Spring 2001

# Painting on the Periphery: Women Artists in Three French Texts

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> Now their separate characters are briefly these. The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer. . . . His intellect is for speculation and invention. . . . But woman's . . . intellect is not for invention or creation but sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. . . . Her great function is Praise.
>
> —John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies.*

With the rise of the modern women's movement, feminist artists, critics and art historians have begun to redress the neglect of women artists and to undermine stereotyped views of women's art. As a result, many books have been published in recent years which have once again made accessible the names and works of hundreds of women artists from all periods of art history. However, a relatively small group of feminist art critics (such as Hollis Clayson, Tamar Garb, Linda Nochlin, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock) have chosen a different approach in their attempt to rewrite women's contributions to art.[1] Rather than provide yet another individual biography on a female artist or another indictment of art history's neglect of women artists, these critics seek to go one step further—to explain how and, more significantly, why women's art has been misrepresented and excluded, and what this erasure of women from history reveals about the ideological basis of the writing and teaching of art history. Hence, Parker and Pollock, in their important book *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981), explain this relatively new tendency in feminist art history as not so much an attempt to provide more information about forgotten women artists as an effort to uncover the ideological determinants which have maintained women's exclusion from art history in the first place: "We need to understand . . . that process by which art by women has been separated from the dominant definitions of what constitutes art, consigned to a special category, seen simply as homogenous expressions of 'femininity' . . . we stress women's relation to art practice not just to the institutions of art. . . . Our book is therefore not a history of women artists, but an analysis of the relations between women, art and ideology" (xviii-xix).

The exclusion of women's art is not only prevalent in the annals of art history, but is certainly evident when we consider the place of women artists in French literature. The plethora of male visual artists depicted in nineteenth-century fiction (not just in the works of well-known writers such as Flaubert, Huysmans, the Goncourts and Zola, but in relatively obscure authors such as Edmond Duranty and Phillipe Burty) is contrasted with a number of literary representations of female artists so small as to be almost nonexistent. Indeed, one is confronted with real difficulties in trying to find a text, any text, that portrays a female visual artist. The portrayal of female artists is limited, no doubt, by the fact that women are generally depicted as some combination of the muse, model, art object or wife of the male artist. Taking inspiration from this new wave of feminist art criticism, I would like to suggest that this almost-total exclusion of women is no mere accident, but is attributable to certain ideological notions that assert women's "natural" role as the object of art and her "inability" and/or "lack of desire" to produce art. An examination of three different female artists, in view of Parker and Pollock's book *Old Mistresses*, (a work to which I am greatly indebted), will serve to uncover the ideological assumptions about women's art production that operate in the texts. That is, by examining three different works, two by Emile Zola and one by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, I hope to deconstruct some prevalent nineteenth-century assumptions about artistic methods and genres in relation to gender.

For Parker and Pollock, the differences between "men's" and "women's" art have traditionally (and wrongly) been explained in terms of the biological and "natural" differences between the sexes. Accordingly, they try to counter this biological trend by offering sociological and historical reasons for differences in art production. More particularly, they try to explain, through reference to specific historical events and restrictions, the development of an ideology that increasingly associated the notions of "artist" with maleness and masculinity, and "woman" with domesticity. Some of these historical points are important for my purposes, for they are useful in explaining the absence women artists from literary texts. According to Parker and Pollock, a major ideological transformation began during the Renaissance, with the striving of artisans and craftsmen to become respected members of the intellectual community and cultural elite (82). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the foundation of the official academies of art secured for the artist surer claims to this intellectual



recognition. These academies changed the status of the artist in many ways, but particularly by creating a new system of training that moved away from the craft-based, manual training offered in artists' workshops, with the effect of professionalizing the practice of art and rationalizing its study.

But for my purposes, what is most important concerning the academies is their increasing exclusion of women from sanctioned artistic practice. That is, as male artists gained more and more prestige as "professionals" by moving out of their role as artisans and craftsmen, women were systematically denied the same "upward mobility." Although women were not initially excluded from these influential bodies, (the Paris Académie admitted a handful of women in the late seventeenth century), they were barred altogether in 1706. Likewise, in England, the Royal Academy had two female founding members in 1768, but systematically excluded women from its schools and privileges for the next hundred years (Parker and Pollock 26-27). After the French Revolution, despite abolition of the royal academy in the 1790s, the situation of French women artists deteriorated drastically. They were denied admission to the Académie when it was refounded and, for most of the nineteenth century, were kept outside the major art institution, the Institut des Arts. But the most far-reaching effect of women's exclusion from academic training schools, which was as insistent in the nineteenth century as in the eighteenth, was that they were not permitted officially to study human anatomy from the nude, live model. This point is significant for, as we shall see in examining certain nineteenth-century texts, women are virtually never depicted as artists who work from a nude model. For almost three hundred years, from the Renaissance to the hey-day of the academics in the nineteenth century, the nude human figure was the basis of the most highly-regarded forms of painting and sculpture—what the academic theorists of art described as "history painting" and placed at the top of the hierarchy of artistic genres. The simple fact of woman's being barred from studying the nude constrained many of them to practice exclusively in the genres of portraiture and still-life, genres considered, within the Academic canon of art, less significant. By association, the women who practiced in the so-called "lesser" genres were themselves devalued, considered artists of "lesser" talent (Parker and Pollock 33-35).[2] Artists who were women were thus not only subjected to the institutional constraints of the developing nuclear family, but also to the assumption that the natural form their art would take was the

reflection of their domestic femininity. At the same time, however, "artist" became associated with everything that was male, anti-domestic, and anti-social behavior (Parker and Pollock 99). Consequently, as femininity was to be lived out in the fulfillment of socially ordained domestic and reproductive roles, a profound contradiction was established between the identities of artist and of woman—a contradiction worth studying further in a number of texts.

Zola's short story "Madame Sourdis" (1872) provides one of the rare fictional works in nineteenth-century French literature that depicts a female visual artist.[3] Centered around a female painter and her art, the text might be considered as constituting a feminist validation of women's art. Indeed, the plot—in which a woman takes over her husband's art production when he becomes artistically impotent while he receives all the official awards—suggests the triumph of a woman's art in the male-dominated Academic system. However, in view of this recent wave of feminist art criticism, I would like to deconstruct the text's assumptions about gender and artistic genres in their relation to art production.

"Madame Sourdis" is the story of Adèle, a young provincial girl who, like many real female artists (such as Rosa Bonheur and Vigée-Lebrun), comes to the profession through her artist father. In her father's art supply store, she meets Ferdinand Sourdis, a young aspiring painter who laments that he does not have the financial means to gain recognition in the capital. Adèle and Ferdinand marry, and with her inheritance money move to Paris where his art receives critical acclaim and accolades that culminate in academic medals and membership in the Légion d'Honneur. What the public and critics (with the exception of the couple's artist friend Monsieur Rennequin) do not know is that for the majority of his career, it is his wife's paintings that are being judged and not his. That is, shortly after their arrival in Paris, Ferdinand becomes increasingly unable to produce art, and Madame Sourdis takes over his work for the rest of his career. However, Ferdinand continues to sign her works with his name. Rennequin is an important character, for it is he who, as an accomplished local painter decorated in the Parisian academic system, brings critical judgments to both Adèle's and Ferdinand's work. It is primarily through Rennequin, the principal art authority of the text, that a distinctive ideology about men's and women's relation to art production emerges. More specifically, gender differentiation is marked in the text, thanks to the Rennequin character, in the positioning of Mr. Sourdis and his wife in



terms of the binary operations of artist/copier, tutor/pupil, master/disciple and beauty/ugliness.

Adèle is often portrayed in scenes that emphasize her proclivity for hard work and her copying skill: "Elle dessinait sous la lampe, s'appliquant à reproduire . . . une photographie d'après un Raphaël . . ." (478); "Adèle s'était mise à copier son tableau . . ." (481); "Elle, patiente, entêtée, restait les journées entières devant sa petite table, à reproduire continuellement les études . . . elle veillait . . . très absorbée dans la copie d'une gravure qu'elle exécutait . . ." (489). Her persistence and copying talents reach their full potential in Paris, where she learns to imitate her husband's style so well that she "fools" everyone except Rennequin. Although copying well-known works was a very common exercise among the male academicians, Ferdinand's copying skills are never mentioned. In fact, he is rarely depicted as actually working on a painting. Yet, his art is portrayed as "new" and "original" and carrying the marks of "genius"—terms not employed when describing Adèle's art. At the Paris Salon, his first painting is declared a masterpiece: ". . . *La Promenade* fut déclarée un petit chef-d'oeuvre . . . Cela avait la pointe d'originalité nécessaire . . . tout juste ce qu'il fallait au public de nouveauté et de puissance" (486). Shortly after Adèle copies a work, Rennequin discovers Ferdinand's first painting and remarks: "Le ton est d'une finesse et d'une vérité. . . . Et original! une vraie note! " (480). The implication of these pages—ones that juxtapose a female artist busy copying with the discovery of male "originality"—is that Ferdinand's art is more "evolved"—it has matured to a later stage where copying is no longer necessary, whereas his wife's art remains forever in the "training" stages. These scenes also imply that Ferdinand has innate talent whereas Adèle only has the acquired skill that is a product of her hard work. Similarly, a common strategy on the part of some critics is to rationalize their dismissal of women by claiming that they are derivative and therefore insignificant. R. H. Wilenski, for instance, stated categorically, "Women painters as everyone knows always imitate the work of some men" (93). It is interesting to note that Adèle's art is mentioned once as having "genius," but only in relation to her ability to absorb and copy other artists' styles: "Elle avait ce génie de démontrer le métier des autres et de s'y glisser" (499).[4] Indeed, Adèle's achievement is minimized throughout the text in the constant implication that she is more an imitator than an artist, and thus derivative rather than creative.

