DESIGNING WOMEN: FASHION, FICTION, AND FEMININITY
IN SECOND EMPIRE FRANCE

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores the role of fashion and fashion journal discourse in some of the most widely read French novels of the nineteenth century: Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (1857), Émile Zola’s La Curée (1871), and Edmond de Goncourt’s Chérie (1884). As access to popular styles and fashion magazines became increasingly democratized over the course of the nineteenth century, Second Empire Paris, with its new public parks, cafés, and amusements, became the locus of an unprecedentedly visual culture. Though fashion has often been considered a feminine frivolity in scholarly circles, I argue for its importance in the Second Empire as economic engine, powerful political tool, and visual signifier of social status. The rising significance of fashion in nineteenth-century French cultural life is paralleled by an increased interest in la mode in male-authored realist and naturalist texts. In the decline and dissolution of their respective heroines, I explore how Flaubert, Zola, and Goncourt thematize and problematize the kind of gaze that fashion elicits. Using theorists like Jean Baudrillard, Laura Mulvey, and Anne Higonnet, I examine how Flaubert, Zola, and Goncourt use tropes of vision to show that their protagonists’ fixed focus on fashion blinds them to their exploitation by that very pursuit. I argue that Flaubert and Zola both use the discourse of fashion to
expose the futility of the fantasy of social ascension and sexual liberty present in
Emma and Renée. I also show how Goncourt uses female documents—letters,
diaries, and fashion journals—in *Chérie* to construct, and ultimately to undercut, his
stated aim of scientifically depicting the peripeteia of French girl- and young
womanhood. As the moral degradation of Emma, Renée, and Chérie is manifest in
their increasingly elaborate ensembles, their common obsession with fashion, in one
way or another, precipitates their downfalls and eventual deaths. The respective
ruins of Emma, Renée, and Chérie represent the authors’ critique not only of
unbridled feminine consumption, but also of the political and cultural forces driving
their protagonists’ desires.
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CHAPTER ONE

The Sartorial Imagination of the Second Empire

“L’être qui ne vient pas souvent à Paris ne sera jamais complètement élégant.”¹

In one of his famous 1855 caricatures, Honoré Daumier depicts a scene typical of Second Empire Paris: the setting is a public park; the foreground is crowded with three crinoline-wearing women, depicted in profile; the background is populated with more soberly dressed men, also shown in profile. The women’s exaggerated facial features reflect the grotesque dimensions of their garments. “Ce ne sont plus des femmes,” the caption reads, “ce sont des ballons.” With just a few lines, Daumier’s lithograph captures so many of the facets of fashion’s role in the social life of Second Empire France. The setting of the sketch reveals the popularity of the public spaces newly created by Haussmann’s renovations. The foregrounding of the female figures in the frame visually represents the relative importance of women in the social practice of fashion. Economically, the women’s clothing industry became an important engine for growth as France successfully exported its trends across the globe while solidifying Paris’ place as the capital of female fashion. The focus on women’s clothing also meant that women were the bearers of symbolic meaning in the nineteenth century—in other words, their appearance was the sartorial index of their (and their family’s) social standing. Finally, Daumier’s depiction also underscores the inherently visual culture of the social practice of fashion: being well

¹ Honoré de Balzac, *Traité de la vie élégante*, 72.
² For a brief explanation of this particular stage in the history of menswear, see Morag Martin (1-2) and Margaret Waller.
³ See Veblen *The Theory of the Leisure Class.*
dressed in imperial Paris indicated that one wanted to see—and be seen by—others outfitted in similarly fashionable finery.

In the irrational exuberance of the Second Empire, the Hexagon had never before seen such furious cultural and industrial production in such a short period of time. The Bourse had never before been fueled by such fevered speculation. Buildings had never been grander or constructed more quickly as Paris transformed from medieval aggregate into shining metropolis of bourgeois modernity. As the boulevards widened, so did women’s silhouettes; the voluminous crinolines popular with Second Empire women were the object of both public obsession and ire. Of all the trends embraced by mid-nineteenth-century women, none has become more synonymous with the imperial regime. Hundreds of publications were dedicated to discussing the virtues and vices of this garment, and of women’s fashion in general. Never before in France’s history had fashion been so democratized and so discussed in literature and in media.

Furthermore, fashion and fiction intersected in unprecedented ways during the Second Empire. At the time of Paris’ definitive ascent to the top of the female fashion world, the realist and the naturalist novel dominated the literary scene. The rise of the importance of fashion in nineteenth-century France is reflected in the increasingly intense attention to material reality in these novels. This study focuses specifically on the details and discourses of fashion in Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, Émile Zola’s *La Curée*, and Edmond de Goncourt’s *Chérie*. In their respective texts, Flaubert, Zola, and Goncourt take up the same issues presented by Daumier in his lithograph—that is, the intersecting public debates about fashion and
femininity in France. The realist and naturalist novel provides an ideal format for exploring the discourses of fashion and femininity because of their focus on material detail and, more specifically, the details of materials. In their examination of visual culture produced by the practice of fashion, the novels of Flaubert, Zola, and Goncourt show, through the dissolution and deaths of their respective heroines, the devastating potential of the kinds of desires and ambitions that an obsession with dress can unleash.

As Franco Moretti has noted, the nineteenth-century novel, and especially the Bildungsroman, puts fashion at the center of narratives: “[F]ashion, this great metropolitan idea, designed for young people (and by them); this engine that never stops, and makes the provinces feel old and ugly and jealous—and seduced them forever and a day” (65). I argue that novels like Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, Zola’s *La Curée*, and Edmond de Goncourt’s *Chérie* use the seductive tropes of fashion in the narratives of their protagonists’ fatal attraction to finery. By stoking their readers’ desire for fashionable details, these novels adopted the narrative mode of fashion journals; however, by depicting the terrible fates of these female protagonists, these novels simultaneously expose the false romance of fashion as a deadly imperative to consume and to transcend social status. In their demonstration of the fatal effects of fashion, these novels engage in public debates about fashion and femininity, and provide a counter-discourse to the model of fashion and femininity as promoted by the fashion industry and, ultimately, by the imperial government. In order to appreciate the significant role of fashion in these novels, however, it is necessary to
contextualize the narratives in a cultural history of clothing in the nineteenth century.

BIG BUSINESS: THE POLITICS OF FASHION

After the Revolution of 1789, France’s fashion industry as it had existed under the Old Regime was in tatters. The fury of revolutionary violence had targeted all kinds of symbols of monarchal France, and aristocratic fashion was no exception. The highly stylized artifice and *modes* of the Versailles court were rejected in favor of more sartorially sober dress for both men and women. In what fashion historians have dubbed the Great Masculine Renunciation, men rejected the elaborate waistcoats and breeches of the former era in favor of the dark, democratic suit—the forerunner of the two- and three-piece business suit still popular today.² This schism in the respective trajectories of men and women’s dress would be definitive: though much less florid than under monarchy, women’s dress in the nineteenth century was nonetheless much more ornate than men’s, as it continues to be today. As Thorstein Veblen famously posited, women became the sartorial emblems of their husband’s social status in the nineteenth century: conspicuous consumption in the form of fashionable finery for their wives was the means by which men exhibited their economic power.³

² For a brief explanation of this particular stage in the history of menswear, see Morag Martin (1-2) and Margaret Waller.
³ See Veblen *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. 
The Revolution’s rejection of the aristocratic aesthetic and subsequent democratization of fashion opened a host of signifying possibilities for clothing. The popular designation of members of the Third Estate as “Sans-Culottes” was a powerful reminder that clothing was still a potent political symbol and played as much of a role in the social imaginary after the Revolution as it had before. Clothing could be the site of both political resistance and allegiance in the newly democratized public sphere. For example, nineteenth-century fashion writer Octave Uzanne tells of the “Bals des victims” that were popular right after the Terror (Uzanne, *La Femme et la mode* 8-9). These public entertainments were organized by aristocrats for aristocrats who had lost a close family member in the Revolution’s bloody purge. Uzanne claims that these balls provoked “de véritables innovations dans les excentricités de la Mode”: women widely adopted the “coiffure à la victime” (also popularly known as the “coiffure à la Titus” or “à la Caracalla”) and wore their hair in throwback aristocratic styles; they wore red shawls like the one Charlotte Corday wore as she ascended the executioner’s scaffold; and some, for “l’amour du réalisme,” wore red ribbons around their necks to symbolize the guillotine’s deadly cut (Uzanne, *La Femme et la mode* 10).

Because the Revolution had destroyed everything, Uzanne argues, France had to look to antiquity for inspiration. The subsequent neoclassical styles popular under Napoleon were a sign that the fashion phoenix had once again begun to rise (Uzanne, *La Femme et la mode* 11-12). The Emperor’s many ambitions extended beyond the

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4 For a discussion of how Marie Antoinette’s wardrobe and public image figured prominently in Revolutionary rhetoric, see Caroline Weber’s *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution*. 
geopolitical exploits for which he is best remembered; among his cultural aspirations was the desire to establish Paris as the uncontested hub of fashion and artistic production in Europe (Tombs 310). The turmoil of 1789 and its aftermath had done much to tarnish France’s image as the world’s arbiter of taste, refinement, and elegance. Recuperating the luxury and fashion industries from France’s aristocratic past was thus integral to the recovery of the cultural capital that had been diminished by the revolutionary violence. Encouraging the luxury trades also meant that the newly ascendant bourgeoisie could harness a powerful economic engine for the nation by marketing and disseminating French products and culture to the Continent, Britain, and America.  

Robert and Isabelle Tombs point out that this strategy proved to be a lasting economic legacy: for the rest of the nineteenth century, the French export economy would thrive because of the popularity of luxury items like wine, brandy, Lyonnais silks, and products known as *articles de Paris*—clothing, shoes, perfume, and fashionable accoutrements (324). Because of the success of these industries, and also thanks to the mid-century invention of haute couture by Englishman Charles Worth, Paris definitively solidified its reputation as the world’s capital of luxury and high fashion for women. Additionally, the fashion industry generated much income within France’s own borders: the demand for dresses, for example, for the 1864 ball season generated a revenue 29 million francs (Tombs 372). The profitability of couture spurred ingenuity and industry in the Hexagon as 1,885 patents were granted in

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5 Historian Jennifer Jones explains that the bourgeoisie, seizing the opportunity to capitalize on a potentially inexhaustible source of revenue for the state, were instrumental in reviving the fashion industry after the complete collapse of the luxury trade in 1789. See Jones’s *Sexing La Mode: Gender, Fashion, and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France* (183-84).
1864 for fashion-related inventions (Challamel 253). The transformation of luxury into lucre on a global scale would fulfill the hopes that Jean-Baptiste Colbert had in the seventeenth century for the French fashion industry: it would be to France what the gold mines were to Peru (de Gramont 381).

Fashion also played a significant role in France’s economic rivalry with Britain in the nineteenth century. Because France couldn’t compete with the efficiency and prolificacy of British manufacturing, the Tombs explain that the French “went up-market” and focused instead on products that promoted “fashion, quality and exclusivity, rather than cheapness and technology” (324). This point is underscored by Ernest Renan in his 1859 comparison of French versus British cultural contributions:

Far from saying that the progress of art is parallel to that made by a nation in the taste for ‘comfort’ (I am forced to use this barbarous word to express an idea quite un-French), we can unequivocally state, on the contrary, that the epochs and the countries in which comfort became the public’s principal attraction have had the least talent for art... The incontestable conclusion is that nowhere in history is the progress of industry in any way parallel to the progress of art. (qtd. in Benjamin 554)

While the British could make life more comfortable and convenient, only the French could make it more beautiful. Le goût— the je ne sais quoi quality of luxury items—was marketed as an intrinsically (and exclusively) Gallic birthright that would endure eternally, irrespective of the volatile vicissitudes of France’s political life.6

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6 Of course, the idea that taste and fashion was an eternally enduring French ideal pre-dates the Second Empire, but never before was this notion exploited for greater profit than in Second Empire France. However, fashion has consistently had an exceptional status in French political history. As Joan DeJean points out, French fashion dolls were granted an “inviolable passport” and were “the only commodity whose safe passage was respected” by all during the War of Spanish Succession (1702-1713) (67). Rose Fortassier explains that during the First Empire,
This notion about the superiority French taste and luxury was marketed to unprecedented levels of success in Second Empire France, largely because of the government’s aggressive promotion of the industry. The exponential growth and expansion of the mid-nineteenth-century French fashion industry came about through a symbiosis of public and private interests. Due to the widely viewed illegitimacy of the new imperial government, it could not realistically stake its authority on grounds of birthright, lineage, or even great achievement. Historians have argued that Louis-Napoleon and Eugénie instead sought to create a court whose rank would be determined by levels of glamour and elegance. The imperial regime appropriated symbols of monarchical France in an attempt to graft a veneer of legitimacy onto the face its own authority; it turned to fashion, as Challamel explains, “car le palais impérial voulait rappeler exactement les magnificences qu’avait étalées Louis XIV” (228-29). More specifically, Empress Eugénie cultivated through her clothing choices a symbolic affinity with France’s original fashion plate, Marie Antoinette, whose memory “fit éclore toutes sortes d’objets vestimentaires” (Challamel 235)—a proliferation of hats, dresses, and hairdos à la Reine, à la Lamballe, au Petit Trianon, among others.

The impetus for changes in la mode, however, was not an exclusively top-down model of court-sanctioned taste as it had been in Marie Antoinette’s day. Though the Eugénie was enormously influential in the launching and dissemination

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Napoleon allowed fashion journals to continue to be printed while other publications were being suppressed (42). These examples support the idea that while different governments could come and go, fashion had always been and would always be an inherent and abiding element of French culture.

7 See Dolan, Zeldin, and de Gramont.
of new styles, the Tombs point out that “fashion increasingly centered on commercial public entertainments such as panoramas, arcades, theaters, cafés...and pleasure gardens” (315). The population of Paris had doubled in the first half of the century (Tombs 366), and new styles worn in the city were disseminated widely and quickly in the public places of modernity. The new social order of the Second Empire presented a challenge to the Old Regime epistemologies: individual distinction was not a matter of birth or lineage, but of fashion in a society where, in Therese Dolan’s formulation, “all earned capital was quickly converted into external flourish” (22).

The development of boulevard culture and a democratized fashion system allowed Second Empire subjects to participate in the inherently visual culture of mid-century modernity.

The spectacle of the Second Empire extended far beyond the entertainments of the boulevard. All emphasis was placed on the pomp and circumstance of performance: military parades, public balls, expositions, and operas were frequently staged in Louis-Napoleon’s France. And though the public sphere exercised more influence on style than ever before, the imperial government was still deeply implicated the workings of the fashion industry. A student of sartorial history, Louis-

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8 This model of the lower classes adopting the fashions of the upper classes is what Thorstein Veblen theorized about patterns of consumption in the nineteenth century. While it is true that the upper classes were largely the trendsetters in Second Empire Paris, historians like the Tombs have posited a more fluid va-et-vient among classes matters of style that more closely resembles Georg Simmel’s theory on fashion and society. See Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and Simmel’s *On Individuality and Social Forms*.
9 Tombs 366. The only other European city to experience this kind of growth during this time was London, whose population actually trebled during the first half of the nineteenth century (366).
10 The theatricality of Second Empire France was so complete that an English journalist critical of the regime described the mode of the emperor’s tyranny as “Par-Fêtes (Parfaite).” *Punch.* Vol. 23. Jul.-Dec. 1852. 127.
Napoleon seized upon the powerful role that fashion could play in the shoring up and promotion of his own political purposes. Like his uncle before him, the emperor recognized the control he could exert over his court in the cultivation of a strict fashion culture.\(^{11}\) Shortly after the 1851 coup d’état, he sent forth an imperial decree stating that new court liveries were required for senators and delegates; anyone found not complying with the new dress code would be, without exception, refused an audience with the emperor.

**QUEEN OF FASHION**

The homology between the Second Empire and its fashion culture was so complete that the most enduring symbols of the regime became the military uniform and, most of all, the crinoline. Therese Dolan has shown how those opposed to the regime were able to bypass censure and to effect their political critiques by directing their invective at the crinoline—a garment championed by and emblematic of the Empress Eugénie and, by extension, the imperial government. Henri Bouchot even frames the history of the regime in terms of its biggest trends in women’s wear:

L’Empire connut deux périodes essentiellement tranchées. L’une de la crinoline ascendante et triomphante, qui prosterna l’Europe devant notre goût, qui imposa notre esthétique somptuaire à toutes les parties du monde, y compris Haïti et les îles Sandwich, et ballonna chrétiennes et païennes à qui mieux. L’autre, celle du fourreau, ou si l’on veut, de la marotte, qui fut mauvaise et fit rire une fois de plus de notre instabilité. (176)

\(^{11}\) Sanche de Gramont notes that Napoleon also deployed a strict fashion system in the name of consolidating power, and even “scolded the wives of his generals when they wore the same dress twice” (383). This observation follows Norbert Elias’s theory about the role of fashion as social control at the court of Louis XIV. See Elias’s *The Civilizing Process*. 
Bouchot’s description of the rise and decline of the empire shows what was at stake in the production and dissemination of French clothing trends. The French fashion hegemony was so powerful that its styles were even adopted in places with tropical climates that made the heavy garments uncomfortable and unsuitable to wear. Style was seen as an essential instrument of the civilizing process: all over the globe, to look fashionable was to look French. But whereas the crinoline gathered the world under the tent of Frenchness, the gauche fourreau was not only bad style, according to Bouchot, it was bad politics. He criticizes the risible garment not only because of its unflattering shape, but also because for him, it represented something much more serious and sinister—the crumbling and impending fall of the Second Empire.

The discourses of fashion and politics were closely interwoven throughout the entire tenure of the Second Empire. New colors like Magenta, Solferino, Shanghai, and Peking were inspired by French military victories abroad (Challamel 259). Ferdinand Bac recalls that one particular trend was eerily prescient of France’s eventual defeat at the hands of the Prussians:

On est étonné de voir qu’à partir de 1866 et jusqu’à la guerre de 70, les toilettes des fêtes officielles de la Cour, portent le nom de « Bismarck ». Le 11 janvier 1868, dans les comptes rendus du bal en l’honneur de la reine d’Espagne, on peut lire plusieurs fois ce nom, satin Bismarck, tulle Bismarck...En attendant le canon Bismarck. (41)

Bismarck brown proved to be the writing on the wall for the Second Empire. The color went out of style with the regime that had produced it. As with her idol Marie

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12 Theodore Zeldin points out that at the turn of the twentieth century, only thirty-seven percent of purchasers of haute couture were French. The percentage of French haute couture patrons is even smaller today. Zeldin argues that the appeal of haute couture is derived from its superior quality and its prestige as a foreign product—its “Frenchness” in other words (436-7).
Antoinette, the very threads that Eugénie wore and popularized would prove to bear the specter her own unraveling.¹³

But before the empire’s 1870 defeat, Eugénie, as the most visible woman in France, embodied the interweaving of fashion and politics like no other figure at the time. In his earlier Traité de la vie élégante (1830), Balzac identifies the important influence of foreign-born queens (Catherine and Marie de Medici and on French fashion: “Ce furent nos deux reines italiennes qui importèrent en France les raffinements du luxe, la grâce des manières et les féeries de la toilette” (51). Similarly influential, Eugénie launched the first modern grand couturier, Charles Worth, by wearing his opulent creations—the world’s first name-brand designer dresses—to public events. Though the empress routinely resisted Worth’s more extravagant designs, her sense of duty prevailed over her tendencies toward conservatism in dress. Eugénie was both lauded and criticized for her daring fashion statements, but the empress always insisted that her ensembles were “toilettes politiques”—clothing whose only mission was to provide a source of economic stimulus for France’s textile industries. The scope of Eugénie’s influence in all matters sartorial was broadly felt: the number of silk looms in Lyon doubled to meet demand during the Second Empire. Similarly, Worth’s incorporation of feathers and flowers into designs worn by the Parisian beau monde stimulated the development of the French lace, feather, and silk flower industries; there would eventually be 800 firms in Paris specializing in these new kinds of accoutrements (Zeldin 436).

¹³ For further discussion, see Weber’s Queen of Fashion.
The French textile industries weren’t the only enterprises to benefit from the empress’s fashion habits. Fashion journalism also greatly profited from Eugénie’s support of the clothing trade. She and her glamorous entourage were regularly profiled in the major style publications and newspapers. Challamel explains why this focus on Eugénie was so profitable for both the fashion and print industries:

Avait-on aperçu l’impératrice Eugénie traversant le bois de Boulogne, vite on s’ingéniait de reproduire fidèlement son costume. Avait-on assisté à un bal des Tuileries, on rêvait pendant plusieurs jours aux toilettes transcendantes qui s’y étaient présentées….Une cinquantaine de journaux disaient la forme et la couleur de leurs robes, décrivaient minutieusement leurs parures et leurs coiffures, racontaient en détail les fêtes où elles brillaient autant par leur toilette que par leur beauté, quand elles n’allaient trop loin dans leurs excentriques plaisirs. (231)

Through her style, the empress kept all of France in business and enraptured. Simond contends that Eugénie as the national fashion plate made her “l’arbitre des lettres, des arts et même des sciences” (432)—a description that suggests not only the significant role that Eugénie (or at least her image) played in the social imaginary, but also the deep imbrication of fashion in various aspects of Second Empire cultural life.

It is only natural, then, that the very thing for which Eugénie was best known—her style—would come under attack at the collapse of the Second Empire. Octave Uzanne’s retrospective of Second Empire style belies xenophobic overtones that had become typical of contemporary criticism aimed at the empress:

L’Impératrice Eugénie était devenue, aussitôt son avenement au trône, l’arbitre des variations du costume; dès le jour de son mariage à Notre-Dame, le 30 janvier 1853, elle sut imposer souverainement son goût turbulent, criard, espagnol pout tout dire, à la France...L’Impératrice portait alors les cheveux relevés sur le front et cette gracieuse manière, qui convenait si bien à son visage, devint au bout de peut de jours la
coiffure généralement à la mode; mais il est juste d’observer qu’elle seyait fort mal à de très nombreuses physionomies féminines à la ligne desquelles elle ne pouvait s’harmoniser. (La Femme et la mode 197)

In Uzanne’s version of history, Eugénie becomes the sartorial scapegoat of the empire’s downfall.\footnote{“The Faint of Fashion,” a poem published in an 1870 issue of Punch echoes these same sentiments from a British perspective, imputing the destruction of the empire to the extravagant excesses Eugénie’s style encouraged: “In Paris, Fashion’s High Priestess / Now prostrate in a swoon, / No longer dictates change of dress / At every change of moon. / With peace, however, she’ll come to, / And then resume her reign. / Perhaps an era may ensue / Of venture neat and plain. / Because it doth to reason stand, / Her sway she will resume, / Her nation’s War Bill will demand / Retrenchment of costume. / Who knows, indeed, France having been / In war severely schooled, / But that her garb will match her mien; / By sober taste be ruled.” Qtd. In Dolan 26. Punch (12 November 1870), 198.} She is not the benevolent sovereign that resurrected France’s textile and fashion industries with her “toilettes politiques”; she is instead cast as a fashion imperialist that from the beginning had imposed her “garish” Spanish taste on the French body politic.\footnote{A similar accusation had been leveled at Eugénie’s fashion forbear, Marie Antoinette. As Eugénie’s style would be implicated in the downfall of the empire, Sanche de Gramont points out that fashion would be instrumental in France’s recovery in subsequent conflicts: “Fashion was not only, as Colbert had predicted, a gold mine for France, it also served as an antidote for national misfortunes. Just as the merveilleuses helped Parisians forget the Terror, couturiers continued to present their collections in the gloomy years of German occupation” (384). See also Caroline Weber’s Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution for an in depth study of the political nature of the discourses surrounding Marie Antoinette’s clothing.} And though Uzanne acknowledges her undeniable beauty, he blames Eugénie for leading her subjects astray with unflattering styles, thereby nearly destroying the very “French” style that she had sought so diligently to cultivate.

Thus in the popular debates about Eugénie’s clothing, the discourses of progress, consumption, politics, and gender converged in the figure of the empress. The politics of her dress constituted a double bind: while she was expected to promote the fashion industry by adopting its new styles, any of the innovations she embraced also had the potential to mark her as either fashion-forward—French, in
other words—or foreign. And though the profitable mimeticism of fashion depended on Eugénie’s willingness to wear a wide variety of styles in a short period of time, she also risked being unfavorably compared to Marie Antoinette as a spendthrift clothseshorse whose excesses drained the national coffers. Like Marie Antoinette before her, she was called Queen of Fashion, Comtesse de la Crinoline, Madame Deficit, and Queen of Flounces.¹⁶

Eugénie’s complicated relationship to her clothing is exemplary of broader conflicts dealing with fashion, consumption, and gender politics in the Second Empire. Though she was in an exemplary position as empress of the French, Eugénie’s position represents the double bind in which all women were caught: that is, to participate in the fashion system—the very act of consumption that the Second Empire required of its women to build the nation—also meant to make oneself vulnerable to the suspicions about feminine fashion and, by extension, about female sexuality.

CRINOLINOMANIE: A CASE STUDY

The most enduring emblem of Second Empire France was, most of all, the crinoline—the voluminous descendant of the farthingale that had existed in some form since the Renaissance, but had been most recently popular with the Old Regime court at Versailles (Dolan 22). A recent retrospective on the crinoline at the Musée¹⁶ Dolan points out that during the first of Eugénie’s three regencies, the emperor’s cousin Prince Napoleon, who had himself had wanted to govern in Louis-Napoleon’s absence, mockingly said that the government had been entrusted to a fashion plate. See Alfred Darimon, Notes pour server à l’Histoire de la guerre de 1870 (236).
Galliera in Paris (2008) showed how in its various nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first century iterations, the crinoline continues even today to fascinate the fashion world and endure in the French cultural consciousness.\(^7\) Though the Second Empire crinoline was only en vogue for less than a decade, the longevity of the interest in the garment exemplifies Walter Benjamin’s insight that “[t]he more short-lived a period, the more susceptible it is to fashion” (80). With its exaggerated silhouette and aristocratic origin, the garment captured the public imagination like no other during the twenty-year span of the Second Empire. Overwrought in its construction and exaggerated in its silhouette, the crinoline perfectly emblematized a society obsessed with surface.

Among the many ways that wealth was visually exhibited in imperial France, the crinoline was the most demonstrative emblem of financial success because of its large dimensions. Thus the crinoline became a powerful metonym for Louis-Napoleon’s France. The garment was the object of a well-documented public obsession in the Second Empire. The crinoline even played starring roles to comic effect in popular boulevard plays by Roger de Beauvoir (*Paris-Crinoline*) and Dumanoir and Théodore Barrière (*Les Toilettes tapageuses*). Augustin Challamel adds that “[l]a plus grave question politique du jour ne passionnait pas plus les Français que la question de la crinoline ne passionnait les Françaises” (234).

This assertion was never truer than in January of 1859 when news that Eugénie had shown up to a ball without a crinoline took front page precedence over reporting on the emperor’s New Year’s speech to Baron Hübner (Godfrey 83). The

preemption of political news in favor of a story about dramatic developments in the world of dress exemplifies Henri Bouchot’s observation about the place of the crinoline in the cultural consciousness of the Second Empire: “La crinoline est comme son fétiche; on dirait que les hommes sont trop occupés à médire d’elle pour entendre à autre chose” (165). The headlines about Eugénie’s missing crinoline blurred the distinction between official government reporting in *Le Moniteur universel* and the columns of the many fashion journals that documented her every ensemble.

However, the level of fascination that the crinoline inspired cannot be ascribed exclusively to its significance as a political symbol. It was also a central fixture in intersecting debates about art, gender, and consumption. Octave Uzanne describes how saturated the Second Empire media with debates about the crinoline: “Ce que cette mode invraisemblable fit couler d’encre pour et contre, tout dans la presse parisienne que dans des brochures diverses, on ne saurait se l’imaginer” (*La Femme et la mode* 199). Thousands of articles and caricatures in newspapers and magazines alternatively extolled either the virtues or the vices of the crinoline cage. On one hand, it was hailed as a triumph of French fashion and engineering ingenuity, freeing women’s legs from the layers of hot, heavy petticoats of the previous decades. With its steel structure and beautiful fabric overlay, the crinoline effectively bridged the gap between industry and art in a single garment. It proved to be one of the most popular displays at the Universal Expositions in Paris during the 1850s, and ultimately helped launch the career of Charles Worth while facilitating the dissemination of fashionable Frenchness across the globe.
On the other hand, it was also the target of much invective by social reformers. They claimed that the voluminous garment abetted female sexual deviancy and familial alienation. The number of marriages in France supposedly declined because of the potential financial burden of fabric. The steel crinoline structure was said to prevent men and children from embracing their wives and mothers. Women could also more easily cuckold their husbands by conveniently hiding their lovers under their enormous skirts. Doctors also worried that the circulation of air around the lower limbs could cause the “unfortunately premature end of a situation which it was the original purpose of the crinoline to conceal”—pregnancy (qtd. in Benjamin 66). Furthermore, if women could hide their pregnancies under their dresses, they could also more easily commit infanticide by surreptitiously securing abortions (Dolan 27). Mel Davies has shown that the corsets worn under crinolines from 1851-1870 were cinched tighter than they ever were between 1751-1930; the tightlacing associated with the crinoline caused a host of health and fertility problems in the women that wore them (619, 628). The critics of the crinoline imputed to the garment a power that put at peril the moral fabric of the family and, ultimately, of French society.

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18 Davies explains that a host of (mental and physical) health problems were attributed to tightly laced corsets: “‘Complaints attributed to tightlacing included nervous disorders, hysterical fits of crying and insomnia, constipation, indigestion, headache, backache, curvature of the spine, respiratory problems and fainting (the vapours, so beloved of nineteenth-century novelists), apoplexy (sometimes leading to death), apathy, stupidity, soured temper, lack of appetite and even starvation, displacement of the liver, effects on secretion of the bile, anemia, chlorosis, enteroptosis, neurasthenia, diseases of the genital organs, hernia, imperfect circulation, dyspepsia, nausea and vomiting, pressure on the breast, inflamed nipples, abscesses, and many more’” (628). In La Curée, Renée induces a miscarriage (of the pregnancy produced by rape) by tightly lacing her corset.
DANGEROUS CURVES

Fashion could also claim the women themselves as victims. Myriad anecdotes of death, dismemberment, and mutilation were circulated in newspapers and medical journals. There were reports of factory girls’ tragic deaths by crushing after being caught by their crinolines in a piece of machinery.¹⁹ More than one woman was said to have suffered disfiguring burns and sometimes even death after the flammable fabrics of the broad skirts got too close to the fireplace. Mérimée himself had claimed to have seen a young woman burned alive after her crinoline had come too close to a fire (Baguley 312). Challamel tells of how French women abandoned green fabrics after reading about a young woman’s curious case in l’Union médicale: after experiencing shortness of breath and weakness in her limbs during a ball, the young woman in question was dismayed to discover that her dress had been tinted with a material containing traces of copper arsenite (Challamel 247). The same poisonous dust had also reportedly wreaked havoc on the complexions and stomachs of the factory girls in Nevers that had originally constructed the green dresses (Challamel 247-48).²⁰ The intersection of fashion and arsenic in these real-life

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¹⁹ There is one case of a crinoline saving a life: after a particularly brutal heartbreak, Sarah Henley tried to commit suicide by jumping off Clifton Bridge in Bristol, England. Her crinoline acted like a parachute and Sarah landed safely with relatively minor injuries. William E. Heasall penned the poem “An Early Parachute Descent in Bristol” to commemorate the event: “Once in Victoria’s golden age / When crinolines were all the rage / A dame in fashionable attire / Would change her life for one up higher / So up to Clifton Bridge she went / And made a parachute descent / But though, ’twas not the lady’s wish / A boatman hooked her like a fish / And thus a slave to fashion’s jaws / Was snatched from out of Death’s hungry jaws / This story’s true I’d have you know / And thus it only goes to show.” Reprinted in Bristol Evening News, May 2, 2000.

²⁰ Challamel, however, notes the irony of women’s widespread rejection of green garments based on a fear of the harm they could cause: “[Les femmes] voulaient bien “souffrir pour être belles,” se serrer la taille, emprisonner leurs pieds dans des chaussures trop étroites, et risquer la fluxion de
anecdotes recalls, of course, the most notorious victim of this deadly combination in nineteenth-century literature—Emma Bovary.

Furthermore, though the critics of Second Empire fashion passionately invoked the physical dangers of couture, they were mostly concerned by the menace to societal order that it represented. The fears that Senator André Dupin expressed in his speech on the senate floor were representative of concerns held by a larger part of the population: in this view, the very integrity of the family and, by extension, of the French nation were under siege by the style industry. Fashion indiscriminately elevated anyone who had the money to cultivate a modish affectation, irrespective of lineage or character. The Goncourt brothers describe the Second Empire high society as “l’aristocratie des gens qui ne le sont pas”—a hierarchy of bankers, stockbrokers, and speculators that made up the social constellation of the imperial court.21 Ferdinand Bac’s metaphor for these “gens sans âme et sans prestige” in Second Empire high society suggests the important role that fashion played in their original rise to social prominence: “C’est comme un coffret précieux qui contient des chiffons” (3).

This new way of determining rank represented a significant paradigm shift in the way that class divisions were structured. The display of social rank through sartorial signs had started well before the Second Empire. In his 1830 *Traité de la vie élégante*, Balzac wrote: “Alors, dans notre société, les différences on disparu: il

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“n’y a plus que des nuances” (57). However, the increasing democratization of fashion in the Second Empire further effaced the social boundaries they signified. Bouchot’s observation about the new social order relays general anxieties about the permissiveness of these new hierarchies based on fashion:

Après l’exposition de 1855, une femme de qualité est à la ville la plus mystérieuse et la plus indéchiffrable personne qui se puisse; tout au plus un bout de frimousse s’aperçoit-il dans l’amas des falbalas, parmi les ruches, les rubans ou les voilettes. Grande ou moyenne? Lourde ou svelte? Vous ne devineriez jamais...Même l’Impératrice est ainsi faite, et quand la photographie l’immobilise, qu’elle n’a plus son élégance de démarche, on a peine à la reconnaître. (161-62)

The inscrutability of modern fashion—exemplified for Bouchot by the Empress Eugénie herself—provoked anxieties about the meaning of life in modern society. Caricatures by Cham, Félix Nadar, and Daumier published during the height of the crinoline’s popularity played on popularly held suspicions of the garment (Baguley 312). Images portrayed grooms horrified to discover the emaciated bodies of their brides who, in their elegant ensembles, had appeared to be the full bloom of femininity. The restricting corset and rigid skirt hoops were shown to help corpulent women disguise their girth. Women were also depicted deceiving their husbands by concealing their lovers—and, by implication, any offspring produced by their indiscretions—under their huge skirts.

