

# Review of *Les Travaux d'Hercule ou la Rocambole de la Fouterie* by anonymous published in 1790.

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Labelled as pornographic in the late 18th century, obscene erotic texts and representations unveiled societal cultural taboos, forbidden desires and intimate thoughts of the people of their time. The narrative built around these sexual fantasies can, therefore, be understood as a carrier of collective representations, conscious or unconscious. The plethora of erotic texts produced during the French Revolution can, thus, be interpreted as symbolic of the political turmoil and social upheaval happening at the time. Among these texts, *Les Travaux d'Hercule ou la Rocambole de la Fouterie*, published in 1790, acts as a guide or a manual depicting twelve sexual positions alongside other texts with erotic undertones narrated by an anonymous writer. However, hidden beneath the crude and vivid imagery are the changing virtues and customs driven by the French Revolution. Linking sexuality and politics, *Les Travaux d'Hercule* shows the extent of the embodied experience of the Revolution. We find in this source both the politically charged representations of masculinity and the body as well as a reflection on

the wider dynamics experienced by men in relation to society and women.

In exploring this text, firstly I shall introduce the source's context, situating it historically and within anthropological literature. In doing this, Bourdieu's concept of Habitus and writings on masculine domination will show how the source effectively reflects the social landscape of the time. Secondly, I will demonstrate through the lens of *Les Travaux d'Hercule* the transformation of ideals of masculinity during the French Revolution, from the libertine to the heroic Hercules. Lastly, I shall widen my analytical scope and examine how *Les Travaux d'Hercule* paradoxically hides a subliminal propagandist message inciting violence and extremism whilst also revealing a threatened and fragile sense of masculinity.

*Les Travaux d'Hercule ou la Rocambole de la Fouterie* is a collection of pornographic texts revolving around the depictions of twelve sex positions. Numerated and given a title, the descriptions are only one page long. Surprisingly, *Les Travaux d'Hercule* was not censored: during the Ancient Regime, erotic texts and pornography were banned and were referred to as 'philosophical texts'. These books and pamphlets were therefore hidden but were still largely in circulation and even considered best-sellers (Darnton, 1995: 21). However, after the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in 1789, censorship of all literary genres was lifted and pornography was freed from any state or religious censorship. Thus, *Les Travaux d'Hercule*, published in 1790, narrowly escapes these rules which were later restored during Napoleon's reign (Hunt, 1996: 315). Despite its legality, the author

still chose to remain anonymous, claiming to be an emulator of Piron, Grécourt and Gervais, a dramatist, poet and composer respectively. The author often references the works of these men throughout the book, in particular 'L'Ode à Priape', an erotic poem by Alexis Piron written almost a century before in 1710. These references can be considered an inspiration or a homage to these previous artists who were the precursors of pornographic literature. The source was intended for mass consumption, targeting a male audience: indeed, serving as a guide for men by men. The language used addresses the male participant, explaining how he should act or position himself. For example, 'on fait asseoir une femme. On lui passe les jambes sur les deux épaules' (59). The pronoun 'on' suggests that the reader is part of the action and is himself handling the woman, who is always considered, the 'other'.

*Les Travaux d'Hercule* is part of a wider corpus of pornographic literature published during the Revolution. *Les Quarante manières de foutre*, for example, is also a manual and compilation of sexual positions representing Hercules as the masculine ideal. Furthermore, *Le Bordel Patriotique*, an erotic play satirising Marie-Antoinette and key revolutionaries, has a different aim and structure but is still of a similar genre. Therefore, the source can be understood as one of many and a prime example of the erotic literature produced during the French Revolution, where the language of pleasure and insurrection merge.

The French Revolution constitutes a particularly interesting moment in

history, since these years were a time of unprecedented political and symbolic upheaval. The struggle for domination articulated a split on two levels: on the one hand, the clash between Republicans and monarchists occurred simultaneously with the conflict between the Jacobins and the Girondins; and on the other, the exclusion of women from political life. These power dynamics are most easily represented by the body, which became a political weapon during the revolution. The elites and the aristocracy were seen as a disease, a symbol of a tired and sick France that had to be eliminated (Genand, 2005: 584). This desire was later embodied by the decapitation of Louis Capet, the French Monarch whose body was no longer seen as sacred but merely human. Thus, the representations of the body, and more importantly the masculine body, during the French Revolution were inherently political. This can be linked to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the body internalising and reproducing social values leading to the crafting of our social identity. The cultural reality is moulded and rooted within the behaviours of the person who unconsciously carries them out (Bourdieu, 1977). The concept of habitus reinforces the importance of the body and how its representations can help us capture a particular cultural context, in this case through the sexual bodies described in the source. Bourdieu's work is relevant again when examining masculinity and its theory. In *Masculine domination*, the anthropologist seeks to identify the structural and social roots of man's omnipresent domination over women. He interprets masculinity as a relation of power between men and women

and among men themselves (Bourdieu, 1998: 78). Within the context of the French Revolution and explored in the source, two ideals of masculinity are pitted against each other, one of the libertine of the Ancient Regime and the other of the Hercules of the new Republic. In *Les Travaux d'Hercule*, sexuality and politics are inherently tied and encapsulate the revolutionary ideology for renewal and the creation of a 'New Man'. A parallel is established between the formation of bodies and of political consciousness: mastering the lessons of pleasure allows the emergence of extraordinary men, outstanding lovers but also, and above all, model citizens in the service of the nation.

