

The Stench of Knowledge:

The *vilain* Dreamer in *Les Serées* by Guillaume Bouchet¹

Neil Kenny, All Souls College, University of Oxford

Abstract

Guillaume Bouchet wrote 36 conversations which he presents as taking place in Poitou at convivial evening gatherings (or ‘*Serées*’). Each conversation has a theme. That of the sixteenth *Serée* (first published in 1597) is dreams. The debate is triggered as usual by an incident that has just occurred within the fictional frame: the host refused to invite someone that evening who had turned up earlier in the day and tried to cadge an invitation by claiming to have dreamed that the host was roasting a pig (as indeed he was). The debate proceeds smoothly, but after several pages it is rudely interrupted by a wisecracker, described as ‘*vilain*’. He is intent on telling everyone about a recent dream in which he soiled himself. This disgusts the listeners and disrupts the erudite exchange of learned commonplaces about dreams. Unusually for an event within the fictional frame of one *Serée*, it also occasions the theme of the *next* one, which begins with the assembled guests refusing to sit nearer the joker in case he still smells. Bouchet uses this ‘*vilain*’ figure to foster the distinctively unsettling but constructive epistemology of the *Serées*, and to represent knowing as inseparable from having a body, from having faculties that straddle body and mind, and from being a social animal.

¹ For advice on particular points, I am grateful to Robert Descimon, Richard Parish, François Quiviger, Hugh Roberts, Marie-Claire Thomine, and to the anonymous peer-reviewer.

Keywords

Guillaume Bouchet; dreams; scatology; epistemology; *vilain*

Les Serées by the printer-publisher Guillaume Bouchet,² a much reprinted, vast compendium of knowledge, takes the form of dinner conversations in and around Poitiers, involving merchants and those with whom they might plausibly socialize. The conversations have allegedly been transcribed by Bouchet himself. Each of these 36 ‘Serées’ has a theme. The themes of the sixteenth and seventeenth Serées, first published in 1597, are dreams and smell. These two Serées take up respectively about twenty and a dozen pages in the octavo editions.

About a third of the way into Serée XVI, the discussion about dreams takes a new turn:

² Book 1 appeared in 1584, Book 2 in 1597, and Book 3 in 1598. An augmented version of Book 1 first appeared in 1608. Bouchet had died in 1594. On Bouchet and *Les Serées*, see the works listed in Neil Kenny, “‘Ce qui occasionna ceste Serée fut...’: les ‘causes’ du savoir dans *Les Serées* de Guillaume Bouchet”, in *Contes et discours bigarrés*, Cahiers V. L. Saulnier 28 (Paris: Presses de l’Université Paris–Sorbonne), pp. 103–16 at 103, n. 3. To these should be added Nikolas Kiès, ‘Rencontrer en devisant: la conversation facétieuse dans les recueils bigarrés des années 1580 (Du Fail, Cholières, Bouchet)’, unpublished doctoral thesis (Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2015), which I was unable to consult before writing the present article; Claude La Charité, ‘*Les Serées* de Guillaume Bouchet ou les saturnales polyphoniques’, in *Contes et discours bigarrés*, Cahiers V. L. Saulnier 28 (Paris: Presses de l’Université Paris–Sorbonne, 2011), pp. 117–29; Philippe de Lajarte, ‘*Pravus nunc vobis videor, quia vobis jam non intelligor*: le dessein de Guillaume Bouchet dans *Les Serées*’, in *Contes et discours bigarrés*, pp. 89–101; Jonathan Patterson, *Representing Avarice in Late Renaissance France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 64–77. There is no modern critical edition of *Les Serées*.

