Leonard Hinds  
Indiana University

Paratext and Framing Narrative: Techniques of Skepticism in *Le Parasite Mormon*

The influence of François de La Mothe le Vayer’s skeptical philosophy is apparent in *Le Parasite Mormon*. The narrative structure *in medias res* forces the reader to suspend judgment. The authors put into question the condemnation of sodomy on the grounds of the inhumanity of its punishment and the misleading rhetoric informing indictment. The authors also reveal the deception of staged witnessing, faulty senses, and precipitous judgment. The comparison of Ménage’s intertext and the novel’s paratexts uncovers the authors’ criticism of cultural biases against the libertine and the unjust pursuit of such a character in the first half of the seventeenth century in France.

Attributed to l’abbé François de La Mothe le Vayer, *Le Parasite Mormon*, published in Paris in 1650, has two features that draw the reader’s attention at the very beginning. The first is an engraving of an orator standing in a cauldron lecturing to a group of cooks in a kitchen. The reader, familiar with frontispieces contemporary with this one, such as those in Honoré d’Urfé’s *L’Astrée* (1607-1627) or Madeleine de Scudéry’s *Artamène* (1648-1653), might expect it to depict an episode from the main narrative of *Le Parasite*. Surprisingly, one discovers that it doesn’t. After reading the framing narrative and the four intercalated tales, one is struck by this lack of correspondence between image and word. Could the engraving’s inclusion just be due to the whim of the bookmaker? The second feature is the framing narrative itself. It begins *in
medias res and thus forces the reader to suspend judgment concerning the protagonist, the Parasite Mormon. The opening scene engages the reader’s imagination: the Parasite is being carted to the Place de Grève to be burnt alive at the stake (*PM* 2-3). Yet explanations for this episode are lacking. What is his crime? Who accused him? What judicial procedures brought him to this point? Finally, what is the relationship between the engraving and the inaugural scene? The denouement of the main narrative can provide some answers. Yet an understanding of the origins of this *histoire comique* may further solve the mystery of the judicial pursuit of the libertin.

As already stated, *Le Parasite Mormon* has been traditionally attributed to l’abbé François de La Mothe le Vayer, the son of the famous skeptic François de La Mothe le Vayer. However, this attribution should not limit our questioning of origins. Authorship of *Le Parasite Mormon* is playfully treated in the novel’s introductory pages. Both the preface titled “L’un des Autheurs de ce livre, au Lecteur” and the partially “blank page” indicate that it was composed by a collective (figure 1). While Antoine Adam and Charles Scruggs attribute it to Cyrano, Chapelle, d’Assoucy, Le Royer de Prades, Molière, l’abbé de La Mothe le Vayer, and his cousin Le Vayer de Boutigny, Emile Roy, Jean Serroy, and Andrew Suozzo add to the list Charles Sorel, Tristan L’Hermite, and Paul Scarron (Adam 214-15, note 4; Scruggs 26-27; Roy 423-24; Serroy 405-406; Suozzo 161). The preface refuses authorial identification by veiling the collective in anonymity: “Pour nos noms, tu t’en passeras s’il te plaist […]” (*PM* n.pag.). This author character resists attribution because he and his collaborators wish to hide the novel’s literary origins and are ashamed of their bastard offspring. The partially “blank” page continues this game by stating in the margin that the authors and their friends did not have enough funds to pay for a banquet which would be represented in an engraving; this engraving is absent (*PM* 2, figure 1). Yet I would argue that there is no reason to exclude the possibility of La Mothe le Vayer’s père’s contribution to the novel, whether in design or simply in spirit. In 1630, with the publication of his most daring work, *Cinq Dialogues faits à l’imitation des Anciens par Oratius Tubero*, La Mothe le Vayer père hid behind anonymity. He probably would not want to be known as one of the authors of a “heretical” novel like *Le Parasite Mormon*, because at the time he was the preceptor of Philippe d’Orléans, brother of the future Louis XIV (Wickelgren 8-12). As I intend to show, his thought informs the text’s main intrigue, and even explains the presence of the engraving.