



Mirabeau's monk: hermaphrodites, anadrines and pornography in the Ancien Régime

In the late fifteenth century, according to several near-contemporary sources, a monk gave birth to a child at Issoire in the Auvergne. This story attracted the attention of Jean de Roy, Jean Molinet and Jean de Roy, and as I have mentioned [in a previous post](#), it was still (or again) remembered locally as late as the 18th century. In fact, the story surfaces in many places, and today I would like to draw attention to one of the strangest versions of the story I know. It involves the Bible, andrines and other Greek terms you will never have read before.

To begin with, the context I came across this version of the story is surprising - the *Erotikon biblion* by Honoré Gabriel de Riqueti, who is best known for his role in the French Revolution and normally goes by his 'revolutionary' surname Mirabeau (actually, a noble title - I never understood what is so revolutionary about it). The book sometimes is referred to as pornographic but maybe too learned to qualify in this category. Whether or not you think a book that requires a decent knowledge of Greek and makes you look up half the technical terms it employs counts as 'porn', it certainly was censored, forbidden, chastised and on several occasions destroyed (14 copies of the first edition are said to have survived). The *Biblion* was put on the *Index librorum prohibitorum*, and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (7th ed. 1842 s.v. [Mirabeau](#)) mentions it among Mirabeau's the 'shameful and flagitious productions'. In fact, in the [next edition of 1858](#), even this comment is suppressed and replaced by a very general warning:

“Of the *Biblion Eroticon* and *Conversion*, judging by report, the less that is said the better.”

With all due respect to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, let us take a closer look at the *Biblion*. Chronologically at least, it is a product of the Ancien Régime. Mirabeau wrote it between 1777 and 1780 when imprisoned in the infamous Château de Vincennes (which seems to have this effect on its inmates; his fellow inmate was the Marquis de Sade, who was writing *Les 120 Journées de Sodome* at the time), and published it anonymously in 1783.

The book contains a mixture of philosophical and erotic libertinage, and is at least partly organised into chapters by various sexual practices. Mirabeau takes special delight in skimming the Bible for potentially offensive content (successfully so, it has to be said.) Another of Mirabeau's pleasure seems to have been the invention of cleverly composed neologisms (e.g. *Anelytroide*, *Linguomania*) which must have been literally all Greek to his readers. When it comes to labelling, he was as creative as the 19th c. sexologists Foucault was so fond of.

Our monk is found in a chapter with the heading *Anadrine*, Mirabeau's term for female homosexuality. The chapter begins with a discussion of the hermaphrodite Adam (a topic which has a very long learned tradition; see [here](#) for starters) and the famous story of [Aristophanes as found in Plato's Symposium](#) that humans were originally double-bodied androgynous beings (see <https://intersex.hypotheses.org/2404>). Mirabeau quotes this story in the context of female same-sex desire as a *natural* phenomenon (de Mirabeau 1921, 96; <https://archive.org/stream/oeuvreducomtede00mirauoft#page/96/mode/2up>):



“Mais il est des femmes qui aiment d'autres femmes ? Rien de plus naturel encore ; ce son des moitiés de ces anciennes femelles qui étoient doubles.”

[Are there women loving other women? Nothing could be more natural; they are the halves of the female double being of old.]

This brings Mirabeau to a more general discussion of hermaphroditism, and here, the pregnant monk from Issoire is one of his prime examples (de Mirabeau 1921, 98; <https://archive.org/stream/loeuveducomtede00mirauoft#page/98/mode/2up>):

“Quoi qu'il en soit de ces idées, on a vu encore de nos jours des phénomènes analogues qui portent à croire que la tradition de Moïse n'est pas une chimère. L'un des plus étonnans est celui d'un moine à Issoire en Auvergne, où le cardinal de Fleury fit exiler en 1739 le garde-des-sceaux Chauvelin. Ce moine avoit les deux sexes; on lit dans le couvent ces vers à son sujet:

‘J'ai vu vif, sans fantôme,
Un jeune moine avoir
Membre de femme & d'homme,
Et enfant concevoir.
Par lui seul en lui-même,
Engendrer, enfanter,
Comme font autres femmes,
Sans outils emprunter.’

Cependant les registres du couvent portent que ce moine ne s'engrossa point lui-même; il n'avoit pas été tout à la fois agent & patient. Il fut livré à la justice & détenu jusqu'à sa délivrance. Néanmoins le registre ajoute ces mots remarquables "ce moine appartenoit à monseigneur le cardinal de Bourbon ; il avoit les deux sexes, & de chacun d'iceux s'aida tellement, qu'il devint gros d'enfans.”

