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“Ce viol brutal... la fit ensuite se mépriser”: Rape Culture in *La Curée*

Juliana Starr
University of New Orleans

RÉSUMÉ

*Ces derniers temps, la notoriété internationale du mouvement #MeToo et d'événements hautement médiatisés tels que l'épidémie de viols en Inde et le scandale des agressions sexuelles à Liberty University a suscité un renouveau d'intérêt au sujet du viol et de la culture du viol – celle-ci étant définie comme un environnement dans lequel le viol est prévalent et où les violences sexuelles faites aux femmes sont normalisées et excusées dans les médias et la culture populaire. Le roman *La Curée* (1871) d'Émile Zola, qui dépeint le viol de Renée Béraud du Châtel, âgée de 19 ans, et ses conséquences durant un Second Empire au despotisme féroce, offre un exemple d'une des premières œuvres littéraires à présenter une vision prémonitoire glaçante d'une culture du viol qui s'apparente de manière frappante à la nôtre. À partir d'une variété de sources académiques et d'analyses de féministes et d'experts spécialisés en matière de viol, je montrerai comment le texte de Zola révèle les attitudes et les mécanismes qui créent, maintiennent et perpétuent la culture du viol, et incluent par exemple le blâme de la victime, la protection de la réputation des violeurs, et le fait de raconter des plaisanteries au détriment des victimes de viol. Je démontrerai aussi comment Renée offre un exemple contemporain d'une survivante d'agression sexuelle qui présente nombre des symptômes associés au traumatisme dû au viol et maintenant identifiés par les experts. Ce faisant, je soulignerai l'actualité remarquable de cette œuvre de Zola, dont 2021 marque le cent-cinquantième anniversaire, et son attrait potentiel pour les étudiants d'aujourd'hui qui ont parfois des difficultés à saisir la pertinence des textes du XIXe siècle pour leurs propres vies.*

ABSTRACT

*Recently, the international renown of the #MeToo movement and high-profile news events like the rape epidemic in India and the sexual assault scandal on the campus of Liberty University, have sparked renewed concern about the harmful effects of rape and rape culture – the latter being defined as an environment in which rape is prevalent and in which sexual violence against women is normalized and excused in the media and popular culture. Émile Zola's novel *La Curée* (1871), depicting the rape of nineteen-year-old Renée Béraud du Châtel and its aftermath during the ferocious Second Empire, is an example of an early literary work that paints a prescient and daunting view of a culture of rape bearing a striking similarity to our own. Using a variety of academic sources as well as findings of feminists and experts on rape, I will show how Zola's text reveals the attitudes and mechanisms that create, sustain, and perpetuate rape culture – such as victim blaming, defending the reputation of rapists, the ostracizing of survivors of sexual assault,*

and the telling of jokes at the expense of rape victims. I will also demonstrate how Renée offers a contemporary example of a survivor of sexual assault, with many of the symptoms of rape trauma now identified by experts. In so doing, I will underline the remarkable timeliness of Zola's work, with the year 2021 marking the 150th anniversary of its publication, and its potential appeal for today's students who struggle at times to see the relevance of nineteenth-century texts to their own lives.

Recently, the international renown of the #Me Too movement and high-profile news events like the rape epidemic in India and the sexual assault scandal on the campus of Liberty University, have sparked renewed concern about the harmful effects of rape and rape culture – the latter being defined as an environment in which rape is prevalent and in which sexual violence against women is normalized and excused in the media and popular culture.¹ Émile Zola's novel *La Curée* (1871), the second volume of the *Rougon-Macquart* series, depicts the rape of nineteen-year-old Renée Béraud du Châtel, and its aftermath during the ferocious Second Empire, and serves thus as an example of an early literary work that paints a prescient and daunting view of a culture of rape bearing a striking similarity to our own. Using a variety of academic sources as well as findings of feminists and experts on rape, I will show how Zola's text reveals the attitudes and mechanisms that create, sustain and perpetuate rape culture – for example victim blaming, defending the reputation of rapists, the ostracizing of survivors of sexual assault, and the telling of jokes at the expense of rape victims. I will also demonstrate how Renée offers a contemporary example of a survivor of sexual assault, with many of the symptoms of rape trauma now identified by experts. In so doing, I will underline the remarkable timeliness of Zola's work, with the year 2021 marking the 150th anniversary of its publication, and its potential appeal for today's students who struggle at times to see the relevance of nineteenth-century texts to their own lives.

