

MAUPASSANT'S MEN: MASCULINITY AND THE FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR

For many late nineteenth-century writers, theirs was an age of gender chaos, and in recent years, critics and historians have identified the *fin de siècle* as a time of crisis in masculinity. Feminist scholars seem largely to attribute this crisis to the emergence of the 'New Woman' as a social, political and economic threat to male hegemony.¹ While I do not deny the considerable effect of the changes in the position of women upon the male self-image, I believe its importance may have been exaggerated, obscuring the influence of other factors, specifically changes in the way men thought of themselves and their sex. This paper is intended, then, to modify our view of the *fin de siècle* masculinity crisis, but also to draw attention to an aspect of Maupassant's work which has hitherto remained unexamined.

Perhaps due to his rather 'macho' public image, critics seem to have ignored Maupassant's explorations of masculinity. I would argue that masculinist concerns are central to Maupassant's work, and that he is well aware of men's struggles with the expectations and limitations placed upon them by bourgeois society. In this paper, I will examine the impact of the Franco-Prussian war, or Maupassant's literary version of the war, on French masculinity, both for the generation of men that fought the war, and the generation that followed.

Despite this paper's focus on the 1870 war, I will stress again that it is far from being the only, or even the most important, cause of the *fin de siècle* masculinity crisis - the well-documented advances of French feminism and the emergence of homosexual culture undoubtedly have an immense effect.

For Maupassant, the Franco-Prussian war destroys traditional French masculinity. the 'man's man' is literally and metaphorically slain in 1870. the figure of the soldier had always embodied the values - strength, virility, energy, heterosexuality, promiscuity - that have traditionally combined to make up the 'true man'. According to Épivent in 'Le Lit 29', 'un soldat c'était un gaillard, que diable, un grand gaillard fait pour faire la guerre et l'amour' (II, p. 175), and the soldier aims to 'conquérir', whether in love or in war. Epivent seems to conform to the masculinist myth of the handsome, brave, virile warrior, and the strength and pride of the 'real man' are represented in his moustache, which is:

1. See, for example, Annelise Mauge, *L'identité masculine en crise au tournant du siècle* (Paris: Rivages, 1987); Michelle Perrot, 'The New Eve and the Old Adam: Changes in French Women's Condition at the Turn of the Century', in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, ed. Margaret Higgonet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 51-60; Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992).

blonde, très forte, tombant martialement sur la lèvre en un beau bourrelet couleur de blé mûr, mais fin, soigneusement roulé, et qui descendait ensuite des deux côtés de la bouche en deux puissants jets de poils tout à fait crânes. (p. 174)

The moustache is Maupassant's privileged symbol of traditional masculinity, and a man without a moustache is not a 'real man'. In *La Moustache*, a woman complains of the feel of her husband's kiss after he has shaved his moustache off, concluding that 'un homme sans moustache n'est plus un homme... la moustache, ô la moustache! est indispensable à une physionomie virile' (I, p. 918). The moustache, as erotic instrument and essence of virility, is a symbolic phallus, as can be noted from Jeanne's comment that 'Il n'y a pas d'amour sans moustaches!' (I, p. 920). Moustachioed men - such as Épivent and la Mère Sauvage's son ('un grand maigre au nez crochu, aux yeux bruns, à la forte moustache qui faisait sur la lèvre un bourrelet de poils noirs' (I, p. 1219)) - are 'real men', those who are clean-shaven or whose moustache has not fully grown, such as the Prussian officer Mademoiselle Fifi, are feminised.

Furthermore, the moustache is an emblem of specifically French masculinity, indeed of Frenchness. Jeanne loves the moustache because it is 'française, bien française. Elle nous vient de nos pères les Gaulois, et elle est demeurée le signe de notre caractère national enfin' (I, p. 921). It is noticeable that, when death in war is evoked, we once again focus on the moustache. Jeanne recalls seeing rows of corpses after a battle, and being able to distinguish the French by their moustaches; when la Mère Sauvage imagines her son's death, she sees him 'la tête tombant, les yeux ouverts, tandis qu'il mâchait le coin de sa grosse moustache...' (I, p. 1220).

Death is the death of traditional masculinity, specifically French masculinity, embodied in the moustache. Those left on the battlefield have at least died in the course of doing their duty, in a fashion deemed heroic and manly. The dead men that Jeanne sees retain their moustaches, they have not been unmanned. However, those that remain have to live with the utter humiliation of a defeat that shames them, their nation and their sex.

