

## **Deflowering the Garden: *Le droit du seigneur* and La Fontaine**

by  
**Dana Marie Chase**

“Le Jardinier et son Seigneur” represents one of the only fables written by La Fontaine that does not appear to have been inspired by any other major storyteller. Often a familiar tale of Aesop or Boccaccio clearly functions as an intertext to La Fontaine’s *Fables*, but in this instance, critics have only guessed at a possible root in a tale by Camerarius. Even then, the specialists who compiled the Pléiade edition of La Fontaine’s *Fables* admit to great embellishment of this ancient source.<sup>1</sup> Because “Le Jardinier et son Seigneur” does not appear to have a clear intertextual reference to a classic text, perhaps it can be inferred that a more current source inspired La Fontaine’s creation of this original story. As in much of La Fontaine’s work, the text functions as a specific form of social criticism, namely a critique of the feudal system. Looking at a fable such as “Le Jardinier et son Seigneur” through this lens is in itself therefore nothing new. However, highlighting certain images within the text reveals a more explicit tool that La Fontaine used to paint a brutal picture of the class system, for the fable acts as an extended metaphor of the ancient privilege of noblemen: *le droit du seigneur*. In this fable’s projection of the woman as garden, the gardener’s daughter not only symbolizes fertile ground that her father wishes to control; she also represents desirable territory that the suzerain seeks to conquer.

“Le Jardinier et son Seigneur” tells the story of a bourgeois gardener who becomes so annoyed with a hare who nibbles away at his garden that he decides to call for the help of his seigneur. Already in the second line social hierarchy is established, for the gardener is described as a kind of half-breed “demi-Bourgeois, demi-Manant.” After this introduction which sets the stage for class conflict, the drama unfolds. Gardens have traditionally acted as a metaphor for women, and more specifically as a metaphor for a woman’s sexual organs. In this fable, the garden walled in by a

thick hedge resembles the *hortus conclusus*, the enclosed garden frequently used to represent virginity from the Middle Ages on, especially in religious iconography of the Virgin Mary. The closely guarded space in this fable blends the useful with the agreeable, providing vegetables for the dinner table, flowers for bouquets, and even a few herbs to add flavor, including *serpolet*, a kind of thyme, which is incidentally a plant well-known to attract rabbits.<sup>2</sup>

As could be expected, such a rich variety of greens and flowers soon attracts a pesky rabbit who defies all attempts at extermination. As fecund creatures, rabbits have traditionally represented sexual desire or personified lovers, and in this case it seems that the gardener is having a hard time keeping rabbits out of his precious garden. Furthermore, the reference to “les pierres et les bâtons qui perdent leur crédit” when used against “le Maudit animal” appears to indicate that the rabbit metaphorically represents a member of the lower class who poses a threat to the economic stability of the gardener, a man depicted as social climber caught between the rungs of social hierarchy. As Philip Wadsworth notes in an article on La Fontaine’s views on marriage, many marriages in the 17<sup>th</sup> century were considered as a partnership for the orderly merging of family properties and the procreation of legitimate heirs. Wadsworth argues that La Fontaine fights against this concept of *le mariage de convenience*, advocating instead marriage for love, or at least love within marriage.<sup>3</sup> Even though Wadsworth does not make specific reference to “Le Jardinier et son Seigneur” in his article, the imagery in this fable of La Fontaine supports his argument, for it paints the picture of a father who cannot tolerate the actions of his daughter because he desires to control what he sees as his property. The rabbit, as a creature uninvited by the gardener but made welcome by a garden sown with rich herbs, threatens to disrupt the felicity of the estate. Perhaps as a “jardin assez propre” rather than a virginal, obedient young girl, the daughter cares less about her family name and more about personal happiness. Despite her desire to choose her lover, her father, however, seeks to adhere to convention and marry within or above his class.

By calling on his seigneur for help, the gardener makes an appeal to social order and reinforces class hierarchy.

However, the description of what follows after the gardener makes his request demonstrates a failed attempt to appeal to a higher authority in a time of need. As Marie-Odile Sweetser suggests, the fable “Le Jardinier et son Seigneur” forms a parody of the feudal ideal that accords the suzerain the power to protect those who depend on him. The gardener could have performed the simple task of smoking out the hare by himself, but he mistakenly believes that the seigneur will help him out of a sense of duty. When the seigneur arrives “avec ses gens,” this equally unnecessary show of force wrecks havoc on the estate. Instead of defending his vassals against invaders, the seigneur in this tale ends up doing a horrific amount of damage out of a vain and selfish desire to demonstrate his strength.<sup>4</sup> Appealing to higher authority therefore reveals a certain lack of judgement on the part of the gardener who should have looked after the problem himself.

