

Sylphs and sylphides in French literature (1670-1801)

Elena Sorochina, Worcester College, DPhil in Medieval and Modern Languages
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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS A SYLPH? IS THERE A 'SYLPH LITERATURE'?

This thesis is about imaginary creatures called sylphs (male) and sylphides (female) which appear as characters in numerous fictional narratives throughout the long eighteenth century. Today, these beings, which are known as 'elemental creatures of the air', are often confused with and compared to fairies, or are thought of as the nineteenth-century representations seen in the Romantic movement. Yet sylphs and sylphides in the eighteenth century are different from the fairy and the sylphide of the nineteenth-century stage and poetry so familiar to many.

Sylphs and sylphides were a popular trope in a time when superstition and esoteric beliefs were supposedly less prevalent, with reason and empirical observation being the primary tools for making sense of the world. Because sylphs and sylphides were used in various genres beyond the scope of the *merveilleux* or fairy tales, their popularity seems to trouble assumptions about what was of interest to readers and authors during the Enlightenment.¹

The fact that these characters were introduced instead of, or alongside, other airy esoteric creatures, coupled with their pervasive popularity, suggests that they had a particular appeal and purpose. This study aims to understand what this was and why. It focuses on sylphs and sylphides in the literary culture of the long eighteenth century, and addresses gaps in existing scholarship by framing its work around two fundamental questions: firstly, what is a sylph, and secondly, is there a literature about sylphs so extensive that we could call it a *sylph literature*, and if so, why does it exist during this period, and what does it tell us about the society that produced it?

An important aim of this thesis is to demonstrate more thoroughly than critical material has done thus far the expansiveness and variety of cultural production featuring sylphs, and the reasons behind the marked interest in this motif on the part of both readers and writers alike. We will also

¹ See in particular Robert Darnton's *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), which has challenged our understanding of the types of texts that were in circulation and that were consumed by eighteenth-century audiences. Darnton's work has catalysed many projects that have since added to this field, and which will be referenced throughout this thesis.

aim to establish how sylphs and sylphides were depicted by authors, what roles they had in plots, and how aspects of an evolving sylphic mythology reflected interests, debates, and anxieties of the time. In order to accomplish this, close readings of a range of texts featuring sylphs and sylphides have been undertaken. Relevant additional primary sources have been consulted and brought into discussion, and critical material pertaining to the various themes examined has been drawn upon.

The importance of the imaginary creatures known as sylphs and sylphides – which correspond to the Aristotelian element of air – within the literary landscape of the long eighteenth century is evidenced by the large number of texts featuring these ‘elemental beings’ produced during the period.² These titles belong to an impressive range of genres and styles: fairy tales, moral stories, satires, comedies, libertine and pornographic tales, packaged into plays, opera-ballets, novels, novellas, short stories, poetry, and more. The status of the authorship is also worthy of note; ranging from those who are today considered canonical ‘names’ to anonymous publications, writers of all reputations engaged with this motif.

The richness of this corpus, and the sheer variety of representations of sylphs and sylphides suggest that this is a theme worthy of scholarly attention. The first researcher to note this was Edward Seeber in 1944, who brought to light the importance of the motif by drawing up an extensive list of texts featuring elemental beings that appeared between 1681 and 1939. According to his list, the majority of titles (around 69 %, or 61 titles), appeared between 1681 and 1800, while in the subsequent century and a half, only 27 were produced. These numbers have motivated our focus on the period between the late-seventeenth and the end of the eighteenth century.

Over half a century after Seeber’s article, Michel Delon’s anthology *Sylphes et Sylphides* (1999) returned to some of the more noteworthy texts and authors in greater detail. Delon also provided a chronological list comprising 29 titles published in the eighteenth century and six titles

² Aristotelian Physics sees everything in the terrestrial (as opposed to celestial) spheres as made up of the four Classical elements: earth, water, air, and fire. Each of these was understood to be one substance, and air was still perceived as an elementary fluid rather than a chemical combination until the mid-eighteenth century.

published between 1801 and 1832. His list, although much reduced, largely overlapped with Seeber's, with the exception of a few important additions such as the inclusion of the Marquis de Sade's *Histoire de Juliette ou les Prospérités du vice* (1801), which contains an episode featuring a sylph, as well as two other pornographic texts featuring sylphs: Pluchon-Destouches's poem 'Le Joli vase, ou le Berger sylphe', in *Le Petit-neveu de Bocace ou Contes nouveaux en vers* (1777), and *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne* (1798/1799), a novel attributed to Andréa de Nerciat.³

While these were both pioneering contributions, they are not without their limitations. Delon's selection of texts in the anthology (which includes only six eighteenth-century short stories and extracts from longer works), and its accompanying list are, by design, a showcase rather than a comprehensive catalogue. Seeber's list is a robust attempt at producing a more exhaustive inventory of texts that feature elemental beings. This is a useful resource, but it also poses problems. Seeber compiled his list before the digital age, and as a result he did not have access to the various online databases available today; this inevitably restricted his remit and some texts were missed. Seeber's list also contains errors. For example, he includes *L'Esprit folet, ou le Sylphe amoureux* twice because in one of the instances he lists it as an anonymous publication, but it is, in fact, by Henriette-Julie de Murat, and is the same text as one listed under the title *Le Sylphe amoureux*. The play *L'Amour diable* (1708) is by Marc-Antoine Legrand not Alfred-Louis Legrand. *Le Sylphe, ou Songe de Mme de R***, écrit par elle-même à Mme de S**** (1730), by Crébillon fils, was not published in volume 34 of the *Voyages imaginaires* (1787); the text in question is *Le Sylphe amoureux* which was also believed to have been published in 1730 but is a different short story.⁴ This text was believed to be anonymous by the editor of *Voyages imaginaires*, as well as by both Delon and Seeber. However, we believe that it was likely written by Murat as the text is identical to her *L'Esprit folet, ou le Sylphe amoureux*

³ Please note that all author life dates are given in Appendix 1 for ease of consultation. We will also cite some in the body of the thesis when particularly relevant to our discussions.

⁴ In the case of female authors, we will use their full names the first time we refer to them. After this, we will use the received author name in line with the information provided by the BnF. We will refer to Crébillon fils simply as Crébillon as we will not be referring to his author father in this study.

(1714), except the first three and a half pages at the very beginning (which are dedicated to talking about Villars's *Le Comte de Gabalis*, and are no longer present in the version of 1730; the other difference is that *L'Esprit folet* contains an illustration, which we will discuss in chapter 4).⁵ Mistakes are not surprising, given the fragmentary nature of the publishing of sylph texts, but also due to the lack of a unified scholarly field dedicated to sylph narratives.

Furthermore, many of the texts' titles do not contain words that would indicate that they are in any way about elemental beings, which complicates searching even with today's digital tools, as existing databases have their own limitations (some databases focus on very specific periods, geographic regions, are still being built, etc.). Then there is the issue of the choices Seeber made. For example, why include Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), which mentions 'les esprits aériens' in letter LVIII, but not Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Les Confessions* (1782, 1789) where in Book XI the author mentions sylphides (in a somewhat analogous manner to Montesquieu)?⁶ Similarly, Seeber discusses Jacques Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux* (1772), but omits it from his list. Possibly the greatest challenge of Seeber's list is identifying exactly his criteria for inclusion. Do elemental beings have to be mentioned explicitly? Do they have to feature in a prominent manner and if so, how would that be quantified? We will return to this problem in due course.

While mindful of these restrictions, we have based our initial research on Delon's and Seeber's lists, but expanded our scope, endeavouring to rectify omissions or errors by means of digital search tools such as library databases, book collection catalogues, digitised eighteenth-century journals, as well as more mundane tools such as Google Books.⁷ Our resulting estimate of

⁵ In most cases throughout this thesis, we will refer to *Le Sylphe amoureux* (1730). This is because although it was believed to be anonymous, this text was recognisable enough to be included in the *Voyages imaginaires* and we suspect that it was more widely read than *L'Esprit folet*. We will refer to Murat's original in instances when we analyse the first three pages which are missing from the 1730 version, or when looking at the illustration accompanying the 1714 text.

⁶ Seeber discusses both of these instances in the body of his article, but only includes Montesquieu's in his list.

⁷ Oxford University's online library catalogue 'SOLO', the Bibliothèque nationale de France's digital library 'Gallica', 'WorldCat', Karlsruhe Virtual Catalog 'KVK', and 'MEDIATE' (Measuring Enlightenment: Disseminating Ideas, Authors and Texts in Europe, 1665-1830), a database of catalogues of privately-owned libraries.

texts featuring sylphs and sylphides, as well as other elemental beings (although in much smaller numbers and often as additional characters), published between the late-seventeenth century and the end of the eighteenth century is around 70. We have supplemented Seeber's and Delon's lists with additional titles such as Charles Collé's *Le Jaloux corrigé, opéra bouffon en un acte* (1753), which is a good example of how a title of a work does not give any indication of the presence of sylphs in the plot, and Caroline-Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis's *Les Veillées du château ou Cours de morale à l'usage des enfants* (1784). The pornographic novel *Les Veillées du couvent ou le Noviciat d'amour* (1793) by Claude-François Mercier de Compiègne has also been included more explicitly (Delon mentions it in his preface but not on his list, and Seeber omits it altogether).

The current study has consulted the majority of texts on Seeber's and Delon's lists, as well as other texts found in the course of research, and the corpus selected for close readings is a dataset of 40 core texts published between 1670 and 1801. This selection is the result of a combination of systematic research, conscious choices, as well as some chance discoveries. To these we add Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* and Rousseau's *Les Confessions* as works which only make brief mention of sylphs (albeit in illuminating ways), and to which we will refer in the thesis.⁸ We necessarily also include the text that popularised sylphs and other elemental beings and introduced them to French literature – *Le Comte de Gabalis, ou Entretiens sur les sciences secrètes* (1670) by Nicolas de Montfaucon de Villars. This text's original publication date serves as the start date for our chronological range. Additionally, we incorporate an Italian translation of this text which is effectively a plagiarised version of Villars's original – *La chiave del gabinetto del cavaliere Giosepe Francesco Borri* (1681), allegedly by Giuseppe Francesco Borri. This text is important because there was some confusion in the late-eighteenth century as to which of the two appeared first. *Liber de Nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus* (1566) by Theophrastus von Hohenheim, known as Paracelsus was Villars's main inspiration, and so we include it also. Within our core corpus

⁸ However, we do not include them in Appendix 1 as we do not class them as 'sylph narratives'; they are included in the bibliography.

of 40 texts, we have included two English works: *The Rape of the Lock* (1712, 1714) by Alexander Pope, and *The Sylph* (1779) by Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, both of which were translated into French in 1728 as *La Boucle de cheveux enlevée* and in 1784 as *Le Sylphe*, respectively, and therefore entered French-language circulation. All of these texts, their authors, publication dates, genres as well as selected information on additional editions, are listed in Appendix 1.

Choices about inclusion in our core dataset were made based on a number of criteria. Firstly, at least one text from each decade between 1670 and 1800 was chosen in order to capture chronological changes more accurately.⁹ Secondly, texts were selected to represent a range of genres. This was done in order to ensure that evidence was drawn from a variety of sources, allowing for a cross-sectional examination. The selection therefore includes 12 theatre pieces (plays, comic operas, opera-ballets), seven fairy tales, four poems, seven novels, and several short stories including both libertine and moral tales. Thirdly, our sample contains texts by both well-known authors such as Aulnoy, Cazotte, Crébillon, Dorat, Marmontel, and Murat, and lesser-known authors or works published anonymously. Both male and female writers were included. This was done in order to provide an ample and accurate reflection of the field.

Returning to Seeber's list, we must also address the difficulty indicated above: the fact that it is not clear what is classed as a text about sylphs. Seeber's definition of the corpus is not entirely satisfactory: 'The following titles, representing works in which *esprits élémentaires* figure more or less significantly, afford a clear impression of Villars's influence over a period of 225 years'.¹⁰ What does 'works in which *esprits élémentaires* figure more or less significantly' mean? And when searching modern-day databases, how do we interpret the results? Which of the texts feature elemental beings significantly enough to be included, and how would we measure what constitutes 'enough'? For example, in Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's *Le Prince lutin* (1697), a human male, Léandre,

⁹ We refer to the original publication date; many of the texts were published several times throughout the long eighteenth century. This is shown in Appendix 1.

¹⁰ Edward Seeber, 'Sylphs and Other Elemental Beings in French Literature since *Le Comte de Gabalis* (1670)', *PMLA*, 59 (1944), pp. 71-83 (p. 80).

is granted magic powers by a fairy; he becomes a 'lutin'. He can become invisible when wearing a red hat, and in this way gains the abilities of a sylph, and in his courtship of the princess he behaves in similar ways to a sylph in love. But does this automatically mean that d'Aulnoy's story is a sylph narrative? Considering these questions was a key part of our study, and we have designated the term 'sylph narratives' to describe texts which, broadly speaking, conform to the following criteria: they feature sylphs who act as either main or secondary characters, or they contain characters that are not explicitly identified as sylphs, but nonetheless display sylphic characteristics, or they are used symbolically but, again, this symbolic use is anchored in inherently sylphic characteristics.¹¹ As such, sylph narratives (to be understood as incorporating sylphide narratives), form our core corpus. They all feature sylphs or sylphides in one or more of the ways described above. To this core dataset we have added Cointreau's *L'Amant salamandre, ou les Aventures de l'infortunée Julie* (1756), which we included for several reasons: it provides a useful comparison between sylphs and salamandres as protagonists, and the plot of this text is very similar to that in a group of sylph narratives which we will discuss in chapter 2, but it takes a more sinister turn. Additionally, this story was included in volume 34 of *Voyages imaginaires*, which also contains three sylph narratives.

The difficulty in establishing what constitutes a sylph narrative pervades the very definitions of sylphs and sylphides.

Sylphs and sylphides: a non-definition

The definitions of 'sylphe' or 'sylphide' we find in the *Encyclopédie* are somewhat disappointing; neither 'sylphe' nor 'sylphide' has an individual entry, although 'sylphes' feature in five other articles: 'Déesses-mères' and 'Génie', both by the Chevalier de Jaucourt, 'Gnomes' by the Abbé Mallet, the anonymous 'Spectre', and 'Théosophes' attributed to Denis Diderot.¹² In each of the entries, 'sylphes'

¹¹ We will use this term throughout our study. We will investigate what sylphic characteristics are throughout the study; chapters 2 and 6 will discuss 'sylphness' as a set of abilities and behaviours, whereas chapter 3 will look at the physical and moral attributes of sylphs and sylphides.

¹² See the digitised ARTFL *Encyclopédie*, available at: <https://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.

appears only once, and always in the plural form, that is to say the authors refer to this type of being in general, rather than making any distinction in terms of gender. In the first two definitions by Jaucourt, 'sylphes' are listed as part of a series of esoteric beings under the names 'de démons, de manes, de lares, de lémures, de penates, [...] des fées, des gnomes, & des sylphes'.¹³ For Jaucourt, sylphes are no different from the other mythical creatures he lists, and they are all gathered into a general category to designate 'things of this type'. The Abbé Mallet's entry explains the belief of the 'cabalistes' that 'il y a une infinité d'esprits qui remplissent les éléments, le feu, l'air, l'eau & la terre, des Salamandres, des Sylphes, des Oudins & des Gnomes'.¹⁴ His article concentrates on gnomes, and mentions sylphs only as one of the four elemental beings. The article 'Spectre' mirrors this: 'Paracelse & quelques-uns de ses sectateurs croient que chaque élément est rempli d'un certain nombre d'esprits, que les astres sont la demeure des salamandres, l'air celle des sylphes, l'eau celle des nymphes, & la terre celle des pigmées'.¹⁵ Confusingly, given their association with air, Diderot's entry simply mentions sylphs as one of the beings corresponding to the element of earth: 'Les terres ont leurs gnomes, leurs lémures, leurs sylphes, leurs montains, leurs zonnets, dont les monstres sont les pigmées', whereas the air is inhabited by 'ses spectres, ses sylvains, ses satyres, dont les monstres sont les géans'.¹⁶ His distribution of various beings seems to be in accordance with Paracelsus's earlier writings where he allocates sylphs to the earth and beings named 'sylvains' to the air. This highlights the uncertainty surrounding such classifications, but also a lack of any real intellectual interest in them. We can surmise that mentions of sylphs in the *Encyclopédie* occur in two contexts: the first is to give an alternative name amongst others to mythical beings such as fairies and their sort, the second – to explain the belief of 'cabalistes' that there are four esoteric beings each corresponding to an Aristotelian element. No details are given about sylphs in any of the five entries.

¹³ Jaucourt, 'Génie,' *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. by Diderot and d'Alembert (Paris: Briasson et al, 1751-1772), 27 vols, VII, p. 581.

¹⁴ Mallet, 'Gnomes', *Encyclopédie*, VII, p. 724.

¹⁵ Author not specified, 'Spectre', *Encyclopédie*, XV, p. 448.

¹⁶ Diderot (attr.), 'Théosophes', *Encyclopédie*, XVI, p. 255.

The term 'sylphe, -ide' does not appear in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* until its fourth edition (1762), and the same, very succinct definition is reprinted verbatim in its fifth edition (1798): 'Nom que les Cabalistes donnent aux prétendus génies élémentaires de l'air'.¹⁷ Although sylphs have their own, separate entries in these cases, and both genders are acknowledged, the definition itself is basic and appears to echo those three *Encyclopédie* articles where sylphs are simply described as beings corresponding to the element of air. This definition remains practically unchanged in both meaning and length in the editions of 1835 and 1932 of the dictionary.¹⁸ It is not until 1873 that a detailed entry appears in Émile Littré's *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, which maintains the above definition, but also offers examples of sylphs and sylphides in French literature, starting with Montfaucon de Villars's *Le Comte de Gabalis* (1670), and ending with Victor Hugo. The *Dictionnaire de la langue française* also provides an etymological background and is the first to do so.¹⁹

This shows, insofar as we can tell from the evidence of the dictionaries, that neither the leading eighteenth-century *philosophes* nor their possibly more conservative counterparts at the Académie française engaged with sylphs and sylphides in any depth at all. Evidently, despite the high number of texts and performances featuring sylphs produced during this period, the intellectuals of the time did not consider sylphs an object of knowledge worthy of a description. Such texts may have been dismissed as frivolities or a type of 'popular culture' which although widespread, did not require any serious intellectual attention.

Texts featuring sylphs offer more illuminating accounts, while also highlighting the uncertainty and curiosity surrounding sylphs and sylphides. A definition that summarizes the ways in

¹⁷ *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 4th edn, II (Paris: Brunet, 1762), p. 787; *Ibid.*, 5th edn, II (Paris: Smits, 1798), p. 621.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6th edn, II (Paris: Didot, 1832-5), p. 803; *Ibid.*, 8th edn, II (Paris: The ARTFL Project, 1932-5), p. 630.

¹⁹ *Dictionnaire de la langue française (Littré)*, IV (Paris: Hachette, 1873). The etymology of 'sylph' offered by Littré is referred to above, as part of the *OED* entry.

which these elemental beings were perceived at the time appears in the following exchange from Antoine-François Quétant's play, *L'Amant sylphe* (1783), quoted exactly as written on the page:

Hilaire. Un Sylphe! Quoi'c'est que c't'animal-la? J'ons vu à la ville, des Robins, des Comtes, des Marquis, des Abbés ; s'roient-ils d'l'espece dont d'laquelle vous parlais?

Justine. Bauh!

Hilaire. Mais encore une fois, comment qu'c'est fait un Sylphe?...

Justine. Comme personne: c'est un soufle, une vapeur, un rien....²⁰

The use of 'soufle', 'vapeur', and 'rien' evokes the sylph's association with air, and draws on its key characteristics: lightness and malleability. The vagueness inherent in these nouns points to the creature's other important feature – ambiguity. Written in the late eighteenth century, *L'Amant sylphe* is a retrospective reflection on the status of sylphs in French literary production and the popular imagination to that date. The uneducated gardener Hilaire grapples with the meaning of 'sylphe' by trying to define it against known and unambiguous entities. He lists the other types of male suitor he has seen 'à la ville' and tries to imagine where the sylph would fit within this framework of familiar city seducers. At the same time, he refers to the sylph as an 'animal'; no doubt inserted for comedic purposes, this also suggests that the sylph may be something of a different nature entirely, something from another class of beings. Hilaire's lack of understanding and sophistication is emphasised by his accent, stressing the additional gap between his world and that of his masters, and even that of another servant, the maid Justine with whom he discusses what a sylph might be. Justine, the archetypal literary maid, speaks French correctly and appears to be both lyrical and somewhat complicit, although overall dismissive of her employers' whims. Within the same conversation, but a little earlier, she tells Hilaire: 'Oui, nous gens d'esprit, qui connoissons le néant des choses, il nous faut de grand moyens, de grands ressorts pour nous réjouir'.²¹ Quétant specifies in

²⁰ François-Antoine Quétant, *L'Amant sylphe, ou la Féerie de l'amour* (Paris: Imprimerie de P.R.C. Ballard, 1783), pp. 26-7.

²¹ Quétant, *L'Amant sylphe*, p. 25.

his stage directions that this line was to be uttered 'd'un ton précieux'.²² Justine is therefore both making fun of the aristocracy, but also implying that she is smart and educated enough to understand the alleged complexity of aristocratic manners and emotions.

When Justine replies to Hilaire's question, she does so with an exclamation which is supposed to mean 'I don't know', but she does not even offer that much clarity – what she produces is a mere noise – 'Bauh!'. It takes some insistence on Hilaire's part for her to finally articulate a reply. She explains that a sylph cannot be compared to an existing model, whether in nature or in the city; the sylph is, after all, 'un soufle, une vapeur, un rien'. She goes from barely enunciating to using poetic language; her jump from no explanation at all to metaphor highlights the difficulty in defining the sylph. The metaphors albeit telling, do more to confuse than clarify. The language itself is in flux; Justine moves from one end of the expressive spectrum to its polar opposite. By using poetic language, she also attests to her own half-serious, half-sarcastic preciousness.

Sylphs and sylphides in existing scholarship

The ambiguity surrounding sylphs in primary sources extends into secondary material which fails to clarify the status and meanings of these elemental beings to a fitting extent. Critical material pertaining to this subject is by no means extensive and broadly focuses on two main themes – sylphs as idealised lovers, and sylphs as part of the *merveilleux* genre. Scholarship is significantly skewed towards the first type, concentrating particularly on the role of sylphs as allegories of desire, and most frequently, but not exclusively, on female desire. For example, Thierry Viart discusses this aspect in his 1996 article 'Le Sylphe ou les lumières d'une allégorie', and Natania Meeker follows with 'Libertine Lucretius' in 2012, using the Lucretian pleasure-in-constraint concept to show how the sylph forces the female character to come to terms with her own desires.²³ Marine Ganofsky's *Night in French Libertine Fiction* (2018) dedicates a section to nocturnal amorous encounters of female

²² Ibid.

²³ *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 96.1 (1996), pp. 111-21. *Rivista di storia della filosofia*, 2 (2012), pp. 225-39.

heroines with sylphs.²⁴ Isabella Mattazzi's 2005 *La magia come maschera di Eros*, is another example of the same trend, but Mattazzi's book is also a rare case of scholarship substantially focused on sylphs and sylphides; unlike most other secondary sources which are often articles or book chapters, Mattazzi's work is a monograph.²⁵ She concentrates on three main texts: Crébillon's *Le Sylphe* (1730), Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux* (1772), and Bibiena's *La Poupée* (1747), making it one of the more ambitious projects to date which studies narratives featuring sylphs and sylphides. Michel Delon's 1999 'Présentation' to his anthology, unlike much other scholarship, engages with a larger number of texts spanning a broader range of genres. He treats the sylph and sylphide as a literary motif and as a theme.²⁶ He traces the motif's evolution by engaging with a significant number of texts (some of which are collected in his anthology), but he does so only tangentially. His approach is, as in the case of the above scholars, the link between sylphs or sylphides, and desire. In this study, we will use the terms 'sylphe amoureux narrative' or 'sylphe amoureux character' to describe plots in which the elemental being acts a love interest, suitor, or seducer, highlighting the importance of this theme.²⁷

The other angle from which critics have engaged with texts featuring sylphs and sylphides is by incorporating them into the *merveilleux* tradition and figuring out how these fit into 'mainstream' Enlightenment. Some examples include Kenneth J. Fleurant's 'Mysticism in the Age of Reason: Jacques Cazotte and the Demons' and Philippe Sellier's 'L'Invention d'un merveilleux: *Le Comte de Gabalis* (1670)'.²⁸ In 'La science illuministe du merveilleux. Entre roman véritable et roman de magie' (2009), Yves Citton problematizes the dichotomy between the rational and the superstitious,

²⁴ See Ganofsky's chapter 'Nocturnal illusions: Dreams of sylph-like lovers', in *Night in French Libertine Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), pp. 111-48.

²⁵ *La magia come maschera di Eros, Silfidi, demoni e seduttori nella Francia del Settecento* (Bergamo: Sestante Edizioni, 2005).

²⁶ Michel Delon 'Préface' in *Sylphes et Sylphides* (Paris: Éditions Desjonquères, 1999), pp. 7-31 (p. 17).

²⁷ We will return to this term throughout the study and will add to our understanding of it as we progress through our inquiry.

²⁸ *The French Review*, 49 (1975), pp. 68-75; See Sellier's chapter in *Amicitia Scriptor. Littérature, Histoire des Idées, Philosophie. Mélanges Offerts à Robert Mauzi*, ed. by Annie Becq, Charles Porset, and Alain Mothu (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1998), pp. 53-62.

showing that ‘contes de fées ou de sylphes’ are not something that originated from the obscurantism of the Middle Ages, but are a modern genre.²⁹ These contributions help trace some of the important features of narratives featuring sylphs, and to contextualise these within broader eighteenth-century thought. They usefully underline the idea that while texts featuring the supernatural, including those featuring sylphs, may not be part of the Enlightenment as conventionally understood, they are also not always entirely at odds with it. This is a good starting point, but a restrictive view, not least because approaching these texts as simply *merveilleux* works ignores the multitude of other valuable details and avenues. Something that stands out is that these contributions rarely focus on sylphs specifically.³⁰

Sylphs as libertine seducers and as part of the *merveilleux* genre have received significant scholarly attention. Other depictions have not been tackled by scholars with the same rigour or at all. Another matter is that existing work deals with a very small group of texts; a large proportion of critical material concentrates on *Le Sylphe* by Crébillon alone, sometimes in combination with some of Crébillon’s tales as part of the *merveilleux* genre, or alongside texts by a small group of other authors, which may feature elemental beings.³¹ What characterises much of the critical material is the omission of any clear definition of the sylph and sylphide, alongside the tendency to stay within the remit outlined above.

Our study broadens the scope of the analysis to go beyond what has been covered thus far. On a fundamental level, it includes many more texts, authors, and genres. It also refocuses attention towards the very basic but crucial questions: what are sylphs and sylphides, what did they look like, and what were their other attributes? What did an eighteenth-century (literate) individual

²⁹ *Féeries. Etudes sur le conte merveilleux, XVII^e-XIX^e siècle*, 6 (2009), pp. 21-46 (p. 21).

³⁰ For instance, Citton’s article does not mention sylphs at all in the first part and instead talks about the *merveilleux* in general. The author uses ‘sylphes’ and ‘fées’ interchangeably, overlooking the differences between the two.

³¹ On the perceived importance in the view of eighteenth-century scholars of Crébillon as the creator of a new genre – the *conte érotique parodique et satirique* – which is imitated, albeit unsuccessfully, by other authors, see Geeta Beeharry-Paray, “‘Les Bijoux indiscrets’ de Diderot: Pastiche, forgerie ou charge du conte crébillonien?”, *Diderot Studies*, 28 (2000), pp. 21-37.

understand when someone said ‘sylphe’ or ‘sylphide’? Were they something people would recognise? What were the characteristics of cultural production featuring these elemental beings? Was there a common denominator, and was there such a thing as *sylph literature*? In order to answer these questions, we have orientated our analysis around primary text evidence, as well as a history-of-the-book perspective.

This thesis comprises six chapters which are organised in two groups to address our main research questions: ‘what is a sylph?’ and ‘is there a *sylph literature*?’. While all chapters engage with both questions, chapters 1, 2, and 6 focus on the evolution of sylphs and sylphides as a literary motif, the authors and consumers of texts featuring this motif, and on the various themes that emerge within it. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 investigate the various aspects of ‘sylphness’ – their physical appearance, moral character, their courtship rituals, and their gender(s) and sexualities.

Chapter 1 begins our investigation by looking at two moments of sylph mythmaking: Paracelsus’s original mythology and Villars’s version, by building on Didier Kahn’s extensive work on both authors. We will draw attention to the modifications made by Villars and discuss why they were important for eighteenth-century authors writing about sylphs and sylphides. We will then also look at two important source texts from Antiquity which further shaped the evolution of sylph narratives.

In chapter 2 we group various texts featuring sylphs according to a set of emerging themes they share in order to map out the field and offer points of reference for navigating this vast literary landscape. The ways in which sylphs are depicted in each category will help us identify the changes that authors made to the original mythologies, how they effected them, and why they may have done this. Here we will also attend to the difficulties of classifying texts into rigid categories and address the issue of what constitutes ‘sylphness’ particularly when sylphic properties are somehow transferred to ordinary human beings.

If the first two chapters address the origins of the motif, its modifications and ramifications, chapter 3 begins to tackle the question of what a sylph – the fantastic, esoteric, imaginary being – is.

Using close readings of textual descriptions of sylphs across a range of eighteenth-century sources, as well as available book illustrations depicting sylphs and sylphides, we will build up a picture of sylphic physical attributes and moral dispositions. We will view these in the context of contemporary discourses on aesthetics, fashion, and racial difference. Our work will be additionally underpinned by scholarship on iconography and eighteenth-century book engravings.

Chapter 4 focuses on an important aspect of sylphic nature – their lack of materiality – and, using the alchemical concept of transmutation, investigates how invisible and intangible sylphs and sylphides manifest themselves in the real world. We will look at a selection of objects used by these elemental creatures to win over their mortal love interests, and to make themselves present in reality. We will see what a recurring set of such objects can tell us about the tastes of the period, as well as draw connections with the provenance and circulation of goods, and contemporary views on luxury. Our analysis of textual evidence will be bolstered by reference to examples of contemporary objects from a range of museum collections in France, and in the UK.

Like chapter 4, chapter 5 also engages with the notion that sylphs are often de-articulated in that their bodies are malleable. This premise offers an important opportunity for the exploration of gender and sexuality. As mentioned earlier in this introduction, much existing scholarship has seen sylphs as a metaphor for desire. Within this context, their supernatural abilities, such as invisibility, shapeshifting, and their capacity to become an all-penetrating vapour, make them particularly fruitful conduits for exploring sexual desire, as well as for probing the boundaries of gender. In this chapter we will examine a chronological selection of texts in which sylphs and sylphides (or other characters with sylphic powers), display gender non-conforming traits. By analysing these using relevant concepts from queer and trans theory, we will explore the possibilities which sylphs offer for expressing non-heteronormative sexuality and non-binary gender.

In chapter 6, our final chapter, we will look back at chapters 1 and 2 and, building on some of their findings, we will discuss who wrote and read texts featuring sylphs, and how they did this. We

will also look at how sylph texts referenced one another and why, and finally – we will address the issue of the status of such literature by looking at the place of these texts in some private collections of eighteenth-century individuals. The aim here as elsewhere will be to ascertain whether *sylph literature* is a legitimate category, and if so, then what constitutes it and where it might belong within the broader landscape of literary production of the long eighteenth century.

CHAPTER 1. ORIGINS, MYTHOLOGIES, AND MODIFICATIONS OF THE SYLPH MOTIF

Sylphs and sylphides do not have a consistent definition as our introduction has started to show. This lack of clearly defined parameters produces some confusion, but also represents an innate malleability which persists throughout the evolution of this subject over the centuries. In this chapter we will trace modifications to this motif by comparing the first Paracelsian mythology with a second mythology which adapted the Paracelsian premise and popularised these elemental beings in French literary production of the late-seventeenth century onwards. This second moment of myth creation took place in 1670 with Nicolas de Montfaucon de Villars, and his novel *Le Comte de Gabalis, ou Entretiens sur les sciences secrètes*. We will then assess the impact of two sources from Antiquity on this resulting mythology: Apuleius's *Eros and Psyche*, and Ovid's *Pygmalion*. We will explain how these sources added important aspects that further shaped the trajectory of the theme, considering why they were important, and analysing which groups of sylph narrative they affected. In this way this chapter will broaden the scope of our enquiry and help map out the development of the sylph motif.

We will begin with an anthology of texts featuring elemental beings of the air collected towards the end of our period. The series *Voyages imaginaires, songes, visions, et romans cabalistiques* contains various fantastic texts gathered by Charles Georges Thomas Garnier at the end of the eighteenth century. In volume 34 we find four stories, one of which was *Le Comte de Gabalis* by Villars, originally published in 1670. Garnier summarises *Gabalis* in the 'Avertissement' to the volume in these terms:

La fable du roman du comte du *Gabalis* est simple: on suppose qu'un fameux adepte que l'on nomme le comte de Gabalis, vient trouver l'auteur du fond de l'Allemagne, où il faisait sa demeure; il croit avoir découvert en lui des dispositions naturelles aux grands mystères de la cabale [...] le comte de Gabalis a cinq entretiens avec l'auteur, où il lui débite d'un ton dogmatique & sentencieux de vraies extravagances.

Garnier presents *Gabalís* as a parody of cabbalistic rituals and texts, and uses it to rebuke superstition:

La meilleure manière de combattre les opinions singulières & les systêmes hardis des enthousiastes & des visionnaires, est d'employer contre eux le ridicule; c'est, à ce qu'il nous semble, le moyen le plus sûr de les réfuter & d'arrêter les progrès qu'ils peuvent faire auprès des esprits crédules & de ceux qui deviennent facilement dupes de leur imagination. [...] Il est étonnant combien les absurdes rêveries de la cabale avoient de partisans zélés, lorsqu'il publia son livre: cet ingénieux badinage ruina le crédit des Cabalistes, & dévoua leurs ridicules mystères au mépris public.

[...]

Cet ouvrage eut le plus grand succès.³²

Writing this around 1787-9, the years during which the 36 volumes of the *Voyages imaginaires* appeared, Garnier reflects on the status of this text produced over 100 years earlier. His assessment of its reception aligns with that of Henriette-Julie Murat's in *L'Esprit folet, ou le Sylphe amoureux* which was published much earlier, in 1714: 'il faut que je vous fasse souvenir du *Comte de Gabalis*. Il y a peu de gens qui n'ayent lu ce Livre'.³³ The first pages of Murat's tale are dedicated to Villars's text; she uses it to introduce her premise, and although, unlike Garnier's, hers is an account within a fictional work, she is complimentary about the content and style of *Gabalís*.³⁴

Gabalís was successful indeed with three editions within a few months, not including one or two illegal imitations.³⁵ More reprints appeared in 1671, 1684, 1691, 1700, and 1719 (with undated

³² Thomas Garnier, 'Avertissement', in *Voyages Imaginaires*, XXXIV (Amsterdam, Paris: Rue Hôtel Serpente, 1788), pp. i-viii (pp. i, ii, iii).

³³ Murat [1714], 'L'Esprit folet, ou le Sylphe amoureux', in *Avantures choisies, contenant 'L'Amour innocent persécuté', 'L'Esprit folet, ou le Sylphe amoureux', 'Le Cœur volant, ou L'Amant étourdy', et 'La Belle Aventurière'* (A Cologne, chez Pierre Marteau, 1722), pp. 1-46 (p. 2).

³⁴ It is worth noting that the pages in which Murat talks of *Gabalís* and Villars were subsequently removed when this text was republished anonymously as *Le Sylphe amoureux* (1730). This later version was included in volume 34 of *Voyages imaginaires* which we discuss here, but Garnier seems to be unaware of who its original author might be.

³⁵ Philippe Sellier, 'L'Invention d'un Merveilleux: *Le Comte de Gabalis* (1670)', in *Amicitia Scriptor. Littérature, Histoire des Idées, Philosophie. Mélanges Offerts à Robert Mauzi*, ed. by Annie Becq, Charles Proset and Alain Mothu (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1998), pp. 53-62 (p. 54); Kahn, 'Introduction', in *Le Comte de Gabalis, ou Entretiens sur les sciences secrètes*, ed. by Didier Kahn (Paris: Champion, 2010), pp. 11-148 (p. 117).

editions likely being published between 1671-1684).³⁶ Continuations were also published and reprinted in the eighteenth century, and the original text was reprinted as part of later collections such as *Bibliothèque de campagne, ou Amusemens de l'esprit et du cœur* (1735-1752), where it appeared in volume 2, and as mentioned above, in Garnier's *Voyages imaginaires*. It is difficult to establish exactly how many editions *Gabalís* had, but an estimate of twelve French editions proposed by Philippe Sellier is plausible.³⁷ The text's popularity continued throughout the eighteenth century, with copies found in various private collections, including the Marquise de Pompadour's.³⁸

Le Comte de Gabalis consists of five dialogues between a mysterious Count and a potential adept in which the former reveals various cabbalistic and alchemical mysteries. Didier Kahn explains that there is a long-standing convention within scholarship that this text was ambiguous: on the one hand it was understood as a parody of cabbalistic rituals, but on the other as one that divulges these secrets in earnest; Kahn, however, asserts that to its contemporary audience, the Count was purely ridiculed.³⁹ Garnier's assessment seems to be in line with Kahn's, but also states that it was surprising how many people at the time still believed in cabbalistic practices. Murat, however, suggests that: 'l'on n'a jamais bien sçu s'il avoit eu dessein de parler serieusement, en feignant de badiner, ou s'il ne pretendoit que badiner effectivement'.⁴⁰ *Gabalís* was undoubtedly read for entertainment purposes, and presumably due to its popular status, but it seems likely that some readers may well have been attracted to the text because they were intrigued by cabbalistic writings, and hence that they may have interpreted the contents with a mixture of fascination and amusement. Later narratives inspired by Villars's text which feature elemental beings perpetuate this ambiguity, which is not exactly the ambiguity disproved by Kahn; it is not necessarily to do with the

³⁶ Kahn, 'Introduction', *Le Comte de Gabalis*, pp. 117-9.

³⁷ Kahn, pp. 121-2; Sellier, 'L'Invention d'un Merveilleux', p. 54; For reference, Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* saw 72 French editions between 1761-1800.

³⁸ Philippe Bridard de La Garde, *Catalogue des livres de la bibliothèque de feu Madame la Marquise de Pompadour, Dame du Palais de la Reine* (Paris: Rue S. Jacques, Jean-Th. Herissant, Imprimeur du Cabinet du Roi, Maisson & Bâtimens de Sa Majesté, Jean-Thomas Herissant Fils, Libraire, même maison, 1765), pp. v-viii; Also available in electronic format via the MEDIANE database: <https://mediate-database.cls.ru.nl>.

³⁹ Kahn, 'Introduction', p. 40.

⁴⁰ Murat, 'L'Esprit folet', p. 3.

opposition between the rational and the esoteric, but of a mixture of motivations for being attracted to such texts – an important consideration to which we will return in chapter 6.

What is clear, is the fact that Villars's book had an impact on subsequent writers. In particular, many later texts were inspired by the theme of the four elemental beings – sylphs, nymphs, gnomes, and salamandres – which are discussed by the Count. When Edward Seeber drew up his list of works inspired by *Gabalís*, he demonstrated the lasting influence of Villars's text.⁴¹ Seeber calls his article 'Sylphs and Other Elemental Beings [...]', drawing attention to sylphs in particular: 'In the profusion of works that evolved from *Le Comte de Gabalis* sylphs figure predominantly; being in form the most nearly human, and by nature delicate, engaging, sensual, and given to appearing to mortals in agreeable dreams, they easily fit into situations involving young, inexperienced wives, lovelorn maidens, romantic revery, jealousy, and intrigue'.⁴² Michel Delon's anthology *Sylphes et Sylphides* (1999) takes a similar approach to the importance of *Gabalís* as well as the popularity of sylphs throughout the eighteenth century and in the first decades of the nineteenth century. In an article of 1985, Donna Scarboro discusses how *Le Comte de Gabalis* prompted the inclusion of sylphs in the 1714 version of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (the 1712 version was much shorter and did not feature them).

1.i. Two moments of myth creation

Le Comte de Gabalis and the elemental beings featured within it evidently had an impact on literary and broader cultural production throughout the long eighteenth century and beyond. Although Villars introduced these elemental beings to French literature, they were not his invention.

1.i.a. Paracelsus's original mythology

⁴¹ Seeber, 'Sylphs and Other Elemental Beings in French Literature since *Le Comte de Gabalis* (1670)', p. 80. In addition to Seeber's work, see Jean-Marie Roulin who traced the evolution of the sylphide as a literary character in 'La Sylphide, rêve romantique', *Romantisme* 58 (1987), pp. 23-38. Michel Delon's anthology *Sylphes et Sylphides* (1999), the 'Préface' is a useful overview of sylph representations in several eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century sources, pp. 7-31.

⁴² Seeber, p. 76.

It was the Swiss physician of the Renaissance, Theophrastus von Hohenheim, known as Paracelsus, who introduced these creatures to European thought, and while they appeared in several of his writings, it was his treatise *Liber de nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus* that concentrated on them specifically.⁴³ Paracelsus explains:

Those in water are nymphs, those in the air are sylphs, those in the earth are pygmies, those in the fire salamanders. These are not good names, but I use them nonetheless. These names have been given them by people who did not understand them. But since they designate the things and since they can be recognised by the names, I shall leave it at that. The name of the water people is also undina, and of the air people sylvestres, and of the mountain people gnomi, and the fire people vulcani rather than salamandri.⁴⁴

In this treatise he tells of the existence of four elemental beings, each corresponding to one of the Aristotelian elements. He explains that they are God's creations in the same way that men are, and describes their habitats, lifestyles and the ways in which they interact with humans. Paracelsus does this in a candid, matter-of-fact way, as though he were stating obvious truths, without attempting to provide any proof or use reasoning. Despite this, his 'facts' very clearly stem from imagination rather than empirical observation, and his text is more akin to a story, or even a fairy tale in its style.⁴⁵ He refuses to give appropriate names to the four elemental beings and instead opts for the names by which 'they can be recognised'. He claims that the names he uses are pre-existing ones, perhaps from folklore, Classical and Medieval mythology, and yet there is some suggestion (in the *OED*) that

⁴³ Didier Kahn explains this in detail in 'La question des êtres élémentaires chez Paracelse', in *Les Confins incertains de la nature*, ed. by Roberto Poma, Maria Sorokina, and Nicolas Weill-Parot (Paris: Vrin, 2021), pp. 213-37.

⁴⁴ Paracelsus, 'A Book on Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies, and Salamanders, and on the Other Spirits', in *Four Treatises of Theophrastus Von Hohenheim, Called Paracelsus*, ed. by Henry E. Sigerist (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 223-53 (p. 231).

⁴⁵ Kahn talks of this and of the fact that imagination is no longer a valid tool of knowledge acquisition in the long eighteenth century, in his introduction to the most recent edition of *Le Comte de Gabalis, ou Entretiens sur les sciences secrètes* (Paris: Champion, 2010), pp. 11-148 (pp. 115-6); Henry Sigerist mentions this particularity in 'Introduction', in *Four Treatises of Theophrastus Von Hohenheim, Called Paracelsus*, ed. by Henry E. Sigerist (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 215-22. This fairy tale-like style will resonate, although indirectly, with the prolific fairy tale production featuring sylph in the long eighteenth century.

he may have coined some himself.⁴⁶ In particular, the word 'sylph' appears to be Paracelsus's coinage.⁴⁷ The word 'gnome' seems to have appeared for the first time in another of his works, *De generatione hominis*.⁴⁸

In *Liber de nymphis*, Paracelsus describes elemental beings as creatures of a dual nature, possessing flesh and blood like humans, but also having supernatural abilities such as walking through walls.⁴⁹ They are both human-like and spirit-like, but do not fully belong to either species.⁵⁰ These creatures also do not possess a soul, and across Paracelsus's various writings which mention them, this is the one constant characteristic; so much so that *Liber de nymphis* initially appeared under the name *De quatuor hominibus non animatis*.⁵¹ This detail will prove to be a key plot element in subsequent texts where relations with sylphs and sylphides are given a convenient, innocent and even noble, motivation.

From the outset, the elemental being is positioned as an entity of an ambiguous nature. The naming of these beings as Paracelsus admits above is also problematic, and his struggle with nomenclature is symptomatic of the inherent difficulty in classifying elemental beings.⁵² An additional layer of complexity is added because Paracelsus changes his ideas about these beings across his various writings, which gives rise to inconsistencies and paradoxes in his logic and

⁴⁶ See the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*. All references are to the online edition (<https://www.oed.com/>). According to the *OED*, 'pygmy' is derived from the Classical Latin *Pygmaeus* (see the entry 'pygmy' at and 'gnome' is either a blunder for **gēnomus*, representing a Greek type, or an arbitrary invention by Paracelsus (see the entry 'gnome, n.2'); 'Salamander' comes from Greek and Latin, and 'vulcan' is a borrowing from Classical Latin relating to the god of fire, Vulcan, and volcanoes; 'undine' is from the Latin *unda* for 'wave', but possibly also coined by Paracelsus; similarly, 'sylvester' comes from the Latin *syl-*, *silvestris*, and is used by Paracelsus to mean 'spirit of the woods'.

⁴⁷ The *OED* explains the etymology of 'sylph' and suggests that although 'Littré conjectures a Gaulish origin, citing *svlfis* dative plural from *Inscr. Helvet. no. 117* of Orelli, who connects the form with *suleviæ* female tutelary spirits venerated in Gaul (see Holder *Altcelt. Sprachschatz s.v.*), it is possible that 'Paracelsus's word may be an arbitrary coinage, perhaps a blend of *silvestris* and *nympha*'.

⁴⁸ Kahn, 'La question des êtres élémentaires chez Paracelse', p. 8.

⁴⁹ Paracelsus, 'A Book on Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies, and Salamanders, and on the Other Spirits', p. 228.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Kahn, 'La question des êtres élémentaires chez Paracelse', pp. 22, 17.

⁵² Paracelsus refuses to address the difficulties that exists, in his own admission, in naming the elemental beings. His struggle becomes especially apparent from his other writings where he alternates repeatedly between names and characteristics, as shown by Kahn (2021).

descriptions. The result is a melange of various traditions, and Paracelsus's own mutable ideas. The definition of a nymph, sylph, gnome, or salamander appears to be elusive even within the original Paracelsian mythology of the *Liber de nymphis*.

It is not known for certain when Paracelsus wrote his treatise, but an estimate of 1536/1537 was put forward by Kurt Goldammer in 1980, and confirmed by Didier Kahn in 2021. Despite its Latin title, *Liber de nymphis*, it was originally written in German.⁵³ It was printed posthumously for the first time and as a separate treatise in 1566, and in 1567 it was published as part of a collection of Paracelsus's philosophical works, which was later translated into Latin and published in 1569.⁵⁴ Although popular in his time, the writings of Paracelsus were not very widely read in France. The diffusion of his encyclopaedic volume of works did not start there until 1560 and had already peaked by the beginning of the seventeenth century.⁵⁵ His medico-alchemical and philosophical works regained popularity in France due to their reedition in Latin translation in Geneva in 1658, but ultimately were of interest only to a small group of medical specialists and *chimistes*.⁵⁶

1.i.b. Villars's changes and resulting second mythology: erotization, emphasis on sylphs, and a nomenclature to convey lightness

This brings us back to Villars's *Le Comte de Gabalis*, which was published for the first time in 1670, over 100 years after Paracelsus's *Liber de nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris*; this is the second moment of myth creation. We know today that Villars's text was undoubtedly inspired by Paracelsus's treatise, but this was not an act of straightforward, direct borrowing. Villars first read *Liber de nymphis* in a French adaptation of 1583 by Blaise de Vigenère.⁵⁷ He subsequently read the full version of Paracelsus's text in its Latin translation of 1658.⁵⁸ Vigenère's version is a reduced and re-written version of Paracelsus's treatise, and it lacks many of the details present in Paracelsus's

⁵³ Sigerist, 'Preface', in *Four Treatises of Theophrastus Von Hohenheim, Called Paracelsus*, ed. by Henry E. Sigerist (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. vii-xii (p. xi).

⁵⁴ Sigerist, 'Introduction', p. 222.

⁵⁵ Sellier, 'L'Invention d'un Merveilleux', p. 54.

⁵⁶ Explained by Kahn in 'Introduction', p. 46; Sellier, 'L'Invention d'un Merveilleux', p. 54.

⁵⁷ Kahn, 'Introduction', p. 90.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

text. Villars's *Le Comte de Gabalis* clearly retains the key features of the original mythology, but the borrowing process is somewhat uncertain because both the summary and the original were read, and this makes for a jumbled transmission of ideas.

Some additional confusion surrounds other inspirations for Villars's text. Garnier, the editor of the *Voyages imaginaires* claims that Villars had borrowed the subject matter from an Italian text: 'Le fond cependant ne lui appartenait point; il étoit tiré d'un ouvrage de Borri, intitulé *Chiave del Gabinetto*'.⁵⁹ The alleged source text is Giuseppe Francesco Borri's *La chiave del gabinetto del cavaliere Giosepe Francesco Borri*. The reality is that this text appeared in 1681 and was a translation and plagiarism of Villars's *Gabalis*. Furthermore, Borri did not write this imitation, it was an anonymous plagiarist who combined Villars's text with Antoine Dilly's *De l'Âme des bêtes* (1676).⁶⁰ The fact that even the editor of *Voyages imaginaires* was confused about the real origin of *Le Comte de Gabalis* attest to the overall uncertainty surrounding the text.

What is clear is that *Gabalis* and the elemental mythology within it are a composite product, made up of various sources; Villars is working with components to create a second elemental mythology. Crucially, he makes changes to the original, Paracelsian myth. One significant modification is the sexualisation and eroticisation of the bond between elemental beings and humans, a union which for Paracelsus was primarily a spiritual, divine link. As Paracelsus put it, 'when they enter into union with man, then the union gives the soul. It is the same as the union that man has with God and God with man'.⁶¹ Villars's Count describes this union in not only more secular, but also more amorous, even bawdy ways; he refers to this link using a variety of terms such as: 'mariage', 'se marier', 's'allièrent', 'mariages philosophiques', 'il épouse une de nos filles', 'commerce des filles', 's'étant fait aimer aux filles des hommes', 'innocentes poursuites', 'aucun dégoût ne suit

⁵⁹ Garnier, 'Avertissement', p. iv.

⁶⁰ Kahn, 'Introduction', p. 123.

⁶¹ Paracelsus, 'A Book on Nymphs', p. 238.

jamais nos sages embrassements’, ‘les voluptés philosophiques’, etc.⁶² The sexualisation is playful and toys with the original premise of a spiritual bond. But it is this sexualisation that forms the core of the libertine aspect of Villars’s text, and is the axis around which many subsequent libertine narratives featuring sylphs will be centred.

A second important modification is the shift in emphasis from nymphs to sylphs in *Le Comte de Gabalis* compared to the *Liber de nymphis*. Nymphs are the elemental beings mentioned most frequently by Paracelsus and described as being the most suitable of all four types (nymphs, sylphs, gnomes, and salamanders), for entering into a union with humans. In *Gabalis*, the Count mentions sylphs first when explaining what elemental beings are. The words ‘syphe’ and ‘sylphide’ are mentioned 71 times in total, making them the most recurrent elemental being in this text.⁶³ But this is not all; while Paracelsus tells us that there are more females than males in the species of elemental beings, in *Gabalis* the male ‘syphe’ comes up 54 times, while its female counterpart ‘sylphide’, only 17 times. This unequal gender split seems to anticipate the fact that in eighteenth-century texts, the male character ‘syphe’ is more predominant than its female counterpart, the ‘sylphide’. In our corpus there are 28 texts in which male sylphs are either main or supporting characters, while only five feature sylphides as protagonists.⁶⁴ This outcome is unexpected given the Count’s emphasis on the advantages of liaisons between male human ‘sages’ and elemental females. The importance Villars gives to sylphs and sylphides will resonate with later authors working in a time when lightness had particular meanings, as we shall see. The ways in which Villars uses male and female sylphs and sylphides foreshadows the important gender implications pertaining to both the sylph and sylphide characters but also the genderisation of potential authorships and readerships.

⁶² Nicolas de Montfaucon de Villars [1670], ‘Le Comte de Gabalis’, in *Voyages imaginaires*, XXXIV, ed. by Thomas Garnier (Amsterdam, Paris: Rue Hôtel Serpente, 1788), pp. 3-123 (pp. 46, 61, 62, 66; p. 22; p. 35; p. 81; pp. 23, 24).

⁶³ ‘Nymphe(s)’, ‘ondin(s)’, ‘ondine(s)’ and ‘ondien(s)’ are mentioned 36 times, ‘salamandre(s)’ – 32, and ‘gnome(s)’, ‘gnomide(s)’ – 24.

⁶⁴ The other texts include a mix of sylphs and sylphides where they do not appear as separate individuals, but are used as a general group of elemental beings of air.

A third important change is a more precise use of elemental spirit nomenclature. While Paracelsus uses a range of terms to designate the four elemental beings in the *Liber de nymphis* and in his other writings that mention them, which creates some confusion, Villars no longer uses the other names for the same beings.⁶⁵ He fixes the allusive terminology and settles on 'sylphes', 'gnomes', 'nymphes' and 'salamandres'. Names such as 'sylvestres' or 'the forest people' which Paracelsus uses interchangeably with 'sylphs' are no longer present in Villars's text, and 'ondin' and 'ondiens' only appear twice, while 'nymph(e)s' is used throughout. Villars is largely responsible for introducing the word 'sylphe' into French literary use; he took the 'sylphis' from the Latin translation of Paracelsus's title.⁶⁶ Subsequent texts featuring elemental beings of the air refer to them as 'sylphes' and 'sylphides', while 'sylvestres' is discarded entirely. This is a meaningful linguistic choice. 'Sylvestre' derives from the Latin 'silva' ('forest') and the later 'sylvestre' of Middle French which signifies both 'fait de bois' and 'qui vit dans les bois'.⁶⁷ The etymology of this particular name for an elemental being of the air seems to anchor it too heavily in the realm of the tangible. In Paracelsus's mythology sylphs are 'cruder, coarser, longer and stronger' than nymphs and men, and this aligns neatly with the woody 'sylvestre' designation.⁶⁸ According to Paracelsus, the sylph is all the while spirit-like, and thus immaterial. The ambiguous status and ephemerality of this elemental creature is enhanced by Villars when he states that sylphs are made 'des plus purs atomes de l'air'.⁶⁹ They are made of a purer and lighter substance than humans and are superior in this way.

When making decisions about terminology and composition, Villars makes two important adjustments: the sylphs he creates which enter French fiction at this point shed their heavy, 'coarse' body and any woody association from Paracelsus. Villars then also refines the substance of which they are made. These modifications are important because in the long eighteenth century elemental

⁶⁵ Kahn, 'La question des êtres élémentaires chez Paracelse', p. 22.

⁶⁶ Kahn, 'Introduction', p. 126.

⁶⁷ 'Sylvestre', in *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* (online edition: <http://www.atilf.fr/dmf>).

⁶⁸ Paracelsus, 'A Book on Nymphs', p. 235.

⁶⁹ Villars, 'Le Comte de Gabalis', p. 28.

beings of the air are known for their lightness and malleability, properties which become crucial in many narratives featuring sylphs and sylphides.

Philippe Sellier describes the process in which Villars brought together different elements from various sources to create the mythology in his book as a type of bricolage; this is a useful concept.⁷⁰ Later authors made their own changes and adaptations, the most important of which will be discussed in this study.⁷¹ Before we delve into these, as well as other discussions outlined in the introduction, it is useful to examine two motifs stemming from Classical tradition which are of great relevance to the development of sylph narratives throughout the long eighteenth century. As this period was marked by a significant interest in Antiquity, it is by no means surprising that some of this should be echoed in literature featuring sylphs, but the myths on which we focus are themselves integrated into sylph mythology and offer new critical perspectives for viewing and understanding sylph texts, having not yet received scholarly attention.

1.ii. Two influences from Antiquity which shaped the journey of sylphs and sylphides in the long eighteenth century

Narratives featuring sylphs that appeared throughout the long eighteenth century were inspired by a variety of Ancient as well as Early Modern mythological, literary, and folkloric sources. While we will take a closer look at fairy tale and folklore influences on sylph texts in chapter 2, in the following section we will examine the role of two distinct Ancient sources on sylph narratives. Both of these circulated widely within the literary culture of the long eighteenth century.

1.ii.a. From Psyche and Eros, to Psyche and sylph: the stakes of female curiosity

The first is the Psyche and Eros myth, specifically as it is reimagined by La Fontaine in 1669 in *Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon*. La Fontaine's rewriting of the myth sees Psyche as the embodiment

⁷⁰ Sellier, 'L'Invention d'un Merveilleux', p. 54.

⁷¹ We will map out modifications of the motif and group the various roles that sylphs and sylphides acquire in the work of later authors in chapter 2, while in chapter 3 we will investigate the ways in which sylphs' physical appearance and moral conduct had evolved after Paracelsus and Villars. Chapter 5 will show the range of sylphic gender and sexuality present in later texts.

of the pathological curiosity which defines all women.⁷² Psyche's fatal curiosity about her husband's appearance is echoed in sylph narratives where mortal women desire to see their sylphic lovers, within the 'sylph as idealised lover' dynamic part of *sylphe amoureux* narratives. As mentioned in the introduction, the theme of the sylph as idealised lover or allegory of desire has been discussed at length by others. Here, by contrast, we will use a different angle for interpreting this important theme; we will suggest that the legacy of the Psyche and Eros myth helps to shed light on the links between curiosity and sylphs, and how this curiosity for the idealised sylphic lover may differ from Psyche's.

Within this groups of texts, the existence of the sylph is uncertain. Ambiguity permeates the narratives as the reader along with the main (human) characters oscillate between belief and disbelief, dream, delirium, or fantasy and reality. In Crébillon's *Le Sylphe, ou Songe de Mme de R*** écrit par elle-même à Mme de S**** (1730), Mme de R***'s 'encounter' is the example *par excellence* of such ambiguity. She repeatedly changes her mind about the reality of what took place: 'Oui, madame, ce sont des songes', she tells her correspondent only to contradict herself a few lines on: 'Oh! assurément, je n'ai pas rêvé', she states with some degree of resolve.⁷³

In a much later text, Nougaret's *Le Singulier sylphe* (1800), the Marquise de Folenville has the same difficulty, but unlike Mme de R***, she not only wonders whether her interaction with the sylph is a dream or reality but also doubts the nature of belief in elemental beings at its core:

Un être de mon espèce [says the billet she receives from the supposed sylph]. De quelle espèce est-il donc? Ce n'est pas, sans doute, un sylphe, un génie élémentaire; personne ne croit à de telles absurdités...⁷⁴

⁷² Neil Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 395, 399, 405, 406.

⁷³ Claude Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon [1730], 'Le Sylphe', in *Sylphes et Sylphides*, ed. by Michel Delon (Paris: Éditions Desjonquères, 1999), pp. 59-75 (pp. 58, 60); Stéphane Pujol talks of the importance of the reflexive dimension of sylphic dreams, that is 'une rêverie qui a quelque rapport avec le savoir et la connaissance', in his introduction to *Le Sylphe, 'Ce n'est qu'un songe'*, in *Crébillon fils. Œuvres*, ed. by Ernest Strum and Stéphane Pujol (Paris: Éditions François Bourin, 1992), pp. 35-39 (p. 38).

⁷⁴ Pierre Jean-Baptiste Nougaret [1800], 'Le Singulier sylphe', *Sylphes et Sylphides*, ed. by Michel Delon (Paris: Éditions Desjonquères, 1999), pp. 125-34 (p. 126).

