

RUMINATIONS ON THE RITES OF ECSTASY

Dawn Avril Fitzroy, M.A., PhD.

Two years ago, after a long period of preparation (including some not inconsiderable time searching for a sympathetic publisher – who I finally found in Norman Conquest of Black Scat Books), *La Maison de la Vicomtesse*, volume I of *Les Rites de Jouissance* (*The Rites of Ecstasy*) was released by Black Scat under their New Urge Editions imprint. I had the great honour to have been invited by Catherine Clerval, acting on behalf of the author, H el ene Lavelle, to work on the manuscript for publication, and then to work on the manuscript for the sequel, *Le Ch ateau du Comte*, recently released by the same publisher under the same imprint.

One of my responsibilities (and privileges) was to provide a Foreword to each volume. In my Foreword to *La Maison* I referred to the mysteries surrounding the provenance of the manuscripts and the identity of the author, and promised I would discuss the results of my enquiries and speculations into the book(s) and the writer on the publication of *Le Ch ateau*. Rather than present these in an Afterword to that volume, Norman Conquest has very kindly permitted me space in the *Black Scat Review* for my ruminations. So, what can we say about these texts? In fact a number of questions present themselves, some of them rather knotty.

First, what kind of novels are they? Certainly they can be classified as ‘erotica’, an honourable enough genre to be sure, but whether this is adequate or even absolutely accurate is another matter. They

are very different from mainstream erotica – the spiced-up romances, ‘shopping and f*cking’ romps and BDSM manuals – that we have become familiar with. There is to my mind too much of a sense of *something else* going on here for them to sit neatly on the ‘erotica’ shelf. The overall title of the work is after all *Les Rites de Jouissance*, and there is ritual here as well as rapture, along with tantalising hints of the esoteric, the occluded, the mysterious, even the mystical. It is not my province to try to unravel these secrets, but I do feel qualified to say that the novels hark back to the Decadence and Symbolism of an earlier era more than anything we have been used to recently.

Second, what is their provenance? As I wrote in the Foreword to *La Maison*, I was in Paris researching 18th century erotica just before 2010 when I first heard rumours of *Les Rites*. I was intrigued, and made enquiries, and there was quite an adventure, (a series of tests, really), involving ‘misleading clues and false leads’ before I was permitted to meet Catherine Clerval, who treated me graciously, and denied everything. It took a while to fully gain her trust, until eventually she was willing to admit to me that she represented Hélène Lavelle, and to allow me to see the manuscripts (and then only in English translation). For some reason it is entertaining to Mme. Lavelle to keep her identity secret, and for these novels to be first published in translation. This has already caused a certain amount of confusion – no doubt to Mme. Lavelle’s amusement. So perhaps I can settle one or two issues here. First, the translation is not mine (although, with Mme. Clerval’s kind consent, I have been permitted to iron out some awkward constructions and clarify some of the idiosyncrasies of Valéry Soers). Second, *The Times Literary Supplement* (23rd April 2021) is right to note that the English language edition is ‘the true first’ in terms of publication, but is (I believe!) mistaken to imply there is no French original.

Mme. Clerval would not be drawn on either the setting for the novels, in terms of time and place, nor on the date of composition. But the texts themselves (especially *La Maison*) provide some clues.

To consider first the 'where' of the setting. Certainly France, but clearly not Paris or the Mediterranean south. Gabrielle's home town is provincial and could be anywhere, but it can experience wintry weather, and the landscape en-route to the rural *auberge* (*LM* ch. III) would suggest some altitude, which might indicate a more central region. The only real clue we are given is in *LM* ch. XIV where the Domain is placed 'in the wine country of B-----', but of course there are a number of major wine-making regions in France beginning with 'B', and no shortage of smaller ones. I would tentatively bet on Burgundy (Bourgogne), which would seem to fit descriptions of landscape reasonably well, and also the prominence given to Burgundy wines in the novels. We can't be more specific. Being told that the nearest railroad station to the Domain is at 'M-----' is of course no help whatever, and needless to say I have not been able to find any place named *Désororé* or anything like it anywhere, nor did I expect to.

We might be on surer footing with the 'when' of the setting, where *La Maison* drops some useful hints. Reference to fashion houses that were launched in the early 1960s, and people smoking in wine-bars and hotel rooms, banned in France at the end of 2006, provides the limits of the time frame, but a far from precise one. We can perhaps finesse this further. The Vicomtesse orders 'spirit of Absinthe' in a wine bar, legal in France (I understand) only from 1988, which narrows the time frame by nearly twenty years. Gabrielle having a 'tape' player in her automobile is less help than it might appear (cassette decks were in their heyday in the 1970s and 80s, but were in use the whole time from the 1960s and the

first decade of the 21st century); but it is the missing technologies that speak loudest. By the mid 1990s the age of computers, e-mails, internet, cell 'phones and the like was beginning, and these are all conspicuous by their absence here. To my mind this sets the story fairly precisely to somewhere between 1988 and, say, 1995, which I believe fits all the internal evidence in the texts. [The only fly in the ointment is the suggestion (by my colleague Dr. Ronnie Foil) that *Le Château* ch. XI makes reference to fashion-shows from the late 1990s, but that is not certain.]

