

Le Bordel and *L'Art De F******: Confounding Clues on Title Pages

DANIEL SMITH

This is a tale of two brothels: one seedy, the other sumptuous. It is also a tale of two title pages, title pages that could make a theatre historian salivate over the prospect of piecing together prurient private performances of the past. These are title pages like any other, except for their casually negligent relationship with telling the truth. Smiling lasciviously, one of them offers archaic sexual slang instead of useful information, while the other lists the names and dates and places. It gets specific—maybe too specific. Never trust a title page, especially one from the eighteenth century.

It all started at the Arsenal Library in Paris . . .

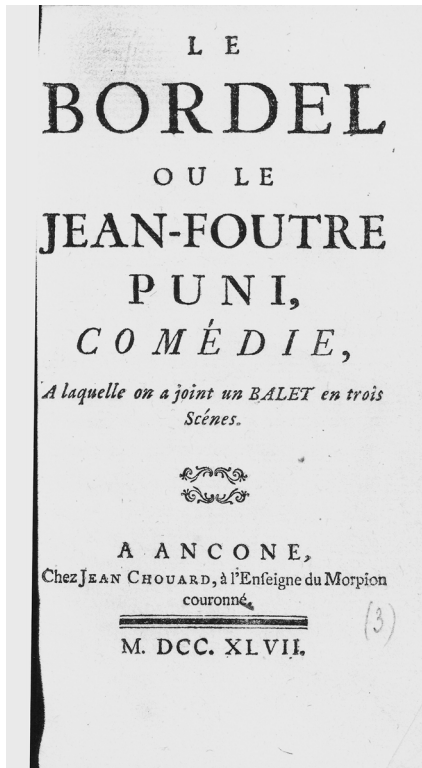
The Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal holds a five-volume *recueil factice* that includes the play *Le Bordel* [*The Brothel*] and the ballet parody *L'Art de foutre*, represented on its title page as *L'Art de F****** [i.e., *The Art of F**king*].¹ Each piece has a title page, and *Le Bordel*'s title page identifies a ballet that is attached (i.e., *L'Art de foutre*). The information provided by the title pages playfully suggests that these plays were not performed, but circulated in print to a community of readers in the know. *Le Bordel* and *L'Art de foutre* have been characterized as belonging to the category of clandestine, erotic, or libertine theatre in eighteenth-century France. Scholarly literature on this topic has generally focused on the performance of such plays in private venues for wealthy participants.² Yet the title page of *Le Bordel*, along with other paratextual evidence, suggests that the play was not meant to be performed. Paradoxically, the title page of *L'Art de foutre*, along with evidence from the text, also seems to preclude the possibility of performance via over-saturated references to an imaginary performance. The evidence provided by these title pages calls for a revision in our understanding of these plays. First, it may be necessary to distinguish among more nuanced types of obscene plays, rather than employing one category for all erotic drama in eighteenth-century France.³ Second, the lack of production history suggested by these title pages requires a consideration of other avenues of consumption. Rather than full productions in brothels or private theatres, *Le Bordel* and *L'Art de foutre* were probably read, whether by solitary readers imagining performances or groups of readers for the purpose of laughter and titillation.⁴ Viewing these title pages through the lens of book history thus affords a potential recuperation of play-reading in theatre history.

The title page of *Le Bordel* as it appears in this *recueil factice* employs broad humor in identifying the title and genre of the play, a fictive place of publication, an imaginary bookseller, and ridiculous coordinates for a place of purchase, while offering no details about where the play might have been performed. The document reads as follows:

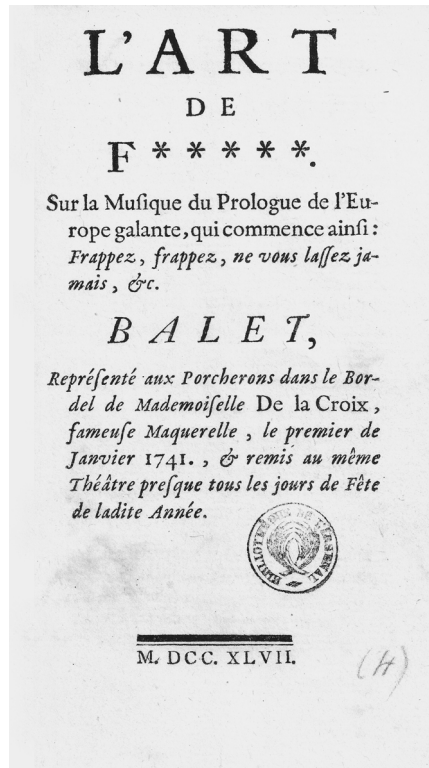
Le Bordel ou le Jean-Foutre Puni,
Comédie,
À laquelle est joint un BALET en trois scènes
A Ancone
Chez Jean Chouard, à l'Enseigne du Morpion Couronné
MDCC XLVII⁵
[The Brothel, or the Fuck-John punished,
Comedy
To which is joined a BALLET in three scenes
At Ancone
Jean Chouard, at the Sign of the Crowned Crab-louse
1747]

This page establishes the contents of both part three and part four of the *recueil factice*, stating the title of *Le Bordel* and mentioning the “Ballet in three scenes” that is joined to it, *L'Art de Foutre*. The listed place of publication, Ancone, is a false imprint.⁶ While there are towns with the name Ancone in France and in Italy, the name was probably chosen because of its punning similarity to the present tense of the vulgar verb “enconner” (lit. “to enter the vagina”). The fictitious publisher and bookseller’s shop is located “at the sign of the crowned crab louse.” Given the variety and the quest for notoriety in Parisian sign-making in the eighteenth century, such a sign is not entirely outside the realm of possibility, though it does seem unlikely.⁷ A bookseller specializing in clandestine titles would probably not want to draw that kind of attention. Nor would such a bookseller want to be named Jean Chouard, which is a slang term for “penis.”⁸ As an effort to circumvent state censorship, the creation of fictive places of publication, publishers, and booksellers is not an unusual strategy for obscene texts of eighteenth-century France.⁹

Although no author is listed on the title page, *Le Bordel* is attributed to the Comte de Caylus, a wealthy patron of the arts and connoisseur of the Ancient world who took up engraving as a hobby and apparently became quite skilled at it. Caylus maintained a libertine circle of friends known as the Société du Bout du Banc. Their primary activities appear to have been drinking heavily and sharing Anacreontic poetry with each other. It is probable that *Le Bordel* was read aloud at one of their gatherings, though there is no evidence of this. The testimony of bibliophile Paulmy d’Argenson suggests that *Le Bordel* was not intended to be performed. In his catalogue entry, d’Argenson dates *Le Bordel* “around 1732” and characterizes the play as “pour n’être point représentée” [not to be performed].¹⁰ D’Argenson also paints Caylus as a sort of ethnographer of the Parisian underworld, offering the linguistic



Title page from "Le Bordel" (ca. 1747), Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal RES 8-BL-35550



Title page from "L'Art de F*****" (ca. 1747), Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal RES 8-BL-35550

"saltiness" of the play as a testament to Caylus's intimate knowledge of brothels.¹¹ Indeed, *Le Bordel* is quite invested in prostitution as a social problem, presenting economic details, raising concerns about venereal disease, and challenging the arbitrary nature of police surveillance and punishment of individual sex workers. But all we get from the title page in the Arsenal's *recueil factice* are dirty jokes.

The title page for *Le Bordel* mentions a ballet in three scenes that is attached, but does not give the title of the ballet in question. The title page of the latter text claims that it was performed in the brothel of Mademoiselle De la Croix on New Year's Eve, 1741, and reprised on all feast days of that year. This seductive documentation has led scholars to classify *L'Art de foutre* as part of a tradition of clandestine erotic performance in eighteenth-century France.¹² But this document's flirtations with history are frustrating; nearly every clue to performance history is counterbalanced by ironic excess. The printer's advertisement that copies can be purchased "at the sign of the crowned crab louse" employs a typical tactic of clandestine publishing, here taken to a ridiculous extreme. The lush and lascivious stage directions flout the bounds of possibility, but it is possible to read these as taking poetic license. A cast list on the second page has been annotated to list the

famous prostitutes who ostensibly starred in the performance, but the date of this annotation is unclear. Baculard d'Arnaud, the author listed on other (non-extant) print versions, spent some time in the Bastille for having written such smut. The documents related to his arrest focus entirely on the illicit printing of the obscene text and not on the performance. After a tortuous search for corroborating evidence, I have concluded that *L'Art de foutre* was probably not in fact performed, at least not under the conditions suggested on its title page.

While *Le Bordel* purportedly presents a fictional brothel, *L'Art de foutre* is ostensibly an entertainment created for an actual Parisian brothel. A parody of the prologue of *L'Europe galante*, an opera by André Campra with a libretto by Houdar de la Motte, *L'Art de foutre* revels in luxury, presenting sensationalist spectacle after sensationalist spectacle. After noting the title as “L'Art de F****” and indicating the place in the musical score where the parody should begin, the title page proclaims that the ballet was in fact performed at a brothel: “Représenté aux Porcherons dans le Bordel de Mademoiselle De la Croix, fameuse Maquerelle, le premier de janvier 1741., & remis au même théâtre presque tous les jours de Fête de ladite Année.”¹³ [“Represented at Porcherons, in the brothel of Mademoiselle De la Croix, famous bawd, the first of January 1741, and remounted at the same theatre almost every Feast Day of that year.”] The asterisks now strike me as odd, given that the word “foutre” is spelled out on the title page of *Le Bordel*. Scholars who have written about *L'Art de foutre* tend to take this statement at its word, mining police records not only for evidence of author Baculard d'Arnaud's stay in the Bastille, but also for discussions of Mademoiselle De la Croix's post-performance fate. Robert Dawson speculates that she wound up in Bicêtre hospital or the Mississippi colony.¹⁴ This latter piece of information is, alas, not to be found there.

The librarian at the Arsenal pegged me right away. She had seen my type before. “You want the Archives of the Bastille, don't you?” Dawson had told me where to look.¹⁵ He had also mentioned that the documents would mostly tell me about Baculard's friend Harnoncourt, who funded the printing. I thought I heard a hint about Mademoiselle de la Croix. But no dice. Then I started figuring about her name, and it came to me. What do the French call it when you sign your name with an “X”? “Marquer d'une croix.” So Mademoiselle de la Croix might just be Madam X.

Maintaining the pretense of an actual performance in a brothel, the cast of characters is listed, with names disguised by asterisks, followed by “whore,” “second whore,” “third whore,” etc. The full names of prostitutes have been hand written in faded ink above the asterisks:

Mademoiselle de la C**** [Croix], Maquerelle
 Mademoiselle P**** [Petit] la jeune, Putain
 Mademoiselle Le S**** [Le Sueur], autre putain
 Mademoiselle DuP***** [DuPlessis], troisieme putain
 Mademoiselle R***** [Rouselle], quatrieme putain
 Mademoiselle M***** [not listed], cinquieme putain
 Mademoiselle L'E***** [L'Empereur], sixieme putain
 Mesdemoiselles A*****[Antonia], R****, & J****[Joly], garces

This style is reminiscent of the roman à clef. Literally “a novel with a key,” a *roman à clef* is a novel whose characters are based on actual historical people.¹⁶ Here, the names remain unlisted to create an aura of scandal. The owner has ostensibly filled in the names of infamous prostitutes of the day. But which owner? And what day? Is the annotator the first owner of the book from 1747? Was the annotator looking back on 1741? Did he or she fill in the names of famous sex workers from 1741, 1747, or some later date?

The remainder of the *dramatis personae* introduces a level of vulgar humor that begins to approach the level of absurdity of the title page of *Le Bordel*:

Monsieur d'A****, Commissaire

Choeur des Garces, Maquerelles, Maquereaux, & Piliers de Bordel, tirés des Comédies François et Italienne & de l'Opera.

Mousquetaires. [Musketeers]

Fouteurs, au nombre de six. [Fuckers, numbering six.]

Archers, qu'on ne voit pas, mais qu'on entend. [Policemen, who are not seen, but heard.]

Suite des Garces à cul et des Laveuses de vit. [Entourage of Ass-sluts and Dick-washers.]

The most intriguing of these entries for a theatre historian is “Chorus of Sluts, Madams, Pimps, and Regulars of the Brothel, drawn from the Comédie-Française, the Comédie-Italienne, and the Opera.” Calling on the authority of the three major theatre troupes would appear to be an effort to raise the status of this text, or to tear down the status of the official theatres. It seems unlikely, however, that members of these troupes would be available for a performance in a brothel several times throughout the year. Rather, casting such actors and actresses in this ballet draws on stereotypes about actors’ and actresses’ libertinism and the sexual availability of actresses.¹⁷ This bit of casting, taken in tandem with the shift to obscene language, arguably subverts the verisimilitude of *L'Art de F******'s title page.

If the cast list challenges the title page's authority, the stage directions weaken it further. The opening stage directions call for the addition of thirty-six prostitutes not specified in the *dramatis personae* (but probably drawn from the ranks of the official theatres) to present the Postures of Aretino in the background, while the six main prostitutes are downstage, “*toutes dans des postures différentes, et prêtes à être foutuës*”¹⁸ [“All in different positions, and ready to be fucked”]. As the “six elected fuckers” prepare for the sexual encounter, the Madam begins to sing. The six prostitutes repeat a variant of her verse, and then the Chorus joins in. Further stage directions specify:

*Les six Putains avancent et les six Fouteurs; cela forme une scene muette. Deux des Fouteurs ne bandent point; deux putains leur mettent la main au vit, et tâchent de rappeler chez eux la nature. Des autres fouteurs qui bandent, l'un veut foutre en charette brisée, l'autre en levrette, ainsi du reste; le tout est accompagné de lassis et de cadences charmantes.*¹⁹

[The six Prostitutes advance, and so do the six Fuckers; this forms a dumb-show. Two of the Fuckers do not get erections; two prostitutes take their cocks in hand

and work to bring nature back to them. Of the other fuckers who are hard, one wants to fuck in the style of the broken chariot (?), another doggie-style, and so on for the rest; all this is accompanied by charming lazzi and cadences.]

The stage directions call for a specific number of men to have erections and to not have erections at this point (four and two, respectively). While it is possible that the text attempts a metaphorical recording of an event that took place in Mademoiselle de la Croix's brothel on one occasion, it strikes me as unlikely that this event could be repeated on each feast day with this precise proportion of erectile functionality. It would be possible to use fake phalli to stage this scene.

After the departure of the Commissioner, the musketeers pair off with the 36 prostitutes in the background, which makes for a total of 72 supernumeraries. As Robert Dawson points out, "There would seem to have been precious little room for spectators."²⁰ The stage directions at the end of the ballet combine the sublime and the ridiculous: "*On fout; il se fait là une décharge générale de foutre, qui forme le plus beau coup du Théâtre du monde.*" ["Everyone fucks. There is a general discharge of semen, which makes the most beautiful coup de théâtre in the world."] ²¹ After a brief song by a female soloist, the action is repeated: "*On fout encore, à peu près, dans la même situation que la première fois; toute la différence qui s'y trouve, c'est que la décharge dure plus long-tems, & que les culetis sont plus répétés: un silence profond accompagne l'action.*" ["Everyone fucks again, basically in the same situation as the first time; the only difference is that the orgasm lasts longer, and the thrusting is more frequent: a profound silence accompanies the action."] ²² Again, these stage directions bask in sensual luxury and the preposterous. The absurdity of these stage directions undermines the factual value of the title page.

In analyzing these two plays' potential for production, the data remain frustratingly unclear. Paratextual evidence related to *Le Bordel* is inconclusive, though there are some indications that the play was not produced. The preface to *Le Bordel* indicates that it had not been performed at the time it was published, though not rejecting the possibility of production. However, Paulmy d'Argenson characterizes it as not being intended for performance. The ridiculous stage directions of *L'Art de foutre* seem to contradict the assertion on the title page that it was presented at Mademoiselle de la Croix's brothel on New Year's and all feast days in 1741. Evidence related to the possibility of productions of *Le Bordel* and *L'Art de foutre* exhibits opposite approaches to the question of theatrical performance, with the Preface to *Le Bordel* stating that it was not performed and the title page of *L'Art de foutre* claiming that it was played in a brothel. Both title pages are tricky. While the texts present visions of a Parisian underworld that would tantalize any film noir detective, the title pages create a nearly impenetrable mystery for theatre historians. That mystery, I contend, is best solved by appealing to the idea of play readers rather than performers and spectators.

ENDNOTES

¹ Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, RES 8–BL-35550.

² A starting point for most research in this area is G. Capon and R. Yve-Plessis, *Paris galant au XVIIIe siècle: Les Théâtres clandestins* (Paris: Plessis, 1905). Karl Toepfer, *Theatre, Aristocracy, and Pornocracy: The Orgy Calculus*. (New York: PAJ Publications, 1993) insists on the play texts' potential for inciting orgy. A focus on visual display is developed by Céline Santini, "Théâtralité et exhibition dans le théâtre pornographique du XVIIIe siècle" *Cahiers d'histoire culturelle* 5 (1999): 39–48. Other scholars have analyzed political aspects of erotic theatre, notably Michèle Bokobza Kahan, "Entre licence et conformisme: Etude sur les théâtres érotiques de société au XVIIIe siècle." *Studi Francesi* 47.1 (March-April 2003): 90–98. Most recently, Laurence Senelick has argued that these plays anticipate Diderot's dramatic theory by allowing for improvisation. See Senelick, "The Word Made Flesh: Staging Pornography in Eighteenth-Century Paris." *Theatre Research International* (Summer 2008): 192–203.

³ Marie-Emanuelle Plagnol-Diéval offers a distinction between "erotico-scatological" plays and "pretext-for-sexual-exhibition" plays. See Plagnol-Diéval, *Le Théâtre de société: un autre théâtre?* (Paris: Champion, 2003).

⁴ Thomas Wynn theorizes a solitary reader mentally staging erotic plays "in a private and imaginary theatre." See Wynn, *Sade's Theatre: Pleasure, Vision, Masochism* (Oxford: Voltaire Society, 2007), 195.

⁵ Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal RES 8–BL-35550, vol. 3.

⁶ On false imprints in the eighteenth century, see Jim Mitchell, "Investigating False Imprints," Eds. M. Crump and M. Harris, *Searching the Eighteenth Century*, (London: British Library Board, 1983) 43–58; and Treadwell, Michael. "On False and Misleading Imprints in the London Booktrade, 1660–1750," Robin Myers and Michael Harris, eds. *Fakes and Frauds: Varieties of Deception in Print and Manuscript* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 1989) 29–46.

⁷ Indeed, a character in *Le Bordel* makes a joke about a certain locksmith named Ledru, which is similar to the name of the proprietress of the eponymous brothel. Ledru's sign-maker had apparently created a sign that said "Ledru pose des sonnettes dans le cul-de-sac" ["Ledru makes bells in the cul-de-sac] but arranged the "de-sac" portion such that viewers at first glance saw "Ledru pose des sonnettes dans le cul" ["Ledru puts belles in his ass."] According to Louis-Sébastien Mercier, this sign made Ledru's fortune, as the double entendre made his shop fashionable. See Mercier, "L'orthographe public" in *Tableau de Paris*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet, vol. 1 (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994) 100–103.

⁸ See Walter Kelly's note on Mahérault's successful French translation of Catullus in *Erotica: The Poems of Catullus and Tibullus*, ed. and trans. Walter K. Kelly (London: G. Bell, 1880), 94.

⁹ See Patrick Wald Lasowski, "Les Enfants de la messe de minuit," Eds. Marie-Françoise Quignard and Raymond-Josué Seckel, *L'Enfer de la bibliothèque: Eros au secret* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2007), 39. Lasowski cites an earlier version of *Le Bordel* also ostensibly published at Ancone, but sold "Chez La Veuve Grosse-Motte" [The Widow Large-Muff].

¹⁰ René Louis de Voyer de Paulmy, marquis d'Argenson, *Notices sur les ??uvres de Théâtre*, ed. H. Lagrave. *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* XLII (Genève: Insitut et Musée Voltaire Les Delices, 1966) 397.

¹¹ This aspect of *Le Bordel* is discussed in Manuel Herrman, *Count de Caylus: A Remarkable 18th Century Polygraph* (PhD Diss. Case Western Reserve University, 1972) 494.

¹² See, most recently, Laurence Senelick, "The Word Made Flesh: Staging Pornography in Eighteenth-Century Paris." *Theatre Research International* (Summer 2008): 192–203. A performance history based almost entirely on the evidence of the title page and the text is

found in G. Capon and R. Yve-Plessis, *Paris galant au XVIIIe siècle: Les Théâtres clandestins* (Paris: Plessis, 1905).

¹³ Recueil factice, BA RES 8-BL-35550, 120.

¹⁴ See Robert Dawson, *Baculard d'Arnaud: Life and Prose Fiction* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1976), 55–59.

¹⁵ Archives de la Bastille, Ms. 11480, ff. 125–239.

¹⁶ The name derives from keys that circulated, purporting to match the characters with the persons they represented. There are few general introductions to *roman à clef* as a concept. Most studies indicate particular novels as belonging to the *roman à clef* genre. An interesting comparative perspective on European *roman à clef* and “historical referentiality” in Chinese fiction is found in Jue Chen, “Poetics of Historical Referentiality: Roman à Clef and Beyond.” (PhD Diss., Princeton University, 1997).

¹⁷ See Lenard Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve: A History of Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin-de-Siècle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ RES 8-BL-35550, 123.

¹⁹ Ibid., 129.

²⁰ Dawson 57.

²¹ RES 8-BL-35550, 130.

²² Ibid., 130.