Eroticism *and the Body Politic*

Edited by
Lynn Hunt

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Eroticism
and the Body Politic

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Stephen G. Nichols, Gerald Prince, and Wendy Steiner,
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Introduction

EROTICISM AND THE BODY POLITIC might seem to make an uncomfortable pair. We do not often think of representations of the political body as being erotic. The illustration for Hobbes's *Leviathan*, for example, shows a male sovereign who literally encompasses in his body all the little bodies of his subjects, but there is no hint of eroticism there. Yet the very fact that political organization can be imagined as a body leaves open the potential for erotic connotations. In European history, this potential was increased by the political imagination of royalism, in which the body of the king was thought to have magical qualities. The establishment of a legitimate government under the hereditary monarchical form of government depended on the erotic functioning of the king's body—and on the predictable functioning of the queen's body. In the centuries before most political matters were openly discussed, the workings of these two bodies, those of the king and his queen, were inevitably invested with great political significance.

The erotics of the body politic go beyond considerations of those two central bodies, however. The bodies of aristocrats could become signs by which to read the health of the body politic more generally. A debauched aristocracy could not continue to command respect, especially once the concept of hygiene became a general metaphor for the health of public life. From the aristocracy, the concern with hygiene spread to other social classes, but women played a special role throughout this kind of discussion. Just as the legitimacy of the royal line depended on the purity of

the queen, so too the health of any particular social class depended on the reliability of its women members.

In most of European history, power has been imagined as men's domain, and women have occupied an ambivalent position in conceptions of power. Men could not relate to one another, politically or socially, without their relationship to women's bodies. The social and political order cannot be reproduced without women, but women were almost always imagined as dangerous if they meddled in public—that is, political—concerns. This was especially true in France, where women could be wives of kings or mothers regent acting in an advisory capacity, but they could never be queens in their own right as in England. Yet, as the essays in this volume show, women's bodies had their own representative power. They could stand for nurturance or corruption, for the power of desire or the need for domination, for the promise of a new order or the decay of an old one. The special role of women in the transmission of power through their reproductive capacities ensured that their representation in art and literature would be multivocal.

The multivalence of the female body was especially striking in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was the time of the great reorientation in European politics—the birth of democratic and mass politics—and it was accompanied by a persistent set of issues about women's place. The essays in this book consider the eroticism of the body politic in this critical period in one country, France. We have chosen to focus on one country in order to bring a wide variety of interdisciplinary approaches to bear on a closely related set of problems. The exigencies of a multidisciplinary project would be enough to explain this focus, but there are also important historical reasons for the focus on France. The French discussion of women's role in the public sphere in the eighteenth century was especially well developed; the French Revolution provoked a major rethinking of conceptions of the body politic; and French art and literature in the nineteenth century pushed the issues of gender boundaries and their implications for power relationships as far as they were pushed anywhere in the Western world at that time. France can thus be considered the model for much European thought about conceptions of the body politic and their relationship to eroticism.

It might seem at first that eroticism is a virtually transhistorical notion, for the erotic has existed in all times and places known to us.[1] Yet it was precisely in the eighteenth and nine-

teenth centuries that the pornographic began to be separated as a category from the erotic. In the eighteenth century, dictionaries defined the erotic as that which concerned love. According to the *Encyclopédie* (1751–80, cited by Vivian Cameron in chapter 4), *erotic* also had the connotations of delirium and excess of bodily appetite. *Pornography* does not appear as a word in the *Encyclopédie* or other eighteenth-century French dictionaries. In 1769, however, Rétif de la Bretonne published a rambling piece, half-novel, half tract, called *Le Pornographe,* which was tellingly subtitled *Idées d'un honnête homme sur un projet de règlement pour les prostituées, propre à prévenir les malheurs qu'occasionne* le publicisme [italicized in the original] *des femmes, avec des notes historiques et justificatives.*[2] Rétif was playing on the original Greek meaning of *pornography*—writing about prostitution—and attaching this to the eighteenth-century problem of women in public (*le publicisme des femmes*). Only in the early nineteenth century (the 1830s and 1840s) did the dictionaries give *pornography* the modern sense of "obscene things," especially obscene publications meant for public consumption. Rétif's early usage of the term thus reveals the now-hidden connection between the development of a modern notion of pornography and the particular eighteenth-century worry about women's participation in public life.

