ASPECTS OF SEXUALITY IN TWO WORKS
BY CORNEILLE AND ROUSSEAU

In the first section of this paper I examine a two-line passage in Pierre Corneille’s seventeenth-century classical play Polyeucte that, while it appears innocuous enough at first glance, contains a word-play that reveals a number of hidden facets of the author’s use of sexual allusion and sheds new light on relationships among the characters as well as on the playwright’s interaction with his peers and his readers. In the second part of this essay, I focus on a few passages of Rousseau’s epistolary novel Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse. The emphasis in this discussion is placed on various aspects of the sexuality of one of the main characters, especially as related to the erotic propensities of the author and the relationship between language and desire in the novel and in Rousseau’s life and other writings.

I

Pierre Corneille’s tragedy Polyeucte, staged in 1642 and published in 1643, recounts in 1814 twelve-syllable lines the story of the Armenian nobleman Polyeucte, who in the third century marries Pauline, the daughter of the Roman provincial governor Félix, who has been ordered by the emperor Décie to intensify the persecution of Christians. It is announced that Sévère, a Roman warrior who earlier sought Pauline’s hand is about to return from a successful military campaign. Pauline loved him and wished to marry him, but her father would not permit the marriage because he did not consider Sévère worthy at the time. But now he is a hero and a favorite of the emperor. All fear that he will be wrathful when he learns that the girl he left behind has married someone else during his absence, especially since her father could surely not object to their union now that he has risen on the social scale.

In the first scene Néarque, a Christian who acts as Polyeucte’s confidant, exhorts his friend to express and confirm his new-found faith by undergoing
the ceremony of baptism. Polyeucte hesitates to follow this suggestion, he explains, because his pagan wife has had a dream in which he is murdered. She fears that this dream is a warning of what will happen to her spouse at Sévère's hands. Néarque rebukes him for allowing himself to be swayed by any consideration so trivial as a mere woman's dream. In order to incite Polyeucte to carry out his plan to be baptized, Néarque accuses him of permitting his religious fervor to wane and warns him that God may soon withdraw from him the precious gift of grace. Polyeucte retorts: "Vous me connaissez mal: la même ardeur me brûle, / Et le désir s'accroît quand l'effet se recule". Lacy Lockert translates this passage as follows: "Thou knowest me ill. I burn with no less ardor. My longing is the more as its fulfillment is further off."

What I wish to point out here is the somewhat obscene word-play of the second line (line 42). It would be pronounced in French in exactly the same way if it were written as: "Et le désir s'accroît quand les fesses reculent". This punning version would thus signify: "And desire increases when the buttocks pull away (or retreat or draw back)". The ear could also perceive the equivocal line in question as: "Et le désir? Ça croît quand les fesses reculent". That is to say, "As for desire, it increases (grows, swells) when..."

There are several indications that the alternative reading of lines 41–42 with these erotic undertones is indeed discreetly pointed to by Corneille himself. First there is the ambiguity of the term ardeur, which according to both Furetière's Dictionnaire Universel (1694) and the Dictionnaire de l'Académie (1694) means "grande chaleur", "chaleur extrême", and "passion". Secondly, the verb brûler, according to the same sources, refers literally to the heat generated by a flame or, figuratively, to heat emanating from passion or sentiment. The use of brûler in an erotic sense is obvious, for example, in Racine's Phèdre (1677), line 634, where Phèdre begins her confession to her stepson Hippolyte of her illicit passion for him by saying: "Oui, Prince, je languis, je brûle pour Thésée". By this, we recall, she means that she sees in Hippolyte her husband as he used to be or could have been. The noun désir can refer to a "mouvement de la volonté vers un bien qu'on n'a pas" (such as Polyeucte's baptism; but it can also designate "désirs de la chair" according to the Dictionnaire Universel. Furetière attests the use of fesse in its modern sense: "la partie charnue qui est au derrière de l'homme ou de la femme, sur laquelle on s'assied".

