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Some Observations about the Suicide of the Adulteress in the Modern Novel

Babis Dermitzakis

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Abstract: Babis Dermitzakis posits in his article "Some Observations about the Suicide of the Adulteress in the Modern Novel" that in three major male-authored European novels -- *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Thérèse Raquin* -- the protagonists are wives who commit adultery ending in suicide. In contrast, texts by women authors of the period show no similar description and perception of adultery by women. Dermitzakis suspects that the male writers did not simply fictionalize a specific social behavior or condition; rather, they likely imported their own prejudices about women's adultery -- and more generally about women's sexuality -- into their writing. Biographical evidence of the three authors appears to support such a hypothesis.

Babis DERMITZAKIS

Some Observations about the Suicide of the Adulteress in the Modern Novel

Adultery is a prominent literary theme in Western literature (see, e.g., Charnon-Deutsch; Doody; Helsing, Sheets, Veeder; Parten; Polhemus; Schmiedt; Stewart; Tanner; Weinstein). Considering the present pre-occupation of the world with adultery on the levels of general societal discourse in politics and the media -- witness the Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton affair in the United States, for example -- a brief revisit of the theme in literature may be of interest. In the study at hand I examine the theme and its structures in selected texts of modern Western literature.

One of the most well-known novels with the theme of adultery, along with Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, is Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. In Tolstoy's text, we have both adulteress and adulterer. However, while the main protagonist Anna's story is in the foreground, her brother Stiva's adultery constitutes a subplot of the story. What is the outcome of these adulteries? Stiva's adultery is an "insignificant" love affair. Normally, as we know, a man is not deeply involved, emotionally, in his extra-marital relations. Traditionally, he seldom reaches the point of abandoning his wife and children, thus dissolving his family. So it is no surprise -- as a reflection of socio-psychological parameters -- that Stiva implores his wife to forgive him, thus intending to keep his marriage intact. This is not the case, however, with our adulteresses. It appears that Tolstoy suggests to the reader that women in great need for a man's love throw themselves into the arms of the first man who, they think, will satisfy their emotional needs. For Anna Karenina this is the successful politician Karenin, despite the fact that the difference of age between them is rather great. For Emma Bovary this man is Charles Bovary, the doctor of the area, who, as she initially thought, would satisfy her romantic fantasies. Only Thérèse Raquin feels obliged to marry her aunt's son, because of the obligation she feels towards her aunt for bringing her up.

After a time, all three women in the above examples feel an unbearable boredom with their lives as married women. The men they are married to are able to offer them much, but not the most significant matter: love. Apart from the particular individual constellation of personality and other narrow specifics, it is the intense pressure of male dominance in a patriarchal society where their only way out becomes adultery. Anna Karenina, unlike her brother -- for reasons I already mentioned -- abandons her husband. Emma, on the contrary, cannot persuade her lover to take her away and leave husband and country. He is not in love with her, and their relationship in his eyes is nothing but a casual love affair, like so many others he has had so far. Thérèse Raquin is more successful than Emma, on the other hand. She manages to persuade her lover to assassinate her husband. All three women are on the point of a nervous breakdown. Anna begins to take drugs and her relationship with Vronski turns more and more strained and complicated. She suspects that he has become bored with her and that he will abandon her. The only way out of her emotional abyss is suicide. Emma, like Anna, also kills herself, abandoned as she is by her lover, and immersed in debts. Neither will Thérèse Raquin avoid suicide. The crime she committed breaks her nerves and the nerves of her lover, Laurent. Wanting to escape from their despair, they try to kill each other but when they realize, horrified, each other's plans, they decide to commit suicide together.

Here I come to my first question: why did Flaubert, Tolstoy, and Zola choose such an end for their adulterous heroines? Why do the women commit suicide, or, why do the authors of these texts resolve the question of adultery by writing the women committing suicide? One answer may be obvious: the authors consciously seek to portray a woman's emotional deprivation and turbulent psychology, and, to make the tale more interesting and convincing, they write them into suicide. But another, and equally obvious question may also be posed: is it not possible that the authors chose suicide as an end for their heroines in order to appease society's implicit and explicit demand of punishment for adultery? And what may be the historical reasons for this punishment?

