Scrambling Sex and Gender with Rachilde: Towards a reading of *Monsieur Vénus* as 'proto-queer'

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Abstract

Taking *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) as its focus, this article expands upon the limited critical discourse connecting the work of Rachilde (1860-1953) to queer theory. *Monsieur Vénus* and queer theory are mutually illuminative: Butler's theory of performativity allows us to interpret the unstable bodies in Rachilde's text, while *Monsieur Vénus* in turn elucidates, or at least exemplifies, some of the questions at the heart of queer studies. For example: can sex exceed the human body? Can a transgender person live a heteronormative life? What is the relationship between queerness and reproduction? In asking such questions, this article grounds a piece of Decadent, *fin-de-siècle* French literature in the context of queer, feminist and trans studies, and thereby maps the connections between Rachilde's work and these contemporary cultural conversations. As the author of *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe* (1928), Rachilde rejected progressive social movements. I therefore borrow Lisa Downing's notion of the 'proto-queer' (Downing, 'Notes on Rachilde' 16) to guard against the complete recuperation of Rachilde into the queer canon. Regardless of its author's positionality, however, I am seeking to frame *Monsieur Vénus* as part of our queer literary heritage. *Monsieur Vénus* is more playful and provocative than it is political, but Rachilde succeeds in 'scrambling' sex and gender in that the two categories become muddled, unfixed and denaturalized.

Keywords: queer theory, feminism, French literature, gender, Rachilde

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List of Abbreviations

LJ Rachilde. *La Jongleuse*. 1900. Des Femmes, 1982.

MS Rachilde. *La Marquise de Sade*. 1887. Mercure de France, 1981.

MV(a) Rachilde. *Monsieur Vénus: Roman Matérialiste*. 1884. Edited by Melanie Hawthorne and Liz Constable, Modern Language Association of America, 2004.

MV(b) Rachilde. *Monsieur Vénus*. 1889. Hard Press, 2016.[1]

PF Rachilde. *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe.* Les Éditions de France, 1928.

SI Rachilde. *La Sanglante ironie*. 1891. Mercure de France, 1902.

[1] *Monsieur Vénus* was reprinted in 1889 with certain passages from the original 1884 edition, including the provocative ending, abridged or omitted. The 1889 edition includes a preface by Maurice Barrès. For a breakdown of the differences between the 1884 and 1889 editions, see *MV(a)* xxvi-xxx.

Introduction

'[A]doptons *il* ou *elle*, afin que je ne perde pas le peu de bon sens qui me reste' (*MV(a)* 77). So begs the Baron de Raittolbe when his friend Raoule de Vénérande, the protagonist of *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), declares herself in love with a young, feminine artist named Jacques Silvert: 'Je veux qu'*elle* soit heureuse', Raoule exclaims, 'comme *le filleul* d'un roi !' (*MV(a)* 75). The reader might have some sympathy for Raittolbe; throughout *Monsieur Vénus*, gendered pronouns, attributes and roles are assumed, swapped and dropped by different characters at a bewildering pace. This is characteristic of the gleefully deviant work of Rachilde (1860-1953, *née* Marguerite Eymery), the only woman recognized among the Decadent authors of *fin-de-siècle* France. Characterized by perversity, transgression and linguistic subversion, *Monsieur Vénus* was a *succès de scandale*, and led to Rachilde's prosecution in Belgium for obscenity (Holmes 42). The novel tells the story of Raoule, a cross-dressing aristocrat, and Jacques, the impoverished object of her dangerous obsession. Raoule sets Jacques up as her 'mistress' in a luxurious apartment and, as she plies him with disorientating hashish, he becomes increasingly womanly. Raoule marries Jacques, scandalising Parisian high society, but becomes violently jealous of his relationship with Raittolbe as it develops in a series of eroticized encounters. Raoule engineers a duel in which Raittolbe kills Jacques, before commissioning a waxwork model of Jacques' corpse, complete with his hair, teeth and nails.

Critics such as Janet Beizer (1994), Rita Felski (1995) and Diana Holmes (2001) have read *Monsieur Vénus* as a denaturalisation of gender and play with identity categories. Yet *Monsieur Vénus* can also be understood as a deeply conservative text: Rachilde upholds the class hierarchy, characterising Jacques' sister Marie by her 'lit de prostituée' (*MV(a)* 31) and 'expression faubourienne' (*MV(a)* 45). Rachilde's fascination with perversion can also be seen as nothing more than a Decadent literary trope. Moreover, if Raoule assumes the male position in her destructive relationship with the feminized Jacques, perhaps this only inverts the gender binary, reinforcing 'the correlation between masculinity and dominance in the symbolic code' (Hawthorne 174). All of these interpretations, however, are useful and reconcilable to a reading of *Monsieur Vénus* as proto-queer. Presentations of perversity in the text constitute both a Decadent trope *and* a proto-queer exploration of the flexibility of sex properties and the porosity of the boundaries between human and object. And as Katherine Gantz argues, gender roles are not only inverted in Rachilde's work, but rather subverted, since—as we will see—the instances of gender inversion are neither systematic nor straightforward (Gantz 124).

