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Desiring Venus

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Mario Praz has noted that the romanticism of the first half of the nineteenth century is marked by the figure of the “Fatal Man,” which in the second half of the century is replaced by the figure of the “Fatal Woman.”¹ In the first instance the hero has a deadly effect on his leading lady; in the second he is killed by her. Praz further writes that:

literature, even in its most artificial forms, reflects to some extent aspects of contemporary life. It is curious to follow the parabola of the sexes during the nineteenth century: the obsession for the androgyne type towards the end of the century is a clear indication of a turbid confusion of function and ideal. The male, who at first tends towards sadism, inclines, at the end of the century, towards masochism. (Praz 216)

Rachilde’s *Monsieur Vénus*,² belonging as it does to the fin-de-siècle period of decadence, fits into this “Fatal Woman” schema, since the female protagonist is ultimately responsible for the death of her male lover. However, the sex roles of the two main characters are complicated by a blurring of gender roles which the terms “Fatal Man” and “Fatal Woman” do not adequately address. The first such blurring regards the author herself, since Praz’s configuration presupposes a male-authored narrative.³

Like Praz, Maurice Barrès is also interested in the relation of literature to real life. In his preface to *Monsieur Vénus*, Barrès calls our attention—albeit naively—to the question of the author’s gender. His first line is telling: “Ce livre-ci est assez abominable, pourtant je ne puis dire qu’il me choque” (Barrès 5). If indeed the book is so “abominable,” why then is it not shocking? Or if it is not shocking, then why is it “abominable”? Barrès reveals the cause of his trouble in due time: “Ce qui est tout à fait délicat dans la perversité de ce livre, c’est qu’il a été écrit par une jeune fille de vingt ans” (Barrès 5-6). In other words, what disturbs M. Barrès is not the novel itself—the words on the page (the “abominable” language)—but the fact that they were written by a “young girl.” Rachilde seems to have intruded upon territory where she does not belong,

could not belong: “Ce *vice savant* éclatant dans le rêve d’une *vierge*, c’est un des problèmes les plus mystérieux que je sache, mystérieux comme le crime, le génie ou la folie d’un enfant, et tenant de tous les trois” (Barrès 6, emphasis added). This “*vice savant*” is for Barrès a euphemism for the written expression of sexual knowledge. Rachilde has crossed the line of seemliness for a young female writer.

This transgression highlights a contradiction in Victorian attitudes about women. On the one hand, women (especially virgins) are kept away from “*vice*”: it is not their domain, they are not (must not be) its authors and should not know of, talk or write about it. On the other, the Bible implies that women are the very inventors of evil (Eve-il). Foucault’s examination of Victorian sexual mores elaborates this double standard. For example, consensus dictated that children were asexual beings. But at the same time these young people—who were supposedly naturally uninterested in sex—were actively forbidden from hearing or speaking of it or otherwise coming into contact with it. This prohibition demonstrates a hidden awareness and fear of children’s sexuality which accounts for the need to deny and repress it. Foucault argues that children were not the only people whose sexuality was repressed by Victorian society; in fact no one outside the marital bond had any legitimate access to it.⁴ Into this Foucauldian contradiction—in which one is assumed simultaneously to know and not to know (or speak)—where can we place Rachilde? Or should we attempt to place her within the contradiction at all? Is the point, perhaps, precisely that this is *not her place*? It is evident, in any case, that Rachilde as author is aware of the problem. As the doctor says of the young heroine early in the novel, “[e]lle ne connaît pas le vice, mais elle l’invente!” (Rachilde 41) Rachilde seems to be playing a joke on those readers who would underestimate her sexual knowledge (read: authority).

As interested as he is in the gender of the novelist, Barrès does not pursue this question with regards to the novel itself, except to say that it portrays “une des plus singulières déformations de l’amour qu’ait pu produire la maladie du siècle dans l’âme d’une jeune femme” (Barrès 14). One must question Barrès’s assessment of the novel.⁵ Here we have a story in which a wealthy and powerful woman (Raoule de Vénérande) keeps a beautiful but miserably poor male artist (Jacques Silvert) as her lover/sex object, becomes terribly possessive of him, punishes him for his real or imagined

betrayals, is instrumental in his death, and worships his effigy in a gesture which possibly represents regret, contentment or even sexual satisfaction. At least in a preliminary reading we can ask what, if anything, is "deformed" about the "love" in this novel, what is indeed unusual, aside from the reversal of traditional sex roles. Rachilde's novel is surely an arrow slung in the face of a society in which "une vraie jeune fille" does not speak of these things. But Rachilde goes beyond a mere role reversal, putting the question of gender front and center with continual references to Jacques's femininity and to Raoule's masculinity, the most basic of which is the heroine's name.

