

GWÉNAËLLE
BEYNET FRÖJD

THE FIGURE OF EROS

**in a rare and unpublished French
book hosted by the National
Library of Sweden
(1785–1814)**

Histoire d'une puce. Between satirical fable
and erotic and libertine tale



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– Forskningsartikel –

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A recently discovered, previously unknown and unpublished, French book in the National Library of Sweden is remarkable for both its style, history, and content. A manuscript note on the flyleaf, from a bookseller or a librarian, tells the reader that the work is “extremely rare” and that it’s “the only copy seen in 40 years”.¹ It turns out that this little book of 52 pages is a testimony to a man’s interest in female pleasure, and provides us with an erotic story set in an imaginary courtly environment, possibly the Swedish court. This work was probably only printed once, privately, and the National Library has a copy in its possession. On the flyleaf, there is yet another manuscript note from a different hand, older than the other according to the style of writing, that describes the work as “a joke, a little nimble here and there” in French. The narrative is entitled:

STORY of A FLEA, translated from Low German into French: taken from a very reliable manuscript, and, reveals the origins of the expression I HAVE A FLEA IN MY EAR, so used today, and the circumstances under which we may and should say it.²

The history of this book takes us back to the very beginning of the 19th century in Sweden, to a well-known noble family then hosting a French aristocrat who was trying to escape the effects of the French Revolution.

This article is the first detailed study of this original French story. One of my principal aims is to give an insight into an aristocratic reading culture in Sweden, with the amusing detail that the story contains Swedish words. It allows us to sketch the outlines of a literary culture shared in European aristocratic circles that knew how to decipher the codes of erotic writing.

Description of the work

Histoire d'une puce tells the story of a flea, born in a stable and living quite a miserable life on the back of a dog. One day, the flea takes the opportunity to jump on the back of a fancier dog, belonging to a baroness. Traveling along, the flea decides to try the adventure on the baroness' stockings and finds a vacation spot in her private areas. The flea, naive, goes from discovery to discovery on the body of the baroness. And from there, the initiatory journey continues. The flea meets other fleas and is introduced to other intimacies of women of all ages.

The book doesn't name an author on its cover, or inside, but one of the manuscript notes attributed to Augusta Piper³ tells us that it was "written by the Duke de Piennes". Augusta's granddaughter Sophie's husband Charles Piper provides this precious information years later, when he donates the book to the National Library of Sweden, with a letter that is still in the book. Louis Marie Céleste d'Aumont was an emigrant from France later known as the Duke de Piennes,⁴ who spent some years after the French Revolution in the Swedish army during the reign of Gustav IV Adolf. While in Sweden, he lived with Axel and Sophie von Fersen in Stockholm, and after Axel's murder in June 1810, he followed Sophie to Löftstad Castle, near Norrköping. Before this tragic date, he was introduced to the Swedish court and rubbed shoulders with the country's most important aristocrats. The Duchess Hedvig Elizabeth Charlotte of Holstein-Gottorp, wife of the Duke Charles of Södermanland (the future King Charles XIII), met him several times and described him in her diary.⁵ It seems that the Duke de Piennes was a multidisciplinary artist: he used some of his spare time during his service to the Swedish King, including wars where he fought in Finland for example, to write, paint watercolours, and create a garden at Löfstad Castle.

As the author's name does not appear on the title page, we don't have an actual date of publication for this unique copy. It is dated 1785, but the Duke de Piennes was only 23 years old at the time and was not yet in Sweden. We can thus assume that he may have had the idea of the book, or started writing it by hand, but decided to print it when he was in Sweden, in the period between 1805 and 1812. Another possibility is that the Duke didn't want to reveal that he was the

author, since he didn't actually put his name on the cover, so he might have chosen a random year before his stay in Sweden, simply to make the book look older. There are fictitious references in the introduction with a similar effect.

Whatever the reason for the antedating, it is most probable that the Duke finished his book during his time at Löfstad Castle and even printed it there himself.⁶ As a matter of fact, a secretary desk containing moveable type is one of the Duke's remaining assets at the Castle. A closer look reveals that it still has most of its letters, lower and upper case, in lead, as well as numerous typographical signs.⁷ I checked if it was possible to compose in both French and Swedish, and yes, I found all the French vowels with accents as well as the c cedilla (ç), and the desk also contains the vowels specific to Swedish (å, ä, ö). The printed text does not appear to have been made by a professional, as the ink is sometimes smudged, some letters are reversed, and there are uneven spaces or varying width between words.⁸ I thus conclude that a single edition was made and privately printed in the duke's spare time, during his stay at Löfstad Castle, using this type case. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that some Swedish words are found in the narrative, words that must have struck the author at the beginning of his stay in Sweden, such as many occurrences of *fröken* (*miss*), but also *rixdallars*⁹ and the interjection *JA SÅ* (*well, well*), probably to amuse a small circle of friends.

Taking a closer look at the narrative itself, we discover that this kind of writing is very much part of its time. Michel Delon declares in his book *Le savoir-vivre libertin*: “the man of the salon knows how to play with the limits, feels how far he can go without going too far”.¹⁰ When we look at the literary and cultural references made between the lines, the Duke seems to have drawn on his literary heritage from France, and added some picturesque elements. The inclusion of Swedish words in the second part of his work clearly shows that it was intended primarily for French-speaking Swedish readers, of whom there were many in the 18th and early 19th century. With his text, the author introduces us to a gallant, erotic and libertine tradition, still alive in the beginning of the 19th century, which could have been shared with a limited and worldly audience.

Derision and satire with verve in the French 18th century

A short introduction plunges the reader into a biting text in the style of Voltaire. The narrator ridicules “the scholars of all the academies of Europe” with his exaggerations and introduces a man, “M. de Kersaventin, who wanted to make a name for himself and deserve one of the 360 vacancies at the Quimper-Corentin Academy”.¹¹ This name recalls the prior of Kerkabon, who appears in the first chapter of Voltaire’s *L’Ingénu*. It is also interesting to note that the prefix *ker-* means *house* in Breton, the south-west Bretonic language of the Celtic language spoken in Brittany, a part of France, and in this story the main character, a flea, will have to find accommodation. One might wonder if the rest of the name is not a construction of the French word “*savant*” – scholar – with the addition of the diminutive French suffix *-in*, which could be interpreted as “*le petit savant*” – the little scholar of houses, which appear to be women’s privates.

The incipit invites the reader to a fable, and we recognise in this first page some similarities to the beginning of a philosophical tale:

A flea from the Margraviat of... big and fat and healthy, having nothing better to do, one day, it was night, it decided to jump on the toilet of the pretty Baroness of * * *, after having searched every nook and cranny, and after having watched with great care its sworn enemy, called Boxwood Comb, it stopped near a needle; then, smelling the blood that had been painted on its tip (fleas have always had a very keen sense of smell), it exclaimed: “Hey what! Comrade, you too, you are a professional! I am enchanted; since we share the same taste, I would like to join you from now on, and if you like, we’ll make common cause, because I have been walking here for an hour and haven’t found anyone to talk to.”¹²

This introduction is followed by a discussion between the needle and the flea in the same tone as Jean de la Fontaine’s *The Grasshopper and the Ant*. It is obvious that the author uses methods of irony and ridicule, as well as comic techniques.

The story starts with a heterodiegetic narrator referring to the flea, and when this little insect introduces itself to the needle, it takes over and the story continues with a homodiegetic narrator-character, to use Gérard Genette's terminology.¹³

Just after the end of the story, a *Note from the editor* is inserted, in which the editor, and therefore the author, who is in this case the same person, tries to clear his name and distance himself from the text through a fictional character, M. de Kersaventin. This was common practice in the 18th century.

