Eighteenth-Century Fiction

Volume 24 | Issue 4 Article 18

July 2012

Compte rendu/book review: Nicolas Veysman, ed., *Contes immoraux du XVIIIe siècle*

James E. Fowler
University of Kent

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/ecf

Recommended Citation
Fowler, James E. (2012) "Compte rendu/book review: Nicolas Veysman, ed., *Contes immoraux du XVIIIe siècle*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*: Vol. 24: Iss. 4, Article 18.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/ecf/vol24/iss4/18

Copyright ©2014 by Eighteenth-Century Fiction, McMaster University. This Article is brought to you by DigitalCommons@McMaster. It has been accepted for inclusion in Eighteenth-Century Fiction by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@McMaster. For more information, please contact scom@mcmaster.ca.

Compte rendu/book review: Nicolas Veysman, ed., *Contes immoraux du XVIIIe siècle*

Abstract
Compte rendu/book review:

Nicolas Veysman, ed., *Contes immoraux du XVIIIe siècle*

Keywords
compte rendu, book review, critique litteraire

This article is available in Eighteenth-Century Fiction: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/ecf/vol24/iss4/18

Nicolas Veysman, ed. *Contes immoraux du XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009. 1312pp. 31€. ISBN 978-2-221-11057-7.

In his concise and useful preface, Michel Delon argues that the *contes immoraux* of the Enlightenment era deserve to be better known and appreciated (8–27). The collection will surely help to achieve this increased recognition. Nicolas Veysman groups his selection of *contes* under the headings: "Licences poétiques" (that is, *contes immoraux* in verse form), "Le Boudoir des fees" (fairy-tale variants of the genre), and "La Culbute immorale" (late-century *contes immoraux*). In the general introduction, Veysman compares and contrasts the *conte immoral* that stretches back to La Fontaine with the "conte moral inventé en 1755 par Marmontel et continué après 1765 par ses nombreux épigones" (48). He then suggests that as the *conte immoral* assumed a succession of forms, its relationship to traditional morality changed. The *conte en vers*, with its subversive "immoralité oppositionnelle," comes first; its peculiar immorality is founded on "un choix délibéré de l'immoraliste pour le vice et le plaisir lubrique." The *conte* [*immoral*] *en vers* is succeeded in the course of the first half of the eighteenth century by the fairy-tale version, which promotes an "immoralité substitutive," an alternative (im)morality tending towards social harmony. Finally, in *contes* written after the middle of the century, but especially around the *tournant* of the eighteenth and nineteenth, we discover an "immoralité problématique," which "[rend] impossible tout partage entre le bien et le mal, impraticable toute censure, invalide tout jugement et impossible toute repression" (49–50). Adopting a more formalist perspective, Veysman then asserts that the *conte immoral* is intrinsically better suited than the novel to show "les mutations de la philosophie morale." He claims that it shares this characteristic with the *conte moral*; for these shorter forms more readily (or necessarily?) present characters as vehicles of ideas rather than as complex or developing individuals (52). Correlatively, he argues that any key character in a *conte immoral/moral* is "doté de qualités hyperboliques. Non pas seulement moral ou immoral mais prodige de moralité ou d'immoralité" (52).

The placing of the "prodige" at the centre of the phenomenon is an excellent insight that reinforces the editor's historically informed and nuanced overview of the *conte immoral*. Veysman distinguishes between "prodiges événementiels," that is, extraordinary occurrences that may defy the normal course of nature or simply lack a known cause, and "prodiges identitaires." The latter term refers to extraordinary characters, but usually in a sense opposed to traditional morality (as in "un prodige de cruauté"). Veysman forcefully argues that "chaque conte immoral élabore un prodige spécifique" (55). The verse variety contains only the "prodige événementiel"; this generally involves

"un stratagème mis en place par le protagoniste immoral, destiné à confondre la crédulité d'un mari ou à séduire un jeune tendron" (55). The *conte féerique* contains the "prodige événementiel" as well as the "prodige identitaire," since in that genre supernatural beings disrupt the laws of nature in order to serve extremes of human passion. Finally, the late-century *conte* [*immoral*] *vraisemblable* contains the "prodige identitaire" alone; it depicts characters who are "prodigies" only in the sense that they display extraordinary characteristics. It mirrors the *conte moral* in this respect, for "le prodige immoral est un être d'exception qui fait l'expérience des limites de la nature humaine; non plus exploration des limites de la bonté humaine, comme chez Marmontel, mais exploration de celles de la jouissance et de la cruauté, comme chez Sade" (55).