Let us begin with the equation Eve=evil. In the novel's opening scene, the heroine is presented groping around in the dark along the walls of an unlit corridor for the door which, unbeknownst to her, will open onto her erotic adventure. Expecting to find a woman who makes silk flowers, Mlle de Vénérande fails to read the ironic error of the sign (in both senses of the word) on the door, marked: "Marie Silvert, fleuriste, dessinateur" (Rachilde 23, emphasis added). Instead, she blindly and still innocently enters the apartment. The first thing she encounters, before her eyes have even focused on her surroundings, is the overwhelming and disgusting odor of cooking apples. These apples, frying odiously in the "atmosphère empuantie" of this tumbledown attic, are the decadent version of the first apple of the Garden of Eden. However in this case they are not first associated with Eve (the woman, Raoule) but with Adam (the man, Jacques), since they are part of his physical and sensual space. Rachilde mentions these apples five times in the short first chapter, at the end of which the heroine no longer finds their odor "insupportable." Instead, "Mlle de Vénérande s'imagina qu'elle mangerait peut-être bien une de ces pommes sans trop de révolte" (Rachilde 28). Can we then say that Rachilde would have Adam give the apple to Eve? Let us examine this scene further.

The sign of gender confusion on the door is replaced by the thing itself as the heroine penetrates the attic apartment along with the cold air. A man is sitting at the table with his back to the door, Raoule and the reader. Seen for the first time from behind, the man is thus presented as object of the gaze, and not as subject which is his "rightful" masculine position.⁶ Our heroine, who has just entered a new world, is confused (as is the reader) by the gender of the man who was expected to be a woman:

—Est-ce que je me trompe, monsieur? interrogea la visiteuse, désagréablement impressionnée; Marie Silvert, je vous prie.

—C'est bien ici, madame, et, pour le moment, Marie Silvert, c'est moi (Rachilde 24).

It is here, in apposition to Jacques's mis-identity as Marie, that we first learn of the heroine's feminized masculine first name, Raoule. Jacques's real name is not admitted to the reader until well into the chapter, and Raoule does not learn it until after her first visit. The narration is in the third-person from the point of view of Raoule. She is clearly the observer (the subject) in this scene, and what she observes is the body, voluptuously described, of the man (the object).

The development by which Raoule comes to accept the apple(s) is tied to the awakening of her sexual desire, provoked by the sight of the partially nude male. The vision of Jacques's golden chest hair, perceived through his open blouse, is irresistible to the visitor, who is compelled by her own desire to touch him:

Une douleur sourde traversa la nuque de Mlle de Vénérande. Ses nerfs se surexcitaient dans l'atmosphère empuantiée de la mansarde. Une sorte de vertige l'attirait vers ce nu. Elle voulut faire un pas en arrière, s'arracher à l'obsession, fuir... Une sensualité folle l'étreignit au poignet... Son bras se détendit, elle passa la main sur la poitrine de l'ouvrier, comme elle l'eût passée sur une tête blonde, un monstre dont la réalité ne lui semblait pas prouvée (Rachilde 31).

Raoule is not described physically in the first chapter; we know not whether her blouse is slightly open, her skin like that of a newborn or her chest hair golden. In a reversal of traditional gender roles, Raoule is the subject of this gaze, Jacques is the object. It is Raoule's *desire* that the author emphasizes, not her body. Actively taking up her desire, Raoule also takes up the dominant power position as holder of the gaze. Rachilde has switched the characters' gender roles and thus the power structure of the entire novel. Perhaps, then, Rachilde has not retold the biblical story in reverse, with Adam giving Eve the apple. Instead, she has reassigned their roles, leaving the structure of the tale intact: Eve/Jacques has given the apple to Adam/Raoule. Simultaneously, and in accordance with

the myth, Adam/Raoule leaves her life of innocence before the fall, symbolized by the dark hallway, and bites from the tree of knowledge as she enters the lighted space of "female" perversion, that of Eve/Jacques. Since it is her own sexual desire that makes her vulnerable to such a fall, let us look to other critics in an attempt to characterize the female desire in this novel.