Il y avoit un Drolle en ceste Seree si vilain, comme vous entendrez par son conte, qu'il eust bien esté receu en l'administration d'aucunes Republiques, où il faut, pour estre Bourgamestre, estre vilain de trois lignees: lequel demanda de quel humeur venoit un songe de merde qu'il avoit faict depuis peu de temps. Lors une Fesse-tonduë luy va dire, vous parlez tant entre vos dents qu'on n'a garde de le vous dire, on ne vous entent point. Que si vous dites ce beau conte, les Cyniques vous enclorront dans un tonneau avec leur Diogene. Parquoy le Drolle en s'excusant va dire, Les paroles ne puent point: & est bien difficile de trouver honestes paroles aux choses deshonestes. Puis recommença ainsi. Vous sçavez tous le besoing que j'ay d'argent, & la devotion que je porte à la feste de l'invention sainte Croix, n'ayant en ma bourse croix, ne banniere, tout estant allé en procession. Voilà qui fait que tout le jour je ne pense qu'à trouver de l'argent. Et parce qu'on songe la nuict ce qu'on a traité de jour, il est arrivé qu'une de ces nuicts je songeay d'avoir trouué un thresor sous terre, & ne l'osant oster de là, parce qu'il estoit grand jour, ce me sembloit, je pensay en moy mesme à remarquer ce lieu, tant pour le trouver mieux quand la nuict seroit venuë, qu'afin aussi que personne ne pensast qu'en un si sale lieu il y eust rien de bon caché. Qu'advint-il de mon songe? C'est que je trouvay quand je fus resveillé, me souvenant bien de mon songe, que j'avois chié au lict: & ainsi une partie de mon songe fut veritable, mais non pas ce je souhaitois le plus.

Quelqu'un lors luy demanda: Et personne ne sentit il rien de vostre beau songe? Non pas, respond nostre songeur, car j'estois tout seul. Il luy fut repliqué, *vah homini sol[i]*. Ouy bien, dit[-]il, quand il a chié sous luy, comme moy, car il n'a personne qui le torche. Alors celui qui parloit à luy, demande à ce songeur, se reculant de luy, combien il y avoit que cela luy estoit arrivé: respondant qu'il

n'y avoit que trois jours, il va dire, Vrayement je le croy bien, car vous en puez encores tout[.] Ils se prinrent tous à rire aussi bien que le songeur, qui ne laissa à leur demander, si on pourroit tirer quelque sens de ce songe, & si c'estoit un bon signe. On luy respond qu'on n'en pouvoit trouver de meilleur, puis qu'il paroissoit bien en ses draps, & en sa chemise, & qu'il ne falloit point aller aux devins, & qu'on sentoit bien que signifioit ce songe.³

So this 'vilain' dreamer tells how in a dream he marked the location of some treasure before waking up to find that in reality he had soiled his bed. The interlocutors' interpretation of his dream then relaunches the discussion of dreams with reference to numerous authorities and commonplaces, especially ancient. The 'vilain' dreamer has disappeared from the discussion. But he then makes a surprising return, a dozen pages later, in the opening sentences of the next *Serée* (XVII), 'Des odeurs, & du sentiment':

Nostre songeur se trouva encores le lendemain là où nous soupçons: mais quand il fallut se mettre à table, personne ne vouloit se seoir aupres de luy, ayans tous ceste opinion qu'il pouoit encores. Quant à moy, je vay faire tout le contraire, car je me renye le plus près de luy qu'il me fut possible: ayant appris que toutes senteurs se sentent moins de près que de loing: à cause que l'odeur, bonne ou mauvaise, temperee & meslee avec l'air, est renduë plus forte: mesmes les fleurs ont leur senteur plus souëf de loing que de prés: [. . .]. Et à cela ne fait rien si le sentiment se fait par l'organe du nez, ou par le cerveau,

³ Guillaume Bouchet, *Les Serees [. . .] divisees en trois livres [. . .]. Dernière edition. Reveuë & augmentee par l'auteur* (Lyon: Pierre Rigaud, 1614), Livre 2, *Serée* XVI, pp. 119–20. In quotations from early modern material, 'i' has been distinguished from 'j' and 'u' from 'v'.