Her dismissal of elemental beings as ‘absurdités’ which coexists alongside her fascination with them echoes the ways in which *Gabalís* may have also been read – with a mix of enthrallment and mockery – as we have suggested above.⁷⁵ What is more remarkable is that, even if the characters and the reader are made aware of the fact that they are dealing with a sylph, the question of belief replaces the question of epistemological status; questions of the form ‘what is it?’ are displaced by questions like ‘should I believe in this?’ and subsequently even belief might not make a difference – the reader can engage with and enjoy the text even if the sylphs are openly fake (that is, impersonated by husbands or suitors – like in *mari/amant sylph* narratives as we shall refer to them).⁷⁶

Texts where the sylph acts as a suitor to a mortal love interest by adhering to a framework of often gallant courtship, or where a sylphide engages in wooing and charming a male human will henceforth be referred to as *sylphe amoureux* plots. The prominence of this plot is significant among sylph narratives as a whole, and some texts use this term or part of it in their titles.⁷⁷ Whether an enigmatic visitor of an ambiguous status in a woman’s bedroom, a pretend *amant* or *mari sylphe*, or an explicitly *merveilleux* and pornographic representation, the sylph offers valuable insights into the workings of desire. Narratives where the male sylph acts as a love interest, ranging from idealised, gentle, and gallant suitor to pornographic ‘amant infatigable’, there exists a recurrent element – the female character’s desire to see the sylph. This wish is shared by sylph narrative heroines and the woman whose curiosity and overwhelming desire to see her lover famously led to her downfall – Psyche. This Classical heroine has a lot in common with the sylph narrative protagonist. Both are in love (and in lust) with the ideal being whom they cannot see, and they are both extremely curious

⁷⁵ For context on the coexistence of a significant interest in the esoteric alongside mainstream Enlightenment, see Dan Edelstein, ‘Introduction to the Super-Enlightenment’ in *The Super-Enlightenment: Daring to Know Too Much*, ed. by Dan Edelstein (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010), pp. 1-34. Although as we suggest, and will see increasingly throughout this study, in *Gabalís* and subsequent sylph narratives, we are not dealing with only coexistence, but intercalation and integration.

⁷⁶ *Mari/amant sylphe* stories are those where a husband or suitor goes to great lengths to impersonate a sylph with which his female love interest is obsessed, in order to ultimately ‘cure’ her of such obsession. Chapter 2 will provide an ample discussion of these.

⁷⁷ A term also mentioned in the introduction.

about him and eager to see him despite obstacles and admonitions. Eros and the sylph have things in common too as sylphs are often compared to the Classical god: 'deux ailes semblables à celles de l'Amour, dont ce beau sylphe était l'image'.⁷⁸ 'Amour' stands for Cupid which is the Roman iteration of the Greek god of love and desire – Eros.

Psyche, Eros, and sylphs are brought close in the late seventeenth century. Just over a year before Montfaucon de Villars's *Le Comte de Gabalis* was published for the first time in 1670, La Fontaine published his retelling of the Psyche and Eros myth in *Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon* in 1669, adapting it to the tastes of his time. Although his *Psyché* was not as great a success as he'd hoped, his retelling of the myth was disseminated through Molière and Corneille's *Psyché* which was first shown in 1671.⁷⁹ The latter was inspired by La Fontaine's text and saw a significant and enduring popularity.⁸⁰ Due to the proximity in their publication dates, it is unsurprising that some works produced subsequently contain references to, or elements from both Villars's and La Fontaine's texts. Yet what is worth our attention is the fact that there appears to be a significant number of texts which combine elements from both sources in a very particular and identifiable way: there is an overlap between the invisibility of sylphs and the interdiction to see Cupid. Furthermore, the resulting desire to see expressed by both sylph narrative heroines and Psyche becomes a central element common to these texts.

This is compellingly evidenced by Crébillon's Mme de R*** who opens her narrative with the prelude 'Vous savez que de tout temps j'ai souhaité avec ardeur de voir un de ces esprits élémentaires, connus parmi nous sous le nom de sylphes'.⁸¹ She does not say that she wishes to have a sylph for a lover, but simply that she wishes to see one. In the opera-ballet *Zélinde*, the female protagonist, Zirphé, cannot see the sylph who is her suitor because he possesses a magic sceptre

⁷⁸ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 101.

⁷⁹ See Pierre Clarac, 'Tableau chronologique', in *La Fontaine. Œuvres Diverses*, II, ed. by Pierre Clarac (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1958), pp. xxiii-l (p. xxxiv).

⁸⁰ Clarac, 'Tableau chronologique', p. xxxv.

⁸¹ Crébillon, 'Le Sylphe', p. 60.

which makes him invisible.⁸² She complains of this and asks him to show himself. Although the sylph uses his magic powers to transform trees and boulders into nymphs in an effort to impress Zirphé, that is still insufficient to make her happy – she insists on seeing the sylph.⁸³ Even Marmontel's Élise in *Le Mari sylphe* (1755-9) expresses the same desire. When Valoé informs her, towards the end of the story, that he has been granted permission to show himself to her by the king of sylphs, the young woman exclaims 'Ah! c'est tout ce que je désire'.⁸⁴ Her desire is not only strong but absolute. There are many more such examples in sylph narratives belonging to different genres.

The sylph's and sylphide's invisibility (in spirit form) is the perfect catalyst for a desire to see because it always leaves open the possibility that the sylphs may never show themselves. On the one hand, not seeing the object of desire means that imagination can run wild, continuously anticipating and embellishing, and on the other, being deprived of the possibility to see means being deprived of input from the queen of the senses, as it was perceived by the eighteenth century, that is – sight.⁸⁵ La Fontaine's Psyche herself complains: 'je ne puis appeler présence un bien où les yeux n'ont aucune part'.⁸⁶ This sentiment is echoed by Damis, one of the male characters being 'corrected' by the sylphide doll in Bibiena's *La Poupée* (1747): 'le bonheur ne saurait être parfait si les yeux n'ont aussi leur satisfaction'.⁸⁷ Without sight the picture is quite literally incomplete and this incompleteness leaves room for more to be desired; something to remain unfulfilled and thus, for attraction to survive.⁸⁸ '[L]e meilleur pour vous est l'incertitude, et qu'après la possession vous ayez toujours de

⁸² François-Augustin Paradis de Moncrif, *Zélinde, roi des sylphes* (Paris: Imprimerie de Jean-Baptiste-Christophe Ballard, 1745), p. 5.

⁸³ Moncrif, *Zélinde*, p. 6.

⁸⁴ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 119.

⁸⁵ Marine Ganofsky talks of this and of darkness and the night as enabling in *Night in French Libertine Fiction*, particularly see 'Nocturnal illusions: Dreams of sylph-like lovers', pp. 111-48.

⁸⁶ Jean de La Fontaine, 'Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon', in *Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon, suivies d'Adonis, poème* (Paris: Imprimé au Louvre par P. Didot L'Aînée, 1797), pp. 1-306 (p. 58).

⁸⁷ Jean Galli de Bibiena, [1747], *La Poupée*, ed. by Henri Lafon (Paris: Éditions Desjonquères, 1996), p. 60.

⁸⁸ Thierry Viart makes a point about desire being dulled by boredom. For him desire's survival is based on two principles – the change of partners and the need for imperfect beauty or alternation between beauty and ugliness in 'Le Sylphe ou les lumières d'une allégorie', p. 116. Both of these principles stem from the notion that change and variety are crucial to the propagation of desire.

quoi désirer', says Eros to the curious Psyche, and by doing so addresses the very nature of desire.⁸⁹ This particular point regarding the act of seeing the lover as diminishing desire only appears in La Fontaine's version of the story, and not in Apuleius's original tale. Like her seventeenth-century reimagining, the 'original' Psyche 'could touch and hear [her husband]', but 'he was invisible to her'.⁹⁰ However, Apuleius's Psyche does not ask to see her husband until her sisters incite her to do so out of envy. Her curiosity does not stem from within but is induced by her sisters who convince her that her husband is a monster. As a result of her sisters' manipulation, she becomes curious, but out of fear rather than desire to see the beauty of her lover.

This suggests that the importance of sight and its link to desire in sylph literature was an element introduced in the late seventeenth century by La Fontaine.⁹¹ Not only is it then picked up by sylph narrative authors, but it also becomes a central part of their plots thereby reiterating the close link between sight and desire in the imagination of the long eighteenth century.

In some cases, the parallel between the sylph narrative heroine and Psyche is made overtly explicit by the characters themselves. In Mercier de Compiègne's pornographic tale *Les Veillées du couvent ou le Noviciat d'amour* (1793), the female protagonist, Agnès, who has sex with a sylph in his invisible form, desperately wishes to see her lover. The sylph warns her that :

Si je deviens visible, c'est ôter à nos plaisirs ce qu'ils ont de piquant [...] Jouis, mais ne cherche pas à voir celui qui te fait jouir; cette connaissance peut te devenir fatale [...] tu serais la victime de ton indiscrete curiosité, comme le fut jadis l'orgueilleuse Psyché.⁹²

What is of note here is that although at first glance it appears that the sylph is referring to the Ancient myth (and this is true in part), he also emphasises the link between invisibility and

⁸⁹ La Fontaine, 'Les Amours de Psyché', p. 60.

⁹⁰ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, ed. by P.G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 82.

⁹¹ Additionally, the Ancient myth does not depict Psyche's curiosity as a female foible; a fatal curiosity as a universal female vice is an aspect introduced by La Fontaine and echoes contemporary views. See Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity*, p. 406.

⁹² Claude-François Mercier de Compiègne, *Les Veillées du couvent ou le Noviciat d'amour* (Saint-Cyr, Paris: Rue du Coq St.-Honoré, n. 120, 1793), p. 113.

heightening desire and consequently pleasure, which is not part of the Apuleian story. Instead, the sylph's warning echoes La Fontaine's Eros, who tells Psyche about the importance of desire remaining in part unfulfilled in order to endure. In the end, however, Compiègne's sylph does show himself and Agnès is astonished by his beauty but she is not punished.⁹³ Instead, she asks this perfect lover to share his attentions with her best friend, and while the sylph is both dumbfounded and touched by this request, he suggests that he find another sylph for the friend.⁹⁴ Both couples presumably live happily ever after.

In most examples, the sylph is unable to appear in a physical form for various reasons, and the female character is extremely eager to see him. As Mme de R*** puts it, the wish to see the sylph is an ardent one. Invisibility or the impossibility of sight has an additional role in propagating desire – it is part of the progression through the senses. The sylph lover will gradually become audible, palpable and only sometimes – and most frequently as a last step – visible. This gradation, beginning with the initial introduction of the sylph, the anticipation of seeing him, and him finally becoming 'complete', creates a build-up of both narrative and sexual tension. In this way, gradation is revealed to be one of the mechanisms which generate and enhance desire. Gradation is a familiar motif in libertine narratives and its significance within this context is discussed by Michel Delon.⁹⁵ Yet a sylph rather than a human lover offers an additional level to the progression, a new possibility afforded due to his esoteric (or pretend-esoteric) abilities. This is one of the ways in which a sylph seduction narrative differs from one where the conquest is carried out by a human. Another alteration to 'traditional' gradation in sylph narratives manifests itself in the incremental materialisation of the sylph through the use of luxurious gifts in a carefully staged process which we will analyse in chapter 4.

⁹³ Compiègne, *Les Veillées du couvent*, pp. 128-9.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-8.

⁹⁵ Delon, *Le Savoir-vivre libertin* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2000), pp. 83-4.

Occasionally, the role of sight in sylph narratives is not unequivocal. It is not always clear what part the appearance of the sylph plays in inciting attraction and desire.⁹⁶ The young Persian woman, Zaïde, in Louise de Bossigny, comtesse d'Auneuil's *Le Génie familier, nouvelles persanes, traduites de l'Arabe* (1709), having read books about sylphs, is desperate to acquire one of these elemental creatures.⁹⁷ She too wishes to see the sylph who seems to be present in her bedroom: 'montrez-vous à moi, je vous en conjure, car je me sens capable de vous aimer avec constance, si vous êtes aussi aimable qu'on vous dépeint'.⁹⁸ In this case the interest in beauty, and a beauty promised by books, is explicit. Crébillon's Countess follows the same trend when she tells her sylph: 'Comment voulez-vous, [...], que je puisse assurer de ma tendresse quelqu'un que je ne connais pas, que je n'ai pas vu', although she is already fond of him.⁹⁹ She is concerned that he may be ugly. When the sylph finally appears and is 'le plus bel homme qu'il soit possible d'imaginer: des traits majestueux et l'ajustement le plus galant et le plus noble', Mme de R*** is fully won over.¹⁰⁰ 'The image of the sylph is able to succeed where the idea of the sylph failed to convince', Natania Meeker tells us.¹⁰¹ Thus, for some of these women, it is not just sight itself but also the aesthetic quality of what is seen, that is, a beautiful object, that is necessary for desire to be truly felt, to be ultimately overcome by it, and to surrender to it. This reflects Enlightenment's need to record experience and observation, but does so in an elevated way: it is not a case of simply logging what is seen but also appreciating it aesthetically.

An example of the opposite is found in Martin de Choisy's *Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y en a peu* (1778). In this three-act comedy, the protagonist Élise also desires to see the sylph who courts her although his actual appearance does not matter to her: 'Ah! Si je puis vous voir, qu'importe sous

⁹⁶ We use 'appearance' to encompass a sylph or sylphide's entire *tendue* including physical traits, clothes, hairstyle, and accessories. These characteristics and their roles will be discussed in chapter 3.

⁹⁷ Auneuil, 'Le Génie familier', p. 233.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁹⁹ Crébillon, 'Le Sylphe', p. 73.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁰¹ Meeker, 'Libertine Lucretius', p. 237.

quels traits/Le cœur embellira l'image'.¹⁰² This is an idealised representation of love and desire and more in accordance with the type of moralising text this is – *Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y en a peu* is a theatrical adaptation of Marmontel's *moral* tale. La Fontaine's Psyche asks what 'it' is that she is meant to love when she cannot see it; she explicitly uses 'que' instead of 'qui': 'Que voulez-vous que j'aime?'.¹⁰³ She therefore highlights just how abstract the 'object' of love or desire is when it is invisible. In response, Cupid encourages her to use her imagination to produce the object that she can love: 'Un mari [...] que vous vous figurerez à votre mode, et à qui vous donnerez telle sorte de beauté qu'il vous plaira.'¹⁰⁴ The idea that the *actual* traits of the lover are not that important and can be created or re-fashioned in the mind's eye, reminds us of the role of imagination and its power to create a desirable image, or at least a pleasant veneer. When his heroine barely manages to catch a glimpse of her sylph suitor, Nougaret obligingly (but somewhat elliptically), tells us that 'elle parvient à sentir pour lui un tendre penchant: nouvelle preuve qu'on n'a pas toujours besoin de voir pour aimer, et que toutes les causes de l'amour n'ont point été définies'.¹⁰⁵

The sylph's invisibility is a vector for imagination; it enables the creation of a beautiful object of desire in the woman's mind while also leveraging the power of imagination, through the means of the senses, in order to increase desire. There is no limit to the physical perfection of the imagined being, and it is ultimately irresistible in every conceivable way. Above all, the image created is mutable (like the sylph's own elemental body), and as such it is in constant response to changing preferences, becoming a potentially unlimited fuel for desire. The invisibility possessed by the sylph is a property which can simultaneously explore both angles of the question of whether desire stems from within or whether visual stimuli from without are more important, and whether love or lust can

¹⁰² Choisy, *Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y en a peu* (Montpellier: Imprimerie de Jean-François Picot, Seul Imprimeur du Roi, Place de l'Intendance, 1778), p. 53.

¹⁰³ La Fontaine, 'Les Amours de Psyché', p. 52.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Nougaret, 'Le Singulier sylphe', p. 132.

operate if they are not satisfied. The sylph's invisibility therefore offers a supplementary dimension for exploring this.

Looking at sylph narratives in which female curiosity features so prominently, it is useful to situate this within contemporary readings of curiosity. From the 1600s, curiosity was no longer viewed solely negatively (or as sin); perceptions could be positive, negative, and neutral.¹⁰⁶ However, female curiosity specifically was seen as a fatal flaw that defined womankind; this is the case in discourse as well as narrative, as Neil Kenny has shown.¹⁰⁷ In sylph stories, this is not the case. The women we saw in our examples may be curious and desirous to see their sylphic lovers, but this is not a curiosity for which they are punished or shamed unlike in many contemporary cautionary tales. On the other hand, this curiosity feeds into an obsession with sylphs which does need to be corrected. This is a theme which we will discuss in detail in chapter 2.

Although curiosity and the desire to see in sylph narratives are not limited to women, male characters experience different variants of curiosity within the scope of their interactions with sylphides; this is a combination of a sexual curiosity and an effeminate curiosity about objects.¹⁰⁸ In Bibiena's *La Poupée* for instance, even before Philandre realises that the doll he sees in a boutique is a sylphide, he becomes completely obsessed with her. It is true that he approaches the doll as an object of craftsmanship but his admiration and drive to see more are caused by the beauty of a female rather than simply the perfection of an artfully created object: 'Je soulevai en devant un mantelet blanc de gaze qui lui couvrait le plus galamment du monde la taille et les bras. Je demeurai immobile en voyant sa petite gorge'.¹⁰⁹ He carries on discovering parts of her body, and lifts her dress: 'Je la [la robe] soulevai pour voir si on avait encore travaillé les pieds et la jambe avec le même

¹⁰⁶ Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 384, pp. 386-7, p. 391.

¹⁰⁸ Kenny explains that on the whole, from the seventeenth century, for men, curiosity could be positive as it drove them to acquire knowledge, and to strive to become better equipped for their roles in society, unless they were plagued by a curiosity which was similar to that of women – gossipy, chasing after the latest fashions, etc. Sexual curiosity about women could also be dangerous in men, p. 22.

¹⁰⁹ Bibiena, *La Poupée*, p. 31.

art'.¹¹⁰ He admits that curiosity compels him to continue: 'Malgré tout mon ravissement, je fus encore engagé par la curiosité à pénétrer plus loin'.¹¹¹ When he brings the doll home, he confesses that looking at, and touching her produces 'une émotion de volupté'.¹¹² This curiosity is violent, almost savage: 'Les miens [les yeux] prenaient plus de feu à chaque instant, et enfin ils devinrent d'une curiosité trop ardente, trop attentive, trop indiscrete'.¹¹³ Here the desire to see is explicitly linked to sexual desire. The male protagonist wishes to uncover more and more of the sylphide's body even if the sylphide is perfectly visible, unlike the male sylphs in the above examples. In an unexpected twist towards the narrative's finale, the sylphide briefly disappears (a final contribution towards the enhancement of desire through gradation). Philandre finds himself prey to the same ardent desire to see as the female heroines when the progression reaches its pinnacle: 'je me meurs, daignez vous montrer'.¹¹⁴

In Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux* (1772), it is the male protagonist's curiosity that acts as the driving force for the adventures that ensue. While the desire to consummate his union with the Devil-sylphide Biondetta plays a central part in this text, Alvare's curiosity is not at all linked to sexual desire or to the wish to see the sylphide. Instead, it is driven by a thirst for knowledge of the occult. Alvare goes so far as to state that finally receiving this knowledge would be more satisfying than being with a woman: 'jamais rendez-vous galant ne fut attendu avec tant d'impatience'.¹¹⁵ After a discussion with the master-of-the-occult-like Soberano (who is undeniably a nod to the character of Gabalis), Alvare finds himself 'plein de curiosité et affamé d'idées nouvelles'.¹¹⁶ His curiosity is violent and ravenous, and takes over any other interests or feelings 'je n'eus plus d'autre passion'.¹¹⁷ He is

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 33.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 36.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 108.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 135.

¹¹⁵ Jacques Cazotte [1772], 'Le Diable Amoureux: Nouvelle Espagnole', in '*Le Diable Amoureux* suivi de la 'Prophétie' de Cazotte, rapportée par La Harpe, de ses 'Révélations', d'extraits de sa correspondance ainsi que d' 'Ollivier' et de l' 'Histoire de Maugraby', ed. by Georges Décote (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1981), pp. 33-125 (p. 37).

¹¹⁶ Cazotte, 'Le Diable Amoureux', p. 36.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

desperate like a capricious child imploring Soberano to instruct him: 'je veux, comme vous, être en commerce avec eux [les esprits]; *je le veux, je le veux*' (our emphasis).¹¹⁸ His curiosity is a burning one, much like the desire to see experienced by female heroines of sylph narratives: 'Vous ne pouvez concevoir la vivacité du désir que vous avez créé dans moi: il me brûle...'.¹¹⁹ Whether it is a desire to see or a desire to know, ardent curiosity is at the core of sylph narratives featuring both female and male human protagonists.

The legacy of the Psyche and Eros myth and its reimagining in sylph narratives offers a useful new perspective on the sylph seduction theme. It shows that for both men and women, curiosity, the desire to see, and sexual desire are closely linked. The additional significant point that transpires is the importance of imagination when it comes to female protagonists.

1.ii.b. Sylphs and the Pygmalion myth: creative imagination in sylph texts

By the second half of the seventeenth century in France Ovid's work was wide-spread within cultural production, and was extending into the new literary circles; the influence of *Metamorphoses* on authors including Jean Racine and Jean de La Fontaine was significant.¹²⁰ For this reason, considering one of Ovid's myths as a possible influence on sylph literature is highly pertinent.

The potential to craft an object of desire using the mind is found in another Classical myth – that of Ovid's Pygmalion. There are striking similarities between this Ancient myth and the same group of sylph narratives as discussed above – *sylphe amoureux* stories – where humans become infatuated with sylphs. In Ovid's story, a young sculptor is disillusioned by women and their failings and so does not wish to marry:

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Helena Taylor, *The Lives of Ovid in Seventeenth-Century French Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 1, 5.

Lorsque Pygmalion eut veu leur débauche, & leur impudicité monstrueuse, il eut horreur de tant de vices que la nature a donnez aux femmes, resolut de vivre seul, & vécut long-temps sans se vouloir marier.¹²¹

Instead, he crafts a statue of a female of such supreme beauty and perfection that he falls in love with it. He treats it as though it were alive by dressing it, adorning it with jewellery, offering it gifts, and caressing it. During Venus's festival, Pygmalion goes to the goddess's temple and asks her to give him a girl *like* his statue (not daring to request that the statue become real), but Venus guesses his real wish and grants it: when Pygmalion returns home, he finds that the statue comes to life as he kisses it.

The myth of Pygmalion was extremely popular during the eighteenth century, with 142 version of it appearing at the theatre and in art between 1500 and 1900, more than half of which were created between 1700 and 1800, as cited by Andreas Blühm.¹²² Amelia Rauser usefully contextualises this:

That statues could live was an idea that fascinated artists, philosophers, and scientists in the eighteenth century. [...] It is not surprising, then that the story of Pygmalion, which placed both desire and the living statue at the core of aesthetic experience, was very prominent in eighteenth-century theatre, dance, and visual art.¹²³

The idea of breathing life into inanimate matter attracted many thinkers of the day, including the philosophers Pierre Bayle, Julien Offray de la Mettrie, and Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, who 'tous réfléchirent à la capacité de donner la vie à un objet inanimé; ce qui est devenu, à son tour, une source de questionnement pour les universitaires au présent, tout comme la relation érotique entre

¹²¹ This is an extract from late-seventeenth-century French translation of Ovid's text: *Les Métamorphoses d'Ovide, traduites en françois, par Mr Du Ryer, De l'Académie française, Avec des explications à la fin de chacune fable. Augmentées en cette dernière édition du Jugement de Pâris, & de la Métamorphose des abeilles*, II, ed. and trans. by Du Ryer (Paris: Loyson, au Palais, dans la Galerie des Prisonniers, au Nom de Jesus, 1676, 1676), p. 364. We choose this translation as it is chronologically closest to the publication of Villars's *Gabalès* (1670) and hence gives us an opportunity to examine a version which will have been available to those also reading *Gabalès*.

¹²² Christina Ferando, 'Illusion de surface: percevoir la « peau » d'une sculpture', *Images Re-vues. Histoire, anthropologie et théorie de l'art*, 13 (2016), pp. 1-29 (p. 1).

¹²³ Rauser, *The Age of Undress. Art, Fashion, and the Classical Ideal in the 1790s* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2020), p. 15.

le créateur et son sujet animé'.¹²⁴ While the role of the senses was a recurrent preoccupation in philosophy, the literature of the long eighteenth century also takes an interesting route, and as seen above, the sense of sight plays an important role in sylph stories. When it comes to narratives featuring sylphs, the esoteric dimension as well as these elemental creatures' alchemical property of transmutation or shapeshifting, allow for new possibilities to experiment with the senses. A sylph's ability to become immaterial puffs of smoke, or entirely invisible, then to rematerialize as a being of (supple) flesh and blood, makes an oscillation between hearing, sight, and touch possible like no other fictional setting. The idea of breathing life into inanimate matter may stem from Antiquity, but in sylph narratives it finds new developments: from reading a text that inspires one to fantasise about sylphs, to the sylph coming to life, the power of literature, and that of the creative imagination comes to the fore in a way that plays on the Classical idea, while taking it down a new avenue.

While acknowledging the importance of the Pygmalion myth in the intellectual landscape of the long eighteenth century, similarities between statues and sylphs (both popular in this period) come to light, despite the seemingly glaring contradiction inherent in their very nature – the former is mass and solidity, the latter lightness incarnate. The relationship of the statue-creation with its maker, and with the senses is highly complex, and the sylph-as-statue model helps shed light on novel aspects of the paradigm.

The above lines from Ovid suggest that the creation of Galatea stems from Pygmalion's disappointment with (human) women. This resonates with the premises of many sylph texts, where the heroine is either disillusioned, repulsed, or even terrified by the attentions of men, and as a result renounces them. In the Pygmalion myth the (male) sculptor carves 'une statuë d'yivoire si admirable, & si belle, qu'il ne peut naistre de plus belle femme', a being of ideal beauty with which he falls in love.¹²⁵ In Marmontel's *Le Mari sylphe*, to name but one example, the man-weary Élise

¹²⁴ Ferando, 'Illusion de surface', p. 11.

¹²⁵ Ovid, *Les Métamorphoses*, p. 364.

borrowing the idea of the sylph from books she reads, but assembles ('elle avait composé') the image of what she desires from familiar, mythological and real-world attributes.¹²⁶ As 'il n'est pas facile de se peindre un esprit', she does what many eighteenth-century fiction authors did when creating and describing their sylphs – a bricolage, to recall Sellier's term once more.¹²⁷ The reflexive, 'se peindre', highlights the fact that the sylph is her own creation, produced within herself, for herself. The result is a product of her imagination, and it is this construction of her mind which seduces her: 'telle était la chimère d'Élise; et son cœur séduit par son imagination, soupirait pour ce qu'elle avait feint'.¹²⁸ Élise composes her ideal sylph lover, a being superior to human men, much like Pygmalion carved out his Galatea: 'elle avait composé un corps fait à plaisir: une taille élégante et noble, une figure animée, [...], un teint d'un éclat et d'une fraîcheur [...] de beaux yeux bleus et languissants'.¹²⁹ Like other women protagonists of sylph texts seen above, Élise acts like a female Pygmalion. While Pygmalion works the marble to create his Galatea, these women carve their ivory sylphs in their minds.

If painting was considered an intellectual art, sculpting was a much more physical one which dealt in weight and mass, volume and density. Sculpting is a process which requires physical effort, potentially causing fatigue and sweat.¹³⁰ This is why the metaphor of sculpting is particularly useful: the link between the physicality of the sculpting process and the bodily effects of the sylph fantasy are apparent. Such effects are especially evident in pornographic sylph narratives, such as Mercier de Compiègne *Les Veillées du couvent ou le Noviciat d'amour* (1793), and *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne* (1798/1799) attributed to Andréa de Nericiat, as we will see below.

In texts like Marmontel's, this creative power is belittled and dismissed as mere fantasising. The reality is that for many of the women protagonists, imagining the sylph is an intellectual act, an act of invention, like that of a writer. In various sylph narratives female characters do a lot of this

¹²⁶ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 100.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 101.

¹²⁹ Ibid, pp. 100-1.

¹³⁰ Ferando, 'Illusion de surface', p. 12.

writing-sculpting, though this process is neither clearly delineated nor necessarily given much attention within the texts themselves. It is, however, highly illuminating and it helpfully problematizes the question of creativity and its ownership, a matter to which we will return in chapter 6, when assessing the intellectual agencies of fictional characters, as well as the natures of authorships of sylph texts from a gender perspective.

The process of selecting, combining, and inventing to ultimately create something new, something that does not exist, cannot be reduced to mere fantasising. Putting together the most aesthetically pleasing elements to create 'ce qui n'a pas de modèle parmi les hommes', is a quintessentially creative process and evokes another Classical example.¹³¹ According to Cicero, Zeuxis composed his Helen of Troy by selecting the best features of several of the most beautiful models, as no single woman was beautiful enough to represent Helen – the most perfect woman in the world. Like Zeuxis, those imagining sylphs are creating a composite image of an ideal beauty. The notion of composition is key not only due to its role in the creative process, but also because it captures the very nature of sylphs, that of elemental beings composed of 'the purest particles of air', as Villars's *Gabalès* explained. This establishes a connection with the (al)chemical origins of these creatures.

Breathing life into inanimate objects is inherently an alchemical transformation. But when it comes to sylphs, the additional level of meaning stems from original Paracelsian mythology, which, as already mentioned, stipulates that elemental beings are only able to acquire a soul if they interact with humans (a detail which persists in various eighteenth-century texts, with the meaning of 'intercourse' between these being and humans becoming increasingly sexualised). The sylph can be brought to life by magic of some sort, but is given a soul through love (or, more likely, lust).

In Bibiena's story *La Poupée*, another aspect of the Ovidian myth comes into play. The doll sylphide that is purchased by Philandre is a miniature Galatea, except that the trajectory is reversed:

¹³¹ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 103.

Philandre starts off by admiring and becoming attracted to the finished product: 'l'objet de mon admiration et de mes désirs', 'une palpitation de cœur qui me rendait maladroit et tremblant.'¹³² As he undresses her at home, he notices the way her 'skin' feels: 'Mais que devins-je en sentant l'attouchement d'une peau unie, fraîche et délicate?'.¹³³ This life-like skin almost scares him, but even more importantly it provokes desire: 'il se glissa dans mes sens une émotion de volupté'.¹³⁴ This is evocative of Mme de R***'s iconic exclamation in Crébillon's *Le Sylphe*: 'Ah!... vous êtes palpable!', which takes place at the very end of the story and combines extreme delight at the prospect of touching (and making love to) the sylph, with a sense of fright at both the esoteric transformation of voice to flesh, but also of the more mundane fact that suddenly there is a *palpable* man in the woman's bedroom.¹³⁵

The use of sculptural language by Bibiena approaches his description of the doll sylphide to art historical discourse: 'on a su [...] lui sculpter une petite gorge avec autant de perfection que la nature aurait pu former', 'ses bras étaient bien tournés, et ses petits doigts étaient séparés et fuselés'.¹³⁶ Philandre talks about the ways in which the doll seems alive: 'malgré leur immobilité, plein de cette grâce vivante qu'on admire dans la jambe et le pied d'une jolie femme qui a l'une et l'autre bien tournés', '[I]a couleur, qui imitait si bien le teint naturel, pouvait donner quelque chose d'animé au visage et à la gorge'.¹³⁷ Such considerations about shape, surface, and colouring echo contemporary thinking on the success and meaning of a sculpture. They speak to both an aesthetically pleasing effect, but also an anxiety about art coming to life and on a smaller scale, what the contents of the surface or 'skin' might conceal within.¹³⁸

¹³² Bibiena, *La Poupée*, pp. 34, 35.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 36.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Crébillon, 'Le Sylphe', p. 75.

¹³⁶ Bibiena, *La Poupée*, p. 32.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

¹³⁸ Mary Beard and John Henderson, *Classical Art. From Greece to Rome* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 130; Ferando, 'Illusion de surface', pp. 1-3.

Another layer of meaning is added to this when thinking about the parallel between the gradual transformation of the sylphide and the gradual ‘thawing’ of Galatea.¹³⁹ While neither Philandre nor Pygmalion can consummate their love for their objects of desire right away (one is an inanimate statue, the other a small doll), they both experience the deprivation and frustration resulting from the impossibility of their desire, while remaining enveloped in a highly sensual experience. Interactions with the doll and statue are limited to an interplay between the senses of sight and touch (and in Philandre’s case, hearing), but the culmination – the sexual act – is impossible until the statue-doll becomes a real woman of flesh and blood.

A remarkable example where a sylph is, for some time, a genuine statue is found in Marie-Magdelaine de Lubert’s tale *Le Prince Glacé et la princesse Étincelante* (1743). Here, at one point in the narrative the sylph prince Miriel is transformed into a statue of Adonis. While in this state, he observes and falls in love with Étincelante; crucially, although immobile and unable to speak, ‘il me restoit l’usage des yeux & du sentiment: je vous vis dans vos jardins’.¹⁴⁰ The supernatural of the tale allows an experiment to take place, toying with, or testing out, some of philosophical theories of the period. This type of engagement with intellectual debate within seemingly frivolous literature such as sylph tales, highlights the complex nature of these texts. This sylph-statue is able to have feelings, and the princess in turn falls in love with the statue: she feels ‘l’admiration & la joie de reconnoître dans le prince des sylphes, la statue charmante de l’Adonis qui lui avoit inspiré des sentimens si tendres’.¹⁴¹ Although Étincelante did not create this sylph-Adonis statue, her developing an attraction to it mirrors the Pygmalion myth, while simultaneously adhering to the theme of women developing unhealthy obsessions with sylphs: ‘la guérir du fol entêtement qu’elle venoit de prendre pour une

¹³⁹ From Ovid’s myth: ‘Il s’assit auprès d’elle, il la caresse, il la baise, mais il luy sembla en la baisant qu’elle avoit de la chaleur. Il recommence aussi-tost à la baiser, il luy touche aussi-tost le sein, & sentit que l’yvoire s’amollissoit; Que sa dureté cedoit à ses doigts comme feroit de la cire que le Soleil amollit, & que la main qui la manie, trouve capable de toutes formes’, p. 367.

¹⁴⁰ Lubert [1743] ‘Le Prince Glacé et la princesse Étincelante’, in *Le Cabinet des fées, ou collection choisie des contes des fées, et autres contes merveilleux*, XXXIII (Amsterdam, Paris: Rue Hôtel Serpente, 1786), pp. 105-83 (p. 131).

¹⁴¹ Lubert, *Le Prince Glacé et la princesse Étincelante*, p. 131.

statue qui représentait Adonis’ – a pattern seen in many sylph narratives, which we will discuss in chapter 2, though here the obsession is with a sculptural rather than literary representation.¹⁴²

1. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the original Paracelsian myth was, to a large extent, a work in progress, as Paracelsus modified his description of elemental beings in his different writings, and in *Liber de nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus* there are some lacunae.

Additionally, the mythology that Paracelsus envisioned presupposes a borderline, ambiguous state of being for these elemental creatures. These two components make the first mythology a malleable one, and this is used by Villars in the second moment of myth creation when he modifies the motif so as to fit in with the interests and views of his time. At this point (that is in the late seventeenth-century) two myths from Antiquity (which circulated among many others during this time) had a particular affinity with sylphs and sylphides, and influenced the ways in which this motif developed further. Thus, elements of the Psyche and Eros, and the Pygmalion myths were found within the details of sylph narratives, as we have shown. In these ways, the flexibility inherent in sylphs and sylphides allowed them to be shaped by various sources. In the next chapter we will follow the further ramifications of the motif, and the ways in which Ancient and Modern sources were combined by authors to create their own versions of sylphs.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 107.

CHAPTER 2. RAMIFICATIONS, REPETITIONS, AND REINVENTIONS: THE EVOLUTION OF THEMES AND CATEGORIES OF SYLPH NARRATIVES

We will start this chapter by looking at how sylphs are used as secondary characters in fairy tales as well as other *merveilleux* stories, expanding the scope beyond what has been done so far.

Addressing Yves Citton's interchangeable use of sylphs and other supernatural beings when he talks of such stories: 'l'univers des fées, des sylphes et autres esprits élémentaires', we will aim to establish what made authors opt for sylphs instead of or alongside other *merveilleux* beings such as genies or fairies.¹⁴³ We will aim to establish what shape sylphs took compared to these beings, and will try to untangle the sylph from the rest of the fantasy tradition to quantify its literary and cultural value. We will investigate sylphs as secondary characters first because it is useful to begin with the depiction of sylphs within this well-established framework and see how authors chose to build on and move away from existing traditions. It will also enable us to establish some chronological trends. This will be a valuable foundation for the rest of this chapter.

We will then turn to another sub-group of narratives unified by a plot where a sylph-obsessed woman is courted by a pretend sylph suitor who 'cures' her of this obsession. With the help of these texts, we will investigate the negative perception of women's fantasising about sylphs, and men's seemingly positive role of deceiving these women back to sanity. By doing this we will uncover the inner workings of obsession, complicity, and manipulation in such scenarios.

Finally, we will analyse a selection of outlier texts which do not fit into the groups or themes put forward by previous scholars or this study. These examples will not only underscore the richness and scope of cultural production featuring sylphs, but will also demonstrate that malleability is a core sylph characteristic which gives rise to diversity in representation as well as signification.

¹⁴³ See Citton's article 'La science illuministe du merveilleux. Entre roman véritable et roman de magie', *Féeries. Etudes sur le conte merveilleux, XVII^e-XIX^e siècle*, 6 (2009), pp. 21-46 (p. 21).

2.i. Sylphs as secondary characters: reinvention and layering of elements

Amid the wealth of literature featuring sylphs, there is a group of texts in which these elemental creatures act as aids to human characters. This theme has not been articulated to any significant extent in critical material. There is some suggestion in Michel Delon's anthology of what he calls 'l'idée de l'ange gardien', in a passing remark in relation to three sources. A larger group of texts will be investigated here in more detail in order to not only trace the new variations in representations that the sylph character enables, but also to assess the purpose of using sylphs instead of other existing types of helper characters.¹⁴⁴

Supernatural beings had an enduring presence in Classical mythology and fairy tales, usually as external influences on the other characters, as benevolent guides or aids, as well as evil foes. When late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors start using sylphs in their work within the fairy tale genre, they do so in different ways. Depictions of sylphs as supernatural helpers are often influenced by existing traditions featuring fairies, genies, etc., while new representations are also created by using old as well as new elements and combining them in original ways; each reimagining is different to the others, even if they are all part of a similar theme. Below we will discuss a few such cases, and try to understand why authors chose to include sylphs at all, or why they replaced fairies with sylphs. Are sylphs and fairies interchangeable as suggested by Citton's 'contes de fées ou de sylphes'?¹⁴⁵ If not, then what are the qualities and by extension, advantages, of sylphness?

Unlike 'sylphe', 'sylphide', or 'sylphes', the word 'fées' has its own entry in the *Encyclopédie*.

The Abbé Edmé-François Mallet defines them as:

[Des] termes qu'on rencontre fréquemment dans les vieux romans & les anciennes traditions; il signifie une espece de *génies* ou de *divinités* imaginaires qui habitoient sur la

¹⁴⁴ Delon 'Préface' in *Sylphes et Sylphides*, pp. 16, 18. He refers to Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock* (1717 in its final version, translated into French in 1728), the anonymous *New Sylph, or, Guardian Angel* (1788, translated into French in 1795), and Barthélemy Imbert's *Les Deux sylphes* (1781).

¹⁴⁵ Citton, 'La science illuministe du merveilleux', p. 21.

terre, & s’y distinguoient par quantité d’actions & de fonctions merveilleuses, tantôt bonnes, tantôt mauvaises. [...]

Leur origine vient d’Orient, & il semble que les Persans & les Arabes en sont les inventeurs, leur histoire & leur religion étant remplies d’histoires de *fées* & de dragons. [...]

Les *fées* de nos romans modernes sont des êtres imaginaires que les auteurs de ces sortes d’ouvrages ont employés pour opérer le merveilleux ou le ridicule qu’ils y sement, comme autrefois les poètes faisoient intervenir dans l’épopée, dans la tragédie, & quelquefois dans la comédie, les divinités du Paganisme¹⁴⁶

This definition talks of the role of fairies in contemporary literary production, while also mentioning the origins of these beings in Middle Eastern culture. The author talks about their magic powers, and the possibility of being good or evil, but he does not describe their properties in any detail. Fairy powers and attributes are open to interpretation, and can vary, as there is no strictly defined remit.

The genie is another recognisable, archetypal helper in *merveilleux* narratives. The Chevalier de Jaucourt’s *Encyclopédie* article ‘génie’ usefully contextualises what this signified at the time. The entry explains that these beings originated in the Roman tradition and that they were not only ‘d’une nature très-subtile’ but also ‘leur corps étoit de matiere aérienne’.¹⁴⁷

Jaucourt’s definition also states that sylphs, gnomes and fairies took on the role of ‘génies’, following their previous incarnations ‘de démons, de manes, de lares, de lémures, de pénates’.¹⁴⁸ From a chronological perspective, sylphs, gnomes, and fairies are a later stage in the evolution of the genie. This description makes it clear that the properties of traditional ‘génies’ are the same as some of those of elemental beings of the air, which is why it is not surprising that in many eighteenth-century texts the sylph takes on the role of ‘génie’.

2.i.a. From genie to sylph: the development of the sylph-servant character

¹⁴⁶ Mallet, ‘Fées’, *Encyclopédie*, VI, p. 464.

¹⁴⁷ Jaucourt, ‘Génie’, VII, p. 581.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

In Legrand's 1719 play *Le Roy de Cocagne*, abundance in the Medieval myth of the land of plenty is explained by the presence of elemental beings: 'le Peuple elementaire,/Qui sans se faire voir met ses soins à nous plaire/A son heure réglée à travailler pour nous'.¹⁴⁹ Legrand respects the Paracelsian premise that each of the four elements is inhabited by a corresponding being, but the emphasis is on the role of these creatures to procure comfort and pleasure for the inhabitants of Cockaigne: 'Et quoy qu'entr'eux souvent'ils se fassent la guerre,/Ils sçavent s'accorder pour nous faire plaisir/Et nous servir icy selon notre desir'.¹⁵⁰ Elemental beings provide food: sylphs hunt, nymphs fish, gnomes prepare, and salamanders cook it.¹⁵¹ The production of pleasure extends to satisfying sexual desire: nymphs take the shape of flowers which grow in the gardens of the kingdom and they can be chosen, plucked, and enjoyed.¹⁵² In Legrand's reimagining all desires are satisfied by means of elemental beings. He weaves elements of a newer mythology into the framework of an older, familiar myth, and includes details that echo the Classical tradition (such as the link between nymphs and plants). His explanation of the magic of Cockaigne by means of elemental beings, as simplistic as it may be, uncovers a mystery for the reader, and creates a different, composite mythology which manages to captivate.

This tactic of blending together different traditions while also making some smaller changes, or introducing new details, appears in several eighteenth-century fairy tales. In Henri Pajon's *Eritzine et Parelín* (1744), the sylph has impressive magic powers but his role is only as servant and guide. He is a 'génie' who is passed on from a 'cabaliste' father to his daughter, to be used as an aid. In this text, elements of 'cabale' and elemental mythology are not mocked, but integrated into the story

¹⁴⁹ Marc-Antoine Legrand, *Le Roy de Cocagne* (Paris: Pierre Ribou, Seul Libraire de l'Académie Royale de Musique, Quay des Augustins, à la quatrième Boutique en descendant le Pont Neuf, à l'Image Saint Louis, et Jaques Ribou, Fils, à l'entrée de la ruë du Hurpois, du côté du Pont Saint Michel, aux trois Pommes de Pin, 1719), p. 17.

¹⁵⁰ Legrand, *Le Roy de Cocagne*, p. 17, pp. 17-8.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

alongside other, more established features of the fairy tale genre.¹⁵³ Eritzine's sylph-servant appears when she reads some 'mots mystérieux que je ne comprenois pas' inscribed on 'des tablettes d'émail'.¹⁵⁴ The sylph who presents himself 'me demanda ce que je désirois'.¹⁵⁵ He has supernatural abilities and is physically attractive: features which are more or less true to Paracelsian mythology and to Villars's version. But although powerful, he is not technically superior to the human (but royal) Eritzine; he attends to Eritzine's needs and this is made explicit through the repeated use of words belonging to the semantic field of service: 'appeler le Silphe qui m'avoit déjà si bien *servie* [...] je *commandai* au Silphe', 'votre père m'avoit mis à *votre service*, & et je vous aurois toujours *obéi*' (all italics – our emphasis).¹⁵⁶ Towards the end of the tale, we learn that Eritzine's father, presumed dead, was in fact transformed into an immortal sage.¹⁵⁷ As such, he has sylphs serve him: 'une armée de Silphes sous la figure d'hommes, marchoit sous mes ordres', 'quatre Silphes qu'il avoit à perpétuité à son service'.¹⁵⁸ This type of servitude is unlike the superior position in which sylphs are placed by Villars or Crébillon. In *Gabalès*, the words 'servir' or 'service' do not appear a single time, and the relationships between humans and elemental beings are not of master and servant, but an exchange of knowledge, or a 'marriage' in exchange for immortality.

In Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis's *Les Veillées du château, ou Cours de morale à l'usage des enfans* (1784), the sylph Zumio is also a servant; at first, he attends to an evil fairy who casts him out, and then decides to attach himself to a young male genie, Phanor.¹⁵⁹ Although the sylph does have the role of a subordinate, the two are companions. Unlike in other examples discussed, where the sylph is nameless, in Genlis's tale 'sylphe' appears only five times, whereas his name 'Zumio' figures

¹⁵³ Texts such as Corneille's *La Pierre philosophale* (1681) which is a theatrical adaptation of *Gabalès*, or another of Legrand's plays, *L'Amour diable* (1708) amongst many, parody and satirise the themes of *cabale*, alchemy, elemental beings, etc.

¹⁵⁴ Henri Pajon [1744], 'Eritzine et Parelín', in *Le Cabinet des fées*, XXXIV (Genève: Barde, Magnet & Compagnie Imprimeurs-Libraires, Paris: Cuchet, Libraire, 1786), pp. 10-57 (p. 31).

¹⁵⁵ Pajon, 'Eritzine', p. 31.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 37.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁵⁹ Genlis, *Les Veillées du château*, III (Paris: Imprimerie de Lambert et Baudouin, Rue de la Harpe, près de S. Côme, 1784), pp. 273, 276.

in 74 instances. The author also grants him a love interest whose 'âme est honnête & pure, digne enfin de l'attachement d'un Sylphe', but he retains his secondary character status.¹⁶⁰

This motif extends even into the Marquis de Sade's work: in *Histoire de Juliette, ou les Prospérités du vice* the sylphe Alzamor is a servant to Durand, a sorceress who summons him whenever she needs him to carry out tasks (which in this case are rape and murder). He retains the exotic 'z' in his name, but the '-mor' syllable is possibly a nod to 'mort'.¹⁶¹ Sade's novel is a violent, pornotopic fantasy, and his use of the *merveilleux* twists the traditional tropes to produce a dark fairy tale.

The sylphs in these examples have taken on subservient roles which are part of previous traditions, while retaining some key sylphic characteristics of their own mythologies. In this way, an older mythology is reimagined, making it interesting to the reader once again.

2.i.b. The sylph as a storyteller

Another staple presence in (fairy) tales is the character of the storyteller. In some texts this role becomes attributed to the sylph who is a version which is less part of the framework outlined by Paracelsus or Villars, and more in line with *contes orientaux*. This reimagining of the storyteller as sylph, with use of sylphic abilities, resembles the ways in which the genie or aid in fairy tales is recast as a sylph, as we saw above. *Le Génie familier, nouvelles persanes, traduites de l'Arabe* (1709) by Louise de Bossigny, comtesse d'Auneuil, seems to be modelled on Antoine Galland's *Les Mille et une nuits*, which started coming out in 1704 (until 1717). Auneuil's text is a *mise en abyme* where the sylph acts as the narrator.¹⁶² The sylph here is the storyteller often found in oriental tales, but also

¹⁶⁰ Genlis, *Les Veillées du château*, pp. 313-4.

¹⁶¹ Delon, 'Présentation', p. 14.

¹⁶² What we see here is *enchâssement* not typical of fairy tales, which are normally linear narratives. Catherine Ramond talks about this story within a story aspect of some eighteenth-century fairy tales as well as of their theatricalisation in 'Théâtralité et merveilleux dans le conte de la première moitié du XVIII^e siècle', in *Le Conte Merveilleux au XVIII^e siècle. Une Poétique Expérimentale*, ed. by Regine Joman-Baudry and Jean-Francois Perrin (Paris: Editions Kimé, 2002), pp. 343-69.

retains the ‘sylphness’ of the original mythology: he is an esoteric being with supernatural powers. The story begins with a young woman who has read texts about sylphs and sylphides, is bored and ‘souhaita avec empressement d’en avoir un [sylphe]’.¹⁶³ The following few pages set out a conversation and an agreement between the young woman and the sylph, a framework which is very similar to Crébillon’s (although this is an earlier text, the motif is clearly recognisable). However, what follows is the sylph’s narration and we never return to the opening ‘young woman and sylph’ episode. The storytelling role of the sylph also appears in the anonymous *Le Sylphe gallant et observateur* (1800-1), but the series of stories recounted are more akin to Diderot’s *Les Bijoux indiscrets* (1748), than an oriental tale in the full sense. The narrator of the stories, Bel-Rose, is granted the power to ‘non-seulement tromper les maris et séduire les femmes, mais encore, savoir les aventures les plus secrètes des dames’.¹⁶⁴ Bel-Rose’s transformation into the ‘sylphe observateur et conteur’ is owed to a magic ring given to him by a benevolent devil: ‘l’anneau dont la vertu magique faisait tout voir et deviner, avait en même temps le pouvoir de rendre invisible et de transformer en sylphe celui qui en dirigeait le brillant’.¹⁶⁵ The properties of Bel-Rose’s magic ring are extremely similar to those of the one owned by Mangogul, the sultan in Diderot’s *Bijoux indiscrets*.

2.i.c. The sylph guardian as ‘guardian angel’: a representational shift from literalness to symbolism

Sylphs as a type of ‘guardian angel’ are also a recurrent motif in a range of sylph narratives, and unlike the almost uniform representation of sylphs as lovers in seduction plots, these depictions show variety.

In Marie-Anne Robert’s *Les Ondins* (1768), the sylph is not a main character in the story, but a ‘génie’ who acts as guardian to Tramarine and Verdoyant’s son, Nubécula: ‘un sylphe de mes amis

¹⁶³ Auneuil, ‘Le Génie familial, nouvelles persanes, traduites de l’Arabe’, in *Les Chevaliers errans, et Le Genie familial. Par Madame la comtesse D*** (Paris: Pierre Ribou, Quay des Augustins, à la descente du Pont-Neuf, à l’Image Saint Louis, 1709), pp. 231-88 (p. 233).

¹⁶⁴ Anonymous, *Le Sylphe galant et observateur, contes anti-moraux, dédiés à la confrérie très-morale des auteurs du Mercure et compagnie Par F. G***, un de leurs abonnés* (Paris: Imprimerie de Tiger, 1800-1), p. 29.

¹⁶⁵ Anonymous, *Le Sylphe galant et observateur*, pp. 80, 31.

s'est chargé de veiller sur la conduite de votre fils'.¹⁶⁶ The sylph is both a protector from the dark powers of an evil wizard who kidnaps the prince, and a guide who ensures that his behaviour is 'good'. Unlike the servant sylphs discussed above, this character assumes the role of a guardian who does not submit to the will of the human over whom he is watching. The sylph as guardian is a recurrent recasting of the original myth.

In Barthélemy Imbert's *Les Deux sylphes* (1781), the two sylphs are supernatural, *merveilleux* beings who act as 'invisibles sentinelles'.¹⁶⁷ They remain nameless throughout the story, a fact which makes them less like individual entities, and more akin to a sense. One of them is good and the other evil ('bon/mauvais génie'), reflecting Jaucourt's *Encyclopédie* definition of 'génies': 'on pensoit qu'il y avoit un bon & un mauvais génie attaché à chaque personne. Le bon génie étoit censé procurer toutes sortes de félicités, & le mauvais tous les grands malheurs'.¹⁶⁸ This supports the idea that the sylphs are an external influence, 'des anges gardiens,' to pick up on Delon's formula cited earlier, which act upon the heroine. However, while the *Encyclopédie* definition goes on to state that 'le sort de chaque particulier dépendoit de la supériorité de l'un de ces génies sur l'autre', in Imbert's story it is up to the young woman to decide how to proceed.¹⁶⁹ She determines her own fate rather than being externally influenced by whichever sylph is stronger. The sylphs, just like thoughts and judgements in the human mind, are 'right' or 'wrong', and crucially – internal. The sylph-genies here are a metaphor for internal conflict, a battle between conscience and temptation. They promise to uphold their duties no matter what: 'Ah! Le devoir est notre loi suprême/Et nous vous servirons, Zilla,/malgré vous-même!' (our emphasis).¹⁷⁰ The fact that they will assist Zilla without her even intending or realising it suggests that the sylphs are part of her subconscious. Their additional role is

¹⁶⁶ Marie-Anne Robert [1768], 'Les Ondins, conte moral' in *Voyages imaginaires*, XXXIV (Amsterdam, Paris: Rue Hôtel Serpente, 1788), pp. 159-316 (p. 233).

¹⁶⁷ Barthélemy Imbert, *Les Deux sylphes* (Paris: Jean-François Bastien, Libraire, Rue du Petit-Lion, près de la Comédie Française 1781), p. 20.

¹⁶⁸ Imbert, *Les Deux sylphes*, p. 45; Jaucourt, 'Génie', VII, p. 581.

¹⁶⁹ Imbert, *Les Deux sylphes*, p. 45

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

to protect female youth and beauty: 'veiller sur votre [Zilla's] jeunesse', and to cure 'Les vapeurs d'une Belle'. They explain that 'Sans être vus au milieu des familles/Nous assistons aux naissances des filles [...]'.¹⁷¹ This aspect of their role is a familiar one; in Pope's *Rape of the Lock* (translated into French in 1728) sylphs famously appear as guardians of women's virtue.

The Sylph (1779) by Georgiana Cavendish, translated into French by Pierre Le Tourneur in 1784 as *Le Sylphe* (and from which we will quote in French as discussed in the introduction), portrays another guardian sylph who acts as a guide and protects the female protagonist, Julie, from the dangers of the big city (London). Here too the sylph watches over the heroine and 's'intéresse à [sa] bonne conduite'.¹⁷² She calls him her 'céleste Mentor' and 'mon ange tutelaire'.¹⁷³ When he first presents himself in writing, he uses traditional elemental mythology and even Rosicrucianism, to explain who he is.¹⁷⁴ He communicates with Julie through the medium of letters and remains anonymous, ensuring that he is not viewed by Julie as a male (i.e. as a love interest), but rather as a helpful entity. Although it is obvious that the sylph is male (the correspondent refers to himself using male articles and Julie uses male pronouns when writing about him to her sister), he tries to remain un-sexed. He also puts distance between himself and Julie as he only interacts with her in writing, until the brief encounter they have at the masquerade ball.¹⁷⁵ He becomes an intentionally disembodied and genderless voice which guides her but is ostensibly detached from self-interest (he does not wish to be seen as a suitor and instead wants to protect her). The sylph is her wisdom and strength when she does not know how to proceed and is, in a way, an extension of her own moral judgement and goodness. Julie and the reader are aware of the fact that he is not a supernatural being and that it is an unknown human 'friend' who plays the role of a sylph: 'revêtu du caractère du

¹⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 18, 21, 20.

¹⁷² Georgiana Cavendish [1778], *Le Sylphe*, Première Partie, trans. by Pierre Le Tourneur (Genève, Paris: Mérigot, jeune, Libraire, quai des Augustins, au coin de la Rue Pavée, 1784), p. 165. As explained in the introduction, will use the French translation throughout this study because it is the version that most of the text's French audience will have read.

¹⁷³ Cavendish, *Le Sylphe*, Première Partie, p. 175; Ibid., Seconde Partie, p. 1.

¹⁷⁴ Cavendish, Ibid., Première Partie, p. 169.

¹⁷⁵ Cavendish, *Le Sylphe*, Seconde Partie, pp. 76-7.

Sylphe'.¹⁷⁶ In the denouement, we learn that the sylph is indeed a human being, a childhood sweetheart (Woodley), who poses as the sylph but also as the suitor with whom Julie was in love (Tonhausen). This is an unusual case of *double-déguisement*, in which not only the moral sense of right and wrong, but also the skill needed to navigate the pernicious ways of eighteenth-century London society are symbolised by the immaterial, esoteric sylph and ultimately embodied in an enigmatic, yet completely human form.

In another text, the sylph-guardian is an imaginary being, a helper desperately sought by the heroine in Dorat's poem *Le Sylphe par excellence* (1780):

Je voudrais bien à tems pouvoir être avertie
Par quelque sylphe alerte, ou quelque bon génie,
Qui se tînt toujours là, prêt à me secourir
Dans certains hazards de la vie.¹⁷⁷

While she asks for external input, she is encouraged to find the sylph within herself, that is, to listen to her conscience:

Et c'est?... Qui donc enfin?... Qui? votre conscience.
Oui, c'est là le vrai sylphe; il n'a jamais trompé.¹⁷⁸

These interrupted lines are oversaturated with omissions and question marks which invite the female addressee of the poem, alongside the reader, to focus their attention on the idea that just like fantasy cannot replace reality, help cannot always come from without. There has to be an internal resource which must be cultivated. The educational and moralising overtones are pronounced in this, and in the other examples discussed above.

The sylph guardian as the embodiment of conscience attests to the affinity between the immaterial moral compass and an entity which is famed for being incorporeal. The choice to render

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., Première Partie, p. 228.

¹⁷⁷ Claude-Joseph Dorat, 'Le Sylphe par excellence', in *Journal Encyclopédique ou Universel*, II, Partie III (Bouillon: Imprimerie du Journal, 1780), pp. 475-7 (p. 477).

¹⁷⁸ Dorat, 'Le Sylphe par excellence', p. 477.

conscience in sylph form points to the legacy of previous mythologies associating genies or angels with conduct guidance. As external agent, it is more effective and helpful to characters in need, and potentially more engaging and tangible for the reader. The sylph as guardian in the literal representations and the sylph as conscience metaphor each engage with the question of whether the decision to behave in a certain way comes from within or without.

The four texts analysed here were published in 1768 (*Les Ondins*), 1778 (*Le Sylphe*), 1780 (*Le Sylphe par excellence*), and 1781 (*Les Deux sylphes*). The sylph in *Les Ondins* is a literal guardian, who could also be classified as a helper, and so we may also include this representation in the first category discussed earlier. As the century progressed, the way in which the sylph guardian was starting to be depicted shifted towards a much less explicit embodiment of conscience and towards symbolic representation. This move from a literal to a more figurative representation suggests that by this later point sylphs and sylphides were a recognisable trope; as readerships became more familiar with these elemental beings, they did not always require explanations about what the creatures were, or a list of their supernatural abilities. This is an important shift which shows that the status of sylphs and sylphides in the culture of the long eighteenth century was evolving chronologically, towards something of a cultural object, a matter to which we will return in chapter 6.

By looking at groups of representations where sylphs play the roles of genie-like helpers, storytellers with magic abilities, or guardians whether truly esoteric or symbolic, we can see that these authors cast the sylph in roles that already existed in the literary tradition, but did so with changes and new details giving these characters a veneer of novelty and contemporaneity. What also unites these examples is that all of these depictions see sylphs as secondary characters. Unlike in the seduction narratives featuring the sylph or sylphide as idealised lovers, which are often the focus of more in-depth scholarly attention, these secondary characters show a lot more variation. They are outside the courtship dynamic, and are not part of the main pair of characters (sylph/sylphide and

human love interest). When we analyse sylphs as secondary or supporting characters, we see the sheer range of literary invention within sylph and sylphide representations; it seems that placing these characters outside the amorous conquest plot offers more scope for experimentation. It is not necessarily the sylph as idealised lover, but the sylph as secondary character who is more comprehensively reinvented.