The war symbolically emasculates Frenchmen, as we see in 'Un Duel', where M. Dubuis has to tolerate a Prussian officer's boasts about victory, and is pushed beyond breaking point by the Prussian tugging Dubuis' moustache and threatening to cut it off. Since we have established that the moustache is an obvious phallic symbol in Maupassant, this is a threat of castration, the final destruction of French manhood. Dubuis resists, he retains his masculinity through violence.

Yet, generally, for Maupassant defeat and its aftermath symbolically unman Frenchmen, and France is left bereft of strong, virile men to defend it. In the absence of 'real men', others have to step into the void and attempt to fulfil the role that

France's men have failed in. The traditionally male duties of violent revenge, resistance, defence of the nation and of its people are taken up by women, most often prostitutes (Boule de Suif, Irma in 'Le Lit 29', Rachel in 'Mademoiselle Fifi'), the elderly (le Père Milon, la Mère Sauvage) and the middle-aged, typically corpulent, bourgeoisie (M. Dubuis, Morrisot and Sauvage in 'Deux Amis'). These actions are frequently read as heroic examples of the indomitable spirit and patriotism of the French people, and there can be no doubt that they are intended to be admirable, but I would suggest that each of these actions is in fact an insult to the men who have left France down and failed to perform their duty as men. Each act of heroism by a woman or an ageing civilian is an indictment of the generation of men that failed in 1870, and continues the unmaning of that generation.

This is particularly evident in 'Le Lit 29', which illustrates a number of the aspects I have raised - the destruction of traditional masculinity, the adoption of traditionally male duties by women, and the symbolic emasculation that this entails. Épivent, as we noted, seems to embody the masculinist myth of the strong, brave, handsome, virile, promiscuous, heterosexual, moustachioed soldier. Yet there are also suggestions that he is not entirely manly - he is immensely vain, and his body is feminised - 'La taille était mince comme s'il eût porté corset... Sa cuisse était admirable, une cuisse de gymnaste, de danseur...' (II, p. 174). Gymnasts and dancers are hardly models of traditional masculinity, and thus it is suggested that even the most apparently virile Frenchmen are not entirely manly. During the war, Épivent fights bravely but in vain, and on his return to Rouen he finds that his mistress, the prostitute Irma, is dying of syphilis. Knowing she had the disease, she slept with as many Prussians as possible in order to take revenge, both for her own disgrace and for the defeat. Many have died due to her.

Irma has then, taken up the role of defender of the nation that Épivent and his like have singularly failed to fulfil. It is no accident that Irma lives in the rue Jeanne d'Arc - like Joan of Arc, she has taken on the traditionally male role of warrior, and proved to be more effective in that role than the men (for Maupassant, it is a measure of the decline of France that the role of a national heroine should be taken by a prostitute). Irma taunts Épivent and his generation for their failure to do their duty, and for the fact that she, a woman, has proved more effective in defending her country against the enemy than they have:

Tu n'en aurais pas fait autant, toi, avec ta croix d'honneur! je l'ai plus méritée que toi, vois-tu, plus que toi, et j'en ai tué plus que toi des Prussiens!

Her accusation, aimed at Épivent but applicable, I would argue, to his entire generation of Frenchmen is 'Avec ça que vous leur avez fait bien du mal aux Prussiens! Ça serait-il arrivé si vous les aviez empêchés de venir à Rouen? Dis? C'est vous qui deviez les arrêter, entends-tu'. She casts a doubt on Épivent's masculinity,

saying 'je vais mourir tandis que toi tu te ballades, toi, et que tu fais le beau pour enjôler les femmes...' (II, p.184). Irma has taken on the traditional male role of dying for 'la patrie', while Épivent cares only for his appearance. He is not a 'real man', he is unmanned, as we see in Irma's parting shot. She sends him away with the words '...va donc... capon!' (II, p. 185). Traditional French masculinity, then, is humiliated and destroyed in the 1870 war. However, this is only part of a more general gender anarchy released by war. In war all norms are swept away, the world is turned upside down, 'le droit n'existe plus... la loi est morte... toute notion du juste disparaît'.²

For Maupassant, traditional gender relations are amongst the first casualties of war, and the Franco-Prussian war and its aftermath see a profusion of effeminate men and masculine women. We have already noted the swapping of gender roles between Épivent and Irma, and the confusion of genders is reflected in the image of the mingling of their clothes on the floor of the bedroom as they make love, the vestimentary symbols of masculinity and femininity intermingled:

Sabre, culotte rouge, képi, dolman chavirés du dos d'une chaise, par terre; les robes, les jupes, les bas de soie répandus, tombés aussi mêlés à l'uniforme, en détresse sur le tapis, la chambre bouleversée comme après une bataille... (II, p. 178)

In 'L'Horrible', the sense of horror that the General attempts to describe, which involves 'un frisson de mystère, ... une sensation d'épouvante anormale, hors nature' (II, p. 114), derives partly from a sense of uncertainty about gender, an unease provoked by the elision of gender difference. The General witnesses the brutal murder by his soldiers of an old man who has been following them. When he and two gendarmes undress the mutilated body, they find it to be of a woman, who they assume must have been following them in search of news of her son. The General feels an 'étrange et poignante sensation d'angoisse' (II, p. 117), and I would argue that this feeling is panic at the collapse of gender distinctions in a world where all norms have collapsed, all divisions have disappeared (all notions of rank and discipline have disappeared among the General's troops, who ignore his orders).

