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Paul J. Young, *Seducing the Eighteenth-Century Reader: Reading, Writing, and the Question of Pleasure*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008. vi + 167 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7546-6417-8.

Review by Philip Stewart, Duke University

Paul J. Young begins his book with the premise that all novelists seek to seduce their readers, extended by the use of the subject matter of seduction to reinforce that effect. In any case, books as a category were often held to hold seductive dangers for the young and the faithful, unless those very seductive powers could be turned to the advantage of edification. He then moves to readings of a variety of texts in which “reading and writing serve as a supplement to pleasure” of various kinds, but largely sensual.

Thérèse philosophe [1] is studied as a good example of cloaking prurient education in the form of a hands-on tutorial, and from there we move to *Histoire de Dom Bougre*, Diderot’s articles “Volupté” and “Voluptueux” (though I know of no evidence that these articles are his) and *La Mettrie*. [2] The essential idea is that the notion of *volupté* being expounded aspires at least in some cases to something beyond the purely physical enticement of the body to one where the text itself plays an equally decisive role. The analysis is enmeshed in enough descriptive data so that the book can be used to acquire a good sense of what the books under discussion—often difficult to obtain in English translation—contain.

The next section looks into the relation of the body to the confined spaces within which seductive activities take place, with particular reference to Bastide’s *La Petite Maison*, but also bringing in some of the works of Crébillon. [3] Again, much of the discussion details the basic data in each story. It is surprising that almost nothing is said of Denon’s astonishingly erotic settings, heavily dependent on décor, in *Point de lendemain*. [4]

Seduction of both heroine and reader, for good or ill, is of course central to Rousseau’s *Julie* as well, already clearly thematized in the novel’s prefaces. [5] On the other hand, there is an insidious countertext frequently operating through the footnotes in particular, which is somewhat tediously delineated here. I am still not sure it does justice to the multiple layers of Rousseau’s sometimes devious irony, nor that the way “Rousseau casts the reader as unnecessary” (119) should be taken too seriously.

A final chapter on the Marquis de Sade, which purports to show that “Sade forces the reader to move beyond the role of passive observer and effectuates his century’s most provocative literary seduction,” seems somewhat anomalous insofar as Sade does not try much to “seduce” the reader though he does in his way incite to corruption. This chapter includes an interesting discussion of the silences and mysteries in Sade’s tales which does not really seem to flow from any line of thought running through the book. The theme of a “perverse logic in these texts, and a seductive leading astray of the reader” (147) could usefully have been introduced earlier.

There are a few disconcerting lapses, such as the rumor that Sade’s “stay in the Bastille allowed him to avoid the guillotine” (121), which did not exist when Sade was in the Bastille, and the suggestion that Diderot’s wish that certain “cantankerous people [...] should be locked up in a *petite maison*” might

involve “an ironic double meaning” (45), whereas the sentence so mistranslated is: “des atrabillaires à enfermer aux petites-maisons” [6], which allows for no ambiguity.

As the overly-broad subtitle might lead one to expect, the strength of the book lies more in the readings of individual works, developing pertinent themes and counterthemes, than in the overall structure, however obvious the importance of seduction may be in the thematics of at least certain kinds of novels. It is a worthy addition to a significant number of studies—by Michel Delon, Marc André Bernier, Michèle Bokobza Kahan, and Peter Cryle,[7] not to mention the Grenoble colloquium [8] and anthologies published in the Pléiade collection and by Robert Laffont [9] – which in the last decade have helped boost the libertine novel from the old *enfer* of the Bibliothèque Nationale or the *second rayon* (Émile Henriot’s term in his 1926 *Les Livres du second rayon, irréguliers et libertins* [10]) into the rank of an important subgenre, perhaps even the flagship of the eighteenth-century novel.

NOTES

[1] 1748. Anonymous, but often attributed to Jean-Baptiste Boyer, marquis d’Argens.

[2] Gervaise de La Touche, *Histoire de Dom Bougre, portier des chartreux* (1741).

[3] Jean-François de Bastide, *La Petite Maison* (1758).

[4] Vivian Denon, *Point de lendemain* (1777).

[5] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761).

[6] *Encyclopédie*, article “Voluptueux” (1765).

[7] Michel Delon, *Le Savoir libertin* (Paris: Hachette, 2000); Marc André Bernier, *Libertinage et figures du savoir* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001); Michèle Bokobza Kahan, *Libertinage et folie dans le roman du 18^e siècle* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000); Peter Cryle, *Geometry in the Boudoir: Configurations of French Erotic Narrative* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1994) and *The Telling of the Act* (London: Associated University Presses, 2001).

[8] Jean-François Perrin and Philip Stewart, ed., *Du genre libertin au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Desjonquères, 2004).

[9] Patrick Wald Lasowski, ed., *Romanciers libertins du XVIII^e siècle*, 2 vol. (Paris : Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2000-2005); Raymond Trousson, ed., *Romans libertins du XVIII^e siècle*(Paris: Robert Laffont, 1993).

[10] Émile Henriot, *Les Livres du second rayon, irréguliers et libertins* (Paris : le Livre, 1926).

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