Doubtless the most significant clue that suggests we are dealing with more than a fortuitous phonetic coincidence lies in Corneille's choice of the verb reculer, which is derived from Latin culus, a noun that gives cul, the equivalent of ass in its vulgar English meaning. This term was current in the seventeenth century, just as it is today. It is quite worthy of note that the author uses the verb se reculer, of which I have found no mention, in the reflexive form, in any dictionary I have consulted. The verb reculer, without the reflexive pronoun,
does appear two more time in the play. I hypothesize that Corneille adds se to fill out the necessary twelve syllables, but also, more importantly, to add an intensifier, such as in the verb se mourir ("to be on the verge of dying"). In my view, he also inserts the pronoun se in order to complete the sound of the words fesses in the pun. If one wishes to demonstrate that Corneille, in spite of the prevailing dramaturgical code of the bienséances (which forbade vulgarity and improper language), does not rigorously avoid sexual allusions, one need only re-read the Cid. There in Act I, scene iv Rodrigue's aging father deplore the destructiveness of time, specifically in regard to the impotence of his arm and his sword, which he is now incapable of raising in defense of his honor 4). Nor is Corneille disdainful of word-plays of questionable felicitousness. When Sévère returns to find his beloved Pauline wed and steadfast in her conjugal fidelity, she hears her confidante Strattonie speak a potential slaughter of Christians, perhaps directed by Sévère himself, as "sévérément" (line 261).

Once it has been established that there exists considerable evidence that Corneille acts deliberately in creating the equivocalness on the level of auditory perception of lines 41 and 42, it is necessary to ask how well this erotic reading fits into the play as a whole. Since the erstwhile suitor of Polyeucte's new bride returns from a military expedition, there arises some ominous possibility that she will be bodily wrested from her Armenian spouse, an act that would result in Polyeucte's desiring her all the more, as the punning line suggests. Since this kidnapping never actually takes place, it is plausible that these lines really depict Sévère's situation rather than Polyeucte's. He exclaims in anguish: "Je verrai qu'un autre vous possède!" (line 422).

It is also reasonable to wonder why Corneille takes the risk involved in fabricating such a pun. The explanation I propose is that he intends to express surreptitiously his contempt for the punctilious critics who so severely attacked him in the course of the "Querelle du Cid". It will be recalled that in this Querelle Scudéry in his Observations sur le Cid (1637) criticized Corneille for failing to observe to his satisfaction the unities and the bienséances. Corneille, in the two lines of Polyeucte we have just discussed, succeeds in demonstrating both his genius and his ingenuity or cleverness by superimposing the apparent and more readily acceptable meaning over the less obvious yet plausible meaning I propose. Corneille counts on the perceptiveness of the attentive reader who will chuckle along with the playwright. The author would no doubt have officially denounced the validity of my reading of this passage, in order to protect himself and to enhance the pleasure of his triumph, but I think he would have smiled impishly while doing so.
Jean-Jacques Rousseau's references to sexual matters are far more transparent than Corneille's. This difference can be attributed to the shifts in taste and standards in the intervening hundred years, by the difference in the genres involved (Rousseau's least illustrious works are his plays and poetry) and the contrast between the personalities of the two writers. In the space available here, I wish to examine the relationship between writing and sexuality in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), especially in one particular letter. This letter—novel, as we know, recounts the love and suffering of Julie and Saint-Preux, who because of class differences cannot marry. To this extent at least they resemble Pauline and Sévère. Julie eventually marries an older man, Wolmar, who realizes that his wife still loves Saint-Preux. She however, like Pauline, is an obedient daughter and vows to remain faithful to her spouse. Wolmar is unsuccessful in his attempt to eradicate her repressed passion, and she finally dies a happy death, still faithful yet hopeful of being reunited with Saint-Preux in the hereafter.

