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Alistaire Tallent, *Fictions of Pleasure: The Putain Memoirs of Prerevolutionary France*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2023. ix + 215 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. $150.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781644533246; $45.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781644533239.

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In *Fictions of Pleasure*, Alistaire Tallent introduces readers to a subgenre of libertine literature that she terms *putain memoirs*. To call a woman a *putain* [slut, whore] in eighteenth-century France was a direct attack on her public reputation, and many individuals responded to such insults with violence or calculated vengeance.[1] But this subgenre turned such calumny into a term of distinction--some of the narrators even proudly proclaim themselves to be *putains* and reflect on the social utility of their profession. Tallent identifies thirteen novels that constitute this literary category, all written in France between 1745-1797. The *putain memoirs* share several core elements: the heroine's first-person narration of her life, a detailed account of a precocious first sexual encounter, her willing entry into sex work as a logical consequence of following natural desire, frank discussion of sexual encounters with clients and lovers, time spent as a kept woman, brushes with venereal disease (usually easily managed), and the narrator's "joy and pride in the telling of her story" (p. 5). All thirteen novels were penned by men, and several proved to be so popular that they went through multiple editions. But this was a subgenre that disappeared after the French Revolution, as the "playfully subversive putains" ceded to the tragic "courtesan with a heart of gold" of nineteenth-century fiction (p. 9).

Tallent identifies pseudo-memoirs of female sex workers as "sites of resistance to ancien régime power structures," by narrators who were all financially "independent women in control of their own sexuality, decision making, and destiny" (p. 3). In many respects, this argument builds upon decades of scholarship that attributes startling social significance to the libertine literary genre across eighteenth-century Europe, especially in France.[2] Thanks to research by Robert Darnton, Antoine de Baecque, and Lynn Hunt, among others, we know that eighteenth-century pornography intersected with political critique by indicting the hypocrisies of religious leaders, abuses of absolutist power, and perversions of patriarchal social order through urgent and graphic imagery.[3] The unequal distribution of wealth rankled, no doubt, but it was the unequal distribution of pleasure in eighteenth-century society that enflamed these characters. In the *putain memoirs*, Tallent asserts, poor women demanded equal rights to sexual pleasure, and through proximity to elite patrons, they accessed wealth and influence. Nothing better revealed the topsy-turvy world of eighteenth-century France than the rags-to-riches tales of the era's *putain memoirs*.

In chapter one, Tallent investigates the subgenre's origins in seventeenth-century texts, including "erotic writing, materialist philosophy, and the libertine novel," (p. 6) while chapter two offers historical context to illuminate the "demimonde of eighteenth-century Paris" (p. 7). Tallent draws on the exhaustive research of historians, including Nina Kushner, Erica Benabou, and Clyde Plumauzille, who have reconstructed the lives and social circles of Parisian sex workers from police archives, correspondence, and hospital records. This is also the chapter where Tallent provides some background on the male authors of the *putain memoirs*. The remaining four chapters each offer a close reading of a specific *putain memoir*. Chapter three focuses on *La Belle Allemande, ou Les Galanteries de Thérèse* (1745), in which Tallent highlights the heroine Thérèse's critique of patriarchal social order, especially as represented by the wealthy older men who seek her company. Such men are "repulsive," "hideous," and "*vilain*" as they fall victim to the protagonist's "empire of beauty," or commanding sexual attraction (p. 56). Youth is desirable, age is repulsive in this inversion of ancien régime social order. Chapter four investigates how Margot, the *putain* protagonist, compares herself favorably to *salonnières* and other famous women who manage to "manipulate both private and public spaces for their own benefit" in *Margot la Ravadeuse* (1753) (p. 8). Chapter five introduces La Dumonci, the heroine of *La Cauchoise* (1783), examining how the heroine sidesteps marriage by "seeking out and relying upon a system of female friendships" (p. 8). Chapter six addresses the subgenre's rejection of motherhood and maternal sentiment, carried to horrific extremes in the Marquis de Sade's *Histoire de Juliette* (1797). Without a concluding chapter or epilogue, Tallent misses the opportunity to weave together some of the insights developed over the course of the monograph. However, she does provide summaries of the nine other novels categorized as *putain memoirs* in an appendix, which will be useful for future researchers in this field.