laissant la dispute aux Medecins. Qui bailla encores plus d'occasion de se reculer de nostre songeur, ce fut qu'en se mettant à table on sentit une mauvaise senteur, dont tous en accusoient nostre songeur: lequel en se riant va dire deux ou trois petits mots de taverne, [. . .]. Et ne disoit pas sans cause, Homme ne bouge: dautant que ce qui est remué remplit plus l'air, & est plustost apporté à nous, & transmis à nostre sentiment, que ce qui n'est mouvé ni brouillé: [. . .]. Il y avoit en ceste Seree un coliqueux, lequel ne se faisoit que rire de ce qu'on avoit joué de la veze: disant, Je ne sçay pas qui a faict cela, [. . .]. Possible adjoustoit-il, qu'il est coliqueux comme moy, & les coliqueux sçavent le danger que c'est de retenir une chose qui ne vaut rien: [. . .]. Ou bien cela viendrait il point de quelqu'un qui a esté pressé & serré à l'entree de la table? Car c'est une chose asseuree, nous asseuroit-il, où peu ont prins garde, qu'au commencement du repas on est plus pressé & serré à la table que non pas à la fin, combien qu'il semble devoir estre au contraire, que nous devons estre plus estroitement assis à la fin du repas, ayans le ventre plein, qu'au commencement.

Mais voyant bien que vous n'en croyez rien, escoutez les raisons qu'en donne Plutarque: ou c'est, dit-il, que la faim nous fait presser & choquer les uns contre les autres à l'entree du repas: ou bien qu'au commencement du disner & souper nous sommes assis de nostre large, & panchons en avant, regardans sur la table de front, mais apres qu'on est rassasié, nous nous tenons sur le costé. Nostre songeur, songeant à ce qu'on avoit dict paravant, va dire qu'il ne croyoit pas, que tant plus ce qui sort de nous par le lieu à ce destiné sent mal, & est de mauvaise odeur, tant plus il denote la personne malade, & avoir les humeurs corrompûes: mais tenant le contraire, disoit qu'on estime la nature de chasque chose bonne, quand elle exerce bien ce qui est propre a son espece. Quelqu'un

se prenant à rire repliqua ainsi: Je m'esbahis comme de tel sujet on peut recueillir quelques raisons servantes aux choses naturelles: [. . .]. Il luy fut respondu: Tant naturelles que vous voudrez, si est-ce que les Anciens ont faict ce qu'ils ont peu pour couvrir ces choses que vous appelez naturelles: [. . .]. Nostre songeur ne laissa pour tout cela à faire un tel conte: laissant aux femmes ceste vaine superstition de paroles, estant mal-aisé de parler honestement d'une chose sale & vilaine.⁴

So the 'vilain' dreamer's presence on the following evening makes the assembled company lurch away from him, except for the narrator, who believes that proximity paradoxically reduces smell. Everyone else then lurches back even further because of a definite smell. Does it come from the 'vilain' dreamer, or is it a new one secretly emitted by another diner altogether? (It is called 'ceste secrette'.⁵) If so, what caused it? Aetiological speculation ensues. Eventually the 'vilain', before disappearing from the text, makes a final speech, announced by the last sentence in the above quotation. It is an anecdote, which recounts how a man's suave wit turned embarrassment into humour after he and one of the women whom he was addressing had broken wind.

Across the divide between these two *Serées*, the smelly dreamer's presence is thus framed by the term 'vilain'. It appears twice when he is introduced and once when he bows out. What does it mean? How does its meaning affect overall interpretation of the work? And why does that matter?

Each of the three occurrences has a distinct primary meaning. The first—'un Drolle en ceste Seree si vilain'—mainly signifies moral lowness. The second—'vilain

⁴ *Les Serees*, Livre 2, Serée XVII, pp. 132–5.

⁵ *Les Serees*, Livre 2, Serée XVII, p. 133.

de trois lignees’—mainly signifies social lowness, and, in the context evoked, the status of commoner as opposed to noble. The third—‘une chose sale & vilaine’—mainly signifies scatological lowness. I am indebted to the work of Marie-Claire Thomine for attuning me to these distinct but related strands and also to the customary grammatical distinctions between them, which Bouchet reflects by using the adjective predicated of a person to refer to morally low behaviour (‘un Drolle en ceste Seree si vilain’), the adjective predicated of an object for scatological lowness (‘une chose sale & vilaine’), and the noun (derived from the medieval Latin *villanus*) for social lowness that is in principle morally neutral (‘vilain de trois lignees’).⁶

