

Naming the “Confessions” of Jean-Jacques Bouchard

by
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Jean-Jacques Bouchard’s *Confessions* is an unusual example of literary confession: the work was written in 1631 or 1632, yet named and published for the first time in 1881; it was named, therefore, 100 years after Rousseau’s work, yet written 150 years before it. Ironically with a title like that, Bouchard makes no reference to the actions he recounts as *erreurs* or *péchés*, nor does he speak of guilt or repentance, even though it is claimed in most recent dictionary definitions of the *confession* as genre that such sentiments form part and parcel of it. Indeed, the work itself is written in the third person, even though it is generally accepted to be autobiographical because of a key written in his own hand which provides names of known persons for the anagrams and Greek pseudonyms used in the text. On the other hand, there is explicit sexual content, which appears to be an unspoken expectation of the “confession” made public, beginning at least with Rousseau’s example.

The genre of the “Confession” has been defined as “sincere autobiography” in some dictionaries, and that qualification could certainly fit this text. What also could fit is one of the definitions of *confesser* in Furetière’s dictionary: “reconnaître une vérité particuliere” (1690), and *Le Grand Robert* (1985) cites this 1564 usage of *confesser*: “Déclarer publiquement (une croyance). Affirmer, proclamer, professer”—though Bouchard’s *vérité* or personal faith, quite *libertine*, may not correspond exactly to what was intended, and, as it happens, is stated only indirectly and privately (since the work was not published in his lifetime). There are in fact two formal confessions recounted in the narrative made by secondary characters, which reflect Bouchard’s opinions of confession as sacrament. In this essay, therefore, I will attempt to answer the question of whether or not “Confessions” is a “titre abusif,” and inappropriate, as is claimed by more than one critic since the first edition.

Unless you have worked extensively on the libertines, you will not have heard of Jean-Jacques Bouchard. The latest editor of his works tells us in 1976 that, “Dans toute l’histoire littéraire qui le concerne, le nom de Jean-Jacques Bouchard est toujours associé à l’idée de relâchement des mœurs, manque de dignité humaine, hypocrisie et opportunisme; mieux même, il est devenu le symbole et la personnification de ces peu enviables qualités” (Kanceff xxvii). Even so, he was greatly admired by many in the libertine *milieu*, and in his youth was welcomed into the Académie des Frères Du Puy, “la plus importante du Paris de ce temps, authentique foyer du nouveau savoir” (Kanceff xiii), and he counted among his friends Gassendi, Peiresc, La Mothe Le Vayer, Naudé, Luillier, La Brosse, Chapelain and Balzac. John S. Spink confirms these friendships and adds that he was “looked upon as being highly intelligent, but his ideas seem never to have had any sort of consistency” (26n.). Most recent historians of the early 17th-century libertines are very critical of Bouchard and his alleged negative influence on his contemporaries. François Perrens, in his description of François Luillier, writes: “. . . [Luillier] n’était pas écrivain, mais il recherchait l’amitié de ceux qui tenaient une plume, et il ne regardait pas toujours assez à leurs autres qualités. Certaines de ces liaisons pèsent lourdement sur sa mémoire. Comment lui pardonner, entre autres, ainsi qu’à plusieurs de ses plus illustres contemporains, ce Bouchard . . . [d]es immondes *Confessions* . . .” (121).

René Pintard writes quite critically of him also, and in his chapter on “Les ‘Déniaisés’ d’Italie” we find two contradictory sub-titles: “la vie édifiante de Bouchard” and “la vie scandaleuse de Bouchard” (233, 235). This is the transition sentence: “Mais voici l’envers de la même vie: sous la sagesse, la persistance des vices anciens; derrière les apparences studieuses, un esprit forcené d’intrigue; au lieu de la piété, une mécréance qui ne consent pas à s’assoupir” (234). The author of the *immondes* “confessions” also sought a bishopric, and Pintard could not reconcile the two. But it is probable you do not already know this work: according to Alexandrian in his *Histoire de la littérature érotique*, Bouchard’s writing represents the first time in European literature that a man

speaks with such lucidity of his childhood sexual experiences and his bouts with impotence (119). And, indeed, these “confessions” have the distinction of being catalogued in *L’Enfer*.

