

Frigidity, Curses, and Imagination: Thinking the Absence of Male Desire in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

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In 1728, when Madelaine Beaunot, a sixty-year old middle-class Parisian, talked about her young husband of twenty-nine years, in front of the Parisian Church Court, she did not beat around the bush. She described with despair how Jean Joseph Soucany, citizen and son of a lawyer at the Parliament of Paris, rejected her caresses: “she had caressed him as much as she could, and when she wanted to put his hand on her breast, he rejected her and said that she should not take it into her head to put her hand on him”.¹ She had filed a petition to annul her marriage, before the Paris bishop’s court (*Officialité parisienne*), citing her husband’s impotence, only two and a half months after her wedding. She testified to her desire to have “a real husband” after the death of her first one, a merchant and citizen of Paris, because “she got married to have a husband, not being able to manage without one, and she did not have one”.² Jean Joseph Soucany, summoned to the archbishop’s palace, next to the cathedral of Paris, answered his wife’s accusations as follows: “he married her because he didn’t want to marry a young person, and he hoped to live in

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Thanks are due to Dr Mathieu Trachman and his masters student Zoé de Ory for their generosity in providing sociological references that were influential in guiding the reflections that led to this paper. Particular gratitude must go to Dr Cathy McClive for her patience, advice, and corrections.

¹ “elle l’a caressé autant qu’il a dépendu d’elle et qu’ayant voulu luy mettre la main une fois sur le sein il la rebuta et luy dit qu’elle ne s’avisat point de mettre la main sur luy”, Paris, Archives Nationales (hereafter AN). Officialité diocésaine de Paris. Z/1o/169/A, Z/168/A et Z/1o/216, 30 avril 1728.

² “qu’elle s’est mariée pour avoir un mary, ne pouvant pas s’en passer et qu’elle n’en a point”. Ibid.

union and peace with the said Beaunot”.³ He did not engage in marriage to fulfil two of the purposes of the sacrament as defined by the Council of Trent — procreation and a cure for concupiscence — but for the third one: mutual support to better fight life’s uncertainties. It appears that he did not attribute much importance to his “marital duty”, or to sexuality.

Such an admission is rare among the corpus of judicial cases of annulment requests that pepper the Parisian Church Court’s archives. Very few men talked in front of a judicial and male council about their lack of desire, or their insecurities. The court personnel was mostly comprised of clerics and among them the ecclesiastical judge (*official*) and his deputy (*vice-gérant*), who had to be priests over 25 years old and have graduated in theology or canon law. Most of the time they belonged to the bishop’s close circles. However, these chaste ears were not only compelled to listen to arguments between churchwardens and parish priests, but also testimonies about clergymen’s incontinence, requests of seduced and pregnant betrotheds or of impotent husbands. These sexual cases of the Church Courts allow us to reach a wide social cross-section. Of the fifty-one requests for annulment for impotence that survive in the archives of the *Officialité* between 1665 and 1789, forty-seven of the accused were men, and among them are twenty-nine cases comprising at least one interrogation that could provide us with enough detail for a qualitative analysis. The sexual behaviours and discourses these documents reveal can be brought together with prescriptive discourses from a broader corpus including moral, pornographic, medical, legal and popular literature. Here we will examine the few surviving examples of male expressions of a lack of sexual desire, exploring the representations of marginal male sexualities this malfunction of desire incarnates. Jean Joseph Soucany’s case could be seen as an exception that is not worthy of interest because of its rarity. While marginal behaviours are by definition difficult to find in archives, we cannot cast them aside. They say a lot about the norms and their fragilities, the agency of individuals to contest, negotiate, escape or seize it. They force institutions to precise their definitions of normality. Social history should not reject case studies as insignificant because of its traditional dependence on statistics and on numerically representative behaviours.

This study was inspired by reflections on very recent developments that define asexual identity as a sexual orientation. Our research was guided by the emancipatory function of gender history and particularly, by the new exposure of queer identities and among them asexual ones.⁴ Even so, the point of this article is not to make a long history of the “asexual identities” through seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, defining early modern behaviours as “asexual” precedents and to adopt an essentialist point of view.⁵ Yet the contemporary asexual argumentation allows scholars to think of desire as a cultural and social product and offers a great opportunity to study the variety of deviances to sexual standards of the time, how they were understood or repressed by institutions, with a new eye. In fact, the “AVA Association for Visibility of the Asexual” a French branch of the American AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Education Network), was created in 2010 to fight against a contemporary “injunction for sexuality” that is described as a source of a new domination. In the context of the aftermath of May 1968’s sexual liberation, sex is supposed to be democratized and to liberate individuals from all forms of puritanism. The Western

³ “il l’a épousé parce qu’il ne vouloit point pour épouse une jeune personne et qu’il espéroit vivre en union et en paix avec ladite Beaunot” Ibid., 17 avril 1728.

⁴ As V. A. Kolve says (cited by J. Bennett) “we have little choice but to acknowledge our modernity, admit that our interest in the past is always (and by no means illegitimately) born of present concerns”. Bennett, “Lesbian Like”, 4.

⁵ For a good summary of the debate that opposed essentialists’ and constructionists’ approaches of history of sexuality, see the excellent reflection of Gary Ferguson in *Queer (Re)Readings*, partisan as David M. Halperin of a “reconstituted constructionist approach”. Ferguson, *Queer (Re)Readings*, 1-49; 6. Halperin, *How to Do*, 12.

advertising industry and “mainstream culture” abundantly use eroticism and the sexualisation of women (and men) for marketing purposes.⁶ Asexual movements condemn this hypersexualised nature of western contemporary societies. People are urged to be committed to their sexual life, but also to spend time talking and thinking about it. This phenomenon is well described by sociologists, who have explained the influence of sexologists on contemporary definitions of sexual norms. As Michel Bozon argues in *Sociology of Sexuality (Sociologie de la Sexualité)*, in the mid-twentieth century, to gain economic success and scientific recognition, sexologists abandoned the question of sexual normality and the study of perversions that worried their forefathers.⁷ Instead, they developed a new scientific discourse that put aside the Christian emphasis on the procreative purpose of sexuality, and produced new and subtler forms of control over sexuality. André Béjin and Michel Pollak named this process in an article in 1977, the “rationalisation of sexuality”, that is focused on counting orgasms of both partners, a form of sexual productivity where the “ideal orgasm” is the unit of measure.⁸ Irvine Janice in a 1993 article analysed how the new sexological category of “Inhibited Sexual Desire” created new individual anxieties about what should be the “ideal and well-rounded sexual life”. This “disease” is associated mostly as a feminine disorder, while in contrast, addictologists define the masculine counterpart: sex addiction. The influence of these scientific discourses is still strong in France today.⁹