When an analysis of certain images in the text are combined with Sweetser’s interpretation, another parody of feudal power emerges in a critique of a particular privilege of noblemen: *le droit du seigneur*. Controversy surrounding *le droit du seigneur* has existed nearly from its inception, and there are many historians who believe that this feudal right never existed as it is commonly understood, namely as the right of a seigneur to have sexual intercourse before the groom.<sup>5</sup> Even though legend recounts numerous instances where the feudal lord takes advantage of his right to sleep with his vassal’s daughters on their wedding night, many social critics hold the opinion that *le droit du seigneur* was simply a tax levied on newlyweds. A line in La Fontaine’s fable appears to hint at this type of monetary exchange, for after the seigneur inquires when the gardener’s daughter will be married and have children, he states firmly, “Bon homme, c’est à ce coup qu’il faut fouiller à l’escarcelle.” The impending marriage of the gardener’s daughter will mean that the gardener will have to dip into the proverbial moneybag and pay up.

Even though the fable at first appears to refer to this seigniorial privilege as simply a monetary affair, the abuse of feudal power becomes more evident in the striking references to *le droit du seigneur* as a sexual transaction.<sup>6</sup> La Fontaine would not be the first to point to this practice as proof of the barbarous nature of the feudal system. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Voltaire used this evidence of an abuse of power as a propagandistic tool to attack both the clergy and aristocratic class.<sup>7</sup> The debate concerning what *le droit du seigneur* meant and whether or not it was ever anything other than a tax continues even until this day, but it is certain that many writers throughout history have pointed to the heinous nature of this aristocratic privilege in order to encourage social reform. La Fontaine, like the Enlightenment *philosophes* who came after him, uses a description of this brutal practice to enhance his criticism of the social order.

The text of the fable “Le Jardinier et son Seigneur” weaves together both cooking and gardening images in order to describe not only the seigneur’s desire for the gardener’s daughter, but also to depict the exchange that takes place between the gardener and the seigneur. On the day the seigneur arrives to perform the task assigned to him, he not only sizes up the situation; he also sizes up the gardener’s daughter. In fact, the first words he eagerly utters to the gardener are “vos poulets, sont-ils tendres? La fille du logis, ...approchez.” In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, just as today, feathered fowl can refer to a young woman,<sup>8</sup> and in this instance the “chick” in question is quite obviously also the gardener’s daughter. After this rather pointed question, and before setting out to hunt the hare, the seigneur sits down to a hearty meal, all the while forcibly fondling the young girl. The next culinary question more precisely narrows down the intent of the transaction between the nobleman and his vassal. The seigneur asks “De quand sont vos jambons? Ils ont fort bonne mine.” The purpose of this inquiry can more clearly be illuminated by observing that *le droit du seigneur* had a variety of synonyms in the 17<sup>th</sup> century: it could also be called *le droit de défloration* or *déflement* (a direct allusion to the breaking of the hymen, and an image rich with garden allusions), or it could be referred to as *le droit de cuissage* or *jambage* (a reference to the

right of the seigneur to place a naked leg in the bed of the newly-wed).<sup>9</sup> Here, the question concerning the gardener's *jambons* acts as an allusion to *le droit de jambage*. Accordingly, the gardener hands the hams over to his seigneur in response to his inquiry, and the transaction is complete. By doing so, the gardener plays his proper role in the social hierarchy and maintains his control over his daughter, presumably out of a fear of losing her to a lover of a lower social status. The seigneur responds with "Je les reçois, et de bon cœur," a comic reaction given that this expression is usually used by those who offer something and not by those who receive. The seigneur is in fact helping himself to what he sees as his.

The scene which follows describes the utter destruction of the small enclosed garden, visually presenting a forceful sexual attack similar to a rape. As a show of his power and a reinforcement of his bold masculinity, the seigneur rides in with all his cavalry and hunting dogs, trampling the vegetables and rendering the garden useless. The reference to this kitchen garden, or *potager*, may also allude to the young girl's sexual attributes, for the word *potage* was used as a metaphor for a woman during the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> For example, in Molière's play *L'école des femmes*, one of the characters proclaims "La femme est en effet le potage de l'homme / Et quand un homme voit d'autres hommes parfois / Qui veulent dans sa soupe aller tremper leurs doigts, / Il en montre une colère extrême."<sup>11</sup> La Fontaine's fable also appears to allude more directly to the gardener's daughter as *un potage* when, after the destruction of the garden, the narrator proclaims "Adieu chicorée et poireaux / Adieu de quoi mettre au potage." In addition to this culinary metaphor, the garden's mangled hedge also visually manifests forced entry, for in the garden's living wall the seigneur rips "non pas un trou, mais trouée, horrible et large plaie / Que l'on fit à la pauvre haie / Par ordre du seigneur." Because of a fear that he could not escape the garden "tout à cheval" the seigneur tears the wall apart.

