the time it arrived.

Indeed, he wrote another pamphlet specifically aimed at what he saw as the sexual excesses of the 1960s, arguing that the sexual freedoms that he had campaigned for had become cheapened in the permissiveness of that decade. What Legman termed "The Fake Revolt" was characterized by "a penny-ante social revolt (Ban the Bomb, Make Love, Not War—a slogan that I have the dubious honor of having invented—and all the rest of it)," what he called "a wildcat sexual permissiveness," and the impact of drugs.<sup>148</sup> So this one-time pioneer in the techniques of oral and vibratory sex and extoller of female pleasure came to condemn "perverted chicks, orgies, whippings, sick 'happenings,' marihuana, heroin, and LSD."<sup>149</sup> Legman's pamphlet was a diatribe against the hippies, hallucinatory drugs, swinging, public sex, the (what he considered to be homosexually controlled) fashion industry, avant-garde film, and the New Left. "Freedom like that will blow us all to hell very soon."<sup>150</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Legman's writings, whether specialized article or multivolume autobiography, spill out; they ramble. "My problem was," he observed later, "I always had too much to say, too little faith in understatement. And I was tormented," he continued, demonstrating that very propensity, "by the needling sensation of being held away from access to print, which made everything I said spill out far too urgently. I packed it all in too tight—all the digressions, discursions, the parenthetical divagations."<sup>151</sup> He wrote in a manner similar to how he spoke. Holmes recalled their first meeting as leaving him "with that peculiar *humming* exhaustion (from being over-stimulated a little too long) that a wild and 'historic' jam session produces."<sup>152</sup>

Legman's range was formidable. He was a pioneer in the art of origami.<sup>153</sup> He wrote a book about the medieval Order of the Knights Templars!<sup>154</sup> He was knowledgeable concerning classical music. But with Legman it always came back to sex. *The Guilt of the Templars* contains lengthy speculation about the sexual practices of the military order and musings about

<sup>147</sup> Legman, 261.

<sup>148</sup> Gershon Legman, *The Fake Revolt* (New York: Breaking Point, 1967), 4.

<sup>149</sup> Legman, 8.

<sup>150</sup> Legman, 32.

<sup>151</sup> Legman, *World I Never Made*, 265.

<sup>152</sup> Holmes, *Nothing More to Declare*, 18.

<sup>153</sup> See Brottman, *Funny Peculiar*, 21–22.

<sup>154</sup> Gershon Legman and others, *The Guilt of the Templars* (New York: Basic Books, 1966).

contemporary same-sex sexual interaction.<sup>155</sup> *Orogenitalism* includes suggestions concerning the link between the pace and rhythm of music and that of oral ministration: “The erotic artist ranges from slow to fast, soft to violent, and strong to tender; building up crescendos of emotivity as well as of speed, pressure, and direction of stroke on the organ used, exactly comparable to the ‘architectural’ rising and progression of a Bach organ fugue, or . . . the symphonic finale of an overture by Beethoven or Rossini.”<sup>156</sup> In one pornographic encounter, outlined in Legman’s autobiography, origami was the prelude to prolonged sex.<sup>157</sup> “One of the most important professional lessons I ever learned,” Legman said, is “to sexualize the message, as I like to do: that art is like sex, and sex is an art.”<sup>158</sup>

Legman was a champion of the freedom of sexual expression, campaigning against censorship in its various guises: from the state’s control of the publication of erotic literature and the self-censorship of the folklorists, to librarians’ consignment of so-called objectionable material to the locked sections of their institutions. Sex was the leitmotif of his lifelong enterprise. Holmes saw his friend’s project as “a vast, stubborn and exhaustive attempt to limn the underwater part of our society’s psychological iceberg.”<sup>159</sup>

How do we (in true sexological style) best classify Legman? It would be tempting to categorize him as one of Kinsey’s autoarchivists, the informants who provided the researcher with the qualitative raw material that became overshadowed by Kinsey’s quantitative work. We have seen that Legman was an important bibliographic contributor to Kinsey’s project and provided archival material. Yet Legman’s career involved much more than this brief relationship. Is it possible that his enterprise was what Melanie Micir (not referring to Legman) has termed a “passion project,” an unfinished, intimate archive?<sup>160</sup> True, Legman labored on with minimal recognition, and the outcome of his efforts was fragmentary and sometimes unfinished, including the autobiography (a passion project in itself). However, Legman was a published author; he has not been totally hidden from history.

And so we return to him as a sex researcher. He was the archetypal autodidact, hovering on the periphery of the major sex researchers, separated from them by university education, institutional support, and professional connection, yet sometimes contributing to their medical and psychiatric projects and even ghost-writing their academic papers.<sup>161</sup> Lisa Sigel has recently outlined the way in which people in the past produced homemade erotica for their own consumption (apart from commercial production

<sup>155</sup> Legman and others, 102–34.

<sup>156</sup> Legman, *Orogenitalism* (1979), 42.

<sup>157</sup> Legman, *Windows of Winter*, 458–70.

<sup>158</sup> Legman, *I Love You I Really Do . . . Part Two*, 336.

<sup>159</sup> Holmes, *Nothing More to Declare*, 30.

<sup>160</sup> Melanie Micir, *The Passion Projects: Modernist Women, Intimate Archives, Unfinished Lives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

<sup>161</sup> Legman, *Mooncalf*, 527.

and professional practitioners), a kind of folk or amateur pornography.<sup>162</sup> Legman might comparably be considered an amateur or folk sexologist. Recall the earlier comments about the “marginal character of great ability, with only one foot in professional bibliography and sex science, and the other in god knows what.” Legman shows that a self-taught person could sustain a lifetime of both published and unpublished sexual exploration—practical, philological, ethnographic, bibliographic, editorial, pornographic, autobiographic, folkloristic, cultural critical—in a quest to confirm (to recall his hero Havelock Ellis) that sex was central to life. Alfred Kinsey is usually credited with being the most significant sexual researcher of the twentieth century, but surely Gershon Legman was among that century’s more remarkable.

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<sup>162</sup> Lisa Z. Sigel, “Handmade and Homemade: Vernacular Expressions of American Sexual History,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 25, no. 3 (2016): 437–62; Sigel, *The People’s Porn: A History of Handmade Pornography in America* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020).