Here ends this interesting work. The manuscript was so badly written that M. de Kersaventin considered it illegible. [But] too careful and, above all, too scrupulous, to allow himself to change or add anything to his text, he did not even dare to finish the last sentence on this occasion; which leaves curiosity in suspense, allowing the reader's imagination to go astray. Fortunately, he was able to save the spiciest part, which also reveals the time when we began to publicly agree [to say] that we had the flea in our ear.¹⁴

As they appeared in the preface, the role of the Academicians returns to close the book. There is an ironic explanation that the Academicians had not yet had time to do their work to expound the expression:

Anyone who has the faculty of reflection will easily find that since there is a flea and an ear, we could have said the same thing; but languages were in their infancy; the Academicians had not yet taken care of it; and at that time we used only circumlocutions, which are a sure proof of poverty.¹⁵

This way of ending with a pirouette, while implicitly mocking the incompetence or ignorance of the Academicians, is reminiscent of the conclusion of the Voltairean philosophical tale *Micromégas*.¹⁶

In these various processes, we can observe a latent satire on certain characteristics of the society of the time, such as the knowledge jealously guarded in small, privileged circles. The author, himself an aristocrat, could pose as an observer of the excesses of his time.

The flea hunt: a long thematic tradition often forgotten and imported to Sweden

At a later point, the narration slips from the concrete, with the animals to the figurative, with the people. When the flea is living on the back of the Baroness's dog, Mignone, the latter must be scratched:

after the wickedness had indicated with its dough the place where I was, two pretty little hands came to fetch me: twice I was seized and twice I escaped death, and this time, I was free for severe pains.¹⁷

This flea hunt on a dog's back could seem almost harmless, but a reader might be attracted by the expression "two pretty little hands" and have their expectations raised. From the dog, the flea decides "to settle down on a very white and perfectly drawn silk stocking".¹⁸ And the flea thinks:

everything has an end, a silk stocking could also have an end; I was soon convinced of this great truth, because by searching, I finally found what I had wanted for so long, a charming place, isolated, where I could live alone and as I pleased, very different from those I knew and where I had spent my life.¹⁹

Of course, the reader understands that the flea has chosen to live in the Baroness's private parts. The use of silk-stocking patterns is not new to literature, and the Duke de Piennes may have been inspired here by an old anonymous German poem, *Mecklenburgisch*, when he commanded troops in Mecklenburg for the King of Sweden:

[...]
He hoops up the white stocking
And comes to the gate of paradise;
What was hidden from many men
This is so bright and clear before him.
[...]²⁰

But the literature of the flea has a long tradition, now often forgotten, from the ancient authors, the Italians, the French humanists of the Renaissance, then the Germans and the English, through various texts such as poems, fables, and satires.²¹ The Germans had a particularly rich flea literature. It is possible that the Duke de Piennes mixed his French literary culture with what he read and heard in Germany before moving back to Sweden and completing his book. The Duke thus inscribes his story in erotic literature using the flea motif in modern literature. Similarly, on the side of the French tradition, Jean de La Fontaine's bawdy tale "The Nightingale", *Le Rossignol*, which the Duke de Piennes must have known, plays with the implicit and "says without saying". The lively, pleasant, and informative side of La Fontaine's animal fables with a moralizing conclusion lived on, while his erotic tales are still little known because Catholic religion and the prudishness of the 19th century tried to pass them over in silence. However, they found a readership in the 17th and 18th centuries.

No easy matter 'tis to hold,
Against its owner's will, the fleece
Who troubled by the itching smart
Of Cupid's irritating dart,
Eager awaits some Jason bold
To grant release.
E'en dragon huge, or flaming steer,
When Jason's loved will cause no fear.

[...]

This is not strange. A longing girl,
With thoughts of sweetheart in her head,
In bed all night will sleepless twirl.
A flea is in her ear, 'tis said.
The morning broke. Of fleas and heat
Kitty complained.²²

Indeed, La Fontaine's influence appears in *Histoire d'une puce* a few pages after the flea has climbed the stocking. We find that hand and those fingers again, and what was previously delayed will happen:

I had scarcely begun when I was disturbed from this sweet occupation by this pretty hand, which I knew only too well, for it wanted to chase me from Mignone's back; two very annoying fingers, which had slipped in very indiscreetly in my dining room, threw themselves on me without giving me time to escape; they began to roll me violently on the floor when there was a knock at the door, it was the cousin of the house; my enemies did not let go for this, but left me alone.²³

Here, the flea clearly moves from being the subject of the narration and becomes the object, believing itself the reason for the hunt. The reader will have understood that all the references to the dining room, the palace, etc. are metaphors for the woman's vagina. Like the young girl in La Fontaine's story, the Baroness has a sexual desire that she satisfies with her fingers. But now the intervention of a new character called the cousin, who appears to be a visitor and probably a close friend and lover to the Baroness, arouses the reader's interest, but also causes confusion. The narrative plays with double meanings and this passage explains the book's long title:

[...] which made it easy for me to hear the conversation that took place, remarkable for a phrase that has since become a proverb; to avoid being wordy I will only quote what is interesting; it is what the baroness said to her cousin at the end. – Why did you come so late, my little cousin? I was really worried, every noise I heard I thought it was you, I had, I swear to you, a Flea in my ear.²⁴

An uninformed reader might take the expression “a flea in my ear” to mean the same thing as it does in today's French: the Baroness is listening, she is on the alert, she is expecting something. However, what follows, and in particular the use of two small adjectives, “new and robust” (*nouveaux et robustes*) will lead the reader to another interpretation, firstly an old and quite innocent one: *to provoke a romantic desire*, as attested in texts from the 13th century,²⁵ and by extension, shortly afterwards, with an erotic sense, *to have a love itch*.

Notice carefully Miss Needle, that I was then a prisoner, and that my position was no longer tenable, for I had seen new and robust enemies

arrive, who, without even knowing me, also gave the appearance of mistreating me. It was only by the greatest chance in the world that I was able to escape. Forgive my digression, but it was necessary to make you see where this way of speaking comes from, that we use so often without knowing its true meaning: I HAVE A FLEA IN MY EAR. You will now be able to judge for yourself under what circumstance we can say it. I have had the opportunity to hear this phrase several times, as you will see from the following.²⁶

And now there is no doubt that this flea hunt is a metaphor for onanism and that this hunt, or sexual practice, can be individual or shared. What is more, this erotic tale moves from individual onanistic pleasure to collective pleasure. The text reserves this surprise for the reader and testifies that this flea hunt is shared by most of the women at court, and if one of them doesn't know, the others initiate her.

One of the *Frökens* decided to ask another if she had had the flea in her ear for a long time. – No, she replied, just before the ball; but I took a good way to get it out. – Another admitted that she was still waiting for it at midnight; almost all of them made a confession: only one, with a rather angry look, agreed that she didn't have one; no one wanted to believe her, and we set off to get it for her.

Curiosity began to win over society, and each *Fröken* hunted her Flea in her privacy.²⁷

A cheeky wink at the reader's sympathy completes the story:

In spite of the lack of success of the hunt, they had so much fun that they made it last long enough without appearing disappointed at having failed. Everything comes to an end, even flea hunting.²⁸

There may be a fashionable reference here to the “proverbes dramatiques” that were very popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. Valentina Ponzetto describes the use of this practice, which was likened to a secular game in her article “Le proverbe dramatique, une voie détournée pour théâtraliser l'irreprésentable?”²⁹ We can hypothesise

that this interest in entertainment based on maxims and proverbs did indeed exist in the intimate circles of Löfstad Castle, since the castle has preserved many games, including small papers with riddles. The Duke could have used this resource by choosing to mention a proverb in his title in order to playfully wink at his readers.³⁰

To the pleasure of the senses: the art of crescendo in eroticism

Proceeding in disguise, with allusions to the emotions and love of dogs, and to the eviction of fleas, the writing of the story reaches its climax with the stylistic devices of erotic literature. The author masters the art of delay in order to create an expectation, and a tension, in the reader.

