

DRAGGING THE YOKE OF IDENTITY: SEXUAL DIFFERENCE IN FIN-DE-SIÈCLE  
NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY FRENCH AND FRANCOPHONE  
LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

MANHAL D DANDASHI: Dragging the Yoke of Identity: Sexual Difference in fin-de-siècle nineteenth- and twentieth-century French and Francophone Literature  
(Under the direction of Dominique Fisher)

In what ways is identity a banner, a badge, or a burden? How a person conforms to or resists the implications of any form of identity is the central focus of this study. Through the concept of the yoke, we will discuss Au pays des sables by Isabelle Eberhardt, Monsieur Vénus by Rachilde, and Les yeux bleus cheveux noirs by Marguerite Duras, all narratives in which identity is not always what it appears to be.

In this study, I will examine representations of gender and identity to consider the relationship between performance and sexual politics. As we will see, Rachilde's and Duras's texts create a world in which any facet of identity is a free-floating signifier, challenging traditional notions of femininity, masculinity, and sexual identity as well as the distinction between so-called normality and abnormality. Despite the seemingly liberating trends contained in these two authors' works, we will see that sexual difference (la différence des sexes) often remains intact, a glaring point of contention within the textual worlds. Eberhardt's work allows us to consider many of the same questions in light of how she created her own unique and hybrid identity, that of an Arab horseman in colonial Algeria. Her gender play and texts point to the limits of cultural, ethnic, and gender identity. Her

fiction is highly critical of colonial power and authority while remaining at times ambiguous to sexual difference.

The combined effect of studying these three authors as an ensemble leads to the conclusion, where we will investigate some of the larger questions of sexual politics and identity in a contemporary fin-de-siècle context. Exploring how each author treats the question of identity in its myriad different possibilities and examining the role of sexual difference and the sex/gender system becomes a vehicle for analyzing the role of norms and normativity in the social order. Adapting to the yoke or choosing to resist it becomes a political act imbued with the potential for reimagining what is possible for the self and the world.

## DEDICATION

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <u>Au pays</u>        | Isabelle Eberhardt's <u>Au pays des sables</u>                |
| <u>Bodies</u>         | Judith Butler's <u>Bodies That Matter</u>                     |
| <u>CG</u>             | Charles Baudelaire's <u>Constantin Guys</u>                   |
| <u>Domination</u>     | Pierre Bourdieu's <u>La domination masculine</u>              |
| <u>Dorian Gray</u>    | Oscar Wilde's <u>The Picture of Dorian Gray</u>               |
| <u>Epistemology</u>   | Eve Sedgwick's <u>Epistemology of the Closet</u>              |
| <u>Gender</u>         | Judith Butler's <u>Gender Trouble</u>                         |
| <u>MV</u>             | Rachilde's <u>Monsieur Vénus</u> (MLA edition)                |
| <u>MV</u> trans.      | English translation of Rachilde's <u>Monsieur Vénus</u> (MLA) |
| <u>La maladie</u>     | Marguerite Duras's <u>La maladie de la mort</u>               |
| <u>Moderato</u>       | Marguerite Duras's <u>Moderato cantabile</u>                  |
| <u>Le ravissement</u> | Marguerite Duras's <u>Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein</u>      |
| <u>Undoing</u>        | Judith Butler's <u>Undoing Gender</u>                         |
| <u>Vested</u>         | Marjorie Garber's <u>Vested Interests</u>                     |

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Over the course of roughly the last 150 years, the ways men and women conceive of their respective gender roles and of the relationships among and between themselves as men and women have drastically changed and evolved. What it means to be a man or a woman continues to unfold. Previously received notions of masculinity and femininity are being explored in the best possible sense: certain so-called defining characteristics of what “made” a man or a woman are no longer necessarily applicable in the present day. Feminism and the women’s movement, two related but certainly not coterminous phenomena, have helped women to enter the workplace on a more equal footing with their male counterparts, enabling access to professions and salaries that were unthinkable in the mid-1800s. Ideas generated by feminism and the women’s movement have prompted a greatly expanded sense of what it means to be a woman and have contributed to the conclusion that there is no one definition or set of defining criteria. Indeed, each woman must stake her own claim to her identity as a woman, or, conversely, she may choose not to. Within a patriarchal society, women may not be the coequals of men, but even the most cynical of observers would agree that there have been massive improvements in this regard since the turn of the nineteenth century. Since gender roles are determined heavily by notions of sexual difference—Teresa De Lauretis’s notion of the “mutual containment of gender and sexual difference(s)” (De Lauretis 2)—when

women interrogate their traditional roles, men's roles, reciprocally, are always called into question. One way to illustrate this is with the ascension of women into professional realms that had once been reserved for men: if it had always been men's domain, what does it mean for men (to be a man) once women are accepted into that space?

In a similar fashion, particularly in the last fifteen years of the twentieth century, matters pertaining to sexual orientation have exploded in the media, in the judicial arena, and in the popular imagination. To be gay or lesbian in the United States or in France, to select the two countries most germane to this analysis, no longer carries the same stigma that it once did. Though not fully acceptable in all eyes, it is not nearly as taboo as it once had been. Those hardest hit initially by the AIDS pandemic were met with criminal indifference on the part of many governments, particularly the American one, leading to a powerful lobby of lesbians and gays who began to fight against what they felt was a pernicious system of inequality denying one's fundamental right to live. Although the gay pride movement traces its origin to a fateful night in June of 1969, concerns that arose in the last two decades of the twentieth century—such as gays serving in the military and AIDS—introduced the issue into homes across America in a way that had not been seen before. (This trend has continued with more recent attention paid to gay and lesbian family concerns: having and adopting children, civil unions, and so on.) Tracing the birth and development of the gay rights movement in America, David Posteraro astutely observes that “if Stonewall was its birth, AIDS was its infancy, childhood, youth and adulthood” (Posteraro, screen 3). Indeed, exponential progress in the realm of equal rights for lesbians and gays was achieved due to AIDS and the reaction

of certain communities to official handling of the epidemic.<sup>1</sup> The situation can be described as being congruous in France. Indeed, despite differences in the genesis and organizing principles of the gay rights movements in France and America, as Frédéric Martel has adduced, “the concrete model that inspired homosexuals [in France] came from the United States” (Martel 17).<sup>2</sup>

The place of sexuality as it pertains to gender is a relatively newer concern than is that of the relationships between the sexes. How much or little one’s gender informs one’s sexuality is still a core question on which many disagree. Is it appropriate to assume that if one is born with a penis, one will automatically be attracted to women? Moreover, is it safe to imagine that if one is born with a penis, one is (will become) a man? The answers to these questions, while once a given, are not simple ones. How a culture grapples with such matters is reflected in a variety of ways: the media, legislation, and mass culture are three areas to which one can turn to find just how a culture has come to understand questions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

The goal of this study is to explore the changes in ideas surrounding sex, gender, and sexuality. Of interest is the way in which men relate to women and vice-versa as well as the ways in which men and women conceive of themselves as men or women. Another axis of my inquiry involves the question of sexuality or sexual orientation. As Élisabeth Badinter has noted, the turn of the nineteenth century witnessed a massive change in the

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the changing role of AIDS with regard to gender and representation, see Paula Treichler’s How to Have Theory in An Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS, particularly chapters two (42-98) and eight (235-77).

<sup>2</sup> Martel’s The Pink and the Black: Homosexuals in France Since 1968 provides an excellent overview of major events having to do with homosexuality, focusing on the development of communities and social institutions. Presenting an innovative approach that derives a sense of collective history from the examination of individual life stories (Martel 7), it is the first such text of its kind in France to focus on French lesbian and gay communities and their histories.

way men and women related to one another and set the stage for a broad reimagining of what being a man or a woman might mean.<sup>3</sup> The turn of the twentieth century marks a time during which sexuality itself became a much less stable concept than it once had been. Each of these fin-de-siècle periods will be explored herein as instances that demarcate the changing relationships between the sexes and as proof of, and as a way to interrogate, the power differentials inscribed within categories like “man,” “woman,” and so on. Although I feel that questions of gender are more prevalent in the first fin-de-siècle, and questions of sexual orientation in the second, I do see a good deal of commingling of these concepts in each era and will examine that fact as well.

### Dragging One’s Heels

In beginning to formulate my goals for this project, I had to ask myself how it might be possible to trace changes in conceptions of gender and sexuality over the course of the last 100+ years. Various methods became apparent, each with its own distinct merits. I knew that in the interest of clarity and (relative) brevity I would need to distill one core “hook” to link together these seemingly disparate times and potentially divergent questions aside from the concept of the fin de siècle, to be explored in the section herein “Fin-de-siècle: Which Siècle?” In part thanks to previous endeavors on my part, and in part owing to further research in light of this study, I selected the question of drag. Admittedly, this is not necessarily the best (and certainly far from the only) way to undertake such an examination. However, drag is unique for the way in which it

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<sup>3</sup> Badinter’s analysis of turn-of-the-century sexual relations will be explored in the section “Another Crisis of Masculinity” within this introductory chapter.

implicates questions of both gender and sexuality. It is for this reason that I have selected drag as the matrix through which to interpret the primary texts.

From its alleged origins as the acronym used in the margins of play scripts to indicate “dressed as girl,” drag has always been a site for the commingling of performance and gender bending since one is “in drag” if one wears the clothes typically thought of as being intended for the opposite sex. To be in drag in this way is often to be implicated in a parodic performance that displays the conventions of the gender one is dressed as, and much of Judith Butler’s analysis of drag as it pertains to gender and performance relies on this notion. Butler rightly points out those ways in which drag can be used to reveal the tenuous nature of gender codes and, further, how each of us is involved in portraying these codes.

The power of certain articles of clothing to evoke a host of cultural, ethnic, and religious beliefs and systems is one thing that initially attracted me to working on the issue of drag academically. Furthermore, less conventional uses of the term have always held particular a fascination for me, such as when famous female illusionist RuPaul referred to the various drag looks he could occupy while a man (RuPaul xi), or to the “Clark Kent preppy drag” he wears as a daytime costume of sorts (RuPaul 143). I wish to capitalize on the possibility of identifying less conventional instances of drag while also taking into account the interplay of cultural, sexual, socioeconomic, religious, and ethnic codes.

As I will show through the exploration of the primary texts, there is a good deal of ground left tantalizingly unexplored with regard to drag. Indeed, gender is performative and drag, as performance, is one remarkable way to observe such performativity.

However, gender is not the only marker of identity that drag can perform. Nor is it my contention that drag must always exist in the conventional sense of drag queens or drag kings. In some ways, I believe drag to be always and everywhere around us and that we are all at various times, to a certain extent, in drag as something or other. In the pages to come I will demonstrate this broader understanding through recourse to three texts of French expression and by providing evidence of correlations between what is happening in the text and events that occur in a culture.

### Parsing the Project

This study takes its point of departure by considering the intriguing case of Isabelle Eberhardt, and her collected stories published in the volume Au pays des sables. I will argue that certain central concepts found in those tales mirror issues underlying in the complicated and fascinating life of their author. Eberhardt, of Russian descent, was born in Switzerland and was raised as a boy in her early childhood. She fled her native Switzerland for the East and spent the remainder of her life traveling throughout colonial North Africa. Interestingly, she did so most often in a man's clothes, having assumed a new Arab identity for herself and even converting to Islam. Eberhardt's drag therefore crosses gender lines and also entails the transgression of religious, ethnic, and sexual ones.<sup>4</sup>

Her life has been the object of most of the extant scholarship on her, with the work itself receiving slightly less critical attention. Few scholars that I have encountered, however, attempt to examine her work in the context of her life, in an effort to consider

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly Slimane Zéghidour notes that in Arabic “the words for nationality (djinsiya) and a person's sex (djinss) share the same linguistic root” (qtd. in Hayes 165).

Eberhardt's inscription of herself as subject in history and society. I shall proceed in chapter two by basing my argument on what I have discerned to be a central metaphor in these texts, namely that of the yoke, and on the concept of evasion in all its possible interpretations in her life and work. I propose to examine much of the scholarly publication that has occurred around both the texts themselves and Eberhardt as an individual to point out certain inconsistencies and weaknesses in the extant literature on the subject. Some of the areas concerned involve the question of women in her work and her alleged misogyny, and the place cross-dressing occupied within Eberhardt's sexuality: arguments have been advanced that not only did she become aroused when dressed as a man and that she furthermore wished to be made love to as a man, which is to say, through recourse to passive anal intercourse.

Eberhardt's play with gender is marked by a dual process of accommodation and resistance with respect to prevailing gender codes and regulatory norms. She resists the constraints of her biological sex in Algeria by presenting herself as a man. In so doing, she is able to travel freely within public spaces, thereby circumventing the expectation that, as a woman, she restrict herself to private (i.e., domestic) spaces. But her adoption of a man's identity was not unequivocal: she often enjoyed dressing as a man only to use feminine adjectives in referring to herself (Garber 328). It is written that her husband once introduced her as follows: “‘May I introduce Si Mahmoud Saadi,’ [...] ‘that is his nom de guerre; in fact it is Mme. Ehnni, my wife’” (qtd. in Garber 329). The fact that moments of va-et-vient between man and woman occurred is an instance of Eberhardt's accommodation to and resistance of patriarchy. While Eberhardt remained mindful of the limitations she faced as a woman and avoided them by dressing as a man, by sometimes

referring to herself as a woman or in the feminine, she participated in a disruptive and potentially transformative process. Devor explains: “Those gender blending females who insisted that they be recognized as women [pose] a threat to patriarchal conceptualizations of womanhood and femaleness” (Devor 153).

Accommodation and resistance can perhaps best be seen during the events leading up to a trial in which Eberhardt was required to appear. In spite of the stipulation that she appear before the court dressed as a woman, she beseeched her husband not to waste money on the frivolous and costly raiment of a European woman. She insisted that she would forego wearing the clothing of an Arab man but only because she intended to present herself in court wearing a European man’s clothing (Garber 327). So while in a certain sense she did acquiesce to what was demanded of her by erasing the markers of her “Arabness,” she nevertheless managed to maintain her own autonomy by insisting on dressing as a man for this court appearance.

Several of Eberhardt’s characters, furthermore, demonstrate accommodation and resistance with regard to power as embodied by one authority or another (institutions such as the army, paternal authority, or patriarchy), or they are faced with the dilemma of accommodating themselves to an authority or refusing to do so. There are colonial officers who are expected to rule over native Algerians in a particular way according to the orders of their colonial superiors. In the case of the protagonist of “Le Major,” we see a French officer who rapidly realizes that France is not helping to “civilize” Algeria (Eberhardt, Au pays 122), so he refuses to participate in the oppression of its people despite repeated insistence on the part of his commanders that he do so (Eberhardt, Au pays 130). Another of Eberhardt’s fictional characters—Tessaadith in “Sous le joug”—

resigns herself to the marriage her family arranged for her and gradually adjusts to it; accommodation seems to be her only choice if she is to survive. After a fashion, the young woman elects to engage in an extramarital affair. This affair reveals the possibility of contentment: she does not have to remain in her miserable marriage. Emboldened at the prospect of escape, she renounces all her wifely duties, no longer willing to participate in any of the activities expected of her. In spite of vicious beatings and harassment, she is steadfast in her resolve and does not yield. Her resistance leads to her repudiation and her repudiation enables her to pursue a relationship with her lover (Eberhardt, Au pays 82-83). Eberhardt's grappling with issues of power in her fiction mirrors her own refusal to capitulate to colonial authority and to the constraints of normalized (single) gender expression. Through Eberhardt's life and work, I intend to lay the ground for an expanded understanding of the notion of drag, which I will develop in the exploration of two other texts.

The second text that forms the corpus of this study is Rachilde's Monsieur Vénus, and it is with this text that I will begin to explore in earnest the question of drag and its implications surrounding the shifting relationships between men and women. The novel was first published in 1884—the same year as Huysmans's À rebours—under the pseudonym of Rachilde, whom we know now to be Marguerite Eymery Vallette (1860-1953). Although not her first novel, it was the first to earn any significant attention in part owing to the fact that it was deemed pornographic and subsequently banned in Belgium (having initially been published in Brussels). Rachilde avoided prison in Belgium and took advantage of France's “vibrant but clandestine industry in pornographic or ‘gallant’ literature” (Hawthorne and Constable xiv) and the novel was subsequently republished in

a censored version in 1889 in France. In his preface to that edition, Maurice Barrès alleged that it depicted “le spectacle d’une rare perversité” (Barrès 5), a spectacle he later refers to as “un des cas les plus curieux d’amour de soit [sic] qu’ait produit ce siècle malade d’orgueil” (Barrès 13), one that sheds light on “certaines dépravations amoureuses de ce temps” (Barrès 20). Despite the public’s apparent prurient interest in the novel (arguably encouraged by Barrès’s reading of it), Monsieur Vénus fell into “relative obscurity” (Hawthorne and Constable xiv).<sup>5</sup> Thanks to a recently published unexpurgated edition and translation by the MLA, many readers will come to know and delight in this twisted tale of passion and pulchritude.

Rachilde’s Monsieur Vénus centers on two protagonists: Raoule de Vénérande, a young cross-dressing aristocratic woman and the dazzlingly handsome Jacques Silvert, a lowly painter. It is my contention that while dressing as a man does afford Raoule a certain liberty and perhaps even allows her to transgress the binary of nature/culture, Rachilde’s text nevertheless fails to escape the trappings of the arguably more oppressive sex/gender binary. Rachilde’s failure or unwillingness to move past the sex/gender system mirrors a key problem in queer theory: namely, the role of sexuality. By and large, in this novel heterosexuality remains the norm—with homosexuality, specifically lesbianism, even being disparaged<sup>6</sup>—and sexual behaviors fall along strict gender lines. The trouble with Rachilde’s text is that sexuality and gender roles are all situated along one continuum, in spite of the fact that she depicts gender expression as malleable. So

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed account of the various editions of the novel, its alleged origins, and its reception, see Hawthorne and Constable’s “Rachilde: A Decadent Woman,” esp. xx-xxiii.

<sup>6</sup> After her friend de Raittolbe “accuses” her of lesbianism, Raoule immediately denigrates lesbians and dismisses lesbianism as “le crime des pensionnaires et le défaut de la prostituée” (Rachilde, Monsieur Vénus 67). My analysis of the text takes a vested interest in this particular exchange and will be developed within the chapter devoted to Rachilde’s novel.

while the novel does a phenomenal job of articulating the potential existence of discordance between sex and gender, it does so consistently and unabashedly within a heterosexist regime, thereby allowing gendered power relations to remain intact.

When Raoule and Jacques are intimate, on one level there is a clear reversal of the roles of active and passive. One might expect Jacques, regardless of his behaving “like a woman,” to be the insertive partner in their coupling. Rachilde, however, suggests the contrary: it is in fact Raoule who ultimately penetrates Jacques. The consequences of this on a theoretical level are quite interesting and fraught in that Rachilde—for all her toying with gender expression and performance—does not overturn the symbolic order or the machinations of compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>7</sup> Rather, her characters seem merely to switch roles and/or genders. The man, in one form or another, becomes the woman just as the woman, for all intents and purposes, becomes the man. But the newly constituted woman maintains passivity and subservience to the man and the man exercises tyrannical control of a financial and emotional nature over the woman. Compulsory heterosexuality is not merely maintained, it is celebrated, elevated as ideal. The pernicious framework of heterosexuality and the rampant heterosexism contained in the novel ultimately preclude its ability to transgress the symbolic order.

As we will see, the novel presents one fantastically bold example of a change in the way men and women relate and interact. Although certainly a work of fiction, it is my firm belief that it nevertheless provides cogent evidence of a process that was already underway at the time of its creation. To wit: Badinter argues that “En l’espace de quelques générations, 1871-1914, un nouveau type de femme est apparu qui menace les

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<sup>7</sup> The term is Adrienne Rich’s, and we will explore the essay from which it is taken in the section “The Sex/Gender System & Sexuality” within this introductory chapter.

frontières sexuelles imposées” (Badinter 30). Furthermore, the novel raises more than a few questions regarding sexuality: in the process of transforming Jacques into a woman, his figurative manhood (or lack thereof) becomes alternately detached from and reattached to his literal manhood (and apparent abundance thereof). Jacques is feminized, infantilized, and ultimately dehumanized in the most grotesque of fashions. Throughout, his sexuality and desire are fraught, vacillating between attempts to express virility and utter passivity. There are even homosexual dalliances and undertones to be explored, which further complicate questions of masculinity, femininity, passivity, and virility.

Sexual orientation is a central facet of my investigation of the third and final text in this study, the 1986 novel Les yeux bleus cheveux noirs by Marguerite Duras. The text centers on the unconventional love triangle between a gay man, a woman, and a recently departed foreign man. Although it was never an actual love triangle since the two men never even met, it nevertheless constitutes the tale’s central triangle. In the mind of the first man, the woman becomes the absent man by proxy. Or at least their nightly rendez-vous constitute an attempt on his part to bring to fruition this impossible substitution. Through the body of the woman, our male protagonist endeavors to relive a fleeting moment and make sense of the affair that he never even lived in the first place. What is more, the triangle operates on still another level, since the male and female protagonists do become involved physically over the course of their meetings. Numerous are their attempts to connect in a sexual way, the implications of which will be studied within the chapter, especially in light of the man’s ostensibly being gay.

For my purposes what is useful, then, is the way in which Duras deploys sexual orientation. Through an expanded definition of drag, sexuality (as desire) and sexual

orientation are reshaped in the text. Phantoms and longing become substitutes for actual partners and satiety. Women stand in for men and men stand in for other men throughout the novel. In the process, the lines distinguishing gay from straight are blurred if not utterly obliterated. The man is hindered by his sexual orientation: as a gay man, he is not attracted to the woman and yet he often wishes it were otherwise. At one moment he states, “Je voudrais que vous m’excusiez, je ne peux pas être autrement, c’est comme si le désir s’effaçait lorsque je m’approche de vous” (Duras, Les yeux bleus 46). He tries repeatedly to satisfy her orally or to penetrate her or even merely to caress her,<sup>8</sup> to varying degrees of success. In presupposing that he will not be able to maintain an erection in order to penetrate her or asserting that he simply cannot bring himself to do so (Duras, Les yeux bleus 27, 55-56), he allows his conception of his own sexuality to prevent his pleasure, to forestall the possibility of connection. And yet, in his endeavors to be with the woman, he manifests marked resistance to the sexual comportment one has come to expect of a gay man. Identifying the man as gay provokes what Halberstam has described as “the inevitable exclusivity of any claim for identity” (Halberstam, “F2M” 210). As Halberstam suggests and Duras depicts, the “badge” of sexuality/sexual identity/sexual orientation—whatever the preferred term might be—is a prohibition. It marks the protagonist as gay, opening him up to the possibility of becoming involved with other men and at the same time demarcating him as a man who can only seek out (is

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<sup>8</sup> “La soie noire aura glissé et son visage sera nu sous la lumière. Il touchera ses lèvres avec ses doigts, celles de son sexe aussi, il embrassera les yeux fermés, le bleu qui fuit sous les doigts. Il touchera aussi certaines parties de son corps, infectes et criminelles” (Duras, Les yeux bleus 68). This quote is revelatory of another element I will explore; namely, the hybridity of genre of the text. Moments such as these are rather like stage directions. The text falls somewhere between a novel and a play written for the stage; indeed its very narration is predicated on a scenic representation of the action it purports to describe.

only supposed to seek out or able to obtain) sexual gratification in the company of other men.

A primary element we will interrogate is the square of black silk the characters use when together. The way the woman is mediated by the silk swatch is bound up in the way she is mediated by the man's gaze. His gaze is the central one in the text but its role is obscured through a textual game debating who sees: "the games of the gaze (who sees, who does not see...) are the very basis of desire" (Ricouart 178). Although a lot of dialogue centers on what the woman sees, how she can see, and when she can see (e.g., Duras, Les yeux bleus 68, 108-09), in point of fact, the voyeurism and the gaze are all male-identified in the text. As such, this novel mirrors a process Edson discerns in Duras's Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein. Both Jacques Hold (the protagonist of Le ravissement) and the unnamed man in Les yeux bleus cheveux noirs are the true voyeurs of the stories, but as Edson notes with regard to Hold: "he attributes the voyeurism to [the woman] and sets himself up as the one being watched, the center of attention" (Edson 25). This shift in perspective, though not an actual shift, is equally applicable to the gay man in Les yeux bleus since so much of the discussion of sight pertains to what the woman can see. At stake is not so much what, or even whether, the woman can see anything at all; what is of chief importance in Les yeux bleus is the man's ability to see the woman. All of this is embodied in the square of black silk with which she alternately veils her eyes and unmask herself. Veiling and unveiling, together with the matter of sight and blindness, are constructed and deployed quite interestingly in this novel and will make up another arc of my examination of it. The use of the black silk enables the characters, very much in their own world, to create and explore new forms of sexual

expression and new sites of history and memory, as well as hybridity between categories of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation, reflecting the hybrid generic nature of the very text itself.

Although Duras's novel might not immediately seem like a logical fit for this study, due to its having been written and published many decades after the other two authors died, I believe that it does in fact fit with the other two texts. Written in a fin-de-siècle context—albeit the twentieth siècle—it mirrors concerns found in the fin-de-siècle texts I have selected. Each of the three texts reflects a crisis in category: male/female, man/woman, and gay/straight, to name but a few. Furthermore, with the application of the term “fin de siècle” to the turning of the twentieth century to the twenty-first, one can easily discern concerns in Duras's novel common to the “traditional” fin-de-siècle period. Gender is toyed with in her text, just as it was in numerous late-nineteenth-century ones. One could see in the pecuniary pact and odd goings-on between the man and the woman a variety of debauchery or decadence. Duras's male protagonist is arguably a modern-day dandy, at least based on the minimal information the text supplies about him. A confusion of sexuality and sexual orientation is present in Duras, in Rachilde, and, implicitly, in Eberhardt's life. Raoule de Vénérande and Duras's male protagonist both have the financial means necessary to pay someone else on their quest for pleasure and release. Additionally, the sexual favors they procure are not at all straightforward, for the relationships are rather intricate between the characters with the money and those to whom it is given. The sexual acts they share or attempt to share are equally convoluted. This is decidedly not an issue of people simply paying for an orgasm. These are people on a mission to indulge in some other, more rarified and abstract form of pleasure, part of

which is tied to the physical aspect of sex, but whose interest lies perhaps predominantly in some psychological or transgressive realm. Neither Raoule nor the man is able to circumvent the sex act, but both seem most contented or at ease when their partner is an unknowing participant: the man tends to wait for the woman to fall asleep before fondling her and exploring her body in Duras's novel, and Raoule's project with Jacques truly attains its apotheosis only after such time as Jacques dies and she is able to preserve him in mannequin-like fashion.

In studying three seemingly disparate and unrelated texts, I hope to draw attention to how they anticipate and reflect shifts in the way in which men and women, gay or straight, relate to one another and conceive of themselves. Through a reworking of the conventional understanding of drag, I will demonstrate that these fin-de-siècle texts mirror events germane to their times and that each fin de siècle was a time of particular interest and change with regard to questions of sex, gender, and sexuality, and the power differentials inherent therein.

### Interpreting Drag

Marie-Hélène Bourcier's Queer Zones: Politiques des identités sexuelles, des représentations et des savoirs provides a useful, open-ended template with which to study drag. Using three schemas—the medical model, the model of liberation, and the performative model—her template is descriptive and more or less follows the chronology of how drag or cross-dressing has been understood in recent times (though no one model has entirely disappeared, so the chronology is more of a continuum). In the medical model, drag is taken to be a pathologized perversion: Krafft-Ebing's Psychopathia

Sexualis (1886) refers to it as a “deviant erotic practice” (Bourcier 156). Bourcier then offers up what she calls the model of liberation as a second model: drag is a social transgression that is related to, and a way to circumvent, women’s social oppression. She argues that this model presupposes “une certaine dénaturalisation du genre” (Bourcier 160) and that it is tied to women’s liberation in general. Finally, relying on her study of the work of Judith Butler, Bourcier discusses the performance model, according to which drag is the performance of gender and furthermore, that all gender is performative (Bourcier 154).<sup>9</sup> Unlike the other models, she writes that this model has the distinct advantage of not being “dépendant de la vérité du sexe et d’une répartition orthodoxe des marques du genre” (Bourcier 166).

Queer theory, gender studies, and cultural studies have generally favored the performance model as a means to interpret drag. The advantage of this model—and one reason for its being in vogue in the first place—is that within such a framework, drag is no longer tied to an essentialist notion of either sex or gender. The performance of gender, as explicated by Judith Butler, is the performance of a performance: there is no true and stable model of gender upon which to base one’s performance. It is a series of repetitions, highly contingent on sociocultural realities. She writes:

In the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction. (Butler, Gender Trouble 176)

But what would happen if one were to remove gender from the equation? That is to say, what if drag were not merely the performance of gender? Butler’s thesis readily

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<sup>9</sup> Bourcier allows for the existence many other models, even speculating that the psychoanalytic model and the model of fashion are ripe for study, although she does not engage with them (Bourcier 154).

lends itself to such an expansion insofar as one of the logical conclusions drawn from her work, one to which she herself is led, is that everyone is in one way or another constantly performing gender. If everyone is in drag, then clearly the term has wider application than to a couple of queens lip-synching in a gay bar. Can drag simply be understood to signify “performance” tout court? In other words, can the assumption of any role or function one chooses in a given day (mechanic, parent, closeted athlete, lawyer, out lesbian, SM aficionado, etc.) potentially constitute drag? And if so, what is the usefulness of such a conjecture? Must gender be blurred for there to be drag?

These matters are precisely what I am attempting to articulate and explore herein. Following Butler, I will argue that drag is indeed performance: sometimes it is the performance of gender, and the reasons for this form of drag are varied (to transgress,<sup>10</sup> to move more freely in public spaces, to entertain, as part of sexual play). Other times, drag is the performance of one’s role in society and in these instances authenticity is harder to detect: after all, what makes an accountant an accountant?<sup>11</sup> Still other instances of drag are related to sexual orientation. Does unilateral, unequivocal orientation exist? Can one be exclusively attracted to one gender? I do not mean to imply that drag in this sense is a prohibition on some notion of innate bisexuality, but rather, that perhaps sexual orientation, much like Freud’s conception of order, is little more than a shorthand, a way to make some sense of an otherwise overly complicated world. In Civilization and Its

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<sup>10</sup> In reporting the “pantheon of personal motives” (Bolin 461) cited for cross-dressing gleaned during ethnographic research she conducted, Bolin indicates that some of her interview subjects reported being “driven by public passing [as the opposite sex] as an exciting and risk-taking adventure” (Bolin 458). She also states, “Many transvestites shared the view that cross-dressing provided relief from the stress of the male role” (Bolin 458).

<sup>11</sup> This contention is not as far from Butler’s work as it might seem for Butler argues that gender is a performative with no true, stable referent. I too argue that drag is a performance whose authenticity or integrality is hard to capture.

Discontents Freud writes: “Order is a kind of compulsion to repeat which, when a regulation has been laid down once and for all, decides when, where and how a thing shall be done, so that in every similar circumstance one is spared hesitation and indecision” (Freud 46). Sexual orientation operates as a regulation, to use Freud’s term, within Duras’s text, to provide one brief example. This is most plainly apparent when the man is unable to be with the woman sexually because of his sexual orientation (e.g., Duras, Les yeux bleus 27-28). Prolonging the point I am attempting to articulate regarding Freud, Riki Wilchins similarly asks: “Is gayness an essential property of gay bodies, so that when we look in the mirror each morning we see a gay person staring back? Or is it rather a way we learn to recognize and see ourselves in the mirror of others’ eyes?” (Wilchins, “Changing the Subject” 47). The conclusion to this study will constitute an attempt to explore precisely these notions.