But the question of the “injunction of sexuality” is not pertinent for ancien régime France, because of the fundamental differences in normative structures. Pleasure was not the aim of sexual activity, but a means to fulfil God’s ordinance to “Grow and Multiply”. The injunction was to respect the patriarchal sexual and procreative rank. There was no global social pressure to blossom through sexuality, and chastity was considered as a superior state by moral and theological literature, while medical literature presented sexual asceticism as a threat to health.¹⁰ Whilst the Counter-Reformation added value to marriage and therefore to its carnal expressions, desire had to be controlled because it interfered with proper devotion to God, so it had to be moderated: erotic practices and thoughts had to stay in the secrecy of the conjugal bed.¹¹

As historians it is important to be aware of the blinkers we wear. Our tendency to analyse ancient societies and behaviours through the modern-day concept of “identity” is hugely anachronical, and encourages historians to think of sexuality as a key to understand the developments of individual identities. In fact, the deconstruction of the concept of “identity” is widespread among historians since the 2000s. The theoretical article of Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper “Beyond Identity” argues how “identity” had to be rethought as a process that can be located in a given time, and upgradeable with changing periods in History. The word

⁶ Reichert, “Sex in advertising research”.

⁷ Bozon, *Sociologie de la sexualité*, 36.

⁸ Béjin et Pollak, “La rationalisation de la sexualité”; see also Irvine, “Regulated Passions”.

⁹ See the responses of one hundred female signatories of the forum named “La liberté d’importuner” on January 9, 2018, part of the #metoo movement, where they described men as full of desires as inevitable predators and claimed the right of “enjoying being a sexual object of a man”, Sarah Chiche, Catherine Millet, Peggy Sastre, Catherine Robbe-Grillet and Abnousse Shalmani (et al.), “Nous défendons une liberté d’importuner, indispensable à la liberté sexuelle”, *Le Monde*.

¹⁰ Even in marriage, the shared choice to renounce to sexuality was considered legal (such *officials* regularly asked spouses if they had that kind of agreement in marriage’s annulment cases). Nevertheless, in the same period, physicians as Jacques Dubois, Ambroise Paré and Jacques Ferrand explained how abstinence could provoke diseases, such as gonorrhea, melancholia. Dubois, *Livre de la génération*, 236; Paré, *Oeuvres complètes*, 2: 557; Ferrand, *Traité de l’essence*, 210.

¹¹ Steinberg, *Une histoire des sexualités*, 209.

“identification”, they argue, would be more appropriate to use. To historians who study sexuality before the nineteenth century, these theoretical developments are a welcomed tool to be used by historians in order to avoid applying today’s concepts to a period of time in which they are irrelevant. For instance, contemporary thought associates sexual orientations to the partner’s gender, such as homosexuality and heterosexuality; words that did not exist before the eighteenth century.¹² Therefore, to look for previous forms of “asexual identity” which is essentially a modern day concept of sexual identity, during the ancien régime is absurd. How can one solve this methodological deadlock when studying marginal socio-sexual behaviours in the ancien régime? According to Gary Ferguson or Susan McCabe and thanks to Queer Theory, one must accept the “trouble in gender”.¹³ It allows the writing of a history of marginal behaviours in society that embraces the diverse, polymorphous and evolutive nature of identifications that individuals could assume or be associated with in past societies.¹⁴ It is quite liberating for today’s historians to think of the gender of those who deviated from the sexual norms of their times as being exempt of the modern labels that we live with today. Queer historicism enables us to analyse with equanimity past attitudes or discourses that we perceive as “queer” because of our heteronormative perception of gender, sexuality and society. It theorises and provides space for the analysis of behaviours that are strange, ambiguous, or incongruous to us. Queer Theory also allows historians to unpack the reasons why, as contemporary observers, they feel the need to anachronistically categorize every behaviour they meet in their archives, and try to stop doing so. As Gary Ferguson argues we should rather “historicize the queer” than categorize queers, and evaluating how queer these behaviours and ideas were for contemporaries.¹⁵

Consequently, Jean Joseph Soucany’s rare and disturbing discourse and demeanour call for a study on the normative perceptions of sexuality and more precisely on male desire, and what it entailed. Thus, I will provide a quick review of the dominant representations of male sexual desire and compare it to the female equivalent, to show how desire was shaped by gender, age and family status. Permanent or lasting difficulties of arousal were mainly shaped by the legal term “frigidity” that was defined by jurists as a “diriment impediment” to marriage, used in annulment trials.¹⁶ Jurists relied on medical descriptions of cold humoral compositions and on a cultural association between cold and inaction to explain incompetent manhood. Naturally cold men should not become husbands because of their incapacity to consummate their marriage. Accidental or temporary sexual dysfunction did not justify an annulment and was more or less understood. Then we will study the impact of these discourses on male experiences of low libido, relying on Church Court archives and especially Jean Joseph Soucany’s case. How did powerful desire define masculinity in seventeenth century representations? How tolerant was society of men’s expressions of their low libidos?

¹² For example, in *Sex Before Sexuality*, Kim Phillips and Barry Reay use Foucault’s *Histoire de la Sexualité*, a linguistic deconstruction of “heterosexual” and “homosexual” categories, to explain how heterosexuality as a sexual identity is an anachronical tool to use to analyse societies before the nineteenth century. Phillips and Reay, *Sex before Sexuality*. Chronology is however reevaluated by scholars, that showed that sexual identities could be found in Atlantic world at the end of the seventeenth century and in the eighteenth century. Trumbach. “Sodomical Subcultures”. Others stated that we can analyze marginal behaviours of individuals as sexual identities even before seventeenth century: as medieval prostitutes for Ruth Mazo Karras, or medieval “gay people” in the essentialist’s work of John Eastburn Boswell. See Karras, “Prostitution”; Boswell, *Christian*.

¹³ Ferguson, *Queer (Re)readings*, 49:54. McCabe, “Whither Sexuality”.

¹⁴ Moreover, Queer Theory and anthropological approaches permit to insist on the relational structures of male and female subjectivities in ancient or extra-European cultures. See Théry. « Pour une anthropologie comparative ».

¹⁵ Ferguson. *Queer (Re)readings*. 53

¹⁶ *Dictionnaire universel françois*, 4: 325; Ferrière et Fournier, *Dictionnaire de droit et de pratique*, 1: 677; Peuchet, *Encyclopédie méthodique*, 1:665.