In one of the few historical studies on the origins of modern pornography, Walter Kendrick traces the invention of the modern notion of pornography to the confluence of two very different strands at the end of the eighteenth and during the early decades of the nineteenth century: the creation of "secret museums" for objects classified as pornographic and the growing volume of writing about prostitution. Kendrick situates the secret museum (whether in the form of locked rooms or uncatalogued holdings) in the long-term context of the careful regulation of the consumption of the obscene so as to exclude the lower classes and women. With the rise of literacy and the spread of education, expurgation of the classics was required; this practice, which was especially prominent in the Anglo-Saxon world, began in the early eighteenth century, flourished throughout the nineteenth, and began to disappear at the time of World War I. Thus, the prospect of the promiscuity of representations of the obscene—"when it began to seem possible that anything at all might be shown to anybody"[3]—engendered the desire for barriers, for catalogues, for new classifications and hygienic censoring. In this sense, it might be said that

pornography as a category was invented in response to the perceived menace of the democratization of culture, which prominently included the participation of women in the consumption of culture.

The essays in this book are not particularly concerned with the history of the separation of pornography from eroticism (though that history does remain to be written). Nor are they endeavoring to establish a clear generic demarcation between the erotic and the pornographic. Indeed, taken as a whole, they demonstrate the difficulty of drawing such a distinct line between the two; in a sense, then, our aim is to destabilize the fixity of these categories (which was established only in the nineteenth century) while demonstrating the connections between the erotic (or the pornographic) and the political. At the center of this possible connection between the erotic and the body politic is the question of women's place.

The structure of this book is relatively simple and straightforward. There are three groups of three essays focused respectively on the eighteenth century, the Revolution, and the fin de siècle. Each of the three sections consists of an essay by an art historian, one by a literary critic, and one by a historian. We had no intention of providing a complete genealogy of the changing relationship between eroticism and the body politic in France, for too little work has appeared on this topic to permit comprehensive treatment. But we do hope to have marked out a field of study and a set of interrelated problems that transcend the boundaries of each disciplinary focus.

The essays presented here also have a methodological import that stretches beyond the subject matter at hand. Too often we specialists have worked in isolation within the confines of our own fields of study. By bringing parallel studies by scholars from different disciplines into juxtaposition with one another, we hope to stimulate interest in the broader questions pertaining to the field of cultural studies. It is, moreover, not coincidental that a study focused primarily on the representation of women's bodies seems especially to require such a multidisciplinary approach. Women have been left on the margins in many fields of study, but an interest in feminist theory has encouraged the authors of these essays to search out ways in which women played a central, if ambiguous, role in the elaboration of relationships of power. These relationships of power range from the political sphere itself, as with the pamphlets about Marie Antoinette,

to the activities of women artists in the Art Nouveau movement and the broader question of gender relations in novels and paintings.

The possibilities of a multidisciplinary approach can be seen immediately in the three chapters on the eighteenth century, each of which includes its own internal disciplinary transgressions. Mary Sheriff, an art historian, uses the social history of wet-nursing in the eighteenth century to develop a new reading of one of Fragonard's most interesting paintings; Anne Deneys, a literary critic, relies on the analogy of political economy to make sense of Laclos's famous novel; and Sarah Maza, a historian, dissects rhetorical strategies in the pamphlets of the Diamond Necklace Affair in order to illuminate the state of French politics on the eve of the Revolution. In all three chapters, but in very different ways, we can see the working out of new concerns in the eighteenth century with the place of women's bodies.

These concerns are best understood in the context of the general problem of women and the public sphere. Joan Landes has recently developed an analysis of this issue based on the work of Jürgen Habermas. She argues that eighteenth-century commentators were preoccupied with the important role that women were able to play in the new institutions of the public sphere, in particular the salons. Montesquieu warned of the effects of women's use of their sexuality to influence public affairs, and Rousseau took this further into a general denunciation of women's propensity for self-display in public and its corrupting effects on masculine virtue.[4] The great Enlightenment thinkers themselves thus developed the connection between female eroticism and the body politic, arguing that the former was the major source of corruption for the latter. Female eroticism was particularly disturbing because it blurred the lines between private and public; eroticism was the intrusion into the public sphere of something that was at base private.

There is, however, something peculiar about the commentaries of Montesquieu and Rousseau that escapes Landes's otherwise remarkable analysis: the denunciation of the public effects of eroticism was often developed in an eroticized form. This is most clear in Montesquieu's case, for *The Persian Letters*, with its extended descriptions of life in the seraglio in the first person through the letters of Uzbek's wives and eunuchs, is itself a very erotic book. Montesquieu wrote the book at least in part to titillate. Similarly, though less evidently, Rousseau's writings about

the public display of women were themselves public displays of women's sensibilities and erotic potential. Even the most vitriolic passages in his *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre* are ambiguous, because they virtually exalt women's powers.