### Approaching the Problem

My approach will cross periods, genders, and genres. We will see that several parallels exist between the two fin-de-siècle periods in terms of the destabilization of gender and in terms of hybridity of literary genres. Isabelle Eberhardt’s short stories will be read in conjunction with the testimonies of her own life, a reading process that I believe is crucial to any understanding of one or the other. Her work problematizes drag just as Rachilde’s novel does, albeit in a different manner. The characters I shall refer to as being in drag are biologically male and female. The primary texts I have selected are all written by women but I do not wish for that to become the overriding angle of my study. As Rey Chow has brilliantly articulated, in the West we often have a tendency to attribute a whole host of labels and badges to, and make assumptions about, written work

based on the author's identity rather than simply focus on the text itself.<sup>12</sup> I do not intend to draw any conclusions in this study that are based on the gender of the authors for that and other reasons. Drag is used in very different ways by each writer and these uses are more salient when examined by contextualizing their creation within both their particular historical moments and a broader literary tradition, rather than by writing them off as being the proper of women.

### The Sex/Gender System & Sexuality

An important element of this study is the sex/gender system: following Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women," I use this term to distinguish the biological (sex) from the cultural (gender). Rubin has illustrated how, precisely, the two constitute divergent social practices ("Thinking Sex" 33). Rubin's thesis in "The Traffic in Woman" is that biological sex is converted into binary gender relations in which men are always in a privileged position (Rubin, "Traffic" 179-80). Although criticized by many feminists and scholars, the theory is crucial to my argument that certain of the characters I will evoke throughout manipulate (violate) the sex/gender system precisely in order to avail themselves of such privilege. Rubin herself refined her own stance in the later piece

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<sup>12</sup> Although Chow's focus is on the question of the place of any intellectual's nationality and ethnicity in his or her scholarly production and on the West's need to label "nonwhites" as such, the conclusions Chow draws are completely applicable to questions of gender. What Chow refers to as "cultural location" can be modified to read "gender location:" "Once such a location is named [...] the work associated with it is usually considered too narrow or specialized to warrant general interest" (Chow 5). While Chow refers largely to academic and scholarly work, we can readily discern a similar trend with regard to fiction: women's writing is often dismissed as less serious, less historic than that of their counterparts who happen to be men.

“Thinking Sex.”<sup>13</sup> While maintaining the conceit of her earlier work according to which sex and gender are two distinct categories, she came to realize that it is also “essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to reflect more accurately their separate social existence” (Rubin, “Thinking Sex” 33). Rubin’s work, when coupled with that of Michel Foucault, forms the basis for many of the developments forwarded by Judith Butler’s substantial and influential body of scholarship.

Sexuality, as historicized and conceptualized by Michel Foucault, has been shown neither to be interchangeable with nor irreducible to gender or sex, but rather that it constitutes a third criterion. He writes that “c’est elle [la sexualité] qui a suscité [...] la notion du sexe” (Foucault 207). Furthermore, Foucault suggests that one notion of “sex”—male or female—was strategically and artificially blended with others:

la notion de “sexe” a permis de regrouper selon une unité artificielle des éléments anatomiques, des fonctions biologiques, des conduites, des sensations, des plaisirs et elle a permis de faire fonctionner cette unité fictive comme principe causal, sens omniprésent, secret à découvrir partout: le sexe a donc pu fonctionner comme signifiant unique et comme signifié universel. (Foucault 204)

Although Foucault did not speak to gender per se, his work has been utilized with regard to gender. Most notably, Butler has applied Foucault’s Histoire de la sexualité I and his theory on the articulation of discourse and power to the subject of sex and gender. In so doing, she is automatically afforded a separation of sex and sexuality (as cited above). But Butler takes the matter one step further: after indicating the general tendency people have to assume that sex is seen to cause gender (if you are born male, you are or will be a man), which, in turn, is thought to cause desire (if you are a man, you are automatically attracted sexually only to women), she overturns it (Butler, “Gender

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<sup>13</sup> For information on precisely what informed the shift in paradigms from one essay to the next, see Gayle Rubin’s interview of Judith Butler (Rubin, “Sexual Traffic”), 66-68.

Trouble, Feminist Theory” 336-39). For the purposes of considering gender, she appropriates Foucault’s conceptualization of discourse which, in grossly reduced form, suggests that rather than reflect what is “real,” discourse produces what we understand to be real. “[T]hese understandings then lead to social attitudes and shape social action” (“Brief Word,” screen 1). As Ross Chambers has explicated, discourse should be viewed “not as a representation whose power depends on its adequacy to a (preexisting) real, but as a mediating practice with the power to produce the real” (qtd. in Hayes 232). In “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse,” Butler demonstrates how the gendered body only appears to (re)present an interior, fundamental truth, and that it does so via a system of performative “acts, gestures, [and] enactments” (Butler, “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory” 336) that inscribe themselves only and always on the surface of the body. Where Foucault comes into direct play in this essay is in the following conclusion Butler derives: “That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts that constitute its reality, and if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is a function of a decidedly public and social discourse” (Butler, “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory” 336).

What gender performativity brings to bear with regard to sex and sexual orientation centers on the question of coherence. Having shattered any potential for coherence between the gendered body and an interior essence—since she advances the notion that there is none—it becomes much easier to show how the illusion of coherence is what caused people to take it for granted that sex caused gender caused desire. This automatic assumption people mistakenly espouse is in fact a regulatory norm or fiction.

Once this regulatory norm is called into question or revealed in all its mendaciousness, one can no longer ignore or dismiss

the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily flow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender [...]. (Butler, “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory” 336)

If coherence does not exist among and between these separate entities, then an entirely new discursive status and critical apparatus arises, one that is capable of exposing and disrupting “the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence” (Butler, “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory” 336).<sup>14</sup> One of the principal areas of inquiry of this study is precisely those gender discontinuities to which Butler so expressively refers.

Other proponents of queer theory and sexuality studies have deployed various tactics to work through gender and sexuality. In the polarizing polemic “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Adrienne Rich links gender to sexuality, making use of the extant binary gender system at the same time that she destabilizes the heterosexism and heterosexuality implicit within it. She situates all women along one continuum (lesbian<sup>15</sup> in nature) and delineates various types of relationships, present and past, that can and do exist between women.<sup>16</sup> Her goal in so doing is to re-create an

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<sup>14</sup> In a different essay, Butler attests to the power inherent in separating sex, gender, and sexuality within a feminist discourse: “But when and where feminism refuses to derive gender from sex or from sexuality, feminism appears to be part of the very critical practice that contests the heterosexual matrix, pursuing the specific social organization of each of these relations as well as their capacity for social transformation” (Butler, “Against Proper Objects” 10 [emphasis in the original]). I submit that one need not necessarily speak within a feminist framework in order to harness the transformative power she evokes.

<sup>15</sup> Rich is quick to point out that she does not necessarily use the term lesbian to signify same-sex desire among women: “I mean the term [...] to include a range—through each woman’s life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman” (Rich 648).

<sup>16</sup> Gayle Rubin offers a critique of Rich’s argument in “Sexual Traffic” 74-76.

effaced history of women's resistance to the regime of compulsory heterosexuality and in the face of men's historical and ongoing domination and subjugation of women, with a goal of "undo[ing] the power men everywhere wield over women, power which has become the model for every other form of exploitation and illegitimate control" (660).

Still other theorists have attempted to remove gender from sexuality: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is perhaps the most notable of people working in this vein. In works like Epistemology of the Closet, she reveals that there is an unstable but significant relationship between male hetero- and homosexuality in an attempt to denaturalize conceptions of men's sexuality. She argues that much of how one considers Western culture is informed by "a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century" (Sedgwick, Epistemology 1). She further stresses that the binary opposition heterosexual/homosexual "subsist[s] in a more unsettled and dynamic relation" (Sedgwick, Epistemology 9-10), which is to say that, according to Sedgwick's hypothesis, "homo" is subordinate to "hetero" and that "hetero" relies on the exclusion of "homo" from it in order to have any meaning (Sedgwick, Epistemology 10).

With regard to theoretical developments on drag, the work of scholars such as Butler, Marjorie Garber, and Judith Halberstam, among others, foregrounds this inquiry. According to Marjorie Garber, drag can be used virtually as a mirror to reveal ways in which a culture is in crisis: "one of the most consistent and effective functions of the transvestite in culture is to indicate the place of what I call 'category crisis,' disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances" (Garber 16).<sup>17</sup> This

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<sup>17</sup> Garber's hypothesis is a bold one given the fact that she ultimately concludes that "category crisis" represents not so much an exception to the rule, but rather that it veritably constitutes "the ground of

notion is one that is vital to my study: it allows me to explore the performative aspects of sexuality and sexual orientation and also provides a means to consider the historical moments in which the primary texts I shall study were written. The year of a text's provenance, in conjunction with the ways the text presents and problematizes matters like drag, gender, and sexuality are all factors vital to my study and form the basis for my argument that each of the primary texts comprising the corpus of my study can be situated within the broad organizing rubric of the fin de siècle.

#### Fin-de-siècle: Which "siècle"?

Fin-de-siècle literature is most commonly understood as being that literature written anywhere between 1880 and 1910 or from the Gay 90s until the dawn of World War I. Lührssen refers to the fin de siècle generally as "those years between centuries when an old world, with its familiar landmarks, is expiring, and a new one, still lacking an identifiable shape, is being conceived" (Lührssen, screen 3). Following this notion, for the purposes of this intervention I propose to expand the term to include the turn of the twentieth century to the twenty-first. The term's denotation does not preclude such a shift; it is its connotation that poses a problem. I propose that the works studied herein justify the expansion of the term in that they present certain crises of category common to the first fin de siècle as well as to the second, as I will demonstrate. One way to justify such an assertion is by examining two narratives that are pivotal to any exploration of the literary fin de siècle in Europe, and how certain of the issues at stake in those texts reflect our own era and/or the primary texts selected for study here.

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culture itself" (Garber 16). It is bold in that she situates drag within a culture as a site of crisis, and then argues that it is indeed this crisis that constitutes the very culture itself.

Oscar Wilde's 1891 novel The Picture of Dorian Gray<sup>18</sup> is perhaps one of the foremost prose incarnations of fin-de-siècle decadence, both in its first sense—that of decay or a falling away—and in the sense of the literary trend. The novel contains several elements that I would argue are constituent of both fin-de-siècle periods: for instance, the cult of youth and beauty and the “feminizing” of men. Wilde's novel presents the case of Dorian Gray, a man who is able to forestall any visible signs of aging through an inexplicable wish. Dorian's coterie is comprised of wealthy, self-absorbed, hedonistic men who present soupçons of bisexuality and are often depicted in classically feminine poses and gestures. A preoccupation with appearances, aesthetics, and pleasure abounds in the text.

Even the most perfunctory analysis of the late twentieth century reveals certain parallels to Dorian Gray. Nowadays, we have medical technology available to aid us in prolonging our youth and beauty (or in creating it, should we not be considered beautiful by society's aesthetic standards and conventions).<sup>19</sup> Plastic surgery (tellingly, “chirurgie esthétique” in French) has even become a form of entertainment: witness the number of unscripted television shows that feature it as the ultimate makeover.<sup>20</sup> While it is not the purpose of my study to conceptualize the turn of the twentieth century as a novel, I would maintain that Wilde's novel advances certain issues that were equally at stake in

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<sup>18</sup> Henceforth, Dorian Gray.

<sup>19</sup> In La domination masculine, Bourdieu argues that surgery is the “ultimate” way for women to resolve “l'écart entre le corps réel, auquel elles sont enchaînées, et le corps idéal dont elles travaillent sans relâche à se rapprocher” (Bourdieu 73).

<sup>20</sup> For better or for worse, unscripted television is certainly a staple of American television and it also figures prominently in French broadcasting. Shows featuring cosmetic surgery are not limited to the United States with the advent of such programs as “J'ai décidé d'être belle” in France.

nineteenth century fin-de-siècle French literature and society that are equally apparent in that of the late twentieth century, and that these issues reflect the era's "cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances" (Garber 16).

The other novel that most typifies the first fin de siècle is À rebours by Joris-Karl Huysmans, once called the "breviary for [...] worshippers" of decadent art (Symons 255). In my opinion, one of the most prominent elements of the decadent mindset to be found in this text is the protagonist's constant search for new and different pleasures. His hedonistic, self-indulgent aims—enabled by considerable fiscal wherewithal—are mirrored in Rachilde's character Raoule de Vénérande. However, Raoule is not the only person to recall Huysmans's *des Esseintes* amidst the corpus of texts studied. It can easily be said that much of what occurs between Duras's unnamed protagonists is in point of fact a search for a new and different form of pleasure, sexual catharsis to be exact. These similarities among and between the various texts are all indicative of certain commonalities, regardless of the century in which any one text was originally published. What the texts have in common and shed light on are certain instabilities in the culture and mindset of their (any) time. It is my intention to demonstrate through the primary texts that these instabilities are particularly prevalent in a fin-de-siècle context.

### Changing Centuries, Colliding Categories

Returning to Garber's notion of the crisis of category: what categories are in crisis at the turn of either the nineteenth or the twentieth century? To begin, we can speak of the sex/gender system as a category in crisis. The inherent instability in, and arbitrariness of, this system arguably facilitates its manipulation. Examples are legion of men and women

crossing gender lines in the literature of the first fin de siècle. Debauchery and decadence were de rigueur for many, and gender-bending was frequently a part of the process. Of course, sexuality cannot be far behind: often, in toying with the sex/gender system, sexuality became another avenue of exploration and experimentation. This, too, can be seen in the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; the work of Wilde and Colette serves as but two instances of this.

But what are the crises of our era? Naturally, sexuality leaps to mind. Sexual orientation is a contested and explosive topic and has been both in France and in the United States for some time. The highly politicized issue of same-sex marriage in America and the pacte civil de solidarité (le PACS, a type of civil union) in France<sup>21</sup> is but one case of how sexual orientation has come to the forefront of national—and even, at times, international—debate. The scandal over the coming out in 1999 of French tennis champion and Olympic medalist Amélie Mauresmo is another illustration of just how deep this crisis runs. Moreover, the advent and place of gender/sexuality studies as well as queer theory in both the French and American academy reflect ongoing changes in how society conceives of and receives these notions.

Sex and gender, too, have continued to present problems for people in recent times. Medical and surgical developments have made possible the reassignment of biological sex. In a variety of ways, the trans community<sup>22</sup> has become more visible and

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<sup>21</sup> On the controversy preceding the PACS, see Fernandez and Iacub. For an excellent analysis of the shortcomings of this form of civil union and the theoretical issues it raises, see Fisher, “L’adoption du Pacs” and “The New French Backlash.”

<sup>22</sup> Let it be clear that I do not wish to associate or conflate transgenderism or transsexualism with drag, as the two are vastly different concepts, practices, and realities. I make mention of the transgendered here merely to demonstrate how questions of sex and gender have become a major concern in daily life, within both the realm of culture and politics.

more vocal: for example, by running for office and by being the subject of (often widely seen and critically acclaimed) films, such as Mystère Alexina, Boys Don't Cry, Ma vie en rose, Thelma, and Hedwig and the Angry Inch, as well as Doug Wright's 2004 Tony Award- and Pulitzer Prize-winning play I Am My Own Wife.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, and undeniably more importantly, judicial matters concerning the legal rights and status of the trans community are more and more frequently adjudicated. For instance, at the urging of the trans community, the International Olympic Committee will henceforth allow an athlete to compete in his or her self-identified gender as long as said person has undergone sex reassignment surgery ("Transsexual Athletes"). Likewise, gender, when examined from the standpoint of expression and roles, can be said to be in crisis. The question of gender roles and expression comprises a significant portion of my intervention.

### Mass Consumption & Evolution

One has only to think of the recent and purportedly widespread phenomenon of the metrosexual<sup>24</sup> to see just how unstable or in transition the notion of masculinity is. A wide array of personal hygiene products long considered to be the purview of women is now available to, and ostensibly consumed by, men. In France alone, the sale of men's skincare products doubled between 1997 and 2002, and in 2004 witnessed another 40% growth, according to Marion Louis. Whereas the men in Wilde's novel were presented in

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<sup>23</sup> The presence of trans characters in popular forms of entertainment has been referred to as "a kind of tenuous artistic legitimacy" by Wilchins ("Deconstructing Trans" 58).

<sup>24</sup> An article published on October 16, 2004 in Madame Figaro, supplement to the French newspaper Le Figaro, heralding the arrival of the metrosexual in France renders the English term "metrosexual" into French as "le métrosexuel." The article defines the term for its French readership as an "homme urbain ultra-soigné" (Louis).

feminine postures, now men get manicures, and many are the claims that it is socially acceptable for men to do so. Nonetheless, there has consistently been a core contingent of people, press, and advertising to view this more recent form of “feminization” of men as abhorrent, resulting in attempts to recall men “to order.”<sup>25</sup>

Serving also to link the two turns of century by implicitly suggesting their similarities, Louis submits the following possible “sociological explanations:” “Féminisation et individualisation de la société, influence du milieu gay et de la mode, diktats de l’apparence et du jeunisme, nouveau culte du corps venu du sport, montée du narcissisme et de l’hédonisme...” (Louis). The hedonism and supreme importance of youth, as well as the cult of the body the article advances as causes of the arrival of the metrosexual at the most recent century’s turn are all elements that categorize the one prior to that. Louis’s article makes impressively concise work of calling attention to the destabilizing influence this trend has had, and will continue to have, on what it means to be a man. This instability within the realm of masculinity can only foster a corresponding reexamination of what it means to be a woman, or to be feminine for that matter. Long-held beliefs on what constitutes the proper of either masculinity or femininity, or men and women, are being shattered left and right. Furthermore, the issue of the metrosexual blurs the lines between gay and straight in that much of what it “takes” to be a metrosexual was once considered the domain of gay men (and women),<sup>26</sup> a consideration which is

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<sup>25</sup> On this, see Lalli; Barker; Shallet; and/or Howard.

<sup>26</sup> How today’s American man in many ways mirrors the American woman at the time of Betty Friedan’s legendary treatise The Feminine Mystique is a question brilliantly explored by Susan Faludi in Stiffed, and is a concept even more ripe for study since the advent of the metrosexual and the massive amounts of marketing and creation of “for men” personal hygiene/care product lines that exist in its wake. Mark Simpson, sometimes considered the person responsible for coining the term “metrosexual,” has gone so far as to categorize the metrosexual as “an advertiser’s walking wet dream” (“Meet the Metrosexual”).

recurrently occluded in any discussion on the subject), however stereotypical or essentialist any of these conceits might be.

On the whole, society—French or American—can be said to be in crisis, specifically along the lines of sexuality, sexual orientation, and the sex/gender system. Recent developments surrounding the prospect of civil union for same-sex couples; the existence, feasibility, and legality of same-sex parenting and adoption; and so on, only serve to reinforce the idea that sexuality, sexual orientation, and the sex/gender system are indeed categories in crisis. By using the term “crisis,” I do not in any way mean to imply that any of these developments necessarily has negative connotations, at least from my vantage point. Indeed, to blur the boundaries of masculine and feminine, or gay and straight, for instance, is a good thing to my mind. That being said, it is still appropriate to speak of masculinity and femininity as being elements that depict society in crisis.

### Another Crisis of Masculinity

Élisabeth Badinter’s XY: De l’identité masculine presents a brilliant examination of how women’s changing role and place in society fostered insecurity in men at the end of the nineteenth into the dawn of the twentieth century. Badinter deduces that men’s roles were no longer clear, and that the uncertainty men faced brought about the notion of masculinity in crisis. Referring to the work of Annelise Maugue, Badinter shows how the education of French girls led to their ascension to professions formerly reserved for men

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The massive door-to-door cosmetics company Avon, one of the last bastions of femininity, has even created its own men’s line of skincare in an attempt to capitalize on this new “market.” Of course, the well-groomed (straight) man is but one of many “niche” markets in today’s society; gays and lesbians constitute yet another such market. The place and role of these niche markets in capitalism is an area which has only just begun to be explored. (See, for instance, Danae Clark’s astute analysis of marketing to lesbians [“Commodity Lesbianism”]).

(Badinter 30). Once these positions were obtained, the demand for equal wages was not far behind. This new phenomenon left men feeling very ill at ease, to say the least:

Du haut en bas de l'échelle sociale, ils se sentent menacés dans leur identité par cette nouvelle créature qui veut faire comme eux, être comme eux, au point de se demander s'ils ne vont pas être obligés d'"accomplir des tâches féminines, bref, horreur suprême, d'être des femmes!"  
(Badinter 30)

Badinter argues that despite an utter lack of rejection on the part of women for these "tâches féminines," men were not reassured, so deep did the crisis run (Badinter 31). Nor, writes Badinter, has this crisis been resolved: she attributes to today's man a contradictory approach to masculinity, one that often vacillates between "caricatural virility" and the "rejection of all masculinity" (Badinter 272). Young men today, according to Badinter, inherited this confused perspective from their fathers who had to accept a new form of femininity but have yet to invent a form of masculinity that is compatible with it (Badinter 272). She therefore situates today's crisis of masculinity within a larger historical context and reveals masculinity to be a construct that is ever-evolving, just as femininity has been. The crisis of one, and its (in)ability to relate to the other, comprises much of her fascinating investigation of masculine identity. The purpose of my study is precisely to examine how these crises manifest themselves (are depicted) in literature, and to interpret them through recourse to critical developments pertaining to notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, and sexuality in an effort to account for how drag is a convenient shorthand through which an author can couch and interrogate questions and anxieties pertaining to relationships between men and women, sexual or not.

## To What End?

Drag, gender, sexuality, and the ways in which one accommodates oneself to these concepts or resists them are my primary avenues of exploration. The use of critics in gender theory like Judith Butler, Marjorie Garber, and Eve Sedgwick will allow me to explore the limitations of the traditional sex/gender system, both descriptively and in the way it imposes limits on people. Seldom does work on sexuality appear to take stock of the potential existence of proscriptions inherent in the avowal of one sexual orientation over another, and I would argue that Les yeux bleus cheveux noirs is a text that reveals this particular crisis of category, while at the same time calling into question the notion of literary categories or genres. It is not bisexuality that is necessarily at stake in Duras's novel; it is the inability of two people truly to connect.

In each of the primary texts described herein, the way in which characters relate to one another and to gender and sexual identity involves one form of drag or another, and it is these matters that I will develop in my project. Drag is one way out of certain restrictions inflicted by each of these categories: as Garber has so shrewdly established, it is concurrently revelatory of the crises contained in these categories. Drag is a means to understand the nature of the dynamics among and between men and women and the instability of these dynamics so acute at century's end. Escape from the symbolic order in each element of this study is often an entry into it or surrender to it. Freedom of choice seems not to exist for the most part in any of the texts: with regard to dressing as a man Eberhardt states that it is impossible for her to do otherwise; because of a label, Duras's characters cannot overcome the barriers that separate them; and the initial assistance that Rachilde's Raoule offers Jacques swiftly embroils him in an inexorable system that in

due course occasions his demise. How each character functions within the symbolic order and attempts to subvert it is an inevitable part of my intervention, for to ignore this question would be to strip the works studied of most of their meaning. Without attention to the categories deployed in the texts and the ways in which they are gradually exploded or revealed to be in crisis, there is nothing tying any of these texts together, historically, by way of genre, or otherwise.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FASHIONING FREEDOM: THE LIFE & WRITINGS OF ISABELLE EBERHARDT

According to numerous scholars and cultural critics, Isabelle Eberhardt, the Swiss-born Russian writer of French expression, has attained nearly mythic status and her exceptional life has overshadowed her writing, perhaps in part by design. Indeed: “Isabelle Eberhardt is one of those literary personages [...] who superimposed their life onto their work” (Hernando 17 [my translation]). People have referred to her as a proto-feminist, “the thinking woman’s Peter Pan” (D’Erasmus 17), and a “riot grrrl version of George Sand” (Spayde 54). Timberlake Wertenbaker’s play New Anatomies features Eberhardt as its protagonist and legendary rock musician Patti Smith even wrote a poem about her entitled “The Ballad of Isabelle Eberhardt.” Much of the scholarly and critical work on Eberhardt tends to focus solely on either her life or her writing, although some critics have written on both subjects (such as Rice). Typically, her writing is dismissed as uninteresting and insignificant, or lauded for being the first set of texts in which subjectivity was considered from the vantage point of the colonized people of Algeria (Rice 189). In Un désir d’Orient: Jeunesse d’Isabelle Eberhardt (1877-1899), Edmonde Charles-Roux writes of Eberhardt:

Son approche de la réalité algérienne apporte la preuve répétée qu’elle n’admettait point qu’il y eût [une] culture dominante en terre algérienne et que, pour sa part, elle se situait instinctivement à mi-chemin entre la culture française et la culture arabo-maghrébine. Une place qu’elle fut

seule à occuper. Russe, elle fut le premier écrivain maghrébin d'expression française. (Charles-Roux 605)

The collection of short stories recently compiled and republished under the title Au pays des sables<sup>27</sup> (2002) depicts life during the early years of the French colonization and occupation of Algeria. In these stories, which meld personal observations, semi-autobiographical narratives, and the chronicles of people she ostensibly encountered during her travels, Eberhardt confronts the notion of the joug as it pertains to native women, expatriates, and even in one case a French army officer stationed in Algeria. The issue of the joug offers the opportunity to discuss what types of constraints people faced during the time of her writing and issues that still affect people in Algeria, especially as far as women are concerned. Examining the short stories in which this question is problematized will allow me to explore elements of Eberhardt's own life, as it has been widely documented that many aspects of even her fictional work can be traced to her life. This study of the concept of the joug—which is translated as “yoke,” although I retain the French term henceforth—will lead me to consider certain dilemmas commonplace in much fin-de-siècle writing; most specifically, questions pertaining to escape and to gender.

### Dressing the Part

The primary interest in Eberhardt's captivating life resides in the fact that she spent much of it dressed as a man or under the assumption of a male persona. In a letter

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<sup>27</sup> Henceforth, Au pays.

to the editor of La Petite Gironde<sup>28</sup> Eberhardt revealed that she began to dress as a boy at a tender age, explaining that her great-uncle raised her “exactly as though [she had] been a boy” (Eberhardt, “Letter” 85). Various scholars have rationalized Eberhardt’s adult practice of dressing as a man through recourse to its having originated in her childhood. For instance, Elizabeth Kirwin writes: “This upbringing formed the basis for the gender fluidity that she would exhibit throughout her life” (Kirwin 256), and Kirwin’s hypothesis is supported by Eberhardt’s own writing. In the same letter to the editor cited previously, Eberhardt herself justifies her practice of dressing as a man by attributing it to her rearing: “This explains the fact that for many years I have worn, and still wear, men’s clothing” (Eberhardt, “Letter” 85). Upon her arrival in North Africa, Eberhardt spent most of her remaining years as her male alter-ego, an Arab horseman named Si Mahmoud Saadi (also rendered into English as Essadi). Marjorie Garber has examined this fact, positing that Eberhardt’s cross-dressing was motivated by a desire to circulate freely in the Maghreb. Garber further argues that for this and other reasons, Eberhardt is a perfect figure of displacement. Garber’s discussion of the political and economic advantages of which Eberhardt was able to avail herself in men’s clothing raises numerous other points to be developed in the pages to come. Garber’s work serves as one foundation for my thesis, which is that Eberhardt manifested accommodation and resistance to the oppression attendant in colonization and to the limitations on women—exacerbated by Islamic law and European society—and that this dual-faceted process is mirrored by her fictional writing. Her ironic play with gender performance and pronouns, her disdain for colonial society matched in its intensity only by her deep belief in Islam,

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<sup>28</sup> “La Petite Gironde, based in Bordeaux, France, was one of [France’s] top regional newspapers from the 1860s to World War II. [...] Today, as Sud Ouest, this daily paper continues as the most important media power in southwestern France [...]” (Sager).

and her fervent exploration of the desert are all important elements of her life I will consider throughout the pages to come. This spirit of rebellion, shaping the course of her life, is easily traced in her fictional writing.

The tale “À l’aube” demonstrates how Eberhardt utilizes the concept of the “yoke” (joug) metaphorically in the sense of a force of oppression, although in this particular instance she does present its literal meaning as well. In “À l’aube,” we are offered a picturesque landscape at dawn, as the title suggests. Eberhardt provides a fairly detailed description of the surroundings, and the first “characters” to enter the scene are several mules, attached to and transporting “quelques lourds chariots” (Eberhardt, Au pays 144). Next, to the north, we witness a convoy of prisoners accompanied by armed soldiers on horse-back. Eberhardt writes that the Arabs (the prisoners) are “enchaînés, pieds nus” (Eberhardt, Au pays 144) and that they are headed to the prison at Taadmith. Here already we see people subjected to the rule of outsiders—the Arab (native) prisoners are led by the rifle-toting European intruders. However, Eberhardt does not allow the implicit critique of the degradation associated with colonization to cease there, for she tells us:

Et tous ces hommes que, civils comme militaires, aucune juridiction n’a jugés, qui sont livrés au bon plaisir des chefs hiérarchiques et d’administrateurs qui les condamnent sans appel, en dehors de toutes les formes élaborées par les codes [...] Démenti flagrant jeté à la vantardise et à l’orgueil de l’hypocrite civilisation! (Eberhardt, Au pays 145)

So it is that all the men are subjected to an order that is not of their choosing and to a fate over which they have no control. Although the portrayal of the shackled Arabs suggests a greater physical discomfort than that endured by the horsemen, psychically the wounds are implied to be the same since not one of them, regardless of origin, can

extricate himself from the joug of the colonial system with all its dehumanizing tendencies and horrific violence. One cannot help but remark the innovation of such a vision, a prescient vision that Frantz Fanon would later elaborate in Les damnés de la terre (1961), in which he relates how colonized people become dehumanized by the colonizers: “Parce qu’il est une négation systématisée de l’autre, une décision forcenée de refuser à l’autre tout attribut d’humanité, le colonialisme accule le peuple dominé à se poser constamment la question: ‘Qui suis-je en réalité?’” (Fanon 300).

If one considers the image of the chained Arabs as an encapsulation of the entire colonial system as she witnessed it, Eberhardt’s stance on the matter is progressive, especially for its time: “Les rapports de domination entre colonisateurs et colonisés sont dénoncés avec force tout en étant décrits et analysés avec finesse” (Andezian 109). She decries the violence waged upon Algeria’s native people (represented by the prisoners), but refuses to blame the soldiers also victims of the system, who train their guns on the natives. She is acutely aware of the soldiers’ role in this drama but resists in characterizing their lot in life as being much better than that of the prisoners. Her awareness and critique of the complex mechanisms of empire and her refusal to scapegoat its most apparent instigators—the low-ranking soldiers—is a reflection of her position within the colonial system. To wit: since she is not French, it is presumably easier for her to criticize the French government. Since she claims for herself Muslim origins,<sup>29</sup> it is a foregone conclusion that she should decry the suffering of those she

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<sup>29</sup> Although the veracity of her claim has yet to be substantiated, in a letter to the editor published on April 23, 1903, Eberhardt wrote: “My father was a Russian subject of the Moslem faith [...]. I was thus born a Moslem, and I have never changed my religion” (Eberhardt, “Letter” 85). In any case, whether by converting or by birth, she was a practicing Muslim. In this way, she avoids a notion Hayes has examined (in a different context), namely “[...] the idea of physical exclusion from the Nation based on religious difference [...]” (Hayes 55).

believes to be her kin. Her scorn for the workings of class and the complexities of power (including class issues), present in many other texts, is one way of understanding why she might hold harmless the French soldiers, who, it nevertheless must be said, locked up the Algerians in the first place. When the fact that the Algerians are in chains is taken as a symbol for the oppression of Algeria at the hands of the French in general, it is revelatory of just how unspeakable she views the entire affair to be. Her rendering of colonization resists the impulse of labeling the natives as “good” and all French people categorically as “bad;” she implicitly recognizes how the soldiers are subject to the same system the natives have had forced upon them. There is only one evil in her depiction of colonization and that is the entire institution that is France in its presence in Algeria. The forces that perpetrate and perpetuate the subjugation of human life; the disrespect for a country’s autonomy, customs, and faith; and the privileging of “Western” ways over “Eastern” ones are the forces she denounces in this short story and in many others. Indeed, “L’angle d’observation choisi est celui de la périphérie, de la marge [...] ce qui lui permet de mettre en évidence les failles d’un système, les ruptures, les dysfonctionnements” (Andezian 110).

