



“ The Obscene, the Word, the Thing ”

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The obscene, the word, the thing.

Methodological questions

Having studied for nearly ten years the actual uses of the words *obscene* and *obscenity* since their appearance in French at the beginning of the 17th century until the Revolution¹ necessarily forged a look – or reinforced a character – more “nominalist” than who questions just as legitimately the presence of the obscene in the periods prior to the use of the word, in the Middle Ages or in the Renaissance. Without wishing to defend any standard, any territory, I would like to offer here, as a researcher rather than as a “villain”², some reflections on different research approaches and thus question again the apparent solution of continuity tearing apart “first modernity” and “Classicism”.

In January 2019, Floriane Daguisé, since then a Doctor in French literature³, gave a presentation on the *rococo* category in which she defended the idea of a rigorous retrospective use of the term, against the criticisms formulated by several historians of literature against these anachronistic uses to which it would be preferable to use « endogenous » qualifiers as *grotesque*, *burlesque*, or even *modern*, allowing, according to Alain Viala, to « get a little closer to things as they were ». An « objective » analysis using only endogenous terms, attached to deconstructing anachronistic historiographical concepts would be opposed to a « non-objective » analysis, suspected of distorting its objects of study by designating them with terms forged in a retrospective and artificial way. Quite rightly, Floriane Daguisé denounced the double illusion on which such a claim to objectivity rested : the illusion of the semantic transparency of endogenous terms resulting, as much as the anachronistic terms, of complex critical inventions, sometimes of polemical exchanges, of misunderstandings ; the positivist illusion of « faithful » restitution of a past which is always fleeting and subject to critical reconstruction :

Interrogating a historiographical category is necessary, even fruitful, when it is a prerequisite or a springboard towards reflection on an era, a type of creation or a particular artist who obviously cannot be summed up as a category ; but to constitute this approach as a scientific vocation or a critical outcome amounts to folding the research back on itself, sclerosing it, immobilizing it. It is up to us, contemporary researchers and receptors, to confer on the terms that we use all their rigor, not by rigidifying their application, but by regenerating and tightening their uses, guided less by a quest for “absolute truth” than by a

¹ Cf. the essay based on our thesis: *Obscénité et classicisme* (Paris: P.U.F., 2003).

² Cf. the « Avis aux vilains » which opens, in the form of a *captatio benevolentiae*, the collective essay at the origin of this conference.

³ Floriane Daguisé, *L'indiscrétion du rococo. Épier, découvrir, surprendre dans la première moitié du XVIII^e siècle français*, doctoral thesis prepared under the supervision of Christophe Martin, defended at Sorbonne University on Nov. 22, 2019. I thank Floriane Daguisé for having sent me the notes for her oral presentation , which continued a reflection started in « De l'usage du rococo dans la critique littéraire dix-huitiémiste », *Dix-Huitième Siècle*, n° 50 (2018), 615-34.

vitality stimulating analysis and reflection. C'est à nous, chercheurs et récepteurs contemporains, de conférer aux termes que nous utilisons toute leur rigueur, non pas en rigidifiant leur application, mais en régénérant et resserrant leurs usages, moins selon une quête de "vérité absolue" qu'en vertu d'une vitalité stimulant l'analyse et la réflexion.

Clear and well formulated remarks, pleading in favor of an exogenous, anachronistic and reasoned use of historiographical categories.