The editor also brings out the fact that, however comical and subversive most *contes immoraux* might have been, they were part of a highly serious Enlightenment trend. For as the *Grand Siècle* recedes, "moralistes et immoralistes sont amenés à repenser la morale, à la considérer, non plus [...] comme un rapport naturel et réflexif de soi à soi, mais désormais comme le résultat culturel d'un rapport social de soi avec les autres" (51). Having framed the problem in these terms, Veysman claims that "le conte immoral paraphe à sa manière le passage de l'ancien au modern"; for it marks a shift from an obsolete neoclassical "esthétique [...] de l'imitation" to a modern "esthétique de la création." And in its way, rather like Rameau's Nephew, the form "aspire à la grandeur, une nouvelle grandeur immorale" (58–59).

In an introduction of this length to such a broad topic, some questions must be raised without being answered. For instance, an intriguing problem is created by the claims made for *contes immoraux* (and *moraux*) versus the novel. Put crudely, Veysman's argument runs: the shorter the form, the "flatter" the characters and so the more effectively "philosophical" the narrative can become. But can it really be established that Sade's *contes* (for example) are more "philosophical" than his *romans*? Surely the existence of his long, philosophical novels problematizes Veysman's claim that "on parle de 'contes immoraux,' guère de 'romans immoraux,' parce que le conte, davantage que le roman, est une forme littéraire favorable aux mutations de la philosophie morale." In particular, the reader could benefit from fuller justification of the claim that the longer versions of *Justine* might be qualitatively different from Sade's shorter fictions (60), especially given that the "urtext" disinterred by Apollinaire in 1909 (*Les infortunes de la vertu*) is quite short.

As for the introductory discussions that accompany each main section—"Licences poétiques" (65–304), "Le Boudoir des fees" (305–672), and "La Culbute immorale" (673–1204)—they usefully and expertly fill in some of the details of the broader picture. These main sections, incidentally, are helpfully divided into subsections. Hence

"Licences poétiques" contains four subsections of between seven and fourteen verse *contes*. This allows for a logical grouping of texts by author and/or theme, although in the three sections on prose *contes* the author-based principle naturally tends to prevail. Overall, the collection is an original, alluring, and expert way into the *conte immoral* that will serve as an invaluable aid to future research.

James Fowler teaches French at the University of Kent. He is the author of *Voicing Desire: Family and Sexuality in Diderot's Fiction* (2000) and *The Libertine's Nemesis: The Prude in "Clarissa" and the "roman libertin"* (2011); he is also the editor of *New Essays on Diderot* (2011), and is currently preparing a study on Richardson and the philosophes.

Armelle St-Martin. *De la médecine chez Sade: Disséquer la vie, narrer la mort*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010. 414pp. 78€. ISBN 978-2-7453-1957-9.

Ce livre, issu d'une thèse, se propose d'étudier le rapport qu'entretient le romanesque sadien avec la médecine de son temps. La démarche s'imposait de toute évidence au vu des nombreuses références aux sciences médicales dont témoignent par exemple *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* et surtout les sommes récapitulatives que constituent *La Nouvelle Justine* et l'*Histoire de Juliette*. Qu'il soit implicite ou explicite, l'intertexte médical se caractérise par sa grande hétérogénéité. La pensée du philosophe matérialiste La Mettrie, inspirée du mécanisme de Boerhaave, occupe bien entendu une place essentielle. Mais on y trouve également des éléments empruntés à l'anthropologie vitaliste, dont La Caze et Ménuret de Chambaud furent les représentants les plus actifs au cours du second XVIIIe siècle. Les travaux relatifs à l'anatomie et surtout à l'irritabilité, notamment ceux de Haller, sont également bien représentés. À cela s'ajoutent des ouvrages qui relaient les avancées des sciences et les débats y afférant, à l'image des écrits de Buffon, abondamment cités et commentés dans les romans de Sade. L'approche proposée ici ne consiste pas, cependant, à établir un relevé exhaustif des sources médicales, mais bien davantage à mettre en lumière la remarquable capacité d'innutrition propre à la matière littéraire. Dans cette optique, la fiction sadienne est perçue comme une véritable matrice textuelle dont la finalité est de subordonner les savoirs à un puissant imaginaire du corps et, bien entendu, de la sexualité.

La première partie de l'ouvrage (« Disséquer la vie ») aborde la manière dont Sade se sert de la médecine comme levier philosophique. Armelle St-Martin invoque alors le terme de « creuset » (88) pour désigner l'hybridation du littéraire et du médical. Le romanesque fait