

## REVIEW ESSAY

### The French in Love and Lust

*Lenard R. Berlanstein*

*Les libertines: Plaisir et liberté au temps des Lumières*, by OLIVIER BLANC (Paris, 1997)

*L'amour à Paris au temps de Louis XVI*, by OLIVIER BLANC (Paris, 2002)

*La discipline de l'amour: L'éducation sentimentale des filles et des garçons à l'âge du romantisme*, by GABRIELLE HOUBRE (Paris, 1997)

*Histoire du flirt: Les jeux de l'innocence et de la perversité*, by FABIENNE CASTA-ROSAZ (Paris, 2000)

*Du premier baiser à l'alcôve: La sexualité des Français au quotidien (1850–1950)*, by ANNE-MARIE SOHN (Paris, 1996)

*The Erotic Imagination: French Histories of Perversity*, by VERNON A. ROSARIO (New York, 1997)

*The Lord's First Night: The Myth of the Droit de Cuissage*, by ALAIN BOUREAU. Translated by LYDIA G. COCHRANE (Chicago, 1998)

*A History of Rape: Sexual Violence in France from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, by GEORGES VIGARELLO. Translated by JEAN BIRRELL (Cambridge, 2001)

The world has long been grateful to French culture not only for spreading the notions of human rights and popular sovereignty throughout the globe but also for the development it has given to *l'art de vivre*: food and fashion, of course; and romantic love. Who is surprised that French troubadours invented the language of heterosexual longing back in the twelfth century?<sup>1</sup> Early in the nineteenth, the novelist Stendhal could still claim that three-quarters of the love letters penned in London and Vienna were in French—the writers eschewing their native tongues in

Lenard R. Berlanstein is professor of history at the University of Virginia. He is author of *Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA, 2001).

<sup>1</sup> Arnaud de La Croix, *L'érotisme au Moyen Age: Le corps, le désir, et l'amour* (Paris, 1999), 140–42.

*French Historical Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Spring 2004)

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies

order to create the proper effect.<sup>2</sup> The French woman is often taken as, and often tries to be, the incarnation of coquetry, for which she deploys charm, wit, and beauty, all laboriously and deliberately cultivated to conquer men. The French male has the reputation for being smooth in his amorous moves and dramatic in his passions, needing a mistress as well as a wife to perpetuate his romantic excitement.<sup>3</sup> While the citizens of Great Britain and the United States may have contributed more to the development of domestic comforts and virtues, the French have specialized, it would seem, in romance irrespective of marital status.<sup>4</sup>

Even though the cultivation of the senses has long been accepted as an irrepressible aspect of Frenchness, historians' curiosity about the subject has been limited. A steady stream of studies has appeared in recent years; and yet, notwithstanding the privileged status Michel Foucault accorded to sex as the key to how power operates in the modern world, the history of love and sex in France has never taken flight to anything like the degree that, say, the study of empire has. The field has a rather low profile, in fact. At fault is not so much the quality of the scholarship as the uncertainty about the framework in which to place the studies. Tacitly at work, too, may be general cultural biases that establish the privateness or indecipherability of sex. The effect is inevitably self-reinforcing.<sup>5</sup>

Robert Nye has described the history of love and sexuality as a field in search of a subject.<sup>6</sup> The scholarship, especially that from France, is tightly compartmentalized into works that explore the evolution of sexual behavior and those that probe the changing cultural meanings of sex. Foucault, of course, is the inspiration for the latter body of work.<sup>7</sup> Guy Richard's 1985 survey of French amorous practices and attitudes since the Middle Ages is the starting point for recent empirical investigations of sexual behavior.<sup>8</sup> Richard's book, fairly pedestrian and not well known outside the field, has provided the basic chronology and the central issue, the struggle between self-fulfillment and per-

<sup>2</sup> Stendhal [Henry Beyle], *De l'amour* (Paris, 1876), 128. This work was first published in 1822 and went through many editions.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Zeldin, *The French* (New York, 1982), 138.

<sup>4</sup> According to Judith Thurman, a biographer of Colette, "The French believe that one should seek unwholesome fun in any bed but one's own" ("*Deshabillé Chic*," *New Yorker*, November 18, 2002, 95).

