Listening to the Prostitute's Body: 
Subjectivity and Subversion in the Erotic 
Memoir Novels of Eighteenth-Century France

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In 1784 an anonymous novella called *La Cauchoise, ou Mémoires d'une courtisane célèbre*\(^1\) appeared. The narrator of this pseudo-memoir never gives her first name, and all we have are the pseudonyms she uses for protection, including La Dumoncy.\(^2\) The story of *La Cauchoise* is typical of the erotic genre already popular by the 1780s. The narrator explains that she was born in a small village in Normandy, where she lived until at age thirteen she was seduced into becoming the kept woman of a young bourgeois playboy who rented her a room in le Havre. When he catches her being unfaithful to him, he arranges

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\(^1\) The edition cited here [hereafter *La Cauchoise*] is from *Œuvres anonymes du XVIIIe siècle: L'Enfer de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, 5 vols. (Paris: Fayard, 1985), 3:385-471. In the preface, Jean-Pierre Dubost points out that the British Museum has a nineteenth-century edition, called *La belle Cauchoise*, which is supposedly a reprint of an edition from 1783. However, no copies of the 1783 edition have been found.

\(^2\) The reader never learns her first name, and the names she uses to refer to herself are inconsistent. When describing her fame, she mentions that she is known as "la Dumoncy, a first-rate fuck (*fouteuse par excellence*)." Later she explains that she adopted this last name, this time spelling it "la Dumonci," because she felt the name she had been using, "Morancourt," needed renewing. *La Cauchoise*, 396 and 454. All translations are my own.
for her to be raped by a group of men and then has her arrested. As part of her punishment, she is sent to a convent, where she develops the only truly selfless and satisfying relationship of the book, an intimate friendship with a nun, Sister Prudence. After teaching La Dumoncy about masturbation, dildos, and anal sex, Sister Prudence, knowing her young lover's taste for high society, arranges for her to be released and sends her to Paris. La Dumoncy arrives in Paris knowing no one. She quickly meets a man who promises he can find high-paying clients for her sexual favors. After "restoring her virginity," he introduces her to a financier who provides her with a beautiful, lavish apartment. This relationship proves to be financially, if not sexually, satisfying to La Dumoncy. Unfortunately, she makes a terrible gaffe at the theatre – insulting a princess – and her financier cuts all ties with her.

La Dumoncy then becomes serious about her profession, deciding to have sex with anyone and everyone who will pay. Among her many customers is a colonel in the infantry who takes her to his garrison in Rouen, where she contracts her first case of syphilis. Contracting and transmitting venereal disease is a recurring theme of the rest of her story, which ends in the Latin Quarter where she admits that she is once again infected and decides to use this break from work to write her memoirs. She recognizes that the little beauty she had has faded and that it will soon be time to become a procuress herself, but she regrets nothing.

Until recently, many eighteenth-century French novels like La Cauchoise remained hidden in the shadows of the Bibliothèque Nationale's Enfer catalog, presumably to protect both unsuspecting and debauched readers from their immoral and erotic content. However, a few scholars have
begun to bring some of these texts into the light of publication. Raymond Trousson's anthology, *Romans libertins du XVIIIe siècle*, the Pléiade edition of *Romanciers libertins du XVIIIe siècle*, and *Œuvres anonymes du XVIIIe siècle: L'Enfer de la Bibliothèque Nationale* allow modern readers easy access to these heretofore neglected texts. A large number of these novels contain the narrative structure and many of the tropes found in *La Cauchoise*. They take the form of a memoir novel in which the prostitute-heroine recounts her rise from obscurity to fame and fortune as well as the titillating details of her erotic adventures. Mathilde Cortey situates the first prostitute-memoir novel as appearing in 1732, although most appeared between 1745 and 1790, with Sade's *Juliette* providing the over-the-top swan song of the genre.

It is important to note that these "memoirs" are strictly works of fiction. As yet, no one has found any evidence that these women actually lived. Although all the novels, being erotic, libertine, and hence illegal, were published anonymously, several have been attributed to lesser-known male authors, including Fougeret de Monbron, Meusnier de Querlon, and Antoine Bret. In fact, *La Cauchoise* also

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5 *Œuvres anonymes*, see note 1 above.
appeared anonymously, but the author is identified in the preface as the author of Les Héros américains and as a contributor to the Almanach des spectacles. He appears to be César Ribié, who is listed as co-author (along with Destival de Braban) of an 1805 edition of Les Héros américains and is also one of the names listed in a 1792 edition of the Almanach.

