

Rachilde and “l’amour compliqué”

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Abstract

In the evolution of “l’amour compliqué” that Barrès discerns in Rachilde’s novels, male characters are stripped of masculinity and weapons, become vulnerable and sexless, while the women turn into predators and warriors. Yet if one examines *Monsieur Vénus*, *La Marquise de Sade*, and *La Jongleuse*, a change in the author’s attitude toward the conflict between sexes becomes apparent. What one sees in Rachilde’s works is the emergence of a death-dedicated love, one that does more than fight against the “phallogrates”’ dominion, but that submerges sexuality in a true “pulsion de mort”.

Swords and daggers, bayonets and scalpels: all the pointed instruments men use for invading others’ bodies are appropriated by the women characters in the novels of Rachilde. In the evolution of “l’amour compliqué”¹ that Barrès sees emerging in these works, the men are stripped of masculinity and weapons. They become vulnerable and sexless while the women turn into predators and warriors. Indeed, one need only consult Praz’s list of “Belles dames sans merci,” figures like Huysmans’ Madame de Chantelouve or Clara, the torture-loving nymphomaniac in Mirbeau’s *Le Jardin des supplices*, to realize how frequently such characters appear in “fin-de-siècle” fiction. In this respect, Rachilde’s works differ little from the writings of her contemporaries. Still, her novels which show the conjugation of aggressiveness and female sexuality deserve attention, not just because they examine from a woman’s standpoint the same questions dealt with by her peers, but because they point out the result of such a view of domination, sex and love, show it leading to a kind of suicide, the

extinction of all feelings for another and, finally, for oneself.

Born in 1860, Rachilde, née Marguerite Eymery, emerged as a prolific writer whose works appeared well into the present century. Friend to the notorious Jean Lorrain, candidate for the affections of Catulle Mendès, later wife of Alfred Vallette, editor of *Le Mercure de France*, Rachilde took pains to cultivate the image of her eccentricity.² Yet there can be no doubt it was in her fiction, not in her life, that she advanced her boldest thoughts, there that she explored as few had done before her “ces formes d’amour qui sentent la mort” (Barrès, p. 6).

Indeed, much critical attention has been devoted to the linking of “l’inconscient et la sexualité” for the writers of the Decadence.³ Jean Pierrot asserts for them “l’antinaturalisme entraîne logiquement un antiféminisme parce que la Femme symbolise la nature”.⁴ Similarly Charles Bernheimer describes this tendency toward

“writing against (female) nature” as “the sublimation of nature’s degenerative violence into symbolic form”.⁵ Thus an examination of Rachilde’s works serves to balance the impression of the misogynistic, objectifying attitude toward female sexuality during the period in question, and shows the reaction of one woman writer to what Naomi Schor calls “the degradation of the feminine in nineteenth-century fiction”.⁶ After proposing an introductory reading of three novels by Rachilde, this paper has as its purpose to encourage further study of an author who rebelled against this fettering of woman, who took the instruments of sexual aggression long used by men alone, and who gave them to her female characters so they might finally “break the chain”.

Monsieur Vénus, La Marquise de Sade, La Jongleuse: if one examines in succession these three novels by Rachilde, texts which Claude Dauphine regards as “[l]es véritables jalons de l’oeuvre”,⁷ one can see at once the author’s changing attitude toward the conflict between the sexes. From the experiments with transvestitism, the chaste voluptuousness of Raoule de Vénérande, who keeps her pretty boyfriend in a sumptuous apartment and lavishes on him gifts of hashish, clothes and flowers, to Eliante Donalger, the juggler of knives who kills herself with one of them to preserve her passion’s purity, one sees in Rachilde’s works the emergence of a death-dedicated love, one that does more than fight against the dominion of “les phallobates” but that submerges sexuality in a true “pulsion de mort”.