[Whatever one thinks about these ideas (i.e. the androgyn in the *Symposium*, CR), still today one has observed phenomena that make one believe that the Mosaic tradition (i.e. of the hermaphrodite Adam, CR) is not a fiction. One of the most striking ones is that of a monk at Issoire in Auvergne, where the Cardinal of Fleury in 1739 exiled the keeper of the great seal, [Germain-Louis] Chauvelin. This monk had both sexes; at the convent, one reads the following verses on him: "I have seen, not as a phantasy / How a young monk had / both male and female genitals / and engendered a child / by himself alone and in him_herself / to engender, to have children, / like other women / without to use tools." However, the registers of the monastery relate that the monk did not impregnate himself; he had not been active and passive at the same time. He was handed over to the justice, and kept in custody until s_he delivered. Nonetheless the register adds the remarkable phrase that "this monk belonged to the Cardinal of Bourbon; he had both sexes; and used both of them in such a way that he became pregnant."]

One could ask what this all has to do with female homosexuality ('anadrine'), but as mentioned already elsewhere, the link between tribadism and hermaphroditism in 18th c. learned discourse was both close and confused (<https://intersex.hypotheses.org/919>).

In the context of the other sources quoted above, what I find more interesting is the question what happened to the story of the monk who gave birth to a child. Mirabeau in his *Bibliion* conflates more or less all published accounts of the pregnant monk; the verses of [Jean Molinet](#) († 1507) here are quoted as if they were found in the monastery itself, and the alleged 'registers' of the monastery contain information from the historiographical sources including Robert



Gauguin and Jean de Roy (which Mirabeau in all likelihood only knew indirectly). Locating the monastery in Issoire ultimately goes back to Gauguin; the claim that the monk 'belonged' to the cardinal of Bourbon is a distorted version of Jean de Roy (who correctly noted that the *abbey* belonged to Charles de Bourbon).

Unlike and indeed contrary to these late-medieval authors, according to Mirabeau these 'registers' deny that the monk became pregnant by himself and that s_he was 'both active and passive'. Given that these registers are fictitious (the other passages Mirabeau pretends to quote from this source are manifestly taken, if indirectly, from Jean de Roy), it seems legitimate to interpret this as Mirabeau denying that the monk was a 'true hermaphrodite'; rather he seems to follow the interpretation that the monk in fact was a woman dressed as a man, and impregnated by another man. In any case it is remarkable that Mirabeau adds this information that effectively denies the possibility of 'true' hermaphroditism.

Odd as it may be, this is in tune with contemporary anxieties about 'true hermaphroditism'; most famously, the *Encyclopédie* of d'Alambert and [Diderot](#) (another fellow inmate of Mirabeau at Vincennes, by the way) spends considerable effort to argue that hermaphrodites in fact do not exist (see <https://intersex.hypotheses.org/365>). In this context, it may be significant that the whole story in the *Biblion* is presented as if set in Mirabeau's lifetime. Just like other authors time and again stressed that they (or reliable witnesses) had seen 'true hermaphrodites' - even if the descriptions they gave were lifted from ancient sources - Mirabeau seems to 'update' the medieval story as to give it more credibility.

Why then, does Mirabeau quote the hermaphrodite monk, if he seems not even convinced there were truly double-sexed humans? It is not double-sex bodies he is interested in, but rather same-sex desire. Like other authors of the eighteenth century who did not believe in 'hermaphrodites', Mirabeau associates hermaphroditism and tribadism (for a parallel case, see e.g. my post on Pierre Carpentier: <https://intersex.hypotheses.org/919>). In the following passages, after some more remarks on the various learned traditions (including Ovid), Mirabeau in fact asserts that 'today' there were no true hermaphrodites - but, as in all times, women desiring women. The rest of the chapter is filled with stories of tribades of antiquity (Sappho and others), and various phantasies about 'oriental' tribades; in fact, it is pure erotic Orientalism, and almost invariably, some male voyeur is part of the scene.

So what begins with an unexpected reference to a medieval hermaphrodite quickly turns in rather conventional modern pornography. Nonetheless, I find this glimpse into the afterlife of a medieval account of an hermaphrodite monk very interesting; it shows, once more, how some of these stories (short as they may be) continued to be told and retold, translated, misunderstood, and adopted to rather different needs across the centuries. It is also significant that the possibility of sex change is only quoted to be dismissed (at least for modern times), and the focus instead is on female same-sex desire.

Sources quoted

L'oeuvre du comte de Mirabeau. Erotika biblion, avec annotations du Chevalier de Pierrugues [...], intr. by Guillaume Apollinaire (Les matires d'amour), Paris 1921.
[\[https://archive.org/details/loeuveducomtede00miraouft\]](https://archive.org/details/loeuveducomtede00miraouft)