Can we distinguish, as for the term *rococo*, « endogenous » and « exogenous » uses of the obscene ? In « L'Anatomie de l'enfer », Nelly Labère poses the hypothesis according to which « If studies on literary obscenity generally take as their starting point the XVIIth century, they undervalue, on the pretext that the term "obscene" was little used before the classical period, medieval and Renaissance practices of the obscene⁴ ». In other words, the nominalist argument would lead to ignoring the *thing* (ludicrous, dishonest, subversive language practices or acts, etc.) on the pretext that the *word* – the term *obscene* – does not designate it. For Nelly Labère, during the pre-classical period, « the obscene is the thing that provokes the word and the word that leads to the thing⁵. » The reference to the famous doublet of the *thing* and the *word*, which will be exploited in the 18th century by a famous poem by Lattaignant, deserves to be studied for a moment in that it allows us to recall that the difficulty to speak about sexuality was not actually born in the classical age and there is indeed what one might call a « feeling of obscenity » in previous periods. Witness the famous internal debate in the *Roman de la rose* and the arguments put forward a century and a half later by Christine de Pizan in favor of the deference of Guillaume de Lorris. In the fish of her Epistles to Prévost de Lisle, the author of *La Cité des femmes* relates the end of linguistic transparency to Original Sin, when (sexual) things, ceasing to be « pures et nectes », lost in the same time any possibility of being called : « le nom ne fait la deshonesteté de la chose, mais la chose fait le nom deshoneste⁶. » The language would keep the memory of Sin when, to name these realities which have become filthy, it uses a transparent and generic word, qualified by adjectives valid for moral judgment : « ja por nomer vilainnes chose / ne doit ta bouche estre desclouse. / Je ne tien pas a cortois / qui orde chose et laide nome⁷. »

The category of obscenity, in the 17th century, emerged at a time when the feeling of modesty (displayed, if not felt) was brought to such an extent that it moved away from the explicit to the implicit, until touching these words which, in ancient times, were chaste veils. The word *thing* thus experienced a double disfavour. Because he came to mean only what he was supposed to name and keep at bay – « Chose, s. m. Parties naturelles de l'homme, ou de la femme. [Il lui a pris son chose⁸] » ; « On appelle aussi en matière obscène *chose*, ce qu'on ne veut pas nommer⁹ » – it became itself unspeakable, much to the chagrin of a Vaugelas, a « remarqueur » who was both concerned with

⁴ Labère, *Obscène Moyen Âge ?*, 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁶ *Le Débat sur le Roman de la rose*, ed. Éric Hicks (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1977), 14.

⁷ Guillaume de Lorris, *Le Roman de la rose*, v. 2099-2102.

⁸ Richelet, *Dictionnaire françois*, 1679.

⁹ Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, 1690.

linguistic correction and a sorry spectator of the excess of purism of his contemporaries :

Chose. Je connois un homme de grand esprit, & reconnu pour tel de tout le monde, qui n'écrit jamais chose, parce que c'est un mot qui fait de sales équivoques. Mais il y a en cela plus de pureté de cœur que de pureté de langue ; n'y ayant pas de doute que c'est un scrupule & une vraie superstition en matière de langage, de vouloir condamner pour une semblable raison un mot reçu d'un chacun, & dont l'usage est si nécessaire, que l'on ne s'en sçauroit passer sans user de circonlocutions importunes, & tomber dans ce défaut signalé de ne dire pas toujours les choses de la meilleure façon dont elles doivent être dites¹⁰.

The proscription for decency of the word *thing* is indicative of the form of « discomfort in the language » that went through the classical age, which knew both purist paranoia for the traps of the Signifier and the art of « enveloping the garbage », of evoking in honest terms the most unspeakable realia, exemplified by Diderot's *Les Bijoux indiscrets* or Lattaignant's poem. It is in this new context of linguistic anxiety that the history of the category of the obscene takes place, of which it is important to recall some salient moments.

The trial of Théophile de Viau in 1623-1624 undoubtedly marked a turning point in France. Against the backdrop of political control, the proscription of the *thing* (libertine behavior in public space) and of the *word* (the speeches which accompanied these behaviors or which reported on them) was proclaimed simultaneously : the witnesses for the prosecution testified against the poet by laying down at the feet of the judges these terms henceforth prohibited from public expression « Dit encore avoyr ouy dire à un clerc qu'il ne congnoist que ledit clerc avoit ouy dire audit Theophile plusieurs motz sales disant *foutre de la nature*¹¹ », etc.). By creating in March 1624, during the time of the trial, the college of royal censors, the monarchy meant that censorship was a sovereign power which it intended to exercise from now on alone.

