

***Plaisirs solitaires: Masturbation in the Histoire comique de Francion***

**par**

**Anne Theobald**

One of the most prominent characteristics of the protagonist of Charles Sorel's *Histoire comique de Francion* is his predilection for pleasure.<sup>1</sup> He finds pleasure in eating, drinking, reading, writing, playing tricks on people, and, perhaps most of all, having sex. In a surprising passage in the fourth book of the 1623 edition, however, he proclaims that, unlike his classmates at the *collège*, he does not take pleasure in masturbation:

En ce temps là, je passois le temps avec le plus de plaisir, et le moins de soucy que je pouvois parmy les compagnies des Escoliers les plus genereux, et les plus desbauchez. Presque tous estoient addonnez a un vice, dont de tout temps nostre College avoit eu le renom d'estre infecté. C'estoit que pressez par leur jeune ardeur, ils avoient appris a se donner eux mesmes quelques contentemens sensuels, a faute d'estre accouplez avec une personne d'autre sexe. Quant a moy je n'estois gueres amoureux de ce plaisir là, et faisois conscience de respandre inutilement une semence tres bonne, au lieu de la mettre en un lieu où elle profitast: je ne me voulois point rendre ennemy des Dames, qui haïssent mortellement ceux qui les privent ainsi de ce qui leur est deub. Mais quand j'y songe, si ces garçons là pechoient, ils estoient assez grievement punis, car ils avoient beau faire, jamais ils n'assouvissoient leur desir qui s'accroissoit de plus en plus et leur donnoit des gesnes secrettes. Un tel martyre me cause de la pitié, et je maudis les loix du monde, qui gardent que les remedes n'y soient donnez, et que tant de filles qui d'ailleurs souspirent en cachettes apres les embrassemens, ne soient mises avec ceux qui sont ainsi travaillez, afin qu'ils esteignent ensemble leurs flames par une eau la plus douce de toutes, et que de-sormais ils s'abstiennent de pecher. Si nous eussions eu

---

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of this paper and Ullrich Langer for their perceptive comments.

chacun une de ces mignardes en nostre compagnie, elle nous eust bien plus servy que celle de tous nos livres.<sup>2</sup>

Sorel provides a complex and somewhat ambiguous commentary on masturbation. On the one hand, he incorporates language similar to that of theological doctrine of the seventeenth century, which condemned masturbation as a mortal sin, but at the same time he seems to demonstrate an awareness of an opposing physiological perspective about masturbation as a natural human behavior. While readers could reasonably assume that Sorel would subvert the Church's stance in favor of a more "liberal" position, his protagonist appears to share the belief of the Church that masturbation is a waste of life, but more than that, he sees it as creating an endless need to replicate pleasure that can't ever be satisfied. My purpose is to briefly discuss the significance of this passage in terms of the context of Catholic theology of the time, but especially to draw parallels between this and other contemporary literary mentions of masturbation, and to explore the connection between this episode in *Francion* and the sort of endless pleasure of fiction that the novel can provide.

In their study of the history of masturbation in France, *Histoire d'une grande peur: La masturbation*, Jean Stengers and Anne Van Neck cite the *Somme des péchez* by the Franciscan Jean Benedicti, first published in 1584, as a work that solidified the position of Catholic theology on masturbation in a systematic way.<sup>3</sup> According to Benedicti, "Quiconque se procure pollution volontaire hors le mariage, qui est appelée des théologiens *mollities*, il pèche contre l'ordre naturel...La pollution volontaire et procurée en veillant, soit par attouchement, par cogitation et délectation, par locution ou conversation avec femmes ou hommes, par lecture de livres impudiques, ou par quelqu'autre moyen que ce soit, est péché mortel."<sup>4</sup> Following the traditional teaching that the practice is condemned as

<sup>2</sup> Charles Sorel, *Histoire comique de Francion*, in *Romanciers du XVIIe siècle*, ed. A. Adam (Paris: *La Pléiade*, Gallimard, 1958) 210. All references are to this edition, which clearly notes the variants between the 1623, 1626, and 1633 editions of *Francion*.

<sup>3</sup> *Histoire d'une grande peur: la masturbation* (Bruxelles: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1984) 30–31.

<sup>4</sup> *Abrégé de la Somme des péchez* (Liège: Imprimerie C. Ouvverx, 1595), cited in Stengers and Van Neck 29. The first version of Benedicti's text was published in Lyon by Charles Pesnot in 1584. Interestingly, Stengers and Van Neck explain that involuntary masturbation ("pollutions nocturnes") was a different case; according to Benedicti, "Celui qui tombe en pollution nocturne en dormant pèche aucunes fois mortellement, quelquesfois véniellement, quelques fois ne pèche point du tout" (cited in Stengers and Van Neck 32–33).