The smelly dreamer is the whole package: morally, socially, and scatologically low; being ‘vilain’, being *a* ‘vilain’, and talking about ‘vilain’ things. But these three meanings, although clearly constituting a semantic nexus, do not merge seamlessly. Indeed, the initial joke relies on their distinctness from each other. We do not really believe that the smelly dreamer is so base (‘vilain’) that he would have qualified to be mayor in a city where to do so you have to be a fourth-generation commoner (‘vilain’). Indeed, no such cities existed:⁷ the stipulation comically inverts the real one that required three previous generations of one’s family to have been noble to qualify one for tax exemptions from a Cour des Aides. Rather, Bouchet is putting the three semantic strands into an unsettled relation with each other. Let me briefly consider how each strand is amplified yet questioned over the pages where the smelly dreamer is present.

⁶ See the contribution by Marie-Claude Thomine to the present volume. See also Jonathan Patterson, ‘Rabelais’s Uncommon Villains: A Reinterpretation of *Quart Livre* 45–7’, *Études Rabelaisiennes*, 54 (2015), pp. 97–113 at 98–9.

⁷ It would not have occurred in any case for nobles to present themselves for *corps de ville* functions that would have damaged their status.

He is an extreme example of the disruptive figures in the *Serées* who regularly interrupt the socially smooth flow of commonplaces. (Another, who also appears here, more fleetingly, is the ‘Fesse-tonduë’.)⁸ The ‘moral lowness’ sense in which the smelly dreamer is ‘vilain’ is the fairly weak one of ‘anti-social’. The reason is obvious, malodorous one! The secondary reason is that he *talks* about the primary reason, thereby earning comparison with the supremely anti-social taboo-breaker Diogenes the Cynic. ‘Vilain’ has further connotations here too. One is that of money-obsessed miser:⁹ even his enthusiastic participation in the traditional Feast of the Finding of the Cross may be a joke about his greed, since it seems to be cross-marked gold crowns (*écus d’or*) that he is keen to find, his own money having ‘processed’ away.¹⁰ Another connotation is that of socio-moral isolation. The smelly dreamer sleeps on his own (which in some contexts might be a sign of virtue but is here one of squalor since it means that no-one cleaned him up after his nocturnal accident), and is physically shunned by all but one diner. Yet he is made a more ambivalent figure by the facts that the other interlocutors already know him¹¹ and that he dispenses friendly advice about avoiding noxious smells.

Secondly, if his being ‘vilain’ in the ‘*social* lowness’ sense is initially left indeterminate by the jokiness with which it is introduced, it is reinforced by his ‘mots de taverne’ and, more implicitly, by his complete disinterest not just in having a wash (a rarer activity then than now *across* the social spectrum) but especially in covering

⁸ On such figures, see André Janier, ‘*Les Serées*’ (1584–1597–1598) du libraire-imprimeur Guillaume Bouchet (1514–1594), rev. by Jean-Claude Arnould (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006), pp. 770–2.

⁹ As Emma Herdman points out in the present volume, ‘chiche’, ‘sordide’, and ‘avare’ are among the epithets for ‘Vilain’ given by Maurice de La Porte in *Les Epithetes* (1571).

¹⁰ Processions for this Feast involved banners of the kind mentioned by the ‘vilain’ and could earn indulgences in sixteenth-century France: see *Cérémonial à l’usage de l’Église du Puy* (Le Puy: P. Pasquet, 1836), p. 442; Jean Julien Estrangin, *Études archéologiques: historiques et statistiques sur Arles* (Arles: Aubin, 1838), pp. 245–6.

¹¹ ‘Vous sçavez tous le besoing que j’ay d’argent, [. . .].’

up his bad odour with the scents and perfumes that were applied with increasing frequency the higher up the social scale one went¹² (as discussed in Serée XVII with reference both to the ancient world—at the end of the second quotation above—and to the modern one). Moreover, the smelly dreamer is interested in smell as an instrument of social degradation laced with misogyny—if more mildly and purportedly consensually than in Rabelais’s ‘haute Dame de Paris’ episode—since the witty man in the smelly dreamer’s closing anecdote seems to be of lower status (‘un habile homme & honeste’, a commoner of below officer level¹³) than the ‘grand’ Dame’ whom he is addressing, surrounded by her ‘Damoiselles’.¹⁴