As in “À l’aube,” the colonial system is depicted in an extremely unfavorable light in “Le Major,” in which the reader meets Jacques, a young French doctor dispatched to Algeria. Extremely nervous and even anguished upon his arrival in an unfamiliar land, he quickly adjusts to his new surroundings and to the people he encounters. After a short period of acclimation, life in Algeria begins very much to please him and he decides he would like to remain there indefinitely. He makes Algerian friends and begins to learn Arabic. His superiors do not take long to notice what is happening with this young major;

they criticize him and demand that he keep the Algerians “à leur juste place” (Eberhardt, Au pays 117). The doctor-major becomes aware of the fact that the “rôle civilisateur de la France” (Eberhardt, Au pays 122) in which he dreamed of taking part does not have any place in the colonial system as it has unfurled around him. As Brahimî has suggested, Eberhardt’s “but étant ici de dénoncer l’odieuse duperie de l’occupation française dans ce Sud où la France est supposée s’adonner à un rôle civilisateur. La première erreur de Jacques a été de croire à ce rôle, mais il n’en est pas vraiment responsable puisqu’il n’avait pas encore vu” (Brahimi 100).

What makes this short story so interesting is precisely the pioneering and unexpected representation it advances of a Frenchman in colonized Algeria who loses his own freedom because of colonization. Postcolonial theory and literature have acquainted countless readers with works in which it is the autochthons who have their dignity and autonomy wrested away from them thanks to the arrival of the colonizers. Fanon ruthlessly decries the effects of colonization on his fellow native Algerians, emphasizing how the process unfurls one’s very existence:

Pour un colonisé, dans un contexte d’oppression comme celui de l’Algérie, vivre ce n’est point incarner des valeurs, s’insérer dans le développement cohérent et fécond d’un monde. Vivre c’est ne pas mourir. Exister c’est maintenir la vie. Chaque datte est une victoire. Non un résultat du labeur, mais victoire ressentie comme triomphe de la vie. (Fanon 366)

With “Le Major,” Eberhardt, however, is able to create a tale that allows her to condemn the system from the perspective both of Algerians and of the French major. Confronted with the reprimands and exhortations of his commanding officers, Jacques is left to choose between abandoning his newly adopted homeland and reproducing the atrocities of the colonial system in the manner in which his colleagues command him.

The major refuses to become a synecdoche of France (and of the West) with regard to the Algerians, even when he is ordered to “affirmer [sa] supériorité, [son] autorité sur eux” (130) by ruling “[d’] une main de fer” (Eberhardt, Au pays 130). He categorically refuses the joug of the colonial system, and the short story closes with the reader’s learning of the major’s complete fatalism and his refusal of the joug of mediocrity (Eberhardt, Au pays 141). Denise Brahimi contends that he is “une sorte de Frédéric Moreau<sup>30</sup> égaré au Sud de l’Algérie, dont les mésaventures permettent à Isabelle d’introduire dans sa nouvelle la critique sociale la plus importante qu’on ait dans son œuvre” (Brahimi 100).

Mediocrity and the joug intersect in another tale, auspiciously entitled “Sous le joug,” in which the parents of a young girl, Tessaadith, arrange for her to marry an old man who is a stranger to her. The author allows herself a moment of social criticism directed toward Algeria in characterizing the wedding as a “viol légal” (Eberhardt, Au pays 79), a turn of phrase that recalls Assia Djébar’s formulation of the wedding night in Arab culture. In Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement, Djébar depicts the violence with which the husband takes his bride’s maidenhead on their wedding night: “Une plaie vive s’inscrit sur le corps de la femme par le biais de l’assomption d’une virginité qu’on déflore rageusement et dont le mariage consacre trivialement le martyre. La nuit de noces devient essentiellement nuit du sang” (Djébar, Femmes d’Alger 154). Both authors challenge the institution of marriage in Algerian culture: Tessaadith’s arranged marriage is a rape in the sense that she had no say in it and did not even know the man to whom she would be wed. Djébar’s treatment of the same question reminds us all of the potential for violence inherent in marriage.

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<sup>30</sup> Moreau is the protagonist of Gustave Flaubert’s famed “chronicle of 1848,” L’éducation sentimentale.

Tessaadith spends her days more or less sequestered with the husband's elderly mother as her only companion. After a short while, growing more and more miserable with her living situation and her marriage, she spies a beautiful man and decides she will take him as her lover. Plots and machinations to that end having succeeded, Tessaadith spends a night of passion with this man and realizes that she

[...] ne voulut pas supporter les entraves que lui imposait son mariage. Elle voulait jouir de son amour [for her lover], librement. [...] Pour obtenir sa liberté, elle s'insurgea brusquement, devint insolente, refusa de se livrer aux travaux domestiques [...]

Un jour, le vieux, lassé, jeta Tessaadith à la porte et, le jour même, la répudia. (Eberhardt, Au pays 82-83)

Having been unable to refuse the marriage or even to protest against it, Tessaadith had no alternative but to accept it and adapt to her new situation. Of course, all this changed when she was presented with the possibility of attaining a modicum of happiness for herself. Once she resolved no longer to endure the arranged and undesired marriage, it was by her unqualified rebuff of all the wifely obligations she had, according to custom, toward her husband that she was successful in eventually extricating herself from it.<sup>31</sup> Her resolve is unquestionable: up until the moment she left, she suffered daily beatings at the hand of her "tyran" (Eberhardt, Au pays 82) of a husband, and still she gave herself over to passion with her lover nightly. She exhibits resistance in the face of adversity, finding little ways to escape until such time as she is released from her matrimonial bond.

Eberhardt writes that Tessaadith had already been "[l]ibérée par son mariage de l'autorité paternelle" (Eberhardt, Au pays 83), and so it is that her repudiation granted her

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<sup>31</sup> Another fictional wife similarly conspires to put an end to the misery of her marriage: namely, Isma in Assia Djebar's Ombre sultane (1987). Although Isma resorts to a different course of action (by convincing her husband to take a second wife), it is interesting to note another parallel between Assia Djebar and Isabelle Eberhardt, both of whom have created female protagonists who conspire against their husbands, resulting in their own relative freedom.

still more freedom: she would not have to return to her father and brothers since her status would henceforth be that of a repudiated woman. It is nevertheless curious that Eberhardt should view marriage as a way out of patriarchy and paternal order in a tale that links marriage to oppression and misery. One might agree that Tessaadith, having been married off to the old man, did in fact escape the rule of the father. However, the argument could be advanced that she entered into marriage not of her own volition, but at the instigation of her father, and that her designated husband was little more than a second father to her. As such, then, in being handed over to an ersatz father by her biological one, her life was in some ways only recuperated by the order of paternal authority. But in any case, by freeing herself from the chains of marriage she effectively doubly subverted paternal authority in that she symbolically turned her back on her biological father and his intentions for her and fled the misery of her marriage. Escaping both her husband and her father at the same time, she was thus finally able to dispose of her life and of her body as she wished by means of the normally devastating performative pronouncement that is talaq.<sup>32</sup> Eberhardt has created an Islamic woman protagonist who actually seeks out repudiation, overturning innumerable accounts of the suffering and abject poverty to which the repudiated wife is subjected and reduced within this culture.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The concept of repudiation (talaq) is complicated in Islam. Not only has it evolved over time as divorce has ceased to be solely a husband's prerogative, its meaning is also highly contingent on the country in which it occurs. In general, though, it is a unilateral act the husband uses to dispense with his wife. It is revocable until such time as talaq has been performed three times. It can also be performed three times at once, in which case it is referred to as talaq thalatha. In the case Eberhardt presents in her story, the exact nature of the type of talaq used by the husband is unclear; however it is unimportant in that Tessaadith effectively sought an irrevocable one. For more on the notion of repudiation in Islam, see Kecia Ali.

<sup>33</sup> By way of example, see for instance Rachid Boudjedra's landmark novel La répudiation, first published in 1969. The topos of the suffering, repudiated woman was so commonplace in Maghrebin writing that novelist Aïcha Lemsine felt the need to correct this reductive vision in her 1978 novel Ciel de porphyre.

This is another instance of how, according to Sossie Andezian, Eberhardt adopts the vantage point of the periphery or the margin in order to “appréhender la société algérienne de l’époque” (Andezian 110). The reality or likelihood of a woman such as Tessaadith actually existing is perhaps slight, and in any event irrelevant for my purposes in that through Tessaadith’s demand for free will one can delineate elements of Eberhardt’s own unconventional and rebellious practices.

### Life and Times

The idea of introducing elements of the author’s life into this analysis is perhaps a problematic one. While not a typical method I employ, I believe it to be necessary in the case of analyzing Eberhardt’s work in the context of this project. Diana Holmes has written on Rachilde’s life—the author whose work is at the core of chapter three—and justified her doing so as follows: “If we are to talk about how women were or were not able to write at certain periods, about the complex juncture of subjectivity, cultural determinants and textuality, then the author’s extratextual existence as an individual in history clearly has to be considered” (Holmes 2). It is precisely because I wish to engage with questions of “subjectivity, cultural determinants and textuality” (Holmes 2) that I wish to explore elements of the author’s biography herein, and how they reflect preoccupations contained in her textual life.

As far as Eberhardt’s life is concerned, the first manifestation of the joug is the era in which she lived. Eberhardt was born in February of 1877 in Switzerland and was raised just outside Geneva. As the daughter of an exiled Russian aristocrat, she grew up with certain material privileges, and yet Eberhardt rejected much of her own social

milieu. That she held in contempt this bourgeois (and even merely European) life is undeniable. In “L’âge du néant,” a trenchant work of satirical social commentary written in 1899 and published under the name Mahmoud Saadi, she excoriates the Europeans she sees at a theatre in Marseilles of an evening. Evoking both a Zolaesque preoccupation with heredity and an almost Baudelairean fascination with and disdain for both the *mal du siècle* and the artifice of women, she characterizes all that she witnesses around her in the “triste foule massée sous [ses] yeux” as the “profonde tragi-comédie moderne” (Eberhardt, Écrits 2: 529, 530). Like many of her contemporaries, Eberhardt sought to escape Europe and all the trappings of the decadent society she so deeply resented. In this regard, her life and writings resemble Elaine Showalter’s examination in Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle (1990) of the “male quest romance” of roughly the same period in that they “represent a yearning for escape from a confining society, rigidly structured in terms of gender, class, and race, to a mythologized place elsewhere” (Showalter 81). As a child Eberhardt did so by turning to the writing of people like Pierre Loti, the (in)famous Orientalist, only to turn literally to the Orient in later life and lose herself in the desert. As Jarrod Hayes infers in Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb (2000): “Travel to the ‘Orient’ was the continuation of reading fiction [about it]” (Hayes 26). Hayes’s statement is one way to anchor the assertion that Eberhardt’s practices are tied to and revealed by her fiction, since she too digested much of what was written about the Orient before finally sojourning there and experiencing it for herself.

Despondent, Eberhardt had to leave Europe and flee all that was familiar to her in order to “find herself” and to realize her dream of becoming an important and famous

writer.<sup>34</sup> Hédi Abdel-Jaouad categorizes her departure in Islamic terms, stating that she repudiated Europe (Abdel-Jaouad, “Portrait” 93). This question of repudiation can be applied equally to the cross-dressing she imposed upon herself so as to travel freely within the “pays des sables.” One could see in her decision the repudiation of the feminine or of the female sex, or one could consider that Eberhardt, aware of the restrictions imposed upon women and of the sexual segregation in the Maghreb, quickly realized that her projects would have failed had she undertaken them as a woman. Culturally and sexually, her new identity represents a categorical rejection of the bourgeois value system, the symbolic order, and the colonial system: her dressing as an Arab man permits her to repudiate all the forms of control to which she might have been subjected. Élise Nouel, in the chapter devoted to Eberhardt in her study Carré d’as... aux femmes!, writes furthermore: “Ceci [her dressing as a man] était peut-être aussi une défense, un désir d’échapper à elle-même, à son sexe” (Nouel 66).

Eberhardt’s relationships with and attitudes toward other women are fraught to say the very least. With only one or two exceptions—the most notable being her references to her mother—her personal journals depict utter disdain and contempt for women, whether European or otherwise.<sup>35</sup> Denise Brahimi’s Requiem pour Isabelle

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<sup>34</sup> Eberhardt’s desire to become a writer of note was a matter treated in much of her correspondence and journal writing: “L’esprit littéraire se réveille en moi, et je tâcherai au moins de me faire un nom dans la presse algérienne, en attendant d’en faire autant dans celle de Paris...” (qtd. in Nouel 91-92).

<sup>35</sup> Her fiction, too, is commonly denounced as misogynistic, although curiously I have yet to encounter a critic who views the work in such a light who can account for the tale of Tessaadith described above. Certainly Eberhardt’s relationship with women is a complex one, or so it would seem judging from her autobiographical and fictional work; I mean only to suggest that it is perhaps not as clear-cut as most critics would have it. For one example of such criticism of Eberhardt’s work, see Chilcoat. For a more nuanced analysis of the portrayal of women in Eberhardt’s œuvre, see Andezian, esp. 117-18. If one takes Eberhardt’s texts as the portrayal of a nation under colonial rule, it is important to consider what Hayes has described as “[...] the failure of any narrative to write the Nation without marginalizing or doing violence

(1983) performs a close reading of numerous passages of Eberhardt's Mes Journaliers; on the issue of women Brahimi claims:

Toutes les autres [all women except for Eberhardt's mother and a certain Mme Ben Aben] sans exception sont des créatures aussi laides que dégoûtantes, pour lesquelles Isabelle témoigne d'une grande distance mêlée d'aversion. [...] [C]e qu'elle exprime est une haine véritablement vouée à la femelle,<sup>36</sup> et qui semble avoir atteint des sommets pendant son séjour à Marseille durant l'été 1901. [...] Isabelle déteste profondément les femmes de son temps, et les méprise totalement, au point de leur dénier même la qualité d'être humains. (Brahimi 82-84)

Whether Eberhardt's decision was motivated by an aversion for everything that had to do with women or whether it was a pragmatic choice inasmuch as the author could not have come and gone as she pleased within "male space" in Algeria, the joug of gender rears its head. Fatima Mernissi's Beyond the Veil describes the sexual segregation of space in Muslim societies as the regulatory mechanism of Muslim sexuality. Public space is by definition male, and women, for whom the domestic realm is reserved, are defined in terms of sex and sexuality. Those women who transgress the boundaries of male space pose a threat to the social order, because crossing the frontier of domestic space into public space is an "attack on the acknowledged allocation of power" (Mernissi 137). Mernissi further explains how this division reflects the separation of those who hold authority (the men) and those who do not (the women). The patriarchal order is certainly part of this practice given the restrictions it imposes on women. Mernissi ultimately

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to a portion of its citizens" (Hayes 150). While this assertion does not necessarily "excuse" any misogyny on the part of Eberhardt, it is a more considered way of examining it, one that is less reactionary or essentialist (such that as a woman, it is even more inflammatory that her prose be misogynistic).

<sup>36</sup> The use of the word "femelle" in French is pejorative when pertaining to people, if not downright inflammatory (whether as a substantive or an adjective). Brahimi's choice of word here reveals just how strong she believes Eberhardt's hatred of women to be. The expected, neutral formulation would substitute "aux femmes" (or "à la femme") for "à la femelle."

concludes that “sexual segregation intensifies what it is supposed to eliminate: the sexualization of human relations” (Mernissi 140). By the same token, the processes of accommodation of and resistance to it also manifest themselves. Bound to the terms of the Shari’a,<sup>37</sup> she was forbidden to circulate freely as a woman in North Africa. As Hayes has noted, “Women, hardly a minority, are locked in the margins of the Nation, away from the public space of its citizens” (Hayes 58). As a solution to this proscription and marginalization, she elected to adopt the costume of a man in order to be able to travel and write as she pleased, “experimenting with the freedom available to boys and men” (Showalter 64). Jon Spayde has noted that “Eberhardt’s willingness to cross the gender divide both reflected and furthered her ravenous appetite for adventure in the big world” (Spayde 54). She therefore transgressed the limits of her biological sex in an Arabo-Muslim culture by dressing as a man. The Western order is also transgressed through the practice of cross-dressing specifically as an Arabo-Muslim man. It represents not only a change of gender (without surgical intervention, of course) but also the adoption of a new identity, that of the Arab horseman, an identity she claimed for herself and that many presumably accepted. Alberto Hernando writes:

Isabelle is in the habit of using the masculine [form of both pronouns and adjectives] in her diary and in her correspondence. The frequent use of distinct names (Nadia, Nicolas, Podolinski, Mériem, Mahmoud) or the alteration of her biographical referents should not be judged as a capricious eccentricity or a convenient fraud in front of [confronted with] an external atmosphere adverse or reticent to women. Her diverse names are the exponent of a visceral unrootedness, the manifestation of a personality as rich it was contradictory and confused. Her doubling is a way to intensify life, to transgress the narrow margins of a social

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<sup>37</sup> The Sharia or Sheria (in English) is commonly taken to mean Islamic law, although the terms “Islamic” and “law” are both misnomers since only portions of it are based on the Qur’an. It deals with domestic and everyday life as well as judicial and civil matters; portions of it are applicable to non-Muslims residing in Muslim society. See Kjeilen for a more detailed analysis of the Shari’a as well as Mernissi’s Beyond the Veil, p. 21.

normalization that identify you as a unique personality. But we are not one, but multiple [...]. (Hernando 29 [emphasis in the original] [my translation])

Andezian presents a much more nuanced examination of Eberhardt's life and work, especially regarding the use of disguise and the presentation of women in her texts. Overturning the idea that it was simply her dressing as a man that enabled Eberhardt to venture into spaces from which she would otherwise have been barred, Andezian argues that it was rather Eberhardt's hybridity and double appurtenance that enabled her relatively unrestricted movement: "C'est moins son déguisement qui la fait accepter dans les milieux masculins habituellement inaccessibles aux femmes que sa capacité à être à la fois homme et femme, occidentale et orientale, membre de la société coloniale et membre de la société indigène" (Andezian 111). Andezian's hypothesis is one that is richer and arguably more plausible, especially in light of the fact that Eberhardt herself was more than willing to point out that "les Algériens connaissent sa véritable identité mais qu'ils feignent de l'ignorer par respect" (Andezian 118). Implicit in Andezian's argument is also the simple fact that the rules of hospitality are different in Algeria than in the West.

The question of the motivation for Eberhardt's cross-dressing is further complicated when one reads that her sexuality was perhaps implicated in it. Rosa Montero, in Historias de mujeres (1995), contends, "Isabelle's sexuality has always aroused a morbid curiosity. It seems to be that she could only get excited when she dressed as a boy, even though it also appears that she only ever attracted men: she used to love to visit brothels with other men, but she only ever observed" (Montero 164 [my translation]).

Although this is the only reference that I could find according to which Eberhardt required men's clothing to be aroused sexually, it nonetheless presents another element of the forces ostensibly motivating her practice of cross-dressing (assuming it is true, which represents something of a leap of faith). In any case, such comments indicate that Eberhardt's turning to the Orient arguably "provided a playground for the relief of tensions engendered by Western sexual normativity," as Hayes has elaborated with regard to the notion of sexual tourism (Hayes 23). Even Edward W. Said has written on the effect of tourism and colonialism on sexual license in literary discourse, characterizing travel to the Orient as an attempt to find "a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden" (Said 190).

On the issue of sex, furthermore, biographers have alleged that in fact Eberhardt wanted to be made love to as a man. Annette Kobak, in the 1988 biography Isabelle: The Life of Isabelle Eberhardt, cites Françoise d'Eaubonne's 1968 Couronne de sable: Vie d'Isabelle Eberhardt, in which d'Eaubonne claimed that for Eberhardt, anal intercourse was a primary means of avoiding the risk of pregnancy.<sup>38</sup> Kobak ultimately refutes this theory, primarily based on Eberhardt's description of the position she favored for intercourse (Kobak 98-99). Unfortunately, this description does not preclude anal intercourse despite what Kobak seems to think, for Eberhardt merely mentions that she likes to make love face-to-face with her partner (Kobak 99). Anal penetration is not precluded by such a positioning, although this anatomical truth is conspicuously (conveniently?) left out of Kobak's argument. Just how fully Eberhardt may have taken

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<sup>38</sup> The practice of anal sex as a means of contraception is certainly not something Eberhardt would have ignored. Its application in premodern France has been studied by Bloch. Furthermore, its occurrence in Arabo-Muslim cultures, both to avoid pregnancy and to enable the above-referenced ceremonial defloration, is notorious, if for the most part formally undocumented.

to her male alter-ego is not a matter one can resolve, nor can we be fully cognizant of every possible motivation she might have had for its assumption. What is more provocative than all of that is what the critical implications of her play with gender might be.

### Eberhardt and Drag

In the landmark study Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety,<sup>39</sup> Marjorie Garber undertakes an examination of Eberhardt's cross-dressing and male identity. She notes: "Cross-dressing for Isabelle Eberhardt thus became a way of obeying the paternal and patriarchal law (Trophimowsky [her tutor and the man many scholars agree was her biological father] permitted her to go into Geneva only if she dressed as a boy) and a way of subverting it" (Garber 325 [emphasis in the original]). Garber quotes Kobak's presentation of an excerpt of a letter written by Eberhardt to her husband Slimène Ehnne regarding an impending court appearance. In the letter, Eberhardt beseeches her husband not to procure her any European women's clothes due to the high price of such garments. She vows to Ehnne that she will cease, if only for the court appearance, to dress as an Arab man but that she intends fully to present herself in the guise of a European man, stating that: "it's not for the pleasure of dressing up as a man, but because it's impossible for me to do otherwise" (qtd. in Garber 327 [emphasis in the original]). According to Garber, in this letter

[...] class, gender, and nationality are deployed as categories that contain, or define, cultural anxieties. Eberhardt asserts her desire to present herself as a European—which is to say, a European man—a strategic choice

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<sup>39</sup> Henceforth, Vested.

prescribed by economic and political factors. To dress as an Arab man is politically unwise, to dress a Frenchwoman, economically impossible. (Garber 327)

Garber's analysis is striking in that it posits Eberhardt as a paradigm of the "personification of displacement" (Garber 328 [emphasis in the original]). In so stating, Garber is calling attention to Eberhardt's alterity: she was a convert to Islam, rejected the importance of her non-Algerian citizenship and ancestry, and seemed to enjoy playing with gender indeterminacy. Adopting various male pseudonyms throughout her life, presenting herself as a man while simultaneously announcing herself as a woman, etc., are all processes that typify what Hayes has termed the "continued unmasking of cross-dressing" (Hayes 169). This unmasking is one way Eberhardt brings to the forefront the lack of congruity between her appearance and self-identification. In this regard, Eberhardt's views on gender exhibit elements of Holly Devor's reformulation of gender, which she argues is "as much in the reading as in the telling" (Devor 153). The gender blending displayed by Eberhardt and elaborated from a theoretical standpoint by Devor is a schema in which "[g]enders would become social statuses available to any persons according to their personal dispositions and their exhibited behaviors" (Devor 153). To Devor's contention that gender could become a social status, I would add a cultural element, particularly relevant in light of the cross-cultural practice manifested by Eberhardt.

Garber's reading of Eberhardt's transvestism and play with gender, then, is one that takes into account its manifold expressions and refuses a simple, binary-based analysis of its motivations. In Eberhardt, Garber sees a woman who played with gender as it suited her and expected others to attribute to her whatever status she herself favored

at any given moment, be it Arab or European, man or woman.<sup>40</sup> Garber avoids interpreting Eberhardt's cross-dressing as merely a way of "getting what she wanted" in subverting patriarchy: as cited above, in Switzerland it facilitated her visits to Geneva as it was easier for her to do so in male dress, according to her tutor anyway, and thus catered to the demands of patriarchy. Notwithstanding the foregoing, precisely because she adopted male garb, she simultaneously subverted patriarchal order, revealing the instabilities of such an order in so doing.

Instabilities are a core component of Judith Butler's analysis of drag as it is presented in her formidable study Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity<sup>41</sup> (1990, rpt. 1999). Butler essentially formulates a critique of gender parody as a performance in which gender is imitated without there being an original model on which to base such an imitation, thereby "[depriving] hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities" (Butler, Gender 175-76). Moreover, she writes:

In the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of construction. (Butler, Gender 176)

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<sup>40</sup> In reference to a different narrative, Jarrod Hayes comments: "Whereas the fictions of both gender and Nation are inescapable, neither are [sic] written in stone, and both, therefore are subject to rewriting" (Hayes 135). The parallel to issues at stake in Eberhardt's practice and work is, I believe, a clear one.

<sup>41</sup> Henceforth, Gender.

An unstated corollary to the above notion is the inherent and attendant subversion of both the social and the symbolic order, the subversion of which is of capital importance to Eberhardt's practice.

If one applies Butler's work on parody and gender identity to the "drag" "performed"<sup>42</sup> by Eberhardt, it becomes readily apparent that Eberhardt, in presenting herself in (Arab) male dress, destabilizes the notion of fixity of gender identity. She can slip on men's clothing and introduce herself as a woman precisely because, according to Butler, both such binary categories (man and woman) are constructions. What is more, she argues, they are constructions that depend upon one another in order to distinguish one from the other: "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingencies" (Butler, Gender 175 [emphasis in the original]). Another layer of analysis, however, is necessary: by choosing to dress as an Arab man, Eberhardt upends a traditional value system according to which "Arab" is a devalorized identity both on the social and cultural level precisely due to her having elected to embody it.

Reading Butler side-by-side with Garber in the case of the life and work of Isabelle Eberhardt is fundamental to any understanding of what her cross-dressing performed, as well as to any understanding of her cross-dressing as "performance." In "The Spectre of the Veiled Dance: The Transvestic, and European Constructions of the 'East'," Katrina O'Laughlin presents readings of Virginia Woolf's Orlando, Isabelle Eberhardt, and the letters Flaubert wrote during his two-year voyage to the Orient, which

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<sup>42</sup> I have placed both terms (drag and performed) in quotation marks here as I hesitate to use such terms in speaking of Isabelle Eberhardt. Firstly, drag and the performativity of gender as critical concepts came into being well after Eberhardt dressed as a man in North Africa. Secondly, I do not wish to suggest that she necessarily adopted male dress for the reasons cited in that particular paragraph but merely that one can read her cross-dressing in such a light.

began in 1849. O’Laughlin’s analysis of Eberhardt’s cross-dressing is notable for the ways in which she relates it to colonial authority and to the veil. For O’Laughlin, the gender indeterminacy evidenced by Eberhardt’s practice “radically compromise[s] the hegemony of culturally managed sex/gender systems” (O’Laughlin 234) and the veil is “a persistently resonant element or signature of the conflation of gender/sexual ambiguity [...]” (O’Laughlin 235). O’Laughlin posits that “Veiling represents the reality of cross-dressing to pass—the sexed body must be hidden by the costume of the ‘opposite’ sex” (235). What is problematic in O’Laughlin’s analysis, however, is that it relies too heavily on secondary sources: no one source by Eberhardt, in the original French or in translation, appears in her bibliography. Equally troublesome is the reliance on Garber’s Vested to lay out the terms of O’Laughlin’s own analysis. She cites Garber extensively, yet she never really offers anything new in her reading of Eberhardt and Garber, as well as in her application of Butler’s Gender to Eberhardt. She does attempt to further Garber’s analysis of the veil, but since her entire conception of it is informed by Garber’s original work, it is not an entirely successful endeavor. It is more a development of the concept of the veil according to Garber’s own formulation and interpretation of it, and I suspect that had Garber opted to elaborate further on this notion, it would have been far more interesting and accessible than O’Laughlin’s.

What O’Laughlin attempts to demonstrate is indeed interesting, but she fails to consider fully the ways in which Eberhardt’s experiences mirrored her work. An analysis of this sort would yield better results if one’s hypothesis were that Eberhardt’s cross-dressing subverted colonial practices. One way to formulate such an argument is through recourse to the question of the M’Tourni. As Abdel-Jaouad has written, the term

designates, “form [sic] the French, tourner [to turn], the one who turns away from his former religion and converts to a new one” (Abdel-Jaouad, “Isabelle Eberhardt” 11). First of all, let us not forget that Eberhardt, like the main character in her short story “M’Tourni,” took an Arabic name and converted to Islam. Such a consideration of the notion of M’Tourni in the case of Eberhardt’s life and work is not sufficient, however, for it goes beyond the question of religion and can be applied to familial, national, and gender concerns. Just like their author, many of Eberhardt’s European characters convert to Islam and adopt traditional Algerian dress and customs. Her disavowal of her European identity in favor of her Islamic beliefs is another instance in which she can be said to have “turned away from” some former aspect of herself, privileging her newly acquired religion. As a wanderer, nationality was of little significance to Eberhardt; her faith was capital.<sup>43</sup> Raised in a climate of intolerance and disdain,<sup>44</sup> she turned her back on the “comforts of home” and family and set out to find herself amidst the turbulent backdrop of colonial Algeria. A similar process can be found in short stories such as “Le Major” and “L’Anarchiste.”

As Behdad aptly remarks, one can hardly speak of Isabelle Eberhardt’s texts without speaking of her life. I am no less able to avoid this trend than was he or were other critics. Abdel-Jaouad, in his article “Isabelle Eberhardt,” delimits the notion of evasion in the life and works of Eberhardt and writes, “escape is also escape from social ties” (Abdel-Jaouad, “Isabelle Eberhardt” 12). One must consider the question of evasion

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<sup>43</sup> Garber writes: “Eberhardt was apparently willing to regard all of these categories as play except one: willing, indeed apparently eager, to present herself as European or Arab, male or female, aristocrat or workman, depending upon the context, she was militant in her assertion of her Muslim faith” (Garber 328).

<sup>44</sup> Abdel-Jaouad points out that in Geneva “every Russian émigré was regarded with suspicion [...]” (Abdel-Jaouad, “Portrait” 95).

in both a social and a familial sense: it is the rejection of the bourgeois milieu in which Eberhardt grew up as well as of its values. Just like the character of the father in her short story “L’Anarchiste,” she too sought “une terre neuve, une patrie d’élection” (Eberhardt, Au pays 155) and therefore set out traveling to remove herself from her situation, a situation that has been characterized by Garber as “overdetermined” (Garber 325). According to Sidonie Smith, “Eberhardt actually constructs her travels as a ‘return’ to a ‘true home’ from a place that has been no home, from a place in which she has always already been a ‘stranger’” (Smith 297).

One cannot ignore the paradox that arises in considering the hypotheses of Smith and Abdel-Jaouad. It is precisely thanks to her origins and to her family that Eberhardt was able to travel in the first place; had she been raised in a society where the education of women, whether within the family or by the State, were not a priority, it is doubtful she would have ever even heard of the Maghreb, let alone traveled and relocated there. Her relationship to (her) class is fraught: what enabled Eberhardt to escape is also precisely what she was escaping. All her knowledge, especially of languages, originated in the instruction she received from her tutor. She was in the company of her mother the first time that she went to Algeria, and the purpose of their trip was to visit her half-brother (Behdad 116). It is due to her family that she gained an awareness of the Maghreb in the first place and was able to go there, navigating life far more easily than those who did not have the advantage of being able to speak, read, and write in Arabic. Had she not been bourgeoisie, she would never have had the education that permitted her to escape traditional bourgeois values. Bound to the yoke of her genesis, she was at once indebted to and disgusted by her family’s social standing and place within the classed society of

her time, but I would not be so quick to label her the “poor little rich girl” one might associate with such an ambivalent attitude. Eberhardt seems to have recognized that she could benefit from certain advantages her family’s standing afforded her, if only in turn to run away from that world as quickly as possible. It seems more a pragmatic decision than a question of the privileged young woman “slumming it” for effect or attention. If I am focusing primarily on the question of social evasion here, it is not at all in an effort to reduce the notion of evasion as it applies to her to merely a social one; the author’s transvestism also entails the idea of escape, an escape from the shackles of gender and culture through an embrace of alterity, as I hope to have demonstrated in the foregoing.

Alterity is a central component in the life and work of Eberhardt and merits some discussion here. In point of fact, the adoption of the position of the Other in her life is what allowed her to create her narratives. As Andezian has noted,

La démarche d’I. Eberhardt se définit par la sortie hors de soi, sortie de ses propres catégories identitaires (catégorie sexuelle, sociale, nationale) et l’adoption des catégories de l’Autre, dans l’objectif de mieux observer et de mieux connaître cet Autre. [...] [C]haque de ces identifications est vécue jusqu’au bout avec conviction et sincérité. (Andezian 118)

In short, Eberhardt’s willingness to become and reveal herself as something other than what she may have appeared to have been to the indigenous peoples she so eagerly wished to know was a crucial step in her process of realizing her dream of becoming a writer. By demonstrating her status as a “femme non conformiste” (Andezian 118), the people she encountered were more apt to spend time with her, to share their secrets, and to admit her to their ranks. Eberhardt’s refusal to conform to what was expected of her as a Western woman is precisely how her practice stands in staunch defiance of the social, cultural, and sexual categories defined and prescribed by the symbolic order.