In other words, the words *obscene* and *obscenity*, the existence of which was well attested, acquired with and after the trial of the libertine poet a new function and legitimacy. Father Garasse, who had denounced in 1619 the « obscénité de paroles¹² » of the Protestant minister Pierre du Moulin, then assumed the role of attorney general of libertine poets in his *Doctrine curieuse des beaux esprits de ce temps ou prétendus tels*, finds himself accused the same year by François Ogier to have « cite en diuers endroits de tres

¹⁰ Vaugelas, *Nouvelles remarques sur la langue françoise. Ouvrage posthume avec des Observations de M. Alemand* (Paris: Guillaume Desprez, 1690), 191-192.

¹¹ *Le Libertinage devant le Parlement de Paris : Le procès du poète Théophile du Viau (11 juillet 1623-1^{er} Septembre 1625)*, ed. Frédéric Lachèvre (Paris: H. Champion, 1909), I, 252.

¹² François Garasse, *Le Rabelais reformé par les ministres et nommément par Pierre du Moulin ministre de Charanton* (Brusselle: Christophle Girard, 1619), 113. L'expression sanctionne l'emploi répété par le ministre du mot *crotte*, regarde donc plus le registre scatologique que sexuel, la censure de Garasse portant d'ailleurs plus sur la bouffonnerie de son adversaire que sur les gestes de transgression que recouvrira plus volontiers la catégorie de l'obscène.

de[te]stables & vilains passages¹³ » from the *Parnasse libertin* and had to argue in his defense that he had, on the contrary, « modifi[és] en douces et honnestes paroles¹⁴ » these very passages. Sorel, former companion of Théophile, publishes the first edition of his *Histoire comique de Francion* in 1623, but as soon as the trial is over and the condemnation of the poets pronounced, expurgates his text of all free terms for the second edition « reveuë » from his novel (1626).

Forty years after Théophile's trial, the words *obscene* and *obscenity* are almost in common use. It is however then that Molière realizes, as we know, the tour de force of staging their « false » baptism, in the famous scene III of his *Critique de l'École des femmes* (1663) where *obscenity* comes to Climène's mouth to qualify the unqualified *le...*

Climène – Il a une obscénité qui n'est pas supportable.

Elise – Comment dites-vous ce mot-là, Madame?

Climène - Obscénité, Madame.

Elise - Ah! mon Dieu ! obscénité. Je ne sais ce que ce mot veut dire ; mais je le trouve le plus joli du monde¹⁵.

Beyond the improvisation effect¹⁶, the scene illustrates wonderfully the « ob-scene device » as described by *Obscène Moyen Âge ?* since *obscenity* dramatizes an excitement which replaces both the thing (the adulterous relationship so feared by Arnolphe and impossible to represent on stage) and the *word* now forbidden of expression, the famous *il m'a pris le...* implying the noun *con*, both obvious and taboo for all the spectators of 1663 whose laughter signed a perfect defense mechanism.

Molière's target was twofold. Alongside the aristocrat women who hold salons, « précieuses ridicules » and referees of linguistic good taste, the playwright also targeted grammarians who, won over to the ideological and cultural project of the monarchy, praised a French language more dreamed than real, decreed *chaste* by nature, in other words cut and emancipated as much from its Greek and Latin roots as from the « vilaines libertés » that took the idiom during the Medieval and Renaissance periods.

[C'est une langue] Sur tout, Chaste jusqu'au scrupule, & d'une Delicatesse de goust presque infinie. Les saletez, les Paroles outrageuses, les Bassesses, n'y sont point souffertes; Et si l'on veut s'expliquer sur quelque passion tendre, il ne faut pas que ce soit avec ces vilaines expressions que Catulle & Martial ont si souvent employées. Il faut que cela soit dit d'une

¹³ [François Ogier], *Jugement et censure du livre de la Doctrine curieuse de François Garasse*, chap. III (Paris: 1623), s. p. It will be noted that Ogier only summons the category of obscenity with protection of Latin and in an indirect form : « ie ne suis pas de ceux qui veulent oster aux Muses leur plus agreable entretien, & les rendre toutes sauuages & rustiques. Je desire qu'elles soyent filles de bon discours & de douce conuersation, & non pas infames & impudiques, *scenica meretricula*, comme dit Boëce, telles que les sont les auteurs des Parnasses et Cabinets Satyriques » (*ibid.*).

