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1413 |

Bodies & Words in Libertine literature

FR4123 Libertine Literature and Libertinage in 18th-century France

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Words can seduce, entice, persuade, convince. They express wants and desires, they plead, cajole, compliment, and consent. They seal pacts, promises, friendships and oaths. But they also easily serve to lie, to deceive, to influence and to manipulate. One word can undo a reputation, recuse a friendship, condemn an innocent, start a war.

As a philosophy, *libertinism* preaches a liberation from the constraining codes of morals and religion. As a practice, it encourages a hedonistic sexuality, unhindered by shame, guilt and conventions.

In Crébillon's *La Nuit et le Moment*, Clitandre and Cidalise enter a verbal joust, the price of which is a night together. Each successful argument brings Clitandre a step closer to the coveted body, while Cidalise counters with her own weapons: irony, derision, humour, and wit, all meant to keep him at a distance.

In Laclos' *Liaisons Dangereuses*, words are weapons the strong use to dominate the weak, to bend them to their will, to use and abuse their bodies and their minds. Beyond the apparent dance of seduction lies tactic and strategy, lies and manipulation. Letters exchanged in times of love become evidence of weakness once disenchantment sets in, and every word can be twisted and used against the one who uttered it.

Lastly, in Sade's *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir*, words and bodies collide as the characters philosophize in between orgies. Practice, follows theory, as a libertine noblewoman initiates her protégée to not only transgress the rules of physical decorum, but also of linguistic propriety.

In each work, bodies and words are intricately connected: to remain in charge of one's own body requires a complete command of the language. Lose the verbal upper-hand, and physical autonomy is soon to follow.

The module enriches the Department of French's offering in Literature as a social and historical cultural output. It replaces Libertinism within its context, studies how it developed in opposition to the ideologies that came before it, and how it influenced subsequent literature, philosophy, and schools of thought. This course also introduces students to canonical works of literature, the knowledge of which will allow them to understand when they are being referenced, reused and transformed in the artistic outputs that followed, in France and globally. Lastly, by presenting the students to the practice and nuances of using words to convince, lie and manipulate, it develops their critical thinking, a state of mind they will take into the rest of their studies and into their life, making them more socially conscious, more aware and more critical citizens.

Libertinism as a subject transcends the boundaries of genres and brings together literature, philosophy, performance, morals, theory on the purpose of existence, and all forms of practices and arts, and the course will reflect this multifaceted nature by studying texts, illustrations, paintings, but also films and plays.

Attendance and Participation

You are expected to be in class on time, to have read the material and be ready to discuss it. Sitting through a 2-hour class without knowing what the other students are talking about is a very nerve-racking experience, don't put yourself through it.

Practice / Formative response papers

A response paper is a small essay, about a page, in which you will develop one argument, something you have noticed in your reading of the text (for instance, if the text has religious undertones, you can make the case that the main actor is a Christ figure. You can argue that the tone of a letter shows that the character who wrote it is duplicitous, you can spot a theme and explain its recurrence, or draw a comparison with another literary work, etc.) The subject is open, but you must have a point, make an argument.

This paper is an intellectual response to the text, the outline of an argument. It is not a statement of personal taste (« I liked it / didn't like it »), or an emotional response to the story (« I was sad because... ») It is an academic exercise, designed to make you read the text actively, find patterns, and build an argument.

There will be 6 response papers throughout the semester, and I will provide prompts for the first two. Instructions and advice will be forthcoming.

Practice / Formative Commentary

A commentary is a close reading of a text, looking at all its rhetoric aspects (sentence structure, figures of speech, patterns of repetition, contradictions or oppositions, general themes, style, etc.) to gain a deeper understanding of the text and its underlying meaning.

Mid-semester Commentary - 40% of final grade

(1000 words)

End-of-term essay - 60% of final grade

(2500 words)

I will provide three essay questions, one on each of the works. If you find interest elsewhere in the text, you are welcome to write about your own topic, with my approval. An essay build on the work of the response papers (formulating an argument) and on the work of the commentary (close reading of the text). Instructions and advice will be forthcoming.

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A few Words of Advice

Reading the Works

It is crucial to read the works in time, and to be ready to talk about them in class. Reading is a pleasurable activity, so take the time to do it well, and put yourself in good conditions to enjoy it (sitting comfortably, days ahead of class, with no music and distractions. Not on the train or 5 minutes before class time.) Read pen in hand: take notes, they will be precious for in-class conversation. If there's something you don't understand, mark it and ask. Don't spent every other minute looking up words in a dictionary, it will only make reading painful and endless. Learn to make educated guesses and to prioritize the parts of the text that are most important. *The students will be strongly encouraged to read the books in full, although we will only analyse closely a selection of chapters, in order to reduce the students' workload.*¹

Content Warning

The readings for this course feature scenes of inappropriate behaviour, obscene words and sometimes reprehensible acts of a sexual nature. They are a tough, demanding and sometimes disturbing read, and you should feel free to stop reading a text if you are not comfortable continuing. We will study them with caution and question their depictions of verbal and physical violence, as well as our response to it, so please voice your concerns as they arise throughout the semester.

Student Accessibility and Accommodation

Add official description

Honour Code

Add official description

PROGRAMME DU SEMESTRE
Introduction, Contexte, Glossaire
Semaine 1 Introduction - Définitions Libertin.e, morale, goût, commerce, honneur, épistolaire, séduction, chute, rupture, vice, philosophie, boudoir, lit, ruelle, intimité, connivence, maître, roué, érotisme, pornographie, un livre "à lire d'une seule main", convaincre V.S. persuader, etc. - Analyse d'Image

¹ Sections in italics were freely (and gratefully) borrowed from Dr. Granowski's Casanova course proposal.