Rachilde's presentations of gender subversion were not intended as politically radical. As the author of *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe* (1928), she was ardently individualistic and anti-feminist. She writes of having no desire 'de m'emparer de droits qui n'étaient pas les miens', and states: 'J'ai toujours agi en *individu* ne songeant pas à fonder une société ou à bouleverser celle qui existait' (*PF* 6).[2] Rachilde thus framed her transgressive work as non-threatening and detached from extratextual feminist politics. In light of this, a queer reading of *Monsieur Vénus* might be more appropriate than a strictly feminist one; regardless of its author's positionality, the text can be read today as a Butlerian exposition of the performativity of sex and gender. Instances of drag throughout *Monsieur Vénus* testify to gender's imitative structure, while Rachilde's ambiguous linguistic play and scattering of gendered signifiers cast doubt upon the fixity of sex and render Raoule and Jacques' bodies highly unstable. Reading *Monsieur Vénus* as proto-queer thus grounds the text in the context of queer studies, and connects Rachilde's Decadent work to contemporary cultural conversations.

I borrow the term 'proto-queer' from Lisa Downing, who, focusing on *La Marquise de Sade* (1887), locates Rachilde 'in a genealogy of (proto-)queer writing' (Downing, 'Notes on Rachilde' 25). The prefix here is an important caveat, which punctures the superiority of the modern reader by establishing a queer literary heritage while signalling that Rachilde's work is not straightforwardly emancipatory. As Downing explains, 'a text can be proto-queer while its author may have led a heteronormative lifestyle… certain forms of political radicality that we would expect from a 20th or 21st-century queer writer may be wholly absent' (Downing, 'Notes on Rachilde' 18). Regardless of Rachilde's historical and political position, therefore, *Monsieur Vénus* proves fertile ground for the modern reader versed in queer theory. What is more, Rachilde's work can elucidate, or at least exemplify, some of the questions at the heart of queer studies. What is sex, and how does it relate to gender? Can sex exceed the human body? What is the relationship

[2] In her own life, Rachilde wore men's clothing and self-identified as an 'homme de lettres' (Holmes 74). In *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe*, she cites economic reasons for doing so, as well as describing the impact of her father's regret that she had not been born a man. Although they lie beyond the scope of this article, Rachilde's identity and authorial posture are thus worthy of study in their own right (on these topics, see Holmes and Mesch).

between queerness and reproduction? Can a transgender person live a heteronormative life? A good place to begin this article might be the question with which Judith Butler ends *Gender Trouble* (1990): what 'strategies for engaging the "unnatural" might lead to the denaturalization of gender as such?' (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 190). I will argue that Rachilde's decadent embrace of the 'unnatural' scrambles sex and gender, in that they become confused, muddled and entirely unfixed. This notion of scrambling is more playful than it is political: Rachilde reveals sex and gender to be constructions, without positing any kind of utopian alternative in which sexes, genders and desiring positions might proliferate freely.

Gender as Performance and Sex as Gender

A cornerstone of queer theory, Butler's *Gender Trouble* argues that gender congeals over time as a result of repeated acts. We come to believe that gender is natural, but it is not. Gender is therefore a 'doing' as opposed to a 'being', or rather it is done, since the subject is constructed in this doing: there is no doer behind the deed. In this sense, then, gender is performative. Butler takes this further, arguing that the performance and construction of gender is also the process by which sexed beings come to exist. She states:

> If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 9-10).

For Butler, distinguishing between sex and gender is impossible: sex is a social construction and it is gender. Sexed bodies have 'no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute reality' (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 185). The classic example of such an act is the doctor's performative utterance of 'it's a boy!' or 'it's a girl!' when a baby is born; such normative discourse *constructs* sex as a natural fact. While the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 47) holds that sex is the binary biological basis upon which gender is constructed, sex is, in fact, itself constructed as such.

Monsieur Vénus and Butler's conception of sex and gender are mutually illuminative; the subversion of gender roles throughout the text functions as an illustration of the iterative nature of gender and the mutability of sex. For example, Raoule's bedroom is decorated with a 'panoplie d'armes', 'mises à la portée par un poignet féminin' (*MV(a)* 22). The dissonance between the masculine imagery of weapons and the delicacy of 'un poignet féminin' is grotesque and disconcerting and destabilizes gendered signifiers. This is encapsulated on a linguistic level where, by virtue of an idiosyncrasy of the French language, the adjective 'feminine' takes the masculine form. Elsewhere, Raoule is reported to exclaim: 'Je suis *jaloux* ! rugit-elle affolée…' (*MV(a)* 84). Here, Raoule is depicted in both masculine and feminine terms, rejecting in her speech the feminine gender to which the omniscient narrator conforms. This dual perspective evokes the two guises, male and female, in which Raoule appears throughout the text. It also points to the artificiality of both language and gender, and thus their ripeness for manipulation. This is emphasized by Rachilde's use of italics, which 'call into question the linguistic code or convention that assigns gender' (Beizer 223).

The assignment of sexed bodies is similarly destabilized in *Monsieur Vénus*. When Jacques envelops himself in Raoule's bedsheets revealing only 'la rondeur de son épaule', it resembles 'l'épaule large d'une femme' (*MV(a)* 182). The sex of Jacques' body is highly unstable, and he becomes increasingly feminine/female: 'Plus [Jacques] oubliait son sexe, plus [Raoule] multipliait autour de lui les occasions de se féminiser' (*MV(a)* 95). Jacques' body is a shifting surface upon which any sex or gender might be inscribed. As Jay Prosser puts it, repurposing Simone de Beauvoir: 'One is not born a woman, but *nevertheless* may become one' (Prosser 33).

Before reading Jacques' becoming as a trans narrative, however, we might take a moment to examine the theme of artificiality throughout *Monsieur Vénus*. There is an emphasis on surface from the moment Jacques appears:

> Autour de son torse, sur sa blouse flottante, courait en spirale une guirlande de roses ; des roses fort larges de satin chair velouté de grenat, qui lui passaient entre les jambes, filaient jusqu'aux épaules et venaient d'enrouler au col (*MV(a)* 8).

