Libertinage

'It is strange that of the many writers who, in their novels, have wished to paint their century, so few have stepped beyond the circle of libertinage' (*Œuvres*, III, 572). Jean-François Marmontel's observation in his *Essai sur les romans* (1772) points to the paradox of eighteenth-century French libertine writing. A defining feature of the period, libertinage is essentially exclusive and oppositional in nature. On the one hand, it is a common subject of novels, plays, memoirs, dialogues, poetry and songs. On the other, it is characterized by an aspiration to singularity, opposing as it does religious, moral and political orthodoxy. Concerning above all the theorisation, practice and expression of sexual pleasure (not love), libertinage is an affront to conventional behaviour. The apparent permanence of libertinage in eighteenth-century French letters might imply that this is a movement whose definition remains fixed from the Regency until the Revolution. Yet libertinage is a fluid concept, encompassing literature, philosophy, and politics. Elite and vulgar, disruptive and restrictive, erotic and cerebral, spontaneous and rehearsed, libertinage is a protean and contradictory practice.

The term *libertin* derives from the Latin *libertinus* meaning freedman, and its usage in early modern France suggests both emancipation and degradation. It was first employed in French by Calvin in 1544 to condemn dissident Anabaptist sects in the Low Countries primarily for their religious heresy, and for their apparent moral depravation. The early and mid seventeenth century sees such writers as Théophile de Viau, Cyrano de Bergerac and François La Mothe Le Vayer elaborate a materialist philosophy (inspired by Epicurus and Gassendi) to challenge orthodox religious doctrine. Though distant relatives of literary characters such as Versac, Valmont and Juliette, these *libertins érudits* demonstrate that dissident behaviour may be founded on philosophical principles rather than driven by lust. In the second half of the century, libertinage was a term of reproach suggesting freethinking impiety and, consequently, moral dissoluteness. Molière's use of the term illustrates this link between religious and moral laxness. Consider how Orgon expresses his distaste for Valère in *Le Tartuffe* (1662): 'Je le soupçonne encor d'être un

peu libertin; / Je ne remarque point qu'il hante les églises' (II, 2) ['I still suspect him of being somewhat of a libertine; / I have not observed him frequenting churches']. The link is made with greater force in Molière's next play, *Dom Juan* (1663), where the title character's nonchalant atheism and cynical sexual promiscuity make him the first great libertine hero of French literature. Despite Pierre Bayle's attempt to separate faith and morality in the *Pensées diverses sur la comète* (1683), the first edition of the Académie Française dictionary (1694) confirms that libertinage concerns impiety before immorality: 'The state of a person who signals little respect for religious matters. […] It is sometimes used for debauchery and wicked conduct' (*Dictionnaire de l'Académie Françoise*, I, 645). But within a decade the irreligious element of libertinage gives way to a more secular sense of autonomy and depravation. The Trévoux dictionary defines libertinage primarily as 'debauchery, disorder, unruliness in matters of morality', and secondarily as an insufficient respect for the mysteries of religion (*Dictionnaire universel françois et latin*, II, unpaginated). It is certainly how Diderot understands the term when he 'translates' the Earl of Shaftesbury's *Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit* in 1743: 'La débauche, qui n'est autre chose qu'un goût trop vif pour les plaisirs des sens, emporte avec elle l'idée de société. Celui qui s'enferme pour s'enivrer, passera pour un sot, mais non pas pour un débauché. On traitera ses excès de crapule, mais non de libertinage.' [Debauchery, which is nothing more than too keen a taste for pleasures of the senses, implies the idea of society. He who hides himself away to get drunk, will pass for a fool, but not for a debauched man. His excesses will be treated as villainy, but not as libertinage.' *Œuvres completes*, I, 397]. Libertinage, here synonymous with debauchery, is a matter of bodily satisfaction, but crucially it is not antithetical to social pleasures. Diderot here accords significant importance to sociability, whereas other examples of libertinage will require this social world precisely in order to assert the independence of the libertine individual. The effacement of anti-religious aspects from libertinage and its consolidation as social practice in the eighteenth century is confirmed in Grimod de La Reynière's remark of 1783: 'Today people glory in libertinage as much as in unbelief, and they