## THEOBALD

“an act against nature” in that it does not lead to procreation, the purpose that God intended for sex, Benedicti categorizes it as a mortal sin.<sup>5</sup> He goes a step further by condemning masturbation as a crime against God’s word, referring first to Onan’s sin in Genesis.<sup>6</sup> After his brother’s death, it was Onan’s duty according to Jewish law to sleep with his sister-in-law in order to give his brother an heir. Onan resented the fact that his son would be an heir to his brother and preferred to “spill his seed” on the ground rather than impregnate his sister-in-law. While his crime seems to cover not only masturbation but also *coitus interruptus* and becomes such mainly because it involves disobeying God’s law, the terms *onanisme* and masturbation have been used interchangeably in both French and English since the beginning of the eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Francion’s claim, “[je] faisois conscience de respandre inutilement une semence tres bonne” (210), could be a reference Onan’s sin. Benedicti also refers to the New Testament to condemn masturbation as a sin against God’s word, citing Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: “Ne vous trompez point: car ne les paillards, ne les idolâtres, ne les adultères, ne les mols, ne les sodomites, ne les larrons... n’hériteront point le Royaume céleste.”<sup>8</sup> For Benedicti, “les mols” are masturbators.<sup>9</sup> Sorel’s use of the words “vice” and “pécher” in the passage undoubtedly refer to the Catholic teaching on masturbation.

While Sorel’s passage clearly has documentary value to modern historians of sexuality,<sup>10</sup> it is also, and perhaps primarily, an example of literary parody. The words “ardeur, martyre, gêne, éteindre, soupir, remède, flammes,” and “douce” are all used in Petrarch, and most important, in French imitations of Petrarch, to describe the poet’s burning love for a

<sup>5</sup> Stengers and Van Neck 31. They note that the expression “péché contre nature” was used in reference to masturbation by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, by St. Antonin in the fifteenth century, and by Cajetan in the sixteenth century (30).

<sup>6</sup> Stengers and Van Neck 31–32.

<sup>7</sup> According to Stengers and Van Neck, the term onanism has existed in both languages since the 1720’s; the common term used before the eighteenth century was self-pollution in English and *la pollution* in French (65).

<sup>8</sup> Benedicti 113, cited in Stengers and Van Neck 32. This is Benedicti’s translation of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (VI, 9–10).

<sup>9</sup> Stengers and Van Neck 32. They note, “Dans saint Paul, [...] les ‘mols’ de Corinthe—*molles* dit en latin la Vulgate—sont en fait, d’après le texte grec, des ‘dépravés’, des gens mous et efféminés, ce qui nous met assez loin de la masturbation” (32).

<sup>10</sup> The passage in *Francion* is mentioned by Stengers and Van Neck as well as by Philippe Ariès in *L’enfant et la vie familiale sous l’Ancien Régime* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973). Both texts cite it as an example without discussing it in detail.

lady (in Petrarch's case, for Laura). The image of "douce eau" as a fulfillment of erotic desire derives from Petrarch's *Rime sparse* as well (see the famous Canzone 126: *Chiare fresche et dolci acque*). Of course, the situation Sorel describes, masturbating boys and sighing girls who are ready to have sex if only the "laws of this world" permitted it, is completely contrary to the chaste though pining Petrarchan lover devoted to the one and only (married) beloved whose virtue persists until her death. Although at first glance it may seem surprising to find this lyric language associated with masturbation, it is typical of Sorel to mix high and low registers and to re-write and subvert material from literary precedents. This is something that the unconstrained "genre" he is practicing allows him to do. Therefore, one cannot separate the documentary value of Francion's comments from the literary games that Sorel is playing, which inform his comic fiction as a whole.

Another example of Sorel's literary games that also relates to Francion's idea of wasting life (and perhaps to masturbation) occurs in the second book during Francion's dream. As he dreams of having sex with Laurette, his love interest, he kisses an old woman, Agathe, who is also spending the night at the inn. Francion's roommate, who turns out to be his old friend Raymond, pulls him back: "Mais le compaignon de lict de Francion la priva d'un si cher contentement, car il tira son gentil baiseur par le devant de sa chemise, mettant en evidence la plus aymable piece de son corps, qui avoit froslé contre le ventre de ceste vieille, et luy avoit causé un plaisir noppareil, et puis après il le fit remettre au lict" (102). Although Francion is not touching himself, the word "frosler" implies a masturbatory act, and if Raymond had not been there to stop him, it is not difficult to imagine the outcome had Francion's dream continued. After he wakes up and Raymond tells him what happened, a horrified Francion says to Agathe,

ne t'en glorifie point de ce que j'ay faict, car apprens que je prenois ta bouche pour un retraict des plus salles, et qu'ayant envie de vomir j'ay voulu m'en approcher afin de ne gaster rien en ceste chambre, et de ne jeter mes ordures qu'en un lieu dont l'on ne peut accroistre l'extreme infection. J'y eusse possible apres deschargé mes excremens en te tournant le derriere et si j'ay touché a ton corps, c'est que je le prenois pour quelque vieille peau de parchemin, que je treuvois bonne a torcher un trou où ton nez ne merite pas de fleurer. (102)

## THEOBALD

This passage, although not explicitly about masturbation, seems to reaffirm Francion's objection to wasting life. The expressions "jeter mes ordures" and "descharger mes excremens" emphasize the fact that sex with an old woman cannot produce life.<sup>11</sup> Much more than a possible commentary on masturbation or on the theological consequences of the "pollution nocturne," this passage is above all highly literary: the erotic dream is a mainstay of amorous lyric inherited from the sixteenth century. The frustrated lover cannot possess his beloved in real life, so he turns to the "songe amoureux" to indulge his erotic fantasies.<sup>12</sup> Francion's disappointment when he is awakened by Raymond harks back to the transformation of the voluptuous body of the sorceress Alcina into that of an old hag in Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (VII, 70–72), and to the satirical tradition that follows.