<sup>5</sup> George Chauncey demonstrates the power of contemporary myths of invisibility to produce ignorance about a gay culture that flourished in the early twentieth century. He also shows that the sources, far from being unavailable, were waiting to be found. See his *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York, 1994), chap. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Robert A. Nye, "Sexuality, Sex Difference, and the Cult of Modern Love in the French Third Republic," *Historical Reflections* 20 (1994): 57.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* (New York, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Guy Richard, *Histoire de l'amour en France: Du Moyen Age à la Belle Époque* (Paris, 1985).

sonal restraint within a "bourgeois order." Richard found the apogee of sexual liberty in the prerevolutionary era, when the court aristocrats, realizing they were in the twilight of their power, practiced libertinism with abandon. However, the French Revolution brought the bourgeoisie to the fore, and its interests and mores led to a repudiation of sexual self-fulfillment. The culture of respectable appearances and a worship of female innocence induced a very restricted sex life for women and closeted, hypocritical indulgence for men. The popular classes, Richard believes, received no encouragement to break out of their traditional repression, inspired more by their harsh material conditions than by morality, until the 1950s, when the bourgeois order finally weakened.

Several recent studies amplify and refine Richard's narrative. In his schema, the late eighteenth century is a turning point, a foil to the bourgeois order that followed and a foreshadowing of the sexual revolution two centuries later. It is also a historical moment unusually rich in firsthand testimony on at least certain aspects of sexual behavior, because the elites were much less guarded about improprieties than they would be later. Olivier Blanc has written two well-researched books about this formative era. They are largely based on case histories, and while the stories he relates are fascinating, Blanc's approach is not probing from a historiographical point of view. In *Les libertines*, Blanc treats the highborn women who pursued self-fulfillment by seeking and discarding lovers. While the general outlines of the argument are well known to specialists, Blanc's study usefully reminds the reader of how tolerant the cultural and political climate was regarding the violations of orthodox sexual morality, especially if there was a fig leaf of cover for the sake of appearances. (Madame Joly de Fleury married her husband *because* he was deeply involved with another woman so that she could pursue her own interest in women.) Though society knew all about the sexual adventures, the women were still able to penetrate prominent cultural and social circles. The book also underscores that sex between people of the same sex was not only very familiar to high society but also as fully accepted as any other irregularity. Blanc chooses to treat the libertines, who pursued self-fulfillment with little guilt, he claims, as the prophets of late-twentieth-century liberation. He does not consider the backlash that was quietly building and that would lead to Richard's "bourgeois order."<sup>9</sup>

Blanc's more recent book, *L'amour à Paris au temps de Louis XVI*,

<sup>9</sup> Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 1988); Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY, 1994); Madelyn Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1992).

extends these conclusions. Basing his claims on thorough research into the published and unpublished sources on Parisian fashionable society of the late eighteenth century, he reaffirms that libertinism was more than just an occasional phenomenon. It was practiced, he claims, by the majority of men and women who occupied elite positions. Moreover, both adultery and liaisons with persons of the same sex were openly practiced. People in *le monde* (which included prominent commoners as well as courtiers) resolutely expected members of their class to observe and accept their affairs. Blanc presents convincing evidence that high society was, indeed, awash in libertinism. He establishes that instances of official repression arose from political considerations or personal vengeance, not moral outrage. Rather than taking 1789 as the moral turning point, as our current historiography would have it, Blanc insists on the continuity of adulterous practices up to the radicalization of the Revolution in 1792.<sup>10</sup>

As in *Les libertines*, Blanc's strength here is his immersion in the sources, but his weakness is historiographical context. His knowledge of the geography of same-sex solicitation is encyclopedic, but Blanc seems to think that the term "homosexual" can be used unproblematically for the era. Though he cites the pathbreaking studies on homosexuality brought together by Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant Ragan, he could use their findings more systematically.<sup>11</sup> Blanc also fails to engage with the political culture studies on the origins of the Revolution, which connect demands for moral regeneration to the rights of man.<sup>12</sup> Instead, Blanc advances the idiosyncratic claim that the turn to a society of respectable appearances came under Napoléon, simply because the enriched parvenus had to insist on family respectability. Blanc's assertion that libertinism was so widespread because the logic of marriage conflicted with personal desire (37) begs the question, "Why did it explode when it did?" After all, arranged marriage was hardly new.