As we have seen, the female sexual organs are never named explicitly in the narrative. Instead, the reader follows the flea's point of view, and the little insect always uses the lexical field of the house to mention the vagina in which it has chosen to live, such as my Palace, my home, my hermitage, my estate, my cave, an institution, a place and so on.³¹

Similarly, following a long tradition, the story uses martial vocabulary to describe the attack on the woman in order to possess her physically. The equation of romantic seduction or physical possession with war or the hunt corresponds to the ideology of the Ancien Régime,³² as Michel Delon has pointed out.³³ The man's fingers are described by the flea as *enemies* and sexual intercourse as a *manœuvre*. A great work of the 18th century that uses this type of lexical field is *The Dangerous Liaisons* by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos. The main male protagonist, Valmont, can say, for example, in a less pornographic register than *Histoire d'une puce*:

I forced the enemy to fight who was temporising. By skilful manœuvres, gained the advantage of the ground and dispositions; contrived to lull the enemy into security, to come up with him more easily in his retreat; struck him with terror before we engaged.³⁴

In de Piennes's text, the metaphor is deflected by a double perspective, which creates a shift and a comic effect. The naivety of the flea is juxtaposed with the consciousness of the reader. The flea seems to be fighting for its life, yet it conveys images of erotic possession.

The eroticization of discourse continues through references to baths and perfumes. As the flea has the opportunity to change places and meet other fleas, it can compare different intimacies through smell. The reader gradually experiences an awakening of the senses and is immersed in a fragrant festival. Here too, the author is following a tradition of recounting the mores of a late 18th century court. As Michel Delon underlines:

The discretion of these light and sweet scents is characteristic of the olfactory revolution, [...] which replaces animal odours and musk with plan perfumes. [...] While the musk highlighted the emanations of the body, its sexual scent, rose water and other scented waters want to attenuate them, to refine them, to steal them.³⁵

In the Duke's text, page after page, different fragrances flow: lavender, jasmine, rose, orange blossom. At first, the flea gets to know the Baroness' scent, which is lavender:

I will talk to you first about Thursday at nine in the morning, because it is that of my first bath with lavender water: without expecting it, I was sprinkled from my feet to my head with this infernal mixture.³⁶

Although the flea does not appreciate the lavender water, its complaint gives the reader a good idea of the personal hygiene of a lady of the aristocracy; the flea mentions how often the Baroness uses water and perfume:

I noticed that there were three days a week, Monday, Thursday and Saturday, where the water was perfumed with amber lavender brandy, which I really did not like.³⁷

Alain Corbin deals extensively with the history of odours in his book *Le miasme et la jonquille, L'odorat et l'imaginaire social, 18-19^e*

siècles.³⁸ In his chapter “Le nouveau calcul du plaisir olfactif”, he recounts the abandonment of musk for plant scents in the 18th century. He recalls the increasing codification of the spirit of civility and stresses the social function of washing: “Intrusive perfumes as well as indiscreet body odours had to be avoided so as not to cause discomfort”.³⁹ He adds:

Among the elite, the new use of perfumes coincided with the new ritual of the toilette: the individual must not betray poor hygiene by wearing a scented mask. Quite the contrary, the individual atmosphere revealing the uniqueness of the “I” must be allowed to break through. Only some vegetable odours, chosen with discernment to express a certain olfactory harmony, could enhance allurements of the individual person. The woman developed a wish to breathe and control her fragrances at the same time that she began using the looking glass. The psychological and social function of delicate scents justified the new fashions.⁴⁰

Histoire d'une puce is representative of these new tastes, and de Piennes had probably read erotic books from the previous generation, such as Restif de la Bretonne and Casanova, which introduced this olfactive revolution:

Courtly literature was quick to record the discrediting of musk. Notions of hygiene and ablutions are central to Restif de La Bretonne's eroticism. Rose water had a surprising monopoly; it was ceaselessly refreshing Conquette-Ingénue's feet and private parts. The bidet became the accessory of pleasure. Casanova's story has the same monotony as far as the use of scents is concerned: washing the woman's body in rose water assumed the form of a ritual. Perfume played hardly any role except in setting the scene for pleasure.⁴¹

The flea later learns that every lady can have a different scent and that no two private parts are the same. One of them also uses rose water: “Knowing beings as I did, I didn't take long to find an establishment almost identical to the one I had just left, and all scented with rose water”.⁴² And the flea that lives on this lady has an estate “a third smaller”.⁴³ The flea continues the exploration thanks to the

intervention of another flea. Like an ingenue in the writings of Voltaire and Montesquieu, the flea has the opportunity to see and understand more as this second flea addresses him:

I can see that you're a bit of a novice, so I want to take charge of your education, and if you like I'll introduce you to all the court fleas, even the Princess's; you know that you should make the first visit.⁴⁴

During the expedition, the reader is entitled to a guided tour of the underwear of young and old ladies, and the secrets of intimate hygiene are revealed:

We started with a very young *Fröken*, where we found an infinitely small flea, and very miserable, but nevertheless content with her mediocre fortune. If you adapt your wishes to what you can have, you are always happy. The land had almost no walks, and it seemed to be fallow. Despite its poverty the flea wanted to live in an atmosphere that smelled of orange blossom.⁴⁵

Jumping from one lady to another, the Baroness's flea sees "a flea that had just danced [...]" and says: "There was a very pleasant scent of jasmine in the air, which I much preferred to that of the sweet water that we had just inhaled".⁴⁶ Confirming this change in mores during the 18th century, the flea asks and learns:

To my question about smells, it answered me: – It's something that you have to get used to at court, and of all the ladies you have seen here, there are only two, old and ugly, who do not use it.⁴⁷

To complete this foray into 18th century feminine practices, the story reveals very intimate details about hygiene and intimate washing. The reader becomes a voyeur while reading the text, which uses comic devices and exaggerations to imagine a scene of shaving and hair regrowth:

[T]here was still another young lady's flea, because there were a lot of them; we found it bursting into tears, and in despair: – You see me in the deepest pain, she told us, sobbing; if you had come yesterday, ladies,

I could have received you properly and in a delicious place, but Fate wanted it completely shaved, half an hour before the ball. For a year, since I settled here, this is the fourth time I have had this misfortune; the devastating spirit, which thus upsets my domain, cannot be touched by any instance, and every three months, it reappears with the destructive iron; like the Aquilon that devastates the countryside: to add to the misery, I don't even have the means to sleep under the stars, because my house is always unbearable afterwards, and uninhabitable for more than a fortnight.⁴⁸

All the senses are honoured in erotic literature, and the sense of hearing is often used to mean hearing music or a pleasant voice. In *Histoire d'une puce*, the use of this sense is discreet, but it is nevertheless a leitmotif for understanding the action of the story. The flea's misfortune draws our attention to this theme:

Monday, fatal day, and I spent my night hidden in a towel on the bedside table, where I was disturbed four times, if I know how to count. When I fell asleep, I don't know exactly what time the Baroness's cousin, who had come to supper with her, left: all I know is that I woke up with a start, and in that first moment when we have no clear ideas, I thought I heard the door close softly, just as the clock struck four. Unable to free myself from one of the folds of the towel, I was carried into the wardrobe.⁴⁹

As Michel Delon reminds us: "indiscretion through the keyhole [...] is constitutive of an entire libertine literature that invites the reader to participate in a burglary".⁵⁰ Here, the flea is hidden under a towel and can't see what is happening, but it hears the noises. The indiscretion in this passage occurs through the sounds heard and the interpretation given to them. In one sentence, de Piennes shows us that he masters the style of erotic and libertine writing: "I thought I heard the door close softly just as the clock struck four". The French verb *croire* used with two infinitive verbs ("entendre fermer") helps to mitigate an assertion. Then a verb of perception is used, with elements that open and close, as well as an adverb that makes the difference, stealthily raising the reader's interest without them even

realizing it. The adverb is interesting because it is it “that most often carries the burden of emotion, trouble and desire”:⁵¹ by interpreting “gently”, the reader can make a cheeky reading and understand that the cousin’s visit was not just a courtesy visit and why he must slip away discreetly before daybreak.

