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Tracy L. Rutler, *Queering the Enlightenment: Kinship and Gender in Eighteenth-Century French Literature*. Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021. Xxi + 291 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. €65.00. (pb). ISBN 978-1-800-85980-7; €65.00 (eb). ISBN 978-1-800-85797-1.

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In *Queering the Enlightenment*, Rutler puts ends and endings into question. The first ending I would like to consider is the final paragraph of Foucault's short essay, "La vie des hommes infâmes," a work I first encountered as a set text for Bob Mills's MA course "Queer Theories of the Past" at King's College London. The way that Foucault relates the fragments of lives he has been citing from petitions, denunciations and internment records to literature proper has always intrigued me: "Je disais, en commençant, que ces textes, je voudrais qu'on les lise comme autant de 'nouvelles.' C'était trop dire sans doute; aucun ne vaudra jamais le moindre récit de Tchekhov, de Maupassant ou de James. Ni 'quasi-' ni 'sous-littérature,' ce n'est même pas l'ébauche d'un genre; c'est dans le désordre, le bruit et la peine, le travail du pouvoir sur les vies, et le discours qui en naît. *Manon Lescaut* raconte l'une des histoires que voici." [1]

What links the isolated, transgressive, historical lives attested in Foucault's archival sources with Prévost's *Manon Lescaut*, one of a series of not obviously queer narratives that Rutler mines for alternative Enlightenment kinship and community bonds? It must be more than simply, to cite Montesquieu, that the hero of Prévost's novel is "un fripon et l'héroïne une catin qui est menée à la Salpêtrière." [2] What both corpora do is allow their interpreters to access a time when patriarchal forms were shifting and when failures to reproduce patriarchal structures left traces in various kinds of text. This prompts Foucault, and Rutler, to ask how regimens of power and kinship were changing, and what this meant for gender and sexuality. An equally important resonance, perhaps, is that the acts of narration staged by Rutler's writers (Prévost, Crébillon fils, Marivaux, Graffigny) always have an effect and a purpose within the lives recounted. Those recording Foucault's fragments are participating in the attempt to discipline their subjects, while the speakers of Rutler's first-person narratives and plays are, in distinction to the omniscient narrator of later novels, attempting to escape or impose discipline, seduce or connect, translate meaning or obscure it. Rutler's project of reading "a little queerly" focuses less on individual transgression and more on how narrators invoke multiple others to collectively imagine alternative forms of kinship, even where those forms ultimately fail—a project in the spirit of Eve Sedgwick, Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz. [3]

To continue with endings: following this broadly “reparative” path means Rutler has to push back against their power.[4] That is to say, she pushes back against where libertine and sentimental writing end up—pointing to the sexual and reproductive regimes seductively advanced in Rousseau’s *Julie* or violently transgressed by Sade—and sometimes against the endings of texts themselves. When discussing the politics of any novel in the classroom (and Rutler goes further than saying that these are political, claiming their authors as “some of the most brilliant political theorists of their day” [p. 5]), particularly heated discussions might arise around how to interpret the social or sexual unruliness of a narrative which the ending apparently resolves and brings back into line. Many of the texts Rutler analyses have ambiguous endings or are unfinished; with a text like *Manon*, which appears to reaffirm male homosocial bonds at its close, Rutler suggests that we must seek other possibilities “in the breach” between regimes opened up by *Manon*’s masculinisation and des Grieux’s feminisation within their doomed relationship (p. 129). The collective, utopian nature of the alternative possibilities envisioned by the works she studies is essential to the argument that these texts can be read queerly. She therefore looks outside the nuclear family and the exclusive romantic couple. Rutler seeks optimistic hints about a “fatherless (if not father-free) society,” as well as “unfamiliar” renderings of the family (author’s italics, p. 29). She sees revolution in the works’ depiction of “intimate communities of otherwise unrelated individuals; they offer paradigms of subjectivity that will not come into focus until the end of the nineteenth century with the arrival of Freud and psychoanalysis; and their works often remain unfinished, refusing to provide answers and instead demonstrating the potential of utopian ways of life.” (pp. 30-31).

There are three parts to *Queering Enlightenment*. “Family Remains” contains the introduction and a background chapter detailing the critical eye turned to patriarchs by Montesquieu (in *Lettres Persanes*) and Voltaire (in *Œdipe* and the fragmentary *Artémire*). “Prodigal Sons” contains case studies of Prévost and Crébillon, while “Narrative Spinsters” focuses on Marivaux and Graffigny. Across these two sections, Rutler traces alternative regimes to patriarchy: brotherhood, motherhood, and sisterhood (this progress tracking that from the slenderest to the broadest utopianism). So, in the work of Prévost, impotence of various kinds facilitates “free movement between masculine and feminine realms,” but under the rule of a patriarchal master (p. 107). Rutler reads the career of the Ambassador, narrator of the *Histoire d’une grecque moderne*, as an ultimately fruitless quest to negotiate this terrain and strengthen homosocial bonds through control of Zara/Téophé, the heroine. Rutler argues of both the *Histoire* and *Manon* that the real purpose of the female love interest is to provide a story to tell other men in exchange for entry into brotherhood: each woman becomes virtuous and dies shortly afterwards. “At this point her ghost is more valuable to the narrator than her presence” (p. 128).