Gabrielle Houbre's *La discipline de l'amour* enriches our understanding of the postrevolutionary moral backlash by examining the sexual socialization of the young between 1815 and 1848. Houbre draws on memoirs, fiction, and advice manuals and has done an outstanding job of tracking down personal correspondence, which is sometimes surprisingly candid. (The marvelous engravings that illustrate her points also

<sup>10</sup> On the emerging discourse of private virtue in the prerevolutionary era, see Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley, CA, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan Jr., eds., *Homosexuality in Modern France* (Oxford, 1996); and Merrick and Ragan, eds., *Homosexuality in Early Modern France: A Documentary Collection* (Oxford, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Maza, *Private Lives*; Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere*; Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, CA, 1992).

deserve note.) Her subject matter divides into two stages, the sexual curiosity and confusion among adolescents (a newly recognized stage in the life cycle) and the preparations youths made for adulthood and marriage. Some of Houbre's richest pages concern life in the (all male) lycées. School officials faced boys whose quest for erotic knowledge, if not experience, was nothing less than explosive; but the educators preferred to close their eyes to the whole matter, as long as it was possible to avoid scandal. The boys themselves were pained by what they did not understand and were desperate to experience "life." Prostitutes, grisettes, servants, and married women provided some hope of satisfaction. The yearning for intimacy also turned some boys to their fellow students. Charles de Rémusat remembered this attachment to a school-mate as "passionate . . . threatening to erupt into what there was in Antiquity" (107).

Proper parents of the early nineteenth century sought to protect the obligatory innocence of their daughters through a regime of sexual ignorance and surveillance. Yet, Houbre uses memoirs and letters to demonstrate that keeping daughters in ignorance was at least a partial failure. In fact, she reveals a surprising level of sexual/romantic obsession among many girls. Their boarding schools had to mobilize against physical relations among the students (178).

The second part of the study, about young men and women coming out "into the world" in preparation for marriage, is less rich in novel insights. This is partly because Houbre, without alerting her readers, significantly narrows her purview to Parisian high society. The theme in this section is the defeat of youthful idealism and passion by the implacable demand for respectability. The descriptions of rigid ball and courtship rituals might have been lifted from romantic novels. Her study seems to show either how true to life the novels were about fashionable society or how much Houbre has been influenced by literary evidence. The reader has to be suspicious precisely because Houbre reproduces the romantic discourses (adolescence as a moment of wonderment, polished society destroying true emotion through its conventions, etc.) instead of deconstructing them. Moreover, the theme of the first part of the book, the ferociously strong hold of "love" on the imaginations of adolescents, gets lost in the second part. Houbre presumes that the matches that will form in *le monde* have little to do with love. Few opportunities for emotional (much less physical) closeness presented themselves until after marriage. The author does not ask what happened to the youthful obsession with love.

Two new books explore the breakdown of Richard's "bourgeois" sexual order. Fabienne Casta-Rosaz picks up precisely where Houbre

leaves off and carries the story of French girls' sexual initiation to the late twentieth century. This author focuses on "the flirt," the social type who would challenge and transcend the restraints that concerned Houbre. The flirt was the well-raised girl who, while stopping well short of intercourse, signaled her interest in a male, arranged to see him away from her parents' supervision, and even permitted some physical intimacies. Casta-Rosaz argues that Houbre's regime of ignorance and surveillance showed its first serious cracks in the 1880s. This is when the term *flirt*, borrowed from English, entered the French language in a sustained and often sensational manner. Not only did a stream of book titles suddenly broadcast the anglicism but more upper-class girls than ever before dared to break out of the conventional restraints. The author sees the emergence of the flirt as a part of wider cultural shifts occurring during the Belle Epoque: new freedoms in education, fashion, and physical movement (sports, for example) accorded to young women; and, more important, the final triumph of a romantic ideal of marriage over the arranged match. Allowing youths to mingle and relying on their good sense to limit improprieties—understood as the "Anglo-Saxon" mode of courtship—was replacing the regime of ignorance and surveillance.

These noteworthy trends grew out of myriad private negotiations between parents and children. The public acceptance of new freedoms was, however, a much more difficult matter. The flirt's entry into collective consciousness of the Belle Epoque was shocking.<sup>13</sup> The type was immediately absorbed into the discourse of perversion and degeneration that came so readily to social observers of the day. The French public also found the flirt's notoriety all the more annoying because she confirmed the British contamination of national culture.

Casta-Rosaz has not devised a method for surveying the behavior of the population at large. She treats young women from proper families and has nothing to say about working-class girls, whose behavior might have complicated her narrative. For sources, she turns to memoirs and novels (most of which are not well known) for case studies of the succeeding eras, analyzing the histories at length and with commendable subtlety. The reader enters the minds of numerous "good" girls who risked being adventurous but rarely assumed that they had

<sup>13</sup> Michèle Plott argues that upper-class women could construct an enlarged sexual sense of self inside and outside marriage ("The Rules of the Game: Respectability, Sexuality, and the *Femme mondaine* in Late-Nineteenth-Century Paris," *French Historical Studies* 25 [2002]: 531–56). While covering a lot of the same ground as Casta-Rosaz but deploying a more impressive array of sources, Plott suggests that the flirt would not have been shocking in fashionable circles; it would have been expected for women there to be flirts.

the right to be so. Thus, caution about going too far, ruining their reputations, losing their still sacred virginity, or getting pregnant triumphed over daring. These were not Blanc's libertines.