The story which perhaps best illustrates the gender chaos unleashed by war is 'Mademoiselle Fifi'. The Prussian officer Wilhem d'Eyrik is clearly feminised - he is called by his fellow officers and by the narrator, 'Mademoiselle Fifi', on account of his feminine appearance and his habit of saying 'Fi, fi donc'. His manner is effeminate, he has a 'tournure coquette', and his body, like Épivent's, is feminised - he has a 'taille fine qu'on aurait dit tenue en corset' and '[une] figure pâle où sa naissante moustache apparaissait à peine' (I, p. 386). The narrator further unmans Mademoiselle Fifi by using the feminine pronoun to describe him - 'Mlle Fifi elle-même ne semblait pas

2. Guy de Maupassant, 'la Guerre', in *Chroniques*, 3 vols (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1980), II, p. 295.

tenir en place, Elle se levait, se rasseyait' (I, p. 388) - and describes his feminine powers of persuasion thus - 'il demandait cela avec des grâces de chatte, des cajoleries de femme, des douceurs de voix d'une maîtresse affolée par une envie' (I, pp. 390-91).

Yet Fifi is not entirely effeminate, for he is also possessed of many extremely masculine characteristics, such as an enormous taste for violence and destruction, apparent in his wanton destruction of works of art in the occupied château, and his brutality towards the prostitute Rachel. He blows cigar smoke into her mouth as he kisses her, and follows this with a series of pinches, and finally bites her lip until it bleeds. Fifi is in fact an androgynous figure, who sees to wreak gender chaos, infecting those around him with that androgyny. He draws a moustache on the portrait of a woman, turning her into an androgyne like himself, and provokes Rachel into 'masculine' violence as she stabs Fifi and eludes the Prussian troops. Rachel is unsexed by Fifi, as illustrated by her declaration 'je ne suis pas une femme, moi, je suis une putain...' (I, p. 395). Rachel, like Fifi, is neither man nor woman.

The gender anarchy released in 1870 does not disappear with the end of the war. The masculinist myth of the victorious warrior cannot survive the humiliation of defeat and occupation, and until 1914, there will be no opportunity for its revival. *Revanchisme*, I would argue, is in part a desire for the re-confirmation of French masculinity through military victory. In the rest of this paper, I shall examine Maupassant's treatment of the generation of men that has to live with the defeat in 1870, born too late for that war and too early for 1914, and thus without any opportunity to prove their masculinity by living out the warrior myth, focusing on *Pierre et Jean*, and its examination of the post-war generation's struggles with masculinity.

New masculinist myths have to be created for a generation that has no chance to prove itself in war, and Pierre Roland struggles, and fails, to live up to these new myths. A series of arenas for the confirmation of masculinity opens up, and principal among these is perhaps sport. As Perrot notes, the *fin de siècle* sees a growth of physical culture, 'the development of sports, the praise of athletic figures, the new stadium gods who displayed their beautiful muscular bodies before women spectators',³ and sport creates the new masculinist myth of the athlete. The athlete is, I would argue, a watered-down version of the warrior - success in both sport and war depends upon physical and mental strength and courage.

Sport, like war, is a competition between men and success depends upon overcoming other men. Maupassant was himself a keen sportsman, and physical culture - especially boating, fishing and hunting - play a key role in his work, not least in *Pierre et Jean*, which opens with a fishing trip aboard Père Roland's boat, the *Perle*. Much of the significance of sport as a male activity is apparent here.