In *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), the heroine, Raoule de Vénérande, takes as her lover Jacques Silvert, an ephobic, pink-complexed florist, dresses him in silks, and swaps conventional roles so completely with him that they arrive at an imperceptible exchange of “prénoms de personne”. While Raoule’s confidant and suitor, the Baron de Raittolbe, assumes the usual male traits of initiative, possessiveness, he feels so thwarted by

her inattention to him that he is reduced to impotence and in a fit of helpless pique, breaks the blade of his “fleuret”. On the other hand, Jacques Silvert is not so much frustrated as he is neutralized, objectified, turned into “un Vénus”, a statue sculpted by the loving but detached hands of the woman/lover/artist. In this text the conscious pursuit of individual perversion is reduced to a mere esthetic exercise. Jacques Silvert is a painter of crude landscapes, a bad artist, but one who does not know it. More than he, Raoule de Vénérande sees herself as a creative person, one who might write a book on a new and untried passion: “mon coeur, ce fier savant”, she says, “veut faire sone petit Faust...”.⁸ In the exploration of an unknown love, she pretends to objectivity. “On n’est pas faible, quand on reste maître de soi au sein des voluptés les plus abruptissantes”, she says (*Monsieur Vénus*, p. 85). Alleging to create “une dépravation nouvelle” (*Monsieur Vénus*, p. 107), she claims to have control over the execution of her project. But once she is involved, she lets Jacques get embroiled in an affair of jealousy, and allows him to be killed in a duel that could have been avoided. Having forfeited her perspective as an artist, she puts at risk her medium, her means of self-expression. She ultimately loses Jacques, renounces him and sends him to his death. So, in her bedroom at the end she has substituting for the living: clay she planned to use to model her idea—a German-made automaton constructed in Jacques’ likeness, “une statue de cire” that is made to move by hidden springs and wires rather than by her own science as a lover.

In *Monsieur Vénus*, the woman is no longer a pleasure vehicle. Instead it is the man who is depersonalized, becomes “une substance molle”, malleable, plastic, conforming to his female partner’s directives or requests. Raoule assigns to Jacques the “woman’s” role, describes him as “une proie”, “[un] bel instrument de plaisir” (*Monsieur Vénus*, p. 34). He is the one acted on, made love to, beaten and abused, and finally

skewered with a dueling sword, reduced in death to “la chair d’un nouveau-né” (*Monsieur Vénus*, p. 222). Conversely, Raoule takes on characteristics that are most often seen as masculine, is shown as predatory, martial, invasive, penetrating. It is she who keeps on a bedroom wall “une panoplie d’armes de tous genres et de tous pays” (*Monsieur Vénus*, p. 36), who appropriates the phallic sword that is, at the end, thrust by her intermediary de Raittolbe into Jacques’ soft body.

In *La Marquise de Sade* (1887), the apprenticeship of Mary Barbe in this philosophy of female sadism begins with a visit to a Clermont-Ferrand slaughterhouse. Unlike her predecessor, Raoulé de Vénérande, Mary Barbe is a character whose history is detailed back to childhood. Daughter of a cavalry colonel, Mary Barbe grows up hearing her brutal father’s lamentations over the absence of a son, over being saddled with “un avorton de fille”.⁹ Made aware precociously by the company of soldiers that force and violence are the instruments of men, traumatized by her witnessing a butcher’s killing of a cow, a sacrificial animal she associates with women’s suffering, she resolves to arm herself and plots to take revenge. The sword imagery so prevalent in *Monsieur Vénus* becomes in *La Marquise de Sade* that of cat’s claws¹⁰, so that cutting, scratching, stabbing can be done more surreptitiously, as though by pets, creatures still domesticated. The female character is at once presented as caressable and feline, tame and well-behaved, and as dangerous and punishing, inflicting “des balafres”. Thus in Mary’s nightmare vision, “la chatte dévoratrice” becomes at first the woman that captivates her prey and then an aggregate of phallic parts turned against the male oppressor:

Oh! la chatte! ...elle la voyait grandie, ...ondulant comme un serpent couvert de fourrure. Sa queue flexible avait des remous pailletés. Cela lui faisait l’effet d’une lame de métal, le couteau du boucher, se ployant avec des cassures de satin. Ses pattes

déliées se garnissaient de griffes d’or, très pointues; dans sa tête de bête devenue presque humaine, ...resplendissaient deux yeux énormes, taillés à mille facettes ...passant de l’azur clair au pourpre sanglant....

—Minoute! bégaya la petite fille suppliante, ne me fais plus de mal, toi!