Certain places are more conducive to social exchange and romantic seduction, such as gardens and parks, dinners, balls and evenings at the theatre or the opera. *Histoire d’une puce* ends up at the opera, a favorite pastime of 18th century aristocrats and libertines. Patrick Wald Lasowski, in his work *Dictionnaire libertin*, describes the opera as follows: “the opera girl stirs the imagination. We conceive her freer, more corrupt, more spiritual, more knowledgeable than any other woman in pleasures”.⁵² The fall of this erotic tale remains suspended, and everyone has reason to imagine what the singer has her hand on:

Two days later I went to the opera with the baroness. Since I wanted to hear the music better, which I really like, I left my lodgings: and jumping from box to box, I was soon in the theatre. I had the idea of making a niche for the first actress, who was very pretty: I took the most interesting moment to jump in her ear; her surprise was so great that she sang out of tune; then she quickly brought her hand to her * * *⁵³

So, if the reader has been attentive to the actual meaning of the expression, he or she will have no problem understanding the image of the ear, which is shaped like a shell and represents the female sex. It is a piquant detail intended to amuse and probably leave the reader with a smile of understanding between the heterodiegetic narrator and the reader. The ellipsis that closes the story is a final testimony to this style of erotic writing, which is a part of a logic of suspension of reading.

Nature, helper of eroticism

Just as the female sex is represented by a shell-shaped ear, the author uses nature to metaphorically describe the erotic journey of the female body and the sexual relations between lovers. Throughout the story, women’s bodies are eroticized with terms that come from

nature. In this way, the narrator makes the reader wait by eroticizing the description of the journey, thus creating an expectation, and perhaps even desire.

I thought it safer to go North; having seen two mountains on the horizon, I set off in that direction with the intention of climbing the eastern one. I had great difficulty reaching the top, the terrain was very hard, and I think it was lava, and it was so polished that I slipped with every step and almost broke my neck twenty times. After much fatigue, I reached a charming rose bush, which happened to be at the highest place. To my misfortune, this cursed little cousin, who had been following me, saw me and threw himself on me to devour me; I dodged its murderous tooth so skilfully and so well that my fool, instead of seizing me, fell on his face in the middle of the roses, and seized only an unfortunate little bud in my place, which will undoubtedly have been the victim. To mock him, I was to post myself on the other mountain, where he wanted to surprise me and was no happier.⁵⁴

The reader can understand that the flea explores the woman's body and reaches the breast, which looks young and firm, as the terms "lava" and "polished" suggest. The mention of the "charming rose bush" is a classic theme. The French medieval work *The Romance of the Rose* has been a major influence on the seduction of women for centuries, and de Piennes's family seems to have owned a medieval manuscript of it, which he brought with him to Sweden. In the first part of the book, the protagonist sees a rose bush in a fountain, then his gaze falls on a particular rose. In the courtly part written by Guillaume de Lorris, this rose is the symbol of womanhood, while in Jean de Meun's additions, the quest continues in a more licentious way, as this rose becomes synonymous with the female genitals.⁵⁵ In *Histoire d'une puce* we are closer to the biting irony of Jean de Meun since the *little bud* does not represent the woman but her nipple. This passage is again elliptical and comic, as the flea thinks it is being chased away, while the cousin tries to nibble the Baroness's nipples during their erotic games.

Nature returns again and again to describe the flea's actions, as well as the parts of the body:

I was so enchanted with the country I had just discovered that I promised myself I would return there: it was entirely devoted to flowers; I didn't see any other kind of vegetation there, except a few saplings on the western mountain, which Nature in her wisdom had placed to protect and shelter another pretty rose bush she had grown there.

As I continued my journey, I found myself in a dark and deep valley, a rather dense forest, which I crossed with difficulty, and saw a plain as far as the eye could see; as there was no clear path, I was at first very embarrassed, and in order not to get lost, I decided to walk across the fields, always heading South.⁵⁶

The reader has to imagine the hairs and the down with “a few saplings”, then probably the armpits, “a dark and deep valley”, as “the plain” should be the Baroness's back and not her stomach, because the flea says that it's coming home “through the back”.

It is interesting to note that Nature seems to be personified in the text, as the term is always capitalized. This is in line with an idea already present in *the Romance of the Rose*, namely that Nature is the assistant of lovers and should provide them with everything necessary for their carnal union, which is seen as a natural and normal instinct to satisfy.

Moreover, the laws of physics and natural metaphors intervene in the narrative, which seeks to imitate sexual activity through words and to show copulation to orgasm:

While I was searching for the reason, I felt such an enormous weight fall on me that I was stunned: I would certainly have suffocated, if this foreign body, by some kind of elasticity that I cannot imagine, hadn't made bounce and move a few inches away, making it easier to breathe a little; it didn't take long, because it fell harder to move away again. This manoeuvre went on for some time, I only had the interval between each jolt to catch my breath and look at the day. At that moment a violent earthquake was felt throughout my kingdom, my palace was shaken to its foundations, the earth seemed to open up; I thought I was between two volcanoes, moved alternately by a centrifugal and a centripetal force, trying to come together as one. The intervals between the tremors were

too short for me to think of running away and reaching my country; besides, for every step forward I took, I took four steps back.

This earthquake lasted at least twenty-five minutes, it seems to me, if I have a good memory, that the tremors were horizontal and vertical. There was a moment of calm, probably because there was not enough volcanic material in fusion, and I took the opportunity to crawl into my cave.⁵⁷

The text mimics sexual intercourse through the use of punctuation, such as the comma and the semicolon, which allows interruptions and resumptions, but also through the vocabulary used to describe comings and goings and opposing forces. Once again, there is a comic effect in the gap created between the reader's understanding of the act's reality and the flea's naivety. It is designed to provoke self-satisfaction, even the smile and laughter of the reader: "it seems to me, if I have a good memory", "a moment of calm" or when intimate fluids of the two protagonists are described as "volcanic material in fusion". And this erotic writing, always hidden in an animal fable, pushes the situation to the point of ridicule: "I took the opportunity to crawl into my cave".

Eroticized reading and erotic writing

Reading is also a topos of erotic literature, and the work uses this subterfuge in a striking paragraph. The apparent tranquillity of the reading activity is misleading.

Fatigue had taken away my appetite; however, toward the evening: hunger, they say, brings the wolf out of the woods, and seeing the Baroness lying carelessly on her sofa, and busy reading, I happened to go into my dining room in the North to sit at the table: but it was written in the book of Fate that I would fast still longer. When I had taken the first bite, an importunate hand came to take me there; seeing only two of my enemies pursuing me, my fear was not great, and I didn't go very far to hide. I was indeed right, the hunt was not general, and the two trackers that I had fled from, not imagining to search my whole country, confined their search to the only place where I intended to get my food; it is true,

however, that the hunt was lively and long. I was terribly frightened when I heard that the Baroness dropped her book. Three times during this unhappy evening, I tried to return to my post, and three times I was driven out under the same circumstances: I waited for her sleep to compensate me.⁵⁸

Here we are witness to a new flea hunt, which leads to another masturbatory act: two fingers are once again designated as the flea's enemies, and turning the metaphor of hunting around, the fingers are now called *trackers*, which by its definition – men employed to track game – can make the reader smile, suggesting the persistence of the search for pleasure. The passage begins with a pictorial expression – “the Baroness lying carelessly on her sofa, and busy reading” – that allows us to imagine the protagonist in a setting like those of the painter François Boucher, a Master of Rococo art who painted scenes full of sensuality and voluptuousness with women such as “Resting girl” or “La Sultane lisant”.⁵⁹ Once again, the adverb next to the verb helps to eroticize the scene. There is also a hint of irony in the use of the adjective *busy*, intended by the author to create complicity with the reader, but it works even better in French with the combination of a past participle, used as an adjective, and the adverb *fort* placed in front of it, which serves to reinforce the turn of phrase. Moreover, as Michel Delon describes it: “the dominant sexual ideology places the female body in an object position, showing it to be pervaded by a desire that makes it wait for a partner, with whom the male reader cannot avoid to identify himself”.⁶⁰ The narrative is thus visual enough to hold the reader's attention until the book falls: “when I heard that the Baroness dropped her book”, which fits into the sentimental or erotic story with the suspension of reading, as Michel Delon again points out,⁶¹ and introduces the equivalence of the abandonment of the book to that of the body. The exaggeration is there to amuse and delight the reader, joining overstatement with a repetition: “Three times during this unhappy evening, I tried to return to my post, and three times I was driven out under the same circumstances”. Erotic writing plays with euphemisms, seeking the reader's support with simple words like “under the same circumstances”.