With Crébillon *films*, Rutler seeks to reclaim from Sade (and from Adorno and Horkheimer’s interpretation) an early libertinage of possibility, where telling licentious stories to defer and intensify desire points to a utopian ethical collective, rather than the dystopic one of *120 journées de Sodome*. References to the “cruising” part of Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* come to the fore, as she analyses the multiplicity of others through whom the narrator of *Les égarements du cœur et de l’esprit* forms a sexual self. Cruising, as understood here, is not just cruising for sex but also entry into Crébillon’s *monde*: “queer sociality [that refuses] normative behaviour in the present, and [imagines] a potential form of socialization that allows being together to take shape in a myriad of ways that change and morph over time” (p. 153). This fatherless formation through cruising allows Meilcour to avoid becoming the more egoistic kind of libertine. Rutler argues that although all the sex may be heterosexual, it is significant that the narrative ends on a note of

openness with no apparent movement towards marriage and procreation. The narrator of *Le Sopha*, meanwhile, has been both man and woman before winding up as a series of settees, witness to lovers' trysts. Where in Sade repetition opens up an anti-relational refusal of the future, the couch's participation in serial encounters (later recounted to a sultan and sultana) are "transformative" of multiple-partner relationships which allow interlocutors to "feel with" each other in ethical *jouissance* (p. 167). Families are not reproduced, but desires are-- "coproduction" valued over "reproduction" (pp. 173-174).

In the works of Marivaux, Rutler finds an alternative "maternal symbolic," first in the non-biological mothering relationships entered into by the protagonist of *La vie de Marianne*--in order to demonstrate that a regime of motherhood encompasses care without biological reproduction--and then in blood mother-daughter relationships in Marivaux's plays. Rutler argues that the story of Marianne's doomed romantic relationship with a nobleman is dwarfed by her successive, intense, non-exclusive attachments to maternal figures. She suggests that this makes Marianne's narrative a "fairly queer love story" of a form of "female-female desire" (p. 195). Marianne is able to circumvent the patriarchal laws of alliance from which her name-less, father-less status ought to exclude her, attracting instead new mothers (Miran and the ambiguously gendered Dorsin, all feminine beauty and masculine courage) through her mastery of coquettish storytelling (p. 198). As for Rutler's reading of Crébillon, at issue is how a protagonist sustains relationships between more than two people without those relationships descending into competitive oedipal triangles: the utopian possibility of *Le Vie de Marianne* is an all-female family which also allows its members independence. Rutler finds echoes of this same freedom in Marivaux's plays *La mère confidente* and *L'École des mères*. Conflict between a mother's marriage plans and a daughter's desires in *La mère confidente* is resolved, not through the intervention of a father figure, but through "familial transvestitism," the mother disguising herself as an aunt to gain access to her daughter's confidence (p. 215). The resulting conversation brings about a compromise: the daughter renounces the plans she had put in place to elope, hoping instead to bring her mother round to her desired match, and the very fact of this renunciation does indeed bring the mother round. Rutler argues that this play stages an anti-competitive alignment of desires between mother and daughter rather than the more common overthrow of a patriarch's "castrating" power to keep young lovers apart, as we often see dramatised in comedies from the period (pp. 216-220). She calls this the staging of "weaning" (p. 216). Unfamiliar with these plays, I found Rutler's close readings convincing. However, some explicit contrast with plays by Marivaux in which fathers are present and influential would have helped the reader understand more clearly what is special about the way in which the "maternal educations" described bring "reason and emotion" together (p. 220).

Finally, Rutler turns to sisterhood, supporting her new readings of Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (in all its versions) with analysis of the author's less-studied plays. Graffigny, contends Rutler, uses her narratives to ask what a world "made for women" could look like (p. 229). In the play *Phaza*, the main character is raised as a man and betrothed to a woman before learning of their "true" female identity and marrying the man who had been their close friend. This unique position allows Phaza to articulate the inequality of marriage to female characters: escaping the shallow education usually afforded to French women (harshly critiqued by Zilia in the *Lettres*), Phaza is able to begin to raise their initial betrothed from her false consciousness. The classic technique of the travel narrative, which uses ignorance to critique, is shown to extend to travel across different genders or social classes, unfamiliarity with a culture and unawareness of one's own place within that culture alike facilitating access to alternative knowledges (pp. 244-245).

