

# Introduction

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In liberal democracies around the world, freedom of speech has been a constitutional right for more than two centuries. Nonetheless, this cornerstone of liberal democracy is currently under reconsideration, partly as an effect of the changing media market, the gradual dismantling of traditional newspapers and broadcasting companies, the increased partisanship of news sources, and the widespread dissemination of misleading or biased information by the traditional and social media. At least in theory, globalization, the Internet revolution, and other innovations in communication and distribution have enabled cultural freedom and freedom of speech to transcend the confines of the nation-state. As a consequence, however, power over content and access has in several crucial regards shifted to the private sector. Currently, a limited number of private enterprises (providers, companies, and media platforms) exercise global influence over a very large number of users.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, with the rise of social media, moral, political, and social outrage can easily be voiced on a large scale.

While both liberals and conservatives vehemently propagate the ideal of cultural freedom alongside other constitutional rights, increased cultural control is nevertheless being discussed and implemented. Several governments in and outside Europe are moving towards a more authoritative regulation of culture, media, and the universities. Due to the content or orientation of their work, authors and other cultural workers also experience increasing public pressure.<sup>2</sup> In other words, various forms of censorship and other mechanisms of control still impact the circulation of texts.

In light of this contemporary political landscape, it is not surprising that literature is suppressed and censored, nor that its freedom remains a topical issue. But writing has always been the subject of controversy and conflicting use. Moreover, while every kind of literature has been subject to suppression at one time or another, literature itself has, to an equal degree, also functioned as a means of regulation. This tension is reflected in the very origins of written language. Mesopotamian cuneiform, one of the world's oldest writing systems, was originally invented for the sake of bookkeeping.<sup>3</sup> The literary medium can thus be said to occupy a dual position: on the one hand deemed necessary to control, and on the other utilized as an instrument of control.

In order to approach the question of literary censorship today, we argue that a historical perspective of this kind is essential. Secondly, we suggest that the phenomenon of literary censorship necessarily involves a number of extra-textual factors of a legal, social, and political nature. The title *Forbidden Literature* thus refers to more than individual literary works. Dealing mainly with empirical material from the Nordic countries—both fiction and non-fiction from a range of periods—the different contributions ultimately address the principles at stake in the regulatory and prohibitory practices of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The questions of literature's societal function and worth—its moral and political potential, its conditions of freedom—have often been raised in public debate.<sup>4</sup> Rather than answer these questions, however, the case studies presented here chart the discursive framework in which they arise. The studies deal with censorship's past and present, in liberal democracies as well as totalitarian regimes—tracing a historical continuum wherein literature is conceived as a phenomenon in need of regulation. Asking how and why literature becomes the object of repressive measures, and how literary practices are shaped in relation to various mechanisms of regulation, the contributions provide a prismatic perspective on the complex relationship between literature and censorship.

## Freedom of speech, an operationally effective fiction

Before the invention of the printing press in the 1430s, writing was in practice reserved exclusively to the social and religious elites.<sup>5</sup> Since, in most of Europe, the institutional apparatus of the Church largely coincided with the production and distribution of knowledge, the control of what was written and circulated could be upheld with relative ease.<sup>6</sup> The Gutenberg revolution, however, entailed a decisive and irrevocable transformation of the material and historical conditions for writing, which also profoundly impacted the history of censorship.

Perhaps most importantly, the new media landscape coincided with a religious reform process and helped to shape its course. With the Reformation, religion became even further intertwined with politics, making nonconformity and heresy ‘virtually indistinguishable from sedition and treason.’<sup>7</sup> Simultaneously, this development prompted large parts of Europe to impose laws, mechanisms, and institutions of censorship.<sup>8</sup> The 1559 *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, a list of publications deemed heretical according to Roman Catholic doctrine, was one notorious response to the invention of the printing press.<sup>9</sup> In time, regulatory mechanisms would similarly be implemented in response to the invention of the telegraph, telephone, photograph, film, radio, television, fax, and of course the Internet. All these innovations have facilitated the production of and access to knowledge, but each technological advance has also made new practices of censorship and control possible, thus highlighting what Nicola Moore terms the ‘interdependence of modernity and cultural regulation.’<sup>10</sup>

