

Immodest Modesty

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The Renaissance reinvented modesty—that contradictory passion which reveals while hiding. In a masterful book, Dominique Brancher shows how this art of circumvention spanned a variety of knowledge, especially medical knowledge, in the sixteenth century.

Review of Dominique Brancher, *Équivoques de la pudeur: Fabrique d'une passion à la Renaissance* (Ambiguities of modesty: The production of a passion in the Renaissance), Genève, Droz, 2015, 904 pages, € 89.

When entering the Sansevero Chapel Museum in Naples, one discovers not only Giuseppe Sanmartino's extraordinary sculpture of the Veiled Christ (1775), but also a modesty statue—*Pudicizia*—executed by Antonio Corradini (1752). This white marble statue reveals its charms by concealing them with a veil so thin that it adapts to the smallest curves of the female body; meanwhile, its face turns away, eyes half closed, to escape direct confrontation with those of its admirer.

The suggestive power of this sculpture illustrates how much the art of concealing can be associated with provocation, indecency, even obscenity. This ambivalence is particularly striking in the context of the Sansevero Chapel, a marble temple dedicated to the virtues and values cultivated by its founder, Prince of Sansevero, seventh of the name, which have little to do with the pleasures of the body and the charms of seduction: decorum, liberality, religious zeal, sweetness of the conjugal yoke, piety, disillusionment, sincerity, education, divine love.

This ambivalence is the running theme of the book by Dominique Brancher, *Équivoques de la pudeur: Fabrique d'une passion à la Renaissance*. The book is a thoroughly original and ambitious one. Immodest modesty is a motif that runs through all of Western culture, from antiquity to the present through prudish Vienna (p. 13), where Freud discussed the contradictory nature of modesty, including its relation to the sex drive and to culture.

Here, the Renaissance is not privileged on the grounds that it invented modesty. As in many other domains, it “updated and reframed an old motif” (p. 14). It is not easy at first to describe the emerging reinvention of this motif, because from the standpoint of modesty the Renaissance is a period about which there is no consensus. Some construe it as an era of impurity of language and customs; this is the Renaissance of Rabelais and Montaigne. Others, on the

contrary, see it as a time marked by the repression of instincts, following the analyses put forward by Norbert Elias in 1939 in *The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*.

A Rhetoric of Modesty

Addressing the issue of modesty in a particular period immediately raises the question of the possibility of a history “that postulates a common emotional experience beyond the diversity of practices and beyond variations in the language used in each society” (p. 25). Is modesty a fact of nature or of culture? Brancher chooses not to tackle this problem. Instead, she finds a way to circumvent it by proposing to analyze modesty as the object or the rhetorical modality of a discourse.

The Renaissance takes on its full meaning in this perspective. Indeed, it corresponds to the time when there developed forms of censorship “that sought to control the indiscretions of the printed book.” How could one speak of the sexual parts without being obscene? How was one to discuss penis size without falling into immorality? And what of feminine pleasure? These were pressing questions for doctors who wished to disseminate their knowledge. The text, *a fortiori* when it was written in French as opposed to Latin (which was less accessible to a wide audience), was perhaps transgressive, and its author may have been a pornographer. Suspicion sometimes led to trials (Ambroise Paré) or to acts of censorship (Laurent Joubert, Jacques Duval, Jacques Ferrand).

Brancher devotes her analysis to the art of writing that was developed by those doctors, an art that, as we shall see, gave rise to a veritable medical eroticism and that blurred the boundaries between the exposition of knowledge and the stirring of lust. Brancher begins by studying “the ambivalent naming of ‘modesty’” (p. 55). It was at the end of the sixteenth century that the neologism “*pudeur*” (the French equivalent for “modesty”¹) appeared, a term that “came to designate the private and intimate relation to the body, with the imposition of discretion rather than the laying of social blame on sex” (p. 60). Its usage replaced that of various French words derived from the Latin *pudere*—*pudorité*, *pudicicie*, *pudicité*—as well as of other related words—*honte*, *verecondi*, *verecunde*. The emergence of the French term “*obscène*”² (obscene) was contemporary to that of “*pudeur*.” According to Brancher, whereas in the Middle Ages the preoccupation associated with the older terms stemmed from Christian anthropology and primarily targeted nudity, in particular that of women, the appearance of the two neologisms in the Renaissance marked a significant social inflection: both crystallized the anxieties of a society faced with the circulation of printed books that were suspected of publicizing the secrets of intimacy. Moreover, this preoccupation now concerned all of humanity—not just the female sex—in matters of language as much as the body. While it testified to the emergence of a private space, it also reflected an interrogation about the real effects of concealment: was concealment a way to preserve that space, or a means to better reveal it through using euphemisms and circumlocutions that were more effective than crude expression? This preoccupation conveyed an anxiety about the “great paradox” whereby “the coarsest expression and the most decent that can

