

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SEXUALITY in LITERATURE – Early Modern Period

OVERVIEW

The political-cultural distance between the world of Chaucer and Boccaccio and that of Early Modern Europe surpasses the simple marker of calendar years, or even centuries. Early Modern will mean not only the period of the 16th century Renaissance, in which classical literary and art forms again found their readers, and classical secular passions again found their voice, but the period during which the practices of science overturned the citizen's world picture—Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton recharted the heavens, and, in a broader sense, the foundations were laid for the making of a modern man, who would exceed in self-awareness, social insight, and artistic daring the great exemplars of the past. The question facing us, in this course, is: does the course of erotic literature change and evolve at the same pace and in the same way as culture in general. We will not answer that question but we will raise various facets of it.

Michel Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality* (1978), takes one measure of the evolution of modern sexuality by considering the changes in Catholic penitential practice throughout the first fifteen centuries of the Christian era. What he finds, as he tracks the major Church Councils—Lateran (12th century), Trent (1550)—is at first a greater emphasis on the confession of specific sins, then, at The Council of Trent in the midst of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, an increasing invitation from priests for individual penitents to confess—to put into discourse the details of their sexual inclinations, moods, indiscretions, shames, unspeakable longings. This very broad observation, of one of many themes in the development of 'modern sexuality,' gives us a hint of the kind of diversification of both sexual discourse and sexual practice, which makes itself noticed from Early Modern to our own times. Which is to say, in Foucault's terms, that despite our vaunted period of Victorianism in the West, and despite what we have learned from Freud about the necessary connection between sex and repression, we seem in the modern centuries to be on a course of steeply ascending interest in the sexual. It will be no surprise, to the inhabitant of contemporary western—should we say global?—culture to know that in our own time some kind of crisis of sexual fascination holds us in its grip.' We talk about nothing else, unless it's terrorism!

We will try here to illustrate not only the tenor of literary sexuality in the Pre Modern period, but to choose **three texts**—Clément Marot's *Le Beau Tétin* (1545-6), Christopher Marlowe's 'Hero and Leander' (pub. 1598), and John Donne's 'The Extasie' (1620?)—which suggest moves of Early Modern Poetry beyond what we have so far associated with the Mediaeval and Ancient Periods.

Marot's poem, 'Le Beau Tetin,' 'The Beautiful Breast,' is part of the tradition of the *blason* poem, which flourished from the 1530's to the 1550's in France, and which involved a celebration, part by part, of the beloved's body. 'A *blason*' traditionally focused on the body parts of the female beloved: eyes, eyebrows, nose, ears, tongue, hair, chest, stomach, navel, buttocks, hand, thigh, knee, foot, as well as the breast, where many, including Marot, often made their last port of call.

The Breast

*A little ball of ivory
In the middle of which sits
A strawberry or a cherry...*

*When one sees you, many men feel
The desire within their hands
To touch you and to hold you.
But one must satisfy oneself*

*With being near you for my life!
Or another desire will come.*

*For every reason, happy is he
Who will fill you with milk,
Turning the virgin's breast into
The breast of a beautiful, complete woman.*

The list of beauties, of the idealized woman, is a piece out of traditional literatures—Catullus' *Da mi basia milia* or Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, in which the poet addresses the sequence of ways in which his mistress surpasses a summer's day. However, the glossy play, with increasingly sensitive and rarely fully listed, body parts is part of stock Renaissance tease, and adumbrates increasingly intricate writer-reader relationships.

Christopher **Marlowe's** 'Hero and Leander' is an incomplete (it seems) version of the ancient tale of two lovers, one (Hero) a priestess of Sestos (the Turkish side of the Hellespont), the other (Leander) a handsome young man from Abydos (the opposite side of the Hellespont). The tragic tale involving the two is foreshortened, by Marlowe, into brilliant cameos of meeting and love at first sight. The excerpt below encases Marlowe's rich imagination of the power of attraction, and, while not cutting into bodiliness as such, brilliantly anatomizes the power of sight to include the body in all its passion

*And in the midst a silver altar stood:
There Hero, sacrificing turtles' blood,
Vail'd to the ground, veiling her eyelids close;
And modestly they opened as she rose.
Thence flew Love's arrow with the golden head;
And thus Leander was enamoured.
Stone-still he stood, and evermore he gazed,
Till with the fire that from his count'nance blazed
Relenting Hero's gentle heart was strook:
Such force and virtue hath an amorous look.*