The hideous nature of such a violent action on the part of the seigneur is compounded by the revelation that the breaking of this young girl's hymen was most likely not at all necessary. When viewed in a more positive light, *le droit du seigneur* can represent a necessary ceremonial privilege, for the suzerain clears the way

for the groom on the wedding night. However, in this instance, the seigneur appears to be unaware that this young girl may not in fact be a virgin. As pointed out in the beginning of the fable, this “jardin assez propre” has been overrun by a nibbling rabbit “qui vient prendre sa goulée,” and therefore it follows that the seigneur need not resort to such a barbarous initiation. Furthermore, the fable states early on “On fricasse, on se rue en cuisine.” The expression *fricasser* functions on multiple levels in this narrator’s commentary, for *une fricassée* is “un ragout de poulet ou de lapin cuit à la casserole,” another allusion to a woman as *un potage*.<sup>12</sup> The expression then can be expanded to include “passer à la casserole,” a phrase that alludes to the action of obliging a woman to sex.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the culinary innuendo that reinforces the depiction of the seigniorial right as a sexual act, the verb *fricasser* also can refer to the action of dispensing money in a dishonest fashion, thereby including the idea of a monetary exchange between the seigneur and the gardener.<sup>14</sup> These images of gardens, kitchens, and moneybags work together to vividly create an extended metaphor describing *le droit du seigneur* as both a physical violation and a deceitful transaction.

The final lines of the fable sum up the irony and the brutality of the scene that has just been described. The gardener, surveying the damage done to his estate, proclaims “Ce sont là jeux de prince,” a cliché that ends “ils plaisent à ceux qui les font.” No joy has been procured from such an attempt to appeal to the powers that be, for all who fall under the rule of the seigneur are bound to suffer from abuse. The depiction of *le droit du seigneur* demonstrates the faults of a society that adheres to strict feudal hierarchy instead of recognizing the essential equality between all human beings. The relationship between the garden and the rabbit, as a metaphor for the bourgeois fear of intermarriage with the lower class, actually proves to be less damaging than the “salvation” offered by revered upper-class seigneur. In the end, the fable offers no easy solutions to the problems caused by an omnipotent, power-hungry suzerain. The moral of the story “Petits princes, vuidez vos débats entre vous” does not propose great social upheaval, but rather reluctantly reaffirms the existence of social hierarchy, albeit a faulty one. The

fable “Le Jardinier et son Seigneur” therefore not only tells the rather quaint tale of a pesky rabbit, a bumbling gardener, and a boorish nobleman; it also demonstrates what goes wrong when a seigneur abuses his rights.

## Columbia University

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Footnote to “Le Jardinier et son Seigneur,” in La Fontaine, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 1, edited by Jean-Pierre Collinet (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1991). All quotes from this fable come from the Pléiade edition, pp. 143-44.

<sup>2</sup> The sexual connotation of an herb like *serpolet* is also reinforced by Panurge’s evaluation of an ideal woman as given in Rabelais’ *Tiers livre*. Panurge explains that if he were given a choice of eligible women, he would prefer to take “les guayges bergerottes es-chevelées, es quelles le cul sent le serpoulet” rather than to marry “les dames des grandes cours, avecques leurs riches atours et oda-rans perfums de mauljoinct.” François Rabelais, *Le Tiers livre* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1962), 197.

<sup>3</sup> Philip A. Wadsworth, “La Fontaine and his Views on Marriage,” *Rice University Studies* 51, no. 3 (Summer 1965): 81-96.

<sup>4</sup> Marie-Odile Sweetser, “Le jardin: nature et culture chez La Fontaine,” *Cahiers de l’Association Internationale des études françaises* 34 (Mai 1982): 59-72.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Eleanor Palermo Litvack, *Le droit du seigneur in European and American Literature* (Birmingham: Summa Publications, 1984), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Double entendre may be evident even within the statement “il faut fouiller à l’escarcelle,” for a purse, as a hidden, secret enclosure, has been used as a metaphor for the female sexual organs. For instance, the 20<sup>th</sup> century poet Sylvia Plath refers to a pregnant woman by saying “I’m a riddle in nine syllables/.../Money’s new minted in this fat purse/...”(Sylvia Plath, “Metaphors,” in *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. [Glenview, Ill: Scott Foresman, 1987], 497.)

<sup>7</sup> Litvack 12

<sup>8</sup> *Le grand Robert de la langue française: dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, s.v. “poulet.”

<sup>9</sup> Litvack 1

<sup>10</sup> *Le Robert*, s.v. “potage”

<sup>11</sup> Molière, *L'école des femmes*, Act 2, scene 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Le Robert*, s.v. “fricassée.”

<sup>13</sup> *Le Robert*, s.v. “casserole.”

<sup>14</sup> *Le Robert*, s.v. “fricasser.”