

# VIRTUS

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## Eighteenth-century French libertine nobles

218

Chad Denton, *Decadence, radicalism, and the early modern French nobility. The enlightened and the depraved* (London: Lexington Books, 2017, xvii + 161 p., ill., index)

Chad Denton's contribution to the study of the eighteenth-century French high nobility is to argue that their association with *libertinage* aligned them with a rejection of socio-religious norms, especially in the sexual realm. The unintended consequences of this alignment undermined the nobility itself, as the entire Old Regime political order was restructured at the end of the century, but the 'libertine ideal' of asserting individual freedom against restrictive institutions survived and flourished. Denton draws together threads of scholarship on the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century nobility, on sexuality, and on atheism during the Enlightenment to offer a thought-provoking interpretation of how a set of early modern nobles represented themselves, and of how others represented them. His argument, however, is more suggestive than exhaustively documented, as he relies heavily on secondary scholarship to make connections between what others have shown rather than breaking new ground in terms of original research (though a number of printed primary works are cited). The book's introduction is followed by five chapters and a conclusion.

Denton begins by introducing his thesis that great nobles 'adopted libertinage (...) as a means to justify their privilege as an order and to assert their defiance of behavioral norms promoted by the Church and the monarchy' (xi). By the end of the century, though, this model was opposed by 'a discourse of economic utility' and lost its force. Efforts by Louis XVI

and his queen to oppose libertinage were popularly ignored as the royal couple was assumed to be libertine and incompetent. 'The libertine ideal of asserting one's own freedom through knowledge of the institutions surrounding one' (xii) outlasted the fall of the Old Regime, according to Denton. Central to the argument is that illicit sex was 'a signifier of privilege' (xv) and that the great nobility's 'new identity as an intelligentsia' linked it to libertinism (xvi). This reviewer found it somewhat difficult to follow the logic of the historiographic review in the introduction, and thought that a more comprehensive analysis of the literatures on sodomy and noble adultery could have been attempted.

Chapter one discusses the refinement of the court nobility in terms of noble educational practices, military academies, and the libraries of court nobles. It also mentions changing identities related to the nobility, without mentioning the robe nobility or categories like 'the state nobility' as defined by James Collins. The reader is not provided with a sense of how the composition of the nobility itself changed over time. Trends are sometimes mentioned, such as changes 'in economic and military technology' which 'inspired a conscious exploration of the importance and function of nobility' (2), but without an explanation of precisely when they occurred. This chapter points out that figures like Fénelon called for great nobles to play a political balancing role in society, and linked their ability to do so with refined education. The degree to which Fénelon's views were widely held is not discussed. Denton sees libertinism as a way by which nobles asserted their group privilege with respect to royal absolutism, but one wonders who exactly attributed legitimacy to libertinism, and under what conditions.

Libertines are defined in chapter two as those who rejected religion and faith and thus felt free 'to engage in illicit speech and behavior' (26). Denton consistently ties the educated nobility to the libertine nobility: 'For a court nobility that had been reconstituted to a degree as an intelligentsia, libertinage offered the opportunity for privileged defiance' (27). But were education and libertinage necessarily inseparable? This chapter stresses the 'new sanctified atmosphere' at the court following the establishment of the 'puritanical regime' of Madame de Maintenon (28), and the fact that many court nobles rejected the new strictures and instead relocated to the court of the future regent, Philippe II, at St Cloud. While state institutions (like *lettres de cachet*) were employed as enforcement tools, it seems as if they had little effect on the nobility. Denton links this new moral climate to Jansenism, and the latter to the French Revolution (it would have been opportune to cite Dale Van Kley here). The chapter then shifts abruptly to a discussion of erotic literature, beginning with sixteenth-century Italian examples, and then considering texts and discussions from 1655, 1619, 1748, and the 1680s-90s. This chronological disorder makes it difficult to understand how nobles related to erotic literature over time, and whether the relationship exhibited any particular trend. With respect to the general question of how many nobles were non-religious, Denton points to property inventories in Paris showing 'fewer religious paintings and icons in their homes than non-nobles' (44). One is left wondering whether there is other evidence indicating that nobles lost their religion more quickly than other groups. Denton's observation that the baron d'Holbach, 'the undisputed spokesman for noble atheism', made a sharp distinction between atheism and sexual transgression, seems to undermine his earlier claim (46). But he then casts back to the seventeenth century again, pointing to the Grand Condé

as the embodiment of erudition unified with libertine sexuality (48).