Female pleasure

Immoral tales were a particular subgenre in 18th-century France, and it is not uncommon for these works to mock the aristocracy in the second half of the century, after they had previously laughed at the customs of peasants and shepherdesses.⁶² The Duke's work is a testimony of this tradition, imported to Sweden, where there were readers already nourished by French culture.

The French immigrant living in Sweden left behind a text nourished by his own readings and experiences. In fact, his probable reading of texts such as *The Romance of the Rose* or the stories of La Fontaine shows his interest in stories about women, love, and the games of seduction. In retrospect, the theme of *Histoire d'une puce* may seem daring to a contemporary reader, but both women and men in the early modern European aristocracy knew how to use seduction and even eroticism with different codes. Since it's likely that the Duke wrote his story in Sweden, he clearly expected a certain type of readership, revealing the great literary culture in French-speaking circles in Sweden at the time. The von Fersen library at Löfstad Castle confirms this, as we can still see today that during the time of Axel and Sophie there was a large collection of books on all sorts of subjects, including many books of French literary classics and erotic literature.

With *Histoire d'une puce* – “Story of a flea” – the Duke succeeds in using the style of the fable to introduce flea literature. In the description of the female body and the intervention of the personification of nature, he draws on a long tradition of seduction that can be traced back to the courtly but also to the erotic medieval literature of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun. As we have seen, the book also makes use of erotic themes and metaphors in the style of 18th-century writers such as Choderlos de Laclos. One might think that this kind of literature, more playful and subtle than some of the Swedish writings in the erotic genre of the time, might have appealed to women, although Augusta Piper seems to have found it “a little [too⁶³] nimble here and there”.

Notes

- 1 In Swedish: “högst sällsynt”, “enda ex. på 40 år jag sett”.
- 2 *HISTOIRE d’UNE PUCE, traduite du plat allemand en français : tirée d’un manuscrit très digne de foi, et, qui fait connoître d’où vient cette manière de parler si usitée de nos jours, J’AI LA PUCE À L’OREILLE, et dans quelle circonstance l’on peut et doit le dire* (Rar 135). This book is studied as a part of my PhD research project in French philology at Lund University and will be the subject of an edition in French with a translation into Swedish. My English translations for this article are new.
- 3 Augusta Piper, born Armfelt (1786–1845), was married to Axel Adolf Piper. Her granddaughter was married with Charles Emil Piper who wrote a letter and put it in the book *Histoire d’une Puce*. More information on the website of the National Archives, consulted the 2024-03-07. <https://sok.riksarkivet.se/?Sokord=augusta+piper+1%c3%b6fstad+&Endast-Digitaliserat=false&AvanceradSok=False&page=3&postid=Arkis+51F-DA627-E8A9-11D4-BBC7-00D0B73E7A8B&tab=post>.
- 4 It is fairer to call him Duke de Piennes (“à brevet”) as he was known in Sweden during this period, because he only inherited the title of 8th Duke d’Aumont when his father died in 1814. In this article I will refer to him as Duke de Piennes, Louis Marie Céleste d’Aumont, d’Aumont and the Duke.
- 5 The Duchess wrote a diary, mostly in French, which she started when she came to Sweden and continued almost until her death. She asked to wait to publish it. The published version we have today, in nine volumes, is a translation into Swedish made at the beginning of the 20th century: *Hedvig Elisabeth Charlottas Dagbok* by first Carl Carlsson Bonde and then Cecilia af Klercker: *Hedvig Elisabeth Charlotta. Hedvig Elisabeth Charlottas dagbok 6 1797–1799* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1927).
- 6 I discovered in October 2023 that a secretary desk at Löfstad contains many letter types and punctuation marks, and it will be the subject of a future article.
- 7 The staff calls this furniture a portable printing press – *resetryckeri* in Swedish – following a denomination which remained in the family tradition until the death of Emilie Piper in 1926. It seems that the castle no longer has the central part of the furniture to press a text, but this secretary desk is still important because it contains all the small types in a type case under a flap which lifts. With a more careful inspection of the furniture, I discovered with my supervisor two drawers under the first level, and they were held using discreet hooks on the inner edge of the secretary desk. We asked the staff member for permission to try to open it because we were sure that there were drawers. Here I thank Emma Vilhelmsson who accepted this. It was not so easy to pull out the drawer the first time. We needed to be three to do it. In these two hidden drawers, I found several sizes of capital types, but also a wooden box with tools to write the title on leather bands as scraps of old paper and under them what seems a very special handmade erotic game with quotes in French. In a comparison of the types with the digitized copy of *Histoire d’une puce*, I noticed that both use Garamond font, a common style in this period.
- 8 Here I would like to thank Mats Larsson from Lund University Library, treasurer in GRAMUS (“Grafiska Museerna i Sverige”), who confirmed that the work was not professional and the furniture quite unique in Sweden.

- 9 As it appears in the work. The correct spelling is “Riksdaler”. It was a Swedish coin and the currency of Sweden between 1777 and 1873.
- 10 “L’homme des salons sait jouer avec les limites, pressent jusqu’où il peut aller trop loin”, Michel Delon, *Le savoir-vivre libertin* (Paris : Hachette littératures, 2000), 67.
- 11 “les Savants de toutes les Académies de l’Europe [...] M. de Kersaventin, qui vouloit se faire un nom, et mériter une des 360 places vacantes à l’Académie de Quimper-Corentin”.
- 12 For all quotations from the French text, I respect the written form of the words. It reflects the spelling and conjugation of the time. Sometimes minor errors appear, but I have chosen not to correct them. “Une Puce du Margraviat de ... grosse et grasse et bien portante, n’ayant rien de mieux à faire, s’avisait un jour (c’étoit la nuit) de sautiller sur la toilette de la jolie Baronne de *** après avoir parcouru tous les coins et recoins, et avoir observé avec beaucoup de précaution son ennemi juré, appelé Peigne de buis, elle s’arrêta près d’une Epingle ; sentant alors l’odeur du sang dont elle avoit été teinte à la pointe (les Pucelles ont de tout temps eu l’odorat très fin), elle s’écria : hé quoi ! Camarade, vous aussi, vous êtes du métier ! j’en suis charmée ; puisque le même goût nous rapproche, je veux dorénavant me lier avec vous et si vous voulez nous ferons cause commune, aussi bien depuis une heure que je trotte ici je n’ai trouvé à qui parler”.
- 13 Gérard Genette, “Discours du récit”, in *Figures III* (Paris : Seuil, 1972), 65–278.
- 14 “Ici finit cet intéressant ouvrage ; le manuscrit étoit si mal écrit, que M. de Kersaventin est convenu qu’il étoit inlisible : trop exact et surtout trop scrupuleux, pour se permettre de changer ou d’ajouter quelque chose à son texte ; il n’a pas même osé dans cette occasion finir la dernière phrase ; qui laissant la curiosité en suspens, met l’imagination du lecteur dans le cas de s’égarer. Heureusement qu’il a pu sauver la partie la plus piquante, et qui fait connoître l’époque où l’on a commencé de convenir publiquement qu’on avoit la Puce à l’oreille”.
- 15 “Tout être qui réfléchit, trouvera aisément que depuis qu’il y a une Puce et une Oreille, on auroit pu dire la même chose ; mais les langues étoient dans leur enfance ; les Académiciens ne s’en étoient point encore occupées ; et on ne se servoit alors que de périphrases, qui sont une preuve certaine de pauvreté”.
- 16 “The Sirian resumed his discussion with the little mites. He spoke to them with great kindness, although in the depths of his heart he was a little angry that the infinitely small had an almost infinitely great pride. He promised to make them a beautiful philosophical book, written very small for their usage, and said that in this book they would see the point of everything. Indeed, he gave them this book before leaving. It was taken to the academy of science in Paris, but when the ancient secretary opened it, he saw nothing but blank pages. ‘Ab’ he said, ‘I suspected as much.’” Translated by Peter Phalen in The Project Gutenberg eBook of *Romans – Volume 3: Micromegas*, by Voltaire. Consulted the 2023-01-13. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30123/30123-h/30123-h.htm>. “Le Sirien reprit les petites mites ; il leur parla encore avec beaucoup de bonté, quoiqu’il fût un peu fâché dans le fond du cœur de voir que les infiniment petits eussent un orgueil presque infiniment grand. Il leur promit de leur faire un beau livre de philosophie, écrit fort menu pour leur usage, et que dans ce livre ils verraient le bout des choses. Effectivement, il leur donna ce volume avant son départ : on le porta à Paris à l’Académie des sciences ; mais quand le secrétaire l’eut ouvert, il ne vit rien qu’un livre tout blanc : Ab ! dit-il, je m’en étois bien douté”, Voltaire, *Micromégas, L’Ingénu* (Paris : Classiques Bordas), chapter 7, 47.

