

Spring 2009

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Recommended Citation

Starr, Juliana. "Pygmalion Politics in Balzac's *Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu*." *French Studies Bulletin: A Quarterly Supplement* 110.(2009): 17-19.

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PYGMALION POLITICS IN BALZAC'S *LE CHEF-D'ŒUVRE INCONNU*

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The complex of beliefs involving male power, naked female models, and the creation of art receives its most perfect rationalization in the ever-popular nineteenth-century representation of the Pygmalion myth: stone beauty made flesh by the warming glow of masculine desire.¹ In the original myth, it is Pygmalion 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, Galatea, to life. Hence both man and woman participate in the artistic process. Nineteenth-century depictions of the myth, however, tend to portray the male artist as not only the creator of the art object, but also as the one who, through the quasi-magical powers of his genius, breathes life into that object.² It could thus be argued that many artists, in ignoring Aphrodite's contribution, represented the story in such a way as to diminish women's power as artistic creator while accentuating male powers of creativity. In this sense, the myth may be studied in terms of the discourses of gender difference.

Balzac's narrative *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* (begun in 1831 and heavily revised in 1837) was one of the first nineteenth-century texts to reveal a preoccupation with the political forces at work in the relationship between male artists and nude female models. Set in Paris in 1612, the story deals with the artistic passion of several male painters and their attempt to gain an understanding of Ideal Beauty through their contact with a beautiful young woman, Gillette, whom they recruit, against her will, to be their nude model. The story thus centres on an unequal power struggle between male artists and their model. In the sense that she is used as an instrument for obtaining artistic knowledge, her name itself, a diminutive, feminized version of the masculine name 'Gilles', may be read as particularly meaningful in this context – it suggests her consignment to the status of child and second-class citizen.³

An important reference to Pygmalion occurs in the characterization of the masterful painter, Mabuse, who has discovered the 'secret du relief' – a painting technique purported to 'bring figures to life' like no other. His technique is passed on through four generations of painters – a sort of patriarchal guild in which artistic genius and know-how are passed down from man to man. In the sense that all the means of artistic production, knowledge, and exchange are controlled exclusively by men, Irigaray's notion of the 'hom(m)osexual monopoly' applies to Balzac's story: 'tous les systèmes d'échanges qui organisent les sociétés patriarcales, et toutes les modalités de travail productif qui y sont reconnues, valorisées [...] sont affaire d'hommes. Femmes, signes, marchandises, sont toujours renvoyés pour leur production à l'homme [...] et ils passent toujours d'homme à un autre homme.'⁴

At the heart of the text's preoccupation with questions of power are in fact two women, one real and one painted. For ten years, Frenhofer has been working on his masterpiece entitled *La Belle Noiseuse*, a nude that portrays the beautiful courtesan, Catherine Lescault. The younger artists, Porbus and Poussin, hope to see the work in order to learn the secret of creating Ideal Beauty, but Frenhofer jealously guards it for himself, as if Catherine were a 'real' lover he does not want to 'prostitute' by showing her to others. (His protectiveness is thus ironic, in that the work depicts a woman whose very profession is to be readily available to men).⁵ To gain access to the painting, Porbus and Poussin make an important arrangement with Frenhofer: they will show him Poussin's lover, the beautiful Gillette, a real woman whom they think would be Frenhofer's Ideal Model, and in return, Frenhofer must show them Catherine, his masterpiece. At the heart of this 'deal' are in fact two myths – that of Pygmalion struggling to create Perfect Beauty, but also the Romantic image of the artist forced to choose between muse and mistress. More importantly, at the basis of this arrangement is the notion that women are interchangeable.

Indeed, in the sense that the artists create a relationship of equivalence between the women in which one can readily substitute for the other (the aesthetic ideal – Catherine, for the ideal in flesh Gillette) Balzac's story sets up a kind of economy in which men are the exchangers and women are the tokens of exchange. This is evident in Porbus's justification of the deal, when Frenhofer initially resists showing his painted mistress to others: 'Mais n'est-ce pas femme pour femme? Poussin ne livre-t-il pas sa maîtresse à vos regards?'⁶ Hence, underlying Porbus's notion of a 'fair woman-for-woman deal' is the more mundane assumption that women are exchangeable and interchangeable entities. The subjection of Gillette's body to masculine control entails a process similar to the transformation of raw material into a commodity: the material, corporeal value of her body (that she wants to protect), is superseded by the social and symbolic value that serves the men in the narrative and their Art. In fact, for Irigaray, a woman is divided into two irreconcilable bodies: her 'natural' body and her socially valued, exchangeable one: '*La marchandise – la femme – est divisée en deux "corps" irréconciliables:*

son corps “naturel”, et son corps valeureux socialement, échangeable’.⁷ Not surprisingly, Gillette’s posing proves humiliating and destroys her relationship with Poussin.

