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van Tilburg, M.W.A.

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# ○ THE ALLURE OF TAHITI

## GENDER IN LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH TEXTS ON THE PACIFIC

*Marja van Tilburg*

*Dr Marja van Tilburg studied history at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. She joined the Department of History and the Centre for Gender Studies at Groningen in 1986. Her thesis 'Hoe hoorde het? Seksualiteit en partnerkeuze in de Nederlandse adviesliteratuur 1780–1890' (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis; 1998) explores the diffusion of Enlightenment pedagogy in conduct books for adolescents. At present she is engaged in research on the reception of cultures of the Pacific in eighteenth-century Europe from a gender perspective.*

*Correspondence to Marja van Tilburg: m.w.a.van.tilburg@rug.nl*

How do eighteenth-century French travelogues about the Pacific represent indigenous women? What does this tell us about contemporary notions of femininity? Does it show the influence of the Enlightenment and early Romanticist debate on the nature of the sexes? Or is it based on early modern standards of womanhood? These questions negotiate a textual analysis of Bougainville's *Voyage autour du monde* and Diderot's influential *Supplément* to this travelogue. The analysis of the descriptions of 'first contact' between the French and the Tahitians, especially those of the contribution of women to these encounters, will provide answers.

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Eroticism has loomed large in the discourse on the South Pacific since the discovery of Tahiti in the late eighteenth century. A sensual picture of the island was painted in the travelogues of the first European explorers: life was easy because of the fertility of the soil and the abundance of fish in the sea. The people were friendly and hospitable, sharing all the pleasures of life with their unexpected visitors. According to these reports Tahiti resembled Paradise.

The representation of Tahiti as a garden of delights has attracted the attention of scholars of various disciplines. Historians and anthropologists have tried to explain this image by the course of events following upon the arrival of the French. They pointed to the benefits the ensuing sexual relations brought visitors and islanders alike (most recently: Denoon et al. 2000; Claessen 1997). Other anthropologists have attributed the idea to misunderstandings on the part of Europeans (Tcherkézoff 2001; Tcherkézoff 2004), and literary critics following the example of Saïd have shown how the islanders are portrayed as the 'heterosexual others' of the disciplined Westerners (Edmond 1997). But whatever angle is chosen, research has focused upon the island as a sexual pleasure ground.

To date, the contemporary debates which prompted late eighteenth-century explorers to represent Tahiti as they did have not been given due consideration. Among them were several ambitious authors who hoped to attract the attention of leading intellectual coteries. They dwelt upon the erotic aspects of island life precisely because sexuality and femininity were already widely debated within Europe at that time. The permissive attitude towards sexuality presented excellent examples for Enlightenment authors advocating a new sexual morality – one based on natural law instead of Christian dogma – and the apparent absence of inhibitions in indigenous women collided with contemporary notions on woman (Tilburg 2004). Thus Tahitian culture provided food for thought for *philosophes* searching for the true nature of humankind.

Moreover, the travelogues of these first explorers warrant an analysis of the representation of the women of the South Sea Islands. They present local customs in a factual, precise way. The descriptions focus on differences between these customs and western ways. By creating implicit contrasts, the authors make strange customs comprehensible to a European readership. On the whole, these passages reflect the late eighteenth-century interest in variation in the human species. However, they depict women in a vague, suggestive way. The sketches present similes of western images of femininity. By using stylistic devices the authors try to capture the imaginations of their readers. Clearly, two distinct types of ‘othering’ are taking place: one of a European explorer and one betraying a typical male perspective (Tilburg 2004).

In spite of the evocative and imaginative quality of these paragraphs, the descriptions of island women convey unease, even tension. We may presume that this awkwardness stems from the explorers’ concept of femininity. After all, this was the lens through which they perceived female islanders. And according to their reports they saw unusual and by European standards unfeminine behaviour displayed by real women.

This article focuses on the notions of womanhood held by the explorer Bougainville and by his critic Diderot. In this way the idyllic depiction of an enthusiastic voyager can be checked against the sense of plausibility of a critical armchair traveller from a similar cultural background. Bougainville’s *Voyage autour du monde* (1771) provides excellent examples of dense descriptions of female islanders. Diderot’s *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (1796) questions Bougainville’s interpretation of events. He suggests other explanations for the women’s generosity towards the French. They may have been seeking profit, and their deception of the French men may have improved their status. The two authors thus present different perspectives on the first contact, suggesting different concepts of femininity.

In this article their descriptions of island life and portrayals of women will be approached as representations (Greenblatt 1991). The texts will be analysed according to the requirements of post-structuralist theory. In this way latent meanings held by the authors can be made evident (Scott 1988). The analysis may bring different notions about woman to light. A comparison of the results may reveal which ideas were strongly held in late eighteenth-century France – or to put it more accurately: which concepts of femininity required travel writers to juggle stylistic devices in order to describe the amazing behaviour of indigenous women.

