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## ‘The Queen of Decadence’:

### Rachilde and Sado-Masochistic Feminism

Rebekkah Dilts

*In 1884, the novel Monsieur Vénus took the French literary world by storm, and inaugurated its controversial female author, Rachilde, the ‘queen of decadence.’ Many critics did not believe that a young, aristocratic woman could possibly have devised such a salacious story. A literary press which specialized in erotica first published the book, but it was banned regardless, and Rachilde was even condemned to prison for pornographic writing. Subsequent editions therefore required fake male co-authors and introductions by famous male writers that consigned the novel not literature at all, but the case study of a hysterical woman. Rachilde also publicly denounced the feminism of her moment, a proclamation that affected the twentieth-century reception of her writing. Yet, following new French and English editions published in 2004, Monsieur Vénus has been hailed a queer forerunner in contemporary academic circles, even while questions about Rachilde’s feminist affiliations persist. This paper goes beyond the biographical details that have dominated conversation about Rachilde’s writing to closely interrogate the use of sexual violence in Monsieur Vénus, and in her much lesser-known novel, La Marquise de Sade (1887). Based on the definition of sadomasochism Gilles Deleuze outlines in his book, Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty (1991), the respective use of masochism in Monsieur Vénus and of sadism in La Marquise de Sade places its female characters in the unlikely positions of masochist and sadist to offer a provocative critique of the decadent moment, and its representations of sexuality, the body, and even nationalism.*

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The same year Joris-Karl Huysmans published his exemplar of decadence, *Against the Grain* (1884), another novel, *Monsieur Vénus*, took the French literary world by storm.<sup>1</sup> A violent and sexually graphic work of literature, it was authored by Marguerite Eymery, who used the pen-name Rachilde. While the novel may have earned her the title, ‘queen of decadence’, many critics could not believe that a young, aristocratic woman devised such a salacious text.<sup>2</sup> Though a Belgian literary press specialising in erotica published the book, it was banned and Rachilde was subsequently sentenced to prison for pornographic writing.<sup>3</sup>

In order to deflect questions about the novel’s conception, the 1889 French edition added a troubling preface by Maurice Barrès that claimed the book not as literary

<sup>1</sup> Huysmans’s novel was originally published in French under the title *À rebours*.

<sup>2</sup> Rachilde claimed sole authorship over the first edition of the book but, because of the narrative’s prurient content, a supposed male co-author, Francis Talman, joined her name on the second ‘first’ edition of the text (it remains unlikely Talman ever existed, however). While subsequent editions did not bear the phantom Talman’s name, questions as to the narrative’s inspiration persisted. In her book, *Rachilde and French Women’s Authorship* (2002), Melanie Hawthorne claims that Rachilde became the ‘queen of decadence’ following the publication of *Monsieur Vénus*, p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> *Monsieur Vénus* was first published by the Belgian literary press Auguste Brancart. Because Belgium had more flexible publishing laws than did France during the mid-to-late nineteenth century, it was not an uncommon strategy for French writers to publish their salacious works of literature in Belgium to garner more attention for their writing in France. While Rachilde was sentenced to prison, it was essentially a *pro forma* condemnation, and she never saw the inside of a jail cell. See Hawthorne’s book *Rachilde and French Women’s Authorship* for further information.

fiction but rather the case study of a hysterical woman: a personal account of Rachilde's mental instability and perversion.<sup>4</sup> 'Barrès's perspective,' Melanie Hawthorne writes, in the introduction to her translation of *Monsieur Vénus*, 'brings into focus the apparent incongruity of her work within the decadent orientation adopted by other, almost exclusively male, *fin de siècle* writers.'<sup>5</sup> Keenly aware of her public image, however, Rachilde herself attempted to playfully offer various sensational stories about the narrative's conception, none of which ultimately helped to prevent continued controversy over the novel.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the misogynistic critical reception of her works due to her status as a female author, Rachilde herself been considered a misogynist, in part because, hesitant to affiliate with the political feminist movements of her day, she published an essay in 1928, *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe* (or *Why I Am Not a Feminist*), that has persisted in affecting the reception of her work.<sup>7</sup> In the text, Rachilde employs an ironic style characteristic of her literary writing to express ambiguity about the politics of feminism; she ultimately believes it to be a regressive movement beholden to bourgeois morality that has not 'enormously improved existence'.<sup>8</sup> Regardless, an attempt by the French publisher Flammarion in 1977 to reissue *Monsieur Vénus* was not well received, for reasons some critics have attributed to Rachilde's perceived stance as anti-feminist and the narrative's portrayal of women to be cruel and violent, which did not align with the politics of Second Wave feminism.<sup>9</sup> Yet following new French and English editions published by The Modern Language Association in 2004, which include portions of the novel that were previously unpublished in English, Rachilde and *Monsieur Vénus* have been hailed queer and feminist forerunners in many academic circles, even while questions about Rachilde's politics continue to circulate.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> As Hawthorne details in *Rachilde and French Women's Authorship*, Rachilde herself variously claimed it was based on an obsession with the male writer Catulle Mendès; that it was an autobiographical account of her obsession with a young, working-class man; and that it was written purely for shock value and to make her money. These claims, however, were tongue-and-cheek, and in keeping with the way Rachilde engaged the press and responded to its shock over her writing.

