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Alexandre Wenger, ed., *Le livre sans titre: Les conséquences fatales de la masturbation*. Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Million, 2011. 127 pp., notes, 17 color plates (one unnumbered, others I-XVI). 17€ (pb). ISBN 978-284137262.

Review by Michael Sibalis, Wilfrid Laurier University.

Today there are books published that entice and titillate us with titles such as (to take a few recent French examples): *Éloge de la masturbation* (2002), *Osez la masturbation masculine* (2010) and *Nouvel éloge de la masturbation* (2010), the last of these, according to its title page, “richly illustrated.” The little book under review here (also illustrated) takes the reader back to a very different time at the height of “the Great Masturbation Panic” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when medical science taught that “self-abuse” or “onanism” was the root cause of an almost unlimited array of chronic symptoms.[1] To make matters worse, masturbation seemed a particularly difficult habit to kick, “the crack cocaine of sexuality,” as Thomas Laqueur has recently put it.[2] The shift from a religious to a predominantly medical condemnation of masturbation occurred in the course of the eighteenth century with the publication of the anonymous tract *Onania, or the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution (circa 1712)* and especially Samuel Tissot’s *Onanisme* (1760), followed by a proliferation of other tracts in the same vein.

Le livre sans titre (the original title demurely avoiding any mention of the subject matter) is a republication in modern typeface of one of these tracts, published in Paris first in 1830 and again in 1844.[3] This new edition has a forty-page introduction by Alexandre Wenger, a social historian of medicine at both the University of Geneva and the University of Fribourg. It also includes a very short text from the 1830s, entitled *Conseils sur les moyens de corriger les jeunes détenus de l’habitude de l’onanisme par une Administrateur des prisons*, which Wenger describes as a “chapitre d’introduction” to the work (p. 14). Wenger also believes *Conseils sur les moyens* and *Le livre sans titre* to be by the same unnamed *administrateur*, who held some undefined post in Geneva’s penal system. But both his suppositions are dubious. *Conseils sur les moyens* appeared in Paris as an undated four-page brochure by a publisher different from the one who issued *Le livre sans titre*. [4] The two may be bound together in the copy that Wenger consulted in Geneva, but this is not so at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and there is no reason to assume that they ever constituted a single publication or even had the same author.

Conseils sur les moyens nevertheless does do useful service here as a preface to *Le livre sans titre* because it explains exactly how the authorities used it in the Genevan penal system. Prison officials were worried by (in their own words) “l’état de dépérissement que l’on observe chez les jeunes détenus” and which they attributed to persistent masturbation (p. 47). With rare exception, the young men arriving in prison at fourteen or fifteen had already taken up the habit. How could they be persuaded to stop and thereby preserve their precarious health? According to the *administrateur*, “[p]our atteindre ce but, on fait usage, avec succès, du *Livre sans titre*” (p. 49). “Le texte de cet ouvrage est médiocre,” he opined (with good reason), adding, however, that “toute son utilité est dans les gravures, dont la première représente un enfant dans toute la fraîcheur de la santé, et les suivants, les divers ravages que peuvent produire successivement sur lui les habitudes que l’on veut combattre” (p. 49). He did not think that the pamphlet could persuade adults, who should instead be offered a more substantial work “propre à être lu,” such as *Les dangers de l’onanisme*, by Doussin-Dubreil, a 190-page-long book in the form of letters to

a medical student in Bordeaux (p. 51).^[5] But when it came to the more impressionable adolescent, the pamphlet could “l’effrayer au plus haut degré” and “en quelque sorte ... le frapper de terreur” (p. 50). Along with hard work to exhaust the young prisoners, a limit of no more than seven or eight hours in bed at night and intense surveillance during periods of rest, the pamphlet (he insisted) could prove most effective (pp. 51-52).

Le livre sans titre itself consists of sixteen vignettes, each comprising a short descriptive text and a hand-colored illustration. (In the republication, these are in black and white in the main text, but end plates reproduce them in color.) The first vignette (pp. 55-57) describes a healthy, handsome and happy adolescent, with a graceful bearing and lively imagination: “Rien ne semblait au-dessus de ses espérances, tout devait céder à ses efforts dans l’étude, et s’il partait pour les combats, tout devait rendre hommage à sa valeur” (pp. 55-56). In the second vignette (pp. 59-62), however, the young man, who once “faisait l’orgueil de sa mère,” has become withdrawn, secretive and moody. His eyes are sunken, his voice hoarse, his complexion pale, his legs cold; he is easily winded and feels pins and needles along his spine. And so the story goes on, vignette after vignette, as the presumably horrified reader witnesses the progressive physical and intellectual deterioration and finally ineluctable death of a once-promising young man, in spite of all the medicines he takes and every cure he attempts. The cause is never explicitly stated, the text referring only to “les excès auxquels il continue à se livrer” (p. 67), “un penchant fatal” (p. 77), “un secret ennemi [qui a pris] tant d’empire sur sa volonté” (p. 79), “une voie coupable et funeste” (p. 87), or, more succinctly, “un vice” (p. 103). Ultimately, of course, it is the boy’s lack of willpower that kills him, “car il faut absolument que la cause cesse, pour que le mal ait son terme... C’est dans ta volonté pervertie qu’est la peste ; et tes excès réitérés porte à ton sang l’embrasement contagieux qui te dévorera” (pp. 92-93).