Such a portrayal of a woman's art implies that Adèle's painting

has value only *in relation* to other people's (especially her husband's, to which it is constantly compared). A similar example involves the relationship of the Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his muse and model, Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal, who was also an artist and poet herself. In the cases in which recognition is awarded to Siddal's art, it is usually defined exclusively in relation to Rossetti's. Thus, the following comment from the critic John Gere: "Under Rossetti's influence she made drawings and wrote verses, but she seems to have had no original creative power: she was the moon to his sun, merely reflecting his light" (14). French sculptor Camille Claudel, the companion of the more famous sculptor Auguste Rodin, provides another example. In his review of the 1893 Salon, Octave Mirbeau's opening remarks clearly place Claudel in a subordinate position vis-à-vis not only Rodin, but also in relation to her famous writer brother Paul Claudel: "Mlle. Claudel est l'élève de Rodin et la soeur de M. Paul Claudel . . . Instruite par un tel maître, vivant dans l'intellectuelle intimité d'un tel frère, il n'est point étonnant que Mlle Camille Claudel, qui est bien de sa famille, nous apporte des oeuvres qui dépassent par l'invention et la puissance d'exécution tout ce qu'on peut attendre d'une femme" (quoted in Delbée 324-25). Claudel's artistic talent as a sculptor is thus explained as being the direct result of her proximity to and intimacy with men of genius—she is the "pupil of" one man and the "sister of" another.[5] Art produced by a woman cannot be understood in terms other than those that position it as the product of male influence. The woman artist is thus framed in a relative, secondary position by the patriarchal discourses of art history and their celebration of heroic male creativity (Pollock 97). The fact that Adèle copies her husband's works in order to learn his style positions her in the role of pupil and him in the role of "Old Master": ". . . elle l'admirait comme un maître. . . . Tout ce qu'elle avait rêvé se réalisait, non-plus par elle-même, mais par un autre elle-même, qu'elle aimait à la fois en disciple, en mère et en épouse" (486). "Il était son maître, c'était le mâle qui reprenait sa place dans le ménage" (492). ". . . il se remit à lui donner des conseils, comme à une élève. . . . Il était raide comme professeur" (494). Throughout the story, in fact, her husband's art provides the standard by which Adèle's is judged. And her art does not measure up, for while it has the "grace" of his, it lacks the "virility": "Rennequin avait dit un mot très juste: elle avait, comme artiste, les grâces du jeune peintre, sans en avoir les virilities . . ." (481).

The difference between male and female art is clearly delineated



in the text, moreover, by a stereotypical vocabulary that contrasts superior male "strength, vigor and virility" with inferior female "weakness, grace and charm." This type of vocabulary constitutes a frequent and pejorative attribution of a certain notion of femininity to all women artists. James Laver, for instance, describes women painters of the seventeenth century as trying "to emulate Frans Hals but the vigorous brush strokes of the master were beyond their capability; one has only to look at the works of a painter like Judith Leyster . . . to detect the weakness of the feminine hand" (16). Likewise, when Rennequin spots Ferdinand's first painting, he tells Adèle that it ressembles her style, except with "strength": "Vrai, ça te ressemble. . . . C'est toi, avec de la puissance . . ." (480). In addition, when Adèle helps him complete a painting that he cannot finish, Ferdinand goes back over her work and "brings it to life" by adding the touches of "vigor" of which she is incapable: "Et ce fut ainsi qu'il retravailla la toile, qu'il revint sur le travail d'Adèle, en lui donnant les vigeurs de touche et les notes originales qui manquaient. . . . L'oeuvre vivait maintenant" (495). These kinds of comments, according to Parker and Pollock, are easily recognizable in the language of a modern art criticism that constantly associates creativity with male sexuality and whose praise is thus bestowed on such qualities as "vigor, thrust, force and above all mastery" (83).[6] When Ferdinand evaluates Adèle's copy of his painting, he finds it "feminine" and "full of charm." His comments thinly disguise his condescension before art made by a woman: "Adèle démonta Ferdinand . . . posséda bientôt son procédé, au point qu'il resta très étonné de se voir dédoublée ainsi, interprété et reproduit littéralement, avec une discrétion toute féminine. C'était lui, sans accent, mais plein de charme" (482). Rennequin reinforces this dichotomy of masculine "vigor" versus feminine "lightness of touch and finesse" when he evaluates a painting that the husband and wife collaborated to produce. His clearly binaristic opinion of the background of the work (Madame Sourdis' contribution) versus the foreground (Monsieur Sourdis' contribution) reveals an ideology that considers male and female differences in art production as part of a natural biological order: ". . . les fonds ont *une légèrté et une finesse* incroyables et les premiers plans s'enlèvent avec beaucoup de *vigeur*" (496, my italics).

Closely related to these notions is another dichotomy—one that pits "skill" and "manual dexterity" against "imagination" and "intellect." Here, we find the distinction mentioned many times in Zola's art criticism between "l'habilité" and "le génie."[7] What is striking about

Zola's story is that this distinction occurs along clearly delineated gender lines. Ferdinand's artistic talent is constantly associated with his intellectual gifts and originality, as described in the following terms: "ce nouveau temperament . . . un accent personnel" (480), "le génie" (483), "l'originalité spirituelle" (485), "la belle flamme" (487), "l'inspiration," une flamme invisible" (493), "les précieux dons de son originalité" (497), "la flamme" (509). In addition to underlining his superior imagination and intellect, such terms evoke an almost super-human creative capacity, a divine gift. Indeed, the images of flame suggest his affinity with Prometheus, a semi-divine mythological figure who dared to compete with the gods by stealing their creative fire. In fact, Ferdinand is even described as a "god": ". . . il avait gardé sa barbe d'or . . . qui le faisait ressembler à quelque dieu vieilli . . ." (506). On the other hand, the terms employed to portray Adèle's art firmly anchor her talent within the limits of manual dexterity, mechanicalness and technique: "exactitude mathématique" (478), "habilité" (480 and 489), "une mécanique qui se règle de jour en jour" (500), "une sûreté de main qui indiquait une grande pratique . . . sa facture adroite, courante, cette mécanique bien réglée . . ." (500), "une sûreté de main extraordinaire" (508). In addition, the constant use of the term "métier," implying "skill," further underlines her "inaptitude" for the intellectual aspects of her craft: ". . . il [Ferdinand] répétait partout qu'elle savait son métier de peintre mieux que lui . . ." (496); ". . . elle est plus forte que moi . . . Oh! un métier! une facture!" (501); ". . .elle a un métier épatant!" (509). Stating that she has the "métier" of an artist, rather than describing her simply as an "artist," is a subtle way of minimizing her contribution by emphasizing manual dexterity over intellect. The implication, again, is that she is not a real artist (for she lacks the necessary innate talent, the golden nugget of genius), but she has acquired the artist's "skill" and can imitate it. Rennequin's remarks on the husband and wife collaboration clearly reinforce this dichotomy of intellect versus manual dexterity through his assertion of a categorical difference between masculine and feminine: "Ferdinand, le talent mâle, restait l'inspirateur, le constructeur, c'était lui qui choisissait les sujets et qui les jetait d'un trait large, en établissant chaque partie. Puis, pour l'exécution, il cédait la place à Adèle, au talent femelle, en se réservant toutefois la facture de certains morceaux de vigueur" (498). Rennequin's remarks thus betray certain stereotypical notions by asserting male talent as the inspiring, intellectual, constructing force in art while relegating female talent to the manual skills involved in "execution." And here even the "vigorous" elements of the execution are the man's job, leaving women's domain in art only in the weaker elements of manual skill.