Here is a definition of adultery, one that explains the reasons for society's abhorrence of the act and its punishment: "Adultery: from *ad alterum se conferre*, 'to confer (property) upon another.' In the age of matrilinear inheritance, female property owners could leave cast-off husbands destitute by conferring their 'matrimony' (wealth) upon another. Patriarchal societies therefore sought to insure wives' sexual fidelity for economic reasons. To this end, the Bible commands stoning to death an

adulterous wife or bride suspected of premarital affairs (*Deuteronomy* 22: 21). The latter rule was to invalidate the pagan custom of premarital defloration by a stranger, lest someone other than her husband might claim on the bride's property. Hebrew patriarchs also considered 'adulterous' a widow who might remarry 'unto a stranger' outside the paternal clan. Widows were ordered to marry a brother of a deceased husband, so their property would remain under the control of male in-laws. This law of Levirate Marriage with its apparently divine sanction caused much trouble in later centuries" (Walker 11).

But let me go further than the obvious reason that the punishment of adulterous women in fiction is a reflection of historical parameters of society. In the case of Tolstoy, there may be an additional, personal, reason in place. Tolstoy, in his writing in a period of eleven years has evolved his fiction with regard to adultery from the simple and scornful treatment of Helena, the adulteress wife of Pier in *War and Peace*, to the suicide of his heroine in *Anna Karenina*. In a context of a biographical and psychological influence on his fiction, could it not be that Tolstoy is dramatizing a personal situation? Tolstoy is a Russian aristocrat and a successful writer. He is, however, ugly and his wife is seventeen years younger than he is. When Tolstoy begins to write *Anna Karenina*, he is forty-four years old while his wife is twenty-seven. To me, the possibility that Tolstoy meant the novel as a forewarning toward his young and beautiful wife appears to be very strong and a worthwhile notion to consider with regard to the genesis and purpose of *Anna Karenina*. The fact that some critics have seen Anna's death as a way of self-punishment for an adultery committed by himself (he seduced a young peasant woman) would not disprove my hypothesis. Rather, it may as well have been an additional subconscious motivation. In his novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1890) Tolstoy goes even further. He has his hero kill his wife only on the basis of suspicions, though the evidences were enough for the court to declare him innocent. In nineteenth-century Russia it seems to be sufficient for the murderer to prove that his wife deceived him to be released.

I would like to suggest that for women adultery is an expression of both sensuality and sexuality, a situation where the (Freudean) Id conquers the Superego, thus violating its prohibitions. In the fictional dramatization of this Freudean view of the matter, our three writers degrade their protagonists not by their adulteries but by the women's suicides. While in the case of Tolstoy the punishment of the adulteress is based on his latent Puritanism (a view advocated by Maxim Gorky), his patriarchal world view, and (possibly) his personal psychological state with regard to his young wife, Flaubert's case points to the clear impact of the author's biography resulting in a repressive mechanism expressed in his fiction, in the service of suppressing sexual instinct. A failed relationship of Flaubert with the poet Luise Colet caused his solitary life, and Flaubert's own dictum, "Madame Bovary c'est moi," represent clear evidence of the biographical elements of and in the novel.

In Zola, who was an adulterer himself, we are unable to contemplate such influences of the biographical in his fiction. But let me approach Zola from a different angle: heroes in the novels of Naturalism are always negative heroes and in the end they are justly punished because of the evil they have spread. However, in the case of Zola, it may be a pertinent question to ask why he focused his narration not on his negative heroes, but rather on his negative heroines in several of his texts.

In order to expand my examples from canonized texts in West European literature, I will now draw on some examples in modern Greek literature. The protagonist Lalo in Nikos Kazantzakis's 1906 play *It's Dawning* commits adultery only in her thoughts (on adultery enacted and/or in imagery, see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek). She does not have the courage to proceed to the real act but, as another example of the motif of adultery and suicide, she torments herself because of her desperation and vacillation and in the end commits suicide. Kazantzakis -- using as a *porte-parole* for his ideas the family doctor (perhaps an Ibsenian influence) -- presents himself as an exponent of sexual liberation. However, in my opinion the tale Kazantzakis writes disproves his intentions. The fact that his heroine is written into killing herself not only means that sexual liberation was too early for Greek society of the time. The suicide also means that it was too early for the writer himself to accept emotionally, not only intellectually, his own stand. Interestingly Kazantzakis treats the adulterer on equal terms with the adulteress in one of his other plays, his 1908 *Fasga*. The protagonist, Loris, abandons his wife Maria for his mistress Helen, who incites his ambitions. In the course of the story, both characters undergo much degradation and at the end he dies in deep misery.

