THE FRENCH BED

I can’t speak from the man’s point of view, but as a woman, I’d say this etching tells truth about sex. The lover is kneeling for his own pleasure first, then hers too, perhaps. His foot is flexed for pushing energetically. He’s as deep as he can go into the soft folds of her flesh. And she, with knees frankly spread, is telling him with fingers where and how he should move. Notice the eyes, they are so wise with each other. It’s not a brothel. He was in love with this wife.

Rembrandt, in his exuberance, gave the girl three arms. One hand we see stroking the side of her lover’s back, another reaches round for his bum, and the third, a fully visible limb, lies limp on the bed, as if she’s totally compliant, or done. The bed is well made, with canopy and draperies, the linens as plush as her thighs. She’s relaxed into what he desires; she’s eager and wants her own pleasure too. The drypoint’s velvety strokes so accurate. He saw what he wanted and made it, and wanted what he saw.

After all the crosses, Christs feeding the peasants, rooftops and ruins, beggars in hats, here is domestic interior—fine inked-up lines swirled into rumpled bedclothes and bodies’ vulnerable curlings—her sweet face, his competent shoulders. A scribbling style, tender and swift, all gesture and touch. The needle’s hard burr softens and makes vivid the intimacy, the inwardness, the mutual desire. What comes after seduction, the drapery drawn for our eyes—what we want desperately is this.