A Hierarchy of Desires

The ancien régime produced many discourses defining the social roles of individuals, according to gender, but also age, marital or social status. It produced a very precise social hierarchy which was valid for desire's representations. First, medical discourses described young and old men's desires as excessive or insufficient because of their feminine humoral balance. The ideal type was described as the "virile age," between 25 and 40 years old, where desires were naturally moderated by reason: "imagination is strong, but wiser than in puberty. The man thinks and blends, judgment is formed, and it is healthy and strong. Passions are becoming less acute, women's love is no longer this wild exhilaration of young years; it is replaced by sincere friendship".¹⁷ This medical analysis brings to the fore the fact that young boys' (and girls') desire was thought to be excessive and uncontrolled. Their humoral temper compared to the feminine one, cold and humid, was paradoxically and successively thought to produce excessive or insufficient desire.¹⁸ On the contrary, the virile man was characterized by the ability to find the good and middle way to "healthy desire".

Legal and moral discourses took over from medical ones to justify the exclusivity of married men's satisfaction of desires. Condemning prenuptial intercourse, clerical sexuality and extra-marital love, normative texts prohibited bachelors and clerics from satisfying their desires. Even if they did sometimes engage in sexual activity, their pleasures were just more or less tolerated.¹⁹ The ranking of desires was organised around the matrimonial privilege of pleasure that fitted the social, political and gendered domination of fathers over wives, children, apprentices and servants of the household.²⁰ Thus, male desires were constructed in comparison with female ones. One of the questions that sparked a number of medical or moral developments in seventeenth-and eighteenth-century France was, who out of men and women felt more desire and pleasure?

The most common answer to this question in the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century, presented women as controlled by passion and their strong desires, which both attracted and frightened commentators.²¹ Jean Liébault, physician and author of *Three Books Dealing with the Infirmities and Illnesses of Women (Trois livres des maladies et infirmités des femmes)* (1582), re-edited four times in the seventeenth century, explained with some contradictions why the womb had to be "counted by the things that could never be satiated, as fire, hell, dry soil: and that to say that she never says it's enough".²² From the model of the Succubus, women were governed by their womb, which expressed the insatiable desire to be filled. Their genitalia sucked the vital energy and spirits of the male body with "a certain rage and

¹⁷ "L'imagination est vive, mais plus sage que dans la puberté. L'homme réfléchit et combine, le jugement est formé, et est sain et solide. Les passions se modèrent, l'amour des femmes n'est plus cette fougueuse yvresse de la jeunesse ; l'amitié sincère en prend la place." Levacher de La Feutrie, Moysant et de La Marcellerie, *Dictionnaire de chirurgie*, 2:684.

¹⁸ Historians of representations have clearly revealed it: Jahan, *Les Renaissances du corps*, and *Le corps des Lumières*; Vigarello, Courtine, et Corbin, *Histoire du corps*, 1:336-339.

¹⁹ Flandrin, *Les Amours paysannes*, 237-241; Flandrin, *Le sexe et l'Occident*, 285-288; Burguière et Lebrun, *La famille en Occident*, 72.

²⁰ Delumeau et Roche (éd.), *Histoire des pères et de la paternité*; Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*; Hardwick, *The Practice of Patriarchy*.

²¹ Ranum, "Les refuges de l'intimité"; Beauvalet-Boutouyrie et Berthiaud, *Le rose et le bleu*, 14-16.

²² "au nombre des choses qui ne peuvent estre aucunement rassasiées, assavoir le feu, l'enfer, et la terre seiche: et dire qu'icelle ne dict jamais, c'est assez", in Liébault, *Trois livres des maladies*, 525.

a furious cupidity”.²³ Their desire was stronger and more dangerous than male desire, because of their inability to control it owing to their lack of reason.

Thus, most of the normative discourses between 1600 and 1750 presented women as insatiable and passionate creatures.²⁴ That argument served to justify a marital or paternal control of them, but also to create a strict division between the sexes regarding sexual roles and gestures in conjugal intercourse. Women should stay passive, to “suffer” male initiatives. Their desires could not be expressed openly and had to be contained because of their excessive nature. So feminine passive roles were thought of as a natural and moral ordering of society.

Feminine passivity matched the way physicians saw sex roles in procreation. The male contribution to intercourse was usually viewed as superior to the female one. For example, the seventeenth-century *Conjugal Love, or the Pleasures of the Marriage Bed Considered in Several Lectures on Human Generation, (De la génération de l’homme, ou Tableau de l’amour conjugal)*, gave the following explanation of procreative roles:

The man on the contrary acts with more firmness, (...) reasons with more strength; and contributes to conceiving a child with more promptness. It is mainly he who acts in procreation, where he commits himself to it, and by his body and spirit’s actions gives all the marks of his strength and heat. (...) Whereas the woman merely suffers what the man wants to impress upon her, and often she is not as ready as he is to give what is needed to form a human.²⁵

But in this way, these men also endorsed the heavy responsibility of sexual achievement. The dominant Hippocratic theory insisted on the need of female semen, and so pleasure, in order to procreate.²⁶ Thus, the moral and medical injunction to procreate could indirectly focus attention onto male sexual performance and pleasure that they could or could not imprint on the female body.²⁷ Men’s responses to ecclesiastical judges illustrated a permeation of male culture of performance, focused on female pleasure. Men accused of impotence never talked about their sensations during intercourse, but more often about the quantity and the quality of their performance. For instance, the young Marquis of Gesvres, 19 year-old Joachim Bernard Potier, declared in 1712 that, “the said lady must recall having experienced the erection’s effects many

²³ “certaine rage et furieuse cupidité”, *Ibid.*, 526.

²⁴ Normative discourses on female desire have already been covered by historians of women and gender studies. The question of sex differences or the study of misogynist discourses and of the “*querelle des femmes*”, leads them to examine the representations of women’s desire. They all notice the “womb woman” *topoi*: Duby, Perrot, Schmitt-Pantel, Klapisch-Zuber, Davis, Farge et Fraisse (ed.), *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, 3 :366-375; Berriot-Salvadore, *Un corps, un destin*; Beauvalet-Boutouyrie et Berthiaud, *Le rose et le bleu*, 23-28; Haase-Dubosc et Henneau, *Revisiter la “querelle des femmes”*.

²⁵ “L’homme au contraire agit avec plus de fermeté, (...) raisonne avec plus de force; et contribue à faire un enfant avec plus de promptitude. C’est luy principalement qui agit dans la generation où il se communique soy-mesme, et qui par ses autres actions de corps et d’esprit donne partout des marques de la force de sa chaleur. (...) Au lieu que la femme ne fait que souffrir les impressions que l’homme veut luy donner, et souvent elle n’est pas si-tost preste que luy à donner de quoi former un homme. En un mot, elle n’est faite que pour concevoir, pour allaiter, et pour elever ses enfans.” dans Venette, *De la génération de l’homme*, 111.