¹ Translator’s note: The etymology of the English word “modesty” differs from that of the French term “*pudeur*,” as it is derived either from the Middle French “*modestie*” or directly from the Latin “*modestia*.” However, like “*pudeur*,” “modesty” appeared during the Renaissance, specifically in the 1530s.

² Translator’s note: The English term “obscene” is derived from the Middle French “*obscène*” and dates from the 1590s.

be employed to designate an obscene matter paint it with equal vivacity and distinctness in the imagination of the author or the reader” (Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, “Fourth Clarification” p. 436, quoted on p. 418).

This reflection was found in many texts, including the *Essays* of Montaigne. It drew on the observation of exotic customs. It sometimes went beyond the issue of naked bodies and sexuality to negatively qualify certain attempts at concealment, such as that of the penitent in the practice of confession. Above all, it focused on the use of language, rhetoric being perceived as a defeat before the connotations of discourse, the duplicity of figures, and the perversity of readers. Editorial orthodoxy was developed to guard against these dangers, as is paradigmatically exemplified by the elaboration of criteria for blacklisting in the Congregation of the Index established in 1571.

This censoring apparatus, examined in Chapter IV of Part One, “L’obscénité mise à l’Index” (the blacklisting of obscenity), reflects the growing emphasis, during the Renaissance, on obscenity as an “autonomous aesthetic and ethical category in the reception of texts” (p. 172), as well as the increasing affirmation of its complicity with impiety in a Christian context “obsessed with the reformed devil” (p. 173). Brancher’s analysis reveals how, little by little, the focus of censorship widened from the use of terms accused of deranging the senses to include that of the vernacular, and then style with the 1596 Index decreed by Clement VIII. Following the Index of Paul IV (1558-1559), this censorship activity came to denounce the heresy of obscenity. The relative impunity enjoyed by medical texts in this regard ended in 1590, with the promulgation of rule XII that forbade astrology and divination books as well as practical manuals, namely medical ones. Thus, the *Centuriae* of Amatus Lusitanus, a collection of clinical cases published in Lyon in 1580, was expunged of certain cure narratives, such as that of the mother superior of a convent who suffered from satyriasis and uterine fury because of her sexual abstinence (centuria 7, curatio 97). In France, medical works in French escaped the Index until the eighteenth century, but were condemned by other supervisory bodies.

A Medical Art of Writing

The second part of the book examines in depth those medical treatises written in French that explored the mysteries of generation and the sexual organs. A significant portion of these treatises was devoted to the “secrets” of women, to gynecological knowledge of the female body, of female diseases and pleasure conceived as essential to reproduction. The very notion of “secrets” served to designate a tradition of medical works derived from the *De secretis mulierum*, which is attributed to Albert the Great and to a French translation of the so-called *Trotula* texts of the thirteenth century.³

These medical—anatomical, gynecological, surgical—treatises were associated with avant-garde fields and tended to privilege the results of direct observation, which was under development during the Renaissance, rather than mere commentaries on canonical works. Opting for the vernacular and for a less classical form of writing, their authors “experimented with new

³ The so-called *Trotula* ensemble, dedicated to the therapy of female diseases, was probably composed by different authors. It consists of three treatises brought together in the twelfth century, the second of which was undoubtedly written by Trota, healer of Salerno. It was translated several times in vernacular language in Europe during the Renaissance.

ways of narrating medicine” (p. 219). The question of style I evoked earlier played a central role in the ethical and aesthetic evaluation of those texts, among which the work of Ambroise Paré provides a particularly telling example for Brancher’s reflection.