Minoute ronronna, désormais bonne personne ...sentant une affinité poindre entre elle et sa petite maîtresse ...faisant patte de velours, ayant l’air de lui dire à l’oreille:

“Si tu voulais ...je t’apprendrais à griffer l’homme, l’homme qui tue les boeufs ...l’homme, le roi du monde!” (*La Marquise de Sade*, p. 30)

Among the first incriminated tendencies of men is their attribution to women of a maternal disposition, a child-bearing role. When Mary Barbe’s mother, a frail, complaining woman, dies while giving birth to the son her husband longed for, Mary imagines her being martyred to her father’s wish for a male offspring:

Morte! Maman!... cria la petite jeune fille que eut la vision sanglante de boeuf qu’elle avait vu tuer un jour ... pour en tirer quelques gouttes de sang. Une révolution s’opéra en elle; on avait tué sa mère comme cela, du même coup, pour avoir ce ... morceau de chair... (*La Marquise de Sade*, p. 84).

As Raoule de Vénérande’s revenge on men had been a manner of infanticide, with the flesh of the impaled Silvert described a soft like a newborn’s, so is Mary Barbe’s retribution directed first against the male that is most vulnerable. One night while the colonel holds a regimental party where all the household staff takes part, the infant Célestin’s wet nurse puts him down beside her in her bed. In her drunken sleep, she

rolls over and suffocates the baby while Mary Barbe looks on. Over time all her victims are reduced to this same state of abjection, helplessness, are stripped of their male dignity. On a whim she causes her friend Sirocco to be fired from his job. She is in part responsible for ruining a municipal performance of military exercises in which the colonel's men are players. Later, after her father is killed in combat, her uncle Dr. Célestin, a dignified, elderly and self-possessed physician, becomes her guardian. All his life insensitive to women's beauty, their sexual attraction, "il avait su borner ses aventures galantes à de simples relations hygiéniques" (*La Marquise de Sade*, p. 175). He regards Mary first as an intruder in his house, a distraction from his research, and admits he would rather give shelter to a boy whom he might train as a disciple. Nonetheless, he consents to instruct her in anatomy, natural history and human sexuality. Despite his resolutions and most long-standing habits, he feels himself attracted to her, and when once he kisses her, purportedly by accident, he feels a thawing of his old man's frozen heart, a quickening, a coming back to life. Still this instant of rejuvenation is short-lived, as Mary wastes no time in exploiting the belated sexual awakening of her now compromised protector. She takes pleasure in mocking him and teasing him and making him her slave. He becomes progressively degraded, senile, deprived of self-respect, until a laboratory accident leaves him unconscious on the floor. There Mary lets him perish from exposure to the same chemicals he had worked with all his life.

She next turns to her husband and her lover. The desire of the former for Mary is so keen that he becomes a *débauché* and dies, as the doctor called to diagnose the cause of death observes, "[d]un cas de satyriasis...étrange" (*La Marquise de Sade*, p. 284). Paul Richard, a medical student, then becomes her lover, and like Jacques Silvert, is described as "blonde, imberbe, timide comme une jeune fille" (*La Marquise de Sade*, p. 202). For him, even slight embarrassments, mild

shocks causes nosebleeds that Mary takes pleasure in inducing. Once she learns that Richard is the son of her new husband, she knows she has the weapon that she needs to pit one against the other. At first, Mary is genuinely drawn to Paul by his ingenuousness, fragility; with him she can envisage an escape from the brutalizing "amour sale" that is practiced by adults. "Je rêve de l'amour très impossible fait de mystères enfantins et que l'on n'ose pas mettre en action," she confides (*La Marquise de Sade*, p. 232). "Aimer, c'est souffrir", had been the motto over Mary's bed when she was still a girl, and at age nineteen, she still takes to heart its message, preferring only that love bring suffering to others, not herself. She escalates her torment of Richard: where once it was enough to cause him nosebleeds, her sadism becomes overt, as she delights in puncturing his skin with hairpins, pointed fingernails that recall the claws of her pet cat.