In her short stories, the reader encounters numerous characters that, subjected to various constraints, are limited in their experiences. One can discern these very same problems in Eberhardt's life. Through an analysis of the recurring notion of the joug in her short stories, I have illustrated efforts toward liberation and freedom: Tessaadith, who frees herself from an arranged marriage to live with her handsome lover; a Russian father, who escapes the crushing routine of the everyday (Eberhardt, Au pays 155); a doctor-major, who persists in treating the colonized people as human beings, despite the reprimands and threats of his superiors. These are characters that rebel against the shackles of religion, tradition, society, and colonialism. To refuse the imposed yoke, whatever its nature, in these short stories and in Eberhardt's life, becomes an act of emancipation, a challenge, a quest for freedom. In her practices and in her writings, Eberhardt faced moments where she or one of the protagonists she created had the choice: trudge forward in a bleak, even oppressive, existence or carve out a more satisfying existence regardless of the consequences. In the words of Abdel-Jaouad, "Isabelle wanted to achieve freedom, not through revolution, but through evasion. Instead of confrontation, she elected retreat and withdrawal. As for all her fictional characters, freedom becomes for her the most audacious act of rebellion" (Abdel-Jaouad, "Isabelle Eberhardt" 13).

## CHAPTER THREE

### MONSIEUR VÉNUS: INVERSION AS SUBVERSION

Rachilde's Monsieur Vénus, “an embodiment of binary oppositions” (Wilkinson, screen 1), is a provocative tale from the standpoint of gender and sexuality. The author creates characters that do not conform to the “rules” of the sex/gender system; this in turn allows Rachilde to deconstruct certain binaries, such as nature/culture, body/machine, matter/spirit (material/spiritual), masculine/feminine, and man/woman. Herein, terms such as masculine, feminine, man, woman, sex, and gender will retain the same definitions elaborated previously. My analysis will consist of a textual investigation of how elements of the plot constitute interrogations of these binaries as well as what might be gleaned from questioning them. The focus of this reading is to examine how Rachilde's novel prefigures contemporary theories of gender performance and sexuality, all the while remaining vigilant in asserting the fraught relationship the novel maintains with such approaches. Demonstrating the various permutations of gender contained in the novel, we will explore the nature of gender relations and the potential and problems contained in Rachilde's subversion of them, specifically related to the insufficiency of gendered language to convey the full range of erotic choices portrayed in the text.

We must also consider the role of sexuality within the sex/gender system as it operates within the novel. Indeed, we can discern the potential inherent in Rachilde's destabilizing the sex/gender system for there is the possibility of resistance in her deployment of gender as a construction. For Rachilde, the body and sex may be natural but desire does not flow from the body or, necessarily, from gender for that matter. In Monsieur Vénus (henceforth, MV), heterosexual acts reproduce power relations between men and women and homosexual acts are viewed with disdain, but gender is made available to any sex or sexuality. Vital to this paradoxical stance with regard to the sex/gender system is the binary of nature/culture which is, as we will see, the overarching force at stake in the novel. Problematizing this binary in the novel is what gives it resonance with queer and gender theories: both methods of inquiry treat the dichotomy of nature and culture, in fact taking it as an organizing principle. Regarding the study of sexuality, Sedgwick refers to this as "the meditation on and attempted adjudication of constructivist versus essentialist views on homosexuality" (Sedgwick, Epistemology 40). As for gender studies, examining the sex/gender system is how this issue is treated: "the [...] question of the relation of the biological and the cultural" (Butler, "Against Proper Objects" 5) or the difference between sex (chromosomal) versus gender ("the far more elaborated, more fully and rigidly dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviors" [Sedgwick, Epistemology 26]).

As a result, preeminent concerns in all three domains (within the novel, gender theory, and queer theory) interrogate what is innate or endowed by (a product of) nature as opposed to what is socially, socioeconomically, and culturally constructed. In effect, Rachilde anticipates Lee Edelman's idea of the "unknowability" of sexuality: "its always

displaced and displacing relations to categories that include, but also exceed, those of sex, gender, class, nationality, ethnicity, and race” (Edelman xv). As we shall see, Judith Butler’s work is a productive countervail to Rachilde’s in that Butler’s theoretical engagement with these issues stands as an influential model of cultural production within the realm of both queer and gender studies. It is for this reason that I argue that Rachilde’s novel serves as a bellwether for contemporary inquiry.

Rachilde’s interrogation of nature, culture, sex, gender, sexuality, and the body is what allows her novel to be a thought-provoking, important, and utterly suitable text to be analyzed through the dual lenses of queer and gender theories. Her treatment of such interrogations may not—and in fact does not—conform to what is typically expected of a text deemed “queer,” but it is precisely because she asks the questions in the first place that one can assert that the text holds an important place in an emerging queer canon. Not all of her answers are the conventionally correct ones, i.e., antihomophobic. Her portrayal of homosexuality, and specifically lesbianism, coupled with the misogynistic elements within the text make the narrative a difficult one to situate in this way; in Rachilde’s examination of these issues, however, her narrative is nonetheless aligned with contemporary, postmodern theories on gender and sexuality.

Sexuality, from the standpoint of masculine and feminine, is essentialized in the novel and mimics the conventions of heterosexuality (the man as active partner; the woman, passive). Yet, at the same time, Rachilde succeeds in divorcing sexuality and desire from the body and from the sex/gender system; therein lies her contribution to queer theory. Sexuality is both essentialized and broadened in MV in ways that have long made it anathema to many queer theorists. The same type of aversion and difficulty can

be seen in studies treating questions of gender as they pertain to MV. Nevertheless, the novel does have contributions to offer to theories of gender as well. Denaturalizing gender and resisting the sex/gender system, exhibiting both as nothing more than the byproduct of society, culture, and economics, is one productive way of destabilizing received, regulatory notions of gender. In Rachilde's systematic inversion of predominant binaries circulating within the culture of her time, she offers a glimpse of how inversion can become subversion. Many critics—including Bram Dijkstra (337), Nelly Sanchez (281, 283), and Robert Ziegler (116-17), among others—read the novel merely as a game of inversion but it is my firm contention that Rachilde's reworking of various dichotomies speaks to the constructedness and contingency of these binaries. Though she may not offer a way to escape the determining role these dyads have on one's existence, her capacity for demonstrating them to be instantiations of power that are in no way natural symbolizes her personal conception of freedom.

### Decadent Designs

The narrative concerns two protagonists: Raoule de Vénérande, a wealthy, independent, and unwed woman who frequently presents herself, both in manner and dress, as a man; and Jacques Silvert, a working-class maker of artificial flowers with artistic aspirations. They meet accidentally one day when Raoule seeks out Jacques's sister Marie to place a flower order. Raoule is immediately transfixed by Jacques and sets out to make him her mistress, reserving the role of lover for herself and ignoring the criticism and warnings of her friend the baron de Raittolbe and her aunt dame Ermengarde, with

whom she lives. Jacques is depicted as a man of sublime, “almost supernatural beauty” (MV trans. 84),<sup>45</sup> completely caught up in the complicated cat-and-mouse game Raoule has envisioned for him. Raoule becomes his keeper, providing for his every need and encouraging him in his art, as in Baudelaire’s conception of art and prostitution (“Qu’est-ce que l’art? Prostitution” [Baudelaire, Fusées 7]).<sup>46</sup> Raoule’s financial support of Jacques, however, is problematic and does not come without strings. As Baudelaire expressed it, “Les voluptés de l’entrepreneur tiennent à la fois de l’ange et du propriétaire” (Baudelaire, Fusées 8). Her intentions for Jacques are to aestheticize and dominate him, remaking him into an animated wax doll by the end of the tale, literalizing the dynamic of owner/property to which Baudelaire alludes. Attempting to subvert the naturalness of the body, she arranges to have Jacques killed so that she might have his body reconstructed, with fetishistic elements, by technology. Her vocation undoubtedly favors artifice over the natural and privileges the unconventionally erotic and the nonreproductive, in accordance with the Decadent aesthetic: at one point, the pleasures she and Jacques enjoy together are described as “une volupté factice” (MV 100). Elsewhere, the baron urges Raoule to abandon Jacques and hopes she will return to a life “suivant les lois de la saine

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<sup>45</sup> All quotations from and references to Monsieur Vénus, whether in French (MV) or in English (MV trans.), refer to the 2004 MLA Texts and Translations editions of Rachilde’s novel since they are more widely available than the original 1884 edition.

<sup>46</sup> One view on this link is that Baudelaire adopts a cynical position, focused on the market as the tie that binds the artist to the prostitute: both the artist and the prostitute enter the marketplace and exchange goods and services for cash. Another is that an artwork is “par essence publique: [elle] s’adresse à un public, n’a de sens que par lui, devient, aussitôt faite, la proie du premier venu” (Baudelaire, Journaux intimes 205). In Debarati Sanyal’s fascinating The Violence of Modernity she posits that “[...] ‘prostitution’ is redefined as a dynamic metaphor for poetry, and more specifically, for the circulation of bodies and things in the poetic and social texts. [...] Baudelaire uses ‘prostitution’ to denote an explosion of psychic boundaries and a free circulation of subjectivities. Poetic prostitution releases the body from its gendered and class determinations [...]. [...] poetic prostitution becomes a metaphor for the semiotic exchanges of allegory and commodity production, a heuristic tool for investigating the tension between body and form within interlocking processes of representation.” (Sanyal 102).

nature” (MV 145) and her aunt characterizes her passion for Jacques as so many “désirs contre nature” (MV 174).

Rachilde frequently describes Jacques through recourse to figures from Classical Antiquity: his backside is “digne de la Vénus Callipyge” (MV 40); the baron de Raittolbe antonomastically calls Jacques “Eros lui-même” (MV 117) and “l’Antinoüs du boulevard Montparnasse” (MV 142); and at various moments, Jacques is “une Vénus du Titien” (MV 155) and “[un] Protée amoureux” (MV 184). For the most part, these references consolidate the reader’s attention on Jacques’s body as well as his beauty and femininity, “interpret[ing], fram[ing], and render[ing]” his body “meaningful in relation to the ideal referent of the represented female form” (Felski 196). Additionally, the references reflect a trope of the fin-de-siècle period. Antinous, the beloved of emperor Hadrian, is a personage to whom many Decadent writers refer in their works; one reason for this is that such a veiled reference allows authors to code their characters as gay or nonnormative. Decadence is a supremely useful sensibility for depicting unconventional desires; as Martha Vicinus accurately notes: “Decadent images and literary devices were used as covers for—or as representative of—deviant, concealed desires” (Vicinus 93). She further demonstrates that Decadent writers often mined classical literature and mythology as well as historical figures, “reworking classicism” in order to depict alternate sexualities and ‘deviant’ desires (Vicinus 93-94).

Central to the Decadent aesthetic are the following notions: a narcissistic—if not solipsistic—form of sensuality (Baudelaire’s “culte de soi-même” (Baudelaire,

Constantin Guys<sup>47</sup> 87), the celebration of the artificial, a disdain of nature, an investigation of the tension that exists between nature and art as well as between art and life, an aversion to fecundity in favor of sterility, and a general discontentedness with civilization (from which stems one of the supreme ideas associated with Decadence, that of ennui). Elaine Showalter asserts: “The decadent aesthetic rejected all that was natural and biological in favor of the inner life of art, artifice, sensation, and imagination” (Showalter 170). Monsieur Vénus stages several of these topoi, which form an integral portion of Raoule’s attempt to recreate Jacques as a woman and then as a work of art. Art, love, and artifice are three components constitutive of the Decadent sensibility, all utilized in a quest to “express the previously unexpressed” (Vicinus 101). Rachilde’s use of Decadence, furthermore, is connected to her destabilizing of existing categories of sex and gender. All of this contributes to the overall idea, according to the Decadent mindset, that “nature exists only to be improved upon by art” (Schneider 143). Artistic perfection is preferable to sexual satisfaction, and this has important consequences when it comes to interpersonal relations.

It is patently clear that an important intertext for many Decadent works—and MV is no exception—is Ovid’s tale of Pygmalion. Pygmalion, disgusted with real women, falls in love with the ideal woman he has sculpted. With a little help from—  
 fortuitously—the goddess Venus, the sculpture comes to life (Ovid 277-79; bk. 10). Based on the story of Pygmalion, psychiatry has designated “[t]he condition of loving a statue, image, or inanimate object; love for an object of one’s own making” as Pygmalionism (“Pygmalionism”), a condition from which Raoule most definitely suffers,

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<sup>47</sup> Henceforth, CG.

albeit willfully, by the novel's close. Given that "the essence of decadence" is "the disjunction between art and life" (qtd. in Lukacher 459), the very Pygmalionesque desire to transform oneself or another into a work of art is one of the chief defining characteristics of the aesthetic impulse of the Decadents. The disjunction between life and art is what compels some Decadent authors to envision scenarios in which one character remakes another character or object (or the self) as a work of art, mirroring Pygmalion's undertaking. This enterprise can manifest in different forms: in À rebours (1884), des Esseintes has his famous tortoise that eventually dies under the weight of its jewel-encrusted shell (Huysmans, À rebours 95-98; 103; ch. 4) as well as the paradoxical quest for real flowers that look artificial (Huysmans, À rebours 132-33; ch. 8).

Ultimately, many of these situations prove to be untenable, ending in death (as with Aschenbach, who dies at the end of Thomas Mann's Death in Venice), disease, death, or decay (Dorian Gray, À rebours), and the realization of "the impossibility of beauty (and innocence) made permanent" (Vicus 98). As the foregoing implies, generally those who attempt to do so encounter failure, often with disastrous results. And yet Raoule succeeds in ways other characters could not. The fate that befalls Dorian Gray will not befall Jacques, Rachilde's male protagonist: he will never age, preserved as he is in wax and rubber. While a nearly dead des Esseintes faces ever-degenerating health by the close of À rebours and is left to nourish himself by enema (Huysmans, À rebours 229-31; ch. 15), Raoule can perform actions of an entirely different sort *par voie anale*. Both novels, first published in 1884, seem to localize the culmination of their aesthetic undertakings at the anus, a site that stands counter to "the natural." For des Esseintes, the fact that he resorts to nourishing himself via enema symbolizes "the last aberration from

the natural that could be committed” (Huysmans, Against the Grain 195) since eating typically terminates rather than begins there. As for Raoule, the locus of the anus is significant for the way in which it symbolizes her departure from reproductive, heterosexual acts framed within marriage, acts which have been hierarchically situated at the top of the “erotic pyramid” of the “hierarchical system of sexual value” (Rubin, “Thinking Sex” 11).

The aestheticization of women in literary works of the period inevitably ends in the woman’s death, killing the woman into art. In the case of MV it is the woman who aestheticizes the man: “the reversal of convention, whereby a *male* body is appropriated as textual surface by a *female* creative force, defamiliarizes the conventional power relationship and thus puts it into question” (Beizer 251 [emphasis in the original]). Their alliance recalls the artist/protégé relationship frequently found in other Decadent works, an eroticized form of artistic patronage wherein one artist befriends and financially subsidizes a younger artist. The monetary terms of Jacques and Raoule’s arrangement are clear: she provides him with a studio where he can live and paint, free from the “misère” of his former quarters (MV 17). Aligned with Raoule as his “chère bienfaitrice” (MV 35), Jacques has overcome his modest beginnings and tainted heritage, a real working-class man living the dream life of a painter.

Raoule de Vénérande is the elder artist vis-à-vis Jacques, the aspiring—if untalented (MV 16)—painter. “[H]er artistry [...] asserted far from the canvas [...] is a satisfaction of desire in the creation and control of life” (Wilkinson, screen 1). In this way, she is aligned with the Decadents and the aesthetes, who sought to turn their lives into art. Her impulse to aestheticize Jacques is alluded to throughout the novel. Jacques is

in point of fact simultaneously Raoule's canvas and her text or stationery. Upon seeing him naked for the first time, she refers to him as "Poème effrayant de la nudité humaine" (MV 41). Elsewhere, we read that his body "était un poème" (MV 126) and in another scene, she uses her fingernails to claw into his skin, carving visible physical traces of her presence into his body (MV 84). Later, he is likened to so much clay, when the baron speculates as to the possibility of restoring Jacques's manhood: "Peut-être tirerait-on un homme de cet argile... si Raoule voulait" (MV 189). Jacques's body is the raw material or medium through which Raoule, "le Christophe Colomb de l'amour moderne" (MV 73), might stylize, aestheticize, and dominate him.

Jacques's stature as Raoule's artistic project culminates in his death at the baron's hands when they duel. Posing as Raoule, Jacques went to de Raittolbe and attempted to seduce him (MV 197-200). Jacques, "irrevocably feminized by his female Pygmalion" (Anderson 9), wishes to take a male lover and seeks out de Raittolbe. Failing to seduce him, Jacques is, to borrow terms from Vicinus's study of Aubrey Beardsley's self-portraits, "enmeshed in desire, but incapable of execution" (Vicinus 99). Raoule catches him there and she and de Raittolbe agree that he and Jacques will fight a duel to repair the offense. Though he might have moved out of his working-class life, his defeat is assured because of his roots. As several critics have observed (Belenky 285; Hawthorne, "MV: A Critique" 168; Lukacher 458), Jacques's failure to survive the duel is overdetermined: working-class men knew little of the skills needed to engage in this form of combat.

### Class and the Dandy

Prefiguring contemporary theories of gender performativity (explored in the introduction to this study), Rachilde has created a world in which gender is completely free from (anatomical) sex. This aspect of the text is innovative, to say the least. But Rachilde also thematizes the often-overlooked role of class as a facet of gender performance. Raoule is Jacques's social superior and as such, has more freedom than he. Jacques does at times collude with Raoule in her enterprise of recreating him as a woman, but it is critical to remember that this enterprise is of her devising, not his. He does not have the luxury of focusing on such matters, revealing himself to be more concerned with making ends meet (MV 10). The dichotomy of class as it pertains to gender performance is a crucial element of MV. While numerous scholars have examined the role of class as a determining factor in Raoule's agency in the narrative, there are no clear articulations of the way in which her "class privilege" shapes and informs her gender performance. Raoule's aristocratic origins and social status enable her to reinscribe prevailing notions of power and privilege that go uncontested throughout the novel. Though the aristocracy and its power was in decline, if not absolute freefall, by the time of the novel's publication in France, those from aristocratic families still held more cultural capital than members of the working class.

Raoule's dominion over Jacques mimics the domination and subjugation of the working class by those situated more favorably in society. Her ascension to a position of dominance and superiority is not at all surprising when viewed through the lens of class and class struggle. Her privileged social standing enables her appropriation of

“masculine”<sup>48</sup> traits and behaviors. In tandem with this, Jacques’s inferior origins inform and shape his feminization; he does not have the money or talent to abandon the life Raoule proffers. His work as a maker of artificial flowers is undoubtedly a profession relegated to women at the time (Antle, “Mythologie” 12). This feminization-via-occupation, as Lisa Downing has suggested, “is just one of the ways in which Rachilde systematically destabilizes and inverts stereotypes of gender [...]” (Downing 95). His background devalorizes him and reduces him to a state of anaclitic dependence upon Raoule, financially, emotionally, and sexually. Their cross-class union might well constitute a transgression of social codes, but it does not contest the hierarchical structure that informs these social codes. Rachilde, via Raoule, is able to critique and reveal the social element that informs gender and sex, but does not apply herself to any form of critique of class structure. The “class-bound model of ‘femininity’” (Wilson 197), and of masculinity, as it shapes Raoule’s appropriation of masculinity stands unchallenged in the narrative. As Melanie Hawthorne notes, “class privilege is a prerequisite to Raoule’s autonomy” (Hawthorne, “MV: A Critique” 169). Furthermore, the role of class as it relates to and informs sexuality is another aspect that requires some examination.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s vastly influential work Epistemology of the Closet (1990) (henceforth, Epistemology) offers a useful lens through which to view the potentiality of Rachilde’s novel. In Sedgwick’s exploration of sexuality she posits: “some dimensions of sexuality might be tied, not to gender, but *instead* to differences or

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<sup>48</sup> Borrowing an idea from Halperin’s One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, I enclose certain terms, like masculine and feminine, within quotes “because I do not wish to commit myself [...] to any of the various essentialist definitions of gender which I shall be discussing” (Halperin 117). As he suggests, “By [‘masculine’], then, the reader should understand [*masculine*] power as constructed by the writer, social group, or historical culture in question” (Halperin 117 [emphasis in the original]).

similarities of race or class” (Sedgwick, Epistemology 31 [emphasis in the original]). In the case of MV, the operation of class difference as an erotically charged element constituent of desire is abundantly clear. Raoule is drawn to the lower-class Jacques despite her distaste for his former, unpleasant living conditions. Colloquially, one might say that part of the pleasure Raoule derives is precisely from slumming it. She ignores conventional endogamic expectations of her era and social class. Analyzed from the standpoint of class, sexuality, sex, and gender, Raoule is in many ways quite liberated from the constraints placed on those of her anatomical sex during Rachilde’s life (and which, arguably, perdure to this day in various ways). Raoule de Vénérande is fiercely individualistic and in this way recalls the dandy, a figure dear to the fin-de-siècle period.

Raoule is depicted textually in a manner that is consistent with Baudelaire’s definition of the dandy. Although in “Le Dandy” (Baudelaire, CG 83-92) he defines the dandy only as a man and elsewhere asserts that “La femme est le contraire du dandy” (Baudelaire, Mon cœur 53), my contention is that Raoule is nevertheless a dandy, especially as Baudelaire himself defines it.<sup>49</sup> The dandy is a man “élevé dans le luxe [...] qui n’a pas d’autre profession que l’élégance” (Baudelaire, CG 83). Raoule’s upbringing took place in splendid surroundings: her home is described as “le plus bel hôtel de tout Paris” (MV 147). The fact that she has ample sums of money to devote to the pursuit of any new pleasure is fundamental to her dandyism: “l’argent est indispensable aux gens qui se font un culte de leurs passions” (Baudelaire, CG 84). Without it, “la fantaisie [...] ne peut guère se traduire en action” (Baudelaire, CG 84). He adds, “Ces êtres n’ont pas d’autre état que de cultiver l’idée du beau dans leur personne, de satisfaire leurs passions,

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<sup>49</sup> We will see, furthermore, that Raoule is also linguistically defined/coded as man by her aunt.

de sentir et de penser” (Baudelaire, CG 84). Raoule spent the entire week following her first encounter with Jacques occupied with setting her plan into motion, “n’ayant d’autre but que la réalisation [du] projet” (MV 27).

The dandy has a “besoin ardent de se faire une originalité” (Baudelaire, CG 87) and “le dandysme” is, for Baudelaire, “une espèce de religion” and “une doctrine de l’élégance et de l’originalité” (Baudelaire, CG 88). Incarnating “opposition et [...] révolte,” the dandy is compelled by a “besoin [...] de combattre et de détruire la trivialité” (Baudelaire, CG 88). Raoule demonstrates these qualities throughout the narrative: when preparing for a gathering in her home, she resists the idea of throwing a party “pour l’unique et monotone plaisir de réunir beaucoup de monde. Il lui fallait en plus l’attrait d’une originalité quelconque à offrir ses invites” (MV 134). Her relationship with Jacques requires that he ignore his “sens vulgaires” so as to begin to perceive the world as she does, given that her senses are “plus subtils, plus raffinés” (MV 61), using narcotics to expand his senses and simultaneously explore “le secret des ardeurs stériles” (MV 92). Finally, Raoule’s courtship of Jacques represents another factor prevalent among the dandies: Raoule too attempts “an ‘impossible’ erotic conquest in which cruelty rather than affection predominates” (Gill 175).

At the same time, Raoule incarnates the New Woman, a literary type prevalent in the 1880s and 90s. According to Sally Ledger and Roger Lockhurst, the New Woman was depicted in different ways by different authors but one thing these New Women had in common was the refusal of “a penchant for self-sacrifice, a talent for home-making, a willingness to defer to men” (Ledger and Lockhurst 75), qualities associated with femininity and womanhood. The New Woman, Showalter asserts, was the female

counterpart to the decadent or aesthete (or dandy), most notably because of the fact that both “challeng[ed] the institution of marriage and blurr[ed] the borders between the sexes” (Showalter 169). Another element that links the New Woman to the dandy is the “transgression of class boundaries” (Showalter 169). Raoule’s union with Jacques typifies this: her selection of a working-class man to be her lover and eventual husband is highlighted at different moments; this is another dimension that MV has in common with other works of the period, as Showalter has explained (Showalter 169).

Immediately upon their first meeting, we can glean the juxtaposition of two socioeconomic classes: Raoule informs Jacques that she could have sent her dressmaker on this errand (MV 15); he spies the diamond that is used to cinch her overcoat and only then determines the price of the order (MV 13); her glove, that of a “grande dame,” reminds him of “sa misère” (MV 17) and throughout the entire episode Raoule is at turns disgusted and at ease “chez ces misérables” (MV 15). Diana Holmes highlights the role of such class dynamics in Rachilde’s novels as crucial to the feminizing of male characters in relation to the wealthier (and upper-class) female ones (Holmes 114-15). Raoule, in her desire to recreate Jacques, is solely concerned with the surface and therefore untroubled by his “low birth:” “Qu’importait la naissance de cet homme pour ce qu’elle en voulait faire, l’enveloppe, l’épiderme, l’être palpable, le mâle [sic] suffisait à son rêve” (MV 19). The role of Raoule’s class is capital to my designation of her as a dandy, as suggested by Baudelaire and further explicated by Deborah Houk’s assertion that, “Dandyism, then, would represent an alternative system of beliefs for those nobles and artists who, having lost their position as the elite of the community, wished to mark their rejection of society’s bourgeois values” (Houk 65). Raoule “consciously enact[s] a

willed refusal of social and moral norms” (Felski 185), but this rejection of society’s values does not go uncommented. The baron is revolted by the prospect that she might marry Jacques (MV 141) and her aunt becomes paralyzed with stupor at the news (MV 163) and then proclaims that such a union will cause her to die from shame (MV 163). Butler’s scholarship on norms is valuable here for she demonstrates that “being outside the norms is in some sense being defined still in relation to it” (Butler, Undoing Gender 42), a notion exemplified in the novel, especially with regard to normative conceptions of gender.

### The Limitations of Language

Language plays an important role in the construction and study of gender in the novel. Monsieur Vénus is replete with instances in which language either belies or determines gender. One instance of this is during Raoule’s initial encounter with Jacques: looking to place a flower order with Marie Silvert and seeing only Jacques, she inquires if she is in the right place. He replies that she is indeed, and that for the moment, he is Marie Silvert: “C’est bien ici, Madame, et pour le moment, Marie Silvert, c’est moi” (MV 9). This passage is of particular significance since it lends a performative dimension to his discourse, allowing Jacques to “verbally assume a female identity” (Belenky 284) from the very beginning of the novel. We also learn that dame Ermengarde had the habit of sometimes referring to her niece as “*nephew*”<sup>50</sup> (MV trans. 28). A close reading of her

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<sup>50</sup> All emphasis found in quotations from Rachilde’s work is the author’s own (unless otherwise indicated). For this chapter—and this chapter alone—I will depart from the current preferred MLA practice of substituting underlining for italics because of the fact that Rachilde made frequent use of italics in her writing. Italics in Rachilde’s work serve as “voiles textuels” (Fisher, “À propos” 302) “to stress textual awareness of [an] infraction of accepted usage” of reversals pertaining to gender (Anderson 8) and “[to] signif[y] the deliberateness of her subversive linguistic play” (Gantz 122).

use of “nièce” and “neveu” speaks to a certain malaise with regard to gender performance and the violation of customary gender roles. The novel is very clear in telling the reader that her aunt prefers “neveu” when Raoule is engaged in pursuits commonly thought to be more appropriate for men, such as fencing and painting lessons (MV 28). Ermengarde’s syntax reinscribes prevailing gender norms of the period, allowing there to be a voice of dissent and opposition to Raoule’s free play with gender.

Another illustration of how language constructs gender occurs when Raoule confesses to the baron that she is in love, only it is perhaps better stated that “he” is in love:<sup>51</sup> “Baron, dit-elle brusquement, *je suis amoureux*” (MV 69). Thinking he knows the score, de Raittolbe immediately invokes lesbianism: “Sapho! [...] Continuez, *Monsieur de Vénérande*, continuez, *mon cher ami!*” (MV 70). Even de Raittolbe, who knows Raoule fairly well, is confounded as to how exactly it is that she will be Jacques’s “amant” rather than his “maîtresse” (MV 75). His confusion stems in part from Raoule’s inconsistent use of male and female pronouns when referring to her paramour, so he requests that she clarify and be consistent (MV 77). Thus, at de Raittolbe’s insistence, Raoule vows only to refer to Jacques in the feminine (MV 77), creating and crystallizing Jacques’s gender identity as a woman. Finally, when Jacques has begun to love Raoule with a woman’s heart and has all but become a woman (MV 94), Jacques will no longer do as a moniker. As a result, Raoule and the narrator begin using the diminutive and feminine-sounding “Jaja” (MV 98). His switch to the woman’s role in the dyad requires a concomitant change in proper name. Ultimately, all of these instances of “travestissement linguistique” (Fisher, “Du corps” 51), in which language contradicts or cognominates

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<sup>51</sup> I say “he” since English leaves no other option for rendering Raoule’s deliberate use of the masculine form of the adjective “amoureux” in Raoule’s declaration (MV 69).

gender, function as an expression of the inescapability of the “prison binaire” (Barthes 137) of gender and gendered language through which Raoule can express herself. The limitations of language as well as of the dyadic gender system are a source of continual (and textual) frustration, as we shall see.

Despite Raoule’s confession that she is “*amoureux d’un homme*” (MV 72), numerous indications affirm that she only refers to Jacques as a man here in order to clarify her situation for the baron by rejecting the insinuation that her relationship is lesbian in nature. When accused of being a lesbian, Raoule denies the baron’s allegations, denouncing lesbianism in no uncertain terms as common, a crime, a failing, and a weakness: “Vous vous trompez, Monsieur de Raittolbe; être Sapho, ce serait être tout le monde! Mon éducation m’interdit le crime des pensionnaires<sup>52</sup> et les défauts de la prostituée. J’imagine que vous me mettez au-dessus du niveau des amours vulgaires? Comment me supposez-vous capable de telles faiblesses?” (MV 70).

Raoule rejects the signifier “lesbian” for all the ways it is apparently insufficient or inappropriate as a description of her desire. Refusing the “precise specifications of an identity” (Halberstam, Female Masculinity 50), she fancies herself a pioneer of love, rather than a woman who seeks affective and sexual intimacy with other women. In this way, she recalls the women to which Judith Halberstam briefly alludes in her compelling Female Masculinity (1998): “a masculine woman who had no interest in same-sex sexuality” (Halberstam, Female Masculinity 57). Because “contemporary models of gender variance tend to presume some continuity between lesbianism or transsexuality

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<sup>52</sup> Zola, too, conceived of boarding schools in which boys and girls were segregated as a particularly ripe ground for the “spread” of homosexuality. He once wrote: “Souvenez-vous du collège. Les vices y poussent grassement, on y vit en pleine pourriture romaine. Toute association cloîtrée de personnes d’un même sexe est mauvaise pour la morale” (qtd. in Caron 46).

and cross-gender identification” (Halberstam, Female Masculinity 59), one might expect to discern some form of same-sex desire on Raoule’s part. Further conflating the issue is the fact that the fin de siècle was “a period which typically defined sexual preference through gender identification” (Felski 192). Raoule’s clear denial of any lesbian inclinations is categorical but to label it heterosexist discourse is likely erroneous; it is simply that she does not evince any attraction to other women.