## **BOUGAINVILLE’S TRAVELOGUE**

*Voyage autour du monde, par la frégate du Roi La Boudeuse et la flûte l’Étoile* is the official account of the voyage around the world commissioned by the French king, in order to keep up competition with the British in the struggle for wealth and empire. Bougainville started editing his elaborate logbook immediately upon his return to France in the spring of 1769. His report was intended to attract the attention of leading intellectuals as well as the court. Hoping to be acknowledged as a *philosophe*, in 1771 he published a very polished travelogue.<sup>1</sup> The travelogue is composed according to the conventions of the genre. It presents a chronological account of events during the voyage, with a systematic description of the new cultures encountered added in separate chapters. The report differs from other travelogues in its style: it offers hard facts instead of marvellous stories, telling examples rather than bewildering anecdotes. The phrasing is straightforward and precise. This type of reporting was probably chosen on purpose: it suggests

mastery of the subject. As such, it enhances the authority of the text. But somehow this factual style does not suit the contents. It is as if 'Bougainville the traveller had [been] left behind' (Célestin 1996: 73). Only occasionally is a personal note sounded. Upon arrival in Tahiti, for instance, the author conveys relief at the hospitality bestowed upon his crew, and he is delighted with the beauty of the island. However, such examples are rare: private responses stir the quiet, still waters of the text, only to disappear again.

The chapters on Tahiti hardly diverge from the pattern described above. Only the paragraphs on the female sex stand out. When writing on this topic Bougainville becomes more elaborate – as if to make the women's conduct intelligible to his readership. These passages also show a change in style: here the author presents analogies and metaphors rather than facts. His choice of words is emotive – as if to draw the reader into the story. More importantly, it is in these passages in particular that his personal impressions are voiced.

To further specify Bougainville's description of women, examples of both types of reporting will be discussed in the following section.

### **STYLISTIC DIVERSITY**

When reporting on events on the island, Bougainville prefers to stick to the facts. This is illustrated by the account of his official visit to chief Toutaa:

*Il fallut lui rendre sa visite chez lui; nous fûmes bien accueillis, et l'honnête Toutaa m'offrit une de ses femmes fort jeune et assez jolie. L'assemblée était nombreuse, et les musiciens avaient déjà entonné les chants de l'hyménée. Telle est la manière de recevoir les visites de cérémonie (236).*

[We were obliged to call on him at home; we received a warm welcome, and the gentlemanly Toutaa offered me one of his wives, who was very young and rather pretty. There was a large gathering and the musicians had already launched into the nuptial songs. This is how official guests are greeted.]

He states the obligation to pay the visit. He mentions the generosity of the reception. The offering of the young, attractive woman is presented as part of the ceremony. There follows a depiction of the people gathered there and the actions performed. Throughout the account he uses only one stylistic device: the sexual intercourse with the young woman is referred to by the phrase 'chants de l'hyménée'. Earlier in the text he has given a detailed description of this type of gathering. He probably assumed that mentioning the music would be enough to bring the message home to his readers.

At first sight the author is just presenting a series of facts. A closer look reveals that this list of facts hides an implicit opposition between Tahitian and European receptions; it demonstrates differences between the indigenous way of entertaining guests and the western one. Thus after introducing the visit to his readers, he then informs them of the offer of the woman. This is followed by facts on the setting of the sexual intercourse. The music indicates the sexual aspect of the meeting. Every item of this account is contrary to western ways. Like most travel writers, Bougainville creates an implicit contrast. The very last sentence of the paragraph emphasises the focus on opposites.

In other instances Bougainville is entirely factual when reporting on sexual intercourse, as in the report of the visit of the chief Ereti and his entourage to the French encampment:

Sur la fin de la nuit, il envoya chercher une de ses femmes qu'il fit coucher dans la tente de M. de Nassau. Elle était vieille et laide (233).

[Towards the end of the night, he had one of his wives come and sleep in M. de Nassau's tent. She was old and ugly.]

In this fragment time and place are stated, and the persons involved are mentioned. The relationship between the islander and the woman is specified. Perhaps the choice of the word 'coucher' is euphemistic. But this word is not vague enough to puzzle the readers about what is going on. All in all, this can be considered a precise and factual account.

However, this factual style prevails only in descriptions of sexual encounters taking place within a specific social setting. In the first example, the intercourse takes place at a reception at the home of a Tahitian family. The woman is presented by the head of the family. In the second example the woman in question is married to the *paterfamilias*. In these instances Bougainville assumes that the intimacy is part of indigenous hospitality. He notices how the woman in question is ordered to provide pleasure. For Bougainville this is explanation enough: a wife has to obey her husband. Hence these receptions do not raise questions, and they are chronicled in his usual straightforward manner.

A different, more circuitous style appears in the descriptions of sexual encounters with Tahitian women in which the social context is hard to identify. Several reasons suggest themselves: either the nature of the proceedings is not obvious, or the relationship between the person making the offer and the woman is not apparent. In the travelogue three reports of such encounters can be found: two are in the chronological account of events, and the third is in the section describing Tahitian culture.