In yet another episode, Francion comments indirectly about wasting life in the third book as he recounts his dream to Raymond. In his dream, after fleeing a group of monsters, he meets a man whom he describes as malicious; the man has climbed an apple tree and not only takes the fruit, but also breaks the branches, leaving only the trunk that has no hope of producing fruit in the future.<sup>13</sup> Martine Debaisieux has demonstrated that the episodes in Francion's dream mirror his adventures in the novel.<sup>14</sup> She shows that the threat of castration in the dream reflects Francion's fear of

---

<sup>11</sup> On the topoi of the *maquerelle* and the body of the old woman in *Francion*, see Jeanne Goldin, "Topos et fonctionnement narrative: La maquerelle dans l'Histoire comique de Francion" (*Études françaises* 13.1–2 [1977]: 89–117) and Jean Serroy, "La P... irrespectueuse: L'histoire de la vieille dans le *Francion* de Sorel" (*Littératures classiques* 41 [2001]: 123–131). On the relationship between Francion and Agathe, see Catherine J. Spencer, "Jouvence du récit: les métamorphoses d'Agathe dans *Francion*" (*Cahiers du dix-septième* 6.2 [1992]: 231–222).

<sup>12</sup> See the classic study by Henri Weber, *La Création poétique au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle en France de Maurice Scève à Agrippa d'Aubigné* (Paris: Nizet, 1955) 356–366. See also Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani, *Les thèmes amoureux dans la poésie française (1570–1600)* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1975) 147–162.

<sup>13</sup> "[...] ce qui me vint premierement a la rencontre fut un homme malicieux qui estoit monté sur un pommier et ne se contentoit pas de cueillir le fruit, mais rompoit aussi les branches, de sorte qu'il ne demeura plus que le tronc de l'arbre qui ne donnoit pas esperance de produire quelque chose l'année future" (*Francion* 148).

<sup>14</sup> *Le Procès du roman: Écriture et contrefaçon chez Charles Sorel* (Saratoga: Anna Libri, 1989, Orléans: Paradigme, 2000). Debaisieux discusses parallels in terms of content and structure; see especially 84–85 and 89–93.

impotence and loss of the virility that is part of his identity.<sup>15</sup> When the dream is considered in juxtaposition to the passage on masturbation, it seems to represent not only his fear of losing the ability to experience and give sexual pleasure (which allows him to see himself as superior to other men), but also a preoccupation with not being able to reproduce.<sup>16</sup>

While Francion objects to masturbation in the passage in question from the fourth book, calling it a vice, a sin, and a waste of life, he also suggests that it is common practice among almost all (“Presque tous”) of his classmates. The fact that he knows this implies that they do not try to hide it and therefore feel no guilt or shame about it. As we have seen, the position of the Church that masturbation was a mortal sin was not solidified until the late sixteenth century, and according to Philippe Ariès, cultural norms about children and sexuality were much less strict before the seventeenth century.<sup>17</sup> Ariès cites passages from the journal of Heroard, personal doctor to the young Louis XIII, as examples of children’s exposure to sex; he summarizes, “Pendant ses trois premières années, personne ne répugne ou ne voit de mal à toucher, par plaisanterie, les parties sexuelles de cet enfant.”<sup>18</sup> It was common, and not at all shocking, for adults to joke about sex in front of children and even to touch them sexually.<sup>19</sup> In the fifteenth century, Jean Gerson set out to reform cultural norms to protect children’s innocence; he wrote specifically about masturbation in *De Confessione mollicei*.<sup>20</sup> For Gerson, masturbation was a danger brought on by original sin, but it could be prevented through confession and through educational reform: “Comment preserver l’enfance de ce

---

<sup>15</sup> “Constamment bafoué et ridiculisé, Francion, décrit ailleurs comme trompeur et moqueur, circule dans un monde hostile mettant en doute sa virilité et dans lequel il finira par se castrer” (Debaisieux 90).

<sup>16</sup> At the beginning of Francion’s dream, we find another example of his “superiority complex” as he and the men around him must plug holes in their boats with their members; Francion says, “Ho! le malheur pour quelques uns de mes compagnons qui me vouloient ensuivre! Leur pauvre piece estoit si menuë qu’au lieu de bondon, elle n’eust pu server que de fausset [...] Moy [je] ne craignois pas que ce malheur m’avint, parce que j’estoy fourny, autant que pas un, de ce qui m’estoit necessaire” (141). I do not consider this an example of masturbation in the text because the men are not described as experiencing any sexual pleasure.

<sup>17</sup> *L’enfant et la vie familiale sous l’Ancien Régime* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973). See especially chapter 5, “De l’impudeur à l’innocence.”

