“The Dissolute Taste of Vulgar Men”: Same-Sex Desire in Issoudun under the First Empire

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The history of French homosexuality as written so far has, with rare exception, been the history of Parisian homosexuality. This does not mean that same-sex relations did not occur outside the capital. Police files and judicial records for the last two centuries document many incidents of same-sex activity in the provinces; historians simply have to dig in the archives to find them. The Napoleonic era is particularly rich in this respect, because, while police dossiers from the period held in the French National Archives have almost nothing to say about Parisian homosexuality, they do contain quite a bit of information about homosexuality in the countryside, villages and towns of the Empire. Most of the recorded incidents involved schoolteachers or priests who abused boys entrusted to their care. These men were generally predatory “loners,” that is to say, with few attachments to the local community and no evident contacts with others who shared their sexual interests. However, two scandals – one in Chartres in 1805 and another in Issoudun in 1806–1807 – do reveal the existence of small groups of “sodomites” (sodomites), “sodomists” (sodomistes) or “pederasts” (pédérastes), to

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use the terminology of the day. This paper focuses on events in Issoudun in order to understand how French homosexuals in the early nineteenth century lived their sexual orientation, how they conceptualized it, and how their fellow citizens regarded them.

Issoudun, in central France, was a small but important provincial centre under Napoleon. With ten or eleven thousand inhabitants (almost as many as live there today), it was the largest town in the department of the Indre and one of its three subprefectures. Balzac, who set several chapters of La Rabouilleuse (1842) in Issoudun, described the town as a provincial backwater in the early nineteenth century, with an economy based on wine production and woollens in decline. It was, he wrote, a town “without any activity at all, not even commercial activity, without any taste for the arts, without any learned societies, and where everybody remains at home.” When a homosexual scandal broke there in 1806, departmental officials reacted with panic. The Indre’s imperial prosecutor declared that “a hideous and unnatural taste has appeared among our fellow citizens. [...] It is spreading to all ages, all classes,” while another magistrate worried that “if we don’t promptly remedy the situation, today’s generation of young people risks being completely lost.”

It all started in October 1806, when Jean Besson, the sixteen-year-old son of a joiner, was treated for an anal abscess caused by a venereal disease known at the time as crystalline. As the surgeon operated on him, the adolescent, crying out in pain, confessed to his mother that “it was the result of the relations he has had with the abbé Courant.” As Jean would later explain in more detail, these relations began in the Year X (1801-1802) when he worked as a ten-year-old clerk (commis) at the town hall. Courant, who was then municipal tax collector, detained the boy after work one evening with the excuse that he had a letter that needed delivering. Besson stated “that when everybody had left, the aforementioned Sieur Courant began to kiss and fondle him, that [Courant] unbuttoned his [own] breeches and satisfied his lust, without his being able or daring to offer any resistance because of his youth.” Their sexual encounters continued for as long as Jean worked for the municipality and continued afterwards whenever Courant had the boy’s father send him over to his home to polish his furniture. Madame Besson later admitted that in about 1804, two townsmen, suspicious of Jean’s relationship with Courant, warned her to “set things right” (mettre ordre). When she spoke to the boy in private, however, he insisted “that he was going there only to wax [Courant’s] furniture and that nothing indecent was going on.” “[H]aving no knowledge of the corruption of

5. Procureur-général près la Cour de Justice criminelle to Minister of Justice, 16 December 1806, BB8 384, dossier 1394-C2, Archives Nationales de France, Paris (henceforth AN); Dubois, magistrat de sûreté pour le premier arrondissement to directeur du jury, 10 March 1807, F7 8158, dossier 10,666-R, AN.
6. Deposition by François Peneau, surgeon, 23 March 1807, F7 8158, dossier 10,666-R, AN. All depositions cited below are from this dossier.
7. Deposition by Jean Besson, 23 March 1807.
Sieur Courant [...], which was then known [to others],” she believed her son. If Jean may have resisted Courant at first (at least so he claimed), it is apparent that by 1804 he was no longer an unwilling victim.