Que pouvons-nous deviner en regardant l'image en haut de cette page: qui sont ces deux personnes? Quelle est leur relation? Qu'est-ce que leur expression et leur langage corporel nous disent? Comment la relation entre "corps" et "mots" est-elle illustrée ici? Est-ce une relation attendue ou surprenante? À qui la jeune femme écrit-elle? Qu'est-ce que cette image nous dit du courant de pensée libertin? Qu'est-ce que cette image nous dit sur ce dont on va parler en cours ce semestre?

- Pourquoi suivre ce cours? Pourquoi lire de la littérature libertine en 2021? Y a-t-il un intérêt?

Semaine 2

Le mouvement libertin

- Contexte historique du mouvement
- Philosophie
- Quel rapport avec la littérature? (La forme: dialogue, lettres)

À lire: Sade, Extraits d'*Aline et Valcour* « Quand il n'y aurait pas un seul homme sur la terre, tout n'en irait pas moins comme il va » et « Il est pédéraste, vous voyez bien que c'est un crime affreux »

À lire:

Laurence Tricoche-Rauline, *Identité(s) libertine(s). L'écriture personnelle ou la création de soi* (extraits)
Sharon Callens, *Libertinage et apprentissage dans le roman du XVIIIe siècle* (extraits)

Crébillon Fils - La Nuit et le Moment (1755)

Semaine 3

Intimité morale et rapprochement physique

- Les histoires de Clitandre - étapes d'une conquête
- Les réponses de Cidalise - mise à distance
- Connivence et séduction
- Theater adaptation of the play by Jean-Louis Thamin (1978)

À lire: Roman Wald-Lasowski, "Crébillon-Fils et le Libertinage galant"

Semaine 4

Ambiguïtés

- La présence ironique du narrateur
- La connivence des deux personnages est-elle illusoire? La fin du récit était-elle jouée d'avance? Cidalise est-elle une conquête comme les autres?

À écouter: podcast <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/pas-la-peine-de-crier/la-nuit-45-la-nuit-est-le-moment>

Semaine 5

Adaptation cinématographique

- Film adaptation of the play by Anna Maria Tató, *The Night and the Moment* (1994)

What visual, narrative and artistic choices did the directors make? How do those choices influence your reading and your understanding of the play?

- Intro to Scene analysis

Choderlos de Laclos - *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782)

Semaine 6

Des Personnages construits par leurs Mots

« Épisode de la clé »

Focus on:

Lettre 96 - « Je parie bien que, depuis votre aventure, vous attendez chaque jour mes compliments & mes éloges »

Lettre 97 - « Ah ! mon Dieu, Madame, que je suis affligée ! »

Lettre 105 - « Hé bien ! Petite, vous voilà donc bien fâchée, bien honteuse ! »

Semaine 7

Non-dits et sous-entendus. Lire entre les lignes.

Focus on:

Lettre 48 - « C'est après une nuit orageuse... »

Lettre 50 - « Est-ce donc ainsi, Monsieur, que vous remplissez les conditions auxquelles j'ai consenti à recevoir quelquefois de vos lettres ? »

Lettre 56 - « À quoi vous servirait, Monsieur, la réponse que vous me demandez ? »

Dangerous Liaisons de Stephen Frears - Scene analysis

À Lire: Vera Lee: « Decoding letter 50 in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* »

Semaine 8

« Hé bien ! La guerre » - Stratégie Militaire et supériorité mentale

« La Guerre entre Valmont et Merteuil »

Focus on:

Lettre 81 - « Que vos craintes me causent de pitié ! »

Lettre 145 - « Sérieusement, Vicomte, vous avez quitté la Présidente ? »

Lettre 153 - « Je réponds sur-le-champ à votre lettre, & je tâcherai d'être clair »

Dangerous Liaisons de Stephen Frears - Scene analysis

À lire: Yae Jin Yoo, « Le Libertinage féminin de Mme de Merteuil dans *Les Liaisons dangereuses*: Une "révolution manquée?" »

Marquis de Sade - *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir* (1795)

Semaine 9

Théorie et Pratique

La pédagogie et la structure des *Dialogues destinés à l'éducation des jeunes demoiselles*

Sade: *juste* de la pornographie?

À lire: Anne F. Garréta, « Le désir libertin, allumeur de Lumières »

Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (extracts)

Semaine 10

Défier les conventions

- Contexte historique et personnel de Sade
- Défier les conventions morales, physiques, sexuelles *et linguistiques*
- « Athée jusqu'au fanatisme ». Aller à l'encontre systématique des conventions : libération ou contrainte?
- Sade montre *tout*. Crébillon ne montre *rien*. Comparaisons
- Analyse d'image: illustrations du dialogue

Semaine 11

« Français, encore un effort si vous voulez être républicains »

- Un appel aux armes
- Briser le 4ème mur

À lire: John Phillips, « Obscenity Off the Scene: Sade's "La Philosophie dans le boudoir" »

Semaine 12

Conclusions (prudentes)

- Traces actuelles du mouvement

À écouter: Podcast - <https://francais.radio.cz/la-litterature-libertine-cest-la-litterature-de-lemancipation-8138692>

À lire: « Faut-il brûler Sade », de Simone de Beauvoir

Abnousse Shalmani, a French-Iranian feminist, and her book is « Khomeiny, Sade et moi »