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# FIGURES OF THE FAILED BREADWINNER IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH FICTION

James T. Day

If it is true, as noted critic Elaine Showalter has stated, that “feminist criticism has established gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis,”<sup>1</sup> then literary representations of male gender roles require precisely the kind of critical scrutiny that many scholars are at present rightfully devoting to literary portrayals of women. In response to urgent questions raised by feminist criticism and the women’s movement in general, the new discipline of men’s studies has begun articulating its province of inquiry, and literary representations of male gender roles fall within this province.<sup>2</sup>

Just as the socially defined role of homemaker has become—or has always been—oppressive for many but not all women, the role of breadwinner or family provider turns out not to be well suited to all men. In *The Myth of Masculinity*, for example, Joseph Pleck observes that the male sex role identity paradigm “has helped generate sex role strain,” and he calls upon the social sciences to further the liberation of the sexes by, among other things, “examining the burdens and conflicts arising from assigning men the role of family provider.”<sup>3</sup> A good many current studies of the masculine condition, in fact, address negative aspects of the provider role or the “breadwinner bind.”<sup>4</sup>

In France, literary representations of the breadwinner role, with its attendant social and psychological problems, are especially noticeable after about 1830. By this time the Industrial Revolution had altered economic structures and expectations in French society, just as the social order had been transformed following the demise of the ancien régime. As merit and hard work began to be more valuable in pursuit of affluence than vested privilege, especially under the influence of Napoleon, upward mobility became a real possibility, and bright young men had to respond to the social imperative of financial ambition. But for many of the males represented in the realist fiction whose vogue began around 1830, the socially sanctioned obligations and expectations accompanying these new opportunities were clearly a source of “sex role strain,” and many a male protagonist finds that, when all factors are considered, the economic opportunity associated with his gender is in fact a mixed blessing.

Since literature tends to depict desire rather than fulfillment, it happens that, despite the likelihood that many nineteenth-century Frenchmen found genuine satisfaction in providing for their families, few are represented as major characters in the fiction of the period. Protagonists from the privileged classes, especially in the early part of the century (Chateaubriand’s René, Constant’s Adolphe), were not subject to the economic pressures of a breadwinner figure; male working-class characters nearer the end of the century might have co-breadwinners in their working wives (e.g., Zola’s Coupeau in *L’Assommoir*); and for other characters, especially those beyond the fringe of literary realism, the desire for family life is not explored (e.g., Huysmans’s decadent hero des Esseintes). The model of male family provider

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is especially true. Lucien Leuwen, the father of the hero in *Lucien Leuwen*, can be taken as the image of a successful fictional breadwinner—he is prosperous and content with his family and economic role—then it must be said that he is an exceptional figure. The expression “failed fictional breadwinner,” then, shall refer to male characters who do not succeed in adapting themselves to the traditional role of family provider, or to those whose apparent success is represented as entailing unhappiness. In taking as my brief corpus several “classics” of nineteenth-century France, works by Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert and Maupassant, I intend to show that attention to the male protagonists’ troubled self-image reveals persistent literary sensitivity to the burdens of masculinity in the context of expected economic performance.

Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* (1830) may at first glance seem to be out of place in a study of failed fictional breadwinners. Julien Sorel, consumed by economic and social ambition, appears to be an exploiter of women as he pursues his dream of upward mobility and usurpation across class lines. He seduces madame de Rênal, the mother of the children he tutors in a provincial setting, before moving on to Paris and seducing the daughter of his aristocratic employer. Thanks to undeniable talent and clever machinations, he procures for himself the cross of the Legion of Honor, a new name conferring nobility, a pregnant aristocratic fiancée, an enviable promised dowry and a commission as a military officer. What else could a young Frenchman of his time desire? Yet despite these appearances of success, the denouement of Julien’s novel reveals that his tender heart was not in fact made for social and economic conquest. During Julien’s imprisonment following the well-known scene where he shoots and wounds his first mistress—an unexpected scene for which the equivocal motivation can be considered a reflection of the hero’s conflicting masculine desires—Julien comes to understand that quiet contemplation and the assurance of madame de Rênal’s genuine affection are more important for his happiness than material success.