This Baudelairean imagery is deeply synesthetic, and immediately presents Jacques as steeped in materiality. He is feminine and hyper-sexualized, flowers trailing in between his legs and around his neck. Importantly, these flowers are artificial ornaments, their flesh not organic but rather velvety satin. Later in the novel, Jacques decorates his apartment with real flowers, but this time explicitly plays at being a woman for the sake of performance, 'se jouant la comédie vis-à-vis de lui-même, se prenant à être une femme pour le plaisir de l'art' (*MV(a)* 96). In this example of drag, it is not just femininity, but 'being a woman' (*être une femme*) that can be adopted for purely aesthetic purposes, as art for art's sake. This suggests that there is little to distinguish being a

woman from being feminine, and hints at the artifice inherent in any performance of femininity. As Butler puts it, using drag to exemplify her theory of performativity: '*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself*' (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 187).

This is not to suggest that gender is a choice, something artificial and thus trivial that we perform at will 'pour le plaisir de l'art'. Indeed, Butler clarifies: 'If drag is performative, that does not mean that all performativity is to be understood as drag' (Butler, *Bodies* 175-6). Rather, drag—including when Jacques plays at womanhood for the pleasure of it—demonstrates that all gender is performative, even in more 'natural'-seeming forms. This is the implication of the instances of drag that run throughout *Monsieur Vénus*. For example, the narrator reports that when Raoule dresses as a man, she is 'l'image d'un homme beau comme tous les héros de roman que rêvent les jeunes filles' (*MV(a)* 176). This is a parody of norms of masculinity, laughably trite and so easily adopted by a 'woman'. The image generates a 'pastiche-effect' through which the 'real' is constituted as an effect; Raoule's 'hyperbolic exhibition' of the supposedly natural category of 'man' reveals its 'fundamentally phantasmatic status' (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 186-7). There is a similar effect in chapter 16, when both Jacques and Raoule visit Raittolbe in drag, disappear for a moment and swap their clothes back, emerging as a straight couple. This topsy-turvy episode stupefies Raittolbe's valet, to whom it seems that 'Mme Silvert' has changed her hair colour from Jacques' red to Raoule's brunette. Dorothy Kelly provides an apt summary of the effect of this incident, in which no gendered characteristic ends up attributable to any one character alone:

> The decadent, upside-down world turns itself around so many times that one loses one's bearings and after a while notices only the artificial machine of reversal, the artificial nature of gender identity itself. (Kelly 152)

As Butler notes, the revelation of the artificiality of gender is not *necessarily* subversive, yet in any repetition of a gendered norm, interstices open up for resisting and reshaping it (see Butler, *Bodies* 169-70). As such, *Monsieur Vénus* is not necessarily subversive or queer; it could be argued that Raoule merely perpetuates masculine violence in her abuse of Jacques. Nonetheless, there is every reason for the modern reader to recognize the ways in which Rachilde undermines the naturalisation of both sex and gender, in instances of cross-dressing and beyond. Among all the sexual perversity and violence of *Monsieur Vénus*, it is only when Raoule asks Jacques to marry her that she feels as if she is doing something 'contre nature' (*MV(a)* 113). On a surface level, it might be seen as 'contre nature' for a woman to ask a man to marry her, not least for a noblewoman to propose to a poor artist. Yet we might also read this comment as an indictment of the unnaturalness of hegemonic heterosexuality, represented by the institution of marriage. Raoule and Jacques rehearse yet elude this heterosexual norm, and thereby highlight the plasticity of sex, gender and sexuality.

Towards New Sex and Gender Identities: Reconceptualising the Desiring Subject in *Monsieur Vénus*

This emphasis on plasticity is reminiscent of Prosser's observation that 'One is not born a woman, but *nevertheless* may become one'. Transgender theory such as that of Prosser sheds new light on *Monsieur Vénus*, and it is possible to read the character of Jacques as a trans woman *avant la lettre*.[3] Indeed, without imposing ahistorical categories on this *fin-de-siècle* novel, Gantz has speculated whether 'the best postmodern assessment of Raoule and Jacques's relationship might be that of "stone butch" and "proto-pre-op"' (Gantz 129). If so, Rachilde's work points towards alternative sex and gender identities. Her subversion of gendered language, 'rather than simply being yet more Decadent inversion for the sake of celebrating the "unnatural", effectively generates previously unimagined identities and desiring positions' (Downing, 'Notes on Rachilde' 25).

This is not an unduly optimistic queer recuperation of Rachilde, for there is much in *Monsieur Vénus* to substantiate Gantz's framing of Raoule as stone butch and Jacques as pre-op trans woman. The narrator reports that if Raoule was more beautiful than Marie, Jacques' prostitute sister, she did not receive more pleasure: 'elle en donnait, mais n'en recevait pas' (*MV(a)* 109). The term stone butch was popularized by Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and refers to butch lesbians who—sometimes due to sexual trauma—do not want to be genitally touched, although they touch their partners. In *Monsieur Vénus*, Jacques tries to embrace Raoule, but she remains stone cold: 'il lui sembla qu'un corps de marbre glissait entre les draps' (*MV(a)* 90). Raoule reflects on this coldness: she is, in her own words, 'Raoule de Vénérande, qu'une orgie laisse

[3] I follow Goulimari (2020) in using 'trans' as 'an umbrella term for those who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth'.

froide' (*MV(a)* 41). Jacques, meanwhile, is 'pas même un hermaphrodite, pas même un impuissant, c'est un beau mâle de vingt et un ans, dont l'âme aux instincts féminins s'est trompée d'enveloppe' (*MV(a)* 75). Gantz uses this image of a mistaken envelope to argue that Jacques is in fact already a (trans) woman: 'it is his sex, and not his gender, that is out of place' (Gantz 126).