would seem to blush for being virtuous, just as they have long done so for showing faith.' (*Réflexions philosophiques sur le plaisir*, p.34). A fashionable habit by this time, libertinage is considered as distinct from atheism. Libertinage and anti-clerical sentiment will be casual bedfellows throughout the century, in such texts as the novel *Dom Bougre, ou Le Portier des Chartreux* (1741, attributed to Gervaise de Latouche) or the anonymous obscene play *La Bougie de Noël* (late 1790s), but libertinage only rediscovers its radical, foundational atheism in the works of Sade.

The regency of Philippe d'Orléans (1715-23) marks a crucial phase in the development of libertinage in France. Following the austerity of the final years of Louis XIV's reign, the Regency represents a period of sexual licentiousness, moral irreverence and financial speculation (epitomised by John Law's catastrophic attempts to reform the French banking system). For all that the memorialist Saint-Simon criticizes Philippe's court, now firmly established not at Versailles but at the Palais-Royal in Paris, the Regency set up an urban and urbane model of libertinage. Even Marmontel recognizes that 'libertinage was of a better tone there' (*Œuvres*, III, 571). Although no significant libertine works were produced during the Regency, its combination of society, sophistication and sexuality, embodied by the duc de Richelieu (great-nephew of the cardinal, and subject of apocryphal memoirs), was to prove appealing to later writers like Crébillon fils, Laclos and Sade. Certainly there are numerous libertine texts that stray out of the *hôtel particulier* and into the street or brothel (such as Andréa de Nerciat's *Félicia ou mes fredaines*, 1775, and the *Correspondance de Madame Gourdan*, attributed to Théveneau de Morande, 1733), but eighteenth-century libertinage tends to be an aristocratic phenomenon. Closed in upon itself, this ritualistic world is governed by strict rules of behaviour whose very existence invites infringement, and where private actions are played out before an audience adept at the shared code. Reduced by royal absolutism to a parody of the warrior, the aristocratic libertine achieves renown through the conquest of women, as Mirabeau confirms in *La Morale des sens* (1781): 'A woman pursued by a lover resembles a besieged town' (p. 109). In this

respect, libertinage is not simply a matter of mindless debauchery, it is a strategy of seduction, domination and glory. Though we no longer speak of 'libertinism', that is not to say that libertinage is not in some ways a system. A key exposition of libertine principles occurs when Versac instructs Meilcour in Crébillon fils's *Les Egarements du cœur et de l'esprit* (1736). Attentive to maintaining one's rank in society, he insists upon the singularity of the libertine enterprise:

> Vous ne saurez imaginer combien il faut avoir d'esprit pour se procurer un succès brillant et durable dans un genre où vous avez tant de rivaux à combattre, et où le caprice d'une seule femme suffit souvent pour faire un nom à l'homme du monde le moins fait pour être connu. […] De quelle finesse n'avez-vous pas besoin pour conduire tout à la fois plusieurs intrigues que pour votre honneur vous ne devez pas cacher au public, et qu'il faut cependant que vous dérobiez à chacune des femmes avec qui vous êtes lié! [..] Etre passionné sans sentiment, pleurer sans être attendri, tourmenter sans être jaloux: voilà tous les rôles que vous devez jouer, voilà ce que vous devez être.[i]