This section opens with a remarkable chapter, “Contagions” (contagions), which reveals how, in these treatises, writing about the science of bodies and sexuality combines with eroticism. One must start from the analysis of an object that, at first glance, has nothing to do with the subject—the analysis of mental powers, and in particular of imagination:

The medieval conception that was still predominant in the sixteenth century generally distinguished two aspects of this “power of the soul that from itself produces forms” [Mirandola, *On the Imagination*]. On the one hand, imagination receives and faithfully reproduces perceived data before transmitting them to the cogitative part of the soul, which can then engage in reflexive activity. On the other hand, as a true creative power, this faculty can freely and irrationally reconstruct species that are perceived by the senses; it can actively create new forms that are likely to mislead the intellect and to flatter the senses at the expense of reason.

This psychology of faculties is not divorced from biology.⁴ It is represented anatomically. With it, medicine can account for the sexual act (and for the act of eating). The desire for it is generated by the memory of the pleasure experienced during an earlier act—a memory itself awakened by an experience, an image or a word that “inflames” the imagination. This is an essential point: Imagination is a faculty that does not need the presence of the object to be activated. Therefore, a description or an iconographic representation suffices to captivate the senses. Vision (reading) can correspond to real encounters. As part of this conception, the statement “making love with the image” (p. 260) takes on its full meaning.

These treatises reflect a stylistic quest for the staging and dissemination of medical knowledge and the findings of anatomical observations. Doctors did not hesitate to pander to the carnal curiosity of their readers to better transmit this knowledge, borrowing rhetorical devices from the narrative forms that had pride of place in the sixteenth century, including the farce and the novella: medical observations were humorously distorted; case narratives were dramatized; the resort to rules was fictionalized, so as to attain an art of writing as useful as it was delectable by clearing oneself of the accusation of hypocritical modesty.

The resources of poetry, but also its use in the presentation of medical knowledge, came to the fore especially in case narratives. This genre was deployed in an overabundant production throughout the second half of the sixteenth century. It took the name *Historiae* or *Observationes* and significantly addressed cases that proved confusing to a medicine of reproduction and sexed bodies—for instance, the figure of the hermaphrodite.

Some doctors dabbled in poetry, known for its memorial virtues, and exploited the resources of rhythm, scansion and rhyme. Thus, Louis de Fontenette proposed an adaptation of the Hippocratic Aphorisms that can be described as “burlesque,” in the spirit of a facetious tribute (*Hippocrate dépaïsé ou la version paraphrasée de ses Aphorismes. En vers François, 1654*).

⁴ See on this topic G. Canguilhem, “What is Psychology,” *Ideology and Consciousness* 7, 1956: 37-50.

Doctors-writers searched for a language that could transmit their knowledge to a wider audience. This forced them to make “complex linguistic transactions between different socio-cultural groups, but also between different registers of language” (p. 436). While striving to standardize the anatomical nomenclature, they resorted to euphemisms, images of all kinds, analogies, comparisons and homophonies, and employed Latin (which they had abandoned) to express ideas in veiled terms—“sexuality can find its place in the Other of a language estranged from itself” (p. 477).

The Erotic Charge of Anatomical Iconography

Beyond their use and reception, were not signs themselves morally ambivalent, even obscene? This question opens the third and final part of the book. While it was amply addressed in the first two with regard to verbal language, it is raised again concerning a fundamental dimension of the anatomical treatises of the Renaissance: their iconography. In particular, Brancher aims to understand how the story of the Fall was approached in the treatment of anatomical nudity. The addressee of these medical treatises went from being a reader to being a spectator, at the risk of becoming a voyeur when faced with sheets that presented anatomical knowledge in images—*a fortiori* when these were flying and removable images made of paper flaps that could be lifted to explore, in ever greater depth, the secrets of the human body. “Bodily desire and the desire for knowledge were conflated” (p. 644), through graphic devices that sometimes revealed all the erotic charge of the modesty veil. The modest Eve represented in the *Historia de la composicion del cuerpo humano* by Juan Valverde (1556) illustrates this in the form of a woman who covers her breasts and her genitals while also disclosing her inner world (the matrix).

Rather than deciding between condemning or legitimating modesty, the iconography of the Renaissance most often maintained the tension between criminal nudity and natural nudity, between morally depraved medicine and knowledge with pure intentions. This is illustrated by engraving 43 of the treatise by Pieter Pauw (1596), which depicts the anatomical theater at Leiden. Here one sees two laymen lifting the veil that covers the dissected body:

By lifting the sheet, the two curious men, like the reader of the flying sheets who lifts the superimposed layers, replay the temptation, but by placing themselves under the legitimating aegis of medicine, whose carefully ordered instruments organize the scene. Thus the image dramatizes in an exemplary fashion the theological conditions for the unveiling of nature before science (p. 697).