Seen against this background, it is not a coincidence that questions regarding individual freedoms (such as the freedom of speech) became increasingly pressing with the advent of print capitalism, the rise of middle-class literacy, the formalization of linguistic norms, and the transformation of writing into a proper mass medium—all culminating in the concerns of the Enlightenment project.<sup>11</sup> Outlining a number of central issues concerning censorship and

the Enlightenment, Mogens Lærke concludes that the concept of free speech was far from uncontroversial among the movement's thinkers.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the modern understanding of free speech and cultural freedom rests upon a notion of 'tolerance' that was embraced only by the so-called 'radical Enlightenment'.<sup>13</sup> Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) is a poignant example, providing an influential interpretation of free speech and tolerance opposing any kind of censorship. 'Moderate Enlightenment', on the other hand, conceived of 'toleration' as a state of peaceful interreligious co-existence that employed censorship as a natural means of securing the status quo. This explains why John Locke advocated tolerance, but at the same time excluded Catholics and atheists, since he considered both groups to be potential threats to the state's stability.<sup>14</sup> Similar limitations on the notion of toleration can also be found in moderate Enlightenment thinkers such as Leibnitz and Voltaire.<sup>15</sup> In time, however, a more radical notion of tolerance would emerge victorious—at least in theory. According to its statutes, any attempt to limit the freedom of expression must be condemned, thus conceiving of censorship as an 'inherently suspicious institution in any state apparatus'.<sup>16</sup>

If the radical strand of Enlightenment has set the tone of contemporary debates, the moderate notion of tolerance is the one translated into practice. While seeking to abolish the censorship apparatus of the Old Regime, already the French revolutionaries of the 1790s simultaneously promoted and experimented with new means to govern thought and language. Such a double standard, Sophia Rosenfeld concludes, would eventually prove integral to the 'modern struggle to free ideas and their expression'.<sup>17</sup>

The discrepancy between the general conception of censorship in liberal democracies and the actual regulations of the liberal state may thus, in Jürgen Habermas's words, be said to exemplify 'eine operativ wirksame Fiktion'.<sup>18</sup> For while freedom of speech has been implemented constitutionally in liberal democracies around the world, it has never been unrestricted.<sup>19</sup> As an operationally effective fiction, the concept of liberal cultural freedom has been

invoked as an argument both for and against repressive measures, producing active and more silent forms of censorship while shaping the form and content of literary texts—a fact clearly illustrated in the history of modern literature.<sup>20</sup>

### Modern literature and censorship

Many of Western literature's most celebrated works have been put on trial or in other ways been subjected to censorship and suppression. Indeed, scholars have argued that the prosecutions against Charles Baudelaire and Gustave Flaubert in the 1850s marked the beginning of literary modernity as such, or, as Pierre Bourdieu suggests, that this historical moment saw the inauguration of literature as an autonomous field.<sup>21</sup> Since then, famous trials such as the ones against Baudelaire and Flaubert, or, later in the twentieth century, against Agnar Mykle's *Sangen om den røde rubin* (1956), Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' (1956), or Bernard Noël's *Le Chateau de Cène* (1973), have continued to define literary modernity.<sup>22</sup>

It is not incidental that the majority of these titles were written by male authors; women were often censored at the editing stage. Violette Leduc, famous for bringing erotic literature into the French mainstream, is a case in point: her descriptions of lesbian sexuality in *Ravages* (1955) were heavily censored by the French publishing house Gallimard before publication.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the Swedish publisher Bonniers demanded substantial alterations to *Porten vid Johannes* (1933)—the fourth part of Swedish author Agnes von Krusenstjerna's suite about the Palen sisters—on account of its explicit lesbian content. The publishers eventually refused Krusenstjerna's manuscript.

It is apparent in retrospect that scandal and provocation—*l'outrage des bonnes mœurs*—is inseparable from the notion of modern literature. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers and poets have more often than not positioned themselves in opposition to the prevalent moral and aesthetic values of society. Foucault's idea that the possibility of transgression, inherent to any act of writing,

increasingly attained 'the form of an imperative' at the end of the eighteenth century, underscores this fact.<sup>24</sup> For a writer to be modern, he or she must in one way or another generate a scandal. Arthur Rimbaud's famous dictum 'One must be absolutely modern' has essentially come to signify 'One must absolutely transgress.'