Mary Sheriff's essay goes right to the heart of these questions by juxtaposing Rousseau's commentary on the evils of wet-nursing to Fragonard's painting on the same subject (*Visit to the Wet Nurse*, c. 1775). Rousseau insisted that "natural" women breast-feed their own children as part of his program for a new domesticity, which was linked to the establishment of a more virtuous political order. Fragonard's painting would seem to represent similar concerns, but at every turn it subverts a simple reading. The mother in the painting is erotic—as opposed to good or bad—and she dominates both the composition of the painting and her husband, whose head rests on her breasts, and who himself appears relatively effeminate. The composition of the painting seems to be divided between religious veneration and erotic display, and the husband has strangely displaced the child in the arms of the natural mother.

Fragonard's painting thus epitomizes many of the critical issues of the day about women's proper role and demeanor, but it does so in a profoundly ambiguous way, which calls into question men's role as well. The erotic mother's body is central to this ambiguity, which is both sociopolitical and representational. The painting, in the obvious artifice, sensuality, and opacity of its construction, enacts precisely the kind of representational strategy that Rousseau abhorred and associated with the degenerate, effeminate society created by women in public.

Anne Deneys focuses on the system of exchange that organizes the relationships of characters in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. The exchanges include promises, stories, and pacts, and each of these in turn presupposes the exchange of women between men. She uncovers three levels of exchange in the libertine novel: the economic, the ethical, and the linguistic. Women function as merchandise in the libertine economy, merchandise that is always in movement and whose circulation serves to enhance the reputation (capital) of men. On the ethical level, the libertine characters take as their raison d'être the development of a method for holding off the dangers of the flesh. They can only triumph by separating themselves from their own affections and passions. By means of this method of control, the libertines expose women—"des machines à plaisir," as the marquise de Merteuil calls them—

to public scandal and thus function, ironically, as upholders of the social order. Finally, the libertine exchange of language is based on the belief that signifiers and their referents can be separated from each other; the marquise de Merteuil and Valmont believe that they can use lies and hypocrisy to get what they want. But the novel proves them wrong when Valmont falls in love with the Présidente de Tourvel. Here again the novel is not subversive but rather paradoxically supportive of the functioning of the law.

Thus libertinage in the novel is not so much concerned with transgression as it is with reinforcing "the supreme law of exchange." The rich analysis presented in this essay makes brilliant sense of the description—or rather nondescription—of women's bodies in the novel. Because women are counters of exchange between men, their bodies have an almost entirely abstract value. The bodies of women are thus, in a sense, absent in the story; they are almost never described in any telling detail.

A particularly striking instance of the absent female body was that of Marie Antoinette in the Diamond Necklace scandal of 1785–86, which is analyzed by Sarah Maza. The queen of France was not, of course, just any woman, and her reputation was a matter of state. This was an affair that was all about reputation, for as Sarah Maza shows, the queen actually played no role in this scandal that ruined her name. Structural historical reasons explain how the queen's absent body could count for so much in the power relations of late Old Regime France. Pamphleteers of the 1770s and 1780s had repeatedly and violently denounced the feminization and eroticization of power under Louis XV, who was portrayed as unduly influenced by his notorious mistresses Madame de Pompadour and Madame Du Barry. When Louis XVI came to power, Marie Antoinette became the target of choice for those who associated the overlapping of female sexual and political activity with the political decay of the nation.

The pamphlets about the scandal not only insinuated that Marie Antoinette might have participated, given her reputation for sexual debauchery, but also in the process developed an indictment of the effects of female sexuality on political life. The pamphlets and legal briefs generated by the trial of the principals in the scandal not only ruined the queen's reputation; they helped establish a new public avid for details about upper-class female intrigue. This public would come to see femininity as incompatible with a virtuous public sphere.

The French Revolution brought the issue of women's influence on the public sphere to a crisis point, because women were able to seize upon many opportunities to actually participate in the political arena. The women's march to Versailles in October 1789 captured the imagination of revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries alike. In 1790 Edmund Burke described how "the royal captives . . . were slowly moved along, amidst the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women." These he explicitly contrasted to the "delightful vision" of Marie Antoinette, whom he depicted as "glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendor, and joy." Her downfall was the sign of the disappearance of the age of chivalry itself, and of the rise of a new, cold "conquering empire of light and reason," in which "all the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off."[5] Burke's juxtaposition of Marie Antoinette to the female furies who marched to Versailles reminds us that the figure of a woman could have many different, even contradictory, meanings, depending on one's politics. But it is also an example of how all sides of the political spectrum worried about the place of women's bodies in the political order.[6]