3. Michelle Perrot, pp. 57-58.

Firstly, it is clear that sport is very much a man's business, an arena for competition between men. The fishing trip is the inner sanctum of male competition and bonding in Maupassant, a space where no woman may enter - in 'En Mer', a fishing boat is the setting for another example of fraternal rivalry, and in 'Deux Amis', perhaps Maupassant's greatest tale of male bonding, Morissot and Sauvage's fishing trips ends in their death, side by side. Père Roland's comment that 'on ne devrait jamais pêcher qu'entre hommes'⁴ emphasises that sport is for men and about men - normally, Roland and his sons go fishing alone. The presence of Mmes Roland and Rosémilly has disrupted the all-male idyll and spoils the catch. There is a strong competition between Père Roland and his two sons. Pierre and Jean both underestimate the size of their catch in order to make their father feel better (p. 718). The two brothers then compete athletically as they row the boat. The rowing becomes a virility competition, 'une lutte pour montrer leur vigueur' (p. 723), a chance for the brothers to perform for the women (and for their father and one another), showing off their bodies - 'Alors ils allaient montrer leurs biceps' (p. 724). They take off their jackets and roll up their sleeves to show their 'bras nus' (p. 723), Pierre's being 'velus, un peu maigres, mais nerveux', Jean's 'gras et blancs, un peu roses, avec une bosse de muscles qui roulait sous la peau' (p. 724). Maupassant seems well aware in this passage that sport is a celebration of masculinity and of the male body. There is a knowingness in the passage, an insistence on sport as male competition - it is 'l'orgueil de mâles des deux frères' (p. 724 - my emphasis) which is excited by the prospect of being able to 'se mesurer l'un contre l'autre' (p. 724). In this opening scene, it is noticeable that Pierre is the loser. A pattern is set - throughout the novel, Pierre will lose in competition with other men.

Similar competition between men can be seen in the world of work, and I would argue that, for the bourgeoisie, careers offer a second arena for the confirmation of virility. A 'real man' is expected to be aggressive, competitive and successful in public life, and both Pierre and Jean are under pressure to succeed in their chosen careers. Success comes easily to Jean - by the end of the novel, at the age of twenty-five, he has established himself as a provincial lawyer with a home, a legal practice, an inheritance and a fiancée. He has lived up to the expectations of a bourgeois male.

Pierre, however, is less comfortable with these expectations, and is initially reluctant to adopt any particular career, flirting with a number of professions, yet feeling no real calling (p. 718). Finally, he settles on medicine, but on completing his studies he does not immediately find a permanent position, and at the time of the novel's action pressure is growing on him to set up in medical practice - he feels guilt at the amount his vacillations over a career have cost his parents, he is conscious that he is comparatively old at thirty to begin his career, and he feels an extra spur from the fact that his younger brother has completed his studies and is about to set up in legal practice.

4. Guy de Maupassant, *Pierre et Jean*, in *Romans* (Paris: Pléiade Gallimard, 1987), p. 717. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

It is clear that Pierre is not driven by any great interest in medicine, or even desire for success for its own sake, but above all by a need to prove his masculinity by competing with, and overcoming, other men in the careers race. Remembering the professors who taught him, he tells himself that 'il valait autant qu'eux, sinon mieux' (p. 742); he is particularly keen to defeat Jean in the professional arena - 'il serait plus riche que son frère, plus riche et célèbre, et content de lui-même, car il ne devrait sa fortune qu'à lui' (p. 743).

The world of careers is simply an extension of the rowing competition for Pierre, an opportunity to battle with other men for fortune and admiration. He has little or no feeling for medicine in itself, and it is significant that we hardly ever see him at work, his only moments of medical practice being his recommendation to his father not to drink (pp. 752-54) and his clumsy examination of his mother (at his father's, not his own, insistence) (pp. 784-85). On both occasions, he is unconvincing as a doctor, sounding pompous or unsure.

Medicine is simply a way for Pierre to enter professional competition with other males, as he feels he must, yet he is not remotely suited to this competition. He ends up as a loser in the careers race as in the rowing competition - Jean sets up office in the apartment Pierre had set his heart on, and Pierre ultimately finds himself in the position of doctor on a transatlantic liner. It is a badly-paid job that no one else wants, and Pierre is aware that he is one of the 'sujets médiocres' that '[on] embarque souvent sur ces bateaux-là' (p. 816).

The *fin de siècle* also sees the rise of the masculinist myth of the 'macho', imperialist voyage of discovery. The male explorer, on a voyage of colonial and sexual conquest, is another replacement for the soldier as masculinist hero. Despite the novel's setting in Le Havre, I believe that the presence of this myth can be detected in *Pierre et Jean*. Le Havre is a port from which ships set off for exotic locations, and Pierre dreams of colonial and sexual adventure in 'des pays aux grandes fleurs et aux belles filles pâles ou cuivrées, des pays aux oiseaux-mouches, aux éléphants, aux lions libres, aux rois nègres' (p. 738). Yet his job on the transatlantic liner is a demeaning parody of this myth - the ship simply shuttles back and forth between Le Havre and New York, and Pierre will never see 'les blondes suédoises ou les brunes Havaïaises' (p. 739), but will simply dole out pills to upper-class tourists and poor emigrants.

