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


Secondary literature