In the end, the most original contribution of this work is that it calls attention to the emergence of the flirt (both as representation and reality) during the Belle Époque. The flirt was one more sign that French women were breaking out of nineteenth-century restrictions—though not without controversy and resistance.<sup>14</sup> The post-1914 narrative, by contrast, mainly reinforces the chronology laid down by Richard. Though habits became freer and the reputation of the flirt less scandalous after the Great War, French (bourgeois) mores remained conservative. Internalized restrictions, even if not the “French” way, worked well. Casta-Rosaz examines the rise of a youth culture but confirms that its ability to shape behavior was retarded by several decades relative to the United States.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Casta-Rosaz follows the conventional narrative in dating the final breakdown of the old order with the introduction of the contraceptive pill. The chapters on the twentieth century are more impressive for their exploration of young women's moral turmoil than for offering original claims about the evolution of sexual codes in French society at large.

Anne-Marie Sohn has undertaken the most ambitious effort to rethink Richard's chronology, and she couples it with a breakthrough in empirical research. Sohn has identified sources that give her access to the words of ordinary people talking about sex. She draws on some seven thousand judicial dossiers that she read for her 1993 *doctorat d'état*.<sup>16</sup> Her sources even overrepresent the popular classes, usually so hard to reach. Sohn listens attentively not only to what the people who gave testimony (the accused, the victims, the witnesses) had to say explicitly about matters sexual but also to the meanings that slipped out when they discussed other subjects. Her reading of the evidence is consistently judicious.

Sohn begins by distancing her work from that of Foucault; firmly positivistic, she wants to investigate the “lived” experience of sexuality,

<sup>14</sup> Recent works stressing the success of new models for womanhood at the end of the nineteenth century include Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago, 2002); and Lenard R. Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Middle-class parents across the Atlantic had conceded the inevitability of youthful experimentation during the 1920s whereas, according to Casta-Rosaz, French bourgeois parents were still fighting it in the 1950s. On the American situation, see John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago, 1997), chap. 11.

<sup>16</sup> “Les rôles féminins dans la vie privée à l'époque de la Troisième République” (Doctorat d'état, Université de Paris I, 1993).

not the cultural constructions surrounding it (8); separating the two sorts of questions does not appear problematic to her. She uses her vast reservoir of evidence to refute Richard's claim that repression and hypocrisy were the order of the day until the late twentieth century. Instead, Sohn argues that from the 1860s (and more clearly from the 1890s) through World War II, an important, though largely subterranean, sexual liberation was going on.<sup>17</sup> To be sure, the claim that sexual restraints eased at the end of the nineteenth century is not as revisionist as Sohn wishes us to believe, but it is still useful to have this movement carefully explored and well documented.<sup>18</sup>

Sohn's case for the end-of-the-century liberation rests on subtle but telling shifts in language and gesture. The painful shame French people expressed in talking about sexual pleasure through most of the nineteenth century yielded to casual acceptance of sexual bliss between legitimate lovers as a desirable aspect of life. Though at this point, change occurred mainly on "the verbal plane" (307), behavior did alter, to a degree. Gestures became more open and more suggestive. Kisses on the lips, and even deep kisses (tongue in mouth), once too lascivious to be exchanged in public, no longer shocked by the 1930s. Presumably, this is when foreign visitors first began to observe the public displays of affection that they would come to take as quintessentially French and that would henceforth be as much anticipated by tourists as a visit to the Louvre. Sohn's findings also confirm the claims that other scholars have made about the eroticization of sex within marriage by the early twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> The findings explain, as well, the banalization of the figure of the flirt by then.

Content to describe what changed, Sohn is too cautious to speculate on the causes of the sexual liberation. If church teachings had played a large role in shaping popular sexual morality, and the subsequent liberation was a matter of de-Christianization, readers have to arrive at this conclusion on their own.<sup>20</sup> Sohn notes that her infor-

<sup>17</sup> A more recent book by Jean-Yves Le Naour, *Misère et tourments de la chair durant la Grande Guerre: Les mœurs sexuelles des Français, 1914–1918* (Paris, 2002) examines the impact of World War I on sexual practices. It supports Sohn's claims for new kinds of behavior but adds that the war actually enhanced respect for "traditional morality" as a norm. It took time for a freer outlook on sexual morality to gain legitimacy.