Mary makes no distinction between real love and its expression, concluding that the experience of passion is no more than the sign of a woman's subjugation. Like Raoule de Vénérande, Mary equates love with sexual abstention, reversing the pattern she discerns in men, who desire and feel nothing, who, as Raoule says, "oublie de nous donner, à nous, leurs victimes, le seul aphrodisiaque qui puisse les rendre heureux en nous rendant heureuses: l'Amour!..." (*Monsieur Vénus*, p. 87.)¹¹ Neither of these heroines in fact believes in love: Raoule deludes herself by thinking she can fashion a woman from a man, an unthreatening, ornamental object that she can toy with at her leisure. Mary employs a method that is direct, not attempting to supplant "les phalocrates" by pretending to their role, but by using her own femininity in getting them to forfeit their good name. At the conclusion of the book, when she has killed her uncle and her husband and driven off Richard, she assumes the status of "femme libre" that she so long had coveted. Through her marriage she acquires money and a title so she can live life as she wishes: with impunity, free from fear of so-

ciety's opprobrium. In the company of friends she beings to frequent "bal musettes", "endroits recélants de fortes horreurs capables...d'étancher sa soif de meurtre" (*La Marquise de Sade*, p. 285). At a dancehall she considers hiring a transvestite and later killing him to allay her homophobic urges. Basically, however, her pursuit of fitting prey is only thwarted by a lack of worthy targets. "Où était le mâle effroyable qu'il lui fallait, à elle, femelle de la race des lionnes?..." (*La Marquise de Sade*, p. 287). At the end Mary Barbe is once more left alone, her sole companion, an alcoholic aunt, now dead of heart congestion. So she again takes to the streets, goes back to the starting point of her tortuous career, from an abused, unhappy childhood, through adolescence and an awakening to her own sadistic drives, to marriage and then widowhood when she came to see herself as a kind of lionness that equated love and sex with cold, preemptive killing.

Elle se rendit à la Villette; là, on lui avait indiqué un débit de sang, espèce de cabaret des abattoirs où des garçons bouchers, mêlant du vin à la rouge liqueur animale, buvaient, se disaient des mots brutaux (*La Marquise de Sade*, p. 296).

At the outset, Mary Barbe had learned from her pet cat to approach her victims softly, with her claws retracted. By establishing in others a false security, she could get at them more easily. With her accession to maturity and independence, she feels she can be more open in stalking her male prey. She need no longer act like Raoule de Vénérande and appoint a male lieutenant to do her killing for her. If Raoule had been an artist who had dabbled in perversion, Mary was a murderess driven by a philosophy of hate. As a fencing student, Raoule had played with swords, yet Mary had really planned to execute her enemies, had planned to do it coldly with claws bared, le coeur tranquille, haut le poignard!" (*La Marquise de Sade*, p. 297).

In *La Marquise de Sade*, the death wish is externalized, still manifested by an impulse to hurt others. Mary Barbe had been indoctrinated as a child to think that sons meant more than daughters, that women functioned merely as salon decorations or were hysterics like her mother, enfeebled hypochondriacs. Reserved for men, therefore, was the right to initiate relations, a mastery of science and the prerogative to inflict suffering. Thus Mary had sought to deflate the self-important like her overbearing father, humiliate the dignified like Dr. Célestin, lower all men to the level of the pleading Paul Richard, and then destroy them without conscience once their worth was proved a fraud. Still the lust for murder, evinced by Mary Barbe may only camouflage a wish for self-destruction. Easier than retaliating for the ill treatment she received, than degrading the same men who made her feel inferior, is the cancellation of that sense of her unworthiness by her own elimination. To be sure, the blood drinker, Mary Barbe, does not seem suicidal; but while she does show purpose and energy, she is lacking in emotion and can only feel by arranging and then witnessing another person's pain. To find the stimulation she requires she must engage in more risky and demeaning sorties into the city's underworld. Though she claims to be estranged from the shallowness that permeates the time—"ils la faisaient rire avec leur *décadence*" (*La Marquise de Sade*, p. 287)—and prefers the crimes of passion that she thinks had marked the past to the transgressions of self-interest that more reflect the present, she in many ways resembles Huysmans' Des Esseintes, the character long considered to epitomize the era. Like Des Esseintes, Mary Barbe is interested in the generation and observation of exquisite sensations, sensations so intense that people and the outside world are reduced to mere accessories. Like Des Esseintes, she makes efforts to defend against contamination by contact with society, but it is likely her experiments in sadism will end in exhaustion, failing health and impending self-destruction.