So what are these *confessions* about? They tell the story of the main character, Orestes, from early childhood to his departure for Italy in his twenties. He is a scholar, a reader of Greek and Latin, yet he abandons his studies and decides to stay with his parents, Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, when faced with the choice of “s’enterrer tout vif” in a monastery or “se jeter dans un nouvel escalavage du service de quelque grand” in order to get away from their tyranny (1).¹ From that point on he seeks only “la beauté et le plaisir dans les livres” (1), and takes up music. But this idyllic existence doesn’t last: at the age of 23 he falls in love with one of his mother’s chambermaids, Allisbée (Isabelle). When his relationship with her erupts in scandal and his parents object to his marriage to her, he manages to wrest some money from them with the help of influential friends, and departs for Rome under the protection of Cardinal Barberini.

The events that make up the *Confessions* tell a story of sex and seduction, and narratively the work is quite interesting. Having become a recluse at his parents’ house, he discovers that he has become impotent with women (specifically, with a *vachère* he has seduced), and this prompts him to examine his sexual past, much in the manner of a confessor. He reminisces about his sexual play at the age of eight when he used his own member with his sister’s girlfriends instead of a stick “comme font les petits enfants faignant de se doner des clysteres” (6);² his discovery of masturbation at the age of 11, a skill which he taught his friends; his experiments with various sexual aides with his schoolmates and joint adventures (such as mutual masturbation in church while seated near attractive young women); and finally, his love affairs with boys at school, and his servicing of female servants at home (5-7). So, curious as to why all of a sudden he has become impotent, he orders and consults a number of medical books: they convince him that the cause was too much masturbation—“il conclut que les fautes qu’il faisoit provenoit plus tost du relaschement et affoiblissement que lui avait causé le trop long et continuel service

dont il estoit comme usé, que de sa constitution naturelle” (8)—but also realizes that his temperament (almost equally dominated by the contradictory hot bile and cold melancholy) dispose him to this flaw, since “lors qu’il a plus de passion de venir à bout de quelque chose, c’est lors qu’il y arrive le moins, et quand il a le plus d’appréhension de commettre quelque faute, c’est alors qu’il y tombe le plus tost” (8). He concludes that all the arugula and *satyrion*³ in the world will not help him perform the act, and decides to make this a learning experience by checking the information he finds in these medical books against the *vachère*’s own body. He finds conemporary medical knowledge lacking, and, indeed, often incorrect.

This usage of medical books is exactly what the physician Nicolas Venette hoped would not occur. In the preface of his book, *La Génération de l’homme, ou Tableau de l’amour conjugal, considéré dans l’état de mariage* (1685), he writes: “Il seroit à souhaiter que le Lecteur, de quelque sexe qu’il fût, eût l’esprit fort réglé, & qu’il [sache] ce que c’est que l’amour & le monde: qu’après cela, il ne fût ni libertin ni impudique; je desirerois même qu’il fût d’un âge raisonnable, pour être en état d’en profiter. . . .” (xiii-xiv). Bouchard exemplifies here the erotic potential of medical books written about women and reproduction, specifically the use to which one might put the information one gleans there. Parody also plays a role in his work: while many medical books put some information (e.g., on *furor uterino*) in Latin, most of the racy bits of Bouchard’s text are written using Greek letters, and sometimes also in Italian.⁴