Marie-Anne Robert's *Les Ondins* which we have discussed above is noteworthy for an additional reason: it is a distinguishing example of a hybridisation involving elemental beings which goes beyond the modifications we saw thus far. Here, the sylph acts as helper and guardian to a young child. This in itself is not a strange representation, but elemental mythology is intercalated with other traditions and sources, including Classical mythology and even Dante's *Commedia*.¹⁷⁹ In her story Robert integrates, re-writes, and adds a sequel of sorts to the Psyche and Eros myth; she has one of the princesses marry Eros in a faithful union, while her sister marries the nymph-prince, Verdoyant. Eros and Verdoyant meet and speak to each other, and so Classical and elemental mythologies, embodied by these characters, interact explicitly within the same narrative framework. Robert's reimagining of elemental mythology is peculiar.¹⁸⁰ On the one hand, it remains very faithful to Paracelsus, integrating Christian monotheism into her fictional world; the nymph-king himself explains to Tramarine (who is a pagan) that:

[...] il est vrai que je jouis de l'immortalité, mais je tiens toute ma puissance d'une seule divinité que nous adorons tous, & qui est celle qui a formé tout ce qui est dans l'univers; c'est par sa toute-puissance que nous régnons sur les ondes.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ The episode in Tramarine and Verdoyant's travels through the Kingdom of Waves where they meet humans who have died and talk to them about their fates is remarkably reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. But the author introduces an unexpected element derived from elemental mythology: one of the souls is condemned to drinking 40 pints of 'thé élémentaire' per day (p. 239) in order to become purified. In this underwater purgatory, sinners' punishments are proportional to their crimes just like in Dante, and the obligation to drink the 'elemental tea' is not only completely foreign to Dante's Christian universe, but is also an original invention by Robert, which does not feature in any other sylph narratives.

¹⁸⁰ Robert, 'Les Ondins', p. 283.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 222-3.

On the other hand, Robert makes a notable change to the original rules: elementals are immortal and are not allowed to marry humans: 'il ne nous est pas permis de nous unir à une mortelle'.¹⁸² Although the sylph who appears in Robert's story has a very limited role, elemental mythology here permeates the entire narrative and is combined with other traditions to create a distinctive final product.

This type of weaving of old and new, or Ancient and Modern elements was an important means for writers to establish themselves within a tradition and the literary landscape as a whole. While many authors mixed traditions, as we saw, for female writers of fairy tales like Robert or Auneuil as well as several others, this tactic had additional purposes. By using complex genealogies to include Classical and Medieval folklore, the *conteuses* aimed to equalise the prestigious foreign past and the more modern French present, and by doing so unsettled the hierarchisations of genre.¹⁸³ They created sophisticated tales, for a more refined, elite reader.¹⁸⁴ Stories that included elements from Classical myth and Dante, as well as the modern mythology of elemental beings like that of Robert, convey the erudition of the writer but also expect a high level of knowledge of the reader. By using sylph mythology in their tales, then, these authors inscribe their work in modernity and distinguish themselves from others. The inclusion of sylphs in their tales may also have been an attempt to capitalise on the appeal of the motif.¹⁸⁵

As shown earlier, it was not just the *conteuses* who used a bricolage of different elements in their texts. Echoing contemporary authors such as Pope or Diderot also elevated the status of writers' own work. In chapter 6 we will examine how this referencing expands into sylph texts which mention or cite other sylph texts, and what this self-referentiality can tell us about the place of sylph narratives in the broader literary production of the eighteenth century.

¹⁸² Ibid., pp. 225-6.

¹⁸³ Helena Taylor, *Women Writing Antiquity: Gender and Learning in Early Modern France* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 177-8.

¹⁸⁴ Taylor, *Women Writing Antiquity*, p. 196.

¹⁸⁵ Helena Taylor explains how Villedieu 'made her brand name by "cashing in" on the popularity of historical fiction set in antiquity', *Women Writing Antiquity*, p. 104.

All of the above subgroups of texts are united by both a degree of recycling of existing motifs, and reinvention. The new details added, modifications made, and the blending of several traditions (old and new) give rise to the ramification of the sylph motif such that although trends and groups of representations can be identified (as above), divergence creates offshoots. These are key characteristics of the corpus of sylph texts and we suggest that these texts are a useful tool in themselves to tracking how motifs might have evolved in the landscape of eighteenth-century literary production. The next part of this chapter will focus on a very different group of sylph representations which shares another important characteristic of the corpus – repetition.

2.ii. The *mari/amant sylphe* narrative: a male performance of female fantasy

The motif of the sylph as husband or suitor in disguise is found in several texts including, among others, Marmontel's *Le Mari sylphe* published in his *Contes moraux* (1755-9), the anonymous *Le Sylphe amoureux* (1730), Fagan and Panard's *Le Sylphe supposé* (1730), as well as Quétant's *L'Amant sylphe, ou la Féerie de l'amour* (1783), which is a theatrical adaptation of Marmontel's story.¹⁸⁶ These narratives share a common premise: a young woman (recently married, widowed, or disabused by the world of male seducers or men in general), is pursued by a man (her husband, potential husband, admirer, or lover), who *pretends* to be a sylph. Edward Seeber noted the theme of the husband or lover as a pretend-sylph in his article 'Sylphs and Other Elemental Beings in French Literature since *Le Comte de Gabalis* (1670)', but he merely acknowledged the popularity of this motif and gave some examples of texts; his analysis is limited to one instance.¹⁸⁷ The *mari/amant-sylphe* theme is an important sub-genre and is worth investigating more closely, not only due to the popularity of the

¹⁸⁶ As we have already pointed out earlier in the thesis, the text of *Le Sylphe amoureux* (1730) is identical to that of *L'Esprit folet, ou le Sylphe amoureux* (1714) by Murat (except the its first three and a half pages which serve as an introduction), and we therefore believe that the anonymous text is in fact by this author.

¹⁸⁷ Seeber points out on p. 77 of his 1944 article that 'The effectiveness of this device [the husband or lover pretending to be a sylph] presupposes that the woman is already convinced of the reality of sylphs; this usually results from her having read *Le Comte de Gabalis*.' This statement is true, but we shall see that what takes place in these narratives is a lot more nuanced and with greater consequences than simply the influence of reading.

motif, but because of the psychological machinery which makes this ruse both necessary and successful, and what it tells us about the complex dynamics between (upper-class) women and men.

Playing the part of the sylph typically comes in several stages which are shared by all of the texts above. The female protagonist, a young aristocrat, is obsessed with sylphs and is not interested in human men. Her suitor or husband plays the role of the sylph, usually beginning his performance by manifesting himself as a voice which has nocturnal *entretiens* with the woman. Next, things more tangible than words, or ones which appeal to the senses in other ways, are offered. These include written poetry, fragrances diffused around a room or contained in *flacons*, jewellery, dresses, musical instruments, concerts, and even embellishments in the garden. The 'prétendu sylphe' is gallant, he knows how to impress with things of the latest fashion (*le dernier goût*) and to enhance the *féerie* of the interaction. Finally, the sylph manifests himself in a corporeal form – as the husband or the suitor. There is a build-up of tension and excitement by means of gradation which takes the female character and the reader from the sylph fantasy implanted through reading, to the 'disembodied' voice, then to the objects and agents which 'touch' the various senses, and ultimately – to the tangible thing, the culmination of the narrative – the sylph becomes man.¹⁸⁸ The suitor will gradually charm his lover, always leaving her awaiting the next visit and desiring more. In so doing, he not only increases the level of *féerie*, but also manipulates her desires, escalating them step by step: 'Le Sylphe en est encore aux simples entretiens nocturnes [...] je vais la faire passer de surprise en surprise; j'ai rassemblé ici tout ce que les arts peuvent produire de plus approchant de la Féerie....'.¹⁸⁹ In all cases, the *mari/amant sylphe* story has a 'happy ending' because the young woman is, in one way or another, no longer interested in sylphs and embraces the role and behaviour which is expected of her.

¹⁸⁸ Chapter 4 of this study will return to these gift-giving rituals to show how the esoteric sylph becomes transmuted into various luxurious objects in a process that is economically, sensually, and emotionally transactional.

¹⁸⁹ Quétant, *L'Amant sylphe*, p. 6.

2.ii.a. Women's pathological obsession with sylphs: 'sylphism'

In this type of narrative, women – aristocratic women in particular – are described as obsessed with sylphs. This fixation is often seen as an effect of reading books or seeing theatrical productions featuring sylphs, with heroines subsequently spending a lot of time and energy thinking up, and thinking about the sylphs; this is invariably perceived as something negative. The spread of reading in the eighteenth century, and the consumption of novels by female readers in particular was seen as a danger to both health and social order; excessive reading could cause 'infertility and rejection of marriage [...] and was implicated in sexual development and disorder through the faculty of imagination'.¹⁹⁰ In *mari/amant sylphe* narratives the reading of sylph texts by women affects them deeply: 'Il est vrai qu'une lecture mal entendue a fait sur elle un prodigieux effet', 'De Zélindor son esprit est frappé'.¹⁹¹ As women were believed to be affected emotionally in intense ways by what they read, and that their imagination would become over-stimulated as a result, reading posed a real danger.¹⁹² Reading about idealised, imaginary beings like sylphs, then, was particularly problematic.¹⁹³ This is evidenced by the language used in sylph narratives to refer to women's fascination with these elemental creatures: 'une illusion cruelle', 'son erreur', 'folie'.¹⁹⁴ Here, we find an overlap between 'typically female' foibles: their weaker minds are easily influenced and prone to excessive fantasising, and as the sylphs are thought of as love interests, the danger is also that of women's sexual curiosity.¹⁹⁵ The alleged 'badness' or 'wrongness' of an interest in sylph

¹⁹⁰ Lisa Jane Graham, 'What Made Reading Dangerous in Eighteenth-Century France?', *French Historical Studies*, 41.3 (2018), pp. 449-71 (p. 462).

¹⁹¹ Barthélemy-Christophe Fagan and Charles-François Panard [1730], 'Le Sylphe supposé', *Théâtre de M. Fagan, et autres oeuvres du mesme auteur*, IV (Paris: N.B. Duchesne, Rue S. Jacques, au-dessous de la Fontaine S. Benoît, au Temple du Goût, 1760), pp. 1-56 (p. 4); Martin de Choisy, *Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y en a peu* (Montpellier: Imprimerie de Jean-François Picot, Seul Imprimeur du Roi, Place de l'Intendance, 1778), p. 17.

¹⁹² Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin (trans. by Peter Thomas), 'Female Curiosity and Male Curiosity about Women: The Views of the Cartesian Philosophers', in *Women and Curiosity in Early Modern England and France*, ed. by Line Cottagnies, and others (Brill, 2016), pp. 160-74 (p.167).

¹⁹³ Jeffrey Freedman, 'Enlightenment and Revolution', in *The Oxford History of the Book*, ed. by James Raven (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 206-37 (p. 229).

¹⁹⁴ Quétant, *L'Amant sylphe*, pp. 60, 40; Fagan and Panard, 'Le Sylphe supposé', p. 4.

¹⁹⁵ Neil Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 387.

narratives evidenced by the ways in which it is described in fictional sources echoes the language found in contemporaneous work on mental health, and inscribes obsession with sylphs in the domain of mental illness (even if tentatively).¹⁹⁶ Concerns surrounding women's reading and the fantasising it spurred, and their effect on their social roles, reproductive functions, and mental health finds an acute representation within sylph narratives when interest in sylphs and reading about them is described as a pathology which requires a cure: 'guérir son erreur', 'la ramener à la réalité'.¹⁹⁷ These descriptions cannot be read outside of the context of the importance of the various conditions and behaviours collectively thought of as hysteria, which became a widespread diagnosis in the second half of the eighteenth century, and was seen by medical professionals as being caused by 'an excessive imagination or frustrated desire'.¹⁹⁸ Doctors and thinkers advised against solitude and reading novels, either of which might exacerbate the work of imagination.¹⁹⁹ Obsession with sylphs, which we will call 'sylphism' in the spirit of echoing its alleged nature as disease, a form of *aliénation mentale* to use Pinel's terminology, can also, tentatively and temptingly, be associated with *vapours* due to the linguistic affinity. Vapours were also connected to the higher classes and an increased sensibility, which is something that sylph-obsessed women share: they are overwhelmingly aristocrats and impressionable.²⁰⁰

Sylphs may be dismissed as nonsense, but if they make a woman forego her natural and social responsibility, that is, cause her to refuse the courtship of flesh-and-blood men or impede the consummation of a marriage, they become a very real concern. They disrupt social order as they

¹⁹⁶ In the preface to the second edition of Philippe Pinel's *Traité médico-philosophique sur l'aliénation mentale*, 2nd edn (Paris: J. Ant. Brosson, Libraire, Rue Pierre-Sarrazin, 1809), he explains: 'Les mots d'aliénation, de manie, de mélancolie, de démence, pourroient être entendus dans le même sens que ceux de folie, de délire, d'extravagance, d'égarément de la raison, etc., dont on use dans le commerce de la vie civile', p. iii; and he defines 'mélancholie' as one of the four types of mental disorder as 'un délire exclusif sur un objet ou sur une série particulière d'objets', p. iv.

¹⁹⁷ Choisy, *Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y en a peu*, p. 17; Quétant, *L'Amant sylphe*, pp. 4-5. In chapter 6, we will return to the subject of reading sylph narratives and examine this from the perspective of who read them, where, how, and what influence they had on their readers.

¹⁹⁸ Sabine Arnaud, *On Hysteria: The Invention of a Medical Category between 1670 and 1820* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 146.

¹⁹⁹ Arnaud, *On Hysteria*, pp. 8, 146, 160.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

become an obstacle to men, and to the fulfilment of prescribed social roles: ‘ce Sylphe qui la préoccupe, est un furieux obstacle à l’accomplissement de vos désirs’, says the young woman’s father to the suitor in *L’Amant sylphe*.²⁰¹ Sylphism is a malady, an obstacle, and a waste: ‘Elle croit aux esprits; ... mais.... mais, en vérité,/A l’Amour, à l’Hymen, n’est-ce point un outrage/De la réduire au plaisir de rêver?’.²⁰² This idea of wasting amorous and biological potential, and ‘reducing’ it to fruitless fantasies also picks up on some of the contemporary thinking around masturbation, the ill effects of which are discussed in Samuel-Auguste Tissot’s influential *L’Onanisme* (1760). In these ways female imagination in *mari/amant sylphe* stories is pathologized; it is not seen as a creative force (whose potential we discussed in chapter 1), but an unhealthy proclivity which needs to be corrected, an obstacle which must be removed or circumnavigated. The ways in which this is achieved reveals how an idea can propagate fantasy, how women’s imagination functions (at least according to those writing about it), and how men would have to abet this fantasy in order to dispel it.

2.ii.b. Men’s ‘cure’ for ‘sylphism’: theatricality and a temporary madness

In Marmontel’s moral tale, *Le Mari sylphe*, the young Élise, educated in a convent, believes that men are the enemy, and so finds refuge in the sylph fantasy: ‘il n’y avait rien dans la nature qui fut digne de l’attacher. Mais elle avait trouvé dans la fiction de quoi l’occuper. La fable des sylphes était à la mode’.²⁰³ Her husband Volange’s pretend-sylph is an antidote to Élise’s fixation; the fake sylph is an anti-sylph. The Marquise d’Autricourt in *Le Sylphe amoureux* is a young widow who does not give in to love: ‘elle n’en [de l’amour] fait qu’un jeu d’esprit ou son cœur ne prend point de part’.²⁰⁴ She too is familiar with *Gabalís* and the four elemental beings.²⁰⁵ The fake sylph (M. de Ponteuil), who

²⁰¹ Quétant, *L’Amant sylphe*, p. 5.

²⁰² Choisy, *Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y en a peu*, p. 17.

²⁰³ Marmontel, ‘Le Mari sylphe’, p. 102.

²⁰⁴ Anonymous [1730], ‘Le Sylphe amoureux’, in *Sylphes et Sylphides*, ed. by Michel Delon (Paris: Éditions Desjonquères, 1999), pp. 79-96 (p. 79).

²⁰⁵ Anonymous, ‘Le Sylphe amoureux’, p. 80.

pursues the marquise manages to charm her into falling in love, thereby curing her of her scepticism about men by way of pretending to be a sylph.

L'Amant sylphe's narrative structure replicates Marmontel's story, but is a later text, and is a play rather than a tale. The heroine is another sylph-obsessed Élise. Her suitor, the Marquis de Versange, pretends to be the yearned-after elemental being. Aided by servants and the female protagonist's own father, he puts on an impressive performance of a sylph: 'je vais lui préparer la scène la plus agréable'.²⁰⁶ The language of the theatre such as the verb 'jouer' appears repeatedly throughout the text: 'tout ce prestige, tout cet enchantement, toute cette magie que vous voulez faire jouer'.²⁰⁷ A similar vocabulary is used by Volange in Marmontel's story: 'débuter en sylphe'.²⁰⁸ The lexical choices and elements of stagecraft reflect the period's *théâtromanie*.

The sylphs performed by Versange, Volange, Ponteuil, and other *maris/amants sylphes* are an artificial construction; they are scripted and acted out with the help of gifts, complicit servants, props, and sometimes even mechanical aids: in Marmontel's story a mirror is successively swapped with a painting of the young woman surrounded by sylphs – 'prestige frappant mais facile à produire, au moyen d'une coulisse ménagée dans la cloison, où glissaient sans bruit tour à tour le miroir et le tableau, pour se succéder l'un à l'autre'.²⁰⁹ The complexity of the *mise en scène* of the sylph varies between texts but the constants are artificiality and pretence; the sylph is not only a performance but also a (building) project: 'Où en est le sylphe?', asks the father, the Comte de Valmont, his son-in-law to be, as if to say, 'which stage of the construction process are you at?'.²¹⁰ Staging here then,

²⁰⁶ Quétant, *L'Amant sylphe*, p. 8.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁰⁸ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 103.

²⁰⁹ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', pp. 117-8.

²¹⁰ Quétant, *L'Amant sylphe*, p. 6; The above examples are all testimony to very elaborate sylph performances, but sometimes this is not the case. In texts like Pluchon-Destouches's *Le Joli vase, ou le Berger sylphe* (1777), the shepherd seducer Atis pretends to be the sylph Azor. His project is not as ambitious as that of *maris* or *amants sylphes*; he does not wish to cure his love interest, Eglé, of her passion for sylphs, but to use it to his advantage and take her to bed. The timeframe of events is much shorter, the characters are no longer aristocrats but shepherds, and the sylph-performance is reduced to hiding behind a curtain: see Pluchon-Destouches, 'Le Joli vase, ou le Berger sylphe', in *Le Petit-neveu de Bocace ou Contes nouveaux en vers* (Amsterdam, 1787), pp. 73-82 (pp. 77-8).

encompasses three notions key to these types of sylph plots: a progression in stages (gradation), a step-by-step building of the sylph illusion, and the theatricality of this process.

While the female character in this type of narrative creates an object of obsession starting with an idea acquired from fiction, the male character creates and acts out what he believes to be this object desired by the woman. For the interaction with the sylph and the plot to proceed, and conclude in a 'happy' ending, the two ideas (the sylph which the woman desires and the sylph which the man provides), have to coincide. This means that either the man knows the particular (and sometimes hidden) predilections of the woman he pursues very well, or that there exists a relatively fixed set of behaviours and objects which form the sylph fantasy. The latter schema hints at the fact that as perceived by men, or male writers (to which we will return in chapter 6), all women who like sylphs like the same things about sylphs.

2.ii.c. Plot recycling among several *mari/amant sylphe* narratives

In *mari/amant sylphe* narratives the sylph construction is made up of two types of components: recycled elements of familiar motifs or mythologies, and recognisable, often fashionable gestures and objects. These are largely consistent across texts; the sylph created by the husband or suitor is mostly made of these recycled elements combined with smaller details which reflect the more individual tastes of his love interest, although even these seem to be shared by several texts or to be generalised assumptions (for example, all women like dresses). Such predictability makes it easy for manipulation to take place.

It takes a particular type of man to make this happen. He has to deceive gallantly and for the greater good; he has to think up and carry out the sylph performance successfully. 'M. le Marquis est pire qu'un sorcier', states Hilaire, the gardener, in *L'Amant sylphe*.²¹¹ '[C]'est que vous êtes aussi exaltés l'un que l'autre, chacun à votre manière' says Élise's father to the marquis, believing both his

²¹¹ Quétant, *L'Amant sylphe*, p. 36.

daughter and her suitor to be equally mad, albeit each in their own way: 'la folie de l'un & de l'autre'.²¹² Although reality battles fantasy and wins, this reality is itself complicit in the sylph reverie because the man has to step into the world of sylph obsession, at least with one foot, in order for his sylph to fulfil the expectations of the woman. In Barthélemy-Christophe Fagan and Charles-François Panard's comic opera *Le Sylphe supposé* (1730), a suitor to another sylph-obsessed woman states:

Puisque de l'erreur qui l'obsède
Rien n'arrête le cours fatal,
Il faut chercher notre remède
Dans la source même du mal.²¹³

The cure is found within the madness itself. Women's imagination is important in this type of narrative as discussed above, but men's creative power clearly plays an important role too. And although the man never succumbs to the sylph fantasy himself, he does have to embrace it to no small degree and commit to it for a considerable length of time. The remedy to sylphism is therefore a complicit, but also manipulative performance.

Charles Collé's *Le Jaloux corrigé, opéra bouffon en un acte* (1753) is an unusual case where the deception in order to 'cure' someone is reversed. The story is about another married couple, but in this case the husband monsieur Orgon suspects that another man is courting his wife and becomes insufferably jealous. With the help of her maid Suzon, madame Orgon puts on a performance for her husband in order to rid him of his obsessive suspicions. Suzon dresses as a woman on one side of her body, and as man on the other, and in this way is able to pretend to be Mme Orgon's admirer – a sylph – who is able to magically disappear when Suzon turns around.²¹⁴

As evidenced by the above examples, *mari/amant sylphe* plots can be extremely similar to one another. Texts in which a lover or husband pretends to be the coveted elemental being are

²¹² Ibid., p. 6.

²¹³ Fagan and Panard, 'Le Sylphe supposé', p. 14.

²¹⁴ Charles Collé, *Le Jaloux corrigé* (Paris: La V. Delormel & Fils, Imprimeur de l'Académie Royale de Musique, Rue du Foin, à l'Image Ste. Geneviève, 1754), pp. 9-11.

plentiful, and the table below brings together some additional texts of this type to illustrate the ways in which repetitions manifest themselves.²¹⁵

Title	Author	Plot	Publication date
<i>Le Sylphe amoureux</i>	Anonymous [Murat]	Sylph suitor to who courts a sceptical woman	1730
<i>Le Sylphe supposé, opéra-comique en un acte</i>	Charles-François Panard & Barthélemy-Christophe Fagan	Sylph suitor aided in his courtship by complicit women	1730
<i>Le Mari sylphe</i>	Jean-François Marmontel	Sylph husband or husband-to-be as remedy for a sylph-obsessed woman	1755-9
<i>Isabelle et Gertrude, ou les Sylphes supposés, comédie en 1 acte</i>	Charles-Simon Favart	Sylph suitor aided in his courtship by complicit women	1765
<i>Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y en a peu, comédie en 3 actes</i>	Martin de Choisy	Sylph husband or husband-to-be as remedy for a sylph-obsessed woman	1778
<i>L'Amant sylphe, ou la Féerie de l'amour, comédie</i>	François Antoine Quétant	Sylph husband or husband-to-be as remedy for a sylph-obsessed woman	1783
<i>Le Singulier sylphe</i>	Pierre Jean-Baptiste Nougaret	Sylph suitor to who courts a sceptical woman	1800

The plays *Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y en a peu* and *L'Amant sylphe, ou la Féerie de l'amour* reproduce the plot of the earlier moral tale *Le Mari sylphe* almost exactly to the extent where even the main characters' names are the same: Élise and Volange (or Versange in *L'Amant sylphe*). The

²¹⁵ The three shades of blue are used to indicate the connections between the subgroups of these texts.

reason for reproducing a text in this way (something which seems to be inherently unoriginal), is a testament to both the success of the original tale and the popularity of the storyline. These adaptations for the stage add novelty simply by virtue of being theatrical productions: crucially, and perhaps more than Marmontel's original moral story, they are entertainment. Derivatives of a work by a reputable author, Choisy's is a piece published by the King's printer, and Quétant's was put on at Fontainebleau for the royal court. This attests to the fact that the play was deemed of interest and artistic merit, but more broadly it also underscores the prestigious status of some sylph texts, as well as the widespread appeal of sylph narratives in general, placing them firmly within mainstream culture.

The ways in which the premise is borrowed is similar in the case of *Isabelle et Gertrude, ou les Sylphes supposés* which is inspired by *Le Sylphe supposé*. The plot is somewhat different to the three *mari sylphe* texts discussed here mainly because other female relatives are involved in facilitating the sylphic deception, but the premise of using a fake sylph to court a woman remains the same, and in all five texts there is a female heroine who believes in sylphs. Both texts involve a younger female character called Isabelle; in *Le Sylphe supposé* she is a niece who helps her sylph-obsessed aunt's suitor to win her attentions, and in *Isabelle et Gertrude*, she is a gullible daughter whose mother Gertrude uses elemental mythology to disguise the fact that she has a lover.

Le Sylphe amoureux and *Le Singulier sylphe* are *amant* and *mari sylphe* plots respectively. The women in these stories, unlike in the versions above are not obsessed with sylphs, but instead rather sceptical of the possibility of the involvement of anything esoteric (at least at first). *Le Singulier sylphe* which appeared in 1800 is similar to the much earlier *Le Sylphe amoureux*.

These three sub-groups of texts are brought together by specific shared characteristics, and are part of the *mari/amant sylphe* overarching theme. The repetition of the same or similar plots appears to challenge the appeal of novelty which was emblematic of contemporary consumption (of material and cultural goods). Authors will have been driven not only by the creative and reputational,

but also by commercial motivations to produce and re-produce these texts throughout the eighteenth century. This shows that the appetite for them persisted, and while it is certainly true that these various texts will have reached different audiences and in different ways due to their genres, the reason to keep returning to the same theme means that it was a popular and recognisable one. Novelty is satisfied by the reinventions and tweaks of a familiar motif which is a draw in itself. These sylph texts are worthy of remakes because they are part of a cultural object which is taking shape.

2.iii. Representations of sylphs that are difficult to classify: a sliding scale of meaning

The two broad groups of representations we have discussed so far in this chapter have shown that reinvention and recycling take place within the categories of sylph narrative we have identified, as well as within the categories of sylph seduction narratives familiar from existing scholarship. In some cases, such categories which help us make sense of the field become disturbed by representations which either invert the expected mythological traits of sylphs, take invention to the point of absurdity, or question what can be classified as a sylph or sylphide when these elemental beings remain present in the plot but their powers are displayed by other characters. Below we have gathered such examples that we consider to be outliers to our categories, but which nonetheless elucidate important aspects of the landscape of sylph literary production.

2.iii.a. The transferral of *sylphe amoureux* properties to humans: 'sylphisation'

Sylph-like abilities can be transferred to a human as we saw above in the case of the anonymous *Le Sylphe galant et observateur* in which the human male Bel-Rose uses his new powers to embark on libertine adventures and to enjoy spying on people. The cases below will problematise what constitutes sylphness as some supernatural powers are transferred to human characters, like in *Le Sylphe galant*, but their behaviours are very different to Bel-Rose's, and pose the question of whether certain attributes are part of the transfer of powers or whether some sylphness was already inherent to the men in the stories. These examples illustrate the difficulty in defining a character as a

sylph as well as the possibility of classifying as sylphs those representations which are not explicitly called such by the authors.

In Louise Lévêque's *Le Prince invisible* (1722) the sylph is the son of a fairy who is mistress of the four elements. Predictably, he is the master of air. He is both a Paracelsian elemental being and a fairy creature. He is referred to as a 'demi-Dieu', but most often as 'le Prince des Génies', and has a set of abilities in accordance with the original mythology; for example, he can make himself invisible at will.²¹⁶ The sylph in Lévêque's tale, unlike the overwhelming majority of sylph narratives, is decidedly evil: we hear about 'sa barbarie & sa fureur', and he bursts into 'une si furieuse colere'.²¹⁷ He kidnaps the princess Rosalie and is the main antagonist in the story. He might not have been a sylph at all but an evil sorcerer instead, as very little remains of the mysterious, airy, subtle creature described by Villars, or Paracelsus's benevolent spirit-man created by God. The role of the *sylphe amoureux* is instead taken up by an ordinary, human prince who is granted the power of invisibility due to a magic stone given to him by a fairy. The 'invisible prince' is the gentle lover who writes poetry for the captive Rosalie with an invisible hand, and finally rescues her.²¹⁸

The premise is similar in Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's *Le Prince lutin*, published in 1697. An ordinary but noble-hearted human, Léandre, is granted magic powers by the fairy Gentille who gives him 'un petit chapeau rouge' which makes him invisible while he wears it. He becomes a 'lutin aérien, aquatique et terrestre'.²¹⁹ There are no sylphs present in this text but Léandre himself becomes a composite of the four elemental beings (sylphs, nymphs, gnomes, and salamanders); Abricotine, the loyal maid to the princess of Amazons, explains 'J'ai entendu dire [...] que les lutins sont composés d'air et de feu; qu'ils n'ont pas de corps, et que c'est seulement leur esprit et leur

²¹⁶ Louise Lévêque [1722], 'Le Prince invisible' [1722], in *Louise Lévêque, Le Prince des aigues marines et Le Prince invisible, contes* (Paris: Coustelier, Quay des Augustins, 1744), pp. 109-90 (p. 176). Gnomes are also mentioned in this text, and as per Paracelsian mythology, they inhabit an underground kingdom.

²¹⁷ Lévêque, 'Le prince invisible', pp. 151, 154.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-3.

²¹⁹ Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy [1697], 'Le Prince lutin', in *Contes des fées par Mme d'Aulnoy*, ed. by Marie Guerrier Haupt (Paris: Bernard-Bécher Éditeur, 1868), pp. 259-95 (pp. 267, 266).

volonté qui agit'.²²⁰ In certain respects, this description is more in line with the original mythology than most other fairy tale descriptions because it emphasises the spirit-like nature of *lutins*. Just like in *Le Prince invisible*, Léandre in d'Aulnoy's tale is a male character who behaves like a *sylphe amoureux*: he is extremely gallant and offers the princess many extravagant gifts.

In these two cases, sylph-like powers and behaviours are transposed onto human heroes, but it is not only these abilities that make the human males sylph-like, it is their inherent attributes such as their kindness, bravery, and gallantry. Thus, when in *Le Sylphe galant et observateur* the male human protagonist is given sylphe-like powers, he embraces the characteristics of the seducer sylph more (though only one brief sexual episode is mentioned), rather than the noble side of the *sylphe amoureux* code of conduct.

At the same time, these two fairy tale sylphs or sylph-like characters are somewhat incidental. The *sylphe amoureux* dynamic between the suitor-turned-sylph and the female love interest is stripped of the complexity we see in Crébillon's *Le Sylphe* (1730). Lévêque's and d'Aulnoy's *sylphes amoureux* versions are less elaborate than those in Nougaret's *Le Singulier sylphe* or the anonymous *Le Sylphe amoureux*, for example. These fairy tale versions are (paradoxically) less magical and less mysterious. These are skeleton versions, reduced forms of the *sylphe amoureux*, which are geared towards fulfilling the more typically fairy-tale-like aspects of the narrative.

When we first looked at the list of sylph narratives we pointed out that it is challenging to determine exactly what characteristics such narrative should have, and here we have shown that sylphness can be transferred. While disturbing category boundaries, this also helps notice and understand what attributes make up this sylphness. So even if we are dealing with narratives that are about princes as in the above cases, they have attributes of sylphs (both supernatural and behavioural). The fact that these are identifiable and desirable characteristics also transpires in Fagan

²²⁰ Aulnoy, 'Le Prince lutin', p. 287.

and Panard's comic opera *Le Sylphe supposé* which we saw earlier as an example of a *mari/amant sylphe* narrative. In that case the suitor Cléant is 'sylphised':

Isabelle: Cléant n'est plus.

Pierrot: Non, Madame; désespéré de vos rigueurs il a imploré toutes les Puissances de l'air, pour obtenir une métamorphose qui peut vous être agréable, il est devenu Sylphe.²²¹

The air that follows explains that a 'Génie' fulfils Uranie's wish and turns Cléant into a sylph: '[...] le sylphise à l'instant.'²²² This verb 'sylphiser' is completely made-up (a modern edition of this text thought this to be a typographic mistake), and inserted for comedic purposes without doubt, but it also highlights the fact that there is such a thing as sylphness, and later in the text details of delicate and light features are attributed to it.²²³ When we investigate what forms sylphs take in chapter 3 we will return to the notion of this lightness which is a key attribute of these elemental creatures.

2.iii.b Natural history or literary hyper-invention: atypical depictions of sylphs

In some cases, the mythology of elemental beings is changed to such an extent that they no longer conform to the original premise in obvious ways, or are modified almost beyond recognition. For instance, in Antoine Hamilton's tale *Zénétyde* (1731), sylphs are described as invisible entities who 'au lieu de régler les Elemens qu'ils habitent, sont souvent cause des desordres qu'on y remarque'.²²⁴ This trait is not only absent from the original mythology, but also sets this version of sylphs apart from other fairy tale sylph representations.

Another curious example is the use of sylphs and other elemental beings in De La Rougère's *Le Génie ombre et la Sala-gno-silphondine-Chimboração, conte physique* (1746).²²⁵ As the title

²²¹ Fagan and Panard, 'Le Sylphe supposé', pp. 31-2

²²² Ibid, p. 32.

²²³ See the PDF version available at <https://www.theatre-classique.fr/>, ed. by Paul Fièvre (Ernest et Paul Fièvre, 2019).

²²⁴ Antoine Hamilton, 'Zénétyde', in *Œuvres mêlées en prose et en vers* (Paris: Rue S. Jacques, Je. Fr. Josse, Libr. Impr. Ordinaire de S. M. C. la Reine d'Espagne, Seconde Doüairiere, à la Fleur de Lys d'Or, 1731), pp. 20-131 (p. 23).

²²⁵ La Rougère, De, *Le Génie ombre et la Sala-gno-silphondine-Chimboração* (Chimerie: 1746)

suggests, in this text the elemental being in question is literally a composite of all four beings corresponding to the four Aristotelian elements. This is not in itself what is unexpected about this representation, as there are other texts in which one elemental being incorporates traits or abilities of others. What is surprising, however, is the very definition of the Sala-gno-silphondine in De La Rougère's story. This being is Newton's force of universal gravitation: 'Intelligence habitant le feu, la terre, l'air & l'eau; ou l'attraction'.²²⁶ The composite elemental being here becomes the embodiment of a physical law; the mythical is equated to the scientific. This unlikely alliance is highlighted by the text's antithetical subtitle 'conte physique'. To make matters even more curious, 'Chimborazo' probably stands for 'Chimborazo', the stratovolcano in Ecuador, which during this period was still believed to be the highest mountain on Earth.²²⁷ The Sala-gno-silphondine represents the complexity of the relationship between the esoteric and the rational. This 'intelligence' is also a specifically female deity which on the one hand fits into the tradition of associating natural forces with the feminine, and on the other, represents the esoteric as female. This example attests, once more, to the malleability of elemental beings, and the fact that authors exploit this to varying degrees to produce a sliding scale of what sylphs and sylphides can stand for.

2. Conclusion

This chapter has proposed a way of mapping some key groups within, and identifying recurring traits of literary production featuring sylphs in the long eighteenth century. We have endeavoured to do this in a way which supplements and usefully reorganises the findings of existing scholarship on the matter, and have proposed categories and terms, as well as teased out themes which will function as reference points through the rest of this study. These categories are not to be understood as rigid, but are indicative of important qualities of the corpus. We have also shown the diversity of sylph representations and the malleability of their significations by bringing out more atypical examples;

²²⁶ La Rougère, *Le Génie ombre*, p. 107.

²²⁷ The force of gravity would actually be lowest on the highest peak on Earth, so it is possible that this is some sort of 'inside joke'.

this has drawn attention to the fact that pliability is an advantageous key attribute of the motif. By pinpointing and investigating the interplay between repetition and reinvention in *mari/amant sylphe* plots, and the mixing of traditions and mythologies when sylphs appear as secondary characters in (fairy) tales, we have established how and why authors chose to use sylphs in their work. We saw how some authors take bricolage to such a high level that categories become frustrated, leading us to surmise that there is a spectrum of sylphness. Symbolic uses of sylphs or the possibility of the transfer of sylphic qualities suggest that there is a set of characteristics which is not only consistent, but recognisable. As our study progresses, we will carry on identifying elements of what constitutes sylphness by looking at the behaviours, physical and gender attributes of these elemental creatures, and in our final chapter we will revisit the subject of the meaning of sylphs to show an evolving cultural and literary perception of these beings.

CHAPTER 3. SYLPIC FORMS AND CHARACTERS

In the previous chapters we looked at how the meanings and mythologies of sylphs and sylphides evolved from the texts that introduced them, modified them, and subsequently throughout those texts that reinvented and recycled them. We also examined how they were described in contemporary dictionary definitions in order to find clues as to how these beings were understood during the long eighteenth-century. In this chapter we will address the issue of a sylph's and sylphide's appearance, which we will call 'form'. This concept is more accurate given their shapeshifting capacities and their ability to switch between states of matter (solid to vapour; visible to invisible). 'Form' for us will encompass clothing and other apparel too, and we will also analyse some of their more prominent behavioural traits and moral characteristics. We will use examples from various genres and different points in the eighteenth century to understand how the sylph and sylphide's form evolved from the vague descriptions in Paracelsus's and Villars's mythologies, to being 'en toute choses infiniment au-dessus de nous', or 'à tous égards si fort au-dessus des hommes', as two authors of the first decades of the eighteenth century put it.²²⁸

Within the scope of *sylphe amoureux* narratives, the sylphic form is a significant driver for the human love interest's sexual desire. As explained in chapter 1, in many sylph narratives, to see the sylph is an ardent desire expressed by the mortal in this dynamic. Sylphic form is an important part of our investigation due to its centrality to such plots. The way sylphs and sylphides are described in texts and depicted in illustrations can tell us how they were seen and understood. The sylphide appears far less frequently than its male counterpart in eighteenth-century texts; for this reason, this chapter will mostly discuss descriptions of male sylphs.

²²⁸ Murat [1714], 'L'Esprit follet, ou le Sylphe amoureux' (1722); Crébillon [1730], 'Le Sylphe ou Songe de Madame de R * * * écrit par elle-même à Madame de S * * *', in *Sylphes et Sylphides* (1999), p. 70.

Returning to the citation from Quétant's *L'Amant sylphe, ou la Féerie de l'amour* (1783), which we examined in the introduction, we find that the work of defining a sylph ought to include considering their appearance.²²⁹ What, then, does a sylph look like? Does its malleability, its nature as a 'vapeur' mean that it can be reimagined endlessly by authors and their characters, or is there a consistent set of attributes used to describe these elemental beings? To answer these questions, we will analyse textual evidence, accompanying illustrations, and will set our findings in the context of contemporary ideas on aesthetics, morality, and racial difference.²³⁰

We start by revisiting Paracelsus's premise. In his *Prologus* to the *Liber de Nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus*, he states that 'the purpose of this book is to describe the creatures that are outside the cognizance of the light of nature' and then he reiterates this intention in Tractatus I: 'the purpose of this book is to describe the four kinds of spirit-men, namely, the water people, the mountain people, the fire people and the wind people'.²³¹ He goes on to talk about where they live, what they look like, what they eat, and how they behave, but none of this is described with any precision. Namely, when talking about the physical aspect of elemental beings, he states simply that they 'look like men but are not descendants of Adam', and their figures 'are very different, like men'.²³² That is to say, that just like within the human race, there is a lot of variation within the four elemental races in terms of looks. Paracelsus subsequently offers a bit more detail about the physical characteristics of each elemental being:

About their figures know that they are different. The water people look like men, both women and men. The sylvestres [sylphs] do not conform [to the human body], but are cruder, coarser, longer and stronger than both. The mountain people are small, of about two spans. The salamanders are long, narrow and lean.²³³

²²⁹ François-Antoine Quétant, *L'Amant sylphe, ou la Féerie de l'amour* (1783), pp. 26-7. Cited exactly as it appears in the original version.

²³⁰ All illustrations to which we refer in this, and the subsequent chapters, are listed in Appendix 2.

²³¹ Paracelsus [1566], 'A Book on Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies, and Salamandres, and on the Other Spirits' (1996), p. 226.

²³² Paracelsus, pp. 219, 230.

²³³ Paracelsus, p. 253.

He later adds in Tractatus III that:

The nymphs appear, as we said before, in human clothing, with human features and desires. The forest people are like men, but shy and fugitive. The mountain people are like men, not tall, short; sometimes they reach about half the size of man or so, sometimes more. Thus and in the same way, the vulcans appear fiery, and fire is all over they features and clothing.²³⁴

These descriptions offer some indication of how Paracelsus imagined these beings as looking and behaving, but he supplies only very general information on points of reference such as height, for instance. Regarding sylphs, the key information is that they are different to men and nymphs and that they are 'cruder, coarser, longer and stronger' than them as already mentioned in chapter 1. Paracelsus seems to cover a lot of ground, but he does not give many details about these beings (and we will return to some of his 'facts' later in this chapter). What is most striking about his presentation overall, is the fact that notions of beauty are entirely absent from his descriptions. This is surprising because in Villars, and in numerous subsequent authors, the superior beauty of elemental beings becomes an extremely important feature, and the reason behind the fascination with them on the part of human beings.

While Paracelsus alludes to a superiority of elemental beings, this is largely vague and linked to their nature as spirits rather than any other attributes: 'For they are in everything like men, but without a soul, and better than man, for they are like the spirits which nobody can lift'.²³⁵ It is Villars who introduces this notion of elemental beings' aesthetic superiority, complementing one of his other modifications – sexualisation:

L'air est plein d'une innombrable multitude de peuples de figure humaine [...] Leurs femmes & leurs filles sont des beautés mâles, telles qu'on dépeint les Amazones.
[...] les mers & les fleuves sont habités de même que l'air; les anciens sages ont nommé ondiens ou nymphes cette espèce de peuple. Ils sont peu mâles, & les femmes y sont en grand nombre ; leur beauté est extrême, & les filles des hommes n'ont rien de comparable. La terre est remplie presque jusqu'au centre de Gnomes, gens de petite stature [...] Les Gnomides, leurs femmes, sont petites, mais fort agréables & leur habit est fort curieux.

²³⁴ Ibid., p. 240.

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 229.

[...] Les femmes des Salamandres sont belles, & plus belles même que toutes les autres, puisqu'elles sont d'un élément plus pur.²³⁶

Although the concept of magnificent beauty is now present, Villars is still very succinct and does not explain of what this beauty consists, or what each creature looks like. By his own admission, the Count only briefly passes over the descriptions as his new disciple will allegedly see the elemental beings for himself: 'Vous verrez leurs habits, leurs vivres, leurs mœurs, leur police & leurs loix admirables'.²³⁷ This deferral seems to indicate an unwillingness to commit to any set of physical attributes, perhaps in order to perpetuate the air of mystery, but could also be a deliberate omission allowing the appearance of elemental beings to be open to interpretation.

We noted in chapter 1 that in *Gabalès* the focus shifts to sylphs instead of nymphs, the latter being more prominent in Paracelsus's treatise. For this reason, more frequent references to the beauty of sylphs and sylphides in Villars's text are an expected consequence: 'la plus belle d'entr'elles [des femmes] est horrible auprès de la moindre sylphide', 'un beau sylphe', etc.²³⁸ Once again, however, the Count only gives us the adjective 'beautiful' or presents it as a superlative in comparison to human attractiveness, rather than explaining of what this appeal is composed. We can surmise that Villars's text describes the beauty of elemental beings as superior to that of humans, and also qualifies it as renowned. Because this fabulous attractiveness is undefined, it opens the possibility of interpretation and becomes a malleable concept.

This lack of clarity and detail allowed subsequent authors, their characters, and their readers, to imagine these elemental beings of the air in a variety of ways, but as we shall see in this chapter, although diversity in representation exists, several characteristics emerge which are shared by many texts. These traits include physical attributes, the effects that accompany sylphic appearances and disappearances, their clothing, jewellery and hairstyles, as well as their quality as lovers, suitors, and

²³⁶ Villars [1670], 'Le Comte de Gabalis', in *Voyages imaginaires*, XXXIV (1788), pp. 19-20.

²³⁷ Villars, 'Le Comte de Gabalis', p. 21.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24, p. 95.

more generally, as beings. We will start by investigating sylphic bodies, and how their representations (both textual and graphic) engage with contemporary aesthetic standards, and the forms sylphs and (to a lesser extent) sylphides took in some of the long eighteenth century's sylph narratives in both text and image.

3.i. Physical attributes of sylphs and the 'special effects' that accompany their appearance

Examples in which sylphs are magic, *merveilleux* beings are a good starting point because they are by design more directly related to the esoteric beings of Paracelsus's mythology and Villars's mock-cabbalistic text. In Crébillon's *Le Sylphe* (1730), Mme de R*** converses at some length with a voice of a being who purports to be a sylph. The young woman is gradually persuaded to take him as her lover, and at the end of the story he becomes visible: 'En ce moment une lueur extraordinaire remplit ma chambre, et je vis au chevet de mon lit le plus bel homme qu'il soit possible d'imaginer: des traits majestueux et l'ajustement le plus galant et le plus noble'.²³⁹ These lines encapsulate some very important features of the sylph's appearance and manifestation which recur in other sylph narratives. Namely, the very bright light which accompanies the sylph's presence, the overwhelming beauty of the sylph, and his elegant attire. Here, 'le plus bel homme qu'il soit possible d'imaginer' tells of an astonishing attractiveness, but the physical characteristics are summarized rather than detailed as 'traits majestueux'. This points to 'de la majesté, de l'éclat, de la grandeur'— there is a sort of exceptionality and greatness in the sylph's features.²⁴⁰

3.i.a Sylphic anatomy: youthful, toned, and White bodies

Élise in Marmontel's *Le Mari sylphe* (1755-9) imagines her fantasy, magical sylph as having human characteristics because she has no other model to build on: 'Élise avait été obligée d'attribuer tous

²³⁹ Crébillon, 'Le Sylphe', p. 74.

²⁴⁰ 'Majestueux, euse', *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 5th edn, II (Paris: Smits, 1798), p. 51.

les traits d'un homme au sylphe qu'elle désirait'.²⁴¹ Her version of the sylph is still a man to some extent, but his features are greatly enhanced:

elle avait composé un corps fait à plaisir: une taille élégante et noble, une figure animée, intéressante, ingénieuse, un teint d'un éclat et d'une fraîcheur digne d'un sylphe qui préside à l'étoile du matin; de beaux yeux bleus et languissants, et je ne sais quoi d'aérien dans toute les grâces de sa personne.²⁴²

This account is more elaborate than Mme de R***'s, and it introduces poetic and other-worldly elements, culminating in the addition of wings and comparison of the sylph to the mythological Eros: 'deux ailes, semblables à celles de l'Amour, dont ce beau sylphe était l'image'.²⁴³ Élise starts with an outline over which she lays increasingly fantastic and subtle, 'airy' features. Yet this 'airiness' is not easy to convey in words in the narrator's own admission: 'je ne sais quoi d'aérien', suggesting that the difficulty in articulating what 'sylphness' is permeates into descriptions of sylph anatomy (much like the concept itself). Here it is useful to call on Richard Scholar's conception of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a term that is 'capable of tracing first-person experiences that elude explanation' and which questions the limits of 'what can be known and put into words'.²⁴⁴ Scholar also emphasises its role as an aesthetic concept and its importance for the conception of the self, both of which are relevant for our example.²⁴⁵ Crucially, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is also important in the construction of the sylph; it captures sylphness well because it is a term for something un-articulatable. Looking more closely at this process suggests that what Élise is really doing is bringing together the most perfect elements of an anatomy (real and fantastic), to create an ideal sylph.

²⁴¹ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 100.

²⁴² Ibid., p. 101.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ See *The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi in Early Modern Europe: Encounters with a Certain Something* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) pp. 3, 9.

²⁴⁵ Scholar, *The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi*, p. 10.

The emphasis on the amazing beauty and exquisiteness of sylphs is also present in some contemporary fairy tales. In *Le Prince Glacé et la princesse Étincelante* (1743), Lubert describes her sylph-prince in the following terms:

Tout ce que l'imagination peut se présenter de plus parfait & de plus agréable, n'approche encore que de bien loin de l'objet qui parut aux yeux d'Étincelante; rien n'étoit si beau, ni si digne de donner de l'amour. Cette céleste créature, étoit un prince d'environ dix-huit à vingt ans.²⁴⁶

The prince Miriel, similarly to the examples above, is an incredibly attractive man-sylph; once more, lyrical undertones are part of the portrayal, and a new detail is included – youth. This addition is also present in another fairy tale, Pajon's *Eritzine et Parelin* (1744): 'à l'instant je vis paroître un jeune homme de la figure la plus aimable'.²⁴⁷ Here the sylph plays a supporting role, but his aspect is commented upon by the female protagonist Eritzine with a degree of admiration, and an illustration depicting him and the central couple of the narrative was included as a frontispiece to this tale in volume 34 of the *Cabinet des fées* (1785-6), shown in Figure 1 below. This engraving expands on the textual description of the sylph.

²⁴⁶ Lubert [1743], 'Le Prince Glacé et la princesse Étincelante', in *Le Cabinet des fées*, XXXIII (1786) p. 114.

²⁴⁷ Pajon [1744], 'Eritzine et Parelin', *Le Cabinet des fées*, XXXIV (1786) p. 31.



Figure 1: Unnamed engraving, Clément Pierre Marillier (1740-1808); an illustration to a *Eritzine et Parelin*, by Henri Pajon in *Le Cabinet des fées*, XXXIV (1786)



Left – figure 2: Unnamed engraving, Louis Du Guernier (1677–1716) and Claude Du Bosc (c.1682-c.1746); illustration to *The Rape of the Lock* (1714) by Alexander Pope

Right – figure 3: Unnamed engraving, Clément Pierre Marillier; illustration to the French translation of 1779 of Pope's *Rape of the Lock*

The sylph in figure 1 is depicted in mid-air, gracefully lifting himself towards the sky with the aid of his butterfly-like wings. The wings echo both Classical models found in murals such as those of Pompeii and Herculaneum excavated during this period, as well as other eighteenth-century illustrations such as those to Pope's 1714 version of *The Rape of the Lock* (figure 2 above shows one of the six plates, for reference). Figure 3, like figure 1 is by Clément Pierre Marillier, and similarities in style are noticeable. Unlike in figures 2 and 3 where the sylphs appear as chubby toddlers and are more akin to putti, the sylph in figure 1 is an adult.

The sylph's body in figure 1 is only partly draped in clothing which exposes his toned chest and shoulder. His legs are also on display and they too appear lightly muscular and well-proportioned. If we examine the illustration as a whole, it becomes apparent that the sylph is the centrepiece of the composition; it is he, and only then Eritzine, who attract our attention, whereas Parelin, the husband, is relegated to the margin. The sylph's face is in full view and his youthful and almost pretty features, his flowing, light-coloured hair immediately attract the gaze. The sylph's complexion also sets him apart from Parelin: it is lighter and more glowing, which once again attracts the eye and makes him the centre of the visual arrangement. Without the accompanying text, we could read this image as a fantasy lover with a female human, and a human man who is trying to hold the woman back.

At the same time, Parelin is half-obsured by Eritzine. His body is fully covered by his clothing and tall boots. Even his hair is hidden by a turban, and his face barely visible. Unlike the sylph, he is not showcasing a Greek-god-like physique, his complexion appears darker, and his clothes are clearly Eastern in style; the turban and shalwar-like trousers attest to this. The setting of the *conte* is

intentionally exotic, or ‘au goût oriental’, which accounts in part for Parelin’s appearance.²⁴⁸ Yet there is more at play here; Parelin becomes the ‘other’ in this illustration, draped in ‘foreign’ clothes and with darker skin, he is side-lined and hidden, even though he is a more important character than the sylph in that he is the protagonist’s husband.²⁴⁹ Meanwhile the sylph, although a supporting character, gains prominence in this illustration; he is by no means an ‘other’ (which seems paradoxical given his nature as an esoteric being), but is an embodiment of European ideals of beauty, a topic to which we will now turn.

Marillier’s engraving is a useful summary of several traits shared by sylphs, all of which speak to important debates, ideologies, and ideas on beauty, physical and moral differences between human beings, and racial categorisation. The emphasis on an almost luminous white skin is not incidental. Certainly, Classical aesthetic ideals permeated contemporary thinking around what was considered attractive, and the Neoclassical beauty canon presumed a white skin tone.²⁵⁰ The whiteness of the stone from which Greek sculptures were made, and its interpretation in the eighteenth century ‘as a marker of the physical, moral and social superiority of the Ancient Greeks and by extension of the Europeans now viewed as a unified group of people’, connects these ideals to contemporary perceptions of human variation and race.²⁵¹

During a time when questions around perceived racial differences such as skin colour or facial features were of crucial importance in the context of colonial expansion and economic growth due to this expansion, the choice to emphasize the lightness of sylphs’ skin is more revelatory than it seems at first glance. The various competing theories put forward during the eighteenth century to

²⁴⁸ Thomas Garnier, ‘Avertissement’, *Le Cabinet des fées, ou Bibliothèque choisie des contes des fées*, XXXIV (Genève: Barde, Manget & Compagnie Imprimeurs-Libraires; Paris: Cuchet, Libraire, Rue & Hôtel Serpente, 1786), pp. 5-10 (p. 6).

²⁴⁹ Mechthild Fend talks about how ‘[t]he perception of people’s colour changed gradually from the sixteenth century, and this shift was related to the colonial expansion of European nations, the increase of the transatlantic slave trade and the exploitation of African slaves in America and the Caribbean. ‘Black’ became a synonym of slave and a discriminative marker in the colonial politics of slave labour’, in *Fleshing out Surfaces: Skin in French Art and Medicine, 1650-1850* (Manchester University Press, 2017), p. 146.

²⁵⁰ Fend, *Fleshing out Surfaces*, pp. 143-4.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

explain differences in skin colour among human beings all suggest that there were perceived categories of peoples, and that these were arranged in a hierarchical order depending on their skin colour. Whether it was a religious explanation, polygenesis or monogenesis, or a 'scientific' theory based on dissections, a narrative central to such debates was that some peoples were superior and others inferior due to their skin colour.²⁵² Black skin became the subject of formal enquiry, so much so that in 1741 the Académie Royale des Sciences of Bordeaux launched an essay contest on the topic of the 'degeneration' of Black skin and hair. Although none of the entries won, they proposed a range of explanations, which are in themselves gateways to understanding contemporaneous thinking on the subject of ethnic variation: from environmental causes to religious 'curses', all theories 'defined human variation in terms of hierarchy and fixed categories'.²⁵³ Curiously, Paracelsus challenged the traditional Genesis narrative by suggesting that there were two Adams: a White one and a Native American one.²⁵⁴ If Black individuals were 'subpersons', placed at the bottom of the ladder, justifying their enslavement, White individuals were at the top, and were justified in being 'masters'.²⁵⁵ Within this frame of reference, the emphasis on the extreme lightness and luminosity of sylphic skin points to an ideal which is 'whiter than white', superior to even White Westerners. We can then imagine that such superior whiteness would have placed sylphs at the top of any hierarchy of beings.

²⁵² For thorough discussions of the contemporary theories of human variation and race see for example, Andrew S. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science & Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), Marco Menin, 'L'organe du toucher et la neurologie du racisme: l'origine tactile de la couleur de la peau chez Claude-Nicolas Le Cat', *Archives Internationales d'Histoire des Sciences*, 71 (2018), pp. 36-60, and even more recently, Meghan K. Roberts, 'Making Race and Reputations in Eighteenth-Century France', *History Workshop Journal*, 98 (2024), pp. 135-54.

²⁵³ Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Andrew S. Curran, *Who's Black and Why?: a Hidden Chapter from the Eighteenth-Century Invention of Race* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022), p. 8. The introduction to this volume delves into the motivations, context, meaning, and outcomes of the contest.

²⁵⁴ Gates and Curran, *Who's Black and Why*, p. 30.

²⁵⁵ Julia Jorati, *Slavery and Race: Philosophical Debates in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2024), p. 2.

‘Dans la symbolique occidentale, le noir, expression d’une dégradation physique, est aussi synonyme de déchéance morale’, explains Guillaume Linte.²⁵⁶ Skin colour then was more than a physical attribute; it was a marker of the quality of an individual, what he or she was like from a behavioural and moral point of view, and what he or she was ‘made for’. Several contemporary perspectives qualified Black people as naturally lazy, violent, incapable of intellectual enquiry, etc., and so their enslavement by their moral and intellectual ‘superiors’ was permissible.²⁵⁷ The link between skin colour and personal quality was a crucial one, and it extended into the connection between facial features and behaviour too. Markers like skin colour, facial features, and hair type all played a role in organising hierarchies. These were not only proto-anthropological, but also aesthetic.

Classical ideals of beauty were of great relevance during the long eighteenth century. Ancient Greek sculpture was a significant influence on shaping ideas on aesthetics of the human body. Both their shade and shape were significant.²⁵⁸ In the second half of the century multiple works were published which became interested in measuring the human face and body, and in trying to understand the link between proportion and attractiveness as well as between certain characteristics and moral character (physiognomy).²⁵⁹ The link between moral goodness as evidenced by physical perfection is found not only in contemporaneous ideology of racial difference but also in the Classical notion of *arete* (an excellence in all aspects).²⁶⁰ Within this context, schemas appeared whereby animals such as monkeys, as well as various ethnicities, and the Classical sculptural ideal (Hercules or

²⁵⁶ Linte, ‘La couleur de la peau dans le discours médical (1730-1770)’, *Dix-Huitième Siècle*, 51 (2019), pp. 261-74 (p. 262).

²⁵⁷ Gates and Curran, *Who’s Black and Why*, pp. 20-1; Jorati, *Slavery and Race* (2024), p. 16.

²⁵⁸ It is worth noting that although the sculptures excavated were frequently of white marble, this does not mean that they were originally white; Greek sculptures were often colourful. Another point is that in the eighteenth century, renowned sculptors applied colour tints to the surface of their creations to make them more life-like: they ‘ont tous vivifié la surface du marbre à l’aide de patines à base de cire, de thé, de tabac, de suie, de terre et de poussière de pierre’, explains Christina Ferando in ‘Illusion de surface: percevoir la « peau » d’une sculpture’, *Images Re-vues. Histoire, anthropologie et théorie de l’art*, 13 (2016), pp. 1-29 (p. 6).

²⁵⁹ Marian Hobson, ‘Architecture, analogy and proportion’, in *Diderot and Rousseau: Networks of Enlightenment*, ed. by Kate E. Tunstall and Caroline Warman (Liverpool University Press, 2011), pp. 283-331 (p. 296).

²⁶⁰ Amelia Rauser, *The Age of Undress. Art, Fashion, and the Classical Ideal in the 1790s* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 14.

Apollo Belvedere) were ranked in terms of their proportions and symmetry.²⁶¹ Such hierarchies inadvertently intertwined the discourse on aesthetics and that on race.

If the Apollo was the pinnacle of beauty physical, he was also the embodiment of moral perfection. So were sylphs. Their bodies and facial features were refined and noble; they were not merely those of a Western European, but those of an idealised Western European of the Classical past. As such, and although entirely esoteric, sylphs are at the top of the hierarchy of humans (and human-like beings) – they are more-than-human. They are frequently described as morally superior to mortals; sylphs are more faithful, noble, kind, delicate, and gallant than ordinary people. Sylphs' superiority over humans is therefore both physical and moral.

Sylphs, ethereal and imaginary, are thus codified within contemporary discourses on race, beauty, and moral goodness; hierarchies proposed by these see them at the very top – they are what we might term 'better-than-human'. The illustration to Pajon's tale speaks to all of this. The sylph's clothing is reminiscent of the togas of Ancient Greece and Rome, and this depiction of the sylph is similar to a Classical statue of an athletic young man (who could very well be an Apollo Belvedere), which has come to life and is paradoxically lifting itself into the air. The sylph embodies the ideals of Classical beauty as described above, but he is also weightless enough to be lifting himself into the air using only his delicate butterfly wings. This lightness is another key attribute of sylphic form, which we will discuss later in this chapter.