²⁶ On the evolution of medical representations of sexual roles see: Laqueur, *La fabrique du sexe*; Lugt, *Le ver, le démon et la vierge*; Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*.

²⁷ See Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 142: “Because of the uncontroversial nature of the pleasure-seed connection in men, scholastic authors, whether in medicine or in natural philosophy, did not regard male sexual pleasure per se as a matter of any serious interest. Because pleasure and the emission of seed were so closely associated, the role of pleasure in conception was more controversial with respect to women than with respect with men”.

times” and that he received in her love letters expressions of her “satisfaction that she had of their conjugal union”.²⁸

While female pleasure was the focal point of Parisian husbands as a benchmark for virility, physicians largely commented on female desire: presenting it as imperious, measuring it and comparing it to male desire. But the absence of female desire in marriage was a perfect non-issue in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century legal, moral and medical literature. Women’s passive sexual role reinforced the idea that their everyday consent was a detail, as their absence of desire could not stop penetration, and so invalidate the marriage. Guy de Chauliac, a physician, surgeon and anatomist of the fourteenth century, whose work *The Great Surgery*, (*La grande chirurgie*) was reissued several times in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, explained this clearly: “thus frigidity and evil charm, which is the lack of coitus, are within the purview of men. Women cannot fail at coitus, except when their vulvas are blocked. But men fail at it if their complexion is cold, because this prevents their having an erection”.²⁹ Problems of male desire flooded this medico-legal literature, associating male impotence to frigidity or curses. In fact, canon law insisted on the necessity of exchanging an original consent that built the sacramental union between a man and a woman, involving a dispossession of their own body, whose ownership was given to the other spouse.³⁰ But casuists saw no difference between men and women in terms of conjugal duty: in marriage, both renounced everyday consent. However, physicians and jurists seemed to ignore female desire’s dysfunctions in marriage, while they elaborated on those of male desire. For instance, there was no discussion of the ugliness or the beauty of men and its influence on female desire to be found in moral, legal or medical literature, as there was for male desire.³¹

Nonetheless, the procreative conception of marriage, and the “two seed theory” medical discourse dominant in the two last centuries of the ancien régime, reinforced the importance of female pleasure in conjugal intercourse. Men had to take women’s desire into consideration. But pleasure was not desire: it could be felt without desire. Female desire and consent, both inside and outside marriage, was barely considered. For example, jurists, secular judges and writers had difficulty believing that women over the age of twelve truly had no desire to be raped.³² The “two seed theory” generated a debate about pregnancy in raped women: how they could be pregnant without feeling pleasure and ejaculating?³³ Hippocrates had established that pregnancy was triggered by the encounter of female and male semen. Female ejaculation only happened with pleasure. If they had felt pleasure how could they not have any desire? Here again, in male normative discourses, the consideration of female pleasure outshone considerations regarding the absence of desire in women. Female desire was never thought of in a negative way, it was seen repeatedly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as strong and uncontrolled.

²⁸ “laditte dame doit se souvenir avoir éprouvé plusieurs fois les effets de l’érection”, “satisfaction qu’elle avoit eue de leur union conjugale”. AN, Officialité diocésaine de Paris, Z/1o/156/B et Z/1o/155/B, 23 avril 1712.

²⁹ “ainsi le refroidissement et malefaction, qui est privation du coït, advient de la part des hommes. Car les femmes ne sont privées du coït, sinon par l’oppilation de la vulve. Et les hommes en sont privez, à cause de la mauvaise complexion froide qui oste l’érection”, De Chauliac, *La grande chirurgie*, 545.

³⁰ Madero, *La loi de la chair*; Noonan, “Marital Affection in the Canonist”, *Studia Gratiana*.

³¹ Pierre-Jean-Jacques-Guillaume Guyot evoked in the entry “Mary” in his *Répertoire universel et raisonné de jurisprudence*, the necessity for husbands to still consummate frequently their marriage even if their wife’s beauty was fading. There is no mention of any female version of these male problems of desire. Guyot, *Répertoire universel*, 19:144.

³² Vigarello, *Histoire du viol*; Bernard, *Comédie de la résistance*.

³³ See Gaudillat Cautela. “Questions de mot”, 8.

Nonetheless, Georges Louis Leclerc Buffon and Louis Jean Marie Daubenton, both physicians and naturalists, were the first in my medical corpus, in a paragraph dedicated to “uterine fury” published in 1749, to present female desire as “naturally cold or (...) very quiet” most of the time, while male desire was described as often “immoderate”.³⁴ Their argument followed a shift in representations of difference between the sexes.³⁵ As representations of female desire cooled down, visions of male desire proportionally reheated, and frigidity switched sides. As Robert Muchembled has shown, in the 1840s, the medical professional body abandoned the “two semen” theory.³⁶ Woman’s pleasure was no longer needed. The prudish figure of the “honest woman” was supposed to have little taste for sexuality, but to find happiness in motherhood and being a guardian of familial virtues. On the other hand, male desire was thought impetuous, justifying venal and adulterous love. Interestingly, frigidity has been linked to womanhood since the mid-nineteenth century, a representation that is still strong today, but was thought of as only a masculine phenomenon in the two last centuries of the ancien régime. We will now examine perceptions and experiences of marital desires’ malfunctions as revealed in the Church court records.

Experiences and Perceptions of Feeble Male Desire: Cause or Consequence of Impotence?

Jean Joseph Soucany’s trial is difficult to interpret. Jean Joseph was the son of a parliamentary lawyer, member of the bourgeoisie, following a strategy of social advancement. This could explain why he or his father, who signed his marriage contract in January 29, 1728, chose a rich widow of 60 years old when he was only 29. Reading the contract, it is clear that Madelaine Beaunot had insisted on maintaining her economic and legal freedom, protecting her progeny from her first marriage, and limiting the risks of marrying a spendthrift. Nevertheless, Jean Joseph had administrative power over her funds, and could receive rent from her properties “to meet the cost of marriage”.³⁷ The interrogation of Madelaine Beaunot revealed Jean Joseph’s strategy. She was extraordinarily rich, and she had understood only after her marriage that her husband married her for financial reasons.³⁸ He asked her to “provide the pension of five hundred pounds that she had promised him”.³⁹

Jean Joseph experienced three medical examinations of his “shameful parts” (*parties honteuses*) on May 20, 1728, July 28, 1728, and October 12, 1731. As usual, two surgeons and two doctors visited the presumed impotent husband. Medical experts wrote that Jean Joseph had a “wrong physical configuration that could be repaired through an operation”.⁴⁰ However, the young husband refused to risk his life in that operation, and after further attempts to convince him over the next three years, the *official* pronounced the marriage null and void for non-consummation on December 1, 1731. Perhaps his lack of desire was caused by this physical

³⁴ “naturellement froides ou tout au moins fort tranquilles sur le physique de cette passion”, “le nombre des hommes immodérés est assez grand pour en donner des exemples”, Buffon et Daubenton, *Histoire naturelle*, 2:504.