In *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* René Girard traces through Western (mostly male) literature, from Cervantes through the 20th century, an elaborate and ingenious structure of romantic and romanesque desire.⁷ In Girard's view, the "romantic lie" consists in the romantic hero's naive conception of spontaneous desire. The romantic hero believes that the source of his desire rests in himself or in the desired object: "Désirer à partir de l'objet équivaut à désirer à partir de soi-même" (Girard 30). Quite to the contrary, argues Girard, all desire is mediated by a third party; the hero's (subject's) desire is always an imitation of the mediator's (perceived or imagined) desire for the object in question. The triumph of the "roman-escape" author rests in the fact that he—in Girard's model the authors are male—recognizes the triangular structure of all desire and consciously displays this structure in his text.

Girard's analysis is fascinating and useful, but also quite problematic for a feminist reader. For example, he shows that not only is all "honest" desire triangular, but that in fact desire cannot occur without another desire to serve as its model. Thus, when the mediator ceases to desire the object, the object is no longer appealing to the subject. Girard's story is the subject's story, the story of the romantic hero, and not that of the "object," which in his system is the woman. To understand her place in this triangle, it may be helpful to turn to Luce Irigaray. In her essay, "Women on the Market," Irigaray argues that capitalist society "is based on the exchange of women."⁸ This exchange is what permits us to escape the disorder that would ensue if the incest taboo were disregarded. However, as a result of this exchange, the woman is perceived by the male subject as having no value of her own, except exchange or market value. As anyone familiar with the laws of supply and demand surely knows, an object (a product) gains in value only when it is in demand. Although, unlike Girard, Irigaray emphasizes the woman's role in this system of exchange, she makes a similar argument to his. In Irigaray's view, the value of an object of

exchange (in this case woman) is not intrinsic, but instead depends on the relationship of the exchangers:

The exchange value of two signs, two commodities, two women, is a representation of the needs/desires of consumer-exchanger subjects: in no way is it the "property" of the signs/articles/women themselves. At the most, the commodities—or rather the relationships among them—are the material alibi for the desire for relations among men (Irigaray 180).

As does Girard, Irigaray puts the emphasis on the mediated aspect of the relationship. In both cases the object appears to be an accessory to the more important relationship between the subject and the mediator. Girard is of course aware of this phenomenon of woman as object of exchange, although he never specifically analyzes her position, describing her simply as the "objet désiré."⁹

Girard's analysis is nevertheless relevant to our discussion for several reasons. One of the properties of triangular desire is that it is contagious. That is, once the subject perceives the mediator's desire for the object, the subject mimics this desire and in so doing becomes himself a mediator for the original mediator, who in turn mimics this copy of his own (perceived or imagined) desire. This mutual contagion will continue back and forth, with the subject and mediator becoming rivals for the desired object (Girard 118-19).

Mediation also occurs in the sexual domain when just two parties are involved. In this case, the desired object becomes the mediator for her own body. Perceiving the subject's desire for her, she overvalorizes her body, begins to desire it herself, and refuses to cede it to the subject, which in turn only augments the subject's desire.¹⁰ The problem is that in order to assure himself of the other's desire, simultaneously remaining in a position of power, and to prevent the mediator/rival from winning the desired object, the subject must dissimulate his own desire and wear a mask of indifference.¹¹ This holds true for the original subject as well as for the mediator/rival, even when the latter is the same person as the original object.¹² Here Girard makes a point that can be summed up adequately with the familiar notion that one always wants what one can't have; conversely, in order to make oneself more attractive to the object of one's desire, one must feign indifference, play "hard-to-get." But is this really all that's at work here, especially on

the part of the female "object"? On the one hand, Girard identifies the subject as masculine and the object as feminine without questioning such an assignment of gender roles or its implications. On the other, whenever a woman becomes a subject in a given text—often only as a mediator/rival for her own body—Girard likewise ignores the question of *différence*, of a possible distinction between her desire and that of the male subject. Specifically, Girard does not question the potential difference in the nature of the dissimulation of a woman's desire versus that of a man.