<sup>5</sup> Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus*, English edition, trans. by Melanie Hawthorne (MLA, 2004), p. xxxiii.

<sup>6</sup> Rachilde addresses the extraordinary and unexpected controversy she faced over *Monsieur Vénus* in the lengthy preface to its follow-up novel, *Madame Adonis* (1888).

<sup>7</sup> Rachilde, *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe* (Éditions de France, 1928). Nearly all of Rachilde's biographers—Melanie Hawthorne, Claude Dauphiné in *Rachilde femme de Lettres 1900* (1985), and Auriant in *Souvenirs sur madame Rachilde* (1989), for example, claim that this pamphlet sparked much confusion and even outrage on the part of her contemporaries, as did her portrayal of violent and treacherous female characters in her fiction. Many twentieth and twenty-first century literary criticism on Rachilde and her work also discuss the challenge of reconciling her declarations with feminist readings of her novels.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Hawthorne makes this claim in the preface to the English edition of *Monsieur Vénus*, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Rita Felski, for example, in *The Gender of Modernity* (1995) writes, 'we do not need to claim Rachilde as an exemplary feminist forerunner in order to appreciate the startling and innovative power of her representations of female sexuality' (206). Melanie Hawthorne in *Rachilde and French Women's Authorship* and

Most contemporary writing about *Monsieur Vénus*, however, and about the few of her other novels that remain in print, tends to focus on Rachilde's biography or the problematic reception of her writing. The misogynistic treatment of Rachilde's books raises important questions about the historical treatment of female authors, yet for the purpose of this paper, I wish to interrogate more closely the use of sexual violence in *Monsieur Vénus* and in her much lesser-known novel, *La Marquise de Sade* (1887). While the violent sexual relationship in *Monsieur Vénus* has been characterised by certain critics as *sadomasochistic*, I argue that it is specifically *masochistic*, based on the concept Gilles Deleuze offers in his book, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*.<sup>11</sup> While *La Marquise de Sade* has received notably less attention than has *Monsieur Vénus*, the respective uses of masochism in *Monsieur Vénus* and of sadism in *La Marquise de Sade*, places its female protagonists in the unlikely positions of masochist and sadist and offers a provocative critique of the decadent moment and its representations of sexuality, the body, and even nationalism.

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### **Masochism and *Monsieur Vénus***

In part a Pygmalion trope, *Monsieur Vénus's* plot centres on the relationships between its bourgeois female protagonist, Raoule de Vénérande, and Jacques Silvert, a working-class artist. Raoule dresses and refers to herself alternately as a woman and as a man, and upon meeting the young and androgynous-looking Jacques, she becomes obsessed with him. Jacques agrees to be her lover and sex slave, and they engage in violent drug-fuelled sexual encounters initiated by Raoule—ones that push the boundaries of gender in distinct and transgressive ways. At first a clandestine relationship, since Raoule is a member of the French aristocracy and Jacques is not, Raoule eventually marries Jacques, eliciting shock from the Parisian bourgeoisie. Following their wedding, Jacques is inadvertently killed, but Raoule finds a way to preserve his corpse for her eternal sexual pleasure.

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Rachel Mesch in *The Hysteric's Revenge* (2006) hail the innovative importance of Rachilde's female characters while considering the question of Rachilde's misogyny and political affiliations within the context of her literary work.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Janet Beizer characterises Rachilde's writing as sadomasochistic in her introduction to *Monsieur Vénus* in *The Decadent Reader* (1998), p. 239. Romana Byrne also characterises the novel and Rachilde's oeuvre as sadomasochistic in her book, *Aesthetic Sexuality: A Literary History of Sadomasochism* (2013). Felski too discusses the sadism of Rachilde's characters in the chapter, 'The Art of Perversion: Female Sadists and Male Cyborgs,' in *The Gender of Modernity* (1995). Deleuze's book *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* was first published in French as *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch: le froid et le cruel* (1967).