Chapter three, 'The liberated sodomite' begins by describing an orgy amongst young court nobles in the Versailles gardens in 1722. Acknowledging that 'the canonical mainstream champions of the Enlightenment' all condemned sodomy, Denton maintains nonetheless that sodomy was a 'vehicle' for overturning moral assumptions (56). In a section entitled 'Sodomy as Revolt', the author invites the reader to view the court nobles in question as disinterested champions of sexual and intellectual freedom. Elsewhere in the chapter, Denton writes that these young nobles 'were not simply acting out of desire, but had rationalized some resistance against moral norms' (74). But such claims only work by abstracting persons from their immediate social and political environments, which seems to obscure more than illuminate. 'The act of sodomy itself through philosophical-erotic texts became a signifier for liberating knowledge', Denton writes – but according to whom? Spinoza is cited as a source for the idea that the significance of sexual acts was culturally relative, and in the late eighteenth century this notion was reinforced by writings depicting the acceptance of sodomy in other societies. The author notes 'a tendency to present sodomy as a crime of the elite and (...) to associate in slang and anecdote sodomy with both philosophy and nobility', and the evidence presented is indeed anecdotal (67). The fact that there were few prosecutions of noble sodomy cases is interpreted not as proof of the relative infrequency of the crime, but as evidence of its significance 'as a mark of noble privilege' (ibid.). Was every kind of crime of which nobles stood accused, but from the prosecution of which their privilege freed them, viewed by society as characteristic of nobility? Denton insists that that the high nobility and royal family 'happened to have a surplus of men alleged to be habitual sodomites in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' (69). Likewise, he finds 'at least two organized groups of noble sodomites known to Versailles history,' the group from 1722 and an earlier one from 1682 (70). In both cases it would be useful to identify and describe these people in detail, engaging in critical analysis of the sources that identify them as sodomites, while distinguishing between texts functioning as political propaganda and other kinds of accounts.

The fourth chapter looks at adultery at court, arguing that adultery 'was one mode through which the nobility had solidified its libertine resistance against traditional Christian morality and institutions' (80). The relationship between eighteenth-century noble adultery and the literary representations of noble adultery dating back to the twelfth century is not precisely clarified. The key difference seems to be that by the eighteenth century, enough writers had begun to view marriage as a social construction that nature-based objections to adultery lost their force. Enlightenment criticisms of marriage, together with 'the philosophical endorsement of heterosocial relationships outside marriage' together created 'an elite *ethos* about love and desire' (90). The idea that authentic feelings could override social convention began to take hold, but the author does not prove that this conviction was limited to the nobility. At the same time, during the reign of Louis XV there was growing criticism of the practice of royal adultery and hostility toward royal mistresses.

Chapter five explains 'The end of the libertine nobility' by describing first the efforts of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette to replace popular views of the French court as debauched with a new image of domesticity within the royal household. They were unsuccessful both due to 'the seedy underground press' that attacked the queen ruthlessly (112) and to the way

in which the intimate humanization of the royal family undermined the special status of the ruling dynasty. This coincided with growing criticism of the monarchy and the nobility for being economically parasitic and failing to invest sufficiently in France's commercial revitalization. The nobility in general and the royal family were associated with libertinism, 'a favorite boogeyman of the Revolution' (131). Denton mentions the incest accusations hurled against the queen by her detractors. Here, a discussion of David Sabeau's argument about the revival of close marriage amongst wealthy bourgeois families during the Revolutionary era might have been enlightening, since those who benefited from the incest accusations were engaging in behavior (first-cousin marriage) that would have been traditionally categorized as incestuous. 'Although the libertine nobility had presented a model where acculturation in elite society meant social advancement, and where knowledge could liberate one from archaic moral and religious models, their legacy was ultimately written by their enemies' (135).