This relationship between modern literature and the law has often been narrated as the struggles of a heroic vanguard, seeking to free society from bourgeois bigotry and double standards, advocating the right to speak one's mind and be whatever one wants. However, recent studies on the subject have proposed a more complex account.<sup>25</sup> The 'constituent' approach to censorship outlined by Sue Curry Jansen has also made it possible to rethink the strict opposition between modern literature and the repressive forces regulating it on a more comprehensive level. Jansen focuses on the forms of censorship that liberal political theory typically ignores or denies, arguing that 'in all societies the powerful invoke censorship to create, secure, and maintain their control over the power to name'. Furthermore, she views this 'constituent or existential censorship' as a feature of all enduring human communities.<sup>26</sup> Although liberal democracies adhere to the rhetoric of free speech, they also exercise a form of power that governs all actions and expressions, thus making traditional forms of textual censorship superfluous.<sup>27</sup>

The distinction between constituent censorship and methods of literary regulation such as prepublication censorship entails a shift from one analytical level to another, of course. As Judith Butler argues, censorship has often been conceived as an action performed by one subject upon another in order to silence his or her voice. In such cases, power is understood as a force possessed by certain institutions or individuals, imposed on other subjects.<sup>28</sup> Adopting a Foucauldian understanding of power, the 'constituent' approach instead proposes that censorship should be understood as a 'structural necessity': 'an economy of choice governed by principles of selection and regulation; internalised through language, and consequently present in every utterance.'<sup>29</sup> According to this line of reasoning, the dichotomy between censorship and freedom

is misconceived from the start. ‘To be for or against censorship as such’ is, as Michael Holquist famously states, ‘to assume a freedom that no one has. Censorship *is*. One can only discriminate among its more and less repressive effects.’<sup>30</sup> The question, then, is not so much whether literature is suppressed or not, but what discursive and material conditions govern and regulate it.

There is, however, a flipside to the understanding of censorship as an unavoidable dynamic of power in society. Throughout history, censorship has simultaneously served to underscore and to create an interest in the very thing it seeks to repress.<sup>31</sup> Tacitus understood this when considering the censorial measures put in place by Emperor Nero.<sup>32</sup> In his plea for the abolition of censorship, Diderot observed the same mechanisms. To his mind, even texts opposing true religion, good customs, and the government should be allowed to circulate, since any censorial restraint would only serve to popularize them.<sup>33</sup> Examples from British modernism provide further illustrations of this point. As recent studies have argued, the relationship between modernist literature and censorship cannot be conceived of simply as acts of suppression carried out on various autonomous practices. Instead, Celia Marshik suggests that literature’s form and content is always shaped dialectically in relation to its persecutors. Writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce developed their distinct styles because of the demands of the social purity movements and the legal restrictions on obscenity at the turn of the last century. In fact, modernism on the whole ‘owes many of its trademark aesthetic qualities—such as self-reflexivity, fragmentation, and indirection’ to a ‘climate of censorship.’<sup>34</sup> Marshik’s argument may thus be said to exemplify a general point, namely that social forces seeking to control literature often end up producing the literature they seek to repress.<sup>35</sup>

## Towards an operative understanding of censorship

As a transdisciplinary field of scholarly inquiry, the study of acts and mechanisms of censorship serves to highlight the intersections and power relations between (state) authority, legal system, citizen, author, and reader. However, it would be a mistake to univocally correlate censorship with totalitarianism.<sup>36</sup> Views on censorship do not correspond to a set of fixed political positions.<sup>37</sup> Understood as a control mechanism in the term's broader sense, the practice of censorship might rather be seen as an unavoidable—and in a specific sense, productive—aspect of any hierarchy, be it democratic or totalitarian.<sup>38</sup>