¹⁴ « Tout le mal dont je suis criminel en la publication de ces Maximes est un péché bien pardonnable en ce que je les ay modifiées en douces et honnestes paroles tant que je l'ay sceu faire » (François Garasse, *Un mémoire inédit ... adressé à Mathieu Molé pendant le procès de Théophile* (6 novembre 1623), éd. Frédéric Lachèvre (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1912), 18.

¹⁵ Molière, *La Critique de l'École des femmes*, scène III, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Couton (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), I, 649-650.

¹⁶ Successful illusion of improvisation, as evidenced by the commentary by publisher Bret in his edition of the Molière theater, a century later : « Le mot d'obscénité sur lequel Élise se récrie dans cette scène, étoit nouveau sans doute, & de la création des Précieuses. Molière ne prévoyait pas qu'il feroit une si heureuse fortune », Molière, *Œuvres* (Paris: Bret, 1773), II, 508.

maniere envelopée d'un tour fin, & que l'on puisse toujours s'imaginer qu'on a voulu dire autre chose¹⁷.

In these lines published in 1683, after the battle, the fact that Charpentier avoided using the « joli » *obscenity*¹⁸ indicates that the negative « accessory ideas » attached to the realia the word was supposed to designate were quickly transferred to it.

In their « endogenous » uses, after the Theophile de Viau trial, *obscene* and *obscenity* are conceptually or semantically weak words, whose « function » is less referential or denotative than emotional. They designate less than they display the speaker's famous « injured modesty », participate in his/her *ethos*. The non-definition that Urban Chevreau proposed in 1700 is therefore linguistically relevant : « Il n'y a gueres plus de cinquante ans, que l'on a introduit, ou renouvelé dans nôtre langue, les mots d'Obscene, & d'Obscénité, pour Deshonnête, Ordure ; & ils expriment parfaitement bien ce qu'on leur a fait signifier¹⁹. » Because they express more than they signify, one can use these words to reprove objects or representations which do not in any way have any relation with the category of dirt (*caenum*). The contemporary uses of the words *obscene* and *obscenity* bear witness to this, which draw the contours of our modern modesty : at the time of the « Pornographic Consensus²⁰ », *obscene* in our eyes are less the representations of sexuality than the images of the Shoah, the cynical rhetoric of the defenders of neo-liberalism, or this *cold* or *white* obscenity characterizing for Jean Baudrillard the web of communication networks that surrounds us²¹...

From these few historiographical reminders, it is possible to ask under what conditions the obscene can become a theoretical and exogenous analytical tool. The first would be to use it entirely « disaxiologized », avoiding any moral or critical judgment on the object under consideration. This principle may seem obvious, but it is not always easy to apply given the heavy semantic heritage of the word that has been mentioned. Evidenced by it, in *Obscène Moyen Âge ?*, the distinction drawn by Katy Bernard between *grivois* and *obscene*, the latter being deemed improper to account for the subtlety of the poetry of Guillaume d'Aquitaine²², or the evocation by Madeleine Jeay of « l'obscénité la plus insupportable [...] de la décrépitude du corps vieillissant²³. »

The second would be to propose conceptually convergent uses of the term. To ward off the risks of cacophony opened by the invitation made to participants in her

¹⁷ François Charpentier, *De l'excellence de la langue françoise* (Paris, Vve Bilaine, 1683), 611-612.

¹⁸ He uses it, however, a few pages later.

¹⁹ Urbain Chevreau, *Chevraena, ou diverses pensées de critique, d'érudition et de morale* (Amsterdam: Thomas Lombrail, 1700), II, 271-272.