<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Birken, *Consuming Desire: Sexual Science and the Emerging Culture of Abundance, 1871–1914* (Ithaca, NY, 1988); and Kevin White, *The First Sexual Revolution: The Emergence of Male Heterosexuality in Modern America* (New York, 1993), among other works, cover the breakdown of "Victorian" morality.

<sup>19</sup> Angus McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History* (Oxford, 1999), chap. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Sohn treats Catholic attitudes in "French Catholics between Abstinence and 'Appeasement of Lust,' 1930–50," in *Sexual Cultures in Europe: Themes in Sexuality*, ed. Franz X. Eder, Leslie Hall, and Gert Hekma (Manchester, 1999), 233–54.



nants frequently invoked a “natural” order of sexual comportment, the violation of which was serious, but she does not ask how the understanding of the natural was formed in the first place. Moreover, Sohn is excessively committed to a liberationist narrative. Judith Walkowitz has shown for Great Britain, and John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman have shown for the United States, that the separation of sex from its moorings in conjugal procreation produced angry, defensive reactions in the form of antivice campaigns and the proliferation of categories of perversion.<sup>21</sup> Sohn ignores such complexities. Her findings are most interesting and provocative on shifts in languages and gestures (chaps. 1 and 3). Many of the other topics explored—taboos, seduction, sexual initiation, breakups—yield predictable results. Still, Sohn deserves much credit for offering such a strong case that popular sexual practices did evolve significantly before the better-known sexual revolution of the 1960s.

None of these empirical studies ever question the appropriateness of using today’s language of love to interrogate the past. Yet, it is not safe to assume that the romanticized concept that appeared in the late eighteenth century and spread during the nineteenth established, once and for all, the modern way of thinking about love.<sup>22</sup> The implications of “sexuality’s” emergence as a category for understanding human behavior at the end of the nineteenth century need to be addressed.<sup>23</sup> So does the eventual shift of sex from a moral/religious concept to a medical/psychological one.<sup>24</sup> Nye has proposed that the convergence of sex, love, and marriage into one and the same ideal was an innovation of the Third Republic.<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, a student of homosexual and heterosexual identities (mainly in the United States),

<sup>21</sup> Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992), 5–6; D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, chaps. 8, 10. For the defensive reaction in France, see Alain Corbin, *Les filles de nocés: Misère sexuelle et prostitution aux 19<sup>e</sup> et 20<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris, 1978), 385–452.

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Maza, “The ‘Bourgeois’ Family Revolution: Sentimentalism and Social Class in Prerevolutionary French Culture,” in *Intimate Encounters: Love and Domesticity in Eighteenth-Century France*, ed. Richard Rand (Princeton, NJ, 1997), 39–48. For a provocative survey of the subject, see Alain Corbin, “Intimate Relations,” in *From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*, vol. 4 of *A History of Private Life*, ed. Michelle Perrot, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 549–614.

<sup>23</sup> Carolyn A. Dean, *Sexuality and Modern Western Culture* (New York, 1996); Robert A. Nye, ed., *Sexuality* (Oxford, 1999), 115–204.

<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting Arnold Davidson’s assertion that “the science of sex did not arise because we became more preoccupied with our true sexuality. The reverse is true. With the science of sexuality our existence became a ‘sexistence,’ saturated with the promises and threats of sexuality” (*The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* [Cambridge, MA, 2001], xiii).

<sup>25</sup> Nye, *Sexuality*, 57–76. According to Blanc (*Les libertines*, 18–19), who has studied the eighteenth-century sources carefully, it was acceptable to express cynicism about spiritual love; but even in libertine circles, one could not portray love in terms of sexual pleasure.

is one of the few scholars who has grappled with the changing meanings of love before sexuality. He presents a plausible case that heterosexuality became “normal sex” only in the early twentieth century. Prior to that, the language of the “procreative instinct” prevailed. “Love,” Katz claims, was a spiritual sentiment while lust was its opposite, not its complement.<sup>26</sup> This analysis allows us to understand the distinctions the writer Etienne de Neufville was making in his 1841 *Physiologie des amoureux*: “At the age of twenty, one loves sincerely and seriously; one respects and venerates the woman who inspires you”; but “at thirty, the heart become bitter [and] . . . one sees in love only an agreeable pastime.”<sup>27</sup> A claim that the psychologist Alfred Binet made in an 1887 essay on fetishism illustrates the transition that was in the works from “before sexuality” to after in the conceptualization of love: “The attraction that the lover experiences for all the parts of a person’s body are not the product of a platonic admiration or a purely aesthetic sentiment; this attraction is sexual, and female beauty is a cause of genital excitement in men.”<sup>28</sup> If Nye and Katz are correct, then Richard, Blanc, Houbre, Casta-Rosaz, and Sohn would need to revise their research paradigms in significant ways so as not to misread the past.

