

LIBERTINE NOVEL

Colas DUFLO, Professor in French Literature, Paris Nanterre University

Patrick WALD LASOWSKI, Professor in French Literature, Paris 8 University

Part 1 – Definition of libertinism

CD: Patrick Wald Lasowski, you teach 18th-century French literature at Paris 8 University. You have published two volumes of 18th-century libertine novelists in the prestigious collection La Pléiade. You have also published a *Libertine Dictionary*. So, before we get to the novel, maybe we could go back to the definition of libertinism. Unrighteousness or pursuit of pleasure?

PWL: Big question. It is a major issue indeed to know if the 18th century libertine is an impious man or a debauchee. Sometimes, as you know, we emphasise its scholarly, argumentative and obstinate contestation of religious dogmas, without any relation to pleasure-seeking. This is what is then called "libertinism of mind" or "libertinism of credence", of which philosophers were said to be the dangerous propagators, they who overthrew the frames of Christian thought, them whose nefarious influence led to materialism.

Terrestrial enjoyments then mingled with impiety and built up through deliberate transgression of worship practices. Their strong spirit was strong enough to party on the day of Christ's Passion, to go to the cabaret during Christmas Mass, to take a nun as mistress or to disguise a mistress in ecclesiastical dress to spice things up. Sometimes voluptuousness's abyss is self-sufficient, and so it is that in his *Dictionnaire critique, pittoresque et sentencieux*, the Marquis de Caraccioli wrote that: "The word libertine now only means a debauched man and no longer an impious one", contrary to what some dictionaries say. It was then a debauchery of manners.

To these libertinism of mind and manners, we must add the "libertinism of the pen", of all those the one that interests us particularly: writers, painters, draughtsmen, engravers, sculptors, in short, all the artists who engaged in the representation of scenes of pleasure. In these three cases, the key word was disruption. A libertine man was a being of disruption, the one by whom disturbance arrived, as they say, the one by whom the scandal comes.

Part 2 – Libertine novel

CD: The 18th century saw the emergence and full development of libertine novels, which took as main subject love affairs in every sense of the word. How can we explain this increase of libertine novels in the 18th century? How do you characterise the genre?

PWL: Let me use an expression specific to players, card players and all players who want a game to be interesting. In libertine novels, the representation of sexual scenes is what made the game interesting. This is what was at stake here, with its share of risks, detours, outrage and malice. The success of libertine novels is itself related to the story of the novel, regarded then, as you know, as a minor genre and that quickly went from what we would call "love and adventure stories" to "love

adventures stories". How many novels benefited then of tacit permission because of their great success, even though they were pursued by censorship, because it was unthinkable, inconceivable to prohibit them.

And see, what an extraordinary project novelistic imagination rubbed against the Enlightenment's philosophical questioning. Scepticism, Hedonism, Epicureanism, encyclopaedic militancy, Providence reconsideration, negation of the soul's immortality, anti-spiritualism based on machinery, all this found in the libertine novel a formidable field of experimentation. To which must be added at the same time the development of a culture of pleasure, which established itself after Louis XIV's death, in the effervescence of the Regency, and which was perpetuated in the best years of Louis XV's reign.

For example, Saint-Simon told us how at Versailles, during the three-Christmas Midnight Masses, Philippe d'Orléans, France's Regent, showed an extraordinary diligence in reading his prayer book. Moved by his faith, his former governess complimented him on the way out. "You are very foolish, Madame Imbert," replied the Regent, "it was Rabelais that I had brought for fear of being bored." As you see, it was books against books, profane books against sacred books. The novel thus worked towards secularisation. The libertine novel was a declaration of atheism.

Part 3 – Obscene or veiled

CD: Can we say that there are different kinds of libertine novels? Should we distinguish obscene libertine novels, which explicitly stated sexual acts, and veiled libertine novels that spoke of it through allusions, euphemisms and metaphors?

PWL: Everything is based in this case, as everything is always based, on language. It is always a question of enriching the means by which language describes pleasure or by which it pretends to refuse it. Gauze is a light silk fabric. To cover with gauze, to veil, was the expression used when one attempted to attenuate licentious remarks. Metaphors, equivocal allusions, as you recall, allow one to show the nakedness of bodies, scandalous, licentious scenes, details of sexual postures, each time covering the text with a veil of decency. Thus, sometimes, it was said that the libertine was the most brilliant man in the world or that he multiplied the proofs of his passion. But sometimes, as the scandalous *Portier des Chartreux* confessed: "I immediately began to heavily hump and give her prick thrusts that she felt up to her heart." On one side cold blood, politeness of the code, allusions and sighs, on the other, brutality, cynicism, frankness of the language.

But beware, veiling obscenities was not thoughtful, used to protect the reader's modesty. It was full of malice. The malice in Crebillon's *The Night and the Moment* for example or in La Morlière's *Angola*. The malice was to describe scenes, situations, and scandalous sexual acts in a language so encrypted that the reader had to wonder about what the lovers were doing exactly.

Part 4 – Forbidden books

CD: There was a whole clandestine trade around these novels.

PWL: Indeed. Hunted by the police, anti-religious treatises, political pamphlets and obscene books shared the same destiny and were more or less pursued by the police depending on the case and depending on the virulence of the poison distilled by these works. Printed outside the kingdom, they were shipped from London, Amsterdam, The Hague and Brussels, Hamburg, Geneva or Lausanne. I could go on.

These "drugs", as they were called then, crossed borders, by land or by sea, through mountain trails, in ships' holds, in sheets, to be stored near Paris. That's when they crossed the capital's gates, in a carriage's double bottom, in pockets, under the skirts of women, before being stitched together by booksellers selling them clandestinely, while for their part peddlers offered them on the quays, in Versailles' gardens or in the Palais Royal's.

But French printers were not left out. In Paris, Rouen, Reims, Avignon, they played an active part in printing these books called "chestnuts". Some printers had a well-established reputation. Those were the ones snitches and police inspectors watched, waiting for a misstep. On the novels' covers, the printing libertine genius announced works printed in Kythera, Luxuropolis, Japan, a hundred miles from the Bastille. The ideal printed location announced Hell or the Vatican.

Conclusion – Libertine images

CD: You recently published a book titled *Scènes du plaisir* devoted to libertine engraving. How is illustration an integral part of these novels?

PWL: Allow me a quote, or rather the memory of a quote. In January 1749, *Les Cinq années littéraires* by Pierre Clement reported that the famous *Thérèse the philosopher*, the Marquis d'Argens' scandalous novel, was very expensive because, has Clement explained, it was new, proscribed and adorned with infamous prints, in a word, libertine in every sense and excesses of the word. We could not imagine a better definition or better advertising for libertine novels.

As we know, novelistic writing's object is the depiction of pleasure. So, how could designers, painters, engravers elude this challenge? Illustrated books were the jewels of libertine libraries. By making sexual spectacle its main motive, the libertine novel called for illustration. See how the *Story of Dom Bougre, portier des Chatreux*, included 18 engravings in 1741, 21 in 1748 and 24 in 1787. That is the rule, and it is a golden one: more is always needed.

CD: Patrick Wald Lasowski, thank you very much.

PWL: Thank you.