³⁵ The English historiography situates this shift around the 1670s where women are reconsidered as naturally virtuous, weak and sexually passive. See Bailey, *Unquiet lives*, 111; Hitchcock, *English Sexualities*, 42-9; Fletcher, *Gender, sex and subordination*; Gowing, *Common bodies*. Nancy Cott dates later the development of the vision of women as passionlessness, somewhere between the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. See Cott, “Passionlessness”.

³⁶ Muchembled, *L’orgasme et l’Occident*.

³⁷ AN, Notaires de Paris. MC/ET/XI/483 (étude Valet), 29 janvier 1728.

³⁸ “elle a du bien plus qu’il ne luy en faut pour elle et son mary”, AN, Officialité diocésaine de Paris, Z/1o/169/A, Z/168/A et Z/1o/216, 30 avril 1728.

³⁹ “qu’elle assura la pension de cinq cent livres qu’elle luy avoit fait espérer”, *Ibid*.

⁴⁰ “mauvaise conformation (...) laquelle pourroit être réparée par quelque operation”, *Ibid.*, 28 juillet 1728.

malformation suggested by the experts. But the age difference, and Madeleine's wealth suggested that he could have married her for money, and that the old *bourgeoise* took legal action against him when she realised it.

This case leaves us a bit hungry for more. Further hypotheses could be valid. Both Madeleine Beaunot and the experts suggested that, fully aware of his malformed anatomy, this young citizen intended to find a rich and old wife, and to enjoy her fortune, without engaging himself sexually. He protected himself, turning his back in bed, violently rejecting her legs when she put them on his. But unfortunately, this wasn't enough to make Madelaine keep her hands off him. He seemed to place little importance in his sexual life in comparison to other men, and refused to risk his life to gain sexual potency.

In a corpus dominated by men who rejected every re-assessment of their desires, their wives' testimonies are useful. They described violent reactions or alternative sexualities in their husbands. But almost seven out of twenty-eight accused husbands never approached their wife to even try to consummate the marriage. One of them, Jean Ruffroy, a 36-year-old winemaker, confessed to his worried and unsatisfied wife that he was impotent, and proposed that she take a lover to have children.⁴¹ It indicates that he renounced his monopoly over his wife's body, joining the feared society of cuckolds and risking being discovered, to gain the social recognition and credit that paternity gave to men. Consequently, some impotent men who could not attain the performative and moderated virile ideal responded to that exclusion by indicating alternative ways of being a man by accepting a less sexualised nature. But Church Courts flipped the power relations in couples, accepting the requests of their wives to invalidate their marital authority and claims. In a way, legal practice and canon law discourse, shaped in a patriarchal system and fed by theological work, recognized the reality and the heavy consequences of male lack of performativity. In doing so, and remembering that only men could accuse their spouse of adultery, jurists and canonists showed that men erred on the side of insufficiency, never of excess.⁴²

This judicial reaction was sustained by normative discourses. Doctors of the time found two kinds of impotency: one created by a genital malformation, the other by a cold temper that prevented erection and penetration, and sometimes ejaculation. Both could be permanent, occasional or accidental. The term "frigidity" came from medieval canon law, notably from the chapter "Of Coldness and Misdeeds," (*De Frigiditis & Maleficiis*), in the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX, used to describe the permanent state of men who are incapable of consummating their marriage: "that prevents the marriage or that undertakes its dissolution".⁴³ In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the term was still more legal than medical. But jurisconsults relied on medical descriptions and expertise to define the legal frame of annulment cases, demonstrating the permeability of the two discourses.⁴⁴

Moreover, both legal and medical scholars were very tough on permanently impotent men who contracted marriage. Jurists insisted on the fraud (*dol*) that such an action represented: men engaged themselves in a contract they could not respect, and lied about their identity. It was almost as if a commoner would marry a noblewoman by awarding himself false titles.

⁴¹ AN, Officialité diocésaine de Paris, Z/1o/217, Z/1o/216, 1er juillet 1778.

⁴² Dareau, *Traité des injures*, 346, 349; Ferrière et Fournier, *Dictionnaire de droit et de pratique*, 1:73; Guyot, *Ibid.*, 1:395.

⁴³ "qui empêche le mariage ou qui opère sa dissolution", Ferrière et Fournier, *Ibid.*, 1 :677.

⁴⁴ Peuchet, *Encyclopédie méthodique*, 4 :665.

Furthermore, normative authors compared them to eunuchs, and monsters, and questioned their male nature.⁴⁵

But if the absence of desire expressed by men is an understandable reaction or consequence of genital malformations, “frigidity” is a more complex phenomenon. It was described as a medical condition or a permanently wrong, feeble or depraved temper for a man. Frigid men were associated with the phlegmatic, a feminine temperament, that was characterised by floppy fibres, which stimulated less desire and could be foreshadowed by secondary male attributes such as lack of hair, a soft body, feminine facial characteristics notably in the nose and “effeminate” gestures.⁴⁶ Multiple testimonies attested to the penetration of medical theory into the spouses’ discourses. Two of them described their husband trembling when he approached the conjugal bed, a behaviour associated with cold temperament. Marie Marguerite Salomon, wife of Guillaume Colin, a 27 year-old journeyman, described precisely in 1703 what her husband could and should feel. She said that “his impotence comes from a natural coldness”, and added “because he never had any wish in his life, neither did he have any emotion to succeed in it”.⁴⁷ Medical literature used similar vocabulary to describe the symptoms and manifestations of desire: “movements”, “soft irritation”, “feelings”, “temptation” should be experienced by all men approaching women. This “tickle” or “itching”, was said to come from the circulation of semen in the penis, the firing up of heat, blood and “animal spirits” in the genital area, which produced erections.⁴⁸ Nicolas Venette insisted on the importance of testicles in that process.⁴⁹ The sanguine temper was known as a “middle way”, as opposed to melancholic fibres that were too tense and vibrant and created an “extreme ardour”.⁵⁰ Bilious men had to control their passions, while phlegmatic ones “are unwilling to love”.⁵¹

Moreover, impotent men were often presented as old depraved men, who by contracting diseases, or spending too much energy and fluids in sexual encounters, became soft, feeble and cold. Thus, it seems that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there prevailed, not an injunction to sexuality, but rather a bodily hierarchy that excluded weak or debauched ones from the marital status. Patriarchal masculinity had to be embodied in a strong and powerful body.