Finally, so far as the third strand of ‘vilain’ is concerned—the repulsive nature of the objects discussed—it is focused on smell. This is mainly the smell of the ‘thing’ (the ‘chose’) itself, that is, of what the dreamer produced in bed and of what someone may have emitted during dinner. It is characteristic of Bouchet’s pre-deodorization era that the former is assumed to be longlasting (at least by our own washing-obsessed standards), possibly lingering into its fourth day by the time we get to Serée XVII, just as the scents that were widely used as counterblasts were long-lingering, as Montaigne notes about his gloves, handkerchief, and moustache.¹⁵ The

¹² See Peter Burke, ‘Urban Sensations: Attractive and Repulsive’, in *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Renaissance*, ed. Herman Roodenburg (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 32–59 at 45; Georges Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France Since the Middle Ages*, trans. by Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Vigarello argues (pp. 78–84) that in France it was especially in the seventeenth century that cleanliness, whether through washing or clean linen, became associated with social distinction.

¹³ See Charles Loyseau, *Traité des ordres et simples dignitez* (Chasteaudun: for Abel L’Angelier, 1610), p. 135: ‘les Officiers nobles hommes: les bourgeois honorables hommes ou honnestes personnes’. Quoted in Robert Descimon, ‘Un langage de la dignité: la qualification des personnes dans la société parisienne à l’époque moderne’, in *Dire et vivre l’ordre social en France sous l’Ancien Régime*, ed. by Fanny Cosandey (Paris: Écoles des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2005), pp. 69–123 at 82.

¹⁴ *Les Serees*, Livre 2, Serée XVII, p. 135.

¹⁵ See Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. by André Tournon, 3 vols (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1998), I.55 (‘Des senteurs’), pp. 494–5. For a classic argument for a deodorization revolution in the eighteenth and especially nineteenth century, see Alain Corbin, *Le Miasme et la jonquille: l’odorat et l’imaginaire*

smelly dreamer makes two proposals for mitigating the disgusting nature of the ‘chose’. One, again recalling the Cynics and immediately contested, is that the ‘chose’ is natural and therefore good.¹⁶ This serves to question in an unresolved way the relation between scatological and moral lowness. The second proposal is his denying the possibility that the stench of the ‘thing’ lingers so powerfully that it permeates even the words used to describe it. Yet the very denying of that possibility raises it. Although he rejects the proverb ‘Les paroles ne puent point’,¹⁷ on the other hand the mumbling and teeth-clenching with which he first tries to tell his story suggest some somatic disruption of the clean speaking (‘honestes paroles’) he is aiming for.

How do these meanings of ‘vilain’ associated with the smelly dreamer affect interpretation of the *Serées*? To answer that we need to look beyond *Serées* XVI and XVII. As I have tried to show elsewhere, Bouchet often explicitly provides a ‘cause’ for the adoption of the evening’s topic. He takes pains to identify the ‘causes’ or ‘occasions’ of the pursuit of knowledge. They tend to be contingent, everyday events that occur shortly before the evening gathering or during it.¹⁸ The smelly dreamer takes to an extreme this concern to anchor the pursuit of knowledge in everyday contingency. He constitutes the only example in all 36 *Serées* of a ‘cause’ (in this case: that which occasions the topic of smell) that has in fact lingered on—like a

social, 18^e–19^e siècles (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1982). For a more nuanced chronology, see Mark Jenner, ‘Civilization and Deodorization? Smell in Early Modern English Culture’, in *Civil Histories: Essays Presented to Sir Keith Thomas*, ed. by Peter Burke, Brian Harrison, and Paul Slack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 127–44.

¹⁶ A less radical version of the argument, later defended by the smelly dreamer (at the end of the long quotation above), is the orthodox Aristotelian one that humans and other animate beings have functions that are good when exercised in a way that is proper to them. On the use of the Cynics in *Les Serées*, see Hugh Roberts, *Dogs’ Tales: Representations of Ancient Cynicism in French Renaissance Texts* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 134, 144–6, 231, 243–5, 256–7.

¹⁷ The proverb is also discussed (by Hircan and Oisille) in relation to a scatological story, with abundant use of the *vilain* family of terms, in Nouvelle 52 of Marguerite de Navarre’s *Heptaméron*.