It is only in *La Jongleuse* (1900) that the ultimately suicidal nature of these characters' pursuits at last becomes apparent. The aggressivity that had at first been turned on men is explicitly internalized; the daggers and swords used to put to death oppressors become a means of self-immolation. Here, too, the man as would-be lover becomes more rehabilitated.¹² In *Monsieur Vénus* the problem of the predatory male who uses mistresses as the currency to buy his self-esteem is not addressed with seriousness. By presenting at the outset the pretty Jacques Silvert, the adversary is already shown disarmed, trivialized, made laughable and harmless. In reducing the conflict between the sexes to a matter of esthetics, the treatment of a theme takes the place of a solution; "l'homme objectifié" becomes "l'homme déconsidéré" and the plastic stasis of *Monsieur Vénus* covers up the active threat that men may really pose. In *La Marquise de Sade* there are some men that are effeminate: the male prostitutes wearing jewelry and cosmetics; even the beardless Paul Richard bears some resemblance to a girl. But their presence does not hide the fact that there are other men, the colonel and the doctor, who at first are in control, while the women are neglected, disenfranchised or constantly abused. As the title indicates, Mary Barbe's revenge on men is much more programmatic, more based on personal philosophy than had been Raoule de Vénérande's. Each male figure she encounters may endeavor to subject her, so she looks on each as an aggressor that she can make into a victim. Both Raoule and Eliante, the heroine in *La Jongleuse*, have exotic arms displays, but Mary is less inclined to own such things for exhibition, contemplation as she is for demonstration. This is the case with the vials filled with poison she keeps locked up in a coffer. First on her wedding night she brings out these deadly substances: curare, cyanide, to show them to her husband, to warn him of the consequence of trying to possess her. And later she makes use of one to free herself of him, a man whom she felt nothing for and who no longer served a purpose. There seems to be a bit of

showmanship in each of these three women, a desire to defy conventions openly to define their own identity. All seek to scandalize, to shock, to provoke effects in others. To some extent, each character is an actress, a performer; the only difference is how seriously they take the role they then go on to play. All juggle with social rules and collective expectations. All use sleight of hand to appear acceptable, while they undermine the system that says they have no value. In a metaphor that anticipates the novel next to come, Mary Barbe is described as thinking of the murder of her husband, contemplating killing him with no suggestion of emotion. "Elle jouait avec ces idées funèbres comme avec les couteaux brillants que font tourner les jongleuses" (*La Marquise de Sade*, p. 271).

Yet despite her casualness, the sarcastic way she deprecates her enemies, Mary Barbe wages war on men with deadly earnestness. There is no more turning men to dolls as with Raoule and Jacques. Rather as the men gain in stature and retain their independence, the women are more successful in diminishing their influence. Thus Léon Reille, the suitor of Eliante Donalger, is stronger, more self-possessed than had been Paul Richard, less likely to flush and bleed and dissolve into choking supplications. He romances, wheedles, bullies, feigns indifference, all to gain the favor of the woman he wants. Unlike Raoule, Eliante is not inventing a new vice; nor is she, like Mary Barbe, conducting a campaign to discredit and destroy the men who might wish to have her. There is no reason to question the sincerity of Eliante who, after her first meeting with Léon, when only their conversation had been intimate, addresses a note to him as "monsieur et cher amour".¹³

Raoule had mentioned once before that women looked on love divorced from its expression as the greatest aphrodisiac. The same holds true for Eliante, who sees love not as Eros, the binding of the two attracted partners in a union that transcends them, but as the enhancement of the indi-

vidual who feels that love within her. There is no focusing of consciousness on that which one desires and an attendant sense of emptiness until one merges with it. Love does not entail a yearning for its object. For Eliante it is not a future- or goal-oriented feeling, but is rather more inclusive. "Je suis réellement amoureuse de tout ce qui est beau, bon, me paraît un absolu ...," she says. "Mais ce n'est pas le but, le plaisir; c'est une manière d'être" (*La Jongleuse*, p. 49). Instead of joining with the being on whom attention narrows, the loving person takes in everything, enjoys an environmental fullness. "J'air le dégoût de l'union," she says.