Curse or Imagination? Explaining the Feeble Desire of Sexually Potent Men

Permanent impotence is one thing, but how did normative discourses see occasional dysfunction in male desire, or potent men who were not attracted to sexuality? What is exceptional in our inaugural case, is that Jean Joseph Soucany confessed his absence of desire for his wife, and his agenda to marry an old woman to live a quiet marital life, but he denied impotence, despite his physical malformation. He is the only presumed impotent husband that I found in Parisian Church

⁴⁵ Antoine Furetière in his *Dictionnaire universel*, gave some examples to define what is not a “man”: “We say that we are not man, (...) when we have subtracted the natural parts that serve the reproduction, or when they are no more in function” (“On dit qu’on n’est pas homme, qu’on ne sent plus qu’on soit homme, quand on a retranché les parties naturelles qui servent à la generation, ou lors qu’elles ne sont plus en fonction.”) Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, 1033.

⁴⁶ Ancillon, *Traité des eunuques*, 6-7.

⁴⁷ “son impuissance provient d’une froideur naturelle”, “parce qu’il n’a jamais de sa vie eu aucune envie ny aucune emotion pour y parvenir”, AN, Officialité diocésaine de Paris, Z/1o/151/A, 2 janvier 1703.

⁴⁸ Levacher de La Feutrie, Moysant et de La Marcellerie, *Ibid.*, 1:540-541; Venette, *Ibid.*, 344, 231-2; Menuret de Chambaud, “Impuissance”, 8: 632-634.

⁴⁹ “humours and subtle vapours, that melting among spirits of our blood and our nervous juice, make all our boldness and all our vigour”, “des humeurs et des vapeurs subtiles, qui se melant parmy les esprits de nostre sang et de nostre suc nerveux, font toute nostre hardiesse et toute nostre vigueur”, in Venette, *Ibid.*, 550.

⁵⁰ Levacher de La Feutrie, Moysant et de La Marcellerie, *Ibid.*, 2:184.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 2:350.

Court archives, who admitted a lack of libido without confessing his impotence. How we can explain that if we don't pay attention to the medical expertise?

Madelaine Beaunot declared that when she tried to touch his body, he shouted "that he didn't want to be touched by any woman, nor touch a woman".⁵² This could be interpreted first as disgust for a 60 year-old woman. His interrogatory could invalidate this hypothesis, because he declared that "he didn't want to marry a young person" and his words seems to reject all types of women.⁵³ So it could also be an expression of a repugnance for her gender, a same-sex desire, or a more general disgust for intercourse. His desire to live a "calm" life could be another clue in that direction. Gédéon Tallemant des Réaux, the Huguenot writer of the *Short Stories*, (*Historiettes*), a collection of Court anecdotes, paints a portrait of a lawyer from La Rochelle, called Reveau, who developed such a discourse. Married to a widow and being a virgin on his wedding night, he said openly that he had "found twelve bigger pleasures in his office" than his conjugal bed.⁵⁴ Promoting a libertine and desiring courtier's masculinity, that excelled in controlling his passions and feelings, Tallemant des Réaux could not understand how men could express no interest in sex.

Physicians, moralists and jurists experienced similar issues when trying to explain permanent indifference to sex in otherwise potent men. According to them desire had more complex origins: love, imagination or memories, senses (sight, touch, hearing, arousing readings), the heat or humidity of a humoral composition, and nature or God's will. Debauchery, which was seen as an excessive waste of semen and animal spirits, acted on most of the desires' channels. It dried, withered and weakened the genitals and temper of a man and his imagination was extinguished or contaminated by immoral thoughts. To feel temptation was an experience that every man was supposed to overcome and master. Even a clergyman, who was supposed to possess all of his male attributes to endorse his priesthood, had to feel and resist concupiscence with his faith.⁵⁵

However, theological treaties and moral literature still praised chastity as a superior state to be fully devoted to God, that clergymen and nuns could reach, but also married couples if both partners agreed. This model of behaviour was diametrically opposed to the carnal nature of Catholic marriage, but still normative and highlighted by religious discourses. It offered more possibilities to early modern individuals. So, Jean Joseph Soucany who claimed to be potent and "hoped to live in union and peace" with his wife, meaning without intercourse, could have developed this model of chaste marital masculinity.⁵⁶ But was this model truly upgraded by society? This frank affirmation of a less sexualised identification in front of the *Officialité* was exceptional. Its rarity shows how this chaste marital model was nonconformist at the time. Popular Christmas songs of the sixteenth century, still sung in the seventeenth century, presented Jean Joseph's homonymous, Virgin's husband, as an ambiguous Christian model of the chaste but jealous man. When Joseph was presented to Mary, the Christmas songs of Moustiers' manuscript, completed in 1608, said:

Joseph o his cane

⁵² "qu'il ne vouloit pas que jamais une femme le toucha ny toucher une femme", AN, Officialité diocésaine de Paris, Z/1o/169/A, Z/168/A et Z/1o/216, 17 avril 1728.

⁵³ AN, Officialité diocésaine de Paris, Z/1o/169/A, Z/168/A et Z/1o/216, 17 avril 1728.

⁵⁴ Des Réaux, *Historiettes*, 2: 804.

⁵⁵ See Le Gall, "La virilité des clercs".

⁵⁶ AN, Officialité diocésaine de Paris, Z/1o/169/A, Z/168/A et Z/1o/216, 17 avril 1728.

Was forced to come,
 But for the Virgin
 Hadn't any desire;
 Because all his life
 Never had intention
 Wish nor longing
 Of union.⁵⁷

Joseph then doubted the immaculate conception. Joseph's ambiguity, chaste and unfaithful behaviours didn't allow the Catholic Church to make him a model for marital masculinity. Furthermore, for medical, canonical or secular legal literature, lack of interest in sex in well-formed men, if it existed, could only be the sign of a degenerate body or soul, or a mark of excessive behaviours. Jean Joseph's desire to live a peaceful marriage with an old lady, could be interpreted as queer to the majority of his contemporaries, because illegitimate, as he had a non-chaste wife; or incongruous, because it didn't fit to the dominant perception of marital maleness.