Portrayals of sylphs in pornographic texts published towards the end of the century are another fruitful avenue for exploration, and although the subject matter of these texts is substantially different to that of fairy or moral tales, sylphic physical attributes are extremely similar. In Pluchon-Destouches's poem *Le Joli vase, ou le Berger sylphe* (1777), the young Eglé yearns to have

²⁶¹ Marian Hobson, 'Measuring statues, or, special neutrality', in *Diderot and Rousseau: Networks of Enlightenment* (Liverpool University Press, 2011), pp. 317-33 (pp. 322-3).

a sylph for a lover and although what she receives in the end is the perfectly real shepherd Atis, the sylph she imagines is a fantastic being of marvellous beauty. She dreams:

Combien mon silphe est beau! sur ses épaules nues,
Ses cheveux blonds flottaient au gré des vents;
Combien ses yeux étaient étincelants!
Combien j'aime ses traits, ses grâces ingénues!²⁶²

The emphasis here is on the uncovered shoulders and floating blond hair, just like in the illustration to Pajon's tale. The similarities between the two sylphs are made even more apparent if we look at the engraving to the 1787 edition of Pluchon-Destouches's text (figure 4 below).



Figure 4: Unnamed engraving, Nicolas Ponce (1746-1831); illustration to *Le Joli vase, ou le Berger sylphe* (1787 edition) by Pluchon-Destouches

The sylph in this image, who is not an esoteric being but an ordinary shepherd pretending to be a sylph, is portrayed possessing an athletic, sculptured or even sculptural, physique. Much like his

²⁶² Pluchon-Destouches, 'Le Joli vase', p. 76

female companion he is almost entirely nude, and both are characteristically pale-skinned. The setting is sumptuous and conducive to the erotic scene, although the décor appears to be too luxurious given that the protagonists are purported to be peasants, adding to the fantasy aspect of the reader/viewer's experience.

White skin and a well-toned body (of human dimensions) are unifying characteristics of most sylphs, but as already pointed out in chapter 2, sylphic representations necessarily have range and outliers exist which are worthy of attention. One such example is Charles de Fieux de Mouhy's novel *Lamekis, ou les Voyages Extraordinaires d'un égyptien dans la terre intérieure, avec la découverte de l'île des Sylphides* (1735-8). In this text, sylphs are depicted differently from the representations we saw so far. Firstly, sylphs come in several types and different sizes; one type is extremely tall and another very small (diminutive enough to sit on a human being's shoulder). There are also good and evil sylphs – much like the good or evil 'génies'-sylphs discussed in chapter 2. What is interesting here, is that these smaller sylphs are either black (evil) or white (good), and this correlation between skin colour and moral quality brings to mind similar reflections in the context of human variety discussed above.

The large sylphs are a sort of animalised version of the more traditional sylphs:

[...] il me parut avoir six pieds de hauteur; sa tête étoit attachée sans col à ses épaules; à la place des bras deux grandes ailes en sortoient, dont le plumage étoit blanc; le corps, comme je l'ai-dit, ressembloit à celui d'un oiseau, excepté qu'il étoit sans plumes, & que l'extrémité se terminoit en pointe comme celle d'un lézard; dessous chaque aîle sortoit un bras nerveux & couvert de poil; la couleur du visage & du corps étoit d'un blanc mat, sans être relevé d'aucune teinte; les traits étoient parfaits & d'une beauté sans égal; mais ce qui l'emportoit sur tout le reste, étoit une chevelure si longue, qu'il n'y avoit point de Sylphe qui ne pût s'en servir pour s'en couvrir entièrement.²⁶³

²⁶³ Mouhy, *Lamekis, ou les Voyages Extraordinaires d'un égyptien dans la terre intérieure, avec la découverte de l'île des Sylphides*, Seconde Partie (Paris: Louis Dupuis, Rue S. Jacques, près la Fontaine S. Severia, à la Fontaine d'or, 1736), pp. 17-8.

Their size aside, they have pointy, lizard-like tails and hairy arms. They also possess wings, much like other sylphs we saw in this chapter, but they are not butterfly-like and instead are covered in white plumage. Although reminiscent of angelic wings, these are also a somewhat incongruous addition to other animalistic features. At the same time, these sylphs also possess ‘les traits [...] parfaits & d’une beauté sans égal’, which are in line with more typical descriptions of these elemental creatures. Their skin is ‘d’un blanc mat, sans être relevé d’aucune teinte,’ and this white does not reflect light and so is transparent, which effectively captures the essence of sylphs.²⁶⁴ Mouhy’s sylphs are hybrid creatures, combining elements of the more traditional sylphic aesthetic with animal features and the result is both impressive and unsettling.

Mouhy’s chromatic universe expands further, to include peoples who have blue and red skin, and he proposes an alternative story of human origin and ‘evolution’ to include such races. Emmanuelle Sempère explains that Mouhy’s colour scheme was influenced by contemporary thinking about colour, and that difference in skin colour can be either divine or monstrous.²⁶⁵

Whether outlandish as in *Lamekis* or more domestic as in Marmontel’s or Crébillon’s stories, considerations about skin colour, body and facial shape and their connection to the moral or intellectual quality of a person were paramount during the long eighteenth century.

3.i.b. A de-articulated composition of sylphs: puffs and clouds

In another erotic text, Compiègne’s *Les Veillées du couvent, ou le Noviciat d’amour* (1793), the author-narrator admits that the sylph is a narrative device needed to magically penetrate into the convent where he can have intercourse with the heroines without anyone being any the wiser. This sylph is still a fantastic being, with many supernatural abilities, such as shape-shifting: ‘Nous pouvons prendre toutes les formes que nous voulons’, he tells Agnès, his love interest.²⁶⁶ As in many other

²⁶⁴ Emmanuelle Sempère, ‘Les effets merveilleux des couleurs dans *Lamekis* du Chevalier de Mouhy (1735-1738): couleur de la peau et désordre du monde’, *Dix-Huitième Siècle*, 51 (2019), pp. 275-87 (pp. 284, 285).

²⁶⁵ Sempère, ‘Les effets merveilleux des couleurs dans *Lamekis*’, p. 279.

²⁶⁶ Mercier de Compiègne, *Les Veillées du couvent*, p. 125.

plots, at first the sylph refuses to show himself to his lover and remains invisible but palpable.²⁶⁷ The idea that this sylph is able to insinuate himself into even the most impenetrable places without difficulty and without being discovered is made conceivable through his depiction as clouds of smoke in the engraving which accompanies the text (figure 5).



Figure 5: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; illustration to the fifth edition of *Les Veillées du couvent, ou le Noviciat d'amour* by Mercier de Compiègne (1793)²⁶⁸

This sylph, unlike those in the illustrations we have discussed earlier, is not sculpted out in the plane of the image, and is instead de-articulated into fluffy, light, and voluptuous puffs of air. These clouds could be read as obscuring the sylph (and as being an accompanying element of fantasy apparitions), but they could also be understood as the sylph's body, which is the more interesting avenue.

²⁶⁷ Compiègne, *Les Veillées*, pp. 113-4; We have attended to the theme of invisible sylphs and heroines who desire to see them in chapter 1.

²⁶⁸ This engraving exists alongside another, very similar version which was part of the second edition of Compiègne's text. We will discuss the differences between these two images in chapter 6.

Clouds have many meanings in the Early Modern imagination and iconography. They are light and impermanent, shapeless but suggestive, they are malleable and can become anything.²⁶⁹ They can be a representation of the divine, a link between this realm and the ethereal, but also ‘evoke amorous desires’.²⁷⁰ For the purposes of our analysis here, the meaning of clouds as a bridge between the tangible and intangible, and as visual markers of the *merveilleux*, which can also suggest a sort of divine or superior purity are the most relevant. It is also undeniably valuable to read the clouds in erotic illustrations such as the one above, and in other similar depictions (which we will discuss later), as representations of desire. But clouds have additional resonance with the sylphic form.

In a chemical sense, the sylph can be understood as a gas which can penetrate the smallest of openings and even other physical matter. In such depictions where the sylph is represented as a smoke, there is a convergence between chemistry and alchemy, a nod to the esoteric and *merveilleux*, which is expected, but also to scientific discovery.²⁷¹ In the next chapter, when we look at how sylphs and sylphides manifest themselves in the real world through scents and objects, we will revisit this notion of composition of the sylphic body and expand our analysis to address the importance of the quality of air and the roles of scent.

Figure 5 shows only the sylph’s face, which displays features no less attractive than (or too different from) Mercier’s Agnès. We also see a small part of the sylph’s hair which appears to be darker than Agnès’s. As for the rest, all of the sylph’s body as well as the back of his head are completely obscured, or rather, represented by clouds. These beautiful puffs are graceful in their own right, and in their roundness are suggestive of ‘tous les globes que l’amour a formés’, as Patrick

²⁶⁹ Jeffrey N. Peters and Katharina N. Piechocki, ‘Early modern clouds and the poetics of meteorology: An introduction’, *Romance Quarterly*, 68.2 (2021), pp. 65-78.

²⁷⁰ Alison Calhoun, ‘What cloud machines tell us about early modern emotions’, *Romance Quarterly*, 7, 68.2 (2021), pp. 114-26 (p. 120); Peters and Piechocki, ‘Early modern clouds’, p. 68.

²⁷¹ Philip Stewart explains that ‘[l]orsque l’artiste cherche [...] à donner à l’irréel une marque explicite, celle à laquelle il a le plus souvent recours est un nuage, un brouillard, ou une fumée’, in *Le Conte Merveilleux au XVIII^e Siècle*, ed. by Régine Jomand-Baudry and Jean-François Perrin (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2002), pp. 370-8 (p. 372).

Wald Lasowski puts it in relation to hot air balloons.²⁷² The clouds also highlight the malleability of the sylph – an important characteristic which this sylph implies when talking about his various shape-shifting episodes. Ultimately, these clouds render the essence of the sylph as being composed of the purest atoms of air, as in Gabalis’s description, and attest graphically and more explicitly than the illustrations discussed earlier in this chapter to the lightness inherent to sylphs.²⁷³ A feature which is so central to the sylphic form and sylphness more generally, this lightness resonates with the ‘légèreté’ of morals, attachments, fashions, and gestures of the French eighteenth century.

While Agnès’s body is depicted clearly, using pronounced lines, down to the details of her hairstyle and her ankle and foot, the sylph remains shrouded in mystery. The female body is on display, and is made even more visible due to the shapelessness of the sylph’s body. A visual setup whereby the female body is offered up to the gaze is shared by many pornographic texts and illustrations. However, this tension between representation and omission cannot be understood merely as fuel for a voyeuristic experience or erotic fantasy. The clear contours of Agnès’s body and the detailed depictions of the room and the objects within it (such as the floor and furniture, the folds of the bedlinen and discarded book), attest to the reality and physicality of both the woman and the objects that create her world. The sylph on the other hand, is incorporeal and otherworldly. What is particularly curious in this example is that while the textual description of the sylph remains generic and vague, the illustration matches this ambiguity, and yet when the text starts to give more details when the sylph appears to Agnès, as we shall see below, there is no illustration to accompany this. Of course, it is well-established that engravings did not all end up being faithful to the text: they were somewhat independent from it, and offered possibilities for creativity beyond the confines of the textual description, and as such, they could offer details that the text could not.²⁷⁴ Among the

²⁷² Wald Lasowski, ‘Palpable!’, in *Le Siècle de la légèreté: émergences d’un paradigme du dix-huitième siècle français*, ed. by Marine Ganofsky and Jean-Alexandre Perras (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), pp. 23-36 (p. 24).

²⁷³ Villars, ‘Le Comte de Gabalis’, p. 28.

²⁷⁴ Nathalie Ferrand, *Livre et lecture dans les romans français du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), and *Livres vus, livres lus. Une traversée du roman illustré des Lumières* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009), pp. 7-8.

examples in this chapter, the illustration to Pajon's fairy tale is an expansion of what the text offered. As we look at depictions of sylphs in this chapter and later, in chapter 6, we will notice that there is a significant dialogue between images of sylphs, and also with other contemporary illustrations; there exists an intertextuality between them which links them to traditions and recognisable visual tropes, connecting them to texts beyond the one they illustrate.²⁷⁵ In the case of *Les Veillées du couvent*, the more detailed the description of the incredible beauty of the sylph, the harder it may have been to represent him graphically, or perhaps the erotic content may have lessened its effect had the mystery of the sylph been translated graphically in clearer terms than the sumptuous *merveilleux* puffs of smoke.

The sylph describes himself and his kind to Agnès: 'Toujours jeunes, toujours beaux, toujours robustes'.²⁷⁶ This echoes not only previous examples which talk of the key attributes of the sylphic aesthetic, but also the fact that sylphs do not age as both Paracelsus and Villars stipulate. Paracelsus tells us about nymphs that 'they reach a very old age, but you cannot notice it because their appearance remains the same from beginning to end, and they die unchanged' and Villars maintains that they possess 'des beautés qui ne vieillissent jamais'.²⁷⁷ Eternal youth is an essential sylphic characteristic and can also be interpreted as a nod to another Classical myth – that of Endymion, whose perfect youth and beauty were preserved in his eternal sleep; the sylph, like Endymion is allegedly a non-threatening lover.

Finally, after the gradation through Agnès's and the reader's senses (i.e. some general textual description and an enticingly enigmatic illustration), the sylph shows himself:

Le voilà!.... Et soudain les yeux d'Agnès sont éblouis par l'éclat du Sylphe. Il est sans voile, et semblable au bel Adam, avant son crime. Des cheveux noirs flottent sur ses épaules d'ivoire, le feu de l'amour étincelle dans ses yeux, sa bouche de rose sourit agréablement, et la

²⁷⁵ This is generally true of eighteenth-century illustrations as Philip Stewart explains in *Engraven Desire: Eros, Image & Text in the French Eighteenth Century* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1992).

²⁷⁶ Compiègne, *Les Veillées du couvent*, p. 125.

²⁷⁷ Paracelsus, 'A Book on Nymphs', p. 243 ; Villars, 'Le Comte de Gabalis', p. 24.

beauté de son cou ne peut être égalée que par celle du mien, si j'en crois Mimi et d'autres femmes connaisseuses qui me l'ont dit.²⁷⁸

Just like in the above erotic poem and fairy tales, the sylph is handsome and his hair, although not blond but black, flows onto his shoulders which are characteristically ivory-toned. The text then moves on to some more conventional descriptions of lovers and the 'love that burns in his eyes'. Next, rather unexpectedly, the account no longer strictly conforms to typical sylph narratives and is more in keeping with Compiègne's ironic tone: in a humorous turn the author-narrator compares the beauty of the sylph's neck to that of his own, subverting the magic of the moment. He reels the reader back in, reminding them that the sylph is only a literary ploy. But in the subsequent lines he goes even further:

C'est l'Amour, c'est Mars, c'est vous, lecteur si vous voulez que je vous flatte, c'est moi, si vous voulez que je me flatte aussi, c'est un ange, enfin tout ce que vous voudrez. Il est autant au-dessus de Pâris, que le cèdre altier l'emporte sur le lierre rampant ou l'humble fraisier. Une couronne de roses orne l'ébène de ses cheveux et une odeur délicieuse s'exhale de toutes les parties de son corps.²⁷⁹

While acknowledging existing associations such as that with the god Eros, with angels as well as the perceived superiority of sylphs, Compiègne also openly encourages the reader to imagine whichever features they wish; the sylph can have the appearance of whatever appeals to each individual imagination. This detail brings us back to Marmontel's text in which Élise undertakes a composition project and puts together a sylph to her own liking, as discussed in chapter 1.

In the third pornographic text in our investigation, *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne* (1798/1799) attributed to Andréa de Nerciat, the textual description of the sylph is extremely limited and the only engraving to the story (figure 6 below), is even more elliptical. Here all descriptions of the sylph focus exclusively on the genitalia of the creature, and on the ways in which the process of

²⁷⁸ Compiègne, *Les Veillées du couvent*, pp. 128-9.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

intercourse with a sylph is different to that with a human male. At first, some of the sylph's anatomy is described:

Probablement un Sylphe est fait autrement qu'un humain. [...] La langue d'un tendre amant est moins douce, moins agile, moins légère; ses lèvres sont moins ardentes.²⁸⁰

Subsequently the narrator explains that sex with a sylph is superior to that with a human, as with a sylph for a partner the woman is spared the pain of losing her virginity: 'épargnant à la fortunée religieuse de tristes préliminaires, resserrant et développant à son gré les formes de son corps aérien, sans peine, sans douleur, s'introduisait au-dedans d'elle-même'.²⁸¹ The sylph is not described in any more detail, apart from a further mention related to his lightness: 'ses mains légères', 'ses doigts aériens' and '[l]e corps céleste, souple et léger, sans effort se prêtait à tous les mouvements de l'amour ou du caprice'.²⁸² The only descriptions offered are those that facilitate the reader's imagining the sylph as the perfect sexual partner, who due to his lightness and malleability is superior to a human lover.

This sylph is airy and light, a characteristic accentuated by his graphic representation. Unlike in the graphic depiction of the sylph in *Les Veillées du couvent* where at the very least, the sylph's face is visible even though the rest of his body is depicted as the same sort of enigmatic and yet familiarly 'airy' smoke, here absolutely no part of the sylph's anatomy is distinguishable. At the same time, Éléonore refers to the sylph as a '[b]eau génie'; a nod to Villars's mythology and earlier fairy

²⁸⁰ Andréa de Nerciat, *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne*, p. 19.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-2.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 25.

tales, as if to reassure the reader of the fact that the sylph is a benevolent being and nice to look at too, despite the ambiguous smoke they see in the graphic depiction (figure 6 below).²⁸³



Figure 6: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; an illustration to the second edition of *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne* attributed to Andréa de Nerciat

The narrator in *Éléonore* refers to the sylph as the ‘amant infatigable’, once again adding to his profile as the perfect lover, and more generally – as a super-man.²⁸⁴ This aspect is somewhat surprisingly echoed in Sade’s Alzamor in the third part of *Histoire de Juliette* (1801). In this part we find ourselves in the realm of the fantastic and surrounded by supernatural figures.²⁸⁵ Here, the reader is not only faced with implausible pornographic, or rather pornotopic scenarios so characteristic to Sade, but also finds themselves in the company of monsters and magic beings such

²⁸³ Nerciat, *Éléonore*, p. 23.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁸⁵ See Michel Delon, ‘Sade, le tournant fantastique’, *Romance Studies*, 32.3, 2014, pp. 131-40.

as the giant cannibal Minski and the witch Durand. Within this setting, Sade's sylph appears in circumstances that are radically different to most sylph encounters – he is summoned by Durand who commands him to 'devirginize' a young girl while she is being poisoned. In this scene, the sylph proceeds to rape and sodomize the child: 'Cet homme était d'une vigueur prodigieuse, en deux minutes il dépucela la jeune fille, et fit couler le sang dans la chambre'.²⁸⁶ Just like Nerciat's tireless lover, Sade's iteration of the sylph is of a prodigious virility and vigour. Alzamor is a rapist, but he still retains a key feature of sylphness – the ability to appear and disappear accompanied by the characteristic cloud of smoke: 'un nuage s'élève, et le Silphe paraît', 'La Durand prononça deux effroyables paroles qu'il me fut impossible de retenir, et nous ne vîmes plus que de la fumée. [...] Un mot presque pareil, et un second nuage le ramenèrent'.²⁸⁷ Sade's sylph is a far cry from the gentle, helpful, and gallant sylph featured in the majority of other narratives. However, the fundamental difference is not limited to behaviour. Alzamor is no longer young and enchantingly beautiful, quite the opposite; he is 'un vieux Silphe', 'un grand homme sec, pâle, et bilieux, d'environ cinquante ans'.²⁸⁸ This description mimics the traditional sylph motif, but it transforms the key features into something both more befitting the context, and also somehow more realistic. The 'old' sylph is still an 'amant infatigable', although in a context of violence rather than a romanticised setting. This is in effect a parody of the *silphe amoureux* trope. Alzamor's physical appearance is an inversion of the attributes of the traditional sylphs described in numerous other sources (including the above examples): he is no longer young, he is 'bilieux' presumably to mean both unhealthy-looking but also ill-tempered, and curiously he is described as pale, a characteristic that to some extent remains true to the highly prized ivory skin of the sylph, but here it assumes negative connotations. At the same time, he responds to summons through '[des] mots barbares' which echo the 'mots mystérieux' found on 'tablettes d'émail' read out by Eritzine, the female protagonist of Pajon's 1744 fairy tale.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁶ Sade [1801], *Histoire de Juliette ou les Prospérités du vice* (En Hollande, 1797), p. 232.

²⁸⁷ Sade, *Histoire de Juliette*, pp. 231-2.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 232, 231.

²⁸⁹ Pajon, 'Eritzine et Parelin', p. 31.

These words are used by Eritzine to summon her sylph-helper and the way in which the sorceress Durand summons Alzamor mirrors this action, making Sade's sylph not only a negative twist on the sylph-lover motif but also on that of the sylph-servant or helper, as mentioned in chapter 2.

The three pornographic texts discussed above show that the textual descriptions of sylphs can vary in level of detail, suggesting that the unwillingness or inability to thoroughly describe the sylph's appearance is carried over from their ambiguous nature inherent in their definitions and mythologies. In these texts such reluctance can be strategic – allowing the reader to fill in the gaps, and think up a sylph that would satisfy their (erotic or aesthetic) desires. The clouds in the illustrations speak to this. While they 'are therefore inseparable from both an epistemological and aesthetic consideration of the unrepresentable', they have several relevant meanings, as we have suggested here.²⁹⁰ Fundamentally, they signify possibility: within the unarticulated, the malleable, the mysterious, there is potential for imagination.

3.i.c Lightness: a key component of sylphness

The above depictions taken from works as diverse as fairy tales, moral stories, and pornographic texts have all underscored several key physical sylphic attributes which they all have in common: the whiteness of sylphic skin, their toned, athletic bodies, their delicate and noble facial features, their youthfulness, and a lightness conveyed either by flowing soft hair, butterfly wings, or puffs of smoke. The sylph's lightness chimes with the perceived lightness of the century; fleeting interests, loose morals, ever-changing fashions and tastes, light (hearted) literature, not to mention the popularity of objects which embody lightness themselves – fans, umbrellas, ruffled sleeves, perfume, and delicate fabrics such as lace or silk, but also butterflies and hot air balloons.²⁹¹ This notion of physical lightness is developed further in the texts we will turn to now.

²⁹⁰ Peters and Piechocki, 'Early modern clouds', p. 70.

²⁹¹ See Marine Ganofsky and Jean-Alexandre Perras, *Le Siècle de la légèreté: émergences d'un paradigme du dix-huitième siècle français* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019); Jean-Alexandre Perras, 'Le 'Siècle de la

In Barthélemy Imbert's play *Les Deux sylphes* 1781, not much is said of the aspect of the sylphs who come to warn and test the female protagonist Zilla. The only details that we find in Zilla's very brief description of the sylphs to her nurse Feline, indicate that these beings are handsome and light:

Un beau jeune homme, un autre après,
Tout aussi beau, de corps & de visage,
Sont venus près de moi, mais si légèrement...
En vérité, leur corps étoit, je gage,
Plus léger que leur vêtement.²⁹²

Like other traditional sylphs inspired by Villars, these beings are attractive, but no details are given regarding their particular physical traits. Instead, a strong emphasis is placed on lightness; Zilla continues her account: 'Leurs pieds, sans la fouler, glissoient sur la verdure;/On eût dit que, sans aîle, ils auroient pu voler'.²⁹³

The idea that lightness is a central component of elemental beings is not in itself an eighteenth-century invention. According to Paracelsus, all four elemental beings (nymphs, sylphs, gnomes, and salamanders), have both 'flesh from Adam' which is the same as human flesh, and that which is 'not from Adam' which 'is a subtile flesh and cannot be bound or grasped [...] before the flesh that is not from Adam, walls recede, which means that such flesh does not require doors or holes; it goes through intact walls and does not break anything'.²⁹⁴ This 'subtile flesh' makes elemental beings 'like the spirits', light and intangible. For Paracelsus, sylphs as well as the other three elemental beings, can alternate between their corporeal and incorporeal states. In some sources we find that sylphs can be spirit-like at first, but then become palpable, in others they may

frivolité': sur l'invention d'un lieu commun au XVIII^e siècle', *Early Modern French Studies*, 37.1 (2015), pp. 64-74.

²⁹² Imbert, *Les Deux sylphes* (1781), p. 17.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁹⁴ Paracelsus, 'A Book on Nymphs', p. 227.

be palpable and/or visible from the outset but crucially, they always remain light and this is indeed a *modification* (rather than an invention) of authors of the long eighteenth century.

What Villars tells us of sylphs is that they are ‘peuples de figure humaine, un peu fiers en apparence, mais dociles en effet: grands amateurs des sciences, subtils [...]’.²⁹⁵ Here, ‘subtils’ could refer either to their docile character or gracefulness of gesture, or indeed to their ‘nature à pénétrer, à s’insinuer promptement’, as explained by the 1694 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*.²⁹⁶ Eighteenth-century dictionaries retain the meaning of ‘subtil’ as ‘fine’ in the chemical sense, alongside its other meanings which are more to do with behaviour.²⁹⁷ Villars also tells us that all four elemental beings are made up of the finest (in the sense of both purest and most delicate) particles of the elements to which they belong. Thus, salamanders are composed of ‘des plus subtiles parties de la sphère du feu’, nymphs ‘des plus déliées parties de l’eau’, and gnomes ‘des plus subtiles parties de la terre’.²⁹⁸ By the same logic, ‘[l]es sylphes [...] sont composés des plus purs atomes de l’air’, which without doubt means that they too are made of the very finest particles of their own element just like the other three beings.²⁹⁹

In the case of sylphs, something else is also afoot: because air is strictly speaking the lightest of the four elements, and the sylph is made of the finest and lightest particles of air, this being becomes the lightest of the light, so to speak. This is perhaps why authors who followed in Villars’s footsteps made sure to emphasise lightness each time a sylph is described. In Choisy’s *Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y en a peu* (1778), in a scene which is recreated in 1783 by Quétant in his *L’Amant sylphe, ou la Féerie de l’amour*, the maid Justine describes the sylph (albeit not without irony) as ‘[...] tout esprit (peut être sans cervelle),/Beau comme un ange, aussi vif que l’Amour,/Léger comme le vent, brillant comme le jour’.³⁰⁰ A similar accent is placed on lightness by Eglé in *Le Joli vase*, but with

²⁹⁵ Villars, ‘Le Comte de Gabalis’, p. 19.

²⁹⁶ ‘Subtil, subtile’, *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, 1st edn, II (Paris: Coignard, 1694), p. 509.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4th edn, II (Paris: Brunet, 1762), p. 768; *Ibid.*, 5th edn, II (Paris: Smits, 1798), p. 606.

²⁹⁸ Villars, ‘Le Comte de Gabalis’, p. 28.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ Choisy, *Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y en a peu*, p. 16.

the additional detail regarding the sylph's breath which smells delightful: 'Ah! c'est cet esprit enchanteur,/Dont le souffle léger, l'haleine parfumée,/Distille cette douce odeur'.³⁰¹ The fragrant breath of the sylph is a recurrent theme in its own right; the pleasant scent emanating from the sylphic body is a testimony to their overall perfection, and an additional stimulus for the senses which contributes to giving more nuance to the sylph encounter experience (or fantasy), and to heightening physical pleasure. We will discuss the importance of scent in constructing the sylphic fantasy (or sylphic presence) in more depth in chapter 4.

As we saw in chapter 1, the sylph's 'flesh from Adam' that is described by Paracelsus as being 'coarser' than that of men, becomes light even when the sylph is palpable, that is – even when the sylph is not in spirit form. Thus, this lightness in the eighteenth century applies to both the disembodied, spirit-like state of sylphs and sylphides, and to their embodied, palpable manifestations, as Nerciat has it in *Éléonore*: 'ses mains légères', 'ses doigts aériens' and '[!]e corps céleste, souple et léger'.³⁰² The notion of lightness extends even into the voice of the sylph: 'Je crois l'entendre encor cette voix si légère', says Élise of her secret sylph-lover's voice.³⁰³ As we shall see in the pages to follow, this lightness of the body of the sylph extends into lightness of clothing. In fact, the words 'léger/e' and others belonging to the semantic field of lightness are so recurrent in sylph depictions, that there are rarely any descriptions of these elemental creatures which do not mention lightness.

3.i.d. Special effects that accompany sylphic presence: light and the importance of *éclat*

We have already established that clouds or smoke (*fumée*) have a part to play in the manifestation of sylphs, and are part of their physical, or compositional attributes. Smoke is a frequent accompaniment to the sylphic apparition or disappearance in what is both a *merveilleux* element, but also a theatrical one. Even when we are dealing with a pseudo-sylph, this special effect is necessarily

³⁰¹ Pluchon-Destouches, 'Le Joli vase', p. 76.

³⁰² Nerciat, *Éléonore*, pp. 24, 25.

³⁰³ Choisy, *Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y en a peu*, p. 26.

deployed as a recognisable marker of *féerie*. For instance, in Nougaret's *Le Singulier sylphe* (1800), the final puff of smoke designates the end of the sylph performance: 'l'esprit disparut au milieu d'un nuage de fumée', as this pretend sylph has to leave and encourages the Marquise de Folenville to love her husband.³⁰⁴ Ironically, the sylph does not leave the room but simply 're-appears' as the husband; the *merveilleux* smoke is therefore the sign that the *merveilleux* itself is disappearing from the story, to be replaced by reality.

Another element that accompanies the appearance of sylphs, ostensibly more often than puffs of smoke, is bright light. This light has the role of surprising and impressing the mortal to whom the sylph appears and in the overwhelming majority of cases, signifies moral virtue. The connection between a bright and pure light with divinity is apparent, and this both legitimises sylphs as positive and safe, and erects them as superior beings, potentially on par with deities or angels, thus undermining traditional Christian doctrine, but reflecting Paracelsian Christian mythology in which elemental beings are part of God's universe.

Returning to the sylph who appears in Mme de R***'s bedroom at the very end of Crébillon's story, we find that to mark the culmination of their long discussion, the triumph of seduction, and of the sylph himself, his appearance is accompanied by a bright light: 'En ce moment une lueur extraordinaire remplit ma chambre'.³⁰⁵ This light is not localised to a single area, to the bedside where the sylph appears for instance, but fills the entire room. It is also an 'extraordinary' and hence an intense light which creates a sensually (i.e. visually), overwhelming effect. A similiarly bright light announces the appearance of the sylph in Nougaret's tale mentioned above; the Marquise de Folenville is asleep in her bedroom when someone gently pulls her by the arm and when she tries to open her eyes she struggles:

elle ouvre les yeux et les referme bien vite, ne pouvant d'abord soutenir l'éclatante lumière qui vient les frapper. [...] elle voit au milieu de sa chambre un grand homme [...], tenant à sa

³⁰⁴ Nougaret [1800], 'Le Singulier sylphe' (1999), p. 133.

³⁰⁵ Crébillon, 'Le Sylphe', p. 74.

main un globe de feu, et dont le visage est si éclatant de lumière, qu'il lui est impossible de le fixer.³⁰⁶

Paradoxically, it is this very brightness that obscures the features of the sylph (so that the woman does not recognise him as none other than her husband). The light as well as smoke and flames appear each time the sylph comes to visit the young woman and they envelop and hide the details of his physical aspect: 'la lueur passagère de quelque feux qui brillaient tout à coup lorsqu'il paraissait', 'des tourbillons de flammes et de fumée l'enveloppent par intervalle, et une longue flamme bleue brille sur sa tête'.³⁰⁷ Such an impressive display of pyrotechnics would not only hide, but also detract from the object which is meant to be the focal point of these special effects. Curiously, the 'globe de feu' is somewhat of a theme in its own right; in Cointreau's *L'Amant salamandre, ou les Aventures de l'infortunée Julie* (1756), when the fake salamander (who is a pseudo-salamander only in name, and may as well have been a pretend-sylph), appears for the first time to the naïve Julie, a 'globe de feu' is present too.³⁰⁸ In such cases, the bright light is used tactically to produce an effect of awe, and to perpetuate the sylphic fantasy.

Bright light also accompanies the appearance of sylphides. In Bibiena's *La Poupée* (1747), the release of tension at the end of the narrative is expressed by the final appearance of the sylphide Zamire in all her splendour, accompanied by a 'lueur extraordinaire'.³⁰⁹ The increasing brightness of this light is connected to the growth of the (sexual) power of the male protagonist Philandre: '[à] mesure que cette lumière devenait plus éclatante, je sentais augmenter mes forces'.³¹⁰ Light, in this case, has the role of augmenting male potency.

Brightness is not always or only limited to external sources but can originate from the sylph or sylphide themselves. For instance, in *Les Veillées du couvent*, the woman is blown away by the

³⁰⁶ Nougaret, 'Le Singulier sylphe', p. 131.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 132.

³⁰⁸ Cointreau, 'L'Amant salamandre, ou les Aventures de l'infortunée Julie', in *Voyages imaginaires*, XXXIV, ed. by Thomas Garnier (Amsterdam, Paris: Rue Hôtel Serpente, 1788), pp. 319-481 (p. 361).

³⁰⁹ Bibiena, *La Poupée*, p. 136.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

sylph's inherent shine : '[e]t soudain les yeux d'Agnès sont éblouis par l'éclat du Sylphe'.³¹¹ This brilliance is a significant component of the sylph's physical aspect; the perfect sylph that Marmontel's *Élise* fashions for herself is a being with 'un teint d'un éclat et d'une fraîcheur digne d'un sylphe qui préside à l'étoile du matin' (i.e. a fresh and *radiant* complexion).³¹² Light-coloured but also bright skin are associated with beauty as well as a flawlessness that cannot be mortal; the sylph is an airbrushed, luminous human. It also follows that lightness of this type is a testimony to the magical nature of these creatures which can have religious undertones, their superiority over humans, and oftentimes – their moral superiority.

There is, however, one noteworthy exception to this rule – Cazotte's sylphide in *Le Diable amoureux* (1772). The overall positive meaning of brightness associated with sylphs and sylphides is frustrated by Cazotte's depiction of the first appearance of the Devil-sylphide Biondetta/o in his text of 1772. When he/she appears in the vault in the ruins of Portici for the first time, 'un torrent de lumière plus éblouissante que celle du jour' accompanies the manifestation of 'une tête de chameau horrible', an 'odieux fantôme'.³¹³ The engraving to this episode (attributed to Clément Pierre Marillier and part of a set of six plates to the 1772 edition), depicts the setting:

³¹¹ Compiègne, *Les Veillées du couvent*, pp. 128-9.

³¹² Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 101.

³¹³ Cazotte [1772], 'Le Diable amoureux' (1981), p. 39.

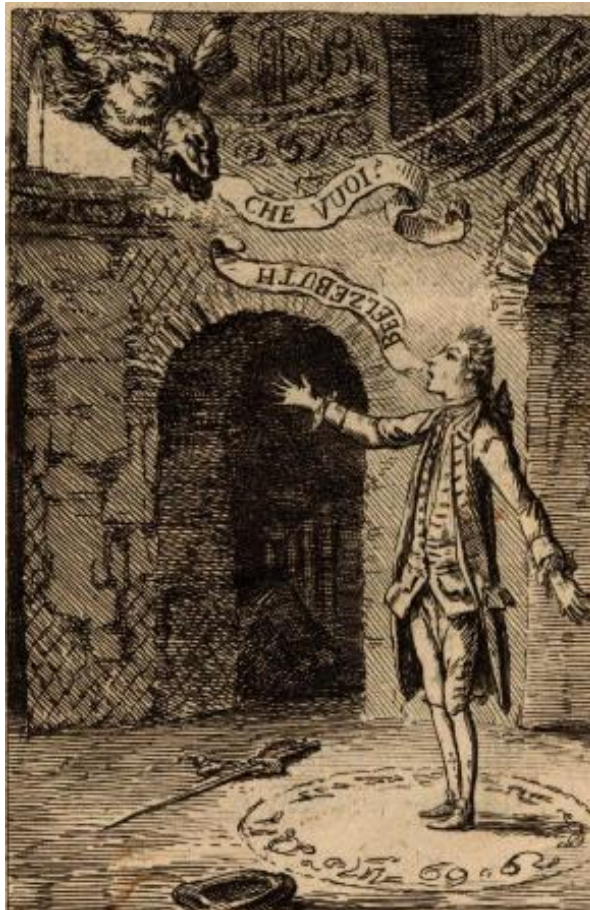


Figure 7: Unnamed engraving, attributed to Clément Pierre Marillier (1740-1808); illustration to *Le Diable amoureux* by Jacques Cazotte (1772)

This is a direct reversal of the association of light with sylphs and their inherent virtue, and is instead a terrifying light which signals the appearance, or apparition, of something sinister. The uneasy relationship between the male protagonist Alvare and the ambiguous Biondetta/o culminates with the nightmarish scene whereby the sylphide confirms her true nature as Beelzebub. This, just like the first manifestation, is accompanied by extremely bright light: '[à] l'instant, l'obscurité qui m'environne se dissipe: la corniche qui surmonte le lambris de la chambre s'est tout chargé de gros limaçons: leurs cornes [...], sont devenues des jets de lumière phosphorique'.³¹⁴ This light is strong enough to overwhelm and hurt Alvare: 'ébloui par cette illumination subite', 'une lumière frappante

³¹⁴ Cazotte, 'Le Diable amoureux', p. 114.

les [ses yeux] aveugle'.³¹⁵ Just like heroines in sylph narratives, Alvare is blown away by the light, but in this case the situation takes on a sinister and disturbing tone. The slugs are a disgusting presence and the entire grotesque setup subverts the association of sylphs with light and purity. Towards the end of the novella, when Alvare is en route to his ancestral home to see his mother, his carriage comes to a sudden halt, and he comes out to find that 'un nuage noir s'élevait en l'air, le sommet représentait une enorme tête de chameau'.³¹⁶ The engraving which depicts this scene is found below.



Figure 8: Unnamed engraving, attributed to Clément Pierre Marillier; illustration to *Le Diable amoureux* by Jacques Cazotte (1772)

³¹⁵ Cazotte, 'Le Diable amoureux', p. 115.

³¹⁶ Cazotte, *Le Diable amoureux, nouvelle espagnole* (Naples, 1772), p. 138.

The cloud is black and ominous unlike the sumptuous and playful (albeit suggestive) puffs we found in other examples discussed in this chapter. This dark cloud, and the menacing camel apparition, like the luminous slugs flip sylphic convention on its head to signify evil and ugliness.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, sylphides and their descriptions figure less frequently than sylphs in our corpus, but Cazotte's *Biondetto/a* is an important example of how female elemental beings of the air are described, and what role their appearance has in the plot.³¹⁷ The gender-ambiguous Devil-sylphide in Cazotte's novella subscribes to contemporary aesthetic ideals which we have detailed above, and her appearance is in keeping with that of sylphs.³¹⁸ Like a sylph, the young *Biondetto* is 'l'Amour en trousse de page', and later in the guise of the performer *Fiorentina*, the sylphide's beauty is exquisite:³¹⁹

une petite main longuette, potelée, tout à la fois blanche et purpurine, dont les doigts insensiblement arrondis par le bout étaient terminés par un ongle dont la forme et la grâce étaient inconcevables.³²⁰

The attention to detail is noticeable particularly in comparison with the descriptions of male sylphs, and this is significant because the Devil-sylphide's power to seduce *Alvare* is found within the details of her irresistible beauty. The emphasis is, once again, on the whiteness of skin, but with an added mention of the crimson undertone which was important in the eighteenth-century aesthetic.³²¹ Pink tones in general were also being associated more and more with the feminine.³²²

Further in the text, *Biondetto/a*'s hair is described in some detail, mirroring depictions of the hair of male sylphs – it is long, flowing and blond:

³¹⁷ In chapter 4, we will also turn to *Bibiena's La Poupée* (1747) to investigate the role of the doll-sylphide's physical attributes as well as her clothing; we will approach this from the perspective of the doll as a luxury, collectible object.

³¹⁸ We will discuss sylphic gender as well as examples of its fluidity in chapter 5.

³¹⁹ Cazotte, 'Le Diable amoureux', pp. 43-4

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³²¹ Fend, *Fleshing out Surfaces*, p. 166,

³²² Sempère, 'Les effets merveilleux', p. 281.

il avait étalé ses cheveux qui tombaient jusqu'à terre, en couvrant, à boucles flottantes et naturelles, son dos et ses épaules, et même entièrement son visage. Ne pouvant faire mieux, il démêlait sa chevelure avec ses doigts. Jamais peigne d'un plus bel ivoire ne se promena dans une plus épaisse forêt de cheveux blonds cendré; leur finesse était égale à toutes leurs autres perfections.³²³

The scene is also represented in this engraving:



Figure 9: Unnamed engraving, attributed to Clément Pierre Marillier; illustration to *Le Diable amoureux* by Jacques Cazotte (1772)

The ivory complexion is accentuated once again and the softness and fineness of the hair contributes to creating an air of lightness. At the same time, this extremely long hair is similar to that of the sylphs in *Lamekis*, bringing out the animalistic undertones of Biondetta/o's real nature.

As shown through the above examples, it was only with authors who succeeded Villars, that the sylph starts to gain more detailed physical characteristics. The long eighteenth century seems to

³²³ Cazotte, 'Le Diable amoureux', p. 53.

take a more pronounced interest in the way sylphs looked. The almost complete lack of description of their appearance in *Gabalis*, starts to not only gain details such as hair type and colour (either blonde or black), physique, facial features and complexion, and even age, but also any accompanying attributes such as bright light or smoke. A sylph type begins to take shape and the same identifiable traits including ivory skin, flowing (and sometimes floating on the wind) hair, youthfulness and lightness are found across a variety of genres, sometimes as disparate as pornography and moral tales.

3.ii. Sylphic attire: clothing or its lack

If there is a clear sparsity of detail pertaining to something as essential as physical appearance in Paracelsus and to an even greater extent, in Villars, then it is perhaps no surprise that not much detail is offered regarding the way these beings are clothed in these authors' texts. Villars, in particular, offers no information on the general presentation of elemental beings.

Paracelsus on the other hand, although not giving any descriptions of the aspect of elemental beings' clothing or what it is made of, does offer some curious and enigmatic information on how it is worn: 'About their clothing: they are clothed over their genitalia, but not in the way of our world, in their own way'.³²⁴ In this sense he seems to view elemental beings as primitive humans, and this aligns with his recurring reference to them as 'wild men'. He also states that they manufacture, 'spin and weave their own clothing', and it is implied that they have their own raw material to make this from as 'he who gave us wool from sheep, gives it to them too. For it is possible for God to create not only the sheep which are known to us, but also the same in fire, in water, in the earth'.³²⁵ Nothing more is offered on this subject, and as Villars does not elaborate any further on this aspect of elemental aesthetic either, we will work with the evidence found in texts by subsequent authors. As

³²⁴ Paracelsus, p. 234.

³²⁵ Ibid., pp. 230, 234.

we shall see, contemporary fashion trends and products that become available due to evolving global trade networks, start to be reflected in the attire which authors choose for their sylphs.

3.ii.a. The role of nakedness and naturalness in sylphic presentation

We will begin our analysis with sources in which sylphs do not wear any clothing at all.

Unsurprisingly, in pornographic texts sylphs typically appear nude or at least clothing is not mentioned or depicted graphically, as we saw in the examples above. In *Les Veillées du couvent*, when the sylph manifests himself, he is ‘sans voile, et semblable au bel Adam, avant son crime’; he is not only completely nude, but possesses an ironic innocence and perfection.³²⁶ When the pseudo-sylph Azor materialises as the young shepherd Atis and comes to make love to the unsuspecting Eglé in Pluchon-Destouches’s *Le Joli vase*, he too is completely nude: ‘Atis paraît, non couvert de dorure,/De diamans, de saphirs, de rubis,/Il est paré par la simple nature;/Elle fila pour tous mêmes habits’.³²⁷ Although his ‘attire’ is humble, he is embellished by some additional elements from nature – such as fresh flowers – ‘le jasmin, & l’œillet & la rose/Demi-close,/Ceignent son front, couronnent ses cheveux;/Et les parfums les plus délicieux/L’ont arrosé [...]’.³²⁸ The simplicity of the adornment is in contrast to the extravagance of the expensive jewels listed here and which, as we shall see later on in this chapter, can occasionally feature as part of a sylph’s attire. Extravagant items are also offered as gifts by sylphs as part of their courtship of humans, and we will take a closer look at such objects and their roles in chapter 4.

In Nerciat’s *Éléonore ou l’Heureuse personne*, neither clothing nor its lack is mentioned at all when the sylph appears in the woman’s bedroom; we are only told that the sylph ‘condense autour de son être l’air qui l’environne, se donne un corps’ and then immediately proceeds to have sex with the heroine.³²⁹ It can therefore be assumed that this sylph is also nude. This nakedness is what a

³²⁶ Compiègne, *Les Veillées du couvent*, p. 129

³²⁷ Pluchon-Destouches, ‘Le Joli vase’, p. 81.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Nerciat, *Éléonore ou l’Heureuse personne*, p. 18-9.

pornographic narrative demands, and the fact that the sylph (whether real or fake) has the ability and possibility to manifest himself already nude, is an advantage it has over human lovers – the ‘ready-made’ nakedness is a shortcut to sexual intercourse.

The ultimate nude sylph, however, is Sade’s Alzamor, who appears in a violent and transgressive sexual scene from *Histoire de Juliette*. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Alzamor appears when summoned by the witch Durand and in one particular instance, when he arrives accompanied by the characteristic cloud of smoke, he is not only naked, but also has an erection: ‘le sylphe bandait, et ce fut le vit en l’air qu’il s’empara de l’enfant’, and he proceeds with the rape.³³⁰ We can infer that Alzamor’s previous appearances saw him likewise naked; after all, his role seems mostly to be the performance of sexual acts. Yet his nudity does not by any means project the same type of aesthetically pleasing, noble, harmless and almost innocent nudeness of the other pornographic sylphs; his is an aggressive one.

The above examples demonstrate that lack of clothing, the (literally) stripped down version of the sylph, is in itself a manifestation of sylphness: there is a naturalness and simplicity inherent to the sylph as opposed to the elaborate (and excessive) clothing and makeup often sported by contemporaneous human men. It is, of course, true that the above examples are from pornographic texts in which nude bodies are bound to feature sooner rather than later. And yet, the fact that these elemental beings appear in a natural state is not only a shortcut towards the sexual act, but a statement about their inherent flawlessness which requires no artificial embellishment – no elaborate adornments fashionable at the time, no powdered wig, or precious stones.

3.ii.b. Emerging trends in the styles of clothing and overall presentation of sylphs

In other texts, more layers of different materials are added to clothe and adorn sylphs. When Crébillon’s Mme de R*** sees her sylph in the culmination of the story, he is dressed in ‘l’ajustement

³³⁰ Sade, *Histoire de Juliette* (1998) p. 658.

le plus galant et le plus noble'.³³¹ While this is by no means a detailed account of the sylph's attire, it still indicates two important facts – that the sylph's clothing and overall presentation is both refined (gallant), and that it is noble. The sylph is therefore dressed both fashionably, and with exclusive elegance and taste. We are offered similarly few specifics regarding the attire of the pseudo-sylph in Nougaret's *Le Singulier sylphe* (although a lot is said of the general ambiance and special effects accompanying the sylph-husband's appearance, as discussed above). In this case, a 'grand homme couronné d'étoiles brillantes, couvert d'une robe rouge et bleue' presents himself to the Marquise de Folenville's gaze.³³² A tall sylph wearing a shining crown and a robe in almost regal colours – red and blue – would certainly create an imposing and almost official impression, even if somewhat over-the-top. An air of nobility and superiority is conveyed which is more indicative of real-world social codes and hierarchies than of fantasy elemental beings, but the sylphs' status as superior to humans is also underscored.

3.ii.c. Clothing fit for a sylph king: the appearance of Zélindor and Miriel

Building on the notion of nobility mentioned in the above sub-section, we will now examine two case studies of sylphic royalty and their apparel.

In Lubert's fairy tale *Le Prince Glacé et la princesse Étincelante*, the princess is transported to the magnificent palace of the sylph prince Miriel. When he finally makes his entrance, his attire is as opulent as his abode:

Un habit de gaze couleur de feu & or, noué d'une ceinture de diamans, l'habilloit galamment, & se ratachoit de pierreries avec beaucoup de grace. Ses cheveux blancs poudrés & frisés tombaient avec une élégance simple & naturelle jusqu'à sa ceinture; une couronne de diamans mêlés avec des feuilles d'émeraudes, achevoit de le parer.³³³

³³¹ Crébillon, 'Le Sylphe', p. 74.

³³² Nougaret, 'Le Singulier sylphe', p. 131.

³³³ Lubert, 'Le Prince Glacé et la princesse Étincelante', p. 114.

The notion of gallantry in clothing here echoes Mme de R***'s brief description above. In Miriel's case, lightness becomes introduced explicitly, and manifests itself in the choice of gauze or tulle which is light, transparent, and made of expensive luxurious thread as detailed in the eighteenth-century meaning of 'gaze': 'Espèce d'étoffe fort claire, faite de soie, ou de fil d'or & d'argent'.³³⁴ Apart from this light and exquisite material, the sylph is adorned from head to toe in precious stones, making his attire one of the most opulent sylph outfits thus far.

Miriel's outfit is only truly matched by that of the king of sylphs – Zélindor. The stage representation of this sylph who has had such a significant impact on many heroines of other sylph narratives (including Marmontel's and Choisy's *Élises* as we shall discuss in our final chapter), features a beautifully designed, rich, and elaborate costume and hairstyle. Figure 10 below shows one of the costume designs for the opera-ballet. The themes are consistent with Miriel's outfit and reunite elements from other descriptions of sylph dress: pale and gentle colours, ruffles, light fabrics, and even feathers are used to convey lightness and airiness, while what seems to be a generous amount of costume jewels enhance the overall magnificence of this royal sylph.

³³⁴ 'Gaze', *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 4th edn, I (Paris: Brunet, 1762), p. 810.



Figure 10: Costume design, Louis-René Boquet (1717-1814); *Zélindor, roi des sylphes* by François-Augustin Paradis de Moncrif (1766)

Miriél's crown of diamonds echoes that of Nougaret's version of 'shining stars' mentioned above. But while its overall brilliance may be owed to riches, it is also an extension of the sylph's inherent luminosity, in the same way as silk or 'gaze', although also luxury items, can be interpreted as enhancements of the sylph's natural lightness and nobility of character.

3.ii.d. The place of elaborate costumes and powdered wigs in sylph presentation

In the second part of Georgiana Cavendish's *Le Sylphe* (1784: as mentioned before we refer to Pierre Le Tourneur's French translation), the protagonist Julie meets her guardian sylph for the first time at a masked ball. She is fully aware that the sylph is no fantastic being but a man who acts as a friendly guide, helping her navigate the perils and seductions of London society. Following this encounter,

Julie writes to her sister, and excitedly describes what the sylph was wearing, before talking of anything else:

Son ensemble me parut plus parfait que tout ce que j'ai vu. Une étoffe d'argent s'arrondissoit sur son corps dans les plus élégantes proportions. Sa jambe étoit à demi couverte par un brodequin à franges du même tissu. Un manteau de soie bleu flottoit sur son dos, attaché à une de ses épaules par une épaulette de diamans, & se déployoit jusqu'à terre. Cette robe brillante étoit bordée d'une riche broderie d'argent du plus bel éclat, & son chaperon, assorti au reste de l'habillement, étoit le plus élégant qu'on puisse imaginer. [...] Ses cheveux tombaient en boucles, & flottoient négligemment sur ses épaules, retenus par un ruban blanc; c'étoit enfin le plus séduisant objet qui jamais ait pu sortir des mains du Créateur.³³⁵

This lavish adornment is on a par with those of the prince and the king of sylphs. Once more, silk as well as a silver fabric are part of the ensemble – both costly materials but also possessing light-reflecting and shiny qualities. The luminosity of the sylphic costume (and in this case, it is a costume because the setting is a masquerade ball, and because the role of the sylph is performed by a human in the broader context of the novel) – his 'robe brillante' – is further enhanced by the now familiar diamonds and silver embroidery 'du plus bel éclat'. Elements of lightness are present too: his silken, light blue coat, hangs loose or rather floats ('flottoit'), on his back, and the locks of his hair fall and flow on his shoulders.

This hairstyle seems to be different to the wigs fashionable towards the end of the eighteenth-century. By this time, male wigs tended towards simplicity, elegance and convenience, and their length was not regarded highly anymore, unlike in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century when wigs were immense.³³⁶ Cavendish's sylph's hair is more in line with the tendency towards naturalness, *la belle nature* – 'an eighteenth-century aesthetic principle by which the arts were understood to represent the reality of nature'.³³⁷ Thus, although this sylph could not conceivably attend a high society ball without a wig, his is a style which is was both longer than the

³³⁵ Cavendish, *Le Sylphe*, Seconde Partie, pp. 76-7.

³³⁶ Michael Kwass, 'Big Hair: A Wig History of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century France', *The American Historical Review*, 111.3 (2006), pp. 531-59 (pp. 646, 647).

³³⁷ Kwass, 'Big Hair; A Wig History of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century France', p. 652.

wigs fashionable at that time, but which also evoked a certain naturalness. It is this naturalness as well as the presence of floating locks which makes his hairstyle more sylph-like. As we saw in all the examples discussed throughout this chapter, sylphic hair as a rule is natural, either black or blond, usually long, and flowing. Even in Miriel's case, although it is powdered and curled, his hair still 'tomboient avec une élégance simple & naturelle'.³³⁸

Marmontel's Élise dresses her perfect, fantasy sylph in the lightest colours and fabrics: 'Elle y avait ajouté la parure la plus légère, des fleurs, des rubans, des couleurs les plus tendres, un tissu de soie à demi transparent et dont se jouaient les zéphirs'.³³⁹ This attire is perhaps one of the most faithful to the 'light' essence of the sylph and hence true to the traditional perception of these elemental creatures passed down from Villars. Moreover, the transparency of the fabric seems to translate the spirit-like nature which Paracelsus attributed to them. But while this beautifully crafted description of the sylph's clothing speaks of sylphness more than many found in other sylph narratives, it is in dissonance with the fashions of the day.

This becomes evident particularly when looking at illustrations of contemporary fashions such as Jean-Michel Moreau's collection of engravings *Monument du costume physique et moral de la fin du dix-huitième siècle* (1789), which were accompanied by Rétif de La Bretonne's text. In this assortment of 26 engravings no plate is exempt from the presence of elaborate, opulent, and heavy clothing and hairstyles. Below we show two of these images (figures 11 and 12), as examples of the intricate, and often difficult to wear items of multi-tiered clothing (and artificial hair): 'ballooning paniers, tiers of ruffles, and elaborately brocaded silks reminiscent of the fashions favoured by Mme de Pompadour' were popular for much of the eighteenth century and these elaborate styles were still present at court even on the eve of the Revolution.³⁴⁰ Apart from the ruffles on men's and women's clothing (in particular the fashionable ruffled 'jabot' sleeves), and the feathers adorning

³³⁸ Lubert, 'Le Prince Glacé et la princesse Étincelante', p. 114.

³³⁹ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 101.

³⁴⁰ Jennifer M. Jones, 'Repackaging Rousseau: Femininity and Fashion in Old Regime France', *French Historical Studies*, 18.4 (1994), pp. 939-67 (p. 945).

women's hairstyles and hats, nothing truly suggests lightness. That is not to say that being able to navigate around furniture gracefully and lightly was not of vital importance if one wished to appear refined in the higher echelons of society; this was an essential skill and part of the etiquette.



Left – figure 11: ‘Les adieux’, Moreau le Jeune (1741-1814); illustration from *Monument du costume physique et moral de la fin du dix-huitième siècle* (1789)

Right – figure 12: ‘La grande toilette’, as figure 11

However, if we look again at Élise’s sylph, his clothing is both transparent and loose – the reverse of what we see in Moreau’s illustrations where men sport fitted waistcoats and even tight stockings: aristocratic men of the period ‘would have worn a sleekly fitted silk suit embellished with lace jabot and cuffs’.³⁴¹ In order to compare Élise’s sylph and the fashions of the day, we need not look further than the illustration to Marmontel’s text:

³⁴¹ Harold Honda and Andrew Bolton, ‘Preface’, in *Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Harold Koda and Andrew Bolton (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 11-4 (p. 12).



Figure 13: Unnamed engraving, Gravelot (Hubert-François Bourguignon, 1699-1773); illustration to 'Le Mari sylphe', in *Contes moraux* (1765); [based on preparatory drawing entitled 'La déclaration d'amour']

Here both Élise and her *mari sylphe* Volange are dressed according to contemporary fashion.

Volange's clothes are most certainly not transparent, quite the opposite – there are several layers of them; neither are they particularly light save perhaps the sleeves and the bottom of his coat which is a bit looser and shows some movement.

The fantasy sylph imagined by the young woman still keeps one foot in the real world of eighteenth-century fashion and consumption; she picks silk as the fabric to clothe him, a material which was highly prized and accessible to small numbers of upper-class customers. At the same time, the ribbons with which she adorns the sylph, although not necessarily an exclusive item, were very much a popular merchandise amongst other trimmings which could be acquired in the famous

boutiques of the *marchandes de modes*, a landmark of Parisian material consumption and social life. These two simple items anchor even the lightest sylph in the very tangible realm of financial transaction and material exchange, as well as the broader networks of goods circulation and its reliance on colonial expansion.

These examples have shown that whether the sylph is clothed or naked, elements such as elegance or gallantry and a certain superiority in dress (or undress) is shared by all. Some instances showcase complex adornments, and have taken Paracelsus's idea of minimal and rustic clothing to the dreamy heights of luxury couture. This inevitably links sylphic fashion to the tastes of the time, while inscribing it within the world of commerce.

3. Conclusion

From the above examples a range of sylph representations emerges. What is shared by depictions across genres are two main trends. The first is a substantial ambiguity when it comes to comparing these elemental creatures to anything or anyone else, aside from perhaps Adonis or Eros (which are still vague reference points as they too are mythological). The second is the emergence of a set of types and features which recur across genres – young, toned, beautiful, dressed in the latest but elegant and refined fashions (unless nude), virtuous or at least morally superior to humans. These recurrent elements become a formula that creates sylphs and sylphides, although, of course, with authorial variation.

Some sylphs appear wearing nothing at all or a simple garland of flowers around their head, while others are clad in extremely elaborate and luxurious clothing and jewels. And although they cover a broad spectrum, these representations have several key and identifiable elements in common, present in sources ranging from pornography to moral stories, and from novels to fairy tales. No matter whether we are dealing with physical characteristics only, or with highly ornate clothing, all sylphs share an 'éclat' – a brilliance and luminosity which emanates from their very skin, their eyes which are consistently 'étincelants', their glimmering silken clothes, their multiple shining

jewels, or the 'special' effects such as bright light which can accompany their appearance. The sylph's beauty is a composite one in the sense that it is made up of elements which are perceived as ideal in the eighteenth-century artistic aesthetic, which also echoes contemporary racial ideology: a light and radiant skin tone and a defined but not overly muscular body. Another crucial characteristic shared by all sylphs is that they are light in weight. This can manifest itself through their bodies being mere clouds of smoke, their invariably flowing hair as well as the light fabrics, colours and fittings of their clothes. In this way the airiness inherent in sylphic mythology is translated using contemporary ideas on aesthetics, fashion, race. All these physical attributes are also signs of a moral superiority over humans.

We have mentioned on several occasions throughout this chapter that sylphs are superior to mortals not only physically but also in terms of their morality: they are more noble, are (usually) not as plagued by vices, and crucially are better lovers than ordinary humans. They are better lovers because they are better at sex due to their supernatural, elemental properties, as we saw for instance in Nerciat's *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne*. They are also very skilled at courtship and as Mme de R***'s sylph explains:

nous savons tout ce qui se passe dans le cœur d'une femme. Elle ne saurait former de désirs que nous ne satisfassions nous entrons dans tous ses caprices [...]

Il n'est point, comme je vous l'ai dit, de fantaisie que nous ne satisfaisons, de biens dont nous ne comblions ce que nous aimons.³⁴²

And because they can see into a woman's heart, sylphs are also dangerous lovers.³⁴³

Overwhelmingly, they are also extremely gallant; this is the case to such a significant extent that one of the texts in our corpus is entitled *Le Sylphe galant et observateur* (anonymous author, 1800-1).