Vivian Cameron shows how counterrevolutionaries represented the female body in an important caricature from the early years of the Revolution. The engraver of the *Grand Débandement de l'armée anticonstitutionelle* might seem to take Burke with a certain mock seriousness, for he shows in parodic form how the drapery of life can indeed be "rudely torn off." In the print, leading aristocratic women who supported the new constitution lift their skirts to display their buttocks to the Austrian army. A well-known democrat, Théroigne de Méricourt, lifts her skirts to show her pudendum, called in the print her "République," or "public thing." Here the connections between sexuality and power are made explicit, albeit in the always ambiguous context of satirical humor. In her analysis of this engraving, Vivian Cameron traces a variety of formal and thematic influences ranging from the carnivalesque and scatological to the erotic and misogynist. The engraving is an especially valuable source because it brings into clear visual focus many of the themes about eroticism and the body politic that had been unfolding in the eighteenth-century literature. Like Fragonard's painting earlier in the century, the meanings of this print remain ambiguous, especially on the role of women, who are at once mocked and repre-

sented as potent threats to the control of men on both sides of the French Revolution.

The essay that I have contributed to this volume takes the literature against Marie Antoinette into the revolutionary period itself. The trial of the former queen highlighted the accusations of sexual debauchery and linked them to a representation of her as a bad mother. The charge that she had committed incest with her eight-year-old son was made more plausible by the increasingly pornographic pamphlets published after 1789. The charges in these underground pamphlets had a wide public resonance thanks to popular newspapers such as Hébert's *Père Duchesne,* which referred to the queen as "an old whore, who has neither faith nor respect for the law." The pamphlets against Marie Antoinette exemplify a deepening revolutionary concern with gender boundaries. If "a woman who becomes queen changes sex," as Louise de Keralio claimed, then what were the revolutionaries to make of women who demanded rights to political participation? A leading Jacobin deputy claimed that such women were "emancipated girls, amazons," and not long after the queen was executed, the National Convention closed all women's political clubs. Thus Marie Antoinette's body stood for women's entrance into the public arena; she was a kind of negative third point in the triangular relationship of male bonding that lay at the heart of republicanism.

The relationship between the erotic body and the social body is dramatically developed by Lucienne Frappier-Mazur in her essay on the marquis de Sade's *Story of Juliette.* Although often very violent, the Sadian orgy scene had a "rigorous ritualism" and a "ritual symbolism" that were closely related to sociopolitical reality. Women are the central, though multivalent, figures in this dramatic contest between disorder and order. The work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas on the body as a social metaphor is used here to show how Sade, by his very extremity of expression, reveals the social function and arbitrary character of the inferiority ascribed to women in his time. Women are the models for a hierarchical system that is marked by internal contradictions because they are defined both by sex and by social class. The feminine is associated with defilement and disgust, a disgust that turns into desire only if women are violently subjugated, thus averting the threat they represent. The sexual hierarchy of the orgy scene serves as the model for the despotic principle in all its minute variations, and the woman is always the victim of choice.

Sade thus goes beyond representing the social and political currents of his time to develop a more far-reaching analysis of the role of women in any social body; he shows their subjection as socially necessary and arbitrary. In the novel the erotic has become frankly pornographic (and very far removed in tone, though perhaps not in substance, from a work such as Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*), but the pornographic turn itself fosters a more profound putting into question of the social order.

In all three periods under discussion here, women's bodies were at the center of male debate about social tensions. Society itself came to have a greater place in the controversies of the nineteenth century. Where in the earlier periods the eroticized aristocratic woman (or prostitute or queen) represented a specifically political corruption and decay, by the end of the nineteenth century writers were much more concerned with prostitution and eroticism as examples of the commercialization of all human relations.[7] In the novels of Emile Zola, for example, the female body is explicitly related to the machinery of commerce and industrialism.[8] The department store in *Au Bonheur des dames* depends on its appeal to women's desires; the prostitute *Nana* brings eros and commerce together through her own body.

Zola's female characters, and the figures analyzed in our three final chapters, on the fin de siècle, came out of a complex nineteenth-century lineage reaching back to the novels of Balzac and the pioneering study of Parisian prostitution by A.-J.-B. Parent-Duchatelet, *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris* (1836). We have seen how the political theme of the woman in public easily shaded over into a concern with prostitution. The prostitute was *the* public woman, and any woman pretending to act in public (whether the queen or a more ordinary democrat such as Théroigne de Méricourt) risked being identified as a prostitute. In the nineteenth century the prostitute came to occupy a special role in narrative forms because she exemplified the capacity to cross social barriers by masking her true class background. Peter Brooks has shown how the themes of the body, prostitution, the serial novel, and commercialization of the narrative plot itself coalesced in Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842–43), thought by many to have been the most widely read novel of the nineteenth century. Sue's popularity was made possible by the conjunction of serial production, growing public interest in the social causes of prostitution, and a concern with the proliferation of the lower, and presumably criminal, classes.