In *Second Skins* (1998), which Gantz draws upon in her argument, Prosser critiques Butler's *Gender Trouble*. He condemns what he sees as the erasure of trans subjectivities and embodied realities, and challenges 'the assumption that transgender is queer is subversive' (Prosser 29). Prosser points out that 'transgendered subjectivity is not inevitably queer… by no means are all transgendered subjects homosexual' (Prosser 31). Jacques is at first horrified by Raoule's suggestion that Raittolbe felt homosexual desire for him (*MV(a)* 130-131), but as he becomes increasingly female, Jacques turns to Raittolbe, visiting him dressed as a woman and seeking to seduce him. This turn to Raittolbe comes after Jacques is faced with Raoule's breasts on their wedding night. He cries out: 'Raoule tu n'es donc pas un homme ! Tu ne peux donc pas être un homme ! Et le sanglot des illusions détruites, pour toujours mortes, monta de ses flancs à sa gorge' (*MV(a)* 184). It could be said, then, that as a trans woman, Jacques seeks a heterosexual relationship: first with the butch Raoule and then, when the 'illusion' of Raoule's manhood is destroyed, with the hyper-masculine Raittolbe—whose desire Jacques rejected as homosexual before his identity was so feminized.[4]

These complicated dynamics are reflected in some of the key questions raised in the work of Prosser and Butler. Does the inclusion and instrumentalization of trans identity in queer theory neglect heterosexual trans people? Is trans identity necessarily subversive, or can trans people live heteronormative lives? What is the link between gender and sexuality, if any? The identities of Jacques and Raoule are so unfixed that their sexualities remain ambiguous. Sometimes, they repeat but invert heterosexuality, as when Raoule calls herself Jacques' husband and Jacques her wife (*MV(a)* 158). If we see Jacques as a trans woman then her/his eroticized encounters with Raittolbe likewise rehearse heterosexuality, but his relationship with Raoule as stone butch becomes queer. Ultimately, Raoule and Jacques' coupling is both a testament and a challenge to doxa: their love 'pour vivre avait besoin de regarder la vérité en face, tout en la combattant par sa propre force' (*MV(a)* 185). Butler acknowledges this paradox in her response to Jennie Livingston's film *Paris is Burning* (1990. See Butler, *Bodies* 81-97). She focuses on the aptly named trans woman Venus Xtravaganza,[5] whose desire for a nice suburban home and husband exemplifies Prosser's point that 'transgendered subjectivity is not inevitably queer' (Prosser 31). As Butler writes:

> Venus, and *Paris is Burning* more generally, calls into question whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed, whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms (Butler, *Bodies* 85).

This analysis could apply word for word to *Monsieur Vénus*. The ambiguous subversion of desiring positions in the text exposes and undermines norms of gender and sexuality, but also has the potential to reinstate them.

In fact, if we consider Jacques to be the titular 'Monsieur Vénus',[6] it is remarkable and disquieting that Venus Xtravaganza becomes his namesake, and in some ways his double. Raittolbe's violent reaction to his sexual attraction to Jacques is an affecting representation of homo/transphobic hatred, inspired by fear and fragility. After feeling inexorably drawn to Jacques' body, Raittolbe beats him, howling: 'tu sauras ce que c'est qu'un vrai mâle, canaille !' (*MV(a)* 121). Later, when Jacques appears in drag, Raittolbe tries to strangle him; Raoule then finds Raittolbe about to shoot himself in the head. She asks him, quite simply, 'Vous en avez peur ?' (*MV(a)* 143). Jacques' unstable sex and gender, and his beauty, make him unintelligible. This is both arousing and threatening, and the violent reaction that it provokes in Raittolbe foreshadows the fatal duel between the two characters. When this duel occurs, the moments before Jacques' death are focalized through Jacques, which tenderly highlights his naivety and the perverse tragedy of the situation ('A quoi souriait-il ? Mon Dieu, il l'ignorait', *MV(a)* 203). Rich in pathos, this generates a similar poignancy to the scene in *Paris is Burning* in which footage of Venus Xtravaganza socialising

[4] I continue to use masculine pronouns for Jacques for the sake of consistency and clarity. In *Monsieur Vénus*, the omniscient narrator uses masculine pronouns for Jacques and feminine pronouns for Raoule, although these are pointedly interchangeable in the characters' speech.

[5] It seems unlikely that Venus Xtravaganza's name is a deliberate reference to *Monsieur Vénus*; beyond academia, the text has not been popular in modern times. Nonetheless, both Rachilde and Venus Xtravaganza exploit the connotations of 'Venus' as feminine and seductive.

[6] Both Jacques and Raoule can be seen as 'Monsieur Vénus'; the very title of the text presents a scrambling of gendered signifiers and evokes the shifting gender identities of its two protagonists.

and innocently announcing 'I'm hungry!' is overlaid with Angie Xtravaganza's description of her murder (1:8:13-1:9:29). *Monsieur Vénus* thus offers a remarkably timeless (and perhaps inadvertent) staging of the tragedy engendered by what we might now conceive of as transphobic rage.