News of Jean Besson’s misadventures spread quickly and infuriated many in the town. On 24 October 1806, the café owner Guillaume Lecharbonnier declared angrily that “these sodomist rogues [ces gueux de sodomistes] should be driven from the city.” Charles-Philippe-Henry Proteau, a local property owner (propriétaire), “blazing with furor,” concurred: “yes, we should exterminate those rogues.” And when Lecharbonnier subsequently learned that his own son had been one of Courant’s many victims, he publicly raged “that if they [any sodomites] happened to pass by, he would strangle them.”

Alarmed by the fuss, departmental authorities felt obliged to open an investigation, and a magistrate eventually took depositions from forty-nine men and women between 23 March and 8 April 1807. Although a few deponents claimed to know nothing at all or very little about same-sex activity in Issoudun, most had a great deal to tell. Either they themselves had been propositioned – sometimes even sexually assaulted – or they knew someone else who had. The main perpetrators were two brothers-in-law: fifty-year-old Charles Courant and fifty-eight-year-old Félix Gaudeffroy. Gaudeffroy’s wife was Anne Courant, presumably Charles Courant’s sister, and both men were also uncles by marriage of the wife of the subprefect of Issoudun. They were also prominent in their own right. Gaudeffroy was a deputy judge. Courant had held various posts in the city’s administration since the 1790s, and although he had left the Church many years earlier, people were still referring to him as the abbé Courant in 1807. Depositions also implicated Étienne Berthaud, a wool merchant (married with children), a schoolmaster named Perny and (albeit only peripherally) Nicolas Fournier, a baker (married with five children). Although the investigating magistrate focussed on these five individuals (and in fact Fournier’s name came up only a couple of times), these five were by no means the only sodomites living in Issoudun. One deponent offered up the names of twelve “individuals inclined to this vice, in this city,” while the department’s imperial prosecutor reported that “about forty [men] are indicated as being guilty of this crime” (although he provided no evidence for this figure and gave no names).

Taken together, the forty-nine depositions paint a picture of frequent and persistent same-sex activity in Issoudun, ranging from consensual relations to sexual assault, and stretching back fifteen or more years. The deponents, all adults with the exception of Jean Besson, recounted both recent incidents and others that had taken place as long ago as the 1790s and perhaps even earlier. It is often difficult to date these with any precision because deponents usually situated them rather vaguely as occurring, for example, “last summer without [his] being able to recall the day,” “about a year or eighteen months ago without [his] being able to specify the time,” “two or three years ago as far as he can remember,” “about three or four years ago,” “about twenty years ago,” “some time after his

8. Deposition by Marie Deveux, wife of Louis Besson, 27 March 1807; see also deposition by Antoine Desjorbert, 7 March 1807.
9. Deposition by Charles-Philippe-Henry Proteau-Gaignante, 24 March 1807; see also deposition by Guillaume Lecharbonnier, 1 April 1807.
11. Deposition by Pierre Robet, lieutenant de gendarmerie, 1 April 1807.
12. Deposition by Alexis Grenouilloux, 23 March 1807.
13. Procureur-général-impérial to Minister of Justice, 7 February 1807, BB18 384, dossier 1394-C2, AN.
return from the army,” or “the first or second year that Sieur Courant was a priest (chanoine).”

There is no evidence in the depositions of what might be termed a homosexual “subculture” in the sense of social practices, a lifestyle or a value system distinct from the dominant culture. Issoudun’s sodomites did not stand out in any obvious way from other Issoldunois except for their sexual activities (whether occasional or frequent); at least four of the five men under investigation were married, they were all well integrated, both socially and professionally, into their community, and no deponent suggested that they were in any fundamental way different from anyone else (e.g. by being “effeminate”). On the other hand, the depositions provide evidence of the existence of a cluster of men in Issoudun who enjoyed sex with other males, who knew and to some extent socialized with each other, who apparently exchanged information on the objects of their desire and who on occasion may even have cooperated in their attempts at seduction.

The objects of their advances were usually outside their group and mostly adolescents in their early to late teens, although one or two, like Jean Besson, were prepubescent and many were mature males. Few, if any, of these victims were themselves inclined to same-sex relations. Most rebuffed the sodomites, but some (notably the youngsters) gave in for reasons that the depositions fail to disclose. We can only assume that they felt intimidated (the seducers were older and enjoyed higher social status) or expected a reward or perhaps anticipated pleasure in the sexual encounter. Indeed, this is a traditional pattern. It was common in the past for young heterosexual males to seek both financial gain and pleasure in sexual relations with other (generally homosexual) men, without feeling that they in any way compromised their own masculinity, as long as they avoided any effeminate mannerisms characteristic of the subculture and usually played the “active” (i.e. “male” or “insertive”) sexual role in the encounter.