<sup>18</sup> Ariès 142.

<sup>19</sup> Ariès 144–145.

<sup>20</sup> Ariès 149.

## THEOBALD

danger? Par le conseil du confesseur, mais aussi en changeant les mauvaises habitudes de l'éducation, en se comportant avec les enfants autrement. On leur parlera sobrement, en n'utilisant que des mots chastes."<sup>21</sup> The purpose of the "conseil du confesseur" was to make children, especially those between ten and twelve years old, feel guilty about masturbation.<sup>22</sup> Ariès writes that the moral discipline that Gerson called for in *collèges* was not established until the late seventeenth century.<sup>23</sup>

Jean-Jacques Bouchard's *Confessions* reflect the less severe, pre-guilt perspective on masturbation. Bouchard was a part of the libertine social circle in Paris during the 1630's; if he didn't know Sorel, they were likely to have had acquaintances in common.<sup>24</sup> In this fascinating account of sexual initiation that was not published until 1881, masturbation is described in surprising detail. The narrator explains that the main character, Orestes, discovered the practice at eleven years old:

Estant parvenu à l'age d'onse ans il treuva de luy mesme le moyen de *bransler la pique* en cette façon : une après disnée, come il estoit dans une petite estude assis sous une table [...] *regardant son vit et le maniant*, il sentait je ne sçai quel chatouillement extraordinaire, ce qui le fit recommencer une autre fois avec plus d'attention ; et y ayant treuvé un goust noppareil, il comencea de là en hors à perfectionner cet art dont il s'imaginoit estre l'inventeur, l'apprenant aux petits laquais de chez luy et à quelques enfans de ses voisins.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *De confessione mollicei*, Opera 1706, t. II (309), cited in Ariès 150.

<sup>22</sup> Ariès 149. Stengers and Van Neck note, "Après Gerson, qui est du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle, on ne rencontre pratiquement plus aucun ouvrage, grand ou petit, qui cherche à guider les confesseurs pour leur indiquer la bonne manière de démasquer les masturbateurs" (34).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 151.

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Pierre Cavaillé describes Bouchard's *Confessions* as "un document exceptionnel [...] sur la sociabilité libertine à Paris dans ces années de Luillier, La Mothe le Vayer, Pellault, Marchand, Guy de la Brosse, Bourdelot, sans oublier Gassendi et son mécène Raphaël de Bollogne" ("Jean-Jacques Bouchard en Italie: Athéisme et sodomie à l'ombre de la curie romaine," in *Dissidents, excentriques, et marginaux de l'Age classique: Autour de Cyrano de Bergerac*, ed. P. Harry, A. Mothu, and P. Sellier [Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006] 292).

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Jacques Bouchard, *Les Confessions*, in *Journal* (2 vol, t. I) ed. E. Kanceff (Turin: G. Giappichelli, 1976) 6–7. The words in italics appear in the Greek alphabet in Bouchard's text. I would like to thank Adam Horsely for pointing me to Bouchard's *Confessions* for this study.

He continues to masturbate as a *collégien*: “Il mena cette vie là tout le temps qu’il fut au college, c’est à dire depuis les treize jusques à dix huit ans, *spermatisant tous les jours, deux fois d’ordinaire, le plus souvent trois ou quatre [...]*.”<sup>26</sup> A few years later, Orestes cannot achieve an erection in order to have sex with women:

devant que se trouver avecque quelque *femme*, il estoit dans des ardeurs et des impatiences nompareilles tout le temps qu’elle estoit absente; puis en la presence aussitot il se sentoit fraper de je ne sçai quelle mauvaise honte / si opinastrement froide, que ni la chaleur du devis, ni du vin, ni des caresses, ni des baisers mesmes ne la pouvoit surmonter. Il en falloit venir à une forte et puissante operation de main, et après avoir bien *pressé, [...]* et *frotté*, une grosse heure durant, jusques à la lassitude de l’un et de l’autre [...], il ne succedoit autre chose qu’une excessive sueur, suivie incontinent après d’un frisson si violent, qu’il n’y avoit si petite partie de son corps qui n’en fust esbranlée avec une espece de convulsion; ce qui luy causoit une telle dissipation d’esprits qu’il demouroit come esvanouy une bonne espace de temps. Que si après cela il pensoit solliciter et presser de nouveau son bidet ombrageus, c’estoit lors qu’il recomençoit de plus belle ses quintes et son opiniastreté, car il l’a vu mille fois se dresser, puis au mesme instant qu’il le vouloit faire entrer, tomber plus mort que jamais.<sup>27</sup>

Orestes fears that his impotence is caused by too much masturbation in his youth. This problem could be what Sorel refers to as the “*gesnes secrettes*” experienced by Francion’s friends. Interestingly, impotence is one of the physical consequences of the practice, along with convulsions, fatigue, and weakness, threatened by the anonymous author of a widely-circulated pamphlet about masturbation in 1715.<sup>28</sup> The description of Orestes’s symptoms suggests that the rumors of physical effects of masturbation that were believed to be true in the eighteenth century may have already started as early as the 1620’s or 30’s.