The corrective is to historicize “love,” and Vernon A. Rosario has taken a provocative step in that direction by providing the genealogy of eroticism. Rosario asserts that “the erotic” as we understand it today (“arousing sexual desire”), rather than being a timeless and universal category, is specifically a product of nineteenth-century French culture. The pre-nineteenth century meaning of the term, mainly to be found in English, was melancholy love. *Erotique* was first used in French, according to Rosario, in an 1825 gastronomical treatise, referring to truffles.

One might have supposed that poets took the lead in describing what feelings “truly” lurked within a soul filled with desire, but those familiar with Foucault will not be surprised that Rosario identifies physicians as the key group constructing the erotic imagination. “It was [in] the ostensibly cold and unfriendly setting of the medical examination room that people began to develop the ideas and terms for the erotic” (159). Rosario insists that men of letters read medical reports on mentally troubled lovers and did not hesitate to borrow the words and sentiments of the patients for their fiction. Doctors invented the erotic as they explored the pathologies of masturbation,

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York, 1995); and Katz, *Love Stories: Sex between Men before Homosexuality* (Chicago, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> Etienne de Neufville, *Physiologie des amoureux* (Paris, 1841), 40–41.

<sup>28</sup> Alfred Binet, “Le fétichisme dans l’amour,” *Revue philosophique* 24 (1887): 272.

erotomania, inversion, and fetishism, according to Rosario. Foucault's readers will also not be surprised that physicians incorporated within this construction their anxious preoccupations with France's decline and the class, racial, and cultural problems that they believed were dragging the nation down.

Following in the footsteps of Jan Goldstein and Robert Nye, Rosario's study is about the politics of medical knowledge.<sup>29</sup> Arguably, the historiography calls for more at this point. The author's engaging analysis begins and ends with the erotic as an element of the perversions that had to be cured so that normative love—heterosexual, conjugal, reproductive—could become universal. What of Nye's point that normative married love was eroticized under the Third Republic, reconciling conjugality and sensuality? Nye's claim is all the more compelling in that it has the support of Sohn's empirical evidence. Beyond noting that novelists learned the idea of the erotic from physicians and transmitted it to a broader readership, Rosario is not concerned with the category in the wider culture—though Sohn's findings imply that the erotic had become “intuitive” for a wide public by the eve of World War I. Rosario simply assumes that eroticism remained within the perversion/heredity/degeneracy complex. He does not raise the possibility that it could have been undergoing normalization. Yet, there were certainly influential voices arguing that the French needed to marry for love and experience the sexual longing that would lead to stronger families and high natality.<sup>30</sup>

Rosario's is the sole recent contribution to the history of the conceptualization of love, but there are some interesting studies of related subjects. Alain Boureau demonstrates that historians of modern France have much to learn from reflection on the “medieval” *droit de cuissage*—the right of the seigneur to sleep with the bride before her groom did. Even though Boureau considers it naive on the part of scholars and the general public to believe that there had ever actually been a such a right (distinguished historians like Michelle Perrot have erred in affirming its existence), he methodically tracts down all the relevant references and deploys his consummate skills as a medievalist to expose the myth. More interesting is the modern life of the myth. A collective consciousness of the *droit de cuissage* in effect grew with the emergence of Richard's bourgeois order. Voltaire was one of the first to use the term (in his 1756

<sup>29</sup> Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness, and the Politics of Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton, NJ, 1984); Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1987).

<sup>30</sup> Joshua H. Cole, “‘There Are Only Good Mothers’: The Ideological Work of Women's Fertility in France before World War I,” *French Historical Studies* 19 (1996): 639–72.

*Essai sur les mœurs*). A good number of prerevolutionary plays, most notably Beaumarchais's sensational *Le mariage de Figaro*, used the *droit* (or a variation on it, the right of a master to sleep with his servant) as a plot device. A belief that medieval custom had permitted the lord's right flourished as French culture started to grapple with the implications of human rights.

Indeed, the construction of "the rights of man" indirectly made the *droit de cuissage* a passionate subject in modern France. Boureau credits the lively debate over whether lords ever had such domination and who was responsible for the outrage if they did (the Crown? the church? the lords?) with "the invention of the Middle Ages." The debate brought scholars to crystallize a conception of those centuries as a distinct era, with its own essence, not just a transition between antiquity and the contemporary world. (It is noteworthy that Eugène Sue's first novel about the Middle Ages was adopted for the stage in 1859 under the title *Les droits du seigneur*.) With the development of factory production and protest against working conditions, the labor movement denounced foremen taking advantage of women workers in terms of a *droit de cuissage*. Even the late twentieth century needed the myth to conceive of men's illegitimate domination over women. The 1992 penal code reform, which made sexual harassment a crime, referred to the offense as the *droit de cuissage* (1).