The depositions show that Issoudun’s sodomites had numerous occasions for making sexual advances toward their fellow citizens. Incidents occurred indoors (at home, in an office, in restaurants, in a café latrine...), as well as outdoors (in the street, in gardens, in the countryside...). Sometimes the sodomites took advantage of happenstance, but in most cases they manipulated the situation to create opportunity. Nor was there anything subtle about their manoeuvres. In fact, the sodomites could be quite brazen in their attempts at seduction, and their advances were often aggressive and at times even violent, which suggests that

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14. Depositions by François Lecharbonnier, 24 March 1807; Gaspard Faullot, 1 April 1807; Marin-Cezard Tournois, 26 March 1807; Hilaire Renault, 25 March 1807; Louis Nicolas Tabouet, 26 March 1807; Pierre Derouet, 23 March 1807; Jean Antoine François Moral, 23 March 1807.

15. A few depositions suggest as much, such as the one by Claude Pradet (30 March 1807), which tells a confused and convoluted story of how, in about 1798, when he was seventeen and working for a notary, a fellow clerk named Deseglise repeatedly urged him to pay a visit to Courant. Courant eventually invited Pradet and Deseglise to join him in a garden belonging to his brother-in-law, Rémi Tourangin. There Courant made sexual advances to Pradet. Suddenly Tourangin showed up at the gate, and asked the young man: “Are you then la Pradet?” (the feminine form of address was already homosexual slang in Napoleon’s day). Pradet fled the garden. His deposition seems to indicate that Courant, Deseglise and Tourangin may have planned Pradet’s seduction.

they had little or no fear of any consequences from their actions. Courant and Gaudeffroi, in particular, must have believed that their social position and political influence shielded them from any repercussions.

A few of the depositions concerning Charles Courant can be quoted here to illustrate these points. Courant clearly preferred young adolescents, perhaps because they were oversexed and easily influenced. For instance, he regularly invited groups of seven or eight boys at a time to dine with him (at his expense) in private rooms in various restaurants and, according to one deponent who had attended as a boy, “at these meals there were committed indecencies and unheard-of infamies that cannot even be described and for which Courant set the example.” 17 Jean-François Berthelot, a young goldsmith, described one such meal that took place in about 1798 or 1799 when he was sixteen or seventeen, saying “that at this meal as at the others, the aforesaid Courant made unseemly remarks, that he set an example and committed the most shameless acts; that during the meal the aforesaid Courant took Babouin, who was at the time fifteen-years-old at most, into a small chamber next to the room where they were, in order to use him for his pleasure.” But Babouin, who all along had suspected Courant’s intentions, threw garbage on the former priest, much to the amusement of the other youngsters present. 18

Jean Moral recounted how, in the late 1780s or early 1790s, when he would have been in his late twenties, he went swimming in the river, but “for the sake of decency” entered the water some distance away from Courant, who was already bathing there: “[Moral] was hardly undressed and in the water, when he saw the aforesaid Sieur Courant cross the river and come toward him and join him in the water where he was, who told him that he wanted to fool around with him and immediately threw himself on him to satisfy his passion and since [Moral] refused, he threatened to drown him.” 19 Louis-Pierre Dermousseaux recounted how in the mid-1790s, when he was about twenty, Courant invited him for a walk in an enclosed garden, “that there he flew into his arms and kissed him, saying to him that he would love him better than the prettiest woman, that he the deponent, pushing him away, told him that he would love the ugliest woman better than the prettiest man.” 20 One evening in 1801 or so, Courant brought Alexis Grenouilloux, a nineteen-year-old notary’s clerk, to his office at the town hall. Grenouilloux told the investigating magistrate “that [Courant] asked him if he liked women; that he answered yes, that this taste was natural, that [Courant] asked him if he was well hung, that at the same instant [Courant] threw himself on him to kiss him, unbuttoning his [own] breeches and soiling himself with the most indecent emissions; that the deponent then got out of his chair, saying that [Courant] was a scoundrel and that he had to leave him and went away.” 21 In 1806, Courant invited twelve- or thirteen-year-old François Lecharbonnier to go walking with him in the country. The boy later explained “that [Courant] led him to the covered path along the river […] that having arrived above the fountain that is on the path, the aforementioned Courant sat down, took the deponent onto his knees, fondled him and even unbuttoned his own breeches and committed indecencies in front of him,” before he managed to get away. 22