Men's sexual desire was represented as commonplace; nevertheless, they could experience occasional dysfunctions of desire and difficulty mastering their body, over longer or shorter periods of time. Multiple explanations and excuses were used to justify these occasional weaknesses in medical and popular culture. But when sexual dysfunction through lack of desire lasted, external reasons were evoked. First the ugliness or nastiness of the wife could justify feeble desires in married men.⁵⁸ Popular culture cultivated the *topos* of the old, greedy, and immoral woman who tries to seduce young men.⁵⁹ For men to be subjects of desire, women had to be perfect objects of desire:

For an ugly woman,
 You would always want it to be straight,
 My minger, and it seems to you, I gage,
 That I could with a finger reciprocate!
 You may well flatter it with language,
 Even with hands; that evil aspect,
 Disgusts everything, for yourself is an injury:
 That's why you shall, if you were quiet,
 Looking for me by night only.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ "Joseph o sa verge / On y fist venir, / Mais point à la Vierge / N'avoit de désir ; / Car toute sa vie / N'eut intention, / Vouloir ny envie / De conjunction.", in Gautier-Desvaux and Koeachlin-Schwartz. *Noël au Perche*, 115. I want to thank Dr. Tatiana Debbagi Baranova for the reference. See also Michel Pastoureau's analysis of the striped cloth of Saint Joseph in *L'étoffe du diable*, sign of his unfaith and jealous reaction in front of Mary's pregnancy, and the miracle of the Immaculate Conception. Pastoureau, *L'étoffe du diable*.

⁵⁸ See Menuret de Chambaud, "Impuissance"; Venette, *Ibid.*, 542; De Lignac, 207-208.

⁵⁹ This *topos* was very developed in Flemish and German iconographic culture of 16th and 17th centuries, denouncing huge age differences in marriage, lust of old women but also old men. Cupidity of young men and women who marry old and rich people were also condemned. See the work of Lucas Cranach or Henrick Goltzius, Goltzius, Hendrick. *Le jeune homme et la vieille*. Oil on canvas, 96 x 80 cm, 1616, musée de la Chartreuse, Douai.

⁶⁰ "A une laide, /Tousjours voudriez que je l'eusse tout droit, /Ma laideron, et vous semble, je gage, / Que j'en puis faire ainsi comme du doigt ! / Vous avez beau le flatter de langage, / Voire des mains ; ce diable de visage / Desgoute tout, et à vous-mesme nuit : / Parquoy deussiez, si vous estiez bien sage, / Ne me chercher seulement que de nuit." Joubert dit Angoulevant, *Satyres bastardes*, 181.

A bad relationship, or lack of love and respect between spouses, was also a good argument to justify potent men's lack of desire. The responsibility was often allocated to women. In a book written in 1621, Charles and Jacques Guillemeau, a physician and a surgeon respectively, gave importance to affection in intercourse, writing that, "before everything, a conjunction of soul and will has to precede body's conjunction".⁶¹ Even if legal literature insisted on marital duty, medical and popular culture was tolerant with temporary weaknesses and husbands who hated or were disgusted by their wives. Madelaine's description of her husband's disgust seems to point at this problem of age difference. But it was not a legitimate reason to forget marital duty for the judges of the Church Court.

If the married man was happy in his marriage, other reasons were developed. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, normative discourses more frequently invoked the possibility of being bewitched, with what was called the knotting cord (*nouement d'aiguillette*). The spell was made just when the groom was about to marry, knotting a shoelace, pronouncing magical invocations to prevent consummation, establishing a pact with the devil.⁶² That curse was reported as believable in the seventeenth century's seventeen reeditions of the surgical reference book, *La grande chirurgie*, by Guy de Chauliac.⁶³ That explanation provided a spiritual, "supernatural" justification for men to resolve their anxieties, and exculpate them from any responsibility.

But medical and legal authors gave less and less credit to this theory throughout the seventeenth century. To explain male erectile dysfunction, curses were replaced by an excessive male sensitivity regarding sexual performance. Legal and medical discourses concurred in that rationalisation process, from an external to an internal cause of impotence. The power of imagination and feelings was constructed as the main explanation for problems with male desire. Two eighteenth-century physicians, Jean-Joseph Menuret de Chambaud (1751), and Louis François Luc de Lignac (1772), advised close family members of men who thought that they had been enchanted, to be sparing with them, until they recovered mental strength and confidence.⁶⁴ The "psychological" nature of that advice is interesting because it is pioneering. The Church Court cases illustrate this evolution. Eutrope Pohier, a fifty year old surgeon accused of impotency in 1659, confessed to his erectile dysfunction, saying someone had cast a spell on him. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, invoking curses to justify impotence became impossible. Besides, a wide debate leading to the abolition of the trial by congress (*Congrès*), in February 1677 reinforced the "psychological" justification based on the influence of imagination and insecurities over sexual performance.⁶⁵ The *Congrès* was a judicial ordeal where impotent men had to prove their potency in front of medical experts (usually a jury of physicians, surgeons and midwives), consummating the marriage with their spouse. Jurists and doctors agreed that the trial was not fair, considering what we could call the "psychological operating" of male desire.

Furthermore, the unmanageable nature of genitals became more and more naturalized. Most of the seventeenth century moral and medical literature attributed the inability of men to

⁶¹ "devant toutes choses il faut que la conjunction de l'ame et volonté precede la conjunction du corps (...), que quiconque est exempt de l'amitié doit estre exempt de la volupté", Guillemeau and Guillemeau, *De la grossesse et accouchement des femmes*, 30.

⁶² Paré, *Oeuvres complètes*, 3: 67; Beauvalet-Boutouyrie, *La sexualité en France*, 132.

⁶³ De Chauliac, *La grande chirurgie*, 545.

⁶⁴ "on verra que la menace de rendre un homme dont l'esprit est foible, suffit pour lier ses forces ; que cet homme soit averti, seulement qu'il s'imagine avoir des ennemis intéressés à s'opposer à ses plaisirs, il n'en jouira pas". De Lignac, *De l'Homme et de la femme*, 235-236; Menuret de Chambaud, "Impuissance".