The sylph in this text is indeed a gallant lover, but the term *galanterie* is complex and its applications in the context of sylphic behaviour are illuminating. Alain Viala's *La France galante: essai historique*

³⁴² Crébillon, 'Le Sylphe', pp. 62, 69.

³⁴³ Ibid., p. 62.

sur une catégorie culturelle, de ses origines jusqu'à la Révolution (2008) draws out its importance and traces the changes in its meaning during the course of the eighteenth century from 'amour tendre et tempéré' to being more closely aligned with libertinage in the second half of the century.³⁴⁴ The former iteration, which sees the ideal man as one who respects women and is more moderate and considerate in the ways in which he pursues them, finds an almost perfect incarnation in the sylph, and in particular in the *sylphe amoureux* (a notion we have discussed in chapter 1). The *galanterie* of sylphic lovers makes them a suitable refuge for women from the aggression of mortal men. But *galanterie* can be used to seduce and corrupt too and as such become a facilitator of libertinage; this too is found in sylph narratives – progressively evolving into the 'sylphes mauvais garçons' of the end of the century, as Michel Delon puts it – are the libertine seducers who 'cultivent les pulsions'.³⁴⁵ Central to gallant courtship is, of course, the practice of gift-giving, and this is another key element of numerous sylph narratives, which will form the focus of our next chapter where we will look at how sylphs manifest themselves in the real world through exotic scents and rare, luxurious objects.

³⁴⁴ Alain Viala, *La France galante: essai historique sur une catégorie culturelle, de ses origines jusqu'à la Révolution* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008), p. 455.

³⁴⁵ Delon, 'Présentation', p. 27; As opposed to a galant lover who 'cultivait la conversion des pulsions', Viala, *La France galante* (2008), p. 463.

CHAPTER 4. SYLPIC TRANSMUTATIONS AND THE ECONOMICS OF THRILL

When we examined what we have called the sylphic form in the previous chapter, we looked at the sylphic body with all of its accompaniments. In that case we approached the issue of the manifestation of sylphs and sylphides as themselves, whether appearing in tangible form or as ephemeral and invisible entities. In this chapter we will refigure our analysis towards the ways in which sylphs represent themselves in the real world, not by materialising as the perfect human body (or at least not at first), but instead how they make themselves present through other objects, in a process which we will call sylphic transmutation. This process can be understood as an intermediary between the invisibility of sylphs and sylphides and their full materialisations as the perfect lover (although the transformation is not always complete or linear).

As elemental creatures, sylphs and sylphides possess flesh and blood like humans, but also have supernatural abilities such as walking through walls, as we have learned from Paracelsus's description.³⁴⁶ They are both human-like and spirit-like, but do not fully belong to either species, an ambiguous state of being to which we have attended in chapter 1. Due to their elemental nature, sylphs exist between the material and immaterial, and are able to switch between states of being.³⁴⁷ At the same time, intellectual discourse places them in the zone between belief and disbelief, between dream and reality; sylphs are thus also able to change the states of mind of those with whom they interact. As such, they are creatures of the border, not fully belonging to either realm and inherently ambiguous. It is this uncertainty that they sometimes try to dispel by using various objects to make their presence felt, smelled, and seen in the real world.

Many of the eighteenth-century sylph narratives centre on the themes of courtship and the seduction of human partners by this elemental being (the *sylphe amoureux* plots with which we are now familiar). Although much scholarship has ascribed sylph narratives to the libertine genre, as

³⁴⁶ Paracelsus, 'A Book on Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies, and Salamanders, and on the Other Spirits' (1996), p. 228.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

already mentioned in this thesis, many sylph texts (even those that are in essence seduction plots), diverge from typical libertine narratives. For instance, while Michel Delon points out the importance of lighting, scent, food, and music in libertine seduction narratives, the ways in which scents, objects, and lighting are used in these texts diverges from typical libertine plots.³⁴⁸ This is partly due to the supernatural or the pretence of supernatural elements with their added possibilities for enchantment, but also because the gentle and gallant sylphs are to a large extent the counteragents to aggressive male pursuers. These factors create a different dynamic, not without its own complications, however. Within this setup, gift-giving plays a central role.

Gifts of luxury objects such as fashionable clothing, exquisite jewellery, beautifully crafted collectable items, and exotic scents are used as proof of a sylph's existence, and a way for this ephemeral being to manifest itself in the real world. The materials and substances into which the sylph is translated are varied – from liquid essences and perfumes atomised and diffused in air, to gemstones and precious metals. When the sylphs are translated into such objects, they undergo multiple alchemical transformations, shifting between elements and states. These transmutations take sylphs from their airy state to liquid or even solid forms. Today we would recognise such changes as phase transitions: vapourisation, deposition, sublimation, condensation, etc., and at the time some such transformations will have been understood as alchemical stages. Like these scientific and alchemical processes, the transformation of elemental being to elemental object is multidirectional, with a fragile equilibrium; sylphs can revert back to their intangible forms and vanish if conditions are modified. However, the similarities between, on the one hand, the models of modern chemistry and thermodynamics, and, on the other, sylphic transmutations end there, with the latter containing distinctive epistemic complexities which merit investigation on their own account.

³⁴⁸ Delon, *Le Savoir-vivre libertin* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2000), pp. 145-81.

Often sylphic gifts are made of multiple materials and involve several transformations – crafting, distilling, refining, moulding, forging, stitching, and shaping by several artists, craftspeople, artisans, and even shopkeepers. The materials themselves as well as the techniques employed shed light on the provenance and circulation of goods and skills during the long eighteenth century. While used as material proof, luxury items are still evocative of the sylph’s nature – weightless, flowing fabrics of pretty dresses, light, flowery scents diffused in a room, and even solid but highly luminous precious stones such as diamonds recall the sylph’s lightness and radiance which we argued are central components of sylphness in chapter 3; no matter the transformation, sylphness is always retained. Crucially, sylphic transmutations carry psychological meaning too – they represent the sublimations of dreams and desires, and an additional layer of difficulty is introduced when sylphs transform into living beings, particularly when they become or substitute already existing people.

In this chapter, we will look at a selection of items (often recurring) used as sylphic gifts and analyse the ways in which certain objects (broadly speaking) capture and shape the airy sylph, what the complexities of doing this might mean, and how this way of codifying the sylph might reflect the period’s standards, predilections, and obsessions.³⁴⁹ To some extent we will use the approach of Katie Scott and Hannah Williams’s *Artists’ Things* (2024) where they discuss each object separately. We will also adopt this approach, but, unlike Scott and Williams who organised their objects alphabetically, our small selection of objects will be discussed in order of increasing tangibility.³⁵⁰

Conspicuous consumption of luxury goods, and the pursuit of a refined existence surrounded by opulent décor, foods, scents, and sounds were the hallmarks of the eighteenth-century elite. Clothed in the latest elaborate fashions, displaying their snuff boxes, fans, mirrors and exotic pets, this section of society sought to impress with their exuberance and the latest taste.³⁵¹ This appetite

³⁴⁹ All images used in this chapter are also listed in Appendix 2 for convenience.

³⁵⁰ Katie Scott and Hannah Williams, *Artists’ Things: Rediscovering Lost Property from Eighteenth-Century France* (Getty Research Institute, 2024).

³⁵¹ See, among others, the collections of essays *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (Palgrave Macmillan Ltd., 2003); *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. by John Brewer and Roy Porter (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical*

for expensive, ever-changing fashionable luxury items was of concern to contemporary thinkers and is linked to criticism of the upper classes for their profligate lifestyles. At the same time, exquisite items played important roles within the lives of the elite; creating ambiance, being part of etiquette, constructing identities and attesting to status, and being at the heart of gift exchange. Within this framework, sumptuous things, sounds, scents, and surroundings were also key players in seduction rituals. In sylph texts, exquisite items take the meaning of treasures and marvels that are the products of magic forces (real or pretend). Luxury goods in this context often act as real-world manifestations of the sylph, as proof of its existence, and in many sylph narratives, luxurious things, scents, musical performances, and even complex mechanical devices are employed to impress human love interests.

Objects offered by sylphs carry a significance which goes beyond the meaning of gift exchange in a traditional, anthropological context.³⁵² To understand this, we turn to the idea that objects can become agents of seduction. There is hardly a more suitable text to recall than Jean-François de Bastide's *La Petite Maison* to illustrate this idea. Published for the first time in 1753 or 1754 in the *Journal Oeconomique*, and later in its own right in 1758, and then again in 1763 as part of the *Contes de M. de Bastide*, complete with notes, this short text is both a libertine seduction narrative, and a revealing art-historical account of tastes and fashions of the mid-eighteenth century. It combines seduction and aesthetics, sensual and sexual discovery, to incite wonder and pleasure.

The title of Bastide's text reflects the popularity of *petites maisons* in the eighteenth century as safe, secluded spaces where the owner and a select group, or a lover, could freely indulge in various, often socially unsanctioned pleasures away from prying eyes.³⁵³ The narrative premise is a

Perspective, ed. by Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, and London, England: University of California Press, 1996); as well as Reed Benhamou, 'Fashion in the "Mercure": From Human Foible to Female Failing', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 31.1 (1997), pp. 27-43.

³⁵² I necessarily refer to Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques* of 1925 (Paris: Quadrige-PUF, 2007), as well as more recently, Maurice Godelier's *L'Énigme du don* (Paris: Fayard 1996), and Alan D. Schrift's *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity* (New York: Routledge, 1997), etc.

³⁵³ Marine Ganofsky, *Night in French Libertine Fiction* (2018), p. 96.

familiar one: the beautiful, young, intelligent, and virtuous Méliete resists the gallant advances of the Marquis de Trémicour. The marquis is not about to give up and takes the young woman to see his *petite maison* in a final attempt to win her over. They walk through the curated gardens and the spaces of the exquisitely decorated and furnished house. As they journey from room to room, pleasures incited by the décor, scents, and sounds present there accumulate and intensify until finally Méliete yields to the marquis's amorous advances.

Three points are of note regarding this story: firstly, it is not the marquis *per se* who does the seducing, but the garden, the menagerie, the house and the objects, scents and sounds within it. Secondly, a gradual but exponential increase in pleasure occurs and although this is a typical element of many contemporary seduction narratives, in this case the woman is offered gradually more and more aesthetically pleasing and exciting experiences, as each space is more beautiful than the last, until 'elle se sentit pour ainsi dire suffoquée', overcome and seduced.³⁵⁴ The choice of 'suffoquée' is also indicative of the violent and perhaps murkier side of some seduction narratives (including those featuring sylphs).

Lastly, it is not only the beauty of the rooms and the objects within them that win her over, but the fragrances, music and even the food served at the supper: we are dealing with a simultaneous, multisensorial seduction which succeeds where the man had failed. Marine Ganofsky argues that both the seclusion of the *petite maison*, and the fall of darkness act as reassuring and empowering factors enabling Méliete to embrace her desire and act on it without worrying that she might be observed.³⁵⁵ At the same time, the paradigm of things (broadly speaking), doing the seducing on the lover's behalf highlights the nuances underpinning the dynamics of amorous conquest and relationships between lovers (or spouses), as well as questions surrounding the transfer of, or at least the blurring between, the desire for a being and that for objects.

³⁵⁴ Bastide [1763], *La Petite Maison* (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, Rue Saint-Honoré, 338, 1879), p. 21.

³⁵⁵ Ganofsky, *Night in French Libertine Fiction*, pp. 94-103.

Gift-giving and the use of objects in sylph narratives is further complicated by the lack of consistency of the sylphic body as posited in its original mythology. Building on the idea of malleability, Christophe Cosker suggests that the sylph's body is 'protean', and able to take on the shape of desired objects and beings.³⁵⁶ An important example of this is found in Crébillon's *Le Sylphe* (1730) with which we are by now very familiar. Mme de R***, its beautiful, aristocratic female protagonist who, having retreated to the countryside for some peace, is seemingly visited in the seclusion and intimacy of her bedroom by a sylph. The elemental being talks at some length about his past amorous exploits to his new conquest. In doing so, he explains that 'J'ai souvent été obligé de changer de forme pour me faire aimer'.³⁵⁷ Here the sylph talks of taking the shapes of real men: 'son maître de musique' in one case, and 'un fort aimable homme qui l'aimait' in another.³⁵⁸ Cosker suggests that by taking the shape of desired beings, the sylph does not necessarily reflect his own nature, but the desires of others.³⁵⁹ He also talks of a vaporisation, a sublimation of the desired body (aligning this process more with psychoanalysis than chemistry).³⁶⁰ While the sylph's body is often vaporised, blurred and 'de-materialised' by the desire that is projected onto it, the reverse is also true. The ephemeral body of the sylph changes into tangible, everyday (albeit beautiful and expensive) objects, as well as living things in a process of deposition. The sylph's supernatural ability to become materialised through substances and objects sets sylph narratives apart from traditional seduction plots.

Both the measured seduction by means of things, and the gradual materialisation of the sylph are closely linked to another key principle central to any seduction ritual: gradation – the process of progression in carefully spaced stages through sensual pleasures. In *Le Savoir-vivre libertin* (2004), Michel Delon explains that 'la galanterie et la délicatesse qui sont l'art des degrés et détails'

³⁵⁶ Christophe Cosker, 'La vaporisation du corps amoureux dans Le Sylphe de Crébillon fils', *Nouvelle revue esthétique*, 10 (2012), pp. 71-82 (p. 75).

³⁵⁷ Crébillon [1730], 'Le Sylphe' in *Sylphes et Sylphides* (1999), pp. 59-75 (p. 67).

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Cosker, 'La vaporisation', p. 75.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 76.

are the opposite of a 'séduction directement physique, sexuelle, génitale', and while the brutalité of 'tout d'un coup' belongs to male arrogance, 'les degrés accordent les rythmes masculins et féminins. Gradations, progressions, degrés constituent une esthétique de l'amour'.³⁶¹ Gradation underpins the erotic encounter where sexual pleasures are paced and moderated, progressing in boldness and intensity. Yet this gradation is not limited to the physical aspect or full consummation which is often the final stage within a wider framework of progression; the seduction narrative takes the protagonists on a journey where the senses (hearing, sight, touch, smell, taste), are engaged by various stimuli which induce pleasure and delight. The social ritual of oscillation between the permissible and the forbidden, of favours gradually conferred, of advances progressively more daring, adds to the delaying, deferring, and dispensing of pleasures in a measured and transactional manner; this economy of pleasure is the very key to maximising it.

Sylph narratives reflect such a dynamic, but more importantly, extend its possibilities much further. Supernatural abilities such as invisibility, shapeshifting, and the capacity to grant wishes allow sylph lovers to take their partners on elaborate journeys through the senses, introducing extra possibilities for delaying and dispensing pleasures, new ways of experiencing sensations that are not available to humans, and even introducing the power of suspense and surprise into the seduction trajectory. Within this framework, objects offered by sylphs are contributors to suspense and excitement, but also agents of seduction. As beings on the border between dream and reality, fantasy and fact, that are invisible and immaterial, sylphs make use of objects from the real world to make themselves present in it. These things can tip the balance in favour of the reality of a sylphic visitation, and even convince some of the most sceptical humans beings of their existence. In this context, objects and their component elements are manipulated to elicit sensations such as excitement or longing, with various transmutations affecting different senses: perfume engages smell and draws on the power of fragrances to evoke memory, sumptuous fabrics stimulate touch, and

³⁶¹ Delon, *Le Savoir-vivre libertin*, pp. 84, 83.

various other beautiful objects invariably captivate sight. Yet materials and substances do not simply affect or stimulate, they create a dynamic of monetisation – the more they cause delight, desire, or wonder, the more the giver obtains in return; whether feelings or favours, they are fundamentally exchanged like commodities.

The link between the supernatural, alchemy, the sale of items, and sex, is captured by Montesquieu in Letter LVIII of his *Lettres persanes* (1721):

A Paris, mon cher Rhédi, il y a bien des métiers. Là un homme obligeant vient, pour un peu d'argent, vous offrir le secret de faire de l'or. Un autre vous promet de vous faire coucher avec les esprits aériens, pourvu que vous soyez seulement trente ans sans voir de femmes.³⁶²

This letter describes Paris as a 'ville enchanteresse' (an 'enchancing city' or potentially even more interestingly, an 'enchantress city'), but crucially it talks about commerce, salespeople, and shops as well as the ways in which fraudsters make money from fooling the gullible. Magic and alchemical secrets are sold just like any other commodity, and the promise of a liaison with elemental beings ('les esprits aériens' means sylphs specifically), the condition of which is lifted by Montesquieu from Villars's *Gabalès*, is monetised just like the latest fashions.³⁶³ The connection between the sale of commodities and the sale of fantasy is evident here. Not without its sarcastic overtones, this passage also points to a darker side of such exchanges: trickery and deceit are not absent from sylphic courtship as examples below will show.

4.i. Scent: the first and the last(ing) element of sylphic manifestation

Within the framework of sylphic seduction and representation through objects, odour holds a place apart. It represents one of the first stages of the gradual manifestation of the sylph, and is also

³⁶² Montesquieu [1721], *Lettres persanes* (Paris: Baudouin Frères, Éditeurs, Rues de Vaugirard, No. 17, 1828), p. 139.

³⁶³ The Count explains: 'il faut renoncer à tout commerce charnel avec les femmes', and 'nous avons tous résolu d'un commun accord de renoncer entièrement aux femmes, & de ne nous adonner qu'à immortaliser les nymphes & les sylphides.', Villars [1670], 'Le Comte de Gabalès', in *Voyages imaginaires*, XXXIV (1788), p. 17, pp. 23-4.

crucial because scents, like sylphs, belong to the element of air. This, coupled with recent scholarly attention given to the role of olfaction and osmology, makes the significance of odours within sylph narratives a fruitful ground for enquiry.³⁶⁴ Of course, we might wonder whether it is accurate to refer to odour as an object. What we are proposing is not a metaphorical description, but a scientific one:

odorants traveling up the nasal cavity interact with the olfactory receptors, situated in the sensory nerves behind the bridge of the nose in a cell layer in a patch of skin called the epithelium. This interaction translates chemical information from the environment into electrical signals in the brain.³⁶⁵

These odorants are volatile molecules, and molecules are (very small) objects. Naturally, using modern scientific rationale would be anachronistic, but the concept of odour as object is very usefully applied by Holly Dugan to an Early Modern context in *The Ephemeral History of Perfume: Scent and Sense in Early Modern England* (2011), where she understands molecules to be ‘material objects’, which is how we will view them for the purposes of our work in this chapter.³⁶⁶

Air was perceived as a single elemental fluid rather than a chemical combination until around 1750.³⁶⁷ As elemental creatures of air, sylphs have an unequivocal affinity with the substance itself as well as anything that may be diffused within it: from noxious fumes to delightful, luxurious fragrances. If for Paracelsus sylphs were beings of a dual nature, behaving like intangible spirits at times but also in their man-like, tangible forms ‘cruder, coarser, longer and stronger’ than humans and nymphs, when Villars re-writes their mythology in 1670, he sets them more firmly within the immaterial and crucially describes them as being composed of ‘des plus purs atomes de l’air’: a fundamentally superior form of the substance.³⁶⁸ This is a clear compositional shift towards a lighter

³⁶⁴ For instance, Jean-Alexandre Perras and Érika Wicky (eds.), *Mediality of Smells/Médialité des odeurs, Cultural Interactions. Studies in the Relationship between the Arts*, Volume 47 (Oxford: New York: Peter Lang, 2022).

³⁶⁵ Ann-Sophie Barwich and Barry C. Smith, ‘From Molecules to Perception: Philosophical Investigations of Smell’, *Philosophy Compass*, 17 (2022), pp. 1-18 (p. 9).

³⁶⁶ Dugan, *The Ephemeral History of Perfume: Scent and Sense in Early Modern England* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), p. 4.

³⁶⁷ Alain Corbin, *Le Miasme et la jonquille: l’odorat et l’imaginaire social, XVIII^e – XIX^e siècles* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986), p. 11.

³⁶⁸ Paracelsus, ‘A Book on Nymphs’, p. 235; Villars [1670], ‘Le Comte de Gabalis’, p. 28.

and more refined being, which also resonates with this period's associations with frivolity and dissipation.³⁶⁹ The insistence on the purity of air is indicative of broader concerns with air quality, and its effects on the human body; for centuries, odours were believed to be directly ingested, and to have an impact on the brain.³⁷⁰ Invisible particles were understood to be touching the brain, and some odours could be evil, or even sinful and so to cause harm, while others were holy and beneficial.³⁷¹

4.i.a. The superiority of the air that constitutes the sylphic body

Thinking of sylphs as made of pure, and therefore, safe or even beneficial air, is one way of interpreting an aspect of their allure. The appeal in this case is linked to nothing other than their chemical composition; a somewhat medical, or at least hygienic attractiveness.

Illustrations to sylph texts are a good place to start when looking at the relationship between the airy sylphic body, the rest of the air in a space, and the bodies of others. Two engravings which we have already encountered in the previous chapter are particularly illuminating (figures 14 and 15 below):

³⁶⁹ Jean-Alexandre Perras, 'Le 'Siècle de la frivolité': sur l'invention d'un lieu commun au XVIII^e siècle', *Early Modern French Studies*, 37.1 (2015), pp. 64-74.

³⁷⁰ The importance of concerns surrounding the quality of air, particularly the poor quality of Parisian air, is made plain in Louis-Sébastien Mercier's 12 volumes of *Tableaux de Paris*, which appeared between 1782-1788. His Tome I is rife with examples of 'bad air': see *Tableaux de Paris*, Nouvelle édition corrigée & augmentée, I (Amsterdam, 1782-8), pp. 122, 125, 128, 136; pp. 267-8; Mark S. Jenner, 'Follow Your Nose? Smell, Smelling, and Their Histories', *The American Historical Review*, 116.2 (2011), pp. 335-51 (pp. 345, 346).

³⁷¹ Dugan, *The Ephemeral History of Perfume*, pp. 12, 14.



Left – Figure 14: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; illustration to the fifth of *Les Veillées du couvent, ou le Noviciat d’amour* by Mercier de Compiègne (1793)

Right – Figure 15: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; an illustration to the second edition of *Éléonore ou l’Heureuse personne* attributed to Andréa de Nerciat

Both images depict the sylph as clouds, but in figure 14 a face is also visible and the way in which the clouds are grouped hints at the curvature of a human-like body, whereas in figure 15 the clouds are much more dispersed around the room. In each case, the female figures appear to be bathed in the vapour. The puffs of smoke or clouds are a recognisable marker of the *merveilleux*, as we saw in the previous chapter, but they are also a way to represent the air of which the sylph is made as compositionally different to that in the rest of the room.

In figure 15, the cloud is emanating from or going towards the woman’s genitalia. This is unremarkable given the pornographic nature of the text, but it is nonetheless indicative of another contemporary mainstream belief suggesting that perfumes could be used to treat hysteria, that:

leur force de pénétration, la mystérieuse connivence qui s'instaure entre le nez et la matrice conduisent les médecins à utiliser, mais avec doigté, la vertu antispasmodique des "odeurs". Ils prétendent calmer ainsi les accès de leurs clientes.³⁷²

In relation to this, it is worth re-visiting Nerciat's description of sex with a sylph: 'resserrant et développant à son gré les formes de son corps aérien, sans peine, sans douleur, s'introduisait au dedans d'elle-même'.³⁷³ The overlap between the therapeutic use of perfume and the textual description of sylphic intercourse is striking; both substances – the medicinal tonic and the sylphic body are able to penetrate, and are light, soothing, and overall beneficial for the recipient. The fumes in the illustrations also evoke fumigation, the practice of combatting bad and dangerous smells with good aromas and smoke, the latter emanating from a *parfumoir*.³⁷⁴

As mentioned in chapter 3, cloud imagery has long-standing meanings in the graphic tradition, and what is specifically relevant here is that religious Western art associated clouds with the Holy Spirit and the impregnation of the Virgin Mary, which is ironically relevant in this context. Similarly, the use of incense in Medieval liturgy to signify the divine underscores scent's (and smoke's) power to represent an otherworldly presence in reality.³⁷⁵ Clouds could conceal, or indeed, be a creature that poses a threat. Suffice it to think of Ovid's tale of Jupiter and Io in *Metamorphoses* and its visual interpretation by Correggio of the sixteenth century (figure 16):

³⁷² Corbin, *Le Miasme et la jonquille*, p. 78.

³⁷³ Nerciat (attributed to), *Éléonore, ou l'Heureuse personne*, 2nd edn (1799), pp. 21-2.

³⁷⁴ Corbin explains that 'L'usage des cassolettes, celles d'argent notamment, signe l'appartenance à l'élite.' The supreme luxury was the *parfumoir*, "'petit coffre de bois garni à son entrée d'une grille qui soutien en l'air ce qu'on veut parfumer. Au bas de ce coffre est une petite ouverture, par laquelle on passe une chaufferette pleine de feu, ou l'on met bruler les pastilles".'. *Le Miasme et la jonquille*, p. 76.

³⁷⁵ Dugan, *The Ephemeral History of Perfume*, p. 17.



Figure 16: Detail from *Jupiter and Io*, oil on canvas, c.1530, by Antonio Allegri, called Correggio, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Viena

Even more interestingly, another Ancient myth tells of Zeus modelling a replica of Hera out of clouds for Ixion to pursue instead of the real thing. This seems a good solution, but Hera is concerned that somehow, she will still be affected. Zeus dismisses this worry by claiming that the two (cloud and Hera) are not interchangeable, but naturally this is not as clear as Zeus suggests. The swapping of a being for another and the difficulties that this poses echoes endings to some sylph narratives where the sylph offers to take the shape of a real-life husband or lover, as we shall see below.

In the third part of Sade's *Histoire de Juliette* (1801), Clairwil and Juliette visit the abode of the witch Durand in order to have their fortunes told, and to purchase various potions and poisons. There is an overwhelming variety of 'aphrodisiaques et des philtres amoureux, ainsi que des

emménagogues et des électuaires anti-aphrodisiaques’ and numerous poisons fill the place.³⁷⁶ These are an organic part of a sorceress’s house. In this setting, the stage is prepared for the magic rituals such as predicting the future:

un nuage fort épais s’éleva dans la chambre. La Durand tomba en syncope, elle cria, fit d’étranges contorsions, pendant lesquelles son beau corp paru tout nu, et revint à elle quand le nuage fut dissipé. Cette vapeur avait laissé dans la chambre une odeur mêlée d’ambre et de soufre.³⁷⁷

In this scene the witch enters a state of violent trance which is caused by the appearance of the cloud. There is no known, or at least surviving, contemporaneous illustration to this scene but it is conceivable that it could have resembled one of the illustrations to the pornographic texts discussed above (figures 14 and 15). The cloud might have come into close contact with Durand’s naked body, affecting her directly through her skin. As the smoke disappears, what is left is the smell of ‘ambergris and sulphur’. Ambergris, a scent of animal origin, was very popular earlier in the century and Sade’s choice of this particularly emblematic and recognisable product may suggest a nostalgia for the days of the past, but also adds to the idea of exclusivity and luxury, as ambergris was a very expensive scent and an aphrodisiac. By the time *Histoire de Juliette* was published in 1801, ambergris and other heavier scents were supplanted by light, floral fragrances. Even Casanova, writing his *Histoire de ma vie* between 1789-1798, follows the fashions of the time and prefers perfumes of botanical origin such as jasmine to that of ambergris which he associates with a bygone era.³⁷⁸ In this sense, the ambergris for Sade has a similar role to the essence of roses spread in the rooms of sylph-obsessed young women by their suitors, husbands, and maids – it creates a fantasy world. For Sade in this case, it is the microcosm of the sorceress’s house, where magic, sex, and murder are intertwined. This is also the context in which the sylph Alzamor makes his appearance and disappearance, accompanied by a puff of *merveilleux* smoke, as we saw earlier in this thesis.

³⁷⁶ Sade [1801], *Histoire de Juliette* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1998), p. 657.

³⁷⁷ Sade, *Histoire de Juliette*, p. 658.

³⁷⁸ Gérard Lahouati, “‘Un français parfumé.’ Casanova”, *Littérature*, 185 (2017), pp. 9-23 (p. 14).

The other odour left over after ‘the vapour’ disappears is that of sulphur. This will have been known to both author and readers as a noxious smell, associated for centuries with Hell, the afterlife, and even the substance that rained from the sky on Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24).³⁷⁹ Sulphur or ‘brimstone’, was also part of various systems of alchemical elemental knowledge.³⁸⁰ As such, the powerful, unpleasant smell of sulphur is loaded with sinister meaning, and in Sade’s text, is suggestive of the dark things that take place in Durand’s house. It additionally symbolises rebelliousness and scandal; the expression *sentir le soufre* became popular during this period. Like the ambergris, the sulphur is a waft of the old world and its anxieties. Ambergris would have been used to mask noxious smells, but it is also a deeply musky, ‘natural’ odour. For Sade, both the sulphur and the ambergris are evoked as remnants (and re-constructors) of a past space-time: ‘l’évocation archaïsante du bon vieux temps, où les choses avaient leur odeur véritable, et où les humains savaient aimer sans fausse honte ni artifice’.³⁸¹

Deploying the heavy, old-fashioned, ‘natural’ ambergris and sulphur as odours more appropriate to the raw, carnal, and violent urges indulged at the sorceress’s house, rather than the floral scents fashionable at the time when Sade wrote this, is not simply an aesthetic choice, but a philosophical one.³⁸² Delon explains that Sade ‘réclame l’odeur contre le parfum, la nature brute et brutale contre les euphémismes et les atténuations,’ going on to add that ‘Sade affirme brutalement les liens de l’odorat et du désir.’³⁸³ Instead of the period’s predilection for sentimentality, in Sade’s texts, the violent nature of desire is acknowledged and valorised. Just as the heavy, natural odours are favoured instead of the light floral scents, Sade’s sylph is also a brutal, robust older man, rather than the supple, airy youth with an idealised body and light, flowing hair. The ambergris acts as an

³⁷⁹ Corbin explains that sulphur was perceived as a threat to health: ‘Soufres, mouffettes, vapeurs méphitiques compromettent son élasticité [de l’air] et constituent autant de menaces d’asphyxie.’, *Le Miasme et la jonquille*, p. 13; Emily C. Friedman, *Reading Smell in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (Bucknell University Press, 2016), p. 101.

³⁸⁰ Friedman, *Reading Smell*, p. 102.

³⁸¹ Delon, *Le Savoir-vivre libertin*, p. 164.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Ibid., pp. 164, 165.

aphrodisiac, a stimulant for the sexual activities to follow in the subsequent pages. The revolting and strong smell of sulphur can be interpreted as a stimulant too – one suited to prelude murderous orgies. Associated with the Devil, sulphurous scent is undoubtedly a signifier of evil. Substances and smells usually deemed unpleasant or obscene are, after all, an integral part of Sade's universe.

Other forms of air are also of interest. Given the belief that breath was the source of miasmas and stench above all other emanations, and hence a great source of anxiety, finding examples of sylphic breath being described as superior to that of mortals is significant.³⁸⁴ In Pluchon-Destouches's *Le Joli vase, ou le Berger sylphe* (1777), the female protagonist, Eglé, describes her sylph-lover's breath as not only pleasant, but also perfumed: 'Ah! c'est cet esprit enchanteur,/Dont le souffle léger, l'haleine parfumée,/Distille cette douce odeur'.³⁸⁵ Sweet-smelling breath and other corporeal emanations of the sylph also feature in Compiègne's *Les Veillées du couvent*: 'une odeur délicieuse s'exhale de toutes les parties de son corps'.³⁸⁶ Admittedly, these examples are from texts which are not only pornographic, but also highly ironic, so the perfection of the sylph is always exaggerated for comedic effect.

This insistence on sylphic breath as a seductive force is developed more in Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux* (1772), where the demon-sylphide Biondetta/o sets out to appropriate the soul of her male victim, Alvare, by seducing him. In this text, the foul and putrid are associated with Biondetta/o's demonic forms at the beginning and end of the narrative, while fresh air and pleasant aromas accompany her form as an enchantingly beautiful sylphide-turned-woman: 'Figurez-vous l'aurore au printemps, sortant d'entre les vapeurs du matin avec sa rosée, ses fraîcheurs et tous ses parfums'.³⁸⁷ Most importantly, just before Alvare succumbs to the Devil's seduction, scent is one of the last contributing factors to his downfall 'je me suis trop approché de cette bouche où la fraîcheur

³⁸⁴ Corbin, *Le Miasme et la jonquille*, p. 54-5; Lahouati, "'Un français parfumé." Casanova', p. 13.

³⁸⁵ Pluchon-Destouches, 'Le Joli vase, ou le Berger sylphe' (1777), p. 76.

³⁸⁶ Compiègne, *Les Veillées du couvent ou le noviciat d'amour* (1793), p. 29.

³⁸⁷ Jaques Cazotte [1772], 'Le Diable amoureux' (1981), pp. 53-4.

se réunit au doux parfum de la rose'.³⁸⁸ The above examples also highlight the prominence of floral scents or of fresh flowers, and of the rose in particular.

The above examples demonstrate how the air making up the sylphic body engaged with and reflected contemporaneous thinking about the dangers and benefits of odours. Next, we will look at external scents associated with sylphs in creating an impression of a sylphic visitation.

4.i.b. Odour as constructive force and the centrality of rose-scented products in sylphic manifestations

In the Early Modern period, odour was starting to be recognised as having the power to 'stir affective memory', and it had been used to construct racial, social, and sexual categories.³⁸⁹ However, in some sylph narratives, scent has a distinct purpose, which is not solely to evoke a memory of an experience, place or person, or delineate a group of individuals, but to construct a being that is otherwise completely imperceptible by any of the human senses. In many sylph narratives odour is the first step in tipping the balance in favour of the reality of sylphs; the enchanting smell of flowers is frequently the first proof that appears the morning following what seems to be a sylphic dream. Scent thus constitutes one of the first stages of the gradation process so central to seduction plots (although in several cases we are not dealing with seduction proper, but more of a process aimed at convincing and charming their object).

In Marmontel's moralising *Le Mari sylphe* (1755-9) the husband Volange tries to make his young wife fall in love with him by pretending to be a sylph, a creature with which she is obsessed. This narrative setup is important because unlike in some other cases where the sylph is described as a supernatural creature, here the elemental being has to be constructed relatively convincingly by the husband with the aid of perfectly mundane, albeit exquisite, means. Scent is one such means. When Élise explains to her maid, Justine, that she dreamt of her sylph, she cannot articulate what

³⁸⁸ Cazotte, 'Le Diable amoureux', p. 111.

³⁸⁹ Jenner, *Follow Your Nose?*, pp. 346-7; Dugan, *The Ephemeral History of Perfume*, p. 21.

took place, or describe how the sylph looked, all she recalls is that ‘j’entendais une voix ravissante, je respirais les plus doux parfums, et à mon réveil tout s’est évanoui’.³⁹⁰ It was sound and scent that created the atmosphere of a dreamlike experience. In order to both evoke the memory of the dream, and to construct the sylph in the realm of reality, the sylph-husband opts for diffusing an aroma as the first stage of ‘materialisation’ of the elemental creature:

On connaissait à peine encore à Paris la quintessence de rose; Volange remit à Justine un petit flacon de cet élixir précieux. Demain, lui dit-il, avant le réveil de ta maîtresse, tu auras soin d’en parfumer son lit.³⁹¹

The ‘quintessence de rose’ which, as Marmontel explains, was only starting to be known in Paris at the time (around the mid-eighteenth century), was a product with a long-standing history. To the modern observer the rose is a flower so familiar that it scarcely feels necessary to delve into its significance. However, stripping back some layers of meaning and contextualising this flower and its scent within the eighteenth century proves revealing. The rose has a history spanning centuries, and is a symbol loaded with significance. From pagan celebrations to Christian ceremonies, from representing the sweat of Muhammad to the Holy Ghost, from symbolising Venus to the Virgin Mary, from sex to chastity, the history and interpretations of the rose are extensive in both the Eastern and Western traditions.³⁹²

In sylph narratives, the rose is commonly called upon whether as the flower itself, its fragrant essence, or even the colour (pink). This attests to the importance and recognisability of this flower during this period, as well as speaking to the fittingness of roses to complete sylphic fantasies. Embodying both innocence and lust, this flower sits on the boundary between purity and desire, much like the sylph and sylphide do. The pale, subtle colour of these flowers cited in sylph narratives adds to the overall theme of lightness and freshness. The pallor of roses is mentioned in

³⁹⁰ Marmontel [1755-1759], ‘Le Mari sylphe’ (1999), p. 103.

³⁹¹ Marmontel, ‘Le Mari sylphe’, p. 103.

³⁹² See for instance, Peter E. Kukielski and Charles Phillips, *Rosa: The Story of the Rose* (Yale University Press, 2021), and Jennifer Potter, *The Rose: A True History* (Atlantic Books London, 2011).

contemporary dictionary definitions: Jaucourt neatly explains in his *Encyclopédie* entry that ‘on peut rapporter toutes les roses à deux classes; celle des roses cultivées, & celles des roses sauvages: ces deux classes réunies forment cinquante-trois especes de roses’, and surmises that ‘mais il nous suffira de décrire la rose cultivée commune, qu’on appelle la rose pâle ou incarnate, *rosa rubra, sativa, pallidior*’.³⁹³ Jaucourt does not tell us anything about this flower’s scent, but does say that it is fundamentally pale in colour. The more subdued colour of the rose as it was known in the eighteenth century can also be found in the 1762 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*: ‘Sorte de fleur odoriférante, qui est ordinairement d’un rouge un peu pâle, & qui croît sur un arbrisseau plein de petites épines’.³⁹⁴

The supremacy of the rose aligns with fashion trends of the second half of the eighteenth century: ‘Au grand success de l’eau de rose, s’ajoutent ceux de la violette, du thym et, surtout, de la lavande et du romarin’.³⁹⁵ This also points to the overall change in scent fashions mentioned earlier in this chapter; from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, heavy, animal scents such as musk were no longer favoured and light, floral scents became fashionable.³⁹⁶ This shift chimes with the inherent lightness of sylphs: heavier, musky scents would not have easily translated the sylph, but the new predilection for delicate floral aromas embodies the sylph perfectly.

The rose essence in Marmontel’s story was no doubt imported as part of the ever-expanding global trade in commodities and may have come from India. A luxury product, it is the result of steam distillation of rose flowers into rose water, subsequently producing very small quantities of rose oil (approximately four tons of petals produce only ten grams of attar).³⁹⁷ This process of distillation, a scientific, chemical transformation has alchemical connotations; the transmutation of an almost unfathomable quantity of light rose petals into a tiny amount of precious liquid is a magical

³⁹³ Jaucourt, ‘Rose’, *Encyclopédie*, XIV, p. 363.

³⁹⁴ ‘Rose’, *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, 4th edn II (Paris: Brunet, 1762), p. 654.

³⁹⁵ Corbin, *Le Misame et la jonquille*, p. 89.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 67-8.

³⁹⁷ Kukielski and Phillips, *Rosa*, p. 49.

transformation. The condensing of big to small also speaks to the theme of miniaturisation. Delon explains that miniaturisation is a key ingredient of the libertine world, that '[l]e mobilier s'amenuise et se disperse en bibelots, de même que les sentiments se dilapident en sensations momentanées', and that '[l]es dimensions réduites vont de pair avec un assouplissement de la règle, un goût de la variation'.³⁹⁸ Miniature objects were expensive to manufacture and hence were exclusive items, but they were also easily concealed within pockets and other secret or private locations.³⁹⁹

Diminutivisation finds a particularly interesting expression in sylph narratives; a move towards small, light, and easily concealable treasures is part of the arsenal of sylphic transmutations alongside other, constant changes in state, form, and appearance which are part of sylph mythology, and the objects that accompany them.

Volange's ruse succeeds and the sylph becomes more real as the fragrance of roses is interpreted as proof of magic by Élise:

La plus flatteuse illusion! Car c'en est une, je dois le croire, et je ne suis pas un enfant...
Pendant l'odeur des roses !... Oui, je la sens, rien n'est plus réel, et ce n'est pas la saison
de ces fleurs.⁴⁰⁰

Like Crébillon's Mme de R*** Élise oscillates between disbelief and belief, and scent starts to tip the balance in favour of the latter. The rose scent in this example is disembodied in that there are no roses in the room for Élise to see, and so the object from which the scent could emanate is not available. In turn, as she smells the rose essence, Élise conjures up the mental image of a rose.⁴⁰¹ This is like magic to her. At the same time, she also thinks of the sylph whom she understands to be both the source of the magic and to be associated with the light, floral scent. Therefore, although she

³⁹⁸ Delon, *Le Savoir-vivre libertin*, pp. 121, 123.

³⁹⁹ Barbara Burman and Ariane Fennetaux, *The Pocket: A Hidden History of Women's Lives, 1660-1900* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 145; Melinda Alliker Rabb, 'Johnson, Lilliput, and Eighteenth-Century Miniature', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 46.2 (2013), pp. 281-98.

⁴⁰⁰ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 104.

⁴⁰¹ Barwich and Smith refer to these as "'object smell' (with visible source)' and "'given smell' (with unknown origin)' using Hans Henning's terms (1916), and add that this places us at a 'conceptual crossroads', 'From Molecules to Perception', p. 7.

smells a scent at first unknown to her, she recognises it as *rose* but what her mind imagines is not just *rose*, but also *sylph*.

Within the economies of fact and fantasy, scent, although invisible and intangible, does a lot to create an atmosphere of magic, especially when the scent in question is extremely rare and precious. The nature of scent as fleeting coupled with its power to evoke feeling or memory captures both the ephemerality of the sylph as an elemental being, and its connection to air itself: both fragrance and sylph share this realm. Unlike in many other erotic narratives of the period (for example, in Rétif de La Bretonne's, and even Sade's writing), scent is not just a preliminary or simple accessory.⁴⁰² Instead, it is a transmutation of the sylphic body into a substance that is perceptible by the human sense of smell. Due to its affective power, fragrance has an intellectual role – it causes the mind to imagine, to create the sylph-lover (out of thin air), attesting to a transmutation of ideas. At the same time, scent has the power to linger, to transcend time, evoking memories and atmospheres: in this way, it is part of the gradation schema, but it also allows for a non-linear trajectory of materialisation and seduction.

4.i.c. Potions and elixirs as a sylphic gift: the miniaturised scent bottles – a transition from immaterial to tangible

As we saw above, perfume in the eighteenth century was understood to have certain medicinal properties, but its role is also steeped in mysticism as it was perceived to have the power to ward off evil (miasma or spirits). Hence smelling bottles, elixirs, and fragrances find themselves on the border between perfumery, medicine, and alchemy. This is demonstrably the case in several sylph narratives.

In *Reading Smell in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (2016), Emily Friedman explains that:

As the century progressed, a move away from fumigation and aromatics that spread around spaces was taking place and the practice of using scents shifted towards the individual,

⁴⁰² Corbin, *Le Miasme et la jonquille*, p. 89-90.

miniaturised item containing or emanating aroma. Such items were smelling bottles or vinaigrettes (small containers with sponges soaked in vinegar).⁴⁰³

Museum catalogues offer numerous examples of scent bottles which could be carried on one's person, displayed, or concealed. Made by highly skilled craftsmen such as jewellers or toymakers, these scent containers were miniature treasures. Light and small, made of glass, porcelain, precious metals and stones, they were exquisite objects of everyday use (for those who could afford them).⁴⁰⁴ Unlike perfume burners which were stationary, large, and spread scent throughout a bigger space, scent bottles became very small, light and delicate. With many examples weighing under 100 grams, and some as little as 19.1, 20.2, and even 7.8 grams, while also having diminutive dimensions (heights and widths vary, but some examples measure 7.9 x 3.4cm, 11.8 x 1.1cm, 19.6 x 1.75cm, 4.2 x 2.4cm), they were easily worn on chains as jewellery or concealed within corsets or corsages.⁴⁰⁵ An example of a scent bottle pendant is shown below.⁴⁰⁶



⁴⁰³ Friedman, *Reading Smell*, p. 52.

⁴⁰⁴ Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, p. 147.

⁴⁰⁵ This and further information on scent bottles of this period can be found using the online database Joconde, Collections des musées de France: <https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/>.

⁴⁰⁶ More information about this pendant can be found here: [Flacon, pendentif \(culture.gouv.fr\)](https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/objets/flacon-pendentif).

Left – Figure 17: Small scent bottle made of cut crystal, with an enamel insert, and mounted in gold, last quarter of the eighteenth century, Musée International de la Parfumerie – front view

Right – Figure 18: As figure 17 – rear view

Emanating out to a smaller space, and being more fleeting, these were scents that could create a personal impression on a more reduced scale, allowing a more individualised way of representing oneself, and of leaving an olfactory imprint. In the anonymous *Le Sylphe amoureux* (1730), the mysterious sylph admirer offers the Marquise d’Autricourt several gifts as part of his courtship. One of these is a set of perfume bottles:

elle trouva la cassette remplie de bouteilles de cristal de roche, garnies d’or, séparées les unes des autres par des compartiments de velours bleu; l’odeur des essences dont ces fioles étaient pleines, leur fit juger qu’elles étaient des meilleures d’Italie.⁴⁰⁷

The storage box as well as the bottles themselves are exquisite, luxury items (below, the figure shows a set from the Waddesdon Manor collection in the UK, which may be similar to the one described in the text).⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁷ Anonymous [1730], ‘Le Sylphe amoureux’ (1999), p. 84. Although as we have pointed out earlier, this text is identical to Murat’s *L’Esprit folet, ou le Sylphe amoureux* (1714), we will use the 1730 text for our analysis in this chapter but will also look at the illustration accompanying Murat’s 1714 version, which is not part of the 1730 text (or of the *Voyages imaginaires* volume).

⁴⁰⁸ Waddesdon Manor online catalogue: <https://waddesdon.org.uk/the-collection/explore-the-collection>.



Figure 19: Casket and scent bottles, unknown artist, c. 1755-60, Waddesdon Manor

The contents of the bottles the marquise receives are equally delightful, but instead of the usual labels that describe the scent such as ‘jasmin ou fleur d’orange’, they bear magic potion titles: ‘recette immanquable contre l’infidélité’, ‘[p]réservatif contre l’indiscrétion des amants’, ‘[p]hiltre pour conserver ou faire naître l’amour dans le mariage’, etc.⁴⁰⁹ Here, perfumes and essences are rebranded as potions and cross over into the world of magic; this seems a natural transition as the small bottles, the exotic scents and the inherent bewitching nature of perfume lends itself to translation into the language of the mystical.

At the same time, medical uses of essences and scents find a place among the supernatural in Cazotte’s *Le Diable amoureux*: ‘Je m’étais fait apporter des eaux spiritueuses, des elixirs propres à dissiper un évanouissement’.⁴¹⁰ In Jean Galli de Bibiena’s *La Poupée* (1747), a sylphide is tasked with correcting the ways of narcissistic men, one such male character, the would-be lothario Damis, resorts to a liquid aphrodisiac before an amorous encounter: ‘une bouteille remplie d’une liqueur jaune qu’il but à plusieurs reprises: c’était une potion cordiale, un restaurant pour rappeler la

⁴⁰⁹ Anonymous, ‘Le Sylphe amoureux’, pp. 84, 85.

⁴¹⁰ Cazotte, ‘Le Diable amoureux’, p. 89.

volupté'.⁴¹¹ The conflation between perfumes and medical potions is not incidental, and it is particularly evident when thinking about personal, miniature *flacons* described above, 'que l'on pouvait porter sur soi dans un but de séduction mais aussi pour se prémunir des mauvaises odeurs et même des maladies que l'on pensait repousser avec du parfum'.⁴¹² What Autricourt receives is a clever surprise of a gift, which is geared towards allowing her self-expression through the new perfumes. This gift also ensures that the sylph is materialised through the solid evidence of the box and bottles rather than the scent within, thus gradually moving through phases and substances, towards more tangible materials and states.

4.ii. Palpable items: a recurring set of luxury sylphic gifts

The set of scent bottles discussed above is a sort of transition item between invisible odours and tangible and visible things, as it combines both the materiality of the containers and the ephemerality of their contents. Sylphic courtship progresses to increasingly more tangible and luxurious things. The coveted fashionable dress, items of jewellery, and the musical instrument – namely the harp – are all part of a gift language used by sylphs to win over their mortals in *sylphe amoureux* narratives. In this section we will take a closer look at examples of such objects and their role in both promoting the sylph fantasy through acting as tangible proof of the existence of the elemental lover, and adding extra excitement as these gifts often appear as if by magic, startling the human heroines.

As materialisation progresses and the sylph keeps on reflecting the desires of his love interests more and more (in accordance with Cosker's notion), a problematic idea comes into view. At which point does the desire for objects displace the desire for the sylph? Vivant Denon's novella *Point de lendemain* (1777) like Bastide's *Petite Maison*, is a prime example of things (broadly speaking) being deployed to impress and seduce, but Denon also articulates the displacement of

⁴¹¹ Bibiena [1747], *La Poupée* (1996), p. 58.

⁴¹² See the historical background about the scent bottle in figures 17, 18: [Flacon, pendentif \(culture.gouv.fr\)](http://culture.gouv.fr).

desire that can occur in this dynamic: '[C]e n'était plus Mme de T... que je désirais, c'était le cabinet'.⁴¹³ The narrator explains that while he is certainly motivated by desire for the woman, he is even more moved by the curiosity for the things contained within her cabinet, and so the sense of lust for things surpasses sexual drive.⁴¹⁴

4.ii.a. The coveted dress and the diamond jewellery

The type of displacement found in Denon's novella is also present in Quétant's *L'Amant sylphe* (1783), in which the naïve and sylph-obsessed Élise is courted by Volange (her very real-life suitor), with the help of her maid, Justine. This play is inspired by Marmontel's text and the protagonists have the same names, but the plot is modified somewhat, as mentioned in chapter 2. Like in many other sylph narratives, the courtship begins with nocturnal conversations and advances towards the seemingly magical appearance of tangible gifts, as the sylph progressively materialises in accordance with the gradation principle. This manifestation of physical proof takes place as if in response to Justine's rebuking of her mistress's obsession with an impalpable being: 'd'ailleurs je ne vois pas quel grand charme est attaché à l'amour qu'inspire un objet sans consistance'.⁴¹⁵ The emphasis on immateriality links back to the original Paracelsian mythology where sylphs are both spirit-like and human-like but never fully either.⁴¹⁶ To address this, and in order to apparently convince even Justine, this *coup de théâtre* culminates with the appearance of a dress seen in town and coveted by Élise: 'Madame, voyez, voyez donc cette robe que vous trouvâtes si jolie hier chez cette marchande'.⁴¹⁷ She also receives some diamonds, as if to add to the exclusivity but also the tangibility of proof (diamonds being one of the most indestructible substances): 'Eh! voyez donc cet écrin, ces

⁴¹³ Vivant Denon [1777], *Point de lendemain* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993), p. 30.

⁴¹⁴ Denon, *Point de lendemain*, p. 30; This variant of curiosity is part of more general perceptions of types of male curiosity, and was viewed in a neutral way, but also negatively, as some believed that fascination with trivial things like collectibles was ultimately purposeless and frivolous. For more context on this, see Neil Kenny's *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany* (2004).

⁴¹⁵ Quétant, *L'Amant sylphe, ou la Féerie de l'amour* (1783), p. 14.

⁴¹⁶ Paracelsus, 'A book on Nymphs', p. 228.

⁴¹⁷ Quétant, *L'Amant sylphe*, p. 14.

chiffres; ah! les beaux diamans!'.⁴¹⁸ Élise is enchanted by the gifts but is concerned should her sylph think that material objects matter to her, and that they could augment her feelings for him. This is a direct reflection on the oscillation between the desire for objects and desire for the lover, an ambiguity between yearning for material things and for spiritual and physical bliss. The economy of sylphic love is complicated by this not just because gifts can win over the person to whom they are given, and hence are somehow a dishonest or impure way of going about it, but primarily because they can be desired more than the lover, especially given that the sylphic lover is not present and is constructed through these various objects.

In Marmontel's original version of this story, Élise is even more explicit about this difficulty when she receives the fashionable dress after which she had pined, from her sylph:

Le lendemain Élise étant à sa toilette, Justine jette les yeux sur le sofa du cabinet, et fait un cri d'étonnement. Élise se retourne, et y voit étalée une robe pareille à ce qu'elle avait vue à la promenade. Ah ! Voilà donc comme il se venge de ce désir qui n'était pas pour lui!⁴¹⁹

She identifies her desire for the dress as competing with the one she has for the sylph, to the point where she is concerned that he may become jealous of this inanimate object. Here, the dress is desired at some point possibly more than the sylph himself, but the sylph is *composed* of the dress and the other elemental objects he uses to represent himself to Élise; the transference or displacement of desire here is not strictly complete as the desired thing is still part of the set of objects which constitute the sylph. It is Élise's imagination that ultimately stitches together these various objects, elements, and gallant behaviours to create the most pleasing idea of the sylph.

In the anonymous *Le Sylphe amoureux* (1730), the Marquise d'Autricourt is courted by a mysterious admirer who claims to be a sylph. One of the first gifts he offers her is exquisite jewellery which she and her friend, mademoiselle de Fontenay, find at the bottom of an urn one morning, following some inexplicable and seemingly magical occurrences during the night: 'la marquise et elle

⁴¹⁸ Quétant, *L'Amant sylphe*, p. 14.

⁴¹⁹ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 110.

ne furent pas peu surprises de voir que c'était une table de bracelets entourée de diamants brillants'.⁴²⁰ Diamond jewellery is also offered to the Marquise de Folenville in Nougaret's *Le Singulier sylphe* (1800). She is surprised to find this in the morning: 'elle trouve sur sa toilette, un écrin dans lequel il y avait des boucles d'oreilles de diamants, et de superbes bracelets'.⁴²¹ These diamonds are certainly luxurious but they also reflect up-to-the-minute fashion as they are 'montés dans le dernier goût'.⁴²² Later, one night, in the dark, Folenville feels something cold touch her neck (a hand, she thinks), and faints; when she comes back to her senses she finds 'un magnifique collier de diamants, composé de pierres de différentes couleurs, dont l'arrangement symétrique forme un effet admirable'.⁴²³ In both cases the jewels cause a great deal of surprise and thrill adding to the overall fun and seemingly magical atmosphere.

The choice of diamond jewellery in particular is indicative. Diamonds are extremely expensive and so a luxury gift, unobtainable for most. Yet diamonds are also highly luminous as the repeated use of 'brillant(s)' confirms. These stones are transparent too, and together these two properties make diamonds an ideal choice for acting as a continuation of the light, bright and glimmering sylph himself.

Lavish diamond jewels are presented to both these heroines early on in their respective narratives, rather than appearing later, after preludes such as nocturnal conversations and scents, as is the case in other examples. This change in the ritual is necessary because the two women in question are pragmatic and do not believe in 'bagatelles' such as sylphs. For this reason, their pseudo-sylphs proceed directly to giving them both the most indestructible and most magnificent gifts early on, so that once Folenville receives the second item of jewellery, overwhelmed by its perfection and startled by its indubitable reality she exclaims: 'Il ne m'est plus possible d'en douter,

⁴²⁰ Anonymous, 'Le Sylphe amoureux', p. 81.

⁴²¹ Pierre Jean-Baptiste Nougaret [1800], 'Le Singulier sylphe' (1999), p. 128.

⁴²² Nougaret, 'Le Singulier sylphe', p. 129.

⁴²³ Ibid., p. 130.

s'écrie-t-elle avec une joie mêlée de terreur, je suis aimée d'un esprit, d'un sylphe!⁴²⁴ This seems to sway the balance from complete disbelief to total belief.

However, these items have another role too. Just like the playful performances put on by actual or pseudo- sylphs, the strategic pacing of gift-giving and curated placement of items coupled with their simultaneously luxurious and frivolous nature, heightens the general ludic atmosphere. This dynamic is different from the games played by lovers in libertine narratives; suspense and thrill take on another form in this framework where magic is 'made real' due to the potentially supernatural dimension, but also because the suitors are not, in fact, seducers; they are gallant and well-meaning *convincers*. The gradual process through which sylphic gifts engage with the various senses is a fascinating spin on the century's interest in sensation as part of empiricism.

4.ii.b. The harp: a musical instrument coded with meaning

Another recurrent gift in sylph narratives is the harp. Unlike jewellery or clothes which can only be worn, the musical instrument can be used and initiates a set of activities: practice, performance, and possibly composition. In *Le Mari sylphe*, the sylph-husband encourages Élise to exercise her talent : 'vous avez une voix touchante, une oreille exquise, et la harpe sous vos doigts mêlant les accords à vos sons, ferait les délices des habitants de l'air'.⁴²⁵ She agrees and asks Volange to get her one: 'Je suis souvent seule, dit-elle à son mari, la musique me dissiperait. La harpe est à la mode, et j'ai envie d'en essayer'.⁴²⁶ Volange immediately agrees and brings her a harp the same evening. The harp also features in similar ways in *L'Amant sylphe* as explained in the stage direction to the opening scene: '[l]e Théâtre représente un cabinet de jardin très élégant. Hilaire [the gardener] y entre portant une harpe, il y arrange des livres de musique', and in Martin de Choisy's *Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y*

⁴²⁴ Nougaret, 'Le Singulier sylphe', p. 130.

⁴²⁵ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 111.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

en a peu (1779): '[e]lle aime la musique, & j'aurai soin encore/ De mettre sous sa main une harpe sonore/ Qui n'a jamais paru devant ses yeux'.⁴²⁷

It is unsurprising that a musical instrument should be part of the array of sylphic gifts, as music, its appreciation, and the skill in performing it were key parts of 'artful living' in eighteenth-century elite circles, and '[l]ike music appreciation, musical proficiency, especially in women, was an essential component in the formation of elite social personae'.⁴²⁸ The harp was highly fashionable as Élise explains above, particularly because it was the instrument famously played regularly by Marie Antoinette.⁴²⁹ This sylphic gift too feeds into the desire for fashionable items, but it also has deeper meanings. The music lesson or the solitary practice of music is a sensual and possibly sexual opportunity. Many libertine narratives set up the music lesson as the chance for pupil and tutor to indulge in closeness, touch discreetly, and for desire to increase and seduction to progress.

The virtuous heroines of the three sylph narratives listed above do not, however, become seduced by their music masters but instead delight in performing music which has, in some cases, been composed by the sylph-lover. The experience of playing the instrument or singing is sensual and perpetuates the sylph fantasy; because the sylph offers the harp as a gift and encourages the young woman to practice it, playing this instrument means following the sylph's wishes, until the harp and the experience of playing it become an extension of the sylph: '[l]a première idée qu'elle eut à son réveil fut celle de son sylphe, et la seconde celle de sa harpe'.⁴³⁰

Playing an instrument is a key plot element even in *Le Diable amoureux*, where the Devil-sylphide Biondetta/o uses her solitary musical performance – singing and accompanying herself on the harpsichord – to elicit an emotional response and to seduce Alvare. She sighs about how unkind

⁴²⁷ Quétant, *L'Amant sylphe*, p. 1; Martin de Choisy, *Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y en a peu* (1778), p. 39.

⁴²⁸ Harold Koda and Andrew Bolton, 'The Music Lesson: A Window of Opportunity', in *Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Harold Koda and Andrew Bolton (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 44-58 (p. 45).

⁴²⁹ Koda and Bolton, 'The Music Lesson', p. 46.

⁴³⁰ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 112.

he is to her and how much she is suffering; she even employs tears.⁴³¹ As Alvare observes her secretly through a keyhole, his senses and emotions are overwhelmed by this elaborate performance of victimhood: '[l]e ton de la voix, le chant, le sens des vers, leur tournure, me jettent dans un désordre que je ne puis exprimer'.⁴³² In this sensual spectacle offered to the male voyeur, the musical instrument is the sylphide's accomplice in seducing Alvare. This scene is of sufficient importance to have warranted an illustration (figure 20 below). Biondetta/o is depicted wearing male clothing, but her performance helps to inscribe her in the realm of a stereotypical femininity, with its characteristic female virtues and foibles.⁴³³

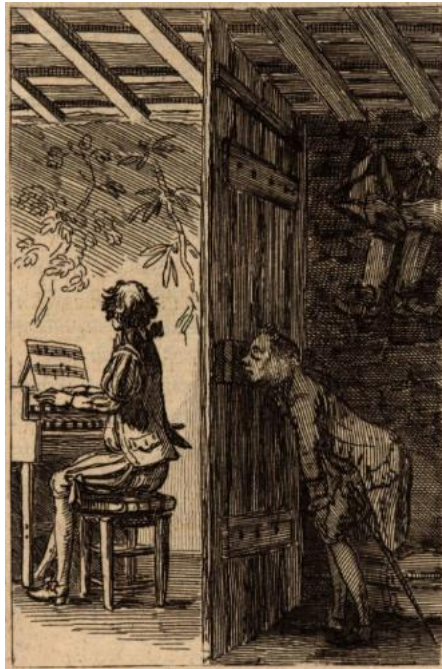


Figure 20: Unnamed engraving, attributed to Clément Pierre Marillier (1740-1808); illustration to *Le Diable amoureux* by Jacques Cazotte (1772)

⁴³¹ Cazotte, 'Le Diable amoureux', pp. 70-3.