What has prompted Julien to choose a course of action that is incompatible with the fulfillment of his deepest needs? Stendhalian psychology is quite complex and a simple answer will be inadequate, but it is important to recognize Julien’s response to social conditioning. Peter Brooks, in the course of a penetrating analysis of the interrelating political, psychological, and narrative components of the novel, takes account of this social conditioning when he observes that “If, as Julien says . . . the ‘fatal memory’ of Napoleon will forever prevent young Frenchmen like himself from being happy, the reason is that Napoleon represented the possibility of ‘la carrière ouverte aux talents’: the legitimization of class mobility, legalized usurpation.”<sup>5</sup> While Julien may have overestimated the influence of Napoleon on the social norms prevailing in 1830, it is certain that a new success ethic has emerged. The call to financial ambition is of course heard by all males, whether or not they intend to be family providers. But, in the patriarchal society of the period, the desire for wealth generally accompanies the desire for heirs: hence Julien’s repeatedly expressed desire for a son, influenced perhaps by Napoleon’s annulment of his marriage to Josephine, who had borne him no children, and subsequent marriage to Marie Louise, who gave birth to Napoleon II. In conforming to the success ethic, Julien feels obliged to decline his friend Fouqué’s offer of a partnership in a secure but modest woodcutting business; instead, he self-consciously imitates historical or literary models of masculine performance—Don Juan, Danton, Napoleon. And, as has

been the case with his role models, his success is the root of failure.

But Julien's failure is exceptional in that he is lucid about the shortcomings of the male gender role he has adopted. In prison he finds release from his desires for fortune, honor, and the prestige of an aristocratic wife and progeny. These desires have in fact never been authentic, but represent instead what Julien thought he *ought* to desire. Even though he might win his freedom by playing his cards right, Julien chooses to remain in prison and courts the guillotine by playing out his role of plebian in revolt to its logical conclusion. The issue of class conflict, which Stendhal develops only intermittently, prevails in the end to justify the demise of a protagonist who has both succeeded and discovered the hollowness of the success ethic.

Although Julien ultimately proves unsuited to the breadwinner role, the model of an ambitious and dutiful family provider is clearly delineated in the novel through the development of characters such as M. Valenod and especially M. de Rênal, who, in order to publicize his success and importance, hires Julien to tutor his three sons. Stendhal gives us a negative image of M. de Rênal, whose status as ridiculous figure is directly proportional to his success as family provider. He is somewhat embarrassed to owe his prosperity to his flourishing nail factory, but one has to live in one's time (which for M. de Rênal means accepting the fact that bourgeois commercial wealth is displacing aristocratic fortunes—witness the rise of Valenod in the novel), and the industrial enterprise has allowed him to become mayor of Verrières, to build a fine house and to acquire a country château, to hire Julien, and so on. But M. de Rênal's civic and industrial activities leave him little time for the family he provides for, and his relations with his wife and children are obviously superficial—to the point where his innocent and devoted wife is vulnerable to the discovery of passion for the first time in the arms of young Julien, whose obligatory masculine ambition is tempered by exquisite sensitivity. Since M. de Rênal's income derives from industry and commerce rather than from property, his aristocratic estate does not prevent him from exemplifying a specific male gender bind documented in Stearns' *Be a Man!* and other studies; that is, the conflicting roles of paterfamilias and breadwinner. With M. de Rênal, Stendhal calls into question the breadwinner role and the success ethic by presenting a contemptible character who achieves a measure of success without pondering its negative implications; with Julien he presents an admirable character whose most notable achievement is the discovery of values that are superior to those of financial ambition and social prestige.

Balzac's *Père Goriot* (1835), like *The Red and the Black*, participates in a tradition of nineteenth-century novels that Brooks identifies as being concerned with issues of paternity, authority, legitimacy, and the transmission of wisdom.<sup>6</sup> The enduring popularity of these themes suggests in itself something of a male gender crisis, as the sense of masculine self-worth is continually predicated on obsessive notions of personal authority and power. With progressive industrialization and economic expansion in nineteenth-century France, authority, paternal or otherwise, is commonly associated in literature with personal economic achievement. The consequences of these beliefs are generally shown to be negative, and *Père Goriot* in particular invalidates the assumption that gratifying paternal authority should derive from a man's success as breadwinner.

The protagonist of the novel, Eugène de Rastignac, like Julien Sorel, makes his way from the provinces to Paris in order to seek fame and fortune. His lack of money, despite his advantages of an aristocratic name and useful family connections, gives

him no better alternative, during his difficult time as a law student, than to stay at the modest Vauquer boarding house, where his story begins to intertwine with that of Goriot. Structurally, the novel traces Rastignac's apprenticeship in society, but thematically, it centers upon the issue of paternity,<sup>7</sup> and as a result it is Goriot who proves in the end to be the work's most memorable character.