*It lies not in our power to love or hate,
For will in us is over-rul'd by fate.
When two are stript, long ere the course begin,
We wish that one should lose, the other win;
And one especially do we affect
Of two gold ingots, like in each respect:
The reason no man knows, let it suffice,
What we behold is censur'd by our eyes.
Where both deliberate, the love is slight:
Who ever lov'd, that lov'd not at first sight?*

John **Donne's** 'Extasie,' while virtually contemporary with the poems discussed above, may portend a future more difficult to anticipate than that promised to the work of Marot and Marlowe. Rapidly forgotten after publication, the work of Donne—like that of his contemporaries Marvell and Herbert—was only 'rediscovered' in the 20th century, and that by poets, like W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot, for whom these 'metaphysicals' represented a fresh brilliance, ironic and passionate both, which was needed in a literary world too softened up by the Romantic Movement.

*WHERE, like a pillow on a bed,
A Pregnant banke swel'd up, to rest
The violets reclining head,
Sat we two, one anothers best.
Our hands were firmly cimented
With a fast balme, which thence did spring,*

*Our eye-beames twisted, and did thred
 Our eyes, upon one double string;
 So to'entergraft our hands, as yet
 Was all the meanes to make us one,
 And pictures in our eyes to get
 Was all our propagation.
 As 'twixt two equall Armies, Fate
 Suspends uncertaine victorie,
 Our soules, (which to advance their state,
 Were gone out,) hung 'twixt her, and mee.
 And whil'st our soules negotiate there,
 Wee like sepulchrall statues lay;
 All day, the same our postures were,
 And wee said nothing, all the while.*

The interwoven intimacies of body—sight, touch, desire—could hardly be more sensuously depicted. A new poetry, risking an eroticism which is both spiritual and physical at the same time, is in the making here.

Discussion Questions

Marot's breast poem is part of a hot poetic tradition, which forced its way onto the French Renaissance scene in the mid-16th century. Is this kind of body-part listing a fertile device for poetic imagination?

Marlowe introduces the theme of love at first sight. How does his use of sight/vision compare to that of Donne, in his intertwining of two lovers by their eyes?

Is the carnality of the sex act evident or only implicit in the three samples of early Modern Poetry presented here? How would the Wife of Bath have read the three poets presented here? Would she have thought them 'too precious'?

Selected Readings

Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, New York, 2006.

Carey, J., *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*, London, 1981.

Hillman and Mazzio, eds. *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, New York, 1997.

Saunders, Alison, *The Sixteenth Century Blason Poetique*, Bern, 1981.

Tromley, Fred, *Playing with Desire: Christopher Marlowe and the Art of Tantalization*, Toronto, 1998.

Yalom, Marilyn, *A History of the Breast*, New York, 1997.

Example

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
 And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
 And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
 Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;
 How many loved your moments of glad grace,
 And loved your beauty with love false or true,
 But one man loved the pilgrim Soul in you,
 And loved the sorrows of your changing face;
 And bending down beside the glowing bars,
 Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
 And paced upon the mountains overhead
 And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

This is a translation of one of the most brilliant Renaissance French poems, which was written by Pierre Ronsard (1524-1586), and here appears in a translation by the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939). The example suggests the character of Early Modern Poetry which—think of the Marot, Marlowe and Donne examples—is above all created in intricate and self-conscious language—just think of the rhetoric of the highly stylized *blason* poems. The difficulty of translation, even for a great modern poet like Yeats, comes out in the above effort, which misses much of the sexual innuendo of the original. The original addresses the 'you,' Ronsard's old lover, as she sits weaving at her loom, and performing activities of spinning and weaving, the French words for which explicitly connote sexual behaviors—which are at the heart of the poem, for Ronsard is recalling the joy of sex, that was the hallmark of his knowing this lady.

ENLIGHTENMENT LITERATURE

Prose fiction, more than poetry, becomes the banner vehicle for the main themes of Enlightenment Literature. The novel emerges as the preferred reading of the developing urban middle class in Western Europe, and flourishes in a climate of ever increasing literacy and economic energy. It is not that religious thought had been absent from the great literatures of Renaissance western Europe, for from Spenser and Shakespeare to Milton, and very much including Donne, there had been major testimonies to 'religious sensibility.' It is that the weight of scientific world views, Protestant assaults on classic Christian tradition, and the economically buoyed new individualism of society, have combined to shift the balance of prevailing values in Europe. Among the by-products of this shift is anticlericalism, while another is the growth of an industry of pornography and obscenity. We will briefly address three texts from this broiling atmosphere of eighteenth century thought.