To understand more fully the notion of dissimulation, or the mask, which upon examination leads to the larger issue of masquerade, let us turn to Joan Riviere. In her 1929 paper entitled "Womanliness as a Masquerade," Riviere concentrates on "intermediate types" of women, those who fall between the poles of heterosexuality and homosexuality. More specifically, Riviere's primary concern is the "intellectual" woman and her relation to "femininity."¹³ While she says that the traditional view of intellect as a masculine attribute is falling into decline, Riviere does not reject the terms of this equation.¹⁴

Riviere uses as her primary object of study the example of an American woman whose career involves writing and speaking to large groups of men. The woman performs this (masculine) intellectual work very professionally, but when it is over she behaves toward the men in a flirtatious and coquettish manner. It is the incongruity between these two types of behavior that Riviere finds "problematic" and which triggers her analysis.

In Riviere's psychoanalytic view, the patient adopts this coquettish behavior in what Riviere calls a "masquerade of womanliness." This masquerade is an attempt to cover up or deny the assumption of "masculinity" (intellect) which is a sign of the woman's having castrated her (The) father and appropriated the phallus. It is further an attempt to avert retribution (and anxiety stemming from fear of retribution) of the father for this castration. Riviere makes no distinction between the terms "womanliness" and "femininity"; indeed, both are screens behind which the woman can masquerade "as guiltless and innocent," in a "compulsive reversal of her intellectual performance" (Riviere 38). Riviere provocatively states that genuine womanliness and its masquerade are one and the same thing, and then leaves the reader to wonder what could be behind the mask. As Stephen Heath points out in his

reading of Riviere, "to be a woman is to dissimulate a fundamental masculinity, femininity [sic] is that dissimulation" (Heath 49). In this masking process, enacted "for the man," "the identity of the woman—the assumption of 'the woman'—slips" (Heath 50).

How can Riviere's analysis of dissimulation be coordinated with René Girard's model of desire in a way that enlightens our reading of *Monsieur Vénus*? Girard, while focusing on the structure and duplicitous nature of desire in the novel, has not broached the question of the specificity of women's desire within that structure. Joan Riviere addresses the issue of woman's duplicitousness, without relating it to her desire, other than as a "negative" desire to avoid retribution for her "masculinity." Further, the very notion of "woman" slides out of her grasp and in its place remains nothing but a mask, an illusion.

In order for the reader to apply Riviere's psychoanalytic structure to *Monsieur Vénus*, Raoule would first have to exhibit signs of "masculine" behavior, which she clearly does throughout the entire novel, as witnessed by her transvestism, for example. Secondly, she would have to express her feelings of guilt, by means of a "masquerade of womanliness," for having assumed the masculine role. However, in the couple of brief sequences in which Raoule does consciously adopt this false cloak, it is accompanied by irony rather than guilt. For example, in one scene, she stands up her official lover, Raittolbe, in order to have sex with Jacques. The next day, when Raittolbe expresses his dismay at having been abandoned, Raoule simply replies: "—Rien ne doit vous étonner, puisque je suis une femme.... Je fais tout le contraire de ce que j'ai promis. Quoi de plus *naturel*?" (Rachilde 81, emphasis added) Words like these strike the reader less as an admission of guilt than as a conscious laying bare of a power structure based on hypocrisy and lies. Raoule is in effect saying: you desire me, therefore you would have me be a woman, but your idea of Woman does not include what I am, so the joke's on you. The punch line is that she uses what she considers to be Raittolbe's idea of femininity (the lying woman) against him in their battle of wills. Raoule assumes that Raittolbe is not in love with her "real" self, but with his own idea of her; therefore she exploits every opportunity to undermine this idea. Perhaps Raoule's femininity is less well explained by Riviere than by Irigaray, who juxtaposes what she calls a "masquerade of femininity" with "mimicry." The former is a mask behind which

women must hide in order to assure their value on the (sexual) exchange market (Irigaray 84). Conversely, the latter is a deliberate assumption of the feminine role in order "to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. . . . To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it" (Irigaray 76).