D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* lies at the other end of the spectrum. For Lawrence, sexual satisfaction is one of the happiest experiences of man and he should constantly pursue it, without succumbing to inner inhibitions or external pressures. His adulteress, Lady Chatterley, will not commit suicide. On the contrary, she will abandon her husband to run away with her gardener. Here, the author of the controversial act of adultery, justifies the protagonist's flight in various ways. Her husband is invalid, owing to a wound he received in the war. Initially he prompts her to develop sexual relations with another man. When, however, this happens, he will find in horror that he is unable to bear it. Lawrence supported that the real tragedy of *Anna Karenina* is that she is unfaithful to the greater unwritten morality. His *Lady Chatterley*, on the contrary, remains faithful to this morality, without inhibitions or feelings of guilt, and it is her who makes the first step approaching the gardener. In contrast, Emma Bovary waits in vain for Leon to make the first step and she has to wait until Rodolphe takes the initiative.

While Tolstoy, Flaubert, and Zola punish their adulteresses by writing them into suicide, other authors write such adulterous women into situations where they are killed. Examples of such texts are *Oresteia* and *Hamlet*, where both Clytemnestra and Gertrude are killed. In the medium of film, a good example is Nagisha Oshima's 1976 *In the Realm of the Senses*. Here, it is clear that it is not the adultery as a social crime that is condemned; rather, it is sexuality as an unbridled, uncontrolled instinct, that is negated. As a less dramatic punishment where this is written into an internal, self-directed punishment of adultery is the case of resignation. For an example, I would like to draw on Maro Vamvounaki's 1981 novel, *The Chronicle of an Adultery*. His heroine, Anna, similar to Kazantzakis' Lalo, does not dare to proceed to the real act of adultery, although she very much wishes it would happen. In the end and after much torment, she resign to capitulation. Vamvounaki, interestingly, returns to the theme in her next novel, *The Pianist and Death*, where the protagonist returns to her husband after much soul searching. I read the return of the adulteress to her husband as authorial rationalization and justification (see Dermitzakis). This rationalization and justification is, however, of crucial importance because the author is a woman who conflates social prohibitions and attempts to break free of such. There are similar confluences in the heroines of Thomas Hardy. For instance, Sue in *Jude the Obscure* considers the death of her children as a punishment, because she abandoned her husband for Jude, her cousin with whom she had been in love before getting married and Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* feels equally guilty for letting herself be seduced -- more accurately, raped -- by a rich relative.

It is finally worth mentioning an opposite example. In her 1998 best seller, *Judas Kissed Wonderfully*, Maira Papathanasopoulou does not kill off the adulterer; rather, she ridicules him in various ways by having him return to his wife who pays him back in kind: she flees with the husband of the woman with whom he deceived her. The truism that women have often been victims of men in patriarchal societies, does not necessarily result in literature in texts where social and societal situations are simply fictionalized as analogies of society. It is usually more than that: the plot is often an acting out of the writer's own suppressions and rationalizations, a disguised emergence of the suppressed material of the unconscious into the fictitious world of the novel. The biographical material offers the basis of the deconstruction of the novel, and the discovery of the hidden intentions of the novelist, often diverging greatly from the explicit ones. And in the case of the three great authors mentioned above, we can deduce that they are subconsciously less tolerant to a married woman, whose frustrations lead her to commit adultery.

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Author's profile: Babis Dermitzakis works in the fields of literature and social anthropology, narratology, technics of drama writing, Asian theater (especially the Peking Opera) at the University of Athens. In addition to numerous articles, Dermitzakis's book publications include *I anangeotita tou mithou* (The Necessity of Myth) (1987), *I laykotita tis kritikis logotehnias* (The Folk Character of Cretan Literature) (1990), and *To horio mou: apo tin autokatanalosi stin agora* (My Village: From Self-Sustaining Economy to Market Economy) (1995). He has also published portraits of contemporary Greek prose writers in various journals. E-mail: <hdermi@atlas.uoa.gr>