

It goes without saying that all these pissing youths are and must be male, certainly for physiological reasons, but above all for symbolic ones: with their little instruments, they represent virility in action and the power relations inscribed by the phallus in human civilization. In the Western classical tradition, representations of girls or women pissing are rare but remarkable, and are tied, when they appear, to an iconography of exception. Consider the figure of the standing young woman who lifts her dress to piss into a hat in front of the “indecent fountain,” on the ceiling of the guardroom of the Château du Plessis-Bourré outside of Angers (1468–1473, fig. 69);¹ or the winged girl pissing into a wooden clog on one of the large ceiling coffers in the oratory of the Hôtel Jean Lalemant in Bourges, which burned down and was rebuilt around 1500. She opens her gown to make way for a wavy, thick, and straight stream, in contrast to the more or less parabolic curves that generally emerge from the penises of little boys; a bit of it drips down her right calf (fig. 70). These images are enigmas, which have most often been connected to alchemy.² A fifteenth-century text, falsely attributed to Nicolas Flamel, includes a child’s urine as an ingredient in the manufacture of the Philosopher’s Stone: “*And now we arrive at the secret of secrets. It is this: you take the urine of a child of eight, ten, or twelve years of age, who drinks wine and leads a loose life, though he be healthy and well-disposed by nature, and you collect it in a water vessel.*”³ But the text does not mention any wooden clogs, nor the child’s gender, and the *pisseuse*

in the Hôtel Lallemand is the sole figure legible as female in the group of fourteen *putti* that alternate with cryptic emblems (fig. 73). The twenty-four paintings of Plessis-Bourré, like the thirty coffers of Bourges that also bring together cherubs and allegorical emblems, form a cryptic ensemble that resembles Lotto's group of wooden covers in the choir of the basilica at Bergamo (fig. 74). Here and there, so many labyrinthine fantasies whose key has been lost, perhaps intentionally. But even if these works resist interpretation, we must nevertheless keep in mind the presumable intentions of the respective artists: to create images whose surprising, heteroclit nature evokes alchemical imagery.

In the sixteenth century, representations of *pisseuses* seem to have been concentrated in the northern countries. The German painter and engraver Matthias Gerung placed a winged Melancholy, placid and enormous, in the middle of his panel *Melancholia* (1558), in a landscape whose background prominently features both a rainbow and a comet. She is surrounded by numerous groups engaged in "every possible activity of urban, rural, and military life":⁴ war, religious processions, work, games, acrobatics, music, dances, dancing bears, and a brothel-cum-sauna full of naked women. At the bottom left, a woman lifts up her dress to piss on the banks of a body of water; next to her, a boy vomits, holding himself up against the trunk of a dead tree (figs. 75a–75b). None of these busy individuals pay any mind to the enormous figure of Melancholy or to the celestial forces that determine their actions.

Besides this unique example, if the rest of this century, so prodigiously productive of pissing little boys, at one time or another managed to portray a urinating woman, it was only with the proviso that she retain an allegorical aspect, mythological or animalistic. Cornelis Bos's 1543 *Triumph of Bacchus* includes a fleshy naked woman at the engraving's extreme left edge, half-fawn, with a human right leg and a goat-like left, who pisses vigorously while drinking from a wineskin held out to her by a muscular satyr, his torso girdled by a grapevine (fig. 76a). Toward the center of the image, a dead-drunk satyr is slumped over asleep on his stomach, his open asscheeks visible in a mirror held by a nearby *putto*, and one can see in the reflected image that the satyr has shat himself (fig. 76b). In this engraving, his face lies in a pool of his own vomit, but not in the painting by Van Heemskerck (c. 1536–1537), a more compact version where the fawn-woman is replaced by a man who isn't pissing (fig. 77).