Tallent's research makes clear contributions to the scholarship on libertine literature in eighteenth-century France. The author provides a sustained inquiry into the social and political significance of female narrators in libertine literature and provides some convincing conclusions. What made women appealing protagonists? Heroines of pseudo-memoirs spoke directly to women's limited economic options, and deplored young women's dependence on family and protectors. These characters simultaneously recognized and rejected the sexual double standard of their society. Tallent's analysis responds to relevant scholarship in eighteenth-century French studies, tracing connections between the fictional, the plausible, and the empirical. This was a society in which a few courtesans and elite sex workers did have access to dizzying wealth and political influence. Pamphlets, newspapers, and pornographic novels promised to provide access to these realms of elite politics in which women played a central role.[4] This resulted in widespread grievances, with social commentators castigating all women's power as illegitimate.[5] Correspondingly, women who gained some level of celebrity--whether for social, artistic, or intellectual achievements--regularly contended with public perceptions of sexual notoriety.[6]

Tallent offers precise explication and analysis of four novels, introducing main characters, plot structures, narrative arcs, and themes for readers unfamiliar with the texts. She quotes key passages at length, offering both the French original alongside her English translation to ensure ample context and minimize misunderstandings. In extended discussions of the power of women's sexuality, public reputation, friendship, and challenging motherhood, Tallent deepens readers' understanding of some of the enduring themes of French literature far beyond the eighteenth century. She also notes key differences between the novels, attending particularly to the heroines' tone, sense of humor, and self-awareness. This monograph offers a reliable

introduction to the *putain memoir* and to the significance of libertine literature in eighteenth-century France.

Three questions lingered as I finished reading *Fictions of Pleasure*. First, what about violence? The book's thesis does not adequately prepare readers for the abundant textual depictions of sexual violence and gendered subjugation in this literary genre. Male authors wrote these protagonists into scenes that undermined the characters' autonomy or agency, making the women's assertions of independence ephemeral at best, and deluded at worst. La Dumonci suffers gang rape at the behest of her jealous protector, Margot's mother beats her upon learning of a first sexual encounter with a young groom, and Juliette is party to innumerable rapes, tortures, and murders, including the brutal slaughter of her own daughter (p. 96, 67, 135). For Tallent's argument to highlight the heroines' financial independence and bold subversion of society, it necessarily sidesteps factors that revealed the profound limitations of a *putain's* independence. As a result, the author treats the ubiquity of sexual violence in these four novels as incidental, a bug rather than a defining feature in the system of libertine literature.

Second, who read the *putain memoirs*, and what sense did readers make of these texts? Tallent does not inquire into the reception of these books, although scholars have established with some certainty the publication runs, circulation and distribution patterns, and responses to many libertine texts.[7] In addition to readers' responses, it would be helpful to have a sense of the authors' motives. In the claims advanced throughout the book, authorial intent and readers' reception loom large but just beyond the analysis. What were the authors' purposes in adopting a female sex worker's voice? Did the authors of this subgenre intend to challenge the sexual double standard? Or did they seek to mock a disordered world in which a sex worker has the money to pay for a carriage and a box at the opera, but a titled noblewoman does not? Is this subgenre championing the *putain*? Or is it mocking the lady with her strict morals? The question is vital, particularly since this text has been published in the University of Delaware Press's series on Early Modern Feminisms. It is difficult to conclude that the *putain memoirs* constitute a genre of early modern feminist writing. The genre seems to share more with the misogynistic screeds penned against the *salonnières*, than it does with the writings of women seeking a modicum of financial security and intellectual independence.[8] In a revealing preface, Tallent identifies *Histoire de Mademoiselle Cronel dite Frétillon*, a roman-à-clef published in 1741, as the inspiration for all *putain memoirs* that followed. Tallent asserts that the author of this novel based the main character on his former lover and seemed to have composed the first volume as an act of revenge, calling out her infidelities. A profound misogyny animates that violent text, and casts real doubts on Tallent's proto-feminist interpretations of the subgenre. If this first instance of a *putain memoir* served to smear a woman's reputation publicly, bringing readers in on the lover's revenge, it seems plausible that a similar animus may have motivated other authors.