- 17 “ayant eu la méchanceté d’indiquer avec sa patte la place où j’étois, deux jolies petites mains vinrent m’y chercher : deux fois que je fus saisie et deux fois j’échappai à la mort, et j’en fus quitte cette fois pour une violente courbature”.
- 18 “pour aller m’établir sur un bas de soie très blanc et parfaitement tiré”.
- 19 “tout ayant une fin, un bas de soie pouvoit bien aussi en avoir une ; je fus bientôt convaincu de cette grande vérité, car, à force de chercher, je finis par trouver ce que je désirois depuis si longtems, un lieu charmant, isolé, où je pouvois vivre seule et à ma guise, bien différent de ceux que je connoissois et où j’avois passé ma vie”.
- 20 “[...]”
 Er hüpf am weissen Strumpf empor
 Und kommt and des Paradieses Tor;
 Was manchem Mann verborgen war,
 Das liegt vor ihm so hell und klar.
 [...]”
 Leo Kozzella, *Der Literarische Flobzirkus* (München : Hesperos Verlag Grünwald, 1922), 373.
- 21 About this tradition, see for example:
 Dominique Brancher, “La puce à l’oreille’ désir métaphysique et religion drolatique”, *L’Année balzacienne* (2013:14), 75–96. Consulted 2024-08-08. <https://doi.org/10.3917/balz.014.0075>;
 Emma Cayley, “Avoir la puce en l’oreille”, *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes* [En ligne], 22 | 2011, mis en ligne le 01 décembre 2014, consulted 2024-08-08. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/crmh/12512> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/crm.12512>;
 Marcel Françon, “Un Motif de La Poésie Amoureuse Au XVIe Siècle”, *PMLA/ Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 56 (1941:2), 307–36, consulted 2024-08-08. <https://doi.org/10.2307/458953>;
 Alexis Piron, *L’Origine des puces* (1749) Consulted 2024-08-08, https://books.google.se/books?id=NmY8AAAACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=sv&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false;
 Anonyme, *Les Mémoires d’une puce* (Paris : Flammarion, 2000),
 Stanislas Matthew Rhodes, *En loppas memoarer* (Stockholm: Vertigo förlag, 2015).
- 22 “Pour garder certaine toison,
 On a beau faire sentinelle ;
 C’est tems perdu, lorsqu’une Belle
 Y sent grande démangeaison :
 Un adroit et charmant Jason,
 Avec l’aide de la donzelle,
 Et le maître expert Cupidon,
 Trompe facilement et taureaux et dragon.
 [...]”
 Ce n’étoit pas grande merveille :
 Fille qui pense à son amant absent,
 Toute la nuit, dit-on, a la puce à l’oreille,
 Et ne dort que fort rarement.
 Dès le matin Cataut se plaignit à sa mère
 Des puces de la nuit, du grand chaud qu’il faisoit ;
 [...]”

- Jean de La Fontaine, *Contes et Nouvelles en vers*, “le Rossignol”, tome II. Amsterdam, reproduction de l’édition dite des Fermiers généraux de 1762. ([S.l.] : Club français du livre, 1951), 295–306.
- 23 “J’avois à peine commencé, que je fus dérangée de cette douce occupation par cette jolie main, que je ne connoissois que trop pour avoir voulu me chasser sur le dos de Mignone ; deux doigts très importuns s’étant glissés fort indiscrètement dans ma salle à manger, se jetterent sur moi sans me donner le tems de me sauver ; ils commençoient à me rouler par terre d’une violente manière lorsque l’on frappa à la porte, c’étoit le cousin de la maison ; mes ennemis ne lâchèrent pas prise pour cela, mais ils me laissèrent en repos”.
 - 24 “ce qui me donna la facilité d’entendre la conversation qui eut lieu, fort remarquable par une phrase qui depuis est restée en proverbe ; pour ne pas être verbeuse je ne vous en citerai que ce qu’il y a d’intéressant ; c’est ce que dit à la fin à la Baronne à son cousin. – Pourquoi donc êtes vous venu si tard, mon petit cousin ? vraiment j’étois inquiète, chaque bruit que j’entendois je croyois que c’étoit vous, j’avois, je vous le jure, la Puce à l’oreille”.
 - 25 Långfors, Arthur, “Le fabliau du moine Le Dit de la Tremontaine: deux poèmes inédits, tirés du manuscrit 2800 de la bibliothèque du Baron James de Rothschild”, *Romania* vol. 44 (1915:175/176), 567. Consulted 2024-06-03. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45044280>, middle of the 13th century : *avoir la puche en l’oreille* “être tracassé par des soucis d’amour” and *Dits et contes de Baudouin de Condé et de son fils Jean de Condé*. Edited by August Scheler. Partie 1, tome 2, 9, v.265. Bruxelles: V. Devaux, 1866–1867. Consulted 2024-06-03. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k65340667>, 1310–40 *mettre (à qqn) la puche en l’oreille* “provoquer (chez quelqu’un) un désir amoureux” and according to Le Trésor de la Langue Française Informatisé. “Puce”. Consulted 2024-05-28. <http://stella.atilf.fr/Dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/advanced.exe?8;s=969319260>
 - 26 “remarquez bien Mademoiselle l’Épingle, qu’alors j’étois captive et que ma position n’étoit plus tenable depuis que j’avois vu arriver de nouveaux et robustes ennemis qui, sans me connoître seulement, se donnoient aussi les airs de me maltraiter. Je ne pus m’échapper que parle plus grand hazard du monde. Pardonnez ma digression, mais elle étoit nécessaire pour vous faire voir d’où vient cette manière de parler, qu’on emploie si souvent sans en connoître le véritable sens : J’AI LA PUCE À L’OREILLE. Vous pourrez maintenant juger vous-même dans quelle circonstance on peut le dire. J’ai eu plusieurs fois l’occasion d’entendre cette phrase, comme vous le verrez par ce qui suit”.
 - 27 “Une des Frökens s’avisa de demander à une autre, s’il y avoit longtems qu’elle n’avoit eu la Puce à l’oreille. – Non, répondit celle-ci, un instant avant le bal ; mais j’ai pris un bon moyen pour la déloger. – Une autre prenant la parole, avoua qu’elle l’attendoit toujours à minuit ; presque toutes firent leur confession : une seule convint, avec un air assez fâché, qu’elle n’en avoit pas ; personne ne voulut la croire, et l’on se mit en devoir de la lui chercher. La curiosité commençant à gagner la société, chaque Fröken fit en son particulier la chasse de sa Puce”.
 - 28 “Malgré le mauvais succès de la chasse, elles y prenoient tant de plaisir, qu’elles la firent durer assez longtems, sans paroître désappointées d’avoir fait chou-blanc. Tout a un terme, même la chasse aux Puces”.
 - 29 Valentina Ponzetto, “Le proverbe dramatique, une voie détournée pour théâtraliser l’irreprésentable?”, *Fabula-LbT* vol. 19, “Les Conditions du théâtre : le théâtralisable et le théâtralisé”, ed. Romain Bionda, October 2017. Consulted the

2024-05-29. URL : <http://www.fabula.org/lht/19/ponzetto.html> . DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58282/lht.1955>.

