



L'Ordre hermaphrodite

A last blogpost on 18th c. erotic culture (really not my field of expertise)... As I learned from a blog on 'revolutionary trivia', namely <http://rodama1789.blogspot.de/2015/03/scandalous-societies-order-of-felicity.html>, there was a society of libertines called '*Ordre hermaphrodite*' in the mid-18th c., apparently short-lived. As it is appropriate for a secret society famous for their orgies, there are a lot of rumours about it, and it is notoriously difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. What we do have, however, is a contemporary pamphlet, which pretends to document a speech of the order's founder. Whether or not it was indeed a sort of founding charter, it is valuable evidence for the use of the term *hermaphrodite* in eighteenth-century France.

The speech describes, in lofty language, the goal of the society to recover to joys of paradise, and accordingly claims Adam and Eve as first members of the Order. The author at great length described the 'journey' the order has set out to in nautical terms, and apparently the same is true for internal communication in the order (see Quoy-Bodin 1986). So basically, they claimed to search the paradise lost, and on the way they celebrated many orgies.

As I am interested in the historical semantics of terms like *hermaphrodite*, I find it very interesting that in the context of Adam and Eve it is *not* the story of the *hermaphrodite* Adam that is used here, but rather '*hermaphrodite order*' means 'mixed order', as opposed the many male-only (and few female-only) societies in mid-eighteenth century France.

The name may well have been inspired by anti-monastic polemics on (fictitious) 'mixed orders' known from the late Middle Ages; in these texts, monks (or rather friars) are accused of introducing women into their orders for sexual pleasure. A French version of this theme is the *Frère Denise* fabliau (see Lett 2005), and there are many similar polemics. Until today, there are a lot of cheap jokes on 'mixed orders' (religious orders with both a male and a female branch) and 'double monasteries' (houses of monks and nuns built close to each other). Suspicious and indeed accusation of illicit closeness between the sexes in such arrangements go back at least to the late eleventh century, were common stock in the polemics against secular clergy, monks and friars, and had a long afterlife as general anti-clerical stereotypes (Constable 1996, 72-73; Steckel 2014).

In any case, *L'Ordre hermaphrodite* is an example that the 'hermaphroditism' in 18th c. France was not only associated with female homosexuality (as in [Mirabeau's *Eroticon biblion*](#), for example) or anal intercourse (as in [de Sade's *Juliette à Florence*](#)), but also with heterosexual pleasure. Given that 'hermaphroditism' at the same time still was the dominant vocabulary to describe double-sexed (and ambiguously sexed) bodies, this indicates that these bodies were sexually charged as a result of the - rather new - libertine erotic discourse of the century.



Primary sources

Anonymous, *L'Ordre hermaphrodite, ou les Secrets de la Sublime Félicité*, [Paris] 1748. [<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k8530435>]

Secondary literature

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Didier Lett, 'L'habit ne fait pas le genre. Frère Denise (1262) de Rutebeuf: une jeune fille dans un couvent masculin', in: Odile Redon, Line Teisseyre-Sallmann and Sylvie Steinberg (eds.), *Le désir et le goût : une autre histoire (XIIIe-XVIIIe siècles) : actes du colloque international à la mémoire de Jean-Louis Flandrin, Saint-Denis, septembre 2003* (St Denis, 2005), 267-290.

Jean-Luc Quoy-Bodin, 'Autour de deux sociétés secrètes libertines sous Louis XV: l'Ordre de la Félicité et l'Ordre Hermaphrodite', in: *Revue Historique* 276 (1986), 57-84. [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40954408>]

Sita Steckel, 'Perversion als Argument: Sex und Geschlechterordnung in innerkirchlichen Polemiken des lateinischen Hoch- und Spätmittelalters', in: Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger (ed.), *"Als Mann und Frau schuf er sie". Religion und Geschlecht*, Würzburg 2014, 47-85. [<http://www.academia.edu/7052860>]