Paradoxically, Goriot had been a very successful breadwinner during his working years; it is in retirement that the resulting family alienation becomes obvious and ultimately brings about his ruin and death. Like M. de Rênal, Goriot was attuned to the economic climate of his times. He made a small fortune in the pasta and grain trade during the turbulent years when bread was scarce in France, and with his profits he continually spoiled his two daughters before marrying them off to socially prominent men. Goriot's poignant personal tragedy lies in his inability to show love for his daughters in any other way than by giving them money or material things. Thus conditioned, the daughters bleed him of his last resources as they try to cope with unhappy marriages. Despite commercial success during his working years, Goriot is prodded toward death by a sense of failure both as father and as provider. His status as victim derives specifically from competing gender roles: that of breadwinner versus that of father. Unlike M. de Rênal, whom Stendhal ridicules by concentrating on his inadequacies as a husband in the context of his socio-economic vanity, Goriot, presented only as a father, retains his innocence and our sympathy. He may not seem as "sublime" as Rastignac reports, but he is certainly a compelling image of a specific male gender bind.

Rastignac, who has made heavy financial demands on his own family while trying to find a niche in Parisian high society, is nonetheless capable of being scandalized by the daughters' insensitivity toward their self-sacrificing father. But by the closing lines of the novel, in light of his famous challenge to Paris—"A nous deux maintenant" ("Now it's me against you")—and his decision, just after Goriot's bleak burial, to spend the evening dining with one of the heartless daughters, we can only conclude that he is determined to join the fray and to pursue a model of riches, power, and perpetual unfulfillment. Rastignac's apprenticeship is over, for he is now prepared to give up pursuing the satisfactions of truly authentic family ties in order to answer the seductive call of financial ambition. Such are the perils of the male gender role. They must be accepted. To be a man in Balzac's world, one must conform to the requirements of *homo economicus*, whatever the cost.

Writing in the first half of the nineteenth century, Stendhal and Balzac are keenly aware of the changing economic climate of their time. Ambition, upward mobility, and socio-economic desire motivate many of their characters, who tend to come from the middle or upper classes. The protagonists are generally endowed with a good deal of talent and/or energy, and even in their failures they are likely to be admirable. In the novels just examined, Julien Sorel, Goriot, and Eugène de Rastignac find it natural to pursue dreams of economic ambition so as to establish themselves in society, be a credit to their families, and cultivate self-esteem. Stendhal explicitly deplores obsessive preoccupation with money, and Balzac offers vivid portraits of its ravages, but in depicting the response of their male protagonists to the social imperative of financial ambition, they seem to accept the situation as inevitable, even if unsatisfying, and the only alternatives they hint at are death or some form of reclusion. In the second half of the century, as fiction becomes dominated by the Realist and Naturalist schools, ambition often seems to have been replaced

with a survival ethic. While the role of economic factors in this evolved literary perspective is difficult to assess, it is certain that the effects of the Industrial Revolution were generalized after 1850, the triumph of a consumer-oriented bourgeoisie was well established, and the promise of continuing economic expansion was tempered by disillusionment among intellectuals following the revolution of 1848 and the Franco-Prussian debacle of 1870-71. New scientific theories and new applications of the scientific method, moreover, were transforming traditional views of man and his world. Zola's interest in heredity as a determinant of human behavior and his Naturalist enterprise of the experimental novel exemplify a general tendency to develop fictional characters with close attention to details within causal patterns. In this intellectual climate, Flaubert and his disciple Maupassant portray men and women who are mired in the banal but deterministic circumstances of rather dull bourgeois or lower-class lives.

Their male protagonists may find that the supposed economic advantages of masculinity are in fact illusory, that they must struggle to make the best of mediocre talents and limited opportunity. Their masculinity may further be diminished by the worldly pretensions and/or the economic demands of their wives. In *Madame Bovary* (1857), Emma's suicide, one recalls, is most directly precipitated near the end of her novel not by heartache over her futile love affairs, but by despair over the mountain of debts she has accumulated. Charles has failed her not only as lover, but especially as provider, despite his seemingly adequate income as a country doctor. Long before her adultery, in fact, Emma explicitly deplores his lack of professional ambition.<sup>9</sup> Flaubert, who like many realists had little inclination to create admirable characters, portrays Charles as a hardworking but rather doltish fellow whose chief virtues are the ability to endure ridicule and the capacity to push himself just beyond the brink of his limited intellectual resources in pursuit of a career. Having gamely tried, during his early years, to satisfy first his mother and then an older wife whom his mother had chosen for him, he is enchanted with Emma and desires nothing so much as her happiness. He also loves his little daughter, and if he weren't so boring, imperceptive and uncouth, he would be a splendid husband indeed. Emma's happiness requires the passions of novelized romance and the glamour of Paris fashion magazines, however, and Charles's hard work and dutiful attentions go unappreciated. His position as husband figure in the novel deserves scrutiny and analysis, for even though Emma's point of view and status as character are far more important than those of Charles, her story is nonetheless framed by the narrative of Charles's efforts to prepare himself educationally and to pursue a career. He is an interesting figure because of the gulf between his good intentions as husband and provider and his inexorable mediocrity in both enterprises. The one thing Charles does that would really have pleased Emma comes too late, for it is in response to her suicide: he dies of grief.