The same disciplined attention to principles is what distinguishes Valmont from other men in Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782): 'sa conduite est le résultat de ses principes. Il sait calculer tout ce qu'un homme peut se permettre d'horreurs, sans se compromettre; et pour être cruel et méchant sans danger, il a choisi les femmes pour victimes.'[ii] Unlike the *petit-maître* who poses no threat to women, this dangerously apathetic libertine engineers scenarios to humiliate and ruin women, and thereby publicize his own glory. Libertinage almost always involves triangulation. The libertine must understand, profit from and maintain the social conventions by which he achieves renown; his tactical sexual aggression does not intentionally overturn the ideology that underpins his noble caste. This form of libertinage is an essentially conservative strategy of hypocrisy and subversion, and is typified by the four heroes of Sade's *Les 120 journées de Sodome* (written in the Bastille in 1785). In the face of bourgeois virtue, such behaviour saps at the aristocracy's claim to moral superiority, but libertine literature avoids

moralizing. In Laclos's novel the 'avertissement de l'éditeur' punctures the moral claims of the 'préface du rédacteur', and Vivant Denon's *Point de lendemain* (first version, 1777, second version, 1812) ends with the hero's bemused ignorance: 'Je cherchai bien la morale de cette aventure, et… je n'en trouvai point' [I sought the moral of this adventure and… I did not find one, p.69].

[iii]

Libertinage in all its forms is connected with the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. Many early modern erotic works present scenarios of education, from *L'Académie des dames* (originally published in Latin in 1660), to Mirabeau's *Le Rideau levé, ou l'éducation de Laure* (1786), and Sade's *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795). More generally, the libertine novel takes the form of the *bildungsroman*, whereby the young hero or heroine is educated to the realities of the world. This education is primarily of an erotic nature, and it is one of the eighteenth century's key lessons that sexual pleasure, devoid of the stain of sin, can liberate the mind as well as the body. As Diderot writes: 'on tire parti de la mauvaise compagnie, comme du libertinage. On est dédommagé de la perte de son innocence par celle de ses préjugés.'[iv] The eighteenth-century book trade's conception of clandestine 'philosophical books' illustrates that libertinage may be philosophical, transgressive and disruptive. Robert Darnton cites a bookseller in Poitiers who, writing about 'un petit catalogue de livres philosophiques' to his Swiss distributor in 1722, requests the following works: '*La Religieuse en chemise*, *Le Christianisme dévoilé*, *Fausseté des miracles des deux Testaments*, *Mémoires de Mme la marquise de Pompadour*, *Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental*, *Système de la nature*, *Thérèse philosophe*, *Margot la ravaudeuse*.'[v] This list would seem to encourage links between categories that modern scholarship has tended to separate into 'high' and 'low' Enlightenment. One might thus consider how Boyer d'Argens's *Thérèse philosophe* (1748) and Fougeret de Monbron's *Margot la ravaudeuse* (1748) resemble the abbé du Prat's *Vénus dans le cloître, ou la religieuse en chemise* (1692) in their description of sexuality, but also how these works are as freethinking

as Boulanger's political and historical enquiry (*Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental*, 1761), and the baron d'Holbach's landmark work of materialist and atheist philosophy (*Système de la nature*, 1770).

Influenced by the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), materialist thinkers like Helvétius, Condillac and Buffon argue that knowledge comes through sensory perception, and that the natural world is characterized by energy and change. Linking materialism and libertinage is La Mettrie (1709-51), whose *L'Homme-machine* (1747) insists upon the natural movement within man: 'Le corps humain est une machine qui monte elle-même ses ressorts: vivante image du mouvement perpétuel.'[vi] He was also a theorist of pleasure in such works as *L'Ecole de la volupté* (1746). Without relying on religious explanations, this mechanistic view of human nature privileges the accumulation of diverse sensory experiences, and appeals to many libertine writers who locate human happiness in the physical satisfaction of desires in this world. Thus *Thérèse philosophe* combines graphic sex scenes and discussions of masturbation, dildos and sodomy, with materialist philosophy supported by empirical evidence: 'nous voyons, par des observations claires et simples, que l'âme n'est maîtresse de rien, qu'elle n'agit qu'en conséquence des sensations et des facultés du corps'.[vii] Sade rather esteemed this text, proposing that it gave the idea of a 'livre immoral'. His own works theorize extreme sexual liberty in terms of materialism. As a character declares in the *Histoire de Juliette* (1801): 'Il doit y avoir une théorie sur cela comme sur tout, il doit y avoir des principes, des règles...'[viii] Fougeret de Monbron's Margot may be less philosophical than Thérèse or Sade's heroines, but her story – a whore's progress in the vein of Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1748) – similarly emphasises that human behaviour may be perceived authentically through erotic acts; thus the ruling classes represented in the novel by debauched clergymen, magistrates and financiers, sexually and financially exploit the poor.