The story's treatment of artistic genres and media, such as oil painting, watercolor and the decorative arts, further underlines this genderized ideology vis-à-vis art production. More specifically, Zola diminishes Madame Sourdis' contribution by associating her art with the "lesser genres," while associating her husband's with "high art." In the hierarchy of the arts, developed throughout Western art history, painting and sculpture have traditionally enjoyed an elevated status while other arts that adorn people, homes or utensils are relegated to a lesser cultural sphere under such terms as "applied," "decorative," or "lesser" arts. This hierarchy is maintained by attributing to the decorative arts a lesser degree of intellectual effort or appeal and a greater concern with manual skill and utility. By the mid-nineteenth century the divorce of "high art" and "craft" was complete, thanks to the changes of art-education from craft-based workshops to academies and in the theories of art produced in those academies. For Parker and Pollock, the discourses of art history have separated high art from craft along both class and gender lines—that is, high art, produced outside the home by "professionals," has generally been understood as the domain of middle and upper-class men whereas craft, produced largely in domestic settings, has been seen as the domain of the lower classes and women (50). Similarly, Madame Sourdis' achievements are minimized through the comparison of her art with craft. Indeed, Rennequin's comments reveal his condescension before her work by associating it not only with tapestry-making but, also with the quintessentially "feminine," graceful and decorative image of the flower: "Le peintre . . . regardait les aquarelles de la petite Adèle, qu'il déclarait un peu pâlottes, mais d'une fraîcheur de rose.—Autant ça que de la tapisserie, disait-il en lui pinçant l'oreille" (476). Such comments, ones that associate Madame Sourdis' art with nature (as implied by the flower image) and the craft of tapestry-making, suggest that Rennequin does not take her seriously as an artist. It is interesting to compare these, his first comments on her work, to his enthusiastic first remarks about her husband's art—an art characterized above all by its "truth and originality": "Le ton est d'une finesse et d'une vérité. . . . Voyez donc les blancs des chemises qui se détachent sur le vert. . . . Et original! une vraie note! . . ." (480). Later, having accepted and interiorized Rennequin's opinion of her work, Adèle downplays her own art by comparing it to craft:

"C'était sa tapisserie, comme elle le disait avec un sourire pincé" (489).

In addition, Zola's story betrays a certain ideology of gender in relation to artistic media. As we have seen, for almost three hundred years from the Renaissance to the late nineteenth century, the nude figure was the basis for the most highly regarded forms of art, what academic theories called history painting and placed at the summit of artistic achievement. Furthermore, the medium in which history painting was done—oil paint—was considered, in the theory of the academies, the most difficult to master and therefore the "best." The simple fact of prevention of study of the nude and the exclusion from academies constrained many women to study exclusively in the genres of still life, portraiture and landscape and to experiment in other media such as watercolor and pastel. These genres and methods were less prestigious and thought to demand less skill or intellect.[8] By association, women artists specializing in these "lesser" genres or working in "lesser" media were themselves regarded as artists of inferior talent (Pollock 44).[9] Rather than question the "truth" of such genre and media hierarchies in an attempt to understand their arbitrary nature and how they came into being, Zola's text seems to naturalize, support, and reinforce nineteenth-century academic ideologies. At the beginning of the story, Ferdinand works in the favored medium of the academies and, accordingly, his art is more appreciated than his wife's watercolors. Indeed, at the same Salon where his oil *La Promenade* is declared a masterpiece, Adèle's watercolors go completely unnoticed. Furthermore, Zola's use of the term "se risquer," implying that Adèle takes "risks" in abandoning her watercolors and taking up oils, suggests that her change of medium constitutes a kind of step up: "Adèle s'était mise à copier son tableau: *La Promenade*. Elle abandonnait ses aquarelles et se risquait dans la peinture à l'huile" (481). Finally, Adèle's switch to oil involves a period of training or tutelage in which she learns her husband's style and medium through copying his work—hence, again, the implication of the "superiority" of oil paint (that requires an initiation period) over watercolor (that does not require an initiation period).

In fact, Adèle's art receives recognition only when it copies her husband's artistic language, including its style and medium, in keeping with academic methods. From a Lacanian point of view, then, Adèle's switch to oil paint involves a sort of initiation into the male symbolic language of the art academies. However, Madame Sourdis can never fully assume her husband's artistic language, she can only copy it. Her oil work is portrayed as an inadequate imitation of her husband's; in fact, the quality of the Sourdis' artistic production is directly proportional to her amount of collaboration. The more she paints, in other words, the worse their art becomes: "Son premier tableau, *La Promenade*, [painted exclusively by her husband] était plein d'une personnalité vive et spirituelle, qui peu à peu avait disparu dans les oeuvres suivantes, qui maintenant se noyait au milieu d'une coulée de pâte molle et fluide, très agréable à l'oeil, mais de plus en plus banale" (499). Rennequin's following remarks further illustrate this point while suggesting that he is the only artist/critic "astute" enough to detect the "inferior" feminine spirit that has "infected" Ferdinand's later work (painted exclusively by his wife):

> ". . . c'est trop bête . . . de préférer ses oeuvres actuelles aux oeuvres de sa jeunesse! Cela n'a plus ni flamme, ni saveur, ni originalité d'aucune sorte. Ah! c'est joli, c'est facile, cela je vous l'accorde! Mais il faut vendre de la chandelle pour avoir le goût de cette facture banale, relevée par je ne sais quelle sauce compliquée, où il y a de tous les styles, et même de toutes les pourritures de styles . . . Ce n'est plus mon Ferdinand qui peint ces machines-là. . . ." (507)

Such comments portraying Adèle's art as aesthetically "pleasing" and "pretty," but banal, colorless, unoriginal and too preoccupied with detail reveal many of the stereotypical criticisms traditionally used to denigrate women's art.

A specific ideology concerning male and female art production can therefore be perceived in the different portrayals of the husband and wife vis-à-vis oils and watercolors. Zola's plot relies on a major "switch" that is quite illuminating in this respect. By the end of the story, Ferdinand has experienced his downfall in the form of artistic "impuissance" (Zola frequently uses the term in describing Ferdinand's inability to produce art, thus associating artistic creativity with male sexuality).[10] His wife has completely taken over his work and it is now he who does watercolors. In Lacanian terms, Ferdinand has retreated and regressed back to the Imaginary, outside the male academic system of language in oil. Indeed, the man who once produced mature works of originality and genius is now depicted as a child. As he works at the table where his wife once did her watercolors, at "cette place de petit garçon," he is portrayed as infantile and comical working in this medium: "Rennequin, qui se penchait derrière lui, se mit a

sourire, devant la maladresse enfantine du dessin et des teintes, un barbouillage presque comique. . . . Maintenant, c'était Ferdinand qui faisait les aquarelles" (510). Hence, the implication is that watercolors are for women and little boys, but not for grown men. Clearly, this scene carries a not-too-subtle denigration of the medium of watercolor—a medium that Zola associates with women and children. This passage suggests, moreover, that Ferdinand has taken over his wife's place and medium, and has now experienced the ultimate downfall—he is now confined to doing childish, unevolved "women's art."[11] Accordingly, I would like to suggest that Adèle is not portrayed as infantile or ridiculous doing watercolors because Zola understands that medium as a "natural" one for women. Meanwhile, Madame Sourdis upholds her husband's reputation by doing oils. Not surprisingly, her work as an oil painter is portrayed as "unnatural." Her switch to oils is depicted as a kind of unfortunate takeover of her husband's domain, as evidenced by the frequent use of the term "invasion" to describe how she has incorporated her husband's skill and chased him out of his "natural" habitat, finally devouring his talent: ". . . il s'abandonna, il laissa Adèle l'envahir" (498). "Dans cette substitution de leurs tempéraments, c'était elle qui avait envahi l'oeuvre commune, au point de l'y dominer et de l'en chaser . . ." (504). "Il [Rennequin] avait suivi le lent travail d'envahissement d'Adèle. . . . Pour lui, Adèle avait mangé Ferdinand, c'était fini" (507-08). Indeed, Adèle has become a "monster" by working in a medium that is generally seen as the domain of men: ". . . elle l'avait remplacé [Ferdinand] en se l'incorporant, en prenant pour ainsi dire son sexe. Le résultat était un monstre" (504). The term "sexe" here is a loaded one, for it suggests both the notions of "gender" and "penis." The implication is that in order to do respected art, Adèle has to become an unnatural monster of a woman—she must take on masculine characteristics by appropriating both her husband's gender and his penis. In other words, she must take up man's penis/brush (the phallic connotations of the paint brush are rather obvious) and emit his creative fluid by working in his sperm/oil. Hence, the paint brush becomes a phallic signifier, an extension of the male sexual organ.[12] And, again, the intimation of this switch of artistic medias is that both the husband and wife are out of their "natural" element. Thus, the association of men with the "superior" medium of oils and women with the "lesser" medium of watercolors is understood as part of a natural, biological order.

Given the context of such ideas, ones that identify excellence in art with all that is masculine, it is not surprising that often the only way critics can praise a woman artist is to say that "elle peint comme un homme," as Charles Baudelaire commented on Eugénie Gautier in 1845 and as Octave Mirabeau wrote (in reference to sculpture) about Camille Claudel in 1893: "Cette année, elle montre deux compositions étranges, passionnantes, si neuves d'invention . . . d'une poésie si profonde et *d'une pensée si mâle,* que l'on s'arrête surpris par cette beauté d'art qui nous vient d'une femme" (quoted in Delbée 325, my italics).[13] Such remarks imply that for Baudelaire and Mirbeau, women who create art are an exceptional, unnatural minority. In fact, their comments suggest that women who dare enter the world of European Culture are so atypical as to have surrendered their sexuality. Kant, too, shared their ideas when he wrote: "Laborious learning or painful pondering, even if a woman should greatly succeed in it, destroy the merits that are proper to her sex . . ." (78). In keeping with this type of ideology, Madame Sourdis is depicted as an ugly, unsexed, unnatural woman—the price she must pay, it seems, for her interest in art. Indeed, the author's insistence on Madame Sourdis' homeliness, an insistence that reaches obsessive proportions, suggests that for Zola, feminine artistic talent and physical beauty cannot go together: ". . . elle était si pâle et si jaune, qu'on ne la trouvait pas jolie. On aurait dit une petite vieille, elle avait déjà le teint fatigué d'une institutrice vieillie dans la sourde irritation du célibat" (477). "Lorsqu'elle se regardait dans une glace, elle avait bien conscience de son infériorité, de sa taille épaisse et de son visage déjà plombé" (486). ". . . elle travaillait à sa guise, de ses mains courtes de femme volontaire et sans beauté. Elle se savait peu plaisante, avec son teint plombé, sa peau dure et ses gros os . . ." (498). "Ce qu'elle voulait . . . c'était de maintenir au sommet de cette célébrité, qui avait été tout son rêve de jeune fille laide et cloîtrée" (498-99).