The well-known description of the landing on the island provides the first example. On this occasion a fleet of canoes filled with men and women welcomed the French. The islanders invited them to come ashore and to become intimately acquainted with the women. To describe this reception Bougainville turns to analogies and references:

Les pirogues étaient remplies de femmes qui ne le cèdent pas pour l'agrément de la figure au plus grand nombre des Européennes, et qui, pour la beauté du corps, pourraient le disputer à toutes avec avantage (225).

[The canoes were full of women whose figures rivalled those of most European women and whose beauty was second to none.]

In this comparison between Tahitian and European women Bougainville refers to a typical western notion of femininity. With the verbs 'ne céder à' and 'disputer', he suggests a competition between women, a rivalry to appear the most beautiful. With this comparison he is conveying a double message: Tahitian women are as beautiful as European ones and they are as vain as well.

Following on from this analogy, he gives another:

La plupart de ces nymphes étaient nues, car les hommes et les vieilles, qui les accompagnaient, leur avaient ôté la pagne dont ordinairement elles s'enveloppent (225–226).

[Most of these nymphs were naked, the skirts which they normally wrap around themselves having been removed by the men and old women who accompanied them.]

This time the parallel is created by a reference to classical culture: the women in the canoes are named 'nymphes'. Tahitian women are put on a par with these female figures of ancient mythology. In European culture nymphs are usually depicted partly covered with veils or completely nude. Once again Bougainville is communicating two messages at once: the word 'nymphes' suggests that these women are gracious and that they are minimally clothed. This reference also associates the women – who because of their skimpy clothing might be perceived as harlots – with civilisation.

The following sentence describes how the women invited the French to have sexual intercourse. This short message is accompanied by a long explanation. Here the author establishes a connection between these seductive women and shame. He is probably anticipating the response to the scene of the landing. Steeped in Christianity, his readers can only associate seducing women with sin. Following the western dichotomy between body and mind, they perceive sexuality as being the opposite of civilisation. Bougainville has to bridge these opposites if he wants to pass these women off as civilised human beings. To build this bridge he turns to analogies and allusions:

Elles nous firent d'abord, de leurs pirogues, des agaceries où, malgré leur naïveté, on découvrait quelque embarras; soit que la nature ait partout embelli le sexe d'une timidité ingénue, soit que, même dans les pays où règne encore la franchise de l'âge d'or, les femmes paraissent ne pas vouloir ce qu'elles désirent le plus (226).

[They began by gesturing flirtatiously from their canoes, but in spite of their naïvety, one could detect a certain embarrassment; either nature has endowed the fair sex everywhere with an ingenuous timidity, or, even in those countries where the candour of the golden age prevails, women appear not to want what they most desire.]

This time the allusions are to late eighteenth-century discourse. The first one is implied in the suggestion that nature has endowed all women with shame. The word 'nature' refers to the Enlightenment notion of natural law. Bougainville assumes the existence of laws governing human behaviour. One such law engenders shame in women. In this train of thought, Tahitian women know shame – even though their behaviour suggests otherwise.

The second allusion is to the early Romanticist approach to human nature. The phrase 'l'âge d'or' refers to Rousseau's theory on the historical development of humankind. This *philosophe* suggested that humanity had changed over time because it had to adapt to changes in society. In the course of this process people had developed specific social skills, one of these being pretence. By mentioning 'the golden age' Bougainville suggests that the islanders had embarked on the road to civilisation. Like all civilised beings, the island women knew they should feel shame *in*

*sexualibus*. Like any other civilised beings, the Tahitian women pretended not to desire what they wanted.

More importantly, both references to contemporary discourse pertain to a traditional perception of femininity: in Christian Europe women need to feel shame. These references appear in a comparison between Tahitian and European women. The parallel put Tahitian women on a par with western ones. This suggestion of similarity follows upon a series of references to traditional western notions of femininity. These devices also portray island women as being equal to other women in beauty, grace and civilisation. On the whole, this passage presents well-established western ideas regarding womanhood. Moreover, it strongly suggests that the *Tabitiennes* met the implied standards.

Bougainville's discussion of women shows two diverging styles of writing. Whenever a woman's actions are ordered by her husband, he presents a factual account. If a woman's conduct cannot be understood by reference to a male relative, he presents a very circuitous account. These two types of reporting differ in their precision. The first style results in a more or less true account of the actual proceedings, whereas the latter conveys only a vague and suggestive outline. This style is dominated by analogies and references. All stylistic devices pertain to western images of femininity. In these passages Bougainville presents western icons instead of indigenous women.

Now Bougainville's styles of reporting have been specified, it is time to find out why Bougainville changes style.

## FACTS AND FICTIONS

Other examples of circuitous writing can be found in somewhat longer pieces of text. In these paragraphs Bougainville starts his report in his usual, factual style and then suddenly changes his tone. This abruptness is interesting: it suggests that the change is somehow related to the content. What exactly induces the transition? And more importantly, what does this tell us about the author?