In response to this broad conception of censorship, Beate Müller has pointed out the risks 'of equating very different forms of control by confusing censorship with social norms affecting and controlling communication.'<sup>39</sup> In particular, she advocates a strict division between 'censorship' and 'exclusion', reserving the former term for cases of 'authoritarian intervention by a third party into an act of communication between the sender of a message (the author) and its receiver (the reader)'.<sup>40</sup> Analytically, Müller argues, it is more productive to separate various instances of discourse regulation—'censorship, self-regulation, canon formation, and social control—than it is to level them.'<sup>41</sup> In a similar vein, Robert Darnton underscores the importance of distinguishing between different kinds of regulation, concluding that if 'the concept of censorship is extended to everything, it means nothing.'<sup>42</sup> Negotiating a way forward between these positions, Helen Freshwater defines censorship on the basis of an ethical pluralism. 'To suggest', she declares, that a certain experience of repression does not qualify as censorship because it 'does not correspond to a predefined category would represent an untenable reinscription of the original act of exclusion.'<sup>43</sup> Hence, recognizing censorship's diversity would not necessarily lead to a conflation of 'extreme violations of human rights with the refusal of grant money, or the criticism of a reviewer'.<sup>44</sup> Rather, Freshwater insists on the necessary contextualization of censorship. 'Censorious



events', she proposes, 'should be analysed with critical emphasis upon their socio-historical specificity', foregrounding 'the differences between different types of censorship and the decisions taken by numerous censorious agencies, as well as their interaction'.<sup>45</sup>

While not adhering to a single definition of censorship, the present anthology—adopting a number of theoretical and methodological approaches—does insist on the 'time and site-specific' nature of literary regulation.<sup>46</sup> In this regard, Freshwater, Darnton, and Müller clearly share common ground.<sup>47</sup> Taking stock of literature's historical role and societal legitimacy, the contributions thus probe the continuum between more restrictive and more inclusive notions of literary censorship. The case studies illustrate a continual dialectic between literature and censorship, focusing on the production of meaning inherent to this process. If the effects of censorship continue to impact on our understanding of literature, determined scholarly effort is needed in order to disentangle and confront the discursive logic of literary regulation, past and present.

### The thematic sections of the anthology

The present book is divided into three overlapping thematic sections. The first, 'Literature in Court', deals with distinctions between art and pornography, moral and immoral, truth and fantasy. The principal question is not how these categories should be defined, but what happens to texts and their function when they migrate from one discursive field to another. The contributions by Heede, Schatz-Jakobsen, Arnberg, and Lindsköld all take as their starting point the most iconic scene of censorship: the law court. All four also pay special attention to the interpretive disputes arising in this context, and in particular the attempts to define the boundaries of literary or artistic work. As the studies demonstrate, a court trial should be seen as a historically important locus for aesthetic interpretation and definition.

Heede investigates the history of queer Danish literature and

its first erotic lesbian novel, Emmy Carell's *Kan Mænd undværes?* (1921). This bestseller, deemed immoral by the Danish courts, is juxtaposed against the author's later, supposedly harmless, production. Comparing Carell's debut with her subsequent work, Heede's study sheds light on the often arbitrarily drawn line between moral and immoral literature.

Schatz-Jakobsen's focus is the trial of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), a significant case in the history of English literature. The study provides an exemplification of Holquist's dictum, namely, that censorship necessarily draws attention to 'that which it denies,' willingly or not, and associates itself 'with the archaeological praxis of reading between the lines.'<sup>48</sup> Consequently, the courtroom in Schatz-Jakobsen's case is revealed as a privileged space for attentive reading that may be seen as an application of the principles of New Criticism.

Arnberg analyses the prosecution of two pornographic novels in 1967, authored by a young Swedish housewife. The trial centred on the judicial limits of obscenity, but as the study shows, it also interpreted gender and desire in relation to the sadistic content of the books. Moreover, the courtroom in Arnberg's case formed a scene where pornographic stereotypes were themselves enacted—in turn impacting on the public understanding of the porn trade.<sup>49</sup>

Lindsköld studies the trial of the Swedish comic magazine *Pox* and its publisher Horst Schröder in 1989. Charged with the unlawful depiction of sexual violence, the quality of the comics on trial became a matter of judicial importance, resulting in an extensive aesthetic and narrative analysis. The Swedish infrastructure of art is generally regulated indirectly, without explicit judgements upon taste being passed by politicians or civil servants. In the trial against Schröder, however, the courtroom made an authoritative definition of aesthetic quality possible in regard to a new art form: the adult comic.

The second section of the anthology, 'Contingencies of Censorship,' explores the unforeseen consequences of regulation and suppression in regard to the practice, production, and circulation

of literature. The three case studies utilize widely different material, but all of them provide perspectives on the productive side effects of censorship and other regulative mechanisms. As they show, the suppression of literature can give birth to new literary devices and modes of circulation.

Ljungström charts the effects of an act of self-censorship in 1774. A book describing local superstitions was condemned by the Church, whereupon the clergyman Johannes Gasslander burnt all available copies of the book, which he had written with his father. As Ljungström shows, however, this dramatic event only fuelled rumours about the Gasslander family and their dealings with sorcery—eventually leading to the discovery of a number of magic manuscripts hidden in their library. While these texts in turn warranted further acts of censorship, they also gave rise to the narrative and scholarly interest detailed in the study.

Lindegren's investigation highlights the productive side effects of recent developments in intellectual property rights—furthermore actualizing the phenomenon of authorized and unauthorized literary sequels. As Lindegren argues, more restrictive copyright laws have in fact had a substantial, and aesthetically fruitful, impact on the relation between authorship and ownership.

Malita's case study details the fate of Romanian author Paul Goma in relation to the official censor under the communist regime in the 1960s and 1970s. Persecuted, and for a period imprisoned, Goma's literary career nonetheless does not fit into a simple scheme of repressive cause and effect. Malita instead shows how literary suppression in Goma's case was turned into cultural capital in the European literary market. Spurred by the prospect of foreign publication, Goma abruptly ended his cooperation with the regime, only to push the limits of political decorum in an increasingly agitated back and forth with the Romanian censors.

The third and final section, 'Censorship and Politics,' concerns the power of literature, and the way it has been governed. While the making of quality literature, fiction and non-fiction, and the practice of reading it, is often said to make people's lives better, the

same logic suggests that inferior forms of literature may instead be harmful. What does the threat of bad literature, or an erroneous account of historical events, entail? And what does it do to the idea of literature and cultural freedom?

The studies by Johansson, Erlanson and Henning, Savolainen, and Helgason centre not on the act of forbidding, but on regulation as a tool for societal reform or control in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Sweden and Finland. Rather than single out specific examples, the four investigations discuss tendencies in the discourse of reading, writing, and mediating literature in the emerging welfare state—and its afterlife.

Johansson analyses the printed output of the Swedish Association for Moral Culture, an organization formed in 1909 to combat the alleged decay of Swedish cultural life. Through a study of their militarist, pathologizing rhetoric, Johansson demonstrates how the question of censorship was rendered as a mission of civilizing import for the association, and that the radical measures conceived of by the association corresponded to an equally strong belief in the affective power of literature and art.

Erlanson and Henning in turn outline the influential political thinking of Arthur Engberg, the Swedish Minister of Church, Education, and Cultural Affairs in the 1930s. Engberg's ambition to regulate literature, they argue, was not directed at the artistic product so much as the human material that produced it. Engberg's 'art of governing' is thus shown to have operated at the nexus of material and spiritual, natural and cultural, biological and political—suggesting, in turn, that Engberg's notion of 'cultural politics' might indeed be understood as a form of biopolitics.

Savolainen's study focuses on the clash between the radical and emancipatory ideals of the children's library and its rules of conduct in the early Finnish welfare state. More specifically, Savolainen's contribution deals with childhood recollections of libraries between 1930 and 1959, outlining a phenomenology of power in the eyes, ears, and hands of a marginalized audience forced to balance freedom and discipline.

Helgason's contribution, finally, examines the indirect suppression of literature by public libraries, studying a number of rulings by the Swedish Office of Parliamentary Ombudsman. This particular office has the mandate to act independent of the executive, ensuring that public authorities and their staff comply with the relevant laws and statutes. Helgason focuses on a number of contemporary cases where city libraries, on what proved to be insufficient grounds, refused to acquire certain provocative works of non-fiction. This study thus highlights the increasingly frequent conflicts between public cultural policies and constitutional principles such as the freedom of opinion and expression.