The following comments are perhaps the most striking, for they position Adèle's artistic production in direct relation to her morphology, thus underlining the biological bias of Zola's text. Here, her "inadequate" physical characteristics become part of the criteria for judging her art: "Elle passait pour une maîtresse femme, bien qu'elle fût petite et très grosse. C'était même un autre étonnement, dans le pays, qu'une dame si corpulente pût piétiner devant les tableaux toute la journée, sans avoir le soir les jambes cassées" (503). Madame Sourdis' artistic achievements are thus limited to her "surprising" ability to overcome the physical "handicap" of her ugliness. It is difficult

to imagine such remarks in reference to a man—("He passed for a master, although he was short and very fat"). In fact, as Parker and Pollock demonstrate, physical beauty or lack of it is rarely an issue for male artists. In the discourses of art history, however, the frequent emphasis on women artists' physical characteristics defines their work as merely a reflection of those characteristics (92-93). Similarly, the implication of Zola's story, is that Madame Sourdis cannot be physically attractive and an art producer at the same time. If Ferdinand's wife were depicted as beautiful, the logical portrayal of her, in the context of nineteenth-century ideology, would be as a lovely object to be looked at, as the muse and model of man's art—a portrayal of the "beautiful" artist's wife that we find in Zola's later work *L'Oeuvre* and in the Goncourts' *Manette Salomon*. I would like to suggest that for Zola, Madame Sourdis' ugliness and lack of sexual relations are perceived as necessary points if we are to believe a woman as an artist. Her interest in art, in other words, can be seen as less of an exception, indeed less of an aberration, if it is understood as compensation for the fact that she is not beautiful or desirable.

In a male artist, however, physical beauty and artistic talent are not by any means mutually exclusive. Finding himself in a marriage of convenience and repulsed by Adèle's homeliness, the "handsome, sensual and viril" Ferdinand meets his sexual needs elsewhere, in extra-marital affairs with "beautiful" women. His artistic output, in fact, is in direct relation to his virility. For example, Rennequin describes Ferdinand's increasing inability to produce art in the following terms: "Ce diable de Sourdis tourne au cabotin. . . . Avez-vous vu sa dernière toile? Il n'a donc pas de sang dans les veines. . . . Les filles l'ont vidé. Eh! oui, c'est l'éternelle histoire, on se laisse manger le cerveau par quelque bête de femme . . ." (500). Such remarks suggest that Ferdinand has employed his energies in the wrong way by spending his virility on sexual exploits rather than sublimating his sexual energy to produce art. These remarks betray the ancient notion that men waste their artistic energies and talents on sexual adventures. Such comments further situate women in the realm of nature, as a "regrettable" hindrance to the free production of male art. Such remarks thus reinforce stereotypical assumptions by associating men with the sphere of culture and women with the sphere of nature. In discussing the growth of the analogy between artistic behavior and male sexuality during the nineteenth century, one might begin by citing Flaubert, who called the artist a "'fouteur' sentant le sperme qui monte et la décharge qui



s'apprête" (letter of 1866 to Hippolyte Taine *Correspondance* III, 313-14). Such notions, Parker and Pollock point out, have their roots in the Renaissance when male artists were advised to be continent and chaste so as to preserve their "virility" for their art. This notion carries through to modern art; Vincent Van Gogh, for instance, told fellow artist Emile Bernard: ". . . eat a lot, do your military exercises well, don't fuck too much; when you do this, your painting will be all the more spermatic. . . . If we want to be really potent males in our work, we must sometimes resign ourselves to not fuck much" (509). For Flaubert, Van Gogh and Zola, therefore, art becomes largely the product of sublimated male sexuality.

In the context of such an ideology, Adèle is depicted as taking on stereotypically masculine characteristics in order to become accepted and respected as an artist: ". . . Ferdinand se sentit redevenir un enfant. Adèle le dominait de toute sa volonté. C'était elle le mâle, dans cette bataille de la vie" (491-92). ". . . elle se remit à la besogne, abattant l'ouvrage avec une carrure toute masculine" (501). One is reminded of the real nineteenth-century female artist Rosa Bonheur, who applied for official permission to disguise herself in men's clothes in order to paint scenes outside the domestic sphere, at the Paris horse fair of 1853. Apparently, the sight of a woman painting in public among men and farm animals was too dangerous and shocking a scene to be allowed. However, Madame Sourdis does not have to disguise herself as a man in the literal sense of the term because she benefits from an even more effective tool that lends "legitimacy" to her paintings—her husband's signature on her work. In fact, Madame Sourdis' canvases are acclaimed in public only because they are signed by her husband. The importance of this signature and the process of naming cannot be overemphasized. For Lacan, gender difference is ordered within a patriarchal system in the name of the father or the "phallus," which is also the signifier of cultural meaning. That is, we gain access to the symbolic order, the cultural order of language, by a process which is predicated on the Oedipal drama—the repression of the mother and the submission to the law of the father. One could argue that Ferdinand's signature on her paintings functions as a phallic signifier. As such, his name lends legitimacy, acceptance and meaning to paintings that would not otherwise be empowered with these attributes. His name functions as the mark of the phallus, of cultural legitimacy, in that it allows Adèle's art to enter the symbolic system of male academic art where it can create meanings. Adèle understands all too well that her own

signature lacks the ability to gain her access to the male world of art: "—Oh! de la peinture de femme, ça ne vaut pas la peine," she remarks to Rennequin (478). She readily accepts, without complaint and even with pride, her husband's name on her paintings. But her access to the male art world involves a process that is akin to the Oedipal drama—she must repress her own art art, her own voice, in order to accept the name of the father. That is, her success is predicated on her repressing her own art and imitating her husband's: "Les oeuvres de Madame Sourdis n'auraient pris personne, tandis que les oeuvres de Ferdinand Sourdis conservaient toute leur force sur la critique et sur le public" (503-04). In this sense, she has only two real choices—either accept her husband's name on her paintings or remain forever outside the system.[14]

Adèle's imitation of her husband's art thus means that although she "succeeds" professionally in the male system, she still remains a bearer and not a maker of meanings. She only appropriates his name, "the phallus," which still functions as the agent of meaning. As such, her art only signifies the male artistic production that it imitates. Like many of the other female characters we have discussed, therefore, Adèle remains merely a sign of male creativity, a token of exchange in an economy controlled by men—an economy that includes her father who initiates her into art, her husband whose art she copies and who signs her work with his "stamp of approval," the male artist Rennequin who judges her work based on academic criteria created by men and finally the male artistic establishment who approves of her paintings only because they are done in secret and carry the phallic signifier. In this sense, Zola's story illustrates how the gender of the artist determines the way art is seen and how, in the modern world, the status of the artwork is inextricably tied to the status of its maker.

Zola's novel *L'Oeuvre* (1886), published fourteen years after "Madame Sourdis," reveals similar ideologies in its treatment of the innovative painter Claude Lantier and his wife, Christine. The novel represents the life of a modern Parisian artist of genius wrestling heroically with his art, symbolized by the female figure of the young and beautiful wife. The text thus supports the prevalent nineteenth-century notion that women inspire art but do not practice it; by depicting the principal art producer as male and the wife as the object of his art, the novel reinforces the culture/nature dichotomy while underlining the identity of the nineteenth-century artist increasingly conflated with notions of maleness and masculinity. But Christine is herself an



art producer whose art production is relegated to a secondary role, in four very brief passages. These scenes, in which she tries to validate her own work, are particularly pertinent for our discussion, for they provide a perspective on Zola's ideology concerning men's and women's artistic creation.

A number of strategies operate in the text that lend prestige to Claude's work while downplaying Christine's contributions through her association with the "lesser" arts, genres and media. As with Madame Sourdis, Zola anchors Christine's art in the craft tradition (fans she decorates with her mother), while placing her husband's work in the more prestigious realm of the "high" arts (painting). Again, as Parker and Pollock demonstrate, the different arts' prestige is intimately tied to the setting (public vs. domestic) in which they are made. In other words, the high arts draw much of their privileged status because they are produced largely outside the home by "professional" male artists; the "lesser arts," by contrast, lose prestige through their association with women and the domestic sphere (70). Accordingly, Christine's work never gains a public audience, but remains a private, domestic activity while Claude's art reaches a significant public and enjoys a generous amount of influence—his first great canvas, "Plein Air" works to revolutionize nineteenth-century painting after its exposure at the "Salon des Refusés." In addition, Claude's principal genre, the highly-regarded nude (a genre painted almost exclusively by men) is contrasted with Christine's less-appreciated landscapes. And again, the author portrays his male protagonist as an oil painter and the wife as a watercolorist.