A great number of pornographic texts during the Revolution, including *Les Travaux d'Hercule*, deploy a specific imaginary of the male. Through the sexualised staging of virility, a sense of their physical characteristics and attestations of sexual potency contribute to the construction of an ideal of masculinity. The latter is socially constructed and defined by the people who carry it out. When thinking about virility, rather than being inherent or something one must maintain, it is an ideal one must attempt to achieve. This study of the male body and its representations explores the social perception of manhood at the time of the Revolution, one that is politically charged. Indeed, during the Ancient Regime, and most generally France in the 17th and 18th centuries, the representations of the ideal man revolved around the figure of the libertine, indulging in hedonistic pleasures, with little or no moral virtue, and associated with the nobility and

aristocracy (Forthe and Taithe, 2007: 23). Embodied by Valmont, the hero of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* published in 1782, he is the champion of narcissism and dishonesty. However, at the turn of the Revolution, the libertine became considered ridiculous, effeminate and useless as illustrated in the source. At the beginning of the book, the author clearly welcomes the reader on their journey to pleasure. However, he later warns that this book is not addressed to the 'petits-maitres, ces pygmées en galanterie' (p.10). Here, the author mocks and ridicules the 'petit-maitre' and later refers to them as 'des débilés et des efféminés' and compares them to feeble women. We can see here a clear shift in the perception of masculinity through the rejection of the figure of the libertine, and the replacement of the strong and vigorous Hercules. The Revolution condemns all allusion to refinement, delicacy and dishonesty - values defining the former. It is no coincidence that the National Constituent Assembly passed a decree abolishing the nobility in June 1790. Hence, at the time of the publication of the source, the aristocracy and what they represented were considered something of the past and no longer relevant. The narrator, therefore, excludes weak or diminished bodies from his text: these fatigued entities, whether characters or readers, will no longer have a place in this sexual breviary or in revolutionary France. This exclusion is emblematic of the wider ideological dynamic, the desire to eradicate the Ancient Regime and the nobility by the revolutionaries.

As the title of the book suggests, the Revolution will find its champion in the

mythological figure of Hercules. Hercules is an invincible hero who effectively embodies the values of revolutionary eroticism: strength, ardour, and prowess. In the text, the author praises the so-called Hercules' position which requires lovers of power and strong muscles. Throughout the manual, the man is often referred to as the figure of Hercules. An example from the first position illustrates this: 'notre Hercule lui passe l'instrument dans le postérieur' (17). The direct association of the reader with the mythological hero is apparent here, and for the revolutionaries, Hercules was the epitome of manliness both physically and morally. The author links the nature of pleasure with the nature of masculinity, one of energy and vigour. Physically, the man has to be gifted, in order to experience real pleasure: 'il faut pour goûter le plaisir de ce groupe charnel, que l'homme soit pourvu d'un membre d'une longue démesurée' (17). Hercules embodies this sexualised and physical aspect of masculinity through his athletic prowess and his virile features. Moreover, the Roman hero also personifies the moral virtues of the Revolution. Therefore, the re-appropriation of this figure symbolises the return to the popular and the working class. The structure of the book mirrors the twelve labours Hercules must overcome, associating sexuality with work. The twelve labours are undeniably a fundamental element of his character, and, in this text, his sexual exploits are all 'labours' which oppose him ideologically to the idleness of the aristocracy. He resembles the ordinary and hard-working revolutionary, or more specifically, the 'sans-culottes' – a radical faction of the French Revolution who imagined themselves as the antithesis

of the aristocracy. They were part of the lower-class, priding themselves in their traditional values and strong work ethic. The 'sans-culottes' find their idol in Hercules, a strong working man. The author of *Les Travaux D'Hercules* not only denounces the sexuality of the old Regime and its protagonists but also claims to train the citizen, teaching him the best ways to use his body. He makes it clear from the start that he desires, through these instructions, to create a new Hercules for the Republic: 'Je forme des Hercules, des hommes extraordinaires enfin, en développant dans l'être organisé les facultés viriles de l'humaine nature' (6). The aim of the author mirrors the mission of Hercules in his book, to restore strength and vigour to the sexuality of the patriots. Through this representation of masculinity, we discover a subliminal message, one of propaganda. The manual does not only aim to indulge the reader's pleasures but seeks a greater goal, that of the creation of the ideal patriot and revolutionary.