The most significant anxieties surrounding women’s fashion, however, were not centered on the shape of the bodies underneath the clothing, but rather the social meaning of those bodies. In his sweeping study of clothing in the nineteenth century, Philippe Perrot explains that the democratization of fashion sparked a contradictory impulse: as the bourgeoisie grew in size and power, anxieties arose about the
complete erasure of all sartorial (and therefore social) difference within the group. Jennifer Jones explains that these concerns about the flattening of social distinctions—especially among women—began at the beginning of the century and were informed by a fundamental conflation: that is, that the desire for a rapid succession of trends would morph into the desire for a rapid succession of lovers and result in a communicable female promiscuity across all classes (77-112).

According to historians of the Second Empire, these anxieties about fashion and women’s sexuality appear to have been at least partially justified. Egon Friedell argues that the “paragon of fashion” in the Second Empire is “the grande dame who plays the cocotte” (qtd. in Benjamin 75). Of course, fashion also allowed the cocotte to play the grande dame, provided that she could afford the same luxurious garments as high society ladies. Zola’s novel Nana exemplifies this kind of social and sexual permissiveness—an erotic fluidity in which, as Uzanne puts it, men were the “trait d’union” between the demimonde and the beau monde féminin. And just as Le Moniteur universel sometimes blurred the line between fashion reporting and political news, style publications often stood astride the nebulous division between the femmes comme il faut and the filles à la mode:

A cette époque, on eut la grande tristesse de voir se produire la confusion des mondes...Le demi-monde fut créé; la presse encouragea les déclassés, parla de leur bonté, de leur charme, de leur esprit naturel, vanta le bon goût et l’excentricité de leurs toilettes; il fut question dans toutes les gazettes de ces reines de la main gauche dont on ne clandestinait plus les amours; le reportage pénétra dans les boudoirs des actrices, des lorettes et des filles. (Uzanne, La Femme et la mode 231)

22 See Philippe Perrot’s Le Dessus et les Dessous de la bourgeoisie : Une histoire du vêtement au XIXe siècle (especially 173).
Balzac articulated the difference between the beau monde and the demimonde as the distinction between the *femmes comme il faut* and the *femmes comme il en faut*: the former included women who were respectable and marriageable; the latter was the sphere of the *lorette*, the actress, and the courtesan (Hiner 10). For Uzanne, the press and the fashionable *filles* are mutually enabling: both promote the transgression of boundaries that traditionally had kept social spheres distinct from one another. Fashion and fashion reporting had permitted the revision of societal codes that promoted, to France’s detriment, the vertical social ascent of the *grandes horizontales*.

**DESIGNING WOMEN**

In considering the complex web of ideologies surrounding women’s relationship to fashion, it is helpful to review how the realm of consumption came to be feminized in the first place. The historian Victoria de Grazia traces the gendering of consumption to two major structural changes in the nineteenth century. The first was the “identification of wage labor with male labor” and the development of the division of labor in industrial economies. The second was “the advent of liberal politics and public space”—a change that was “premised on a reconceptualization of needs” that identified “rational” versus “irrational” needs, with men being identified with the former and women with the latter (15). While men were to contribute to the
nation through politics and industrial labor, women were to build up France in the private sphere of their homes by surrounding their families with French products.

This impetus for the nation to consume goods that were symbolic of Frenchness represented a significant paradigm shift from the Old Regime. De Grazia explains that casting off the social structure of monarchical France meant that goods were transformed from “being relatively static symbols around social hierarchies...to being more fluid and directly constitutive of social status” (18). Owning the right goods and wearing the right clothes, in other words, was not only indicative, but also transformative, of social class. And this transformation of the bourgeoisie from a “purchasing class” into a “consuming class” can be dated from the middle of the nineteenth century, de Grazia argues, because of specific historical circumstances: “As a way of life, the bourgeois mode of consumption was historically unique, precisely because, as befitting its individualist outlooks, its ethos of progress, and the greatly varying income of its protagonists, it tolerated an unusual variety of turnover of models of self and social deportment” (18).

This bourgeois ideology of progress had to redefine rampant consumption as liberating, and even necessary, to the building of a modern French society. Sumptuary laws and restrictions on individual (and especially women’s) freedoms represented court-imposed strictures meant to order society and reaffirm royal authority. De Grazia notes that yoking an ethos of progress to consumption required inverting Old Regime ideas that viewed the unbridled acquisition of goods as inherently destabilizing; eighteenth-century “mercantilist thinkers” turned traditional ways of thinking about consumption “topsy-turvy to argue that even the
luxury trades, indeed the luxury trades first and foremost, were an impetus to the accumulation of national wealth” (13). Citing Marguerite Perrot’s work, Leora Auslander also argues that the impetus to consume appropriate goods was a requirement of membership in the bourgeois class.23

Because the locus of bourgeois consumption was the private sphere of the home, women’s role in the process of nation- and economy-building in the mid-nineteenth century became a debate with significant stakes for Second Empire society. Scholars like de Grazia, Auslander, and Naomi Schor have taken interest specifically in the “importance of consumption to the question of what processes transform a female into a woman” in the nineteenth century (de Grazia 7). Jules Renard has dismissively called the mid-nineteenth-century woman “le roseau dépensant”—the silly, materialistic creature of countless caricatures whose spendthrift ways impoverished her poor husband.

Though there were certainly more than a few women who fit this wastrel profile, Renan’s broad swipe at the female consumer completely neglects the important role she played in the construction of a modern French identity. This kind of bias against women is representative of scholarship about the history of consumption in general; de Grazia points out that the “conspicuousness of the female figure, in contrast to her real powerlessness, has resulted in a kind of overtheorization” (19).24 The persistent image of the bourgeois woman as spendthrift

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23 See Marguerite Perrot’s La Mode de vie des familles bourgeoises, 1873-1953.

24 Veblen famously built his theory of conspicuous consumption around the figure of the bourgeois woman as a way to effect a critique of the class and its spending and social habits as a whole. The work of historians like de Grazia and Auslander, however, takes a different approach and argues for the role of women consumers in the building of the nation.
has historically obscured her contributions to the cultivation of the idea of Frenchness that still endure today. Auslander states along the same lines that “[w]omen indulged in beauty not for the sake of beauty but rather for higher ends—the welfare of their husband and children, the family’s social standing” (92). Just as the French economy depended a great deal on foreign and domestic consumption of luxury goods, the French family depended on the ability of the woman of the house to adorn herself appropriately and to constitute their status through her purchases (Auslander 83).

**READING FOR DETAIL**

But how would women know what to consume? And how to consume it? As previously noted, the dismantling of the aristocratic sumptuary structure had democratized fashion and put style within the grasp of the well-heeled, irrespective

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25 Auslander points out that consumption was not only a way to build up and define the identity of the bourgeoisie, but also became a way to initiate all French citizens and foreigners into French culture later in the century: “[T]he French language and French consumer goods came to be seen as a means of integrating an influx of foreigners into the French nation, as well as a means of unifying the diverse regions of the hexagon itself” (93).

26 Auslander argues that this process of self-constitution through consumption started in French women’s formative years: “Bourgeois daughters, when on the marriage market, were encouraged to increase their value through the cultivation of their beauty and the acquisition of clothing, jewelry, and culture. That obligation did not end with marriage, for in the bodies and talents of wives, and in the homes they created, inhered the position of the family. Therefore, bourgeois wives not only had to produce themselves as cultural objects but also needed to acquire, arrange, and use those goods—especially furnishings—defined as necessary for representing and constituting the family’s social position” (83). Auslander cites an excerpt from an April 1848 issue of *Le Conseiller des dames* as an illustration of this imperative to consume for the sake of the family and the nation: “Whether women are the wives of republicans or the wives of royal subjects, their mission remains the same—... to preserve France’s old reputation of distinction, by their taste and their spirit, to encourage the beautiful in arts and letters, to teach their families love of country and fear of God...” (94).
of the origin of their fortunes. Though this liberation of style from the dictates of the court corresponded with the bourgeois ethos of progress, the availability of status symbols provoked anxieties about the blurring of class lines. The need for order proved lucrative for the fashion industry as it responded through a proliferation of vestimentary nuances that determined the difference between an elegant ensemble and a fashion faux pas. The semiotics of fashion became big business. As Perrot puts it, the fashion landscape became “un champ multipolarisé…où se hiéarchisent miniteusement signes et conduites” (173).

With this new proliferation of visual microdistinctions, the Second Empire saw an explosion of the advice industry—publications that helped women know how to dress, what to read to their children, how to decorate their homes, and so on. Perrot explains the significance of these publications in the lives of the bourgeoisie:

Tous [les magazines]...ont une parole autoritaire, communatoire, qui transforme le vêtement...[Les magazines] témoignent d’une demande sans précédent de la part des fractions non initiées de la bourgeoisie (puisqu’ils on besoin d’apprendre), en ascension (réelle ou fictive), et en quête frénétique des signes d’appartenance qui doivent venir compléter leur réussite économique (authentique ou non), pour légitimer leur nouveau statut (licite ou fantasmé). (168)

Perrot’s constant qualifications in his description of the bourgeoisie’s social ascension suggest how fluid it could be, and how unstable the produced meanings were. Fashion promised at the very least the illusion of authentic social belonging.

The main audience for fashion publications was the woman of the bourgeois household, as it fell to her to assemble the signs of the family’s belonging in that
class. However, as much as fashion was integral to the construction of family and French identity in the home, it also played a major role in the spectator culture of Parisian public life. Brunhilde Wehinger’s study on the boulevard theater and fashion culture in 1850s Paris describes the triangulation between fashion, theater, and spectatorship: patrons went to the theater to see latest popular play, but also to be seen wearing the latest fashions by the attending public. Though women used fashion and furnishings to construct a properly French, bourgeois identity, the ostentatious nature of Second Empire fashions seemed to some observers engineered to push women out of the home. An excerpt from Victorien Sardou’s boulevard play *La famille Benoîton* (1866) includes a character’s lamentation about the new role of fashion in public life and its effects on the family:

Autrefois, une femme se mariait pour avoir son ‘chez elle’, et gouverner ce petit royaume baptisé d’un nom charmant, presque ridicule aujourd’hui... ‘le ménage’! Elle ne sortait guère... D’abord, c’était moins facile; mais en 1865, quelle est la fonction la plus ordinaire d’une maîtresse de maison? C’est d’être sortie!—‘Madame est sortie!’—Or chaque sortie, bal, spectacle, concert, promenade, course et visite, ayant un but différent, représente une toilette nouvelle... Une Parisienne va, vient, trotte de Trouville à Ems, de Bade à Etretat, aussi prestement que son aïeule de l’armoire au linge à l’armoire aux confitures! Et toujours la toilette qui va son train! Toilette de wagon, toilette de bateau, toilette de bain, de cheval, de traîneau, de chasse, de

This charge was women’s from the beginning; as girls, they were responsible for the care and upkeep of their dolls. Marie-Françoise Lévy explains the obligations of little girls to their toys: “Vêtir sa poupée, entretenir ses habits, la tenir propre en n’oubliant pas de lui faire régulièrement et avec soin sa toilette, est une première obligation” (38). She adds that the dolls were seen as exemplary of their owners: a slovenly doll meant a slovenly girl. The inverse was also true: an immaculately kept doll indicated good breeding and good domestic potential.
The desire to be “sortie,” to be out among the crowds and partaking of the public entertainments of the Second Empire, displaces the woman from the home and plunges her in the mutable mobility of modernity. Furthermore, her clothing expenses require the sale of her husband’s lands—holdings that are typically associated with the establishment and continuity of ancestral lines.

Though they were supposed to constitute themselves and their families through consumption of goods, fashion could also entangle women in an obsessive materiality that would mean the destruction of the very home they were supposed to create. Susan Hiner’s study of the *corbeille de mariage* explores the latent threat of materialism inherent in the conjugal gift: while the objects contained within the *corbeille* (cashmere shawls, fans, handbags, parasols, etc.) represented “indices of respectability” for bourgeois women, a lust for more of these objects in young women could ruin the very families they were meant to consecrate (5). The fashion-obsessed female that imperils her family is a frequent motif in Second Empire novels: Emma Bovary ruins her husband with her exorbitant purchases; Renée Saccard must sell her ancestral lands to subsidize her haute couture habit; Chérie dies in a virginal decadent dissolution in her designer clothes. As Auslander points out, ideologies about social status and female consumption were not just limited to fashion magazines. Novels, which are the primary focus of this study, also played a hugely
important role in the dissemination of ideas about the role of women in the bourgeois home.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I explore Emma Bovary’s disastrous pursuit of distinction through fashion. I show how Flaubert appropriates the details and the discourses of fashion journals in *Madame Bovary* in his opening description of Charles’ hat. I argue that the highly detailed but nonsensical description of Charles’ hat is an allegory of reading that allows the reader to see how fashion journals—just like romantic novels—have a blinding effect on Emma. The novels and the journals both nourish Emma’s illusions about creating an elegant life for herself; the subsequent gaps between illusion and reality in the novel show the futility of her attempts to transcend her station. I pay particular attention to passages that feature Emma’s engagement with fashion and fashion journals. Emma’s failure to perceive the difference between fantasy and reality is thematized in the narrative as blindness, and ultimately reveals her endemic *bovarysme*.

Chapter two is an analysis of the role of fashion in *La Curée*. Like Emma Bovary, Renée Saccard similarly brings herself to ruin through her extravagances, both sartorial and sexual. I argue that like in *Madame Bovary*, Renée’s inability to distinguish reality from fiction is thematized as blindness. Like Flaubert, Zola similarly creates a model of reading in his text that is characterized by the search for meaning in material detail. Renée’s myopia is put on naked display from the first scene of the novel; her recognition of her own blindness only occurs at the end of the novel, after she has stripped off all of her expensive clothing. I argue that Zola anticipates Laura Mulvey’s insights about the gendered dynamics of spectacle: it is
Renée’s appropriation of the male gaze that make her blind to the atomizing and alienating effects of that very same gaze—wielded in her case by her husband (Saccard) and her stepson (Maxime). I also show how Zola uses the pun to exemplify the idea of simultaneous narratives: the first (fantasy) is the transgressive, liberating life Renée believes she is leading; the second (reality) is the story of her bankruptcy and exploitation by her speculator husband Saccard. Renée’s realization of her nakedness at the end of the narrative coincides with her recognition of the deleterious effects of the male gaze on her body.

Finally, my chapter on Edmond de Goncourt’s last novel Chérie explores the author’s notion of “la réalité élégante.” I discuss the publication history of Chérie and Goncourt’s call for papers in the preface of La Faustin: in order to create the most realistic study of French girl- and young womanhood possible, Goncourt asked for and received all kinds of letters and memoirs from his readers. There are, however, no textual or paratextual acknowledgments of Goncourt’s female collaborators in Chérie. As Chérie can be seen as a transitional text from naturalism to decadence, I argue that this male appropriation of women’s writing is an adoption of female literary codes analogous to that described by Margaret Cohen in The Sentimental Education of the Novel. In other words, as Cohen argues that the (male) realist novel appropriated codes from the (female), sentimental novel, Goncourt similarly uses female writing in his transitional novel from naturalism to decadence. I argue that in the book’s publication history and subject matter, there is a similar appropriation of women’s work by men in French fashion history.
This dissertation aims to understand the importance of fashion—fine clothing, but also the discourse of fashion journals—in some of the most widely read novels of the nineteenth century. In the decline and dissolution of their respective heroines, I aim to explore how Flaubert, Zola, and Goncourt thematize and critique the visual culture of fashion that they depict in their novels. I argue that all of these authors use their narratives as vehicles to critique the fantasy of social ascension and sexual liberty present in Emma, Renée, and Chérie. In the end, it is the women’s fixed focus on fashion that makes them blind to the way they are exploited and ruined by that very pursuit.
CHAPTER TWO

Dubious Distinction: Flaubert’s Revolution in Style

Car j’écris (je parle d’un auteur qui se respecte) non pour le lecteur d’aujourd’hui, mais pour tous les lecteurs qui pourront se présenter, tant que la langue vivra. Ma marchandise ne peut donc être consommée maintenant, car elle n’est pas faite exclusivement pour mes contemporains. Mon service reste donc indéfini et, par conséquent, impayable.  

Dans Mme Bovary, si elle peut vieillir, il y a tout l’avenir d’une marchande à la toilette.  

What is familiar about the critical reception of Madame Bovary (1857) is that the number of the novel’s detractors rivaled the number of its apologists, the notability of Sand and Baudelaire notwithstanding. The critiques ranged in tone from the constructive to the combative, with one disapproving critic going so far as to proclaim the publication of Flaubert’s novel the definitive death of good literature. 

What is perhaps less familiar about the critical response to Madame Bovary is that many of Flaubert’s reviewers, in their attempts to describe to the public the novel’s obsession with material detail, made recourse to a common metaphor—that of clothing and fashion. Barbey d’Aurevilly, for example, praises Flaubert’s virtuosity with the description of objects, but also laments that the focus on the material

28 Flaubert, Correspondance, 172.
30 See both Benjamin Bart’s Madame Bovary and the Critics and Bernard Weinberg’s French Realism: The Critical Reaction for excellent discussions of contemporary critical reactions to Flaubert’s novel.
31 Cuvillier-Fleury for Le Journal des Débats politiques et littéraire: “On écrit beaucoup, et il n’est guère de journal ou de recueil périodique qui ne donne son roman au public; le public lit tous les romans qu’on lui donne. Quelqu’un me disait un jour, voulant caractériser ce genre de progrès qui est particulier à notre époque: ‘La pyramide s’abaisse, mais elle s’élargit par la base.’ Cela est vrai: elle s’élargit tellement que tout y entre.” (Web)
distracted the young author from sufficiently developing character and plot. D’Aurevilly reprimands Flaubert for repeating “sous tous les costumes le même imbécile,” and similarly complains that Flaubert’s protagonist exhausts “tout le vestiaire romanesque du dix-neuvième siècle” with Emma’s rehashing of all of the clichés of romantic literature\(^\text{32}\): the smoking, the transvestism (men’s vests and hairdos), the yearning for Italy, and so forth (Web).

Though he echoes many of the same complaints of d’Aurevilly, critic J. Habans remains nonetheless optimistic about the literary future of the young Flaubert. For Habans, it is simply a question of style. If Flaubert could harness his powers of description to create a sense of moral hierarchy in his text by privileging the significant over the trivial, he could still become a great author: “C’est un homme vigoureux et bien proportionné revêtu d’habits mal faits. Il changera de tailleur” (Web). Similarly struck by the sartorial in *Madame Bovary*, Alfred Dumesnil’s observation is however more succinct: “Une profusion d’accessoires” (Web). And though admiring of Flaubert’s talent, Edmond Texier echoes his fellow critics’ objection to the lack of differentiation among the characters. He also registers his complaint in terms of their clothing: “Ce qui manque aussi à M. Flaubert, c’est la science des contrastes, et par conséquent de la composition. Tous ses personnages ont le même ton, le même habit et la même physionomie morale” (Web, my emphasis). Even the suppression of certain controversial passages in *La Revue de*  

\(^{32}\) Flaubert’s recourse to stereotypical romantic topoi in *Madame Bovary* puzzled critics like Sainte-Beuve and Cuvillier-Fleury. They saw Emma’s romantic fantasies as degraded forms of her literary models, unworthy of Flaubert’s attention, and they considered the subject matter—though not the style— of *Madame Bovary* a step back for the French novel. This is an especially poignant critique since the future path of the French novel had been a subject of debate since Balzac’s death on August 18, 1850.
Paris, the weekly where Madame Bovary first appeared in serial form, is described by Texier as an attempt by the editors to throw “un simple châle de barège sur les épaules trop décolletées de l'amoureuse” (Web).33

Like many of his fellow critics, Alfred-Auguste Cuvillier-Fleury also concedes to Flaubert an unusual proficiency with the depiction of detail, but takes the author to task for not having the savoir faire to use it correctly. The narration of Madame Bovary exemplified for Cuvillier-Fleury the “avidité matérialiste” of its eponymous heroine: as Emma’s hungry pursuit of lust and luxury represented her moral decline, the text’s obsessive and seemingly indiscriminate description of objects—and especially clothing—privileged glittering surface over meaningful depth, thereby creating in the narrative a bewildering conflation of the transcendent (or at least what should be) and the banal. Flaubert’s anarchy of meticulously drawn materials, Cuvillier-Fleury explains, is both symptom and cause of the novel’s unmoored moral perspective. In his estimation, should Madame Bovary and its characters, “[d]rapés dans cette défroque du romantisme...couverts de paillettes et de broderies d'emprunt,” enjoy any kind of longevity, it will be not as a novel, but as “une marchande à la toilette” (Web)

The critics’ qualification of Flaubert’s novel as a simple purveyor of modish novelties can be attributed to both the publication history and the narrative style of

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33 This is a reference to the Vaubyessard scene in the novel, just before Emma (in her “robe de barège”) and Charles are about to leave: “Emma mit un châle sur ses épaules, ouvrit la fenêtre et s’accouda” (123). Emma is trying to stay awake after the long night, “afin de prolonger l’illusion de cette vie luxueuse” (123). The suggestion that Madame Bovary needed to cover because it shows “a little too much” is particularly suggestive because it draws on the imagery of the scene where Emma is exposed to too much. The aristocratic lifestyle that she sees that night will from that point on determine—and deform—her vision of the world.
*Madame Bovary*. The novel first appeared in serial form in *La Revue de Paris* between October 1st and December 15, 1856. While the *Revue* was a literary magazine, it occupied the same discursive space as the women’s fashion publications of the *presse féminine*; both were sold and distributed in similar venues and in similar ways, and the female readership for both kinds of publications greatly overlapped. Furthermore, the heavily detailed opening passage of *Madame Bovary* support Cuvillier-Fleury’s claim that he could not distinguish between Flaubert’s prose and the pages of a fashion magazine. The book famously begins in a classroom with the introduction of Charles as a boy—“le nouveau habillé en bourgeois” (55).

Charles is described as an unexceptional young man with an imbecilic-looking face; the hat that he brings to class, however, is just as sophisticated as he is simple:

C’était une de ces coiffures d’ordre composite, où l’on retrouve les éléments du bonnet à poil, du chapska, du chapeau rond, de la casquette de loutre et du bonnet de coton, une de ces pauvres choses, enfin, dont la laideur muette a des profondeurs d’expression comme le visage d’un imbécile. Ovoïde et renflée de baleines, elle commençait par trois boudins circulaires; puis s’alternaient, séparés par une bande rouge, des losanges de velours et de poils de lapin; venait ensuite une façon de sac qui se terminait par un polygone cartonné, couvert d’une broderie en soutache compliquée, et d’où pendait, au bout d’un long cordon trop mince, un petit croisillon de fils d’or, en manière de gland. Elle était neuve; la visière brillait. (*Madame Bovary* 56-7)

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34 Jann Matlock has pointed out that the critical vitriol directed at realist texts during the July Monarchy and Second Empire was “frequently published side by side in the press with the very newspaper novels it condemned” (“Censoring the Realist Gaze” 32). Flaubert’s critics make a poignant critique in their claim that *Madame Bovary* was indistinguishable from a fashion journal as the novel was initially serialized and, like other realist novels, was published side by side with the kinds of texts that appeared regularly in ladies’ magazines. Furthermore, the relationship between fashion magazines and literature is strengthened by the fact that many nineteenth-century authors—Balzac, Nerval, Mallarmé, for example—also wrote for women’s fashion journals.
The attention and pride of place given to the hat underscores its importance in the narrative; if we are to know how to read the rest of the novel, we must know how to interpret this initial object. The description of the hat announces an exhaustively detailed style that will typify the depth of detail that will be devoted to subsequent material objects in the rest of the book. The lengthy explanation of the hat’s composition also poses one of the novel’s first interpretive problems. Despite what the abundance of details suggests, the endless precisions do not make the hat any more realizable: by all accounts, it is a nonsensical collage of a dozen different styles and did not—and cannot—exist in reality as it is described in the book. What, therefore, is the signifying purpose of this impossible object in a realist novel, and what is its relation to the rest of the narrative?

**DETAIL ORIENTED**

This gap between the language of the description and the object it purports to depict has elicited much commentary from critical readers of every stripe. For Georg Lukács, virtuosic descriptions, like that of Charles’ hat, are exemplary of the enumerative style of the later realists (like Flaubert or Zola) in which the author privileges the proliferation of details over the depth of their signifying power (like Balzac and Tolstoy do). Lukács sees the piling up of “inessential details” as the symptom of the author’s inability to forge a sense of immediacy with natural

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35 An attestation to this fact is *La Casquette de Charles Bovary*, a collection of illustrations in which twenty-four different artists attempt to create an image of the infamous hat. See *La Casquette de Charles Bovary* by Michel Boujut.
objects—an immediacy that has been destroyed by the mass production of late capitalism (157). For Lukács, the convoluted description of Charles’ hat exemplifies the alienated relationships of a bourgeois world in which “details meticulously observed and depicted with consummate skill are substituted for the portrayal of essential features of social reality and the description of changes effected in the human personality by social influences” (143-4). In other words, in Flaubert’s aesthetic practice, an object like the hat has no symbolic significance in the text outside itself precisely because, as a mass-produced commodity, it is has no singular, significant meaning. The description of Charles’ hat is therefore both an allegory of the distance between subject and object in the industrialized era, and also a linguistic exercise unto itself as a demonstration of the Flaubert’s masterful command of the nineteenth-century sartorial lexicon.

If Lukács found cause to criticize the superfluity of description in Flaubert, Roland Barthes’ famous defense of the detail in “L’Effet de réel” posits that the “extraneous” details of Lukács’ characterization do indeed serve a purpose in realist texts: simply put, these details exist to signify “le réel.” In her reading of Barthes’ essay, Naomi Schor describes the shift from Lukács to Barthes as a move “from a teleological to a tautological model of the detail” in which the real is denoted through “a conspicuous consumption of language” (“Details and Decadence” 29). The abundance of details in Flaubert’s prose is portrayed by Barthes to be a kind of linguistic luxury:

Ces notations [qu’aucune fonction...ne permet de justifier] sont scandaleuses (du point de vue de la structure), ou, ce qui est encore plus inquiétant, elles semblent accordées à une sorte de luxe de la
narration, prodigue au point de dispenser des détails ‘inutiles’ et d’élever ainsi par endroits le coût de l’information narrative. (84)

Though their presence may initially provoke anxiety in the reader, Barthes argues that the ultimate usefulness of these details lies in their luxurious abundance. It is in the very piling up of precisions that the text is able to signify the real.

For decades now, Lukács and Barthes’ respective writings on the role of the detail in realism have framed subsequent discussions of Charles Bovary’s hat. Despite Flaubert’s endless precisions, the hat, in all of its absurdity, has not been seen as a real object, but instead has always been interpreted as an allegory for something else. For Jonathan Culler, for example, the hat is a “parody of a symbolic object” and depicts not an actual hat, but represents rather an allegorical rendering of the schism between words and things (92). Lawrence Schehr sees in the description of the hat the rejoining of romanticism (presence) and modernism (absence); the details constitute, but also irrevocably obliterate, the object, thus calling into question the “a priori adequation between language and things” (10).

Elissa Marder’s psychoanalytic reading of “the most notable accessory in all of literary history” explores the symbolic combination of the tassel (male) and fur (female) in the hat as exemplary of Charles’ troubled sexuality (97). For Jean Ricardou, Flaubert’s piling up of details creates an “excroissance perpendiculaire” that stops the plot’s momentum to create a “temps mort” in the narrative. This dead space forces the reader to stop to contemplate the object, thereby generating a concordance between the literal and the referential dimensions—we the readers, like
Charles’ classmates, stop to stare at the new boy and his bewildering, ridiculous, overwrought hat (27-28).

While these readings are astute analyses of the symbolic and rhetorical role of Charles’ hat, there is one aspect of the passage that is consistently overlooked by contemporary readers, but that was nonetheless signaled by Flaubert’s critics in the nineteenth century—that is, the striking resemblance of Flaubert’s description to similar ones featured in nineteenth-century women’s fashion journals. Consider the similar tone and detail in the following passage from the January 4, 1824 issue of *Le Journal des dames et des modes* describing the remarkable headdress of Madame la duchesse de C[...]:

[Pour sa coiffure elle avoit quelque chose de si nouveau et de si distingué, que je n’eus pas grand mérite à en conserver l’idée; qu’on se figure une passé absolument ronde dont une moitié relevée grâce sur le front, étoit surmontée d’une immense plume blanche nouée; sur le sommet de la tête, plusieurs nœuds de velours égalemént terminés par des ferrets d’acier étoient rassemblés avec art, et de manière à retomber quelque peu sur l’arrière-passe du chapeau, dont l’étoffe couleur de feu s’allioit on ne peut mieux au nom de chapeau Trocadéro qu’on lui a donné justement [sic]. (qtd. in Kleinert 6)]

The fact that critics like Cuvillier-Fleury immediately thought of a fashion magazine after reading the opening passages of *Madame Bovary* is unsurprising: the tone, focus, and scope of the description of Charles’ hat closely resembles those from contemporary fashion publications. The commercial motive behind the meticulous descriptions of clothing and accessories found in the *presse féminine* is clear: hats and clothing are described in such minute detail so that female readers, should they desire that their own milliners or seamstresses create for them something similarly sophisticated, could have the *nouveauté* reproduced for themselves. The text is
explicitly constructed so that the objects described can be produced materially, and then purchased by the reader. Flaubert’s motivation for imitating fashion journal discourse in *Madame Bovary*, however, is less clear: while female readers were able to translate fashion magazine descriptions into real objects, what kind of reality does Flaubert want his reader to derive from his own similarly detailed and materially oriented text?

My fundamental contention is that understanding the role of fashion and fashion journal discourse in *Madame Bovary* is essential to understanding the poetics of the novel. Underscoring the similarity between Flaubert’s prose and the text of nineteenth-century fashion magazines, I want to return to Barthes’ notion of the realist text as luxury made narrative and suggest that the consumption of commodities is an essential driving force in *Madame Bovary* for both Emma and the reader. While romantic literature has long been acknowledged as the source material for Emma’s fantasies, I show how fashion journals, and nineteenth-century novels read as fashion journals, also contribute to Emma’s desire to escape her milieu. Furthermore, I use Ricardou’s argument about Charles’ hat—that the proliferation of details forces the reader to stop to *look* at the object—as a point of departure for my own analysis of how Emma looks at similarly detailed accessories and clothing in the novel. I argue this kind of looking—in other words, the search for meaning in the scrutiny of details—not only replicates a similar kind of looking that is solicited in nineteenth-century fashion journals, but also ironically reveals Emma’s profoundly myopic vision of her place in the world.
Using Jules de Gaultier's 1921 characterization of le bovarysme as “un mode de vision” indicative of “le pouvoir départi à l’homme de se concevoir autre qu’il n’est” (55, 13), I show how Flaubert binds the discourses of the romantic novel and of the fashion journal together in Emma’s fantasy to show that they produce analogous and mutually reinforcing effects on her. More specifically, what pushes Emma to consume both romantic literature and fashion journals is rooted in the same impulse—that is, the urge to escape the ennui of her provincial existence by deriving another reality from text. In turn, Emma’s consumption of these texts, both literary and periodical, has the same effect: in fueling her social and sartorial ambitions, they render her blind to the unbridgeable distance between her literary fantasy and her provincial reality. Her repeated—and, ultimately, frustrated—attempts to distinguish herself through dress is thus symptomatic of her bovarystic belief that she can somehow transform her prosaic life into an elegant and singular existence. Flaubert reveals his protagonist’s endemic bovarysme through her profoundly ironic relationship to fashion: the more that Emma seeks a sense of distinction through sartorial (and therefore social) superiority, the more that her clothing reveals her utter sameness or contiguity with the provincial milieu she so desperately tries to escape.

My argument is developed over four stages. First, using Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the “orders of simulacra” (imitation, production, and simulation) as a framework, I describe the seismic shift in the sartorial landscape of nineteenth-century France and how fashion journals, at once descriptive and prescriptive, shaped their female audience through the promotion of certain kinds of looking and
interpretive practices. Because their commercial viability depended on their readers’ willingness to buy their wares, these publications sold a “romance” of a different sort: that of the possibility of social ascension through elegant dressing. Second, I show how the question of distinction—between the obscene and the moral, between the disingenuous and the sincere, between reality and illusion—through visual interpretation was of central importance both in Flaubert’s obscenity trial and in Gaultier’s definition of *le bovarysme* as psychological pathology. I discuss how these problems of distinction are intimately related to Emma’s own pursuit of distinction through fashion. Third, I explore how fashion and fashion journals—both as Emma consumes them and as Flaubert imitates them in the novel—reveal Emma’s scotomatous vision of the world: Flaubert repeatedly shows that where Emma perceives difference (and where she seeks distinction), there is only sameness. I also argue that Emma’s consumption of fashion journals is one of many examples of dangerous reading in the novel in which the reader unsuccessfully tries to translate text to lived experience. Fourth, I discuss how the end of the novel, with Emma’s effacement and Homais’ exaltation, ultimately constitutes a critique of the disingenuous distinctions of the political culture of Second Empire France.

**CRIMES OF FASHION**

Of course, the discussion of style and detail in *Madame Bovary* famously extended beyond the purview of literary debate. After the publication of the final installment of the novel, Flaubert was charged with “outrage à la morale publique et
religieuse et aux bonnes mœurs” for his tale of adultery and provincial ennui. The issues that formed the core of the prosecution’s obscenity case against the author were the very same ones that vexed many of Flaubert’s literary critics: that is, because of its photographic-like descriptions and unorthodox narration, the novel took in all within its scope at once, commingling the sacred with the secular, and thereby producing the sacrilegious in the absence of a moralizing narrator. Like the literary critics, prosecutor Ernest Pinard also uses a clothing metaphor to describe the scandal of the novel:

Cette morale stigmatise la littérature réaliste, non parce qu’Elle peint les passions: la haine, la vengeance, l’amour; le monde vit que là-dessus, et l’art doit les peindre; mais quand Elle les peint sans frein, sans mesure. L’art sans règle n’est plus l’art; c’est comme une femme qui quitterait tout vêtement. (Web)

For Pinard, Madame Bovary is not the coyly underdressed mistress of Texier’s comparison; she is rather a woman stripped naked in public, standing in bold defiance of good taste and good morals. He argues that the realist, in wanting to show the truth of all aspects of life, shows too much, thereby initiating his reader into an obscene world where all is on undifferentiated naked display. As Flaubert’s critics accused him of writing a fashion journal for the presse feminine, Pinard was particularly concerned with the effects that this kind of exhibitionism would have on female readers. As Jann Matlock as shown, Pinard’s argument, in its constant recourse to the visual aspects of Madame Bovary, rehearses popular anxieties about the female gaze. The prosecutor submits as evidence of obscenity passages describing how Emma’s looks (read: gaze/appearance) are never more beautiful than in the
places in the novel that, to his eye, most glorify adultery (Spectacles of Realism 46-47).