Choderlos de **Laclos'** *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (pub. 1782) is both an assault on the morals of a corrupt aristocracy, not long before Revolution turned the French government upside down, but a brilliant study of the uses of sexuality for power play and personal amusement. The initiators of the novel's complex plot—which turns entirely around corruption, seduction, and humiliation—are two aristocrats with time and desire on their hands—the Vicome de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil. Old and experienced lovers they use one another as pawns in their own perverse projects—to seduce an 'unavailable court lady' who is 'incorruptible' and thus a worthy challenge; to win over a young man who would normally not buy an older woman's wiles. The corrupt lady and gent, who mastermind the elaborately evolving sex plays, and occasionally satisfied love matches, live in an atmosphere of sexuality which, if heterosexual, has been entirely disengaged from the purposes of procreation. We can say, with Foucault, that carnality, even perversity, have here been traded in for intrigue and desire, which are the showpieces of aristocratic erotics.

The **Marquis de Sade** published largely—plays and novels and reports—but remains familiar to us for four pornographic works—*The 120 Days of Sodom*, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, *Justine*, and *Juliette*, in which he deploys his desire to say all, where sex is concerned, and thus to give play to the thought of those two contemporary philosophers—La Mettrie and the Baron d'Holbach—on which de Sade's own thinking fed. Those thinkers' materialism, determinism, and value free subscription to nature itself all played into Sade's fictions about the ultimate search for sexual pleasure, the orgasm being nature at its most delicious, and life at its most realized. In *The 120 Days of Sodom* the almost infinitely diverse means for reaching orgasm are narrated and delectated by four wealthy libertines, who have holed themselves up in a remote castle where they can devote 120 days to tale telling and enacted pleasure. The anything-goes canvas is enriched by profligate delights coverings all positions, all orifices, all members, and including the special pleasures of coprophilia and urolagnia.

The Monk (1796), by Matthew Gregory **Lewis**, is a work of Gothic fiction, which turns the power of horror directly into sexuality. The central figure is a fictive mediaeval monk who, though considered incorruptible, is taken by the power of Lucifer, and led into committing every sort of crime: the rape and murder of a beautiful virgin; a headlong lustful affair with a lady—in fact his sister—who has disguised herself as a novice master in the monastery; the sexual murder of the mother of the virgin he has killed. Any number of sexual scenes, drowned in horror rather than genitalia, are paraded through this shocker, which

exemplifies the ardor of literary sexuality as it is thrown onto the screen of popular reading, and into the fire of contemporary anticlericalism and anti-aristocracy.

The Enlightenment, often dated from Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (first volume published in 1751), is marked by a widespread curiosity about history, the natural world, and the physical/social setting of human beings. The literature of the period is permeated with open interest in sexuality, and above we have mentioned three kinds of literary-sexual intersections: Laclos' cynical dismemberment of the sexual addictions and strategic moves, within a privileged aristocratic coterie; the Marquis de Sade's daring exploration of the body's wide range of possible pleasures, excluding none, up to the very shrine of shit-eating; Matthew Lewis' gothic tales of sexual plunder, addiction, gory murder, none of which seems more than the hyperbole or Daily News version of sexuality, but which was in fact material of great interest and titillation, for the growing, but still widely unsophisticated, reading public of the time.

Discussion Questions

Does the coming to the fore of prose fiction, as a new voracious appetite in European societies, open the way to new kinds of interest in sexuality in literature? With this development, have we entered a new freedom of discourse, about the sexual, which was not available in, say, our earlier examples of mediaeval literature?

Does de Sade's philosophy of unreserved sexual exploration seem to you founded on the work of the philosophers La Mettrie and d'Holbach? Do you see a substantive link between Sade's eroticism, and 18th century French materialism? What is this link?

Laclos portrays a sexually wired upper class in which amusement—and resultant pain—is the chief driver of the erotic. There is no mention of body parts, genitalia, or the sex act in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Can the climate of social sexuality be adequately characterized, without 'naming the body'?

Selected Readings

Bongie, Lawrence, *Sade: A Biographical Essay*, New York, 1991.