This male authorship of female-narrated memoir novels poses a puzzling question: why would these men choose to write as women? Kathryn Norberg in "The Libertine Whore" speaks to the lack of a literary explanation for this narrative technique. She provides a pragmatic and logical explanation: first-person narration heightens the vicarious and voyeuristic pleasure of the reader. Mathilde Cortey gives the authors slightly more credit when she interprets the literary transvestism as a means of intensifying the subversive nature of the novels, as transgression of gender boundaries coincides with the social-climbing heroines' transgression of social boundaries. The fact that men were writing "as" women – women who defied gender expectations, social constraints, and the traditional mores of their time in order to lead sexually and financially independent lives – begs another question: to what extent do these characters "escape" the heterosexual male

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(Nantes: Le Passeur, 2001); and idem., La Tourière des carmélites servant de pendant au "P. des C.," in Lasowski et al., Romanciers libertins.

9 Antoine Bret, La Belle Allemande ou les galanteries de Thérèse, Deux parties (Paris, 1755).


11 Cortey, 242.
fantasies of womanhood and present instead a proto-
feminist and subversive image of womanhood?

Most scholars would answer that such a feminist reading is impossible. Mathilde Cortey refuses to see these characters as proto-feminist because they are individualistic and self-serving with no greater political cause.12 While Norberg celebrates the strength and independence of these characters, she reminds us that they lack female subjectivity and exist instead as mere reflections of heterosexual male desire.13 Nancy Miller would seem to endorse such a reading of all male-authored female characters, whom she sees as simply the author in "female drag . . . the better to be admired by and for himself."14 In erotic literature in particular, she describes the role of the attractive female character as a means of facilitating the homoerotic bond between the male author and male reader – a love triangle similar to what Eve Sedgwick presents in her reading of medieval courtly literature in Between Men.15

While it is true that the prostitute-heroines describe and embody heterosexual male fantasies of female sexuality, it is nevertheless astonishing that no one wants to grant them the subjectivity to escape their author's and readers' desires. Critics consider these novels pornography in the etymological sense of writing about prostitutes and in the sense of containing sexually explicit material, but the texts lack the subordination of women that Catharine

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12 Ibid.
13 Norberg, 230.
MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin included in their twentieth-century definition and that continues to be associated with the genre today. Instead of being subordinated and oppressed, these heroines are revolutionary in the sense that they disdain traditional roles for women, especially marriage, monogamy, and motherhood. They succeed in and enjoy their chosen profession, and they express outspoken criticism of sexual double standards and unnatural expectations of women. A reading of these characters as simply objects of desire—as objects of exchange completing the homosocial and homoerotic bonds between male authors and male readers—misses the significant social and feminist critiques these women and, thus, their male authors make.

With the example of La Cauchoise's La Dumoncy, I propose first a reading of these characters that concentrates on the movements and actions of these women rather than on their words. Such a reading draws on E. Jane Burns' notion of "bodytalk," her response to misogynistic representations of medieval heroines.17 In Bodytalk, Burns bases her rereading of medieval heroines on Luce Irigaray's

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16 “On the basis of its reality, Andrea Dworkin and I have proposed a law against pornography that defines it as graphic sexually explicit materials that subordinate women through pictures or words.” Catharine MacKinnon, Only Words (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 22.

17 Burns explains her frustrations as a feminist scholar of medieval French texts: "I found myself coming back repeatedly to the female characters in male-authored texts, looking for ways to read around the misogyny that structured their portraits." Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), xii. She describes further how she began to wonder "if there were not some space within the highly misogynistic medieval depictions of female bodies and voices that enables us to read nonetheless 'for the feminine' in such male-authored texts" (xiii).
theories that the female body is silent, absent, and unrepresentable within phallocentric Western discourse and that it is also the site of a possible means of feminine expression beyond that discourse.\textsuperscript{18} Just as Irigaray and Cixous propose writing through the body, be it the vaginal lips representing the speaking mouth or the mother's milk and menstrual blood representing the author's ink, Burns proposes reading through the body in order to explore "how female voices, fashioned by a male author to represent misogynous fantasies of female corporeality, can also be heard to rewrite the tales in which they appear."\textsuperscript{19} Such a reading of prostitute-memoir novels partially circumvents the patriarchal discourse of the author and at the same time exposes how prostitute-heroines manipulate the desires of their customers, authors, and readers in order to undermine the traditional power structure.