For Deleuze, sadomasochism is a reductive conflation of two distinct sexual perversions, masochism and sadism, that are motivated by divergent responses to social and historical moments, and deploy quite different formal literary strategies. According to Deleuze's definition, a masochist is typically a male subject who seeks a cruel, unsentimental woman to dominate him in order to experience a temporary disavowal of his masculine agency, which is reemphasised following the masochistic encounter. Since a male subject is in the prime position of social power, a masochist desires dominance from a woman so that he can simulate an experience of powerlessness. To do so, he establishes with her a set of rules or contracts by which he can experience temporary submission. Because masochism takes its name from the nineteenth-century author of *Venus in Furs*, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, it is in part a response to the Romanticism of Masoch's day, which was, Deleuze claims, a historical moment that was so sensual, it became anti-sentimental: the very reason the masochist desires a cold, and unsentimental woman. He writes:

Man became coarse and sought a new dignity in the development of consciousness and thought; as a reaction to man's heightened consciousness woman developed sentimentality, and toward his coarseness, severity. The glacial cold was wholly responsible for the transformation: sentimentality became the object of man's thought, and cruelty the punishment for his coarseness. In the coldhearted alliance between man and woman, it is this cruelty and sentimentality in woman that compel man to thought and properly constitute the masochistic ideal.<sup>12</sup>

The sadist, on the other hand, 'professes an essential coldness which Sade calls 'apathy.'<sup>13</sup> Of all the differences between sadism and masochism there is therefore 'the most radical difference between sadistic *apathy* and masochistic *coldness*.'<sup>14</sup> Literary instantiations of masochism and sadism therefore use formal strategies to convey either anti-sentimentality or apathy. Masochistic literature typically employs suspenseful, decadent descriptions and its scenes are populated by cold statues and art objects. 'Sade's heroes, by contrast, are not art lovers,' Deleuze claims. Sadistic literature instead utilises long descriptions and readings of text, punctuated by apathetic descriptions of sex and murder.

In the masochistic dynamic between the characters Raoule and Jacques, however, the masochist is Raoule, an upper-class woman who often acts like a man, and who initiates the relationship with Jacques, a working-class man who is often described as a woman:

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<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. by Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 57.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

‘You will not be my lover ...You will be my slave, Jacques....’

‘What? You're crazy!’

‘Am I the master, yes or no!’ exclaimed Raoule. ‘I’m going to leave...I’m going to leave!’ he repeated, desperate, no longer understanding his master’s desires.

‘I’m sorry!’ she murmured, ‘I forgot you’re a capricious little woman who has *her* right to torture me.’<sup>15</sup>

Raoule is both the dominant, gendered female and the dominator – the one who has more social and financial power, and elects to take on a young, lower-class artist to reject the social order of the aristocracy – which she rebukes by not wanting to marry, much to the chagrin of her aristocratic suitor, and to her aunt and guardian. Raoule’s proclamation, that as a woman Jacques has the right to torture her, is an ironic acknowledgement of the prototypical masochistic dynamic, and by extension, the societal male and female dynamic. Since men are ultimately in the primary position of social power, it is only in a masochistic dynamic orchestrated by a man that a woman holds the temporary power to torture him. Yet, because Raoule is also acting as the male subject, she complicates the masochistic paradox and is able to act as both the male and female subject.

In the essay, ‘Masochism: A Queer Subjectivity?’, Amber J. Musser revisits Deleuze’s definition of masochism and Judith Butler’s definition of subjectivity to consider how a reinterpretation of both definitions together can offer a more expansive conception of queerness and of masochism.<sup>16</sup> She insists that the masochist should not necessarily be thought of as a masculine subject or as even an individual: ‘Deleuze’s masochist...s/he requires a symbolic dominator to be complicit in the illusion of powerlessness...the masochist and his/her dominant only exist in their interrelation, neither can be thought as individuals’<sup>17</sup> (2005). Musser’s assertion that subjectivity in masochism can be interpreted as symbolic is a useful way to interpret the dynamic

<sup>15</sup> Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus* (MLA, 2004), p. 88. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. All references are to this edition; further references will be given in the body of the text. Original text in French:

‘Tu ne seras pas mon amant...Tu seras mon esclave, Jacques...’

‘Quoi?... Tu es folle!...’

‘Suis-je le maître, oui ou non?’ s’écria Raoule.

‘Je vais m’en aller... je vais m’en aller!’ répéta-t-il désespéré, ne comprenant plus les désirs de son maître.

