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# Introduction: ethics, aesthetics, and cultural debates surrounding narratives of scandal and shock

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**Abstract:** Scandals and the shocks they provoke have long shaped the cultural, political, and aesthetic imagination of the Western world. They expose and disrupt social norms, yet by doing so, they make those very norms visible and subject to renegotiation. This special issue, *Narratives of Scandal and Shock: Transgression, Media, and Cultural Response*, explores how scandalous narratives emerge, circulate, and transform across literary, historical, and medial contexts. Drawing on narrative theory, literary studies, and cultural history, the contribution examine how transgressive acts, authors, and texts incite public outrage and fascination, compelling societies to re-evaluate morality, authorship, and cultural identity. The issue investigates how scandal operates as both an aesthetic strategy and a social mechanism—arresting thought through shock, provoking affective engagement, and at times catalyzing change. Case studies range from classical and nineteenth-century controversies to contemporary debates surrounding #MeToo, autofiction, and transgressive literature, to name just a few examples. Together, these essays demonstrate that scandal and shock are not mere disruptions but productive forces in the ongoing negotiation of cultural values and artistic expression.

**Keywords:** narratives of scandal; narratives of shock; transgressive storytelling; narratives of rupture; literary scandals

Scandals have long occupied paradoxical positions in cultural and socio-political life in the Western world and continue to do so today. Scandals disrupt and frustrate the status quo, but through this offsetting of established norms, make those norms visible and may establish new ones. They can flare up in crises of monarchy and state, such as the diamond necklace scandal surrounding the Queen of France, Marie-Antoinette, during the French Revolution in 1785 (Beckman 2014); they emerge in struggles over justice and citizenship, exploding as political scandals like Watergate

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in the early 1970s, when abuse of power led to US President Nixon's resignation (Liebovich 2003); they can appear in moments of religious upheaval, such as the sexual molestation scandal in the Catholic church, which led to drops in Mass attendance by one third in 2024 in the UK alone (Durham University 2024). Scandals and the shock they induce in individuals and in communities are typically moments of rupture: they disrupt established norms, provoke outrage, and push societies to revisit and often to renegotiate their taboos, values, and rules.

Scandals are, however, not confined to politics and public life, but they also run through literature and culture. Books, plays, and other creative works have repeatedly sparked shock, outrage, and debate, showing that stories and those that tell them can equally become sites of scandal and contestation. From John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* in 1749 (cf. Literary Encyclopedia 2005) to Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in the nineteenth century (cf. Brink 1998), and from Oscar Wilde's infamous trials for "gross indecency," in 1895 (cf. Holland and O'Connor 2014) to most recent debates around AI-generated literature: authors and their works can easily test the boundaries of what society is willing to accept, what should potentially be changed, and what should be further sanctioned.

As James Lull and Stephen Hinerman (1997), and John B. Thompson (2000) have argued, scandal typically arises when three elements converge: a transgression of established norms, the publicizing of that transgression through media channels, and the ensuing outrage of audiences. By pushing the boundaries of acceptability and confronting deeply ingrained norms, they compel readers to re-evaluate established notions of "normality" (cf. Link 2013; Zorn 2020). Although often perceived as isolated events in (literary) history, this conceptualization of scandal deliberately highlights their communal nature. Literary scandals can jolt individuals out of complacency, forcing them to confront uncomfortable truths, question long-held beliefs, and initiate societal debates about how we want to live.

From an affective perspective, scandals are closely tied to feelings of shock. By inciting outrage, scandals are inherently impactful and shocking, triggering moral disgust, anger, and fear in the public. While these are negative emotions, the impact of shock makes scandals fascinating and alluring – as you, dear reader, may well recognize as one of the reasons you're reading this issue. In short, scandals tend to have shock value. In the context of literature and culture, shock has been connected particularly with modernist and avant-garde aesthetics (Felski 2008: 108–109). However, as many of the articles in this issue will attest, shock has had and continues to have a central role throughout literary and cultural history. From Euripides's *The Bacchae* to Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gothic fiction to contemporary popular authors like Karl Ove Knausgaard: authors and literary works have always resorted to shock tactics to outrage and excite their audiences.