- 30 Valentina Ponzetto also shows how *théâtre de société* used “a few rare erotic-pornographic proverbs” as “a strategy for circumventing obstacles” (“Le proverbe dramatique, une voie détournée pour théâtraliser l’irreprésentable?”, 2017). Carmontelle (1717–1806) and Dorvigny (1742–1812), for example, used proverbs in their works. The Duke most likely had a taste for the theatre because we know that he was the Intendant of the Opéra-Comique in Paris upon his return to France in the years 1823–1824 before his death.
- 31 In French : mon Palais, mon logis, mon hermitage, mon domaine, ma grotte / ma caverne, un établissement, un local.
- 32 The Ancien Régime was the political, legal, and social system in France before the revolution of 1789. We can also use the expression Old Regime in English.
- 33 Michel Delon, *Le savoir-vivre libertin*, 52.
- 34 “J’ai forcé à combattre l’ennemi qui ne voulait que temporiser ; je me suis donné, par de savantes manœuvres, le choix du terrain et celui des dispositions ; j’ai su inspirer la sécurité à l’ennemi, pour le joindre plus facilement dans sa retraite ; j’ai su y faire succéder la terreur, avant d’en venir au combat ; [...]” (Valmont à Mme de Merteuil, lettre CXXV), in Pierre-Ambroise-François Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, préface, commentaires et notes de Béatrice Didier (Paris: Le Livre de poche, 1987), 340. Translated in English by Thomas Moore in The Project Gutenberg eBook of *Dangerous Connections*, v. 1, 2, 3, 4, by Choderlos de Laclous. Consulted 2024-01-15. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/45512/pg45512-images.html>.
- 35 Michel Delon, *Le savoir-vivre libertin*, 161:
“La discrétion de ces senteurs légères et suaves est caractéristique de la révolution olfactive, [...], qui substitue aux odeurs animales et au musc des parfums végétaux. [...] Alors que le musc soulignait les émanations du corps, son effluve sexuel, l’eau de rose et autres senteurs veulent les atténuer, les affiner, les subtiliser”.
- 36 “je vous parlerai d’abord du jeudi à neuf heures du matin, époque si fatale dans mon histoire, puisque c’est celle de mon premier bain à l’eau de lavande : ne m’y attendant pas, je fus aspergée depuis les pieds jusqu’à la tête de cette infernale mixtion”.
- 37 “j’observai qu’il y avait trois jours dans la semaine, le lundi, le jeudi, et le samedi, où l’eau étoit parfumée avec de l’eau de vie de lavande ambrée, ce qui me déplaisoit fort”.
- 38 Alain Corbin, *Le miasme et la jonquille, L’odorat et l’imaginaire social, 18–19^e siècles* (Paris : Aubier Montaigne, 1983). For a translation in English: Alain Corbin, *The foul and the fragrant: odor and the French social imagination*, translated by Miriam Kochan (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986).
- 39 “On doit se garder des parfums insistants comme des odeurs corporelles indiscreètes, par crainte d’incommoder”, Alain Corbin, *Le miasme et la jonquille, L’odorat et l’imaginaire social, 18–19^e siècles*, 85. Translated in English by Miriam L. Kochan in Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: odor and the French social imagination*, 71.
- 40 “Le nouvel emploi des parfums coïncide, au sein des élites sociales, avec les rites novateurs de la toilette : l’individu, répétons-le, ne doit pas trahir une mauvaise hygiène par un masque olfactif. Il convient, tout au contraire, de laisser percer l’atmosphère individuelle, révélatrice de l’unicité du moi. Seules certaines odeurs

végétales, choisies avec discernement peuvent, par l'énoncé d'évidentes harmoniques, souligner la séduction de la personne. Avec la pratique du *self-looking glass*, se développe chez la femme le souci de respirer et de contrôler ses fragrances. La fonction psychologique et sociale des délicates senteurs justifie les modes nouvelles". Alain Corbin, *Le miasme et la jonquille, L'odorat et l'imaginaire social, 18–19e siècles*, 86–87. Translated in English by Miriam L. Kochan in Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: odor and the French social imagination*, 72.

- 41 "La littérature galante enregistre avec rapidité la disqualification du musc. Il y a beaucoup d'hygiène et d'ablutions dans l'érotisme de Rétif. L'eau de rose dispose ici d'un étonnant monopole ; elle rafraîchit sans cesse les pieds, le cul et le 'conin' de Conquette-Ingénue. Le bidet est devenu l'auxiliaire du plaisir. Le récit casanovien reflète la même monotonie olfactive ; le lavage du corps de la femme à l'eau de rose y fait figure de rite. Le parfum n'entre plus guère que dans la mise en scène du plaisir", Alain Corbin, *Le miasme et la jonquille, L'odorat et l'imaginaire social, 18–19e siècles*, 89. Translated in English by Miriam L. Kochan in Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: odor and the French social imagination*, 75.
- 42 "Comme je connoissois les êtres, je ne tardai pas à trouver un établissement à peu près pareil à celui que je venois de quitter, et tout parfumé à l'eau de rose".
- 43 "d'un tiers plus petit que le [sien]".
- 44 "Je vois que vous êtes un peu novice, je veux me charger de votre éducation, et si vous voulez je vous ferai faire connoissance avec toutes les Pucés de la cour, même avec celle de la Princesse ; vous savez que c'est à faire les visites la première".
- 45 "Nous débutâmes par une très jeune *Fröken*, où nous trouvâmes une Puce infiniment petite, et fort misérable, mais nonobstant contente de sa médiocre fortune. Quand on sait ne désirer que ce l'on peut avoir, on est toujours heureux. Elle n'avait presque point de promenades, et tout son terrain paroissoit être en friche. Malgré sa pauvreté elle avoit la recherche de vivre dans une atmosphère parfumée à la fleur d'orange".
- 46 "la Puce d'une *Fröken* qui venoit de danser ; [...]. Il y avoit dans l'air un parfum de jasmin très agréable et que je préférerois de beaucoup à celui d'eau suave que nous venions de respirer un instant auparavant".
- 47 "À ma question touchant les odeurs, elle me répondit ; – C'est une chose à la cour à laquelle il faut s'accoutumer, et de toutes les Dames que vous voyez ici, il n'y en a que deux, vieilles et laides, qui n'en font point usage".
- 48 "c'étoit encore chez la Puce d'une *Fröken*, car il y en avoit un grand nombre ; nous la trouvâmes fondant en larmes, et dans le désespoir : – Vous me voyez, nous dit-elle en sanglotant, dans la douleur la plus profonde ; si vous étiez venues hier, Mesdames, j'aurois pu vous recevoir convenablement, et dans un local délicieux, mais la fatalité a voulu qu'il ait été rasé entièrement, une demie heure avant le bal. Depuis un an que je suis établie ici, voilà la quatrième fois que j'éprouve ce malheur ; l'esprit dévastateur, qui bouleverse ainsi mon domaine, ne peut être touché par aucune instance, et tous les trois mois, avec le fer destructeur ; il reparoit, comme l'Aquilon qui ravage les campagnes : ajoutez à cela que, pour comble de misères, je n'ai pas même la ressource de coucher à la belle étoile, car mon habitation est toujours après insupportable, et inhabitable pendant plus de quinze jours".
- 49 "Le lundi, jour fatal, je couchai hors de la maison, et je passai ma nuit cachée dans une serviette sur la table de nuit, et où je fus dérangée quatre fois, si je sais compter. Comme je me suis endormie, je ne sais pas bien à quelle heure s'est retiré le cousin de la Baronne, qui étoit venu souper avec elle : tout ce que je sais,

c'est que réveillée en sursaut, et dans ce premier moment où l'on n'a pas encore les idées bien nettes, j'ai cru entendre fermer doucement la porte justement quand la pendule sonnoit quatre heure. Ne pouvant me dégager des plis de la serviette, je fus portée dans la garde-robe”.