‘Pardon!’ murmura-t-elle, ‘moi, j’oubliais que tu es une petite femme capricieuse qui a le droit, chez elle, de me torturer.’

<sup>16</sup> Amber J. Musser, ‘Masochism: A Queer Subjectivity,’ *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, 11/12 (2005) <<http://www.rhizomes.net/issue11/musser.html>> [accessed 8 September 2018]. According to Musser:

[B]oth Butler’s subject and the masochist rely on similar strategies, namely repetition, materiality, and disavowal, but corporeality, desire, and intersubjectivity, the essential components of the masochist/dominant complex, are nearly omitted in Butler’s rendering of subjectivity. Accounting for this difference facilitates comparisons between the two and enables alternative readings of Butler’s theory of subjectivity.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2005.

between Raoule and Jacques; in fact, it seems that their version of masochism insists on masculine and feminine subject positions precisely in order to render them symbolic – social, performative, and unbound to the biological body. As their relationship progresses, the narrator even claims that they ‘were more and more united in a common thought: the destruction of their sex.’<sup>18</sup> Domination on the part of Raoule as female subject is significant, however, because the violence of her masochism is to humiliate the male subject by placing him in the inferior role of a woman: ‘– Raoule,’ he begged, don’t call me a *woman* anymore, it humiliates me.’<sup>19</sup> Even more effective than physically harming him, Raoule’s ultimate form of torturous pleasure will therefore be to humiliate Jacques by falsely flattering his masculinity:

She did not hit him anymore, she did not buy him anymore, she flattered him, and man, as abject as he can be, always has—even at a moment of revolt—that fleeting virility called *fatuity*.

‘Do you not know, Jacques, do you not know that fresh and healthy flesh is the only power in this world!’...He flinched. The male awoke abruptly in the sweetness of those words pronounced very low.<sup>20</sup>

Raoule is not mocking Jacques’s femininity to denigrate women or to deem them inferior subjects, but rather to reveal the relationship between gender and sexuality as performative and socially determined. It is significant that the word ‘fatuity’ is italicised in this passage; throughout the novel, the narrator and Raoule alternately use masculine and feminine pronouns to describe the type of behaviours that she and other characters adopt. These alternations often occur within the same conversation and are applied toward the same individual. In a compelling metanarrative move, Rachilde italicises the misgendered adjectives and nouns to call attention to these choices. Yet, the grammatical gender of ‘*fatuité*’ is feminine in French, a choice that perhaps serves to linguistically feminize Jacques and men, while simultaneously calling attention to the way language itself often arbitrarily designates women as weak. Notably, Jacques becomes sexually excited by Raoule’s suggestion that he has ‘healthy flesh’; in Musser’s interpretation of masochism, she claims that ‘flesh [is shown] to be a valuable commodity in and of itself, not something excluded by discourse, but a necessary active part of subjectivity; the masochist

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<sup>18</sup> *Monsieur Vénus*, p. 98. Original text: ‘Ils s’unissaient de plus en plus dans une pensée commune, la destruction de leur sexe.’

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88. Original text: ‘Raoule, supplia-t-il, ne m’appelle plus *femme* cela m’humilie.’

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88. Original text:

Elle ne le frappait plus, elle ne l’achetait plus, elle le flattait, et l’homme, si abject qu’il puisse être, possède toujours, à un moment de révolte, cette virilité d’une heure qu’on appelle *la fatuité*. ‘Ignores-tu, Jacques, ignores-tu que la chair fraîche et saine est l’unique puissance de ce monde!... Il tressaillit. Le male s’éveilla brusquement dans la douceur de ces paroles prononcées très bas.’

requires both flesh and desire to attempt a loss/refinding of self.<sup>21</sup> If the materiality of the flesh can offer potential emancipation in a masochistic dynamic, this possibility is absent from Jacques and Raoule's, as Raoule's flattery of Jacques is actually false, as he does not possess 'fresh and healthy flesh' at all. Rather, Jacques is consistently described by the narrator as having 'marble flesh', and his body is often likened to a Greek statue. The first time Raoule sees Jacques nude, he is compared to a famous statue of Venus:

Worthy of the Venus Callipyge, that curve of his lower back where his spine ran down to a voluptuous plane rose firm, fat, in two adorable contours, and looked like a transparent amber sphere of Paros. His thighs were a bit less thick than women's thighs, and yet possessed a solid roundness that concealed their sex.<sup>22</sup>