In Raoule’s diatribe on lesbianism, we witness her attempts to assert her identity, even if there are no real terms or labels to which she can cling, no one word that can sum up “the pleasurable and cumbersome interactions of embodiments, practices, and roles” (Halberstam, Female Masculinity 50) so as to identify her clearly and concisely. Raoule’s inability to find a term suitable to designate her own variety of erotic practices recalls Marie Hélène Bourcier’s work on sexual identity, in which she discerns a double impasse: “l’identité sexuelle ne peut être réduite ni à des pratiques ni à une identification sexuelle” (Bourcier 56). Raoule impugns this double impasse, although she does not necessarily resolve it.

All of the foregoing serves to reveal, well before Butler was alive to articulate it, that “There are no direct expressive or causal lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality” (Butler, “Imitation” 315). In this way, Rachilde’s narrative is aligned with many of the most influential postmodern theories on sexuality and gender. Imprisoned within a binary system of gender and sexual difference, Rachilde subverts binary notions of gender, sex, and sexuality. This subversion, nevertheless, does not imply transcendence or escape from any form of “prison binaire” (Barthes 137). As Butler has noted in her reading of Foucault: “The

subversion of binary opposites does not result in their transcendence [...], but in their proliferation to a point where binary opposites become meaningless in a context where multiple differences, not restricted to binary differences, abound” (Butler, “Variations” 619).

Raoule confronts and navigates within “a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable” (Garber 16). There is no existing identity or definition that is satisfactory or apt for Raoule or for her relationship with Jacques. Not quite heterosexual (since Raoule penetrates Jacques and he is unable to perform sexually with other women by the end, as seen in his failed trip to the brothel [MV 194]), their liaison cannot truly be deemed homosexual or even bisexual for that matter. Raoule is aligned with other characters in Rachilde’s corpus; as Felski has established, many of Rachilde’s characters “engage in a linguistically and aesthetically self-conscious performance of [...] sexuality” (Felski 185). Within MV, this performance of sexuality sets the couple on the outskirts of coherent, systematized, normative understandings of both gender and sexuality. Their sexual expression is perhaps best described by borrowing terms from Alexander Doty’s Making Things Perfectly Queer (1993). In his introduction, a marvelously accessible rumination on what “queer” and “queerness” might mean as well as what impact or relevance their study might have on mass culture, Doty theorizes queer and queerness as “a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight” (Doty xv).

The nature of the rapport and sexual dynamic between the de Vénérandes is decidedly non-straight. Furthermore, Doty’s postulations prove useful in the sense that he does not prescribe any predetermined political agenda to his definition of “queer” (Doty

xv). To Doty's resistance of a single, encoded queer political viewpoint, I would add one further dimension: the refusal to presume that an antihomophobic agenda is to be or should be found in any cultural work labeled queer according to Doty's framework. If "queer" does not have to be read solely as "gay and lesbian," then it seems essential to remove the assumption of an antihomophobic agenda from this understanding of queer. Rachilde's narrative mirrors the agenda Doty sets forth for queerness in that both "challenge and confuse our understanding and uses of sexual and gender categories" (Doty xvii). Doty's analysis of George Cukor's 1936 film Camille has some relevance for understanding MV. Rachilde's narrative, like Camille, contains moments that "implicitly [work] to deprivilege the heteroerotic, as it is ultimately set within a range of erotic choices" (Doty 34). The range of erotic choices in MV is defiantly opposed to (Raoule's vision of) conventional heterosexuality. In her past dalliances with men, she lamented the lack of pleasure she took, noting that she only served to give pleasure (MV 72; 74). We can presume that her mission with Jacques is to destabilize conventional heterosexual sex acts as a way to "reinvent love" and avail herself of some form of pleasure previously inaccessible to her. Through Jacques's metamorphosis into a "bel instrument de plaisir" (MV 19), Raoule inscribes her attempt to formulate a sexuality in which she can take (and give) pleasure.

### How to Reinvent Love

Raoule's presentation of a woman's role in society—from which she considers herself exempt—is marked by boredom and fatigue, recurrent notions at the fin de siècle.

Raoule counts herself among “l’élite des femmes de [son] époque” (MV 72) because she refuses to participate in sexual relationships in which she can find no pleasure or in which it would be incumbent upon her to “perpétuer une race appauvrie” (MV 72). She revolts against men and society, creating for herself a new form of love. The innovation of her relationship with Jacques is what makes it exciting to her. To be a lesbian (“être Sapho”) would render Raoule like “tout le monde” (MV 70). She does not wish to pursue what to her mind are the “amours vulgaires” (MV 70) of women loving women, and hierarchically situates herself above those women who do. Rather than be Sappho, Raoule wishes to be like Sappho, “la vestale d’un feu nouveau” (MV 73). As priestess of this new variety of love, she can avoid the mundanity of replicating extant forms of sexual and amorous relationships, carving out a place for herself within an otherwise limited and limiting social space for women.

It must be said that there is more to Raoule’s pointed attack on lesbianism than potential homophobia or heterosexism,<sup>53</sup> although these are two factors at stake. Nonetheless, we must not forget that Raoule is always on the lookout for the unusual and the exceptional, and she dismisses lesbianism as “ordinary” (MV trans. 69). If in fact love between two women was, for Raoule, the affair of prostitutes or the indulgence of boarding-school girls, then indeed, it is a form of sexual expression in which she would not be likely to indulge, or at least not in a conventional sense. Raoule is nevertheless adamant that she does not wish to participate in extant forms of love, preferring to seek out the new and the uncharted. She declares that she wishes for her heart to revivify love

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<sup>53</sup> Homophobia designates “fear or hatred of homosexuals” (“Homophobia”). The related term heterosexism refers to a person’s tendency to view heterosexuality as the only “natural,” “acceptable,” or “nondeviant” form of sexuality: “the belief in the inherent superiority of one form of sexual expression over another and thereby the right to dominate” (Collins 128).

itself: “mon cœur [...], il a envie de rajeunir, non pas son sang, mais cette vieille chose qu’on appelle l’amour!” (MV 71). De Raittolbe raises a glass to Raoule’s “new invention” (MV trans. 70), stating: “Un amour tout neuf! Voilà un amour qui me va!” (MV 72). This insistence on youth and personally defined forms of love is a clear indication of Decadent, aestheticist priorities: the cult of youth and beauty and envisioning one’s own form of passion and pleasure are foremost preoccupations, notions of fundamental import to Baudelaire’s definition of the dandy. Raoule constitutes a type of “nouvelle Sapho” (MV 110); as such, we can see that the aestheticization of desire leads her “to express [her] sexuality in rather unique ways” (Houk 67).

The dialogue on Raoule’s “brand-new form of love” (MV trans. 70) does not stop there. Raoule attempts to justify vice and viciousness in her society, declaring that it would be permissible to behave in such a way were one a “créateur” (MV 73). She ascribes a certain religiosity to her undertaking and conceives of herself as its high priestess: “Moi, si je créais une dépravation nouvelle, je serais prêtresse [...].” (MV 73). The baron requests that she further explain how it is that she has managed to fall in love with a young woman, without imitating Sappho: “Racontez-moi le reste, et apprenez-moi comment, sans imiter Sappho, vous êtes amoureux d’une jolie fille quelconque?” (MV 74). Raoule explains that she is in fact in love with a man and recounts her entire history with Jacques Silvert. Regarding Jacques, she informs an incredulous de Raittolbe: “[...] ce n’est pas même un hermaphrodite, pas même un impuissant, c’est un beau mâle de vingt-et-un ans, dont l’âme aux instincts féminins s’est trompée d’enveloppe” (MV 75),<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> This sentiment of the “mistaken envelope” echoes the frequency of referring to the transgendered (from within and without) as having been born “in the wrong body.” Sandy Stone eloquently explores the history of, rationale for, and dangers inherent in this phenomenon in her article “The ‘Empire’

simultaneously rejecting so-called medical discourse on “deviant” sexuality contemporary to the period and substantiating the epistolary ideal she attributes to Jacques. Despite whatever else is to come in their relationship, Raoule is clear and unambiguous in her affirmation that Jacques is a vital young man, neither impotent nor a hermaphrodite, who is merely in possession of “an instinctively feminine soul” (MV trans. 74). Asserting that he is a biological man is essential to her overall plans for Jacques, as we will see.

Suspending momentarily the action of the novel, Rachilde embeds a curious section<sup>55</sup> that discusses man and woman, exposing some of her conceptualizations of each, as well as of the relationship between the two. One of the more arresting portions is the following: “Oublions la loi naturelle, déchirons le pacte de procréation, nions la subordination des sexes, alors nous comprendrons les débordements inouïs de cette autre prostituée qui fut l’antiquité païenne” (MV 92). The imperative in the first three clauses of the foregoing sentence is impressive: the narrator<sup>56</sup> commands her audience to commit the acts she names, rendering this a veritable manifesto. She proposes that we can come

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Strikes Back” (12-14). (It should be noted that although Stone’s article employs the term “posttranssexual,” she has since revised her thinking and now favors the term “transgendered” [“Publication History”]).

<sup>55</sup> The seventh chapter of the book, the portion to which I refer here, is one of the segments expurgated—without explanation or mention—from the 1884 original when published in France in 1889 and later in France in Flammarion’s edition. Fortunately, it was reintegrated into the MLA Texts and Translations editions. The reason for censoring the original text will become abundantly clear in what is to follow.

<sup>56</sup> For a study of narration in Rachilde’s œuvre, see Holmes’s section on narrative voice (104-08). Holmes avers that Rachilde’s primary narrative mode is extradiegetic and omniscient; MV generally mirrors this form of narration, favoring “an ‘absolute’ viewpoint rather than one located in the subjectivity of a character” (Holmes 105). Rachilde momentarily directs the narration to reveal the point of view of several of her characters, allowing the reader to glean alternately Raoule’s, Jacques’s, and even de Raittolbe’s points of view at different moments (Holmes 107).

to some understanding of our forebears by completely destabilizing gender and the sex/gender system. She argues that anything labeled today as “vice” was, during “l’antiquité païenne,” “chantée, encensée, déifiée” (MV 92-93). What is more, Raoule’s ultimate aim is revealed: she is calling for the destruction of man by woman to put an end to the subjugation of the latter by the former (MV 94). In order for this form of resistance—the veritable undoing of man’s stranglehold on woman and of man himself—to succeed, it must pass through the creation of “un nouvel amour” (MV 94) by Raoule, thereby aligning this seemingly out-of-place chapter with the main narrative.

The “new love” referred to in the manifesto mirrors the new love Raoule creates with Jacques. The novel confirms the momentousness of Jacques’s yielding to Raoule’s desire:

Une vie étrange commença pour Raoule de Vénérande, à partir de l’instant fatal ou [sic] Jacques Silvert, lui cédant sa puissance d’homme amoureux, devint sa chose, une sorte d’être inerte qui se laissait aimer parce qu’il aimait lui-même d’une façon impuissante. Car Jacques aimait Raoule avec un vrai cœur de femme. Il l’aimait par reconnaissance, par soumission, par un besoin latent de voluptés inconnues. (MV 94)

Raoule itemizes her conceptions of love and sexuality as they pertain to gender in this passage. Men hold all the power in amorous and sexual relations; Jacques yields his to Raoule. Love, for women, means submitting to a man: “L’homme possède, la femme subit” (MV 92). The passivity of a woman’s role in relationship to a man’s is embodied in the notion that Jacques, who loves Raoule “with a real woman’s heart” (MV trans. 93) became a “lifeless object who let himself be loved” (MV trans. 93). Love renders him lifeless and he can little more than go along with whatever form of degradation Raoule elects to inflict. Sex and sexuality are mysteries to him, so many “unknown pleasures” (MV trans. 93) he looks forward to experiencing at her hands. Though once described as

anything but impotent (MV 74), now his love is completely powerless. He is subordinate to Raoule and even to love itself. His former reliance on narcotics has been transformed into an addiction to Raoule and to the submission being with her entails.

### The Sex/Gender System, Sexuality, and Subjection

Monsieur Vénus appears to affirm and operate according to the then-common sexual inversion model. The model was prevalent in the nineteenth century; for some, homosexuality and inversion were taken to be synonymous. David Halperin has argued that sexual inversion is synonymous with sex-role reversal (and not homosexuality, as Foucault tended to imply) and that inversion tended to categorize “some forms of sexual deviance” as “gender deviance” (Halperin 9). Conflating gender deviance with sexual deviance is a symptom and limitation of the inversion model because the model “can only understand sexuality as heterosexuality” (Butler, Undoing Gender 79). Anything that does not conform to the model is automatically processed as homosexual (since homosexuality figures as the inverse of heterosexuality). The sexual invert was a menace to fin-de-siècle society, typifying the feminization of men, moral decay, and medical deviance, rendering the invert “the embodiment of almost all fin-de-siècle social ills” (Rosario 111). Raoule’s play with gender and her appropriation of “masculine” attributes and dress do not necessarily mean that she is a lesbian. Her testimony against such an assertion attests to precisely how inappropriate conflating the two notions is.

Raoule and Jacques both adopt mannerisms and clothing that one reads as being incongruous with their sex. To use terms from François Cusset’s analysis of Balzac, Rachilde has effectively created “un jeu de vases communicants des rôles et des corps, un

geyser d'ambivalences où les statuts sexuels étanches (mâle, femelle, homo, hétéro) prennent eau de toutes parts [...]” (Cusset 126-27). One hundred years before its time, MV demonstrates the concept of gender performativity that has become the basis for a significant amount of scholarship within feminist studies and sexuality studies. Predicated on the notion of the performative—“an act of discourse with the power to create that to which it refers” (Butler, Bodies 122)—gender performativity depends on social meanings and repetition (Butler, Gender 178). The repetition of normative and normalized social meanings is what allows gender performativity to figure as a coherent expression of gender. It is important to demarcate what constitutes “sex” and “gender” in order to proceed with an analysis of the ways in which the novel anticipates postmodern theories of gender and sexuality.

The sex/gender system is a matrix that is crucial to our understanding of Rachilde’s innovative deployment of gender. Delineating what is sex from what is gender “serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed” (Butler, Gender 9). We can immediately see how MV opposes the traditional sex/gender system, creating characters whose biological sex does not reflect their gender or the gender roles they enact. Gender, gender roles, and gender identity are all complex and interrelated terms. We will speak in terms of gender roles rather than gender identity since contemporary understandings of gender identity define it as a person’s self-definition and understanding of his or her own gender. Gender roles, however, are comprised of all the things we tend to attribute as being either masculine or feminine.

In Élisabeth Badinter's fascinating study of masculine identity, she notes that defining one's gender immediately implicates sexuality (Badinter 147) and distinguishes masculine from feminine identity: "L'identité masculine est associée au fait de posséder, prendre, pénétrer, dominer et s'affirmer, si nécessaire, par la force. L'identité féminine, au fait d'être possédée, docile, passive, soumise" (Badinter 147). Masculine and feminine are rendered meaningful through the "heterosexualization of desire," which "requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine,' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female'" (Butler, Gender 23). Jacques and Raoule tend to display attributes more commonly conceived of as being the proper of the other gender, particularly when it comes to sexuality.

Sexuality within the world of MV is predominantly heterosexual, but Raoule and Jacques "violate" the conventions of heterosexuality, most remarkably when considered from the standpoint of active and passive. Active sexuality is attributed to men, particularly during Rachilde's life; passive sexuality is relegated to women. Raoule, though, is endowed with active sexuality in the novel and she refuses to capitulate to received notions on how a woman is to act on and live out her sexuality. Her ascension to the "masculine" paradigm is linked to her attempt to remake love and undo men's subjugation of women, revealing the link between sexuality and power that Foucault later demarcated: sexuality is "un point de passage particulièrement dense pour les relations de pouvoir [...]" (Foucault 136). Raoule's aestheticization of Jacques is problematic inasmuch as it retains the element of woman in the equation: Raoule, as a man, reinvents Jacques as a woman and as a work of art. She cannot reinvent him simultaneously as a

man and a work of art, or at least Rachilde has elected not to explore this possibility. This is an example of the text's inability to work outside the realm of extant dynamics of power embedded in cross-sex couples. Katherine Gantz suggests: "Despite its salacious overtones, [the novel may] be interpreted as a novel fixated on preserving traditional norms of heterosex, however unconventional its approach" (Gantz 113). While Rachilde destabilizes the sex/gender system with her depiction of characters whose gender expression is not aligned with their biological sex, the gender roles and even sexual roles they perform continue to fall along rigidly gendered lines: the active (insertive) role falls to the man (in this case, Raoule) and it is always already the woman (i.e., Jacques) who is penetrated. Barthes has argued that the dichotomy of active/passive is the "le paradigme le plus pur qu'on puisse imaginer," one that even homosexuality, which he deems a "pratique transgressive," is unable to usurp. (Barthes 137).

When Raoule and Jacques are intimate, there is a clear reversal of the roles of active and passive. One might expect Jacques, regardless of his behaving "like a woman," to be the insertive partner in their coupling. Rachilde, though, suggests the contrary: it is in fact Raoule who ultimately penetrates Jacques. Because the novel manipulates the sex/gender system and inverts conventional notions of active and passive, Pierre Bourdieu's scrutiny of male dominance and the binary of active/passive proves useful in understanding power dynamics in MV. In La domination masculine (henceforth, Domination) Bourdieu studies symbolic domination as it is linked to sexual practices and concludes: "La définition dominante de la forme légitime de cette pratique comme rapport de domination du principe masculin (actif, pénétrant) sur le principe féminin (passif, pénétré) implique le tabou de la féminisation sacrilège du masculin" (Bourdieu

130). Raoule penetrates Jacques, further feminizing him and reinscribing men's authority over women. They become the type of couple to which Bourdieu refers when discussing contemporary lesbian and gay civil rights struggles in that the *de Vénérandes*, like same-sex couples, are "issus de la transgression scandaleuse de la frontière sacrée entre le masculin et le féminin" (Bourdieu 132).

The binary of active/passive within the novel consistently entails scrutiny of what constitutes masculine and feminine. Bourdieu's insistence on reading active as masculine and bound to the concept of dominance is reflected in the novel in various ways. Given that Rachilde questions the inherent naturalness of deeming a given behavior as naturally masculine or feminine, she invokes the binary of nature/culture and refutes the association of the masculine with the mind and the feminine with the body. Women's oppression, as Moira Gatens and others have illustrated, is frequently justified in terms of these two oppositional binaries (Gatens 59). Raoule's domineering treatment of Jacques is an indication of how power relations are staged in the novel according to a politics of gender performativity. Raoule is Jacques's keeper, master, and creator. Jacques, in tandem, is Raoule's mistress, plaything, and inferior.

Any consideration of power differentials in the narrative must necessarily examine the problem of the text's misogynistic elements as well as its potential heterosexism or homophobia. Power differentials in the novel stem from notions of the masculine and the feminine; the masculine is endowed with power and a privileged position with respect to the feminine, in accordance with Rubin's understanding of the sex/gender system (Rubin, "Traffic" 179-80). Rachilde's examination of gender and gender roles involves an interrogation of the dialectic of nature and culture,

differentiating between the innate and the culturally or socially constructed. Rachilde deftly deploys Decadence, a privileged method of destabilizing the binary of nature/culture, given its reliance on and championing of artifice, a decidedly anti-Naturalist stance. It is also a method of disastrous consequences for its flagrantly misogynistic aspects, which Rachilde maintains in the novel, unlike other women writers drawn to the “aestheticism of the Decadents” who were compelled to “[purge] it of its misogyny” (Vicus 101). Though Rachilde stands as “[...] France’s only recognized woman writer of the decadent period” (Gantz 114) and occupied a “privileged position” as a woman of the intellectual elite (Antle, “Mythologie” 11), the determining role of nature on misogyny within the Decadent aesthetic is one that Rachilde does not circumvent in MV.

Hostility to nature, Mark Schneider argues, “reinforced the Decadents’ misogyny: since women [...] gave birth [...] they were tainted by association with nature’s dumb fecundity” (Schneider 144). Rachilde makes manifest the notion that women are created by nature: “La nature les a faites nues” (MV 109). Given the Decadent temperament of her text, aligning women with nature is to be expected: Baudelaire once wrote that women represent “toutes les grâces de la nature condensées en un seul être” (Baudelaire, CG 96). All that is natural is held in disdain or mistrust by the Decadents; women, as products of nature, are viewed with suspicion if not utter malice and contempt. Rachilde, accordingly, depicts misogyny at various moments in her work, exemplified by Raoule’s abusive treatment of Jacques. Men’s subjugation of women is simultaneously essentialized and naturalized in the novel; Rachilde ties women’s inferiority to men to women’s role in reproduction: “Le rôle inférieur que sa conformation impose à la femme

dans l'acte générateur, éveille évidemment une idée de joug d'asservissement" (MV 92).

Men's dominance over women is treated as a specifically masculine attribute, but since gender is revealed to be culturally defined, Raoule—the novel's female protagonist—is the person doing the subjugating (the female man dominates the male woman).

Rachilde's text is notable for how it situates masculinity and femininity in such a way as to make them available to males and females. Nevertheless, it asserts men's superiority over women. What is more, misogyny and homophobia are corollaries within the narrative; Raoule's condemnation of lesbianism as a crime and a weakness (MV 70) serves as evidence of this.

The existence of the "Jacques doll" at the end of the narrative is another example of its destabilizing effect on certain prevailing binaries. In this particular instance, the distinction between machine and body is blurred. Of course, Jacques's tenure as Raoule's doll did not begin with his reconstruction as a wax model. He had been her doll and her plaything all along, to be used and abused according to her whim. This facet of the text serves to invert the Decadent tradition according to which a man aestheticizes and reinvents a woman as a work of art. The aestheticism of the Decadents is notoriously misogynistic and resistant to the notion of women as creators of art. Woman is glorified as an ideal of beauty and yet vilified as an entity at the same time. Woman is a suitable subject or muse for a work of art, yet women, according to this mindset, are not capable of creating art themselves. In Dorian Gray Lord Henry alleges, "They [Women] are charmingly artificial but they have no sense of art" (Wilde 113). In some ways, it can be said that Raoule overturns this restriction of women's capacity to create art, but that depends heavily on how one views Raoule in terms of her gender identity.

### Desire & Death: Against Reproduction

Theodor Adorno has written, “The new is intimately related to death” (Adorno 31). Raoule undertakes to discover and explore new forms of passion, sexuality, and kinship. Given the fin-de-siècle context, it is not surprising that Jacques should have to die in order for Raoule’s goal to be realized. The connection between her artistic creation, love, and death is mirrored in other works of the period, including Dorian Gray, in which Sibyl Vane must commit suicide in order to enter “into the sphere of art” (Wilde 121). This sinister side of creation is also depicted in Dorian Gray when evil is described as little more than “a mode through which” one can realize one’s “conception of the beautiful” (Wilde 161). After their marriage, Raoule approaches Jacques as one would a god (MV 179) and reveals the solipsistic quality of her alliance: “Beauté, soupira-t-elle, toi seule existes, je ne crois plus qu’en toi” (MV 179). By the end of the novel, Jacques cannot navigate the world as a remade woman for he fails to live up to Raoule’s idealized vision of him. After learning of Jacques’s attempt to seduce the baron, Raoule vows: “Je ne le [referring to Jacques] châtierai pas, je me contenterai de détruire l’idole, car on ne peut plus adorer un dieu déchu!” (MV 196). Now that Jacques is no longer God for Raoule, as he had formerly been (“Jacques devenait Dieu” [MV 114]), he must die in order for Raoule to realize fully her intentions for him.

It is at the close of the novel that Jacques’s transformation into a work of art is complete. Staging Baudelaire’s conceit that love is like “une opération chirurgicale”

(Baudelaire, Fusées 10), Raoule undertakes an unmistakably medical project;<sup>57</sup> although we have to wait to find out what exactly is afoot. Following Jacques's death during a duel with Raoule's friend the baron (MV 201-08), Raoule has isolated herself in the hôtel de Vénérande. The bedroom, once described as the "Temple of Love," (MV trans. 208) contains a shell-shaped bed—recalling perhaps Botticelli's Birth of Venus (circa 1482)—on which reposes "[...] un mannequin de cire revêtu d'un épiderme en caoutchouc transparent. Les cheveux roux,<sup>58</sup> les cils blonds, le duvet d'or de la poitrine sont naturels; les dents qui ornent la bouche, les ongles<sup>59</sup> des mains et des pieds ont été arrachés à un cadavre" (MV 209).<sup>60</sup>

Sometimes at night, through a hidden door, a woman "vêtue de deuil" (MV 210) enters the room, and at other times, it is a young man dressed all in black who passes through the door. Clothing is important in the novel: here it indicates that what was once

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<sup>57</sup> The medical aspect of her undertaking is readily apparent with the mention of the implements she uses and the way she is working: "[...] armée d'une pince en vermeil, d'un marteau recouvert de velours et d'un ciseau en argent massif, [elle] se livrait à un travail très minutieux..." (MV 208-09). Evidently, some sort of grotesque operation or vivisection is being performed, as the reader will come to see in the two pages that follow this scene.

<sup>58</sup> "The relic of hair is a sensuous symbol of remembrance, a talisman of erotic memory" (Downing 104).

<sup>59</sup> Although uncomfortable or at least curious terrain for many, the fetishistic, sexual nature of fingernails was documented in a case study in Richard Von Krafft-Ebing's landmark Psycopathia Sexualis. In a footnote, he cites an Italian colleague's 1896 work (published in the Italian journal Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali, the first scientific journal devoted exclusively to sexuality/sexology) referring to a man who would consume the "trimmings of [...] fingernails," eliciting in "the monster strong sexual emotions" (qtd. in Krafft-Ebing 101n1). (Krafft-Ebing links erotic fetishism with religious fetishes (relics); fetishizing hair, nails, and bones seems perfectly aligned with this reasoning [Krafft-Ebing 18]).

<sup>60</sup> In an eerily similar scene during an episode of the popular animated television series Family Guy, the character Quagmire obtains strands of hair from his neighbor's wife which he then attaches to a facsimile of her stashed in his closet. Revealing the doll recalls MV; what adds to the coincidence—for I do not wish to assert that the show mined Rachilde's novel for inspiration—is the line he utters once the hair has been placed: "Heh, a couple of teeth and some toenail clippings and we'll be ready for our date!" ("Emission Impossible").

a temple of love has now become a mausoleum. Rachilde maintains the use of the plural subject pronoun, as if to emphasize further the fact that we are dealing with two entities (who are, in fact, both Raoule): “Ils viennent s’agenouiller près du lit, et, lorsqu’ils ont longtemps contemplé les formes merveilleuses de la statue de cire, ils l’enlacent, la baisent aux lèvres. Un ressort disposé à l’intérieur des flancs correspond à la bouche et l’anime en même temps qu’il fait s’écarter les cuisses” (MV 210-11).<sup>61</sup>

Incorporating a wax doll into the world of the novel recalls the use of Anatomical Venuses by European medical students in the eighteenth century (Showalter 128); as Hawthorne has intimated, Rachilde was likely to have been familiar with these didactic instruments (Hawthorne, “‘Du Du’” 61). Rachilde simultaneously reproduces and transposes a practice common to her time: this “wax statue” (MV trans. 210) reflects another theme commonly found in fin-de-siècle works, again with an attendant inversion of genders. Showalter indicates that “[...] the opening up, dissection, or mutilation of women [...]” was not at all uncommon to the period (Showalter 127).<sup>62</sup> Raoule, the woman, turns this topos on its head in a way by using anatomical elements torn from Jacques’s lifeless body to have a wax doll built “by a German” for her enjoyment (MV trans. 210). The doll “responds” to Raoule’s kiss, not only by returning it, but by spreading its legs in preparation for penetration. As Wilkinson suggests, “Raoule’s obsession has extended the possibility of form and function in the creation of an

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<sup>61</sup> Wilkinson remarks that the final sentence in the passage cited above (“Un ressort...”) was included in the novel’s initial Belgian (1884) edition but was excised from subsequent publications (Wilkinson, screen 4). I would add that the MLA editions (2004) restore this “erotically horrifying phrase” (Wilkinson, screen 4). (Wilkinson’s article precedes the advent of the MLA editions.)

<sup>62</sup> A few pages later, Showalter affirms that the theme was scarcely applied in the service of ‘exploring’ men’s bodies (Showalter 133). Since her study focuses on English literature, it is not surprising that Monsieur Vénus should be absent from her examination.

instrument of mythological necrophilia, an erotic unity of life and death, ensuring that Jacques will remain an instrument of pleasure [...]” (Wilkinson, screen 4).

However pleasurable, Raoule’s liaison with Jacques is destined to remain a sterile one. The only creation or birth that it will witness is Jacques’s own rebirth as the lifeless yet animated wax creature. Raoule’s abhorrence of reproduction and fecundity is perfectly consistent with Decadent preoccupations and impulses. Schneider demonstrates how, within the Decadent aesthetic, “a foremost sin” of nature “was its incessant generativity” (Schneider 143). Unfettering sexuality from reproduction was a leading preoccupation of the Decadents according to Rita Felski: “Decadent writers adopted and affirmed this separation of sexuality from reproduction; the libidinal was stylized, aestheticized, transformed into a self-contained and self-legitimizing spectacle” (Felski 178). This voluntary sterility can be traced in Raoule, as well as in her relationship with Jacques. Vicinus posits that Decadence “establish[ed] art as a tempting alternative to heterosexual reproduction” (Vicinus 96), a sentiment prefigured in Baudelaire’s Fusées (1897) where he aphoristically concludes: “Plus on produit, plus on devient fécond” (Baudelaire, Fusées 38). This fact is aligned with an element common to Rachilde’s corpus since it constitutes “a bitter, unqualified image of the incompatibility between women’s reproductive role, and their self-fulfilment [sic]” (Holmes 196-97).

Holmes asserts that Rachilde’s “contribution to the decadent aesthetic” is to be found “above all [in her] stylized, often violent eroticism that rejected both the binary complementarity of orthodox gender codes and the necessary connection between sex and reproduction” (Holmes 39). Regarding the female dandy in nineteenth-century French literature, Miranda Gill avers: “In their resistance to dominant gender stereotypes,

these diverse and often contradictory representations widened the imaginary parameters of female identity, and it is therein that their real significance lies” (Gill 181).<sup>63</sup>

Rachilde’s novel allows us to reimagine what is possible, personally and socially. Her text embodies Gert Hekma’s declaration that “One way to produce diversity and oppose forms of domination is [by] inverting hierarchical dichotomies” (Hekma 14-15). As we have seen, among the dichotomies Rachilde upends and manipulates are active/passive, nature/culture, male/female, and so on. “The overall effect [...] present[s] a dynamics of gender and sexual desire which is not contained within socially acceptable parameters, and in this sense [...] undermine[s] any concept of fixed or natural sexual behavior” (Anderson 12). Quite succinctly, inversion has become subversion.

It is only at the novel’s very end that any indication of the true possibility of Rachilde’s potential for utter subversion appears. By insisting that the young man in black and the mournful woman both kiss the mannequin and that the kiss is returned and the legs are spread automatically (and therefore, regardless of how the person kissing it dresses), Rachilde intimates that Raoule, whether dressed as a man or as a woman, penetrates the doll. For one man to penetrate another is not terribly subversive in a Decadent framework, and Rachilde was not the first to depict such an act. Furthermore, this is not the first literary instance, Decadent or otherwise, of a woman penetrating a man. By way of example, Sade’s La philosophie dans le boudoir (1795) depicts the young Eugénie sodomizing the ribald Dolmancé with a dildo (447) and the licentious and loud Madame de Saint-Ange copulates in this manner with both Dolmancé (472) and her

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<sup>63</sup> Gill’s “The Myth of the Female Dandy” is a valuable contribution to scholarship on dandyism in general. She attempts to historicize the presence and depiction of the female dandy, overturning the commonplace and normative notion that women could not be dandies in the nineteenth century (Gill 167-68).

own brother, the Chevalier (461).<sup>64</sup> But for Raoule to be able to occupy either position alternatively and to perform the penetration regardless is a fascinating twist. One has to wonder if this was not precisely her endgame all along: with Jacques now dead, she will not encounter any resistance on his part and she can be as much a man or a woman as she wishes at any given moment, still wielding—and thus subverting—the phallus. Never again will the intrusion of her breast result in the shattering of the illusion (MV 184-85). Her mission is now fulfilled: Jacques has become the work of art, the work of artifice that she had intended him to become.