Wenger’s introduction sets the *Le livre sans titre* within its historical context by providing a succinct history of how masturbation came to be seen as a medical problem that menaced civilized society. Wenger is much more interested, however, in the pamphlet’s use as an educational tool. Most anti-masturbation literature was written for adults, but the young obviously had to be of special concern in any campaign against self-abuse. It was first of all necessary to keep them away from temptation: “leur intimité doit être surveillé, leurs lectures contrôlées, leurs fréquentations triées et leur solitude évitée” (p. 17). Then, too, there were the various devices (corsets, belts, etc.) invented to impede masturbation. *Le livre sans titre* represents a third approach, according to Wenger: “Contrairement à la contrainte physique exercée par les machines anti-masturbatoires, son efficacité réside dans la confiance en la puissance de captation du livre, en la force de conviction de la lecture” (p. 25). Text and illustrations together constituted “une façon de s’immiscer dans l’intimité des lecteurs, de semer l’épouvante salutaire dans ce qui échappe par définition au contrôle des parents et des pédagogues, à savoir l’imagination” (p. 28). Wenger admits that there is of course no way to know whether scaring adolescents really worked, but “ce qui est intéressant, c’est le fait que des solutions alternatives fondées sur l’efficacité de la lecture et le pouvoir de l’image aient été recherchées, à côté des camisoles, des ceintures ou de la chirurgie” (p. 41).

Le livre sans titre is certainly an amusing trifle and Wenger’s brief introduction a useful if not especially original contribution to the history of masturbation. On the other hand, his treatment of the pamphlet as propaganda—particularly *visual* propaganda—is more interesting. He could have broadened his analysis to include a discussion of how nineteenth-century elites used various forms of imagery (broadsheets, *images d’Épinal*, illustrated almanacs, etc.) to diffuse new political and social ideas among the semi-literate masses. The pamphlet is not unknown^[6] and the colored plates (the best thing about it) can now be readily found online,^[7] but this short book is nonetheless a welcome addition to the literature on the history of sexuality.

NOTES

[1] Jean Stengers and Anne Van Neck, *Histoire d'une grande peur, la masturbation* (Paris: Agora, 2000). See also Alan Hunt, "The Great Masturbation Panic and the Discourses of Moral Regulation in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Britain," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8 (1998):575-615, and Pierre Humbert and Jérôme Palazzolo, *Petite histoire de la masturbation* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2009).

[2] Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2003), p. 23.

[3] *Le livre sans titre* (Paris: Audin, 1830), Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 8-TD124-18, on microfilm as M-17393; *Le livre sans titre avec 16 gravures coloriées*, 2nd ed. (Paris: L. Maison, 1844), 8-TD124-18 (A). The BNF's copy of the second edition is missing the illustrations. The republication is based on a variant version held at the Bibliothèque de Genève. It has a longer title and does not indicate a publisher: *Le livre sans titre, Dédié aux jeunes gens, et aux pères et aux mères de famille* (Paris: chez tous les Libraires, 1830).

[4] *Conseils sur les moyens de corriger les jeunes détenus de l'habitude de l'onanisme, par un administrateur des prisons* (Paris: Cosse et G.-Laguions, n.d.), BNF: 4-TE103-2 and NUMM-6137397 for the Gallica digitalized version.

[5] Jacques-Louis Doussin-Dubreuil, *Lettres sur les dangers de l'onanisme, et conseils relatifs au traitement des maladies qu'en résultent, ouvrage utile aux pères de famille et aux instituteurs* (Paris: Moreau 1806); (Paris, Briand, 1813); and (Paris: Roret, 1825). The third edition is available in digitalized form on Gallica as NUMM-5661277.

[6] It is discussed, for example, in Stengers and Van Neck, *Histoire d'une grande peur*, pp. 15, 201-202.

[7] <http://morbidanatomy.blogspot.fr/2011/05/le-livre-sans-titre-illustrated-warning.html>

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