As the title of the novel *Monsieur Vénus* (and of Masoch's *Venus in Furs*) indicates, there was a veritable obsession in nineteenth-century decadent literature with Greco-Roman marble statues which represented a nexus between the natural and non-natural body. The image of the body conveyed by the statue was typically that of a superior or idealised human form, and yet it was not necessarily sexed, rendering the statue's gender likewise ambiguous. Famously, Théophile Gautier's poem, 'Contralto' and Algernon Charles Swinburne's poem, 'Hermaphroditus' were inspired by their mutual obsession with a real statue, *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*, which is housed at the Louvre.<sup>23</sup> Onlookers were so tantalised and befuddled by its ambiguous gender that, in the words of Anatole France, the statue was 'so worn out by visitors' caresses' that 'the monstrous and charming figure had to be protected by a barrier.'<sup>24</sup> It is significant that in the description of Jacques's body, which likens him to the Venus Callipyge, he has the transparency of 'amber', since marble representations of bodies reveal neither veins or blood, and therefore conceal not just sex or gender, but also natural life itself. As if to counter the opacity of marble bodies, the revelatory vividness of blood and bloodlust will become essential to the sadism of Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade*.

Deleuze claims that the preponderance of marble statues in Masoch's writing represents the severity characteristic of nineteenth-century 'repression of sensuality',

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<sup>21</sup> Musser, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 40. Original text:

Digne de la Venus Callipyge, cette chute de reins ou la ligne de l'épine dorsale fuyait dans un méplat voluptueux et se redressait, ferme, grasse, en deux contours adorables, avait l'aspect d'une sphère de Paros aux transparences d'ambre. Les cuisses, un peu moins fortes que des cuisses de femme, possédaient pourtant une rondeur solide qui effaçait leur sexe.

<sup>23</sup> The *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* was purchased by the Louvre in 1807.

<sup>24</sup> Patrick Graïlle, *Les Hermaphrodites aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001), p. 9. Original text: 'Ignorez-vous que le marbre de l'Hermaphrodite du Louvre a été usé par les caresses des visiteurs, et que l'administration des musées a dû protéger par une barrière la figure monstrueuse et charmante?'



arguing that the body only ‘became human’ in the nineteenth century when it was represented as art:

It has been said that...the eye, for example, becomes a human eye when its object itself has been transformed into a human or cultural object, fashioned by and intended solely for man...[I]t is the experience of this painful process that the art of Masoch aims to represent...The lover embraces a marble woman by way of imitation: women become exciting when they are indistinguishable from cold statues in the moonlight. The scenes in Masoch have of necessity a frozen quality, like statues or portraits.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike the male narrators of Gautier’s and Swinburne’s poems, Raoule does not bow before the idealised marble image of humanity that her love-slave epitomises; instead of revering its likeness to an art objet, she determines to destroy Jacques’s body. Raoule bites his ‘marble’ flesh, and breaks it apart:

With a violent gesture she tore off the strips of linen bandage that she had rolled around the sacred body of her young male lover, she bit his marble flesh, squeezed it with both hands, scratched it with her sharp nails. It was a complete deflowering of the marvellous beauty that had once made her ecstatic with a mystical happiness.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the novel, Raoule is referred to as unsentimental for a woman, or ‘*froide*’, reminiscent of the unsentimental and cold woman Deleuze’s masochist seeks. In *Monsieur Vénus*’s vision of masochism, the ‘cold’ body of the woman therefore finds the cold, marble body of a man and ultimately produces a non-human entity. Her ‘deflowering’ of his flesh ultimately renders his body available for a non-conventional form of procreation. After Jacques is killed by Raoule’s former suitor Raittolbe in a fencing duel gone-wrong, she commissions German engineers to make his corpse into a rubber sex automaton. Jacques’s marble flesh is therefore replaced with a new and different unnatural material:

On a shell-shaped bed, guarded by a marble Eros, rests a wax mannequin adorned in transparent rubber skin. The red hair, the blond eyelashes, the golden fluff on its chest are natural; the teeth that adorn its mouth, the fingernails and toenails, have all been extracted from a corpse. The enamel eyes have an adorable look.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Deleuze, p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> *Monsieur Vénus*, p. 132. Original text:

D’un geste violent elle arracha les bandes de batiste qu’elle avait roulées autour du corps sacre de son éphèbe, elle mordit ses chairs marbrées, les pressa à pleines mains, les égratigna de ses ongles affilés. Ce fut une défloration complète de ces beautés merveilleuses qui l’avaient, jadis, fait s’extasier dans un bonheur mystique.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209. Original text:

Sur la couche en forme de conque, gardée par un Eros de marbre, repose un mannequin de cire revêtu d’un épiderme en caoutchouc transparent. Les cheveux roux, les cils blonds, le duvet d’or de