### Legacy

Jacques's recreation as a work of art is complete. Raoule, the artist/creator, has succeeded in merging relics culled from his body with other human features stolen from a cadaver, allowing there to be natural components for the manufacture of Jacques as a doll. This mix of the real or natural with the artificial is an important reminder of the way the text uses Jacques's body to stage the drama of the Decadent sensibility. Jacques is half-machine and half-organic: the use of organic materials from his own corpse is a reminder of the role of nature in the text, signaling the feminine within the Decadent mindset. Mingling human remains with mechanical and wax elements alludes to the role of technology and science, superimposing typically masculine domains and attributes.

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<sup>64</sup> Daniel Gerould asserts that Rachilde was quite familiar, from a "tender" age (fifteen), with the literary work of the Marquis de Sade (Gerould 118). The parallel between Rachilde and Sade is concisely described by Downing: "In exploring the vagaries of perverse desire, Rachilde is as sincere, tireless and as comprehensive as Sade" (Downing 95).

Several other factors are at stake in this climax, for the culmination of Raoule's project of taking the raw material of (Jacques's) life and reworking it into art entails an interrogation of several binaries explored throughout the rest of the novel. Jacques, in death, is reborn as Raoule's wax doll. Further blurring the distinction between life and death is his machine-like capacity for animation: he "borders both life and death, movement and stasis" (Udall, screen 3). The fluctuation of birth/life and death occurs in a systematic fashion that also distorts the distinction between human and machine as well as between male and female. All the different binaries explored in the text reflect Sedgwick's notion that such dichotomies are "likely places to look for implicit allegories of the relations of men to women" (Sedgwick, Epistemology 34). Jacques is both Raoule's child and her spouse (her male wife, for lack of a more adequate descriptor). His hybridity emulates that of his creator: although not quite a biological man, she represents a woman who is utterly nonconformist with regard to her own gender expression, a "masculinised female [of] dual gender" (Anderson 9).

The conclusion of the novel displays a marked indifference to the role of gender as it pertains to sexuality and desire, particularly at the moment when Raoule penetrates the deceased Jacques. The role of necrophilia in the text is an aspect worth revisiting as it holds important ramifications as to how sexuality and desire operate in the novel. Lisa Downing's illuminating Desiring the Dead (2003) advances the argument that "Necrophilia hints at the imaginative collusion between life and death, an ambitious leap between the physical and the metaphysical. The obscure spark of desire in necrophilia lies precisely in the gap between the living erotic imagination and the object that is beyond desire" (Downing 1). What renders necrophilia significant for our purposes is the

way in which it contributes to an overall process of deconstruction. Necrophilia, for most people, invokes questions of life and death, right and wrong, perversion and tolerance. Downing leans on the work of Brian Masters to show that necrophilia is really an indication of a person's "overwhelming love of, or attraction to, death and destruction" (Downing 4). She concludes that necrophilia can be as much "an aesthetic, a mode of representation, as it is a sexual perversion" (Downing 4). Considering Rachilde's presentation of desire as a mode of representation is the impetus for our analysis. Downing examines MV and its "deathly desire" (Downing 14) from the standpoint of gender; we will explore it more from the standpoint of sexuality. We will see that the novel is significant for its prescient examination of much of the same terrain explored one hundred years later in theories on sexuality. As Downing herself implores, "More research needs to be done on the experimental treatment of desire by *fin-de-siècle* writers, particularly Rachilde, as precursors of postmodern theories of sexuality popularized in the 1980s and 90s" (Downing 117).

One of the hallmarks of postmodernism is its tendency to interrogate the natural and the cultural. Linda Hutcheon testifies: "the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life, to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' [...] are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us" (Hutcheon 2). This propensity to delineate what is natural from what is cultural is mirrored in the *fin de siècle*. Schneider makes plain that within a *fin-de-siècle* or Decadent context a "stylistic attraction to artifice" often serves to reveal "the assumption of social constructedness" (Schneider 147). Rachilde's representation of desire stems from much the same impulse, revealing gender and sexuality to be

constructed rather than innate. Gender does not inform sexuality or desire any more than sexuality informs gender, according to Rachilde: “Et qu’importe à notre passion délirante le sexe de nos caresses [...]” (MV 183). The significance of this cannot be overstated: Rachilde has verily created a narrative that prefigures much postmodern work on theories of sexuality and gender. For instance, Sedgwick argues in Epistemology that “Some people, homo-, hetero-, and bisexual, experience their sexuality as deeply embedded in a matrix of gender meanings and gender differentials. Others of each sexuality do not” (Sedgwick, Epistemology 26). In this way, the novel mirrors Sedgwick’s assertion about the role of writing that contains “the making and unmaking and *remaking* and redissolution” of “categorical imaginings” (Sedgwick, Epistemology 23 [emphasis in the original]). Monsieur Vénus disrupts the sex/gender system and offers a proleptic portrayal of gender performativity. Although the novel does sustain a challenging relationship to the issue of heterosexuality, this fact alone does not necessarily mean it should be disregarded as a whole.

Viewed through this lens, the novel is problematic in the sense that, for all of its disruptions to the sex/gender system, it nonetheless champions heterosexuality and heteronormativity. As we have seen, the textual depiction of lesbianism is indicative of homophobia. Although Jacques attempts to seduce de Raittolbe, the failure of this initiative brings about the baron’s attempt at suicide (MV 197-99). To be sure, the onus is not—nor should it necessarily be—on Rachilde to depict positive affirmations of women loving women or men loving men. But it does remain a disappointment, and a point of contention, that homosexuality is not treated with the same abandon and disregard for norms that the sex/gender system is. Rachilde maintains a seemingly untenable position

for hers is a queer voice in spite of its homophobia. Severing the oppressive link between sexuality and reproduction is one embodiment of Rachilde's queer voice: queer sexuality is nonprocreative and (therefore?) nonnormative, constituting what Cusset has referred to as an alternative site of "plaisirs substitutifs" (99).

In Queer Critics (2002), Cusset summarizes Anglophone studies that deploy queer theory to examine French literature. Part of his mission is to attempt to fix "queer" for his Francophone audience. Cusset's treatment of the question of definition and fixity (*à savoir* whether queer is ever static) is notable for the concise manner in which he attempts to denominate "queer" for his readers, all the while insisting on the constitutive role of indefinition. As he and others have written, queer as a rule evades categorization, normativization, and definition. It is at once many things and slips easily between extant, accepted categories and epistemologies. Doty summarizes this by arguing that queer "has been set up to challenge and break apart conventional categories, not to become one itself" (Doty xv). Cusset writes that the "vertu majeure" of queer is, in point of fact, its very "indéfinition" (Cusset 22) and that it remains "entre les interstices des catégories dominantes" (Cusset 22). Applying Cusset's summary and theorization of queer scholarship as a practice to Rachilde's sophomore novel allows several elements to come to the forefront: namely, the novel's resistance to dominant categories and its vacillation between clear definition (of sex and gender) and indefinition.

Monsieur Vénus is an early step on the path that, many decades later, would become the fields of gender and queer studies. To expect it to align perfectly with two different theoretical approaches and then dismiss it outright for failing to do so seems disingenuous, as though the novel were an embarrassing secret. I am sympathetic to

Downing's idea of being uncomfortable "with critical responses which place an (impossible) burden upon writers from marginalized groups (female, gay, black) to produce only positive, healthy, life-affirming representations" (Downing 93). Since Rachilde's narrative prefigures much of the theoretical terrain at stake in both fields, it seems much more reasonable to grapple with the text in all its circuitousness and contradiction.

Eve Sedgwick has elaborated a nuanced understanding of "queer" as follows: "queer" can refer to the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of one's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick, Tendencies 8 [emphasis in the original]). She further suggests that "'Queer' seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation" (Sedgwick, Tendencies 9). Raoule is one example of a character who engages in "acts of experimental self-perception and filiation," as evidenced by her musings with the baron, her self-presentation, and the curious form of kinship she and Jacques create for themselves under the more socially palatable guise of heterosexual marriage.

Furthermore, the novel presents a troublesome instantiation of women's subservience to men, presaging Butler's classification of love "as a seduction to subjection" (Butler, Undoing Gender 73). Given the hybrid gender identities of both protagonists, this seduction is a potent one. Colette muses in Le pur et l'impur (1932): "La séduction qui émane d'un être au sexe incertain ou dissimulé est puissante" (Colette 71). Raoule, although biologically a woman, acts and is coded as a man throughout the

bulk of the novel; Jacques, similarly, stands as the woman in spite of his anatomical maleness. Accordingly, seduction in the novel, which Felski deems a “structuring principle” (190), imbricates “hierarchical dynamics of power” (Felski 190). Raoule is Jacques’s keeper, providing for all of his needs and wants. Violently abusive toward him in several passages, she makes recourse to drugs to obtain what she wishes from him. Even when he requests that she cease to refer to him as a woman, she continues to do so all the same (MV 90). One could see in all of these episodes a woman turning the tables, dominating and subjugating a man. But it is crucial to keep in mind that Raoule has to be read as “the man” in this couple; as such, she embodies Bourdieu’s concept of the trap of masculine privilege: “Le privilège masculin est [...] un piège et il trouve sa contrepartie dans la tension et la contention permanentes, parfois poussées jusqu’à l’absurde, qu’impose à chaque homme le devoir d’affirmer en toute circonstance sa virilité” (Bourdieu 56). Raoule affirms her virility by wounding her “cosseted yet controlled sex object” (Felski 195-96); by restricting his behavior, forbidding him to smoke and to speak with other men (MV 84); and by demanding a duel to satisfy the offense of Jacques’s attempted infidelity (MV 199-200). Since Jacques will be the one expected to fight in the duel, her insistence upon enacting a then-illegal and overwhelmingly masculinist form of vengeance is a fatal affirmation of her virility that directly precipitates Jacques’s death. She is suspicious and jealous, untrusting of Jacques and his ability to remain faithful to her as a dutiful “wife” should. Belenky performs a convincing reading of jealousy in MV and the ramifications it has on the sex/gender system. She conveys that Rachilde “use[s] jealousy as a locus of essentialising gender differences and reaffirming prescribed boundaries of gender” (Belenky 276). Relations between the genders, as illustrated, are

left intact in the novel. That being said, it still has crucial things to say about gender and sexuality.

There is one significant and revolutionary aspect to be found with regard to gender and sexuality in the novel: the place of reproduction. Rachilde severs the link between sex acts and procreation, in accordance with other Decadent works. Early in the novel, Rachilde tells de Raittolbe that she is “une de ces créatures qui se révoltent à l’idée de perpétuer une race appauvrie” (MV 72). Raoule vehemently rejects (what is supposed to be) her role as a woman in then-extant relations between men and women. Rachilde embeds an acerbic critique of the role of reproduction as it relates to women’s subservience to men within the manifesto (MV 91-94), arguing that giving birth is a form of slavery for women (MV 92). Raoule refuses to participate in the system and, what is more, turns her back on the then-prevalent “generalized birthrate paranoia in France” (Caron 47). After their marriage, Raoule and Jacques enjoy a tête-à-tête that is quite revealing in this regard. Jacques promises to attempt to kill for Raoule “le plus méchant de [ses] ennemis” (MV 181). Following Raoule’s lead, by which she designates him “Mme de Vénérande:” “Il faut bien qu’elle [referring to himself] demande à tuer quel qu’un [sic], puisque le moyen de mettre quelqu’un au monde lui est absolument refusé” (MV 181). It is not enough that Raoule refuse to participate in an expected process of reproductive sexuality; Jacques has to strip the earth of one life for the sake of his “husband.” Thus, this unique couple completely undermines and destabilizes the preoccupation with *dénatalité*. This, though, is not the only “trend” Rachilde’s novel overturns.

In presenting so singular a character, Rachilde has expanded some of the limited horizons of possibility available to women. Holmes notes that Rachilde is the “inventor of the *homme-objet*” (Holmes 145), sexualizing men like Jacques Silvert in MV and others elsewhere and thereby subverting a longstanding tradition of objectifying women. Raoule constitutes a figure of resistance to normative behaviors with regard to a woman’s place, conduct, and sexuality. She has a very clearly defined sense of self-determination, however objectionable some of the choices she makes might be. Refusing to capitulate to the whims of other men, nature, or society, she stands defiantly in opposition to the hegemony of the sex/gender system. While Raoule is adamant that sexuality and morality are culturally constructed and historically contingent, it bears repeating that she does not direct her attention toward defending and liberating other women’s desires. Raoule’s own liberation is all that is at stake; the solipsistic quality of her project precludes any notion of sisterhood or solidarity among women. Holmes has noted that this is very similar to Rachilde’s own life in that she “escaped from a woman’s prescribed destiny through a philosophy of extreme individualism” (Holmes 76). Rachilde and Raoule both conceived of themselves as “exceptional individual[s]” who “simply took what rights [they] saw fit, and certainly didn’t consider [themselves] as representative of or working on behalf of others” (Holmes 76). Other women can follow Raoule’s lead, overturning received ideas on a woman’s station, but she cautions them to find their own way rather than simply mimic her: “Moi, si je créais une dépravation nouvelle, je serais prêtresse, tandis que mes imitateurs se traînaient, après mon règne, dans une fange abominable” (MV 73).

Received notions on the nature of desire, too, are completely destabilized. The sex and gender of the object of Raoule's desire—and of herself,<sup>65</sup> for that matter—is of little import. Her refusal to capitulate to the hegemonic notion according to which “gender identity is a predictor of sexual orientation” is echoed in Butler's speculation that “sometimes it is the very disjunction between gender identity and sexual orientation [...] that constitutes for some people what is most erotic and exciting” (Butler, Undoing Gender 80). Rachilde's works are an avatar of contemporary theories on the social construction of sexuality, for they allow for an individual to formulate for herself what is sexually desirable. As seen in the case of MV, Rachilde experiments with nonnormative forms of desire as well as gender and sexual expression. There is an inherently liberating element operating within such experimentation, a quality that is decidedly queer. What makes the text highly germane to queer and gender studies is Raoule's resistance to normativity, to regulation by society's expectations, and to being defined by another. This, ultimately, is the goal of queer and gender studies; moreover, it is the legacy of Monsieur Vénus.

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<sup>65</sup> Recall the passage at the book's close in which Raoule—sometimes dressed as a man, sometimes dressed as a woman—visits the ‘embalmed’ Jacques (MV 210-11).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PROTEAN DESIRE AND PROJECTION

Marguerite Duras's 1986 novel Les yeux bleus cheveux noirs is an engaging tale of desire and its disappointment and the restaging of ritual, or what Leslie Hill has referred to as "self-reflexive repetition and circular self-rehearsal" (Hill, "Marguerite Duras" 601), a repetition which "enacts [a man's] unresolved mourning for the loss of an inaccessible sailor-double" (Williams, The Erotics 142). Duras describes the book as "l'histoire d'un amour non avoué entre des gens qui sont empêchés de dire qu'ils s'aiment par une force qu'ils ignorent" (Duras, La vie matérielle 87). In what follows, we will explore the way in which Duras reveals alternative conceptualizations of sexuality, desire, and gender and investigate the tension between homo- and heterosexuality that undergirds the text. We shall consider the innovative form of the novel, situated at the limits of prose and theatre, and how the questions of genre raised by Duras mirror the questions she raises regarding gender. Mediation is a crucial component of the text, particularly the way the female protagonist's body is mediated by the man and by a square of black silk. Accordingly, we shall explore the ways in which the silken square mediates desire and allows for projection and phantasy. Although the silk might seem a trivial element, one that has not garnered much (if any) critical attention, the way in which it is used by both characters is precisely how Duras is able to grapple with questions of the body, desire, gender, sex, and sexuality. We shall study the text's

resistance to heteronormativity and to what Jarrod Hayes has designated “the heterosexual will to knowledge,” defined as “a heterosexual gaze that reduces its Other to a spectacle” (Hayes 91). Finally, we must also scrutinize the role of drag in the text.

On the whole, drag is a difficult term to apply to this novel. Through the use of a piece of black silk (the analysis of which will represent a significant portion of this chapter), Duras is able to draw attention to the performativity of gender and resist heteronormativity (specifically in its masculinist forms). As we will see, the silk is often used so that characters in Les yeux bleus cheveux noirs (henceforth, YBCN) can transform into someone else. When I say that they turn into one another, I do not mean that there is actual shape-shifting but that in the mind of one character, a second character becomes or symbolically takes the place of a third. At times, this occurs without their knowledge; elsewhere, it occurs with their complicity and full participation. Incidentally, the process of transformation does not stop at people: as I will show, it also pertains to things such as body parts (whereby one part can “become” or stand in for another). It is for all these reasons that I argue that a complicated form of drag presents itself and is problematized by Duras. But drag is not a matter of one person donning clothes typically worn by a person of the opposite gender. Nor does it involve the taking on of mannerisms that might belie one’s biological sex. Rather, drag in YBCN is a psychological process: the characters turn into one another, stand in for one another, “connect” with one another without ever really connecting. This occurs for very specific reasons each time that it transpires. As a result, several very remarkable and confusing triangles (the man and woman, with the foreigner as the third party; the man and woman, with the other man as the third party, and so on) arise.

Marie-Hélène Bourcier's work on drag is supremely useful in understanding how it is that one can speak of drag with regard to this text. In Queer Zones (2001), Bourcier, the first postfeminist French critic of sex and gender, advances the notion that we must cease to conceive of drag as always already cross-dressing, and that perhaps it does not need even involve a sartorial component in the first place (Bourcier 165). To ignore her directive is to implicate oneself in a system based on static, a priori truths of gender, a system in which I have little interest and for which I have little use. Furthermore, Bourcier's ruminations on drag are conducive to our purposes in that she reveals it to be "une manifestation parmi d'autres de la déstabilisation des frontières qui ont été assignées entre les genres" (Bourcier 165).

As many of Duras's works can be, YBCN is at times confusing to follow. In this case, it is in part because all of the characters are nameless and function as doubles of one another: "Les deux héros servent de simulacres et de substituts de l'étranger l'un pour l'autre; chacun des deux est associé à l'étranger disparu au double titre de métaphore et de métonymie" (Brodén, "L'interaction" 96). What is more, each character performs complex maneuvers when with another in order to be with someone else, or to relive something from the past, even if that something never truly occurred in the first place. In YBCN, one man witnesses a young, attractive man in a hotel (YBCN 10) and instantly falls in love with him. He hears a strange sound, and the young man is then whisked off by a woman (YBCN 10-12). Later meeting the woman in a café without realizing who she is, man #1<sup>66</sup> proposes that the woman come to him nightly and that he will pay her

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<sup>66</sup> Since the characters are unnamed in the text, I use man #1 to refer to the gay protagonist, man #2 to indicate the young foreigner and man #3 to refer to the man with whom the woman spends her days when not in the company of man #1. Man #4 does not actually exist, but the designation refers to the initial confusion on the part of the male and female protagonists with regard to the identity of man #2.

for these visits (YBCN 13-24). She assents and they meet in an empty bedroom in the home where he resides in the coastal vacation town in France where the tale takes place. The man is obsessed with the memory of the young foreigner with the eponymous blue eyes, black hair. Through the woman—who also has blue eyes and black hair (YBCN 19)—he attempts to reenact the nonencounter with the young man (having only seen him, longed for him, and thought the foreigner might have been attracted to him in return). The nocturnal activities of the man and woman center around talk, masturbation before the other—“Elle le fait elle-même avec sa propre main devant lui qui la regarde” (YBCN 46)—dressing and undressing; in short, the man has created a whole ritual for the woman to (re-) enact. At one point, the woman begins spending her days with a third man and her evenings with the first. Eventually, the two central characters realize that the woman slept with the same man (i.e., the young foreigner) with whom the first man is obsessed, having previously thought it was a fourth man.

Duras often presents two people whose coming together is motivated by some reason other than sexual desire for the actual present partner. Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein (1964) (henceforth, Le ravissement) is an example, as is YBCN, of this topos in her work. Additionally, the nonencounter of the two men at the opening of Les yeux bleus cheveux noirs is not the only instance of a Durassian narrative<sup>67</sup> predicated on something that never actually took place. The plot of L’amant (1984) is also triggered by one such nonevent: the nonexistent photo of the young girl at the beginning of the story—“Elle aurait pu exister, une photographie aurait pu être prise [...]” (Duras, L’amant 16). Leslie

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<sup>67</sup> For more information on the “compulsion to repeat,” particularly a nonevent, in the Durassian œuvre, see Copjec, esp. 44-45 where she notes that Duras’s work “cycles around, repeats, and disfigures the same ‘protextual’ event [...]” (Copjec 44), often in an attempt to “displace the trauma from the immediacy of the present [...] [and] make of it an event which never takes place” (Copjec 45).

Hill's study of Duras's "canonized"<sup>68</sup> 1958 novel Moderato cantabile (henceforth, Moderato) is a fruitful way to consider the role of the nonevent within the Durassian world. She argues that this sort of event "hesitates between something and nothing, between a rehearsal and a performance, a quotation and a reality, an event and a figment of the imagination" (Hill, "Marguerite Duras" 605). With YBCN, however, Duras has outdone herself with the many twists and bends she throws the characters' way as they attempt to satisfy their desire for someone who is absent through the detour and transformation of a third party.

The most frequent transformation to occur is that of the woman who becomes the young foreigner for the first man's benefit. Several interesting entanglements arise out of this transformation, at least one of which the woman is utterly unaware. We see the man attempting to recreate the past through this woman, wishing to relive the episode when he first spied the beautiful young man. He does so by narrating the moment for her benefit. But he also spends all these sordid evenings with her as a way to get close to the young man, initially not recognizing her as the woman who slept with the foreigner. She, on the other hand, thinks that the man of whom her "employer" speaks is yet another man and that it is this man he is attempting to get close to by proxy through her. The third entanglement that arises with regard to the second man is in the description of their lovemaking on the day he was to leave France. At one point, while she is on top of him, he cries out the name she uses for him as if to enable him to be sleeping with himself: "Ce mot était un nom dont elle l'avait appelé lui et dont lui l'avait appelée en retour" (YBCN 93). Therefore, we have man #1 using the woman to get to man #2, whom they at

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<sup>68</sup> The novel has become a canonical text in the French educational system, frequently used "as a classic modern text for the baccalauréat" (Williams, Erotics 8).

first think is a nonexistent fourth man. And we have man #2 sleeping with the woman in order that he might make love to himself (man #2). If only the triangles stopped there.

Once the woman begins her diurnal dalliances with a third man, another set of interesting triangles arises. Of course, the desire between the two is in all likelihood genuine, at least at the outset. But shortly, the first man begins to derive some pleasure from hearing about her sleeping with the third. He asks that she describe her lover in detail and at great length: “Il demande comment était cet homme, son nom, sa jouissance, sa peau, sa verge, sa bouche, ses cris” (YBCN 77). We also read that this third gentleman wants to hear all about the first one and that what he learns excites and arouses him: “Cet homme [man #3] connaît son [man #1’s] existence [...] Lui aussi jouit violemment du désir qu’elle a pour un autre homme” (YBCN 78). So now, man #3 is with the woman to be with man #1 and man #1 satiates his curiosity about (if not to say desire for) man #3 through the woman as well. Still later, unbelievably, the woman begins to operate in much the same fashion: at one point she requests that man #3 be with her as man #1 would be. In so doing, she is connecting with man #1 in a way that she had not been able to prior to that moment.

### Missed Connections

The issue of two people connecting in the text is complicated by several factors, the primary one being sexual orientation. James Williams asserts that Duras “employs homosexuality as an essence of difference [...] a difference which is always maintained intact” (Williams, “A Beast of a Closet” 582). This essence of difference taints the entire text, supplying dialog, conflict, and propelling the plot forward. It is a simple question of

what gender one is attracted to in relation to one's own gender and is seen most readily in the case of the man and the woman as they meet nightly. Sexual orientation is also at the root of why the first man was unable to be with the handsome foreign man. The woman states in no uncertain terms that the foreigner was not attracted to other men; the first man, while discussing whether the young foreigner liked men or women, suggests that all men wind up sleeping with other men at some point: "Tôt ou tard il [the foreigner] serait venu à nous, ils y viennent tous, il suffit d'attendre le temps qu'il faut" (YBCN 92). The other reason is quite simply physical absence. The foreigner has departed from the resort town, provoking an absence and ensuing longing on the part of both the man who witnessed him and the woman. Furthermore, in order for a connection between them to occur, the two men with whom the woman spends all her time would have to meet but this meeting does not take place. Therefore, they are left to enjoy one another by proxy through the vessel of the woman.

The woman's status as a vessel is two-fold. On the one hand, her body is a sort of screen onto which are projected the men's fantasies and through which they are realized, recalling Victoria Best's assertion that, like the body of the woman in the aforementioned nonphoto of L'amant, the body of the woman in the text functions as a "screen for masculine fantasies of possession" (Best 180). In addition, if you take the term "vessel" more literally, the numerous passages pertaining to her vagina leap to mind. Quite stereotypically, both the first man (who is gay) and the woman are rather disgusted by and afraid of female genitalia. She herself describes it in the following manner: "c'est un

velours,<sup>69</sup> un vertige, mais aussi, il ne faut pas croire, un désert, une chose malfaisante qui porte aussi au crime et à la folie. [...] c'est une chose infecte, criminelle, une eau trouble, sale, l'eau du sang [...]" (YBCN 51).

The woman, late in the story, even begins to allege that the first man's disdain for her sexually has something to do with life (YBCN 128-29): since it is the woman's anatomy that disgusts the man, perhaps it is the female anatomy's role in giving birth that is really at issue. The womb is where life begins; in giving life, one is also sentencing a child to death.<sup>70</sup> We know this man is miserable in his own existence and perhaps it is the case that he resents even having been born, transferring his misery and unhappiness onto the body of the woman, the repository of all his fantasies and fears. This fatalistic and nihilistic notion of life is revisited in YBCN at another moment: "Il lui sourit comme s'il était démasqué en quelque sorte, contrit, toujours dans cette interminable excuse de vivre, d'avoir à le faire" (YBCN 65).

The man does not have a problem solely with her vagina. Her body too is at times rather problematic, in essence because it is female. Early in the story the man declares, "Je ne peux pas toucher votre corps [...] c'est plus fort que moi, que ma volonté" (YBCN 27). He wonders if he could succeed in caressing her were he not to look at her body as he did so, "[...] parce qu'ici le regard n'a que faire" (YBCN 28). Obviously, the man's

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<sup>69</sup> In Duras's La maladie de la mort—henceforth sometimes La maladie—the man refers to having heard that "c'est [the vagina] un velours" (Duras, La maladie 10). There is an overwhelming abundance of parallels between YBCN and La maladie; as Duras herself has indicated, YBCN is an intentional and expanded rewriting of the same story presented in La maladie. For this reason, I will not elaborate every element of YBCN as it relates to La maladie so as not to lose sight of the larger issues at stake in my reading of YBCN.

<sup>70</sup> As Samuel Beckett so eloquently put it in En attendant Godot: "[...] le fossoyeur applique ses fers" (Beckett 157). Ricouart, in studying La maladie, posits that the woman is able to discern the man's suffering from "la maladie de la mort" precisely because she is a woman: "Because women give birth, they are responsible for the fact that a person is condemned to live and also to die [...]" (Ricouart 180).

gaze has little to do with the scene in that he is not seeing what truly lies before him, but rather reimagining the scene according to his own wishes. The role of the gaze (“le regard”) is another aspect that requires exploration, particularly in light of issues of gender.

Often it seems as though the characters do not in any way see one another for who and what they truly are: man #1 tries to discern man #2 via the woman; man #3 attempts to unite with man #1, also via the woman; and so on. Indeed, the ability of one character truly to see another is often inhibited by a seemingly innocuous swatch of black silk. Every time the woman wraps her eyes with it, she impedes her ability to see the first man, and his ability to see her for who she is as well. Neither one can peer at the other when the silk is in place. This temporary autoblinding on the part of the woman is not the only way that the two avoid seeing one another. One night she opens her eyes—either upon waking or otherwise—and the reader learns that the two characters do not look at one another (YBCN 63). So not only do they not see one another when she has her eyes masked, they continue not to see one another even when she opens her eyes. And, furthermore, this has been the case for several nights (YBCN 63). In point of fact, Duras’s narrator paradoxically states that it is only when the woman’s eyes are covered and closed that she is able to see the man: “Une nuit, il découvre qu’elle regarde à travers la soie noire. Qu’elle regarde avec les yeux fermés. Que sans regard elle regarde” (YBCN 108). He states that he is scared of her eyes, an idea she refutes: “Ce n’est pas quand j’ai les yeux ouverts dans la direction de votre visage que je vous vois comme vous avez peur que je le fasse, c’est quand je dors” (YBCN 109). At work in the text, as evidenced by this passage, is a tension between seeing and not seeing.

That it should be when the woman is asleep that her seeing him awakens his fear is an intricate movement. The game of sight and blindness in the text is perhaps fully realized: unable to see the other with one's eyes open, it is through detours that the characters perceive one another. Either the eyes must be masked by the silk or must be closed, or one must be sleeping or dreaming in order for one to observe the other. In any case, sight is really a process of (re-) creation. Moreover, the characters often do not see one another for who they really are: the man relies on the woman's face to enable his quest to find the second man's and she does the same thing, as I will discuss in what is to come. As Janine Ricouart suggests, "[...] the games of the gaze (who sees, who does not see...) are the very basis of desire" (Ricouart 178). Antle's study of YBCN asserts further that "[t]his dynamic of desire implies a process of blinding: to see implies here the closure of the gaze or what Duras herself calls the 'blind-gaze'" (Antle, "Marguerite Duras" 121). The silk compounds all the issues of seeing and not seeing: the man can look at the woman without seeing her, she can peer through the fabric and not see anything at all, and so on. The square of black silk equally raises fundamental questions in terms of sexual and gender difference as well as sexual orientation in that it annuls the characters' capacity to see things as they truly are, giving rise to a more nuanced and self-created perception.

### Sexual Difference and the Silk

According to the constraints of the fictional world depicted in the text, connection between the protagonists is forestalled due to their inherent inability to breach what Martin Crowley, in his study of Duras's depictions of homosexuality, designates "the

radical gulf of sexual difference” (Crowley 667). Leslie Hill confirms that Duras’s narrative framework conceives of the world as having been profoundly and fundamentally marked by the difference of the sexes (Hill, “Marguerite Duras” 603). This tendency can be traced even in her earliest works: to wit, in Duras’s 1955 novel Le square the male and female protagonists meet on a park bench and discuss their respective professions, hopes, and life experiences. The woman—employed as a maid and with a small boy as her charge—mentions that she would be unlikely to enjoy the melancholic man’s trade as a traveling salesman, that she would somehow be unsatisfied never hoping to have any permanent place or person of her own. She speculates that he, however, is able to do so because he is a man, highlighting the possibility that there exists some constitutive difference between men and women: “Est-ce parce que les femmes sont différentes?” (Duras, Le square 31). Later, in the 1987 La vie matérielle, a collection of short essay-like entries on different topics,<sup>71</sup> Duras writes: “L’homme et la femme sont irréconciliables et c’est cette tentative impossible et à chaque amour renouvelée qui en fait la grandeur” (Duras, La vie 40). Heterosexual relationships become the site, according to Duras, where a man and a woman can pursue the supposedly futile task of reconciling oneself to the other. The impossibility of this task is what leads Duras to write that in such couplings, “[...] on est tenté d’atteindre à la dualité parfaite du désir” (Duras, La vie 40).

Hill argues that within Duras’s corpus sexual difference is “beyond the purview of each human, who is irremediably differentiated as male or female from the outset of life [...]” (Hill, “Marguerite Duras” 603). This form of differentiation comes to divide men

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<sup>71</sup> Henceforth, La vie.

from women further as life progresses; Maxime Foerster remarks in his study on sexual difference that, “la femme n’est pas un homme, leurs sexes diffèrent et tout doit différer selon cette différence originelle” (Foerster 38). Following Joan Wallach Scott’s astute ruminations on the matter with regard to the parité debates in France, sexual difference in this context should be taken to mean “a psychic not an anatomical reality” (Scott 32). Psychic, Scott argues, because while “[a]natomical difference [is] universal, [...] the meanings attributed to it [are] social and cultural” (Scott 41). In her analysis of the arguments for and against parity legislation in France, Scott adduces that sexual difference comes to stand for difference itself: “Not just any difference, but one so primary, so rooted in nature, so visible, that it [cannot] be subsumed by abstraction” (Scott 35). For Foerster, nature constitutes the keyword in this debate: “La nature, voilà le grand mot, la source et la loi, la raison d’être d’une inégalité [...] d’existence entre les sexes” (Foerster 38). Since Duras’s conception of difference naturalizes it, the deployment of the black silk in the text marks her attempt to sublimate it. Sexual difference operates as an irreconcilable type of difference throughout YBCN; in what follows we will investigate how Duras is able to reconfigure sexual difference through the use of a simple piece of black silk.