Zola's association of men and women with specific genres and media is no mere coincidence, but can be explained by his adherence to a certain type of ideology—an ideology that asserts a categorical difference between "men's" and "women's" art. When Christine's looks of shock and dismay reveal her distaste for Claude's paintings, he comments, "Ah! certes, ce n'est pas de la peinture pour les dames, encore moins pour les jeunes filles . . ." (166). Such observations underline the author's association of men and women with completely different types of art and artistic sensibility. Zola again makes this distinction when he explains Christine's lack of appreciation for her husband's work: "Surtout elle n'y comprenait rien, grandie dans la tendresse et l'admiration *d'un autre art,* ces fines aquarelles de sa mère, ces éventails d'une délicatesse de rêve, où des couples lilas flottaient au milieu de jardins bleuâtres (165, my italics). Hence, through

flower imagery and the use of the term "delicate" (a term never used to describe Claude's work), Zola takes Christine and her mother's art out of the sphere of culture and situates it in the realm of nature. The flowers they paint become the product of a "delicate" feminine pastime and a reflection of their "delicate" feminine physique. More importantly, such remarks offer "natural" and biological explanations to account for differences in taste and art production. In other words, they suggest that there are specific kinds of art that "naturally" appeal to men and others that "naturally" appeal to women.

This strict separation of "men's" and "women's" art is reflected not only in the sphere of art production, but also in the husband and wife's diametrically-opposed critical skills and tastes.[15] The art that most appeals to Christine is aesthetically pleasing and reminds her of her mother's work: "Maman, qui avait beaucoup de talent, me faisait faire un peu d'aquarelle et je l'aidais parfois pour le fonds de ses éventails. . . . Elle en peignait de si beaux! (82). —Dame! j'ai eu si peu de leçons de maman! . . . Moi, j'aime ce que soit bien fait et que ça plaise. Alors, il [Claude] éclata franchement de rire" (166). Such comments again situate Christine in the realm of nature—they show that that her approach to art is largely emotional and is based on her nostalgic tie to her deceased mother. And Claude's laughter in reaction to her remarks implies that he does not take her opinions seriously. In fact, Claude is very wary of "women's judgments"; he makes a point never to "indoctrinate" Christine to art or even to discuss art with her: ". . . Claude, avec son dédain des jugements de la femme, ne l'endoctrinait pas, évitant au contraire de parler art avec elle . . ." (166). The husband and wife's contrasting approaches to art are all the more evident in the following scene in which Claude's important cultural agenda confronts Christine's naive lack of understanding:

> ". . . elle aurait déclaré cela absolument bien . . . si elle n'était restée interdite parfois, devant un terrain lilas ou devant un arbre bleu, qui déroutaient toutes ses *idées arrêtées* de coloration. Un jour qu'elle osait se permettre un critique, précisément à cause d'un peuplier lavé d'azur, il lui avait fait constater, sur la nature même, ce bleuissement délicat des feuilles. C'était vrai pourtant, l'arbre était bleu; mais, au fond, elle ne se rendait pas, *condamnait la réalité:* il ne pouvait y avoir des arbres bleus dans la nature." (212-13, my italics)

In this passage, Zola contrasts Claude's serious, sophisticated theories with his wife's lack of comprehension and narrow-minded views.



Whereas Claude brings new and interesting ideas and judgments to art—judgments based on his training, knowledge and imagination—Christine's understanding of art is locked in her naive tunnel vision, in her infantile "idées arrêtées" and her "condemnation of reality." Hence, once more we see that Zola's text attributes natural explanations (women's intellectual "inferiority") to what is in fact the result of ideological attitudes.

Other aspects of Zola's novel bear a striking resemblance to his earlier short story. Again, a professional male painter is positioned as the art authority and as the legitimate critical voice, making the relationship of husband/wife akin to that of teacher/pupil or master/disciple. Zola explicitly expresses this idea in the following quote: ". . . pendant un mois elle mit une blouse, travailla ainsi qu'une élève près du maître, dont elle copiait docilement une etude . . ." (297). This remark, moreover, maintains the dichotomy of male genius versus female manual dexterity by emphasizing Christine's manual, copying skills in contrast to her husband's intellect as master. But even in the realm of manual skill, Christine's abilities are very limited. In the scene where Claude and his wife paint together, the narration describes her "manual dexterity" in the following terms: "Elle dessina, risqua deux ou trois aquarelles, d'une main soigneuse et pensionnaire" (212). Not surprisingly, Christine gives up and puts down her brush shortly after this remark, faced with her husband's critical looks. Such comments—ones that emphasize a woman artist's second-rate manual skill—situate Zola in the company of certain art critics (such as James Laver) who explain the "inferiority" of art made by women through reference to "the weakness of the feminine hand."[16] And Christine's secondary position does not end here, for her inadequate manual skill is coupled with her lack of imagination. The main characteristics of her art are in fact its monotony and repetitive quality: ". . . deux ou trois motifs toujours répétés, un lac avec une ruine, un moulin battant l'eau d'une rivière, un chalet et des sapins blancs de neige" (165). Christine's art thus mechanically repeats the same scenes and, in this sense, it requires little intellect or originality. On the other hand, Claude's landscapes display "une vision nouvelle" and "science": ". . . il peignait avec une vision nouvelle, comme éclaircie, d'une gaieté de tons chantante. Jamais encore il n'avait eu cette science des reflets, cette sensation si juste des êtres et des choses, baignant dans la clarté diffuse (212-13). Moreover, Claude constantly seeks fresh inspiration: "Lui, fatigué des éternels motifs du jardin, tentait maintenant des études

au bord de l'eau . . ." (212). Zola again associates the male artist with learning, knowledge, inventiveness, originality and creativity while minimizing the female artist's contributions through her association with monotonous, repetitive, unimaginative art.

In the context of this ideology, it is interesting to note Claude's assessment of his wife's artwork:

> Un jour, Claude voulut absolument voir un petit album, son ancien album de Clermont, dont elle lui avait parlé. . . . Lui, le feuilleta en souriant et, comme il se taisait, elle murmura la première.:
> —Vous trouvez ça mauvais, n'est-ce pas?
> —Mais non, répondit-il, c'est innocent.
> Le mot la froissa, malgré le ton bonhomme qui le rendait aimable. (165)

Claude's comments on her work end here. A certain condescension on his part is implicit in this passage as evidenced by her discomfort before his remark, his smile, and his lack of critique except for the phrase ". . . c'est innocent." The implication in this laconic response is either that her art does not merit any more comment or that he does not think she would understand his criticisms of her work. Clearly, Christine's art amuses Claude for its "innocence"—that is for its unsophisticated, childlike quality. This opinion is reinforced when Zola describes her work as "the little landscapes of a schoolchild" while situating it in the realm of "amusement": "Souvent encore, elle-même s'amusait à de petits paysages d'écolière . . ." (165).[17] The adjective "petit," a term virtually never used in reference to her husband's art, is employed here to describe both Christine's landscapes and, as we have seen in the preceding quote, her art album. Such a term, through its association with Christine's art, underlines her work's "smallness" and "insignificance." Moreover, it betrays Zola's biological bias by implying that art made by a woman is a reflection of her "small" physical stature. The author further suggests the primitive, unevolved nature of Christine's work when he describes her folder as "a young girl's album": "Un après-midi, il fut surpris de la voir apporter son ancien album de jeune fille" (212). The implication of such comments, ones that label a woman's art as a "young girl's amusement," is that women do art before they are married (as "jeunes filles") but give art up for domestic duties when they grow up and become women.[18] Indeed, in this type of thinking, art produced by women is not the object of a possible career or even a life-long hobby, but is merely an activity that



helps young girls pass the time before marriage.

And like Madame Sourdis, Christine must take on masculine characteristics if she wants to pursue art seriously. In one important scene, she decides to devote herself wholeheartedly to artistic endeavors in order to win back her husband, but soon abandons her project upon discovering that, as a bonafide art producer, he no longer considers her a woman: "Puis son ancienne idée repoussa, peindre elle aussi, l'aller retrouver au fond même de sa fièvre d'art . . . elle mit une blouse, travailla ainsi comme un élève aupres du maître dont elle copiait docilement une etude . . . elle ne lâcha qu'en voyant sa tentative tourner contre son but, car il achevait d'oublier la femme en elle, comme trompé par cette besogne commune, sur un pied de simple camaraderie, d'homme à homme" (297). This scene is striking for its explicit association of legitimate artistic creation with male sexuality. As was the case with Madame Sourdis, Christine's dedication to art means not only copying man's work, but giving up her sex so as to become completely subsumed into maleness. Zola thus reinforces the stereotypical notion that women who are cultural producers cease to be women. And in the sense that cultural production is understood as an exclusively male domain, the paintbrush and painter's blouse again become phallic signifiers. Zola later amplifies his association of art with masculinity: In the last years of his career, Claude no longer sleeps with his wife for fear that his expended sexual energy will take away from the energy he spends on his work.