²⁰ Xavier Deleu, *Le Consensus pornographique* (Paris: Éditions Mango, 2002).

²¹ For a first attempt, 25 years ago..., to describe the elastic contours of this contemporary perimeter, see *Le Livre interdit* (Paris, Éditions Payot & Rivages, 1996), 14-19.

²² « Car le grivois invite, contrairement à l'obscène, à penser de façon très ténue la différence entre une réception inclusive (*intus*) et exclusive (*foris*). En effet, l'obscène par le choc esthétique qu'il implique, impose une démarcation nette entre l'émission et la réception ; le grivois, au contraire, implique une même visualisation du monde qui ne dramatise pas les seuils d'intentionnalité mais qui, au contraire, les gomme » (Katy Bernard, *Obscène Moyen Âge*, 85).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

project to propose their own definition of the obscene, Nelly Labère invites to favor the work of articulation of the two (false) etymologies of the word : on the one hand the variations of the filth-*caenum* ; on the other, their staging or layouts (*ob-scenum*). Is it so easy, however, to identify the filth ? It will be noted that, in *Obscène Moyen Âge ?*, its perimeter is wide, which goes from the characters of Devils and executioners²⁴ to only representations of “unnatural” sexuality in the fabliaux, the term *vit* not being taken in account considering its supposed « neutral » use.

More relevant and effective are undoubtedly the hypotheses relating to the *topography*²⁵ of the obscene in that they allow in particular to account for the evolutions between early modernity and classical era. What *Obscène Moyen Âge ?* describes in particular is the co-presence, for ancient periods, on the same “public” stage, of obscene representations, of speeches denouncing them as ords, dirty, etc., and texts which, on the contrary, exalt purity, cleanliness, with which obscene representations maintain an always dynamic relationship : tension between *fin’amor* and *grivoiserie* with Guillaume d’Aquitaine or in the *Jardins de plaisance*, opposite versions of the *Roman de la rose* by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, which were extended by the contrary comments of Pisan-Gerson and the Frères Col, *blasons* and *counter-blasons*, Petrarch against Aretin, etc. : as many opposite « couples » where obscenity is fueled by what repels or condemns it. With the classical age and the turning point of Theophile de Viau’s Trial, the opposites became disjointed. The open disputes of order and purity have been followed by a gradual separation of territories by an increasingly tight border between *public* and *private*, stage and backstage. On stage, an official ideology of the pure language, open but measured²⁶ condemnations of « free » speeches and representations that the *obscene* word allowed to amalgamate, from crude poems to the Climène’s *le ...* Backstage, in the shadow of the « seconds rayons », secret societies and private theaters, the free and public authors of yesteryear were rejected – Rabelais, an unavowable reference before his timid rehabilitation in the 18th century, as an object of pure and dead erudition –, the « chansons à boire » now shared in small groups ; it was also on the margins of the underground that a pornographic genre emerged, whose rawness without veil was less new than differently consumed. Finally, at the articulation of these two spaces, in the wake of the Pontanian poetics of facetry, the invention and the success of this “honest” writing already mentioned, offering beautiful elegant turns which readers and listeners could decode salt and dirt, sheltered from their inner selves (La Fontaine, Martial translator from Marolles²⁷, Diderot, etc.).

To close these reflections, I will take a last example of topographic displacement of the obscene, borrowed this time not from literature, but from medicine which, from the 16th century, the revolutions of the printing press and the promotion of vernacular languages, had to face the same questions. Until the end of the classical age, the facility

²⁴ Referring to the occurrence-apax of *obscenitas* in the musicologist Guido d’Arezzo’s works.

²⁵ The preferred *dispositif* in *Obscène Moyen Âge ?* seems to me to cover both Foucault’s and Agamben’s philosophical implications more complex than questions of *disposition*.

²⁶ See the condemnation for obscenity brought against the “censors” Garasse or Bayle...