If *Monsieur Vénus* leaves the possibility of heterosexuality intact, it also therefore points to new, potentially threatening forms of identity and desire. The web of relations between all characters, not least Raittolbe and Jacques, disrupts the hegemony of heteronormativity. Raittolbe, a cavalry officer, appears to function as a paragon of masculinity. Yet his eroticized interactions with Jacques render Raittolbe's gender unstable, too, exposing even normative masculinity as performance. Raittolbe's masculinity is most emphasized when he feels attracted to Jacques: he is 'L'ex-officier de hussards… qui tenait en égale estime une jolie fille et une balle de l'ennemi' (*MV(a)* 116). This ironic description exposes these tenets of upper-class manhood as a sham, as does a scene in which Jacques excites a group of gentlemen at a ball at the Vénérande mansion—when his hip brushes past them, their palms become moist (*MV(a)* 159). There is similar (homo)eroticism as Raittolbe teaches Jacques how to fence: 'de Raittolbe faisait grincer son fer sur celui de Jacques' (*MV(a)* 160), and Raoule derives sadistic, voyeuristic pleasure from orchestrating the duel between them, asserting: 'Je veux vous voir tous les deux, face à face' (*MV(a)* 143). The erotic charge of such dynamics and interactions pluralizes potential sites of desire and unsettles the identity and relationality of all characters in the text.

Ultimately, though, in the final duel, Raittolbe is protected by both his masculinity and his class. Jacques has no hope of winning a duel against a hyper-masculine baron with experience of combat (Hawthorne 168), and it could be argued that Jacques' class and femininity seal his fate. We have seen, however, that Raittolbe's characterisation is not quite so straightforward. Class and gender interact in multiple ways throughout *Monsieur Vénus*, to the extent that the characters inhabit a plurality of sex and gender identities across a nonetheless recognisable class hierarchy. Jacques' sister Marie and Raoule's pious aunt Ermengarde, for example, appear to map on to a classed virgin/whore dichotomy: Marie is a 'démon', Ermengarde an 'ange', and they flee Raoule and Jacques' union 'en même temps, l'un vers Paradis, l'autre vers l'abîme' (*MV(a)* 170; Ermengarde enters a convent and Marie founds a brothel). Yet the narrator's cynical remark about Parisian gossips disrupts this neat reading, pointing out that Ermengarde's dearest wish had always been to take the veil: 'personne n'avait plaint la chanoinesse, alors qu'elle ne menait pas l'existence de ses rêves, [mais] on la plaignit énormément lorsqu'elle eut réalisé son vœu le plus cher' (*MV(a)* 186). Meanwhile, Marie's brothel is reported to thrive (*MV(a)* 186, 191). Ermengarde and Marie are therefore granted agency, and are not categorically condemned as virgin and whore. Rather, their contrasting but parallel fates are both generated by and revelatory of the dynamics of class and gender that intersect to shape their identities, reputations and lives.

Class, Vulnerability and the Medical Establishment

Class and gender also intersect in depictions of vulnerability in *Monsieur Vénus*. Debarati Sanyal argues that Rachilde 'resists a purely performative reading of gender and desire by reminding us of the vulnerability of the human body to the violence of another' (Sanyal 154). Jacques' skin is marked first by the violence of Raittolbe, then by Raoule, who reopens Jacques' wounds to reinscribe her possession of his body, scratching at his cuts and chewing his skin (*MV(a)* 132-3). Jacques' feminine, 'male', working-class—and thus unintelligible—body is exceptionally vulnerable to this violence. In comparison, Raoule does not face violent repercussions for her gender transgression by virtue of her class and wealth. *Monsieur Vénus* might thus be read as an exemplum of Butler's writing on vulnerability, and the violence and dehumanisation that attends those with unintelligible bodies. Butler develops the notion of 'precarity', which is unequivocally harmful (unlike precariousness) and is unevenly distributed along political, social and economic lines. Precarity is produced by normalising frames through which we recognize (or are unable to recognize) certain people's lives as fully liveable and grievable (Butler, *Frames of War*). In this sense, Jacques' humanity is unrecognisable, making him ripe for manipulation by Raoule. He hints at this himself: 'je n'ai pas de nom, moi !' (*MV(a)* 158). The implication here is that Raoule, and indeed Raittolbe, can abuse Jacques since he has no recourse to a reputable family name; in Butler's terms, his life is neither fully liveable nor grievable.

Another normalising frame through which only certain bodies are legitimized is medical discourse. It is unclear whether or not Rachilde intended to expose the precarity of Jacques' non-normative, working-class body—it could be argued that she weaponizes class hierarchies to drive the narrative—but it seems that she did deliberately engage with the medical establishment. In his biography of Rachilde, Claude Dauphiné suggests that her works, particularly *Monsieur Vénus* and *La Marquise de Sade*, were literary transpositions of medical manuals detailing sexual psychopathology (Dauphiné 53). Downing, however, critiques this view, arguing that Rachilde does not so much illustrate sexual psychopathology as critically and strategically respond to it (Downing, 'Notes on Rachilde' 18). The *fin-de-siècle* was an era of increasing medicalization when Jean-Martin Charcot was performing hypnosis on

'hysterical' women patients at the Salpêtrière hospital (Holmes 163). Rachilde, however, pokes fun at medicalization: Raoule's aunt summons multiple doctors to diagnose her niece's hysterical behaviour, but Raoule simply invites the most witty and elegant of them into her bedroom (*MV(a)* 26). This ineffectual intervention implies that medical discourse around hysteria is just that, an 'arbitrary but ideologically interested' discourse (Downing, 'Notes on Rachilde' 21).