⁴³² Ibid., p. 73.

⁴³³ We will return to this subject when we discuss the gender ambiguity, and the performativity of Biondetta/o's femininity in chapter 5. See also Joellen A., 'Behind the Veil of Translucence: An Intertextual Reading of the "Ballet Fantastique" in France, 1831-1841. Part One. Ancestors of the Sylphide in the Conte Fantastique', *Dance Chronicle*, 27.1 (2004), pp. 67-129 (pp. 80-1).

One of the gender ambiguous Devil-sylphide's guises in Cazotte's text is that of the performer Fiorentina, who sings and plays the harp in the vault at Portici during the meal that Alvare provides for his companions (by employing the services of the same shapeshifting, demonic sylphide). Playing the harp enables Fiorentina, who is also Biondetto the page and later Biondetta the sylphide-lover, not only to showcase her musical talent but also her beauty: '[e]lle prend sa harpe, prélude avec une petite main languette, [...] dont les doigts insensiblement arrondis par le bout étaient terminés par un ongle dont la forme et la grâce étaient inconcevables'.⁴³⁴ Thus, the musical instrument is an opportunity to display one's body and show off its attractiveness. Playing the harp is supposed to cultivate female beauty, according to M. Timothée, the music master in *Le Mari sylphe*:

Observez encore, madame, que rien ne développe avec plus d'avantage les grâces d'un beau bras et d'une belle main; et lorsqu'une femme sait placer sa tête avec l'air de l'enthousiasme, que ses traits s'animent, que ses yeux s'enflamment aux accords qu'elle fait entendre, elle s'embellit de moitié.⁴³⁵

In Marmontel's text, playing the harp therefore becomes a recommended and appropriate pastime for women, one that develops their 'natural' feminine charms and talents. Crucially, a musical instrument is something for a sylph-obsessed woman to apply herself to. The sylph-husband offers the harp and encourages the young woman to play it so that she can be diverted from her unhealthy fixation, and her efforts are instead channelled into a virtuous and socially endorsed occupation; this sylphic gift ultimately keeps the woman in check.

Looking at these examples, an important question about men's perception of women's desire for material things such as intoxicating exotic scents, pretty dresses, shiny jewels, or fashionable musical instruments comes to light: are these women won over by a predictable set of relatively banal and frivolous objects? This appears to be so when looking at the formulaic arrangements of a consistent set of these items in *sylphe amoureux* narratives. Nevertheless, these

⁴³⁴ Cazotte, 'Le Diable amoureux', p.45.

⁴³⁵ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 112.

objects have another meaning which sets them more directly within the framework of economics and pride. As Adeline Gargam puts it, they all:

connote the vanity of worldly goods: diamonds, jewellery and arms evoke the symbolism of the vanity of wealth and power; books, pictures and scientific instruments connote the vanity of knowledge; snuff boxes and musical instruments that of pleasure.⁴³⁶

They may be markers of prestige, but the items gifted by sylphs are also very domestic. The scent, the musical instrument, and the doll (as we shall see in the next section), are to be used in the household. The performances, surprises, and games staged by sylphs are also played out in the home. The exquisite dress and fancy diamonds may be for going out or hosting, but they are still decorative objects, connecting the woman to her role adorning the home. As such, the exoticism of the goods (many of which were imported from distant lands), as well as the exoticism of the elemental beings, is domesticated in these *sylphe amoureux* plots.

4.ii.c. The collectible doll-sylphide: a transmutation of the desired being from air to porcelain to flesh

Sylphs and sylphides can take their transformations even further when they shapeshift into living things. In *Le Sylphe amoureux*, the pseudo-sylph turns himself into myriad butterflies. The Marquise d'Autricourt and her friend unlock a drawer of the former's desk and suddenly:

⁴³⁶ Adeline Gargam (trans. by Matthew Hylands), 'Between Scientific Investigation and Vanity Fair: Reflections on the Culture of Curiosity in Enlightenment France', in *Women and Curiosity in Early Modern England and France*, ed. by Line Cottagnies, and others (Brill, 2016), pp. 197-215 (p. 203).

quelque chose en sortant avec précipitation lui toucha le visage, et éteignit la lumière: elle fit un grand cri. La marquise s'approcha d'elle tenant une autre bougie allumée, et elles virent que ce désordre avait été causé par une centaine de papillons.⁴³⁷



Figure 21: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; illustration to *L'Esprit folet, ou le Sylphe amoureux* by Henriette-Julie de Castelnau de Murat (1722)

This transmutation (which does not fail to produce excitement and even fear), takes place in response to the marquise's wish that the sylph, should he choose to appear before her, should take the shape of butterflies.⁴³⁸ The hiding of the butterflies and the surprise the woman experiences contribute to the creation of a sense of wonder, as well as of a ludic atmosphere.

In Bibiena's *La Poupée* (1747), as part of her mission to correct the ways of self-obsessed men and to make them better lovers, the sylphide Zamire shapeshifts into an elegant grey cat to

⁴³⁷ Anonymous, 'Le Sylphe amoureux', p. 86.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., p. 83.

catch the eye of one such man – Damis. Then, to attract the attention of another, Philandre, she becomes a beautiful and exquisitely clothed doll that he cannot resist owning. This doll might have been a *poupée de mode*, a miniature mannequin used to disseminate fashions, and as such it amalgamates the world of toys (children) and that of fashion (adults).⁴³⁹ An example of a British fashion doll dating circa 1740, close to the publication date of Bibiena’s text in 1747, is shown in the figure below.⁴⁴⁰



Figure 22: Doll, carved wood with gesso and paint, inset glass lozenge eyes. Human hair wig with hair ornament of black silk ribbon, unknown artist, c. 1740, Victoria and Albert Museum

An object of superb craftsmanship, it is not only the doll-sylphide’s body itself that is beautifully moulded and tinted, but her clothes are exceptionally intricate and highly fashionable too. She wears a ‘mantelet blanc de gaze’ which covers her upper body and arms ‘le plus galamment du monde’.⁴⁴¹ The cloak made of gauze, like so many other items of clothing worn by sylphs, is light and tantalisingly transparent, inviting a curious gaze and sensual pleasure. It is well-made and flattering

⁴³⁹ Rori Bloom, ‘Playing with Dolls in Old Regime Fairy Tales’, in *Modes of Play in Eighteenth-Century France*, ed. by Fayçal Falaky and Reginald McGinnis (Bucknell University Press, 2021), pp. 9-23 (p. 11).

⁴⁴⁰ Supplementary information can be found in the Victoria & Albert Museum online catalogue: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O385271/doll-unknown/>.

⁴⁴¹ Bibiena, *La Poupée*, p. 31.

much like the rest of the doll's apparel. She wears a dress 'couleur de rose [...] ajustée avec tout l'agrément imaginable', and underneath her little legs are clothed in 'un bas blanc serré par des jarretières couleur de rose, et ses petits pieds d'une mule de la même couleur, brodée de fleurs rose et vert'.⁴⁴² The clothing is intricate and crucially in light colours – white and pink – in line with the palette associated with sylphs in other sources.

Philandre buys the doll and does so in a compulsive way as he is overcome by an almost violent, obsessive desire to have her: 'je me promis avec une résolution déterminé que cette poupée serait à moi à quelque prix que ce put être'.⁴⁴³ This first-person narrative is part of the frame story and in this case helps to home in on Philandre's ardent desire to possess the doll.⁴⁴⁴ When he brings her home, he examines and plays with her like a child. She then gradually starts talking and moving, and grows in dimensions in proportion to his taking on board her lessons, eventually becoming the size of an adult woman. With this transformation in form, a child's fantasy morphs into an adult's sexual desire, while journeying through the gradations that this affords – the childish pleasure of playing with the doll, the almost parental joy of holding the sylphide on his lap when she becomes the size of a young child, and in the last version, sexual intercourse when she reaches adult form.

Just like other gifts offered by sylphs, the doll is a coveted object, and another miniature (a miniature woman), but in this case the sylphide does not produce the object, she *becomes* it. This transmutation, perhaps more than others discussed here, points to a paradox in representation. It echoes the difficulty with some endings of sylph narratives where husbands and suitors impersonate the elemental being (examples of which we have already seen). In such endings, following the gradation of gifts and staggered materialisations, the invisible sylph must finally transmute himself into a human form. This poses the moral question of with whom the woman fell in love in the first

⁴⁴² Bibiena, *La Poupée*, p. 32-3.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁴⁴ In the embedded narrative where the sylphide Zamire acts as the storyteller, she does so in the first person too, and in chapter 5 we will examine an instance in which she talks about her sexual desire for a mortal woman.

place, and the ethical problem of substituting the sylph for the husband or suitor. Different texts deal with this in different ways.

In Marmontel's tale, when Volange finally decides to make the sylph appear in the flesh, that is – to show himself to Élise – he is troubled by the fact that strictly speaking, if she accepts that the sylph has taken the shape of Volange, she would be cheating on him – the husband, with him – the sylph: 'Eh bien, si elle cède, je croirai que la vertu des femmes ne tient pas contre les esprits'.⁴⁴⁵ Yet Élise is virtuous indeed, and although the sylph whom she loves looks like her husband she refuses to be with him and tells him that 'vous avez beau lui ressembler, vous n'êtes pas lui, et c'est à lui seul qu'est dû le prix que vous me demandez'.⁴⁴⁶ Once sure of his wife's fidelity, Volange reveals the deception and the story concludes with a fairy tale-like happy ending.

Similarly, the ending to *Le Sylphe amoureux* sees the Marquise d'Autricourt finally meet her sylph admirer in a tangible form; she too is faced with a dilemma – she is in love with her esoteric elemental but has a marriage proposal from the very human Ponteuil. Autricourt jokingly says that 'je voudrais que mon invisible amant eut la figure de M. de Ponteuil, ou que M. de Ponteuil eut l'amour et la délicatesse de l'esprit aérien'.⁴⁴⁷ Unlike in Élise's case, Autricourt has no moral obligation to Ponteuil, but nonetheless she wishes for the sylph and him to become one and the same – whether by Ponteuil behaving like the sylph, or the sylph taking the physical form of Ponteuil. As such, she wishes for another kind of transmutation to occur, one that would combine the flesh of one being with the 'soul', or at least character, of another, thus creating the perfect lover. This is, of course, made possible through entirely prosaic means as Ponteuil reveals himself to be the mysterious sylph. In both texts, the husband and suitor combine their physical forms with the essence of the sylph – his gallant behaviour and *délicatesse* – to become what the woman wants. Fundamentally, this transformation is a substitution but not without inherent modifications; the man becomes more

⁴⁴⁵ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 119.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 122.

⁴⁴⁷ Anonymous, 'Le Sylphe amoureux', p. 93.

desirable by virtue of adopting sylphic qualities (sylphness) while the woman's obsession with sylphs and desire for them as well as beautiful objects are condensed into and reformulated via the medium of sylphic gifts. In the end, men become more sylph-like and the women are led back to performing their duties as wives or wives-to-be rather than fantasising about elemental beings. Hence these men and women are the entities that ultimately undergo transmutations.

4.iii. Games: the role of suspense, treasure hunts, and the emblematic dangling key

Another item that features in sylphic visitations is the key. Its association with locks and keyholes amalgamates several meanings: a luxury item, a fairy tale trope, a nod to libertine literature, and a sexual innuendo. In *Le Sylphe amoureux*, it is used in some very interesting ways. The ritual of sylphic enchantment begins with a nocturnal appearance of a key floating in mid-air in the marquise's bedroom: 'une petite clef dorée qui paraissait suspendue au ciel de son lit, avec une espèce de tissu d'or et bleu'.⁴⁴⁸ This mysterious apparition frightens and intrigues the woman. Although it is the first item that signifies magic, the key is left to one side for a while, and the story returns to it later. When it appears again, it is found on the floor, beside Autricourt's bed. It is described in more detail this time: 'cette jolie clef' which 'est faite précisément comme les clefs d'Angleterre'.⁴⁴⁹ The narrative engages with this object in a way that heightens suspense for both the heroine and the reader.

Looking at some eighteenth-century keys in museum collections (figure 23 below shows an example), it is clear that they are intricate, beautifully crafted objects combining decorative elements such as rinceaux, shells, foliage, monograms, etc. In keeping with Autricourt's description, many of these keys were made using precious and semi-precious metals, such as gold-plated bronze.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 80.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 84.



Figure 23: Marie Antoinette's key, gilded steel (length: 6.6cm, width: 1.3cm, weight: 14g.), last quarter of the eighteenth century, Musée Secq des Tournelles

The heroine's assessment of the key as being small is revealing. We later discover that it opens a small box, and so it is fitting that the key is smaller. At the same time, the emphasis on its diminutive size adds to the overall theme of lightness of sylphs as well as the idea of miniaturisation and the potential for secrecy and concealment that it offers. This is particularly pronounced here as the words 'petit(e)' and 'petits' appear in total 17 times in this short story; 'petite' appears eight times, four of which are to describe keys, while the others as well the masculine form of the adjective, refer to other sylphic objects such as the 'cassette de la Chine', the phial containing a magic potion, the 'petit amour' found 'sur de l'or émaillé de bleu [...] à demi caché dans un nuage, avec ces mots autours: *Je n'ose*'.⁴⁵⁰ References to a 'petit bois', 'petite table', 'petit balcon' within the topography of sylphic enchantment intensify the sense of diminishment, which at once creates an air of sophistication and subtlety, the latter linking to the overarching theme of lightness.

⁴⁵⁰ 'Le Sylphe amoureux', pp. 84, 85, 82.

Supposedly brought all the way from London, the key in this story is an object of luxury and exclusivity in its own right.⁴⁵¹ But this elaborately crafted key is also an element of mystery as it appears one night, then vanishes, only to reappear once more; its purpose is enigmatic too – Autricourt and her friend, Mademoiselle de Fontenay try to guess what the key unlocks. This feeds into the overall ludic, treasure hunt-like dynamic of the story where the women are held in suspense, guided, surprised by the sylph-lover, and gradually uncover various exciting items along the way. The journey they take, albeit brief and not at all arduous (excepting the odd sleepless night), is reminiscent of that undertaken by some fairy tale characters hunting for magical items; keys are, of course, a canonical element in such plots.

According to Patricia Simons, ‘keys were a very well-known metaphor for the penis’ since the premodern period, and hence the dangling key can also be interpreted as rather suggestive (particularly given that the courtship is by a male suitor, whether esoteric or not).⁴⁵² If so, it is a crude hint but somehow the fact that the key is diminutive, pretty, and dangling, makes it both playful, and tantalizing. The key is *given* to the two women, and hence holds the promise of discovery, and some sort of power (at least to unlock something mysterious), as well as a veiled invitation to eventual sex. At the same time, while the women are playing at hunting for treasure, they in turn are being played with by the fake sylph (and the author of the text alike), as they are tricked and manipulated even though with seemingly benign intentions.

Another episode of sylphic magic involving a key in this story adds to the murkier undertone of the game – the butterflies in the drawer of the marquise’s desk (also discussed above). The pseudo-sylph, the Comte de Ponteuil, explains his ruse:

une centaine de papillons que j’enfermai sans peine dans votre bureau, parce que j’en ai une clef; il y en avait deux quand vous l’achetâtes, j’eus la précaution de m’en assurer d’une.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵¹ ‘Notre amant, dit en riant l’enjouée Fontenay à la marquise, a sans doute passé la nuit à aller chercher cette jolie clef à Londres’, ‘Le Sylphe amoureux’, p. 84.

⁴⁵² Simons, *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 187.

⁴⁵³ ‘Le Sylphe amoureux’, p. 94-5.

After bribing the man who brought the desk to Autricourt's house eight days earlier, Ponteuil is in possession of the double of her key. Apart from the fact that a key is once again crucial in propelling the narrative forward, and helps to weave sylphic enchantment, a slightly sinister aspect to the deception does not escape our notice. Resorting to bribery to access a very private part of a woman's home – her desk where presumably confidential papers and correspondence may be kept – is morally questionable.

The machinations of sylph-husbands and lovers often leave women feeling terrified; this is the case for Autricourt and Fontenay who are scared by the sylphic surprises several times: 'Je meurs de frayeur, reprit l'épouvantée Fontenay', 'je suis si effrayée moi-même que je ne sais que vous dire', and even scream when the butterflies unexpectedly fly out of the desk drawer.⁴⁵⁴ The Marquise de Folenville in Nougaret's *Le Singulier sylphe* too is scared by the sylph's magic, as we see from the recurrent mentions of fear: 's'écrie-t-elle toute effrayée', 'ridicusement épouvantée', 'remplie d'effroi' and she even faints of fright at one point.⁴⁵⁵ The recurrence of 'peur', 'frayeur', 'épouvantée', 'effrayée', 'effroi' may at first seem a heightening of emotions for dramatic purposes by the author, only to then bring the women and the reader to a happy denouement. However, the repetition of words from the semantic field of terror certainly brings in darker undertones to the sylphic seduction ritual. We might think back to Crébillon's Mme de R*** and her initial fear of the unknown and invisible presence in her room, for example: 'la frayeur qui commençait à me saisir', 'reentrant précipitamment dans mon lit, je me mis le drap sur la tête, demi-morte et dans l'état affreux ou peut se trouver une femme peureuse'.⁴⁵⁶

References to being 'half-dead' and the sensation of being held by the neck, recall descriptions of nocturnal visitations by succubae and incubi, which left victims with feelings of being

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 86, 87.

⁴⁵⁵ Nougaret, 'Le Singulier sylphe', pp. 128, 129.

⁴⁵⁶ Crébillon, 'Le Sylphe', p. 61.

choked or strangled. Incubi and succubae are part of a longstanding worldwide folklore tradition, later connected to a medical condition called sleep paralysis. The first clinical description of sleep paralysis dates back to 1664 and was by a Dutch physician who referred to it as 'Incubus or the Night-Mare' in his case histories.⁴⁵⁷ Accounts of night-time encounters with supernatural beings cite feelings of heaviness or pressure on the chest, suffocation, inability to move, as well as terror, and in the case of the succubus, there is also a sexual dimension.

While sylphs cannot be completely dissociated from other folklore and mythical traditions, what is striking is that incubi and succubae seem to be heavy as they press on the bodies of their victims, whereas sylphs are the epitomes of lightness. Becoming less heavy equates to becoming less dangerous much like in fairy tales when a heavy beast becomes light when it turns into a young prince. Examples from nocturnal sylphic encounters highlight the duality of these visitations, and while Ganofsky argues that night in the French eighteenth century is reappropriated as a space of (sexual) freedom, rather than a time of demons and wrongdoings, we would suggest these texts also dabble in the darker potentialities of night.⁴⁵⁸

The link between keys and access to a secret or desired object is crucial not only in fairy tales, but in some libertine narratives too. A decisive episode of Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* features a key; in a game of plotting and secret messages, Valmont seeks to obtain the key to Cécile de Volanges's room: '[!]a jeune personne habite une chambre dont une porte donne sur le corridor; mais comme de raison, la mère en avait pris la clef. Il ne s'agissait que de s'en rendre maître'.⁴⁵⁹ The door is the obstacle that Valmont must overcome to claim his prize much like the hero of a fairy tale (although in this case the situation takes on a much more sinister tone as the young woman is raped by Valmont); he does not delay his triumph: 'dès que j'ai eu la précieuse clef, me suis-je hâté d'en faire usage'.⁴⁶⁰ The possession of the key not only allows the man to penetrate Cécile's room secretly

⁴⁵⁷ Ann M. Cox, 'Sleep paralysis and folklore', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 6.7 (2015), pp. 1-4 (p. 1).

⁴⁵⁸ Ganofsky, *Night in Libertine Fiction* (2018), particularly 'Introduction', pp. 1-20.

⁴⁵⁹ Pierre Choderlos de Laclos [1782] (Paris: Éditions Gallimard et Librairie Générale Française, 1958), p. 248.

⁴⁶⁰ Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, p. 249.

at night, but it also becomes a point of tension when he threatens to use it as evidence of the girl's complicity:

à qui persuaderez-vous que je ne sois pas ici de votre aveu? Quel autre que vous m'aura fourni le moyen de m'y introduire? et cette clef que je tiens de vous, et que je n'ai pu avoir que par vous, vous chargerez-vous d'en indiquer l'usage? ⁴⁶¹

The key here is imbued not only with meaning, but also with power – it gives access, it is material proof, and ultimately it helps convince Cécile to stay quiet and accept Valmont's sexual advances. Of course, keys and locks are quintessential for almost any clandestine encounter – lovers locking themselves away or the man locking the door while the woman resists (or at least pretends to), all contributing to the sense of secrecy.⁴⁶²

The connection between keyholes and voyeurism cannot be overlooked. A recognisable trope in many narratives, it is also found in the episode (discussed earlier in this chapter), from Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux* where Alvare observes the Devil-sylphide Biondetta through a keyhole: 'un petit jour qui me donne dans les yeux m'attire vers une porte condamnée: ils s'échappait par le trou de la serrure; j'y applique l'œil'.⁴⁶³ This episode plays an important role in Alvare's seduction, though Alvare is not in control like the stereotypical (male) voyeur would be – Biondetta sets this up so that she can be observed and make Alvare succumb to her performance of suffering innocence.

4. Conclusion

⁴⁶¹ Ibid, p. 250.

⁴⁶² Ganofsky explains in *Night in Libertine Fiction*: 'The bolted door aptly reminds us that erotic pleasures had been relegated to the enclave of intimate spaces, and that lust had to be dissimulated under the surface of civilised refinement, behind the closed doors of polite society', pp. 94-5.

⁴⁶³ Cazotte, 'Le Diable amoureux', p. 70.

Luxurious items are extremely important in sylph narratives. They are not mere accessories or settings, they are what constitutes the sylph as a potentially real being. Sylphic lovers may be gallant but they are also very domestic, offering gifts of exquisite beauty that may have travelled across continents as part of global networks of commerce, but they can ultimately be integrated into relatively ordinary or everyday use.

Within oscillations between belief and disbelief, such objects can function as proof, tipping the balance in favour of the existence of the magic being, even if only for a while. Uncertainty itself and the gradual process of convincing the woman deploy suspense and awe by means of a multisensorial journey, producing excitement and pleasure. The ways in which these exquisite items are given creates an enjoyment of another type too – a sort of game for adults. At the same time, sylphic machinations and manipulations also point to the darker side of gallantry and courtship rituals.

The sylphic transmutations in the examples we have considered not only illustrate how substances and objects can be used to represent an otherwise ephemeral elemental being, but also demonstrate that these very transmutations are not without peripheral meaning and complexity. While there is a recurrent set of materials which translate sylphness better than others, processes of change are multifaceted and often non-linear even if they align with the gradation principle. Alchemical or chemical transformations in sylph narratives are not limited to familiar phase transitions, and include miniaturisations, displacements, and substitutions which we can incorporate into the range of sylphic transformations. Such shapeshifting offers insights into how desires can be transferred, blurred and amalgamated, and ultimately rearticulated into a new type of composition. By exploring these notions, sylph narratives point to the problematic lack of a clear-cut division between the desire for material things and that for emotional bliss or sexual satisfaction.

CHAPTER 5. THE POSSIBILITIES OF SYLPHIC GENDER

‘Sometime in the eighteenth century, sex as we know it was invented’, writes Thomas Laqueur in 1990 in *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. What does this really mean, and to what extent is this accurate? In this chapter we will examine a range of sylph narratives published between 1747 and 1801 featuring gender non-conforming characters and behaviours in order to assess whether what we would now recognise under the labels of queer sexuality as well as trans and non-binary identity found a facilitated outlet in these fantasy settings.

Some modern scholars state that the Middle Ages had a more tolerant view of queer sexuality than the eighteenth century, and some sociologists and social historians in particular argue that sexual practice leading to pregnancy and birth was favoured during the Enlightenment as evidenced by an increase in birth rates during that period.⁴⁶⁴ Tim Hitchcock, for instance, goes so far as to claim that in the eighteenth century the move towards procreative sex led to the discarding of other previously popular sexual practices.⁴⁶⁵

Texts focusing on reproduction rather than pleasure such as *Aristotle’s Masterpiece; or the Secrets of Generation Displayed in All Parts Thereof* (spuriously attributed to Aristotle), first published in 1684 and which saw 43 editions by 1800 seem to support such a depiction.⁴⁶⁶ This perspective sees men as desiring women, and penetrative, vaginal sex that produced babies. According to Randolph Trumbach, within this framework, from about 1700 onwards, appropriate manhood and men’s status was defined by men’s desire for women (rather than for women as well as men – adolescent boys in

⁴⁶⁴ Tracy Rutler, *Queering the Enlightenment: Kinship and Gender in Eighteenth-Century French Literature* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2021); Tim Hitchcock describes the demographic studies carried out which demonstrate this trend in eighteenth-century England in ‘The Reformulation of Sexual Knowledge in Eighteenth-Century England’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 37.4 (2012), pp. 832-48 (p. 823).

⁴⁶⁵ Drawing on the work of Randolph Trumbach, Alan Bray, and Rictor Norton relating to perceptions of homosexuality in the eighteenth century, Hitchcock also argues that as permissible sexual practice became essentially limited to penile penetration of a vagina, other sex, including sodomy became a threat. Within this framework then, homosexuality and lesbianism could be defined as clearer categories of their own (albeit in opposition to the what was perceived as the norm), ‘The Reformulation of Sexual Knowledge’, p. 829.

⁴⁶⁶ Hitchcock, ‘The Reformulation of Sexual Knowledge’, p. 829.

particular – which was the case prior to this period).⁴⁶⁷ In this scenario women were seen as desiring exclusively men (their husbands specifically), and not seeking pleasure, but wanting to have heteronormative sex which produced babies. Women were viewed as passionless, and ‘loving but without sexual needs’.⁴⁶⁸ Female sexual desire and pleasure were otherwise pathologized and seen as something unsavoury and lascivious, while the female orgasm was deemed unnecessary to conceiving children, and therefore discarded from consideration.⁴⁶⁹ Additionally, and as evidenced by a 1721 definition of ‘woman’ in the *Dictionnaire universel françois et latin (Dictionnaire de Trévoux)*, their role above all was to preserve their virtue: ‘[l]a chasteté est la gloire et le partage des femmes’.⁴⁷⁰ All this, of course, is only a small part of the picture, and the fiction of the long eighteenth century, if nothing else, attests to a much more complex landscape of sex, gender, and relationality.

In reality, while notions of masculinity and femininity were emerging, a significant part of which was based on biological difference, during the eighteenth century gender identity was not a crystallised concept, and ideas of what constituted the ‘male’ and the ‘female’, homo- or heterosexuality had not yet formed.⁴⁷¹ However, despite this retrospective picture of the Medieval, Early Modern, and Enlightenment as times where terms for gender non-conformity did not exist,

⁴⁶⁷ Randolph Trumbach, ‘Erotic Fantasy and Male Libertinism in Enlightenment England’, in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800*, ed. by Lynn Avery Hunt (New York: Zone Books, 1993), pp. 253-82 (pp. 254, 255). Additionally, Elizabeth Foyster talks of the ways in which new ideals of masculinity, or rather, manhood during this time were complex and often contradictory, and put various pressures on men, but also that understanding of how men experienced their bodies is limited, in *Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex and Marriage* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), p. 29.

⁴⁶⁸ Laqueur, *Making Sex*, p. 150; Karen Harvey, ‘The Century of Sex? Gender, Bodies, and Sexuality in the Long Eighteenth Century’, *The Historical Journal*, 45.4 (2002), pp. 899-916 (p. 903).

⁴⁶⁹ Sally O’Driscoll, ‘A Crisis of Femininity: Re-Making Gender in Popular Discourse’, in *Lesbian Dames: Sapphism in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Caroline Gonda and John C. Beynon (Routledge, 2010), pp. 45-61, pp.45, 46, 50, 56; Karen Harvey, ‘The Century of Sex?’, p. 903.

⁴⁷⁰ *Dictionnaire universel françois et latin*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1721), p. 722

⁴⁷¹ According to Laqueur, before the eighteenth century, male and female bodies were believed to be in hierarchical relation to each other, but variants of one type or ‘one flesh’. Whereas in the eighteenth century, the two-body model emerged with the anatomically different female and male body, which were then perceived as opposites. See *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 114, 115, 134, 148, 149; LaFleur, Greta, and others, ‘Introduction: The Benefits of Being Trans Historical’, in *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern*, ed. by Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska (Cornell University Press, 2021), pp. 1-24.

there was instead a real wealth of relevant descriptions.⁴⁷² Michel Foucault also suggests that during this period sexuality had a more significant impact on the forming of relations than reproduction did.

Thus, if on the surface, there is an apparently prescriptive reproductive agenda along with somewhat codified gender roles for males and females, there is nonetheless abundant evidence that sexual behaviour did not conform to these roles, and was also not concerned with and did not coin names for the various notions of gender and sexuality that we use today. It is then, broadly speaking, a time when things were understood differently (with some gender concepts and norms with which we are familiar today emerging), and when what we can call gender non-conformity certainly existed. In other words:

The dynamism of current ways of understanding diversity in gendered presentation and behaviour [...] both expands and limits what the past looks like to twenty-first-century readers [...] Does this approach [where we assume that people in the past had something in common in this respect with the people today] amount to a claim about a universal human experience? Does it show how genuinely different past understandings of human sex and gender were from present ones? A little of both, and also neither.⁴⁷³

The last few lines of this citation are particularly useful to the analysis in this chapter because the ways in which gender non-conformity manifests itself in our fictional examples is neither the experience of people in the twenty-first century, nor can it be exempt from certain readings despite the risk of anachronism; our analysis is hence *a little bit of both*: we take into account the historical and cultural context of the time, while also deploying some of the concepts we use today so as to illuminate certain aspects of gender and sexuality in the eighteenth century. Within this schema, it seems possible to suggest that in the eighteenth century, sexual and gender exploration appear to have been governed by a different set of rules.

In *Queering the Enlightenment* (2021), Tracy Rutler talks about queer relationality's displacement of sexual desire outside the oedipal structure and dynamic of 'cruising' between

⁴⁷² LaFleur, and others, 'Introduction: The Benefits of Being Trans Historical', p. 9.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., p. 3.

encounters instead, also highlighting the value of eighteenth-century literature as allowing queer intimacy to 'peek out' from between 'the cracks'.⁴⁷⁴ Such an understanding of literature's potential will be very useful to us when we turn to our examples from sylph narratives, and it is their potential for queerness and transness that we will specifically be looking at. We will use both queerness and transness, rather than only queerness, as terms which encompass the spectrum of gender and sexuality in the light of recent scholarship's warning that we should not rely solely on 'queer' as a suitable term because it has become both too broad and also potentially blocks our inclusion of trans possibilities in our analyses.⁴⁷⁵

Going back to Laqueur's statement at the beginning of this chapter, we see that the eighteenth century was a time of enquiry into the functioning of human bodies, the extent to which they diverged from one another, the meaning of sexuality, and the ways in which gender roles worked.⁴⁷⁶ Whether we accept the argument that changes in perceptions of bodily differences, the shapes of masculinity and femininity, lesbianism and homosexuality, as well as the categorisations of gender roles occurred relatively suddenly and predominantly in the eighteenth century, or whether we understand it as a process that began earlier, assuming that none of these categories were fully defined at this point, this period remains a time when definitions and boundaries were disturbed without always being pinned down, within which there was a potentiality for expression of all kinds of sexuality and desire.

Sylphs and sylphides, in their capacity as imaginary creatures, give this potentiality an additional outlet – a fantasy realm where the playing out of norm-conforming and non-conforming sexual scenarios can take place. The sylphic body is malleable and thus has the potential to be male, female or anything in between, and sylphs' supernatural abilities, and the atmosphere of uncertainty or the oneiric, enable the exploration of all kinds of sexuality. In these ways sylph narratives help

⁴⁷⁴ Rutler, *Queering the Enlightenment*, pp. 19, 32, 23.

⁴⁷⁵ LaFleur, and others, 'Introduction: The Benefits of Being Trans Historical', pp. 6-7.

⁴⁷⁶ Harvey, 'The Century of Sex?', pp. 901, 911.

sketch out the outlines of desire within, and more interestingly, beyond the confines of the conventionally permissible.

In this chapter we will look at a selection of sylph narratives published at different points in the eighteenth century taken from texts by Bibiena, Cazotte, Nerciat, and finally, Sade, in which these elemental creatures display gender non-conforming behaviours. We will investigate these from the perspective of the possibility or potentiality for a plurality of sexualities. Our close readings of these examples will be underpinned by some modern theoretical concepts, while also being mindful that their applicability to a different time period may not be fully persuasive.

5.i. Notable changes to the gender and sexuality described in the original sylph mythology and their significance for eighteenth-century sylph texts

Within the wealth of sylph narratives, certain examples stand out when thinking about sex, gender, and sexuality. The best place to start is at the origin of the motif, with Paracelsus's description which distinguishes between male and female sylphs.⁴⁷⁷ Paracelsus states that fundamentally, they are like humans and that '[t]hey have children and their children are their kind, not ours', that 'they reproduce like men and therewith share his nature'.⁴⁷⁸ Sometimes such unions produce monsters, namely giants (but other types of monsters can be born from unions between the other elemental beings too). Crucially, they seek union with man, and can conceive children with humans. Paracelsus does not offer any more details on the sexual lives of any of the elemental beings. Presumably, we are to understand that they have heterosexual relationships that produce offspring.

It is then Villars's count Gabalis who introduces the element of gender ambiguity when he states with regard to sylphs: '[l]eurs femmes et leurs filles sont des beautés mâles telles qu'on dépeint les amazones'.⁴⁷⁹ It is significant that Villars emphasises maleness of their beauty given that

⁴⁷⁷ Paracelsus [1566], 'A Book on Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies, and Salamandres, and on the Other Spirits' (1996), p. 235.

⁴⁷⁸ Paracelsus, 'A Book on Nymphs', p. 230.

⁴⁷⁹ Villars [1670], 'Le Comte de Gabalis' (1788), p. 19.

he also emphasises the idea that having a sylphide as a sexual partner is advantageous and that they are superior in attractiveness to human females; perhaps it is merely a nod to an aesthetic preference or indeed an echo of the penchants of adult men for androgynous male youths. In any event, the idea takes root as it is recycled in subsequent texts such as *Le Nouvelliste aérien ou le Sylphe amoureux* (1734), attributed to Caylus: 'Imaginez-vous les traits les plus réguliers et les plus délicats de la beauté de notre sexe, réunis à tout ce qui peut rendre un homme aimable'.⁴⁸⁰ But here the combination of the characteristics of the two sexes is more explicitly just that – a joining – than was the case in *Gabalès*. It also makes the result a bit more difficult to picture than that in *Gabalès*; it is a blurry image and crucially an appealing one despite, or perhaps by virtue of, its very blurriness and its gender and aesthetic ambiguity. If this text is truly by Caylus, it is not surprising that both an appreciation for the sexual body and the artistic aesthetic find a representation in this case, as this author was particularly interested in both of these aspects.⁴⁸¹

Male sylphs too are superior to mortal men: from Crébillon and his *Le Sylphe* (1730) to Marmontel's *Le Mari sylphe* (1755-9), this motif is used in different ways by many authors. It proves useful to writers of pornography as well, with sylphs depicted as extremely virile *amants infatigables*, as seen in Nerciat's and Sade's texts, for instance. At the same time, however, sylph lovers are light and gentle in both their physical characteristics and their behaviour, making them a refuge from the excessive brutality of an unappealing masculinity. While the sylph's body and overall appearance as a youthful, supple but not overly muscular male is in no small part a reflection of the period's affinity for the ideal of Classical beauty (as discussed in chapter 2), the need for a gentler male who is nonetheless a vigorous lover resonates with the period's formulas for desirable masculinity. Many of the sylphs in our corpus are able to explore and embody the ideals of sexual prowess which coexist alongside control and tenderness. Perhaps this is one of the places where the ideal masculinity of the

⁴⁸⁰ Cited in Michel Delon, 'Présentation', in *Sylphes et Sylphides* (1999), p. 13.

⁴⁸¹ Markus A. Castor, 'Jeux de plume et de crayon: Le Comte de Caylus et la galanterie libertine', *Littératures classiques*, 69 (2009), pp. 245-61.

time could be achieved, a model which was otherwise mutable according to men's progression through the various stages of their lives such as adolescence, marriage, and older age.⁴⁸² This ideal was not only contradictory and practically unattainable, but also anxiety-inducing for men, as Elizabeth Foyster, for instance, has shown.⁴⁸³

5.ii. The possibility of lesbianism in *La Poupée*

In Bibiena's *La Poupée* (1747), the male protagonists embody the narcissistic, image-obsessed, frivolous, and effeminate image of manhood which is a type of undesirable behaviour for men in the eighteenth century. This is why the sylphide Zamire is tasked with correcting such men.

Bibiena's text also offers a glimpse into some female behaviours. The sylphide Zamire makes good use of elemental beings' capacity for shapeshifting; she is able to become a cat and a doll which eventually comes to life and grows in proportions. She appears to be heterosexual and her task is to pair up with self-obsessed mortal men and to correct their ways; she teaches them the art of loving well and being 'proper' men in line with the period's ideals, instead of effeminate and narcissistic, aspiring *petits maîtres*. Their recompense for improving their behaviour is sex with her, while she gains immortality in return (this latter part is in keeping with Paracelsus's original mythology). The main narrator in this text is male, the protagonist Philandre, and his focus is on describing events and feelings from this viewpoint. Consequently, throughout the narrative the focus is on male desires whether for objects as we have briefly noted in chapter 4, or on sexual desire. The story culminates in a detailed description of the instructor-pupil dynamic between the sylphide and Philandre where successful learning is rewarded with visual and sensual favours that stimulate sexual passion. In this dynamic the sylphide acts as a type of dominatrix, and while we learn a lot about the ways in which the gradations of rewards fuel desire, this is presented from a one-sided perspective.

⁴⁸² Arlette Farge, 'Les Lumières et la virilité inquiète', in *Histoire de la virilité, I: Invention de la virilité. De l'Antiquité aux Lumières*, ed. by Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, and Georges Vigarello (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2011), pp. 421-98.

⁴⁸³ *Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex and Marriage* (1999).

Here male lust is the focus; we are told what happens each time the next recompense is given, for example: '[p]énétré de toute l'ardeur que les désirs les plus violents peuvent exciter, je brûlais d'impatience, et à chaque instant j'étais sur le point de me livrer à la fureur de mes désirs'.⁴⁸⁴ The sylphide's desire is not described in the same depth; we mostly find rather basic comments such as references to her eyes, for example: '[le] feu dont ils [ses yeux] étaient animés', 'je consultais encore ses yeux, je les vis tendres, languissants même', '[e]lle soupira', '[j]e vis dans ses yeux cette impression de volupté que j'attendais comme le signal de mon bonheur'.⁴⁸⁵ These expressions in her eyes and her occasional sighs serve more to signal that the desire is reciprocated (or at least consensual) than to describe it.

We do, however, find some insight into the female sylphide's standpoint when she recounts her previous exploits to Philandre in an embedded first-person narrative. Zamire tells him that she has a sylph husband, but that he has given up on gaining immortality because his task of correcting 'les femmes prudes de leurs grimaces hypocrites, et à les engager, ou à se parer d'une vertu sincère, ou à devenir galantes de bonne fois', is impossible (Bibiena's sarcastic social commentary is delightfully brisk).⁴⁸⁶ Because her husband does not seek immortality anymore, she has left him: '[j]'aime mon époux, mais je ne me trouve pas disposée de renoncer à l'immortalité. [...] J'ai quitté la couche nuptiale il y a près d'un siècle'.⁴⁸⁷

She is able to hide from her husband by shapeshifting, and pursues immortality essentially by trying out relationships with other men, the *abbés petits maîtres* that she attempts to correct.⁴⁸⁸ We do not know much else about her life or relationship preferences until she recounts an episode of voyeurism in which she observes a beautiful young woman called Julie. The latter happens to be the love interest of Damis, a man who Zamire tries to instruct before meeting Philandre. The sylphide,

⁴⁸⁴ Jean Galli de Bibiena [1747], *La Poupée* (1996), p. 130.

⁴⁸⁵ Bibiena, *La Poupée*, pp. 129, 130, 133.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-3.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-4.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

while in the form of a female cat, turns herself and Damis invisible so that they can observe Julie in her home without being seen. They find her with her preferred lover Clitandre and discover that the two had orchestrated the hoax that caused Damis so much embarrassment (the two trick him into climbing into bed with a man rather than Julie earlier in the story). They also witness a rather prolonged, voluptuous scene between Julie and Clitandre.

As Damis and Zamire watch, they fulfil the 'voir sans être vu' premise of voyeurism. Unbeknownst to anyone, the sylphide admires Julie and shares her impressions with the reader in the first-person: '[l]a beauté de Julie [...] aurait frappé, arrêté, confondu l'homme le plus insensible. Je m'en sentis émue moi-même, qui étais de son sexe', and then: 'd'une beauté qui me donnait à moi-même de l'émotion et des désirs'.⁴⁸⁹ Unlike the descriptions by Philandre of how she feels when with him, this is a more authentic perspective on her feelings and desires. Finally, when Julie is asleep following sex with Clitandre, Zamire observes her again: 'Que de beautés l'on voyait! J'en étais si enchantée que je les trouvais trop parfaites pour être livrées à un mortel. J'aurais voulu qu'un sylphe les possédât, ou pouvoir me rendre sylphe moi-même'.⁴⁹⁰ The sylphide becomes absorbed by looking at her: 'J'étais si appliquée à examiner les charmes de notre belle endormie, [...] qu'entièrement livrée au plaisir qui m'entraînait je ne remarquais point le changement subit qui se faisait dans les yeux de Damis'.⁴⁹¹ While a certain degree of supposedly innocent aesthetic appreciation may be underlying this episode, it is clear that sexual desire is present not least because what Zamire and Damis actually witness is foreplay and sex.

By watching Julie while remaining hidden, and experiencing pleasure from doing this while arguably becoming sexually aroused, Zamire (even though in the presence of Damis), takes possession through her power of invisibility of an otherwise exclusively male prerogative of voyeurism. This episode echoes that in Crébillon's story, when the sylph watches Mme de R*** in

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 78, 83

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 91.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 96-7.

her bed: 'Ô Dieu! que d'appas!'.⁴⁹² Similarly, in Dominique and Romagnési's *La Sylphide, comédie en 1 acte*, which appeared in 1733 (preceding Bibiena's text, and following Crébillon's by just three years), a sylphide and gnomide pursue human, male love interests. The sylphide, much like Zamire, likes to observe Eraste, the man she is infatuated with, in secret: 'Je le vois tous les jours, sans en, être vue'.⁴⁹³ It is clear that one of the advantages of the invisibility possessed by elemental beings is the possibility for the perfect *voir sans être vu* setup.

The voyeurism scene between the two women in *La Poupée* offers a glimpse into the sylphide's thoughts and yearnings, and these develop in increments just like Philandre's. Zamire gradually articulates and expresses her desires by beginning with a light and innocent remark about appreciating the beauty of someone of the same sex, through to feeling 'emotions and desires' in response to this beauty, and ultimately by openly stating that she wishes to possess Julie's charms and to become a male sylph. She explicitly states the desire to sprout a penis, but this does not happen. While able to shapeshift into objects, animals, and other people she is seemingly unable or perhaps unwilling to take on a male body. But why not act on her desire? Possibly because for Bibiena gender role reversal is of less interest and in this text, he mostly tries to uphold some mainstream thinking; after all, the narrative is centred on criticising the effeminacy of certain types of men. Or perhaps if Zamire became a male (for instance, by taking on the body of Julie's lover Clitandre), and had sex with Julie that would take us into murky moral territory, which may well be an entertaining twist in other libertine texts, but in Bibiena's story the sensual is closely tied to sentiment and what we find in the end is an almost traditional happy ending. Despite this, Bibiena's novel is not without powerful libertine and gender role-bending possibilities. The hints at lesbianism are an important way to represent the libertinage of women (the other being economic freedom).⁴⁹⁴ In this respect Zamire's sentiments are similar to Merteuil's behaviour in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*.

⁴⁹² Crébillon, 'Le Sylphe' (1999), p. 61.

⁴⁹³ Pierre François Biancolelli, and Jean Antoine Romagnési, *La Sylphide* (La Haye: Antoine van Dole, dans le Lange Pooten, à l'Enseigne de Hugo Grotius, 1733), p. 7.

⁴⁹⁴ Delon, *Le Savoir-vivre libertin* (2000), p. 296.

Laclos's heroine toys with Cécile, and this hints at the possibility of lesbianism.⁴⁹⁵ As Rutler explains, the value of such 'spectrality' in fiction is that it points to the possibility of queerness.⁴⁹⁶

5.iii. The menacing disorientation of gender indeterminacy and the seduction of a performed femininity in *Le Diable amoureux*

Quel est cet objet aimable
Qui s'est soumis à votre pouvoir ?
Est-il...⁴⁹⁷

Sylphic gender ambiguity becomes the source of nightmarish dread and confusion in Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux* (1772). In this text, the gender indeterminacy of the Devil-sylphide Biondetta/o brings to the fore its demonic nature. Like the ellipsis in the quote above (which invites the reader to fill in with the rhyming 'le diable'), this ambiguity is both titillating and ominous. Gender confusion and its association with the Devil has a long tradition in Western culture and in Cazotte's story it is a key element for driving the plot forward; gender indeterminacy alongside promiscuity and sexual drive which conventional women are not supposed to have, all create a powerful and a dangerous draw.

The first appearance of the demon is in the form of the 'tête de chameau horrible'; the male version 'chameau' rather than 'chamelle' used could suggest that at this stage the apparition was male, or perhaps it was just a generic way of describing the animal.⁴⁹⁸ Equally, it could suggest that Alvare defaults to 'chameau' because it is not clear what sex the camel is (not least because only the head appears). Next however, sex enters the equation in an important way as Alvare makes a remark about it: the camel head vomits a spaniel, and through this odd transformation the demon takes a less terrifying and more convenient form as ordered by Alvare.⁴⁹⁹ It reveals itself to be a female dog:

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ Rutler, *Queering the Enlightenment*, p. 23.

⁴⁹⁷ Jacques Cazotte [1722], 'Le Diable amoureux' (1981), p. 106.

⁴⁹⁸ Cazotte, 'Le Diable amoureux', p. 39.

⁴⁹⁹ Cazotte, 'Le Diable amoureux', p. 40.

'je vis que c'était une petite femelle'.⁵⁰⁰ Although Alvare notices the dog's sex, he is still unsure of its gender, as he refers to it as both 'he' and 'she': 'le chien', 'la chienne', and then calls it 'Biondetta' on account of the dog's white, shiny coat.⁵⁰¹

From this point forth the demon maintains a female form but cross-dresses into a pageboy: 'le prétendu page'.⁵⁰² The fact that the sylphide cross-dresses while maintaining a female body is supported by Alvare's recognition that it is clear that the pageboy is a woman when he is dressed as the female performer signora Fiorentina: 'je reconnus dans Fiorentina le fripon de Biondetto; mais l'élégance, l'avantage de la taille se faisaient beaucoup plus remarquer sous l'ajustement de femme que sous l'habit de page'.⁵⁰³ The sylphide in this instance is a woman who pretends to be a pageboy, who in turn cross-dresses to impersonate a female singer. This multi-levelled superimposition of genders contributes to destabilising Alvare's concentration, weakening his grasp on reality, and prepares a basis for further deceit by the Devil. What is interesting in this context is the fact that such complex gender indeterminacy is not effected by means of the sylphic supernatural ability to shapeshift, but rather by the entirely human ability to cross-dress. Given that the demon had no trouble changing from a camel head into a dog and then into a human being, a change of sex should not have been impossible. Why, then, opt for clothes instead? Perhaps because disguising a female *under* men's clothing is a kind of playful deceit that adds to the titillation. And perhaps because cross-dressing is entirely accessible to anyone, and in this way the dangers of the confusion that it, and gender indeterminacy, cause are made real by the author.

The effect of Biondetta/o's gender indeterminacy and its significance are brought to light in the way he/she is perceived by other characters:

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 41.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 42, 41.

⁵⁰² Ibid., p. 51.

⁵⁰³ Ibid., p. 45.

Je jette l'œil sur lui à la dérobée: figurez-vous l'Amour en trousse de page; mes compagnons d'aventure le lorgnaient de leur côté d'un air où se peignaient la surprise, le plaisir et l'inquiétude.⁵⁰⁴

The reaction of Alvare's companions summarises the attitude towards gender ambiguity as fascination accompanied by suspicion and anxiety.⁵⁰⁵ Cross-dressing as an expression of sexuality and gender did occur in the eighteenth century among the homosexual community as well as in lesbian couples, but also very commonly on stage; even within our corpus of sylph narratives such an example easily comes to mind – Charles Collé's, *opéra bouffon Le Jaloux corrigé* (1753) – where a maid dresses half of her body as male, and the other as female in order to help her mistress cure her husband of his unfounded jealousy. Biondetta/o is queer in the sense that she/he is unsettling by the very indeterminacy of gender and nature: are they a pure and innocent female or an evil demon?

Although Biondetta/o's appearance is certainly extremely attractive and so is in accordance with the sylph aesthetic, this creature's gender ambiguity is different to the Amazonian beauty of sylphides. While undoubtedly appealing, it does not combine the best of male and female traits as in Caylus's description above, and is not androgynous, but rather a deceitful femininity masquerading as masculinity, which in turn is overlaid onto a foundation of an entirely uncertain identity – is it an animal (and which one), a demon, or an elemental being?

As the narrative progresses, the gender indeterminacy of the demon-sylphide persists and causes confusion to both the protagonist and the reader. Although Alvare seems to know that the sylphide became a female rather than a male dog and then displayed the traits of a female human, he is still unsure of the demon's sex; in his narration 'il' becomes 'elle', and the female name Biondetta is used alongside 'le page' within the space of a few sentences.⁵⁰⁶ Early on in their relationship when the sylphide returns to Alvare's apartment dressed as a male servant, he tries to

⁵⁰⁴ Cazotte, 'Le Diable amoureux', pp. 43-4.

⁵⁰⁵ Mechthild Fend, *Les limites de la masculinité. L'androgynie dans l'art et la théorie de l'art en France (1750-1830)* (Paris: Editions INHA-CAHA-La Découverte, 2011), pp. 11-21.

⁵⁰⁶ Cazotte, 'Le Diable amoureux' pp. 53-4, p. 59.

send her away but she claims that even though she was dressed as a man ‘vos gens m’ont vue et ont deviné mon sexe’.⁵⁰⁷ She then plays on both Alvare’s sympathy and societal norms of decency to convince him to let her stay the night: ‘Si j’étais une vile courtisane, vous auriez quelque égards pour les bienséances de mon état’, and Alvare picks up on this ruse: ‘Il vous plaît donc à présent d’être femme pour vous concilier des égards?’.⁵⁰⁸ It seems that Biondetta will adhere to social convention when it suits her. It is not Biondetta/o’s cross-dressing that is disconcerting *per se*, but this creature’s ability to perform genders so well. The demon puts on a very particular kind of femininity, one that saw women, with their moral and physical weaknesses, as inferior to men.⁵⁰⁹ This very apt performance of the female gender (as it was perceived in the eighteenth century) is what seduces Alvare – the vulnerability, the suffering, the tears – a real spectacle is played out to overpower his reason.⁵¹⁰

Alvare continues to remain unsure of the creature’s sex; he employs the conditional tense to express his doubt and to tackle the confusion: ‘[s]i vous étiez une femme’.⁵¹¹ The two genders are used interchangeably until Alvare becomes more and more seduced by Biondetta, the beautiful woman. Gender ambiguity creates a disorientation that is part of the demon’s effort to make the protagonist forget his true nature and origin.

Biondetta challenges societal norms in other, more mundane ways; she insists on sex before marriage and expresses her disapproval of nuptial rite: ‘J’ai votre parole, vous avez la mienne. Voilà l’essentiel. Vos cérémonies sont des précautions prises contre la mauvaise foi, et je n’en fais point de cas’.⁵¹² She claims that respect (waiting to consummate the relationship until marriage) is a poison

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 49-50.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 50.

⁵⁰⁹ Joellen A. Meglin, ‘Behind the Veil of Translucence: An Intertextual Reading of the “Ballet Fantastique” in France, 1831-1841. Part One. Ancestors of the Sylphide in the Conte Fantastique’, *Dance Chronicle*, 27.1 (2004), pp. 67-129 (p. 79).

⁵¹⁰ Meglin refers to these elements as ‘aphrodisiac’ which is an extremely accurate description of how the demon’s performance of behaviours associated with femineity act on Alvare, p. 81.

⁵¹¹ Cazotte, p. 56.

⁵¹² Cazotte, p. 109; Georges Décote explains that this statement could be paraphrasing a quote from Voltaire’s 1767 *L’Ingénu* in ‘Notices et notes’, in *Le Diable Amoureux suivi de la ‘Prophétie’ de Cazotte, rapportée par La*

against love.⁵¹³ Biondetta is a promiscuous seductress, the polar opposite of ideal femininity embodied by Alvare's mother, doña Mencia. Biondetta/o also tries to lead Alvare away from Christian doctrine through discussion and the promise of new, exciting, and mysterious knowledge of mystical laws.⁵¹⁴ Thus, the sylphide challenges not only traditional values such as the importance of chastity and marriage but also the very foundations of gender identity. As Georges Décote puts it: 'Biondetta incarne la passion, le désordre, la remise en cause – qui est celle du XVIII^e siècle – de toutes les valeurs établies'.⁵¹⁵ Consequently, the chaos underlying the demonic sylphide's identity and actions defies the order of society.

The sylphide in Cazotte's text and both her promiscuity and gender ambiguity are evidently posited as dangerous. The sylphide is an evil, demonic creature and as such the opposite of Paracelsus's vision of elemental beings as the creations of a benevolent God. This vilification of elemental beings is consistent with the author's complex religious convictions. While he denounces sylphs as demons, he does not deny their existence. This is because Cazotte's relationship with the occult is rather multifaceted: he was an adept of Martinist doctrines and a devout Christian at the same time, and interpreted important events as being the result of the activity of supernatural and often dark powers.⁵¹⁶ For this reason the depiction of religion and morality in *Le Diable amoureux* is not a clear-cut, orthodox one. However, despite his esoteric beliefs, he clearly condemns occult practices regarding them as evil and causing mayhem in the world. Cazotte deconstructs the vision of the sylph as harmless, yet maintains the possibility for the existence of such beings.

5.iii. Sex change makes for a happy person – a utopic trans potentiality in *Éléonore, ou l'Heureuse personne*

Harpe, de ses 'Révélations', d'extraits de sa correspondance ainsi que d'Ollivier' et de 'l'Histoire de Maugraby', ed. by Georges Décote (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1981), pp. 313-41 (pp. 324-5).

⁵¹³ Cazotte, p.84.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 64-5, pp. 78-80.

⁵¹⁵ Décote, 'Préface', pp. 7-29 (p. 28).

⁵¹⁶ Kenneth J. Fleurant, 'Mysticism in the Age of Reason: Jaques Cazotte and the Demons', *The French Review*, 49 (1975), pp. 68-75 (p. 70).

While in Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux* cross-dressing is the principal tool for creating gender ambiguity, in Nerciat's *Éléonore, ou l'Heureuse personne* (1798/1799) gender indeterminacy takes the form of actual sex change. Locked away in a convent and fantasising about sex, love, and sylphs, the young nun Éléonore is visited by one such elemental being, who promptly has sex with her. As he is unable to stay beyond a few hours, she becomes inconsolable. The sylph offers a gift of her choice to make it up to her. Éléonore asks him to turn her into a man: 'Je voudrais devenir homme', she tells him. She does this, Nerciat explains, to *replace* her lover as she is 'convaincue de la nécessité de le remplacer'.⁵¹⁷ This need to replace the sylph could have been fulfilled by requesting a new lover, but instead Éléonore chooses to *become* her lover. Her desire to become a man is also reminiscent of that in Bibiena's story when the sylphide Zamire states that she would like to become a sylph; the desire for a penis in both cases can be understood as pseudo-Freudian. Éléonore's wish to become a man is specifically loaded with an implicit trans potentiality; she wants to present and live as a man.

Unlike in *La Poupée*, the wish is granted as the sylph obliges, but with an additional twist: 'Je puis mieux faire encore. Tu seras homme pendant un an, puis femme autant, et tu changeras ainsi, n'ayant toujours que vingt ans et demi', provided she does not reveal the secret of her transformation to anyone.⁵¹⁸ The story sees four such metamorphoses: woman-man-woman-man-woman, with more changes implied as Eléonor(e)'s adventures continue in perpetuity beyond the scope of the story; she is Éléonore when possessing a female body, and Eléonor when inhabiting a male one. Additionally, she conveniently regains her virginity when she changes sex, which proves particularly convenient when she starts new relationships as a female.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁷ Andréa de Nerciat, *Éléonore, ou l'Heureuse personne*, 2nd edn (1799), pp. 30-1.

⁵¹⁸ Nerciat, *Éléonore, ou l'Heureuse personne*, p. 31.

⁵¹⁹ Nerciat, p.114.

The relationships that he/she forms alongside the changes are varied and complex. Following the brief relation with the sylph as a woman, Eléonor in male form sleeps with the *abbesse* and then Thérèse, a young woman who already has a lesbian lover, Ursule; all in the same convent. Thérèse thinks that Eléonore is a woman when she begins a relationship with her: 'Mais quel fut l'étonnement de Thérèse, qui croyait célébrer les mystères de la bonne déesse [Sappho], de trouver une victime si différente de celle qu'elle cherchait'.⁵²⁰ Having had heterosexual sex with Eléonor, Thérèse still prefers lesbian sex with Ursule, but the women do form a threesome with Eléonor. One of their encounters is observed by a young nun in a classic episode of voyeurism. In this scene (also depicted in the below illustration), the two women have oral sex with each other and Eléonor approaches them with a clearly visible erect penis (and as the narrator suggests, proceeds to having anal sex with Ursule).



Figure 24: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; an illustration to the second edition of *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne* attributed to Andréa de Nerciat (1799)

This illustration depicts Eléonor very clearly as having a male body, and this representation is markedly different to the one in the frontispiece illustration (below) where Eléonore is visited by the

⁵²⁰ Nerciat, pp.45-6.

sylph and her female body is on display, including details like uncovered breasts. At this point Éléonore's transmutation into Eléonor is an embodiment of her wish to live as a 'he', as a trans man.



Figure 25: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; an illustration to the second edition of *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne* attributed to Andréa de Nerciat (1799)

However, this transformation is not straightforward. When referred to by others, Eléonor(e) is a male or female depending on who is doing the referring and what prior knowledge they have about him/her; gender is as it appears to the beholder only to a certain extent, and it is indicated by the pronouns 'il' or 'elle' in the text. For instance, if we are dealing with another sister who still thinks Eléonor(e) is a woman, 'elle' is used, and if it is the narrator who, of course, knows of Eléonor(e)'s transformation, the male pronoun is employed. Thus, gender in this case appears to be determined by knowledge and not necessarily observation (at least not until clothes are shed). This does not occur seamlessly and not without some confusion as 'Eléonor,' the male version of protagonist's name, and female pronouns are used by the narrator to refer to the protagonist in the same sentence. This is true particularly in the first part of the text, but this indeterminacy persists

throughout the narrative, and the overall effect is that of a slow erosion of the boundaries between genders.