While Burns refrains from making a case for female subjectivity in the texts she studies, I would argue that the movements and actions of the prostitute-heroine's body transport her character from the position of sex object to that of desiring subject. Female subjectivity, whether of fictional characters or real women, is a thorny issue for Luce Irigaray who questions the status of all women as speaking subjects, given the sexual indifference of discourse – that is, the situation in which male equals universal. While Irigaray has been criticized for her essentialist interpretation of gender, her proposal that women find a new means of articulation beyond male-dominated discourse is especially appropriate in the context of literary prostitute-heroines. In fact, in \textit{Ce Sexe qui n'est pas un} Irigaray envisions one means through which women may achieve alternative discourse: female \textit{jouissance} and

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 7.
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self-affection shared among women. If female sexual pleasure – *jouissance* – is a means of escape from male discourse, then the story of a prostitute like La Dumoncy and her body becomes immediately more relevant. When we read her body, we find it leading her into public places and on voyages, trips, and errands. This mobility threatens the public-private binary of the heterosexual marriage paradigm of the period. La Dumoncy also uses her body deliberately to infect certain men with syphilis as a means of exacting revenge and exerting her own power. Finally, she uses her body to explore and achieve her own pleasure as well as the pleasure of intimate relationships with other women. La Dumoncy enjoys the freedoms and independence of her lifestyle, but above all she likes the *jouissance*.

In *La Cauchoise*, La Dumoncy considers a predilection for travel to be an inherent trait in all prostitutes: "Everyone knows that, besides the pleasures of the bedroom, a whore likes nothing better than to travel, and that the country where she is doesn't matter to her, as long as Mr. Asshole and his closest neighbor are abundantly moist." Even with its somewhat crude image, her declaration that the place where she is does not matter flies directly in the face of Enlightenment assertions that there were in fact very specific spaces where a woman should and should not be.

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21 *La Cauchoise*, 450.
From the age of thirteen her parents send her to sell eggs and butter in Le Havre. Our first image of La Dumoncy is of a young girl walking alone from her village to the big city, figuratively and literally moving toward her destiny.

Even when La Dumoncy lives as a kept mistress, she does not await her patron's visits passively and patiently in her apartment. She visits friends, has secret rendezvous, attends festivals, church services, and the theatre to be seen and admired, and she even attends an orgy outside Paris with her lover. Whatever her residence, the prostitute-heroine does not passively await customers in her brothel or boudoir; she is out and about in search of customers, lovers, and wealthy benefactors.

Once she becomes an independent prostitute her movements only increase. La Dumoncy changes residences frequently in order to protect her anonymity, evade police retaliation, and seek out fresh customers. She travels from Paris to Rouen and back again. In fact, her return trip from Rouen provides an amusing anecdote and proof of the power of her body. When she first contracts syphilis, she is in Rouen and decides to return to Paris for treatment; in the coach she meets an attractive young man and a very aroused monk. When the travelers stop to rest, she has anal sex with the handsome man in order to protect him from her disease but deliberately offers the monk vaginal intercourse in order to infect him and punish him for his hypocrisy. In addition to capitalizing on male desire, she controls the type of sex they have with her and therefore controls whom she infects. Later, she helps a client whom she has infected to revenge himself on his adversaries by infecting them as well. Fulfilling this task requires skill, since in this single encounter she has sex with her client's

*the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).
two enemies and with two of his friends whom she does not want to infect. She masterfully manipulates the orgy to transmit her infection only to those men she wants infected. La Dumoncy uses her body not only to make a living but also to manipulate and control men.

La Dumoncy does not just have sex with men for money or power; she enjoys what she does. Cortey describes the sexual desire of prostitute-heroines as “virile,” as characters like La Dumoncy choose their lovers and the latter have no power to resist. Cortey even goes so far as to assert that the prostitute-heroine symbolically castrates her lovers "because they become passive mirrors of her medusa-like desire." This desire is often as much for money and fame as for sexual gratification, but the sense of empowerment remains the same. In an effort to increase the size of her pool of customers, La Dumoncy decides not to refuse ugly or common men. Yet she still enjoys the sex and complains only once of an unpleasant experience. With all the positions and activities that she explores, including watching naked children frolic and copulate, the only thing she complains about is the one customer who demands that she perform oral sex. She conveys her repugnance for that act and is relieved when he proposes vaginal intercourse instead. A prostitute horrified by the thought of fellatio – presumably because it would not satisfy her – is hardly a heterosexual male fantasy. Even at her most pragmatic, the jouissance La Dumoncy seeks is her own.