Pinard feared that Madame Bovary would become a gateway to vice for Flaubert’s female readers: if Emma could be led to dishonor and dissolution by romantic literature, what more could be feared for women readers from the unflinching focus on the “frisson de volupté” so starkly portrayed in Flaubert’s realist text? This was more than just a matter of narrative style: Pinard argued that Flaubert, by privileging inclusion over discretion, shirked his authorial responsibilities by creating in Madame Bovary (and, by extension, all similarly detailed realist texts) a series of lascivious tableaux that represented a threat to the public good, and especially to the integrity of French women. Like Lukács would do a century later, Pinard finds fault in Flaubert’s use of the detail in Madame Bovary; unlike Lukács, however, the prosecutor claimed that what was at stake was much more than literary decorum—at risk was the very virtue of French women. To allow young women to see what is contained in the meticulously detailed pages of the novel, Pinard suggestively proposes, would be tantamount to allowing them to poison their minds with obscenity, just as Emma poisons herself with arsenic: “Ce serait placer le poison à la portée de tous et le remède à la portée d’un bien petit nombre, s’il y avait un remède” (Web). Pinard feared that the dissemination of Madame Bovary would portend moral ravages on the body politic analogous to the physical devastation evident on Emma’s corpse at the end of the novel.

Matlock explains that anxieties surrounding women’s literacy grew as more of the female population learned to read, noting that by the end of the nineteenth century, ninety-five percent of the French population had some level of literacy (Scenes of Seduction 204).
“LES DESSUS ET LES DESSOUS DE LA BOURGEOISIE”

The fears about the democratization of reading expressed in Pinard’s argument against *Madame Bovary* closely parallel similar anxieties surrounding the democratization of fashion in the nineteenth century. Like virtually all aspects of social life in post-Revolutionary France, the fashion industry underwent a radical transformation after the upheavals of 1789. Historian Jennifer Jones explains that the bourgeoisie, seizing the opportunity to capitalize on a potentially inexhaustible source of revenue for the state (and themselves), resurrected the French fashion industry after the collapse of the luxury trade in 1789 (183-84). The abolishment of sumptuary laws after the Revolution meant that *de jure* restrictions on the public’s right to wear certain materials no longer existed—shoppers of any social class with enough money could outfit themselves in the latest creations of Paris’ renowned boutiques. Efrat Tseëlon points out that technological advances like the invention of the sewing machine and washproof dyes further accelerated the democratization of fashion (122); the development of the mass print industry and faster shipping processes—including, eventually, the railroad—facilitated the spread of styles that had previously only been the ken of the royal court. The rise of the well dressed in nineteenth-century France represented the ascendency of the value of work (and, by extension, of money) over birthright. Fashion supplanted the *ancien régime* system of aristocratic right and courtly pomp as the privileged signifying system of social status.

37 The title of this section is taken from the title of Philippe Perrot’s book of the same name.
In Baudrillard’s formulation of this moment in fashion history, the transition from the classical (pre-modern) to the industrial (modern) epoch represents the shift from imitation to production. In the classical era, he argues, there is no fashion because there is no social mobility; all are bound by rigid strictures of caste. Sumptuary codes reinforced a top-down social configuration based on divine right. In his commentary on Baudrillard’s philosophy of fashion, Tseëlon explains that these laws “did not relate to style since rank was manifested in the quality of fabric, in the details, and in the choice of decorations rather than in different styles” (121). For Baudrillard, the symbolic nature of clothing is therefore “shielded by a prohibition that assures their absolute clarity: each sign refers unequivocally to a (particular) situation and a level of status” (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 139).38

However, the transparency of sartorial signs becomes clouded in the industrial era, or the industrial stage of production. Unlike its classical predecessor, the modern epoch is not one structured by caste: it is the era of the bourgeoisie’s ascendancy through the engine of capital gained through massive industrial production. What is relevant is no longer the origin or singularity of a given object, but the “technique” with which said object is produced: in other words, what mattered in the modern era was not necessarily the *materials* used in clothing (for democratization had made them available to all), but the *manipulation* of those

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38 Tseëlon does note that the shape of clothes changed little until the second half of the fourteenth century, when styles began to change more rapidly. Sumptuary laws were passed “with severity but little success,” meaning that these codes existed, but were rarely enforced. After sumptuary laws are abated in 1600, the aristocracy could only distinguish itself sartorially through the rapidity at which it adopted different styles (122). This pace dramatically increases in the nineteenth century, though it is the well funded, and not necessarily the well born, who set the pace.
materials into fashionable styles. Tseëlon explains that the old aristocratic laws of
dress and conduct were replaced by new codes of social demarcation as the fashion
system of the modern era “anchored certain sartorial practices to moral values”
(123). The order of production occurs at a time where there is no longer transparency
in physical appearance; it is rather a complex system of codes of etiquette and dress
that determines the social order.

As the bourgeoisie grew in size and power, anxieties arose about the complete
erasure of all sartorial—and therefore social—difference within the group.
Capitalizing on this need for a new way to mark social status, the fashion industry
responded by accelerating the production of different styles39, sparking the
proliferation of vestimentary nuances that made all the difference between an
elegant ensemble and a fashion faux pas. Philippe Perrot describes this new social
landscape as “un champ multipolarisé...où se hiéarchisent minutieusement signes et
conduites” (173). In order to master the codes of modern fashion, the would-be elite
had to be able to recognize le bon goût—a concept that posits a natural and inherent
affinity for style. In practice, this recognition of good taste involved the scrutiny of
every curve, line, and detail of a garment—in other words, what literary scholars call
close reading.

This complex and constantly evolving system of sartorial distinction became
possible only through the complicity of a burgeoning number of fashion journals. In

39 Jennifer Jones explains that after the dismantling of the aristocracy in France, fashion left the
world of the court and entered the “private world of women.” This shift from court to home was
characterized by the acceleration of the production and turnover of different styles: “No longer
changing only with the seasons, the fashion press suggested that the fashionable woman dressed
according to the hourly striking of the clock” (183-4).
the vacuum of displaced courtly ritual, these publications determined and
disseminated new codes of behavior that replaced the old ways of the ancien régime.
There was, of course, a hefty profit to be made in the instruction of the socially
ambitious and financially flush in nineteenth-century France. Of *Le Journal des Dames et des Modes*, the most widely-read, widely-distributed, and longest-running fashion magazine of the nineteenth century, Annemaire Kleinert says that the
purview of the publication’s influence exceeded that of just clothing:

[S]es éditeurs considéraient comme mode tout type de comportement humain régi par la mode dans son acception la plus large. La littérature, la philosophie, la musique, la peinture, la technique, la pédagogie, voire la religion et la politique étaient pour eux soumises à la mode. (6)

These magazines are not just advocating clothing styles—they are prescribing an all-encompassing lifestyle to the bourgeois woman. And while bourgeois women were the primary marketing target of the journals, the publications were selling, to use Joan DeJean’s formulation, the “romance of high fashion”—the fairy tale of social ascension through finery—to women of all social classes (62). The prescriptive tone of the publications is evident in the ubiquitous phrase comme il faut that punctuates the highly detailed passages of the issue’s fashion plates; in addition to descriptions of clothing, the journals also featured anecdotes, faits divers, travel writings, recipes, poems, and sheet music—in short, texts that would help women cultivate a sense of self that would correspond to bourgeois ideals of femininity.

40 As Susan Hiner notes, Balzac plays with this phrase in his *Autre etude de femme* in his distinction between la femme comme il faut (the proper lady) la femme comme il en faut (the lady of the night) (23).
Perrot suggests that by dictating complicated practices of *loisirs* and *toilette* to their readers, the periodicals helped form the bourgeois subject by revealing to her the keys to successful social ascension. The magazines provided to the uninitiated “[en] quête frénétique des signes d’appartenance” the keys of good dress and behavior in order to “légitimer leur nouveau statut (licite ou fantasmé)” (168). Compliance to the practices outlined was a prerequisite for entry into the *beau monde* of modern France. In Baudrillard’s terms, only those who mastered the minutiae of the code of the culture of appearances could end up on the right side of the “artificial dividing-line, separating the Ins from the Outs” (*Symbolic Death and Exchange* 123). Fashion journals thus performed a double function for those who wanted to belong: though they were complicit in the creation of the fashion code, they marketed their value as guides to help their readers navigate that very same code, acting as a kind of Rosetta Stone for women who did not yet speak the language of *la mode*. As nineteenth-century fashion journalist Eliane de Sérieul puts it, “Certaines affections de mise sont fautes d’élégance, comme certaines locutions sont incompatibles avec la distinction du langage” (qtd. in Perrot 169)—being *à la mode* meant speaking both the visual and the verbal language of the upper crust.

**BLIND SPOT**

Thus the portrayal of fashion as a kind of language is accomplished through the commonplace binding in fashion magazines (*à la Sérieul*) of the visual and the
verbal, of the portrayal of the act of looking at fashion as an act of close reading.

The importance of fashion journal discourse in *Madame Bovary* is evident in the opening pages of the novel in the overwrought description of Charles’ hat. And, as Ricardou has pointed out, the description forces us to pause to *look* at the object, just as Charles’ classmates are looking at him. This rhetorical strategy in *Madame Bovary*, as Matlock has observed, is repeatedly identified in court by Pinard; his condemnation of the book is largely based on the efficacy of its excessively visual nature—it is the *images* of adultery that make the novel so striking and so potentially dangerous.

The prosecutor’s indictment of the book’s visuality becomes all the more poignant because looking—or looking without seeing—is repeatedly characterized as an inherently dangerous interpretive practice. Pinard’s insistence on the importance of the visual in *Madame Bovary* recalls the scene in which Emma is first introduced to Charles (and the reader). Though the details about her appearance are at best sketchy, one resonates with particular significance: “Elle portait, comme un homme, passé entre deux boutons de son corsage, un lorgnon d’écaille” (73). It is essential to notice that the first object associated with Emma is a looking instrument. Just as the description of Charles’ hat forces the reader to *look* at the object, the importance of interpretation through seeing is again underscored in this initial association of Emma with the *lorgnon*. Significantly, as Matlock points out, Emma never looks

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41 The characterization of fashion as a language would be fleshed out in significant detail a hundred years later in Roland Barthes’ study of sartorial semiology, *Système de la mode*. 
through the *lorgnon* in the novel (“Censoring the Realist Gaze” 42). Its interpretive function is subordinated to its decorative function. In other words, it exists in the narrative as a fashion accessory—a thing not with which to see, but a thing with which *to be seen*.

The interpretive implications of Emma’s *lorgnon* become especially suggestive when her predilection for fashion magazines is considered. As Sharon Marcus has shown in her work on Victorian fashion journals, the act of women looking at fashion plates was frequently thematized by the presence of optical instruments in the illustrations: lorgnettes, telescopes, and binoculars act not only as interpretive aids to the women in the drawing, but also function as an implicit invitation to the fashion journal reader herself to participate in this economy of close looking (121-7). Thus in his coupling of fashion journal rhetoric and the *lorgnon*, Flaubert is not only inviting us to stop to look closely at the object, as Ricardou suggests, but is also asking us to consider the epistemological implications of this kind of looking: when we read realist novels like *Madame Bovary*, do we, like Emma (and many of Flaubert’s contemporary critics), only see the glorified pages of a fashion magazine? Or do we see that by constructing this kind of gaze, and by thematizing it in his protagonist’s *lorgnette* qua fashion accessory, Flaubert reveals

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42 Matlock points out that as early as 1823, *Le Journal des Dames et des Modes* identifies the *lorgnette* as a must-have accessory for every fashionable lady (“Censoring the Realist Gaze” 42).

43 While Marcus’ work focuses on British novels and Victorian-era fashion magazines, British fashion journals were definitively *French* in origin and conception: their clothing designs were French, the affectations they advocated were French—everything *but* the language of publication was thoroughly French. This is consistent with the definitive establishment of Paris as the world’s center of women’s fashion (with London as the corollary for men’s fashion) during the Second Empire/Victorian era. Marcus states: “British fashion *was* French fashion. French publishers produced international co-editions of their fashion gazettes, and the major British fashion magazines had Paris offices and employed French artists to illustrate Parisian trends” (119).
Emma’s proverbial blind spot—that is, her delusions of transforming her life by translating pages (whether of novels or fashion publications) into actual experience?

This kind of “blindness” is integral to Jules de Gaultier’s study of the psychology of characters in Flaubert’s novels, *Le Bovarysme* (1921). In his book, Gaultier identifies as his principle focus of investigation the pathology of *le bovarysme*, or “[la] faculté départie à l’homme de se concevoir autre qu’il n’est en tant que l’homme est impuissant à réaliser cette conception différente qu’il se forme de lui-même” (13). Originating in a “défaillance de la personnalité” and a pervasive sense of disempowerment, Flaubert’s characters project their desires onto an unattainable model that they hope to themselves become: “[I]ls imitent du personnage qu’ils ont résolu d’être tout ce qu’il est possible d’imiter, tout l’extérieur, toute apparence: le geste, l’intonation, l’habit, la phraséologie” (14). The devastating effects of this kind of imitation are felt not only because of the unattainability of the model, but also because the character is completely blind to the mimetic origin of his actions. Because of this pervasive scotomata, Gaultier explains, Flaubert’s characters never comprehend the true impulse (imitation) that drives their actions, and in choosing impossible models, they develop a pathology called *bovarysme* that deforms their entire worldview. For Gaultier, this condition “n’est pas la conclusion d’un raisonnement, elle est l’expression d’un mode de vision et peut devenir aussi une méthode de vision” (55, my emphasis).

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44 As nineteenth-century fashion journals did in their own pages, Gaultier also conflates verbal language (“La phraséologie”) and the language of fashion (“l’habit”) in his description of the mimetism afflicting bovarystic characters.
It is crucial to note that Gaultier characterizes *bovarylsm* not just as the pervasive presence of romantic delusions in the psyche (as is often repeated), but that the condition entails a kind of perverted vision of the world that prevents oneself from seeing who one really is. The stated purpose of Gaultier’s study leaves no doubt as to the importance of seeing *bovarylsm* as a way of looking at the world:

[L’e] véritable but de cette étude...[est] celui-ci: mettre entre les mains de quelques-uns un appareil d’optique mentale, une lorgnette de spectacle qui permette de s’intéresser au jeu du phénomène humain par la connaissance de quelques-unes des règles qui l’ordonnent. (8, my emphasis)

The metaphorical *lorgnette de spectacle* that Gaultier proposes to put in the hands of his perspicacious reader finds its novelistic corollary in the (neglected) *lorgnon d’écaill* hanging between the buttons of Emma’s blouse. In other words, if the reader intends to see clearly where Emma is blind, we must carefully examine the moments in which she is looking, but where she is also the most myopic.

### “DESBAYVARY[S]” AT VAUBYESSARD

The dance at the Vaubyessard chateau is the ball that starts it all. The Bovarys receive an invitation to the event as a gesture of the Marquis’ gratitude, in part, because Charles has successfully lanced an abscess in the Marquis’ mouth. The Bovarys have also offered cuttings of their superb cherry trees to the aristocrat, and upon his visit to the Bovary house to thank him, the Marquis notices “qu’[Emma]

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45 The title for this section is inspired by Mary Orr’s brilliant detection of the anagram of Charles and Emma’s last name in the name Vaubyessard.
avait une jolie taille et qu’elle ne saluait point en paysanne” (113). Impressed by the unexpected refinement of the doctor’s pretty wife, the Marquis invites the couple to the dance, affirming “qu’on ne crut pas au château outrepasser les bornes de la condescendance, ni d’autre part commettre une maladresse, en invitant le jeune ménage” (113).

While the original impetus of the invitation to the ball is decidedly unromantic, what Emma experiences there will from that point on determine how she sees herself and her romanticized vision of the world. The spectacle of aristocratic elegance and finery is temporarily interrupted when a servant accidentally breaks a window while trying to move a chair; Emma looks over to the window, and sees “des faces de paysans qui regardaient” through the broken glass (121). Emma is immediately taken back to her own childhood at les Bertaux:

Alors le souvenir des Bertaux lui arriva. Elle revit la ferme, la mare bourbeuse, son père en blouse sous les pommiers, et elle se revit elle-même, comme autrefois, écrémant avec son doigt les terrines de lait dans la laiterie. (121)

In the jagged glare of the broken window, Emma sees herself—the mud, trees, and milk of her farm girl youth—reflected in the faces of the peasants looking in on the ball. This flash of self-recognition, however, is outshined by the glittering spectacle of Vaubyessard: “Mais, aux fulgurations de l’heure présente, sa vie passée, si nette jusqu’alors, s’évanouissait tout entière, et elle doutait presque de l’avoir vécue” (121, my emphasis). Emma’s repression of her rustic past in favor of the elegant present is characterized as a blinding flash of light—a burst so dazzling that it makes her question the very reality of her rustic youth.
Emma’s inability to see is never more apparent than in the aftermath of the Vaubyessard ball. Plunged back into the provincialism of everyday life, she retreats into her recollection of the event in order to eschew the “médiocrité de l’existence” around her: “Plus les choses, d’ailleurs, étaient voisines, plus sa pensée s’en détournait” (130). Flaubert describes his heroine’s attempt to stay awake after the ball as a way “de prolonger l’illusion de cette vie luxueuse” (123, my emphasis). Flaubert is explicit in his characterization of Emma’s perception of her evening with the local aristocracy: it is a blinding illusion, the memory of which will come to dominate Emma’s perception of the world from that point on. This pathological retreat into fantasy is of course the impulse that will drive Emma to ruin and, eventually, to her death. However, if, unlike Emma, Gaultier’s readers can put the “looking device” that he offers to good use, they will be able to understand about the protagonist what she does not understand herself—that is, the illusory origin and mimetic nature of her desire.

Léon Bopp has noted the importance of windows in Madame Bovary as sites where perceptions are formed and realizations occur; the window where the peasants look in on the Vaubyessard ball is no exception. Again, Emma’s life is irrevocably changed for the worse after spending an evening with the local aristocrats; her trip to the chateau leaves “un trou dans sa vie” (126). However, the basis for this sense of devastation is rooted in a false perception of difference between herself and the aristocrats. In her analysis of the scene, Mary Orr argues that a paradox lies at the heart of the Vaubyessard ball: while most readings focus on the differences of social class on display (“les faces de paysans qui regardaient” (Madame Bovary 121))
through the window that remind Emma of her own beginnings), Orr suggests that Flaubert lays bare in this scene the essential sameness of the Bovarys and their aristocratic hosts, not their differences.

Orr points out for example that the provenance of the exotic maraschino ice cream that Emma eats at the ball is Charles’ own cherry trees; it is, in part, because of Charles’ generous gift of cuttings to the Marquis that the Bovarys receive an invitation to the ball (7). Emma’s subsequent taste for all things aristocratic (made literal in this scene) thus originates in her perception of the difference between the life of the aristocrats (the maraschino cherry ice cream) and her own provincial existence (the cherry trees in her own garden). What Emma does not see at “le château, de construction moderne, à l’Italienne” (Madame Bovary 113) is that the aristocrats that she lionizes are provincial gentry, far removed from the romantic nobles that she imagines them to be, and only related by marriage to the Duke de Laverdière (“disait-on, l’amant de la reine Marie-Antoinette entre MM. de Coigny et de Lauzun” (117)). In other words, the inhabitants of Vaubyessard are not the ancien régime aristocrats of Emma’s romantic novels; they are the monied Marquis of modernity, more fonctionnaire than feudalist.

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46 One of Pinard’s strongest arguments against the novel is what he sees as Flaubert’s calumnious invocation of ancien régime rumor: “L’histoire a parlé du collier dans tous les romans, l’histoire a parlé de mille choses, mais ce ne sont là que des soupçons, et, je le répète, je ne sache pas qu’elle ait autorisé à transformer ces soupçons en certitude. Et quand Marie-Antoinette est morte avec la dignité d’une souveraine et le calme d’une chrétienne, ce sang versé pourrait effacer des fautes, à plus forte raison des soupçons. Mon Dieu, M. Flaubert a eu besoin d’une image frappante pour peindre son héroïne, et il a pris celle-là pour exprimer tout à la fois et les instincts pervers et l’ambition de madame Bovary !” (Web) For all of their obvious differences, and despite Pinard’s objection, there is a common thread that unites Emma Bovary and Marie Antoinette: both are great consumers of fashion, and both suffer deadly consequences because of their fashion choices. For further discussion of Marie Antoinette’s fashion, see Caroline Weber’s Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution.
Again, it is Emma’s bovarystic myopia that prevents her from recognizing the provincialism of the local aristocrats. Instead of seeing the overriding commonality of their social stature with hers, Emma allows the rumor of a royal liaison (though only by marriage) to nourish her fantasies about and pretensions to the aristocracy—or at least her romanticized version of it. Orr’s clever discovery of the anagram in the word Vaubyessard further underscores the idea that it is *sameness* and not *difference* that underpins the relationship between the aristocrats, Emma, and the peasants peering through the window: while the first syllable of the chateau (Vau-) resonates phonetically with the Bovary name (veaux), the rearrangement of the letters of Vaubyessard produces a similar kind of equivalence—scrambled, “Vaubyessard” becomes “Des Bauvary[s]” (7). The implication is that, despite their superficial differences of class, all of the guests at the Vaubyessard chateau are Bovarys—provincial, bovine, and literal minded.

Later in the novel, Flaubert uses descriptions of clothing to underscore in the same way essential social similarities underlying surface differences. The narrator explains that the guests at Charles and Emma’s wedding can be distinguished by the clothing that they wear: “Suivant leur position sociale différente, ils avaient des habits, des redingotes, des vestes, des habits-vestes” (86).47 This cursory explanation of sartorially indexed social structure is followed by descriptive and lengthy elaborations on the appearance of each garment.

47 The phenomenon of sartorially-signaled social stratification will be theorized in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries most famously by Thorstein Veblen, Georg Simmel, and Pierre Bourdieu. While their methodologies diverge, all three theorists argue that it is through practices of consumption that social status is shown in the modern/postmodern age. See Veblen’s *Conspicuous Consumption* and *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Simmel’s *On Individuality and Social Forms*, and Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Critique of Social Judgment*. 
Suivant leur position sociale différente, ils avaient des habits, des redingotes, des vestes, des habits-vestes: — bons habits, entourés de toute la considération d’une famille, et qui ne sortaient de l’armoire que pour les solennités ; redingotes à grandes basques flottant au vent, à collet cylindrique, à poches larges comme des sacs ; vestes de gros drap, qui accompagnaient ordinairement quelque casquette cerclée de cuivre à sa visière ; habits-vestes très courts, ayant dans le dos deux boutons rapprochés comme une paire d’yeux, et dont les pans semblaient avoir été à même un seul bloc, par la hache du charpentier.

(86)

Jacques Neefs’ editorial note underscores the sartorial/social connection as he explains the description as “[u]n résumé de la hiérarchie sociale...représenté par les vêtements, ici de haut en bas” (86 FN 1). While an explanation of hierarchy based on “position sociale” is indeed proclaimed at the beginning of the passage, there is nonetheless an equivalence among all the wedding guests created on the formal level of the text—namely, the repetition of the words “habits” and “vestes” in the description of the different garments for the different classes. If we become entangled in the differences of details in the subsequent descriptions of the garments, and if we seek for meaning in those differences—if we, in other words, read the passage as we would read a fashion journal—we could fail to notice their essential similarity. The fact that the peasants are laterally positioned to their supposed social superiors suggests a horizontal continuum rather than a vertical hierarchy. If the same words are used to describe only slightly different coats, and the coats are exemplary of social status, then, as at the chateau Vaubryessard, all of Charles and Emma’s wedding guests are “des Bauvary[s].”

Flaubert gives the game away in a parenthetical aside in the very next sentence: “Quelques-uns encore (mais ceux-là, bien sûr, devaient dîner au bas bout
de la table) portaient des blouses de cérémonie, c’est-à-dire dont le col était rabattu sur les épaules, le dos froncé à petits plis et la taille attachée très bas par une ceinture cousue” (87). The snide relegation of the peasants to the end of the table (though, significantly, laterally positioned to everyone else), underscores the absurdity of trying to establish social distinction where there is essential uniformity. All of these people, Flaubert seems to suggest, are cut from the same cloth. And it is through this lens that we must interpret the reappearance of the peasants later in the text, but this time at the Vaubyessard chateau: their spectatorship of the ball only goes to underscore—not diminish—Emma’s own position as an outsider looking in.

However, Emma’s inability to see the parallel leads her, in Orr’s formulation, to “overvalorize the differences” not only between herself and the peasants, but also between her provincial life and her aristocratic fantasy. What ultimately dooms Emma, Orr explains, is her blindness to the fact that “what she yearns for is only another manifestation of what she already is and refuses to recognize” (8). Thus Emma’s vision of the aristocrats through the looking glass of the Vaubyessard ball determines from that point on how she will see the rest of the world around her. As the unraveling of the plot suggests, she would be better served using her lorgnon d’écaille to see clearly exactly what the Vaubyessard looking glass distorts.

This desire to see difference (or singularity) where there is only sameness (or banality) is also frustrated on a formal level in the novel’s poetics of substitution. Naomi Schor remarks that the endless serialization that characterizes the prose of Madame Bovary represents “chains of substitution” that are the modus operandi of the novel (Breaking the Chain 20). Jonathan Culler similarly argues that the
syntagmatic sequences in the narrative are “an immense paradigm in which everything is equivalent and could replace anything else in the syntagma of chance” (151). This endless proliferation of substitutions in the novel is directly related to the futility of Emma’s desire for a sense of distinction through fashion. Despite her attempts to create a sense of sartorial (and, by extension, existential) singularity, her clothing continuously exposes not her exceptionality from her mundane existence, but rather her perfect contiguity with the world around her. Flaubert thus reveals the profound irony of Emma’s pursuit of fashion: where she would find distinction, she instead finds herself one link among many in the endless chain of substitution.

This truth is never clearer than in the immediate aftermath of the Vaubyessard ball. When Charles and Emma return home from the dance, they discover that Charles’ long time maid, Nastasie, does not have dinner waiting for them. As a result, Emma loses her temper, Nastasie responds insolently, and Emma immediately fires the poor woman. Flaubert then (ironically, of course) serves his protagonist exactly what she wants: “Il y avait pour dîner de la soupe à l’oignon, avec un morceau de veau à l’oseille” (125, my emphasis). Unlike her interlude with the local aristocrats at Vaubyessard, this pedestrian veau leaves a bad taste in Emma’s mouth. Again, the shared phoneme of the veau Emma begrudgingly eats and the Vaubyessard chateau she longs for symbolizes the fundamental similarity—not difference—between Emma and the provincial gentry she romanticizes. Furthermore, the familiar usage of the word veau—“personne paresseuse, sans énergie et souvent stupide”—suggests that Emma is unable to see the similarity between veau/Vau- because she herself is a veau—a dull creature incapable of
perceiving the absurdity of her fantasy (*Trésor de la langue française*). The implication in the dinner scene is that Emma has simply traded one herd for another.

Once again, Emma’s illusions are exposed in the novel’s relentless and facile substitution of one thing for another. In the same scene, when Charles asks Emma if she was serious when she fired Nastasie, Emma imperiously replies: “Oui. Qui m’en empêche?” (126). This saddens Charles not only because he is fond of the maid, but specifically because “[e]lle lui avait, autrefois tenu société pendant bien des soirs, dans les désœuvrements de son veuvage” (125-6). For a short while between his marriages, Nastasie replaced Héloïse (Charles’ first wife and the book’s second Madame Bovary—the first being Charles’ mother, of course). In other words, Emma now occupies the place held by Nastasie as she now substitutes for the maid as Charles’ wife. Emma is but a placeholder as conjugal companion for Charles.

The chain of substitution takes an ironic twist with Emma’s replacement of Nastasie by Félicité whom she grooms, not to be a maid, but her “femme de chambre”—an attendant for an aristocratic lady (131). Once again, the absurdity of Emma’s aristocratic pretensions is underscored by the difference between her actual and her desired social position. Compounding the irony of Nastasie’s dismissal, Félicité will also eventually participate in the novel’s inexorable economy of substitution, though as replacement for Emma. After Emma’s death, Félicité begins to wear her former mistress’ clothing; the clothes fit her so well that Charles begins to confuse the maid for his dead wife: “[Félicité] était à peu près de sa taille, souvent Charles, en l’apercevant par-dessus, était saisi d’une illusion: —Oh! reste! reste!” (491, my emphasis). The word illusion recalls Flaubert’s earlier use of the word to
describe the aristocratic fantasy that Emma so desperately wants to prolong after the
Vaubyessard ball. And like in the Vaubyessard interlude, here an illusion—a
bovarystic desire for an unattainable ideal—is exposed as a false ideology in the
novel’s poetics of substitution. Once again, the maid replaces the wife, and the novel
reveals that the clothing that Emma has purchased to mark a sense of individuality—
which purchases have led to her suicide and to the complete ruin of her family—is
actually one size fits all.

Before her demise, part of Emma’s training of Félicité includes lessons on
proper address (“il fallait vous parler à la troisième personne”) and on proper dress
for a femme de chambre, including an interdiction of “les bonnets de coton” (131). As
Éliane de Sérieul suggests to her readers in her fashion journal piece, Emma tries to
form her maid into the ideal attendant by controlling her dress and her speech.
Emma’s prohibition of cotton bonnets for Félicité is profoundly ironic because her
mother-in-law is “la fille d’un marchand bonnetier,” and her dowry of 60,000 francs
compels Charles’ dandy father to propose marriage in order to secure the sum (59).
After Emma’s death, Félicité stays on with the family for a while, but in the end
leaves Charles and Berthe after absconding with Emma’s dresses in order to sell
them. Though Emma forbids her to wear cotton bonnets because they are too
common, it is Félicité that ultimately exposes the fungible nature of Emma’s
clothing.48 When she is mistaken for Emma in her dresses, and then when she sells

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48 Félicité’s name is important because it is a reminder of the happiness that continually eludes
Emma. Before her marriage to Charles, the effect of romantic literature on Emma is explained in
the following terms: “Et Emma cherchait à savoir ce qu’l’on entendait au juste dans la vie par les
mots de félicité, de passion, et d’ivresse, qui lui avaient paru si beaux dans les livres” (97). The
them after Emma’s death, Félicité exposes the illusion of a sense of singularity cultivated through fashion—an ideology propagated, of course, through the fashion journals Emma reads. Perhaps the ultimate irony of Emma’s relationship to Félicité is that at the end of the novel, her own daughter will assume Félicité’s place as an orphan, though Berthe will be forced to spin the very fabric in “une filature de coton” that her mother forbids for her maid (501).

Emma’s refusal of Charles’ request to name their daughter after his mother—a request to create, in other words, yet another Madame Bovary—is ultimately frustrated by Berthe’s return to her grandmother’s material origins. Emma insists on naming the girl “Berthe” because “[elle] se souvint qu’au château de la Vaubyessard elle avait entendu la marquise appeler Berthe une jeune femme” (173). However, Emma’s origins return despite her best efforts to escape them: while Emma chooses her daughter’s name because of a supposed aristocratic resonance, the child’s name invokes for the reader Bertaux—the farm where Emma’s father lives and where Emma and Charles meet for the first time. Once more, Emma’s attempts to escape her agricultural past in favor of an aristocratic future are thwarted. Like the veaux/Vau- pairing of the dinner scene, the phonetic resemblance

namesake of the romantic ideal in Emma’s novels is the one character—along with the similarly named Lheureux—that is able to understand and profit from the process of substitution.

49 Naomi Schor’s famous reading of Emma’s desire to become a writer is closely linked with her motherhood. Schor claims that “Emma’s writing apprenticeship is consistent with an attempt to change sex, to reverse castration”—a desire that would be fulfilled through a son, “George, the phantasmatic phallic-son” (Breaking the Chain 22). We could say that these desires do converge in the novel in the figure of George Sand. Emma famously reads her novels to find out what people are wearing in Paris.

50 The second half of the sentence reads: “[D]ès lors ce nom-là fut choisi, et, comme le père Rouault ne pouvait venir, on pria M. Homais d’être parrain” (173). As Rouault is replaced by Homais, this is yet another illustration of the novel’s relentless economy of substitution—the very dynamic that prevents Emma from achieving the distinction she so desires.
between Berthe/Bertaux further underscores the relationship of similarity—not difference—between Emma’s milieu and the one to which she aspires.

Furthermore, Berthe’s fate is prefigured in one of Emma and (eventual lover) Léon’s visits to the infant’s wet-nurse: “Au bruit de la barrière, la nourrice parut, tenant sur son bras un enfant qui tétait. Elle tirait de l’autre main un pauvre marmot chétif, couvert de scrofules au visage, le fils d’un bonnetier de Rouen, que ses parents trop occupés de leur négoce laissaient à la campagne” (177, my emphasis). The sadly neglected boy is what Berthe will become, and Emma’s profound negligence of her own child will eventually condemn Berthe to an atavistic return to her grandmother’s cotton origins, though this time as mill worker instead of merchant.

The “bas percés” that Berthe wears—much to the horror of Madame Homais, the unfashionable (yet maternal) foil to the stylish Emma—before her mother’s death

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51 Emma’s refusal to nurse her child is linked by Mary Orr to maraschino cherry ice cream in the Vaubyessard ball scene: when she sees the peasants’ faces through the window at the chateau, Emma has a flashback to childhood memories of skimming off the cream at her own father’s farm. Orr explains that the milk is “the ironic necessary ingredient of that same food she is sampling” and that “[r]ejection of this former task at les Bertaux so completely is of course later repeated when she will eschew any milk-producing functions by sending Berthe to the wet-nurse” (7). Once again, Flaubert shows commonality where Emma would only see difference.

52 Christophe Ippolito points out that upon Emma and Charles’ first meeting, Emma is wearing “bas de cotton” that she abandons when she decides to “suivre la mode” (59). He describes the “hérédité de coton dans la famille Bovary” in naturalist terms: the almost genetic link the Bovarys have to cotton is representative of another hereditary truth in the novel—“on n’échappe pas à celui-ci [le coton], on n’échappe pas à la bêtise” (60). See Ippolito’s “Système du bonnet flaubertien.” Furthermore, Mary Donaldson-Evans reminds us that Emma is shown throughout the novel to be a bad seamstress: she pricks her fingers when trying to mend socks; her wedding dress and her amazone are both poorly tailored; she gives up on a tapestry she has started; etc. For Donaldson-Evans, this difficulty with sewing reveals Emma’s rejection of and incompatibility with bourgeois feminine ideals. See “Pricking the Male Ego: Pins and Needles in Flaubert, Maupassant, and Zola.”
prefigures the child’s ruin in the very material that she will eventually have to produce.\textsuperscript{53}

DANGEROUS READING

The origin of the aristocratic fantasies that drive Emma’s life is, of course, the romantic literature she consumes as a girl. All of Emma’s relationships, in one way or another, are mediated through this kind of literature: though he does not understand them, Charles is charmed by Emma’s literary affectations; Rodolphe seduces Emma with the romantic clichés she so adores; Léon exchanges Saint-Pierresque promises of eternal devotion with her in billets-doux. While Charles’ lack of literary sophistication can be presented in counterpoint to that of his wife (and her suitors), there is a fundamental commonality between the way that Emma and Charles consume literature: they both attempt to translate text to lived experience, and both, as a result, experience disastrous results. In fact, it is Emma’s reading of fashion journals that inspires Charles to pursue his own print fantasy—that is, to become a renowned practitioner of innovative medicine. The devastating consequences of this failed fantasy prefigure Emma’s own downfall, and also bring

\textsuperscript{53} Léon’s conclusions about Madame Homais confirm her decidedly unfashionable—and thoroughly unfeminine—nature: "Quant à la femme du pharmacien, c’était la meilleure épouse de Normandie, douce comme un mouton, chérissant ses enfants, son père, sa mère, ses cousins, pleurant aux maux d’autrui, laissant tout aller dans son ménage, et détestant les corsets : —mais si lente à se mouvoir, si ennuyeuse à écouter, d’un aspect si commun et d’une conversation si restreinte, qu’il n’avait jamais songé, quoiqu’elle eût trente ans, qu’il en eût vingt, qu’ils couchassent porte à porte, et qu’il lui parlât chaque jour, qu’elle pût être une femme pour quelqu’un, \textit{ni qu’elle possédât de son sexe autre chose que la robe} " (181-2, my emphasis).
into sharp focus the dangers of uncritical reading—whether it be fashion journals or medical treatises.