¹⁸ See Neil Kenny, “‘Ce qui occasionna ceste Serée fut...’”. That article does not discuss the smelly dreamer.

smell, or rather *as* a smell—from the diegetic frame of the previous *Serée*, which was devoted to another topic altogether (dreams). He thus provides an extreme instance of Bouchet’s preoccupation with the immediacy with which the apparently trivial everyday can trigger extensive philosophizing. The ‘cause’ of the evening’s topic does not gradually emerge at the start of *Serée XVII*; it is not leisurely devised, like many topics in Nicolas de Cholières’s contemporary *Matinées* and *Aprèsdisnées*;¹⁹ rather, it imposes itself as an overpowering, pungent presence from the first sentence.

The ‘vilain’ dreamer is also one of the most disruptive instruments used by Bouchet to undermine the claim often made for knowledge in the period, that it transcends the vicissitudes of everyday life.²⁰ Bouchet undermines this claim by connecting, instead of separating, two levels of causality: the familiar one of philosophical causation, and that less familiar one, just mentioned, of what causes topics to arise in discussion. I have tried to show elsewhere how those two levels of causality are sometimes distinct in the *Serées* and sometimes intertwined.²¹ Bouchet does not make them coextensive: he does not present analysis of the causes of dreams and of smells as being identical to analysis of what causes them to be discussed. But he creates many gaps in the customary fence between the two, making readers question whether knowledge is ‘out there’ beyond the contingent, embodied, messy, everyday, collective, and conflictual ways in which people try to know.

¹⁹ For this contrast, see Kenny, “Ce qui occasionna ceste *Serée* fut...”, pp. 110–11.

²⁰ For an overview of theories of knowledge, see Charles B. Schmitt and Quentin Skinner, ed., *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), esp. chs 18 (by Richard Popkin) and 19 (by Nicolas Jardine).

²¹ Neil Kenny, “‘lesquels banquets ... ont esté nommez ... des Latins *Sodalitates*’: Discussing Dreams over Dinner in Guillaume Bouchet’s *Serées*”, forthcoming in a volume of essays in memory of Philip Ford: *Sodalitas*, ed. by Ingrid De Smet and Paul White (Droz). That article also focuses on *Serée XVI*, but not on the episode of the smelly dreamer.

The gaps can be gone through from either side of the fence, and in ways that do not always necessarily weaken it. Interlocutors often go through the fence from the everyday side: both the dream and the smell of the ‘vilain’ are everyday objects that ‘cause’ abundant knowledge (of a speculative or contested kind) in the discussion, of which the above quotations give only the barest idea. The excremental dream about marking the location of treasure, which was common in medieval folklore,²² is one of several everyday objects that give rise to discussion of ancient, medieval, and modern authorities on the question of the relation of dreams to waking life. Or again: the dreamer’s apparent smell ‘causes’ the narrator to give the above-quoted disquisition on proximity and smell that is silently adapted from one of Bouchet’s trusty sources, Aristotle or pseudo-Aristotle’s *Problemata*.²³ The very process of progressing from these unsavoury particulars to general natural knowledge is explicitly identified and questioned (‘Je m’esbahis comme de tel sujet on peut recueillir quelques raisons servantes aux choses naturelles’).

Such general knowledge then constantly loops back (through the gap in the fence) to the everyday side, since interlocutors claim that it illuminates questions that face them in their immediate environment: if Plutarch’s theory about diners being more squeezed for room at the start of a meal than at its end is correct,²⁴ then the vile smell present at the start of *Serée XVII* is probably due to someone breaking wind, rather than to the smelly dreamer. This example shows knowledge at its most

²² See Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, Based on the system of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, Part II: Tales of the Stupid Ogre, Anecdotes and Jokes, and Formula Tales* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia/Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004), no. 1645B, pp. 353–3.

²³ See Aristotle, *Habentur hoc volumine haec Theodoro Gaza interprete. Aristotelis de natura animalium. lib. ix. [. . .] Aristotelis problemata in duas dequadraginta sectiones* (Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1513), Section XII, sigs 227^r–228^r. On other uses of the *Problemata* in *Les Serées*, see Janier, pp. 342–3.