Despite the philosophical centrality of nature in many libertine works, few take place in the natural world; Sade is a notable exception, sending his characters into forests and up (and indeed into) volcanoes. When libertines find themselves in the countryside, it is normally to

recover from a sexually transmitted disease or to enjoy their retirement, as in Duclos's *Les Confessions du comte de* *** (1741); otherwise, like Valmont, they long to return to the city, and that city is usually Paris. Whether the salons of Crébillon, the Opéra and Comédie-Française of Chévrier's *Le Colporteur* (1761), or the modest apartments of Rétif de La Bretonne's *L'Anti-Justine* (1798), Paris is the principal sphere of libertine activity. The classic libertine space is the boudoir, described by Mirabeau in *Ma conversion* (1783):

> [Il y avait des] panneaux placés avec art réfléchissant en mille manières tous les objets, et des amours dont les torches enflammées éclairaient ce lieu charmant. Un sofa large et bas exprimait l'espérance pour les coussins vert anglais dont il était couvert; la vue se perdait dans les lointains formés par les glaces, et n'était arrêtée que par des peintures lascives que mille attitudes variées rendaient plus intéressantes; des parfums doux faisaient respirer à longs traits la volupté. Déjà mon imagination s'échauffe, mon cœur palpite; il délire; le feu qui coule dans mes veines, rend mes sens plus actifs…[ix]

Erotic decoration saturates the boudoir with desire, stimulates the senses, and creates an impression of dynamism. Luxury is rehabilitated in this enclosed and aestheticized space, preparing the libertine for more carnal pleasures. The boudoir encourages the libertine's self-regard and passion for accumulation, gradation and novelty: 'La singularité d'une liaison en fait quelquefois tout le mérite.'[x]

The contradictory aspect of libertinage is perhaps clearest in its depiction of women. Despite no significant libertine works being written by women, such texts abound with heroines who spurn the Rousseauian model of virtuous, maternal and domestic womanhood, and enjoy their own and others' bodies. Yet generally the female libertine must operate within strict boundaries of decorum: 'Un joli homme se fait une espèce de point d'honneur d'avoir été libertin; on ne veut point nous permettre qu'on puisse l'être.'[xi] Madame de Merteuil in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* epitomizes one type of libertine heroine in her quest for knowledge, power and sexual pleasure. She reveals her technique of discipline and deceit, differentiating herself from

other women by her attention to her principles: 'ils ne sont pas, comme ceux des autres femmes, donnés au hasard, reçus sans examen et suivis par habitude, ils sont le fruit de mes profondes réflexions; je les ai créés, et je puis dire que je suis mon ouvrage.'[xii] Such singularity prevents solidarity with other women, and Sade's Juliette similarly aspires to total autonomy, murdering her female acquaintances when necessary. Unlike these determined heroines, many libertine texts present women as passive commodities, as demonstrated in titillating semi-fictional works like *Les Bordels de Paris avec les noms, demeures et prix* (1790). Furthermore, any potential threat to patriarchy that lesbianism might pose is neutralized when a good man arrives on the scene to channel the woman's sexuality appropriately, as in Pidansat de Mairobert's *Confession d'une jeune fille* (1784). Male homosexuality is almost non-existent, except for in *Le Portier des chartreux* and in unexpurgated editions of Casanova's memoirs. Again the principal exception here is Sade, who dismantles conventional sexual categories to maximize the number of positions and pleasures.