Goulemot, Jean Marie, *Forbidden texts: Erotic Literature and its Readers in Eighteenth Century France*, Philadelphia, 1994.

Lever, Maurice, *The Marquis de Sade: A Biography*, New York, 1991.

Macdonald and Sherf, ed. *The Monk: A Romance*, Toronto, 2004.

Plessix Gray, Francine du, *At Home with the Marquis de Sade*, London, 1999.

Example

She retreated for a moment; Then gazing upon him with unutterable delight; 'Yes!' She exclaimed, 'My Bridegroom! My destined Bridegroom!' She said, and hastened to throw herself into his arms; But before He had time to receive her, an Unknown rushed between them. His form was gigantic; His complexion was swarthy, His eyes fierce and terrible; his Mouth breathed out volumes of fire; and on his forehead was written in legible characters—'Pride! Lust! Inhumanity!'

Antonia shrieked. The Monster clasped her in his arms, and springing with her upon the Altar, tortured her with his odious caresses. She endeavoured in vain to escape from his embrace. Lorenzo flew to her succour, but ere He had time to reach her, a loud burst of thunder was heard. Instantly the Cathedral seemed crumbling into pieces; The Monks betook themselves to flight, shrieking fearfully; The Lamps were extinguished, the Altar sank down, and in its place appeared an abyss vomiting forth clouds of flame. Uttering a loud and terrible cry the Monster plunged into the Gulph, and in his fall attempted to drag Antonia with him. He strove in vain. Animated by supernatural powers She disengaged herself from his embrace; But her white Robe was left in his possession. Instantly a wing of brilliant splendour spread itself from either of Antonia's arms.

The above scene of violence, in which Lewis' Monk intervenes for his own sexual purposes, onto a sacred wedding forthcoming in his own Cathedral, is the first appearance we see of this 'monstrous figure.'

No attempt is made, by the author, to move slowly into the firestorm of the Monk's attack; that abruptness, and rawness, is part of the Gothic manner. We are forewarned that the Monk will prove to be a rape-minded fancier of the female, at no matter what stage of life, including marriage preparations. Bodies do not touch in this Gothic world, for its pace is too frenzied, and its passions too broad and general. But the sexuality of rape is everywhere here.

MAJOR FIGURE

The **Marquis de Sade** (1740-1814) was (by inheritance) a French aristocrat whom, though it is only part of the picture, we automatically associate with 'sadism,' the sexual perversion that involves taking sexual pleasure in the unwilling pain of others. Environing this principle, which was the governing formula of Sade's four best known works of (erotic) literature, the four 'libertine' novels composed over a twelve year period (1785-1797), lies a personal background of pain and family discord, hatred of his mother, numerous imprisonments for sexual offences, and then, when finally he is freed from prison on the eve of the Revolution, the discovery that that Revolution has been fought not for the poor but for middle class property owners.

The four works of erotic literature, for which Sade is best known, are: *The 120 Days of Sodom* (begun while Sade was imprisoned in the Bastille in 1785), *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (pub. 1795), *Justine* (the first of the three versions of which was begun in 1787, and completed in two weeks), and *The Story of Juliette* (pub. between 1798-1801). Among the perspectives to which we can turn, for understanding these three quite different fictions, is the materialist/nihilist philosophy to which de Sade adhered, and which supported his atheism, his sense that Nature is cruel and without purpose, and his evident conviction that sexual/physical pleasure is our highest experience. (The French philosophers d'Holbach and La Mettrie subscribed to a strict Lucretian materialism, and to the notion that man is essentially a material machine—a perspective that seems undermined by the very philosophical effort that goes into formulating it.) There is also, as part of the frame for these fictions, Sade's lifelong commitment to freedom, the kind of *liberté* he felt promised by the Revolution, which was boiling around him as he composed his fictions. During the thirty-two years of life that de Sade passed incarcerated—either in prison or in mental institutions—he had ample opportunity to reflect on the terrorism of dictatorship, perfectly exemplified by the State Guillotine, just outside his prison window, from which he could study the savage governance of Robespierre's Reign of Terror.