In an attempt to fill the hole left in her life after the Vaubyessard ball, Emma takes up the aristocratic affectations that she has witnessed at the chateau and about which she has read in fashion magazines. She starts buying items that she hopes will identify her as an upper-class lady. She buys a map of Paris and, with the tip of her finger, traces shopping routes in the capital. And for the first time in the novel, Emma reads something other than romantic fiction:

Elle s’abonna à la Corbeille, journal des femmes, et au Sylphe des salons. Elle dévorait sans en rien passer, tous les comptes rendus de premières représentations, de courses et de soirées, s’intéressait au début d’une chanteuse, à l’ouverture d’un magasin. Elle savait les modes nouvelles, l’adresse des bons tailleurs, les jours de Bois ou d’Opéra. Elle étudia, dans Eugène Sue, des descriptions d’ameublement; elle lut Balzac et George Sand, y cherchant des assouvissements imaginaires pour ses convoitises personnelles. À table même, elle apportait son livre, et elle tournait les feuillets, pendant que Charles mangeait en lui parlant. Le souvenir du Vicomte revenait toujours dans ses lectures. Entre lui et les personnages inventés, elle établissait des rapprochements. Mais le cercle dont il était le centre peu à peu s’élargit autour de lui, et cette auréole avait, s’écartant de sa figure, s’étalait plus au loin pour illuminer d’autres rêves. (128-29)

In this scene, Emma has forgone her usual reading of Lamartine, Scott, and Saint-Pierre in favor of Flaubert’s own contemporaries, Balzac, Sue, and Sand. While these writers diverge in many aspects (thematic, formal, and otherwise), Emma seeks in their novels the same thing: she wants to know details about what is à la mode in Paris. In this respect, Emma’s consumption of literature anticipates how Madame Bovary would be received by its critics: in other words, she reads the respective novels of Sand, Sue, and Balzac as if they were fashion journals. The fact that Emma
consumes the popular nineteenth-century women’s magazines *le Sylphe des salons* and *la Corbeille* alongside the books only reinforces this interpretation. And considering the serialization and publication history of many nineteenth-century novels, their proximity—both thematic and physical—to the *presse féminine* cannot be disputed. Furthermore, the fusion of Emma’s memories of the Vicomte at Vaubyessard with the imagery from the novels reveals that her new reading—contemporary novels and fashion magazines alike—begin to aliment her delusional vision of the world just as much as romantic literature fueled the girlish fantasies of her youth.

As was the case with many nineteenth-century female readers, Emma is induced to action by the fashion journals: she immediately begins to shop (aided by the merchant Lheureux) to procure the items that will allow her to participate in *la vie élégante*. In this encounter of text and consumption, Jorge Pedraza argues that Emma’s subsequent shopping sprees are a way to concretize in material goods what she reads; it is also an attempt to prolong the encounter with the text and render the fantasy physical (119). This is the realist corollary to the romantic fantasies that Emma tries to realize with her lovers: in both cases, she attempts to translate the letters and images on the page to actual lived experience.\(^{54}\) Emma’s eventual ruin points to the impossibility of this translation from text to reality: the romantic and the realist are intrinsically linked as her shopping (and subsequent disastrous accrual

\(^{54}\) In his reminiscences of his liaison with Emma, Rodolphe thinks back on all the signs that Emma “devenait bien sentimentale”—essentially a list of clichés from romantic literature: “Il avait fallu échanger des miniatures, on s’était coupé des poignées de cheveux, et elle demandait à présent une bague, un véritable anneau de mariage, en signe d’alliance éternelle. Souvent elle lui parlait des cloches du soir ou des *voix de la nature*” (274-5).
of debt) is fueled by her desire to experience an elegant existence rather than her provincial life.

This equivalence of the descriptions of material detail in literature with the descriptions of commodities in fashion magazines calls into question the relationship between and the values of these two kinds of texts: in Pedraza’s words, “Le roman n’est-il pas lui-même une marchandise, comme Flaubert s’efforce de le montrer avec les habitudes de lecture de son héroïne?” (119). That novels are fungible novelties in the nineteenth century is undisputed; however, Flaubert shows us through Emma that if we consume literature (and especially his novel) in the way that she does, we become blind (as she is) to the way the novel problematizes such methods of consumption. In Gaultier’s terms, to read as Emma does is to privilege the ornamental over the interpretive faculty of the lorgnon in the pursuit of a romantic fantasy.

While Emma’s consumption in this scene of reading is aesthetic, Charles’ is physical. Dorothy Kelly has pointed out that in this juxtaposition of eating and reading, Flaubert anticipates Bourdieu’s insight that social distinction is achieved through certain kinds of consumption—both of food and culture. And while this

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55 For an excellent discussion of the paradox of the novel’s negotiations of the discourses of singularity and fungibility in nineteenth-century Great Britain, see John Plotz’s Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move.
56 Kelly quotes from Bourdieu’s Distinction: “Taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is, embodied, helps to shape the class body. It is an incorporated principle of classification which governs all forms of incorporation, choosing and modifying everything that the body ingests and digests and assimilates, physiologically and psychologically” (121-2). Kelly also points to Lilian Furst’s observation that Emma “feeds her mind in its crucial formative years on an unremitting diet of junk ideas derived from romantic fiction, cloying music, and albums of high-flown pictures” (Furst 153-66). See Furst’s “The Power of the Powerless: A Trio of Nineteenth-Century French Disorderly Eaters” in Disorderly Eaters: Texts in Self-Empowerment.
scene underscores Emma and her husband’s contrasting dispositions (hers excitable, his bovine), Charles finds himself inspired by his wife’s reading habits, and decides as well on a new subscription:

Enfin, pour se tenir au courant, il prit un abonnement à la Ruche médicale, journal nouveau dont il avait reçu le prospectus. Il en lisait un peu après son dîner; mais la chaleur de l’appartement, jointe à la digestion, faisait qu’au bout de cinq minutes il s’endormait; et il restait là, le menton sur ses deux mains, et les cheveux étalés comme une crinière jusqu’au pied de la lampe. (132-3)

While Emma’s reading invigorates her fantasy, Charles’ has a soporific effect on him; instead of inspiring idealized possibilities like they do for Emma, Charles’ reading seems to reveal him to be slow and animal-like, as onomastics would suggest.

However, despite the differences in their natures, there is a commonality between Emma’s consumption of fashion magazines and Charles’ reading of medical journals: he enacts this same dangerous translation of text to reality in his botched operation on Hippolyte’s clubfoot. In other words, Emma and Charles are induced into analogous illusions by their respective texts: she yearns to be a successful doctor’s elegant wife like the women in her magazines; he longs to be admired by his spouse for his accomplishments and is led to believe that the surgical treatise can help him attain professional glory. Their respective aspirations to become something that they inherently cannot be reveal the profoundly bovarystic nature of their ambitions. Indeed, in refusing to acknowledge and accept the mediocrity of their station, Charles and Emma demonstrate the devastating consequences of their willful blindness: mutilation for Hippolyte; dissolution and eventual death for both of them; ruin and abandonment for their daughter Berthe.
Intrigued by his medical journals, and at the unrelenting urging of Emma and Homais, Charles resolves to repair Hippolyte’s clubfoot through surgery. He brings in an outside text to help him prepare: “Il fit venir de Rouen le volume du docteur Duval, et, tous les soirs, se prenant la tête entre les mains, il s’enfonçait dans cette lecture” (280). Charles assumes the same position to read the surgical treatise as he took to read his medical journals. After a drowsy study of the surgery, Charles prepares for and eventually performs the unprecedented procedure. The bitter irony of Emma’s desire “que ce nom de Bovary, qui était le sien, fut illustre, […] étalé chez les libraires, répété dans les journaux, connu par toute la France” (133) is felt in Homais’ premature publication in the Fanal de Rouen of the news of Charles’ surgical triumph. Five days after Homais’ public declaration of the triumph of modern science and medicine, Hippolyte falls seriously ill. The illusion of Charles’ medical miracle is shattered at the sight of the gangrene invading Hippolyte’s leg, a devastating physical testament of Charles’ incompetence. The terrifying sound of Hippolyte’s replacement wooden leg approaching punctuates the rest of the novel, and serves as a constant reminder not only of Charles’ ineptitude as a surgeon, but, again, of the danger of trying to translate text into reality.

In order to save Hippolyte’s life, Charles must send to Neufchâtel for another surgeon—“une célébrité” in the world of medicine—Dr. Canivet (289). Upon seeing the pervasive gangrene in the young man’s leg, Dr. Canivet “s’en alla chez le pharmacien déblaterer contre les ânes qui avaient pu réduire un malheureux homme en un tel état” (289). The doctor’s reproach of Homais for encouraging the foolish surgery underscores not only the misplacement of trust in Charles’ abilities as a
doctor, but also the invalidity of the very idea of surgically correcting a clubfoot: “Ce sont là des inventions de Paris! Voilà les idées de ces messieurs de la Capitale!” (289). The theoretical writings of Parisian surgeons, Dr. Canivet insists, have no place in the clumsy hands of a simple country doctor or a dilettante pharmacist. And though Dr. Canivet’s remarks are a reproach of Charles and Homais’ adoption of fanciful Parisian ideas, they nonetheless resonate as a critique of Emma’s own reading habits. Like her husband, Emma also falls victim to the “inventions de Paris” that she initially consumes in textual, and then in physical, form. And as text is the source material of her fantasies, Emma also looks to it to provide corroboration of the realization of those fantasies. Charles’ spectacular professional failure demonstrates the absurdity—and even danger—of pursuing an unrealizable romantic fantasy.

As Flaubert shows in the mutilation of Hippolyte, this desire to translate text to experience is, at the very least, handicapping. For Emma, the attempt to convert fictional narrative to life will eventually prove fatal as it leads to her suicide by poisoning. The relationship of text and poison is concretized in the complaints of Madame Bovary mère about the listlessness of her daughter-in-law after the departure of Léon. Charles’ mother, interpreting her daughter-in-law’s depression as selfish indulgence, identifies the young woman’s choice of reading as the cause, and insists that all of Emma’s subscriptions—novels and magazines alike—be canceled. Madame Bovary mère explicitly equates the bookseller’s wares with poison: “N’aurait-on pas le droit d’avertir la police, si le libraire persistait quand même dans son métier d’empoisonneur?” (220).
This comparison reappears later in the narrative in Homais’ castigation of Justin after finding a copy of Nicolas Venette’s *L’Amour conjugal* in the boy’s possession: “Tu n’as donc pas réfléchi qu’il pouvait, ce livre infâme, tomber entre les mains de mes enfants, mettre l’étincelle dans leur cerveau, ternir la pureté d’Athalie, corrompre Napoléon!” (378). Significantly, Homais chastens Justin for the book right after he accuses him of being careless with the arsenic in the pharmacy. Because she is present at this scene, Emma knows where to find the poison that she eventually uses to kill herself. Madame Bovary mère’s words about the corroding effect of literature on her daughter-in-law thus prove prophetic in her eventual demise: the slow, figurative poisoning of Emma’s mind by literature eventually culminates by her literal poisoning by arsenic.

**CLICHÉS**

Before her ignominious death, but just after her mother-in-law’s criticism of her reading, Emma embarks on a ruinous affair with a local artistocrat, Rodolphe Boulanger de la Huchette. Significantly, the fashion journals that she reads play an important part in her first encounter with Rodolphe. In her marriage to Charles, Emma has found all of the platitudes of conjugal boredom, as exemplified in this oft-quoted characterization of Charles’ company: “La conversation de Charles était plate comme un trottoir de rue, et les idées de tout le monde y défilaient dans leur

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57 In another testament to the power of the novel’s visual quality, it is above all the images in *L’Amour conjugal* that Homais’ children want to see (“Les enfants voulurent voir les images”) and that give Homais the greatest cause for concern (378).
costume ordinaire, sans exciter d’émotion, de rire ou de rêverie” (106, my emphasis). Emma’s emotional distress prompts Charles to move the family (Emma is pregnant at their departure) to Yonville-l’Abbaye, where she will meet both of her eventual lovers.

In the last paragraphs before the Bovarys leave Tostes, the narrator provides an important detail in Emma’s last survey of the town:

De temps à autre, la porte d’un cabaret faisait tinter sa sonnette, et, quand il y avait du vent, l’on entendait grincer sur leurs deux tringles les petites cuvettes en cuivre du perruquier, qui servaient d’enseigne à sa boutique. Elle avait pour décoration une vieille gravure de modes collée contre un carreau et un buste de femme en cire, dont les cheveux étaient jaunes. Lui aussi, le perruquier, il se lamentait de sa vocation arrêtée, de son avenir perdu, et, rêvant quelque boutique dans une grande ville, comme à Rouen, par exemple, sur le port, près du théâtre, il restait toute la journée à se promener en long, depuis la mairie jusqu’à l’église, sombre, et attendant la clientèle. Lorsque madame Bovary levait les yeux, elle le voyait toujours là, comme une sentinelle en faction, avec son bonnet grec sur l’oreille et sa veste de lasting. (137, my emphasis)

This arresting image of an out of work wigmaker is important, not only because it is one of the last images of Tostes in the novel, but also because the wigmaker is a double for Emma herself (“lui aussi”). The “vieille” fashion plate he has pasted in the window recalls the magazines Emma herself likes to read. The fashion depicted in the plate is obsolete by virtue of its age; it depicts the elegance of a former time that now reads as an anachronism—like Emma’s romantic fantasies. Furthermore, the structure of this scene—Emma looking through a window at a double of herself—recalls the window scene at Vaubyessard.

58 This image of Charles is later repeated in another reference to clothing: “Elle y trouvait étalée sur la redingote toute la platitude du personnage” (188).
Like Emma, the wigmaker laments his failed destiny of becoming part of the urban *beau monde*, though unlike Emma, his social ambitions only reach to Rouen. The old fashion plate displayed in his window is, by definition, old fashioned—like his profession in France by the 1840s. As an emblem of the *ancien régime* aristocracy, wigs started to fall out of favor in France after the Revolution of 1789, though some still wore them through the early 1800s. By displaying the outdated fashion in his shop window, the *perruquier* demonstrates the desire to recreate a former, and irretrievably lost, era. However, in pacing the sidewalks and waiting for his clientele to arrive, the wigmaker is waiting for Godot; he is forty years behind fashion, still hoping to realize a dream of personal and professional success that cannot be realized in the present. Emma’s similarly quixotic pursuit of romantic desires in the realist novel she inhabits proves to be equally archaic and unrealizable. And like for the *perruquier*, Emma’s engagement with fashion journals will also demonstrate the distance between reality and her fantasy.

The fashion journal frame is not only symbolically important in *Madame Bovary*, but is also structurally important in the novel. Emma initially perceives Rodolphe through her window as she sees the fashion plate in the *perruquier’s* storefront window:

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59 The 1795 tax that British Prime Minister William Pitt levied on French wig powder (in an attempt to cut off revenue streams to Napoléon’s army) was the *coup de grâce* for the wig trend in all of Europe. Wig powder was similarly political in the French Revolution as flour was a main ingredient. The powdered wig trend reached its apex during one of the worst periods of famine in France, and the aristocrats—and especially Marie Antoinette—incurred the wrath of the *peuple* because of their styles. For further discussion, see Caroline Weber’s *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution*. Carol Rifelj also notes that the complicated hairdos of the middle decades of the nineteenth century did require false hairpieces, but that *coiffeurs*—not *perruquiers*—did the styling (100).
Emma était accoudée à sa fenêtre (elle s’y mettait souvent: la fenêtre, en province, remplace les théâtres et la promenade), et elle s’amusait à considérer la cohue des rustres, lorsqu’elle aperçut un monsieur vêtu d’une redingote de velours vert. Il était ganté de gants jaunes, quoiqu’il fût chaussé de fortes guêtres. (221)

Seen through the frame of Emma’s windowpane, Rodolphe appearance is, in every sense, spectacular: from the “box seats” of her window seat, Emma immediately notices Rodolphe among the crowd because he is so well dressed. That his clothing is described in detail, and that he is framed by the panes of her window, further underscores the similarity of Rodolphe’s appearance to a fashion magazine image. The structure of Emma seeing Rodolphe as a fashion plate recalls the earlier scene of her looking at the old gravure de modes posted in the wigmaker’s window. Like the wigmaker’s antiquated image, Emma’s liaison with Rodolphe also is emblematic of an attempt to recapture the irretrievable—in Emma’s case, the attempt to resurrect a romantic past that only exists in novels.

Rodolphe’s role as the novel’s purveyor of clichés par excellence is highlighted by his initial appearance in the narrative. And while “cliché” describes the hackneyed phrases he uses to seduce Emma, it is also a typographical term used in reference to mass-produced text or images—like those in the fashion journals that Emma reads. Her inability to distinguish between the trite declarations of Rodolphe’s devotion and sincere sentiment is analogous to her (failed) attempt to cultivate a sense of singularity through her adoption of fashionable styles: her dresses show that even for Charles, the only person who has romanticized her after her death, Emma is ultimately interchangeable with her maid. Emma will come to represent the same kind of interchangeability for Rodolphe that she does for Charles. The language of
romantic cliché and of fashion are again bound together in Rodolphe’s reflections
near the end of the affair: “Emma ressemblait à toutes les maîtresses; et le charme de
la nouveauté, peu à peu tombant comme un vêtement, laissait voir à nu l’éternelle
monotonie de la passion, qui a toujours les mêmes formes et le même langage” (300-
1, my emphasis). When sorting through letters from former lovers, Rodolphe is
unable to distinguish Emma’s letters from those from other women because they
resemble each other so much. Though clichés are the catalyst for Emma and
Rodolphe’s romance, their tiresome homogeneity is also what ultimately ends the
affair.

Furthermore, Flaubert’s famous splicing of Rodolphe’s romantic overtures
with Lieuvain’s agricultural speech in the famous comices agricoles scene reveals the
seducer’s lines for what they really are—platitudes suited for mass consumption.
Rodolphe creates a complicity with Emma by shifting attention to other ladies’
clothing: “[Il] se mit à faire des plaisanteries sur les dames d’Yonville, à propos de
leur toilette: puis il s’excusa lui-même du négligé de la sienne” (235). Rodolphe’s
apology for his appearance is, of course, completely disingenuous. He is
immaculately dressed, evidenced in the fashion journal-like description of his
clothing. He famously beguiles Emma with hackneyed phrases, and the banal
nature of his rhetoric is exemplified on a structural level through the interweaving
with Lieuvain’s announcement of livestock prizes. Edward Ahearn has observed that
even Rodolphe’s full name—Rodolphe Boulanger de la Huchette—reveals the

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60 The passage describing Rodolphe’s clothing is as follows: “Ainsi sa chemise de batiste à
manchettes plissées bouffait au hasard du vent, dans l’ouverture de son gilet, qui était de coutil
gris, et son pantalon à larges raies découvrait aux chevilles ses bottines de nankin, claquées de
cuir verni. Elles étaient si vernies, que l’herbe s’y reflétait” (235).
profound banality of his discourse: “It combines a romantic first name, pretensions
to nobility, and two allusions [boulanger, huche à pain] to that most unaristocratic
of foods, bread” (184). I would add Lieuvain’s similarly resonant name—levain
(yeast)—further forges the parallel between the discourses of the bureaucrat and the
aristocrat. In Lieuvain’s praise of le boulanger, “qui [confectionne] un aliment pour
le pauvre comme pour le riche,” he not only exposes the pedestrian quality of the
rhetoric of Rodolphe (le Boulanger), he collapses the distinction that Emma would
draw between herself and “tous ces gens-là” (243, 238).

The cigar case that Emma gives Rodolphe, “un porte-cigares tout pareil à celui
du Vicomte” that Charles finds the night of the Vaubyessard ball, exemplifies
Emma’s frustrated search for singularity in the banal (299). The original case—and
the romantic fantasies that it emblematizes for Emma—loses its position of privilege
in its reproduction. In Ahearn’s words, “[t]he unique and privileged object,
representative both of passion and nobility, gives way before the horizon of the
multiple” (185). Still unable to distinguish between the singular and the
stereotypical, Emma recycles all of the clichés of her romance with Rodolphe in her
liaison with Léon. Like with Rodolphe, fashion journals play an important role in the
development of their relationship. While their mutual love of romantic literature
(especially poetry) is well documented, Emma and Léon also share a love of fashion
magazines: “[Emma] avait apporté son journal de modes. Léon se mettait près d’elle;
ils regardaient ensemble les gravures et s’attendaient au bas des pages...Ainsi
s’établit entre eux une sorte d’association, un commerce continuë de livres et de
romances” (185). Clichés of both the literary and the periodical kind once again become the lingua franca of Emma and her lover.

While fashion magazines inform Emma’s initial impressions of Rodolphe, they play an even more important role in Emma and Léon’s romance. The lovers cross paths at the theater after the end of Emma’s affair with Rodolphe, and several years of their own (chaste) initial acquaintance. Before the start of the opera, we see the room from Emma’s vantage point:

La salle commençait à se remplir, on tirait les lorgnettes de leurs étuis, et les abonnées, s’apercevant de loin, se faisaient des salutations. Ils venaient se délasser dans les beaux-arts des inquiétudes de la vente; mais, n’oubliant point les affaires, ils causaient encore cottons, trois-six, ou indigo. (340)

The inescapable cotton that, despite Emma’s efforts, will come to characterize the past, present, and future of her family erupts into the domain of the fine arts. To cite Christopher Ippolito’s observation, “on n’échappe pas à celui-ci [le coton], on n’échappe pas à la bêtise” (60). Despite the temporary escape offered by the opera’s flights of fantasy, the mention of cotton represents the harsh material reality that will be imposed on Berthe because of her mother’s irresponsibility—that is, her future as a textile worker.

Furthermore, it is crucial to notice the reappearance of the lorgnette in this scene. Once again, Emma is shown as a spectator, but is not shown looking through the lorgnette. To rehearse Gaultier’s theory, bovarysme is the inability to see oneself for who one really is; he characterizes his study as a metaphorical lorgnon for the reader who can see delusion where the character is blind. This metaphor of blindness
is particularly suggestive in Flaubert’s description of the effect of the romantic opera on Emma:

Elle se retrouvait dans les lectures de sa jeunesse, en plein Walter Scott...D’ailleurs, le souvenir du roman facilitant l’intelligence du libretto, elle suivait l’intrigue phrase à phrase, tandis que d’insaisissables pensées qui lui revenaient se dispersaient, aussitôt, sous les rafales de la musique...Elle n’avait pas assez d’yeux pour contempler les costumes, les décors, les personnages, les arbres peints qui tremblaient quand on marchait, et les toques de velours, les manteaux, les épées, toutes ces imaginations qui s’agitaient dans l’harmonie comme dans l’atmosphère d’un autre monde. (342, my emphasis)

Emma is transported to the high romanticism of her youth; she is dazzled by the intensity and depth of emotion in the music. Once again, Emma is spellbound by the spectacle of Scottish highland romance, and it resonates profoundly in her: “La voix de la chanteuse ne lui semblait être que le retentissement de sa conscience, et cette illusion qui la charmait quelque chose même de sa vie” (343, my emphasis). It is in this state that Emma encounters Léon again, right after the opera, and it is to sustain this illusion of romantic transcendence that Emma will embark on a love affair with the clerk.

After crossing paths at the opera, Léon and Emma agree to meet later. On the day of their appointed rendezvous, Léon prepares for the encounter by dressing in his best clothing and by reading “un vieux journal de modes” (364). The old fashion journal recalls the yellowed plate pasted in the storefront window of the wigmaker; like the ambitions of the perruquier, the romantic fantasy that Emma (and, to some extent, Léon) will try to enact is equally unrealizable. The fashion journal also frames how Léon sees Emma: “Mais un froufrou de soie sur les dalles, la bordure d’un
chapeau, un camail noir...C'était elle!” (267). Emma is a fashion plate come to life, and her subsequent affair with the clerk will involve not only exchanging letters and verses of unending devotion, but also outfitting herself and their garçonnière with the latest Parisian styles. The fashion journal and the romantic novel intersect again in Léon’s appraisal of his mistress:

Jamais il n’avait rencontré cette grâce de langage, cette réserve du vêtement...Il admirait l’exaltation de son âme et les dentelles de sa jupe...Elle était l’amoureuse de tous les romans, l’héroïne de tous les drames, le vague elle de tous les volumes de vers. (397)

Again, the two ways in which Emma searches for singularity—in romantic spiritual communion (“l’exaltation de son âme”) and in sartorial distinction (“les dentelles”)—are frustrated by the reduction to cliché. Léon’s equation of his mistress to every romantic heroine in every novel undermines the very distinctiveness that that position in those plots would endow and that Emma seeks. In comparing Emma to her poetic exemplars, Léon ironically makes her the epitome of banality as a pronoun (“le vague elle”), effectively foiling the possibility of the distinction that she pursues in her relationship with him.61

Emma’s pursuit of romance with Léon leads to a disastrous accrual of debt and, as a result, to her suicide by arsenic poisoning. Emma’s debt outlives her, and Charles is left to deal with the balance. To stave off the imminent seizure of his remaining property, Charles begs his mother for help; she agrees to mortgage her home, but on one condition: “[E]lle demandait, en retour de son sacrifice, un châle,

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61 Elizabeth Amann has observed that as the novel progresses, people and places become less distinct; this loss of distinction is manifest in the domination of Part III of Madame Bovary by pronouns (234). Emma’s reduction to “le vague elle” exemplifies this trajectory in the narrative.
échappé aux ravages de Félicité” (497). Charles refuses, his mother rescinds her offer, and he soon loses everything—his property to the creditors, his daughter to the textile mill, and, eventually, even his life. It is clear by the end of the novel that the only thing Charles has not lost is his illusions: he denies his mother’s request because, for him, Emma’s shawl is a material extension of his dead wife, a textile testament to her singularity.

The cultural history of the cashmere shawl in the nineteenth century reveals that, like the Count’s silk cigar case, the shawl is a commodity whose power to bestow distinction is mitigated by mass production. Susan Hiner has explained that the cashmere shawl captured the cultural imaginary in nineteenth-century France as a symbol of exoticism and familiarity, male enterprise (colonialism) and female domesticity (80-1). By the 1840s, the question of authenticity versus imitation plagued the cashmere industry to the point that a “bureau de la vérification des cachemires” was established to determine whether materials were of Middle Eastern or ersatz origin (91). Considering the opacity of the cashmere shawl as a marker of distinction, Charles’ refusal to exchange it for financial security reveals to what extent he has overinvested the object with meaning. Charles mistakenly takes the commodity for an heirloom, and Berthe’s eventual banishment to the cotton loom of a textile factory only goes to underscore the reproducibility of the garment Charles fetishizes. Charles becomes a victim of his inability to embrace the novel’s poetics of substitution. Lheureux and Félicité—the novel’s “happy” characters—succeed precisely because they understand and exploit the kind of substitution that drives both the narrative and the economy: by putting objects (luxury goods and Emma’s
old dresses alike) into circulation, both Lheureux and Félicité recognize that the value of objects lies in their exchange, not in their (non-existent) singularity.

BLINDNESS AND INSIGHT

The diminished capacity of the cashmere to bestow distinction is another example Emma’s frustrated search for singularity. Like the undetermined quality of the shawl, Berthe’s sad fate at the end of the novel foregrounds the importance of cotton in *Madame Bovary*. It is a symbol of atavism, of a relentless return to origins—no matter how much Emma seeks silk, the common thread in her life is cotton. Cotton becomes an even more suggestive symbol in the novel when considered in the context of Nestor Roqueplan’s 1857 commentary on the material in his meditation on Second Empire mores, *Regain, La Vie Parisienne*:

Le coton, c’est tout notre siècle; le coton, c’est l’attrape, c’est le semblant, l’imitation, c’est le plaqué des bonnes choses. Tout est coton. Tout est à bon marché: le gouvernement comme les chemises. (114)

In this statement, Roqueplan ties cotton to questions of authenticity and, most interestingly, to questions about the legitimacy of the Second Empire government. Roqueplan suggests that like the half-cotton, half-cashmere shawls being sold as the real thing, Louis-Napoléon is also made of cheap stuff—an ersatz emperor made of inferior material. Just as cotton masquerades as more luxurious fabrics, the Second Empire is also a simulation, a knockoff version of France’s original imperial glory.

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62 The title of this section is taken from Paul de Man’s collection of essays of the same name.
These questions of material authenticity and political legitimacy intersect in a fascinating way at the end of *Madame Bovary*. In order to appreciate the novel’s resolution, we must return to the scene of Emma’s death. Just moments before she dies, Emma asks for a mirror and then contemplates her reflection for a moment before convulsions overtake her. The priest’s administration of last rites is interrupted by the sound of the town’s blind beggar (known in the text only as “l’aveugle”) singing a bawdy tune outside the Bovarys’ house. Believing Emma already dead, Charles, the doctor, and the priest are startled when Emma bolts upright “comme un cadavre que l’on galvanise,” cries out “[I]’aveugle!,” and then expires in a hysterical paroxysm (471).

It is crucial to understand the importance of the motif of blindness throughout the novel when considering Emma’s last words. Though presumably referring to the beggar, Emma’s last words could easily apply to her. As shown in the preceding pages, the moments of Emma’s greatest blindness are also the instances in which she is dazzled by representations of the romance she longs for, whether at the Vaubyessard ball, at the opera in Rouen, or in the pages of the latest fashion journal from Paris. Emma is unable to find the distinction she so desires in part because she is unable to distinguish between real luxury and gaudy imitation. Emma’s myopia also encompasses her failure to reconcile her banal reality with the romance of her fantasy, which blindness is compounded by her neglect of the interpretive faculty her *lorgnon*. To her ultimate detriment, Emma only uses the eyeglass as an ornament, or as a fashion accessory. Using the *lorgnon* would indicate an act of critical looking.
that is possible only on the part of a distanced, self-aware viewer: Emma’s nose is pressed too close to the looking glass of romantic illusion to see clearly.

The political critique that the end of the book represents is closely related to this desire for distinction, especially if we consider the respective fates of Homais and Emma together. *Madame Bovary* famously ends with Homais’ receipt of the cross of the Legion of Honor. In short, Homais successfully obtains the sense of distinction that Emma so greatly desires. This is a profoundly ironic award as Homais is a deeply unlikable character whose only “contribution” to the community is the dispensing of self-serving pseudoscience, whether in medicinal or textual form. Furthermore, when the blind beggar—the only character that clearly sees Homais’ deep-seated hypocrisy—tries to expose the pharmacist as a fraud by denouncing his ineffective treatments, Homais silences the dissent by having the man condemned for life to a hospice. Clearly, the distinction bestowed upon the undeserving pharmacist is a trenchant political critique. But what of the relationship to fashion accessories?

To illuminate the importance of fashion in the end of the novel, I would like to return to Baudrillard’s notion of fashion as it relates to the orders of simulacra. After imitation and production, the third order of simulacra is simulation. As Tseëlon explains, Baudrillard’s views of fashion in the age of simulation are antithetical to those of fashion theory: while fashion theory sees the production of fashion as part of

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63 While Baudrillard associates simulation with the postmodern age as a specific historical era, and while he would consider *Madame Bovary* a text of the production era, I believe that his explanation of the role in simulation is deeply relevant to Flaubert’s portrayal of Homais’ receipt of the cross of the Legion of Honor. I use as a point of departure Jeffrey Mehlman’s characterization of the advent of Bonapartism as a “simulacrum of revolution” (10).
the democratization process, Baudrillard argues that “democratization theories fall into the trap of confusing the ideology of consumption with consumption itself” (126). In other words, the “ideology of consumption creates the appearance of social change” and “substitutes an appearance of democracy for absence of real social change” (Tseëlon 126). For Baudrillard, the play of meaning in postmodern fashion makes it a purely aesthetic endeavor—it is fashion for fashion’s sake. However spectacular and self-referential, this playfulness nevertheless masks political and economic intransigence of the forces that control fashion that run counter to true democratization.

Baudrillard’s characterization of fashion in the postmodern age recalls similar writings on the role of the simulacrum in the Second Empire. Following Marx, Jeffrey Mehlman has called the coup d’état of 1851 a “simulacrum of revolution, grotesque in its pretention to pass itself off as the real thing” (10). Mehlman explains that Bonapartism represented the “executive power become independent of society”: Louis-Napoléon no longer represented the interests of one class over another; he only represented his own interests (15). Elizabeth Amann describes the linguistic corollary—and political consequences—of this kind of ruthless self-representation:

At the time, it seemed to many that Louis-Napoléon had introduced a sort of linguistic parasitism: signs were freed from their signifieds and blithely grafted onto their opposites in a farcical negation of the differences that made language meaningful...Just as Bonapartism bows politically to one group at the same time it favors another economically. (100, 102)

Mehlman and Amann identify in Louis-Napoléon’s government the same kind of “playfulness” of the sign that Baudrillard identifies in fashion: both involve processes
in which signs are liberated from signifiers, which liberation appears to indicate a revolutionary process of democratization. In the case of fashion, this democratization would be manifest in the availability of fabrics and styles to all; for the Second Empire, this kind of democratization would appear in the form of the opening of new paths to power in a modern society. However, with both fashion and the Second Empire, the appearance of democratization is an illusion of revolution—a distraction from the forces of power that stay solidly in place under the surface. The play of the sign in both contexts does not reflect a process of true democratization; it is instead a ploy to preserve the powers that be.