- 50 “L’indiscrétion par le trou de la serrure [...] est constitutive de toute une littérature libertine qui invite le lecteur à partager une effraction”, Michel Delon, *Le savoir-vivre libertin*, 16.
- 51 “qui le plus souvent porte la charge d’émotion, de trouble et de désir”, Michel Delon, *Le savoir-vivre libertin*, 77.
- 52 Patrick Wald Lasowski, *Dictionnaire libertin. La langue du plaisir au siècle des Lumières* (Paris : Gallimard, 2011), 338.
- 53 “Deux jours après j’allai à l’Opera avec la Baronne ; là voulant mieux entendre la musique, que j’aime beaucoup ; je sortis de mon gîte : sautant de loge en loge, je fus bientôt sur le théâtre. L’idée de faire une niche à la première Actrice, qui étoit fort jolie, me passa par la tête : je pris le moment le plus intéressant pour sauter dans son oreille ; sa surprise fut si grande qu’elle chanta faux ; puis portant vivement sa main à son ***”
- 54 “je crus plus sûr d’aller vers le Nord ; ayant aperçu à l’horison deux montagnes, je m’acheminai de ce côté avec l’intention de grimper sur celle qui étoit à l’Est. J’eus beaucoup de peine à parvenir au sommet, le terrain étoit très dur et je crois de lave, de plus il étoit si poli que je glissois à chaque pas, et que je manquai vingt fois de me rompre le col. Après bien des fatigues, je parvins à un charmant buisson de roses, et qui se trouvoit, comme par hasard, à l’endroit le plus élevé. Pour ma malheur ce maudit petit cousin, qui étoit à ma poursuite, m’aperçut et je jetta sur moi pour me dévorer ; adroitement j’esquivai sa dent meurtrière et je réussis si bien que mon sot au lieu de me saisir tomba sur le nez au beau milieu des roses, et n’attrapa, à ma place, qu’un malheureux petit bouton, qui sans doute en aura été la victime. Pour le bien narguer j’allai me poster sur l’autre montagne, il voulut m’y surprendre et ne fut pas plus heureux”.
- 55 I am also studying, as part of my PhD project, a manuscript of *the Romance of the Rose* hosted in the National Library of Sweden in Stockholm (signum Vu 39). A first study has been written in French about it and has been published in Gwénaëlle Beynet Fröjd, “Un manuscrit du *Roman de la Rose* en Suède: le manuscrit Vu 39 de la Bibliothèque royale de Stockholm”, in *Pecia. Le livre et l’écrit*, 25, Jean-Luc Deuffic ed. (Turnhout : Brepols Publishers NV, 2024), 11–32. This manuscript would have belonged to Louis Marie Céleste d’Aumont, who was a descendant of the Villequier family, which had owned it since the 15th century. If he carried it with him during the dark days after the French Revolution, this demonstrates his interest in his family legacy across generations, as well as a reading tradition across the centuries. It could therefore still be a reference in literary culture even at the beginning of the 19th century.
- 56 “J’étois si enchantée du pays que je venois de découvrir que je me promis bien d’y revenir : il étoit uniquement consacré aux fleurs ; je n’y ai vu aucune autre espèce de végétation, excepté quelques baliveaux sur la montagne de l’Ouest, que la Nature dans sa sagesse avoit placés pour protéger et abriter un autre joli buisson de roses qu’elle y avoit fait croître. / Étant en train de voyager je continuai dans un vallon sombre et profond, un bois assez épais, l’ayant traversé avec difficulté, je vis une plaine à perte de vue ; comme il n’y avoit pas de route frayée, je me trouvai d’abord fort embarrassée, et pour ne pas m’égarer je pris le parti d’aller à travers champs, en me dirigeant toujours au Midi”.

- 57 “Tandis que j’en cherchois la raison, je sentis tomber sur moi un poids si énorme que j’en fus étourdie : j’aurais été infailliblement étouffée, si ce corps étranger par une sorte d’élasticité que je ne puis concevoir, ne m’avoit, en rebondissant et s’éloignant de quelques pouces, donné la facilité de respirer un peu ; ce ne fut pas long, car il retomba plus fortement pour s’éloigner encore. Cette manœuvre dura ainsi quelques tems, je n’avois précisément que l’intervalle entre chaque secousse, pour reprendre haleine et voir le jour. A l’instant même un violent tremblement de terre se fit sentir dans tout mon domaine, mon Palais fut ébranlé jusques dans les fondemens, la terre paroissoit s’entre ouvrir ; je croyais être entre deux volcans, qui mus alternativement par une force centrifuge et une force centripète, cherchoient à se réunir pour ne faire qu’un. Les intervalles entre les secousses étoient de trop courte durée pour que j’eusse songé à me sauver, et gagner pays ; d’ailleurs, quand je faisois un pas en avant, j’en reculois quatre. Ce tremblement de terre dura au moins vingt cinq minutes, il me semble, si j’ai bonne mémoire, que les secousses furent horizontales et verticales. Il y eut après un instant de calme, sûrement parce qu’il n’y avoit plus assez de matières volcaniques en fusion, j’en profitai pour ramper jusqu’à ma caverne”.
- 58 “La fatigue m’avoit oté l’appétit, cependant vers le soir : la faim, dit-on, fait sortir le loup du bois, voyant la Baronne couchée négligemment sur son canapé, et fort occupée à lire, j’hazardai de me rendre à ma salle à manger du Nord pour me mettre à table : mais il étoit écrit dans le livre du Destin que je jeunerois encore plus longtems. Au moment où je donnois le premier coup de dent, une main importune vint m’y chercher ; ne voyant pourtant que deux de mes ennemis à ma poursuite, ma peur ne fut pas bien grande, et je n’allai pas très loin pour me cacher. J’avois raison en effet, la chasse ne fut pas générale, et les deux traqueurs que j’avois fuis, n’imaginant point de parcourir mon terrain en entier, bornèrent leurs recherches au seul endroit où je comptois prendre ma nourriture ; il est vrai de dire, que malgré cela la chasse fut vive et longue. J’eus une terrible peur lorsque j’entendis que la Baronne laissoit tomber son livre. Trois fois dans le courant de cette malheureuse soirée, je voulus revenir à mon poste, et trois fois j’en fus chassée avec les mêmes circonstances : j’attendis son sommeil pour me dédommager”.
- 59 François Boucher (1703–1770) had a predilection for licentious poses. Examples can be seen online, including the paintings “Resting girl”. Consulted the 2024-05-27. <https://www.wallraf.museum/en/collections/baroque/masterpieces/francois-boucher-resting-girl-louise-o-murphy-1751/the-highlight/> and “La sultane lisant”. Consulted the 2024-05-27. <https://www.themorgan.org/drawings/item/90163>.
- 60 “l’idéologie sexuelle dominante place le corps féminin en position d’objet, elle le montre traversé par un désir qui lui fait attendre un partenaire, avec lequel le lecteur masculin ne peut manquer de s’identifier”, Michel Delon, *Le savoir-vivre libertin*, 241.
- 61 Michel Delon, *Le savoir-vivre libertin*, 236.
- 62 For discussion, see Nicolas Veysman, *Contes immoraux du XVIIIème siècle* (Paris : Éditions Robert Laffont, 2009).
- 63 Someone added the adverb “too” (*trop* in French) under the note.