During the incipient stages of their amorous and epistolary contact, Julie, once she has consented to Saint-Preux's onslaught of unsolicited letters, continues to insist on their remaining chaste. When he is in Julie's presence Saint-Preux is enormously frustrated by this imposed continence, but he somewhat spitefully admits in slightly veiled terms that in her absence he takes matters into his own hands and alleviates his accumulated by masturbating: "Si j'ose former des voeux extrêmes ce n'est plus qu'en votre absence; mes désirs n'osant aller jusqu'à vous s'adressent à votre image, et c'est sur elle que je me venge du respect que je suis contraint de vous porter". The term "votre image" in this passage refers to Saint-Preux's masturbatory fantasies. This assumption is supported by the presence of several other more or less discreet references to Saint-Preux's habit elsewhere in the novel. In a letter he writes to Julie shortly after his arrival in Paris he bemoans the fact that he must be separated from her, and he speaks in veiled terms about the unsatisfactory means he relies on for easing his discomfort: "O doute! ô supplice! Mon coeur inquiet te cherche et ne trouve rien... J'ai beau vouloir ranimer et moi l'espérance éteinte, elle ne m'offre qu'une ressource incertaine et des consolations suspectes". (II,228) Julie, in her reply, shows that she has not failed to comprehend what Saint-Preux is alluding to. She says: "Le ton de ta première lettre me fait trembler. Je redoute ces emportements trompeurs, d'autant plus dangereux que l'imagination qui les excite n'a point de bornes, et je crains que tu n'outrages ta Julie à force de l'aimer. Ah tu ne sens pas, non, ton coeur délicat ne sent pas combien l'amour s'offense d'un vain hommage; tu ne songes ni que ta vie est à moi ni qu'on court souvent la mort en croyant servir la nature". (II, 236–237) She literally fears for her life, because these "dangereux emportements", this "vain hommage" manifested in the act of masturbation are potentially lethal. This under-
standing of the consequences of onanism — all manner of mental and physical deterioration — was universal or at least widespread from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. Soon after the exchange of letters just quoted, Saint-Preux admits that he too sees the gravity of this act and is fearful of being alone, a condition conducive to indulging in fantasies about Julie: "... tes charmes triomphent de l’absence, ils me poursuivent partout, ils me font craindre la solitude..." (II,244) Much later, after Julie has become Madame de Wolmar, she warns Saint-Preux once again about the "pièges de l’imagination" (II,667) and refers to the danger posed by "l’ennemi qu’on porte toujours avec soi". (II,667)

We know from the Confessions that Rousseau masturbated frequently and, like Saint-Preux often had recourse to this means of compensating for the absence of the object of his desires, whether she be real or imaginary. He confesses: "J’ai donc fort peu possédé, mais je n’ai pas laissé de jouir beaucoup à ma manière, c’est-à-dire par l’imagination". (I,17) Speaking again about "ce dangereux supplément qui trompe la nature" (I,109), he describes its advantages, which are so appropriate to Saint-Preux’s case: "Ce vice que la honte et la timidité trouve si commode a de plus un grand attrait pour les imaginations vives; c’est de disposer à leur gré de tout le sexe et de faire servir à leurs plaisirs le beauté qui les tente". (109)

After Julie and Saint-Preux have reached the point where she consents to having sexual intercourse with him — indeed, she summons him to her bedroom — we find him anxiously awaiting her there. Curiously enough, he passes the time by writing her a letter, one we must presume he will hand her when she arrives. Therein he describes his reactions to various articles of clothing he sees lying around: "Toutes les parties de ton habillement éparses présentent à mon ardente imagination celles de toi-même qu’elles recèlent. Cet heureux fichu contre lequel une fois au moins je n’aurai point à murmurer; ce déshabillé élégant et simple qui marque si bien le goût de celle qui le porte; ces mules [slippers] si mignonnes qu’un pied souple remplit sans peine, ce corps [corset] si délicé qui touche et embrasse... quelle taille ... enchanteresse... au devant deux légers contours... o spectacle de volupté... la baleine a cédé à la force de l’impression... empreintes délicieuses, que je vous baise mille fois!... Dieux! Dieux! que sera—ce quand... Ah, je crois déjà sentir ce tendre coeur battre sous une heureuse main! Julie!" (II,147)

This passage has been the subject of considerable critical comment, but no one, to my knowledge, has yet suggested that Saint-Preux is in all likelihood masturbating during this scene. The remarks about the letter have centered instead on the supposed flaw it constitutes in the narrative process. As Donald Webb says: "... critics have often seen it as one in which Rousseau completely loses an already shaky grip on the technique of the epistolary novel". The editor of the Pléiade edition does not hesitate to use the adjective "ridicule"
Donald Webb comes close to my reading when he remarks: "This letter... resembles, for example, Saint-Preux's auto-erotic episodes..." But as I understand his comment, he means that the letter-writing act is auto-erotic, not that Saint-Preux is actually masturbating. The hypothesis that the sight (and feel and smell?) of Julie's garments trigger(s) Saint-Preux's masturbatory fantasies is supported by the increasingly rapid respiration rate suggested by the shorter and shorter phrases and the irregularity in breathing suggested by the variety in the length of the phrases the letter-writer is muttering to himself as he writes. A further basis for this interpretation is the pauses between the exclamations (perhaps ejaculations would be a better word), indicated by anywhere from three to eight dots, all of which build up to a climactic "Ah". This high point of excitation is followed by less choppy phrases and less sensually charged references, such as "tendre coeur". It might be excessive to hypothesize that the dots signal strokes of the hand. In any case, it is likely that on a more symbolic level, the rhythm of the passage is supposed to foreshadow the rise and fall of sexual desire during the ensuing act of intercourse.