[J]e n'y découvre aucune plénitude voluptueuse. Pour que ma chair s'émeuve et conçoive l'infini de plaisir, je n'air pas besoin de chercher un sexe à l'objet de mon amour (*La Jongleuse*, pp. 49-50).

From this standpoint the love she feels for Léon is but one increment of the total emotional charge that ties her to the world. For Eliante, the more indiscriminate the love, the greater is the range of objects to which it may attach. Thus the alabaster vase she bought in Tunis can affect her with its symmetry, its human shape and beauty, can bring her to a climax as much as can a lover whose inconstancy she fears. As Léon watches her be overcome by flattering her urn—"ce fut plutôt une risée plissant l'onde mystérieuse de sa robe de soie—et elle eut un petit rôle de joie imperceptible, le souffle même du spasme" (*La Jongleuse*, pp. 50- 51)—he reacts with outraged disbelief at this assault on his male ego.

Il fut ébloui, ravi, indigné. — C'est scandaleux! Là... devant moi... sans moi? Non, c'est abominable! Il se jeta sur elle, ivre d'une colère folle. —Comédienne! Abominable comédienne! (*La Jongleuse*, p. 51).

But of course the truth of Eliante's orgasm is really no pretense, no performance meant to embarrass him and wound his vanity. Yet he is

right in calling her an actress, not because the reactions she expresses are simulated, false, but because Eliante is usually more intent on acting out her feelings than sharing them with him and risking their dilution: "je vous ai donné ce que je peux *montrer* d'amour à un homme," as she pointedly remarks (*La Jongleuse*, p. 51). In this cult of love where Eliante is priestess, it is unimportant what triggers the emotion, the words and acts through which it is expressed. Eliante's amphora, her collection of erotic Chinese carvings, even her idealized impression of Léon function simultaneously as many things. They are the sensual/esthetic forms that arouse the love she values, they are that through which her love must pass to be further sublimated and that which, through their shape, their words or the figures they depict, confirms the beliefs she holds most dear. For this reason what Eliante brings to her sanctuary-bedroom must act as object of devotion, medium and testimonial all at once. Léon imagines it is his person that stirs this love inside her and that at length she must respond with the surrender of her body. He has failed to realize that once Eliante identifies him as a disciple of love's god, it no longer matters whether he is there with her or not. His effect on her has been incorporated in, assimilated into her religion of the beautiful, so that his continued presence is merely a redundancy. As a performer, Eliante is her most valued audience; what she is in love with is the chance to elaborate on her own self-created myth. Eliante, more than Raoule de Vénérande and Mary Barbe, is completely self-sufficient. Apart from her perverted husband who had died some time before, she uses men as reiterations of her own views on love.

One way to understand more clearly the evolution of Rachilde's heroines is by examining the meaning of the knife/sword/dagger imagery that occurs in each of these three texts. In *La Jongleuse*, the function of these figures is even more important, since the title of the book alludes to juggling with knives, one of which kills Eliante as she lets it plunge into her chest.

With its deadly point, its ability to pierce, the danger that the knife holds out is often reinforced, but in the early pages of the book, the woman is referred to as a weapon that is usually kept sheathed, concealed inside “sa robe noire, cette gaine satinée presque métallique” (*La Jongleuse*, p. 26). The clothed body of the woman is like her gloved hand—“la femme étir[a] le bout de ses gants, ce qui lui ajoutait des griffes pointues” (*La Jongleuse*, pp. 31-32)—in that the lethal power both represent is latent. Still Léon Reille looks on Eliante and hopes that underneath, inside its envelope, he will find an instrument of pleasure, not destruction.

At one point, he learns from Eliante how she had learned in Java the art of juggling with daggers, a skill she put to use for performing at the teas she held for Missie and her friends. These performances meant more to her than mere parlor room amusements: they allowed her to define herself before an audience comprised of men as well as girls. As she stood exposed in her maillot before male onlookers entranced “devant la forme non déguisée” (*La Jongleuse*, p. 142), she would catch and then release again the knives so rapidly, that in motion they created an invisible but cutting wall that cut her off from others. A dialectic of interdiction and desire, the act consisted of an implied seduction, invitation or offering of self and a withdrawal, denial or retraction of the promise. Thus Léon saw her “séparée de sa famille, de la société, du monde entier...part l’énigme de sa comédie perpétuelle” (*La Jongleuse*, p. 143). In addition, Eliante’s performances are narcissistic ones, not designed to entertain admirers, but to please and flatter her with her power to attract, her ability to magnetize the love, the look and the attention of her audience. Everything becomes a knife, a point, a blade: the whetting of the appetite, the hunger of the men transfixed by watching Eliante—their pointed gaze, and the cold inflexibility of “la jongleuse”, “lame d’acier trempée aux feux des passions” (*La Jongleuse*, p. 144), who is tempered against the emergence of emotions that

