

LIBERTINE DREAMS

*The extravagance and vice of Manon's 18th-century Parisian setting is no exaggeration.
Hila Shachar plunges back into the past.*

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Photography Paul Scala



Sir Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon* is set in one of the most notorious periods of French history: the Regency era under Philippe d'Orléans. Pre-revolutionary France was ripe with corruption, and this is reflected in the trajectory of *Manon's* heroine. In the first act of the ballet, she is an innocent young woman about to enter a convent. By the final act, she is branded a prostitute and dies as a convict in a rotting Louisiana swamp. With vivid detail, MacMillan shows us the corrupt world of libertine France in a ballet filled with lust and death.

An atmosphere of vice is palpable in every aspect of the ballet. When her brother Lescaut sells Manon to the highest bidder, she dances in a sexually charged *pas de trois* with him and the rich Monsieur GM, the three of them entwining their legs until Manon is caught between the two men. Macmillan's choreography leaves no room for doubt: Manon's body is presented as a supple instrument upon which male characters play. She is passed from man to man in a bordello; her shoe is dangled underneath the nose of a licentious old man and her body lifted up in the air to be fondled at a party. Then there is the brutal scene in which she is raped by her gaoler.

When Manon dances a passionate bedroom pas de deux with her true love des Grieux, even their purer emotions are given a lavish sensuality. The choreography is full of soaring high lifts, sweeping turns, fervent embraces and lingering kisses that emphasise desire above all else.

Manon's source novel is Abbé Prévost's *L'Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* (1751). In its tone and subject matter, the novel belongs to a tradition of art, philosophy and culture known as "libertine" or "libertinage". This term was coined by French police in the 18th century to describe offences which "outraged public morality". It became linked with the infamous Regency rakes who led decadent lifestyles, indulging in pleasure, affairs, drinking and gambling.

The characters of *Manon*, like the coldly powerful hedonist Monsieur GM, could well have been taken from real life. One of the

celebrities of the day, the Duke de Richelieu, was known for his cynicism and his countless affairs with women, including a notorious liaison with the daughter of Philippe d'Orléans himself. A dangerous man who was jailed for his involvement in a conspiracy against the Regent of France, Richelieu also performed outrageous acts in the name of pleasure – as when he burned down a house in pursuit of a lover.

Another aristocratic libertine of the period, the Prince de Conti, boasted of owning 2000 pretty rings, each symbolising an abandoned mistress. His love affairs with members of both sexes were numerous, earning him the nickname "le Grand Conti". His fast living eventually caught up with him when he contracted syphilis from a prostitute.

It's not hard to see how the story of *Manon* was shaped by such figures and their exploits. While it may seem to us modern in feel, with its bold depiction of sex and prostitution, it is in fact a product of its times. Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* shares a similar storyline, characters and themes to many other novels of the period, including one of the most famous libertine French books, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (*Dangerous Liaisons*), written by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos in 1782.

Labelled a "diabolical" book by London's *Monthly Review* in 1784, *Dangerous Liaisons* was both popular and controversial. Even Marie Antoinette ordered a copy for her library, but made sure to keep the forbidden book a secret. Manon strongly resembles two female characters of the novel, who are debauched in the most calculating manner. The convent-bred Cécile is raped by the Vicomte de Valmont as part of a cruel game between him and the Marquise de Merteuil, while her true love, Danceny, is lured into Merteuil's own bed. Meanwhile, Valmont relentlessly pursues the pious Madame de Tourvel, who ends up dying from grief after her successful seduction.

While many found the plot of the book shocking, it is not merely a fluffy piece of erotica. Novels like *Manon* and *Dangerous Liaisons* were part of a wider philosophical

debate within French society. Perhaps the most recognised figure of the age, who brings together both the eroticism and philosophical underpinnings of libertine culture, is the Marquis de Sade. Many of Sade's own literary works combine philosophical discourse with explicit pornography, in which his sexual fantasies of sodomy, rape and orgies serve as vehicles for his critique of the Catholic Church and the gender relations of his day.

Sade's philosophy is the most well-known example of what "libertinage" meant in the 18th century, beyond simply excessive and decadent behaviour. The aim of "libertinage" was to provoke and disturb as part of a radical movement of intellectuals and thinkers. Sex was, and still is, the great leveller.

For many libertines, their extravagant lifestyle represented a political act of sexual freedom that was unrestrained by religious morality. A prolific philanderer like Richelieu was also a champion of "free thought" and friends with Voltaire. Sade – whose name forms the base of the word sadist – liked whips and orgies with homemade aphrodisiacs, yet he also called for the emancipation of women. Many libertines were enamoured of the kind of opulent clothes and jewels that seduce Manon into a life of prostitution, yet they also decried the greed of the Ancien Régime.

The story of *Manon* is therefore more than just a seedy tale of decadent aristocrats; it is also shaped by the concerns of its day. These are concerns that MacMillan cleverly translates into ballet through his choreography. The tossing and passing of Manon from one man to another, the manipulation of her body in various scenes, all highlight a theme that libertines such as Sade and writers such as Prévost and Laclos emphasised in their works: the exploitation of women as commodities or "conquests" under prevailing religious and societal mores.

It is not surprising then that libertine culture continues to fascinate to this day. A combination of titillation, decadent beauty and serious philosophy, "libertinage"

has endured through modern art, film and fashion. In 1924, the *Manifesto of Surrealism* included Sade as a hero of the artistic movement, while avant-garde writers such as Guillaume Apollinaire and Paul Éluard called him "the freest spirit that had ever lived" and "revolutionary". With their anti-religious sentiments, the surrealists saw libertine culture as a statement of radical freedom.

When the French New Wave director Roger Vadim adapted *Dangerous Liaisons* for the screen in 1959, he moved libertine culture into the bourgeois world of late 1950s France. Starring Jeanne Moreau, the film replaces aristocrats with socialites, late baroque decadence with intricate jazz music, and 18th-century mansions with plush ski resorts. But its cry for sexual freedom is wholly libertine, showcasing how French New Wave cinema adapted the 18th-century principle of "free thought" into "free love", the ethos of the 1960s' sexual revolution.

Libertine exploits and philosophy were reconceptualised in the 90s as glossy fashion. Versace's "bondage" collection in 1992 is one example out of many. Regency corsets, cross-dressing and sadomasochism influenced the work of many designers, including Jean Paul Gaultier, Alexander McQueen, Vivienne Westwood and Thierry Mugler, whose notorious leather corsets were decorated with spikes and nipple rings. The opulent clothes that helped corrupt Manon in the 18th century were celebrated as symbols of a self-conscious cynicism for the post-80s-boom generation.

The abiding presence of MacMillan's *Manon* in contemporary ballet repertoire also plays its part in a continued fascination with libertine style and culture. While libertinage was born in specific historical circumstances, the popularity of *Manon* ensures that ballet lovers will always be drawn back into its world of pleasure, decadence and vice.

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