Libertinage does not long outlast the Revolution, and arguably culminates with Sade. Many texts from the end of the century use erotic material as a vehicle to criticize orthodoxy and power; for instance, Marie-Antoinette was the subject of numerous obscene images, pamphlets and plays, such as *L'Autrichienne en goguettes, ou l'orgie royale* (1789). But the ideology on which libertinage depends, that which allows private acts to be judiciously performed or revealed in public, collapsed under the revolutionary imperative of exposure and transparency. The insistent politicisation of erotic activity proved fatal to libertinage.

Further reading

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[i] 'You cannot imagine how much wit you need to achieve a brilliant and lasting success in a sphere where you have so many rivals to combat, and where one woman's caprice is often enough to make a name for the man the least cut out for renown. […] What dexterity you must have in order to manage several intrigues simultaneously, which your honour demands you must not hide from the public, but which you must hide from each of the women with whom you are involved. […] To be passionate without feeling, to weep without being moved, to torment without being jealous: those are the roles you must play, that is who you must be.' Claude-Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon, *Les Egarements du cœur et de l'esprit*, ed. Etiemble, Paris, Armand Colin, 1961, p.175-6.

[ii] 'His behaviour is the result of his principles. He knows just what wickedness a man may allow himself without compromising himself; and to be cruel and vicious without danger, he has chosen women for his victims.' Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, ed. René Pomeau, Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1996, p.96.

[iii] Vivant Denon, *Point de lendemain*, ed. Michel Delon, Paris, Gallimard, 1995, p.69.

[iv] 'One benefits from wicked company, as one does from libertinage; the loss of one's prejudices compensate for the loss of one's innocence'. Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, in Œuvres, XII. 137.

[v] See Robert Darnton, *Bohème littéraire et revolution*, Paris, Gallimard, 1983, p.7.

[vi] 'The human body is a machine which winds its own springs: it is the living image of perpetual movement'; Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *L'Homme machine*, ed. Jérôme Vérain, Paris, Mille et une nuits, 2000, p,25

[vii] 'We can see through clear and simple observations that the soul is master of nothing, that it acts only in consequence of the body's sensations and faculties.' Jean-Baptise de Boyer d'Argens, *Thérèse philosophe*, ed. Guillaume Pigeard de Gurbert, Arles, Actes Sud, 1992, p.139.

[viii] 'There must be a theory to this as there is to everything, there must be principles, rules…' Both quotations, Donatien-François-Alphonse de Sade, *Histoire de Juliette*, in *Oeuvres* ed. Michel Delon, 3 vols., Paris, Gallimard, 1990-98, III. 591 and 747.

[ix] '[There were] artfully positioned panels reflecting all the objects in a thousand different ways, and cupids whose flaming torches lit up this charming place. A large and low sofa promised much for the deep green cushions with which it was covered; one's gaze was lost in the far-off distances created by the mirrors, it was only halted by the lascivious painting that a thousand varied postures made more interesting; sweet scents made one breathe this pleasure in deeply. Already my imagination becomes excited, my heart beats fast; it is in a frenzy; the blood running through my veins makes my senses more alert.' Mirabeau, *Ma Conversion, ou le libertin de qualité*, Paris, La Musardine, 2005, p.36.

[x] 'The singularity of an affair is sometimes all its merit'. *Vie privée du maréchal de Richelieu*, ed. Benedetta Craveri, Paris, Desjonquères, 1993, p.115.

[xi] 'For a handsome man it is a point of honour to have been a libertine; we are not allowed even to be so'. Anonymous, *Histoire de Mademoiselle Bion, dite Comtesse de Launay* (1754), in *L'Espion libertin ou le calendrier du plaisir*, ed. Patrick Wald Lasowski, Paris, Editions Philippe Picquier, 2000, p.96.

[xii] 'They are not like those of other women, given by chance, accepted without consideration and followed through habit, the are the result of my profound reflections; I created them, and I might say that I am my own creation'; Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, p.263.