It is doubtful, however, that he would have been any happier in adopting a course similar to that of Frédéric Moreau in Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*. Frédéric avoids the breadwinner role altogether by remaining single and subsisting on a dwindling inheritance. As a result of his long and romantic idealization of madame Arnoux, he resists the matrimonial aspirations of Louise Roque, Rosanette, and the widowed Mme Dambreuse, and his halfhearted career pursuits have no better outcome than his sentimental undertakings. As an unusually irresolute literary protagonist, Frédéric finds that the breadwinner role has no appeal for him, and the price he pays for pursuing other options is to find himself middle-aged and lonely,

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living on modest resources, and cherishing as his best memory the recollection of a time when he and an adolescent friend in a state of unfulfillment left a brothel. One might conclude that *Madame Bovary* is, among other things, a case study of a failed breadwinner, while *Sentimental Education* dramatizes the lack of satisfying alternatives to the breadwinner role.

If women are associated with unfulfillment and the disadvantages of masculinity in Flaubert's novels, they may appear even more menacing in the seemingly misogynistic worlds of Maupassant.<sup>9</sup> In particular, a number of his works present gender conflict in direct relation to economic strife. The very titles of two well-known stories, "The Necklace" and "The Umbrella" (1884), suggest articles of economic consumption whose appearance is a sign of economic status. Monsieur Oreille's colleagues at the office constantly rib him about his humble and worn umbrella, so he urges his wife, who does not work but who holds the family pursestrings, to allow him to purchase another one. As a man who is henpecked by his penny-pinching wife and browbeaten by his colleagues—who of course sabotage his new umbrella—M. Oreille is an unusually ridiculous masculine figure. But as a man whose masculinity is called into question by both workday pressures and economic discord at home, M. Oreille is a comic symbol of male malaise in a narrowly defined gender role.

He has a counterpart in the husband figure of "The Necklace," M. Loisel, whose wife, moreover, recalls Emma Bovary. To relieve his wife's persistent melancholy, Loisel obtains, with much effort, an invitation to the minister's ball. His wife's distress only increases: she hasn't a thing to wear. Loisel has saved up 400 francs toward the purchase of a rifle for hunting, but he will endure the emasculating sacrifice of this gender symbol in order to buy his wife a dress.<sup>10</sup> Unwilling to adorn the dress with flowers, as her husband suggests, madame Loisel opts to borrow the fabled diamond necklace from a friend. This, of course, she will lose at the ball, and she and her husband will endure ten years of deprivation to pay for a replacement, before learning that the original was fake. Seduced by appearances, madame Loisel falls prey to an ironic destiny while embodying the hollow social and economic desires that breadwinner husbands were expected to fulfill.

In "The Necklace" and "The Umbrella," as in the novels briefly reviewed here, the breadwinner role is not a privileged one. Those men who achieve genuine social and economic power, Julien Sorel and Goriot, discover that their success brings not happiness but rather alienation from self or family. The male protagonists of Flaubert and Maupassant are characteristic of Northrop Frye's ironic mode of literature<sup>11</sup>—the reader looks down upon their struggles as they are caught between the rock of their wives' or mistresses' desires and the hard place of economic reality. One character who succeeds despite limited talent is the cynical Georges Duroy, hero of Maupassant's *Bel-Ami* (1885). Having achieved wealth and power through his good looks and opportunistic relations with women, Duroy stands as a counterexample to the prevailing ironic mode of late nineteenth-century realism. *Bel-Ami*, however, in portraying a corrupt society where dishonesty and exploitation are the keys to success for either gender, serves as an indictment of contemporary social norms. With his advantageous marriage and soaring career at the end of the novel, Duroy is the very image of a successful breadwinner. And his success is scandalous. Maupassant's novel, in the final analysis, is a convincing representation of the extent to which the male breadwinner role is inherently flawed, for, like works by

Balzac and Stendhal, *Bel-Ami*, depicts a socially sanctioned male gender role that is at odds with high personal and ethical values.