---

<sup>26</sup> Bouchard 7.

<sup>27</sup> Bouchard 5–6.

<sup>28</sup> Stengers and Van Neck 49–50; the Swiss doctor Tissot makes similar claims in *L’onanisme: ou dissertation sur les maladies produites par la masturbation* (Lausanne: Antoine Chapuis, 1760), cited in Stengers and Van Neck 49.

## THEOBALD

Although Orestes is clearly frustrated by the impotence that he thinks is the result of masturbation, it is difficult to determine if he feels guilt. In her discussion of whether or not the title “Confessions” (assigned 250 years after the text was composed) is appropriate, Martha Houle writes, “Bouchard makes no reference to the actions he recounts as *erreurs* or *péchés*, nor does he speak of guilt or repentance.”<sup>29</sup> However, in the previously cited passage, the narrator describes Orestes as feeling struck by “je ne sçai quelle mauvaise honte” when he is unable to have sex with women, and the predicate “je ne sçai quel” is also associated with the “chatouillement” Orestes feels while masturbating in the first passage. But Orestes’s shame is conveyed through physical symptoms, not through moral reflection. Instead of being held back by the moral or religious qualms that characterize the traditional conflict between a sense of sin and the desires of the body, it is Orestes’s body that holds him back. While Bouchard uses Greek letters to “disguise” the most shocking parts of his text, he speaks much more openly about masturbation than Sorel does in *Francion*, and the words “vice” and “pécher” give Sorel’s passage a more moralizing tone. Of course, it is important to note that Bouchard may not have intended to publish the *Confessions*, whereas Sorel rightfully feared being censored; he omitted the passage about masturbation in the 1626 edition of *Francion* presumably for fear of persecution after the trial of Théophile de Viau.

For Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, Bouchard’s description of masturbation suggests that it was an ordinary part of sexual experimentation: “[Bouchard] raconte une initiation à la sexualité, sans doute tout à fait banale, d’un fils de famille de l’époque (masturbation, sexualité de collègue, amours ancillaires compliquées d’impuissance émotive...), et non pas du tout l’expérience ab-norme d’un ‘pervers’ comme on l’a si souvent écrit.”<sup>30</sup> The fact that Francion’s friends masturbate suggests the same thing, and Sorel’s explanation that they felt a physical need to release sexual energy (they were “pressez par leur jeune ardeur”) also points to a physiological stance about masturbation that was emerging in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Jean-Louis Flandrin cites a 1628 translation of Cardinal F. Toledo’s instructions for priests regarding confession:

It is a very grave sin and one which is against nature: it is not permitted either for health or for life, nor for what-

---

<sup>29</sup> “Naming the ‘Confessions’ of Jean-Jacques Bouchard,” *Cahiers du dix-septième* 9.2 (2005): 1.

<sup>30</sup> Cavaillé 292–293.

*MASTURBATION IN SOREL*

ever purpose. Therefore those Doctors who advise this act on health grounds sin grievously, and those who obey them are not exempt from mortal sin. This sin is abandoned with great difficulty, particularly as the temptation is ever-present: therefore it is so common that I believe that the majority of the damned are tainted with this vice.<sup>31</sup>

While there is little to no medical documentation about physical effects, whether positive or negative, of the practice of masturbation during the *Ancien Régime*, this excerpt shows that it was quite common and that it was seen as beneficial by at least some doctors who were recommending it to patients.

Several poems presented in *La Muse lascive*, Michel Jeanneret's anthology of sixteenth and seventeenth century erotic poetry that has been ignored and/or under-valued by critics, both confirm that masturbation was a common practice and shed light on the passage in *Francion*.<sup>32</sup> In an untitled poem by Saint-Pavin, the poet adopts a critical tone toward masturbation and gives voice to the same concern about wasting life expressed by *Francion*:

Pour ne point foutre de putain,  
En crois-tu, pour cela, tes passe-temps sans crime ?  
Bougre, tu te fous de la main,  
Ce plaisir est-il légitime ?  
Si celui qui forma le plus grand des Romains,  
Pour tout con n'eust eu que ses mains,  
Voy de quel heros admirable,  
Il auroit privé l'Univers ;  
Songe que la nature en tes plaisirs pervers,  
Te crie incessamment : Arreste misérable,  
Ah ! c'est un homme que tu pers !<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> *Sex in the Western World*, trans. Sue Collins (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1991) 251–252. Flandrin cites Cardinal F. Toledo, *L'Instruction de Prestres qui contient sommairement tous les cas de conscience*, trans. M.A. Goffar (Lyons, 1628).

<sup>32</sup> *La Muse lascive: Anthologie de la poésie érotique et pornographique française* (Paris: José Corti, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Denis Sanguin de Saint-Pavin, Poésies, in *Disciples et successeurs de Théophile de Viau (...), Des Barreaux (1599–1673) et Saint-Pavin (1595–1670)*, ed. F. Lachèvre (Paris: Champion, 1911). Cited in *La Muse lascive* 273.