The first example describes the general pattern of receptions at homes of Tahitian families. He begins his account in a businesslike way:

Chaque jour nos gens se promenaient dans le pays sans armes, seuls ou par petites bandes. On les invitait à entrer dans les maisons, on leur y donnait à manger (235).

[Everyday, our people wandered around unarmed, either alone or in small groups. The locals invited them into their homes and fed them.]

Then he changes to his circuitous style. At this very moment, he is reporting that in addition to food, sexual pleasure is being offered:

mais ce n'est pas à une collation légère que se borne ici la civilité des maîtres de maisons (235).

[but the hospitality of the local hosts is not limited to a light meal.]

The circuitous style appears with the phrase 'se borner à'. Because the author uses the verb in a negative sense, the focus is on the lack of boundaries. This enables him to suggest there are no

limitations to the hospitality of the islanders. After this exaggeration he tells us why he considers them so very generous:

ils leur offraient des jeunes filles; la case se remplissait à l'instant d'une foule curieuse d'hommes et de femmes qui faisaient un cercle autour de l'hôte et de la jeune victime du devoir hospitalier; la terre se jonchait de feuillage et de fleurs, et des musiciens chantaient aux accords de la flûte une hymne de jouissance. Vénus est ici la déesse de l'hospitalité, son culte n'y admet point de mystères, et chaque jouissance est une fête pour la nation (235).

[They offered their guests young girls; the hut would immediately fill up with a crowd of curious men and women who formed a circle around the guest and the young victim of the duty of hospitality; the ground was covered with leaves and flowers, and musicians sang a hymn to pleasure to the tune of the flute. Here, Venus is the goddess of hospitality, her worship allows no mystery, and each pleasuring is a national celebration.]

In this fragment facts give way to allusions. The first one pertains to the erotic. The words 'hymne de jouissance' convey the sexual aspects of the reception. The last references of this passage are to classical culture. The words 'Vénus', 'déesse' and 'culte' put the proceedings on a par with the religious rituals of ancient Rome. With this analogy Bougainville conveys two different messages: indigenous sexual practices are similar to religious rituals and Tahitian culture is comparable to Roman civilisation. The women are presented as mere attributes to the ceremony; the offer of young girls is mentioned to illustrate the generosity of the islanders. And the young woman engaged in sexual intercourse is named 'la jeune victime du devoir hospitalier'. This phrase suggests that the woman is obliged to have sexual intercourse with the visitors. Since the description focuses on the ceremony, Bougainville suggests that the obligation stems from indigenous custom.

In the passage above it is evident that the change of style occurs at the very moment that Bougainville mentions the offering of girls. The rest of the description directs attention to the ceremony. It presents the woman as assisting at the ritual; she appears as a gift. Or to put it differently: she is an object, rather than a subject making the most of a festive occasion. Bougainville uses a reference to 'Vénus' to indicate the essence of Tahitian hospitality. As usual in his circuitous style, an icon takes the place of the woman.

The third and last example of circuitous writing can be found in the systematic description of Tahitian culture. The passage can be found in a rather long paragraph on the social relations between the sexes. It starts by presenting facts regarding indigenous marriage and goes on to discuss the roles of the sexes. Here Bougainville distinguishes between the roles of married and unmarried women. At this point an interesting divergence in style comes to the fore: he gives a factual account of the lives of the wives, describing the extensive marital authority of the man. It even mentions the husband's prerogative to make his wife have sexual intercourse with other males. However, when describing the lives of unmarried women the explorer becomes vague. The passage makes no mention of responsibilities and takes no note of social control. Instead, it has sexuality as its main theme. According to this description, young women are exclusively engaged in pursuing pleasure.

Bougainville's way of depicting young women is illustrated by the following passage:



Pourquoi donc résisterait-elle à l'influence du climat, à la séduction de l'exemple? L'air qu'on respire, les chants, la danse presque toujours accompagnée de postures lascives, tout rappelle à chaque instant les douceurs de l'amour, tout crie de s'y livrer (258–259).

[Why should she resist the influence of the climate, the seduction of example? The air one breathes, the songs, the dancing which is nearly always accompanied by lascivious positions, everything at every moment recalls, and compels surrender to, the pleasures of love.]

Here Bougainville tries to explain their behaviour. He does not provide one reason but many. He points to natural causes – ‘climat’ and ‘air’ – , as well as cultural ones – ‘chants’ and ‘danse’. He names one after the other. They tumble over the pages, just like the references in the two previous examples. In his attempt at explanation he also makes references to the erotic. He speaks of ‘séduction de l'exemple’, ‘postures lascives’, and ‘les douceurs de l'amour’. Again, the sentences are brimming over. And most important of all: the repetitive use of these phrases suggests sexual pleasure rather than explaining it.