Gender also manifests itself in behaviour, and in some instances, it is very clear that certain behavioural traits are particular to either the female or the male form. For example, when Eléonor(e) first becomes a man, he immediately develops a taste for amorous conquest and inconstancy. This aspect of the transformation seems to support the idea that even though sex changes occur and within them an opportunity to transgress traditional gender roles presents itself, this does not happen as the gender roles and behaviours associated with them align with the physical sex of the person. It is as though the male and female bodies respectively come with pre-installed behaviours and ways of thinking which are characteristic to each gender, for example: 'le changement de sexe faisait ainsi renaître la pudeur au coeur d'Éléonore', or 'Eléonor reprit aussi son rôle de femme et de femme amoureuse'.⁵²¹ This, of course, resonates with the idea that sex dictated and shaped behaviours and predisposition in men and women according to their biology. This type of sex and gender change seems sufficient for a pornographic plot and indeed for catering to a male reader. In this sense, it aligns with Lucienne Frappier-Mazur's thinking: '[m]ainstream pornography, while exploiting some degree of sexual indifferentiation, is, or was, mostly heterosexual and its implicit reader was male'.⁵²²

As the plot progresses, Nerciat blurs male and female behaviour within Eléonor(e): 'surtout un jeune homme timide, et de ce côté, encore un peu religieuse', '[l]a défunte religieuse avait conservé ses goûts' for nice décor and flowers, 'le novice faible comme une femme, vain comme un homme, et gourmand comme une religieuse'.⁵²³ Ostensibly some of this has a comic purpose, but it is significant nonetheless. This blurring develops throughout the novel and the border between the

⁵²¹ Nerciat, *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne*, pp. 103, 113.

⁵²² Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, 'Truth and the Obscene Word in Eighteenth-Century French Pornography', in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800*, ed. by Lynn Avery Hunt (New York: Zone Books, 1993), pp. 203-21 (p. 208).

⁵²³ Nerciat, pp. 66, 70; pp. 70-1.

male and the female erodes, or rather, the two merge, and it is difficult to see where one ends and the other begins. Eléonor(e) also consciously absorbs advantageous behaviours from each gender and makes use of them: she becomes 'sage et discrète désormais', after nearly revealing her secret as a man due to excessive passion, but as a woman she is able to exercise wisdom which she then incorporates into her behaviour as a man.⁵²⁴

The trajectory is different in terms of Eléonor(e)'s sexuality. When Eléonor is discovered, he is forced to leave the convent and to become part of a monastery. There, he is sexually pursued by the Prior who has a 'sodomique entreprise'.⁵²⁵ But as a man Eléonor still has heterosexual rather than homosexual desires, at least at first; when in bed next to the over-stimulated Prior he feels a 'chaleur brûlante et solide qui lui prouvait qu'il ne sentait pas seul de violens désirs; mais ceux-ci étaient d'une nature bien différente des siens'.⁵²⁶ The narrator claims that the only reason that Eléonor allows the monk to penetrate him anally is because: 'Il désirait la jouissance, elle seule pouvait calmer le feu qui le consumait; mais cette jouissance n'avait aucun objet. Il était résigné, prêt à tout souffrir pour y arriver'.⁵²⁷

Thus, while allowing the reader to witness homoeroticism, the text tries to feign disapproval of transgressions of this type. More justifications are offered: because Eléonor 'était destiné à redevenir femme qu'il trouvait du plaisir à faire un heureux de cette manière-là'.⁵²⁸ In some ways this man is (or will be, or has been) a woman and so is not fully a man. Although this possibility is granted by the magic sylphic gift, it also echoes the image of a younger male lover in a homosexual pair who is in an 'in-between' state found in Antiquity, and also allegedly more commonly accepted before 1700.⁵²⁹ At twenty and half years old, Eléonor would have still been considered an adolescent. He is

⁵²⁴ Ibid, p. 174.

⁵²⁵ Ibid., p. 87.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., p. 84.

⁵²⁷ Ibid., p. 85.

⁵²⁸ Ibid., p. 96.

⁵²⁹ Sara F. Matthews-Grieco, 'Corps et sexualité dans l'Europe d'Ancien Régime', in *Histoire du corps, I: De la Renaissance aux Lumières*, ed. by Georges Vigarello (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005), pp. 167-234 (p. 223).

in between states not only because of age, but because he is always between the two sexes, as they change every year; a sort of suspended status.

Crucially, partners are not swapped at the same time as the changes in sex occur, which therefore involves both homosexual and heterosexual relationships and creates a 'universal art of love', argues Michel Delon.⁵³⁰ While true to a certain extent, as same-sex relationships can both be transgressive of traditional norms and blur boundaries between genders, it is difficult to accept this being fully true in this case. This is because, as mentioned above, each of the bodies – male or female – comes with a set of behavioural standards and sexual predilections to which they adhere. This is made clear when Éléonore finds herself extremely distressed when, after having been a male for a year and having entertained a homosexual relationship with the Prior, she turns into a female again and finds that her previous engagement in sodomy would be wholly inappropriate:

comme homme [elle] avait souffert du prieur des choses qu'on ne doit jamais souffrir maintenant; comme femme, elle frémit d'horreur à l'idée de supporter des caresses bien plus dans l'ordre de la nature.⁵³¹

The prospect of vaginal penetration is equally terrifying to her because she has become prudish as a 'good' woman should be, but also perhaps because of the Prior's character: he is a lascivious and debauched individual, and therefore as a woman she is no longer willing to receive his attentions. She even has nightmares about what might happen: 'elle croyait voir le lubrique prieur se réjouissant de son nouveau trésor, profanant l'un sans renoncer à l'autre'.⁵³² This serves to circumscribe Éléonore within the confines of acceptable sexual practice for women, and naturally for dramatic effect, helping to drive the plot forward (Éléonore is now motivated to escape the monastery).

Another noteworthy aspect of Eléonor(e) is a physicality that at least to some extent transcends gender: "Non, tu n'es point un homme", disait le prieur, "tu n'es point une femme, tu

⁵³⁰ Delon, 'Préface' in *Sylphes et Sylphides*, p. 24.

⁵³¹ Nerciat, *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne*, pp. 100-1.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

es un ange”⁵³³ Eléonor(e) is described as a genderless angel, but also a being of a Classical, and androgenous beauty: ‘[q]ue tu es joli! comme ta bouche est fraîche! quelles belles formes! que tu es blanc! comme j’aime à voir tes muscles prononcés, mais gracieux’.⁵³⁴ But this beauty is also strikingly sylphic (as discussed in chapter 3), and in this way it seems that Eléonor(e) does get her wish of becoming her sylph lover.

When Éléonore begins a sexual relationship with her friend Adèle she has lesbian sex with her which is superior in quality to sex with men: ‘qu’un amant mal-adroit, et sur-tout un époux, fait si rarement atteindre à sa froide moitié’.⁵³⁵ But this still leaves one area unsatisfied: ‘l’épuisement général, conservait encore le feu sacré’.⁵³⁶ At this point Éléonore sprouts a penis which is promptly put to use. Once again, she is able to do what other women and sylphides like Zamire did not do. Soon, and while in male form, Eléonor develops an almost overpowering urge to have anal sex with Adèle, to the point of nearly revealing the secret of his magical transformation in exchange for this last favour.⁵³⁷ He does not reveal the secret and ultimately parts with Adèle.

The narrative leaves Eléonor(e) as having become a hybrid being in terms of behaviour by incorporating the most stereotypical traits ascribed to each gender and by making use of the two physical forms. She (here we return to the original Éléonore) enjoys a utopian existence: ‘elle jouit tour-à-tour, sous ces formes diverses, de tous les plaisirs de l’humanité’.⁵³⁸ In this way, having the bodies of both man and woman in turn, and crucially by behaving as man and woman, and sometimes as both, Eléonor(e) becomes that happy ‘personne’ of the title. This denomination can be read as gender-neutral, but Eléonor(e) is not necessarily gender-neutral in the sense of ‘neither gender’, as he/she is expressly both male and female to his/her own advantage and enjoyment, and in this way can be understood both as a cisgender woman and a transgender man, but also as a non-

⁵³³ Nerciat, *Éléonore*, p. 94.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-1.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

binary individual who combines behavioural traits and displays a gender-bending sexuality. Much like the sylph who granted Éléonore her abilities, Eléonor(e) is a 'nobody', a protean being who materialises itself in different physical forms and can be anybody or any gender.

Although at first this text appears to use sex change primarily as spice to a pornographic narrative, aimed at titillating the reader, it soon becomes clear that changing sex by these unique supernatural means affords new opportunities for pleasure certainly, but also for experimentation and the erosion of clear boundaries of gender roles and sexualities. Within this framework, Nerciat introduces possibilities not of gender-neutrality, but of a gender and sexuality where the transitions between Eléonor(e)'s male and female forms become more seamless, and where certain behaviours and preferences are carried through from one sex/gender into the other; as such this is not just a gender possibility but also, a gender permeability.

5.iv. The Sadean sylph – towards extreme transgression and a disembodied sexuality

The exploration of sexual desire and boundaries reaches its extreme, perhaps unsurprisingly, in the Sadean pornotopic universe. The sylph Alzamor appears in the third part of Sade's *Histoire de Juliette*, in a sequence that is particularly rich in supernatural figures. Here, the reader is not only faced with implausible pornographic scenarios but also with monsters including the giant cannibal Minski and the sorceress Durand. Sade's sylph is not enchantingly beautiful as depicted in *Le Comte de Gabalis* and the tradition that followed (as discussed in chapter 3), but rather is 'un vieux sylphe', 'un grand homme sec, pâle, et bilieux, d'environ cinquante ans'.⁵³⁹ Despite his age and appearance, Alzamor is extremely virile: 'cet homme était d'une vigueur prodigieuse, en deux minutes il dépucela la jeune fille, et fit couler le sang dans la chambre'.⁵⁴⁰ This sexual vigour circumscribes him within the norms of masculinity of the period. The accompanying violence, of course, does not and is certainly at odds with the typical depiction of sylphs as gentle and attentive lovers. In this scenario, with Sade

⁵³⁹ Sade, *Histoire de Juliette*, p. 658.

⁵⁴⁰ Sade, *Histoire de Juliette*, p. 658.

choosing to make 'the blood flow in the room' as though overtaking it or filling it in a significant way, the Sadean sylph is both a rapist and a sodomite: 'Voulez-vous, dit la Durand, qu'Alzamor l'encule [un garçon de dix-huit ans] devant vous?'.⁵⁴¹ Thus the sylph engages in two behaviours that were frowned upon during this period, transgressing taboos.

Sade juxtaposes pornography, horror, and the supernatural to create an effect of disorientation, chaos and incongruence which govern his universe. Frappier-Mazur explains that the 'supernatural elements contribute to the rhetoric of excess', and that this is in accordance with the logic of exploration beyond all boundaries.⁵⁴² The Sadean sylph is both an inversion and a parody of the traditional sylph motif, and also its extreme manifestation. At the same time, Sade's libertinage represents a deterioration of the libertine tradition itself. This is evidenced by the disappearance of the initiation element. Initiation or apprenticeship are an important part of the dynamic of relationships in libertine fiction that also characterises human-sylph interactions. While in earlier versions of the motif, the sylph leads the human into uncharted, transgressive areas of desire, in Sade's version this dynamic is only partly preserved. The sylph himself is merely a tool for the fulfilment of the fetishes and fantasies of the human characters. He rapes the young victims when ordered and has anal sex with Juliette and her companion when they desire it. In the latter situation he is present solely as an erect penis, penetrating the women from behind, and it is only later that they realise that this was in fact Alzamor.⁵⁴³ The sylph and his sexuality are a means to an end and are to a certain degree detached from gender; Alzamor's sexuality is almost disembodied, and reduced to just his penis, erect and 'en l'air', being put to use in whichever way the situation and the desires of mortals demand.

5. Conclusion

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., p. 661

⁵⁴² Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, *Writing the Orgy: Power and Parody in Sade* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 106.

⁵⁴³ Sade, *Histoire de Juliette, ou les Prospérités du vice* (En Hollande, 1797), p. 225.

Just as in the context of other contemporary debates, sylph narratives engage, in various ways and to different levels of depth, with questions about sex and gender as we now understand them. Gender ambiguity is clearly present in several sylph narratives, and it takes different forms as we saw above. The various ways this ambiguity manifests itself show the breadth of possibility, but also point to a difficulty in evaluating, classifying, or quantifying gender non-conformity. If we look at the examples of Biondetta/o and Eléonor(e), the ways in which sex and gender difference and blurriness appear in each of these individuals are not the same; we use the '/' and '()' deliberately in each case to denote this difference. The Devil-sylphide is referred to as both a male and female interchangeably and this is highly confusing and destabilizing for the reader, much like for the protagonist Alvare, who is never quite sure who or what this being is. Essentially, it is neither man nor woman. Biondetta/o is a demon in drag who performs femininity (as it was seen in the eighteenth century) so convincingly that Alvare is seduced. Eléonor(e), on the other hand, starts off as a young woman, becomes man and woman, both in turn physically, but also concomitantly through sexual preference and behaviour. Gradually Eléonor(e) becomes a malleable being that encompasses both genders and sexes. Somewhat similarly, Sade's Alzamor displays a sexuality that is not fixed, and is disembodied allowing it to act in all directions to transgress norms and boundaries.

The work of this chapter has been to bring out the plurality of genders, sexualities, and relationships in the eighteenth century. The possibilities offered by the sylph's and sylphide's supernatural abilities and their protean bodies are used by authors to give expression to these possibilities. They may sometimes be less pronounced or at other times less clearly articulated, but nonetheless they are there. The four texts in this chapter were analysed in chronological order intentionally: starting with *La Poupée* 1747, followed by *Le Diable amoureux* (1772), *Éléonore ou l'heureuse personne* (1798/1799), and finally, *Histoire de Juliette* (1801). These texts belong to different genres, and although the libertine and pornographic have some elements in common, with the latter two being explicitly pornographic, it is noticeable that there is an overall intensification of gender non-conformity as the century progressed. This does not necessarily attest to a particularity

of these sylph texts but instead shows that they, like other erotic literature, become more explicit and transgressive in the later decades of the century.

In these texts some possibilities remain unexplored, and that is an authorial strategy in itself. The blurriness of sylphs, their bodies, their sexualities, and their behaviours are highly appealing to readers and writers alike. It is also of note that within the context of sexual experience in sylph narratives (like in many others at the time), literature itself is an important actor; sylph narratives inspire erotic fantasy in protagonists of other sylph texts. Critical material that discusses gender and sexuality of the period intercalates this with analyses of the effects and roles of text and image on sexual behaviour, for instance. We will explore this and other aspects of writing and reading sylph literature in the next and final chapter.

CHAPTER 6. READING AND WRITING SYLPH TEXTS

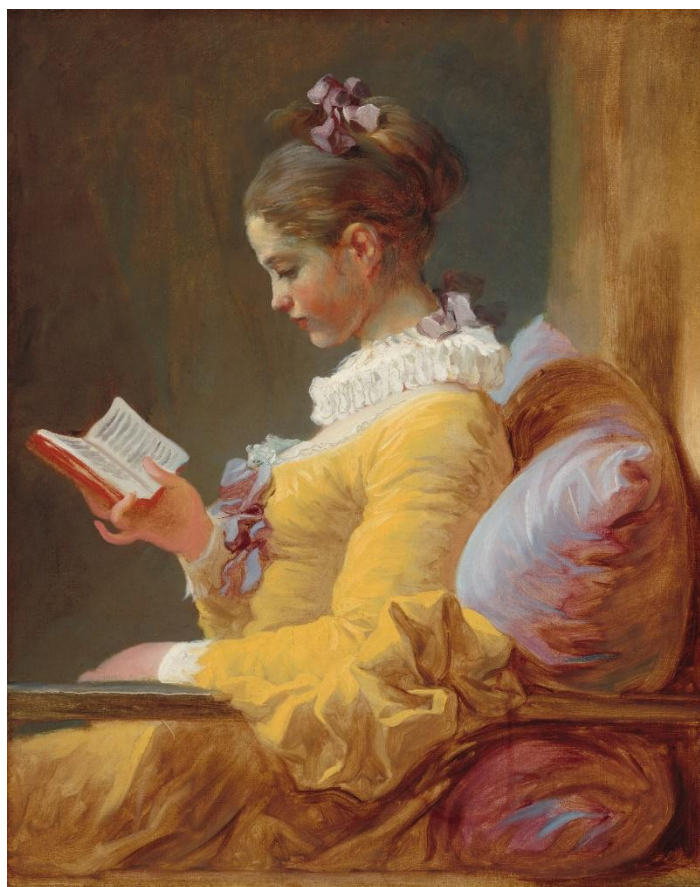


Figure 26: *La Liseuse* or *Jeune fille lisant*, oil on canvas (c. 1770), Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806), National Gallery of Art, Washington

In eighteenth-century France people read. ‘On lit dans presque toutes les classes, tant mieux!’, says Louis-Sébastien Mercier in *Tableau de Paris*.⁵⁴⁴ Readers from different social strata read a wide range of texts (‘texts’ in the broadest sense of term to include short pieces such as *affiches*), and did so in a great number of ways. The numbers of readers and books increased significantly during this period, and although distributed unevenly, literacy was overall on the rise.⁵⁴⁵ Reading practices were also undergoing some changes with an overall shift towards reading silently to oneself, although

⁵⁴⁴ Mercier, *Tableaux de Paris*, Nouvelle édition corrigée & augmentée, 12 vols, IX (Amsterdam, 1772-8), see Chapitre DCCLV.

⁵⁴⁵ Martin Hall ‘Gender and Reading in the Late Eighteenth Century: The Bibliothèque Universelle des Romans’, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 14.3-4 (2002), pp. 771-90 (p. 771); Jeffrey Freedman, ‘Enlightenment and Revolution’, in *The Oxford History of the Book*, ed. by James Raven (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 206-37 (pp. 224-5).

other types of reading, including reading out loud by one person to a group of individuals, persisted.⁵⁴⁶ Ways of reading also varied and ranged from interrupted, piecemeal, on-the-move experiences to immersive reading which absorbed the reader making them oblivious to the outside world, as shown famously by Fragonard's painting above. Contemporary thinkers had a lot to say about which texts were suitable for which people, and were also quick to point out the dangers inherent in some types of reading and of certain types of text, and were concerned about their ill effects on both the mind and body of the reader. It is also clear that during this time, people read in many different places and spaces, and while many read just about anywhere, and frequently even walking along, as in the famous case of Jean-Jacques Rousseau whose inspiration for what became the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* came to him when he was walking along in the heat to visit the imprisoned Diderot. In these cases, reading was intertwined with everyday life, but there were also more special, private spaces such as cabinets and boudoirs, which afforded a very different experience of reading.⁵⁴⁷ These facts suggest that as there were many types of reader, different ways of reading, and different situations and places where texts could be read, the texts produced responded to the different needs of the readers and so were also highly varied in content, length, and format.

The transformations of reading practices in the eighteenth century were also set within the context of the shaping of the concepts of private versus public.⁵⁴⁸ As both the numbers of readers and texts grew, opinions on what constituted suitable reading for different types of people proliferated. While there were several types of texts that were seen as *mauvais livres* (anti-religious, anti-monarchy, pornographic, etc.), and although their circulation was monitored by the state (with

⁵⁴⁶ Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France* (Princeton University Press, 1987), particularly 'Urban Reading Practices, 1660-1780', pp. 183-239

⁵⁴⁷ Thomas Wynn, *Reading Drama in Eighteenth-Century France*, Oxford University Press, 2024, p.51.

⁵⁴⁸ Jürgen Habermas's work in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), is important but not useful to us beyond the coining of the concept. Instead, see Philippe Ariès's and Georges Duby's *Histoire de la vie privée, III: De la Renaissance aux Lumières*, ed. by (Editions du Seuil, 1986), particularly Jean-Marie Goulemot's essay 'Les pratiques littéraires ou la publicité du privée', pp. 371-405 .

varying rigour, focus, and success), there were also intellectual concerns about the suitability of some texts for particular demographics, and the perils of others. These were becoming articulated around gender, among other things. The effects of reading were understood as powerful, useful, but also potentially very dangerous. One example that encapsulates the influence and hazard inherent in reading is the supposed 'epidemic' of young people's suicides believed to be caused across Europe by the reading of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774).⁵⁴⁹ Unsuitable reading could corrupt morals or *gâter l'esprit*, and young women were particularly vulnerable.⁵⁵⁰ We saw in chapter 2 how reading sylph texts can cause an unhealthy obsession with elemental beings by examining a group of texts where young women became fixated on sylphs usually as a result of reading *Le Comte de Gabalis*. Their husbands or suitors were then deployed to remedy these women's alleged pathologies by pretending to be sylphs themselves, and thereby gradually charming and deceiving their spouses to finally abandon sylphs and love them instead.

It was not only who read what type of text that made a difference, but also where and how. As more people could read, and reading privately to oneself was become a growing part of the practice, new concerns took shape.⁵⁵¹ Being alone allowed the reader to concentrate and become absorbed by the material, and it also meant being isolated and unseen, making it a very intimate process. This solitary experience was replete with both opportunity and danger. Prolonged periods of isolation and intense reading or lengthy periods of scholarly work was considered a threat to health.⁵⁵² Tissot's two important works: *L'Onanisme; ou Dissertation physique sur les maladies produites par la masturbation* (1760), and *De la santé des gens de lettres* (1760) caution against such dangers. In *L'Onanisme* he explains specifically that the reading of lewd literature, coupled with lounging in overly comfortable bedding, and other indulgences, can lead to masturbation:

⁵⁴⁹ Freedman, 'Enlightenment and Revolution', pp. 206-7

⁵⁵⁰ Lisa Jane Graham, 'What Made Reading Dangerous in Eighteenth-Century France?', *French Historical Studies*, 41.3 (2018), pp. 449-71 (pp. 453-4).

⁵⁵¹ Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, pp. 183-239.

⁵⁵² Anne C. Vila, *Suffering Scholars: Pathologies of the Intellectual in Enlightenment France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

Tout ce que je puis dire c'est que l'oisiveté, l'inaction, le trop long séjour au lit, un lit trop mol, une diète succulente, aromatique, salée, vineuse, les amis suspects, les ouvrages licentieux, étant les causes les plus propres à porter à ces excès, on ne peut les éviter avec trop de soin.⁵⁵³

However, solitude is also a chance to find retreat from others and the distractions of daily life, as well as an opportunity for introspection.⁵⁵⁴ In a secular context, it can facilitate thought, daydreaming, or reading (and allows the effects of this reading to take hold of the mind and the body). Places of solitude such as boudoirs and cabinets can be privileged spaces to allow oneself to enjoy the pleasures of text.⁵⁵⁵

In this chapter, we will analyse textual evidence to understand who were the fictional readers of sylph narratives, and how they read them. With the use of catalogue databases and others resources, we will then try to provide a picture of who the real-life readers and writers of such texts were, and how fictional representations compare to actual data. In the final part of this chapter, we will evaluate the status of sylph narratives by examining information on the formats and editions of sylph narratives in the eighteenth century, and will offer a diagram of a potential genealogy of the motif. We will end by investigating what the cultural meaning of these narratives in the long eighteenth century was in order to understand their place within the cultural production of the period and to establish whether they form a category which can be called *sylph literature*.

⁵⁵³ Samuel Auguste Tissot, *L'Onanisme; ou Dissertation physique sur les maladies produites par la masturbation*, traduit du Latin de Mr. Tissot et considerablement augmenté par l'auteur (Lausanne: Imprimerie d'Antoine Chapuis, 1760), pp. 187-8.

⁵⁵⁴ Marine Ganofsky discusses solitude and its role as an important plot driver in Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* in "'La solitude ajoute à l'ardeur du désir': Dangerous Isolation in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*", *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 33.4 (2021), pp. 493-511. Solitude is defined as encompassing both seclusion (as a beneficial retreat), and isolation (potentially dangerous as it leaves one on their own with their desires, without protectors, physically trapped, and so more prone to seduction).

⁵⁵⁵ Wynn, *Reading Drama in Eighteenth-Century France*, specifically 'The Enlightenment Closet', pp. 51-72 (p. 61).

6.i. Fictional representations of reading: sylph-source texts in second- and third-generation sylph narratives

The number of sylph narratives that stage their characters reading other sylph narratives is striking. In the majority of cases, characters already possess knowledge about elemental beings, and sylphs in particular, due to their prior reading of sources which discuss them. We will refer to narratives which are inspired by, or feature reading of, Villars's *Le Comte de Gabalis* (1670), as second-generation texts. We consider sylph texts that are inspired by second-generation representations as third-generation narratives.

The ways in which this is conveyed varies across texts and ranges between mentions that allude to readings of unspecified texts about sylphs, often hinting at or referring to *Gabalis* directly, or mentioning other contemporary texts featuring sylphs. In Auneuil's *Le Génie familier* (1709), the story begins with the act of reading by Zaïde :

Une jeune Persane, d'une beauté surprenante, lisant un jour un livre qui traitoit des Silphes, & des Silphides, & regardant avec plaisir la complaisance de ces Amans aériens, souhaite aven empessement d'en avoir un, pour se desennuyer de l'affreuse solitude ou la jalousie de son époux la contraignoit de vivre.⁵⁵⁶

The title of the book being read is not explicitly mentioned but we can deduce that it is *Le Comte de Gabalis* not least due the fact that by 1700 it was reedited and in wide circulation. By 1730, Crébillon's *Le Sylphe* and the anonymous *Le Sylphe amoureux*, both feature the reading of texts about sylphs. 'J'ai lu que les sylphides étaient si belles' says Mme de R***, and later the sylph in the story questions the validity of some of the facts in *Gabalis*, and references the book directly.⁵⁵⁷ In *Sylphe amoureux*, the sensible Marquise d'Autricourt and Mademoiselle de Fontenay read this text at the beginning of the tale: '[u]n soir qu'elles avaient lu ensemble le comte de Gabalis, après avoir eu une conversation fort vive sur les sujets dont il traite'.⁵⁵⁸ Neither of these instances of reading are

⁵⁵⁶ Auneuil, 'Le Génie familier', p. 233.

⁵⁵⁷ Crébillon [1730], 'Le Sylphe' (1999), pp. 69, 73.

⁵⁵⁸ Anonymous [1730], 'Le Sylphe amoureux' (1999), p. 80.

described as having a negative effect on the reader, but some authors start to introduce this element as a plot driver: Fagan and Panard's *Le Sylphe supposé* (also of 1730), an *opéra-comique*, claims that the reading of *Gabalès* and other fantasy writings such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) or Cyrano de Bergerac's works *L'Autre monde: ou les États et empires de la lune* (1657) or *Les États et empires du soleil* (1662) have a damaging effect on the female reader: 'Il est vrai qu'une lecture mal entendue a fait sur elle un prodigieux effet', says the young Isabelle of her aunt Uranie.⁵⁵⁹ This is followed by an air which reinforces the message and in which the 'sylphe' and the 'chimériques esprits' receive a large proportion of the blame:

Et le Sylphe et Guliver
Lui font voir un Monde en l'air;
Bergerac et Gabalis,
Et toute la séquelle
Des chimériques esprits
Ont brouillé sa cervelle.⁵⁶⁰

Another vivid example in which *Gabalès* is again blamed for blurring the female understanding can be found in Favart's *Isabelle et Gertrude ou les Sylphes supposés* (1765) where a gullible young daughter is encouraged to believe in the existence of sylphs by her mother to cover up the latter's affair:

Mme Gertrude: N'avez-vous pas lu le livre que je vous ai donné?
Isabelle: Ah! oui; *le Comte de Gabalis* qui dit qu'il y a des Silphes, des Esprits Aériens, des Intelligences, cela m'a amusée, mais est-ce que tout cela est vrai?⁵⁶¹

The feature whereby sylph texts make female readers become obsessed with these elemental beings is subsequently developed and used by several writers throughout the later decades of the eighteenth century; in chapter 2 we saw several such examples, including Marmontel's moral tale and the theatre pieces it inspired, which form the *mari/amant sylphe* group.

⁵⁵⁹ Fagan [1730], *Le Sylphe supposé* (1760), p. 4

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ Charles-Simon Favart, *Isabelle et Gertrude, ou les Sylphes supposés* (Paris: M. de la Chevardiere rue du roule à la croix d'or M. de musique du Roi et de la famille royale, 1765) p. 34.

While in some narratives featuring sylphs reading *Le Comte de Gabalis* or another named or unnamed sylph text is limited to a brief mention, in others the engagement with the source sylph narrative is more detailed. For example, Marmontel's *Le Mari sylphe* (1755-9), features Moncrif's ballet *Zélindor, roi des Sylphes* (1745), giving it something of an appraisal within his own text. Pornographic writers towards the end of the century also use sylph source texts as springboards for their plots, and Compiègne goes as far as to incorporate parts of another erotic text featuring sylphs – Pluchon-Destouches's *Le Joli vase, ou le Berger sylphe* (1777) – into his *Veillées du couvent ou le Noviciat d'amour* (1793).

Although, as explained above, the ways in which reading of sylph source texts is used in other sylph texts varies (a tangential mention, with or without specifying the text, a detailed engagement or even a citation of the original text), it is clear that the act of reading other sylph texts is shared by a large proportion of the corpus, and is central to the plot of the second- and third-generation sylph narratives.

6.i.a. The fictional readers of sylph texts

Due to the fact there that are many instances of reading sylph source texts within sylph narratives, it is possible to draw some conclusions about the nature of these fictional readerships. A manifest unifying trait is that all reader characters are protagonists. Whether the second-generation text is a fairy tale, moral story, seduction narrative, light-hearted play, or pornographic tale, the reading that puts the plot in motion (whichever direction it may take), is done by one of the main characters who belong almost exclusively to the upper classes. In all sources where reading as the origin of knowledge about sylphs appears, the readers are aristocrats: 12 of the texts in Appendix 1 feature reading of sylph source texts, and in all cases the reading is carried out by members of the upper classes. By contrast, in *Le Joli vase*, the protagonists are typical of the pastoral: a 'gentille jardinière' named Eglé, seduced by the shepherd Atis who pretends to be a sylph. Here, a young beauty finds

out about sylphs in a dream, and not by reading about them: ‘Un jour d’été, la belle avait en songe/Vu le plus charmant des follets....’⁵⁶²

Another notable attribute of readerships is a gender distribution which is significantly skewed. Fictional women readers of *Gabalès* or of other sylph texts learn that elemental beings of the air, which may or may not exist, would nonetheless make wonderful suitors and are superior to men. Their reaction to this can fall anywhere between fascination and obsession. Men, it seems, do not read sylph source texts, or at least not in the ways that women do. There are fewer texts in which men-sylph interactions are featured, and the men in question are more driven by the quest for cabalistic knowledge, rather than losing themselves in fantasies about sylphs. This is the case in Cazotte’s *Le Diable amoureux* (1772) where the protagonist Alvare wants to learn the secrets of commanding spirits, and only as a result of this desire and a ritual that he attempts, he becomes entangled with a Devil-sylph.

Difficulties surround the genderisation of sylph text readers because although the majority feature women readers, the second- and third-generation texts that showcase such a readership are by an overwhelmingly male authorship. This in itself is challenging to quantify due to the fact that the authors of sylph texts are in any case predominantly male: 28 of the all titles in our corpus are authored by males, two are anonymous (although one of these we strongly believe was by a female author – Murat), one is jointly authored by a male and a female (the musical score to *Les Génies* is by Duval), and seven are by female writers (see Appendix 1). As the majority of the titles are produced by men and so the number of texts produced by women is a considerably smaller sample, it is not possible to ascertain whether men were more likely than women to portray women as reading about, and becoming obsessed with sylphs because the numbers are not an equal or close to equal split. What we can see, however, is that of those women writing about sylphs, most do not mention reading of sylph source texts. Only two female characters created by female authors read sylph

⁵⁶² Pluchon-Destouches, ‘Le Joli vase’, pp. 75, 76.

source texts: in Auneuil's *Le Génie familial* discussed above, and in Murat's *L'Esprit folet, ou le Sylphe amoureux* of 1714/*Le Sylphe amoureux* of 1730. Nevertheless, in neither case do the women who read about sylphs follow the allegedly pathological path of sylph obsession so often described by male writers. This femaleness of fictional readers of sylph texts is not necessarily representative of real eighteenth-century readerships of these types of titles as we shall see later in this chapter.

An important feature of readerships is the overlap between gender and class. This intersection is a fruitful ground for enquiry because of what it says about who reads sylph narratives and why, and what this reveals about them as a group of people. Most of the female protagonists in sylph narratives are upper-class women. In some cases, there is an explicit opposition between the obsession with the immaterial shown by aristocratic women and the preference for the tangible displayed by their servants. A very clear example of this is found in Quétant's *L'Amant sylphe*, where the young Élise constantly fantasises about sylphs while her maid Justine prefers real-world lovers: 'je n'ai pas les idées assez déliées pour concevoir un ombre sans corps, moi pour être convaincue, il me faut des choses palpables'.⁵⁶³ This difference is later reiterated by the valet Dubois 'tu n'es pas fille à te nourrir de fumée'.⁵⁶⁴ Even if sceptical about the existence of sylphs, like the heroines of Nougaret's tale or those in *L'Esprit folet/Le Sylphe amoureux*, the wealthy are still those who have the time to indulge in reading and thinking about these elemental creatures, not to mention the elaborate and costly courting that the men in these stories carry out.

In man-sylphide narratives, the male protagonists belong to the highest echelons of society too. In Dominique and Romagnési's *La Sylphide* (1730), the aristocrat Eraste is pursued by a sylphide, whereas his valet Arlequin, is favoured by a gnomide. The gnomide has to justify herself and explain that she is just as good as the sylphide: 'Songez que je suis comme vous une essence toute

⁵⁶³ Quétant, *L'Amant sylphe*, pp. 13-4.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p. 35.

spirituelle; que les Gnomes ne le cèdent pas de beaucoup aux Sylphes'.⁵⁶⁵ Yet it is clear that in this narrative gnomes are inferior to sylphs as they pair with a lower-class human: the gnomide chooses the servant rather than the master.

The tendency to couple sylphides with the highest social classes is further represented in Bibiena's *La Poupée*, where Philandre who is an aspiring *abbé petit-maître*, attracts the attention of a sylphide, who sets out to correct his ways while rewarding him with gradual visual and sensory delights, and by ultimately becoming his lover. Philandre does need 'correcting': he indulges in an extravagant lifestyle which is geared towards the (unsuccessful) conquest of women. He is beholden to fashion trends and novelty, and wears excessive makeup. The sylphide instructs him 'Ne soyez donc jamais le premier à saisir la mode, donnez-vous encore moins de soin pour la chercher'.⁵⁶⁶ Damis, another *abbé petit-maître* in Bibiena's text whom the sylphide fails to correct, is even more extravagant (and effeminate): 'il n'y avait pas de coin [dans ses appartements] où sa fatuité ne fut répandue: le gout de bizarrerie et de colifichet dominait sur tous les meubles'.⁵⁶⁷

Cazotte's Alvare in *Le Diable amoureux*, also falls in love with a (demonic) sylphide. He is a Spanish aristocrat of the house of Maravillas and a member of the military, a 'capitaine aux gardes du roi de Naples'.⁵⁶⁸ Much like Philandre, he leads a dissipated lifestyle, overindulging in gambling and accruing many debts: 'Le quartier courant est mangé; je dois au jeu, à l'auberge, au tailleur...'.⁵⁶⁹ In *La Sylphide*, Eraste's lifestyle is similarly frivolous, and as a result, his financial situation is dire: it is implied that he has squandered his money and the only way to pay off his debts is to marry the daughter of the rich Monsieur Oronte.⁵⁷⁰ He and his valet are, however, saved by the sylphide and

⁵⁶⁵ Dominique and Romagnesi, *La Sylphide* (La Haye: Antoine van Dole, dans le Lange Pooten, à l'Enseigne de Hugo Grotius, 1733), p. 4.

⁵⁶⁶ Bibiena [1747], *La Poupée* (1996), p. 110.

⁵⁶⁷ Bibiena, *La Poupée*, p. 54.

⁵⁶⁸ Jaques Cazotte [1772], 'Le Diable amoureux' (1981), p. 34.

⁵⁶⁹ Cazotte, 'Le Diable Amoureux', p. 49.

⁵⁷⁰ Dominique and Romagnesi, *La Sylphide*, p. 14.

gnomide respectively, who pay off Eraste's creditors.⁵⁷¹ The tendency to spend excessively, to lead a self-indulgent lifestyle, and to be ultimately wasteful is shared by the aristocratic men who become involved with sylphides.

This selection of instances suggests that sylphs and sylphides tend to be linked to aristocrats who are for the most part presented as a wasteful class. This manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, women who are obsessed with sylphs waste their time and energy on something that does not exist instead of fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers. It is not only a question of reading about sylphs, but an overall interest in these elemental beings as characteristic of the higher social classes. Secondly, the men in sylphide narratives squander their fortunes and time by gambling, chasing fashion, and women. In this way sylphs and sylphides can be understood as devices for drawing out and criticising such faults in the upper classes.

Like in the case of the gender of the readerships, this association of higher classes with sylphs and sylphides in fiction does not reflect reality. We will examine who the likely readers of sylph narratives were in the long eighteenth century later in this chapter, but what we can observe from the fictional portrayals of reading about sylphs and sylphides, is that the fictional readership is a homogenous one: it is the upper-class woman who consumes sylph cultural objects in this way. Upper-class men are also associated with sylphides but not through reading; their interest may lead them towards elemental beings via the quest for knowledge.

The fictional consumers of sylph and sylphide cultural products are a homogenous demographic, even though the genres and authors of the texts in which we find the above examples vary significantly. What we can conclude is that these fictional readerships are in fact *a* readership, and specifically, an imaginary one. We can compare these fictional representations to the findings we have gleaned from database sources about who actually read or owned sylph texts. What we are not

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., p. 15.

able to gage from such data is *how* sylph narratives were read.⁵⁷² This is where fictional examples of reading experiences become invaluable.

6.i.b. The experience of reading sylph texts within sylph fiction

J'étais, un des derniers jours de la semaine passée, retirée dans ma chambre. La nuit était chaude, j'étais couchée d'une façon modeste pour quelqu'un qui se croit seul, mais qui ne l'aurait pas été si j'eusse cru avoir des spectateurs. Ennuyée d'une compagnie provinciale qui m'avait obsédée toute la journée, je cherchais quelque dédommagement dans un livre de morale [...]⁵⁷³

Crébillon's Mme de R*** sketches out the scene of her encounter with a sylph in the above lines of her letter to a female correspondent. This setup incorporates some essential details which will prove key to the experience of reading sylph texts: an intentional retreat from other people, the privacy of one's own space (in this case the bedroom and more specifically, the bed), and a level of undress which is enabled by the absence of other people, but is at the same time for the benefit of a secret onlooker in the narrative, and the reader-voyeur.

When we discussed reading of sylph texts in chapter 2 as part of the *mari/amant sylphe* group, we did not touch upon the experiences of reading and this is because most such instances do not offer descriptions of the process, setting, or effects of reading in the moment when it takes place. There are some exceptions to this. One such occasion is found in *Le Sylphe amoureux*, where we are given a few more details: the Marquise d'Autricourt and Mademoiselle de Fontenay read *Le Comte de Gabalis* in the evening, together, after having had a fervent conversation about its subject.⁵⁷⁴ This brief description offers some key details – women reading together in the evening which presupposes a level of privacy and intimacy, as well as a shared experience of reading. What we also learn from this text is that Autricourt borrowed *Gabalis* (albeit due to a manipulation by her

⁵⁷² Beyond general critical reception of theatre pieces, it is also difficult to assess the individual effects of theatrical productions featuring sylphs on audience members.

⁵⁷³ Crébillon, 'Le Sylphe', p. 60.

⁵⁷⁴ Anonymous, 'Le sylphe amoureux' (1999), p. 80.

suitor, M. de Ponteuil) from another female friend, Mademoiselle de Tilly: ‘elle le [le livre] mit exprès sur la table, vous ne manquâtes pas de l’ouvrir, et de lui emprunter avec empressement’.⁵⁷⁵

Borrowing and lending books was an important part of eighteenth-century circulation of texts, with public libraries, literary societies as well as the possibility to rent books by the day or the hour emerging which promoted new ways of circulating reading material but also other reading and discussion practices.⁵⁷⁶

Generally, how reader characters obtain the sylph source texts often remains undisclosed, and the above is a useful insight into one such option. In other cases, purchasing is mentioned (even if ironically) as is the case in Fagan and Panard’s *Le Sylphe supposé* where the magic and spirit-obsessed Uranie asks for certain texts to be bought for her:

Sylphonet, ayez soin d’aller chez Monsieur Pédantin; qu’il m’envoie son *Traité des Corpuscules* et chez Monsieur Tourbillon, ses observations sur la nature des Esprits Aériens.⁵⁷⁷

The authors’ names and titles of texts are used to ridicule Uranie and those who take cabbalistic practices seriously, and the stage direction to this scene also contains a useful detail: Uranie is found ‘un livre à la main’.⁵⁷⁸ This highlights the embeddedness of reading such texts into Uranie’s everyday life, but it also inadvertently echoes the seventeenth-century remark about novels ‘qu’on ne peut lire que d’une main’.⁵⁷⁹ These sorts of books were seen as immoral and dangerous, and the concept of such texts therefore being read with only one hand is usefully deployed by Jean-Marie Goulemot in *Ces livres qu’on ne lit que d’une main*, where he discusses the effects of reading erotic texts on the reader.

⁵⁷⁵ Anonymous, ‘Le Sylphe amoureux’, p. 94.

⁵⁷⁶ Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print*, pp. 214-5.

⁵⁷⁷ Fagan, *Le Sylphe supposé*, p. 10.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁹ Philip Stewart, *Engraven Desire: Eros, Image & Text in the French Eighteenth Century* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1992), p. 100.

Some sylph narratives are exactly those types of texts – pornographic tales within which reading of other erotic sylph texts takes place. According to contemporary thinking, erotic literature had an especially negative effect on readers, not only by promoting depravity, but also by causing unhealthy reverie and even masturbation.⁵⁸⁰ As such these texts posed a different type of danger compared to those that contained falsehoods to mislead the susceptible or to fill their heads with fantasies of imaginary creatures.

In *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne* (1798/9) attributed to Andréa de Nerciat, the eponymous heroine accidentally keeps one book from home when she goes to the convent; this turns out to be a novel about sylphs: 'C'était un joli roman, du moins il en portait le titre: une histoire de Sylphe'.⁵⁸¹ This is not a specific sylph text but a more generic title which could mean any of a plethora of such works. What is of note is that *Éléonore* owns this book which means that fictional readerships sometimes possessed sylph source texts as part of their private collections (however small). The fact that a mention of an 'histoire de Sylphe' is sufficient suggests that the reader would have been familiar enough with the material in question, which in turn means that the various sylph stories in circulation toward the end of the eighteenth century were sufficiently embedded in the popular imagination.

The reading of this book causes the young nun to fantasize about sylphs, but the trajectory this process takes is different to that found in *mari/amant sylphe* narratives in that it is a lot more intense. Here more details on the reading experience are given, and what is particularly telling is how *Éléonore* reads: '[l]e livre fut dévoré, lu, relu. Une religieuse, dans la situation d'*Éléonore*, doit désirer l'existence des Sylphes. Elle fit mieux, elle y crut; le jour elle y pensait; la nuit elle y rêvait.'⁵⁸² Her reading is intensive and it absorbs her; but she also truly consumes it by re-reading and 'devouring'

⁵⁸⁰ Goulemot, *Ces livres qu'on ne lit que d'une main: lecture et lecteurs de livres pornographiques au XVIII^e siècle* (Aix-en-Provence: Alinéa, 1991), especially: 'Effets particuliers de lecture du livre érotique', pp. 43-63.

⁵⁸¹ Nerciat, *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne*, p. 15.

⁵⁸² Nerciat, *Éléonore*, p. 15.

the contents, a practice not common to all readers but nonetheless an important (and sometimes concerning) way of reading in the eighteenth century.

This way of reading is also found in another erotic text, Compiègne's *Les Veillées du couvent ou le Noviciat d'amour* (1793) where the description of the nun heroine's reading of a sylph text is rife with erotic detail:

Agnès s'assied, écarte les jambes, ôte son fichu et tire de sa poche un petit livre qu'elle devait lire à la promenade avec Louise; privée d'elle, elle le lira seule fort bien; on ouvre, on feuillette le livre et on voudrais dans sa mortelle impatience lire tout dans une même séance: c'est le petit neveu de Boccace, livre charmant, belle poésie, tableaux enchanteurs. Le premier conte qui saute aux yeux d'Agnès est intitulé: *le berger Sylphe*. Oh! oh! dit Agnès, celui-là doit être joli; j'ai lu déjà je ne sais où de ces contes de Sylphes; ce sont des esprits bien beaux, bien tendres et bien complaisants; ô dieux! si je pouvais en avoir un, et Louise un autre! Voyons, cela doit m'amuser, lisons. La porte est fermée à double tour et je ne crains pas les importuns.⁵⁸³

Agnès has decided to undertake her reading in a secluded spot so that she is not disturbed and can enjoy the text and its erotic content privately. The book she reads is a real sylph text – *Le Joli vase, ou le Berger sylphe*, a pornographic poem by Pluchon-Destouches which was indeed published as part of *Le petit-neveu de Bocace ou Contes nouveaux, en vers* (1777). The book is small enough to fit in her pocket, as it would have been in reality due to its duodecimo format, and this detail supports the idea that books were carried, and sometimes concealed on one's person; sylph texts like many others during this period lend themselves to this due to their size, and potentially because of their content.⁵⁸⁴

Compiègne refers to other texts too in the prefatory material: 'un joli livre de contes'; 'L'Oiseau bleu', 'Le petit serpent verd', and he mentions Perrault and the negative effect of reading fairy tales (no doubt in an ironic fashion: 'elle avait rêvé que quelque prince charmant avait dormi

⁵⁸³ Compiègne, *Les Veillées du couvent*, p. 108.

⁵⁸⁴ Roger Chartier explains how books were found amongst possessions of victims of an accident in Paris, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, pp. 198-9.

près d'elle,'and that such stories are fit only to 'gâter et séduire l'esprit des enfants').⁵⁸⁵ We have already seen references to other contemporary texts and also specifically to other sylph texts within sylph texts, but here the author goes one step further and inserts an eight-line extract from the *Berger sylphe*.⁵⁸⁶ The snippet chosen does not contain any pornographic detail but does mention a 'Sylphe' and the heroine's desire to have this being for a lover: '[v]iens partager ma vive ardeur'.⁵⁸⁷ Compiègne uses Eglé's invocation to the sylph as Agnès's invocation which becomes the climax of her masturbation inspired by the reading:

Le conte est lu et on le recommence ; mais à la seconde lecture elle est plus rêveuse: le livre échappe de ses mains, ses bras tombent, sa gorge bondit, son poulx bat avec plus de violence, sa tête se penche languissamment sur le pied de son lit, et la sueur l'inonde à grosses gouttes; Agnès s'imagine un instant être Eglé et s'écrie avec elle⁵⁸⁸

Much like Éléonore, Agnès is absorbed by her reading and she reads and re-reads the text. In Compiègne's story, the physical effects of reading are described in detail, and the accompanying illustration adds intensity; this scene (both as a description and the image), was designed to have a similar effect on its reader as the *Berger sylphe* had on Agnès. The layering of erotic sylph texts in this case contributes to the heightening of titillating effects, but it may also have another purpose; there may be an additional pleasure to be had from either recognising the other sylph text, a sort of connoisseur's satisfaction, or if not known to the reader, this would be an additional text to discover and enjoy. For the author this could have been an opportunity to capitalize on the effects of existing texts to enhance the success of his own work, but it was also a way to inscribe his creation within a tradition (in this case, of erotic writing specifically).

⁵⁸⁵ Compiègne, *Les Veillées du couvent*, pp. 29, 32; pp. 28-9.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁵⁸⁷ Pluchon- Destouches, 'Le Joli vase', p. 78.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*



Left – figure 27: *Le Midi*, engraving (c. 1760), Emmanuel Jean Népomucène De Ghendt (1738?-1815)



Right – figure 28: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; an illustration to the fifth edition of *Les Veillées du couvent, ou Le Noviciat d'amour* by Mercier de Compiègne (1793)

Goulemot talks about the effects of reading erotic literature on the reader by using De Ghent's engraving of Pierre-Antoine Baudouin's original gouache (figure 28) as an illustration of this process. Among other things, his detailed analysis of the image points to the link between the book which is found discarded on the ground, next to the young woman, and its role in inspiring sexual fantasy and masturbation.⁵⁸⁹ The book is the 'seductive element' in such frameworks.⁵⁹⁰ De Ghent's engraving is sufficiently explicit in its iconography to tell its erotic story, while still requiring some unpacking. The illustration to *Les Veillées du couvent* is even less ambiguous. Clearly it is a more explicitly erotic image, with the young woman's naked body on display, her clothes discarded on the floor (with the corset string pattern mimicking that of De Ghent's representation). The two images are strikingly similar: both women are in secluded spaces (one in a private garden, the other in a bedroom/cell),

⁵⁸⁹ Goulemot, *Ces livres*, pp. 43-7.

⁵⁹⁰ Stewart, *Engraven Desire*, p. 98.

they have both been reading a book which is now discarded on the floor or ground, there is a male presence (the bust of a young man and the sylph who is only materialised as a young man's face surrounded by puffs of smoke, respectively). Such engravings are part of a recognisable visual theme which typically depicted (young) women reading on their own but often observed by some sort of onlooker, and with the effects of the reading shown in various ways (the free hand as a suggestion of masturbation, an overall bodily posture which conveys total abandon, or a distracted gaze).⁵⁹¹

De Ghent's suggestive engraving appears to have evolved to become the pornographic illustration to Compiègne's text (they were produced around 30 years apart), and the link between reading erotic texts and masturbation persisted. Compiègne's tale tells us that the young woman had been reading an erotic sylph text specifically. Her fantasy, unlike in De Ghent's engraving where the act of imagining is not graphically captured, is represented visually here by the shape (and concomitant shapelessness) of the sylph. The sylph is both a *merveilleux* being as represented by the puffs of smoke, and a representation of erotic reverie. Compiègne's Agnès takes the fantasising about sylphs further than heroines of *mari/amant sylphe* narratives which we have discussed earlier in this study; she does not simply obsess over sylphs, she follows up with a sexual experience.

It is worth noting that *Les Veillées du couvent, ou le Noviciat d'amour* had several editions, the first two seem to have appeared in 1793, and the fifth in 1796. The first edition includes a single illustration, which is not the one discussed above, but the accompanying image to another titillating episode from the book, the interaction between the young nuns and the gardener Colin, who is in reality 'un amant déguisé, ou plutôt un jeune homme plein d'esprit et bon poète, que les malheurs ont forcé de se vendre comme une odalisque à la lubricité de Madame l'abesse [...]'.⁵⁹² The caption reads: 'Lève donc Colin, lève donc, montre nous donc ça.....'.

⁵⁹¹ Stewart discusses several such examples in *Engraven Desire*, pp. 94-102.

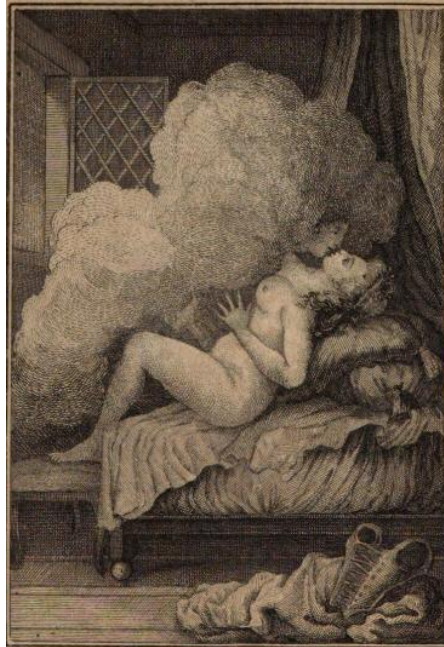
⁵⁹² Compiègne, *Les Veillées* p. 85.



Figure 29: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; an illustration to the second edition of *Les Veillées du couvent, ou Le Noviciat d'amour* by Mercier de Compiègne (1793)

This image is the frontispiece to this edition. The second edition contains both illustrations (the one featuring the sylph and the one with the gardener), and in this case, the sylph illustration is used as the frontispiece. But there are two versions of the sylph illustration: the one we have discussed above (figure 28, included again below), and a slightly different representation (figure 30 below). In its full version figure 28 includes the caption: 'O dieux! dieux! Que sens-je là! Ce n'est point une puce', while the version in figure 30 has no caption. The two illustrations are in a slightly different style overall, and with some discrepancies: the details of the woman's hair, the sylph's face, the design of the window, are different, and there are trees visible out of the window in one illustration, but not the other. Figure 30 is a mirror image of figure 28 (presumably due to its position as frontispiece), and crucially it is missing the discarded book. According to Nathalie Ferrand, the illustration in figure 28 is to the fifth edition of Compiègne's text, and so it appears that the book in

the image appeared at a later stage, acknowledging the significance of reading on erotic fantasy graphically (alongside the textual description).⁵⁹³



Left – figure 30: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; illustration to the second edition of *Les Veillées du couvent, ou le Noviciat d’amour* by Mercier de Compiègne (1793)

While several second- and third-generation sylph narratives talk about the intellectual or psychological effects of reading sylph source texts on the (female) readers, the physical effects showcased by the above examples are not touched upon. This is partly due to the nature of the texts themselves (a moral tale is unlikely to include descriptions of arousing effects on the body).

However, perhaps there is also something inherently unseemly about the effects of reading and fantasising about sylphs which remains unsaid, and lurking dangerously as a possibility or suspected reality, in texts other than pornography. If we revisit the illustration to Marmontel’s *Le Mari sylphe*

⁵⁹³ Ferrand, *Livres vus, livres lus. Une traversée du roman illustré des Lumières* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009), p. 195. The fifth edition of Compiègne’s *Les Veillées* which we have consulted does not contain this illustration (or any others), and it is possible that there were several versions of the edition in circulation.

(figure 31 below), the excision of both the indecorous effects of reading, as well as of the text itself from the illustration is evident.



Figure 31: Unnamed engraving, Gravelot (Hubert-François Bourguignon, 1699-1773); illustration to 'Le Mari sylphe' by Jean-François Marmontel, in *Contes moraux* (1765)

In this engraving the book has fallen to the ground, and unlike in the erotic texts discussed above, a sylph does not appear; instead, a real-life husband presents himself and reality overcomes fantasy, inappropriate desires are displaced by socially endorsed marital duties.⁵⁹⁴

Reading sylph narratives was evidently seen as a perilous pastime for women, much like the reading of novels. Yet sylph texts are doubly dangerous because they unleash both a supernatural daydream and sexual desire for a supernatural being (in combination these can never be fulfilled and

⁵⁹⁴ Ferrand, *Livres vus*, p. 192.

have the potential to be perpetual). Sylph texts that produce such effects and which are reproduced in other sylph narratives are also contagious. In the next section we will see whether such fictional readerships and reading practices also manifest themselves in reality.

6.ii. Reading and writing sylph texts in the long eighteenth-century literary world: the real readerships and authorships of sylph narratives

Much scholarship has already shown that the texts read during the eighteenth century were varied, and were not necessarily dominated by what we would now describe as the period's canon.⁵⁹⁵ What we can infer from this, broadly speaking, is that people read texts which we may think were minor or outdated a lot more than major philosophical works, for instance. This also means that all sorts of what we might consider liminal literature was also part of the average reader's consumption. While some sylph texts may fall within the category of low-quality or pornographic literature, a lot of sylph narratives were by well-regarded authors. In this section we will look at who the actual readers and writers of such texts might have been.

6.ii.a. Eighteenth-century consumers of sylph cultural production (texts and performances)

The number and range of sylph texts that feature female heroines who consume sylph narratives, as discussed earlier, seem to suggest that this was a female-focused genre. It is true that many of the sylph narratives which fall within the (fairy)tale or novel category may have appealed to an actual female readership not necessarily because they were sylph stories but because of the genre to which they belonged. These texts may have been read or acquired as part of collections of stories. It is also true that using reading of sylph texts by female heroines was a type of narrative device, and often a premise for a critique of women's reading practices. For these reasons, literary representations of women as consumers of sylph literature must be approached with some caution, although they undoubtedly reflected some contemporary behaviours and tastes.

⁵⁹⁵ Starting with the work of Robert Darnton and most recently, Alicia Montoya.

Looking at available book catalogues of some eighteenth-century French women, we can see that significantly fewer of them than men had copies of *Le Comte de Gabalis* (four women to fourteen men). Marmontel's *Contes moraux* were also owned by more men than women (30 items versus seven), and anthologies of d'Aulnoy's fairy tales for instance, were owned by men and women in comparable numbers (five and three respectively).⁵⁹⁶ The fact that in the real world more men than women had copies of *Gabalis* seems to contradict the predilection of women for this text found in fiction. However, these are very small figures altogether and hence it is difficult to ascertain how accurate and significant these differences are. Another issue is that men were more likely overall than women to have books in their possession, and to have their possessions catalogued, so this could be an important factor affecting the data. Men and women may have also chosen to own these texts for different reasons. It may not be possible to determine whether the men who owned copies of *Gabalis* bought it for entertainment, or like Alvare in Cazotte's novella, perhaps they were at least a little intrigued by the promise of cabbalistic knowledge.

The sylph narratives in our corpus are from an array of genres and formats: 12 pieces for the theatre (some are one-act plays, others are ballets or plays with ariettas), seven fairy tales, nine short stories (moral, libertine or erotic, or simply light-heartedly entertaining), several novels of different lengths, and poems ranging from the mock-epic to the pornographic. Their authors are both male and female (and occasionally anonymous), and are of various social standings and literary reputations (some are well-established while others are more obscure or struggling to gain acknowledgement).⁵⁹⁷ This variety suggests that the readers, or rather consumers, of these products were people with different interests and tastes, and likely of different social classes, and levels of literacy. Within the plethora of sylph texts there was something for everyone – a short tongue-in-

⁵⁹⁶ These figures are taken from the MEDIATE database (Measuring Enlightenment: Disseminating Ideas, Authors and Texts in Europe, 1665-1830) which is made up of 600 private British, Dutch, and French collections. The French collections data was used, and any references are to this dataset. See Alicia C. Montoya, Micha Hulsbosch, Helwi Blom, Evelien Chayes, Anna de Wilde, Rindert Jagersma, Juliette Reboul, and Joanna Rozendaal, MEDIATE database, 2022 – (ongoing), <https://mediate-database.cls.ru.nl/>

⁵⁹⁷ See Appendix 1 for lists of names.

cheek poem for a coachman to read quickly, be entertained and possibly titillated, or a beautifully crafted narrative that would delight and absorb a young upper-class lady.

6.ii.b. The composition of the authorship of sylph narratives

Looking at our corpus as well as additional titles from Seeber's and Delon's list, we can confirm that there is a real range in the authorship of sylph texts. The gender split is uneven as discussed earlier, with more male than female writers overall. This preponderance of male writers is in accordance with authorship in the eighteenth century and is not unique to sylph texts. The female authors were mostly *conteuses*: Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy (1650-1705), Louise de Bossigny, comtesse d'Auneuil (1670-1730), Henriette-Julie de Murat (1670-1716), Louise Cavelier Lévêque (1703-1745), Marie-Madeleine de Lubert (1702-1785), Marie-Anne Robert (1705-1771), with the addition of Georgiana Cavendish who produced the two-volume novel *The Sylph* (1779), translated into French in 1784 as *Le Sylphe*, and Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis who made a name for herself writing on children's education, and who produced *Les Veillées du château, ou Cours de morale à l'usage des enfants* (two volumes, 1784) which features a sylph character. These authors were a mix of aristocratic and bourgeois women. These women were successful writers, though with varying styles, intellectual allegiances, and reputations.⁵⁹⁸

Within the male writers' subgroup, the diversity is greater. There is a difference not only in style or genre but also in status. Jean-François Marmontel (1723-1799) was a member of the Académie Française and an *Encyclopédiste*, and his sylph narrative is a moral tale, while Claude Joseph Dorat (1734-1780) was not accepted by the *philosophes*, and was a writer of varying success.