## THEOBALD

Since Saint-Pavin treats masturbation much more favorably in another poem (“Ma main est là bien aymée/ Qui me sert le plus souvent,/ Le soir, ma porte fermée,/Seul, je m’en joue en resvant”<sup>34</sup>), this poem may be written in the voice of someone who has chastised the poet for masturbating; or perhaps the poet is talking to himself as an expression of self-loathing. But the last verses suggest that the crime of masturbation is perverse not because it goes against God but because it goes against nature and the human race. Indeed, it is nature that cries out incessantly to the masturbator, not the Holy Spirit or his conscience. In addition, the counter-factual example given, Augustus’s absence from history, had his father not discharged in a “con,” can easily be read ironically. First of all, it is pagan, not Christian, and the burlesque juxtaposition between the vulgar “con” with elevated style of the periphrases “le plus grand des Romains” and “quel heros admirable” undermines the moral questioning that the hortatory rhetoric is intended to produce. Clearly, Saint-Pavin is having fun with the topic. Masturbation seems to lend itself to a sort of writing that includes many levels of intention and meaning, much the same as Sorel’s passage, whose mixture of theological, mock-Petrarchan, and naturalistic vocabulary can also be read as a Catholic condemnation or as a warning against the physiological consequences of the practice or finally, it can simply be read ironically as a gesture to the censors.

Malherbe takes a more personal tone in a poem that describes the struggle between desires of the body and fear of sin:

Sitôt que le sommeil au matin m’a quitté,  
Le premier souvenir est du con de Nérée,  
De qui la motte ferme et la barbe dorée,  
Égale ma fortune à l’immortalité.

Mon vit, dont le plaisir est la félicité,  
S’allonge incontinent à si douce curée,  
Et d’une échine roide au combat préparée,  
Montre que sa colère est à l’extrémité.

La douleur que j’en ai m’ôte la patience,  
Car de me le mener c’est cas de conscience,  
Ne le mener point ce sont mille trépas.

Je pense le flatter afin qu’il se contienne,

---

<sup>34</sup> *La Muse lascive* 272.

## MASTURBATION IN SOREL

Mais en l'entretenant je ne m'aperçois pas,  
Qu'il crache en la main sa fureur et la mienne.<sup>35</sup>

The words “incontinent,” “colère,” and “fureur” emphasize the uncontrollable force of the poet’s sexual desire, which is comparable to Sorel’s description of Francion’s friends who are “pressez par leur jeune ardeur” to masturbate. It is unclear whether Francion’s friends experience guilt or shame, but in Malherbe’s poem, masturbation is a “cas de conscience.” His member is compared implicitly to a hunting dog (see the hunting vocabulary: “curée,” “échine,” “mener,” “flatter,” “se contenir”). The lyrical markers “immortalité” and “mille trépas” make of this poem another send-up of allegories of the erotic chase and capture. Usually, it is the lover who is “captured” by the snares of the beloved (in this case, her “con” instead of her eyes), and in the case of Actaeon, he is devoured by his own dogs. But the subject of masturbation allows this erotic allegory to be turned on its head. The result of the action is bittersweet: desire’s fury is appeased, but the poet becomes furious with himself. His semen, a mark of his own and his “dog’s” anger, is in his hand which also, conveniently, is the hand that holds the pen. The last term “fureur” can be taken ironically, as a *furore poeticus*: the scenario of masturbation has allowed Malherbe, as Saint-Pavin and Sorel, to engage in some extremely self-conscious and multi-leveled writing.

In comparison to these two poems, however, the tone of Sorel’s passage seems much lighter. His solution to the problem of “jeune ardeur” is neither abstinence nor masturbation, but sex between a man and a woman. Francion says, “je maudis les loix du monde, qui gardent que les remedes n’y soient donnez, et que tant de filles qui d’ailleurs souspirent en cachettes après les embrassemens, ne soient mises avec ceux qui sont ainsi travaillez, afin qu’ils esteignent ensemble leurs flames par une eau la plus douce de toutes, et que desormais ils s’abstiennent de pecher.” Sorel seems to acknowledge that sexual desire is a natural human instinct and suggests indirectly that there is nothing inherently wrong or sinful about it. However, there is no mention of marriage in this passage. Sorel therefore foregoes one sin (masturbation) for another (premarital sex), which his protagonist enjoys throughout the novel.

The only punishment for masturbation mentioned in the passage is that “jamais [ses amis] n’assouvissoient leur desir qui s’accroissoit de plus

---

<sup>35</sup> François de Malherbe, *Oeuvres*, ed. A. Adam (Paris: Pléiade, 1971), cited in *La Muse lascive* 107.

## THEOBALD

en plus et leur donnoit des gesnes secrettes.” For Francion, then, masturbation produces a never-ending need to replicate pleasure, whereas sex with a woman seems to provide fulfillment. Masturbatory pleasures are infinite but unlikely to produce satisfaction whereas heterosexual pleasure is teleological and definite. The analogue to Malherbe’s “fureur” is found in the representation of another endless pleasure in the *Histoire comique de Francion*: the pleasure produced by reading and writing fiction. It is, indeed, the pleasure of novelistic prose as opposed to the definite and teleological pleasure of drama and poetry. In this sense, Sorel engages in meta-poetic play similar to what we have seen in the poems, although it is more on the level of an indefinite writing process than in the lexical and intentional games of Saint-Pavin and Malherbe.