If this does provide a rough date for the setting of the story, is this also the date for the composition of the books? It is tempting to think so, but there is a problem. It would mean the texts being in existence for over ten years before rumours of them even arose, and coming up twenty years before I saw them. In all honesty I find this hard to credit. But how else to account for the glaring absence of information technology devices? I can only speculate. Perhaps these texts were deliberately composed as period pieces? Perhaps the author finds modern technologies uninteresting and unsexy, and simply left them out? I must admit I do find this explanation rather fetching, and am happy in my own mind to put the date of composition (of first drafts at least) some time in the early 2000s – a date which can accommodate the possible fashion show references, with, for whatever reason, a deliberate exclusion of contemporary technologies.

Third, what do we make of the authorship? Here an immediate question arises whether both novels are products of the same hand. Continuity in plot, theme and character would support that attribution – with *La Maison* clearly preceding *Le Château* in composition — but the tone and style are quite significantly different, the introspective feminine dreaminess but otherwise quite realistic ambience

of *La Maison* contrasting strongly with the more bracing, hallucinatory, disjointed wildness and sheer strangeness of *Le Château*. So perhaps different hands were at work, although whoever wrote *Le Château* was obviously familiar with *La Maison*. Personally I think similarities greatly over-ride differences, and favour the same author for both, Hélène Lavelle, but not everyone is persuaded.

If 'Hélène Lavelle' is the sole author, then who is she? In contrast with the 1950s classics that have clearly been influential here, *Histoire d'O* and *L'Image*, there have to my knowledge been no rumours as to who the author really is behind the nom-de-plume. If I knew Mme. Lavelle's identity I would of course respect her privacy and not divulge, but I have been kept completely in the dark here – apart of course from what is stated in the biographical note published with the novels that Mme. Lavelle presides over a 'salon of connoisseurs of the erotic arts', who have collectively written on 'Gothic, Sade, Alchemy and the Occult, Decadence and Symbolism', and surrealist writers and artists – and Mme. Clerval informing me that Mme. Lavelle is fairly well known in France, under another name, as a writer in 'another genre'. However, since Mme. Clerval has offered no discouragement to me speculating, I feel that I am free to float a few possibilities.

'Hélène Lavelle' will not be her real name of course, and she is clearly catering for the fantasies of a female audience. She might have some connection with the Burgundy region, as we mentioned above, but there is one more additional conjecture I feel I can make about her. It is common enough with this type of novel for the author to write herself into the story, spinning her fantasies around her own character. If this is the case here, and I think it probably is, then 'Gabrielle' is the obvious candidate as the avatar of the author. She is identified in the texts as the writer, and the intimate focus and

minute attention paid to Gabrielle's thoughts, dreams and feelings would support this. But we should not exclude the possibility that the author has written herself in as one of the other characters, and here I must admit to a personal suspicion that the author has actually cast herself as 'the Vicomtesse' (with 'Gabrielle' perhaps as a younger incarnation of herself?). Just an intuition, but if I am on track that the author does not care much for new technologies, that might support the idea of an older writer. [It might be pertinent here that 'Pauline Réage' was 46 when *Histoire d'O* was published, and E.L. James was 48 when the first volume of *Fifty Shades of Grey* came out]. But regardless of whether she features as 'Gabrielle' or 'the Vicomtesse', who 'Hélène Lavelle' is in reality, well, that is being kept firmly in the dark. And, to be honest, I prefer it that way.

As for the translator, 'Valéry Soers', again, certainly a nom de plume, and an even more opaque one. We cannot even be sure what sex 'Valéry' is (which might imply some gender disguise or masquerade in translation?), and 'Soers' is perhaps a pun on *soeur* (= 'sister'), but if so, are we being nudged to ask whose? [Personally I take this as a further hint that the author is 'the Vicomtesse', but I will not expand here...]

All I can be sure of is that everything here is supposition, and the only safe conclusion we can draw about any of these questions is that we cannot draw any safe conclusions.

Finally, can we be sure this is entirely fantasy, or is the author writing from experience (a possibility that, given her acquaintance with erotic demi-mondes, seems more than plausible)? The ending suggests a network of Domains spreading, and, outlandish though it sounds, I have, during my enquiries, heard tantalising rumours that some such places do exist. I would love to know more. I wonder if unravelling some of the unexplained details in the novel, for example,

the Domain being called *'Désororé'* – a name Gabrielle keeps meaning to ask about but, maddeningly, never does – might lead somewhere? [Unlike Gabrielle, I did ask, but Mme. Clerval, entirely predictably, evaded the question]. Perhaps I may take this opportunity to invite any readers who can throw light on such details, who have knowledge, harbour suspicions, or merely share my sense of intrigue, to contact me via the publisher. My researches continue.

One final twist to this tale. Delving into such areas, and involvement with texts such as these, necessitates some caution on my behalf. Dawn Avril Fitzroy is not my real name, although I can confirm I am a Canadian academic, female, based in Britain, specialising initially in medieval Latin inscriptions before being seduced (literally) by 18th century French erotica.

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