One might object that it is highly unlikely that Saint-Preux is masturbating with pen in hand, but one must also ask if such a feat is any more peculiar than the fact that he is writing this letter at all, in view of the fact that Julie is supposed to enter at any moment and indeed does arrive before the last drop of ink is spilled, so to speak - "on ouvre!... on entre!... c'est elle!" (II,147) In addition, we must take into account Saint-Preux's unconventional attitude about contact with Julie. While there is not sufficient space here to go into detail, may it suffice to say that he exhibits a paradoxical impulse to flee Julie's presence. Separation is in many ways preferable to being together. In this regard it is especially enlightening to consider the opening sentence of the very first letter of this long novel, where Saint-Preux lucidly tells Julie: "Il faut vous fuir, mademoiselle, je le sens bien". (II,31) In analogous fashion, masturbation is preferable to sex. Imaginary episodes are more satisfying than reality. Writing is more effective (and affective) than direct action. Both Rousseau and Saint-Preux find it necessary to have recourse to pure fantasy or to an embellished re-creation of reality. As Julie explains in turn: "Tant qu'on desire on peut se passer d'être heureux; on s'attend à le devenir; si le bonheur ne vient point, l'espoir se prolonge, et le charme de l'illusion dure autant que la passion qui le cause. Ainsi cet état se suffit à lui-même, et l'inquiétude qu'il donne est une sorte de jouissance qui supplée à la réalité... l'homme a reçu du ciel une force consolatrice qui rapproche de lui tout ce qu'il désire, qui le soumet à son imagination, qui le lui rend présent et sensible... Mais tout ce prestige disparaît devant l'objet même... l'illusion cesse où commence la jouissance". (II,693) Speaking in his later work Les Dialogues Rousseau comments similarly on the workings of his imagination: "Ecartant de l'objet tout ce qu'il a d'étranger à sa convoitise, elle ne le lui présente qu'appro-
prié de tout point à son désir. Par là ses [speaking of himself in the third person] fictions deviennent plus douces que la réalité même". (I,857) The film that Saint–Preux is watching in his "cinéma intérieur" is superior to the reality he will know in bed with Julie.

In support of the reading whereby Saint–Preux is masturbating as he writes, I cite also the use of the expression "donner le change", which means "to sidetrack or, more literally, to trick a pursuer into following the wrong path or into chasing something else. After the paragraph quoted earlier, Saint–Preux comments on the letter–writing phenomenon itself: "J'exprime ce que je sens pour en tempérer l'exès, je donne le change à mes transports en les décrivant". (II,147) The same expression is used in the Confessions in reference to masturbation, "la funeste habitude de donner le change à mes besoins". (I,316)

Certainly critics must always exercise caution when drawing conclusions about the actions of fictional characters when this activity is not explicitly present in the text. I find, nonetheless, that the intra–textual comparisons (within La Nouvelle Héloïse) discussed above, as well as the analogies discovered between the passages under consideration in the novel and others in Rousseau's autobiographical works, join together to constitute a weighty argument in favor of the reading I propose.

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In these two commentaries on Corneille and Rousseau several similarities should be noted. Desire and language are closely linked in both passages. Polyeucte and Saint–Preux both reveal aspects of their sexuality by their words; at the same time they leave other facets of their feeling disguised, to be discerned by a perceptive interlocutor within the work or by an attentive modern reader. All interpretation remains speculative rather than definitive, however. We can never be positive that Polyeucte intends to talk about sex besides or instead of religious fervor in lines 41 and 42. We cannot know for certain what Saint–Preux does in that closet before he comes out of it. Just as we cannot be sure if Polyeucte and Saint–Preux have straight or curly hair, in the absence of precise references in the text. Yet we must not refuse to use the text to help us perceive what is outside the text or unmentioned within it. Specifically, in the passages analyzed in this paper, the words of the characters allow us to draw tentative conclusions about their personalities and those of their creators, as well as about their attitudes toward the phenomena of speaking, writing, reading and copulating.


3) Seronde and Peyre, p. 606.

4) Seronde and Peyre, p. 35, especially lines 241–244.

5) Rousseau, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Pléiade edition, four volumes, II,53. All subsequent references to Rousseau are from this edition and will be noted in parentheses by volume and page.