My argument is that the silk in YBCN at once literalizes and obfuscates sexual difference. Taking terms from Hill’s analysis of the role of music in Moderato, I see the scarf as a marker of “non-verbal differentiation” (Hill, “Marguerite Duras” 607), one that “dramatiz[es] the very instability of sexual difference” and denotes “the separation but also the apparent fusing of identities” (Hill, 607-08). The black silk is brought onto the scene by the woman, illustrating Ricouart’s assertion that “both aspects of the

spectacle—active and passive—are combined in Marguerite Duras’s work” (Ricouart 173). Ricouart’s arguments are informed by Laura Mulvey’s high-profile treatise “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1973; rev. 1975) in which she discerns a dichotomy in “pleasure in looking,” “split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey 837). Although in the novel the woman is the object of the man’s gaze, she takes some form of action by arriving with the black silk of her own accord, destabilizing binary notions of subject/object and active/passive. Like Mulvey suggests in her analysis of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, *YBCN* too “[...] focuses on the implications of the active/looking, passive/looked-at split in terms of sexual difference” (Mulvey 842).

This piece of fabric is at once extremely provocative and problematic. An American reader cannot help but think of the cliché, sexualized image of black silk stockings, often used in advertising and cinema (of the nonpornographic and pornographic varieties), as well as on television, to convey sexiness and allure. The text renders it a fetish as well: the way the silk swatch is used and the action it facilitates while simultaneously foreclosing certain other actions all contribute to the theatricality of the novel. In the text, the man is unclear as to what purpose it serves and asks the woman as much (*YBCN* 37). She informs him: “La soie noire, comme le sac noir, où mettre la tête des condamnés à mort” (*YBCN* 37). The mention of a decapitated head ties death to desire, as is often the case in the Durassian corpus. The silk thus functions dually as an instantiation of desire and of death. Jacques Guicharnaud has examined this link in Duras’s work, concluding that in her corpus the link between love (desire) and death “is stated as fact” and that “[i]ts symbolism is not explanatory [...] There is no question of establishing a relation of cause and effect, of saying that love leads to death or vice versa,

but of simply making [...] the characters swing between the two poles” (Guicharnaud 111). The swatch of silk is a prop, arguably the most critical one in the novel other than, perhaps, the woman’s body, which, although it is often treated like a prop, I would prefer not to categorize it as such.<sup>72</sup> The man even avails himself of it at times, which is a curious instance of drag: not only are we told that he wears kohl around his eyes at one point (YBCN 25), but we also read later that while she sleeps: “Parfois, c’est lui qui s’habille en pleine nuit. Il farde ses yeux, il danse. [...] Parfois il met son bandeau bleu, son écharpe noire” (YBCN 45).

The woman mentions that she assumed he wanted her to come with the silk, and to sleep, and that both the black silk and the act of sleeping are ways to enable him to be close to her (YBCN 47). The silk, at times, serves as a place of refuge for the woman. On several occasions she beseeches him to satisfy her. Sometimes he attempts to do so and sometimes he does not, but either way, in most cases he fails. Typically, following such a request on her part and a failure on his, she covers herself with the fabric and falls asleep (YBCN 56). It serves as a sort of safety blanket for her: when things become too difficult or she has overstepped the bounds of their arrangement, she has the solace of the silk as a place to which she can return. It seems that at times she makes use of it to avoid the reality of their situation: “Elle fait la morte, le visage aboli sous la soie noire. C’est ce qu’il pense les jours mauvais” (YBCN 63).

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<sup>72</sup> Following is one of the clearest indications of how the woman’s body is dehumanized and treated as merely a prop or accessory: “Chaque soir, elle amène son corps dans la chambre, elle défait ses vêtements, elle le place au milieu de la lumière jaune. Se recouvre le visage de la soie noire” (YBCN 103). The woman does not arrive in the room and undress, placing herself in the light; she brings her body to the room and puts it in the light, as if she were carrying a chair or some other object that was not fully part of her. Throughout the novel, her body is treated as something detached from her, even at her own doing.

While it is often the case that the silk enables the man to avoid seeing her for who she really is, she does in fact participate in this same process during one decisive episode. Lying next to one another, her eyes are closed with the silk on top of them and she begins to caress the man: “Elle cherche en aveugle un autre visage [...]” (YBCN 83). In what follows, she becomes alarmed and begins to cry, lamenting the loss of the young man. And then: “L’homme est redevenu l’homme de la chambre” (YBCN 83). The man does not understand what has just happened, nor is it necessarily immediately clear to the reader, so he asks her to clarify: “Il lui demande ce qui lui est arrivé. Elle dit que c’était son visage à lui qu’elle, elle caressait, mais que, sans doute sans s’en rendre compte, sans qu’elle le sache, elle avait cherché un autre visage que le sien. Que tout à coup cet autre visage avait été sous ses mains” (YBCN 84-85). For a brief instant, the first man was the young foreigner with the blue eyes and black hair, and this, at the hands of the woman. The masking of her eyes enabled her to “see” what was not there, but what she so desperately wished could have been. Here, the woman’s actions run parallel to those of the man: she enjoys the projected presence of the absent man mediated by the presence of the first. The parallel actions between the first man and the woman do not, however, cease with this one instance.

At one other moment in the text, the woman removes the black silk and contemplates her body as an outsider to it in the same way that the man does: “Elle a enlevé la soie noire. Ils regardent son corps. Elle a oublié qu’il est le sien, elle le regarde comme lui le fait” (YBCN 126). In a sense she has become external to her own body and shares sight with the man. Victoria Best’s essay on the use of photographs in texts by Duras and Barthes speculates on what it means to view a representation of oneself.

Though the woman in YBCN is not viewing a still snapshot of her body, her viewing position is similar to it. In seeing herself from this perspective, “that rare glimpse of the self as other is not simply a nasty shock, but a moment that transcends the imprisoning temporality of existence, a moment taken out of the passage of time and therefore an exhibit, a shred of evidence, to be scrutinized, to be enjoyed” (Best 178). A fusion of her gaze with his own has occurred, enabling her to consider her own body in much the same way as he does, which we know is problematic, to say the very least, since he often does not see her body for what it truly is. As Duras suggests with regard to viewing a photo of oneself, the woman in YBCN witnesses a “fausse perspective du miroir” (Duras, La vie 100).

As Fisher has elucidated, in YBCN writing is marked by “le motif de l’effacement” (Fisher, “L’écrit” 82): there is the “absence centrale” (YBCN 116) of the young foreigner as well as the tension between the written and spoken word that threatens to erase or blur the distinction between what is said, what is written, and what appears on stage. This “theme of erasure” is not restricted to the written word; it can also be delineated in and on the body of the woman. During the moment presented above in which the woman undergoes an out-of-body experience of sorts, an erasure is effected on the body of the woman (she forgets it is her own) and a second erasure occurs at the level of sight (her vision becomes his; she sees the body displayed before her as her companion does). Neither her body nor her gaze is her own at this particular moment. The specificity of the woman has befallen a double erasure through which the two characters merge. Her self-effacement recalls Annabelle Cone’s contention that in Duras’s works “woman erases the trace of her own existence, thereby making herself transparent or invisible”

(Cone 133). So while at times the silk serves to blur boundaries and reality to enable one of the characters to become another via phantasy and projection, in some cases it is with the removal of the black silk that one of the characters becomes someone else, as we have just seen. Certainly, had she not removed the silk, she would not have been able to see her body at all; the fact is that with its doffing, she not only sees her body, but she sees it as if it were not her own or at least somehow external to herself. The woman, who had been an embodied subject, becomes a disembodied one, leaving her body to float unbound as an object, the quintessential objectified female form.

When the woman masks her eyes with the black silk, she tacitly gives the man permission to explore her body, creating what Mulvey, in her study of traditional narrative cinema, refers to as “moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey 837). Covering her eyes allows the man to scrutinize her and her body in whatever way he wishes. This process is akin to Mulvey’s presentation of Freud’s work on scopophilia in that the man takes “other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 835). Sometimes the man sees the woman for who and what she is; other times her wearing the silk establishes her body as a generic form onto which he can project his longing for the foreigner. The silk is a barrier between the two of them and at the same time, paradoxically, it assists in their connecting with one another. It separates the woman from the man but allows him to approach her intimately. Self-imposed, Duras’s female protagonist has rendered herself and her sex invisible, assuming that the man would prefer it so. Simultaneously, the silk allows the woman to see (as dissonant a notion that it is, it is a recurrent one in the text) and through its mediation, the woman participates in processes similar to those of man #1.

The function of the silk in the novel is rather dædal; it is aligned with the role of the woman's body, which itself serves many purposes and comes to represent various things. The black silk square enhances the body's function as a prop, an essential part of the drama that unfolds before us. It serves to conceal the woman's sexuality: by allowing the woman to cover her eyes, the reality of her body is somehow denied for the man. He can create her in his own image or in that of the young man with blue eyes, black hair. Insofar as it allows the man to project his own fantasies and desires onto the woman's body, the fabric "suggests the possibility of access to another sphere, another sexuality, another self" (Showalter 148). The man attempts to relive the nonencounter with the foreigner through the woman's body, in part through the silk that effaces her. It not only enables the man's desire for the other man to perdure in a new space and time, it also represents the barrier of nondesire between the man and the woman. In this text, the woman's sexuality could not be any more inaccessible to the man by virtue of his homosexuality. All the same, her sexuality is further contained and rendered impotent, so to speak, when she drapes herself with the black silk. It thus mediates desire and sexuality. The fact that it is the woman who should arrive with it, who came up with the idea of donning the black silk is one indication of her accommodating herself to the man's endgame. That she should egg him on, attempting to goad him into exploring her body, and specifically her vagina, is an instance of her resistance to the transformation he attempts to impose upon her. Nevertheless, she is in part responsible for the transformation given that when she first encourages him to embrace her, she convinces him that it is not her he is kissing, but rather the young man he so desires. Very early on in their relationship, on the night of their initial meeting in fact, she encourages and

facilitates this transformation: “Elle lui donne sa bouche à baiser. Elle lui dit qu’il l’embrasse, lui, cet inconnu, elle dit: Vous embrassez son corps nu, sa bouche toute sa peau, ses yeux” (YBCN 20).

The woman further endeavors to render her body the site of the desired transformation for the man at another moment. Referring to her vagina, she attempts to persuade him to penetrate her but to pretend it is a different place or orifice: “Il serait peut-être possible de faire comme si c’était un lieu différent, fictif, et d’y glisser [...]” (YBCN 54). She has not only suggested the transformation of herself into the young foreigner, she has veiled her eyes to facilitate man #1’s perception of her as the departed young foreigner. Like O’Brien suggests with regard to absent characters in Le ravisement, in YBCN the absent foreign man may be gone from the text but nevertheless “remain[s] a disturbing presence in it” (O’Brien 242); or, as Willis notes, “the text depends upon the absences it perpetually evokes” (Willis, “Staging Sexual Difference” 116). It is clear that the man’s desired goal is in part realized: “Avec elle enfermée avec lui dans cette chambre il n’est pas tout à fait séparé de lui, de cet amant aux yeux bleus cheveux noirs” (YBCN 40). Thanks in part to the choreography—what Broden has termed “la disposition et les mouvements des corps” (Broden, “Narrativité” 221)—and the annulment of differences afforded by the black silk square, the man brings himself closer to the absent yet ubiquitous foreigner.

With the black fabric, the woman can become a surrogate of the foreigner for her male counterpart, highlighting the role of what Defromont terms the “rapport dévié” (Defromont 101) among and between Duras’s protagonists, a way to highlight the notion that in Duras characters do not interact directly or “face à face” (Defromont 101) but in a

more circuitous fashion, “comme si l’échange ne pouvait s’établir que dans la torsion du discours” (Defromont 101). Irigaray’s thesis on sexual difference and sameness becomes important in understanding the narrative: “‘Sexual difference’ is a derivation of the problematics of sameness, it is, now and forever, determined within the project, the projection, the sphere of representation, of the same” (Irigaray 26-27). The substitution that takes place in Duras’s tale is a byproduct of sameness. The gay man, the foreigner, and the woman are all mirrors of one another, sharing physical traits and resembling one another. One evening, once the woman is naked the man discovers that they look alike and tells her as much (YBCN 44-45). She concurs and points out that they have the same hair and eye color and that they are of the same height (YBCN 45). Since her hair, eyes, and height had already been established as identical to that of the young foreigner (YBCN 11; 19), the first man’s desire for her and for the young man becomes all the more narcissistic: all three of them in effect resemble one another.

This shared resemblance recalls Lacan’s idea of the “être à trois” advanced in his commentary on Le ravissement (Lacan 13), a concept that informs how, in both Le ravissement and in YBCN, characters function in an interdependent manner, are defined relationally and intersubjectively, and can come to “fuse.” Lacan, discerning this fusion or loss of individuation, writes that since the characters are “voués à réaliser le fantasme de Lol, ils seront de moins en moins l’un et l’autre” (Lacan 13). The “threefold being” in YBCN is comprised of man #1, the woman, and the young foreigner, and if we replace “Lol” in the foregoing portion of Lacan’s essay with the unnamed gay man of YBCN, we can begin to see how it is that Lacan’s perspicacious reading of Duras bears fruit for our purposes. Julia Kristeva’s analysis of the role of doubles and reduplication in La maladie

sheds further light on how this process in YBCN is in some ways doomed to failure. She notes that the entire process of doubling in Duras is inexorably tied to sadness: “Aussi [la douleur] se révèle-t-elle par le jeu des reduplications où le corps propre se reconnaît dans l’image d’un autre à condition qu’il soit la réplique de la sienne” (Kristeva 248).

Furthermore, she argues that in taking a double as a figure of alterity, one can “fixer pour un temps l’instabilité du même, lui donner une identité provisoire” (Kristeva 253) but that eventually all one is exploring is “le même en abîme [...] Le double est le fond inconscient du même, ce qui le menace et peut l’engloutir” (Kristeva 253).

Although the square of silk does serve to annul sexual difference metaphorically, we cannot overlook the other dimension of the man and woman’s coming together nightly. The man is attempting to know Woman, through this particular woman. He has never loved a woman or known a woman’s intimate touch (YBCN 28-29). His effort to overcome the constitutional, primary difference that alienates him from her must pass through an intense scrutiny of her body. John O’Brien’s examination of the operation of metaphor and metonymy in Lacan and Duras provides a matrix for understanding this process. In his analysis of Le ravissement he adduces: “Access to Lol, to her mystery and mysteriousness, becomes access to the female body” (O’Brien 237). Replacing Lol in the foregoing with the unnamed woman in YBCN reveals the importance that she be naked in order for this process to work. O’Brien concludes that nudity is essential because only “[...] then truth would be unveiled, revealed, and desire fulfilled [...]” (O’Brien 237).

The man requires access to the woman’s body in order to produce knowledge about sexual difference. The problem, of course, with this schema is that of conventional Western epistemologies. The ingenuity and significance of Duras’s work can be gleaned

through this process conflating activity and passivity, subject and object. Characters such as Duras's women tend to overturn accepted forms of stratification and complicate our understanding of Western epistemologies. As Hélène Cixous has rightly noted,

[...] every theory of culture, every theory of society, the whole conglomeration of symbolic systems [...] is all ordered around hierarchical oppositions that come back to the man/woman opposition, an opposition that can only be sustained by means of a difference posed by cultural discourse as 'natural,' the difference between activity and passivity. (Cixous 44)

Destabilizing the active/passive binary, the scarf functions as a way to mediate the woman's body and the man's desire. Mediation in Duras is a recurring trope, appearing throughout her vast corpus of writing. Laurie Edson's study of Le ravisement advances the idea that Duras uses this strategy to interrogate "assumptions of objectifiability and knowability" (Edson 19). Following her reading of Le ravisement, we can agree that "traditional epistemological models have led to oppositional thinking and the creation of a host of dualisms—culture/nature, subject/object, reason/emotion—in which one term of the dualism is privileged at the expense of its devalued 'other'" (Edson 18). All of these dualisms, Edson argues—following Irigaray and Cixous—"derive from an overriding male/female dualism" (Edson 18). The effect of this dualism in the quest for knowledge has resulted in the conclusion that traditional epistemes historically constitute the female by male desire (Edson 18). Edson reads Le ravisement—and we can apply her reading of it verbatim to YBCN—as "a story of mediation, male desire, and ultimately of epistemological crisis. It is the story of the way a male attempt at knowledge, in objectifying a female subject, mediates and determines ('produces,' to use Foucault's term) what can be known" (Edson 19).

Sexual difference (the male/female dualism to which Edson refers) is the primary force operating within the narrative realm of Duras's works. For critics like Edson, Crowley, Hill, and others, her writing constitutes a "critique of the epistemological models that have come to dominate Western culture" (Edson 19). Mistacco confirms that "Duras s'applique à déconstruire" "le fantasme de l'homme de connaître et de posséder le féminin" (Mistacco 131). Victoria Best's study of photography in Duras and Barthes expands on this notion, linking it back to fetishism: "[...] the fetish suspends knowledge in favour of a perpetual fascination with the fetishized object, and in this way, the fetish represents the male gaze in a state of persistent non-mastery over the objectified female" (Best 179). What the man in YBCN might be learning is certainly open to debate; Willis's remarks confirm that in Duras's texts "[t]he relation between seeing and knowing is rendered ambiguous" through a form of discourse "that inverts and destroys the equation of seeing with knowing" (Willis, "Staging Sexual Difference" 119). Given the dual nature of his examination of the woman (he sees her as a woman in order to produce knowledge about Woman and he also perceives her as the young foreigner for whom he had fallen at the outset of the narrative), it is difficult to state with any certainty what the man might have gleaned from exploring the woman's body. Furthermore, the sexual nature of the enterprise the two characters share requires some examination. In order to do so, we require Jean Baudrillard.

In "La chirurgie esthétique de l'altérité" Baudrillard argues: "Avec la modernité, on entre dans l'ère de la production de l'Autre" (Baudrillard 169). He further intimates that this otherness must be produced as difference (Baudrillard 169) and that this difference has bearing not only on the world but equally on "le corps, le sexe, [et] la

relation sociale” (Baudrillard 169). Projection and production enter the libidinal world as a way in which to know and to idealize the woman: “Il ne s’agit plus dans l’amour romantique de conquérir la femme, de la séduire, mais de la créer de l’intérieur, de l’inventer, tantôt comme utopie réalisée, comme femme idéalisée [...]” (Baudrillard 170). In the same essay, he states that modern sexuality verges ever more toward “une forme incestueuse dérivée” (Baudrillard 171); this hypothesis can be applied to the process at work in Duras’s narrative. Baudrillard’s description of this type of sexuality hinges on “la projection du même dans l’image de l’autre” (Baudrillard 171). The man projects this image of sameness onto the quintessential Other, the woman in the dyad; as Mulvey explicates: “Woman [...] stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other [...]” (Mulvey 834). Baudrillard further refers to the need “d’avoir à produire l’autre en l’absence de l’autre” (Baudrillard 174), a process most decidedly afoot in Duras’s text. The man projects an image of sameness (that of the absent young foreigner whom we know he resembles) onto the body of the woman (who resembles, as it happens, the two men). Through this projection, he effectively is producing “l’autre en l’absence de l’autre” (Baudrillard 174). The woman’s role here is pivotal: as a marker of difference between the man and herself, she comes to stand in for the young man. Simultaneously, she enables the gay man to explore the essential difference dividing them.

### Veiled Passions

But what of the “histoire” between the woman and the foreigner, the one that actually took place? The reader knows they were together the day the young man had to leave France. In an instance of dramatic irony, the reader also more than likely presumes

that the young man of which both the first man and the woman speak are in fact one in the same, even if the characters themselves do not initially realize it. A bit later, the first man inquires about a word or sound she sometimes makes while sleeping. He even suggests that the sound might resemble the one he heard someone cry out that fateful day at the hotel (YBCN 93). She explains the sound's provenance: it was in fact her pronunciation of the young man's foreign name.<sup>73</sup> On their final day together, she straddled the young man and "s'était fait pénétrer elle-même par lui" (YBCN 93).<sup>74</sup> Curiously, he then called her by this name that she had called him (YBCN 94). In essence, another complicated instance of desire by proxy<sup>75</sup> has taken place during this brief episode. Although it was the woman who initiated the sex act, the man must have had some desire for it since he was erect enough to facilitate penetration. As he called out to her by her name for him, he was in effect operating a shift by which he began to make love to himself, through the body of this woman and mediated by the utterance. The woman even anticipated that he might send her a letter, addressed to her solely via this word/name (YBCN 95), indicating that she was aware of the extent to which she had "become" him, of how their history together was recorded in and captured by the singular sound.

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<sup>73</sup> Blot-Labarrère identifies the sound—"selon les spécialistes"—as "Thala" (Blot-Labarrère 24) and notes that in literary Arabic, the word is "une onomatopée, une façon de dire 'Viens!' Courant au Moyen-Orient, le terme indique un appel" (Blot-Labarrère 24).

<sup>74</sup> Detlefsen points out the ingenuity of Duras's formulation, noting that in phrasing the sex act in this way "Duras produces a different version of sexuality in the way that she has her characters refusing traditional sex roles" (Detlefsen 22). Conventional wisdom on intercourse casts the insertive partner as the "active" one and the receptive partner as the passive one. The woman's mounting the man destabilizes the active/passive binary and constitutes, according to this line of thinking, a refusal of traditional sex roles.

<sup>75</sup> The notion of desire by proxy will be developed in the following section "The Place of Desire."

Once her narration of the event is concluded, the first man makes her repeat the word over and over; finally realizing that it was in fact she who cried out that day at the hotel (YBCN 95-96). The word becomes a mantra, a sense-memory of sorts, as well as a site of memory through which the man is able once again to stand before the young man with blue eyes, black hair (YBCN 96) through man's #1 projection of man #2 onto the woman's body. Not only does the word permit the first man to relive the incident, it also facilitates the woman's recollection of that evening at the hotel (YBCN 96). Now that the man realizes it was she who led the young man off, he sees her not as herself but as "celle qui a été pénétrée par le jeune étranger aux yeux bleus cheveux noirs" (YBCN 96). With this awareness, her identity is no longer bound up in her own individuality, but rather is a function of—is mediated by—her liaison with the foreigner. She is defined passively by the fact of having been penetrated by the young man. In fact, the woman's identity has more or less always been defined relationally, intersubjectively: after having seen her for the first time with the young man at the hotel, the first man sees her again later. Due to the fact that she is not with the young foreigner, the first man is unable to recognize her as being the same woman: "L'absence de celui-ci [of the foreigner] fait qu'elle reste inconnue de lui [man #1]" (YBCN 13). Her role as talisman for the first man is suddenly more significant since she actually made love to the veritable object of his affection, for which she is an ersatz or, to extend the theatrical aspect of the text, understudy. Now that he knows the story he wishes to see her as she is, but this is because of her liaison with the second man. In fact, he asks that she not mask herself with the black silk because he would like to watch her sleep (YBCN 96). Remaining unveiled he will see her as she is, mediated by the phantasy of man #2. Echoing a process Hayes has explored in the work

of Maghrebin authors, unveiling here enables “narrative relations of secrets [and] of marginal sexualities [...]” (Hayes 9). Arguably, it is not the woman he will see as she sleeps, however, but the beloved young foreigner, now that her transformation into the second man has been aided by the realization that they had their own history together.

The process of one person becoming another operates throughout this text and is occasioned most frequently by the body of the woman. The young man makes love to himself via the woman and through recourse to the utterance of her pronunciation of his own name. The first man literally and figuratively employs her and her body to achieve some sort of closeness with the young man. The third man derives sexual pleasure knowing about the dalliances of the woman with the first man (and vice-versa) and she feels it was predestined for her to love the first man, this “faux amant” (YBCN 86) who does not love. Oddly enough, she even begins to direct questions to the third man about the first man in an effort to understand him and his actions better, despite the fact that the two do not even know each other (YBCN 121), arguably mimicking the gay man’s process of learning about Woman through one woman.

She also has the third man recreate her evenings with the first man; this effectively turns the third man into the first, but a revised or enhanced version of him, one who is capable of satisfying her sexually (YBCN 140-41). She accounts various for her time spent with the first man and requests that the third man reenact those moments for her in much the same way that the first man might perform them—touching her body only when she is asleep, etc. (YBCN 141). The woman uses the third man’s desire for her

body<sup>76</sup> to recreate a re-creation. In a way, she is at once the first man setting the scene and making demands, and turning her lover (man #3) into the first man by asking him to perform the tasks in so peculiar a way. Her desire and her body are both subjected to projection and mediation. Her body, in effect, is central to everything. As Françoise Defromont has remarked regarding the woman in La maladie, here too it is the woman's "présence corporelle autour de laquelle se cristallise le discours" (Defromont 96). Through the woman's body the characters obtain a measure of what they want, projecting onto her body who and what they truly desire. That the woman is fully aware of her own place in this complex ballet is clear and she seems to take to her role quite willingly.

### The Place of Desire

What Duras has succeeded in doing with this tale is to create a scenario in which desire and sexuality are clearly aligned with and yet separate from questions of biological sex, gender, and even sexuality and sexual orientation. Clearly aligned with, because we have before us a gay man repulsed by the mere thought of a vagina. Desire (or the lack thereof) and sexual orientation work together to make it such that the man avows no interest in or attraction to the woman's genitals. However, at the same time, this process is complicated because the couple does in fact consummate the relationship (YBCN 131-32). Some form of desire for something or someone must have existed for the man to obtain and sustain an erection long enough to penetrate the woman. The man reveals that he did desire her at least one time (or evince the phantasy of desire) when she was telling him about her time with the young foreigner: "[...] quand vous avez parlé de cet homme

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<sup>76</sup> A bit earlier in the novel, we learn that although this man might have some feelings for her, he does not confuse that fact with his desire for her body (YBCN 127). Here is another indication of how this woman is not her body; her body in many ways is a stand-in or sign for Woman generally.

que vous aviez aimé, de ses yeux, le temps de le dire je vous ai désirée” (YBCN 29). It is quite revealing and provocative that his desire should be aroused through the narration of an episode spent with another man. Though she is reporting on something she did with someone else, the text remains clear that his desire was not for the other man in the encounter, but for her or her role in the episode anyway: his desire for her is again mediated by the presence of something else, in this case the foreigner. The woman, in turn, desires the first man and even discusses the likelihood that she might fall in love with a gay man or other gay men (YBCN 121-22), noting that “[c]e malheur d’être repoussante devenait plausible dans certaines circonstances de la vie” (YBCN 122). She wants him despite knowing that he cannot satisfy her, or she him for that matter. The barrier of sexual orientation precludes any sustained desire for her on his part, or so it seems to her. Here again we see how gender and desire are tied to sexual orientation: despite whatever willingness to be with her sexually he might manifest at times, in reality it is a fleeting sensation born of complicated maneuvers of the mind and not a true, unrelenting form of carnal attraction.

Sexuality—in the sense of sex acts or sexual behaviors—seems at times disconnected from sexual orientation in the text. All the instances in which the first (gay) man approaches the woman’s vagina are moments during which his sexual orientation does not inform his sexual behavior. It is critical to reiterate the role of mediation and phantasy in this attempt to divorce sexual orientation from sexual acts. In all the various instances in which man #1 evinces desire for or sexual attraction to the woman, it is mediated by and a product of the swatch of black silk or the phantasy or projection of man #2. Mediated though they are, these moments represent an attempt on the part of the

man to transcend his sexual orientation via sexuality. He tries to overcome the dictates of sexual orientation—he is not attracted to women—by forcing or feigning a form of sexuality with this particular woman. However, as Antle has explained, this “simulation of a sexuality [...] inevitably fails because of the difference in sexual orientation” (Antle, “The Frame of Desire” 195). Within the context of Duras’s work, the divorce of desire from sexuality is not entirely uncommon: Leslie Hill reveals that within Duras’s work desire “refuses to be intimidated by the puzzling asymmetry produced by the co-existence of divergent, mutually antagonistic sexual orientations [...]” (Hill, Marguerite Duras 138).

At stake in the narrative is not so much desire but desire by proxy. The term suggests the indirect manner in which desire circulates throughout the text and highlights the deviations involved in satisfying desire. Desire by proxy is embodied in the first man’s desire for the woman since his desire for her is more truly a reflection of his desire for the man with blue eyes, black hair. The foreign man is absent from the text but remains a significant force within it. Desire by proxy accounts for the maneuvers required of the first man and the woman to satiate their longing for the younger man. This form of desire via detour is a way to mourn the absent man, produce knowledge about the woman (about Woman), and is completely bound up in the complex process of doubling in the text. Since each character resembles the next and can also serve as a stand-in for another, desire can take myriad forms and is not necessarily directed toward the actual present partner. The two men who remain part of the woman’s quotidian existence (the man who remunerates her and the one with whom she makes love during the day) also experience some form of desire by proxy for one another.

The incidence of the first and third men (the former, gay; the latter, straight) achieving some sort of union together, despite never coming into contact with one another, is another example of how desire in the text is blind to questions of gender and the body, revealing “the co-existence of [...] mutually antagonistic sexual orientations” (Hill, Marguerite Duras 138). Although the third man is ostensibly straight, there is some form of longing on his part for the first man, or at least his orgasm is somehow tied to and mediated by her association with the first man: “Elle dit que parfois il frappe à cause de lui, de cet homme qui l’attend dans la chambre. Mais que c’est d’envie de jouir qu’il frappe [...]” (YBCN 127). Each man avows some curiosity regarding the presence of the other man in the woman’s life, a curiosity that when sated becomes pleasurable.

The first man’s curiosity about her past with other men is sated in a certain way thanks to the woman’s body, which we see clearly when he asks her questions about a particular man’s penis (YBCN 130). His desire for the young foreigner is clearly homosexual; a same-sex attraction that he wishes had been reciprocated. However, it is via heterosexual actions with the woman that he approaches and prolongs this same-sex attraction,<sup>77</sup> enabling James Williams to assert that in the text homosexuality is “recuperated as an erotic form of heterosexual object-relations” (Williams, The Erotics 158). It is at these moments that one can speak of a form of drag. It is not drag as conventionally conceptualized for there is no cross-dressing per se, but it is a metaphorical form of drag through the literal use of the silken square that accentuates and enables the characters’ capacity to transform into one another via projection, mediation, and phantasy. The use of the silk and its attendant ability to facilitate these metaphorical

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<sup>77</sup> The man reveals to the woman that all his relationships were short, of the one-night-stand variety, and that: “L’histoire du jeune étranger aux yeux bleus cheveux noirs est la plus longue, à mesure que passe le temps, mais c’est à cause d’elle qui la garde” (YBCN 98)

metamorphoses recalls drag's inextricable link to the performativity of gender. Drag in YBCN is a form of creation, either autocreation or the creation imposed by one person upon another and the performance of such a creation. The man recreates the woman as the young foreigner and at times she is a willing participant, all too happy to play the game ('perform the role') even if its stakes are unknown to her.

### Écriture in drag?

The manifestation of drag in YBCN is for the most part an atypical one. Aside from one or two allusions to the gay character's wearing make-up (e.g., "Il est fardé" [YBCN 27]) and certain of the woman's accessories, there is no cross-dressing of which to speak. The woman does not attempt to dress up as the second or third man for the benefit and pleasure of the first man; her transformation into one or the other is more imaginary and complicated. The stylized restaging of one scene over and over again is how the principle instance of drag is carried out in this text. That "drag" here, however complicated or nontraditional it might be, should be tied nevertheless to some form of theatricality and performance is a provocative notion, rendered all the more so by the novel's hybridized form, as it falls somewhere between prose and theatre.