⁶⁵ Breen, "Le président Bouhier..."; Darmon, *Le tribunal de l'impuissance*.

master their penis to the indelible mark of the original sin. In 1621, the Guillemeaus, father and son, and Vincent Tagereau cited St Augustin, to show that genitals were not only mastered by our will, but were “moved and excited by a shameful concupiscence attributed to the disobedience of our first parent: of which concupiscence we are not masters”.⁶⁶ That negative guilt-inducing view of sexuality justified why men, the most reasonable creatures of the creation, felt modesty, and could not master their genitalia, in the same way as their hands or feet. Although in 1749, Georges Louis Leclerc Buffon, known for his religious scepticism, wrote about “a sort of instinct the causes of which we don’t know,” the mysteries of God’s will would be progressively replaced by the mysteries of Nature.⁶⁷

Thus, the power of imagination over sexual desire replaced arguments about the unnatural and evil causes of lack of arousal. Men’s power and control over their physical genitalia and their emotional desires that are the founding principal of virility were increasingly rationalised and demystified. This shift, which happened between the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, was a precursor to the domination of and secularisation of psychological interpretations of human behaviours in the nineteenth century. Dominant masculine discourses, in that process, continued to find excuses for feeble male desires. But they were totally incapable of explaining the lack of appeal of sex to potent men no matter the circumstances, and objects of desire. So, the equivalent of contemporary asexual identity was completely ignored in a world where the dialectics of identity were not yet sufficiently developed for this category to be considered and appreciated.

To conclude, the variety of hypotheses we have presented to explain Jean Joseph Soucany’s discourse in front of the *officialité*, his sexual behaviours related by Madelaine Beaunot, or his anatomical condition could leave us frustrated because of the difficulty in interpreting them.⁶⁸ Thanks to queer theory however, we can better grasp a glimpse of meaning behind this variety of behaviours and interpretations: Jean Joseph could be at the same time impotent, not interested in sex in general, in women, or specifically in mature ones, whilst being satisfied with the financial comfort that marriage allows. He could be seen as demonstrating an alternative and chaste marital masculinity, or just merely have decided to present himself as an austere man just to please his interpretation of Church Court’s ideals, and to maintain his marriage for financial reasons. The detailed analysis of the confrontations between different micro-models of masculinities is more revealing than knowing exactly how Jean Joseph Soucany defined his sexual self. The claims of chaste marriage made by Jean Joseph were queer in a society that valued male sexual ardour and performance of husbands. His experienced and needy wife and Parisian *Officialité* seemed to concur with a legal and tridentine conception of marriage’s sacrament, as a remedy for concupiscence, that ignored sexual consent to promote conjugal duty, deprecating chaste or impotent masculinities. These normative discourses were slightly different from the popular and literate culture that considered age differences, ugliness and nastiness as valid reasons for feeble male desire.

⁶⁶ “mues et excitées par une concupiscence honteuse attribuée au péché de desobeissance de nos premiers parens: de laquelle concupiscence nous ne sommes pas maistres”, Tagereau, *Discours sur l’impuissance*, 173-174; Guillemeau et Guillemeau, *Ibid.*.

⁶⁷ “une espèce d’instinct dont nous ignorons les vraies causes”, Buffon et Daubenton, *Ibid.*, 2: 507.

⁶⁸ But it’s important not to over-interpret, as Ferguson says “not to seek to explain away too quickly or to gloss over instances of inconsistency, hyperbole, or textual trouble”, analyses of how one’s individual’s discourses and attitude were disturbing for contemporaries is “is in many respects more important than the proposing of definitive answers”. Ferguson, *Queer (Re)readings*, 52; 51.

The young *bourgeois* was dismissed from his marital status by Parisian Church Court because he did not respect the dominant sexual expectations of a household man. Age, social and family status of the individual determined a hierarchy of sexual and procreative access and roles that supported the hegemonic masculinity of a few: middle-aged married men. The capacity to feel and the intensity of desire was a question of age, sex and humoral balance, but the right to mention it and to transform it into action was reserved for men, and particularly for married men. Pleasure was their privilege, but it came with downsides: pressure to perform their conjugal duty and to endorse active sexual roles. As Raewyn Connell has shown, masculinity is not singular but plural, and men who did not fit into the ideal type of masculinity could not reach a perfect position of power in front of others: men or women.⁶⁹ Sexual desire was represented as ardent, violent and passionate. The experience of feeling desires and mastering them determined early modern virility, distinguishing men from irrational females.

Yet, all attention was concentrated on the malfunctioning of male desire contrary to contemporary normative discourses that focus on the inhibited desires of women. Married men who were impotent were regarded as abusive, ambiguous creatures with degenerated body balance, or old and depraved. Potent men with occasionally inhibited desires or erectile problems were seen from a more tolerant but still judgmental point of view. At the same time, lasting issues were progressively demystified and linked to mental confidence and health, in a very early example of attention to the influence of thoughts and circumstances on behaviours and bodies.

At the turning point of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the roots of the developments of psychological analysis revisited the previous theories on the influence of imagination on desire. Theories about curses were put aside. This process of rationalisation generated a new relationship to the self, to the body and to sex and a new will to explain its mysteries, either by science or by introspection, something which contemporaries were used to doing because of their regular visits to the confessional. This evolution was one of the seeds of what Michel Foucault called a “apparatus of sexuality” (*dispositif de sexualité*) fed by the emergence of psychoanalysis, psychology and sexology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This complex apparatus progressively created a need for sexuality: “to make us talk about sex, to pay attention to it and our worries and to make us believe in the sovereignty of its law, while we are crossed in fact by the mechanics of power of the sexuality”.⁷⁰ Interestingly, this creation of an imaginary unit, “sexuality”, creates an illusion that sex could give us access to our “self”, to a truth, to our profound and secret “identity” that is free from any form of regulation and control. This fascination for the power of sex is ruled by the “apparatus of sexuality” and is the principle of its good functioning and success according to Michel Foucault. “And it is that desirability of sex which fixes each of us at the injunction to know it” and make us believe we are experiencing “liberation”.⁷¹

Jean Joseph Soucany’s trial represents an opportunity to depart from the all too common contemporary essentialization of the differences between male and female desire. As Catharine MacKinnon wrote in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, “desire [is] socially relational, internally necessary to unequal social orders but historically contingent”.⁷² Desire ought to be

⁶⁹ Connell, *Masculinités*.

⁷⁰ “pour faire parler du sexe, pour y attacher notre attention et notre souci, pour nous faire croire à la souveraineté de sa loi alors que nous sommes travaillés en fait par les mécanismes de pouvoir de la sexualité”, in Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 1:209.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁷² MacKinnon, *Toward a feminist theory of the state*, 4.

seen as a subject of social science per se, a product of social organisation. It should not be reduced to a mere natural impulse, thought of as biologically stronger in men, which feeds men's "sexual deprivation", a *topoi* peppering scientific and journalistic contemporary discourses.⁷³

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⁷³ See Trachman, "Désir(s)", 213-221, and Ferrand, Bajos et Andro, "Accords et désaccords", 359-380.

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