In the closing sentences of *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert’s juxtaposition of Homais’ brutal behavior with his receipt of the cross of the Legion of Honor foregrounds the trenchant irony of the award:

> Depuis la mort de Bovary, trois médecins se sont succédé à Yonville sans pouvoir y réussir, tant M. Homais les a tout de suite battus en brèche. Il fait une clientèle d’enfer; l’autorité le ménage et l’opinion publique le protège. Il vient de recevoir la croix d’honneur. (501)

Though the narrative concludes shortly before the advent of the Second Empire, Homais is clearly a double for Louis-Napoléon. Homais’ ruthless repression of his competition (“trois médecins”) and of his dissenters (“l’aveugle”) recall the similar efforts of the Second Empire to eliminate opposition. Furthermore, Homais’ ability to deploy (sometimes contradictory) discourse at will to serve self-interest is undoubtedly a critique of the similar disingenuousness of Second Empire political discourse.
The cross of the Legion of Honor that Homais receives thus does not signify scientific triumph or service to fellow man: it is entirely ornamental, a self-referential sign whose meaning has been evacuated by the recipient’s lack of merit. It is fool’s gold, a half-cotton, half-cashmere shawl—a fashion accessory, at best. And even though Homais survives Emma at the end of the novel, the brutally ironic recounting of his “accomplishment” reveals the same truth learned from Emma’s horrific demise: true distinction is not possible in a society where inauthenticity reigns and where dissent is repressed in the name of political expediency.

Even the blind can see that.
CHAPTER THREE

Empire Wastes: Fashion and Fractured Femininity in *La Curée*

On the occasion of the review in the Champ de Mars, the PRESIDENT wore the uniform of a General of the Infantry—or of a Colonel of the National Guard—for, as he has never served in either, it is extremely doubtful which uniform he wore, or in fact, what rank in the French army he has gained at all, beyond that, from never having been in it, of a Rank Imposter. As these doubts make it very inconvenient to know what military title to give him, we suggest that LOUIS NAPOLEON do take his title from the only battle-field [sic] in which he has hitherto distinguished himself, and be henceforth known as “the Great SHAM de Mars.”

Louis Napoleon seems to attach so much importance to the coats of his senatorial and other lacqueys that his government may be called a Co(a)terie of Despotism.

For twenty years, the imperial government of Louis-Napoléon provided much fodder for sarcasm in the British satirical newspaper *Punch*. The publication frequently expressed its disapproval of the regime in ways that many French publications could not because of strict censorship laws in the Hexagon. In their caricatures and quips about the French Emperor, the British satirists provided their readers innumerable variations on a theme, focusing primarily on the illegitimacy of the origins and agendas of the Second Empire. Over the years, the writers at *Punch* criticized everything about Louis-Napoléon’s government, from its adventurist wars, to its ruthless razing and renovation of Paris, to its feckless financial ventures. The

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64 *Punch, or the London Charivari*. Vol. 22-23. 1852. 223.
65 *Punch, or the London Charivari*. Vol. 22-23. 1852. 82.
66 In an 1853 edition of the publication, a *Punch* writer notes: “The Moniteur [the official Imperial newspaper] has denied officially the report, “that the Imperial Government intended to authorize gaming houses, and to re-establish the lottery.” The Moniteur might have added that the Government has no necessity to authorize any other gaming establishment than the Bourse, or to extend the privilege of gambling to any but such companies as the Société Générale du Crédit.
humorists spoke derisively specifically of Louis-Napoléon’s apparent fascination with dress: the Emperor is repeatedly mocked for his careful attention to his own clothing and that of his deputies, or, in *Punch*’s formulation, his “co(a)terie of despotism.

Upon the establishment of the Second Empire senate, *Punch* reports that a “grave deliberation” took place in the chamber about the proper length of knee breeches at official functions. To ignore the dress code edict in Louis-Napoléon’s court, the writers at *Punch* imply, would be to commit a serious sartorial transgression—a breach of breech etiquette, in other words.

While *Punch* would also later take aim at the flamboyant feminine fashions (especially the crinoline) of Second Empire France, what seemed to be particularly bothersome to the humorists about French fads was Louis-Napoléon’s disingenuous appropriation of vestimentary signs of authority. He wore a military uniform, though he had never served as a soldier; his chest was decorated with a panoply of medals for valor in battle he had never shown. The perfidy of the Emperor’s new clothes was a symbol in the pages of *Punch* for the parvenu regime as a whole. The publication regularly took aim at Louis-Napoléon’s regime for its pretensions to greatness, for its mania for monumentalizing itself, for its crazed and conspicuous consumption, and for its ruthless exploitation of resources—both natural and human—to exhaustion.

Mobilier, and others of the same class to which the Empire gives its patronage” (*Punch*, Vols.24-25, 1853, 20).

67 *Punch, or the London Charivari*. Vol. 24-25. 185. 41.

68 Bernadette C. Lintz explains that Zola caused a scandal with his depiction of “l’Empereur fardé” at the battle of Sedan in La Débâcle (1892). While some of Zola’s contemporaries contested the historical veracity of a “made-up” emperor, he refused to change the text. Lintz suggests that the image of Louis-Napoléon wearing make-up into battle suggests his facility with “la théâtralité et du trompe-l’œil” in politics as an “expert en l’art de manipuler les signes” (611).
Of interest in this analysis of *La Curée* are the rhetorical and stylistic strategies deployed by Zola to critique both the immoderate spectacle and the unbridled speculation of the Second Empire. My central claim is that the twin narratives of Renée’s moral downfall and Saccard’s corrupt speculation are different manifestations of the same root cause—that is, the collapse of the distinctions that had previously ordered French society. In a Second Empire Paris where prostitutes and proper ladies share paramours, fathers and sons share lovers, and investors and regulators share inside information, Renée’s incestuous romance with Maxime is the libidinal corollary to Saccard’s insider trading and profiteering in the Parisian real estate market. Renée’s profound myopia—her inability to distinguish visually her surroundings—is the physical manifestation of the collapse of distinctions occurring at the personal and political levels in *La Curée*.

Furthermore, Renée’s fascination with fashion represents her attempt to distinguish herself sartorially as one of the preeminent members of the Second Empire beau monde. Considering the importance of looking and of being seen in the social practice of nineteenth-century fashion, Renée’s significant visual impairment reveals her fixation on fashion to be profoundly problematic. Using the language of Laura Mulvey’s theory of gendered looking and spectacle in cinema, I show how Zola anticipates many of Mulvey’s insights in the story of Renée as sartorial spectacle. I argue that the kind of reading for detail elicited by the practice of fashion produces a kind of fracturing of the female form similar to that which Mulvey describes. In *La Curée*, Renée’s victimization can be attributed to her inability to perceive how others (specifically, Maxime and Saccard) see her: born of her desire to see and be seen,
Renée becomes blind to the atomizing and alienating effects of the male gaze on her subjectivity. I also show how Zola effects his critique of the moral degradation of imperial France stylistically through the pun. Using Tony Tanner’s insights about the political implications of the transgressive joining of multiple meanings in one word, I argue that the pun is an effective rhetorical vehicle for a critique of the corrupt and incestuous nature of the personal and political relations in *La Curée*.

**MAKING A SPECTACLE**

The Second Empire inaugurated an unprecedentedly spectacular period in French political history. With its constant public demonstrations of wealth and power, Louis-Napoléon’s reign was a thoroughly theatrical era. As Matthew Truesdell explains, imperial subjects were frequently dazzled with visual demonstrations of the regime’s power in a variety of spectacular forms:

> A yearly holiday on the birthday of the First Emperor, spectacular visits to the provinces, elaborate inaugurations, enormous military reviews, two Universal Expositions, an imperial marriage and baptism, visits from foreign royalty, and a variety of other gala events comprised what has come to be called the *fête impériale*. But these events were more than just amusements; they were among Louis-Napoléon’s key tools in the projection of powerful images before a mass audience, images that portrayed him as the ideal leader for the age—the providential savior of the country and the guarantor of a peaceful, prosperous, and glorious future. (3-4)

As the state demonstrated its power and wealth through public spectacle, French citizens who wanted to show their own economic (and, correlatively, political) power did so through the similarly visual practice of fashion. Therese Dolan describes the
Second Empire as a period in which all economic prosperity was “quickly converted into external flourish” (22). The sartorial changes at court reflected an evolution in the clothing codes of French society in general: as fashion was the most powerful signifier of social status, social mobility became increasingly powered by wealth, and fashion was the most obvious index of prosperity.

The importance of women in the practice of fashion in France has been documented since the nineteenth century by various cultural historians. In her path-breaking study *Ladies of the Leisure Class*, Bonnie Smith demonstrates how bourgeois women, through their cultivation of a fashionable appearance, increasingly became the visual emblems of their families’ social and economic standing over the course of the nineteenth century. In his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen similarly argues that women were the visual index of their husbands’ wealth; he contends that the practice of feminine fashion in the nineteenth century was not an inconsequential practice of aesthetics, but a serious display of political and economic power. Similarly recognizing the importance of female dress, Philippe Perrot describes in *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie* how fashion culture created an unprecedentedly visual social dynamic in the nineteenth century. The development of public life in Paris—including the formation of new public spaces, the proliferation of theaters, cabarets, and cafés, and the rise of boulevard culture—provided an opportunity for those who wanted to be upwardly mobile to see and be seen in their best finery.69 Because social status was displayed through dress, and because the

69 For further discussion of the development of public culture in nineteenth-century France, see Vanessa Schwartz’s *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*. 
difference between good and bad style was determined by vestimentary nuances, nineteenth-century fashion culture encouraged the scrutiny of the well dressed, the meticulous inspection of their garments, and the visual breakdown of their ensembles into their component parts.

The kind of “reading” practiced by and on the modish mondaines in Paris can be seen as a search for meaning in material detail: it was a method of looking that attempted to determine value—political, economic, and social—in the evaluation of sartorial subtleties. In *La Curée*, this is exactly kind of looking Renée does with her *binocle d’homme* as she studies the intricacies of the ensembles of the Parisian social elite. Because of the details of female dress, looking at fashion privileges focus on the material details of dress over the perception of the wearer as a human whole. Sandy Petrey has observed that *La Curée* is a novel characterized by the “[a]bsence of people, [but] glittering presence of things” (632); the focus on fashion in the narrative reinforces the idea of the subordination of the subject to the sartorial. Saccard states this general principle in his statement about the stories he tells to seduce investors: “Le fond de l’histoire importe peu; ce sont les détails, le geste et l’accent qui sont tout” (259). In other words, it is not content that matters in Second Empire society—it is fashionable form.

**INVESTMENT PIECES**

The importance of elegant appearances in imperial France is established from the very beginning in *La Curée*. The origin stories of both Saccard and the Second
Empire are inextricably bound in the novel; the rise of the imperial regime is also the narrative of Saccard’s abandonment of his republican sympathies and his embrace of France’s new financial and social codes. Of the December coup d’état that installed the Second Empire, the narrator notes the newfound importance of fashion at Louis-Napoléon’s court:

C’était l’heure où les aventuriers du 2 Décembre, après avoir payé leurs dettes, jetaient dans les égouts leurs bottes éculées, leurs redingotes blanchies aux coutures, rasaisent leur barbe de huit jours, et devenaient des hommes comme il faut (105-6).

Cultivating one’s appearance comme il faut was key for those with those who wanted access to the upper echelons of power. Even more important was a similarly attentive cultivation of the appearance of upper-class women in La Curée: while only cursory details are provided about the men’s clothing, the women’s dress—and especially that of Renée—is documented in great detail.

As the visual emblem of Saccard’s financial success, and with her husband’s blessing, Renée is allowed to indulge her every fashion fantasy because the perception of Saccard’s wealth depends largely on Renée as sartorial spectacle. It is clear that Saccard’s permissiveness vis à vis Renée’s spending is not proof of his devotion indulgence as a spouse; it is rather a cold calculation:

[Saccard] entrait dans ses calculs qu’elle jetât l’argent par les fenêtres, ces cinquante mille francs, qui allaient disparaître en dentelles et en bijoux, devaient lui rapporter, à lui, le cent pour cent. (117)

Saccard’s investment in Renée as sartorial spectacle pays enormous dividends:

Saccard’s potential shareholders are reassured by the display of his wealth and invest in his speculative schemes. Saccard even encourages Renée’s toilettes imaginatives
with the express hope that he can broker advantageous business contracts with his wife’s lovers, though she is unaware of her husband’s ulterior motives.

In Saccard’s encouragement of Renée’s fondness for fashion, *La Curée* exposes the circular logic that informs this kind of demonstration of wealth. The willingness of Saccard’s potential business partners to invest in his ventures depends heavily on what he is able to buy for his wife to wear; the financial benefits that result because of this demonstration of wealth allow Saccard to buy his wife more expensive clothing, which in turn serves as a solicitation for more investments. In his masterful and surreptitious manipulation of his wife’s appearance, Saccard proves his earlier statement—it is not content that matters, but rather the details—of a story, a dress, or a piece of jewelry. Saccard’s enabling of Renée’s spending habits also serves as an implicit critique of the Second Empire’s ostentatious displays of power. The process is tautological: like Saccard in the novel, Louis-Napoléon repeatedly made use of spectacular demonstrations in order to shore up the very power he was claiming to exhibit. In their trenchant critiques of Louis-Napoléon’s obsession with appearances, the writers at *Punch* trace the illegitimate origins of the emperor’s power to a specious kind of circularity. The *Punch* parodists point out that the origin of Louis-Napoléon’s authority was derived from the demonstration of that very power.

As demonstrated in the previously cited excerpts from *Punch*, the frequent vehicle of the publication’s critique of the emperor was the pun. The play on multiple meanings was a commonplace humorous device in the publication, but in using the pun to underscore the illegitimacy of Louis-Napoléon’s government, the play on
words becomes an especially significant political critique. Soren Hattensen Balle explains that puns are approached “with the same suspicion as other culturally deviant practices” because of the instability inherent in their polysemic resonance (306). While we most often focus on the ludic aspect of puns, Balle reminds us that puns also have the potential to provoke anxiety because, as Freud described, of their “interrelatedness with sexuality in terms of [their] function as a psychic delay or displacement device for the expression of sexual desires” (306). The pun alternately reveals and conceals what cannot be expressed directly in the play of possible signifieds.

Using the pun to discredit the imperial regime in France was thus a way for the Punch satirists to mimic and critique the instability of meaning that Louis-Napoléon had introduced into the political system through prevaricative policies. As Elizabeth Amann argues, the Imperial regime introduced a sort of “linguistic parasitism” into the political system: official discourse seemed meaningless as “signs were freed from their signified and grafted onto their opposites in a farcical negation of [meaningful] difference” in the attempt to negate political dissidence (100). If the origins of Louis-Napoléon’s authority were a sterile self-referentiality, the pun, with its multiple evocations, was a way to critique and exemplify the emperor’s disingenuous policies which, as Amann explains, meant that the imperial government “bow[ed] politically to one group at the same time it favor[ed] another economically” (102).

While the articles in Punch certainly were not written with the same amount of care or sophistication as the great works of nineteenth-century literature, their use of the pun is nonetheless an example of a powerful use of the rhetorical device.
Like the British satirists, Zola also takes aim at the unbridled speculation, sartorial excess, and self-serving spectacle of Second Empire France. And like the Punch writers, Zola uses puns in the opening pages of his novel to indicate an instability of meaning in Second Empire society. The novel begins in the middle of a traffic jam in the Bois de Boulogne; sumptuous toilettes are bursting through the doors of carriages too small to contain the crinolines. While waiting for the flow of traffic to resume, the carriage passengers take the opportunity to examine the clothing of their fellow travelers. The first words of dialogue in the novel are spoken by Maxime Saccard as he directs his stepmother’s gaze to a passenger riding in a neighboring coach: “Tiens...Laure d’Aurigny, là-bas, dans ce coupé...Vois donc, Renée” (39).

The woman that Maxime points out, Laure d’Aurigny, is a prominent demimondaine in Parisian society. Her name resonates on two levels: it is an ironic reference to the idealized woman immortalized in Petrarch’s poetry, and thus inaugurates the novel’s motif of debased literary archetypes; and it is also a homonym for l’or, as in the gold that gilds the Saccard mansion, and as in the wages that Laure earns as a courtesan. Furthermore, Tony Tanner’s theorization about the relationship of sexual deviance and the pun provides further insight on the significance of wordplay such as Zola’s:

>Puns and ambiguities are to common language what adultery and perversion are to ‘chaste’, that is, socially orthodox, sexual relations. They both bring together entities (meanings/people) that have

71 Mario Maurin points out that the traffic jam described in the opening pages of La Curée is the “peculiarly modern and urban version” of the mythical labyrinth (97). This idea of the traffic jam qua modern labyrinth is particularly suggestive because of the novel’s frequent reference to the incestuous Hippolytus-Theseus-Phaedra (Aristide-Maxime-Renée) triangle.
‘conventionally’ been differentiated and kept apart; and they bring them together in deviant ways, bypassing orthodox rules governing communications and relationships. (A pun is like an adulterous bed in which two meanings that should be separate are coupled together.) (197)

Balle points out that, unlike Freud, Tanner’s interpretation of the pun is less a manifestation of “secret libidinal wishes,” but rather a “structural analogy between the heterodox nature of meaning formation in punning and deviant sexual relations” (307). In other words, for Tanner, the pun challenges signification in the same way that sexual deviance challenges sexual norms: the relationship between disruptive language and non-normative sexual behavior is homologous (Balle 307).

Considering Tanner’s comparison of punning to adultery, the polysemy of Laure’s name becomes even more significant: not only is it ironically resonant of both poetic idealism and of money, the simultaneity of these meanings is, in Tanner’s view, an adulterous coupling—the very means of Laure’s income. Laure thus exemplifies both the linguistic and the sexual deviance that Tanner describes. As one of the favorites of the demimonde, Laure indeed brings together disparate entities: as her successive lovers, men of the moneyed bourgeoisie, the aristocracy, and the imperial government are brought together in her bed. This is of course the sexual corollary to the corruption of the men’s political relationships; their illicit sexual transactions with Laure parallels their illegal sharing of insider information about

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72 At the Saccards’ first dinner party, Maxime makes another pun that reinforces the idea of sexual deviancy inherent in the rhetorical device. Speaking of a well-known prostitute named Sylvia, Maxime jokes: “Mon père l’a connue particulièrement” (67), clearly referencing both the sexual and non-sexual resonance of the word. This is also important because the first time “les inséparables” Suzanne and Adéline appear in the text, the narrator specifies that Renée “[les] avait connu[es] en pension” (43). Adéline and Suzanne are a lesbian couple, and as Maxime’s pun recalls this earlier use of “connu[es],” we are to understand (as the narrator implies later in the novel) that Renée’s initiation into vice began during her years at boarding school.
the renovation of Paris. Furthermore, when Laure encounters financial difficulty, Saccard buys her jewels as a gift for his wife. With the transfer of the diamonds to Renée, Saccard effectively erases any distinction between the two women as both the purchase and the gift represent investments on his part.

It is in Renée’s examination of Laure in the Bois de Boulogne that another crucial pun is presented. At Maxime’s urging, Renée strains to see Laure across the park. The description of Renée’s labored examination of her rival provides a crucial clue to the importance of looking in the novel:

> Renée se souleva légèrement, cligna les yeux avec cette moue exquise que lui faisait faire la faibless de sa vue...Puis, *comme elle voyait mal*, elle prit son binocle, un binocle d’homme, à garniture d’écaille, et le tenant à la main, sans le poser sur le nez, elle examina la grosse Laure d’Aurigny tout à son aise, d’un air parfaitement calme. (40, my emphasis)

This passage introduces the importance of the scopophilia that characterizes the book’s libidinal energy: all of the characters—especially Renée—constantly find themselves looking at others or being looked at by others. Furthermore, the detailed documentation of characters’ clothing and appearance in the opening passages of the novel inaugurate a kind of close examination of material detail that will characterize the narrator’s focus for the rest of the novel.

As imperial France was, above all, a feast for the eyes, the opening scene of *La Curée* remains true to its historical context by offering a veritable catalog of the sartorial splendor of Paris’ social elite. This passage also establishes the importance
of looking as interpretive practice in the novel. Maxime and Renée’s initial promenade in the Bois de Boulogne inaugurates the kind of social watching that will continue throughout the entire book, and there are frequent references to optical instruments in the narrative. Furthermore, Zola shows Renée looking through “binocle d’homme” because, as the narrator explains, “elle voyait mal.” Again, it is crucial to recognize the polysemic resonance of the word “mal”—the word suggests both mal (poorly) and mâle (male).

Like Emma Bovary, Renée is shown in her first appearance in the novel with a man’s looking instrument; unlike Emma Bovary, Renée is shown from the very beginning looking through the instrument. This difference underscores not only the significant difference between the social dynamic of Paris and the provinces, but also highlights the importance of spectacle in the public interactions of the beau monde. It is clear that Renée’s vision is distorted because of her myopia: her dysmorphic perception of the world is rooted in a physiological deficiency in her vision. But what of the mâle, the adulterous bedfellow of Zola’s pun? What does it mean to look as a man would? For further elucidation, we must turn to Laura Mulvey’s theorization of the male gaze.

By my count, the word “yeux” appears 148 times, “regard/-er” 244 times, and “vue” 31 times. There is hardly a page in La Curée that does not contain a reference to looking or seeing. While Mulvey’s essay develops a theory of gendered looking in the cinema, I find useful and relevant for this analysis her insights about the male gaze and the woman qua spectacle. Books like Zola and Film: Essays in the Art of Adaptation examine not only filmic adaptations of Zola’s novels, but also the “cinematic” quality of his prose. In his preface to the edition of La Curée used in this study, Jean Borie describes the setting of the novel “prend une importance énorme, un décor baroque, théâtral...un décor surchargé mais fragile—plantes tissus, stucs, eaux ruisselantes—un décor hollywoodien avant la lettre” (29, my emphasis).
Basing her theory on the “preexisting patterns of fascination,” as described by psychoanalysis and as thematized in literature, Mulvey famously posits that the history of narrative cinema is underpinned by the gendered dynamic between viewer and spectacle (Web). Mulvey explains that the image of woman lies at the heart of the pleasurable spectacle of Hollywood films; she explains that the depiction of women in cinema corresponds with the role of woman as described by psychoanalysis and as prescribed by patriarchal culture—she is the “bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Web). Correlatively, in terms of spectatorship, scopophilia—the act of “taking other people as objects [and] subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” described by Freud—is understood in strict gendered terms: men are the active lookers and derivers of visual pleasure, while women are looked at and displayed to titillate the male viewer (Web).

Mulvey argues that while the spectacle of woman is an essential element of narrative film, her appearance on the screen stymies the progress of the story: the

75 Again, while Mulvey’s theory speaks specifically to the gender dynamics of the cinema, I believe that her theory is relevant in that it describes many of the gendered dynamics of looking at work in La Curée. Furthermore, Henri Mitterand has argued that the cinematic quality of Zola’s novels is evident in the frequent adaptation of his work for the cinema: “Zola’s detailed plans are constructed like film scenarios, with their action sequences (the confrontation between the miners and the soldiers in Germinal), their descriptive scenes (Gervaise gazing up at the huge tenement building in the Rue de la Goutte d’Or), their dialogues (the tête-à-tête between Maxime and Renée in La Curée), their tableaux full of light or veiled shadows, their scenes full of the movement of people (Claude Lantier running along the Quai de Bourbon in L’Oeuvre) and of objects (the locomotive in the snow in La Bête humaine), captured from every angle, at every speed, from every point of view; with their myriad effects of specularity and of visual correlations, their twists of fortune, their flashbacks, their changes of pace, etc. One could go on endlessly finding in the Rougon-Macquart novels the whole prehistory of cinématographic narrative” (Émile Zola: Fiction and Modernity 59).

76 In terms of fashion theory, Mulvey’s description of woman as the bearer, and not maker, of meaning corresponds with Veblen’s assertion that women dress fashionably because they are the sartorial indexes of their husbands’ wealth and accomplishments. For further discussion, see Veblen’s The Theory of the Leisure Class.

77 Mulvey cites as examples of this dynamic stripteases and pin-up images, “from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley” (Web).
spectacle of her eroticized body halts the narrative in order to sate the male scopophilic drive. These charged displays of femininity often involve a fracturing of the female body: Mulvey explains that the camera’s close-up and lingering focus on women’s legs or faces “destroys...the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative” and renders the female form iconic rather than realistic (Web). Furthermore, Mulvey points out that narrative films are structured around a central character with whom the male spectator can identify:

As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence...The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action. (Web)

In other words, the successful identification of the male spectator with the male protagonist—thus the reaffirmation of men’s place as creators of meaning in a patriarchal culture—in the film depends in part on the fragmentation and abstraction of the female body. The atomization of the female figure is thus both a precondition

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78 Lawrence Shehr has described a similar dynamic in the descriptive prose of realist novels. He points out that during an ekphrastic moment in a text, “there can be no representation of a character as a living or conscious subject” (9). The effect of extended description has an analogous effect to the camera’s close-ups: figures are emptied of consciousness when they are objects of a meticulous gaze. For further explanation, see Schehr’s Figures of Alterity: French Realism and Its Others.

79 Mulvey links the fragmentation of the female form in film to the paradox of phallocentrism: that is, its utter dependence on “the image of the castrated woman” (Web). She explains the compulsions that inform this abstraction of the female body: “Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the reenactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the concerns of the film noir); or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a
and a result of the male gaze: as the female body is abstracted and, in turn, rendered iconic, the male spectator gains control of her within the diegesis, thus reaffirming his superior position as bearer—and not object—of the gaze.

There are, of course, female spectators represented in the movies that Mulvey discusses. But if the prerogative of patriarchal culture is to ensure the dominance of the male gaze, what happens when the woman looks? In her exploration of the female gaze in cinema, Linda Williams points to the smoldering of the silent film vamp as an example of a bold female gaze in narrative film. But while the screen siren may initially look with abandon, her perspective in inevitably suppressed in order to restore the primacy of the male gaze. Williams explains:

> [T]he dubious moral status of such heroines [vamps, femmes fatales, and other transgressive female figures], and the fact that they must be punished in the end, undermine the legitimacy and authentic subjectivity of this look, frequently turning it into a mere parody of the male look. (61)

Mary Ann Doane adds that “the woman’s exercise of an active investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimization” (61). Following Williams and Doane, there is no place in narrative film for the female gaze: her very existence is a threat to the patriarchal order in which she exists. Women as looked-at objects are abstracted and fragmented in the name of phallocentrism; female spectators are subjugated and punished according to the same logic.

Thus Maxime’s directive to Renée in the opening scene of La Curée takes on particular significance when considered in light of the gendered dynamics of looking.

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fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence overvaluation, the cult of the female star” (Web).
Nestled closely in their carriage, Maxime and his stepmother Renée are caught in traffic in the Bois de Boulogne one afternoon; the gridlock allows them the luxury of scrutinizing their fellow passengers at their leisure. While Renée follows Maxime’s directive to look (in order to confirm that the demimondaine Laure d’Aurigny has indeed changed the color of her hair), it is she who is described in great detail in the following paragraph:

Renée, penchée en avant, la main appuyée sur la portière basse de la caliche, regardait, éveillée du rêve triste qui, depuis une heure, la tenait silencieuse, allongée au fond de la voiture, comme dans une chaise longue de convalescente. Elle portait, sur une robe de soie mauve, à tablier et à tunique, garnie de larges volants plissés, un petit paletot de drap blanc, aux revers de velours mauve, qui lui donnait un grand air de crânerie. Ses étranges cheveux fauve pâle, dont la couleur rappelait celle du beurre fin, étaient à peine cachés par un mince chapeau orné d’une touffe de roses du Bengale. (40)

While the passengers’ attention is directed to Laure d’Aurigny, Renée is clearly the object of the narrator’s “active investigating gaze,” to use Doane’s formulation. And though no detail about Maxime’s appearance is provided, every curve and layer of Renée’s ensemble is described in meticulous detail. The difference in depth of detail is drawn along gender lines: Maxime directs Renée’s gaze as she becomes the object of the narrator’s visual curiosity.

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80 The kind of “reading” that the narrator does here is reminiscent of the descriptions of clothing in women’s fashion journals. This description also reinforces that fashion journals encouraged the same kind of reading for detail in realist and naturalist texts. In order to write verisimilar descriptions of women’s clothing, Zola consulted the “Paris au jour le jour” section of several issues of Le Figaro (20 January 1870 and 10 April 1870). Philippe Perrot also explains that this kind of reading in material detail was essential for those who wanted to be part of the fashion elite: there was often a minute difference between an elegant ensemble and a fashion faux pas. For further reading, see Perrot’s Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century.
This distinction is further underscored by the subsequent description of Renée straining to see: “[C]omme elle voyait mal, elle prit son binocle, un binocle d’homme, à garniture d’écaille, et le tenant à la main, sans se le poser sur le nez, elle examina la grosse Laure d’Aurigny tout à son aise, d’un air parfaitement calme” (40, my emphasis). Renée’s vantage point is undermined by her myopia; she is unable to discern details without the aid of her “binocle d’homme.” And like the humorists of Punch, Zola also uses the pun to effect a critique: the word mal used in this context denotes the adverb meaning “poorly,” but also evokes the phonetically identical mâle, meaning male. This play on words is anticipated by the description of Renée’s optical device; the narrator tells us that she uses a man’s accessory to compensate for the weakness of her sight. But what does it mean for Renée to see “mâle”—to see as a man sees? And what is the relationship of the homonyms mal and mâle as they are used in the context of this woman’s life in Second Empire France?

CUTTING GLANCES

The second chapter of La Curée is an analeptic episode that explains the origins of Saccard’s family, of his wealth, and of his adopted surname. Because of his decision to side with the republicans after the coup d’état, Saccard finds himself dislocated from the center of power after Louis-Napoléon’s victory. The enterprising Saccard leaves the province to distance himself from his former political loyalties in

81 That Renée uses a “binocle d’homme” is particularly significant for this dissertation in that Emma Bovary also carries a man’s looking device: she is wearing a lorgnon between the buttons of her blouse when she first meets Charles. Like Flaubert, Zola also uses the eyepiece to underscore his protagonist’s blindness to her position within the world.
order to make his fortune in Paris. After a period of penance (prescribed by his older
brother, high-ranking imperial minister Eugène Rougon), Saccard secures a position
as a fonctionnaire; the position gives him access to information about Haussmann’s
plans to raze and reconstruct the city. Two months before her death, Saccard takes
his first wife Angèle to a cabaret at the top of the Buttes Montmartre to reveal his
plans to capitalize on the construction. From his vantage point overlooking the city,
Saccard explains to Angèle the imminent changes to the Parisian cityscape:

Ce spectacle des toits de Paris égaya Saccard... “Oh! vois, dit Saccard,
avec un rire d’enfant, il pleut des pièces de vingt francs dans
Paris!...Oui, oui, j’ai bien dit, plus d’un quartier va fondre, et il restera
de l’or aux doigts des gens qui chaufferont et remueront la cuve...On a
déjà commencé...Ce n’est qu’une misère. Regarde là-bas, du côté des
Halles, on a coupé Paris en quatre...” Et de sa main étendu, ouverte et
tranchante comme un coutelas, il fit signe de séparer la ville en quatre
parts. (112-13)

Saccard goes on to identify the axes (“les entailles”) along which Paris will be
dissected and reorganized, and describes the city as “Paris haché à coups de sabre,
les veines ouvertes, nourrissant cent mille terrassiers et maçons” (114). Saccard’s
violent vivisection of la ville from the heights of Montmartre frightens Angèle as she
watches her husband transform into “ce couteau vivant, ces doigts de fer qui
hachiaient sans pitié l’amas sans bornes des toits sombres” (114).

This figurative quadrisection of Paris reveals to the reader how Saccard will
eventually make his fortune speculating on real estate during the Haussmannization
of the city.\(^\text{82}\) Because he has access to insider information from the city planning

\(^{82}\) Later in the novel, Saccard’s predictions about the renovation of Paris prove to be accurate:
“Les temps prédits par Saccard, sur les buttes Montmartre, étaient venus. On taillait la cité à
coups de sabre, et il était de toutes les entailles, de toutes les blessures” (142). The violence that
characterizes Saccard’s first description is continued later when his plans actualize.
office, he is able to buy properties slated for imminent destruction and to resell them to the government at an elevated price. Furthermore, the visceral quality of Saccard’s description gestures not only to the extensive destruction required to reconfigure the city, but also to the violence visited upon other bodies (and, in particular, upon Renée) by the male gaze in the narrative. The clearest corollary of Saccard’s ruthless razing is Maxime’s similar perspective on the notable women in his social circle. Maxime is described as a veritable walking catalog of the belles of the Parisian beau monde: he collects photographs of women, mondaines and demimondaines alike, and peruses the album with Renée when they are bored. The description of the couple’s activity recalls the violence of Saccard’s cutting gaze on the city of Paris:

Just as Saccard reduces the city to rubble from the heights of Montmartre with a few swipes of his hand, Maxime and Renée similarly reduce the women in the photographs to mere fragments from the privileged position as viewing subjects. The listing of discrete facial features and body parts recalls the same kind of fragmenting of the female form posited by Mulvey. This fragmenting, Mulvey explains, is the
result of phallocentric logic that depends on the fragmentation and iconization of female form to reinforce male sexual superiority.

However, in this particular instance, it is clearly Renée who wields the loupe and the atomizing gaze that renders the other women rubble. She seems to be an equal participant with Maxime in the figurative dissection of the women’s faces. It is essential to notice, though, that it is Maxime that puts an end to their game (“[il] finit par cacher la loupe”) by hiding the magnifying glass. It is he, and not Renée, who is the bearer of the privileged gaze. Not only is Maxime more physically capable of seeing (Renée is myopic; Maxime suffers no visual impairment), his perspective determines that of Renée. He invites her to look at the photo album, just as he encourages Renée to look at Laure in the opening scene in the Bois de Boulogne. In both cases, Maxime’s gaze is a means to a libidinal end: he fantasizes about which women he would sleep with after dissecting the faces in the photo album; in the Bois de Boulogne, after Renée drops her binocle, Maxime, “dont les regards déshabillaient tranquillement les femmes étalées dans les coupes et dans les landaus voisins,” allows his gaze to linger on the women waiting in their carriages (42).

Maxime’s looking is consistent with that described by Mulvey: his gaze fixes the female form and reduces it to fragments for his own erotic pleasure. But what of Renée’s gaze? It is clear that Maxime directs his stepmother’s regard in these two scenes, and he even denies her ability to see more of the photo album. However, it is also clear that Renée also closely examines the women’s faces and derives pleasure from what she sees. In short, this scene demonstrates that Renée is not only looking with Maxime—she is also looking as Maxime. To return to the mal/mâle pun of the
Bois de Boulogne scene, Renée “voyait mal”—Renée sees poorly because of her
nearsightedness, an affliction is underscored by her constant recourse to (men’s)
looking instruments. However, we are also to understand that Renée “voyait mâle”—
she is looking at other women as Maxime looks at them by focusing on the fragments
of their faces, thus turning them into objects of scopophilic pleasure.