might weaken her. Eliante loves no one, nothing but her philosophy of love. So to protect herself against the awakening of undesired feelings, she redirects her energy away from people who might touch her into an assessment of her reaction to them, excluding them as causes in favor of effects. The aggressiveness of Mary Barbe had made her look outside for victims. Only with a realization that the object of her hate might be an aspect of herself could her anger be internalized and the path to suicide from self-involvement be eventually described. This is the course that Eliante will follow, one based on denying any hold that others have on her, on withdrawing affect from those who make her feel, and investing it instead in an awareness of those feelings. Steel blade, “dédaigneuse de sang et de chair, n’usant plus que son propre fourreau noir” (*La Jongleuse*, p. 144), she does not assume the male penetrating role, but over time destroys herself through a simple lack of any contact with another but herself.

Through the accentuation of her ornamental beauty, her virtue and devotion to her niece, Eliante in many ways resembles “les créatures relatives” of whom Françoise Basch has written.¹⁴ Yet she does not couple her attractiveness with docility, or obedience to men. Rather she manipulates them for amusement, juggles them like knives. She lives to feel their glances that are sharpened by desire. She exposes herself to them but is never in real danger. Yet she does fear growing older and not feeling others’ looks, fears relinquishing the status of “prêtresse d’Eros” and being forced to take the role of “mediante d’amour” (*La Jongleuse*, pp. 212, 215). As much as she would like to see herself as an independent woman, not a creation or composite of men’s opinions of her, it is only by attracting their admiration that she feels herself alive. At the same time she must detach herself from others, owe them nothing lest the autonomy she covets be all but forfeited. “On n’est libre qu’en tuant tout le monde...,” she says (*La Jongleuse*, p. 102). Freed from obligation, from the need to interact,

she must also forego love as the means to be complete. First she is the dagger and its sheath, then the wound it opens up and finally the knife and her own dead body in which her weapon is embedded.

All these characters try to overcome the ascendancy of men: Raoule through an esthetic neutering of her boyfriend Jacques Silvert; Mary through attacks with hairpins, poison gases, and Eliante through a sleight of hand dissociation of sexuality and love. Concealed beneath their declaration of "la haine de la force mâle" (Barrès, p. 19), is less a belief in women's self-acceptance than a flight from the spontaneous, the unpredictable and free. They are drawn to what is mechanical, highly structured and recoil from emotions that might make them give up self-control. Their ambition is to follow Raoule de Vénérande in making men wax robots that cannot challenge them to grow. What they deny is that women are reactors, their range of choices limited by their need to answer men, so they insist on leading, taking the initiative themselves. As the man is made an object, becomes "un être insexué", the threat he posed is neutralized. Thus Rachilde's women characters define their strategies, their goals in terms of an absence of constraint. They destroy what repels or frightens them, but do not know, cannot attain what it is they truly want. Once Raoule makes Jacques Silvert her property or "thing", once Mary Barbe does away with the men that she despises, the objectives that were negative are effectively achieved. The tyrants are thrown down; the masters are destroyed and the woman's self as object is liquidated too. Disconnected from the men who impose on her a role, Eliante is relieved of her old "en-soi" existence and can say to Léon Reille: "Je suis déjà morte" (*La Jongleuse*, p. 100). But if there is no future to create free of their lovers' domination, their lives will not be purposeful, nor their identities self-defined. They flee the image-prisons they were sent to by their men, kill off the factitious selves they felt had stifled them. Yet they run the risk of finding

underneath an empty center where no real self is hidden. Léon Reille wonders whether the "comédienne" 's many masks may in fact be covering the absence of a face. And so when he believes she has finally acquiesced, he learns the woman he has conquered was never really there. Through a last trick, Eliante makes use of Missie as a stand-in in her bed, so when Léon awakens in the arms of the wrong woman, he sees Eliante juggling for the last time with her "cinq glaives de douleur" (*La Jongleuse*, p. 253), sees her about to become a victim of her most beloved performance. In death, for Eliante, there is no revelation, no disclosure of who she really is. "La femme glissa en arrière. Un flot pourpre noya le masque pâle...son dernier fard..." (*La Jongleuse*, p. 225).