Boureau is successful in identifying the myth as an element in the "mental structures of domination and desire" (39). The feudal framework grounded the modern world's commitment to the sanctity of personal volition. However, Boureau does not fully engage with the ways sex reveals the functioning of power. The mobilization of the myth for the defense of women's rights in the recent past brings Boureau to one of his most provocative but unsatisfactory conclusions. In France, he claims, sexual harassment has been cast in feudal terms, as a matter of people having unequal rights, whereas in the United States, the protest against the offense is specifically about gender, men's abuse of women. He credits the French conceptualization of harassment with producing far less political divisiveness than the American approach.<sup>31</sup> What Boureau fails to perceive is how insufficient the feudal perspective has been for exposing the roots of male domination. Thus, he is insensitive to the

<sup>31</sup> Bourreau's point parallels the controversial thesis of Mona Ozouf's *Women's Words: Essay on French Singularity*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago, 1997). Ozouf contrasts the consensus-building notion of equality of the sexes in France with the contentious attacks on men she finds characteristic of American feminism. For wider commentary on this debate, see Eric Fassin, "The Purloined Gender: American Feminism in a French Mirror," *French Historical Studies* 22 (1999): 113–38.

deficiencies of the 1992 provisions, for example, in failing to provide protection against harassment from coworkers or against a hostile work environment.<sup>32</sup>

Georges Vigarello's study of rape law since the sixteenth century takes us further into the experience of coerced sex in France. (Actually, few of his findings seem unique to France.) Vigarello shows that until the women's movement of the late twentieth century put rape trials on trial (along with patriarchy), the crime tended to punish the victim and all too often allowed the perpetrator to go unpunished. Before 1789, rape was a moral crime closely associated with sodomy, adultery, and bestiality. It was fiercely condemned but rarely punished because rapists could buy off the victim's family or plead that the victim had consented. The principle of individual responsibility in the laws enacted by the French Revolution did shift attention to the victim's injury, Vigarello shows, but it was a matter of "a radical theoretical transformation" with "meager immediate effects" (92). During the nineteenth century, too, convictions remained rare. There was the widespread belief (despite the gender stereotype of the "weaker sex") that a woman should be strong enough to fight off an assailant. A simplistic understanding of the sexual impulse made juries doubt that a married man who slept with his wife would have any reason to rape. Many writers condemned the ostracism that the public inflicted on the victims, deemed "unclean," but they offered slim hope for enlightening the public on this prejudice. Not until the penal code reform of 1992 were many impediments to prosecution removed. Vigarello interprets the recent legal reform as being directed specifically against women's oppression, not against Boureau's feudal dependence, but his account does not explain the limitations on the protection the reform offers.

The broad outlines of Vigarello's history are fairly familiar, but a lot of specific observations make the book worth the read. One is on the public fascination for bloodshed yielding to "a more internalized . . . fascination for private devastation" (232). This is seen (in both France and the United States) in the contemporary take on the victims' suffering; sympathizers today lament, not that victims will be ostracized, but that raped women will never recover from their sense of violation. Another sign is the emergence of child abuse as the most heinous of crimes, the molesters being monsters whose incorrigibility is virtually a public imperative. Vigarello reasonably proposes that these new per-

<sup>32</sup> On the inadequacies of the French legislation, see Robert Nye, "Sex and Sexuality in France since 1800," in *Sexual Cultures in Europe: National Histories*, ed. Franz X. Eder, Leslie Hall, and Gert Hekma (Manchester, 1999), 107.

ceptions of coerced sex reflect the sanctity of personal security and of ownership of our bodies today.