Walter Benjamin has argued that one of the defining features of shock is that it arrests the flow of thought, creating a moment of tension (Benjamin 1968: 262). Shock has the effect of freezing into place, where attention is intently focused on the shocking aspects of a scene or an idea. We see this effect in many scandals, which tend to focus on certain aspects of a text or an event, obfuscating other elements or alternative interpretations. As Benjamin notes, this results in a moment of tension, which can lead to the opposite reaction of outrage and spurring into action. Paradoxically, shock can both arrest the attention and provoke to action. Feelings of shock, then, both determine the focus of a given scandal and provide the affective impetus for scandals to induce political action, censorship, or even violence.

While scandals can lead to positive consequences, they can be destructive and restrictive as well. Through their disruptive nature, however, scandal and shock can serve as catalysts for introspection, provoking affective and intellectual engagement and prompting the exploration of socio-political and cultural dilemmas within and beyond the literary realm. Scandals equally resonate in their afterlives: in the debates they inspire, the media amplification they undergo, the negotiations they force into the open, and the follow-up works of literature they inspire, such as Mosés Kaufman's dramatic reproduction "Gross Indecency," which brings the three trials of Oscar Wilde on stage (1998). More recently, in the wake of #MeToo, authors have channeled scandal into narrative reclamation. For example, E. K. Johnston's novel *Exit, Pursued by a Bear* (2018) gives voice to a survivor's struggle to reassert agency after assault, while Chanel Miller's memoir *Know My Name* (2020) transforms her court-case into an act of public witnessing, reclaiming identity and demanding accountability.

This special issue, *Narratives of Scandal and Shock: Transgression, Media, and Cultural Response*, investigates the intersections between scandalous and shocking narratives, authors, and cultural responses, examining the diverse ways in which narratives of scandal and shock emerge, evolve, and influence authorship, readers, and broader cultural landscapes. We explore the ways in which stories of transgression both unsettle and reshape collective understandings of morality, aesthetic preferences, (cultural) identity, and artistic practice in the Western world, and highlight that the disruptive, affective influence of scandal and shock has been and continues to be central to cultural production across historical periods.

The contributions in this issue showcase how literary scandals break out when either the text itself or its author violate important norms for society, thereby negotiating the boundaries of normative thought and action. This kind of polemical approach can be utilized solely for shock value and publicity, but often in this complex, dynamic process, the borders of the norm transgression can become an intermediate and a meeting space, in which exchange processes take place between the opposing sides. In this sense, literature can become an agent of change in the

social world (cf. Felski 2020). By telling stories about scandals, literature can also provide a way of thinking about scandals, examining how they arise and influence the people caught up in them.

By situating scandal and shock within the broader field of narrative studies, we highlight its role as both a cultural mechanism and an aesthetic strategy. Contributions in this issue attend to the following questions: How do narrative structures create scandalized responses, and what role does shock value play in processes of cultural consumption? Can we distinguish between scandal as an accidental byproduct of reception and scandal as a deliberately engineered strategy by authors, artists, or publishers? What kinds of affective ambivalence, simultaneous fascination and disgust, are generated by scandalous or shocking narratives, and how do these dynamics change across media and historical contexts? In addressing such questions, this special issue brings together perspectives from narrative theory, literary studies, media studies, and cultural history to examine how scandal and shock are narrated, mediated, and contested.