In order to appreciate the consequences of the gendered dynamic of looking
in the photo album scene, we must return to the initial scene in the Bois de
Boulogne. After she tires of looking at the other carriage passengers, Maxime tries to
console his stepmother in her boredom by reminding her of her elevated place in
Parisian society:

[L]es journaux parlent de chacune de tes robes nouvelles comme d’un
événement de la dernière gravité…[A]voue que tu es une des colonnes
du second Empire…Partout aux Tuileries, chez les ministres, chez les
simples millionnaires, en bas et en haut, tu règnes en souveraine. (45)

Maxime identifies his stepmother as one of the more impressive spectacles of the
Second Empire; because of her flair for fashion, her every appearance generates
enough curiosity to make her a worthy subject of the major newspapers. Maxime
reminds Renée that she belongs to the gratin of Parisian society, but this does little to
appease her. As the young man probes further, he tries to force Renée to articulate
exactly what she wants (“Que veux-tu encore?)? Renée responds to Maxime’s
question: “Quoi?...autre chose, parbleu! Je veux autre chose. Est-ce que je sais, moi!”
(47). Renée’s inability to articulate her desire frustrates her ability to stem her
voracious appetites; the rest of the narrative recounts Renée’s attempt to sate her
desire in increasingly illicit ways, reflected in her progressively revealing clothing, and culminating in her incestuous relationship with Maxime.

In this particular exchange with Maxime, Renée reveals the lack that will generate the rest of the narrative: because she is unable to identify the object of her desire, and because she has become bored with her old amusements, Renée will resort to increasingly transgressive pleasures in an attempt to satisfy her curiosity. The rest of the novel is the record of her increasingly audacious behavior and dress, and her extreme transgression on both accounts (i.e., incest and nudity). However, there is already a hint of Renée’s past improprieties in the opening scene when Maxime says to her: “Je dirais que tu as mordu à toutes les pommes” (45). Maxime’s remark is a clear reference to the Biblical story of Eve’s desire to know good and evil—*le bien et le mal*. The pun on *mal/mâle* once again comes into play as Renée responds to Maxime’s comment by expressing her desire to trade places with Laure d’Aurigny: “[E]h bien, il y a des jours où je suis tellement lasse de vivre ma vie de femme riche, adorée, saluée, que je voudrais être une Laure d’Aurigny, une de ces dames qui vivent en garçon” (48).

Renée’s desire to “vivre en garçon” is intimately related to her desire to see like a man: both are transgressive acts that seem to offer Renée the opportunity to escape the mundanity of her privilege in order to access new realms of experience—to see the world through new eyes. Susan Harrow also connects Renée’s desire to see with her yearning for financial, social, and sexual independence. Because of Renée’s

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83 *La Genèse* 3: 4-5: “Alors le serpent dit à la femme: Vous ne mourrez point; mais Dieu sait que, le jour où vous en mangerez, vos yeux s’ouvriront, et que vous serez comme des dieux, connaissant le bien et le mal.”
myopia, Harrow contends, she is relegated to the position of “viewed object rather than viewing subject” despite her (failed) attempts to see (“Myopia and the Model” 153). Renée is ultimately condemned to destruction and death because of her refusal to be contained by the reifying myth of Woman as emblem of imperial authority. Harrow argues that Renée’s personality “resists containment” and “her unregulated desire seems to threaten the order imposed from without” (“Myopia and the Model” 153), thereby necessitating her suppression from the narrative before the end of the novel.

While Harrow’s reading illuminates many of the important scenes of Renée as viewing subject and viewed object, her analysis also neglects an important historical aspect of La Curée. It is not the threat of Renée’s unregulated desire that forces the patriarchy of imperial France to eliminate her from society (and, in turn, the narrative). In fact, Renée’s rampant desire is emblematic of the very energy that fueled the irrational exuberance of Second Empire France. The parodists at Punch corroborate this notion in their regular condemnations of the feckless financial policies of Louis-Napoléon, and in particular, in their critical comparison of the Bourse to a gaming house. Renée’s desire in the novel is as much a creative force as it is a destructive influence: it is Renée’s desire that propels the narrative forward as she goes from vice to vice in search of an escape from banality. And it is Renée’s illicit desire for Maxime that allows Saccard to secure the property that Renée has inherited in order to avoid complete financial ruin. Renée’s downfall and death does not just represent the imposition of patriarchal law on transgressive female desire. Renée’s death must be understood in the specific context of Second Empire France:
her ruin represents not only the repression of transgressive female desire, but rather
the exploitation and exhaustion of a valuable resource in a society where humanity
has become yet another fungible commodity.

**ON DISPLAY**

The first scene at the Saccards’ mansion is a crucial expository scene that
elaborates on the social dynamic introduced in the initial Bois de Boulogne passage.
The dinner party scene unveils more about the style of the book: of interest is not
only the style of Renée’s elaborate toilette, but also the novel’s own rhetorical style.
Sandy Petrey has noted that the descriptive displacement of humans in favor of the
commodities that surround them is an effect of the novel’s frequent recourse to
metonymy: “Tuxedos and gowns appear to displace the humans supposedly wearing
them” (634). This relationship of contiguity typifies the descriptions of Renée and
her home in this scene. The Saccard mansion, like the prose used to describe it, and
like the toilettes of the woman who inhabits it, is ornamental, overwrought, and
ostentatious: “C’était un étalage, une profusion, un écrasement de richesses...[un] feu
d’artifice architectural” (52, 53). The balconies are supported by “les grandes femmes
nues, jouant avec des pommes” (52) as the external architectural flourishes produce
the effect of an “hôtel en toilette de gala” (53).\(^4\) Maxime’s architectural comparison

\(^4\) Zola comments on the relationship between *haute couture* and high art in his description of the
wall hangings in the Saccard mansion: “Les quatre grands panneaux avaient dû être ménagés de
façon à recevoir des peintures de nature morte; mais ils étaient restés vides, le propriétaire de
l’hôtel ayant sans doute reculé devant une dépense purement artistique. On les avait simplement
tendus de velours gros vert” (59-60). The character of Worms in *La Curée* is clearly based on real-
of Renée to “une des colonnes du second Empire” (45) makes the conflation complete.

The contiguous relationship between Renée (“femme] à la chair de soie”), her dresses, and the Saccard mansion underscores Renée’s role in her marriage: she, like the Hôtel Saccard, serves as a flamboyant display of Saccard’s financial success. The narrator makes explicit the equivalence of Renée and the mansion in Saccard’s mind:

[Saccard] la regardait un peu comme une de ces belles maisons qui lui faisaient honneur et dont il espérait tirer de gros profits. Il la voulait bien mise, bruyante, faisant tourner la tête à tout Paris. Cela le posait, doublait le chiffre probable de sa fortune...Elle était une associée, une complice sans le savoir. Un nouvel attelage, une toilette de deux mille écus, une complaisance pour quelque amant, facilitèrent, décidèrent souvent ses plus heureuses affaires. (147)

For Saccard, like for all of the speculators of the Second Empire, the appearance of wealth facilitates the acquisition of wealth. Saccard’s capitalization on his wife’s elegant appearance proceeds through the same mechanism as his real estate speculations: just as he surreptitiously brokers Renée’s affairs with important government officials, Saccard also uses confidential information to purchase properties slated for destruction. As the pompous artificiality of the Saccard mansion is compared to a gala gown, so is the cityscape of Paris described in sartorial terms. The bridges are black lace dividing the “robes changeantes qui passaient du bleu au

life design innovator Charles Worth, a British national that revolutionized French women’s fashion. Worth is credited by fashion historians with creating the first designer brand and elevating fashion to an art form. Worth even dressed the part: he would often wear Rembrandt-esque capes and hats in an attempt to lay claim to the status of artist. However, given the derisive descriptions of Worms’ dramatic declarations (“La source est tarie.” (139)) in the novel, and considering that the velour was chosen as an inexpensive substitute for art, it is clear that Zola did not share Worth’s opinion of himself.
vert” of the Seine; the riverbanks are bands of “satin gros vert” (128). Face, land, and lace—all are contiguous, and all are potential commodities in Saccard’s hands.  

Furthermore, as she remains unaware of her husband’s motives, we are told that as Renée increasingly indulges her lust for lace, she becomes Saccard’s “complice sans le savoir.” In other words, while Renée believes she is exercising the liberties of an open marriage when she embarks on affairs, she remains unaware (until the end of the novel) of her husband’s tacit endorsement and manipulation of her indiscretions. Saccard’s ability to conceal his influence is due in part to his ability as a storyteller. Over the course of the novel, he starts rumors that are beneficial for his business, succeeds in censoring criticism of the Crédit Viticole in le Moniteur universel, and is able to obtain his insider information through storytelling: “Pendant des heures, il les faisait causer, entre deux portes, avec de petits rires étouffés, leur contant des histoires, provoquant leurs confidences” (90).

85 The contiguous relationship of Renée, her clothing, and the Hôtel Saccard also reveals a uniquely Second Empire aesthetic. As the official court portraitist, Franz Winterhalter’s paintings of the imperial family established a Second Empire style, but attracted much criticism from those who felt that his pictures privileged the sartorial over the human subject. Francis Henry Taylor explains that Winterhalter’s best-known portrait, The Empress Eugénie Surrounded by her Maids of Honor, is not without its compositional merits, but ultimately fails to distinguish the empress and her ladies from their dresses—“[a] confusion of face and fabric everywhere” (2). Like the empress in Winterhalter’s painting, Renée is described as an extension of the materials that surround her. Harrow describes the intimate relationship of architecture and haute couture in La Curée: “The architectural and the bodily surfaces are subject to the same processes of concealing, perfecting, stylizing, travestying, pastiching and mythologizing” (444). And like the house she inhabits and the dresses she wears, she is yet another manifestation of her husband’s financial triumphs—a spectacle of successful Second Empire speculation.

86 Even in his dealings with the Crédit Viticole, Saccard prefers to remain a silent partner: “Mais sa gloire la plus pure était le Crédit Viticole qu’il avait fondé avec Toutin-Laroche. Celui-ci s’en trouvait le directeur official; lui ne paraissait que comme member du conseil de surveillance” (143). As with his dealings with Renée, Saccard is able to exercise more influence if he remains in the shadows. Furthermore, the fact that Renée’s ensembles generate stories in the largest Parisian newspapers also points to Saccard’s ability to control the narrative of those around him.
This kind of duplicity in narrative is thematized in the novel in the
descriptions of the stories that Hupel de la Noue tells. Again, at the Saccards’ first
dinner party, de la Noue entertains the men with another version of a story he has
already told the women:

M. Hupel de la Noue égaya fort ces messieurs en leur racontant de
ewnouveau l’histoire qu’il avait dite pendant le diner, mais en la
complétant par des détails tout à fait crus. C’était sa spécialité: il avait
toujours deux versions d’une anecdote, l’une pour les dames, l’autre
pour les hommes. (72)

As the differences between de la Noue’s narratives are drawn along gender lines, the
women at the dinner party only hear the sanitized version of the story. This dynamic
is later seen in the contrast between how Renée sees herself in her marriage and in
society (her narrative), and the dark reality of her manipulation and victimization by
her husband (Saccard’s narrative). From the very beginning of the novel, the reader
is able to perceive at the extradiegetic level what Renée fails to realize at the level of
diegesis—that is, the difference between her perception of reality and the brutal truth
of her exploitation that she is unable to perceive.

**HUNGRY EYES**

The difference between Renée’s perception of her world and the reality of her
position is consistently thematized in the novel as the difference in how she sees and
how she is seen. Again, this discrepancy is established in the Bois de Boulogne scene,
but reaffirmed in the dinner party scene directly after the outing.
As she climbs the stairs to change into her dinner dress, Renée catches a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror: “Renée montait, et, à chaque marche, elle grandissait dans la glace, elle se demandait, avec ce doute des actrices les plus applaudies, si elle était vraiment délicieuse, comme on le lui disait” (55). When she looks at her own reflection alone, Renée doubts for a moment whether she truly corresponds to the clichés that circulate in the beau monde about her beauty. Furthermore, the comparison of Renée to a lauded actress reinforces the notion of Renée as spectacle; she is on display at her husband’s dinner party to be consumed by the guests.

When she descends the stairs to join the dinner party, after she has dressed for the soirée, the narrator provides a surfeit of details about her dress and her physical appearance:

Quand Renée entra, il y eut un murmure d’admiration. Elle était vraiment divine. Sur une première jupe de tulle, garnie, derrière, d’un flot de volants, elle portait une tunique de satin vert tendre, bordée d’une haute dentelle d’Angleterre, relevée et attachée par de grosses touffes de violettes; un seul volant garnissait le devant de la jupe, où des bouquets de violettes, reliés par des guirlandes de lierre, fixaient une légère draperie de mousseline...Décolletée jusqu’à la pointe des seins, les bras découverts avec des touffes de violettes sur les épaules, la jeune femme semblait sortir toute nue de sa gaine de tulle et de satin, pareille à une de ces nymphes dont le buste de dégage de chênes sacrés. (57)

As Harrow observes, the clichés used to describe Renée’s beauty (“Elle était vraiment divine”) serve to “signal the preponderance of essentialist constructions of Renée’s beauty” in order to expose the myth of femininity as exactly that—a myth (“Myopia and the Model” 155). Renée’s appearance at this initial dinner party also inaugurates the connection between Renée and mythological women that will inform her story throughout the novel. The transparency of Renée’s dress fabrics also prefigures her
progressive undressing and eventual nudity that will accompany her mental
degradation over the course of the narrative.\textsuperscript{87}

This scene also represents the second instance (in as many scenes) that Renée
presents herself to be consumed as a spectacle. Lawrence Schehr has observed that
“there can be no representation of a character as a living or conscious subject during
an ekphrastic moment” in the text (9). The minute detail that characterizes this
ekphrastic description underscores her status as a visual commodity to be consumed.
After the lengthy and nuanced description of her dress, Renée, wearing the diamonds
her husband purchased from Laure, stands to be admired by her guests:

\textit{Et elle resta ainsi quelques seconds sur le seuil, debout dans sa toilette
magnifique, les épaules moirées par les clartés chaudes. Comme elle
avait descendu vite, elle soufflait un peu. Ses yeux que le noir du parc
Monceau avait emplis d’ombre clignaient devant ce flot brusque de
lumière, lui donnaient cet air hesitant de myope, qui était chez elle une
grâce. (58)}

The description of the weakness of Renée’s sight contrasts starkly with the acuity of
the gaze that documents in detail every element of Renée’s appearance. Though both
men and women are looking at and admiring Renée, the depth and scope of the
description of her appearance is consistent with the description of Renée given at the
Bois de Boulogne—a description characterized by the fracturing effect of the male
gaze. The portrayal of Renée as she descends the stairs to join the party is a similarly
atomized portrait: the narrator focuses alternately on Renée’s skirt, flounces, breasts,
arms and shoulders, thereby producing a totality of fragments that constitute Renée.

\textsuperscript{87} Danielle Kent has astutely observed that Renée’s clothing becomes more diaphanous as the
narrative progresses (134).
This fragmentation of Renée’s body takes on particular significance when considered in the context of the guests’ conversation. As Mulvey explains, the impetus of the male scopophilic drive is to fracture and then to abstract the female body in order to control it by rendering it a fetish object. That Renée’s guests are fantasizing about the sexual lives of the demimondaines right after the fetishizing description of Renée’s body is no coincidence. The women congratulate Renée on having a good and generous husband while also expressing the desire to “sentir sur leur peau nue un de ces bijoux que tout Paris avait vus aux épaules d’une impure illustre” (58). Again, we are reminded that there is little distinction between the grandes dames and the grandes horizontales in the unrestrained circulation of jewelry, clothing, and lovers.88

This kind of disconcerting substitution—the wife for the prostitute as the wearer of jewels—reaffirms Saccard’s strategy of using his wife as he would use his mistress, and establishes an equivalence between the two women. Additionally, Renée’s willingness to wear Laure’s jewels foreshadows her later adoption of the style of another grande horizontale—Sylvie. After Sylvie becomes Maxime’s mistress, Renée grows to know her “de la plante des pieds à la pointe des cheveux” through the young man’s endless stories about their exploits:

88 This kind of promiscuous circulation of commodities is demonstrated in the most extreme way in Zola’s Nana. As the mouche d’or, Nana circulates through the ranks of French society, spreading her corruption and disease at every level. Charles Bernheimer points out that “the rotten corpse of Nana is symbolically analogous to the rotten body of Imperial France about to enter the disastrous war against Bismarck’s Germany” (213). Andrew Cliff and Matthew Smallman-Raynor have shown how one of the most common methods of smallpox (the disease that maims and eventually kills Nana) transmission was through the circulation of clothing, especially among members of the military. Gut Trebay’s characterization of fashion as “some mostly benign contagion” in the New York Times (2007) would appear to underestimate fashion’s potentially deadly force.
Elle avait un signe bleuâtre sur la hanche; rien n’était plus adorable que ses genoux; ses épaules avaient cette particularité que la gauche seulement était trouée d’une fossette. (158)

In recounting his exploits with Sylvie to his stepmother, Maxime produces the same kind of fetishized fracturing of the female body that characterizes the descriptions of Renée in the novel. Renée’s demand that Maxime have a bracelet almost identical (though with sapphires, not emeralds) to Sylvie’s made for her underscores once again the lack of distinction between Renée and the filles that frequent her husband and stepson. Renée’s desire to have Sylvie’s bracelet remade for her reveals a mimetic impulse that is not only a salient feature of fashion, but also foreshadows the illicit affair that she will have with Maxime.

It is fashion that binds the stepmother and stepson together upon their first encounter. This meeting is recounted in an analeptic episode just after Saccard and Renée’s wedding in 1854, and just after Maxime’s return from boarding school in Plassans. Though he goes on to become “le Brummel de sa classe,” Maxime is more urchinly than urbane (135); his worn clothing and shorn head dismay his modish stepmother, who has just returned from the atelier of the famed couturier Worms. The young man obsessively studies the nuances of his new stepmother’s ensemble:

L’enfant la crut déguisée. Elle portait une délicieuse jupe de faille bleue, à grands volants, sur laquelle était jetée une sorte d’habit de garde française de soie gris tendre. Les pans de l’habit, doublé de satin bleu plus foncé que la faille du jupon, étaient galamment relevés et retenus par des noeuds de ruban; les parements des manches plates, les grands revers du corsage s’élargissaient, garnis du même satin. Et comme assaisonnement suprême, comme pointe risquée d’originalité, de gros boutons imitant le saphir, pris dans des rosettes azur,
descendaient le long de l’habit, sur deux rangées. C’était laid et adorable.\(^8^9\) (130)

Though the paragraph begins in the third person, the narration quickly slides into free indirect discourse, merging the narrator’s perspective with that of Maxime. This description is given before Maxime and Renée officially meet; he is surreptitiously observing her from the salon, scrutinizing every intricacy of her complex costume—“l’enfant la dévorait du regard” (130, my emphasis). Maxime consumes Renée as spectacle just like the guests at the dinner party—piece by elegant piece, fragment by fashionable fragment.

Maxime then turns his focus to Renée’s neck: “Il était tout près d’elle, il lui regardait le cou avec tant d’attention, qu’elle finit presque par rougir” (131). His fetishistic focus on his stepmother’s neck not only reveals the libidinal energy driving his intense gaze, but also helps to identify the not-quite-right detail about Renée’s ensemble. After placing herself in front of a mirror, Renée is unable to identify the distracting detail of her designer clothing. This uncertainty recalls her doubt in seeing herself in the hallway mirror upon entering her home at the beginning of the novel; the mirror scene with Maxime reveals a latent fear within Renée that her true essence does not correspond to what she sees in the mirror—that she is not the modish muse of the Parisian beau monde. Maxime’s suggestion delights Renée and

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\(^8^9\) Sandy Petrey has identified the oxymoron (i.e., “laid et adorable”) as an important recurring rhetorical device in *La Curée*. Petrey argues that “[i]mmobile syntax communicates the deadening of existence, and semantic confusion communicates its neutralization” (630). He contends that the oxymoron represents the “neutralization of all distinctions which give meaning” (630). The effacement of distinction on the rhetorical level is expressed on the thematic level of the novel in the narratives of incest and political corruption.
reassures her of her own beauty: “Moi, voyez-vous, continua-t-il, j’échancrerai
comme ça cette dentelle, et je mettrais un collier avec une grosse croix” (132).

Delighted by the young man’s suggestion, Renée embraces Maxime and
deems him her counselor in all things couture: “Renée le consultait gravement sur
ses toilettes” (137). This scene is crucial because it identifies fashion as the catalyst
for the complicity of stepmother and stepson. It also shows how Renée adopts
Maxime’s perspective (elle voit mâle, in other words) in order to fill a perceived lack
in herself. This dynamic will mark the rest of Renée and Maxime’s relationship.
Maxime becomes her plaything, and because of his young age, is able to accompany
her to the otherwise all-female enclave of the famed couturier Worms:

[Maxime] s’était permis de parler deux ou trois fois, pendant que le
maître s’absorbait dans le spectacle de sa cliente, comme les pontifes
du beau veulent que Léonard de Vinci l’ait fait devant la
Joconde...[Worms] faisait mettre Renée debout devant une glace...
“Robe Montespan en faille cendrée..., la traîne dessinant devant, une
basque arrondie..., gros noeuds de satin gris la relevant sur les
hanches..., enfin tablier bouillonné de tulle gris perle, les bouillonnés
séparés par des bandes de satin gris. (139)

Again, Renée is placed before a mirror, scrutinized, and ultimately “produced” as a
series of fragments by a domineering male spectator. Harrow points out that Worms’
“transform[ation of] un fashioned material into a refined image...produces the body
as a sign” (“Myopia and the Model” 157), but not as a sign of Renée’s individuality as
a well-dressed woman. She is instead a modish monument to the male artist—“a
magnifying mirror of the genius of the man who makes her” (157).
RENÉE’S VAUBYESSARD BALL

The next occasion for which Renée enlists Worms’ services is the imperial ball. After pestering her brother-in-law Eugène Rougon for months, Renée secures an invitation to the event. She commissions “une toilette prodigieuse de grâce et d’originalité” (166), and, to her delight, succeeds in catching the “œil mort” of the emperor himself the night of the ball:

[L’empereur et le vieux général] étaient au milieu du salon, lorsque Renée sentit leurs regards se fixer sur elle. Le général la regardait avec des yeux ronds, tandis que l’empereur, levant à demi les paupières, avait des lueurs fauves dans l’hésitation grise de ses yeux brouillés...Et elle crut entendre l’empereur, ce rêveur équivoque, qui murmuraït, en la regardant enfoncée dans sa jupe de mousseline striée de velours: “Voyez donc, général, une fleur à cueillir, un mystérieux œillet panaché blanc et noir.” Et le général répondit, d’une voix plus brutale: “Sire, cet œillet-là irait diantrement bien à nos boutonnières.” (167-68)

Like in Worms’ atelier, Renée again becomes the object of scopophilic pleasure for the male gaze. As she lowers her own eyes in deference to the emperor, Renée revels in the sensation of becoming spectacle for and object of Louis-Napoléon’s desire. The comparison of Renée to an “œillet” contains a play on words: the general is referencing both the sewing term (eyelet) and the flower (carnation). The eyelet is an acknowledgment of the complicated construction of Renée’s ball gown; the carnation recalls earlier comparisons of Renée to flowers—“[E]lle ressemblait à une grande fleur, rose et verte, à un des Nymphéa du basin, pâmé par la chaleur” (80).

The œillet pun also draws focus to a subsequent and crucial pun in the same passage. After receiving the compliments of the emperor, Renée feels a degree of joy
that she spends the rest of the narrative trying to recapture: “C’était, pour elle, la *note aiguë* [high point] de sa vie” (168, my emphasis). When considered in isolation, the meaning of the sentence is straightforward: being complimented by the emperor for her beauty is the pinnacle of Renée’s life as a well-dressed woman. However, when considered in the context of the novel’s last sentences, the phrase takes a more sinister turn: “L’hiver suivant, lorsque Renée mourut d’une méningite *aiguë* [acute], ce fut son père qui paya ses dettes. La *note* [bill] de Worms se montait à deux cent cinquante-sept mille francs” (338, my emphasis).

It is crucial to notice that the same words are used to report both Renée’s greatest triumph and her ultimate defeat. That *note* and *aiguë* reappear at the end of the novel in close conjunction underscores the importance of the imperial ball as a turning point in the novel. In *Madame Bovary*, the Vaubyessard ball is the point in the novel at which Emma, intoxicated with her romanticized notions of ancien régime aristocracy, is irretrievably blinded by her desire to join the fantasy world she has created. Andrew McQueen points out that the fashions worn by Empress Eugénie and her ladies-in-waiting—like the dress worn by Renée at the ball—represented “l’imitation d’une cour ancien régime” (195). The ball, McQueen contends, is “un lieu privilégié de cette réécriture parodique des origines de l’Empire” (192). Like the *arriviste* aristocrats of the Vaubyessard ball, the imperial court of the Second Empire is also an ersatz incarnation of a past romanticized by the protagonist. And like the Vaubyessard ball is for Emma, the imperial ball proves to be a catalyst for Renée’s accelerated destruction.
Renée’s ultimate fate is signaled in her encounter with the emperor. Just before he and the general approach her, Renée is overcome with emotion: “Renée, reprise par l’émotion, distinguait mal” (167). And though her sight is weak, Renée is still able to see that the emperor is short, pudgy, and heavy lidded. The recognition of these physical flaws, however, does not deter her romanticizing vision: “[M]ais elle était ravie, et elle le voyait beau, avec son visage blême, sa paupière lourde et plombée qui retombait sur son oeil mort” (167). If Renée’s myopia prevents her from seeing clearly, and if she draws conclusions about the emperor in direct contradiction to the description given by the narrator, what are we, the reader, supposed to see from our superior vantage point?

Aurélie Barjonet gestures to a possibility in her study of La Curée when she points out that Zola’s focus on Renée at the imperial ball “turns [her] into an exhibit for the reader, just as her attire and attitude put her on display at the ball” (93). This recognition of the dynamics of looking in this scene is essential to our understanding of the rest of the novel. As Barjonet explains, Renée functions as a spectacle at both the diegetic and extradiegetic levels of the novel. We, like the attendees of the ball, are free to examine Renée in great detail—just as we did in the opening scene in the Bois de Boulogne. Because Zola has thematized looking in the narrative by embedding different levels of perspective, we are to understand that Renée, because she sees “mal,” will meet her untimely downfall and death because she cannot see. The key to understanding the unfolding Renée’s moral and physical deterioration is to examine closely scenes in which she is looking.
BLINDNESS

Renée’s evening at the ball proves to be the reference point for all of her experience thereafter. Her encounter with the emperor ignites a desire within her to recapture the magic of the “note aiguë” that was the evening at the Tuileries: “Renée s’était jetée plus follement dans sa vie de visites et de bals” (169). Renée’s desire to recreate her experience leads her to accompany Maxime to a ball hosted by Blanche Muller—“une actrice en vogue [qui] donnait [un bal] aux princesses de la rampe et aux reines du demi-monde” (169). If the imperial ball she attended was an ersatz version of an ancien régime institution, then Blanche Muller's ball is a copy of the copy.

What Renée encounters at the demimondaine gathering, however, proves to be a disappointment:

Les hommes, elle les connaissait; c’étaient, pour la plupart, les mêmes financiers, les mêmes hommes politiques, les mêmes jeunes viveurs qui venaient à ses jeudis...Et lorsqu’elle regardait les femmes, l’illusion ne cessait pas complètement. Laure d’Aurigny était en jaune comme Suzanne Haffner, et Blanche Muller avait, comme Adeline d’Espanet, une robe blanche qui la décolletait jusqu’au milieu du dos. (173)

Though ostensibly in another social sphere, Renée finds her own more or less recreated in the salon of Blanche Muller. The movement of men between the twin realms of the femmes comme il faut and the demimondaines (what Balzac called the femmes comme il en faut) is signaled from the beginning of the book in Saccard’s

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90 The mixed company found at Blanche Muller’s ball is reminiscent of the diversity of Saccard’s fréquentations: “[Saccard] recevait...le plus étrange monde qu’on pût voir: sénateurs et clercs d’huissier, duchesses et marchandes à la toilette, toute l’écume que lest tempêtes de Paris jetaient le matin à sa porte, robes de soie, jupes sales, blouses, habits noirs” (140).
purchase of Laure d’Aurigny’s jewels for his wife. What is remarkable in this scene is
the way that Renée looks at the other women at the ball: sitting next to Maxime,
Renée passes the evening “lui demandant les noms de ces dames, les déshabillant du
regard, comptant les mètres de dentelles qu’elles avaient autour de leurs jupes” (173).

The way that Renée undresses the women with her eyes recalls the way that
Maxime similarly directed his gaze in the Bois de Boulogne. Her desire to experience
more illicit pleasures is paralleled by her increasingly audacious gaze: Renée begins
to look at the women around her like Maxime does. After she asks Maxime to leave
the ball, Renée accepts his invitation to go to Café Riche: “Son régal de femme
curieuse tournait mal et elle se désespérait de rentrer ainsi avec une illusion de
moins et un commencement de migraine” (174, my emphasis). Again, the mal/mâle
pun resurfaces to describe Renée’s adoption of the male gaze in her penetrating looks
at the women at the ball. And while Renée has appropriated Maxime’s perspective
(mâle), she also fails to see clearly (mal) the implications of accepting Maxime’s
invitation. It is in Café Riche that Maxime and Renée embark on their incestuous
affair—a commission of the ultimate mal.

Upon arriving at the café, the companions are led to a private room by
Charles, Maxime’s usual attendant at the establishment. After Charles leaves the
room, Renée excitedly takes out her binocle d’homme to examine the room in detail:
“Pendant qu’elle levait le front, comme pour étudier la cornice, grave et le binocle à
la main, elle jouissait profondément de ce mobilier équivoque, qu’elle sentait autour
d’elle” (177). In her inspection of the room, Renée documents all of the vestiges of the
aventures de jeune homme left in the room; the abandoned ribbons and combs leave
little doubt as to the predominant purpose of the private room. Renée takes on a decidedly masculine air in her impudent inspection of the room, so much so that Maxime “n’était plus bien sûr de son sexe” (184). When Renée discovers Maxime’s name (as well as her own) etched on the mirror, he turns her away from the reflection. As Renée tries to loosen Maxime’s grasp on her wrists, they fall together on the divan. Renée’s last words of protest before relenting are: “Voyons, laisse-moi...Tu me fais mal” (185).

Before their incestual interlude, Renée and Maxime spend some time watching the crowds below the window. One woman in a blue dress stands out from the “monde étrangement mêlé et toujours le même” for Renée (178); she watches the woman finish a glass of beer at a table by herself. Just before Maxime and Renée sleep together at the café, she once again catches sight of the woman pacing the sidewalk, “tournant la tête, toujours en quête” (183). In his analysis of Renée’s fascination with this woman, Henri Mitterand suggests that the woman in the blue dress can be seen as a double of Renée herself:

As the hours go by, this woman appears more and more like a substitute figure, the substitute figure for Renée, in a relationship that is both metonymic—she is there, in view, simultaneously taking part in the same activity for the benefit of male desires—and metaphoric—an image, however degraded, of seduction. (50)

As Laure d’Aurigny’s jewels create an equivalence between her and Renée, the fixation on the woman in blue strengthens that identification. Despite her fascination, Renée is unable to perceive any similarity between herself and the

91 One of the other names etched on the mirror is Paquita—a clear reference to Balzac’s *La Fille aux yeux d’or*. *La Curée* is the Second Empire edition of Balzac’s tale of incest, *l’or et le plaisir*. 
prostitute on the street. And though her own name is inscribed along those of the
demimondaines on the mirror, Renée remains ignorant of her kinship with these
women until the scene of her undressing at the end of the novel.

The woman in blue represents one of many doubles and *mises en abîme* in
the novel, the most obvious of which is *Phèdre*—a performance that occurs on the
diegetic level of the narrative. In *The Mirror in the Text*, Lucien Dallenbach argues
that while the *mise en abîme* increases the legibility of a text for the reader by calling
on previous extratextual knowledge, the characters rarely benefit from the same level
of insight—if at all—from the embedded narrative. At the performance of *Phèdre* that
she attends with Maxime, Renée recognizes her own story of incest in that of the
Hippolytus-Theseus-Phaedra love triangle on stage: “Comme son drame était
mesquin et honteux, à côté de l’épopée antique!” (242). And while Renée recognizes
the content and form of her story on the stage (hers is the degraded Second Empire
version of the myth), she is unable to stem the desires that drive her to that point.

As the affair with Maxime intensifies, so do the acceleration and amplification
of Renée’s desires. Renée indulges all of her sexual and sartorial fantasies with her
stepson without regard to cost—personal or financial. Maxime represents the
possibility of recapturing the pleasure Renée felt the night the emperor
complimented her at the ball—he becomes the “*note aiguë* qui s’accordait avec ses
toilettes folles” (224, my emphasis). Correlatively, Renée’s wardrobe becomes more
extravagant and more revealing:

> Elle eut, cet hiver-là, un luxe de linge merveilleux. Elle porta des
> chemises et des peignoirs d’un prix fou, dont les entre-deux et la
> batiste la couvraient à peine d’une fumée blanche. Et, dans la lueur
Renée’s clothing proves once again to be the sartorial index of her mental and moral state. Her willingness to wear increasingly revealing clothing shows her disinclination to disguise the incestuous relationship with Maxime: “l’incestueuse s’habituit à sa faute, comme à une robe de gala, dont les roideurs l’auraient d’abord gênée” (243).

However, there remains an inverse relationship between the transparency of Renée’s garments and the clarity with which she perceives her position. Renée is forced to forfeit several properties to her husband in order for him to agree to make cursory payments to her creditors. She becomes more and more brazen in her clothing choices and in her relationship with Maxime. Nothing, however, curbs her desire to dress and to see:

> Jamais elle n’avait eu des imaginations plus hardies de toilettes et de coiffures. Ce fut alors qu’elle risqua cette fameuse robe de satin couleur buisson, sur laquelle était brodée toute une chasse au cerf, avec des attributs, des poires à poudre, des cors de chasse, des couteaux à larges lames. (226)

Renée’s “curée” dress exemplifies Dallenbach’s insight about characters’ obliviousness to the embedding of their own stories in narratives. The profundity of Renée’s blindness is unusual in its severity: not only is she unaware of her financial victimization by her husband, she recreates the narrative of her downfall on the vehicle of that collapse—her couture crinoline.

The hunting scene that Renée has embroidered on her skirt is certainly a reference to her own relationship with Maxime: his feminine nature is repeatedly
referenced, and he is called her “proie” several times in the novel. However, it is this very sexual and sartorial aggressiveness that makes her blind to her exploitation at the hands of Saccard by limiting her focus to her affair with Maxime. Further exacerbating Renée’s myopia is her insistence on seeing mâle:

L’inceste mettait en elle une flamme qui luisait au fond de ses yeux et chauffait ses rires. Son binocle prenait des insolences suprêmes sur le bout de son nez, et elle regardait les autres femmes, les bonnes amies étalées dans l’énormité de quelque vice, d’un air d’adolescent vantard, d’un sourire fix significant: “J’ai mon crime.” (226)

Again, it is Renée’s radical adoption of Maxime’s gaze that allows her to leer at other women in public. As a result of her incestuous affair with Maxime, Renée’s transgressive desire begins to manifest itself in other non-normative ways. Renée begins to look with impunity at the women around her, undressing them with her eyes and attempting to divine their own secret crimes.