The main female character of Zola's novel *La Curée* is Renée Béraud du Châtel (later bearing the married name Renée Saccard) who hails from an upper middle-class Parisian family. Having lost her mother in childhood, she is raped at the age of nineteen by an anonymous forty-year-old married man while visiting a friend's country home. Fresh out of Catholic boarding school, the assault is her first sexual experience. The shaken young woman returns home to Paris and, realizing that she is pregnant, confides in her aunt Elisabeth who arranges her marriage of convenience to Aristide Saccard, a recent widower and aspiring speculator who plots ruthlessly to steal her entire fortune.² The rape is of enormous consequence, as it launches the plot and shapes Renée's whole life. Without it, she would never have married the villainous Saccard and would never have suffered the post-rape trauma that haunts her. The assault itself is not portrayed, but rather its circumstances and aftermath are told through the lens of two women – Elisabeth and Sidonie, this latter Aristide's sister. This is the novel's brief account of the assault: “Dans l'abandon de son désespoir, l'enfant lui raconta une histoire navrante : un homme de quarante ans,

¹See the following online articles: “#MeToo is at a crossroads in America,” accessed 24 Nov. 2021

< <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/05/08/metoo-around-the-world/> >; and “Girl, 16, said she was raped by hundreds of men in western India,” accessed 21 Nov. 2021

< <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/16/india/india-girl-rape-hundreds-men-intl-hnk/index.html> >; and “Liberty University faces new scrutiny over handling of sexual assault claims,” accessed 21 Nov. 2021; < <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/oct/31/liberty-university-handling-sexual-assault-claims> >; and “Rape Culture” accessed 21 Nov. 2021 < <https://www.marshall.edu/wcenter/sexual-assault/rape-culture/> >.

² It is interesting to note that Aristide Saccard will become a rapist in *L'Argent* (1891), vol. 18 of the *Rougon-Macquart* series.

riche, marié, et dont la femme, jeune et charmante, était là, l'avait violentée à la campagne, sans qu'elle sût ni osât se défendre”(74).³ Eventually, Renée suffers a miscarriage, much to the delight of her new husband who will not have to share his stolen wealth with an heir.

Renée’s story is typical of rape survivors in a number of ways. First, with her youth and convent education, she is naive and vulnerable, an easy target for predators. Studies show that adolescents and young adults between the ages of thirteen and twenty-four account for the largest number of reported rapes in the United States.⁴ In addition, the reaction of her family illustrates the “victim blaming” – a term that refers to holding the victim of a crime to be responsible for that crime – occurring in many cases of sexual assault. In the context of rape, this expression refers to the attitude that certain victim behaviors such as flirting or wearing provocative clothing may have encouraged the assault. Victim blaming is a secondary victimization in that it is the re-traumatization of the rape victim through the negative responses of individuals and institutions.⁵

Renée’s husband considers the rape her “honte” (81) and his sister calls it her “faute,” (69) revealing that, in their minds, the young woman is to blame. The fact that her father “wanted her dead” indicates that he too blames her, preferring her death over living with the scandal and shame of rape: “Le père vient de s’apercevoir de *la faute*. Il voulait la tuer” (68-69, my emphasis). Not surprisingly, he banishes her from his home until after the wedding. Even her sympathetic aunt sees her, not as a survivor or victim, but rather as “la coupable,” (75) and considers the marriage as something that will “faire rentrer Renée dans le monde des femmes honnêtes” (75). She helps her niece largely out of a sense of guilt for not raising her at home with her younger sister Christine whom she favors over Renée. But paradoxically, in her mind, the purpose of keeping her at home would not have been to keep her away from potential predators but rather to keep her from “succumbing” to their assault: “[...] ses préférences pour Christine la désolaient, et elle pensait que, si elle avait également gardé Renée près d’elle, la pauvre enfant n’aurait pas succombé” (74). This comment – one that places the responsibility on women to resist rape rather than the responsibility on men not to commit rape – constitutes another example of victim blaming and shows how much sexual violence against women is accepted, normalized, and excused in Zola’s story.⁶ By placing the comment in the mouth of a female character, moreover, the author demonstrates how women can be complicit in a system built on their own exploitation.