²⁷ See Abramovici, « Épurer l’héritage : l’abbé de Marolles, traducteur de Martial », *Littératures classiques*, 75, 2011, 156-166.

for a medical author consisted in maintaining bilingualism, in staying or reverting to Latin as soon as he had to evoke delicate or indecent subjects, looking at the questions of generation or sexuality. Ancient languages were also strongly mobilized for the constitution of a stable anatomical nomenclature, where metaphors and periphrases were sacrificed on the altar of jargonous efficiency. A contemporary of this gestation, Rabelais amused himself by blurring the marks, mixing registers and levels of language about, for example, the « vertu détentrice du nerf qui restreint le muscle nommé Sphincter (c'est le trou du cul)²⁸ »... Two centuries later, when tackling the delicate question « Of the organs which are used for the generation », the doctor De Lignac summons Buffon to assure his reader that he followed to write this chapter « cette sage retenue qui fait la décence du style ». And to illustrate it immediately by indicating how to designate « the part that distinguishes man from woman » : « Il seroit aussi inutile qu'indécent de rapporter tous les noms qui lui ont été donnés, particulièrement dans notre langue. Les Anatomistes la nomment le membre viril, la Verge, & je ne sache pas qu'elle puisse être nommée autrement sans blesser la pudeur²⁹. » But to this confident and clear assertion is added a footnote, which specifies:

[a] Les Latins lui ont donné une infinité de noms ; ils l'appelloient Penis, Hasta, Muto, Verpa, Mentula, Priapus, Caulis, Virga, Fascinus. Nos anciens Romanciers, moins délicats que nous en parloient sous des noms qui ne scandalisoient personne ; on savoit ce que c'étoit que la Lance Virile, le Pistolet d'Amour, le Gaudisseur de la Maison, le Médiateur de la Paix, le Cultivateur du champ de Nature. On trouve encore à cette partie, des noms beaucoup moins honnêtes, dans les Œuvres de Rabelais, le Moyen de parvenir, le Dictionnaire comique et satyrique, &c. de le Roux.

As with Bayle, the note in small print, discreet and tedious at the same time, concentrates the essential. Very significantly, it is not the obscene monosyllable, confined for ages in the only bad books, which is here falsely censored by a preterition: it is the infinite richness of Latin classics and of obscene Middle Ages, it is literature, with which the physician maintains an obvious and significant nostalgia.

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²⁸ Rabelais, *Quart livre*, chap. LXVII, ed. Jacques Boulenger, Lucien Scheler (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 726.

²⁹ De Lignac, *De l'homme et de la femme, considérés physiquement dans l'état du mariage* (Lille: J.B. Henry, 1772), 148.

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Summary

Under what conditions is it possible to use, for the Middle Ages and the Renaissance periods, obscene words and obscenities, “exogenous” categories for these periods although it is obvious that one encounters representations or discourse entirely analogous to those who will later be qualified as such? This article proposes some reflections on different research approaches and questions at new expense the apparent solution of continuity tearing apart « modernity » and « classicism ».

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Abramovici, Jean-Christophe
Agamben, Giorgio
Arezzo, Guido d'
Aretin, Pierre l'
Baudrillard, Jean
Bernard, Katy
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Buffon, Georges Louis Leclerc
Catulle
Charpentier, François
Chevreau, Urbain
Daguisé, Floriane
Deleu, Xavier
De Lignac
Diderot, Denis
Foucault, Michel
Furetière, Antoine
Garasse, François
Gerson, Jean
Guillaume d'Aquitaine
Jey, Madeleine
Labère, Nelly
La Fontaine, Jean de
Lattaignant, Gabriel-Charles de
Le Roux, Philibert Joseph
Lorris, Guillaume de
Marolles, François de
Martial
Meun, Jean de
Molière
Moulin, Pierre du
Ogier, François
Pétrarque
Pisan, Christine de

Pontano, Giovanni
Rabelais, François
Richelet, Pierre
Vaugelas, Claude Fabre de
Viau, Théophile