⁵⁹⁸ Women writers have been thoroughly discussed by many scholars. See, for instance, Helena Taylor's *Women Writing Antiquity: Gender and Learning in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024); see also Joan DeJean's *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (New York, Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1991); Suellen Diaconoff, *Through the Reading Glass: Women, Books, and Sex in the French Enlightenment* (State University of New York Press, 2005); Heidi Bostic, 'Literary Women, Reason, and the Fiction of Enlightenment', *The French Review*, 85.6 (2012), pp. 1024-38; Aileen Douglas, 'Women, Enlightenment and the Literary Fairy Tale in English', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 38.2 (2015), pp. 181-94.

Crébillon *fils* (1707-1777) wrote light-hearted satirical and erotic works, and like Marmontel, received the patronage of Marquise de Pompadour. Nicolas-Edme Rétif de La Bretonne (1734-1806) was a prolific writer known for his licentious works, while Claude-François Mercier de Compiègne (1763-1800) and Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Nougaret (1742-1823) both turned to writing pornography out of necessity, but also wrote in other genres, though Nougaret was a mediocre writer, according to Goulemot.⁵⁹⁹ The creators of ballets, comedies, and comic operas featuring sylphs and sylphides were for the most part recognised and established writers like Barthélemy Imbert (1747-1790), François Antoine Quétant (1733-1823), or Charles-François Pannard (1689-1765). The corpus also includes Jacques Cazotte (1719-1792) with his fairy tales and his own mystical beliefs, and Charles de Fieux de Mouhy (1701-1784), a prolific novelist who wrote *Lamekis*, an extremely original text (unlike some of his other works). There are also the lesser-known authors like the creator of *Sala-gno-silphondine- Chimborazo*, La Rougère (17[?]-1747), as well as works published anonymously. Of all the male writers on this list, and with the exclusion of Cazotte, only Henri Pajon ([?]-1776) was predominantly a fairy tale writer, often featuring sylphs in his work.

In addition to viewing these authors in the context of their overall contemporary reception and status, and necessarily retrospectively, it is valuable to note how authors self-identify when presenting their texts. For instance, Marmontel informs his readers that he is a member of the Académie ('M. Marmontel de l'Académie Française') on the title cover his *Contes moraux* (1765-9). Compiègne calls himself 'un bâtard de Mirabeau l'aîné' in the title of *Les Veillées du couvent* (1793). Of course, Mirabeau was a very well-known writer of pornography and Compiègne's adoption of the name was both a comically coded message to the potential readers about the type of content they might expect, and an attempt to integrate his work into the erotic canon. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Genlis says about herself in the title of her *Les Veillées du château, ou, Cours de morale: à l'usage des enfans* (1784) 'par l'auteur d'Adèle et Théodore', to promote and self-endorse her new

⁵⁹⁹ Goulemot, *Ces livres qu'on ne lit que d'une main*, p. 160.

work following the success of her *Adèle et Théodore ou Lettres sur l'éducation* (1782). A similar tactic, albeit in a more perverse fashion, is employed by Compiègne whose title *Les Veillées du couvent, ou le Noviciat d'amour* imitates Genlis's *Les Veillées du château, ou, Cours de morale*, as an ironic play on words given the radical difference in content (but also the parallel as both are books about 'instruction'). This is also a sales strategy; Nougaret, for example, echoed titles of existing successful works (including Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*, or Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses*), in order to reap the benefits of recognisability.⁶⁰⁰ These strategies point towards the interconnectedness of authors and texts which, while not particular to sylph narratives, does demonstrate that these authors were aware of one another's sylph texts.

The above names, genres, and tactics suggest that when it came to writing about sylphs, women authors did so predominantly within the fairy tale genre, whereas male authors wrote across a wide range of genres. The array of authors of various statuses and writing in different styles and genres shows that almost everyone who was writing in the long eighteenth century, also wrote about sylphs one way or another. Yet one additional question is not just who wrote but how. To address this, we will look at some examples more closely. The way that male and female authors describe and use sylphs is not the same.

6.ii.c. The ways in which sylphs are depicted and used by authors in the long eighteenth century

Appropriations of femininity

Within an array of narratives featuring male sylphs and female human love interests, male authors writing about what women might imagine sylphs to be like is enlightening. Descriptions put forward in these cases (found in texts ranging from the moralising to the pornographic), are brief, omissive, and surprisingly similar from text to text. Even formulations around explicit failures to describe the sylph are similar; Marmontel's 'je ne sais quoi d'aérien' is not far off Compiègne's 'enfin tout ce que

⁶⁰⁰ Goulemot, *Ces livres*, p. 160.

vous voudrez'.⁶⁰¹ Although these and a few other texts manage to give us some detail of what the female heroines imagine their sylphs to look like, their descriptions remain dismissive or ironic in tone; the selection of attributes described is highly stereotypical (and shared, with small variations, by most texts). The scarceness of details, and especially the repetitiveness of elements across texts points towards the existence of stereotypes around male beauty (discussed in chapter 3), but more importantly this evidence suggests that there is a consistent set of characteristics which men assume women to find appealing. In the case of these texts, female creativity (discussed in chapter 1) is circumvented, as the sculpting of the sylph is, in reality, executed by men who are drawing on platitudes of the time, while reducing the sylph's beauty to often unrealistic terms.

Male sylphs written by female writers

While a description of a sylph by a woman author might be a more credible representation of female desire (and naturally of the female creative process), details are still reduced to general and vague comments as is the case in Lubert's *Le Prince Glacé et la princesse Étincelante*:

Tout ce que l'imagination peut se présenter de plus parfait & de plus agréable, n'approche encore que de bien loin de l'objet qui parut aux yeux d'Étincelante; rien n'étoit si beau, ni si digne de donner de l'amour. Cette céleste créature, étoit un prince d'environ dix-huit à vingt ans.⁶⁰²

Lubert then goes on to describe the sylph's clothing and hairstyle in some detail, perhaps pointing to an ostensible importance of apparel in the creation of a desirable image. Lubert's sylph is a prince and a love interest in the tale, and the way he is described aligns with typical fairy-tale depictions of beautiful princess and princesses. This description therefore still falls within the remit of the 'sylph as idealised love interest' dynamic even if written by a woman.

To gain a different perspective, we will look at Genlis's sylph in *Les Veillées du château*. The way she describes and uses this male sylph is distinct from the above cases. The description of the

⁶⁰¹ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 101. We have also discussed the role of the 'je ne sais quoi' in this context in chapter 3; Compiègne, *Les Veillées du couvent*, p. 129.

⁶⁰² Lubert [1743], *Le Prince Glacé et la princesse Étincelante* (1786), p. 114.

sylph is generally a passing comment: ‘un petit Sylphe fort joli’ or ‘cet aimable Sylphe’; there is no ode to his beauty.⁶⁰³ Zumio is a type of servant (see chapter 2), and this reduced description may be in part to do with the sylph’s role in the story. However, Genlis’s sylph is more than just an aid, he has a lot more presence in the tale than, for example, Pajon’s sylph in *Eritzine et Parelin* (1744), who too is an aid but remains nameless and only materialises to help or chastise the female heroine. Exceptionally, Genlis’s Zumio acts as a companion to a male protagonist instead of a female one, which is predominantly the case in other texts. Her focus clearly shifts from sylphs as romantic interests, or as accompanying women – she uses him as a supernatural friend to a male protagonist in a dynamic of mutual help rather than one-sided guidance.

Thus, barring some rare exceptions, when designing sylph characters, describing their appearance, and giving them roles in their stories, both male and female authors adhered to a mostly formulaic representation of these creatures. This is likely because the more sylphs appeared in literature, the more crystallized their form became, and crucially it was a form that was recognisable by readers and easily drawn upon by authors. When it comes to an influential sylph representation, one particular text stands out: Moncrif’s *Zélindor* which we will examine next.

6.ii.d. A case study: the influence of *Zélindor* (1745) on other sylph narratives

François-Augustin Paradis de Moncrif’s opera-ballet *Zélindor, roi des sylphes* was hugely successful and was performed at the Académie Royale de Musique in August 1745, at Versailles in March (two performances), and December of the same year, as well as at Fontainebleau in 1769. This was a sylph text of high cultural status due to the fact that it was good enough to be performed for the royal court multiple times. It was also clearly a recognisable cultural product of its time in that it was referenced by other authors and surely familiar to readers and theatre-goers.

⁶⁰³ Genlis, *Les Veillées du château*, pp. 271, 297.

Marmontel writes in his *Mari sylphe*: 'L'opéra de Zélindor dans sa nouveauté avait le plus brillant succès'.⁶⁰⁴ He thus recognises the popularity of the opera-ballet, while hinting at the link between success and novelty. His heroine Élise is an avid reader of sylph texts, and as a result she believes in the existence of these elemental beings: '[I]a fable des sylphes était à la mode. Il lui était tombé sous la main quelques-uns de ces romans où l'on a peint le commerce délicieux de ces esprits avec les mortelles; et pour elle ces brillantes chimères avaient tout le charme de la vérité'.⁶⁰⁵ Although no particular sylph text is named, the novel in question could easily be *Gabalès*. Élise goes to see *Zélindor* with her maid and she is absorbed by the performance which fuels her fantasy: 'Il semble qu'on l'a [*Zélindor*] fait exprès pour elle. Elle ne revient pas de la surprise où elle a été de voir jouer ses propres songes'.⁶⁰⁶

The three-act comedies *Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y en a peu* (Martin de Choisy, 1778), and *L'Amant sylphe, ou la Féerie de l'amour* (François-Antoine Quétant, 1783) were both inspired by Marmontel's earlier tale, and the plot and themes are essentially the same. The former also talks of the influence on the heroine of seeing the opera-ballet: '[d]e Zélindor son esprit est frappé'.⁶⁰⁷ Like *Zélindor*, *L'Amant sylphe* was performed at Fontainebleau. These examples reiterate the fact that the source material for both plays was Marmontel's text, and the additional reference to *Zélindor* adds another layer of intertextuality. Because Choisy's play precedes Quétant's and they are extremely similar with only minor variations, it is clear that the latter was inspired by the former. The multiple iterations mean that the plot was captivating enough and that repetitiveness did not make the play less successful. The slight changes to the text, and of course, the differences in stage directions will have supplied some elements of novelty.

Zélindor's influence on other texts and on characters in those texts is emblematic of the self-referentiality that characterises sylph narratives. There are many instances where sylph texts

⁶⁰⁴ Marmontel [1755-1759], 'Le Mari sylphe' (1999), p. 101.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 100; Goulemot 'Les pratiques littéraires ou la publicité du privée', p. 394.

⁶⁰⁶ Marmontel, 'Le Mari sylphe', p. 102.

⁶⁰⁷ Choisy, *Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y en a peu*, p. 17.

mention one another in the body of the narrative or in the preface. Genlis mentions Marmontel's *Le Mari sylphe* in the preface to the third volume of *Les Veillées du château* (although she states that she does not see how this, as well as a couple of others in this vein, are to be understood as 'moral' stories).⁶⁰⁸ She references numerous texts and writers, but she chooses to include a sylph text specifically in the preface to the third volume where she herself introduces a sylph character. We have already seen the high number of references to Villars's *Gabalès*, and an insertion of an extract from Pluchon-Destouches's *Le Joli vase*, into Compiègne *Les Veillées du couvent*.

This self-referentiality which takes place on several levels as shown by our examples, demonstrates that sylph texts and their authors were aware of each other and were interconnected in ways which readers could also recognise. Goulemot explains with regard to the erotic literature of the eighteenth century that references can be present:

soit qu'ils apparaissent, dès la préface, comme une source, l'origine d'une lignée, l'archétype du genre, soit que leur lecture constitue, dans le récit d'initiation des héros, une étape décisive. Cette présence narrative référentielle est la preuve d'un statut culturel, d'une historicité, d'une hiérarchisation des œuvres érotiques.⁶⁰⁹

This 'proof of a cultural status' is articulated in sylph narratives (not limited to the erotic) through this type of intertextuality, repetition (which we have discussed in chapter 2 in more detail), as well as other factors which we will investigate next when assessing the overall status and place of sylph narratives within eighteenth-century literary production.

6.iii. The status of sylph narratives within eighteenth-century literary culture

One of the aims of this study has been to understand where narratives featuring sylphs and sylphides stand within eighteenth-century literature. Some scholars relegated them to the *merveilleux* or fairy tale traditions, while others inscribed them into the libertine seduction genre. All this must also be considered against a backdrop of what exactly constituted mainstream Enlightenment thinking.

⁶⁰⁸ Genlis, *Les Veillées du château*, p. 33.

⁶⁰⁹ Goulemot, *Ces livres*, p. 40.

Then, there exists the additional challenge of rationalising where texts fit in terms of the circulation of books (forbidden or proudly printed with an ‘approbation’ or ‘privilège’).

Due to this fragmented categorisation (and because scholars have looked at very small selections of texts from the corpus), we could conclude that texts featuring sylphs are a type of liminal, or even specialist literature that was of interest to a subset, or subsets of readers. For example, we might think that it was a type of literature that due its esoteric nature was somehow at odds with mainstream Enlightenment, and so appealed to a select group of readers. Certainly, if we were to look at the Rosicrucian elements and, in the cases where these aspects were taken up by subsequent authors, we may be justified in such a view. After all, *Le Comte de Gabalis* had mixed interpretations when it first appeared; some readers understood it to be a parody of cabbalistic beliefs, whereas others took its contents at face value. We can also accept that some sylph texts would fit what Dan Edelstein *et al.* describe as the ‘Super-Enlightenment’. We might also think that as fairy tale characters sylphs appealed to those who read fairy tales, or if looking at seduction narratives, to those who liked racier titles. These themes already start to suggest that there were several types of texts which appealed to several, very different, types of readers. Sylph narratives go beyond even these categories as they are so varied in content, style, format, and message that ultimately, they reflect and actively deal with key contemporary trends, concerns, and interests, which, apart from appealing to a heterogenous readership, reflect Enlightenment thinking in ways that are sometimes no less robust than in other genres (which we would more readily recognise as Enlightenment staples).

6.iii.a. Formats, editions, and collections in which sylph narratives circulated

The format in which sylph narratives were published is a useful pool of practical information for gauging their status. The bigger the size of a book, the more expensive it was. Additionally, smaller formats could also point to the more underground status of a text (as it was more easily concealed). Catalogue information shows that many sylph texts were published in either octavo or duodecimo

formats which is in line with a lot of contemporary publications in the *belles lettres* category. Pornographic texts, such as *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne* were published in the smaller, sextodecimo format which is in keeping with formats of clandestine works. Sylph plays from our corpus, on the other hand, were published in the larger, quarto size, which again, is not atypical of plays published in this period in general. We can conclude that sylph texts, whatever their genre conform to the publishing standards of that genre, and thus do not stand out due to their format.

Another consideration is the length of the texts. As we have established, sylph texts are in myriad of genres such as poetry, plays, ballets, comic operas, fairy tales, moral tales, short stories, moral and pornographic novels. The shorter lengths of some of the texts is necessarily motivated by the genre, but it is also clear that a shorter text was a more easily consumable product. The multitude of one-act plays or short stories could attest to these works' value as entertainment – easy to produce and reproduce, catering to an audience with a penchant for novelty. Fundamentally though there is nothing unusual about the length of sylph texts; just like other literary production of the period these texts vary in format.

Many texts in our corpus appeared in more than one edition, and although it is not possible to compile an exhaustive list of all editions due to the lack of records, we have included information on some reeditions in Appendix 1. For instance, Bibiena's *La Poupée* which was published originally in 1747, then appeared in 1748 and 1782. It was also translated into German in 1753. D'Aulnoy's fairy tale *Le Prince lutin* came out in 1698 as part of her *Contes de fées*, then in 1735 in a reedition of the same collection, and then in *Le Cabinet des fées* which included works by multiple authors in 1787-9. *Le Cabinet des fées* also contained Pajon's *Eritzine et Parelín* which first appeared in 1744 in the *Mercure de France*, then in the *Bibliothèque des fées et des génies* in 1765. Pluchon-Destouches's *Le Petit-neveu de Bocace ou Contes nouveaux en vers*, which contained *Le Joli vase, ou le Berger sylphe* was published in 1777, 1781, and 1787, and Nerciat's *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne* was published in 1798 or 1799 for the first time, with a second edition following promptly in 1799. Much like

Nerciat's, Compiègne's pornographic sylph tale also saw at least two editions in its first year (1793), which is a natural part of the supply and demand of such texts. The reeditions of sylph texts belonging to different genres and by authors of very different statuses suggests that overall, there was a persistent interest in sylph texts which motivated demand for more editions.

Because many sylph texts appeared in more than one edition, and some of them were re-published as part of collections, decisions about which texts were included in which series can be an indication of the perception and status of the texts in question – a type of critical reception. Several of the theatre pieces and fairy tales in our corpus were republished in collections of works by the same authors, and then there were collections which gathered works by several authors and appeared in multiple volumes, such as *Le Cabinet des fées* (comprising 41 volumes published between 1785-9), or *Voyages imaginaires* (36 volumes, which appeared between 1787-9). Both were put together by Charles-Georges-Thomas Garnier, and contain a range of texts by a great number of authors, many of whom were well-known and included Charles Perrault, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, and Crébillon among others. Both collections contain sylph texts. While *Le Cabinet des fées* is a selection of fairy tales and 'autres contes merveilleux', *Voyages imaginaires* groups texts and volumes into *Les Voyages imaginaires* (volumes 1-30), *Les Songes et les visions* (volumes 31-32), and *Les Romans cabalistiques* (volumes 33-36). Technically then, texts in the *Voyages imaginaires* are not classed as fairy tales. Volume 34 contains *Le Comte de Gabalis ou Entretiens sur les sciences secrètes* as well as *Le Sylphe amoureux*, and Robert's *Les Ondins, conte moral*.⁶¹⁰ For all intents and purposes, Robert's text is a fairy tale, as is also admitted by Garnier, the editor of the collection: '[l]e merveilleux est prodigué dans ce roman, qui tient de très-près aux contes de fées'.⁶¹¹ *Gabalis* is not a fairy tale, and neither is *Le Sylphe amoureux*; they are very different to *Les Ondins* and to each other: *Gabalis* is a satire in the form of dialogues, and *Le Sylphe amoureux* is a gallant *mari/amant sylphe*

⁶¹⁰ We have discussed this volume and Garnier's 'Avertissement' with respect to *Gabalis* in chapter 1.

⁶¹¹ Garnier, 'Avertissement', in *Voyages imaginaires*, XXXIV (Amsterdam, Paris: Rue Hôtel Serpente, 1788), pp. i-viii, p.v.

short story. The latter was believed to be published for the first time in 1730 (the same year as Crébillon's *Le Sylphe*), however its text is almost entirely identical to Murat's *L'Esprit folet, ou le Sylphe amoureux* (1714) as we have explained earlier in this study. Both versions cite the borrowing and reading of *Gabalès* by the protagonists (and the version of 1714 also dedicates three and a half pages at the start to reviewing *Gabalès*). By a wonderful turn of fate, in volume 34 of *Voyages imaginaires*, *Le Sylphe amoureux* is re-published with the text it had cited all those years before, and it looks as if the texts are talking to each other. The fourth text in the volume is Cointreau's *L'Amant salamandre, ou les Aventures de l'infortunée Julie* (1756) in which the salamander lover may as well have been an *amant sylphe*, but with sinister motivations. All three of the later texts were influenced by *Gabalès*, and it seems that it is not just the theme of elemental beings, but also intertextuality that brings these texts together in this volume.

Two volumes of the *Voyages* are taken up by another sylph text – Mouhy's *Lamekis, ou Les Voyages extraordinaires d'un Égyptien dans la terre intérieure, avec la découverte de l'île des Sylphides* (1735-8). The *Voyages* part of the collection is what we could describe as belonging to the fantasy genre, and today we could read *Lamekis* as an early form of a fantasy or science fiction narrative. Volumes 12-13 in the *Voyages* section are also dedicated to another text by Robert: *Voyage de Milord Céton dans les sept planètes, ou Le Nouveau mentor* (1765). Judging by the ways in which sylph texts were organised in this collection, it is clear that they were understood differently when they first appeared compared to the later years of the eighteenth century. In any case, five entire volumes of 36 of an important series like the *Voyages imaginaires* were taken up by texts about sylphs.

6.iii.b. *Le Comte de Gabalès* – a collectible book

The Marquise de Pompadour's extensive collection of books contained a wide range of genres, with sections of works for the theatre and of novels being particularly rich.⁶¹² Within her collection, and across different categories, many sylph texts are found. These included some of the more notable or popular sylph theatre pieces like Dominique and Romagnesi's *comédie La Sylphide* and Moncrif's opera-ballet *Zélinde, roi des Sylphes*, as well as Bibiena's *La Poupée*, and Crébillon's *Le Sylphe*. It also contained Villars's *Le Comte de Gabalis*, alongside, for instance, *Dissertations sur les Apparitions & sur les Revenants & Vampires*, par Dom Aug. Calmet (1746), but also Voltaire's *Lettres sur l'âme* (1739). Some of the sylph texts in the marquise's collection were part of anthologies of works like plays or collected works by a particular author, but stand-alone texts such as *Gabalis* or *La Poupée* suggest that these books were chosen intentionally if not by Pompadour herself, then by those who gifted these books to her and thought them to be suitable presents for someone of her rank and with her interests. As the King's mistress, she occupied the realm of luxury and tasteful gift-giving, but also the erotic, and texts like *La Poupée* are undoubtedly connected to the latter. Some works may have also been offered to her by the authors themselves particularly if she was their patron, like in Marmontel's case.

Pompadour's books were found to be in very good condition, and several were 'en grand Papier; un très-grand nombre en maroquin, & la plupart des autres sont d'une Reliure choisie'.⁶¹³ The various sylph texts she possessed were in duodecimo format, with some theatre pieces in octavo and quarto. In the 'Sciences et Arts/Philosophie/Métaphasique' section we find a copy of *Le Comte de Gabalis*. The version that Pompadour had is from 1700 – a reedition with an added second part.⁶¹⁴ It was in duodecimo format, and based on what was generally said by Philippe Bridard de La Garde about the state of the marquise's books, it is fair to deduce that this text would have been bound

⁶¹² Philippe Bridard de La Garde, 'Avertissement' to *Catalogue des livres de la bibliothèque de feu Madame la Marquise de Pompadour, Dame du Palais de la Reine* (1765), pp. v-vi.

⁶¹³ Bridard de La Garde, 'Avertissement', p. vii

⁶¹⁴ Didier Kahn, 'Introduction', in *Le Comte de Gabalis* (2010) p. 119.

rather attractively. Some editions of *Le Comte de Gabalis* from other private collections, now part of Oxford University's libraries, give some indication of the types of possible bindings.⁶¹⁵

Edition year	Binding type	Format	Provenance if known	Current Collection
1670	17 th -cent. red goatskin over pasteboards sewn into 5 supports; pairs of gilt fillets towards outer edges of boards and corner fleurons; gilt roll on edges and turn-ins of boards; gilt text block edges; marbled paper pastedowns.	In-12		All Souls Col. Library
1670	17 th /18 th -century sprinkled calf; gold-tooled spine and roll on board edges; red sprinkled edges.	In-12	Brian Lawn (private collection)	Weston Library
1671	17 th -century calf; pairs of blind fillets towards outer edges of boards; blind tooled decoration around board edges; blind tooling on spine	In-12		Merton Col. Library
1671		In-12	Bequest of Alexander Thistlethwayte 1771	Wadham Col. Library

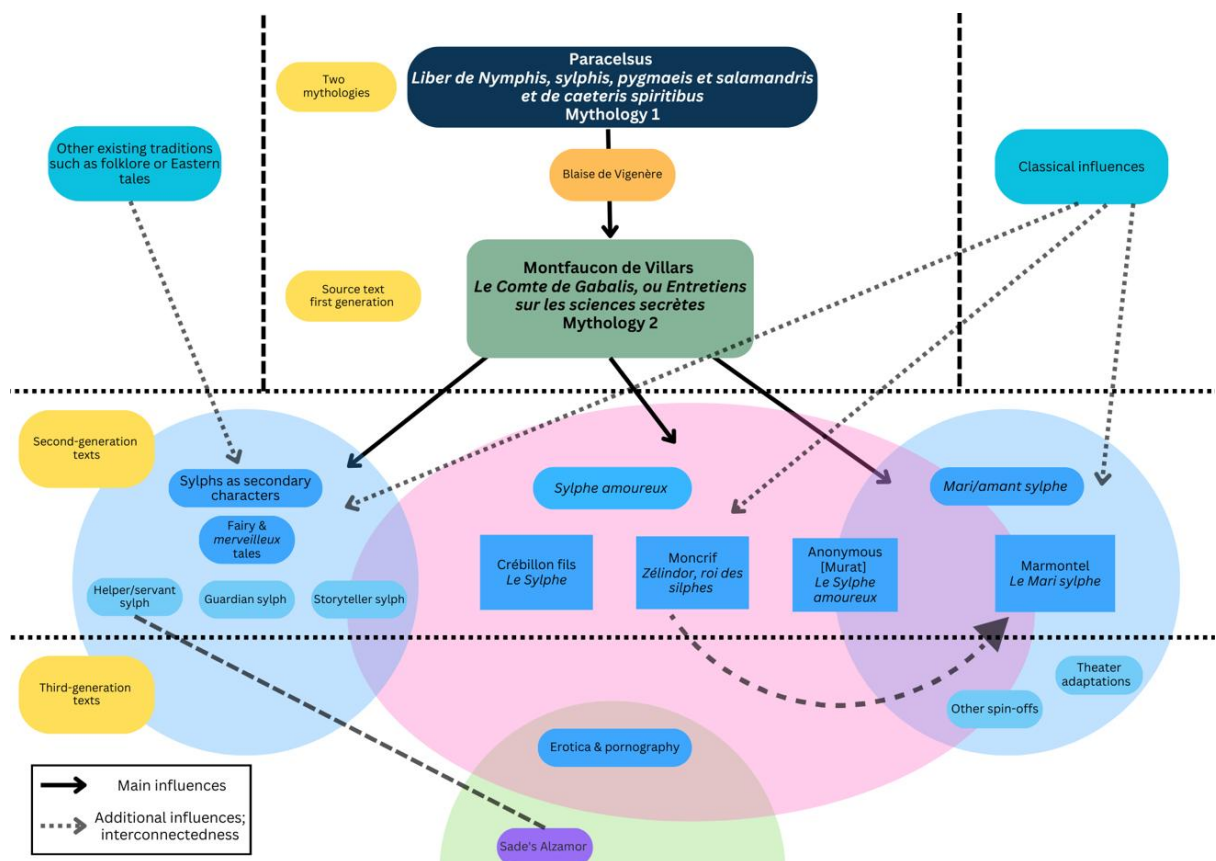
The above examples show that the copies of *Le Comte de Gabalis* in some private collections were bound in calfskin as well as (red) goatskin (i.e. Morocco). Both types of binding were high-quality options, and unquestionably not cheap. These leathers would have been both durable covers, and also very smooth to the touch, adding to the overall pleasure of the reading experience. They were attractively coloured and blind- or gold-tooled and gilded with ornamental figures. As such these copies of *Gabalis* were nothing other than luxury collectors' items.

Returning again to *Gabalis* and finding copies of this book in collections of prominent individuals and in luxurious formats reaffirms the notion that sylph texts were not by any means relegated to the fringes of, or are negligible within literary production.

6.iii.c. A genealogy of sylph narratives from Paracelsus to the late eighteenth century

⁶¹⁵ Information available via SOLO (Search Oxford Libraries Online), <https://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>.

At the start of this study, we looked at the role of Villars's *Le Comte de Gabalis* which was the text that introduced elemental beings into French literature, and the changes it made to the original Paracelsian mythology of these creatures. Building on the work of chapters 1 and 2 as well as what we have established in the current chapter, we propose a type of genealogy of sylph texts starting with Paracelsus's *Liber de Nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus* and Villars's *Gabalis*, and all the way through to the end of the eighteenth century (see the image below, also included as Appendix 3 in a larger format). It shows what we refer to as source texts, as well as second- and third-generation texts, the main groups of texts and themes that developed after *Gabalis*, as well as the overlap and connections between these (please note in particular the *sylphe amoureux* category as overlapping to different degrees with the fairy tale and *merveilleux* sylphs group, *mari/amant sylphe* narratives, and finding its more extreme embodiment in the pornographic genre). Texts that were particularly representative of their subgroup, popular, or influential on other sylph texts are included.



This diagram is a practical way of organising and summarising some of our findings, and a graphic representation of the diversity, complexity, and interconnectivity of literary production featuring sylphs. Building on Robert Danton's description of literature as a communications system (between authors, publishers, book sellers, and readers), we see sylph texts as an insight into such communication.⁶¹⁶ In a footnote reference, Joellen A. Meglin states: 'The Sylph figure may be seen, anachronistically, as paradoxical embodiment of the concept of intertextuality, since it operates like a *mise en abyme*, infinitely referring the reader to earlier texts'.⁶¹⁷ As we saw in this chapter as well as earlier in this study, intertextuality is indeed a key part of sylph literature, but an important aspect of this literature is the interconnectedness of the texts with one another, and with other sources which makes them a valuable case study into the transmission of ideas.

This significant role is not something that scholars have hitherto acknowledged. For instance, returning to *Gabalès* as a source text, we find the following superficial critical perspective:

Ce livre de Montfaucon de Villars n'a pas de postérité directe; il connaît seulement deux médiocres suites et est surtout mentionné dans les lectures des personnages ou des commentaires.⁶¹⁸

Jean-Paul Sermain wrote the above lines in 2002. The multitude of texts which were inspired by *Gabalès* and many of which we have discussed in this study prove the contrary of this statement. While reading of *Gabalès* in second-generation sylph texts is indeed recurrent, it has far more value than Sermain recognises as we have already shown. Crucially, this text inspired a new literary theme, that of sylphs and other elemental beings, to return to Edward Seeber's terms, which branched off into many modifications and permeated myriad literary genres which borrowed from each other, modified and reinterpreted, creating a great variety of representations and an array of meanings.

⁶¹⁶ *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), p. xx.

⁶¹⁷ Meglin, 'Behind the Veil of Translucence: An Intertextual Reading of the "Ballet Fantastique" in France, 1831-1841. Part One. Ancestors of the Sylphide in the Conte Fantastique', *Dance Chronicle*, 27.1 (2004), pp. 67-129 (p. 85).

⁶¹⁸ Jean-Paul Sermain, *Métafictions (1670-1730): la réflexivité dans la littérature d'imagination* (Paris: Champion, 2002), p. 157.

What our genealogy does not show is the move from literal to symbolic representations and meanings of sylphs and sylphides which we discussed in chapter 2, and we will now return to this subject to see how such representations evolved to have figurative uses and what this says about the cultural perception of sylphs and sylphides during the long eighteenth century.

6.iii.d. Sylphs and sylphides: the emergence of a cultural object

Sans quelques réminiscences de jeunesse et Mme d'Houdetot, les amours que j'ai sentis et décrits n'auraient été qu'avec des sylphides.⁶¹⁹

At the beginning of this study, we assembled contemporary definitions of 'sylphe' and 'sylphide' and pointed out that the information was scarce; the *Encyclopédistes*, for example, did not consider sylphs an object of knowledge and so did not provide it with its own article. Throughout this study we have pinpointed evidence that confirms the formation of sylphs and sylphide narratives as a recognisable cultural object. In chapter 2, we noted that sylphs and sylphides start to be used symbolically, especially towards the end of the eighteenth century suggesting that they were becoming identifiable by readers, and that their meanings were understood. When Rousseau wrote the above lines in *Les Confessions* in the 1760s, he knew that his readers would be able to decode all of what he means (that his loves were with imaginary beings, but also potentially highly idealised).

A different meaning of 'sylphide' is used in Rétif de La Bretonne's 'La Duchesse ou la Femme sylphide', which is part of his *Les Contemporaines par gradation, ou Aventures des jolies femmes du temps actuel* (1783). Here, the term 'sylphide' is used to negatively describe a particular type of woman, her social status and behaviour.⁶²⁰ In this short story, the protagonist, a young Duchess, is described as floating in and out of courtly society, absorbing compliments and leaving. She seems to have high moral values at the start, but gradually, her behaviour deteriorates, and she becomes a

⁶¹⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau [1782, 1789], *Les Confessions*, Book XI, Tome II (Paris: Launette, 1889), p. 272.

⁶²⁰ Rétif de La Bretonne [1783], 'La Duchesse ou la Femme Sylphide', in *Les Contemporaines par gradation, ou Aventures des jolies femmes du temps actuel*, ed. by Jules Assézat (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre Éditeur, 1875-1876), pp. 1-48.

libertine whose morals are as loose as the sylph is light; ‘une femme légère’ meaning a sexually active and unfaithful woman. ‘Sylphide’ as descriptor here is connected to an inherent property of elemental beings of the air – lightness, and is therefore linked to their original mythology. At the same time, sylphs and sylphides are sometimes directly associated with unfaithfulness (*inconstance*). This aspect is captured by the title of another text, ‘Les Sylphes, ou l’Amour léger’, the fourth part of Fleury’s opera-ballet *Les Génies* (1736), in which each of the four elemental beings corresponds to a particular type of love.⁶²¹ Being a ‘sylphide’ sometimes has nothing at all to do with the esoteric but is, in fact, a comment on the behaviour of a particular group of women in eighteenth-century French society; ‘la femme-sylphide’ designates a social type. Mme de R*** in Crébillon’s story is familiar with this type of woman: ‘je rêve que je connais dans le monde nombre de femmes sylphides’, she tells the sylph with whom she converses.⁶²²

Whatever its meaning (Rousseau’s imaginary, idealised loves, or society’s fickle and promiscuous women), the term ‘sylphide’ is used as an epithet, and this marks a state of linguistic integration, and hence cultural recognition. The sylph’s nature as a malleable ‘vapeur’, able to become anything both in the esoteric sense of shapeshifting or transmutation, and as literary device, is put to use by Compiègne in *Les Veillées du couvent* where the sylph is a *merveilleux*, esoteric being who visits Agnès. To her, the sylph is a supernatural being of fairy tales; he describes himself in ways that are consistent with Villars and the essential traits of Paracelsian mythology. However, from the author’s point of view, and he communicates this very plainly, the sylph is an element of the *merveilleux* which is simply necessary to the plot. As the female protagonists are locked away in a convent and no man can gain access to their cells, a supernatural being is necessary in order to penetrate the convent unnoticed: ‘il faut du merveilleux, il faut des démons, des incubes, des sylphes, des salamandres, des gnomes [...] moi je cherche un charitable sylphe, gnome, diable ou

⁶²¹ The other three acts are as follows: ‘Les Nymphes, ou l’Amour indiscret’, ‘Les Gnomes, ou l’Amour ambitieux’, and ‘Les Salamandres, ou l’Amour violent’. See Fleury, *Les Génies* (Paris: Imprimerie de Jean-Baptiste-Christophe Ballard, Seul Imprimeur du Roy, & de L’Académie Royale de Musique, 1736).

⁶²² Crébillon, ‘Le Sylphe’, p. 72.

homme si je ne trouve rien de mieux, qui veuille bien violer mes héroïnes’, the author-narrator tells us. The sylph is therefore none other than a narrative technique.⁶²³

The use of sylphs and sylphides as figures of speech or narrative techniques attests to an evolution of status towards that of a cultural object which within itself has many facets and is able to convey meanings.⁶²⁴

This section has demonstrated that sylph narratives were part of mainstream literary production and consumption: their formats, reeditions, and their inclusion in the libraries of the elite inscribe them firmly into the core of what we call the literature of the long eighteenth century. As the century progressed, sylphs and sylphides evolved into recognisable cultural products in their own right. The interconnectedness of sylph narratives with one another, and with other texts make them a valuable resource for tracking how themes and ideas evolved and were transmitted. For this reason, these texts are a literature that cannot be relegated to the margins (of its own cultural production or modern scholarship).

6. Conclusion

In this, our final chapter, we have compared the fictional and actual readerships of sylph texts and we have established that these are likely to have been different from each other. Although fiction suggests that sylph texts somehow were a female-orientated genre, geared towards the frivolous upper-classes, the reality is that probably anyone who could read and had access to circulating texts, or who was able to go to the theatre, will have come across sylph cultural production. This was then a highly heterogenous readership (or several distinct readerships), who consumed these texts for reasons that ranged between wanting to be entertained, aroused, sheer curiosity, or familiarity with a given author. Increasingly, as we have shown, familiarity with the motif itself will have also been a

⁶²³ Compiègne, *Les Veillées du couvent*, pp. 100-1.

⁶²⁴ The meaning of sylphides will shift again in the nineteenth century to the Romantic vision, a cultural reference with which we are still familiar today.

motivator for this consumption. The self-referencing found in sylph texts and theatre productions, as well as the evidence of metaphorical and symbolic uses of sylphs and sylphides shows that they were becoming recognisable and codified cultural objects. Because of the wide range, high numbers of sylph texts (and reeditions), as well as authors of various reputations who produced them, these texts were by no means part of a marginal genre. One important feature of sylph narratives that has been almost entirely overlooked by previous scholarship is that these texts and the versions and uses of sylphs within them offer a case study of the evolution and spread of literary ideas in the long eighteenth century. These reasons make it clear that narratives featuring sylphs do form a *sylph literature* which was written, read and recognised as a category by almost anyone in the long eighteenth century, and which therefore has value as an intellectual object to modern scholars and readers alike.

CONCLUSION

On a fundamental level this thesis is a more comprehensive and thorough investigation of the motif of sylphs and sylphides in the literature of the long eighteenth century than has hitherto been attempted. It has expanded the scope of analysis beyond the main lines of inquiry in existing scholarship, these concentrating on sylphs as idealised lovers in seduction narratives, and sylphs as part of the *merveilleux* tradition.

We have been able to establish that there is a set of identifiable sylphic characteristics which set these elemental beings apart not only from seemingly similar entities such as fairies, but that many of these features are specific to eighteenth-century sylphs and sylphides and not to the ways in which they are envisioned in the nineteenth century. The lightness, whiteness, luminosity, youthfulness, and well-toned body so central to the sylphic form all reflect the aesthetic (pseudo-) scientific, and racial convictions of the time. For instance, the sylphides of Romanticism are pale, but in an otherworldly and often sinister way unlike the athletic sylphs of the eighteenth century who recall the Apollo Belvedere far more than a ghostly spirit. The sylphs and sylphides of our corpus are

better lovers, better at courtship, and overall, more refined and morally superior to mortals. Their gallant gift-giving rituals position them as delicate and attentive suitors, a tactic which makes them an appealing alternative to the aggressive pursuits of mortals, although more often than not this sylphic behaviour is performed by these same mortals in order to attract the interest of sylph-obsessed women. The malleable sylphic body is an unarticulated matter onto which desires can be projected, and as such it allows various sexual scenarios to play out. Sylphs and sylphides are channels for possibility for gender non-conforming experiences and display a range of sexualities. Sylphs then, are the embodiments of several types of ideal: aesthetic, moral, relational, and sexual. Sylphness is superiority. But this sylphness is also a desirability that appeals specifically *then*, and is a valuable snapshot into the century's predilections.

Sylphs and sylphides are paradigms in motion from their very inception by Paracelsus, his mythology not always being clear and leaving a lot unsaid as if waiting for others to fill in the gaps. Villars adds to the premise and modifies it, appealing to readers and subsequent authors who make their own changes throughout the eighteenth century and beyond, creating a wealth of sylph literature. The authors and readers of this literature included most people who wrote and read at the time, and texts vary in genre, format, length, and quality. Due to their variety and the intertextuality they display, sylph narratives are valuable tools for tracking the circulation of ideas during this period. The multiple re-editions and iterations of plots in slightly different configurations attest to the popularity and status of sylphs and sylphide literature as a cultural product. Therefore, there certainly existed a sylph literature and it was known to and consumed by a range of individuals, from a hypothetical pageboy going to see a sylph play to the Marquise de Pompadour who had sylph literature in her private collection.

The breadth of our corpus has allowed us to notice trends which have been previously overlooked. For example, by tracking the ways in which sylphs as guardian angels were depicted throughout the century, we established that representations gradually became less literal. This shift

feeds into the overall tendency of sylphs and sylphides to become more and more recognisable as the century progressed. Identifiable tropes such as the *sylphe amoureux* and the *mari/amant sylphe* crystallize as they are used more and more by authors, and the proliferation of such plots attests to this. As the century advanced, these elemental beings started to be featured in narratives which tackled gender and sexuality, making use of their supernatural abilities and malleability. Overall, the eighteenth-century sylph is male, with fewer female examples. In the nineteenth century sylphs and sylphides change shape; unlike in the eighteenth century, when male sylphs were featured more than their female counterpart, the subsequent century saw the sylphide take centre stage. This later version is the embodiment of a fragile, idealised femininity which is often fatal. The sylphides we have encountered in our corpus too are idealised females but they possess an agency and desire which are both intentional and pronounced.

The limited space available has meant that some avenues of inquiry were not explored, but would be worth pursuing as part of future projects. For instance, it would be fruitful to investigate the reception of sylph texts by examining material such as contemporary literary magazine reviews. Additionally, gathering data on the pricing of sylph narratives (books, theatre tickets) would be a useful way of further evaluating the place of sylph literature in the period's cultural production. Although our corpus spans around 130 years, expanding this into the mid- to late-nineteenth century to track the transformations of the motif that take place then would allow us to see even more clearly the legacy of this literature.

The idea for this thesis originated in a lecture given by Michel Delon at the Sorbonne several years ago, in which he mentioned sylph narratives among other seduction plots. This study has shown that sylph literature is not limited to seduction plots and that it is not only an important part of the cultural production of the long eighteenth century, but that it is also extremely varied and closely linked to key topics including commerce, race, sexuality, and aesthetics. This is why we would like to close with a suggestion that including more sylph literature in curricula might be a fruitful approach

to teaching eighteenth-century French literature today, renewing its appeal for new generations of readers but also leading to discussions of the period as a whole.

APPENDIX 1. PRIMARY SOURCES FEATURING SYLPHS, ORDERED BY DATE OF FIRST PUBLICATION.

Text title	Author	Author life dates	Gender	First publication	Other selected editions	Genre	Sylph gender
<i>Liber de Nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus</i>	Theophrastus von Hohenheim, Paracelsus	c. 1493-1541	Male	1566	1566	theological treatise	
<i>Le Comte de Gabalis, ou Entretiens sur les sciences secrètes</i>	Nicolas de Montfaucon de Villars	1635-1673	Male	1670	1670, 1715, 1788 in <i>Voyages imaginaires</i>	novel	
<i>La chiave del gabinetto del cavaliere Gioseppe Francesco Borri</i>	Giuseppe Francesco Borri (alleged author)	1627-1695	Male	1681	1681	translation/plagiarism of <i>Le Comte de Gabalis</i>	
<i>La Pierre philosophale, comédie</i>	Thomas Corneille	1625-1709	Male	1681	1681	play	mix
<i>Le Prince lutin</i>	Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville baronne d'Aulnoy	1650-1705	Female	1698	1698, 1737 in <i>Les Contes de fées</i> , then in <i>Le Cabinet des fées</i> 1787-9, etc.	fairytale	m
<i>L'Amour diable, comédie</i>	Marc-Antoine Legrand	1673-1728	Male	1708	1708, 1710, 1712, 1731, 1742, 1770, etc.	play	mix
<i>Le Génie familier, nouvelles persanes, traduites de l'Arabe</i>	Louise de Bossigny, comtesse d'Auneuil	1670-1730	Female	1709	1709, <i>Le Cabinet des fées</i> , 1787-9	fairytale	m
<i>La Boucle de cheveux enlevée, poème héroïcomique de monsieur Pope (The Rape of the Lock)</i>	Alexander Pope, translated by Mr. ** [Marthe-Marguerite de Caylus]	1688-1744	Male	1712, 1714	1712, 1714 (1728 translated into French)	poem	m

<i>L'Esprit folet, ou le Sylphe amoureux</i>	Henriette-Julie de Castelnau, de Murat	1670-1716	Female	1714	1714, 1722, 1734	short story	m
<i>Le Roy de Cocagne, comédie en 3 actes</i>	Marc-Antoine Legrand	1673-1728	Male	1719	1719, 1780, 1800	play	mix
<i>Le Prince invisible, histoire</i>	Louise Cavelier Lévêque	1703-1745	Female	1722	1722, 1744, then in <i>Le Cabinet des fées</i> , XXIV, 1787-9	fairy tale	m
<i>La Sylphide, comédie en 1 acte</i>	Pierre-François Biancolelli (Dominique), and Jean-Antoine Romagnesi	1680-1734; 1690-1742	Male; male	1730	1730	play	f
<i>Le Sylphe supposé, opéra-comique en un acte</i>	Charles-François Panard and Barthélemy-Christophe Fagan	1689-1765; 1702-1755	Male; male	1730	1730	play	m
<i>Le Sylphe, ou Songe de Mme de R***, écrit par elle-même à Mme de S***</i>	Claude-Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon (Crébillon fils)	1707-1777	Male	1730	1730, 1735	short story	m
<i>Le Sylphe amoureux</i>	Anonymous [Murat]	Unknown	Unknown [probably female]	1730	1730, then in <i>Voyages imaginaires</i>	short story	m
<i>Zénétyde, in Œuvres mêlées</i>	Antoine Hamilton	1646-1720	Male	1731	1731	fairy tale	mix
<i>Lamekis, ou les Voyages extraordinaires d'un égyptien dans la terre intérieure, avec la découverte de l'île des Sylphides</i>	Charles de Fieux de Mouhy	1701-1784	Male	1735-8	1735-8 first printed in eight volumes, then in <i>Voyages imaginaires</i> , 1787-8	novel	mix/male

<i>Les Génies</i>	Fleury, music by Mlle Duval	Unknown	Male; female	1736	1736	opera-ballet	mix
<i>Le Prince Glacé et la princesse Étincelante</i>	Marie-Madeleine de Lubert	1702-1785	Female	1743	1743, then in <i>Le Cabinet des fées</i> , XXXIII, 1785-9	fairy tale	m
<i>Eritzine et Parelín</i>	Henri Pajon	[?]-1776	Male	1744	1744 in <i>Mercure de France</i> , then in <i>Bibliothèque des fées et des génies</i> 1765, then in <i>Le Cabinet des fées</i> , XXXIV, 1787-9	fairy tale	m
<i>Zéлиндор, roi des silphes</i>	François-Augustin Paradis de Moncrif	1687-1770	Male	1745	1745, 1752, 1753, 1769, 1773	opera-ballet	m
<i>Le Génie ombre et la Salagno-silphondine-Chimboração, conte physique.</i>	De La Rougère	17[?]-1747	Male	1746	1746, then in <i>Bibliothèque choisie et amusante</i> , IV, 1748-52	short story	f
<i>La Poupée</i>	Jean Galli de Bibiena	1709-1779[?]	Male	1747	1747, 1748, 1782	novel	f
<i>Le Jaloux corrigé, opéra bouffon en un acte</i>	Charles Collé	1709-1783	Male	1753	1753	comic opera	m
'Le Mari sylphe', in <i>Contes moraux</i>	Jean-François Marmontel	1723-1799	Male	1755-9	1755-9, 1765, 1771, 1780, 1798	short story	m
<i>L'Amant salamandre, ou les Aventures de l'infortunée Julie</i>	Cointreau	Unknown	Male	1756	1756, 1761, then in <i>Voyages imaginaires</i> , XXXIV, 1788	short story	m (salamander)
<i>Isabelle et Gertrude, ou les Sylphes supposés, comédie en 1 acte</i>	Charles-Simon Favart	1710-1792	Male	1765	1765, 1770, 1822	play	m
<i>Les Ondins, conte moral</i>	Marie-Anne Robert	1705-1771	Female	1768	1768, then in <i>Voyages imaginaires</i> , XXXIV, 1788	novel	m

<i>Le Diable amoureux</i>	Jacques Cazotte	1719-1792	Male	1772	1772	novella	f
'Le Joli vase, ou le Berger sylphe', in <i>Le Petit-neveu de Bocace ou Contes nouveaux en vers</i>	Pluchon-Destouches	Unknown	Male	1777	1777, 1781, 1787	poem	m
<i>Le Sylphe, ou le Mari comme il y en a peu</i> , en vers libres & en trois actes, mêlée d'ariettes	Martin de Choisy	Unknown	Male	1778	1778	play	m
<i>Le Sylphe (The Sylph)</i>	Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, translated by Pierre Le Tourneur	1757-1806	Female	1779	1784 (translated into French)	novel	m
'Le Sylphe par excellence', in <i>Journal Encyclopédique ou Universel, Tome II, Partie I</i>	Claude-Joseph Dorat	1734-1780	Male	1780	1780	poem	m
<i>Les Deux sylphes, comédie en 1 acte</i>	Barthélemy Imbert	1747-1790	Male	1781	1781	play	m
<i>L'Amant Sylphe, ou la Féerie de l'amour, comédie</i>	François Antoine Quétant	1733-1823	Male	1783	1783	play	m
'La Duchesse ou la Femme Sylphide', in <i>Les contemporaines par gradation, ou aventures des jolies femmes du temps actuel</i>	Nicolas-Edme Rétif de La Bretonne	1734-1806	Male	1783	1783	short story	f

<i>Les Veillées du château, ou Cours de morale à l'usage des enfants</i>	Stéphanie Félicité Du Crest, comtesse de Genlis	1746-1830	Female	1784	1784, 1796	fairy tale	m
'Vers d'un Sylphe à une femme célèbre', in <i>Almanach des Muses</i>	Augustin Barruel	1741-1820	Male	1784	1784	poem	m
<i>Les Veillées du couvent ou le Noviciat d'amour</i>	Claude-François Mercier de Compiègne	1763-1800	Male	1793	1793 (5 editions)	novel	m
<i>Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne</i>	Andréa de Nerciat (attributed to)	1739-1800	Male	1798/1799	1798 or 1799, 1799	novel	m
<i>Le Singulier sylphe</i>	Pierre Jean-Baptiste Nougaret	1742-1823	Male	1800	1800	short story	m
'Le Sylphe galant et observateur', in <i>Contes anti-moraux, Dédiés à la confrérie très-morale des Auteurs du Mercure, et Compagnie</i>	Anonymous	Unknown	Unknown	1800-1	1800-1	short story	m
<i>Histoire de Juliette, ou les Prospérités du vice</i>	Donatien Alphonse François de Sade	1740-1814	Male	1801	1801 (antedated 1797)	novel	m

APPENDIX 2. ALL IMAGES USED IN THE THESIS (BOOK ENGRAVINGS, IMAGES OF OBJECTS, PAINTINGS)



Figure 1: Unnamed engraving, Clément Pierre Marillier (1740-1808); an illustration to a *Eritzine et Parelle*, by Henri Pajon in *Le Cabinet des fées*, XXXIV (1786)



Figure 2: Unnamed engraving, Louis Du Guernier (1677–1716) and Claude Du Bosc (c.1682-c.1746); illustration to *The Rape of the Lock* (1714) by Alexander Pope



Figure 3: Unnamed engraving, Clément Pierre Marillier; illustration to the French translation of 1779 of Pope's *Rape of the Lock*



Figure 4: Unnamed engraving, Nicolas Ponce (1746-1831); illustration to *Le Joli vase, ou le Berger sylphe* (1787 edition) by Pluchon-Destouches



Figure 5, 14, 28: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; illustration to the fifth edition of *Les Veillées du couvent, ou le Noviciat d'amour* by Mercier de Compiègne (1793)



Figure 6, 15, 25: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; an illustration to the second edition of *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne* attributed to Andréa de Nerciat (1799)

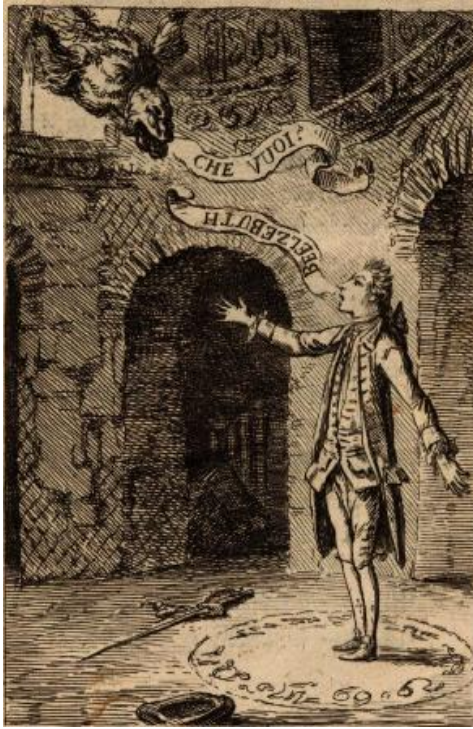


Figure 7: Unnamed engraving, attributed to Clément Pierre Marillier (1740-1808); illustration to *Le Diable amoureux* by Jacques Cazotte (1772)



Figure 8: Unnamed engraving, attributed to Clément Pierre Marillier (1740-1808); illustration to *Le Diable amoureux* by Jacques Cazotte (1772)



Figure 9: Unnamed engraving, attributed to Clément Pierre Marillier (1740-1808); illustration to *Le Diable amoureux* by Jacques Cazotte (1772)



Figure 10: Costume design, Louis-René Boquet (1717-1814); *Zélindor, roi des silphes* by François-Augustin Paradis de Moncrif (1766)



Figure 11: 'Les adieux', Moreau le Jeune (1741-1814); illustration from *Monument du costume physique et moral de la fin du dix-huitième siècle* (1789)



Figure 12: 'La grande toilette', Moreau le Jeune (1741-1814); illustration from *Monument du costume physique et moral de la fin du dix-huitième siècle* (1789)



Figure 13, 31: Unnamed engraving, Gravelot (Hubert-François Bourguignon, 1699-1773); illustration to 'Le Mari sylphe' by Jean-François Marmontel, in *Contes moraux* (1765); [based on preparatory drawing entitled 'La déclaration d'amour']



Figure 16: Detail from *Jupiter and Io*, oil on canvas, c.1530 by Antonio Allegri, called Correggio, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Viena



Figure 17: Figure 17: Small scent bottle made of cut crystal, with an enamel insert, and mounted in gold is shown below, last quarter of the eighteenth century, Musée International de la Parfumerie – front view



Figure 18: As figure 17 – rear view



Figure 19: Casket and scent bottles, unknown artist, c. 1755-60, Waddesdon Manor



Figure 20: Unnamed engraving, attributed to Clément Pierre Marillier (1740-1808); illustration to *Le Diable amoureux* by Jacques Cazotte (1772)



Figure 21: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; illustration to *L'Esprit folet, ou le Sylphe amoureux* by Henriette-Julie de Castelnau de Murat (1722)



Figure 22: Doll, carved wood with gesso and paint, inset glass lozenge eyes. Human hair wig with hair ornament of black silk ribbon, unknown artist, c. 1740, Victoria and Albert Museum



Figure 23: Figure 23: Marie Antoinette's key, gilded steel (length: 6.6cm, width: 1.3cm, weight: 14g.), last quarter of the eighteenth century, Musée le Secq Tournelles



Figure 24: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; an illustration to the second edition of *Éléonore ou l'Heureuse personne* attributed to Andréa de Nerciat (1799)



Figure 26: *La Liseuse* or *Jeune fille lisant*, oil on canvas (c. 1770), Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806), National Gallery of Art, Washington



Figure 27: *Le Midi*, engraving (c. 1760), Emmanuel Jean Népomucène De Ghendt (1738?-1815)



Figure 29: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; an illustration to the second edition of *Les Veillées du couvent, ou Le Noviciat d'amour* by Mercier de Compiègne (1793)

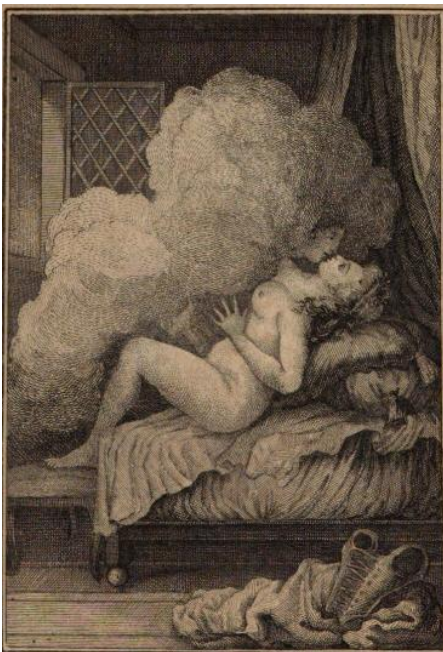
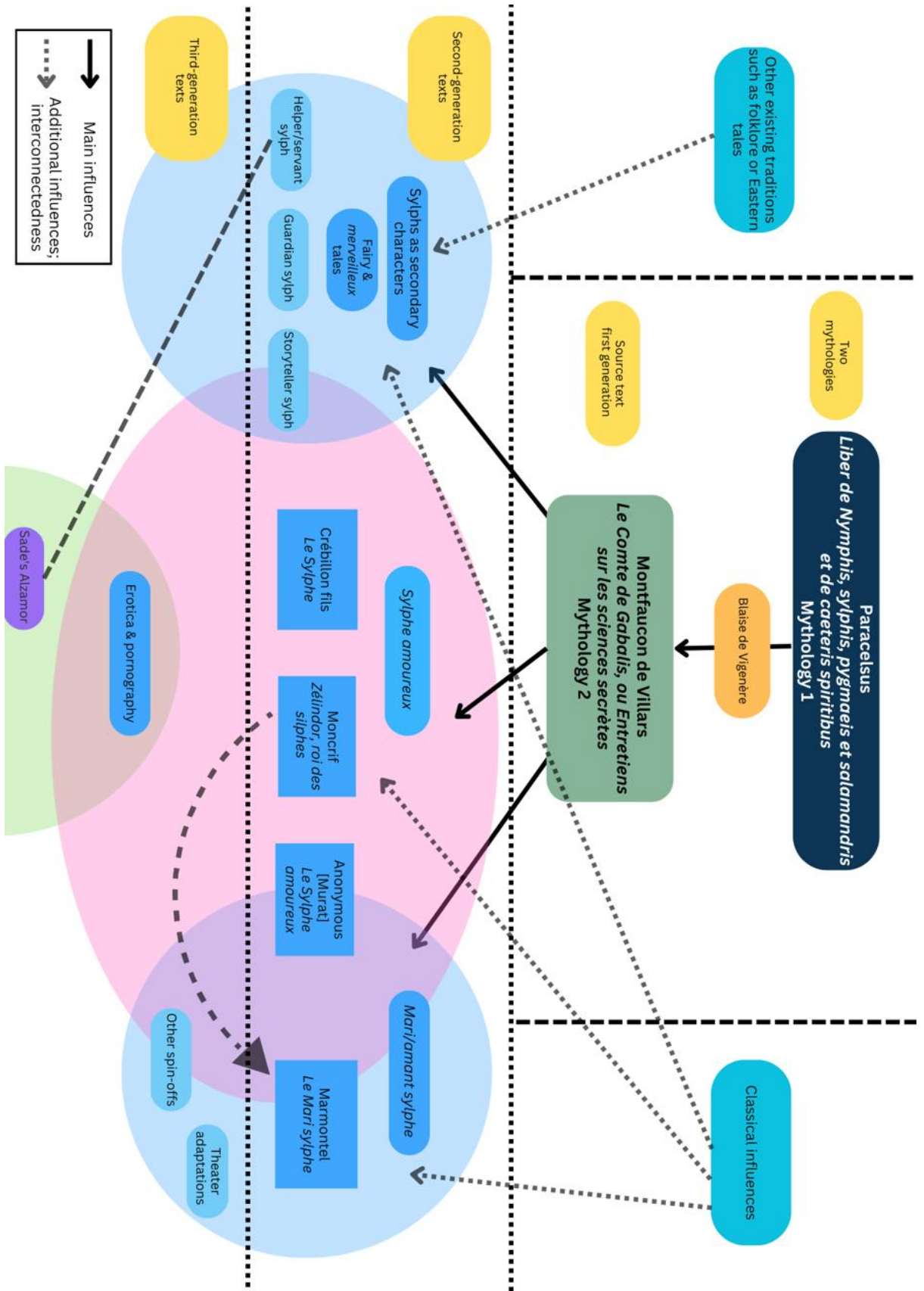


Figure 30: Unnamed engraving, unknown artist; an illustration to the second edition of *Les Veillées du couvent, ou Le Noviciat d'amour* by Mercier de Compiègne (1793)

APPENDIX 3. SYLPH TEXT GENEALOGY DIAGRAM



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