The final image in *Monsieur Vénus* is of the waxwork Raoule commissions from Jacques' corpse, and this too subverts the medicalization of the body. Wax 'Venuses' were used to study anatomy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and like the doll in the text, these models incorporated human hair, teeth and nails. While their purpose was educational, the models outwardly resembled conventionally beautiful and sexualized women (Bailar 31-32). Rachilde subverts this grotesque, normative practice in an equally grotesque way, by creating a male Venus—hinting, perhaps, at the perversity of the real medical Venuses. Suppressed in subsequent editions, *Monsieur Vénus*' original ending describes a spring buried in the flanks of Raoule's waxwork, which 'correspond à la bouche et l'anime en même temps qu'il fait s'écarter les cuisses' (*MV(a)* 211). Here, Raoule's list of perversions expands to include the necrophilic and the non-human. Importantly, the spring spreads the model's thighs, suggesting that Raoule's role is penetrative and casting doubt again on the fixity and meaning of sex categories.

There are echoes here of Raoule as a stone butch. The spring that 'correspond à la bouche et l'anime' mirrors Jacques' earlier attempt 'd'animer par des baisers furieux la bouche [de Raoule]' (*MV(a)* 90). In this reversal of Ovid's Pygmalion myth, Raoule has truly fashioned a creature in her own image. She keeps the model in a hidden room in her mansion, and it is reported that both 'une femme vêtue de deuil, quelquefois un jeune homme' visit it (*MV(a)* 210). The narrator refers to these personas as 'ils', although they are clearly both Raoule, pointing to the plurality of her sex and gender identities and the inadequacy of binary language to express this. For Gantz, this scene is 'the lovers' final parody of heterosex' (Gantz 128). Not only does the ending of *Monsieur Vénus* denaturalize 'biological' sex, then; it denaturalizes heterosexual sex (that is, as an activity), hinting perhaps that all heterosexual sex acts are unnatural, overdetermined and medicalized, and that sexuality itself is a construct.

Beyond the Human: The Extension and Dispersal of Erotic Charge

Raoule's fetishized waxwork, with hair, teeth and nails 'arrachés à un cadavre' (*MV(a)* 209) begs the question of 'where and how the human and the inorganic intersect' (Bailar 32). Reading *Monsieur Vénus* as proto-queer, one might build on this to ask whether we can conceive of sex as extending beyond the human and into the realms of the inorganic. Ayala and Vasilyeva have developed the notion of 'extended sex', arguing 'that properties relevant for sex categorization are neither exclusively internal to the individual skin, nor fixed' (Ayala and Vasilyeva 725). They use a cognitive metaphor, suggesting that since our minds are not purely internal, nor is our sex: just as notepads can extend the capacity of our mind beyond our brain, tools such as dildos can extend our sex beyond our body (Ayala and Vasilyeva 731, 734). There is no explicit mention of such 'tools' in *Monsieur Vénus*, but the implication of Raoule's penetrative role, and Rachilde's incorporation of the semi-human waxwork into the realms of sexuality, suggest that sex is flexible and that the boundary between the internal and the external is unfixed. Moreover, in his preface to the abridged 1889 edition of *Monsieur Vénus*, Maurice Barrès writes: 'Je prie qu'on regarde cet ouvrage comme une anatomie' (*MV(b)* 6). He sees the text as a biological body, and as an extension of its author (see *MV(b)* 6-8 and Hawthorne 164-5). Metatextually, this attests once again to the porous boundaries between human and object.

The idea that 'the boundaries of skin are not the boundaries of sex' and the extension of 'what counts as a sex-relevant property' (Ayala and Vasilyeva 734, 737), are also consistent with the pluralisation of sites of eroticism in Rachilde's work. Early in their liaison, Jacques assures Raoule that he has golden hair all over his body (*MV(a)* 40). As Beizer argues, there is, in the 'attention paid to every form and site of male hair, an apparent defetishizing of the phallus and a reinvestment in a more general erotics of the body' (Beizer 258). This 'general erotics' is also reflected in the ability of Rachilde's women characters to orgasm from thought alone. Moderated in later editions, the original 1884 version of *Monsieur Vénus* describes Raoule travelling home from her first meeting with Jacques:

> Toute cette organisation délicatement nerveuse se tendit dans un spasme inouï, une vibration terrible, puis, avec l'instantanéité d'un accident cérébral, la réaction vint, elle se sentit mieux… on [l']aurait dit une créature délicieusement lasse d'ardentes caresses (*MV(a)* 19).

Raoule (like a stone butch) has no need of 'ardentes caresses'; her pleasure is 'cérébral'. Similarly, in *La Jongleuse* (1900), the protagonist Eliante achieves orgasm while grasping a large Tunisian amphora (*LJ* 50-1). Gantz analyzes the queerness of these situations, which remove the

female orgasm from the realms of reproduction, male pleasure and marriage (Gantz 119). These presentations of female sexuality, then, are not so much an inversion of norms of gender as a subversion of norms of heterosexuality and decency, and a dispersal of pleasurable stimuli.