In his short conclusion Denton claims that the libertine tradition of social critique was taken up in the following century by 'the Socialist, the Positivist, and the Anarchist' (140), as libertinism 'suddenly moved from a nobility of class to a nobility of the mind' (141) – an interesting turn of phrase that deserves some explanation. He sees 'libertinism and its promise of perpetual questioning and skepticism' as 'a potential mode of resistance' whose utility lives on (142). But there have been countless groups throughout history that have questioned social assumptions and pressed for change in one way or another; it remains to be seen whether noble libertines should be celebrated as the 'pioneers' of this kind of social action within the Western tradition (*ibid.*)

221

Denton's book is not a social history of the nobility, or even of court nobles. The author's concern is not the identity of the French nobility as a whole or how the composition of this group and its role in society changed over time. This is understandable, given the author's focus on a specific group (the 'libertine nobility'), but a couple of problems remain. One is that not even the 'libertines' are clearly identified: they were 'high nobles' and 'court nobles', but how many were there, who were they, where did they come from? We need more contextualization to assess Denton's claims. Were they all urbanized nobles? Did they include foreign princes? What was their religious background? Were they married or unmarried? Were they younger sons? In what kinds of disputes were they involved? With whom? Another problem is that it sometimes appears as if all nobles were being characterized as libertine, and sometimes Denton suggests that the libertines were a self-identified group that sought to promote a particular cultural agenda. It is not clear whether Denton wants to explain how French writers represented libertine nobles, or to describe a specific set of noble philosophical and sexual activists, or both. In any case, more context would help us evaluate the author's claims. Finally, there are a number of unfortunate errors and/or typos, in French and English, throughout the text, ranging from the dating of the 'Fronde' [*sic*] revolt to sometime before 1644 (7), to a reference to the historian 'Lucien Fabvre' (43), to the assessment that the future of the Revolution 'lied with the dedicated politician Maximilien Robespierre' (135). This is a thought-provoking book, but with some flaws in conceptualization, in the evidentiary support for some of its principal claims, and in editing.



Adellijke echo's? De invloed van de adel op de ontwikkeling van buitenplaatsen langs de rivieren van het Amstelland en de Oude Rijn <i>Gerrit van Oosterom</i>	9
Het Staatse ambassadegebouw in de zeventiende eeuw. Het logement van Hendrick van Reede van Renswoude in Madrid, 1656-1669 <i>Maurits Ebben</i>	29
Naar het Oosten. Geografische verschillen in het ledenbestand van de Ridderlijke Duitse Orde, Balije van Utrecht, 1640-1840 <i>Renger E. de Bruin</i>	57
De Belgische orangistische adel I. De zuidelijke adel in het Verenigd Koninkrijk der Nederlanden (1815-1830) <i>Els Witte</i>	79
The Bentinck family archives. Highlights and suggestions for further research <i>Menoucha Ruitenberg</i>	103
Bildung und Erziehung. Zur Bedeutung zweier Schlüsselkategorien für Charlotte Sophie Gräfin Bentinck <i>Christina Randig</i>	114
Charlotte Sophie, Joseph Eckhel and numismatics <i>Daniela Williams</i>	127
<i>Craignez honte</i> . The Bentinck coats of arms and their use as an expression of the cross-border character of the family <i>Olivier Mertens</i>	144
Fathers and Sons. A sketch of the noble life forms of the Bentincks in the period of the Great Wars in Europe (1672-1748) <i>Yme Kuiper</i>	162
Van wapenbord tot koningsboek. Herinnering, herstel en herbestemming in de heraldiek van het Gulden Vlies (1559-1795) <i>Steven Thiry</i>	179



25 | 2018