The works I have reviewed make the important case that Richard's conservative, bourgeois sexual order was disintegrating at all levels of society during the last third of the nineteenth century. As is usually the case in the history of sexuality, the will to speak publicly about the changes lagged behind shifts in private behavior, but there were occasional outcroppings of the subterranean revision: for example, the stir made by the flirt's entry into public consciousness. In the meantime, the invention of "the erotic," new attitudes toward rape, and intensified affirmation of sex as a constitutive feature of individuality signaled a reshuffling of sexual consciousness. Scholars in the field will be able to make further progress and pose bolder questions when they attend to two problems. First, they must take gender far more seriously. A sophisticated engagement with feminist theory would bring complexity to the liberationist narratives some are constructing. Second, those in the field must transcend the self-imposed barriers between the empirical research on behavior and the study of discourse. The recognition that sexual systems have shifted and that "love" has not had a fixed meaning is long overdue. Investigating how a sexual system focused on the object(s) of desire—what we have come to call "sexuality"—replaced one constructed around gender or the procreative imperative may well hold the key to how Sohn's early sexual revolution came about and how it provided the impetus for more thoroughgoing change in the twentieth century.<sup>33</sup> These corrections would go far toward producing the exciting field that the history of love and sexuality in France should be.<sup>34</sup>

A substantive question is also looming: Has France had a distinctive erotic history of its own? Put another way, did eighteenth-century aristocratic libertinism or post-1789 bourgeois respectability provide the reigning influence in the long run? The answer, once the basis for predictable claims about national character, has become ever more problematic. The studies reviewed here place France, by default, solidly within the general Western narrative and reduce the scope of a culture that particularly supported the pursuit of pleasure. In fact, the French reputation for open-mindedness about all matters sexual has

<sup>33</sup> On shifting sexual systems, see Chauncey, *Gay New York*, chap. 4; Randolph Trumbach, *Sex and the Gender Revolution* (Chicago, 1998); and David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago, 2002).

<sup>34</sup> A new generation of synthetic work that takes account of these issues has yet to emerge but noteworthy steps in that direction are Leila J. Rupp, *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America* (Chicago, 1999); and Allida M. Black, ed., *Modern American Queer History* (Philadelphia, 2001).

taken a hard hit recently as scholars have become increasingly aware of the record of intolerance for homosexuality, despite the precocious decriminalization of sodomy (in 1791).<sup>35</sup> Yet, it is too soon to draw firm conclusions. There has simply not been enough research on the subjects that might make the case for French exceptionalism. The retarded development of marriage based on choice and affection is arguably one of the outstanding facts in French social history; its implications are not sufficiently understood.<sup>36</sup> Another issue is what we should make of a sensually sophisticated literature and theater that was so accepted in France but that scandalized most other cultures.<sup>37</sup> We do not know if the freedom of expression reflected underlying freedom of practices or was the cultural elite's reaction to the prevailing "bourgeois" prudery.<sup>38</sup> It would be useful to know more about how a special claim on sensuality became an element of Frenchness. Did foreigners originate this construction? If so, what were the politics of accepting it? For that matter, the field should certainly attend to imperial influences on French attitudes and behaviors.<sup>39</sup> Nye has already proposed that, despite the acceptance of homosexuality before the Revolution, so well documented by Blanc, low fertility and anxieties about masculinity produced an "obsessively maintained" sexual culture focused on "heterosexual sexuality and the forms of love that nourished it."<sup>40</sup> This answer may or may not stand the test of time, but students of French culture should certainly want to pin down how Frenchness came to seem so specially tied to *l'amour*.

<sup>35</sup> Nye, "Sex and Sexuality"; David Caron, *AIDS in French Culture: Social Ills, Literary Cures* (Madison, WI, 2001); Jan-Willem Duyvendak, "Identity Politics in France and the Netherlands: The Case of Gay and Lesbian Liberation," in *Sexual Identity/Queer Politics*, ed. Mark Blasuis (Princeton, NJ, 2001), 56–72. On the ambiguous decriminalization of sodomy, see Michael David Sabalis, "The Regulation of Male Homosexuality in Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, 1789–1815," in Merrick and Ragan, *Homosexuality*, 80–101.

<sup>36</sup> Stendhal (*De l'amour*, 132) asserted in the 1820s that no nation had fewer love matches than France.

<sup>37</sup> Clifford Bissell, *Les conventions du théâtre bourgeois contemporain en France, 1887–1914* (Paris, 1914); Jacques-Louis Douchin, *La vie érotique de Maupassant* (Paris, 1986); Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA, 1989); Dominick LaCapra, *Madame Bovary on Trial* (Ithaca, NY, 1982).

<sup>38</sup> Plott, "Rules of the Game," demonstrates that, at least in fashionable Parisian circles of the late nineteenth century, women (married and unmarried) could advance a sensual persona and still remain "respectable." Plott finds memories of prerevolutionary libertinism as well as modern perspectives on the importance of sexual pleasure, even to women, at work. How general this situation was beyond Paris and how different it was from fashionable circles in other cultures remains to be studied.

<sup>39</sup> Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, eds., *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville, VA, 1998), makes a start.

<sup>40</sup> Nye, "Sex and Sexuality," 92.