17. Depositions by Pierre Deseglise, 2 April 1807; Jean-Baptiste Auger, 3 April 1807 (for quotation); and Nicolas Berost, 8 April 1807.
18. Deposition by Jean François Berthelot, 26 March 1807.
22. Deposition by François Lecharbonnier, 24 March 1807.
Alizard said that “being at the café Faullot one year ago last winter, he needed to go to the latrines and found there Sieur Courant with Faullot’s waiter.”\textsuperscript{23} According to other deponents, this waiter, who was from Paris and “about fourteen-years-old” by one account but sixteen or seventeen by others, “passed for being used for the pleasure of the aforementioned Sieur Courant.”\textsuperscript{24}

Although Courant and the others frequently asked those to whom they made advances not to say anything about what had happened, at least some of them talked. As a result, rumors swirled through Issoudun, so people in the community had become aware of what was going on. For instance, Louis-André Gaultier, a twenty-five-year-old lawyer, told investigators that Madame Desaudin once told him that the schoolteacher Perny “had tried to seduce one of the children that she had placed with him as boarders.” On another occasion, the café owner Lecharbonnier “mentioned to him that Sieur Gaudeffroy, passing the monastery one day in front of Russian prisoners of war, whom he was employing at this spot to dig up the earth, the aforesaid Russians pointed to the aforesaid Sieur Gaudeffroy […], putting one hand on their behind [and] saying in their [broken French] language Monsire nixe pas bonne.”\textsuperscript{25} And, according to Alexis Grenouilloux, it was “notorious” in Courant’s neighborhood “that he had a young man come from Villecelin [department of the Cher], to satisfy his pleasures, [and] that Dame Briot who was then Sieur Courant’s tenant told him that Dame Courant caught them in the act.”\textsuperscript{26} Not surprisingly, then, the reputations of Courant and the other sodomites suffered. François Jouslin de Morai, a 52-year-old justice of the peace, told investigating magistrates:

that one day about eighteen months ago while he was taking a walk with the aforesaid Sieur Courant on the place d’armes of this commune, the latter said that he wanted to leave this region, because he did not enjoy the respect he thought he deserved and that everybody avoided him; that he the deponent pointed out to [Courant] that he did not take steps to win this respect, because people reproached him for being inclined to a vice against nature, that the aforesaid Sieur Courant did not reply to him and adroitly changed the subject of the conversation […].\textsuperscript{27}

It is difficult to reconstruct from the many reported incidents – all told from the point of view of victims or outraged witnesses (there are no depositions by the men under investigation themselves) – exactly how Issoudun’s sodomites conceptualized what we would today call their sexual orientation. The closest we have to a clear first-person statement are the words uttered by Courant before making sexual advances to his teen-aged cousin and this cousin’s equally young friend some time in the late 1790s. According to the friend, “[Courant] teased his cousin about his claiming to have a mistress, telling him that he was wrong, that as for him, he did not like women, that he found infinitely more pleasure in fooling around with a man than with a woman, […] and he advised the deponent to do the same.”\textsuperscript{28} This sounds very much like how eighteenth-century Parisian sodomites commonly described their desire for sex with other men: it was a