A marble statue is still present but guards the rubber version of Jacques, though it is described as more ‘natural’ than the description of his body, likening it to a marble one. Yet, its transparency reveals not the mysticism of amber or the *vérité* of blood, but rather its synthetic exterior exposes the unnecessary human parts of his body. With the rubber version of Jacques, Raoule is finally able to inhabit either a male or female role depending on her desire:

At night, a woman dressed in mourning clothes, sometimes a young man in black, opens the door. They come to kneel near the bed, and when they have long contemplated the marvellous shapes of the wax statue, they embrace it, kiss it on the lips. A spring placed inside the flanks corresponds to the mouth and animates it at the same time it makes its thighs move apart. This model, a masterpiece of anatomy, was made by a German.<sup>28</sup>

While the conclusion of *Monsieur Vénus* is often cited in contemporary scholarship as an example of post-humanism, it is also the most critical of the novel’s historical moment: it is indicative of the final stage of the Industrial Revolution, and the conversion of human beings from consumers of manufactured goods to the objects of manufacture themselves.<sup>29</sup> Rachilde specifies that the automaton is German-made; historically, nineteenth-century Germany embraced industrialisation more enthusiastically than France. The final chapter of the novel begins by revealing that Raittolbe has left France to fight in Africa, signifying the loss of potential sexual procreation, and implying that there will be increasing demand for modes of production that do not require human bodies.

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la poitrine sont naturels ; les dents qui ornent la bouche, les ongles des mains et des pieds ont été arrachés à un cadavre. Les yeux en émail ont un adorable regard.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 211 Original text:

La nuit, une femme vêtue de deuil, quelquefois un jeune homme en habit noir, ouvrent cette porte. 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. Ce mannequin, chef-d’œuvre d’anatomie, a été fabriqué par un Allemand.

Notably, because of its reference to necrophilia, the final sentence was so controversial that it was censored from the nineteenth-century French editions of the novel (those that followed the problematic Belgian edition that resulted in Rachilde’s arrest).

<sup>29</sup> For example, Rita Felski characterises the novel’s conclusion as post-human in the chapter, ‘The Art of Perversion: Female Sadists and Male Cyborgs’ in her book *The Gender of Modernity* (1995). Additionally, the chapter ‘Queer Modernisms,’ in *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature* (2014), and numerous recent articles and doctoral theses, such as Elizabeth Anne Carroll’s, ‘Automata, Artificial bodies, Reproductive Futurisms in Nineteenth-Century French Literature,’ (University of Iowa, 2015) and Sophia Magnone’s, ‘The Speculative Agency of the Nonhuman: Animal, Objects and Posthuman Worldings’ (University of California Santa Cruz, 2016), argue the conclusion of *Monsieur Vénus* to be post-humanist.

### The Sadism of *La Marquise de Sade*

If in *Monsieur Venus* the idealisation of art in the face of industrialisation leads to the destruction of bodies, in *La Marquise de Sade*, the apathy of the *fin-de-siècle* elicits literal bloodlust. The introduction to the 1981 French edition of the *La Marquise de Sade* continues to characterise Rachilde a ‘*misogyne*’ [a misogynist], while again championing the importance of her literary work.<sup>30</sup> Yet, an obscure essay by Rachilde that has yet to be published in English, *Sade Toujours!*, indicates that her literary interest in sadism was at least in part an attempt to separate sadism from the man – from the Marquis de Sade. She argues that he was not in fact insane, that he was not a marquis, and that he did not invent sadism:

Rest assured: I do not want to rehabilitate the Marquis de Sade... Sadism—which was certainly not invented by the Marquis de Sade—is nothing more than the intensification of love at the sight of blood or at the feeling of pain. And sadism and its roots are deeply entrenched in animality, a close relative of humanity.<sup>31</sup>

In the final line of the essay, however, she proclaims its title, ‘Sade Forever!’; we should therefore interpret Rachilde’s invocation of sadism as another form of her non-conventional critique of misogyny.