It is important to note that the experiences that give La Dumoncy the most pleasure are with other women. Her healthiest and most satisfying relationship is with the nun, Sister Prudence, but this liaison goes beyond the titillating girl-on-girl fantasies of modern pornography. There are

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23 Cortey, 161.
signs of true devotion in addition to the vivid depictions of their sexual activities and the enormous pleasure La Dumoncy receives from them. La Dumoncy is never faithful to any of her male lovers, but in the convent she saw only Sister Prudence, proclaiming proudly: "I spent an entire year seeing absolutely only her. . . . It was only in the arms of this loveable sister that I would smile and be lively and gay." When La Dumoncy leaves the convent, the two women share "a tender good-bye." Even the graphic details of their sex acts lack the modern pornographic quality of two beautiful women pleasuring each other. Sister Prudence is considerably older than La Dumoncy and somewhat worn out: her breasts have "a bluish-gray tint and are leathery," and La Dumoncy describes her body as "withered, nasty and gloomy." Rather than a display for voyeuristic men, her depictions of their couplings suggest to her readers the possibility of women achieving pleasure entirely without men. Sister Prudence even creates a two-headed dildo that she fills with warmed milk, an inherently feminine bodily fluid, as Jean-Pierre Dubost points out. She releases it at the moment of climax to simulate the sensation of warm semen, a common cause of orgasmic pleasure for female characters in eighteenth-century erotic literature.

La Dumoncy also has a close and tender, although not sexual, friendship with another woman, a seamstress from Le Havre. After La Dumoncy's treacherous lover organizes her gang rape, he informs her that she and her friend will be sent to prison the next day. Instead of lamenting her own abuse and impending imprisonment, La Dumoncy is tortured by the fact that she cannot warn her friend. After

24 La Cauchoise, 411-4.
25 Ibid., 409, 411.
26 Ibid., 345.
her release from the convent, her first thought is again of that seamstress who has unfortunately not been freed. Years later, La Dumoncy finds her friend sick and badly abused by two cruel soldiers: "Imagine my shock and my surprise! I thought I recognized that dear seamstress whose misfortune had caused me the most painful sorrow."\textsuperscript{27} She takes her friend in and cares for her until her death: "I really felt sorry for this poor woman, and my heart applauds still today that I was able to provide her with some slightly more serene days as her death approached. But let's end this topic, because it's making me cry, and let's get back to talking about me."\textsuperscript{28} The tender emotional bond she feels for this friend as well as the sexual satisfaction and \textit{jouissance} she experiences with Sister Prudence reflect the kind of female homosexual economy Irigaray proposes as a means of circumventing the denial of female subjectivity in phallocentric discourse.

Irigaray laments the fact that in the traditional sexual economy of heterosexual relations women must wear the mask of femininity without any compensation for the effort. Women become commodities, which inherently have no subjectivity since no commodity can take itself to the market to be sold.\textsuperscript{29} Yet, when we consider a prostitute-heroine like La Dumoncy, we see a woman who does receive compensation both in terms of sexual gratification and money. La Dumoncy is very aware of her status as a commodity and does in fact take herself to the market. Through her subversive movements and actions, through her female homoerotic \textit{jouissance}, and through her assumption of control in the economy of heterosexual

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 454.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 456.
\textsuperscript{29} Irigaray, 130-1.
desire, La Dumoncy exhibits key aspects of Irigaray's utopian vision of female subjectivity.

Irigaray also theorizes that feminine pleasure, if ever allowed to be articulated through its own language, would threaten logical operations within patriarchal society. She wonders what would happen to the symbolic process if women became speaking subjects.³⁰ The implicit threat or promise is of massive social upheaval and possible violent revolution. Herein may lie the significance of the proliferation of the prostitute-memoir novel genre in pre-Revolutionary France. Perhaps the male authors of these novels, themselves excluded from the legitimate literary establishment, felt an unconscious identification with women, especially subversive women. Or perhaps these authors were expressing some sort of collective unconscious desire for upheaval and subversion. Certainly the connection between pornographic writing and revolutionary zeal has already been identified in the work of Sade and Mirabeau. The movements, actions, relationships, and sexuality of characters like La Dumoncy do render them speaking subjects outside the limitations of phallocentric discourse. A feminist reading of these characters is worth the effort, since it reveals a stronger and more independent model of womanhood and female desire from a long-hidden and unlikely source, the dangerous pornography of l'Enfer.

³⁰ Ibid.