From the analysis of these fragments of circuitous reporting it can be inferred that Bougainville turns to stylistic devices whenever he has to describe women engaged in sexual activities, and – more importantly – doing so without being explicitly ordered by a male relative. This does not surprise us: during the early modern era women were thought to need guidance from a man. They lived either under parental control or marital authority. This supervision was – among other things – aimed at preventing extra-marital sexual activity.

It is as though the imagery is necessary to depict women pursuing pleasure freely...

## **DIDEROT'S SUPPLÉMENT**

Bougainville succeeded in catching the attention of the European *monde*. His account of Tahiti was widely discussed. Most of the debate centred on indigenous sexual practices, which provided food for thought for *philosophes* who were seeking a sexual morality based on natural law rather than on Christian dogma. Among these was Denis Diderot.

Diderot began writing a response to Bougainville's travelogue soon after it was published. The manuscript circulated in Enlightenment salons from 1773 onwards (Célestin 1996: 66). Somewhat later it was published as a series of articles in the leading periodical *Correspondance littéraire*. We may assume that the content was widely known, even though the integral text of *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* was only published posthumously in 1796 (Jimack 1988: 11).<sup>2</sup>

The first version of the manuscript has four parts. Three of these are dominated by dialogues. The first part and the last contain fictitious conversations between two anonymous males. They talk about Bougainville's adventures in the first part, and in the last discuss the feasibility of implementing Tahitian sexual *mores* in France. Between these two dialogues is a third one; in the first edition this constitutes part three.<sup>3</sup> A fictitious French monk who has joined the French expedition discusses island society with the native chief Orou. In this dialogue Diderot presents his view of Tahitian culture. Of course, in his perspective Tahitians live their lives in harmony

with nature. This section suits our purpose of checking Bougainville's travel account against the judgement of a critical contemporary.

In the dialogue the chief draws comparisons between Tahitian and European cultures. As a consequence, contrasts between western and indigenous lifestyles dominate the text. In this respect Diderot's text does not differ from travel writing. In their conversation the chief and the chaplain discuss women, or, to be precise, they draw parallels between the roles of men and women. Consequently, these passages also show contrasts – this time between men and women. At this point the text differs from Bougainville's discussion of women, in which the dominant stylistic device is the use of similes of European icons.

As a true *philosophe*, Diderot presents a society based on natural law. First we shall see how he paints this picture with words; then we shall take a closer look at his depiction of women.

### THE MESSAGE AND THE PHRASING

The chief and *paterfamilias* Orou tries to make his society intelligible to the French monk by drawing comparisons between indigenous customs and European ones. In presenting Tahitian society in this way, Diderot creates one contrast after the other.

At the very start Diderot contrasts Tahitian *mores* and Christian morality. The contrast pertains to sexuality: he has the chief offer his wife and daughters as companions for the night, just as in Bougainville's account. Of course, the offer is refused by the monk with reference to his monastic vows. In the ensuing dialogue Orou expresses incomprehension:

je ne sais ce que c'est que la chose que tu appelles religion; mais je ne puis qu'en penser mal, puisqu'elle t'empêche de goûter un plaisir innocent auquel nature, la souveraine maîtresse, nous invite tous (22).

[I do not know of this thing you call religion; but I can only think ill of it, since it excludes you from an innocent pleasure in which nature, sovereign mistress, invites us all to partake.]

In this remark Orou presents indigenous ways as 'natural'. By naming nature 'la souveraine maîtresse' he voices the opinion that the islanders are subjects of nature. With this phrase Diderot transforms the contrast between indigenous and western ways into an opposition between a society based on natural law and Christian Europe.

Near the end of this discussion Diderot pushes this opposition further. He has Orou remark:

ces préceptes singuliers, je le trouve opposés à la nature, contraires à la raison, faits pour multiplier les crimes et fâcher à tout moment le vieil ouvrier qui a tout fait (26).

[I find these unusual precepts contrary to nature and reason; they can only lead to increased crime and enrage that old workman who has created it all.]

With these words the Tahitian chief conveys the typical Enlightenment train of thought that rules which are contrary to natural law must have an obstructive effect on society. At the same time, the chief's sketch of Tahitian life is transformed into a comparison between a society based on natural law and one corrupted by Christian sexual morality.

In addition to this explicit contrast the dialogue contains many implicit ones. One example occurs in Orou's description of indigenous marriage. On the island marriage equals love: a man and a woman are married by having sexual intercourse. They stay together for the duration of one moon. With the eclipse of the moon the couple is free to part. In the event of a separation the woman returns to her father's household. The children are divided equally between the parents. The expense of raising them is no obstacle; they are provided for by society as a whole. A sixth part of every harvest is put aside to feed them. In presenting indigenous society in this way Diderot presents the opposite of western family values. This opposition focuses on sexuality. After all, desire is given free reign: a marital union is based on mutual attraction. The ceremony consists of the intercourse of the partners. The union merely requires their mutual consent and lasts as long as they wish. Society rather than the individual couple is responsible for the offspring. Interestingly, his design has one similarity with western marriage: the women of the island live with male relatives. They live at their father's home or at their husband's – and live their lives under their authority.