Despite the title of the novel, the moniker ‘La Marquise de Sade’ is never applied to a specific character within the text. Presumably, the ‘Marquise de Sade’ is the protagonist Mary, the daughter of a French military officer. As she grows up, Mary becomes increasingly violent, her lust for blood ignited when, as a young girl, she accidentally witnesses an animal being slaughtered on the family farm. She marries and subsequently murders her uncle, an older scientist who, sexually abstinent for many years, claims that women are inferior—that is, until he meets Mary. She becomes his *protégée*, capable of wielding the apathetic logic of science better than he can. Upon attending a medical lecture with him, Mary remarks: ““their lectures remind me of a slaughterhouse I saw in my childhood...””.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, as the excerpt from *Sade Forever!* suggests, sadism in

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<sup>30</sup> Rachilde, *La Marquise de Sade* (Mercure de France, 1981). The preface reads, ‘A misogynist, Rachilde proclaimed that she was not a feminist. At a moment that calls for a new reading of her work, we bet that it will provide each and every one with an invigorating lesson in freedom’ [misogyne, Rachilde se défendait d’être féministe. Au moment où s’impose une nouvelle lecture de son œuvre, gageons que chacun saura y prendre une vivifiante leçon de liberté] (p. iv).

<sup>31</sup> Rachilde, *Sade Toujours!* (Paris: Fourneau, 1992), p. 12. Original text:

Rassurez-vous: je n’ai pas envie de réhabiliter le Marquis de Sade...Le sadisme – que n’a certainement pas inventé le Marquis de Sade – n’est pas autre chose que l’exaspération de l’amour par la vue du sang ou la sensation de la douleur... Et le sadisme et ses racines profondément enfoncées dans l’animalité proche parente de l’humanité.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206. Original text: ‘Leurs conférences me rappellent un abattoir que j’ai vu dans ma petite enfance...?’

Rachilde's writing wants to expose the innate violence that apathetic practices of modern humanity – like science – have sought to belie.

Toward the end of *La Marquise de Sade*, when Mary has become a full-fledged murderess, she resides in Paris, where 'her life blossoms into an exaggeration that the philosophers of the century call *décadence*, the end of everything... a period of universal cowardice... She was not of today's decadence but of Rome's'.<sup>33</sup> The Imperial decadence of ancient Rome to which Mary identifies was replete with public displays of sexuality and violence: orgies, executions, and blood-letting. While she bemoans that even the most subversive of Parisian nightclubs fail to match the 'vision of terrible Rome, sexes fighting under veils of blood', Mary begins killing the male cross-dressers who frequent them, fueled by the banality and horror of *fin-de-siècle* Paris: the nexus of Sadian apathy.<sup>34</sup>

Notably, Guillaume Apollinaire, who was a friend of Rachilde's, also explores sadism in his pornographic novel, *Les Onze Mille Verges* (1907), which Pablo Picasso dubbed Apollinaire's masterpiece.<sup>35</sup> The narrative recounts the fictional story of a Romanian prince, Mony Vibescu, as he travels throughout Eastern Europe and Asia committing violent sexual acts and murder. In *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*, Scott Baker writes of *Les Onze Mille Verges*:

The characters embark on voyages into areas much in the news in early years of the twentieth century during the Russo-Japanese War. Apollinaire detested Russia and was enthusiastically on the side of the Japanese in that conflict, unlike most of the mainstream French media... it is not a coincidence that Mony Vibescu's most violent, most nauseating deeds, those involving torture and mutilations, make of him a Russian war hero. Indeed, several of the most violent incidents in the book were taken from reports in mainstream newspapers of the time, leading to the conclusion that the novel... is an ironic commentary on the terrible consequences of excessive sexuality and the gratuitous violence of war.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 287. Original text: 'Sa vie s'épanouit en des exagérations à travers ce que les philosophes du siècle appellent la *décadence*, la fin de tout... une période de lâcheté universelle... [E]lle était de la *décadence* de Rome et non point de celle d'aujourd'hui'.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 286. Original text: 'La Boule noire, l'Élysée-Montmartre lui fournirent des distractions, piètres d'ailleurs, mais elle allait toujours, espérant trouver dans un coin inexploré et moins voulu que les autres la vision de la Rome terrible se disputant les sexes sous des voiles de sang'.

<sup>35</sup> Apollinaire originally published the novel anonymously, under the initials, 'G.A.' The title, *Les Onze Mille Verges* is a play on words; Scott Baker explains in *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*:

The title of the work is a pun on *verges* ('rods' or 'scourges') and *vierges* ('virgins') and originates in the medieval legend of 11,000 virgins martyred by the Huns at Cologne. It also relates to a proverbial expression for a would-be womanizer, 'a man in love with the 11,000 virgins.' The main character in the book, the wealthy Romanian *bospodar* Mony Vibescu (*Mony* = 'prick' in Romanian; *Vibescu* = French slangs for 'Dickfuckass'), an insatiable priapist, boasts that he can copulate twenty times in a row. His failure to accomplish this heroic feat results finally in his death under the scourges of 11,000 Japanese soldiers! (p. 34)

<sup>36</sup> Scott Baker, 'Apollinaire, Guillaume,' in *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*, ed. by Gaétan Brulotte and John Philips London (Routledge, 2006), p. 33.