The painters’ quest turns out to be a failure. Their secret technique, purported to breathe life into inanimate objects, possesses no power.⁸ The wealthy, sumptuously-clad Frenhofer, especially, must confront this fact: ‘je n’ai donc ni talent, ni capacité, *je ne suis plus qu’un homme riche* qui, en marchant, ne fait que marcher! Je n’aurai donc rien produit!’ (p. 438, my italics). This statement is a significant one that may offer a key to his artistic bankruptcy. His comments imply that all he really possesses, in the end, is his money, which is unfortunately powerless to procure for him what he really wants – Pygmalion’s divine gift of bringing inanimate objects to life. By underlining the incompatibility of money and art in Balzacian thought, Claude Bernard offers the following insights into Frenhofer’s downfall: ‘Dans l’idéologie balzacienne, la circulation de l’argent reste infructueuse, alors que celle de l’Art est créatrice: elle fait surgir le tout du néant. Souligner la vénalité de l’art, sa prostitution, pour en garantir “l’échange”, n’est-ce pas l’entacher de stérilité?’⁹ Bernard’s observations, which draw the sharp distinction between the creative artistic enterprise and the essentially uncreative monetary system, suggest that Frenhofer’s downfall originates in his mistaken notions about the compatibility of art and money.¹⁰ Perhaps his fatal mistake was to believe that the exchange of money and women could somehow procure him artistic immortality.¹¹

Balzac clearly yearned for a world in which the integrity and wholeness of the art object would be protected against commodification. His story testifies to his perception of this dilemma – the strong desire to separate aesthetics from economics and the extreme difficulty of doing so – as one of the major artistic problems of his time, while exemplifying the unequal power relations between men and women at the centre of that problem.

¹ Linda Nochlin, ‘Women, Art, and Power’, in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York, Harper & Row, 1988), p. 19.

² Indeed, implicit in Frenhofer’s remarks about his masterpiece is the erroneous notion that Pygmalion both created his statue and brought it to life: ‘Nous ignorons le temps qu’employa le seigneur Pygmalion pour faire la seule statue qui ait marché!’: Honoré de Balzac, *Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu*, in *La Comédie humaine*, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex and others, 12 vols (Paris, Gallimard, ‘Bibliothèque de la Pléiade’, 1976–81), X, p. 425. Subsequent page references will be to this edition.

³ Marie Lathers, however, has made an appeal for the agency of Gillette as an active participant in the artwork that is the written text. See her ‘Modesty and the Artist’s Model in ‘*Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu*’, *Symposium* 64 (1992), 49-71, and *Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist’s Model* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2001), pp. 86-108.

⁴ Luce Irigaray, ‘Le Marché des femmes’, in *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un* (Paris, Minuit, 1977), p. 168.

⁵ As Diana Knight has shown, the story contains yet another painted prostitute, Porbus’s *Marie égyptienne*, an object of exchange that passes through the hands of all three painters: Porbus paints her, Poussin copies her, and Frenhofer touches up her portrait. See *Balzac and the Model of Painting: Artist Stories in ‘La Comédie humaine’* (London, Legenda, 2007), pp. 17-18.

⁶ Op. cit., p. 432.

⁷ Irigaray, op. cit., p. 176.

⁸ Alexandra Wettlaufer has convincingly argued that Balzac portrays his fictional artists as deluded failures in an attempt to maintain or regain the generic hegemony of literature over the visual arts. See *Pen vs. Paintbrush: Girodet, Balzac and the Myth of Pygmalion in Postrevolutionary France* (New York, Palgrave, 2001), pp. 29-30.

⁹ Claude E. Bernard, ‘La Problématique de l’échange dans *Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu* d’Honoré de Balzac’, *L’Année balzacienne* 1983, p. 211.

¹⁰ In fact, women are not the only ones objectified in the story, as the artists themselves function as prostitutes. See Michael D. Houston, ‘L’Artiste comme prostituée dans *Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu* d’Honoré de Balzac’, *Romance Notes* 37 (1996), 89-95.

¹¹ The first time Frenhofer speaks is to make Porbus a generous offer for his *Marie égyptienne*, a painting that he does not even particularly admire. Moments later, he pays two gold coins for Poussin’s copy.