In another indirect contrast Diderot comments on sexual desire. Firstly, Diderot specifies the nature of Tahitian sexuality. Of course, he creates a connection between desire and nature. He has Orou explain how island women look for strong partners. And how men choose a woman 'qui promet beaucoup d'enfants [...] et qui les promets actifs, intelligents, courageux, sains et robustes' ['who promises many children [...] children who are active, intelligent, courageous, healthy and strong'] (35–36). In these remarks sexual desire is related to procreation. He does not specify the nature of western desire. He alludes to the difference only in his concluding sentence: 'il n'y a presque rien de commun entre la Vénus d'Athenes et celle d'Otaïti' ['The Venus of Athens and the Venus of Otaïti have almost nothing in common'] (36).<sup>4</sup> Diderot mentions the Roman goddess because Bougainville has done so in his description of sexual customs (235). And he uses this reference in the very same way: to convey information regarding sexuality. The image of Venus is supposed to tell it all. Since Venus is associated with beauty, the reference can be interpreted as associating western desire with physical attraction. Diderot has created an opposition between desire aimed at procreation and desire which does not serve this purpose. In this way Diderot conveys how close Tahitians are to nature and how estranged Europeans.

In sum, Diderot creates many contrasts to describe a culture which is different from European society. He draws a comparison between a society which is governed by natural law with a Christian one. As a *philosophe* he could not have done otherwise: speculation on the true nature of humankind fuelled Enlightenment debate.

Diderot discusses women by drawing comparisons between men's roles on the isle and women's. In doing so, he creates oppositions between indigenous men and women. But there is a certain twist in these oppositions...

Illustrations can be found in the chief's explanation of the sexual education of youth:

C'est une grande fête que le jour de l'émancipation d'une fille ou d'un garçon. Si c'est une fille; la veille, les jeunes garçons se rassemblent en foule autour de la cabane et l'air retentit pendant toute la nuit du chant des voix et du son des instrumens. Le jour elle est conduite par son pere et par sa mere dans une enceinte où l'on danse et où l'on exerce du saut, de la lutte, et de la course déploie l'homme nud devant elle sous toutes les faces et dans toutes les attitudes. Si

c'est un garçon, ce sont les jeunes filles qui font en sa présence les frais et les honneurs de la fête et exposent à ses regards la femme nue, sans reserve et sans secret. Le reste de la cérémonie s'acheve sur un lit de feuilles, comme tu l'as vu à ta descente parmi nous (34–35).

[The emancipation of a girl or a boy is a day of great celebration. In the case of a girl, the young boys crowd around the outside of the hut the day before, and the air is filled all night long with the sound of voices singing and instruments playing. The next day she is taken by her father and mother to an enclosure in which there is dancing, jumping, wrestling and running. This allows her to view the naked man from every angle and in every pose. In the case of a boy, the young girls do the honours in his presence, showing him the naked woman without the slightest inhibition or secrecy. The ceremony ends on a bed of leaves, as you saw when you landed among us.]

At first glance, Diderot seems to be offering a comprehensive description of the sexual education of boys and girls. A closer look reveals that his list of gender-specific details is far from complete. He mentions only two differences: the parents' assistance at the ceremony, and the contribution of members of the other sex. More importantly, only half of the comparison is explicated. The parents' participation in the girl's ceremony is specifically mentioned, whereas no reference is made to their contribution to the boy's. And while the boys show their athletic prowess, the girls merely 'do their bit'. In sum, Diderot's account of the ceremonies is uneven. To compare the initiation of girls and boys the reader has to fill in the gaps. The same holds true for the paragraph as a whole: to interpret the sexual education of girls and boys the reader has to make things up.

Recent research suggests that Diderot was very conscious of the power of language. In his texts he creates a kaleidoscope of representations in order to defy interpretation (Brewer 1993). We can safely assume that the play of contrasts described above was created deliberately. But to what purpose? This can only be inferred from the text. However, the text provides hardly any clues. The series of contrasts do not add up. Taken together, they do not depict the lives of men and women on the island – let alone provide insight into the roles of the sexes in 'natural' society. From this we may infer that the question cannot be answered in terms of Diderot's perspective on gender in the ideal world.

An answer can be found in the context. It lies in the effect of Diderot's play with words on his readers. From the reception of Bougainville's account Diderot knew how interested the western audience was in strange sexual customs and attractive indigenous women. In the passage above Diderot seems to set out to satisfy this curiosity. He describes a ceremony whose *raison d'être* – maturation – implies sexuality. He copies Bougainville's depiction of a reception at a Tahitian home. This was one of the scenes which had stirred the interest of the European public. By paraphrasing this passage Diderot raises certain expectations in his readers. After having done so, he merely conveys that the girls 'play their part'. Evidently, Diderot is playing with his readers' hopes and dreams.

Diderot's text is dominated by contrasts. He makes use of this stylistic device in various ways. In his discussion of culture the device helps him to convey relevant aspects of 'natural' society.