The final arena for the confirmation of virility is not new, but Pierre is equally unsuccessful in it. The myth of the Don Juan remains as strong as ever for the post-1870 generation, and there is a great pressure on bourgeois males to be promiscuous, competitive and successful within compulsory heterosexuality. However, Pierre is not sexually active in the novel, and appears to feel no real sexual urge. He has had little sexual experience, but has shown as little commitment in his relations with women as in his career, and seems to have taken mistresses as part of the prevailing student culture of the Latin Quarter. For Pierre, women are either possessions which will gain

him extra kudos in the eyes of other men (particularly his brother), or companions offering only maternal affection and 'consolation', rather than sexual gratification (p. 747). Increasingly, he feels only contempt and disgust for women such as Mme de Rosémilly and the barmaid (p. 748), and these feelings become especially acute at Trouville, where his misogynistic vision transforms the scene of pleasure-seekers on the beach into 'une immense floraison de la perversité féminine'. Yet it is important to note that Pierre's hatred is not aimed solely at women. The men on the beach are also the object of his disgust, he feels contempt and horror for:

ces hommes assis près d'elles, les yeux dans les yeux, parlant la bouche près de la bouche, [qui] les appelaient et les désiraient, les chassaient comme un gibier souple et fuyant bien qu'il semblait si proche et si facile. (p. 776)

I would argue that what Pierre feels on the beach is disgust at the whole institution of heterosexuality, at the heterosexual exchange that makes the beach just 'une halle d'amour où les uns se vendaient, les autres se donnaient'. Pierre himself is outside heterosexuality, he walks through the crowd on the beach as an outsider, unable and unwilling to join in. He is an exile from heterosexuality, unable and unwilling to compete in the competition for women, incapable of conforming to the Don Juan myth.

Pierre is a loser, then, in every realm of male competition, and is incapable of living up to any of the masculinist myths available to the post-1870 generation. Yet Maupassant's sympathy is no doubt with Pierre as a man who cannot conform to the expectations placed on bourgeois men, and finds himself an exile from conventional masculinity, just as he ends the novel as an exile on the transatlantic liner. I would argue that in *Pierre et Jean* Maupassant is showing up the predicament of a generation of men for whom there are no adequate models of masculinity, who live in an age where the old myths have disappeared.

The new masculinist myths that Pierre cannot live up to are themselves empty and mediocre. Success in bourgeois careers such as medicine and the law is not heroic, since these are not ultimately 'manly' pursuits. Doctors are never, for Maupassant, who had considerable first-hand of their work, the heroic figures they are for Zola. The older generation of men in the novel serve to highlight the lack of virility of the post-1870 generation - Beausire is a retired liner captain, Papagris a sailor. For Pierre and Jean's generation, physical, athletic activities such as boating and fishing are not work, but frivolous, trivial leisure. Marowski is a popular figure amongst Pierre and his fellow students because he represents for them a lost age of manly heroism. They construct legends around Marowski, and this:

réputation de conspirateur redoutable, de nihiliste, de régicide, de patriote prêt à tout, échappé à la mort par miracle, avait séduit l'imagination aventureuse et vive de Pierre Roland. (p. 739)

Pierre's attraction to Marowski, I would suggest, is based upon the old Pole's embodiment of heroic, active masculinity that Pierre, and the men of his generation, cannot attain. The fact that there is no evidence, from Marowski himself or anyone else, to support the legends is neither here nor there - the post-1870 generation needs to believe in heroic masculinity. They know theirs is an unmanly, unmanned generation, and success in the realms of sport, careers or sex is no substitute for real action. They are haunted and taunted by reminders of a bygone age of virility, victory and action - Pierre and Jean are cursed with the surname 'Roland', embodying a macho military heroism they cannot emulate, Jean's father and benefactor has the martial surname 'Maréchal'. Furthermore, the spectre of the humiliation of 1870 cannot be exorcised - the name of the ship that Pierre sets sail on at the end of the novel is 'Lorraine'.

In Maupassant, then, are strong indications of a crisis in masculinity, and he and his characters are trapped in a no man's land of gender uncertainty, an anguish at the lack of opportunities to repair the damage to French masculinity wrought by the Franco-Prussian war. This paper has sought to identify the forms of that crisis in Maupassant - perhaps the next step for a masculinist approach to the *fin de siècle* is to examine the perceived crisis more closely and ask ourselves if the concern for masculinity in the literature of the period is based in a real social phenomenon. Or is masculinity crisis a literary invention, symbolic of deeper unease, deeper disorder?

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