Finally, what political impact did the *putain memoirs* have when published? Should we understand them as proto-revolutionary texts? Or are these texts better understood as a symptom of ancien régime duplicities? Tallent characterizes the subgenre as subversive, attacking hierarchies of nobility and the patriarchal family in favor of individual pleasure and straightforward capital exchange. Following Lynn Hunt's analysis of the "family romance" of the Revolutionary era, Tallent invites readers to consider the *putain memoirs* as introducing the themes of the despotic father, or the bad mother developed in later novels.[9] But revolutionary journalists and politicians took aim at the "empire of beauty" exerted by

courtesans and mistresses seeking to invalidate the ancien régime. Many revolutionaries would interpret the subversion of patriarchy depicted in libertine novels not as a laudatory plan for a new order, but as a symptom of the old order's dysfunction. In drawing our attention to this set of novels, Alistaire Tallent's text merits sustained engagement, raises important questions, and proposes bold interpretations of an important literary subgenre.

NOTES

[1] Hugues Lecharny, "L'injure à Paris au XVIIIe siècle, un aspect de la violence au quotidien," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, vol 36, no. 4 (Oct-Dec 1989): 559-585.

[2] Lynn Hunt, ed. *The Invention of Pornography, 1500-1800: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity* (London: Zone Books, 1996).[3]

[3] Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1996); Antoine de Baecque, *The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770-1800* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); Lynn Hunt, *The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Cecilia Feilla, "Essential Workers of the Palais-Royal: Prostitution and the Public Good in French Revolutionary Drama," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 57: 1 (Fall 2023): 43-64.

[4] Bernadette Fort and Jeremy Popkin, *The Mémoires Secrets and the Culture of Publicity in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998).

[5] Christine Adams and Tracy Adams, *The Creation of the French Royal Mistress: From Agnès Sorel to Madame Du Barry* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2020).

[6] Evident in Dena Goodman's study of Parisian *salonnières* in *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); Gita May's *Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun: Odyssey of an Artist in an Age of Revolution* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008), 153; and in Judith Zinsser's biography *La Dame d'Esprit: A Biography of Marquise du Chatelet* (New York: Viking, 2006).

[7] Addressed, for example, in Darnton, cited above, as well as Thomas Wynn, *Reading Drama in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024); Amy Wyngaard, *Bad Books: Rétif de la Bretonne, Sexuality, and Pornography* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013); John Phillips, *Sade: The Libertine Novels* (London: Pluto Press, 2001).

[8] Emilie du Châtelet, *Selected Philosophical and Scientific Writings*. Judith Zinsser, ed., Isabelle Bour and Judith Zinsser, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Marie Jeanne Phlipon, Madame Roland, was a renowned correspondent whose letters and memoirs have undergirded many histories of the eighteenth century and revolutionary era in France. See *Lettres de Madame Roland, 1780-1793*, ed. Claude Perroud, 2 vols. (Paris, Imprimérie nationale,1900-1902) and *Memoires de Madame Roland*, ed. Claude Perroud, 2 vols. (Paris, 1905). On women's letter writing in eighteenth-century France, see Dena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009). On women in the

sciences in eighteenth-century France, see Nina Rattner Gelbart, *Minerva's French Sisters: Women of Science in Enlightenment France* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2021).

[9] Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

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