Several factors must be considered to explain why, in these classic works of nineteenth-century French fiction, male gender roles are so unenviable. There is first of all the truism that fiction feeds on obstacles to individual fulfillment (as Gide put it in *The Immoralist*, "What would there be in a story of happiness? Only what prepares it, only what destroys it can be told"<sup>12</sup>); clearly, gender-related frustration has proved to be an obstacle of choice. One must also take into account the nineteenth-century vogue for the bourgeois unheroic hero, often plagued with "occupational inertia," as documented in the important study by Raymond Giraud.<sup>13</sup> Nor can one discount the possibility of latent misogyny or neurosis in the authors, who except for Balzac never married (and Balzac died a few months after his belated marriage at age fifty). Whatever the merits of such speculation, it is surely true that these realist authors have been unintentionally perspicacious in assessing and portraying the underside of the male breadwinner role in nineteenth-century France. Whether lured by the promise of financial opportunity in the first half of the century, or sustained by an attitude of resignation in the second half, male protagonists are consistently affected in an adverse way by the economic expectations placed upon them.

From a modernist point of view, of course, these burdensome expectations, which in a somewhat evolved form are still to be found in France as well as in most western countries, can be alleviated only through the empowerment of women. Gender-oriented criticism, because of the questions it raises, inevitably is fraught with political implications. Conceived of as a complement to feminist criticism, a "men's studies" perspective on literature would serve, among other things, to question received assumptions about male authors and characters, to provide a balanced assessment of historically determined sources of tension between the sexes, to shed light on specific portrayals of masculinity, and to account more accurately for various representations of the dynamics of society.

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- 1 Elaine Showalter, "Introduction," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 3.
- 2 For a concise and excellent introduction to the issues and perspectives of concern to men's studies, especially with respect to literature, see Eugene R. August, "'Modern Men,' or, Men's Studies in the 80s," *College English*, 44 (1982), 583-97.
- 3 Joseph Pleck, *The Myth of Masculinity* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1981), p. 160.
- 4 Herb Goldberg, *The Hazards of Being Male: Surviving the Myth of Masculine Privilege* (Plainview, N.Y.: Nash, 1976; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1977), p. 91 et passim. For a historical view of the evolving male gender role and a new economic definition of manhood in the wake of industrialization, see Peter N. Stearns, *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1979), esp. chapters 3-5. A more general view of trends in France is presented in Theodore Zeldin's *France, 1848-1945*; vol. 1, *Ambition, Love, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973).
- 5 Peter Brooks, "The Novel and the Guillotine; or, Fathers and Sons in *Le Rouge et le noir*," *PMLA*, 97 (1982), p. 350.
- 6 Brooks, p. 348.
- 7 Critical opinion has long been divided on the question of whether to consider Goriot or Rastignac as the protagonist of the novel. Allan Pasco has found a solution to the problem in determining that the novel's unity lies not in its development of a protagonist, but in its articulation of the theme of paternity. See Pasco's "Image Structure in *Le Père Goriot*," *French Forum*, 7 (1982), 224-34.
- 8 Oppressed by what she considers to be the financial and social mediocrity of her existence, Emma resents Charles for having too little prestige in which she might share: "She would have liked the name Bovary—her name—to be famous, on display in all the bookshops, constantly mentioned in the newspapers, known all over France. But Charles had no ambition!" Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Francis Steegmuller (New York: Random House/Modern Library, 1957), p. 68. Naorni Schor provides a contrary interpretation of the first of these sentences in adducing it as evidence of Emma's profound ambition to be a famous novelist. See "For a Restricted Thematics: Writing, Speech, and Difference in *Madame Bovary*," in *Breaking the Chain: Women, Theory, and French Realist Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 16.
- 9 Maupassant produced too many unflattering portraits of women to be spared the charge of misogyny, but his ambivalent attitude toward women has been analyzed in a revisionist study by Chantal Jennings, "La Dualité de Maupassant: son attitude envers la femme," *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 35 (1970), 559-78. Jennings discerns in Maupassant a secret fascination for women and the conviction that they should be freed from the oppressive bonds of marriage.
- 10 Gerald Prince remarks upon this in "Nom et destin dans 'La Parure,'" *French Review*, 55 (1982), p. 270.
- 11 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 34.
- 12 André Gide, *The Immoralist*, trans. Dorothy Bussy (New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 1958), p. 57.
- 13 Raymond Giraud, *The Unheroic Hero in the Novels of Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1957), p. 189.