\textsuperscript{23} Deposition by Louis-Joseph Alizard, 4 April 1807.
\textsuperscript{24} Café owner Faullot eventually dismissed the youth because of this. Depositions by Louis Boucheron, 25 March 1807; Pierre-René-Léon-François Guymon, 25 March 1807; Jean François Berthelot, 26 March 1807.
\textsuperscript{25} Deposition by Louis-André Gaultier, 26 March 1807.
\textsuperscript{26} Deposition by Alexis Grenouilloux, 23 March 1807.
\textsuperscript{27} Deposition of François Jouslin de Morai, 4 April 1807.
\textsuperscript{28} Deposition by Louis-André Gaultier, 26 March 1807.
“taste.” Although Courant and the others never actually used that word, the public prosecutor (as we have seen) did refer to “a hideous and unnatural taste” in Issoudun and another magistrate described sodomy as “the dissolute taste of vulgar men” (*le goût déréglé des hommes grossiers*).30

Courant and his fellow sodomites expected that at least some of those whom they approached might share their taste or at least be willing to give it a try, either because of who they were (for instance, a former soldier or an Englishman) or because they might be persuaded by clever arguments. Thus, in about 1803, according to the thirty-two-year-old weaver François Quiclère, “the aforesaid Sieur Gaudeffroy said to him, You who were in the army, aren’t you then a jolly lad (*bon luron*)? and the deponent replied that he had been in the army, but had never seen a man like him.”31 And in about 1804, according to a twenty-six-year-old day-laborer named William Ronce, “Gaudeffroy came up to him, stroked his thighs, telling him that Englishmen liked this very much, and asked if he was well hung.”32 To win the consent of twenty-year-old Pierre Alexandre Brunet in 1806, Berthault repeated a commonly held belief of the day, “that it was much better than seeing prostitutes, with whom you risked catching a disease, that you didn’t risk anything fooling around with men.”33

Apparently, few were persuaded, however, and (as we have seen) most Issoldunois rebuffed such sexual advances, often insisting that sexual relations were more natural between a man and a woman. For instance, when Gaudeffroy tried to seduce a domestic servant, the man refused him, “telling him that he was not female, and if he continued he would be obliged to hit him.”34 Fifty-two-year-old Pierre Derouet reported how, many years earlier, coming to Gaudeffroy’s home to pick up a package for delivery, “he was very surprised to see Sieur Gaudeffroy get up from the table, come towards him, offering his face and saying to him Kiss me, then; [...] he indignantly rejected such caresses and told the aforesaid Gaudeffroy that if he had to kiss his [Gaudeffroy’s] wife, he would willingly do it.” Derouet later commented that “he realized [...] that he was with a sodomist.” He escaped into the street and then sent his wife to get the package, telling her “that as for her, she had nothing to fear [from Gaudeffroy].”35 Derouet’s deposition shows that for at least some Issoldunois, sodomites had a particular identity (even if they could not be recognized at first glance) and a specific and narrow interest in men only. And the Issoldunois often expressed disapproval, some more forcefully than others. For example, Étienne Beraud, a forty-year-old property owner (*propriétaire*), described same-sex relations as both a “vice” and a “crime,” adding “that since he knew from public gossip the aforesaid Sieur Courant to be inclined to this vice and he, the deponent, often launched scathing attacks against people corrupted by this crime, Sieur Courant never propositioned

30. Procureur-général to Minister of Justice, 16 December 1806, and directeur du jury, as quoted by Procureur-général to Minister of Justice, 28 February 1807, BB1 384, dossier 1394-C2, AN.
31. Deposition by François Quiclere, 27 March 1807.
32. Deposition by William Ronce, 26 March 1807.
33. Deposition by Pierre Alexandre Brunet, 27 March 1807.
34. Deposition by Marin-Cezard Tournois, 26 March 1807, who apparently heard the story from the servant himself.
35. Deposition by Pierre Derouet, 23 March 1807.
him."  
Prior to the scandal involving Jean Besson, however, the Issoldunois were either reluctant or unwilling to turn to either police or magistrates to deal with the town’s sodomites, although there were some who did not hesitate to take justice into their own hands. After fleeing Gaudeffroy’s sexual advances, Pierre Derouet subsequently agreed to accompany Gaudeffroy on an errand into the countryside, but he made prior arrangements with two grenadiers “whom he knew to have been insulted [by Gaudeffroy] like him, while they were on guard in the subprefect’s sentry box.” The soldiers followed them, showing up just as Gaudeffroy renewed his advances to Derouet, whereupon they attacked Gaudeffroy, “cut up his hat, tore his necktie, slapped him several times and dragged him around by his hair.”  