Bouchard’s discovery of his impotence is also a narrative device for telling how he met Allisbée, the chambermaid, when he discovers her looking through his medical books. She is very curious about what she finds there, and does not understand everything she reads, especially the section on the *parties genitales*, and Orestes, “ayant veu que cette fille, au lieu de faire la sotté à la façon ordinaire des autres, comencea à l’interoger sur certains doutes qu’elle avoit là dessus, il entra si avant en conference avec elle, qu’il lui fit sur *son propre con* des demonstrations manuelles de ce qu’elle n’entendoit pas par

l'écriture” (9). He decides to seduce her, and most of these *confessions* focus on their relationship and his difficulties in this seduction, the main one being that each concession on her part is followed by days of shame and doubt. He uses every possible tactic and argument, yet writes that a year later, upon his departure for Italy, “s'estant doné des privautez que les femmes et les maris font difficulté de se permettre, ils se separerent alors enfin tous deus entiers, avec leur premiere virginité” (38). That claim is, in fact, somewhat exaggerated, since they do engage in intercourse, but he interrupts it so that she won't become pregnant, since he had not yet completed his experiments with abortive and sterilizing herbs.

This work includes two incidents which involve confession as sacrament, both very irreverent. The first occurs when Allisbée, the woman Orestes spends a year seducing, goes to confession. Again, I should emphasize here that the reason the seduction makes very little progress is because Allisbée suffers days of guilt and regret after every little advance in intimacy. So imagine Orestes's reaction when she goes to see a *confesseur extraordinaire* at the *Cordeliers* one day in August and hears this account: “. . . elle voulut s'esclaircir de ce qu'elle n'avoit jamais voulu descouvrir au confesseur ordinaire de la maison . . . , de peur qu'il ne dît son secret à Clytemnestre [Orestes's mother]; et ayant exposé la vie qu'elle menoit avec Oreste, le moine luy fit le cas si enorme, et l'espouventa tellement, qu'il renversa en un quart d'heure ce qu'Oreste avoit esté presque un an à bastir: jusques à lui conseiller de sortir du logis pour eviter l'occasion du peché” (25). Orestes is completely unmoved by this report, and his reponse is to try a new tactic: after attempting to rape her, an action he immediately regrets when he realizes it was having an effect opposite to the one he desires, he goes to his bed in despair and comes up with the idea that he could imitate quite convincingly a fainting fit that would touch and perhaps soften Allisbée. This approach does end up by working, and she grants him the same liberties she had before, but makes him promise he won't go any further (25-7).

The fact that Orestes does what he can to undermine the good monk's words to Allisbée, added to his attempts earlier on to undermine her own beliefs in the foundations of the status quo (which come to naught, 13-14), could already inspire the adjective *immonde* when speaking of these *confessions*. But the second example of an actual confession would have cemented that impression amongst some readers. What happens is as follows: before leaving for Italy, Orestes breaks into a servant's room and steals her money in revenge for coming between him and Allisbée. He soon learns that the blame is turning towards him, and so he arranges with his best friend, Pylades (Marchand in real life), to make a false confession on the Saturday before Easter. Quite melodramatically, Pylades throws himself at the confessor's feet, claims to have been a servant of Agammemnon (Orestes's father), and to have stolen forty or fifty *écus* from the servant in question. He then gives fifteen *écus* to the priest and asks him to return them to their original owner. The narrator calls this "une intrigue dont peut estre le monde, au moins la Chrestienté, n'a jamais oui parler" (37). And the desired result is accomplished: Orestes not only gets his revenge, but he also uses the sacrament of confession to his own ends.

This work has known four editions. The manuscript itself was discovered in 1850 by Paulin Paris. The first part of it, which I have summarized here, was given the title *Les Confessions de Jean-Jacques Bouchard, Parisien* in 1881 when it was first published. In 1930 the title was modified to "*Mémoires révélateurs*": *Les Confessions de J.-J. Bouchard* when André Malraux had Gallimard publish it. The third edition was published in 1500 numbered copies by the Cercle du Livre Précieux in 1960, and was titled *Les Confessions d'un perversi*, though on the spine of the cover we read *Confessions de J.-J. Bouchard*. Most recently, *Les Confessions* appears in a two-volume edition of his *Œuvres* published in Turin in 1976. Clearly, marketing strategies were involved in the naming. The scholarly *Œuvres* with a lengthy introduction suits present-day historical accuracy. Gallimard's "mémoires révélateurs" glosses the original "confessions" and aligns it with a genre that the work resembles more since, as I mentioned earlier, Bouchard is not making a confession *per se*.

But why was the work given the title in 1881 in the first place? In Pascal Pia’s bibliography, *Les Livres de l’Enfer*, we find nine titles of late 19th century erotic and pornographic works with the words “confession” or “confessor” appearing as the first word, including Bouchard’s own, for example, *Le Confesseur de Madame* (1891), *Confession de Marie-Antoinette à M. de Talleyrand-Périgord, suivie de la Confession dernière et Testament de Marie-Antoinette* (1873), and *Confession Priapale* (1899). It would seem from this august company that the editor was aligning Bouchard’s autobiography not with Rousseau directly (as might first occur to us), but with contemporary works of a similar, though no doubt fictional, subject matter.

The word “confessions” reappears in 1955 with *Confessions d’un sexologue*; in 1957 with *Les Confessions d’un travesti* (the first in a series called *Les Grandes Etudes Françaises de Psychiatrie*); and, in 1960, Bouchard’s own *Confessions d’un perversi*. The editors in the middle of the 20th century seem to be using a similar strategy while aiming for a different readership, one familiar with Freudian psychoanalysis. Is it Bouchard’s frank tales, indeed, shameless “confession,” of his childhood sexuality (masturbation) and adult sexual problems (impotence) that the editors feel might appeal to this audience? And then the limited, numbered edition with, on the cover, an engraving of a 19th century corseted, stockinged and behatted woman with a hand (her own? someone else’s?) reaching out to touch her naked buttock as she looks at herself in the mirror, would also appeal to the more educated reader, evoking, again, the Victorian sensibilities closely associated with Freud’s work.

In conclusion, can we agree with Alexandrian’s claim about the naming of Bouchard’s writings that, “Ce titre est abusif: on ne saurait qualifier de ‘confessions’ un récit à la troisième personne; en outre, les libertins n’ont commencé qu’au siècle suivant à exploiter le genre des confessions . . .” (116)? I think not. By 1881, clear associations with the erotic with its marketing potential, added to a lessening of the power of the Catholic Church (despite Bouchard’s shocked critics), were more important than traditional considerations of genre in giving a title to this work

(Furet 447-50). And the third person could have been used to hide the fact that the author and the main character are one and the same for political or other reasons. Alexandrian gives his opinion that Bouchard could in fact have published his work under Louis XIII since he makes no direct attack on religion (119—though the two confession scenes seem fairly incendiary to me), but his ambitions to be named a bishop would have conflicted with such a publication. It must also be pointed out that Bouchard did not publish his travel logs either, and they would have been quite uncontroversial, containing as they do very interesting information about travelling conditions in France and Italy for a simple bourgeois. So it is possible that he felt a reluctance to publish anything that did not directly display his erudition.

The study of the title of Bouchard's short work reveals the breadth of meaning that has been brought to the term "confession" in France over the centuries, reflecting perhaps the breadth of what actually occurs in confessionals: people make both complete and incomplete confessions, they are both guilty and guilt-free, and they are both repentant and unrepentant. They may no doubt also speak of themselves in the third person. But of all the subject matters, sex is definitely the most interesting in the confessional.

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NOTES

¹All quotes from the *Confessions* are taken from Kanceff's definitive edition of Bouchard's *Œuvres*.

²All of Bouchard's text quoted in this essay in italics is written using the Greek alphabet in the original.

³"Cette plante excite à luxure. On dit que tenant seulement la racine dans la main, elle met en chaleur. Mais elle a bien plus de vertu, quand elle est prise avec du vin, ou lors qu'on la mange confite." Furetière (1690).

⁴You might have noticed that the Washington Post used a similar strategy a few years ago when publishing an index of all the

shocking details along with Monica Lewinsky's own "confession" so that the reader could avoid—or go straight to—them.

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