I invoke Apollinaire and his turn to sadism to suggest that based on the historical moment in France when his novel and Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade* and *Sade Forever!* emerged, there was a renewed interest in sadism that was tied to the solidification of national and colonial borders. These new nationalisms cultivated an environment wherein state violence, murder, and apathy would be fostered in the lead-up to WWI and the postwar rise of fascism. Significantly, Rachilde herself would come to be associated with certain figures aligned with the beginnings of fascism. For example, she had a fan in the Italian futurist and proto-fascist F.T. Marinetti, who sought to translate her work into Italian, and whose controversial novel, *Mafarka The Futurist* (1909), Rachilde reviewed in the *Mercure de France*. In the essay, '(En)Gendering Fascism: Rachilde's "Les Vendanges de Sodome" and *Les Hors-Nature*', which appears in *Gender and Fascism in Modern France* (1997), Melanie Hawthorne argues that 'nationalism is as much a social construction as gender; nineteenth century nationalism is gendered since women were not legal citizens'. Hawthorne reads Rachilde's incorporation of Sodom and Sade in a collection of her short stories as 'evok[ing] the short-lived Italian fascist state know as Republic of Salò, which Pasolini made the setting for his last film, *Salò: 120 Days of Sodom* (1975)...which in Pasolini's story, as in Rachilde's story, combines a vision of the authoritarian state with sexual politics.'<sup>37</sup> By this line of thought, Rachilde's controversial rejection of feminism in her literary invocation of sadism and masochism, can be interpreted as a rejection of the French state and its hypocritical principles of liberal democracy – *liberté* and *égalité* for the *fraternité*. It is therefore significant that while Apollinaire's style in his book adheres closely to the Marquis de Sade's and to what Deleuze describes as the Sadian literary technique—long, repetitive and apathetic descriptions of sex and violence—Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade*, does not.<sup>38</sup> Most of the descriptions of violence are in fact deferred until the final third of the novel. In *La Marquise de Sade*, apathetic violence manifest in the banality of daily bourgeois life, and specifically, female life.

Sadism and masochism, according to Deleuze, reflect perversions produced by the violence of bourgeois morality. He asks, '[o]ught we to conclude [the language of sadism and masochism] is paradoxical because the victim speaks the language of the torturer he is

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<sup>37</sup> Melanie Hawthorne, '(En)Gendering Fascism: Rachilde's "Les Vendanges de Sodome" and *Les Hors-Nature*' in *Gender and Fascism in Modern France*, ed. by Richard J. Golsan and Melanie Hawthorne (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), p. 38.

<sup>38</sup> It is also relevant that one of the Marquis de Sade's most popular works, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, written in the late-eighteenth century, was not published in France until 1904. Apollinaire participated in editing and printing parts of it.

to himself, with all the hypocrisy of the torturer?'.<sup>39</sup> Rachilde's literature further complicates this paradox: the characters Raoule and Mary are simultaneously torturers *and* victims—the former, with their participation in masochistic and sadistic sexual violence, and the latter, due to their status as women in nineteenth-century French society. These atypical formal and thematic instantiations of masochism and sadism are radical— and perhaps contribute to the uneven reception of Rachilde's work (Apollinaire's prototypical invocation of sadism was, by contrast, lauded). Musser believes the masochist can be interpreted as a potential queer subject, one 'that offers new possibilities for understanding subjectivity' and 'enabling empowered, embodied, erotic, and fluid subjects.'<sup>40</sup>

The masochistic and sadistic roles that Raoule in *Monsieur Vénus* and Mary in *La Marquise de Sade* inhabit can indeed be interpreted as queer subjectivities; the victim-torturer dichotomy they blur ultimately allows them alternative modes of relation and desire outside of social structures. These novels suggest that sadistic and masochistic violence at the hands of women is a method with which they too can experience disavowal and perhaps even transcendence. Resistant to the feminist movement and the moralistic literary naturalism of her time, Rachilde's complex, unconventional interpretations of sadism and masochism have led to misunderstandings on the part of readers while heightening the allure of her œuvre, not just within her contemporary context, but also within twentieth and twenty-first century critical discourse. Rather than aligning with clear categories of feminist or sadomasochistic writings, *Monsieur Vénus* and *La Marquise de Sade* offer a 'post-feminism' that persists.

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<sup>39</sup> Deleuze, p. 23

<sup>40</sup> Musser, 2005.

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