Similarly, in about 1804, Pierre Derouet’s son agreed to meet with Gaudeffroy “behind the walls of the Convent of the Visitation,” but he came accompanied by a soldier. The two men “set about hitting” Gaudeffroy until he pulled out two pistols and chased them off. When Gaudeffroy lured a wheelwright named Louis-André Girault, whom he had hired to saw wood, into his attic and then made sexual advances, Girault beat him up. Berthault’s attempt to seduce twenty-year-old Pierre Alexandre Brunet also ended violently. Brunet recounted:

that the aforesaid Berthault led him into the fields and [...] proposed to fool around with him, [...] that he the deponent pretended to acquiesce to the proposals of the aforesaid Berthault, who led him into a patch of rye and said to him that the place was suitable for their amusements, that [the deponent] pretended to consent to everything, but [...] he told [Berthault] that it was necessary to take off his clothes and he himself the deponent took off his, that the aforesaid Berthault did the same, that he picked up the clothes of the aforesaid Berthault and his own, on the pretext of carrying them to another spot, but in fact, he ran off to more than the distance of a gunshot and left the aforesaid Berthault in his state of nudity, that he the deponent promptly dressed and then returned to the aforesaid Berthault with his whip [...], gave him several lashes of the whip and feeling sorry for the state in which he saw him, he allowed him to get his clothes from the place where he had taken them, but he drove him to this place with lashes, that then he went away and left him alone.

Private revenge of this sort was perhaps inevitable, given that the State could do little under existing legislation. Same-sex relations were fully legal in France since 1791, even when (consenting) children were involved, and rape (or attempted rape) was a crime whose victim was by definition female.

Even had prosecution been possible, authorities preferred to avoid publicity. When the Imperial Prosecutor for the Indre asked the Minister of Justice what course of action he should take in the Jean Besson case, he was told that “[t]his extreme depravity undoubtedly deserves to draw the attention of

36. Deposition by Étienne Beraud, 27 March 1807.
37. Deposition by Pierre Derouet, 23 March 1807.
38. Deposition by Pierre Derouet, 23 March 1807.
39. Deposition by Louis-André Gaultier, 26 March 1807.
magistrates and to arouse the indignation of all supporters of good morals; but it is to be feared that the commotion [éclat] of a public trial, far from stopping the evil, would increase the scandal." The final decision taken was not to prosecute those guilty of pederasty, "crime that the law has not provided for" (which raises the question as to how anyone could even have considered prosecution). Instead, the police simply ordered Issoudun’s five notorious sodomites into “internal exile” to towns at least fifty leagues away, where they were to submit to police surveillance, “being warned that they would be locked up if they indulged in their vile depravity.” Although these men then vanish from history, the resurrection of their story opens a breach in time through which we can catch a glimpse of men whom Pierre Hahn once called “our ancestors, those perverts” (nos ancêtres, les pervers).

It is clear that two centuries ago same-sex relations between men were far more widespread than generally assumed and not limited to large urban centres like London, Paris and Amsterdam. In Issoudun, and most likely in other small towns, the inhabitants knew that there were sodomites in their midst. They might not respect such men (because only sexual relations between men and women were considered “natural”), but their contempt was mitigated by some degree of pragmatic tolerance. Men offended by a sexual advance might sometimes react with verbal or physical violence, but, on the other hand, the fact that sodomites were willing to run the risk indicates that they believed, undoubtedly correctly, that they stood some chance of success, particularly when they targeted inexperienced teenagers. Sodomites in the early nineteenth century are not identical to gays in the early twenty-first, but they are indeed their ancestors.

42. Minister of Justice to procureur-général-impérial, n.d. [January 1807], BB18 384, dossier 1394-C2, AN.
43. Feuille de travail, 22 mai 1807, F7 3090, AN. On the practice of internal exile, see Michael Sibalis, “Internal Exile in Napoleonic France, 1799-1815,” in Proceedings of the Western Society for French History 20 (1993): 189-98. The Minister of Police had Courant imprisoned for three months after the police in Tours reported that he was fondling young men and boys in that town. See BB18 384, dossier 1394-C2, police report, 29 June 1809.
44. Hahn, Nos ancêtres, les pervers.