Today, feminists point out that the persistent threat of rape encourages a culture of silence around sexual violence.⁷ Renée is not given the opportunity to speak to medical or legal authorities and her sister is sent away to keep her from finding out about her ordeal. She is thus deprived of a confidant and has no one to talk to except her aunt. This consignment to silence and isolation disrupts the healing process. Indeed, expressing one’s feelings, even if numbness is all one feels, is a critical step in the survivor’s struggle to reconnect with others, along with their genuine willingness to reciprocate by listening to the victim.⁸ Sadly, Renée is never able to re-establish the

³ Quotations are taken from Émile Zola, *La Curée* (Paris: Atramenta, 2011). Henceforth page numbers only will appear in the text.

⁴ See Sedelle Katz and Mary Ann Mazur, *Understanding the Rape Victim: A Synthesis of Research Findings* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1979) 34-35.

⁵ See the following online article: “Effects and aftermath of rape,” accessed 21 Nov. 2021 < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Effects_and_aftermath_of_rape >.

⁶ See “Rape Culture,” accessed 21 Nov. 2021 < <https://www.marshall.edu/wcenter/sexual-assault/rape-culture/> >.

⁷ See Ellen Stockstill and Jessica Mele, “#MeToo and Victorian Literature: Reading Against Rape Culture in the Undergraduate Classroom,” *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies* 16.2 (2020): 2.

⁸ See Constance L. Mui, “A Feminist-Sartrean Approach to Understanding Rape Trauma,” *Sartre Studies International* 11.1-2 (2005): 163.

bonds of trust broken by the assault. The rape and subsequent isolation foreshadow the progressively vicious financial rape that will leave her bereft of family, friends, and fortune at the end of the novel.⁹ In addition, sexual assault survivors are often discouraged from breaking their silence by a lack of confidence in the judicial system.¹⁰ It is interesting to note that Monsieur Béraud du Châtel is a retired judge and magistrate, and the Civil Code of the time does include at least some anti-assault laws.¹¹ Still, he does nothing to help his daughter legally or emotionally. The fact that no one in the story even considers legal action speaks volumes to the prevalence of sexual violence against women in Zola’s fictional world and its implicit acceptance as an indelible fact of life.

A victim’s silence is also encouraged by societal sanctions against damaging a person’s reputation.¹² Everything in the story works to maintain the reputation of the rapist and the other men in René’s orbit. Her father refuses to attend the wedding so as not to stain his reputation. Aristide’s brother Eugène Rougon, a prominent minister in the legislature, agrees to be his best man, but then jokes that he might not attend the ceremony if the pregnancy is showing too much. He explains that he has an important bill coming up for a vote and cannot risk his reputation. Although he knows the joke is in poor taste, he is proud of it nonetheless, for it shows just how much he can get away with due to his name and status:

Puis, comme il avait ouvert la porte, d’un ton plus bas:

–Dis ?... Je ne veux pas trop me compromettre en ce moment, nous avons une loi fort dure à faire voter... La grossesse, au moins, n’est pas trop avancée ?

Saccard lui jeta un regard si aigu qu’Eugène se dit en refermant la porte: Voilà une plaisanterie qui me coûterait cher si je n’étais pas un Rougon (80).