This analogy between the endless need for, and the pleasure of, masturbation, and the lack of generic framing, the absence of a moral lesson, and the pleasure of the novel is apparent in Sorel’s statements and in his writing practice. The *Advertissement d’importance aux lecteurs* of the 1623 edition of *Francion* implies that the novel came about in order to provide pleasure to the writer: “Je n’ay point trouvé de remede plus aisé ny plus salutaire a l’ennuy qui m’affligeoit quelque temps, que de m’amuser a descrire une histoire qui tinst davantage du folastre que du serieux, de maniere qu’une triste cause a produit un facetieux effect” (61). “Folastre” has the important connotations of “free from constraints” or “playful,” and in the history of its usage is sometimes connected to erotic fantasy.<sup>36</sup> Not only an observer (and participant) of sexual practices, Francion is also a writer, and in the eleventh book of the 1626 edition, he tells his friends, “Je n’escry que pour me divertir” (438). The pleasure experienced by the writer is mirrored by that of the reader. After Francion describes his dream to Raymond in the third book of the 1623 edition, Raymond says, “je suis marry maintenant que je vous resveillay, d’autant que vostre songe eust esté plus long, et que le plaisir que je reçoÿ à vous l’ouyr raconter eust esté de mesme mesure” (154). Similarly, after Hortensius tells a story in the fourth book, the narrator describes Fremonde’s reaction: “a la premiere fois qu’il [Hortensius] dit, pour le faire court, car c’estoient les mots qu’il repetoit, elle luy respondit, si vous voulez plaire, il ne faut pas dire si souvent, pour vous le faire court, parce que tout resolutement nous le voulons long” (197). Not only is this a sexual

---

<sup>36</sup> Furetière gives the following definition of *folastre*: “Qui a l’humeur plaisante, badine, qui est peu serieux” and for *folastrer*: “Faire des actions, ou avoir des entretiens folâtres, plaisants, agreables, peu serieux; badiner, faire de petites folies. Lorsque nous fumes au lit, elles commencerent à folâtrer” (*Dictionnaire universel*).

innuendo, but it also corresponds to Sorel's practice of fiction.<sup>37</sup> So the listener's pleasure—longer is better—comes to be identical to the reader's pleasure. Sorel makes the *histoire comique* longer and longer by adding new episodes and by pushing back the marriage of Francion and Nays at the end of the 1626 edition to the end of the twelfth book in the 1633 edition. He also writes in the closing sentence of the 1626 edition that *Le Berger extravagant* will be a continuation of story: "En attendant je travailleray a mettre par ordre les aventures du Berger extravagant que Francion a composés, et les donneray au public comme une seconde partie de ceste Histoire Comique" (462). As Martine Debaisieux observes, "L'histoire comique de Sorel semble donc constamment vouloir retarder sa fin."<sup>38</sup>

Another example of prolonging the pleasure provided by the novel is found in *La Maison des jeux*, which Sorel composed between 1625 and 1635, at the same time he was writing *Francion* and *Le Berger extravagant*.<sup>39</sup> The characters play a game called "le jeu du roman" and spontaneously create a novel as a group. Each member continues the story, often re-writing other group members' earlier portions. The novel that the group creates "ends" with several marriages, but the group decides that the ending can always be pushed back if they change their minds, and the story can always continue in the imagination of the reader:

Dorilas ayant finy le Roman de cette sorte, les uns dirent que sa conclusion estoit aussi à propos comme elle pouvoit estre, & les autres qu'il la pouvoit changer, & la faire pour le moins aussi bonne qu'elle estoit; Mais l'on en remit les discours à une autrefois, de mesme que des autres particularitez qui concernoient toute l'Histoire; Et l'on dit seulement qu'il y avoit eu un grand plaisir à entendre les

---

<sup>37</sup>Wim De Vos interprets the passage on masturbation in *Francion* as a commentary on writing, but he limits it to the pedantic writing of Hortensius described in the episode that directly precedes it: "Le plaisir solitaire découle de la 'jeune ardeur' des collégiens. Le récit juxtapose le feu littéraire qui anime Hortensius, au désir qui provoque la masturbation. [...] Le pédant s'emprisonne dans le cercle vicieux de l'auto-citation. Nous croyons que la masturbation des élèves fait écho à l'amour propre textuel du maître [Hortensius]" (*Le singe au miroir: Emprunt textuel et écriture savant dans les romans comiques de Charles Sorel* [Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1994]: 115). I also associate the passage with writing, but in a much broader sense.

<sup>38</sup>Debaisieux 52.

<sup>39</sup>Emile Roy, *La Vie et les œuvres de Charles Sorel* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1891) 241. *La Maison des jeux* was published in 1642 and 1657.

## THEOBALD

divers changemens de stile que plusieurs avoient fait dans leur narration; Apres cela l'on donna le bon soir à Lydie, & chacun se retira.<sup>40</sup>

The prolonging of the ending of *Francion* and of the novel game in *La Maison des jeux* runs counter to another, more “official” view of pleasure created by fiction, especially by tragedy in the Aristotelian seventeenth century, which emphasizes the perfect pleasure that a well-conceived closure can provide. But for Sorel, closure in fiction represents the end of pleasure, and the longer the story, the better.

In conclusion, let us look again at Francion’s statement concerning masturbation:

Quant a moy je n'estois gueres amoureux de ce plaisir là, et faisois conscience de resprendre inutilement une semence tres bonne, au lieu de la mettre en un lieu où elle profitast: je ne me voulois point rendre ennemy des Dames, qui haïssent mortellement ceux qui les privent ainsi de ce qui leur est deub.

Similar to Malherbe’s ironic formulation (and to, non-ironically, the Catholic tradition), for Francion masturbation presents a “cas de conscience” and, as the biblically charged expression “resprendre inutilement” confirms, it is indirectly represented as a sin. The adverb “inutilement” can refer to the absence of offspring, just as the verb “profiter” can refer to offspring at the end of the phrase. Spilling one’s seed on the ground instead of inside a woman cannot produce a child. However, the next sentence modifies the meaning of “inutile” and “profiter”: Francion did not want to make himself an enemy of the “ladies.” Note that he does not say “mon épouse,” but he uses the plural. Masturbation, then, is “useless” because it does not please women who would prefer men to make love to them, to give them pleasure (and not necessarily children). Becoming an enemy of the ladies means that this pleasure would no longer be available to Francion himself. In other words, sex with women is deprived of an “ending” (children, marriage) just as much as masturbation, but sex with women is undoubtedly a lot more fun. At the same time, the lexicon of “profit” is one that recalls the profession of writing (as a livelihood); the

---

<sup>40</sup> Charles Sorel, *La Maison des jeux, où se trouvent les divertissemens d'une compagnie, par des narrations agreables, & par des jeux d'esprit, & autres entretiens d'une honeste conversation* (Paris: A. de Sommaville, 1657; Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1972) 602–603.

writing of novels, too, is one that appeals primarily to women, and, in opposition to the “high” forms of literature, allows indefinite re-writing and continuation. In that sense, despite its overt condemnation by Francion, masturbation can be compared to the sort of unending pleasure that the writer can provide to reader and listener and himself.

Ithaca College

### Works Cited

- Ariès, Philippe. *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973.
- Bouchard, Jean-Jacques. *Les Confessions*. In *Journal* (2 vol, t. I), ed. E. Kanceff. Turin: G. Giappichelli, 1976.
- Cavaillé, Jean-Pierre. “Jean-Jacques Bouchard en Italie: Athéisme et sodomie à l'ombre de la curie romaine.” In *Dissidents, excentriques, et marginaux de l'Age classique: Autour de Cyrano de Bergerac*, ed. P. Harry, A. Mothu, and P. Sellier. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006.
- Debaisieux, Martine. *Le Procès du roman: Écriture et contrefaçon chez Charles Sorel*. Saratoga: Anma Libri, 1989, Orléans: Paradigme, 2000.
- De Vos, Wim. *Le singe au miroir: Emprunt textuel et écriture savant dans les romans comiques de Charles Sorel*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1994.
- Flandrin, Jean-Louis. *Sex in the Western World*, trans. Sue Collins. Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1991.
- Goldin, Jeanne. “Topos et fonctionnement narratif: la maquerelle dans l'*Histoire comique de Francion*.” *Études françaises* 13.1–2 (1977): 89–117.
- Houle, Martha. “Naming the ‘Confessions’ of Jean-Jacques Bouchard.” *Cahiers du dix-septième* 9.2 (2005): 1–9.

## THEOBALD

- Jeanneret, Michel. *La Muse lascive: Anthologie de la poésie érotique et pornographique française*. Paris: José Corti, 2007.
- Mathieu-Castellani, Gisèle. *Les thèmes amoureux dans la poésie française (1570–1600)*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1975.
- Roy, Emile. *La Vie et les œuvres de Charles Sorel*. Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1891.
- Serroy, Jean. “La P... irrespectueuse: L’histoire de la vieille dans le *Francion* de Sorel.” *Littératures classiques* 41 (2001): 123–131.
- Sorel, Charles. *Histoire comique de Francion*. In *Romanciers du XVIIe siècle*, ed. A. Adam. Paris: La Pléiade, Gallimard, 1958.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *La Maison des jeux, où se treuvent les divertissemens d’une compagnie, par des narrations agreables, & par des jeux d’esprit, & d’autres entretiens d’une honeste conversation*. Paris: A. de Sommaville, 1657; Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1977.
- Spencer, Catherine J. “Jouvence du récit: les métamorphoses d’Agathe dans *Francion*.” *Cahiers du dix-septième* 6.2 (1992): 213–222.
- Stenger, Jean, and Anne Van Neck. *Histoire d’une grande peur: la masturbation*. Bruxelles: Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 1984.
- Weber, Henri. *La Création poétique au XVIe siècle en France de Maurice Scève à Agrippa d’Aubigné*. Paris: Nizet, 1955.