We might therefore read *Monsieur Vénus* as moving towards a fluid form of hedonism that transcends the boundaries of sex, gender and the human. Although Melissa Bailar sees Raoule as adeptly performing both genders (Bailar 39), Micheline Besnard-Coursodon argues that Raoule refuses any sex or gender at all: 'l'entreprise de Raoule… se fonde sur le refus du sexe, qu'il soit masculin ou féminin' (Besnard-Coursodon 123). Similarly, Jacques' thighs possess 'une rondeur solide qui effaçait leur sexe' (*MV(a)* 40), and when he is high on the hashish Raoule feeds him, he hears 'chants d'amour étrange *n'ayant pas de sexe*' (*MV(a)* 62, my emphasis). Increasingly, Jacques and Raoule are united 'dans une pensée commune : la destruction de leur sexe' (*MV(a)* 98). Together, they are destroying sex itself, for the sake of corporeal pleasure. A frenzied Raoule asks, 'qu'importe à notre passion délirante le sexe de ces caresses'? (*MV(a)* 183).

This hedonistic refusal of sex and gender categories invites a new materialist interpretation. Jacques is in a near-constant state of transition, or becoming, while Raoule describes herself as '*jaloux*', 'folle', and 'le plus homme' all in one single conversation (*MV(a)* 84-85). This evokes Dorothea Olkowski's description of the sea creature the brittlestar, which draws on Deleuze and Guattari, and Barad. The brittlestar is 'constantly breaking off and regenerating its bodily boundaries… nature makes and unmakes itself experimentally; nature's differentiations of its own material were never binary' (Olkowski 55). This reveals the gender binary as entirely unnatural, suggesting not that there are many genders, but rather that 'there are innumerable, mutating genders that cannot be counted, in continuous variation' (Goulimari). This surely applies to the multiplicity of gender identities that we find shifting and intersecting in the characters of Raoule, Jacques, Raittolbe, and even Marie and Ermengarde, in *Monsieur Vénus*. We might plot the sex and gender of these characters on some kind of scatter graph, yet the crosses representing each one would move from scene to scene as they adopt, swap and shed gendered positions within the rhizomatic network of the text. This is no simple gender inversion: it is an infinite scrambling of sex and gender fuelled by Decadent ideals of beauty, pleasure and perversion.

The Queer Death Drive in Rachilde's Corpus

Nonetheless, Rachilde does not construct a utopian world in which her characters' sexes and genders might proliferate freely. The narrative of *Monsieur Vénus* is infused with violence, destruction and death, and is compatible with Lee Edelman's thesis in *No Future* (2004). Edelman presents a queer critique of 'reproductive futurism', that is: the privileging of 'the Child' as 'the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention', the perpetuation of heteronormativity, and the marginalisation of non-normative subjects who resist such futurism (Edelman 2-3). For Edelman, the queer refuses to partake of 'narrative movement toward a viable political future' or to subscribe to 'the fantasy of meaning's eventual realization' (Edelman 4). In this sense, *Monsieur Vénus* is surely a proto-queer, if not queer, narrative. Rachilde divorces sexuality from procreation, and Raoule gives death, not birth. Jacques becomes increasingly childlike throughout the text, and at one point, Raoule holds him, 'le berçant entre ses bras, le calmant comme on calme les enfants' (*MV(a)* 114). The soothing alliteration of this sentence belies the dissonant, grotesque image of Raoule as maternal. Perhaps we should see Raoule as anti-maternal since she indirectly kills Jacques and builds (births?) a waxwork from his corpse. Their coupling has no future and ultimately means nothing: Raoule freezes Jacques in time as a kind of proto-cyborg that she will visit over and over again. The narrative movement towards Raoule and Jacques' future as a married couple is violently and deliberately curtailed.

Therefore, in the narrative arc of *Monsieur Vénus*, death is positioned as the proto-queer equivalent to birth; the drive towards the future is replaced by a drive towards Jacques' death. This equivalence between birth and death is hinted at throughout the text. Jacques juxtaposes childbearing to murder, speaking of himself in the feminine third person in an unsettling and childlike manner: 'Il faut bien qu'elle demande à tuer quelqu'un puisque le moyen de mettre quelqu'un au monde lui est absolument refusé' (*MV(a)* 181). This positions Jacques as a woman who 'lacks', but not in the Freudian sense for he is, after all, in possession of a penis. As Maryline Lukacher argues, Rachilde thus equates 'woman's "penis envy" and man's inability to become pregnant' (Lukacher 124). Furthermore, after he has dealt the fatal blow in his duel with Jacques, Raittolbe sucks Jacques' wound, trying to extract the blood that 'ne coulait toujours pas' (*MV(a)* 207, 208). Why does he not bleed? Perhaps this is a reference to Jacques' inability to menstruate or give birth—a tragic symbol of a kind of trans melancholia, perversely eroticized by Raittolbe's lips in a final allusion to non-procreative sex.

The thwarting of reproductive futurism is present throughout Rachilde's corpus. In *La Marquise de Sade*, Mary Barbe (the eponymous marquise) threatens to poison her husband if he tries to impregnate her: 'je ne veux pas être mère, d'abord parce que je ne veux pas souffrir' (*MS* 215). In

her study of *La Marquise de Sade*, Downing analyzes this figure of the 'murderous female pervert' as an example of the *sinthom*osexual of Edelman's *No Future*. As she explains:

> "*Sinthom*osexual" is a Lacanian pun. The "sinthome" is, homophonically, both a "symptom" and a "holy man" (*saint homme*). The homosexual is the symptom of a homophobic culture. Edelman asks that the queer accede to the death-driven position that culture imagines for him/her—the place of "*Sinthom*osexuality" (Downing, 'Notes on Rachilde' 26 n7).