The last chapter of this part, “*La révolte du membre: épopée organique et dissidence stylistique*” (the revolt of the member: organic saga and stylistic dissidence), develops the idea that doctors, whatever their intentions or their art of writing, were defeated by “the omnipotence of the lower body” (p. 704). According to Brancher, what their writing best demonstrates is that style and iconography failed to repress the sexual organs—in particular those of women, which were portrayed as driven by fury or as akin to wild beasts—and to present certain practices—for instance, masturbation—in an acceptable manner.

Proposals for a Human and Social Science of Medicine

It is a colorful and eminently lively world, replete with variety and tensions, which is reconstructed in Brancher's reflection. This major work relies on skills that are themselves multiple, notably in the history of sources, in philology and in textual criticism, which the author combines with great success. It ends with three important proposals for approaching medicine through the human and social sciences. First, Brancher's analysis very convincingly inscribes medical writings into a history of Western culture—of its normative representations of intimacy, decency, sexuality, bodies and pleasures—but also into a social and political history of the effects of the powers of repression, control and censorship, which are addressed here through a Foucauldian lens. In this dual perspective, medicine becomes integral to the questions that haunt a society in a given period—as shown, in another context, by the work of Julie Mazaleigue-Labaste on the history of the concept of sexual perversion.⁵

The second proposal is to approach medicine as a form of writing that deliberately borrows the means of transmitting knowledge from literature and rhetoric. This makes it possible to highlight the multiple relations of medicine to literature, a move that could also apply to other sciences.⁶ In a sense, one can read Brancher's book as a continuation of the argument put forward by Jean Starobinski, who consistently tried to build bridges between literature and medicine, and who situated the latter between science and poetry. One can also see in her book the desire to tackle, as Elizabeth Spiller does with other medical texts of the Renaissance, the question of “the art of producing knowledge.”⁷

One of the interests of Brancher's book lies in the fact that she confronts the difficulties presented by such an approach, and that she offers answers to the questions it raises. For example: “How can one understand the use of bawdy fables in a ‘scientific’ project that presents itself as a real epistemology and that claims to oppose truth to popular illusions?” (p. 355). Taking the example of Laurent Joubert, Brancher answers this question by showing how these doctors-writers utilized the resources of rhetoric. Thus, Joubert warned against the dangers of unrestrained laughter, but defined the conditions of virtuous laughter following Aristotle and Cicero (*Traité du ris*, 1579). He did not ignore the therapeutic virtues of laughter, which was deemed conducive to the health of the mind and to humoral balance. Moreover, in his *Erreurs populaires* (1578), he used the didactic qualities of the comic scene to strike the mind of the reader and to produce the emotion necessary for memorization.

Lastly, Brancher's book stands out for its third proposition: namely, that of associating this art of writing not only with the desire for truth, but also with the creation of erotic pleasure. The point here is less to take up Freud's hypothesis of an unconscious link between the sexual libido and the impulse to know than to elucidate, as Brancher suggests in her conclusion, “the inscription, in a rhetorical and poetic *form*, of this desiring force that stimulates thought and

⁵ J. Mazaleigue-Labaste, *Les déséquilibres de l'amour: La genèse du concept de perversion sexuelle de la Révolution française à Freud*, Paris, Éditions d'Ithaque, 2014.

⁶ Fr. Aït-Touati, *Contes de la Lune. Essai sur la fiction et la science moderne*, Paris, Gallimard, 2011.

⁷ E. Spiller, *Science, Reading, and Renaissance: Literature, the Art of Making Knowledge, 1580-1670*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

incites its ecstasies” (p. 767). In this sense, the ambiguities of modesty in the Renaissance illustrate a codification of discourses that is at once ethical, epistemological and aesthetic.

With these proposals, Brancher allows us to see a modesty that has its own circumvention strategies. Oftentimes, the philosopher addresses the issue of modesty only through the reading of the *Protagoras*, Plato’s dialogue in which the myth of Prometheus evokes the “*aido*”—often translated into French, more or less appropriately, by the term “pudeur”—as one of the conditions of life in the polis. This discursive, erotic, and scholarly modesty, which conceals certain things only to show others, is like a fly in the ointment. It compels us to resume the thread of reasoning by taking into account the immodest effects of modesty.

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