Although *Les Travaux d'Hercule* was published in the early years of the Revolution, we find in it traces of radical thinking and behaviour. This desire to eradicate the Ancient Regime and its nobility and create a new army, translates into sentiments of violence visible in this text. Indeed, the language used even in the title is symbolic of this phenomenon. This somewhat violent and energetic sexuality is embodied in the omnipresence of the word 'foutre' (8) and its derivatives during the Revolution. The verb designates and expresses through this gesture the erotic ardour and the vigour of the body. Revolutionary sexuality finds in it a perfect

lexical mirror: fast, fertile and energetic. This crude but also violent term reveals a relation of domination between the man and the woman, and a brutal understanding of the body and sexuality in general. These virulent terms and lexical fields seem to foreshadow the events of the Terror, a time in which violence and brutality reigned. The twelfth and final position described in the manual encapsulates this sexual violence vividly. The title '*La bonne manière ou celle du bougrement patriotique du Père Duchesne*' suggests that this position epitomises the sexuality of the perfect citizen and references the Hébertist journal, *Le Père Duchesne*. Founded by the journalist Jacques Herbert, the Hébertists were a radical and violent revolutionary group that supported and encouraged the extreme events that occurred during the Terror. In his newspaper, Herbert used the figure of 'Père Duchesne', an honest but crude foul-mouthed sans-culotte to express his views on the Revolution (Shusterman, 2014: 156). Thus, the reference to this character in *Les Travaux d'Hercule* reveals the violent political undertones of the text. The author's aim might not be limited to creating simply a 'good citizen' but in fact may be to incite them to become bold and strong fighters in the war or in the Terror yet to come. The body is once again used as a political weapon, the strong sexual imagery serving as a metaphor for the greater dynamics within revolutionary France, one of violence and struggle for power.

The twelfth position described in the manual hides another power dynamic, the relationship between the man and the woman. Everything is radicalised, the

language and the imagery no longer imply a subtle domination of the male but an explicit and violent one. Any remnants of eroticism are buried under the foul abuses. The representation of the sexual act here establishes a clear dynamic of domination, even victimisation. The first few lines illustrate this vividly: 'Il faut, sacré nom d'un million de cons vérolés! pour foutre à la manière bougrement patriotique de l'énergique père Duchesne, empoigner par la cotte une garce à cul, et lui ouvrir, sacré triple nom d'une vieille tétasse! sa vilaine foutue fressure de vache'<sup>10</sup> (60). The manner here in which the intercourse is described emphasises, in an extreme and excessive way, the vigour of Hercules. This text verbally reinforces the violent nature of the relationship, described by a filthy lexicalisation of the female body. The woman is barely reduced to her private parts and is completely dehumanised. In the representation of a strong and virile sexual figure embodied by Hercules, the act of love transforms into one of domination and rejection of the feminine more generally. '*Le père Duchesne*' magnifies and exacerbates the revolutionary zeal, and through this excessively parodic text, mocks aristocratic softness; it highlights the violence of the relationship between a vigorous revolutionary who victimises, verbally and physically, his partner, if she is even deemed worthy of that role. As Bourdieu points out, masculinity is constantly defined and moulded by its relationship to femininity: 'une notion éminemment relationnelle, construite devant et pour les autres hommes et contre la féminité, dans une sorte de peur du féminin'<sup>11</sup> (Bourdieu, 1998, 78). In the source, the exclusion and belittlement

of women are perhaps symptomatic of a threatened masculinity. Many women during the Revolution rose to prominence and were given the opportunity for political involvement. Women's political clubs and the publication of Olympe de Gouges' 'Declaration of the Rights of Women' in 1791, contributed to the emergence of women's political engagement. However, this was not always well received by the wider public with women's clubs being banned and key feminist writers, including De Gouges, being executed (Foley, 2004: 5). Ideals of masculinity created during the Revolution became a reaction to this growing feminist movement through the portrayal of all-powerful and dominant male figures such as Hercules. Bourdieu's theory becomes relevant again here, as he insists that masculinity must be examined in relation to women and their power. The all-mighty strength and manliness of Hercules, paradoxically, proves to be his vulnerability. Through a discourse of objectification and victimisation of women in *Les Travaux d'Hercule*, we can see the desire to eradicate all threats to its power. Similar to the demonisation of the libertine and aristocracy but more subtly, the projection of this ideal of masculinity exists to defend itself from women and their growing power.

Analysing *Les Travaux d'Hercule ou la Rocambole de la Fouterie* through an anthropological lens allows us to understand the embodied power dynamic that occurred during the French Revolution. Thanks to Bourdieu's theoretical framework, we were able to explore the significance of the body and sexuality within its social and political

context and examine how the perception of a sexualised ideal of masculinity becomes a testimony to the wider social structures during the late 18th century in France. The rejection of the 'old' ideal of masculinity through the mockery of their feeble and effeminate bodies was symptomatic of a desire to distance or even eradicate the Ancient Regime and what it represented. The figure of Hercules and his depiction as a sexually vigorous hero demonstrated the imperative need to create a physically and morally strong emblem of the Revolution. However, this revealed the excessive and radical undertones of the text encouraging a violent perspective on sexuality and, more importantly, on the Revolution itself. Paradoxically, this excess of violence and domination unveiled a hidden meaning, a defensive stance against the growing power of women during the Revolution leading to a threatened masculinity. Through this source and its sexual representation of bodies, we have therefore delved into the Revolutionary cosmology, mapping their desires and fears, both sexual and political.

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