One must go back more than fifty years in time, to 1833, to find a somewhat different portrayal of female art production, in Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's novel, *l'Atelier d'un peintre: scènes de la vie privée*, the only nineteenth-century French text I have been able to locate that is written by a woman and portrays a female painter.[19] The young protagonist, Ondine, is similar to Madame Sourdis in that she is a painter who comes to art through the tutelage of a man, in this case her uncle, but is different from Zola's character in that the professional ambition she expresses is for herself, not for her husband. In her uncle's studio, where both male and female students are enrolled and where instruction is free of charge, she dares dream of her own fame and fortune as a painter, expressing the twinge of excitement she feels every time she steps in front of her canvas: "L'agreste Ondine elle-même . . . avait aussi ses émotions ambitieuses. Dès qu'elle était seule, au chevalet, les chaînes de son intelligence tombaient, son indolence s'éveillait, ses yeux osaient s'ouvrir tout grands; elle n'avait plus peur,

elle croyait peindre pour l'avenir, et pour l'avenir reconnaissant!" (41-42). She is, initially at least, utterly undistracted and single-minded in this ambition; she knows what she wants, and that is only to learn to paint: "Je ne veux apprendre qu'à peindre, mon oncle!" (64).

The novel is highly interesting in the sense that it constitutes, to some extent, a return to the Pygmalion myth in which a woman plays an important role in artistic creation. In the original myth, it is Pygmalion, an artist king, who makes a statue of a woman and falls in love with it, but it is a woman, the goddess Aphrodite, who brings the statue-woman (later named Galatea) to life. Hence, both man and woman participate in the artistic process. Nineteenth-century artistic and literary depictions of the myth, however, highly influenced by bourgeois and Romantic ideology, tend to portray the male artist as not only the creator of the art object, but as the person who, through the quasi-magical powers of his genius, breathes life into that object.[20] It could thus be argued that many writers and artists, in ignoring Aphrodite's contribution to the story, represented the myth in such a way as to diminish woman's power as artistic creator while accentuating male powers of creativity. Growing religious skepticism in France during the nineteenth century seems to be at least partially responsible for displacing Aphrodite in the myth with an increasing misogyny in such a way that the male artist was transformed into a god. In this important scene, however, Desbordes-Valmore's novel restores the meaning of the original myth in the sense that it is a woman who brings a statue to life through her art. Rather than dismiss Ondine's artistic skill in a few brief phrases, the author actually shows her at work, describing her joy, focus, sense of accomplishment, competence and intelligence as she moves her pencil over paper with her "hand of action." Hence, the following scene, in which she begins work on her "tête de mort" drawing of a sculpture, is truly unique in the annals of French literature for its description of a woman's thrill at the moment of her own artistic creation. She is so focused on her work, moreover, that she even talks to the statue as if it were a real person, declaring to it her determination to bring it to life through art:

> "Elle dessinait donc sans distraction l'horrible tête où elle cherchait à retrouver quelques traits de la vie . . .—Tu mens! Dit la jeune fille impatientée et un peu frissonante; je te forcerai bien à n'être plus si laide! Elle fit courir alors son crayon avec une incroyable vitesse sur le papier, autour de cette tête trop exactement reproduite; elle rougissait d'un air de triomphe, et de sa main, qui tremblait d'action et de joie, volait sur le dessin en y jetant la pensée qui animait ses yeux d'un singulier éclat." (66-67)



The most successful aspect of the sketch, however, is Ondine's depiction of a bunch of lilacs that she has added to the sculpture in the form of a crown. Thus, one could argue that the author does mitigate to a certain extent her protagonist's artistic achievements by consigning her skills to one of the most acceptable and traditional forms of "women's art"—the rendering of flowers. But although this scene does associate Ondine with nature while placing her in a somewhat traditional framework, it is interesting to note that none of the denigrating vocabulary that we have seen in other texts exists here. In fact, it is her sincerity and skill that are emphasized, in terms such as "integrity of form and color": "Ce qu'elle caressa le plus et réussit le mieux dans la parure de cette tête de mort, rendue avec une telle intégrité de forme et de couleur, ce fut une touffe de lilas qui pendait en couronne sur l'ivoire morne et saillant du front; ce débris sans âme, au milieu de fleurs épanouies, semblait nager dans les parfums de la vie" (90). I would like to suggest, moreover, that Ondine's felicitous juxtaposition of the themes of life and death (as illustrated by the head of death sculpture contrasted with the fresh flowers) places her art more in the category of "vanitas" painting, a still life genre that emphasizes the ephemeral nature of life while portraying such objects as skulls, flowers, fruit and half-empty wine bottles, than in the category of domestic still life or flower painting. In other words, her choice of subject matter, according to academic criteria of the period, adds a metaphysical dimension to the work that is not present in the more purely craft-related genres.[21]

Several aspects of Ondine's fictional life help to explain the workings of such a remarkable character in nineteenth-century French fiction. First of all, the author lends her a sort of female role model in the form of a certain Mademoiselle Lescot—a contemporary, renowned woman painter that Ondine may admire. Judging by the names of some of Lescot's most famous artworks ("Le Baisement des pieds à Rome," "Le Condamné à mort," "Meunier et son Fils," "Prière pendant l'orage"), many of them treat mythological and religious subjects, placing them in the highly appreciated category of history painting, a genre practiced by few women artists of the period. In the following passage, Ondine expresses her great appreciation for Lescot—an appreciation shared, remarkably, by the French art world that not only

allows her to exhibit her works alongside those of her male collegues but has also elevated her to the highest echelon of artistic glory: "Et ce nom, plein de grâce et de gloire, bruissait partout aux oreilles timides et attentives d'Ondine, tandis que la foule tourbillonait devant ces tableaux qui intéressaient tant d'yeux et tant d'âmes, et venaient d'inscrire un nom de femme parmi les lauréats de l'école française" (44). I would like to suggest that Mademoiselle Lescot is modeled after the real artist Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, the quintessential court painter—an unusually gifted, self-confident woman portraitist with the ability to present her sitters to their best advantage. The famous Vigée-Lebrun lived until 1842 and her memoirs were first published in 1835, just two years after the publication of Desbordes-Valmore's novel (Heller 58).

Another influential force that works to distinguish Ondine from other fictional women painters is her very sympathetic uncle who, rather then see her talent as a threat to his own, sincerely hopes that she will receive some of the fame and recognition that he has failed to attain in his own career. In a letter to Ondine's sister, he writes, "Il serait assez plaisante que son oncle, qui n'a rien fait jaillir de sa palette que des portraits mal payés, parvînt à faire de sa nièce une artiste un peu célèbre . . ." (8). Her uncle further underlines his egalitarian views in one of the novel's most striking scenes. One day, in order to make room for a new student, he decides to remove the partition that separates the men's studio from the women's. He admits that this separation is not only unnecessary, but also carries the nefarious effect of isolating the women students from the rest of the work environment. In addressing the women painters, he tells them that they should not isolate themselves and he reassures them that they can work alongside the men without fear: "Je ne vois pas qu'il soit bien nécessaire que vous vous isoliez ainsi aux heures laborieuses. . . . Nous ne vous faisons pas peur, j'espère?" (117). Again, this scene is a remarkable one, since it flies in the face of nineteenth-century artistic practices by which men and women were strictly separated into different art studios and schools.

Unfortunately, Desbordes-Valmore's novel does not live up to its great promise, since the author shifts her narrative, in the last two thirds of the work, to a conventional love story between the protagonist and Yorick, one of the artists of "genius" in her uncle's studio. Regrettably, the studio serves primarily as a setting for romance as soon as Ondine is old enough to be interested in the opposite sex. And



at her uncle's urging, Yorick begins to give Ondine advice on her art, hence signaling a return to the traditional relationship of male master to female pupil. The vocabulary of action that was apparent when she worked on her vanitas sketch, moreover, is replaced by one of docility and submission. As her uncle remarks to Yorick: "Vous voyez que je ne dois pas être mécontent de sa *docilité* à nos conseils; on finit toujours par l'aimer mieux, après qu'on l'a un peu grondée" (149, my italics). Furthermore, she now attributes her progress in art to Yorick's skills as a teacher and to her strong feelings for him, not to her own hard work, skill or imagination. In the following scene, therefore, she gives him the credit for her artistic achievements while framing them within the confines of her ultimate dream—marriage: "Comme son oncle chérira Yorick, dès qu'il saura que c'est à lui qu'elle doit ses progrès, et le talent qu'elle va bientôt avoir! Et lui, comme il sera fier de le lui avoir donné! Quelle sympathie de goûts, d'humeurs! Quelle douce maison, plus tard, quand sa soeur y viendra, étonné, ecurieuse, contente! Et qu'elle dira: mariée! Ondine! Est-ce possible?" (246-47). Hence, although the author never explicitly denigrates women's artistic production in Zola-like fashion, she does seem to share some of the master of Médan's ideological concepts: Art is defined as essentially an amateur activity for young girls. Woman's nature is to be realized above all through love and marriage, not professional achievements. We have the impression that Desbordes-Valmore started out to write the story of a successful woman painter but ended up making her an utterly conventional romantic heroine and, through her untimely death, a martyr to love.