²⁴ See Plutarch, *Symposiacs*, V.6.

powerful, para-doxically questioning everyday assumptions, such as that diners are more likely to be squeezed for room at the end of a meal. In other words, Bouchet's causal embedding of the pursuit of knowledge in everyday life is certainly not a vote for empiricism. On the other hand, the uncertainty that pervades most knowledge in the *Serées* undermines the extent to which causal knowledge can illuminate the everyday. Like many other views propounded in the debates, Plutarch's theory could be wrong.

Certainly, some interlocutors claim that such illumination of the everyday can occur despite a degree of uncertainty: the narrator claims that his Aristotelian theory of the relation between proximity and smell holds whatever one's position on the vexed question of the precise location of our organ of smell.²⁵ But the illumination is always provisional because uncertainty is so endemic: the narrator's view of the relation between proximity and smell is not shared by the other diners, nor necessarily by Bouchet. The criss-crossing between both sides of the fence—knowledge and the everyday—embeds uncertainty not just in the correctness or otherwise of propositions but in the embodied and collective processes by which we try to know.

The salient example of this is uncertainty as to whether the smelly dreamer is really still smelly at all, now that a few days have passed since his nocturnal accident. His attempt to launch causal analysis of his dream makes his listeners *think* that they can still smell its after-effects. But Bouchet tacitly presents this reaction as an indication that words might, after all, 'stink' (despite the proverb). It is only after the dreamer has confirmed that the dream occurred a mere three days ago that one interlocutor recoils in *Serée XVI* (perhaps *pretending* to smell something rather than

²⁵ Aristotle and Galen's belief that the olfactory faculty is in the brain was eventually discredited by mid-seventeenth century proof that the smell receptors are located in the nasal mucous membrane. See Robert Jütte, *A History of the Senses* (Cambridge and Malden MA: Polity, 2005), pp. 40–1.

imagining that he does). And, at the start of the next *Serée*, all recoil (except the narrator) because they *see* the dreamer and think that he smells ('ayant tous ceste opinion'), not necessarily because he reallyt does; it is only shortly afterwards that the definite existence of *a* smell is determined, with uncertainty as to whether it is the dreamer's old one or someone else's new one. We are implicitly in the Montaignian domain of the embodied imagination and its interference with perception.²⁶ What causes the interlocutors to discuss smells throughout *Serée* XVII may be not so much a smell (that of the dreamer) as smell-talk, which produces gestural and olfactory (or quasi-olfactory) reflexes in them. Uncertainty about the cause of the discussion (a smell or an imagined smell?) is here the same as uncertainty about the cause of certain smells (are they caused by odours or by the imagination?).

Smells prove impossible to bottle up conceptually as objects of knowledge, because they are invisible, of indeterminate extension (is there one smell or two?), and perceived not only by the external sense of smell but also by internal ones that include imagination as well as reason. It is difficult even to talk about smells without one's conceptual apparatus being perceptually overpowered by them to a degree. As I have tried to show elsewhere, Bouchet treats dreaming in a similar way: the activity of dreaming is not merely the nocturnal object that is analysed, but also the daytime activity of analysing it: hence his punning on the period sense of *rêver* and *songer* as 'to speculate', as in the second long quotation above ('Nostre songeur, songeant . . .').²⁷

²⁶ See Montaigne, 'De la force de l'imagination', in *Essais*, ed. by Tournon, I.21; Wes Williams, *Monsters and their Meanings in Early Modern Culture: Mighty Magic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 15–23.

²⁷ See Kenny, "lesquels banquets".

