For sale: last surviving copy of 'quintessential' English pornography

By John Vincent
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The world's first known piece of printed pornography in English literature makes Lady Chatterley's Lover read like a vicar's sermon. Now the only surviving copy of perhaps the filthiest play written is likely to change hands for a small fortune.

Sodom, described by the auctioneer Sotheby's as the "quintessence of debauchery", was penned in the mid-1670s and attributed to John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester, the brilliant and outrageous Restoration court wit.

One of the most licentious figures of a licentious age, many of his plays were too indecent to be published. That Sodom, or The Gentleman Instructed. A Comedy, its full title, was produced at all is astonishing. Outrageously obscene in its sexual references, language and content, the printer hid his tracks by claiming it was printed in The Hague, giving the daft date of 1000000.

By the 19th century, only two copies survived. Then one was destroyed in the 1830s by the executors of the great book collector, Richard Heber, horrified at finding it in his library. That left just the slim volume which is expected to fetch up to £35,000 when it surfaces from a private European collection at a Sotheby's English literature sale in London on 16 December.

Sodom, fashioned as a "closet drama", centres on a decision made by the lustful King of Sodom, named Bolloxinian, and its dire consequences. Bored by the "drudgery" of normal sex, the king decides to "set the nation free" by allowing "buggery" to be "us'd thro' all the land". Then follows scenes in which acts of copulation, buggery, masturbation, fellatio and bestiality are enacted, recalled or prepared for "off stage". Courtiers, ladies-in-waiting, and especially Queen Cuntigratia, contrive to find satisfaction with different partners and enthuse on the joys of sexual diversity.

Peter Beal, Sotheby's book specialist, said yesterday: "We believe this is the first printed pornography in English literature, a unique copy of the quintessence of debauchery. It is one of the most notorious publications in literature and makes most pornography written 300 years later seem tame. "Although in every sense, and in almost every line, pornographic, the play has two primary purposes, one literary, the other political."

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One aim is the production of a hilarious burlesque, the other to satirise uncompromisingly the court of Charles II and the notoriously lecherous king himself.

Authorship of the work has been the subject of much debate. Although credited on the front cover to "the E of R", after the Earl of Rochester died in 1680, various works were attributed to him, by him or not, to capitalise on his notoriety.

Dr Beal said: "The play's trenchant humour and obscenity are not beyond Rochester's scope. There is even at least one echo of verses by Rochester, when the king declares, 'My pintle only shall my sceptre be'. We recall Rochester's celebrated epigram on Charles II, 'His sceptre and his price are of a length, And she who plays with one wields the other'"

At least one further edition of Sodom was printed, although no copies survive. The publisher Benjamin Crayle paid the huge fine of £20 in 1689 after a jury found the manuscript librum flagitiosum et impudicum, a shameful and lewd book.

**Lines from 'Sodom'**

Some gawdy Fop stoops to the Creature's Eyes,

Yields to the Magick of her charming Thighs,

At Night convey'd to a well-order'd Bed,

Th' already Cuckold gets a Maidenhead.