It is quite frustrating that for each step forward in the feminist sense, some aspect of the plot inevitably works against the novel's more subversive and innovative possibilities. For instance, her uncle asks Ondine to do a painting for the next Salon and even accompanies her to look at art in the renowned Luxembourg gallery, but this storyline is never carried through. We do not find out if she ever finishes or exhibits the work. In addition, Ondine clearly expresses artistic ambition, as we have seen, but describes painting all too often as merely a way to get over the loss of her parents or as a way of pleasing her uncle and her boyfriend. She is given the perfect female role model, moreover, but never gains the opportunity to meet her or to emulate her career. In fact, nothing more is said about Madame Lescot after a few initial remarks. Rather than seek the tutelage of a woman, Ondine thus remains the student of two men—her uncle and Yorick. She

completes a very promising sketch of an image of death, but when it is found immediately after her own demise, we suspect that it serves more as a foreshadowing device than as a bold attempt to lend creedence to a woman's art. She paints alongside male artists and even confronts them as a group at one point, telling them in no uncertain terms that she will not tolerate being mistreated or ignored in the studio, but she dies the next morning of a broken heart. Whereas her uncle states that he will be sure to exhibit one of Yorick's masterpieces at the upcoming Salon (Yorick also dies at the end of the novel), no mention is made of the possibility of exhibiting Ondine's artwork postumously. Hence, whether for personal, ideological or financial reasons, whether to make her story more palatable to contemporary readers or simply to sell more books, it seems clear that Desbordes-Valmore felt strongly inclined to counter each potentially-subversive literary gesture with an enactment of conservative social prescriptions, with a reinforcement of traditional feminine ideals. Indeed, she constantly thwarts her own attempts to validate women's art production through the use of a persistent bourgeois subtext that continually seeks to restore notions of "proper womanhood." Hence, despite some good intentions, both Zola and Desbordes-Valmore end up drastically diminishing women's artistic achievements, albeit in different ways—Zola through the outright dismissal of women's talent or through making his character homely and undesirable, and Desbordes-Valmore through subsuming her protagonist's artistic potential into a conventional love story. Sadly then, we realize that in nineteenth-century France, virtually no fiction writer saw fit to write the story of a woman who realizes her artistic potential in the visual arts.

The three texts I have discussed may seem unusually stereotypical, but they are unfortunately representative of a major tendency in nineteenth-century artistic and literary discourse—a discourse that tended either to maintain total critical silence about women's contributions as art producers, or to denigrate their contributions by placing "women's art" in a special category as an extension of their domestic and refining role in society, quintessentially "feminine, graceful, delicate and decorative."[22] The way art is seen in these texts is based on the intersection of two opposing notions—the concept of the artist as male genius and the stereotype of femininity as inherently incapable of genius. In this sense, the works illustrate the extent to which maleness and masculinity can be taken as the absolute standard of excellence in art. Structured on a series of binary operations such as professional artist/domesticated woman, art/delicate pastime, oil/watercolor, high art/craft, these texts tend to accept these arbitrary hierarchies as self-evident truths of nature. Differences in art and gender are thus attributable to nature and biology instead of societal differences. Therefore, the historical processes by which women came to specialize in certain types of art (such as still-life and flower painting) are obscured by the authors' tendency to identify women with nature. Fused into the prevailing notion of femininity, art made by women in these works becomes solely an extension of "womanliness" and the female artist becomes a woman only fulfilling her "nature." This type of ideology effectively removes women's art and women artists from the field of fine arts. (Parker and Pollock 58).[23]



In certain respects, the artistic and bourgeois discourses of the nineteenth century presented two opposing trends. As patronage gave way to the market by the end of the Old Regime, many artists and writers deplored the new bourgeois world of buying and selling from which they had been mostly excluded or protected before. This hostility between the two camps was certainly fueled by the "bourgeois" king Louis-Philippe's indifference toward art and literature—during the nearly two decades of the July Monarchy, state patronage of the arts fell to a particularly low level (Siegel 13). But, a major irony of the nineteenth-century artistic establishment—an irony I hope to have brought to light—is that while it claimed, in some respects, to be adamantly against the new bourgeois society, it was, upon closer examination, as much a part of it as anyone or anything.[24] For its own artistic policies and practices, that excluded women from official art schools and official exhibitions, helped to create and promote a particular type of binary bourgeois ideology in which men were associated with public life, artistic creation, and cultural production, whereas women were associated with domesticity, childbirth and natural creation. Therefore, in some respects, the nineteenth-century artists who bought into the type of thinking that excluded women from artistic production were themselves at the source of the bourgeois ideology that many of them claimed to abhor.

Clearly, women have not been absent from the history of art, as many nineteenth-century texts might lead us to believe, but their relation to artistic and social structures has been different to that of male artists. In other words, women artists are not outside history or culture but occupy and speak from a different place within it. But to see women's history only as a progressive struggle against great odds and

restrictions is to fall into the trap of unwittingly reasserting the established male standards as the appropriate norm. What is needed is feminist intervention into art and literary history in order to create a whole new paradigm for studying the arts—a paradigm that would consider art (and literature) as a *social practice*, while providing for the study of theories of consumption and cultural production. As Griselda Pollock has pointed out, the difficult task of establishing another approach is, happily, already underway: "Shifting the paradigm of art history involves much more than adding new materials—women and their history—to existing categories and methods. It has led to wholly new ways of conceptualizing what it is we study and how we do it" (5).

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## Notes

[1]For an introduction to the new feminist art criticism see Hollis Clayson's *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era*, Tamar Garb's *Bodies of Modernity* and *Sisters of the Brush*, Linda Nochlin's *Women, Art, Power and Other Essays*, *The Politics of Vision* and *Representing Women*, Griselda Pollock's *Vision and Difference*, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock's *Old Mistresses* and Raven, Langer and Frueh's *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology*.

[2]The notion that women should be kept from anatomy studies and the nude model was so tenacious that in 1886, Thomas Eakins, teaching at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts which did train many women and had instituted an experimental female life class in the 1870s, was dismissed after a public outcry when he removed the loin-cloth from a male model in an anatomy lecture before a mixed audience (Parker and Pollock 35).

[3]However, scholars have shown little interest in Zola's story. Indeed, only a single article has been devoted to "Madame Sourdis" since 1961—John Christie's article in *Nottingham French Studies*, dating from 1966.

[4]In her book *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*, Christine Battersby offers a history of the concept and the term "genius," showing the explicit and implicit gender bias in both. Starting from the persistence of sexual prejudice in art and literary criticism today, she moves back in time to explore the way that our modern notions of creativity are modeled on notions of a male God creating the universe, and the strategies used to present all creative and procreative power as the attribute of males.

[5]James Laver's comments about Vigée-Lebrun are quite similar, in that they reduce her talent to the fact that she was the "wife of" a picture dealer and the "daughter of" a painter: "Madame Vigée Lebrun was the wife of the picture dealer Le Brun and the daughter of a portrait painter" (17). Hence, again, feminine artistic talent is explained largely through its association with men.



[6]Zola constantly employs such terms (vigor, strength, virility) in his art criticism to describe what constitutes good art: ". . . j'ai la plus profonde admiration pour les oeuvres individuelles, pour celles qui sortent d'un jet d'une *main vigoureuse* et unique" (60). ". . . je demande uniquement à l'artiste d'être personnel et *puissant* " (77). "L'âge démocratique où nous entrons exigera un art *viril* "(181, my italics). See also pp. 80-82, 86-88, 119 and 137 in *Mon Salon/Manet/Ecrits sur l'art*.

[7]See for instance, Zola's article : "Lettres de Paris: Exposition de Tableaux à Paris" in which he evaluates the current status of French art. Here, "habilité" (manual dexterity) is clearly subordinate to genius, as a sort of stepping stone or raw material that may lead to it: ". . . même si pour l'heure il n'y a pas de *génies*, on possède cependant la matière première indispensable à leur éclosion, c'est-à-dire la technique portée à son point de perfection, *une habilité remarquable* et l'art de savoir imiter" (217, my italics).

[8]The following comments by James Laver well illustrate this ideology—one which maintains a hierarchy of artistic media (i.e. oil paint as opposed to watercolor) as well as a gender specificity of those media: "In the nineteenth century women artists seem to fall behind a little. There is no female Turner, no female Constable, no great name at all. Water-colour painting was now considered a desirable accomplishment for all young ladies; it was included in the curriculum of 'Ladies' Academies,' together with the pianoforte and 'the use of the globes.' But the results are not very impressive. Few women seem to have attempted oil painting, either as amateurs or professionals" (19).