Thus, *Les Serées* communicates an epistemology that is inclusive (in unsettling and awkward ways) of what one might call the ‘vilain’—a shifting cluster of scatological, moral, and social lowness. The ‘vilain’, in this sense, is allowed to determine the very sequencing of knowledge: smells can be linked to dreams on the level of causal analysis (as they are in the discussion of the smelly dreamer’s accident), but that is not what causes talk of dreams to give rise to a whole *Serée* on smell; after all, there are numerous other factors that are also causally linked to dreams in *Serée XVI*, but they do not trigger (and ‘cause’) the next topic. Rather, what causes that transition on the level of discourse is the uncontrollable irruption of disgust and of socio-moral unease that the stench of words provokes. A ‘vilain’ subject and his even more ‘vilain’ objects are included in the activity of knowing, even if they are partly or wholly ostracized on a social level: indeed, the *Serée* on dreams began with the physical exclusion from the evening, on moral grounds, of the very neighbour who provoked its topic (by trying to cadge an invitation to the pig roast by claiming to have dreamed the night before that he was eating pork).²⁸ What helps stretch socio-moral inclusiveness almost to the extent of epistemological inclusiveness is laughter, announced by the opening description of the smelly dreamer as ‘un Drole’. The interlocutors, with him sometimes joining in, laugh three times in the long quotations above, in a way that defuses disgust and embarrassment.²⁹ Even that activity of laughter, while seeming to be on the everyday side of the fence, then itself becomes part of the object of knowledge investigated, since the dreamer’s anecdote about how wind-breaking in polite company induced laughter gives rise to a

²⁸ *Les Serees*, Livre 2, *Serée XVI*, pp. 111–13. See Kenny, “lesquels banquets”.

²⁹ The same occurs within that embedded anecdote about the ‘un habile homme & honeste’ that is recounted by the smelly dreamer: *Les Serees*, Livre 2, *Serée XVII*, pp. 135.

physiological discussion of how laughter can in turn induce ... more wind-breaking, or even something worse ('& possible pis').³⁰

Bouchet gives the 'vilain'—as both person and thing—a place within the activity of knowing, if an uneasy one. This perhaps echoes the minor role that Bouchet has won for himself in the recent history of smell *qua* smell, since he apparently stands out at the end of the sixteenth century for letting one of his interlocutors argue strongly that garlic breath should remain socially acceptable although it was now threatened by what Elias, no doubt over-schematically, has called the civilizing process.³¹ The merchant Bouchet presents knowing as inseparable from having a body, from having faculties that straddle body and mind, and from being a social animal. Although, as Michel Jeanneret has shown in relation to the symposium genre, many other writers before Descartes (and indeed still after him) presented knowing in ways broadly consonant with Bouchet's,³² the latter's distinctiveness lies partly in the huge momentum that knowing gains in the *Serées* from this embodied, social, and sceptical conception of it. Epistemologically, disgust is at least as productive as destructive in the *Serées*, in contrast to a work with which it had many direct connections, *Le Moyen de parvenir* by François Béroalde de Verville (c. 1616), where degradation is so strong as to seem at times to undermine all knowing. In *Les*

³⁰ 'Je vous laisse penser, adjousta nostre songeur, si ces Damoiselles, & la Dame mesme, se peurent garder de rire, & si en riant il ne leur arriva point d'en faire autant, & possible pis: car vous sçavez que les muscles du diaphragme, qui servent à la respiration, & sont agitez par le ris, servent aussi au reject des excremens.' *Les Serees*, Livre 2, Serée XVII, p. 135.

³¹ 'Et n'y a rien, adjoustoit il, qui monstre plus que nous degenerons de nos ancestres, & que nous ne sommes plus gens de guerre & belliqueux, que de rejeter la viande des bons soldats, & mespriser ceux qui mangent des aulx & des oignons: veu que de tout temps l'ail a esté la meilleure & plus commune nourriture du vaillant gendarme'. *Les Serees*, Livre 2, Serée XVII, p. 140. The passage is picked out by Vigarello (p. 86) as swimming against the tide of the times, at least as regards the social elites to whom the wealthy Bouchet himself belonged. See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, ed. by Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom, and Stephen Mennell (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

³² Michel Jeanneret, *Des mets et des mots: banquets et propos de table à la Renaissance* (Paris: José Corti, 1987).

Serées, knowing is pursued with all the more gusto because of its troubling ‘relation to the ‘vilain’.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Neil Kenny is Professor of French at the University of Oxford and Senior Research Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford. He is the author of *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), *An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century French Literature and Thought* (London: Duckworth, 2008), and *Death and Tenses: Posthumous Presence in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). His current project is on the relation between families, social hierarchy, and literature in early modern France.

Email neil.kenny@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk