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June 2005

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Going Through the Trash: Meaning in the Cabaret and Cabinet Baroque Lyric

by

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Joan DeJean's recent book, *The Reinvention of Obscenity*, brings front and center issues of filth and impiety as they relate to cultural norms. DeJean's assertion that "Paris was *the* center for the production of dirty books and dirty pictures"¹ in the Early Modern period underscores the extent to which obscene literature becomes a cultural referent, either open or clandestine. While her focus is on obscenity as it relates to the neo-Classical era, DeJean emphasizes that the Baroque period also contributed to the "reinvention" of smut that characterized a distinct element of literary and artistic production during the seventeenth century. She concentrates on Théophile de Viau, and mentions works such as the *Le Cabinet satyrique* (1618), and the *Le Parnasse des poètes satyriques* (1622). These volumes, containing bawdy offerings from the likes of Théophile (1590-1626), Mathurin Régnier (1573-1613), and Guillaume Colletet (1588-1641) among others, contribute to what Louis Perceau terms "la magnifique floraison satyrique" (p. 4) of the libertine era.²

Along with Théophile, these latter authors constitute what Claire Gaudiani calls "cabaret" poets, many of whom also fall into the *cabinet* category.³ As Lewis Seifert and others at this conference have noted, the *cabinet* refers to a secluded place where any one of a number of physical and intellectual activities can take place—some much more noble than

¹ Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 2.

² Perceau is certainly to be credited for bringing much of libertine poetry to the attention of contemporary readers, and lyric quotes in this essay come from his *Le Cabinet Secret du Parnasse. Théophile de Viau et les libertins*. (Paris: Cabinet du Livre, 1935). However, the work of Frédéric Lachèvre deserves special mention, as his corpus of over 40 monographs and critical editions served as inspiration to Perceau and other critics. See especially his series, *Le libertinage au XVII^e siècle [...] Disciples et successeurs de Théophile de Viau*, published by Champion in the early 1900s.

³ *The Cabaret Poetry of Théophile de Viau: Texts and Traditions* (Tubingen: Gunter Narr, 1981).

others. For our purposes, the *cabinet* and cabaret constitute a kind of literary privy where poets privilege the ribald, the scatological, and the grossly erotic, thereby revealing key paradoxes with respect to the status of lewd literature as a cultural marker. On the one hand, these poets, in their conventional work, uphold the traditional lyric forms and themes that presumably elevate their poetry to the level of high culture. On the other, the taboo subjects and the often underground publication outlets for the *cabinet* offerings suggest an element of low culture that borders on what we would now term the "counter-cultural" or "subcultural." Effectively, many of these *cabinet* or cabaret offerings find themselves in a cultural "no man's land" because they imitate what presumably become high lyric forms of the sonnet, the ode, and the ballad, while indicting the courtly, aristocratic, and later bourgeois values of the dominant high culture.

Because *cabinet* and cabaret poetry issue from and comment on prevailing taste, they cannot be dismissed as a trivial foray into post-adolescent humor. Rather, much like contemporary trash art, the low seeks, in the words of Dwight Macdonald, "to trivialize the high."⁴ Indeed, I argue that the obscene lyric of Théophile, Colletet, Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695), and Claude Le Petit (1639-1662), serves as a kind of early modern trash art. Certainly, not all trash art is obscene, nor can all "obscene" art be considered "trash." However, if we accept the premise that aesthetic form and content can be expanded by literature that is considered marginal at best and filthy at worst, then the value of *cabinet* and cabaret poetry in Baroque France becomes the same as some forms of trash today. Specifically, examples of what may be termed "popular culture" are just as critically penetrating, and in some cases more so, than examples of high culture. While it is true that in many cases trash culture is meant, in Hannah Arendt's terms, to "ransack the classics" (qtd. in Simon, 16), it also provides a viable intellectual alternative to the "pieties." I contend that the cabaret and *cabinet* lyric furnish this alternative in terms of what they say about sexuality, gender relations, and literature itself. As a result, "trash" becomes not the refuse of a culture but rather one of its fundamental materials.

What then, is trash culture in the contemporary sense and how can we apply it to the poetry in question? Most theorists claim that while trash culture is synonymous with popular culture, it is impossible to arrive at a single definition of either term. On one level, trash culture is associated with mass entertainment and high profit margins. Supermarket tabloids, sitcoms, dime store novels, and B-movies can all comprise what critics and

⁴ Quoted in Richard Keller Simon, *Trash Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 15.

some of the public at large consider to be trash. Obvious anachronisms aside, it would be difficult to relate this definition to the scabrous verse of Baroque and neo-Classical poets in part because the distribution of this lyric was hardly wide and there was little to no economic impetus for these authors to produce such work. Neither does the discussion of trash extend to recent arguments suggesting that trash should be valued as a transformation of genres over time. Along such lines, Richard Keller Simon contends that *Rambo* should be read as a postmodern version of the *Iliad*, and soap operas such as *Days of Our Lives* amount to present-day variations of Jacobean tragedy (p. 25). Clearly, no such parallels apply to the texts in question.

For us, trash defines itself as literary offerings whose content and tone have an appeal so base as to exclude them from any traditional consideration as high art. Publication history has also regarded obscene poetry as trash in that during the Baroque and early neo-Classical periods, these texts were often either published secretly or not at all. Similarly, modern publishers often relegate such poems to addenda and appendices that are long detached from the body of the edition. Smutty poems are considered literary bilge because the critical definitions ascribed to them are those consigned to bawdy jokes, burlesque parody, and general tawdry amusement. No doubt these poems reflect all these categories, but to suggest that they have little to no intellectual value ignores the questions of culture, taste, and of aesthetic problematics that they pose. Boileau's invective in the *Art poétique* that "Le parnasse parla le langage des halles"⁵ is no doubt true and indeed this attitude finds echo in many contemporary critics, among them Susan Tiefenbrun who describes Régnier's band of churlish friends as "ces bas rimeurs si méprisables."⁶

Nonetheless, a strong defense of filth can be made if one sees it, to use Andrew Tolson's words, as "a site of struggle between 'lived cultures.'"⁷ While Théophile's, La Fontaine's and Régnier's credentials as standard bearers of high culture cannot be questioned, it should not be overlooked

⁵ In his effort to revive the noble aspirations of the lyric, Boileau exhorts poets in the following manner: "Quoi que vous écriviez, évitez la bassesse: / Le style le moins noble a pourtant sa noblesse. / Au mépris du bon sens, le burlesque effronté / Trompa les yeux d'abord, plut par sa nouveauté: / On ne vit plus en vers que pointes trivales; / Le Parnasse parla le langage des halles," *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1969), vol. II, vv. 79-84, p. 89.

⁶ "Mathurin Régnier," *La poésie française du premier 17^e siècle*, ed. David Lee Rubin (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1986), p. 165.

⁷ "Popular Culture: Practice and Institution," in *High Theory/Low Culture: Analyzing Popular Television and Film*, ed. Colin McCabe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 143.

that Colletet also was a member of the Académie Française and that Petit was a member of the Parisian Parliament. Why did these authors write such poetry? As a naughty *exercice de style*? As an inside joke? Or as a social and literary statement? The most likely answer is a mix of all three. These poets indeed “lived” in many cultures—the salon, the court, the Church, the tavern, and the brothel. Consequently, their poetry reflects the experiences, paradoxes, and hypocrisies of these different settings. Without question, for this type of lyric, the saloon becomes the salon, creating its own normative language, culture, and poetics. Accordingly, when defining cabaret poetry, Gaudiani suggests that “out of the context of the cabaret ambiance and its long literary tradition, this poetry appears more scabrous than it would have in its natural milieu, the tavern” (p. 15). While the cabaret itself represents what is recognized as “low culture,” it necessarily incorporates elements of high culture not simply to smash it, but to mediate between aesthetic registers. In addition to the poets already mentioned, Voiture (1598-1648), Malherbe (1555-1628), and Motin (1566-1612) also composed this type of lyric. What one remarks, then, is that a significant number of major Baroque poets included the obscene within their corpus. The presence of trash in so many authors is not coincidental. Rather, it indicates a critique on the part of those who are among the most culturally aware and expands the political, social, and artistic parameters in which a given culture can be examined. Luminary poets write trash because they seek, in a harsh manner, to attack conventional notions of taste and to further the experiment of the lyric. In Tolson’s words, trash strives to invent “new languages [...] associated with sub and counter-cultures” (p. 147). Clearly, the abundant use of foul expression in this poetry—while not necessary new in the sense that it is unknown to the reader—nonetheless upends the audience’s notion of how language is used in the lyric. The combination of standard, if not high forms such as the sonnet, the ode, and the epigram, with low topics such as venereal disease, masturbation, and vulgar diatribes against society convey a fluidity that implies how low and high culture can not only coexist, but can flourish in the same work and in the same author.

The Baroque period provides many examples of the blending of high and low culture. Rabelais’s exclamation, “O belle matiere fecale” illustrates how the beautiful and the seemingly repugnant can simultaneously define notions of taste.⁸ Similarly, Claude Abraham reminds us of the obscene ballet libretti Tristan L’Hermite wrote for the court of libertines such as Louis XIII’s brother Gaston d’Orléans, and argues that “the ballets danced

⁸ See Mireille Huchon’s edition. The quote is from chapter 5 of *Gargantua*, which recounts Gargamelle’s copious ingestion of tripes prior to Gargantua’s birth. *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 17.

by Louis XIII and Richelieu were no less obscene."⁹ On the one hand, bawdy literature shocked a section of the public nurtured by the traditions of *bienséance*. On the other, there existed in other circles not only a tolerance for trash, but a desire for it not just from the poets themselves but from those who sponsored them. Some authors, critics, and poets sought to separate these worlds, while others saw them as a unified whole. The titles for the collections of Théophile and his libertine disciples, *Le Cabinet Secret* and *Le Parnasse des poètes satyriques*, suggest that the poets lived in two worlds at once. *The Parnasse*, of course, implies all that is lofty, orthodox, and pure about poetry, while the *cabinet secret* and the *satyrique* point to the efforts to deflate the noble either through parody or scandal. What the cabaret and *cabinet* lyric prove is that the poets who defined the elite practices and products of the canon also sought to destroy them. As such, early seventeenth-century lyric becomes a mode of discourse that is as much polemic as it is artistic.

This essay will confine itself to the discussion of three authors: Colletet, Petit, and La Fontaine. I expressly avoid discussing Théophile's bawdy poetry, and in particular his use of the scatological, because it is the subject of a forthcoming project.¹⁰ Colletet's work is especially pertinent because it deals with the topic of literature itself. The extreme example of Petit's life and work renders his case noteworthy, and La Fontaine merits our attention because he offers a unique perspective in terms of finding a balance between the trenchant and innovative aspects of the obscene.

To a large extent, Colletet's polemic constitutes an attack on literature itself and on literary taste. In a truculent *sixain* published in the *Parnasse satyrique*, Colletet describes the poetic process in the crudest of terms:

Tout y chevauche, tout y [fo]ut;
L'on [fo]ut en ce livre partout:
Afin que les Lecteurs n'en doutent,
Les Odes [fou]tent les Sonnets,
Les lignes [fou]tent les feuillets,
Les lettres mesmes s'entre[fou]tent! (p. 67)

The term "foutre" appears in every line but one, clearly establishing it as the lexical and thematic center of the poem. Its presence can be simply dispelled as the ranting of a foul-minded and foul-mouthed drinking companion of Théophile. However, trash criticism, and its emphasis on the

⁹ *Tristan L'Hermite* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), p. 134.

¹⁰ "Pissing Glass and the Body Crass: Scatology in Théophile." *Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art: Studies in Scatology*, ed. Jeff Persels and Russell Ganim (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004).

Kantian notion of detachment when passing aesthetic judgment (Simon, p. 16) suggests that dismissal of any literary or artistic offering runs the risk of overlooking paradoxes, textual self-consciousness, and overall modes of experimentation that “appear in places we have not looked” (Simon, p. 25). In Colletet’s case, the greatest paradox is why a member of the Académie Française who was not only a poet but also a theorist of the lyric would summarily denounce the activity and the accomplishment that had brought him renown. The most plausible answer is that Colletet sees not only his poetry, but all of poetic endeavor as a colossal failure. His use of “foutre” signals that the commingling of letters, lines, pages and genres does not lead to a sublime combination of form and thought that he and other critics and practitioners would argue is the goal of the literature under conventional circumstances. Rather, the process of lyric, its results, and its public are *foutus* in Colletet’s vituperation. The specific reasons for such revilement are unclear. But one may contend that Colletet believes that poetry and intellectual culture have delivered more pretense than promise. The strength and repetition of the language intimate that poetry’s place in Colletet’s version of artistic reality runs completely counter to conventional notions of beauty and sophistication. For Colletet, poetry in this case is ugly, useless, and dangerous in the sense that it fools readers (“Afin que les Lecteurs n’en doutent” v. 3) into believing its charade.

In a manner similar to Colletet, Petit’s *Sonnet Foutatif* illustrates the relation between obscenity and despair:

Foutre du cul, foutre du con,
Foutre du Ciel et de la Terre,
Foutre du diable et du tonnere,
Et du Louvre et de Montfaucon!

Foutre du temple et du balcon,
Foutre de la paix, de la guerre,
Foutre du feu, foutre du verre,
Foutre de l’eau de l’Helicon!

Foutre des valets et des maistres
Foutre des moines et des prestres,
Foutre du foutre et du fouteur!

Foutre de tout le monde ensemble,
Foutre du Livre et du Lecteur,
Foutre du sonnet, que t’en semble? (p. 159)

While the question to the reader that finishes the poem and its overall irony could certainly suggest that nothing in the sonnet should be taken seriously, the build-up to the *pointe* constitutes a tirade that merits examination. Compared with Colletet, Petit’s harangue is much more

comprehensive. Rather than focus exclusively on literature, and especially the lyric, Petit addresses myriad aspects of life during his era. Literature, sexuality, government, the Church, and indeed "tout le monde ensemble" (v. 12) become both the subjects and the objects of word "foutre". Since Petit himself at age 23 was burned alive at the Place de Grève in 1662 for the work *Le Bordel des Muses* in which this poem appeared, there is little doubt that he felt *foutu* by the institutions that persecuted him, as well as by the artistic modes of expression that led to his condemnation. The social and literary chaos against which Petit inveighs suggest a sense of betrayal so deep and so vast that it can only be expressed by the crudest of language and by vitriol. With respect to trash art, it is important to note that this type of expression takes its name from the idea that it is indeed "trashed" by the elite structures of a society, be they political, economic, or aesthetic. Accordingly, Petit not only feels trashed, but literally is trashed by the repression of the Church and the Crown. We recall that forty years earlier Théophile was condemned to death for the same blasphemies and other moral transgressions of which Petit was accused. Faced with violence to themselves, these poets create a lyric that figuratively does violence to the institutions that persecute them.

As DeJean and others have argued, it is impossible to measure the effectiveness of governmental and ecclesiastical institutions to ban what was believed to be inimical material. And certainly, the cabaret and *cabinet* lyric are not the only forms of Baroque and neo-Classical literature that evoke the oppression, if not the tyranny of Richelieu, Mazarin, and Louis XIV. Yet, sonnets such as Petit's convey a sense of institutional constraint and consequently individual hopelessness that reflect the autocracy of the age. The force and breadth of this despotism gives rise to a poetic force that goes beyond traditional categories of the "burlesque" or "libertine." Notions of collective poetic identity such as the *cabinet* signal a consciousness that borders on that of a movement. While trash art is not a movement in the same sense, like the *cabinet*, it suggests that a new consciousness must be created in order to fully appreciate the aesthetic and social parameters in which any unconventional art situates itself.

This consciousness shifts between various realms of experience and expression. Within the context of early to mid seventeenth-century poetry, it should be noted that not all scabrous poetry contained the political dimensions of Petit's lyric. In many cases, the cultural tension remained on a sentimental level, as in the following "epigramme" attributed to La Fontaine:

Aimons, foutons, ce sont plaisirs
 Qui'il ne faut que l'on sépare;
 La jouissance et les désirs

Sont ce que l'ame a de plus rare,
 D'un Vit, d'un Con, et de deux coeurs,
 Naît un accord plein de douceurs,
 Que les dévots blâment sans cause.
 Amarillis, pensez y bien:
 Aimer sans Foutre est peu de chose,
 Foutre sans aimer ce n'est rien. (p. 86)

Apart from the reference to the *dévots* in line seven, the poem is apolitical. However, La Fontaine's criticism that the *dévots* are unable to appreciate the pleasure and tenderness of sex underscores his role as a dissident of sorts. With respect to Colletet and Petit, one remarks that La Fontaine's use of the word "foutre" is tempered by the term "aimer." In making the distinction between the sentimental and the physical in the act of love, La Fontaine mediates between high and low registers of expression. The juxtaposition of the "Vit" and "Con" with "deux coeurs" in line five is at once surprising and strangely heartwarming. It reinforces the notion in the poem's opening verses that the acts of loving and screwing are one and the same. The low and the high not only coexist, they heighten the effects of one another and build to a crescendo of "jouissance" (v. 3). Unlike Colletet and Petit, La Fontaine's use of "foutre" carries with it an almost constructive, almost positive connotation. As the concluding lines suggest, the reciprocity between "foutre" and "aimer" blurs the distinction between the two, as the low and the high become one in defining physical and aesthetic experience.

Apart from adding a critical dimension to this experience, what good is trash to us today? Clearly, convention and to a certain extent common sense would prevent us from stating that these works should dislodge or even rival texts we recognize as canonical. These offerings were definitely not regarded as great literature in their day and probably should not be accorded such status now. Nonetheless, such texts do constitute literature and should be studied alongside the canon. Indeed, a precedent of sorts exists in that all of us early modernists have, at one time or another, taught Rabelais's *torche-cul*, or examined the pornography of Sade with our students. What I contend is that courses in the baroque and neo-Classical lyric should incorporate the ribald works like those of Colletet, Petit, Régnier, et. al. into their syllabi. Following DeJean's lead, one can suggest that more undergraduate, graduate, and professional research should be conducted in this vein if not to expand the canon then to yield greater perspective into the corpus of Baroque poetry and how it emerges as a social document. Such an expansion would, in the words of trash culture specialist Andrew Ross, give rise to a "thoroughgoing classroom critique of taste" (qtd. in Simon, p. 11). My own experience in class with these texts

has produced lively debate and has demystified poetry to students who had come to the course with the usual prejudice that the lyric is "stuffy" and "inaccessible." In an era where interest in the Humanities and in French is on the wane, altered approaches can serve to re-energize our curricula without compromising our training or ideals.