Renée’s insolent and blinding appropriation of the male gaze is exposed during her visit to her sister-in-law Sidonie Rougon. Because of her rapidly accruing debt, and because of Saccard’s inability (and unwillingness) to help her, Renée is forced to ask Sidonie for help in finding a solution. As a procurer and provider of all kinds of wares (human and material alike), Sidonie suggests that her sister-in-law, in her profound desperation, address her concerns to M. de Saffré—a regular at Blanche Muller’s balls and an admirer of Renée’s. When Sidonie asks for a message to relate to Saffré, Renée’s curt response reveals her complete blindness to the reality of her situation: “[J]e ne suis pas à vendre” (239). Renée’s examination of Sidonie’s apartment with her binocle during the conversation makes the realization of her blindness all the more acute. Not only will she have to “sell” herself to Saccard that
very night (credit extension in exchange for conjugal visit), Renée assures Sidonie's revengeful role in denouncing the incest to Saccard a few days later.

**INSIGHT**

The exposure of both Renée’s crime (incest) and punishment (financial ruin) occurs the evening of the *tableaux vivants* presentation at the Saccard mansion. The rampant materialism of the Second Empire is on naked display in the heaps of gold and jewels (both real and fake) that decorate the elaborate sets. In yet another doubling of their own story, Maxime and Renée interpret Narcissus and Echo as part of the evening’s festivities. The gendered dynamics of looking are thematized as Maxime gazes at himself while Renée looks longingly at the object of the desire. The lovers themselves are, of course, objects of scopophilic pleasure for the spectators present. And in yet another effacement of gender differences between the lovers, the transformation of Maxime as Narcissus into a flower recalls previous comparisons of Renée to flowers—especially that of the emperor the night of the ball.

It is after the performance, however, that Renée truly becomes the spectacle of the night. After going to her *cabinet de toilette* to change clothes, Renée’s subsequent ensemble is so daring that it stuns the crowd into silence.

Elle était en Otaïtienne. Ce costume, paraît-il, est des plus primitifs: un maillot couleur tender, qui lui montait des pieds jusqu’aux seins, en lui laissant les épaules et les bras nus; et, sur ce maillot, une simple blouse de mousseline, courte et garnie de deux volants, pour cacher un peu les hanches. Dans les cheveux, une couronne de fleurs des champs; aux chevilles et aux poignets, des cercles d’or. Et rien d’autre. Elle était nue. (291)
Though the revelation of Renée’s naked body will coincide with the exposure of her crime with Maxime, it is not until Saccard discovers the affair, and then forces the forfeiture of her remaining lands, that Renée realizes that she is naked.

However, Renée does not originally sign the deed of conveyance to appease Saccard: after discovering the plans for Maxime’s imminent marriage, Renée defiantly signs the deed to secure the cash she needs to run away with Maxime. Though Maxime wants no part of her plan, Renée’s glee at the thought of securing her object of desire leads her to kiss her lover passionately—an embrace that her husband witnesses and that ensures her destruction. After Saccard leaves arm in arm with Maxime and the deed to her remaining property in hand, the scales fall from Renée’s eyes. She realizes the full scale of her exploitation at the hands of father and son, and she finally sees herself in the mirror:

Elle s’approcha, étonnée de se voir, oubliant son mari, oubliant Maxime, toute préoccupée par l’étrange femme qu’elle avait devant elle. La folie montait…Qui l’avait mise nue? que faisait-elle dans ce débraillé de fille qui se découvre jusqu’au ventre?...Mais elle ne voyait que ses cuisses roses, ses hanches roses, cette étrange femme de soie rose qu’elle avait devant elle, et dont la peau de fine étoffe, aux mailles serrées, semblait faite pour des amours de pantins et de poupées. Elle en était arrivée à cela, à être une grande poupée dont la poitrine déchirée ne laisse échapper qu’un filet de son...Qui donc l’avait mise nue? (309, 310, 311)

In this scene, Renée sees herself as Maxime and Saccard have seen her all along. The fracturing of her body into stomach, thighs, hips, and skin repeats the atomizing gaze characteristic of both Saccard and Maxime’s perspectives and, generally speaking, of the male gaze as theorized by Laura Mulvey. Instead of repeating the gaze visited upon her, however, Renée finally sees the deleterious effects of such a perspective.
Furthermore, Renée’s inability to recognize her own image in the mirror reveals the extent of the objectification to which she has been subject since the beginning of the narrative. The images of the “femme de soie rose” and “peau de fine étoffe” reveal the progressive conflation of Renée with her clothing. In her study of clothing in Zola’s novels, Hannah Thompson describes how clothes can frustrate the Naturalist impulse to see and say all:

> Despite, or perhaps because of, its avowed desire to reveal all, the Naturalist text becomes trapped in an infinite play of surfaces and depths, appearances and realities, which confounds any attempt on the part of either reader or writer to distinguish between them...Naturalism is as much about blindness as it is about vision. (20-21)

Because clothing can be equivocal (especially in a society in which the beau monde and demimonde share the same lovers and tailors), and because clothes veil the body, they can frustrate the Naturalist prerogative to derive truth from biology. In *La Curée*, Renée’s revelation indeed occurs after she has stripped off all of her clothing and exposes her body. However, it is through her clothing that Zola lays bare the mechanism of her exploitation: because of her myopia, Renée occupies a visually disadvantaged position. Renée’s visual weakness represents the physical manifestation of a figurative blindness that prevents her from perceiving the exploitation she suffers at the hands of her stepson and husband. As the text iterates, for Renée to see as a man is for her to see poorly.

Though he thematizes the destructive effects of the male gaze throughout the novel, Zola explicitly states them in this final scene of recognition. Renée, in
response to her repeated question “Qui l’avait mise nue?,” sees Saccard and Maxime’s images appear in the mirror:

   Elle restait une valeur dans le portefeuille de son mari; il la poussait aux toilettes d’une nuit, aux amants d’une saison; il la tordait dans les flammes de sa forge, se servant d’elle, ainsi que d’un métal précieux, pour dorer le fer de ses mains...C’étaient ces gens qui l’avaient mise nue. Saccard avait dégrafé le corsage, et Maxime avait fait tomber la jupe. Puis, à eux deux, ils venaient d’arracher la chemise. (312)

Here Zola lays out the history and means of Renée’s ruin. Because Renée is an exploitable resource for him, Saccard’s methods in his business ventures are relevant to his dealings with wife: “[il] s’agissait de rendre aveugles et bienveillants ces messieurs de la commission” (120); “[j]l avait une façon d’énumérer ses richesses qui étourdissait les auditeurs et les empêchait de voir bien clair” (163). Saccard proves particularly dangerous to his myopic wife because he finds a way to monetize dissimulation. It is only when Renée sees herself as Saccard and Maxime see her does she understand how blind she has been to their machinations. By the time of this realization, however, it is too late for Renée.

BACK TO THE BOIS

Like a mirror reflection, the novel ends where it began—in a carriage in the Bois de Boulogne. Riding alone, Renée surveys the scene, though this time without the binocle. She sees many of the same carriages that she sees in the opening scene of

92 Sharon Mouanda identifies Hans Christian Andersen’s story “The Emperor’s New Clothes” as an important intertext for La Curée and, in particular, this scene. The tailors in Anderson’s story manipulate the emperor for their own financial gain. Renée’s own embarrassing revelation of nudity at the end of La Curée is the result of Saccard’s manipulation of her for his own financial gain.
the novel. She is devastated to see Maxime and Saccard walking across the park arm in arm, just as they were when they left her bedroom for the last time. Renée is also anguished to see the emperor: “Cette sensation devint si aiguë et si douloureuse que la jeune femme éprouva l’impérieux besoin d’échapper à ce triomphe” (336, my emphasis). The use of the word aiguë recalls the “note aiguë”—the high point—of her life at the imperial ball, though the high point has since transformed into a sharp pain. By the end of the novel, Renée is able to identify the ball and the spectacular fantasy it promoted as the moment when her desire started to spiral out of control. The acute meningitis [“ménigite aiguë”] that kills her in the end is the natural consequence of a life lived blindly going from pleasure to pleasure. The note [bill] that provides the epitaph for Renée’s short life connotes none of the intoxicating elegance of the imperial ball. It is instead le vide that drove Renée to spend and to seek pleasure, to seek the spectacular rather than the substantive.
CHAPTER FOUR

Dressed to Kill: Fashion and Female Writing in Chérie

Eh bien, à l’heure présente, dans ces ateliers de modiste masculine, chez ce petit monde ouvrier de femmes aux légères mains associées aux imaginations du patron, c’est là maintenant qu’il faut chercher la fiévreuse émulation du petit chef-d’œuvre. Réussir une toilette, façonner une délicate chose ayant presque les qualités d’un objet d’art, voilà qui les pousse à travailler à l’envi, et sans jamais se lasser et se rebuter...

By the early hours of June 20, 1870, Jules de Goncourt, the younger brother and literary collaborator of Edmond, was dead. The surviving Goncourt gives a devastating testimony of the protracted illness and death of his beloved brother in their joint journal. The typically naturalist descriptions of Jules’ agony and physical decline are interspersed with Edmond’s metaphysical musings about the meaning of Jules’ death: “Aussitôt, sur son joli visage, des convulsions qui le bouleversèrent, déformant toutes les formes...sa bouche tordue crachotait une écume sanguinolente...Créer un être comme celui-ci, si doué, si intelligent, et le briser à trente-neuf ans! Pourquoi?” (Journal, T. II, 563, 567). Even worse than witnessing the suffering of his brother was the idea of being separated from his âme soeur for the rest of his life: the bachelor brothers, self-identifying all of their lives as Juledmond, shared an intimate emotional bond that manifested itself in their collaborative writing in works of both fiction and nonfiction. As the melding of

93 Edmond de Goncourt, Chérie, 186.
94 Goncourt’s Chérie was one of the books found in Vincent Van Gogh’s personal library when he died. Of the Goncourts’ fraternal collaboration, Van Gogh writes admiringly to his brother Theo: “Have you already read that preface to Chérie by De Goncourt? The amount of work those fellows have achieved is enormous when one thinks of it. It is such a splendid idea, that working and thinking together. And every day I find proof of the proposition that the main reason for much misery amongst artists lies in their discord, in their lack of cooperation, in their not being good,
their twin consciousnesses, the Goncourts’ *Journal* reveals the method and means of the brothers’ collaboration through a stunning univocality. It remains their greatest literary legacy as it profiles the intellectual and political luminaries of Second Empire society.

After the death of Jules in 1870, Edmond de Goncourt only published three more works of fiction: *La Fille Élisa* (1877), *La Faustin* (1882), and the little-known last novel, *Chérie* (1884). All are portraits of nineteenth-century women (a prostitute, an actress, and a young *mondaine*, respectively), and all were in part composed with the details and anecdotes related in the Goncourts’ journal. In this way, the Goncourts’ collaboration lasted long beyond Jules’ premature death; his own observations of Second Empire society, and his shared interest with his older brother in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French femininity, were assimilated into Edmond’s later works on the women of imperial France. And while the *Journal*, as it had with previous works, provided source material for *Chérie*, Goncourt looked beyond fraternal complicity for a new kind of collaboration for his last novel.

In the preface to his penultimate novel *La Faustin*, Goncourt describes his next project as a monograph of a young woman of the haute bourgeoisie in the

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95 The introduction to the Goncourts’ journal underscores their unity of purpose and spirit: “Ce journal est notre confession de chaque soir: la confession de deux vies inséparées dans le plaisir, le labeur, la peine, de deux pensées jumelles, de deux esprits recevant du contact des hommes et des choses des impressions si semblables, si identiques, si homogènes, que cette confession peut être considérée comme l’expansion d’un seul moi et d’un seul je” (xi).

96 From this point on, I will use the abbreviated “Goncourt” to refer to Edmond de Goncourt exclusively.

97 *Chérie* is not even mentioned in the bibliography among the “principales œuvres des frères Goncourt” on the Académie Goncourt website.
Second Empire. To create a more historically and psychologically accurate portrait of a young girl, Goncourt sent out a call for papers to his female readers. Comparing his writerly vocation to that of an historian, Goncourt explains his desire to create his novel from nonfiction accounts in order to tell the story of girls and women—or, in other words, “[des] gens qui n’ont pas d’histoire”:

Je m’explique: je veux faire un roman qui sera simplement une étude psychologique et physiologique de cette jeune fille, grandie et élevée dans la serre chaude d’une capitale, un roman bâti sur des documents humains. Eh bien, au moment de me mettre à ce travail je trouve que les livres écrits sur les femmes par les hommes, manquent, manquent…de la collaboration féminine – et je serais désireux de l’avoir cette collaboration, et non pas d’une seule femme, mais d’un très grand nombre…Et je m’adresse à mes lectrices de tous les pays, réclamant d’elles, en ces heures vides de désœuvrement, où le passé remonte en elles, dans de la tristesse ou du bonheur de mettre sur du papier un peu de leur pensée en train de se ressouvenir, et cela fait, de le jeter anonymement à l’adresse de mon éditeur. (1-2)

As Christiane Mounoud-Anglés explains, correspondence between nineteenth-century writers and their readers (both male and female) was a common phenomenon: both Flaubert and Balzac had frequent exchanges with their readers, the latter receiving over 12,000 letters from the public over the course of his career (21).98

What distinguishes Goncourt’s overture to his female readers from more traditional author-reader correspondence is his explicitly stated intention to incorporate their “documents humains” into his writing. Goncourt would base his novel—“une monographie de jeune fille, observée dans le milieu des élégances de la Richesse, du Pouvoir, de la suprême bonne compagnie” (Chérie i)—on the journals

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98 For more on Balzac’s relationship with his readers, see Judith Lyon-Caen’s La Lecture et la vie: les usages du roman au temps de Balzac.
and reminiscences of his female readers; some of the submissions are even incorporated verbatim in the text. Goncourt’s request that journals and letters be sent anonymously (though many of Goncourt’s readers ignored his entreaty) speaks to his desire to discover his readers’ intimacies in the most objective way possible—to understand femininity through a dispassionate examination of evidence, as a historian or detective would.99

The focus of this chapter is on the gender politics surrounding the composition and critical reception of *Chérie*. I first discuss the publication history and the critical reception of the novel, and in particular, Goncourt’s incorporation of his female readers’ writings into his text. Using Anne Higonnet’s insights about the gendering of both labor and spectacle in the nineteenth century, I show how Goncourt’s appropriation of female writing is analogous to a similar kind arrogation of female labor in the nineteenth-century French fashion industry. With the advent of male-run haute couture houses in the Second Empire, dressmaking transitioned from a collaborative process among women to an autocratic, masculine enterprise, with the *petites mains* of seamstresses fulfilling the artistic vision of the male designer. Considering Goncourt’s longstanding interest in women’s fashion, as well as the important role of *la mode* in the novel, I argue that the economic history of fashion in the nineteenth century is a critical context for understanding the novel’s

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99 Goncourt compares the work of a writer to that of an “agent de police” in an 1871 entry in the *Journal*: “La composition, l’affabulation, l’écriture d’un roman: belle affaire! Le dur, le pénible, c’est le métier d’agent de police et de mouchard qu’il faut faire pour ramasser, —et cela la plupart du temps dans des milieux répugnants, —pour ramasser la vérité vraie, avec laquelle se compose le roman contemporain” (T. II, 848).
gender politics. Goncourt’s analogous use of female texts in his novel represents a similar kind of gendered annexation of labor.

Furthermore, I also argue that the incorporation of female writing in Goncourt’s text is an essential consideration in determining the place of *Chérie* in literary history. Katherine Ashley and Marie-Claude Bayle have both argued that *Chérie* is an important, yet completely ignored, transitional text between naturalism and decadence.\(^{100}\) In *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, Margaret Cohen has famously argued that realism in literature emerged after a “hostile takeover” by male writers of the (primarily) female-authored sentimental novel (12). I contend that a similar annexation takes place in the late realism of Goncourt’s novel: women’s writing once again is instrumental in male literary innovation, this time in Goncourt’s desire to write “beyond” realism in *Chérie*—“un livre de pure analyse”—in his attempt to “représenter l’ondoyante et mutable humanité dans sa vérité momentanée” (iv, xi).

However, because the letters that Goncourt received were, in large part, signed submissions, they also were, by virtue of the author’s self-identification, interested documents. That several of his readers warned him of the undoubted mendacity of other correspondents’ letters reinforces the notion that many—if not all—of Goncourt’s “documents humains” were, to some extent, fictionalized narratives. Hence, in his attempt to capture the essence of femininity through

\(^{100}\) Upon the publication of *Chérie* in 1884, Joris-Karl Huysmans wrote a glowing review of the novel in a personal letter to Goncourt. He especially praises its psychological perspicacity and its linguistic inventiveness: “Il y a là-dedans des observations surprenantes, la naissance de la jeune fille que je considère comme un pur et exquis chef-d’œuvre...Il eût été juste de dire que personne, dans les stylistes qui viendront ne pourra point ne pas se servir des néologismes, des tournures que vous avez créées” (134, 135).
authentic autobiographical accounts of French girl- and womanhood, Goncourt’s stated project and documentary style is undermined by the very means of the novel’s composition. I argue that the contributions of Goncourt’s female readers frustrate the author’s attempt to capture the essential nature of womanhood; contrarily, they, like fashion, are revelatory of the performative nature of femininity. Instead of exposing the essence of the otherwise inscrutable world of women, Chérie reveals femininity to be a cultural and literary construct through the novel’s constant shifting of fictional and nonfictional discourses. Thus Chérie is both the apogee of realism and the avatar of the limits of the (male) realist gaze.101

GENRE TROUBLE

In the preface of what Bayle calls “peut-être le plus méconnu et le plus dédaigné” (5) of all of his novels, Edmond de Goncourt delineates an ars poetica for what he sees to be the next major iteration of French literature—a form that he calls the representation of “la réalité élégante” (ii). At stake was the future and legacy of the French novel. Though Goncourt traces a lineage from the typologies found in Balzac’s novels102 to his own portrayal of la haute bourgeoise, he claims that the

101 I acknowledge here that using the term “realism” in reference to the Goncourts is problematic. While they are most often associated with naturalism, Edmond de Goncourt himself uses the terms “réalité” and “réalisme” to talk about his own work. Because naturalism can be considered an outgrowth of realism, and because Goncourt uses the term to characterize his work in Chérie, I will use “realist” and “realism” to refer to Goncourt’s work in Chérie.

102 While Goncourt expresses a desire to go beyond the literary forms that Balzac had epitomized in the first half of the nineteenth century, his admiration for the earlier writer is clear: Goncourt calls him “l’immense grand homme” in the history of French letters (Chérie ix). The Goncourts had previously stated their view of the importance of Balzac in French literary history in their
intellectual possibilities of the immensely popular “physiologie” genre had been exhausted. He explains: “Oui, je crois, —et ici, je parle pour moi bien tout seul, —je crois que l’aventure, la machination livresque a été épuisée par Soulié, par Sue, par les grands imaginateurs du commencement du siècle” (iii-iv). Wanting for inspiration, Goncourt calls for an innovation of both form and content in the French novel:

Ce roman de CHÉRIE a été écrit avec les recherches qu’on met à la composition d’un livre d’histoire, et je crois pouvoir avancer qu’il est peu de livres sur la femme, sur l’intime féminilité de son être depuis l’enfance jusqu’à ses vingt ans, peu de livres fabriqués avec autant de causeries, de confidences, de confessions féminines: bonnes fortunes littéraires arrivant, hélas! aux romanciers qui ont soixante ans sonnés. (ii)

Unlike the other “romans chic” of the nineteenth century, Goncourt claims his novel to be a much more accurate portrayal of a young woman because, through the incorporation of “confessions féminines,” it avoids rendering its protagonist “non humain, la créature insexuelle, abstraite, mensongèrement idéale” (ii, iii).

What all realist writers, as Bayle explains, have in common is their “amour du document” (7): Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert all incorporated contemporary documents—Le Mémorial de Saint-Hélène, correspondence with readers, faits divers from the popular press—in their depictions of nineteenth-century France. As diverse as their styles are, Bayle suggests that Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert integrated contemporary writing into their narratives in similar ways: “[le document] était complété par une puissance d’imagination qui leur permettait de “cristalliser” et

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*Journal*: “Le roman, depuis Balzac n’a plus rien de commun avec ce que nos pères entendaient par roman. Le roman actuel se fait avec des documents, racontés ou relevés d’après nature, comme l’histoire se fait avec des documents écrits” (Journal, T.2, 96).
de créer de toutes pièces des personnages...pleins de vie et de vraisemblance” (7). For Goncourt, however, a paradox lay at the heart of this method; the embellishments required to narrativize the material drawn from actual life resulted in an undesired distancing from the immediacy of “real” documents. Enzo Caramaschi explains that realism represented an obstacle for Goncourt in his attempt to portray reality: “Il faut se plier à imaginer, à inventer lorsqu’on veut arriver au ‘vrai’ par le biais du roman, lorsqu’on veut faire vivre une vérité dans une forme artistique” (qtd. in Bayle 7).

Goncourt’s solution to the problem posed by realism was to collapse the distinction between his source materials and his literary output by incorporating hypotexts tel quel in his narrative. In other words, what distinguishes Chérie from the novels of Goncourt’s literary forbears is that he privileges the independence of the (female) document instead of seamlessly assimilating it into his text. Goncourt argues in the preface of Chérie for the superiority of this method of assemblage because, he explains, he is able to produce a heightened reality from the gathering “de causeries, de confidences, de confessions féminines” (ii). In order for it to continue to thrive after Balzac and Flaubert, Goncourt argues in his preface, the realist novel must be purged of all that is novelistic. Accordingly, Chérie is composed for the most part only of descriptions; the linearity that makes the text legible is the documentation of Chérie’s chronological progression from girlhood to young womanhood.
Anticipating critical resistance to the style and content of *Chérie*, Goncourt preemptively addresses the issue of the “denovelization” of his narrative in the preface:

On trouvera bien certainement la fabulation de CHÉRIE manquant d’incidents, de péripéties, d’intrigue. Pour mon compte, je trouve qu’il y en a encore trop. S’il m’était donné de redevenir plus jeune de quelques années, je voudrais faire des romans sans plus de complications que la plupart des drames intimes de l’existence, des amours finissant sans plus de suicides que les amours que nous avons tous traversées; et la mort, cette mort que j’emploie volontiers pour le dénouement de mes romans, de celui-ci comme des autres, quoique un peu plus comme il faut que le mariage, je la rejetterais de mes livres, ainsi qu’un moyen théâtral d’un emploi méprisable dans de la haute littérature. (iii)

In his attempt to distill a purer reality from the literary, Goncourt rejects the theatrical in favor of the historical, the *vraisemblable* for the *vrai*. Long before the publication of *Chérie* in 1884, the Goncourts had already begun to liken their craft to that of an historian. As early as 1864, they write: “Les historiens sont des raconteurs du passé; les romanciers, des raconteurs du présent” (*Journal*, T. II, 96). For Goncourt, putting his reader into closer proximity to the documents and documentation of his readers’ childhoods and adolescents meant that his novel would be a purer expression of truth about French femininity.

Though Goncourt embraced the vocation of historian, he remained committed to elegant writing style in literature. Addressing a contemporary debate in the popular press, Goncourt opines that attaining a greater degree of reality in his work did not necessitate the use of philistine language:

Quoi! nous les romanciers, les ouvriers du genre littéraire triomphant au XIXe siècle, nous renoncerions à ce qui a été la marque de fabrique de tous les vrais écrivains de tous les temps et de tous les pays, nous
perdrions l’ambition d’avoir une langue rendant nos idées, nos sensations, nos figurations des hommes et des choses, d’une façon distincte de celui-ci ou de celui-là, une langue personnelle, une langue portant notre signature, et nous descendrions à parler le langage omnibus des faits-divers! (vi)

Goncourt sees literary elegance as an imperative inherent in his responsibility as a writer. His preface is rife with references to style: his focus is a young woman “observée dans le milieu des élégances” (i); he describes his work as the creation of “la réalité élégante” (ii); he ranks himself among “les apporteurs du neuf” (v) while lauding the inclusion of neologisms in literature; he argues that longevity will be the reward of the writer who “continuera à s’efforcer de mettre dans sa prose de la poésie…continuera à courir après l’épithète rare, continuera, selon la redaction d’un délicat styliste de ce siècle, à combiner dans une expression le trop et l’assez” (vi).

Goncourt even characterizes the idea of the novel as outmoded, and encourages the young writers that will follow him to find “une nouvelle dénomination, une dénomination autre que celle de roman” for the work he has done in Chérie.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Goncourt’s effort to render real documents in real style proved to be a point of contention in the critical community. Despite its current obscurity, 6,000 copies of the initial print run of Chérie sold within a month of its initial release. The novel was also widely reviewed in the press, with the favorable reviews of the novel largely

103 Chérie went on sale in March of 1884. On April 18, 1884, Goncourt records in his Journal: “À la librairie Charpentier, sur toutes les bouches, le sourire annonçant un success. Sur les 8.000 du premier tirage, 6.000 sont partis” (ARTFL).
coming from fellow writers. In an article published in *Le Gaulois*, Guy de Maupassant lauds Goncourt’s stylistic innovations: “C’est bien là un livre d’analyse définitif, plus charmant, plus empoignant, que s’il contenait des aventures et des péripéties amoureuses” (qtd. in Bayle 105). For Maupassant, the elegant language of the novel—“langue si subtile, si raffinée, si pénétrante du maître”—is revelatory of the “secrets de cette mignonne créature” (qtd. in Bayle 105). Joris-Karl Huysmans similarly applauds Goncourt’s portrait of an elegant young woman in elegant language:

*Avec La Faustin, Chérie* donnera aux délicats de l’avenir, l’extraordinaire vision, dans un siècle d’utilitaires mufles, d’une frémissante et délicate tendresse, d’un raffinement poussé jusqu’à l’état suraiguë, d’une aristocratie spirituelle dont ce livre sera le dernier et le plus éclatant vestige. (ARTFL)\(^{104}\)

In 1920, Pierre Sabatier also praises the virtuosic quality of Goncourt’s style and psychological perspicacity, calling *Chérie* the “dernier mot d’un artiste exquis et raffiné, en pleine possession de sa science psychologique, et descriptive” (509).

Though Goncourt received the admiration of many of his fellow writers, he was also savaged by critics who, like Goncourt’s admirers, focused on the style of *Chérie*. In *L’Echo de Paris*, M. de Valleyres criticizes the fragmented nature of the narrative, observing that “[I]es actes de cette petite [lui] ont semblé appartenir à toute une série d’enfants et non à la même créature” (qtd. in Bayle 105).\(^{105}\) In *Le Figaro*, Anatole Claveau (under the pen name Quidam) takes issue with the seemingly unmediated presentation of disparate documents and accuses Goncourt of

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\(^{104}\) Letter to Edmond Goncourt. 21 april 1884. ARTFL.

serving a slice of “la partie animale de l’humanité” without bothering to “parer la marchandise” (qtd. in Bayle 104). Jean Levallois complains that with the vast collection of “documents humains” received by Goncourt, “l’artiste n’a plus su qu’en faire ni comment s’y prendre. Il a complètement échoué et est demeuré au-dessous de sa tâche” (qtd. in Bayle 105).106 Levallois goes on to say that despite the multiplicity of true to life details included in Goncourt’s novel, they nonetheless ring hollow: “[C]e qu’il y a de certain, c’est que tous ces faits mis bout à bout n’ont pu communiquer la vie au mannequin qu’ils étaient chargés d’animer” (qtd. in Bayle 105). He concludes by calling Chérie an illogical and unbearably dull novel: “C’est un monstre qui n’a même pas l’avantage d’être un phénomène, un monstre mort-né” (qtd. in Bayle 105).

The method and innovation of Chérie so admired by Goncourt’s partisans are precisely the qualities that draw the harshest reproaches from his critics. What Goncourt’s advocates characterize as an illuminating study of the images and rhythms of the female psyche, his detractors qualify as the unmediated, scattered ramblings of a dozen women. In perhaps the harshest evaluation of all, and nearly a century later (1974), Lazare Prajs attributes the style of Chérie to what he perceives to be Goncourt’s senility and intellectual bankruptcy:

On a l’impression qu’Edmond n’a plus rien à dire et que les lettres qu’il sollicite de seslectrices n’ont pour unique but que de fournir ses documents pris sur le vif à bout de rouleau. Edmond est si à court d’inspiration que le sujet même qu’il se propose de traiter est continuellement relayé par des historiettes de salon qui prétendent être spirituelles. (209)

The thrust of Prajs’ critique is made clear in his use of the derisive term “historiettes de salon”: for Prajs, it would seem, the accounts of the daily rituals of women and girls is an unworthy topic for serious literature. The other critics’ references to an unadorned body, a mannequin, and a stillbirth make clear that Goncourt’s literary legacy is not the only thing at stake in *Chérie*; the possibility and nature of the representation of women, both in its biographical and autobiographical forms, is the question at the heart of the novel. In order to appreciate the historical significance of these stakes, it is necessary to turn to Anne Higonnet’s work on the gendering of labor and of spectacle in the nineteenth century.

**REAL WOMEN, REAL FASHION**

In her essay “Real Fashion: Clothes Unmake the Working Woman,” Higonnet describes a photograph of two seamstresses labeled “Dans l’atelier,” taken in 1862 by M. de Charly. Though there is no trace of the women’s identities, the photograph is nonetheless rich with signification. They are wearing the elegantly tailored products of their labor; the ample silhouettes of their crinolines locate this image in the early 1860s at the height of the garment’s popularity. The costliness of the silk crinoline, however, makes it an improbable choice for the everyday wear of the seamstresses; this is underscored by the fact that the women have surrounded themselves with the tools of their trade—scissors, patterns, fabric panels, and the workbench beside which they pose. Higonnet’s aim in her analysis of the photograph is to propose a model for the history of visual culture in which this image (and others like it) may be
understood. Any such inquiry, Higgonet argues, necessitates an investigation of traditional conceptions of realism and of the many ways that textual and visual modes of realism interact with each other.

To this end, Higonnet suggests the concept of the *combinatoire*—a term coined by Michel de Certeau and elaborated upon by Fredric Jameson. As Jameson explains, “The *combinatoire* aims at revealing, not the causes behind a given form, but rather the *conditions of possibility* of its existence” (158). If Charly’s photograph can be considered the combination of historical discourses about sex, labor, and representation, how can it help us understand a similar intersection of ideologies in other forms of history—Goncourt’s *Chérie*, for example? In order to appreciate the significance of the image of the seamstresses, Higonnet argues we must not limit our interpretive optics to a single field—like art history, for example—but instead must recognize in the image the convergence of multiple of historical material realities.

To this end, Higonnet identifies the photograph of the seamstresses as an example of the *petits métiers* genre. Though the history of the *petits métiers* images stretches back to the 1500s, they became immensely popular in the nineteenth century as typological representations of different kinds of people, both male and female, doing various kinds of labor. While these images were typically labeled in order to identify different types of laborers (i.e., “le chiffonier,” “la bouquetière,” “le ramoneur,” etc.), the distinctions among the professions were also marked sartorially. Higonnet explains that the *petits métiers* images “classified labor into “types,” which although seeming to individualize labor, in fact objectified it as costumes and accessories” (144-5). With the invention of the lithograph in the 1830s,
and the subsequent explosion of mass visual media, the *petits métiers* genre enjoyed an unprecedented popularity through the wholesale dissemination of the images.

As the market for the prints grew, Higonnet points out that the nature of the images of female workers changed: she calls “the sexualization of female labor” the “single greatest change in the genre” (147). Images of laundresses and flower girls became the realm of fantasy for consumers of the prints; the depictions of female workers are overlaid with sexual suggestion—“both lingère and modiste display their ankles, while captions tell us the lingère as a “minois futé,” the modiste an arched back and short skirts” (147). These changes in the portrayal of women workers in the *petits métiers* images mirrors the larger trend of how women were visually depicted in other forms of the popular press, especially in fashion magazines.

Balzac’s heralding of Gavarni’s fashion prints in *La Mode* (1830) marked a watershed moment in the popular representation of women: Balzac praised the virtuosity of the illustrator in his ability to capture not only the form, but also the spirit, of modern women.107 Implied in Balzac’s approbation of the illustrator is the idea that Gavarni’s prints exhibited a perspicacity that lent the images a documentary-like quality: in Balzac’s view, they not only portrayed physical appearance, but also evoked the psychological reality of the women depicted. Even a short perusal of the history of these kinds of images reveals that their function was as prescriptive as it was descriptive; the authors and illustrators—like Balzac and Gavarni—played just as much a role in shaping the *physiologies* as they did describing them.

107 Balzac. “Gavarni.” *La Mode*. October 1830. 20.
A similar kind of authorial intentionality informed the fashion plates of the time. It has been long noted that fashion culture replaced the *ancien régime* tradition of courtly etiquette and dress as the privileged system of social class in nineteenth-century France.\(^{108}\) Integral to assuring the success of this new signifying system of social class was the reconciliation of the domestic sphere of women with the domain of mass industrial production. Through fashion prints, Higonnet explains, women were “urged...to identify with the consumption of industrial commodities” as they were displayed in women’s magazines (154).

Because of the visual nature of the marketing of fashion (and, of course, of fashion itself), Higonnet claims that advertisements for *la mode* were “the first to harness [the] scopic drives” that drove the public to consume (154). Like Gavarni’s illustrations of society women, fashion prints claim a documentary quality through an “innocent” reporting of current trends: *these* are the designs that fashionable women were (or would be) wearing, should you want to know how to belong to the social elite. As Higonnet points out, the naturalization of women’s relationship to fashion was an economically motivated and deliberate revision of women’s role in both public and private life:

> The conditions under which the fashion print emerges as a modern genre, and the conditions of subjectivity the genre fosters, show us how very much a *revision* this was. Fashion prints deliver the domestic references of their antecedents to the mechanisms of capitalist production and commodity fetishism. The print, itself an industrially marketed, mass-produced product, conflates both its gender ideal and the possibilities of feminine self-representation with a desire to

\(^{108}\) See, for example, Philippe Perrot’s *Le Dessous et les dessus de la bourgeoisie* for a cultural history of the importance of fashion in nineteenth-century France.
become a spectacle of commodity consumption. A reification of desire, the fashion print casts femininity as a fetishistic image. (154)

That the women in fashion prints were frequently portrayed reading fashion magazines only strengthened the conflation of the domestic sphere of women with the industrial economic domain of men. And with a combined readership of half a million women in France alone,¹⁰⁹ this radical revision of women’s roles in the new economy and in public life was a significant and widespread phenomenon.