In his depiction of women it enables him to confront his readership with their eagerness to read marvellous stories about the sensuous women of the fabled isle.

This last element is particularly evident in his discussion of women's contribution to Tahitian hospitality.

### **BOUGAINVILLE'S TALE AND DIDEROT'S RETELLING**

In his retelling of Bougainville's account of the reception of the French on Tahiti, Diderot makes some subtle but far-reaching changes. Whereas the explorer distinguished between different types of gatherings, the armchair traveller mentions only sexual encounters. While the voyager perceived these meetings as part of indigenous culture, the critic interprets the intercourse as a type of exchange. Diderot discusses the reception of the French at the end of the dialogue between the chief and the chaplain. When Orou brings up this topic, he starts by mocking the Frenchmen's surprise and gratitude: they have not received a gift. On the contrary! They have bartered something costly: in a few months time their seed will have been transformed into children. And he repeats what he has explained before: children constitute the wealth of the nation.

Orou's choice of words makes it clear that the sexual encounters do not constitute an ordinary exchange: in the very first sentence he uses the word 'imposition' (46), which may be translated as 'taxes'. Two sentences later he names the taking of seed 'tribut', of which the first and foremost translation is 'taxes'. This type of payment is never made freely. Taxes are paid by people under authority of a state. For eighteenth-century readers the word 'tribut' may even have carried connotations of oppression. Persons educated in the humanistic tradition may have associated this term with the Roman Empire. Tribute was paid by peoples who had been brought under Roman rule. With this choice of words Orou reduces sexual intercourse to extracting seed, and places it on a par with taxation – perhaps even with exacting payment under threat of force.

A similar message is conveyed in the middle of this passage, where Orou points out that:

Nous ne t'avons point demandé d'argent; nous ne sommes point jetté sur tes marchandises; nous avons méprisé tes denrées; mais nos femmes et nos filles sont venues exprimer le sang de tes veines (46).

[We did not ask you for money; we did not touch your goods; we rejected your food; but our women and girls came and drew the blood from your veins.]

The first half of this sentence alludes to three ways of appropriating goods which were part and parcel of European dealings with non-western peoples. By naming these in one breath, Diderot is referring to the darker side of the European expansion during the early modern era. This is a reference to the asymmetry between the west and the rest of the world. This phrase constitutes only half the message; it is part of an analogy. A parallel is drawn between the European and the Tahitian styles of accumulating valuable possessions. In this analogy Tahitians are put on a par with Europeans. Diderot presents the Tahitians as dealing with the French in the same way as Westerners usually deal with other peoples.

In sum, Diderot inverts Bougainville's interpretation of events: instead of being cordially welcomed, the French are being robbed of something costly. To create this effect, he reverses the usual roles of the west and the rest. In doing so, he places the French imperialist objective of the expedition at the centre of the story – something Bougainville preferred to leave unmentioned.

Diderot continues to invert Bougainville's account in his discussion of the participation of the women in the reception of the French. This strategy forces him to belittle the women's contribution. He does so by creating the same sort of uneven comparisons as we saw in the previous section. And he does so with the same purpose: to make his readers read more into the text than what is actually stated.

At the beginning of Orou's discussion of the reception of the French, Diderot creates a contrast between the islanders and the sailors. Throughout this passage he has Orou speak in terms of 'nous' and 'vous'. The chief mentions how: 'nous asseions sur toi et sur tes compagnons la plus forte de toutes les impositions' ['we subjected you and your men to the heaviest tax of all'] (46). The 'us' clearly denotes men and women alike. Later he repeats this message, stating that the theft was 'un essai que nous avons tenté et qui pourra nous réussir' ['something we tried and which could work to our advantage'] (47). Moreover, Diderot makes these remarks at crucial points in the text: in the opening sentences of this passage and at the very end. From beginning to end Diderot communicates that males and females of Tahiti approach the French as one.

Immediately following his first remark about the joint effort of men and women, Diderot draws a comparison between 'us' and 'our women and girls'. This passage has already been cited:

Nous ne t'avons point demandé d'argent; nous ne sommes point jetté sur tes marchandises; nous avons méprisé tes denrées; mais nos femmes et nos filles sont venues exprimer le sang de tes veines (46).

[We did not ask you for money; we did not touch your goods; we rejected your food; but our women and girls came and drew the blood from your veins.]

This parallel between 'us' and 'our women and girls' is confusing from the start: what exactly distinguishes 'men and women' from 'women and girls'? It is here that Diderot starts to manipulate his readers. In reading the sentence, the reader encounters an opposition. The second half of the opposition concerns females. Following the western train of thought, the reader tends to think of the first half as pertaining to males. This trick of the mind is induced by a traditional western dichotomy: in western culture the word 'women' is usually paired with the word 'men'. What reader will not interpret the opposition as pertaining to 'men' and 'women'?