This displacement is, famously, what allows Zilia to refuse marriage and choose a sisterly role within her adoptive French family, her reproductive labour all taking place in the realm of writing, translating, and revising. Rutler analyses the way in which Zilia's new role relies on the work of rewriting (and to some extent erasing) the tragic losses of her own past into French—a language which has previously been used to oppress and manipulate her. She suggests that we ought to value Zilia's ability to craft a future and a new family in which she can live and flourish through creative engagement with the past: a refusal of “reality” as the first step towards creating change in that reality. Perhaps we could even think of Zilia as undertaking her own reparative reading, and writing, with respect to both her life story and the French language.

More ends, to close. Rutler acknowledges that her sources may appear “tame” (p. 7), and it is tempting to ask of any given text, can we really call this a queer text? Muñoz's conception of queerness as potentiality, always in the future, is aimed in part to show that this question is a bit of a dead end.<sup>[5]</sup> That being said, reparative reading of this kind—which I agree is absolutely needed if we are to explore fully what queer theory can bring to Enlightenment texts, and vice versa—is likely always to be in productive tension with work that focuses on more obvious examples of transgression, fictional or historical. One question, hopefully less of a dead end than the above, that recurred for me throughout the book is this: who gets to read these texts queerly? Rutler's conclusion offers a few possible answers to this question. What this book does not do is construct a network of eighteenth-century readers able to read “a little queerly.” When we do encounter such readers, they are often failing to grasp an author's attempt to resist reproducing existing structures of kinship (e.g., by rewriting Prévost's or Graffigny's works so that they culminate in marriage). When Rutler re-reads *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* in the light of Graffigny's gender-muddling plays then, it is not because of traceable effects on an eighteenth-century audience, but because she wants to augment the Graffigny that the 1980s needed—“the story of a woman who stood up to the men around her and remained faithful to her own image of herself”—with a Graffigny for the scholars and students of the 2020s (p. 267). And yet, one senses that Rutler would like to situate some of that queer potential within historical Enlightenment communities. She emphasises the social and intellectual links between her four main authors, even suggesting that they formed a kind of “queer intimate community of their own” (p. 30), as well referring positively, if briefly, to the “fan fiction” their texts inspired (p. 272).

I think that this question of “who queers” is important to the pedagogy and future of methods allied to reparative reading, which in its most personal manifestations can seem difficult to “scale” to the classroom.<sup>[7]</sup> Rutler steers clear of this potential problem by continuing to assume the timelessness of oedipal drives as an object of critique, while also contending that her sources imagine characters for whom those structures are less all-encompassing than an orthodox psychoanalytic position might assume them to be. Indeed, all the chapters of *Queering Enlightenment*, which contain some really helpful summaries of relevant theories but allow that theory to sit lightly around excellent close readings, would be suitable for undergraduates and graduates studying this period and these authors. Understanding queerness broadly, as “the rejection of normal love that keeps a repressive social order in place”<sup>[6]</sup> allows Rutler “to complicate queer history and understand it as doing more than the flawed process of merely evidencing,” avoiding mere reinstatement of “that which is known in advance,” that she may instead embrace “the political imagination.”<sup>[8]</sup>

## NOTES

[1] Michel Foucault, "La vie des hommes infâmes," *Les Cahiers du chemin* 29 (1977): 29.

[2] See the BnF's wonderful list of interpretations of *Manon* through the ages: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/essentiels/prevost/manon-lescaut/critiques>.

[3] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123-151 ("Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You"); Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (10th Anniversary Edition) (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

[4] Reparative reading, named by Sedgwick and discussed by Rutler on pp. 17-20, pushes back against "paranoid" reading practices, which associate the quest for truth with the demonstration that the kinds of failures so often encountered in life and staged in texts are inevitabilities. Reparative reading and associated methodologies do not deny failures but aim, instead, to take seriously glimmers of connection even where those glimmers flicker out, and the grounds on which hopes have been based, even where hope is disappointed. Sedgwick (*Touching Feeling*, p. 146) describes this being open to "surprises," both bad and good, and to the notion that the past could have happened differently and that change is possible in the future. Reparative reading seeks to confer "plenitude on an object [e.g. a text, a practice] that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self" (p. 149).

[5] See the introduction to Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

[6] Acknowledgments to Chrys Papaioannou for her question at Elizabeth Freeman's lecture "Committed to the End: On Care Work and Rereading" (Birkbeck College, 20 September 2019), which got me thinking about this.

[7] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 134.

[8] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 27.

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