Jacopo Zucchi's small-scale *The Golden Age*, painted around 1575 as a pendant to *The Silver Age*, depicts groups of naked people who dance or embrace in a fanciful landscape. Two children piss together into a river in which other children bathe: *oro* and *orina*, the color and the verb, offer an image of a social harmony with no need for laws, situated in an Eternal Spring. The Golden Age, as described in Hesiod, Tibullus, or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, knew no violence; labor and domination were equally foreign to it. In the highly finished preparatory drawing conserved at the Getty Museum, the children are small boys

whose streams cross one another, with the stream of the leftmost boy passing in front of the face of his companion, bisecting it (fig. 78). But the pissing figure on the right in the Uffizi's painting is a little girl who, thighs spread, releases a forceful stream that separates into two streams as it falls; the boy, now crowned with a garland of leaves and flowers, lifts his little member high, so that the arc of his urine encircles the girl's head like a halo (fig. 79).⁵ One might say that the little man is already assuming a stance that will enable him to both dominate and protect his mate, with a curve:⁶

$$y(x) = -\frac{1}{2} \frac{g}{v_0^2} \frac{\cos(\gamma)}{\cos^2(\beta)} [1 + \tan^2(\alpha)] x^2 + \tan(\alpha) \frac{\cos(\gamma)}{\cos(\beta)} x$$

The boy's enveloping curve heralds the arrival of the Silver Age, and, with it, the rule of law, represented in that painting's central figure, a large Justice armed with a sword and scales (fig. 80).

According to a description by Vincenzo Borghini, the Golden Age had previously provided the subject for a painting by Poppi based on a drawing by Vasari, dated a few years earlier.⁷ Neither Borghini's text nor Poppi's canvas made room for pissing figures, male or female: the addition was Zucchi's own innovation on the theme, or that of his patron, Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici, the future grand duke of Tuscany.

We have to fast-forward a half century and travel all the way to the Netherlands to find a couple urinating without fuss, in Rembrandt's etchings of a pissing man

and woman (figs. 81a–81b). No more allegorical children, levity, cryptic symbols, curves, or allusive masculinity; just two peasants, male and female, who piss straight ahead, the woman turning around to reassure herself that no one is watching. What could Rembrandt have intended with this last detail, when he places directly before our eyes the same exhibition of urine (and shit) that the woman, looking about uneasily, hopes to conceal? As examples of a genre then in vogue in the Netherlands, these small etchings, about three inches high, simultaneously demonstrate high virtuosity and a contempt for custom. In their rusticity, an aspect Callot had already captured in one of his *Caprices* (fig. 82), these two figures converge with the pissing cows of Paulus Potter or Nicolaes Berchem (Claudel, speaking of Jordaens, described his work as “a human cowshed,” before eventually coming around). But they have the kind of dignity that unaffected men and women share with animals: nothing like this would be seen again, at least not in the West,⁸ before Gauguin's Tahitian woman (*Te Poipoi*, 1892, see fig. 109), where it is impossible to tell if she is urinating, or bathing herself, or both. The young Rembrandt's target was the allegorical humanism then in fashion in Italy, as he confirmed some years later with his *Ganymede*, now in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden: no longer a graceful Trojan adolescent more or less consenting to his own abduction, but a big baby with a fleshy ass who cries and pisses in terror, clinging in vain to the cherries he holds in his left hand (fig. 85).

In the decades that followed, up to the middle of the twentieth century, Rembrandt's *pisseuse* was caught in a closed circuit of voyeurism. Uncountable knickknacks, paintings, drawings, and photographs married amusement and erotic excitation for the male gaze (figs. 86–88),⁹ the *geloïastos* from *Poliphilus* passed down to the present, thanks to the pornographic sites that proliferate in even greater numbers on the Internet. Lequeu's *pisseuse* listens to herself only so that our male gaze can be simultaneously aroused and amused at her expense (fig. 89).¹⁰

This tradition remains one of strictly private use: when the banker and collector Randon de Boisset commissioned or purchased three small erotic canvases from Boucher, including a *pisseuse*, he had them covered with sanitized doubles (a dog standing on its hind legs replaces the chamber pot the woman had previously used to relieve herself, figs. 90a–90c), in keeping with a common practice that continued up to Courbet's *Origin of the World*, a practice we also find in Japan.¹¹ But Boucher took care to leave in a young man, visible through a dark windowpane, observing the scene: as if he were a projection of the real spectator. The artist lets us infer the voyeur's reaction, both in the image and out of it; but the Japanese tradition of *shunga*—images of spring—is more straightforward, and a few decades after Boucher, one can contemplate in a woodblock print by Utamaro not only a woman preparing to relieve herself but her voyeur, a young man with his ass in the air, masturbating furiously (fig. 92).¹²

The visible presence of the gaze returns in the chamber pots known as *vases de mariée* (brides' vases), at the bottom of which a wide-open, painted eye soaks up the sight of an invigorating shower (fig. 93);¹³ it was also taken up by Picasso in his late period, in an aquatint that connects the *pisseuse* and Susanna surprised by the elders (fig. 94).