In Rachilde's corpus, women embrace unproductiveness and are fixated on death, abandoning the society that seeks to assimilate them into its heteronormative narrative of progress. Downing also examines the death drive of the murderous, incarcerated (male) protagonist of *La Sanglante ironie* (1891; Downing, 'Beyond Reasonable Doubt' 196). This murderer personifies death as a lover to be seduced: 'Je rêve la *Mort* comme un homme bien élevé rêverait la véritable femme du monde' (*SI* 8). In *Monsieur Vénus*, this plays out on a literal level: Jacques comes to embody death, and in this deathly form is literally idolized by the gleefully anti-maternal, proto-*sinthom*osexual Raoule.

It is of course possible to produce a non-queer reading of 'murderous female perverts' such as Raoule and Mary Barbe. The final scene of *La Marquise de Sade* is of Mary drinking wine mixed with blood near an abattoir, which aligns her with the men who had horrified her as a child: 'l'homme qui tue les bœufs… l'homme, le roi du monde !' (*MS* 30; see Holmes 131). In other words: men still rule the world, but Mary, in her perversity, moves among them. Does this leave the gender hierarchy intact, much like the class hierarchy that plays out in *Monsieur Vénus*? If Raoule can be seen as victorious in her manipulation of both Jacques and Raittolbe, and in the relative impunity with which she adopts a masculine persona, then it might be said that *Monsieur Vénus* upholds the correlation between power, class and masculinity. It could also be said that the morbid consequences of Rachilde's characters' gender inversions only serve to underline their abnormality, rather than to exemplify any queer, death-driven anti-futurism.

Yet we can and should mount an alternative, queer reading of Rachilde. However anti-feminist she may have been, her work resonates with a reader versed in queer theory. In fact, Rachilde's anti-feminism is a productive lens through which to read her texts, one that raises questions about the nature and power of the literary subversion of gender norms. What role does authorial intention play in the reception of transgressive texts, over a century after they were written? Can subversion be an individualist endeavour, or does it only accrue power through the feminist or queer collective? I would argue that Rachilde, even as an anti-feminist individual, has the power within her texts to destabilize, pluralize and muddle the very concepts of sex and gender; literary texts can transcend the meanings that their authors intend.

In Conclusion: The Implications of Reading *Monsieur Vénus* as 'Proto-Queer'

This article has expanded upon the limited existing critical discourse connecting Rachilde's work to queer theory. An explicitly queer reading of Rachilde, the gender-bending author of *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe*, is in many ways more appropriate than a straight feminist one. I continue to use the term '*proto*-queer' to guard against the ahistorical, complete recuperation of a conservative author so firmly situated within the Decadent tradition. I would nonetheless suggest that even the dystopic ending of *Monsieur Vénus* is a death-driven, queer rejection of a heteronormative future, while the depiction of Jacques' class-based precarity is 'Butlerian *avant la lettre*' (Holmes 3). Indeed, the linguistic subversion, emphasis upon artifice, and ambiguously sexed bodies in *Monsieur Vénus* are a striking exemplification of Butler's thesis that gender is performative and sex is 'always already' gender. Paradoxically, the instability of sex/gender identities in *Monsieur Vénus* also makes possible the restoration of heterosexuality (such as between Raittolbe as a man and Jacques as a woman), demonstrating Butler's point that not all drag is subversive—rather, all gender is performative.

In *Monsieur Vénus*, Rachilde thus makes space for new forms of sex, gender and desire. Raoule may well be a stone butch and Jacques a trans woman, although this is in some ways a moot point. What Rachilde does depict, perhaps unknowingly, is the violence of homo/transphobic rage, which stems from fear of new identities and desiring subjectivities that appear to threaten the heteronormative order of society. Class and gender interact to produce vulnerable, unintelligible bodies in the text, although Rachilde's response to the contemporary medical discourse that would seek to 'treat' such bodies verges on the satirical. In its ending, *Monsieur Vénus* explores the porous boundaries between the human and the inorganic, and plots sites of eroticism across and beyond the human body. Raoule and Jacques seek to destroy or transcend sex in their quest for pleasure, and the innumerable identities inhabited by Rachilde's full cast of characters point to a view of sex and gender as constant states of becoming.

A proto-queer reading of *Monsieur Vénus* therefore begs the question of what sex and gender are. Following Butler, I have used the two terms fairly interchangeably, in

the sense that they are both mutable, cultural constructions—pointedly so, in Rachilde's writing. The artificiality of sex and gender is reflected in the confusing proliferation of gendered pronouns in *Monsieur Vénus*, and perhaps every use of a gendered pronoun in this article should be read as enclosed within invisible inverted commas. This is a fitting indictment of the inadequacy of language, both French and English, to express sex and gender as they are presented and played with in *Monsieur Vénus*. This play with sex and gender is implied in the term 'scrambling': Rachilde renders the two categories indistinguishable, unfixed and unpredictable. Within the death-driven confines of the text, then, *Monsieur Vénus* might be seen to answer Butler's call for the articulation of a proliferation of cultural 'configurations of sex and gender', which confound 'the very binarism of sex, and [expose] its fundamental unnaturalness' (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 190). The extent of the connections between Rachilde's work and contemporary queer, feminist and trans studies is quite remarkable.

Rachilde will undoubtedly remain a controversial figure, something she would have relished far more than any recuperation into the queer canon. As Gantz brilliantly puts it, Rachilde has a 'disruptive writerly fashion of making a scene without necessarily making a point' (Gantz 122). Yet the scrambling of norms in Rachilde's making of a scene invites queer interpretation by the reader. In turn, reading *Monsieur Vénus* as proto-queer attests to the limitless potential of literature to offer new perspectives on sex, gender and sexuality, across cultures, periods and intellectual traditions.

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