At the end these "Belles dames sans merci" show less mercy toward themselves. They begin by captivating men with their mystery and looks, bewitching and ensnaring them so they can make them into slaves. Their purpose in attracting them is, in fact, to give them nothing. The seduction is an unkept promise whose object is frustration. Yet the greater their self-loathing, the more violent their revenge. Mary Barbe will make men bleed to eradicate self-doubt, will commit sadistic acts from a lack of self-esteem. These characters are committed to eliminating men as well as that part of their own psyche that was willing to submit. But with the removal of the self that once had taken part, that had collaborated in their initial degradation, they find there is still no buried truth, no sense of authenticity. They don their attitudes like the masks of Eliante, masks directed at an audience that is meant to be misled. Yet without the onlookers to be duped, they die to their old roles. They have no knowledge of themselves or who they really want to be, so the obsolescence of their anger, their resentment and their shame leaves them directionless and empty, with lives that have no point. With no hate to motivate them, they have nothing more to do, except mourn a useless past which had left them so

embittered, had turned them into monsters, half-crazed recluses, and which in time would lead to suicide, make them victims of themselves.

NOTES

1. Maurice Barrès, Préface, *Monsieur Vénus*, by Rachilde (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), p. 19. All further references to this work appear in the text.
2. Referring to Rachilde and *Monsieur Vénus*, Emilien Carassus ascribes these tendencies to "[une] [d]escendance...baudelairienne," adding that "le goût de l'artificiel, la tendance satanique font savourer des péchés nouveaux qui paraissent le fruit d'une civilisation dont la corruption mesure le raffinement." (Emilien Carassus, *Le Snobisme et les lettres françaises: de Paul Bourget à Marcel Proust* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1966), p. 428.)
3. Jean Pierrot, *L'Imaginaire décadent (1880-1900)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977) p. 152-180.
4. Pierrot, p. 157.
5. Charles Bernheimer, "Huysmans: Writing Against (Female) Nature", quoted from the typescript with permission from the author, forthcoming in "The Female Body in Western Culture: Semiotic Perspectives," *Poetics Today*, p. 15.
6. Naomi Schoe, *Breaking the Chain: Women, Theory and French Realist Fiction* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), p. 135.
7. Claude Dauphiné, Présentation, *La Jongleuse*, by Rachilde (Paris: Des Femmes, 1982), p. 10. All further references to this work appear in the text.
8. Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), p. 85. All further references to this work appear in the text.
9. Rachilde, *La Marquise de Sade* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1981), p. 29. All further references to this work appear in the text.
10. The sword, which Gilbert Durand qualifies as "l'antithèse... de la blessure féminisée," is appropriated by these women to remove from men "[le] symbole due sentiment de puissance." (Gilbert Durand, *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Paris: Bordas, 1969, p. 180.)
11. Thus, as Claude Dauphiné remarks, Rachilde's heroines "refusent l'amour, conçu comme un asservissement dégradant, et se consomment dans une cérébralité consentie, mais péniblement assumée" (Dauphiné, p. 9).
12. "De Jacques Silvert à Léon Reille, l'évolution est nette: c'est une être malléable, velléitaire, docile, au comportement ambigu que l'ouvrier fleuriste de Raoule de Vénérande, alors que l'apprenti médecin d'Eliante Donalger apparaît séduisant et viril. Le jeu s'affine, devenant plus excitant, les dangers se multiplient et la lutte contre la phalocratie triomphante de l'époque se précise entre les lignes..." (Dauphiné, p. 10).
13. Rachilde, *La Jongleuse* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1982), p. 83. All further references to this work appear in the text.
14. Françoise Basch, *Les Femmes victorienne: roman et société (1837-1867)* (Paris: Payot, 1979), p. 21.