To complicate matters further, Diderot starts to play with his reader's notions regarding masculinity and femininity. He connects the sexes to different types of action. Men exact money, loot ships and exchange food, while women extract seed from the loins of men. These connections would have held no surprise for an eighteenth-century reader: they matched contemporary notions regarding the sexes. However, Diderot does not stop here. In the very same phrase he connects the sexes to the performance of these tasks. The men do nothing, but the women take matters in hand. This difference must have confused his readers: any eighteenth-century reader would have expected males to take action, especially since here the actual operation implies conflict. In the western perception of gender men are the aggressive sex. And are the islanders not involved in a sort of clash? Are they not conning the French in the same way as the French have been robbing non-western peoples?

In this uneven comparison Diderot is teasing his audience in his usual fashion: he draws a parallel between 'us' and 'women and girls'. But what distinguishes 'us' from 'women'? What

distinction can be made after Orou has made it clear that his 'us' includes women and men? And after he has put the extracting of seed on a par with taxing and looting and exchange?

Nevertheless, Diderot creates a contrast. In doing so, he implies that he is disclosing interesting information regarding the sexes. He does give his readers something: he discloses the men's role in the reception and the women's. This information must have baffled his readers. It is not the men, but the women who take action against the French. For eighteenth-century readers, engaging in conflict was masculine. To the very same readers the action of extracting seed is quintessentially feminine. Here, Diderot presents his audience with persons who, although feminine in their conduct, are masculine in their resolve. Diderot must have been aware that picturing Tahitian women in this way would be bound to spoil his audience's pleasure.

According to Diderot, Bougainville's interpretation of events could not have been further from the truth. In his account, hospitality has been replaced by theft. The French have been conned, not pleased. The island men and women co-operate, and get their way. Women and girls play their part, but their performance lacks the usual delights of sexual encounters with sensual women.

## CONCLUSION

Late eighteenth-century travelogues about the Pacific are not consistent in style: they use different styles depending on the content. When indigenous cultures are discussed the writing is precise and factual; if the subject matter turns to women, the style becomes suggestive. This effect is achieved by the use of specific stylistic means: these passages tend to present analogies between indigenous and western women, stressing similarities rather than differences. In addition, they include references to familiar European images of femininity, stressing once again that Tahitian women are the same as other women. These texts present European icons of femininity rather than Tahitian women.

Are the representations of Tahitian women related to the authors' perceptions of femininity? Do these pictures reflect unease on the part of the explorers? Might they have had difficulties in regard to these women because their behaviour did not comply with western notions of womanhood?

Bougainville's travelogue seems to confirm this assumption. He writes factual and precise accounts of sexual encounters occurring when the women comply with orders of their husbands. But as soon as he has to describe sexual activities which are not instigated by male relatives, he starts straying from the facts. From this it can be inferred that he has difficulty reporting about women pursuing pleasure of their own accord. This outcome should not surprise us: in his day and age women were thought to need the guidance of men. Obedience was considered a necessary quality in a woman. To Bougainville it was a matter of course that a woman should obey the orders of her husband – even if the order was to have sexual intercourse with other men.

Diderot's perspective is not different from Bougainville's. He designs an ideal society in which sexual desire can be expressed by men and women alike. His design fits the Enlightenment debate on sexual morality. But his design has limitations for women: they may follow wherever their desire leads them, but at the same time they must live their lives under the supervision of fathers or husbands. This combination gives rise to speculation: Diderot's discussion of sexuality may be avant-garde, but his ideas on women are traditional.

To describe the pleasure-seeking women, Bougainville resorts to stylistic devices which are often used by travel writers. He chooses images of beauty, sensuality and seduction. He uses similes of western civilisation. His choice betrays a preference for well-established notions of femininity. Even his few references to contemporary discourse are supportive of a traditional perception of womanhood. Diderot's interest is in deluding his readership: he creates an inversion of Bougainville's account of the reception at Tahiti. He does away with the sensuality of the encounters and the generosity of the women. He writes pleasure out of Bougainville's account.

Although both authors are reputed for putting seductive women in their writing, close reading of their texts suggests that they disregard the subject. Bougainville hides the maidens of Matavai behind a series of well-established icons. Diderot prioritises the wealth of the nation over the pleasure of women. In the mentality of both authors, the pursuit of sexual pleasure does not fit with their notions of womanhood.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Louis-Antoine de Bougainville. *Voyage autour du monde par la frégate du Roi La Boudeuse et la flûte l'Étoile*. The editor Proust presents the text of the first edition, including the 'particularités de l'orthographe originelle' (27).
- 2 Denis Diderot. *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*. The editor Dieckmann presents the first manuscript, adding corrections and extensions of later versions in italics.
- 3 In the last version – the so-called Leningrad manuscript – part three is extended and divided into two parts: parts three and four.
- 4 Dieckmann explains that in some manuscripts the citation is followed by the following sentence: 'L'une est Venus galante; l'autre est Venus féconde.' He attributes this sentence to an eighteenth-century editor of Diderot's work, Naigeon (36). Since this addition may not have been made by Diderot, I have left it out of the analysis.

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