## Notes

- 1 Van Dijck et al. 2018; Zuboff 2019.
- 2 Recent reports reveal that several authors in Sweden, for example, the country ranked number four in the *World Press Freedom Index* (2020), have experienced threats or abuse from individuals (particularly authors who are outspokenly critical of society or have a non-Swedish background). See Reporters without Borders 2020 (<https://rsf.org/en/ranking>); Myndigheten för kulturanalys 2016a, 2016b.
- 3 Bottéro 1992, 70.
- 4 See, for example, Johansson's contribution in this volume on the supposed dangers posed by immoral literature in twentieth-century Sweden.
- 5 See Burke 1978, *passim*; Houston 1983, 269; Ong 2002, 91–2.
- 6 However, note the systematic violence against followers of conflicting systems of knowledge; see Moore 2007.
- 7 Levy 1985, 5.
- 8 Lærke 2009, 3.
- 9 Caravale 2011, 71–2.
- 10 Moore 2016.
- 11 Helgason 2010, 515–27; see also Anderson 2006.
- 12 Lærke's argument continues the poststructuralist questioning of the idea that the Enlightenment was a starting point for a progressive, humanist conception of modernity; see also Rosenfeld 2001, 117–145.
- 13 Lærke 2009, 7, n. 14 *et passim* offers an excellent overview of publications on censorship in the Enlightenment.
- 14 Lærke 2009, 5, 155–78 at 159; Israel 2009, 63. Locke's views can also be juxtaposed with his contemporary Thomas Hobbes, who believed unfettered freedom of speech was likely to produce civil discord (Parkin 2015, 293–317).

- 15 Israel 2009.
- 16 Lærke 2009, 6.
- 17 Rosenfeld, 145; see also Erlanson & Henning elsewhere in this volume for an analysis of a similar problematic in the burgeoning Swedish welfare state.
- 18 Habermas 1973, 258. Habermas's term, 'operationally effective fiction,' has been used in a variety of contexts; originally, however, it refers to a form of ideal, which, despite being fictitious, nonetheless determines or establishes a pattern of thought about certain phenomena.
- 19 See Helgason's contribution in this volume for an analysis of recent examples from public libraries in Sweden. Savolainen's contribution deals with a related issue, highlighting the question of age-based regulations in a library context.
- 20 See Lindegren's contribution in this volume for an example of how copyright—a legally sanctioned restriction on freedom of speech—enables new literary devices and engenders new literary genres and phenomena.
- 21 Bourdieu 1996.
- 22 See also Heede, Schatz-Jakobsen, Arnberg, and Lindsköld in this volume for literature tried in court.
- 23 Locey 2002, 65; see also Brioude 2007, 103.
- 24 Foucault 1998, 212.
- 25 See, for example, De Grazia 1993; Fellion & Inglis 2017.
- 26 Jansen 1991, 7–8 who also makes a distinction between 'regulative censorship' (book bans, enforced controls on publishers, persecution of authors and publishers, legal repression) and 'constituent censorship'.
- 27 *Ibid.* 7–8.
- 28 Butler 1998, 247.
- 29 Freshwater 2004, 231.
- 30 Holquist 1994, 16.
- 31 Ljungström in this volume maps how one such repressed artefact continues to entice interest and circulate; Malita in this volume considers the relationship between state censorship and literary fame.
- 32 Moore 2016, 6.
- 33 Duflo 2009, 125.
- 34 Marshik 2006, 6; see also Sapiro 2011 for a similar perspective on the history of French literature.
- 35 See Heede and Malita in this volume, who both consider authors navigating different climates of censorship.
- 36 See Moore 2016.
- 37 See Burt 1994, xii–xiii.
- 38 See Stavans & Albin 2008, 128.
- 39 Müller 2004, 9.
- 40 *Ibid.* 11.
- 41 *Ibid.* 12.

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- 42 Darnton 2014, 235.
- 43 Freshwater 2004, 241.
- 44 Ibid. 242.
- 45 Ibid. 242.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 See, for example, Darnton 2014, 235 insisting on the specificity of the 'nature of literature' in different 'cultural systems'; see also Müller 2004, 14 on 'reflecting specific historical circumstances'.
- 48 Holquist 1994, 15.
- 49 See Sigel 2011, 67–71.