[9]Again, James Laver demonstrates the way in which women have been associated with the "lesser" media and genres—in this case, pastel: "She [Rosalba Carriera] also attempted painting in oil, but soon began to specialize in the pastel portrait. Pastel is a medium suited (to put it bluntly) to those who cannot draw with absolute precision. A lively feeling for colour harmony, and the decorative sense which women often possess, concealed the weaknesses of her draughtsmanship, and her crayon portraits soon found eager purchasers" (15). It should be noted, however, that in cases where men, Reynolds, Chardin and Redon for instance, specialized in "lesser" genres or methods, their reputations were never impaired (Parker and Pollock 35).

[10]Zola describes Ferdinand's inability to produce art in terms of "impuissance" in the following examples: ". . . Ferdinand n'avançait plus, il se perdait dans les details . . . tournant sur lui-même, se dévorant dans son *impuissance"* (493); "Et alors elle se trouvait bien obligée de terminer en hâte la besogne . . . lorsqu'elle le voyait s'enrager d'*impuissance"* (499); "C'était une coin d'une naïveté charmante . . . qui aidait Ferdinand à porter le sentiment sourd de son *impuissance"* (504); "Sans doute il y avait là une conséquence de son *impuissance* elle-même, un résultat du long détraquement de ses facultés d'artiste" (506, my italics).

[11]In his art criticism, Zola explicitly links women with second-rate art production. In his article entitled "Le Moment Artistique" (1866), for instance, he bemoans the unfortunate state of French art, while suggesting that too many French artists have to much "woman" in them: "Allez donc voir si les maîtres de la Renaissance songeaient aux adorables petits riens devant lesquels nous nous pâmons; ils étaient de *puissantes* natures qui peignaient en pleine vie. Nous autres, nous sommes nerveux et inquiets; *il y a beaucoup de la femme en nous,* et nous nous sentons si faibles et si usés que la santé plantureuse nous déplaît. Parlez-moi des sentimentalités et des mièvreries!" (62, my italics). In "Les Actualistes" (1868), the author employs a similar strategy in describing the "sorry lot" of contemporary French painters: "Il y a une tendance certaine vers les sujets modernes. Mais combien sont rares les peintres qui comprennent ce qu'ils font, qui vont à la réalité par amour fervent pour la réalité. *Nos artistes sont des femmes qui veulent plaire. Ils coquettent la foule"* (151-52, my italics). And in "Les Realistes du Salon"(1866), Zola again underlines the inferior nature of women's art by comparing it with children's art, thereby excluding women from the category he considers "serious art": "Si vous entendez par ce terme [réalisme] la nécessités où sont les peintres d'étudier et de rendre la nature vraie, il est hors de doute que *tous les artistes* doivent être réalistes. *Peindre des rêves est un jeu d'enfant et de femme; les hommes ont charge de peindre des réalités"* (73, my italics). Inherent in his explanation of the task of "all artists," therefore, is the assumption that women and children are absent from that category.

[12]In 1876, Zola again explicitly links painting with male sexuality (and hence the paintbrush with the phallus) in an amusing passage from his art criticism: "Le jury ne peut empêcher les oeuvres de génie de voir le jour, mais il joue un vilain rôle qui finira par rebuter tout le monde car tel un eunuque, le sabre à la main, il se tient à la porte du Salon pour en interdire l'accès aux talents plein de virilité" (*Mon Salon* 253).

[13]A more complete citation of Baudelaire's appreciation of Eugénie Gautier is in order. In his "Salon of 1845" he wrote: "Cette femme a l'intelligence des maîtres;—elle a du Van Dyck;—elle peint comme un homme. . . . La peinture de Mlle. Eugénie Gautier n'a aucun rapport avec la peinture de femme. . . ." (*Oeuvres Complètes* Vol. II, 377)

[14]Feminist critics such as Luce Irigaray have often pointed out this dilemma (of either "becoming a man" or remaining forever outside the cultural system) as a major one confronted by women in patriarchal societies. Caught in the specular logic of patriarchy, woman can choose either to remain silent, producing incomprehensible babble (any utterance that falls outside the logic of the same will by definition be incomprehensible to the male master discourse), or to *enact* the specular representation of herself as a lesser male. The latter option, the woman as mimic, is, for Irigaray, a form of hysteria. The hysteric *mimes* her own sexuality in a masculine mode, since this is the only way she can rescue something of her own desire. The hysteric's dramatization ("mise en scène") of herself is thus a result of her exclusion from patriarchal discourse (see *Speculum of the Other Woman*, especially "Female Hom(m)osexuality", pp. 98-103). Zola's story can be read as an illustration of this dilemma in the sense that Madame Sourdis learns to mimic her husband and her husband's art in order to be accepted in the male cultural system.



[15]In his article entitled "Edouard Manet" (1868), Zola suggests that women are easily taken in by facile, precious talent, and thus are not very good art critics: "Vous vous plaignez qu'Edouard Manet manque d'habilité. En effet, ses confrères sont misérablement adroits auprès de lui. Je viens de voir quelques douzaines de portraits grattés et regrattés, qui pourraient servir avec avantage d'étiquettes à des boîtes de gants. Les jolies femmes trouvent cela charmant. Mais moi, je ne suis pas une jolie femme, je pense que ces travaux d'adresse méritent au plus la curiosité qu'offre une tapisserie faite à petits points" (143). Here, Zola again associates women's tastes with domestic craft.

[16]Laver's comment on seventeenth-century women artists should be noted again: "Some women artists tried to emulate Frans Hals but the vigorous brush stokes of the master were beyond their capability, one has only to look at the works of a painter like Judith Leyster . . . to detect the weakness of the feminine hand" (16). But, as Parker and Pollock point out, if the "weakness of femininity" is so clear in contrast to the "masculine vigor" of Frans Hals, why were so many works by Leyster attributed to Hals in the past? (Leyster's existence was rediscovered in 1892 when a painting thought to be by Hals was found to have her signature).

[17]Zola's implicit lack of consideration for Christine's art becomes more obvious in these remarks from his art criticism—remarks very similar to his appreciation of her art in *l'Oeuvre*: "Ma volonté energique est celle-ci: je ne veux pas des oeuvres d'écoliers faites sur des modèles fournis par des maîtres. Ces oeuvres me rappellent les pages d'écriture que je traçais étant enfant, d'après des pages lithographiées ouvertes devant moi" (61).

[18]The example of the Morisot sisters illustrates the potency of nineteenth-century ideology concerning women's "duty" to marry and to give up artistic practice upon marriage. The three ambitious and talented sisters became for a short time the pupils of Camille Corot. However, the haut-bourgeois environment soon claimed the eldest, Yves, whose marriage denied her further access to art practice. Though Edme was considered the most gifted by her teachers, her career was also cut short—upon her marriage in 1869 she was obliged by social convention to abandon all painting but pastiches of her younger sister's work (Parker and Pollock 43). Shortly afterwards she wrote sadly to Berthe, (the only one of the three sisters whose marriage did not end her career) revealing her sense of loss: ". . . Je suis souvent avec toi, ma chère Berthe, par la pensée; je te suis dans ton atelier et je voudrais pouvoir m'échapper ne fût-ce qu'un quart d'heure pour respirer cette atmosphère dont nous avons vécu depuis de longues années (23). Fortunately, Berthe herself escaped her sisters' fate. Her marriage to Manet's brother was a happy one that in no way obligated her to give up her art.

[19]This novel saw only one edition and may be found in only a few rare

book librairies, including Harvard and Indiana Universities.

[20]The nineteenth century's dramatic reinterpretation of the ancient Pygmalion myth may be observed in many paintings of the period, such as Courbet's "L'Atelier du peintre" (1855), Gérôme's "Marché d'esclaves" (1866), "Pygmalion et Galatée" (1890) and "Le modèle de l'artiste" (1895) and Ingres' "Raphael et la Fornaria" (1814), as well as in less-known works such as Edouard Dantan's "Moulage" (1887) and Félicien Rops' "L'artiste et modèle dans l'atelier" (1875). Imbued with contemporary bourgeois and Romantic ideology, these works demonstrate how the modern story becomes drastically more male-centered and how women's creative powers can be completely ignored.

[21]For an excellent discussion of vanitas painting, see Norman Bryson's *Looking at the Overlooked.*

[22]In fact, for Parker and Pollock, "the hey-day of this special characterization of women's art is without a doubt the nineteenth century" (9).

[23]"What accounts for the endless assertion of a feminine stereotype, a feminine sensibility, a feminine art? Precisely the necessity to provide an opposite against which male art and the male-artist find meaning and sustain their dominance. Indeed, the art of men can only maintain its dominance and privilege by having a negative to its positive, a feminine to its masculine" (Parker and Pollock 80). Thus, in this sense, I would like to suggest that Zola makes mention of women artists not because of any feminist sensibility on his part or any desire to lend expression to woman's accomplishments, but rather to reconfirm and maintain the dominance and "superiority" of male art by means of comparision with "inferior" female art.

[24]In his book *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930*, Jerrold Seigel claims that nineteenth-century "marginal" groups such as artists, bohemians, and dandies were not strictly separate and oppositional groups vis-à-vis the bourgeoisie, as is the common notion, but actually grew out of and from within the bourgeoisie.

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