The kind of literature de Sade generates, from within his reckless creativity and his deep social dysfunction, is arguably at its most powerful in *The 120 Days of Sodom*, which was composed in the Bastille and—though it was temporarily lost during the Revolution—became the foundation for his three subsequent libertine fictions. The tale is familiar from a literary genius like Boccaccio, but battens on the extravagance of de Sade. Four gentlemen who control four young ladies—either as their daughters or as collateral sex possessions—and who are quite happy with the rules of incest, enlarge their empire of pleasures by deciding to conscript willing (and venial) youngsters, of differing ages, but of a common attractiveness, youth, and sexuality, and agree to occupy a mountainous hideout in which they can play out the game of pleasure at their leisure. (It need hardly be said that these four gentlemen, of whom one is a priest, have adequate money and power at their disposal, to make their ultimate sexual dreams practicable.)

In a remote chateau, in the Black Forest, play out the sexual dramas which over an extensive period of time engage these sexual aficionados and the sex subjects they vet and eventually hire. Precise contracts are set up, between the four seigneurs and their hired playmates, who are at various stages of sexual development. Tales are then told from within the group, on the basis of which the reader, a surrogate fly on the wall, can know the culture that has been developed among the group. What we and the participants learn, of course, is that every kind of sex play deviance can afford its pleasure, to the appropriate audience: indeed there is not a throat, in this sexually lurid assembly, that has not choked and vomited with an abundance of semen or a load of crap, not a coprophiliac trick that has not been turned by one of the four pleasure masters, and no debasement of sex subalterns that has not become daily practice in this community. In terms of the texts in this course, we might say that neither *My Secret*

Life nor *The Story of O* can begin to rival the sexual ingenuity brought into play by the actors of *The 120 Days of Sodom*.

Discussion Questions

Does de Sade's erotic fiction seem to you to fit together with his views of nature and society? Is he a consistent thinker?

Sade was a prolific writer. What kind of work did he create outside of his four libertine novels? What made his libertine novels so popular and read in his own time?

What kind of connections do you see, among the erotic works of Pauline Reage. John Cleland (author of *Fanny Hill*) and the Marquis de Sade. Does de Sade seem to you to push the envelope, in certain regards, more daringly than the other two authors?

Selected Readings

Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, New York, 2006.

Barthes, Roland, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, Paris, 1971.

De Jean, Joan, *Literary Fortifications: Rousseau, Laclos, Sade*, Princeton, 1984.

Gorer, Geoffrey, *The Life and Ideas of the Marquis de Sade*, New York, 1963.

Goulemot, Jean Marie, *Forbidden Texts: Erotic Literature and its Readers in 18th century France*, Philadelphia, 1994.

Paglia, Camille, *Sexual personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, New Haven, 1991.

Thoughts from the Marquis

'Sex' is as important as eating or drinking and we ought to allow the one appetite to be satisfied with as little restraint or false modesty as the other. Sade's belief in freedom is unbounded, although he is a master study of the pleasures of bondage.

No lover, if he be of good faith, and sincere, will deny he would prefer to see his mistress dead than unfaithful. Infidelity, even to de Sade, seems the ultimate threat to the self-confidence of its victims.

There is no more lively sensation than that of pain; its impressions are certain and dependable, they never deceive as may those of the pleasure women perpetually feign and almost never experience. The bedrock perception of sadism is here, in this brute analysis of pain.

Never lose sight of the fact that all human felicity lies in man's imagination, and that he cannot think to attain it unless he heeds all his caprices. The most fortunate of persons is he who has the most means to satisfy his vagaries. Fantasy is where pleasure settles; remain open to all your sexual fantasy options.

It is always by way of pain one arrives at pleasure. *Aus schmerzen wird die neue Welt geboren*; from sufferings will the new world be born, says the German poet Novalis.

Your body is the church where Nature asks to be revered. Remember the church nave, in *120 Days of Sodom*, which is set aside as a public latrine?

Are not laws dangerous which inhibit the passions? Compare the centuries of anarchy with those of the strongest legalism in any country you like and you will see that it is only when the laws are silent that the greatest actions appear. The laws are ways of battenning down the hatches, anticipating and precluding recklessness. Bravo, Marquis!

The imagination is the spur of delights... all depends upon it, it is the mainspring of everything; now, is it not by means of the imagination one knows joy? Is it not of the imagination that the sharpest pleasures arise? Masturbation is the product of imagination, as is nothing else. It is pure conjury, and can strike out at the moment's intrusion.

My manner of thinking, so you say, cannot be approved. Do you suppose I care? A poor fool indeed is he who adopts a manner of thinking for others! The Marquis is bold, in a French tradition which includes Laroche foucauld and Pascal: sharp, searing, and to the point. May I mention Charlie Hebdo?