Indeed, the book itself is "in drag" as a novel, or as a theatrical text. Just as there is no gender in the text, there is no genre to it either. Throughout the novel, the voice of an actor interrupts the action. These interruptions appear as passages set off via indentation from the rest of the narrative and function as didascalies ("stage directions"). The actor describes the "stage" (YBCN 21-22); explains how the action should progress and how the "characters" are to be dressed (YBCN 38); accounts for the blocking and

lighting onstage (“Les deux héros de l’histoire occuperaient la place centrale de la scène près de la rampe. Il ferait toujours une lumière indécise [...]” [YBCN 50]); and so on.

The actor guiding the on-stage action, and whose lines conclude the narrative, simultaneously dictates and proposes or speculates. He is at once omniscient and in a position to speculate as to what might or might not have taken place or been said before the audience. His presence, however, is unexplained in the text; as Willis has remarked, the actor’s “situation in (or in relation to) the text and its story is never specified. He operates as a kind of internal gaze from elsewhere, an incorporated frame” (Willis, “Staging Sexual Difference” 121). Through his words the actor reveals precisely to what extent the entire narrative is an embedded one (récit enchâssé): “La lecture du livre [which is what the characters to which the actor refers are “performing”] se proposerait donc comme le théâtre de l’histoire” (YBCN 38). So, the theatre-going audience witnesses the reading of the book taking place on stage (“the play”), which is meant to be the theatre for the story.

Hill’s analysis of Moderato again sheds light on this tendency in Duras’s work: “the uncertainties readers may have about the generic conventions the novel may be following [...] reflect disturbances at work on the level of gender as well as of genre” (Hill, “Marguerite Duras” 608). Replete with stage directions, the text certainly does not remain within the generic confines and conventions of the novel. And yet, it is not quite a play, at least in its presentation. Though the nameless characters might evoke the work of Beckett or others, their dialogue is not set up in the way that it would be in a traditional published play. This hybrid text is innovative and certainly reflective of the abundant literary creation of its author, who also wrote straight plays and screenplays in addition to

numerous works of prose. Antle confirms: “Duras’s work [...] is distinguished by its radical questioning of the notion of genre. The boundaries of genre become increasingly blurred until they no longer appear to exist in a differentiated state” (Antle, “Marguerite Duras” 120). Furthermore, Willis draws parallels between Duras’s innovation in form and her exploration of sexual difference:

In a sense, Duras’ texts are always based on an irretrievable absence, another space beyond their boundaries—a previous text partially recalled, another genre or form, or the scene of reading itself—a scene the writing can never fully embody, articulate, or occupy. At the same time, her texts tend to thematize this absence as loss or violent separation and to do so on a particular ground, that of sexual difference. [...] Meanwhile, these recent works steadfastly erode the integrity of genre. [...] each text appeals to another scene of representation, another genre, often mixing one in with another. That is, each text exhibits a fundamental dependence on an outside against which it defines itself, while refusing consolidation within a particular genre. Consequently, the instability of differentiations and borders is reproduced at the textual boundary itself. (Willis, “Staging Sexual Difference” 110 [emphasis in the original])

Certainly, had the intention been to write a more conventional play, one can assume Duras would have simply done so. But the intentionality of the author is less my concern than is the question of form here and how the fact that it represents a median somewhere between prose and theatre reflects certain elements of the plot. First of all, the main male character’s desire falls somewhere between hetero- and homosexual: he wants to relive a nonexperience with another man, but can only do so by mediating it through the body of the woman and when she is properly veiled (in costume, to maintain the terminology of the stage). The woman vacillates between being herself and becoming the young foreigner the first man so desires. Her sexual satisfaction is nil due to the first man’s sexual orientation, so she has recourse to a third man in order to satisfy her nascent desire. In other words, her desire for one man—the first one—is hybridized or shared

since it is shared in the arms of another man—the third one—in order that some form of satiety might occur. Here again, sexuality is mediated since the woman’s desire for man #3 is really the projection of (mediation by) her desire for man #1. She uses her own forms of projection and phantasy in a heterosexual liaison with man #3 in order to achieve some semblance of satisfaction for the desire she evinces for man #1, with whom the possibility of that satisfaction is foreclosed.

Based on Antle’s argument, we can read the entire framing of the initial episode of the novel and the subsequent attempts to recreate it as reflective of its crossbred form. The gesture with which the woman spurs on the man to kiss her in order to kiss the man with blue eyes and black hair “seeks to approach the sexual act in order to alienate itself at the frontiers or limit points that separate heterosexuality from homosexuality” (Antle, “The Frame of Desire” 188). Just as the novel is a hybrid, situated at the frontiers of prose and theatre, so does its plot attempt to recreate a moment via actions that are situated at the frontiers of homo- and heterosexuality. In this way, the text—especially for the fact that it treats the question of desire—could be said to conform to Donald Kuspit’s definition of what constitutes “the best art:” “The best art of any kind does not offer us forms that are easily specifiable [...] Rather, it presents forms so novel that they seem to undo themselves—seem to burst with desire” (Kuspit 43).

### Sexuality, Queer Theory, and the Text

The text represents and anticipates a coming awareness of homosexuality in France. One might go so far as to say that just as the woman grapples with the issue of the first man’s sexuality, so does society struggle to understand and reconcile the place of

lesbians and gay men within it, as evidenced by countless debates on same-sex civil unions, the pacte civil de solidarité (le PACS) in France. There sometimes exists a certain vagueness on the part of the first and third men with regard to their own sexual orientation and, as we saw earlier, the first man asserts that all men eventually wind up in some same-sex affair (YBCN 92). The fluidity of sexual orientation to which Duras alludes in this text is indicative of how sexual orientation is lived by some people. Without meaning to speak of some form of innate bisexuality (much less of Freud's conception of "primary bisexuality"), the text creates a world in which sexual orientation has a fraught relationship with sexuality and gender. In this way, Duras's text anticipates and mirrors certain crucial moments in the history of queer theory, struggling as it has to reconcile sexual orientation with questions of sex, desire, the body, and gender, as we saw in the introduction to this project.

The text also functions as an indication of the changing relationship between people deemed heterosexual and people who do not define themselves in such a way. Terminology such as "heterosexual" (or "homosexual") becomes more suitable to describe specific acts, rather than to label people who take part in such behaviors. A person can participate in a heterosexual encounter but it is not always or necessarily appropriate to describe said person as a heterosexual. We see this in the case of the story between the first man and the woman: there exist certain moments during which the "homosexual" man evinces heterosexual desire for her and yet ostensibly remains gay. The fact of his being gay, furthermore, is a wall he perceives as precluding his physical and sexual connection with the woman and therefore it must be mediated if there is to be any connection at all.

Veiling oneself with the black silk as a form of mediation renders the woman ambiguous to man #1. Her identity and sex are nullified through the power of the fabric to mediate man #1's desire, which is not at all for her but for man #2. The ambiguities contained in this particular text with regard to form and sexuality are not unique to YBCN: Detlefsen has argued that "[s]exual ambiguity, at the thematic level, parallels stylistic ambiguities in Duras" (Detlefsen 16). In her analysis of Duras's 1964 novel Le ravisement Detlefsen demonstrates that there exists in the Durassian corpus "an ambiguous stance vis-à-vis sexual preference and a refusal to accept homosexual and heterosexual as clearly distinct and opposed to one another" (Detlefsen 16). Man #1 in YBCN displays an often-ambiguous relationship to his own sexual orientation since he does explore the woman's body and vagina and they eventually consummate their relationship. Nevertheless, he is unable to transcend his sexual orientation even if he is able perfunctorily to perform heterosexual acts with the woman. As I have shown, his ability to do this is consistently mediated by the silk square, projection, and phantasy.

Of course, the role of sexuality as it pertains to the woman (to women) is also implicated in the text. Although at first glance it might appear that the female lead character is only ever alternately reduced to or separated from her body, thereby serving merely as an accessory for all the men in the story (present or otherwise), I do not believe this to be the case. The woman is characterized in many ways as an exhibitionist and she plays an active role in the staging of the nightly interludes. Mulvey's study of the way in which women function exhibitionistically in cinema is a lens through which to derive meaning from the woman's self-stylized staging in YBCN. Mulvey argues: "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with

their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 837 [emphasis in the original]).

Mulvey further notes that in erotic spectacle, a woman functions as a sexual object and comes to signify male desire (Mulvey 837). The scopophilic dimension of the relationship between the man and the woman can be traced: leaning on Mulvey’s definition of the scopophilic, we can read the man in YBCN as taking “pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (Mulvey 836-37). As Ricouart has pointed out, Duras’s “story [...] raises the question of visual pleasure. The questions of looking and being looked at are essential in this display of the body as a source of pleasure” (Ricouart 182). The woman is at turns active and passive in this game: she offers herself as the object of desire, accepting money to do so, but she also becomes the subject of desire (albeit an ersatz subject for the eponymous young man).

Duras creates a world in which traditional received notions of men’s and women’s roles in a heterosexual matrix have the possibility of shifting. The female protagonist of this text recalls, in her exhibitionistic tendencies, that of L’amant.<sup>78</sup> Passive female sexuality and its attendant stereotypes are dispensed with with the advent of a roster of female characters that are at once active and passive, subject and object.

### Cloudiness, Blurred Borders, and the Middle Ground

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<sup>78</sup> For more on the exhibitionist tendencies of the girl in L’amant see Willis’s Marguerite Duras: Writing on the Body esp. 7. Willis remarks that the young girl in L’amant “reinscribes the exhibitionist scenario in a woman’s active self-display [...] active, that is, as opposed to the passive form of woman as object of/spectacle for a mastering gaze, that of reader or spectator” (Willis, Marguerite Duras 7).

In recent times, there have been several indications within mass culture, the media, and in the more theoretical, academic realm that hetero- and homosexuality have become blurred to the point almost of nondistinction between them. It is worth noting that generally such a blurring seems only to be discussed from the standpoint of male gender roles and men's behavior and preoccupations. The blurring is focused on heterosexual constructs and heterosexual acts. The metrosexual is one instance of just how men's behavior mirrors or mimics that of certain preconceived and decidedly heterosexual notions of gay men and/or women. An article entitled "Is Straight the New Queer?" advances the argument that the "simulation of queer,"<sup>79</sup> is in point of fact deployed strategically "precisely in order to effect a recuperation of a normative version of 'reality'" (Rahman par. 23). Rahman further explains that when men are portrayed in a less-than-heterosexual fashion, certain signs of heteronormative masculinity are nonetheless present, thereby reaffirming the extant regime of masculinist heteronormativity by "de-essentialising 'queer' for productive dissonance and amusement, [...] safe in the knowledge that there is a secure and policed route out of 'queerness' – the encoded red carpet of heterosexual masculinity" (Rahman par. 22).

In June 2005, the New York Times published an article ("Gay or Straight? Hard to Tell") in which David Colman argues:

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<sup>79</sup> Examining a photo spread of soccer star David Beckham, metrosexual par excellence, Rahman explores how recent modes of representation of masculinity might blur straight and queer (such as Beckham wearing pink nail polish in photos) but that codes of masculinity—for instance Beckham's status as athletic superstar, husband, and father—allow for play between these divergent codes, and that the latter in fact enables the former. In other words, because he is so well-known for his "masculinity" (via athletic prowess) and his heterosexuality (well-publicized allegations of extramarital [heterosexual] affairs perhaps further reinforce this notion) is recognized by one and all, "Becks" can afford to play with queer coding and signs. In the process, whatever queerness might be inherent in his representation is "neutralized by heterosexual signs, thus recuperating the ideological dominance of a heteronormative culture" (Rahman par. 18).

It's not that straight men look more stereotypically gay per se, or that out-of-the-closet gay men look straight. What's happening is that many men have migrated to a middle ground where the cues traditionally used to pigeonhole sexual orientation—hair, clothing, voice, body language—are more and more ambiguous. (Colman 1)

Colman offers up the term “gay vague” for this phenomenon and in essence demonstrates that the codes for homo- and heterosexuality have completely evaporated, so much so that, according to a chief analyst of trends in the fashion industry cited by Colman: ““We have left the era when the defining line for men is one of sexual preference”” (Colman 1). This breaking-down of formerly accepted normative or stereotypical codes of dress and grooming no longer guarantees people can make accurate assumptions about one's sexual orientation based on such factors, or so the argument goes. The codes that are dismantled, however, are evidently heterosexist cultural constructions that are reinscribed as normative since there is a need to distinguish between hetero- and metrosexual. Received ideas about masculinity and femininity are no longer applicable once the distinctions between male homo- and heterosexuality have been blurred. The fundamental problem with this seemingly liberating trend is that women and especially lesbians are completely left out of the discussion. By ignoring women (hetero- and homosexual), this blurring in fact confirms and reproduces heteronormativity and misogynistic tendencies within the social order.

The diminished distinction between gay and straight men has not led to the erasure of heteronormative masculinity. If Rahman is taken at his word, much of this blurring in fact merely serves to endorse it. It is certainly too soon to tell what the

consequences of “gay vague” and the metrosexual might be.<sup>80</sup> Be that as it may, it is telling that such instability should occur in this recent fin-de-siècle period, echoing Showalter’s argument that it is during the fin de siècle that instability within the realm of gender and sexual orientation is particularly prevalent and more, importantly, potentially productive in its disrupting of extant codes (Showalter 207-08). Les yeux bleus cheveux noirs is one instance within the literary realm of such instability, notably blending gender codes with those of sexual orientation. Duras’s text, written in the mid-eighties,<sup>81</sup> presciently pinpoints a crisis in masculinity that lurked around the corner, elements of which constitute aspects of this project’s closing chapter.

Through its form and its themes, YBCN reveals an eagerness to interrogate extant binaries, such as male/female, active/passive, homosexual/heterosexual, prose/theatre, and so on. The author’s attempt to dismantle the barriers of genre mirrors her attempt to deconstruct binaries of gender and sexuality. On the whole, her prose constitutes and reflects an effort to abolish boundaries between genres, with Duras even creating a sort of appendix to one novel (La maladie) containing suggestions for its adaptation to cinema or the stage (Duras, La maladie 59-61). I argue that this effort to shatter generic boundaries is completely bound up in her willful deconstruction of binaries that operate within the social order. By refusing simplistic distinctions between, for instance, gay and straight (as well as refusing to privilege straight over gay), Duras evades the dominant form of discourse on sexuality. As Hayes has argued, “Sexuality in the dominant discourses of

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<sup>80</sup> A recent article in the men’s monthly Details intimates that “the metrosexual revolution [...] has created the illusion of enlightenment about the fluidity of human sexuality, but it is mostly about slightly more stylish, defensive straight guys acting more macho than ever” (Dumenco 138).

<sup>81</sup> Duras’s uncanny ability to ascertain this issue with gender is made even more so in light of the fact that at that time in France there was no theory available for such matters (other than applying and adapting the work of Foucault).

modern, capitalist society is defined by a homo/hetero binary that attempts to divide up all individuals according to what is assumed to be their exclusive sexual orientation towards members of the same or opposite sex” (Hayes 35).

In refusing to capitulate to “the dominant discourses,” Duras’s text is one in which no one form of sexuality or sexual expression is normative. Desire takes many forms, through many circuits and constitutes, in this particular instance, a “[...] site of continued resistance to a heterosexual will to knowledge” (Hayes 91). The piece stages an association Hayes has studied in different literary contexts; namely, the “association between the social order and the unveiling of sexual secrets” (Hayes 120). Since Foucault, we have understood that one of the foundational elements of society is sexuality as it has been organized, categorized, and deployed since the late nineteenth century. By overturning or at least deconstructing the “homo/hetero binary” (Hayes 35), Duras suggests that this binary is not at all the great divide not to be crossed, as many would have it. She reveals one of the building blocks of society to be a lot less rigid than it has been constructed by and elaborated in the popular imaginary.

In resisting the heterosexual will to knowledge, the narrative undermines the authority with which society has endowed the will to knowledge. Duras thus reveals it to be fundamentally less than the rigid, all-powerful system of exclusion. Although this will to knowledge is inextricably linked to discourse and to power and undermining or challenging it might suggest to some freedom or escape from it, that is not the case, nor do I believe it to be the goal in any event. Rather, as Bourcier has explained: “Lutter contre le pouvoir ne revient donc pas à s’en libérer mais à lui opposer une résistance”

(Bourcier 183).<sup>82</sup> Antle's analysis of Duras's œuvre posits that "Duras deconstructs the mechanisms of power – colonial power, fascism, or masculinity – through a radical questioning of the social relations of domination" (Antle, "Marguerite Duras" 119). Duras creates a text in which various forms resistance can be traced: resistance to conventional depictions of women, especially with regard to "spectacle;" resistance to all the various binaries enumerated above; resistance to artificial boundaries between prose, theatre, cinema, and even poetry; and resistance to conventional, simplistic depictions of women's sexuality. The way in which resistance takes shape in this tale is caught up in a process akin to drag, and even Duras's "take" on drag defies conventional understandings of it. It is precisely through the use of self-veiling and unveiling with the silk that Duras is able to demonstrate the conditions of possibility for resisting the discourse of normative sexuality, as evidenced by her willful violation of the dictates of the regime of compulsory heterosexuality in all its insidious manifestations specifically incarnated in the text by the binaries she deconstructs therein.

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<sup>82</sup> Bourcier elaborates: "Il est donc illusoire de se situer hors pouvoir" (Bourcier 183).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION: CONDITIONS OF IMPASSIBILITY

The period known as the Belle Époque began with the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1889 and concluded in 1914 at the dawn of the First World War (Antle, “Mythologie” 8). It was a time of change, transition, and polarity. Antle observes that the period was paradoxically liberating and restrictive for women and that “la femme continue à être prise dans des circuits de représentation traditionnels, et du point de vue de l’art et de la publicité, elle n’en demeure pas moins exclue des modes de production” (Antle, “Mythologie” 8-9). We have examined works by Rachilde and Eberhardt, two unconventional women who in their own lives dressed as men; though we have already discussed it in the case of Eberhardt, we have not until now considered Rachilde’s personal drag. Rachilde dressed as a man to save money (Gerould 118) and in so doing “enjoyed for herself privileges that were ordinarily forbidden to her sex” (Downing 93).

Rachilde and Eberhardt’s work falls squarely into the Belle Époque and reveals its own complicated relationship to identity and to what Antle confirms is a central flaw of the era, its being “productrice de clichés et d’artifices” and for the fact that it “repose principalement sur la mise en scène et l’exploitation du corps féminin” (Antle, “Mythologie” 8). Duras, once referred to as Rachilde’s “héritière” (qtd. in Blot-Labarrère 15), does not belong chronologically to the era, but, as Antle asserts, the Belle Époque “donne [...] un avant-goût de la fin du 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle” (Antle, “Mythologie” 14). Duras’s

Les yeux bleus cheveux noirs belongs to the twentieth century's fin-de-siècle epoch and, like Eberhardt and Rachilde, complicates identity and the display of the female body. The complexity of identity and one's submission to or refusal of it in each text functions as the metaphorical joug ("yoke") conceptualized in the introduction to this study.

The joug circulates through all three of the texts examined herein. Within the foregoing chapters we have considered moments when identity—personal, gender, sexual—is not what it might appear to be on the surface. Eberhardt complicates issues of personal identity by creating a transnational, transcultural, pansexual, transgender, and transreligious identity for herself. In the case of Monsieur Vénus, it is through costume, disguise, and fantasy that Jacques, a biological man, is able to function as a woman in the text. Also, one can consider Raoule's body to be something of a yoke: the intrusion of her bare breast shatters the illusion for her paramour, forcing him to realize that she is not and will never be the man he had imagined. She is bound to her body, which prevents her from succeeding more fully in her assumption of the man's traditional role in her relationship with Jacques. As far as Les yeux bleus cheveux noirs is concerned, phantasy, projected desire, and role-play allow characters to morph into absent ones. At the same time, Duras treats sexual identity in the text like a barrier or type of joug. The man's sexual orientation prevents him from committing all the various acts he might wish to with the woman. Each of these instances illustrates how some form of personal identity becomes a yoke or a barrier, and how one might go about thwarting the barrier or at least operating through it.

Discussing le joug allows me to explore an idea prevalent in each of the primary texts. Another dimension of the yoke we must briefly treat is that of the body, yoked as it

is to sexual difference: as Bourdieu notes, it is the body that constructs sexual difference (Bourdieu 16). Socially, the body is constructed “comme réalité sexuée et comme dépositaire de principes de vision et de division sexuants” (Bourdieu 16). In La différence des sexes à l’épreuve de la République (2003), Maxime Foerster remarks that sexual difference privileges the masculine (Foerster 106), which means that the social order “fonctionne comme une immense machine symbolique tendant à ratifier la domination masculine sur laquelle il est fondé” (Bourdieu 15). Winifred Woodhull’s study of community in Duras’s works summarizes how gender and sexual difference govern social life:

[...] the opposition masculine/feminine subtends the basic bi-polar, hierarchized oppositions ordering Western language and thought since antiquity: spirit/matter, reason/unreason, good/evil, presence/absence, and so forth. In every case the devalued term is reduced to an otherness that shores up the identity and the force of the dominant one [...]. (Woodhull 12)

The rigidity of sexual difference, its effects on social life, and the sex/gender system exposed in the introduction dominate and shape what we consider as possibilities for ourselves, our sexuality, and our understanding of the world. Foerster insists on:

combien la division sexuelle de l’humanité est lourde de conséquences non seulement au niveau juridique par l’inégalité de tous devant la loi, mais aussi, au niveau psychologique, par l’appauvrissement de l’horizon du possible quant au processus de l’individualisation où chacun travaille à l’érection de sa personnalité. (Foerster 110)

Each chapter of this study considered different instances of the yoke, its effects, and any attempt to bypass it or expand the horizon of personal possibility. The question at hand is: what sort of opportunities for personal plenitude can exist under restrictive or intolerant discursive regimes? Are we limited once we adopt or adapt to a specific badge of

identity? For instance, if a man is gay, can he truly be intimate with another woman? Or does “[t]he presence of [...] people in their refusal to submit to existing definitions of themselves creat[e] a site for absolute possibilities” (Piper 170)? In order to consider that dilemma, we must inspect homosexuality and heterosexuality within the binary frame based on sexual difference that structures them as sexual orientation.

With regard to sexual orientation, what is at operation is a binary system wherein “meaning is confined to what something is not” (Wilchins, “Queerer Bodies” 43). So for the moment, rather than think in terms of lesbian, gay, straight, bisexual, and so on, we need to explore the binary of heterosexual/homosexual. As Wilchins has demonstrated, in a binary the second term is “derivative from and dependent on the first” (Wilchins, “Queerer Bodies” 44), so heterosexuality always contains homosexuality in the sense that homosexuality is what heterosexuality is not. Homosexuality is defined appositionally and in opposition to heterosexuality: the binary is “not really about two things, but only one” (Wilchins, “Queerer Bodies” 43). In other words, if you are a woman attracted to women, you are also necessarily a woman who is not attracted to men. In a heterosexist discursive structure, there is a normative sexuality at work incarnated by (reproductive) heterosexuality. Within this system, anything that does not reflect the normative form of sexuality is defined relationally to heterosexuality as nonnormative, by virtue of its very absence or lack of heterosexuality. For the sake of expediency, we shall term this second (nonheterosexual) sexuality homosexuality, regardless of what it is that makes it nonnormative. Patricia Hill Collins acknowledges: “Within assumptions of normalized heterosexuality, homosexuality emerges as a second important category of ‘deviant’ sexuality. In this case, homosexuality constitutes an abnormal sexuality that becomes

pathologized as heterosexuality's opposite" (Collins 129). The limits of this system are apparent: you are one thing or you are the other; furthermore, "to be heterosexual is considered normal, to be anything else is to become suspect" (Collins 129). Writing and language fail us when we attempt to articulate possibilities outside of this regime, this "taken-for-granted ideology" (Collins 129). There are no labels for those who refuse to participate in this one-or-the-other system.

In many ways, what Marguerite Duras has advanced in her novel is a character study of one person attempting to operate outside of this normative framework. Dabbling in heterosexuality, the man is, according to the terms of the binary, not homosexual. But, paradoxically, since he is an avowed homosexual, he cannot be heterosexual. By attempting to shift desire away from matters of gender identity (namely, the gender identity of his partners), Duras has created a sort of antithetical antiphon to Rachilde's novel, in which desire is bound up with concerns related to gender roles, expression, and identity. The purported relationship between de Raittolbe and Jacques stands as the lone form of sexuality that operated outside of the constraints of heterosexuality and yet it ends with the baron killing Jacques. One has to wonder: did he kill Jacques in spite of his love for the artist, or because of it? Quashing the possibility, as the murder effectively does, of any form of nonnormative sexuality, Rachilde asseverates the discursive power of the heterosexist regime within which her novel circulates. From the standpoint of the plot, it is as though the regulatory mechanism of this regime intervened, in some twisted form of discursive *deus ex machina*, to restore order to the proceedings.

One clear form of resistance to regulatory mechanisms is, however, present in the case of each author. For Eberhardt, it is her informed decision to self-represent as a native

man in Algeria that allows her to circumvent some of the restrictions she might otherwise have faced as a foreign woman. Rachilde's exemplary Raoule and Jacques resist the pressure to keep up appearances and conduct themselves—before, during, and after their marriage—as they please. Finally, the man and the woman in YBCN reject the departure of a young man and attempt to reestablish his presence on the body of one another, which results in the sexual union of a gay man and straight woman. These moments constitute a “point de départ d’une déconstruction de la différence des sexes pour penser et vivre autrement l’identité, la sexualité et le rapport au pouvoir” (Foerster 74) and reveal an enrichment of the “horizon du possible” Foerster evokes as being otherwise limited (Foerster 110). By maintaining some focus on personal horizons of the possible, we can address the question of social intelligibility and the issue of those who stand outside of it or at its margins.

In Undoing Gender<sup>83</sup> (2004), Judith Butler tackles the question of intelligibility and “the problem of who qualifies as the recognizably human and who does not” (Butler, Undoing 2). She defines intelligibility “as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms” (Butler, Undoing 3). Social intelligibility refers to the ability to be recognized as human within an interdependent social instrument or mechanism, as all human life is. This intelligibility is constituted by norms that shape our behavior, appearance, values, language, psyche, and our very possibility. This study has centered on moments when characters and texts stand at the limits of intelligibility through their questioning of gender, culture, sexuality, sex, sexual difference, or formal conventions of genre. There is an important difference to be made

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<sup>83</sup> Henceforth, Undoing.

between being unintelligible (in which case, the texts and situations we contemplated would prove unsuitable objects of study) and being on the fringes of normative codes of intelligibility. On this distinction, Butler posits that to be unintelligible is to be “without value to politics” (Butler, Undoing 74) but that to exist “at the limits of intelligibility [...] offer[s] a perspective on the variable ways in which norms circumscribe a human” (Butler, Undoing 74). If identity and personal worth are framed within a social network comprised of regulatory forms of intelligibility (to which one must often conform for various reasons, economic, political, or otherwise) that determine even the very possibility of being recognized as human and the language we have to describe our humanness, willfully situating oneself at the limits of intelligibility is an act of enormous political import. Implicit in this act is a process of self-determination and autonomy that calls into question the norms and the way in which they frame anything found not to conform to those norms. Even if you exist—are intelligible—between the norms, you are still framed, defined, and speak of yourself in relation (juxtaposition) to them; this is the idea of the joug that we have developed and investigated in this study.

Through the metaphor of the yoke we have interrogated texts whose characters (and, in one case, author) refuse to grant more than deferential authority to discursive regimes that control and condition their self-determination, whose sexual orientation stands at odds with gender identity, whose desires are most satisfied when the specific genital acts performed do not correspond with the conventions of sexual orientation (Butler’s contention that “sometimes it is the very disjunction between gender identity and sexual orientation [...] that constitutes for some people what is most erotic and exciting” [Butler, Undoing 80]), and who do not conform to normative codes of

masculinity and femininity. In order for there to be the presumption of normativity in the codes that define masculinity and its femininity, a regulatory operation must reproduce socially accepted and mediated definitions of these codes. To be sure, these codes are culturally defined and each contains its own social history, as Butler has suggested (Butler, Undoing 10). To determine whether codes are embodied in a particular instance, we must all, as humans, be able to recognize these codes in someone. As Stephen Frosh notes, “only if ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ exist and have power can the subversive process of undermining or muddling them have power” (Frosh 10).

Conventional codes of what constitutes the masculine and masculinity dictate, in turn, our relational understanding of the feminine and femininity, and vice-versa. If it is considered masculine to be loud and aggressive, then it follows that to be quiet and gentle is to be feminine. In the case of embodied masculinity or femininity that does not correspond to anatomical sex, the person is further feminized (the boy with feminine traits, appearance, or proclivities) or masculinized (the girl with masculine traits, appearance, or proclivities). To be feminized or female in the world as it is currently constituted is to be defavorized, devalorized, and at a disadvantage in relation to our treatment of males, as Foerster notes: “la mystique de la différence des sexes reste la matrice d’un fossé entre masculin et féminin, et cet écart sera toujours celui d’une asymétrie au profit du masculin” (Foerster 106). To be a masculinized woman in our society is to be subjected to the suspicion of lesbianism, as Duras observes: “As soon as a woman is natural, when she wears no makeup and places herself outside functional coquetry, she is called a lesbian” (Duras and Husserl-Kapit, “An Interview” 433). And to

be a lesbian is to stand among those women Rich refers to as “[...] condemned to an even more devastating outsiderhood than their outsiderhood as women” (Rich 657).

If there is a differential structure at play here, then the terms through which femininity and masculinity can be described and the norms by which they are constituted and reproduced matter a great deal to contemporary society. Examining issues such as these transcends the quaint and irrelevant notions of the highly specialized, fairly inaccessible nature of academic work and reveals itself to be a matter of the utmost importance as it deals with questions everyone faces every day. How do you react when you walk down the street and observe someone who is transitioning from living as a woman to being a man or from man to woman? If a friend asks you what you think someone’s sexual orientation is—for instance, a man who is fairly effeminate in behavior and demeanor—what might your response be? Based on what assumptions would you form this judgment? What “evidence” would you supply to support your position? How do you treat the cultural Other: the person of color with a British accent, the second-generation colleague? Would you welcome into your family’s home those who choose to live outside the regime of compulsory heterosexuality and rigidly dualistic gender codes? How would you react to the “coming out” of a child, a student, a parent, a friend, a colleague, or a spouse? Bourcier urges: “Que les parlés parlent, qu’ils résistent à des effets de domination sociale et symbolique, que les objets du discours deviennent les sujets de leur propre discours” (Bourcier 184). What terms do we have to discuss these issues, and how has this limited our ability to speak our own truths? These are the issues we have analyzed in this study.

We have used a social constructionist model of gender and sexual orientation to explore texts who question these same types of issues. Of particular interest is the erotic possibility contained in the disjuncture between extant codes and binarisms. The notion that some people derive pleasure—if not the ultimate pleasure—precisely at moments when, for example, sexual orientation and gender identity do not correspond is one that is not commonly explored in the work I have encountered, at least from an academic or critical position. For this reason, I have selected as primary texts narratives where pleasure specifically derives from such disjunctions. It is my hope that this insistence on considering the place and role of desire, fantasy, and the body will inform an already rich and diverse corpus of work on gender and sexual theory and studies.

Ultimately, the point is perhaps a simple one: if there are norms and limits of intelligibility, how we as individuals, cultures, and societies treat those who do not conform to our perception of these norms speaks much more to what these codes are and how they operate than even defining them can. Butler elucidates that it is “the spectre of the freak against which and through which the norm installs itself” (Butler, Undoing 69). This “spectre of the freak” becomes, then, a privileged site for understanding and potentially transforming the regulatory operation of power in gendered society. Because I am interested in the overlapping specters of the cultural, sexual, gendered, and literary Other (Butler’s “freak”) my project has been to reframe the role of desire and the body within feminist, gender, cultural and queer studies. More attention has to be paid to questions of desire and the body if we are to understand the mechanisms of power that condition them: “[...] to the extent that desire is implicated in social norms, it is bound up with the question of power [...]” (Butler, Undoing 2). Illusory though it may be to wish

to situate oneself outside of power, as Bourcier has suggested (Bourcier 183), this does not mean there is no political meaning to be found in those located outside the framework of socially accepted intelligibility.

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