The twentieth century brought legitimacy to the theme of the pissing woman, at the same time robbing it of its erotic charge. The little pissing nude scribbled by Klee in 1908, one of a series of nudes in ink, has a clearly satirical tone (fig. 95).¹⁴ However, it was only in the second half of the century that *pisseuses* took on greater importance, with the large *Pisseuse* painted in 1965 by Picasso (fig. 96), which followed on the heels of Dubuffet's *Pisseurs* (1961–1962) while also drawing on Rembrandt's etching *Pissing Woman* and his painting entitled *A Woman Bathing in a Stream*. More recently, some artists have attempted to bend the theme back toward pornography, now a source of motifs for art of all kinds. Modifying traditional (generally anonymous) pornographic imagery in order to confer on it the qualities of an artistic nude, the photographs of Gilles Berquet (fig. 97), Claude Fauville (fig. 98), and Laurent Benaïm grace their black-and-white *pisseuses* with a distinguished pedigree.¹⁵ At the same time, female and/or feminist artists also took up the theme. In 1995, Sophy Rickett, in an elegant black-and-white series, photographed herself pissing standing up in tranquil London exteriors (fig. 99);¹⁶ between 2001

and 2012, the Basque performance artist Itziar Okariz filmed and exhibited a series of pissing actions, *Mear en espacios públicos o privados* (fig. 100);¹⁷ in 1992, Kiki Smith produced *Pee Body*, a wax sculpture of a naked, squatting woman who pisses glass pearls (fig. 101); and in 1996–1997, Marlene Dumas paid homage to Rembrandt’s *pisseuse* in a number of ink washes of pissing women (fig. 102).¹⁸ As for male artists, Robert Smithson proposed a project entitled *Urination Map* for a place named Loveladies, New Jersey: “he planned to urinate in six different locations which, together, would form on the ground an image of the constellation Hydra.”¹⁹ But the context has significantly changed; now, urine seems to be used for provocation or to stake out a position. Or it smacks of deviance: Dutchman Leo, the inspiration for Andres Serrano’s Cibachrome print *Leo’s Fantasy*, confessed to the artist’s assistant that the sight of a woman pissing into a man’s mouth aroused him. Serrano, who was at work on his series *History of Sex*, replied: “Why not? We do requests”²⁰ (see fig. 114).

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- 1 Brought to my attention by Andrew Chen. See Eugène Canseliet, *Deux logis alchimiques: En marge de la science et de l’histoire*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Éditions Pauvert, 1979), pp. 218–225, and Michel Bulteau, *Le Plessis-Bourré: Alchimie et mystères* (Paris: Livre-Essor, 1983), pp. 86–89.
 - 2 Michel Bulteau, *L’Hôtel Lallemand à Bourges* (Paris: Garancière, 1984); Jean-Jacques Mathé, *Le Plafond alchimique de l’Hôtel Lallemand à Bourges: Commentaire symbolique et hermétique des 30 caissons sculptés reproduits intégralement pour la première fois* (Braine-le-Comte: Éditions du Baucens, 1976).

- 3 Christophorus Parisiensis, *Apertorio alphabetale* (1466); French trans. *Le grand éclaircissement de la pierre philosophale* (1628; repr., Paris: Arma Artis, 1976), p. 37. On the fictive attribution to Flamel, see the edition of his alchemical writings edited by Didier Kahn, *Écrits alchimiques de Nicolas Flamel* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1993), p. 113. See also the “warm urine of a child,” *pueri calidam aquam*, in Emblem XL of Michael Maier’s *Atalanta fugiens* (1618), the *Tractatus de urina* attributed to Johannes Isaac Hollandus (sixteenth or seventeenth century), the *Speculum veritatis* by George Starkey (seventeenth century, fig. 71), the *Cabala mineralis* attributed to Simeon ben Cantara (seventeenth century, figs. 72a–72b), etc.
- 4 Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1964), p. 381. With gratitude to Patrick Javault.
- 5 *Masterpieces of the J. Paul Getty Museum: Drawings* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1997), p. 30; *Miroir du temps: Chefs-d’œuvre des musées de Florence*, exh. cat. (Rouen: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 2006), pp. 134–135. The pissers in *The Golden Age* are reproduced in Eduard Fuchs, *Illustrierte Sittengeschichte vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, vol. 1, bk. 2, *Renaissance* (Munich: Albert Langen, 1909), p. 172, with an attribution to “Frederigo Zucheri,” corrected by David Monteau.
- 6 This equation for the stream’s curve was kindly provided by David Monteau: “y’ and x’ are the coordinates of the stream’s plane, g is the gravitational constant, v₀ is the initial velocity of the stream, and α the initial angle of inclination. The classic equation for the curve would then be:

$$y'(x') = -\frac{1}{2} \frac{g}{v_0^2} [1 + \tan^2(\alpha)] x'^2 + \tan(\alpha) x'$$

But this curve must be projected onto the plane of the canvas, which is perspectival and seen from above.

“x and y are the coordinates determining the plane of the canvas, β the perspectival angle on the stream (the angle of horizontal rotation between the plane of the canvas and the plane of the stream), so that x = x’ cos(β), and γ is the angle of the point of view (the plane of the canvas’s angle of inclination with respect to the vertical axis), so that y = y’ cos(γ).”

Of course, this equation does not take into account “the density of the child’s urine, nor the atmospheric density in such a clime,” two variables whose values, for the time being, remain unknown.

- 7 Poppi’s canvas is in the collection of the National Gallery of Scotland, and the drawing by Vasari is in the Louvre; see Alessandra Giovannetti, *Francesco Morandini detto il Poppi* (Florence: Edifir, 1995), p. 76; p. 117, fig. 3. Borghini’s text is reproduced in Ugo Scoti-Bertinelli, *Giorgio Vasari, scrittore* (Pisa: Nistri, 1905), pp. 229–230.

- 8 One plate of Utagawa Kuniyoshi's erotic album *Ôeyama (Tale of the Drunken Demon)*, 1831, fig. 83) is a street scene in which a woman and a man piss Prussian blue; a dog sniffs at the woman, and the man's stream takes a contorted form often found in Japanese art, up to the jet of sperm in Takashi Murakami's *My Lonesome Cowboy* (1998, fig. 84). My gratitude to David Monteau (who also brought to my attention the Utamaro print mentioned later in this chapter), and also to Ricard Bru i Turull.
- 9 See Alexandre Dupouy, *Joyeux Enfer: Photographes pornographiques 1850-1930* (Paris: La Musardine, 2014), pp. 66-73.
- 10 Philippe Duboÿ, *Jean Jacques Lequeu: Une énigme* (Paris: Hazan, 1987), p. 293.
- 11 François Boucher, *La femme qui pisse ou L'Œil indiscret*, covered by *The Learned Dog*; Nadeije Laneyrie-Dagen and Georges Vigarello, eds., *La toilette: Naissance de l'intime*, exh. cat. (Paris: Hazan, 2015), pp. 108-115. In Utagawa Kunisada's album *Hyakki yagyô (Night Parade with One Hundred Demons)*, 1825, figs. 91a-91b), one part of an image, depicting a door, folds back to reveal a woman pissing in a bathroom; *Shunga: Images de printemps*, exh. cat. (Paris: Tanakaya, 2003), pls. 27-28.
- 12 *Ehon takara-kura*, 1800; reproduced in Ofer Shagan, *Japanese Erotic Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013), p. 189, fig. 36.
- 13 See Anatole Jakovsky, *Eros du dimanche* (Paris: Éditions Pauvert, 1964), pp. 181, 230. In Provence, the eye sometimes speaks: *Aviso, couquinet, que iéu te vese*.
- 14 Pointed out by Angela Lampe. See Angela Lampe, ed., *Paul Klee: L'ironie à l'œuvre*, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2016).
- 15 My gratitude to Alain Kahn-Sriber, as well as to Alexandre Dupouy.
- 16 With thanks to Emma Hall.
- 17 With thanks to Carel Blotkamp.
- 18 *Marlene Dumas*, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2001), pp. 14-15, 90, 91 (text by Jonas Storsve).
- 19 Gilles A. Tiberghien, "La Poésie et les arts dans les années soixante aux États-Unis," forthcoming in *Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*.
- 20 *A History of Andres Serrano: A History of Sex*, exh. cat. (Groninger: Groninger Museum, 1997), p. 110.