In conclusion, and to return to the seamstresses of M. de Charly’s original photo, we can glean one categorical truth from the evolution of nineteenth-century French visual culture: surfaces matter. In its display of the tools of dressmaking, the photograph of the seamstresses shows the means and the process of the construction of those surfaces. In turn, Higonnet points out, fashion prints provided improved “possibilities for self-representation” for workers who would otherwise remain invisible (157-8). But is there not still a kind of invisibility inherent in reduction to a type? Higonnet indicates that the only thing we know about these women is their profession; there are no names and no dates to identify them further. What does remain, however, is the name of the male photographer—M. de Charly. Insofar as the image of the seamstresses corresponds to a popular type, do they then only become legible within the horizon of expectations for the petits métiers print?¹¹⁰

More generally speaking, considering the thorough commercialization of the female image

¹⁰⁹ Higonnet extrapolates this number from the circulation of La Mode Illustre in 1866 (52,000) to the probable circulations of all of its competitors (157).

¹¹⁰ An important study of a woman who does assert control over her own self-representation is found in Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s study of the Countess of Castiglione in “The Legs of the Countess” (October (1986): 65-108). Solomon-Godeau’s study of the extraordinary images indicates how unusual it was for a woman to assert control over her self-representation in the photographic medium.
in the Second Empire, is there a possibility for female self-representation without the mediation of a male photographer, illustrator, or author?

CONFESSIONS

The opportunity for self-representation was, ostensibly, the attraction in Goncourt’s call for papers to his female readers. In order to create the most accurate portrait of a young woman possible, Goncourt expresses his desire to have unmediated access to his readers’ first-hand accounts of their childhoods and adolescences. While there are no paratextual references to specific contributors in *Chérie*, Goncourt does gesture to the existence of his contributors in order to convince the reader of the legitimacy of his project: he assures his audience that no other book exists in which there are “autant de causeries, de confidences, de confessions féminines” (ii). Though women and femininity had long been a subject of fascination for the Goncourt brothers, Edmond chose a young woman of the haute bourgeoisie for the subject of his last novel because he believed that she represented a complexity that would crown his literary legacy. In the preface to *Les Frères Zemganno*, Goncourt describes the evolution of his oeuvre:

Nous [Edmond et Jules] avons commencé, nous, par la canaille, parce que la femme et l’homme du peuple, plus rapprochés de la nature et de la sauvagerie, sont des créatures simples et peu compliquées, tandis que le Parisien et la Parisienne de la Société, ces civilisés excessifs, dont l’originalité tranchée est faite toute de nuances, toute de demi-teintes, pareilles aux riens coquets et neutres avec lesquels se façonne le caractère d’une toilette distinguée de femme, demandent des années pour qu’on les perce, pour qu’on les attrape—et le romancier du plus grand génie, croyez-le bien, ne les devinera jamais, ces gens de salon, avec les racontars d’amis qui vont, pour lui, à la découverte du monde. (2)
In Goncourt’s estimation, the proximity of the uncivilized masses to nature made them more amenable to broad characterization.111 The internal life of an ouvrier or ouvrière, Goncourt suggested, could be divined in one visit; discovering the soul of a Parisian, however, could only be accomplished through nuanced study over a long period of time: “un salon parisien, il faut user la soie de ses fauteuils pour en surprendre l’âme, et confesser à fond son palissandre ou son bois doré” (Les Frères Zemganno 2).

This kind of perspicacious observing of high society required a privileged vantage point. Goncourt was a favorite at the salon of Princesse Mathilde, and thus was able to scrutinize the objects of his fascination. He characterizes his ability to study and understand the nuances of the Parisian beau monde as an endowment of a superior sight: in the preface to Chérie, he qualifies his contributions to literature as the act “de révolutionner l’optique des peuples occidentaux” (xv).112 In the preface to Les Frères Zemganno, Goncourt describes his writings as “d’immenses emmagasinements d’observations, d’innombrables notes prises à coups de lorgnon [my emphasis], de l’amassement d’une collection de documents humains” (2-3). In Chérie, it was Goncourt’s direct access to the primary sources of French girlhood and adolescence that would give him direct access to the mysteries of femininity. However, it was Goncourt’s superior optic as a writer and cultural historian of the

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111 This remark may have been a jab at Zola. Though Goncourt and Zola often traded notes and frequented the same salons, there was a palpable rivalry between the two men. Goncourt frequently writes about his concern that Zola is stealing his ideas and publishing them before Goncourt has the chance to finish his books.

112 Goncourt reminds his readers of what he sees are his three major contributions to nineteenth-century literature: 1) “le gout de l’art et du mobilier du XVIIIe siècle”; 2) “le japonisme”; and 3) a host of by-then commonly used neologisms (Chérie xiv-xvi).
period that would allow him to expose and communicate the enigma of woman to his reader.

Ironically, Goncourt’s claim to immediacy and transparency in *Chérie* is quickly undercut in an examination of the letters he received for and about the book. While the author received many submissions from many different women after the publication of *La Faustin*, Bayle has identified the four main contributors to *Chérie*:

- the first contributor is Mademoiselle Abbatucci, the daughter of the French Minister of Finance;[^113]
- the second is Julia Allard Daudet, the wife of Alphonse Daudet;[^114]
- the third major contributor is Catherine Junges, the niece of Nikolai Tolstoy; and the fourth is Pauline Zeller, a *dame d'honneur* for Princess Mathilde Bonaparte. In her first letter to the author, Junges begs Goncourt’s pardon for any mistakes in her writing: “Je devrai aussi beaucoup compter sur votre indulgence quand à mon exécrable français et à mes innombrables fautes d’orthographe, qui me font rougir d’avance” (84).

In her first missive to Goncourt, the performative aspect of Junges’ letter is evident from the start: her clearly immaculate French needs no excusing, but she is complying with certain expectations of her reader by rehearsing *formules de* [...]

[^113]: Goncourt records in his journal that he was inspired to write *Chérie* after a series of conversations with Mademoiselle Abbatucci: “Aujourd’hui, Mlle Abbatucci me parlait de son passé de petite fille, et je la laissais causer, ma pensée allant au plan d’un roman qui raconterait la vie d’une jeune fille du Second Empire” (*Journal*, T. II, 1264). He had first noted his interest in the young woman’s life in 1874: “Mlle Abbatucci serait, pour la confection d’un roman sur les raffinements d élégance de la femme à la mode du grand monde impérial, le plus indiscret et le plus charmant reporter” (*Journal*, T. II, 983).

[^114]: Based on an examination of Goncourt’s correspondence with Daudet, it is clear that he became a kind of surrogate brother for Goncourt after the death of Jules. What is interesting, though, is that while Alphonse may have been like a brother for Goncourt, Julia fulfilled the role of literary collaborator for Edmond. Goncourt’s novel *Les Frères Zemganno* is dedicated to her.
politesse. Her next paragraph further reveals why it is problematic to characterize the *documents humains* from Goncourt’s readers as confessions:

> Je dois vous avouer d’abord, que je suis sûre que la plupart des femmes qui répondirent à votre appel—mentiront. Ce sera à vous, à votre perspicacité, à votre analyse de démêler la vérité dans le mensonge. Les femmes peintes par elles-mêmes seront des anges au fond, leur faiblesses seront sympathiques, le fait même de leurs confessions les représentera comme des êtres exceptionnels. Si j’avais des confessions à vous faire je mentirais probablement comme les autres. (qtd. in Bayle 84, my emphasis)

Junges’ warning about the probable dissimulation of Goncourt’s contributors underscores the difficulty of the author’s intended task. She appeals to Goncourt’s superior perception—the same ability that he vaunts in the prefaces to *Les Frères Zemganno* and *Chérie*—to encourage him to be able to discern the true from the false in the correspondence.

Alidor Delzant, the first biographer of the Goncourts, similarly characterizes the submissions that Goncourt received: “Peu de femmes, à la vérité, répondirent utilement à l’appel...Les lettres envoyées contenaient surtout le récit d’aventures bizarres ou romanesques dont l’auteur avait pris soin de dire qu’il n’avait que faire” (237, my emphasis). Because of the apparently fictional quality of many of the letters received by Goncourt, they seemed to obstruct—not facilitate—his desire to compose a novel from *documents humains*. However, sometimes reticence on the part of his correspondents made Goncourt’s task more difficult. In her own letters to Goncourt, Pauline Zeller voices her hesitance to divulge all of her childhood secrets:

> C’est un sacrifice de coquetterie morale que je vous fais et je suis maintenant beaucoup plus coquette de mon moral que de mon physique. Vous trouverez là un joli échantillon de la vanité et de la légèreté à laquelle, je crois, aucune petite tête de seize ans qui se trouve
jolie n’échappe. C’est la confession la plus complète que j’ai jamais faite sur ces deux péchés mignons. (qtd. in Bayle 91)

Zeller does present her memoirs in an unmediated manner; rather, she assures Goncourt that the woman who writes to him now is no longer the silly and vain author of her girlhood diary. The assurance of sincerity that underpins both Junges and Zeller’s letters are undoubtedly exemplary of similar assurances received by Goncourt in other letters. Junges’ insistence that she has nothing to hide (“Si j’avais des confessions à vous faire...”) and Zeller’s characterization of “la confession la plus complète que j’ai jamais faite” seem to protest too much, especially considered in conjunction with their caveats about other women’s likely dissimulation.

What Junges and Zeller both show is an acute sense of the stakes of self-representation. They both exhibit an awareness of the behaviors expected of them, and frame their memoirs in kind. This type of self-display is thematized in the very first pages of Chérie. The protagonist’s social class is immediately disclosed; she is the granddaughter of a decorated military official of the Second Empire. Nine-year-old Chérie is hosting a dinner party at the “Ministère de la Guerre” for her young friends. The girls reproduce Parisian high society in miniature: they are arranged around the table according to “la hiéarchie des parents dans l’ordre administratif” (2). The girls are the diminutive versions of their mothers; they remove their gloves with the same elegant grace and observe the same table manners. The imitation is so precise because they “répètent enfin, ainsi que des miniatures de femmes, les attitudes, les mines les élégances de leurs meres” (2).
While the girls rehearse the social behaviors of the elders, they also exhibit an acute sense of self-representation—of their status *qua* spectacle. This dynamic of display and observation is intimately bound to the girls’ practice of fashion. Goncourt frames this desire to see elegant clothing and to be seen as stylish as one of the earliest instinct in the young girl:

> Puis c’est chez les bambines un premier instant d’inspection respective de leurs toilettes un de ces examens fait dans *un coup d’œil*, et de *ce regard particulier* à la femme même en herbe, qui *a vu*, en une seconde, la couleur, la coupe, la matière de ce qui habille une autre femme, et en a déjà fait un inventaire critique des pieds à la tête. (2, my emphasis)

The superior powers of observation that Goncourt claims for himself in his preface to *Les Frères Zemganno* are on raw display in this scene of very young girls closely inspecting each other’s clothing. The kind of looking at fashion that Goncourt attributes to these young girls is rooted in the history of French visual culture. In *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, Sharon Marcus has shown how fashion plates frequently thematized the act of looking through the gazes of the women in the illustrations and in the depiction of optical devices.15 Marcus explains that girls were often depicted as playthings for women—much like a doll—and represented the chance for the fashionable woman to recreate herself in miniature (pp. 111-66). This idea is underscored by Goncourt: he describes girls “enjolivée[s] par leur mères avec tout le gout possible, bouts de femme déjà

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15 See especially Chapter Three (“Dressing Up and Dressing Down: The Feminine Plaything) for Marcus’ excellent discussion of the depictions of little girls and the thematization of looking in nineteenth-century French fashion plates (pp. 111-166).
montrés en les galants arrangements que la mode fashionable crée pour les petites filles des riches” (3).

Goncourt further underscores the importance of the visual by describing the gathering of the girls as

l’amusant spectacle que la réunion autour de la table de ces petites Parisiennes, au minois futé, aux yeux éveillés de souris, à l’intelligence hâtive de la physionomie, à l’enfance menue, distinguée, raffinée, quintessencée de l’enfant des capitales et des salons. (3, my emphasis)

The “minois futé” described by Goncourt recalls the exact phrase cited by Higonnet in her study of the petits métiers images. The “minois futé” in the physiologie refers to a sexualized image of a lingère whose enticing allure invites the observer to linger over the lines of her arched back and short skirts. In both cases, the subject is conforming to a visual trope of femininity: the woman and the girl imitating the woman are clearly aware of their status as spectacle. And like the lingère in the petits métiers image, the girl is a type—“jeune fille observée dans le milieu des élégances de la Richesse, du Pouvoir, de la suprême bonne compagnie”—distilled from the letters that Goncourt received from his readers and from his own observations. True to nineteenth-century visual forms of femininity, Goncourt then exemplifies the dynamic of the dinner scene in a highly detailed description of Chérie’s clothing, thus reinforcing the importance of visually striking sartorial signs of femininity.116

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116 Like so many descriptions of women and girls’ clothing in nineteenth-century novels, the account of Chérie’s clothing resembles that of a contemporary fashion magazine: “Chérie est habillée d’une robe de mousseline blanche à fleurettes roses, aux sept volants froncés et bordés de valenciennes, au corsage décolleté à la vierge, sur laquelle croisent des bretelles en ruban rose façonné, formant ceinture, et allant se nouer derrière par un noeud à longs pans. Elle a au cou un collier de perles roses, où les grosses perles alternent avec de petites perles fines. A ses oreilles sont suspendues des poires en corail qui jouent dans ses cheveux courts et bouclés” (4-5).
At the conclusion of the dinner party scene, there is a temporal shift in the novel. The narrator takes us back in order to recount briefly the exploits of “trois générations [qui] avaient donné leur sang aux Napoléon” (9). In this relatively brief family history, and in true naturalist fashion, the genealogical prologue acts as a kind of differential diagnosis for the hysteria that will eventually consume Chérie’s life and cause her death. Chérie’s great-grandfather, Éric Haudancourt, is known as “le bel Haudancourt” and has the same powers of observation claimed by Goncourt in his preface: “il était intelligent, perspicace, jugeant d’un clin d’œil ce qui lui permettaient de tenter l’entrain de ses hommes, la santé de ses cheveux” (10). Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo proves too traumatizing for the officer, and he is tempted by military adventure abroad; he remains in France for the sake of his wife and his child—the only survivor of his four siblings.

After Éric succumbs “d’un coup de sang, d’un trop plein de santé” (13) in 1835, the focus of the narrative becomes his son, Marc-Antoine Haudancourt. Militarily minded like his father, Marc-Antoine leaves France to join the French forces in Algeria. He marries almost immediately upon arrival, taking for his wife a widow of a captain killed in the 1830 battle of Sidi-Kalef. The marriage produces “un beau petit garçon qui avait grandi, à la façon d’un petit Maure, en une chemise blanche, les pieds nus” named Félicien (20). In his affection for his mother, Félicien exhibits “des tendresses presque d’un autre sexe” (22); he soon meets “une jeune
Espagnole d’Alger...alliée à la comtesse de Montijo” (24)—the same woman who would become the Empress Eugénie.

The coupling of Félicien and his Spanish wife (whose proper name is never given) produces a daughter whose name was “un nom de pure caresse”—Chérie. The girl is born in 1851, the year of the advent of the Second Empire. The domestic bliss of the Haudancourt household is shattered by the death of Félicien in the 1855 battle of Sebastopol, and Chérie’s mother is so grief stricken that she enters into “un mutisme entêté auquel on ne pouvait arracher un mot” (30). Chérie’s mother effectively disappears from the narrative at this point; her absence represents the result of a trauma, but it also inflicts a trauma on her young daughter—Chérie’s mother is unable to guide her through the proper stages of girlhood and adolescence. Chérie will eventually succumb to an early death because of this lack, but the absence of Chérie’s mother (and father) are not the only indicators of future tragedy. Chérie is raised by her grandfather on his estate Le Muguet, a former abbey that has been converted to living quarters for the Haudancourts. Chérie’s virginal death is thus presaged in the scene of her childhood. That she bears such a strong resemblance to

117 General Haudancourt radically alters the appearance of and landscape surrounding the former abbey. Having retired from the military, he invests his considerable energy into the complete renovation of Le Muguet estate: “Alors, pour occuper son énergique vitalité, cet homme chez lequel il y avait, ainsi que chez beaucoup de Lorrains, un tempérament de forestier, d’amoureux des arbres, se mettait à récée la propriété du Muguet, à la révolutionner par de gigantesques mouvements de terrain, à changer le cours de la rivière, à replanter d’essences rares les parties déboisées, passant des années, du petit jour à la nuit tombante, dans la pluie, la neige, la gelée, et faisant son métier de remuer de terre en grand, et de planteur et de dessinateur de paysages de plusieurs hectares,—une armée d’hommes et de femmes sous lui, et qu’il menait avec une vieille cravache des champs de bataillé de l’Empire” (12). Haudancourt’s complete transformation of the estate, along with the presence of a (basically) mute woman who has gone insane, seems to a reference to Balzac’s short story Adieu. The failure of Chérie to marry and her resultant death echoes the failed marriage and eventual deaths of Stéphanie and Philippe.
her father announces in the earliest days of her childhood that she will suffer a
similarly premature death.

**CHILD'S PLAY**

The maternal presence lacking in Chérie’s life plays out in many areas of her
childhood, and perhaps never more strikingly than in her relationship with her doll
Mastoc. Marie-Françoise Lévy explains that dolls were doubles of the little girls who
owned them—girls were to care for them as they were to care for themselves. Dolls
were both subject and object: as they represented the girls themselves, they were also
the tool of “l'apprentissage du rôle de la mère..[et] celui d’épouse” (43). Like many
dolls of the period, Mastoc has an elaborate trousseau, complete with all of the
fashionable wares required by elegant young women—“une demi-douzaine de
chemises, de paires de bas, de mouchoirs” (50). The doll’s trousseau is a perfect
replica of the corbeille de mariage offered to young French women on the occasion
of their marriages. As Susan Hiner explains, this offering represented the induction
into and contained all of the symbols of respectable bourgeois womanhood:

The contents of the corbeille were at once luxurious goods menat to
seduce through their material opulence a marriageable demoiselle,
reflecting and reinforcing her status of propriety and concluding the
marriage contract, and also seductive objects in their contribution to
the erotics of female fashion. The corbeille thus signifies both literally
and symbolically the notion of trésor, so frequently used to describe
both the corbeille contents and the young lady for whom they are
destined. (46)
Both the doll and its accompanying trousseau were material symbols of “correct” bourgeois femininity. This kind of staging of female roles underscores not only the imperative function that fashion played in shaping women and girls, but also the constructed nature of such roles. When Chérie ruins her doll by leaving her out in the rain, it is not just an account of childish neglect; the ruined doll is a symbol of Chérie’s eventual failure to fulfill the roles of wife and mother in her own life.\textsuperscript{118}

**READING BETWEEN THE LINES**

As with the doll, Chérie’s first significant experience with literature is presented as a major stage of her development as a young woman. Having fallen ill with scarlet fever, Chérie retreats to her bedroom with a copy of *Le Journal de Marguerite*—what Goncourt describes as “la confession jour par jour d’une douce petite âme, dans un milieu élégant et catholique, en une nombreuse famille aimante” (101). Excepting the last detail, it is clear that *Le Journal de Marguerite* is *Chérie mise en abyme*. Goncourt describes the intoxicating effect of the novel on the young girl:

> En lisant ce livre *d’une élégante réalité*, Chérie éprouvait un sentiment, un sentiment nouveau que ne lui avait procuré jusqu’alors la lecture d’aucun livre. Il se faisait en elle, dans une espèce d’exaltation bizarre, la substitution de son moi dans toutes les choses, exécutées ou dites ou pensées par la petite voyageuse, et elle prenait une part un peu fiévreuse à cette gentillesse de la conduite, à ces bonnes intentions des actes, à ces élanagements de religiosité, à ces

\textsuperscript{118}There is a similar scene with a ruined doll in *La Curée*. Just before the discovery of her affair with Maxime, Renée discovers one of her old dolls during a visit to her father’s home. The doll in this case represents Renée’s similar failure to fulfill properly the roles of wife and mother. The discarded toy also symbolizes the theft of her childhood by a traumatizing rape.
attendrissements fervents, à cette admirable sanctification de Marguerite. Cette fusion de son être avec l’héroïne du livre la gratifiait d’une jouissance infinie [...] (102, my emphasis)

The reading of the book marks the first indication in the book of any kind of interior life in Chérie. Recounting la réalité élégante, the impact of Le Journal de Marguerite on Chérie is clearly the effect that Goncourt wants his own text to have on his readers. In the preface of Chérie, Goncourt expresses his desire to capture a reality so visceral that his book could be considered “un livre de pure analyse” (iv)—so innate that it would create in his own readers “un sentiment nouveau” they had never experienced with any other book.119

As previously discussed, the means of Goncourt’s communion with his female readers would be through his appropriation of their own documents—the journals and reminiscences of their childhoods. In this attempt to portray girlhood in the most authentic way possible, Goncourt occasionally included excerpts from the diaries of his correspondents verbatim. Bayle points out that the “règlement de vie”—Chérie’s exhaustive list of resolutions after her first communion—in chapter thirty-three is almost an exact replica of Pauline Zeller’s girlhood journal (24). And while there is virtually no dialogue in the novel, chapter fifty-six is comprised of rare excerpts (written in the first person) of Chérie’s journal intime. As Katherine Ashley points out, Chérie’s journal entries are a palimpsest: she has written them in a school notebook (“Cahier de Problèmes”) “à contresens de l’écriture des devoirs” (195).

119 Joris-Karl Huysmans’ review of Chérie echoed the sentiment expressed in the novel about Le Journal de Marguerite. In an 1884 letter to Goncourt, Huysmans writes: “Avec La Faustin, Chérie donnera aux délicats de l’avenir, l’extraordinaire vision, dans un siècle d’utilitaires mufles, d’une frémissante et délicate tendresse, d’un raffinement poussé jusqu’à l’état suraiguë, d’une aristocratie spirituelle dont ce livre sera le dernier et le plus éclatant vestige” (134).
Ashley notes that Chérie is “writing against the grain, subverting her ‘devoirs’, both her homework and her duties” (132).

Chérie’s cryptic diary is a vestige of childhood that might well exist in any time period. Her writing “à contresens” could simply be read as the desire for a young girl to keep her recorded intimate thoughts a secret. However, Chérie’s subversive writing becomes more significant in the context of the composition of the novel, especially considering that it so closely follows Zeller’s actual diary. With all of the obstacles contained within such subversive writing—the omissions, the crossed out words, the pen names, the cryptic references, the embellishments, the romanesque—could Goncourt possibly interpret the original texts that formed the basis of his novel? Can Chérie be considered a success in the face of such interpretive difficulties?120

**DE LA PETITE ROBE À LA GRANDE ROBE**

This desire to render the young girl more visible in literature coincides with Chérie’s own desire to become more conspicuous in the social circles of Paris. As with Charly’s seamstresses, Chérie accomplishes this through fashion. Her transition

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120 Maupassant wrote to Goncourt in 1884 about this very difficulty. The problem, Maupassant determined, was that it was impossible to understand young girls because “elle[s] s’ignore[nt] elle[s]-mêmes” (qtd. in Bayle 20). Given this distance between the writer and his desired subject, Maupassant insists that observing girls in order to write about them is an insufficient method: “Il est fort difficile, presque impossible de connaître la jeune fille. Les romanciers, aujourd’hui, precedent bien plus par observation que par intuition, et, pour raconter un coeur de jeune fille, il faut, au contraire, procéder bien plus par divination que par observation” (qtd. in Bayle 20). The key to crafting an accurate portrait of a young girl, Maupassant suggests, is to evoke—not record. Goncourt gestures toward this method in the preface to *Chérie*. 
from *la petite robe* to *la grande robe* is a remarkable event in her life heralded by her first visit to the tailor Gentillat.\textsuperscript{121} Goncourt’s account of Chérie’s visit is remarkable in its similarity to the scene in Worms’ atelier in *La Curée*.\textsuperscript{122} As he considers Chérie, Gentillat, like Worms, rattles off a litany of dress details:

Toilette entièrement en tulle... pour une jeune fille il n’y a que le tulle... Corsage plissé avec quatre rangs de tuyauté autour du décolletage... oui, au bord de la peau, quelque chose qui ressemble à du cygnet... Pour la jupe, derrière, pans de *peplum*, en satin blanc avec deux glands... deux petits glands comme des œufs de pigeon... Maintenant sur l’épaule, un bouquet de myositis et de violettes... c’est comme cela que je vois Mademoiselle. (183-4)

Like in the dressmaking scene at Worms’ atelier in *La Curée*, Chérie’s body is produced by a series of signs by the male designer: the subject/object dichotomy is clear—he is the artist, and she is his creation. Chérie is fulfilling the role of the nineteenth-century bourgeois woman, in Higonnet’s formulation, as “active consume[r]... yet passive spectacl[e]” (156). In fact, the major source of pleasure in Chérie’s life after her induction into *la grande robe* is to wander around the streets of Paris in order to be seen—to be consumed as the spectacle of fashionable femininity.\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{121} From his imperious methods to his artistic pretensions, it is clear that the Gentillat character is based on real life couturier Charles Worth—the *grand homme de la mode par excellence* in nineteenth-century Paris. Zola’s character Worms in *La Curée* is also a version of Worth.

\textsuperscript{122} The similarity was not lost on Goncourt. In his *Journal*, Goncourt records his frustration at the coincidences between his work and Zola’s: “Ce Zola, le sacré assimilateur que c’est, et cela avec de la sournoiserie, de vieux paysan. Avec moi, il ne s’était jamais bien nettement exprimé sur le roman qu’il voulait faire; et jamais, au grand jamais, il n’avait été question d’une étude de jeune fille. Et moi, deux fois, il m’avait demandé de lui lire des passages de ma Chérie...[J]’ai la conviction que je retrouverai des chapitres inspirés de la lecture de Chérie, comme il y en a eu dans *L’assommoir* par la lecture de *La fille Élisa*, parue après, mais commencée avant” (*Journal*, T. III, 282).

\textsuperscript{123} Among the many such notations in the novel, Chérie qualifies a successful walk around town in the following manner: “Décidément, c’est amusant, cette promenade au parc! Oh! quels yeux! des yeux!” (199).
What is also remarkable about the scene at Gentillat’s atelier is the role assigned to his female workers. Goncourt suggests in this passage that perhaps the only domain in which the French laborer still takes pride is that of the *les modes*. In fashion, Goncourt still sees the drive that has motivated artists for centuries: the attempt “de s’approcher de la perfection, d’y faire acte de maîtrise” (186). His subsequent comment about the role of women in the production of art in fashion is revelatory of his belief about the role of women in *his* art:

> Eh bien, à l’heure présente, dans ces ateliers de modiste masculin, chez ce petit monde ouvrier de femmes aux légères mains associées aux imaginations du patron, c’est là maintenant qu’il faut chercher la fiévreuse emulation du petit chef-d’œuvre. Réussir une toilette, façonner une délicate chose ayant presque les qualités d’un objet d’art, voilà qui les pousse à travailler à l’envi, et sans jamais se lasser et se rebuter, surtout quand la femme est comme Chérie, jeune, jolie, élégante, et qu’elle n’a pas la *taille de couturière*, et qu’on la trouve “toute faite” ainsi qu’il se dit en ces endroits, pour exprimer qu’elle est divinement bien faite. (186)

In Gentillat’s atelier, the *modistes* occupy a similar role to that of Chérie: they are also a means to an end for the expression of male genius. However, it is their labor—their *petites mains*—that are the conduits through which Gentillat creates his masterpieces. Women are both the inspiration for and the tools of Gentillat’s creations.

Could not the same be said of Goncourt and his novel? Are his female correspondents not the *petits mains* working in the service of male artistic genius to create his work of art? There is even a coincidence of purpose between Gentillat and Goncourt: their respective works produce—though Goncourt only claims to document—signs of French femininity. In her analysis of *Chérie*, Ashley has explored
the ways in which Goncourt’s source materials were “manipulated and fictionalised to the detriment of documentary and historical accuracy” (134). The omissions in Chérie’s diary, the ellipses in the plot, the fragmented nature of the novel—all go to undermine, as Ashley says, Goncourt’s contention that “novels can be written as history can” (134). Ashley contends that Chérie is indeed not based on the “documentary evidence” of the readers’ submissions; contrarily, “the sources are used to support a predetermined vision of females” (134). That Chérie shares the same fate of dissolution and death as many of Goncourt’s other female protagonists—and unlike (ostensibly) his correspondents—supports the idea that the female documents were used in service of a preexisting ideology, rather than as evidenced of the lived truths of real women.

This argument brings us back to the previous discussion about the stakes of women’s self-representation in nineteenth-century France. Higonnet explains that the realistic representation of photography helped the seamstresses subvert established ideas about who they were through the jarring juxtaposition of their elegant dresses and the signs of their labor:

The seamstresses presented the “wrong” appearances to [Charly’s] camera, and his production of the photograph only makes them look more right. According to beliefs contemporary with the medium, the photograph reveals how the seamstresses “really” looked. But Dans l’atelier reveals something quite different. Far from guaranteeing realism, photography’s promise of a transparently significant visuality allows opaquely referential visual meanings to disrupt the previous social contracts that constitute a perceptual “real.” (158)

In other words, the documentary nature of the photograph helped the seamstresses gloss over the discordant image of their finery (certainly not the usual ken of their
social class) collocated with the tools of *la couture*. It is the promise of truth inherent in photography that ironically makes this subversion possible.

Goncourt employs a similar strategy in *Chérie*, except to a completely different effect. The form of his documentary-like style bears the same stamp of truth as the portrait of the seamstresses. However, instead of using the medium to subvert dominant ideologies about French femininity, Goncourt manipulates his *documents humains* to reinforce prevailing cultural beliefs. Like the *japonaiseries* and the eighteenth-century furniture that so fascinated the Goncourts, the female documents of *Chérie* are also used for decorative effect—to give a hint of the exotic (feminine) and the ring (though not the presence) of truth to the text. Like the fashionable clothing that so fascinates its protagonist, *Chérie* is ultimately a monument to culturally constructed femininity—not the revealing psychological treatise of the female mind it proclaims to be. Chérie’s corpse at the end of the novel is simply the necessary vehicle for the expression of Goncourt’s male genius. For Chérie, like for so many other female protagonists of the period, it would seem that a woman dressed to kill in a Second Empire novel is, indeed, only dressed to kill.
CHAPTER FIVE

Fashion Victims

Julien Sorel, Eugène de Rastignac, Lucien de Rubempré, Frédéric Moreau—these are the names that come to mind when the nineteenth-century French realist novel is invoked. The respective successes or failures of these male protagonists can be measured by the degree to which they divest themselves of their illusions—of military glory, of paternal communion, of singular intimacy. Though the circumstances of their fates may be different, the tragic and disappointing ends of Julien, Lucien, and Frédéric can be attributed to the untenable persistence of romantic illusions in a realist world. The harsh material reality of nineteenth-century France proves to be a fatal testing ground for those attached to antiquated notions of a bygone romantic era.

Whatever the differences among Emma Bovary, Renée Saccard, and Chérie Haudancourt and their male realist counterparts, they share a common and detrimental attachment to a similar kind of romantic notion. While Emma’s obsession with romantic literature is a more traditional manifestation of these illusions, she shares with Renée and Chérie a belief in the transformative power of la mode—what Joan DeJean has called “the romance of high fashion” (62). Emma believes she can escape the provincial dreariness of her life by adopting the trappings of the upper class. The individuality of style (and lifestyle) that Renée believes to exhibit through her costly clothing is revealed to be an illusion: she is simply a luxurious lure for Saccard’s potential investors. The brutality of Renée stripped bare
at the end of La Curée uncloaks the violence and manipulation that has always underpinned Saccard’s encouragement of her fashion habit. For Chérie, her obsession with clothing subsumes all of her other natural desires and becomes a neurotic impulse that drives her to madness. Goncourt’s appropriation of women’s writing in his depiction of a fashion-fixated haute bourgeoisie reveals the role that elegant clothing plays in the reification of nineteenth-century notions of femininity.

Near the end of Chérie, Goncourt makes a remarkable statement on women’s relationship to fashion:

Au fond, la toilette pour une femme, c'est le moyen de témoigner de l’artiste qui habite en elle, —le moyen révélateur par excellence et bien supérieur au produit médiocre d’un pauvre talent d’agrément, au gribouillage d’une méchante aquarelle: —c’est le moyen d’exposer sa grâce, sa gentillesse, sa beauté, parmi l’arrangement, le coloris, l’harmonie d’un heureux tableau; c’est le moyen de faire de sa personne, dans les sociétés civilisées, à travers les incessants changements de modes et d’ajustements, un charmant et frêle objet d’art, toujours renouvelé, toujours nouveau. (266)

In one of the few interventions of the narrator in this novel of documents humains, it is crucial to note that Goncourt’s comparison of fashion to other feminine arts—the “talent d’agrément” and the “aquarelle”—underscores its inherently visual nature. In the novels discussed in this study, each engages questions of perception as mediated through fashion, both as the protagonists perceive themselves and how they are seen by others. Goncourt also voices the belief of other male writers, like Balzac, Baudelaire, and Gautier, that fashion was the medium through which women could express their artistic impulses. That these male writers focused so intently and uniformly on fashion as the means of female aesthetic expression speaks to the limitation of possibility for women’s participation in other artistic endeavors.
Furthermore, a close reading of Madame Bovary, La Curée, and Chérie does not support this idea that women could express themselves artistically through couture. For the protagonists of these novels, fashion is not a manifestation of a yearning for the ideal; it is instead a symptom of dissolution and of the distance that separates reality and the women’s perception of reality. The fiction of Flaubert, Zola, and Goncourt’s narratives bears out historical reality: when the designers, merchants, and advertisers of la mode were men, could a Second Empire woman truly produce herself as art? Could a woman cultivate the same kind of elegant nonchalance of the dandy—a figure lionized throughout the nineteenth century as an aesthetic hero? Considering the dire fates of Emma, Renée, and Chérie, it seems that the philosophical possibilities that women’s fashion offered were only available to men.

Anatole France once stated that if he wanted to learn about an unfamiliar society, he would first examine the culture’s fashion journals because they would be more revelatory of ideology than philosophical treatises or novels (qtd. in Dolan 22). Indeed, the self-importance and pretension of imperial France can be read in the bloated silhouette of the Second Empire crinoline. Because of their detailed depictions of clothing, the novels in this study are indebted to the presse féminine as they adopted both the mode and focus of fashion journals. However, Madame Bovary, La Curée, and Chérie are not only archaeological renderings of Second Empire fashions; these novels also offer a history of visual culture, or the context in which this clothing was seen. In their precise account of la mode, these texts record not just what these trends looked like, but also how they were seen both by
nineteenth-century French society and by the male writers that describe them. Through these novels, we are able to appreciate the spectacular nature of French femininity as expressed through fashion in the nineteenth century.
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