Another effect of Raittolbe's being kept waiting is that he, in addition to Jacques, must play the "woman" (object) to Raoule's "man." Roland Barthes argues that feminine and masculine are effects of roles, such that, for example, the one who waits loves, and the one who loves is feminized. Defining the absence of the lover, Barthes states that: "dans tout homme qui parle l'absence de l'autre, *du féminin* se déclare: cet homme qui attend et qui en souffre, est miraculeusement féminisé. Un homme n'est pas féminisé parce qu'il est inverti, mais parce qu'il est amoureux."¹⁵

Raittolbe also suffers from Girard's schema of triangular desire. His desire for Raoule grows ever more intense as he perceives that she is loved by another, even though this other, Jacques, is at first unaware of and then unconcerned by his rival. Raittolbe eventually resorts to revealing his desire to Raoule, combining it with an insinuated condemnation of Jacques's perversion, in a final effort to wrest her away from his competition:

—Raoule, murmura doucement Raittolbe, si vous le vouliez bien, *nous pourrions échapper au gouffre*, vous, en ne revoyant plus Jacques, moi, en ne reparlant jamais à Marie. Une heure de folie n'est pas l'existence entière; unis par nos égarements, nous pourrions l'être aussi par notre réhabilitation; Raoule, croyez-moi, *revenez à vous-même... vous êtes belle, vous êtes femme, vous êtes jeune. Raoule, pour être heureuse suivant les lois de la Sainte nature*, il ne vous manque que de n'avoir jamais connu ce Jacques Silvert: oublions-le (Rachilde 158, emphasis added).

Unfortunately for Raittolbe, this attempt fails, as Girard would predict, for Raittolbe has disobeyed the first law of dissimulation in this frank revelation of his desire.

Continuing our examination from a Girardian point of view, we can see how Raittolbe, who at first seems truly uninterested and

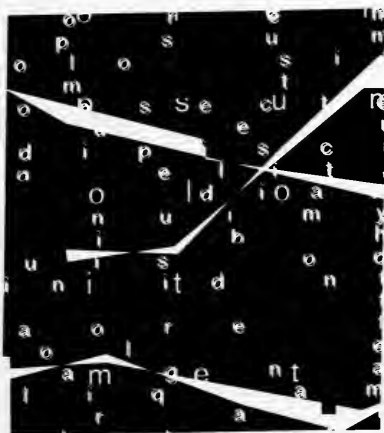
even sickened by Raoule's attachment to a lowly effeminate artist, is drawn by Raoule into the web of desire in which he will ultimately play two roles. His first role is that of lover (subject) of Raoule (object) with Jacques as mediator. Later, however, he adopts the role of mediator/rival to Raoule's subjective love for Jacques. Raoule unwittingly points Raittolbe toward the second triangle by convincing him to distract Jacques's sister Marie from trying to upset the delicate balance of her unseemly affair with Jacques. To this end, Raittolbe seduces Marie, who in turn destroys his strategy by taking his advances seriously and falling in love with him (once again, female desire upsets the power (im)balance). But this contact with the Silvert household results in contact between the two men and, as the novel progresses, Raittolbe becomes uncomfortably aware of Jacques as sex object. This sexual awareness of another man throws Raittolbe's masculine self-image into doubt. In the following scene he has seized the opportunity of Raoule's absence to try to dissuade Jacques from marrying her. Raittolbe enters Jacques's bedroom and is astonished by the sight of Jacques's nudity, represented in the narrative as though seen through Raittolbe's eyes. He has an unfamiliar reaction:

Le baron de Raittolbe, debout devant cette couche en désordre, eut une étrange hallucination. L'ex-officier de hussards, le brave duelliste, le joyeux viveur, qui tenait en égale estime une jolie fille et une balle de l'ennemi, oscilla une demi-seconde: du bleu qu'il voyait autour de lui, il fit du rouge, ses moustaches se hérissèrent, ses dents se serrèrent, un frisson suivi d'une sueur moite lui courut sur toute la peau. Il eut presque peur.

—Mille millions de tonnerres, grommela-t-il, si ce n'est pas Eros lui-même . . . (Rachilde 129).

Raittolbe's sexual appreciation of Jacques deepens as the novel progresses, to the point where he becomes an active player in a struggle with Raoule to possess him. It is as though having been thrust into the role of catalyst, Raittolbe cannot help but slip into that of mediator, until Raoule's desire for Jacques infects him as well. Toward the end of the novel there is a strong suggestion of a sexual liaison between the two men; at the very least Raittolbe appears to have bitten Jacques's neck. When Raittolbe has killed Jacques in the duel—upon which Raoule has insisted—his regret is

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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

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