The opening set of contributions highlights how scandals and shock are narrated across different cultural, historical, and political contexts. In “Before She Knew: Unreliable Narration and the Long Arc of Victimhood in *My Dark Vanessa*,” Deborah de Muijnck examines how Kate Elizabeth Russell’s controversial novel (2020) uses unreliable narration to capture the internalized effects of grooming and delayed recognition of abuse, situating its reception within shifting cultural contexts shaped by the #MeToo movement. Continuing with the theme of sexual violence, Pernille Meyer, Anna Ramsing Lindhardtzen, and Ann-Katrine S. Nielsen analyze the haunting effects of second-person narration in Liv Nimand Duvå’s *The Rose Rule* (2019) in their article “Haunted by You: Engaging with the MeToo Scandal through Second-Person Narration.” They show how the novel disrupts linear temporality and unsettles readers to reflect on the collective silences surrounding systemic sexism.

Turning to nineteenth-century natural sciences, Isabella Maria Engberg explores how narrative style itself can generate scandal in “On the Scandalous Appeal of Ernst Haeckel’s *History of Creation (Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte, 1868)*.” Engberg argues that Haeckel’s blending of biblical and scientific registers created both fascination and outrage in contemporaneous readers, highlighting the role of narrative in shaping the cultural reception of evolutionary thought. From scientific controversy to philosophical dispute, Ville Hämäläinen’s article “Søren Kierkegaard Hoaxed: Dynamics of Disparity and Fictionality in the *Corsair Affair*” revisits the public scandal between Kierkegaard and the Danish satirical weekly *Corsaren*. By tracing the interplay between pseudonymity, hoaxing, and caricature, Hämäläinen demonstrates how fictionality itself fueled and sustained the scandal.

Questions of voice, censorship, and cultural circulation are addressed in Rand Khalil’s “Censored Voices, Global Circuits: Arab Women Writers and the Politics of

Visibility.” This article examines the transnational reception of works by Nawal El Saadawi and Rajaa Alsanea, showing how their controversial novels navigate the double bind of local censorship and global market demands in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, while foregrounding the political stakes of intimate relationships and everyday life for Arab women writers.

The second half of this special issue turns to scandals that probe the intimate intersections of authorship, ethos, and audience reception. In “I Did It, and I Will Have to Live with It: Scandals Surrounding Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle*,” Rikke Andersen Kraglund examines the ethical and cultural controversies sparked by Knausgaard’s autofictional project, which exposes not only the author’s own life but also that of his family. The article highlights the ethical dilemma of including real-life individuals in one’s autofictional accounts. Knausgaard’s later novel provides the focus of Clara Verri’s “The Shocking Case of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *The Morning Star* (2021) and Decreasing Literary Capital,” which investigates how the apocalyptic imagery and supernatural motifs of *The Morning Star* failed to generate the intended sense of shock. Instead, its lukewarm critical reception raises important questions about the shifting value of shock in today’s literary marketplace. Scandals of authorship and authority are equally central to Hanna Lahdenperä’s article “A Flagrant Lack of Common Decency or Literary Truth? Authorial Ethos in Katarina Frostenson’s Later Works.” Lahdenperä analyzes how Frostenson’s literary responses to the Swedish Academy crisis 2017–2018 attempt to reframe her authorial ethos through intertextuality and symbolic capital.

From literary institutions to popular culture, Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar and Emily Anderson examine the volatile relationship between creators and their audiences in “Disappointment Is Coming: Rules of Engagement in Bill Drummond’s Rock Memoirs and HBO’s *Game of Thrones*.” Comparing Drummond’s deliberate provocation of his fans with the widespread backlash against *Game of Thrones*’ final season, the authors show how breaking implicit “rules of engagement” can produce radically different forms of scandal, whether engineered or accidental. Finally, “Narratology of Shock: Affectivity and Transgression in Contemporary Extreme Fiction” by Tero Eljas Vanhanen turns to literature that pushes scandal to its outermost limits. Vanhanen identifies the narrative strategies by which extreme fiction both repels and fascinates readers, arguing that these works mark a limit case of literature that compels us to rethink narratological and aesthetic categories in light of their deliberately transgressive power.

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