The callous joke is emblematic of a culture of rape perpetuated through a sense of male entitlement, the use of misogynistic language, and the objectification of women’s bodies.¹³

In Zola’s novel, women bear not only the physical and emotional pain of rape but also the bulk of the work of helping the victim, avoiding scandal, and upholding reputations. A disgusted Monsieur Béraud du Châtel leaves his sister Elisabeth the sole burden of making all logistic and financial arrangements for the marriage. In her concern for the young woman, her lack of financial acumen, and her embarrassment about the whole situation, she ends up granting Aristide much more of René’s fortune than was originally agreed. Still, she is proud of her efforts and remains oblivious to the possibility that the hasty marriage could produce bad results: “[E]lle voulait ne pas voir le côté honteux ni les conséquences fatales” (75). The women’s work of damage control involves creating an intricate web of lies and deceptions, a web that sometimes pits women against other women. First, Renée and her aunt plot to convince her father that she is pregnant with the

⁹ See Sara Phenix, “Double Entendre: The Aural Poetics of *La Curée*,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 47.3-4 (2019): 173.

¹⁰ Stockstill and Mele 3.

¹¹ Though the nineteenth-century Penal Code defines the crimes of theft and murder, it does not define rape. See Megan Lawrence, “Rape Undefined in the 19th Century: The Literary Consequences,” in *Sexuality, Eroticism, and Gender in French and Francophone Literature*, Melanie Hackney and Aaron Emmitte, eds. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011): 27-47. See also Georges Vigarello, *A History of Rape: Sexual Violence in France from the 16th to the 20th Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001): 106-28.

¹² Stockstill and Mele 4.

¹³ See “Rape Culture,” accessed 21 Nov. 2021 <<https://www.marshall.edu/wcenter/sexual-assault/rape-culture/>>.

child of a wealthy bachelor who genuinely wants to marry her. Next, Sidonie must convince Elisabeth that her brother is affluent and thus worthy to play the role of Renée's seducer. Finally, to convince Elisabeth once and for all that Aristide is indeed a man of means, Sidonie installs him in a fake home, a temporary sublet apartment, where he plays the role of a rich man long enough to conduct negotiations and sign the marriage contract.

All these machinations created by the women benefit the men – the father who is spared a scandal, the rapist who remains anonymous and enjoys total impunity, and Saccard, the “seducer” who lays eyes on his wife for the first time on the eve of their marriage and inherits a fortune. Thus, Zola shows the mechanisms that maintain the culture of rape and, again, how women, even in their often well-intentioned desire to help, are unwittingly complicit in an unjust system built on their exploitation. Here, Saccard expresses his amazing good luck in the following terms that cynically emphasize Renée's hardship as the pivotal element in his success:

Il fut ravi de l'aventure; la fortune lui était enfin fidèle: il avait fait un marché d'or, une dot superbe, une femme belle à le faire décorer en six mois, et pas la moindre charge. On lui avait acheté deux cent mille francs son nom pour un fœtus que la mère ne voulut pas même voir. (82)

Renée spends her most important waking hours in front of mirrors. Indeed, she constantly inspects her image, revealing an obsession with her appearance and with contemplating herself as an object. This mania for self-objectification can be understood, as we shall see, as the result of rape trauma. An immense mirror covers the entire wall of the mansion's staircase progressively magnifying her image as she climbs the stairs. As she contemplates her image, she wonders if she is as beautiful as people say: “Renée montait, et, à chaque marche, elle grandissait dans la glace; elle se demandait, avec ce doute des actrices les plus applaudies, si elle était vraiment délicieuse, comme on le lui disait” (19). This moment is doubly self-objectifying in that she captures her own image, but also, by reflecting upon her public image, she understands herself as an object of the gaze of others as well. When she meets her stepson Maxime for the first time, she enacts a similar, doubly objectifying scenario, immediately appraising her image in the mirror, but this time soliciting Maxime to offer a second opinion: “Mais imaginez-vous que Worms m'a apporté ce costume ce matin... Je l'essaie et je le trouve assez réussi. Il a beaucoup de chic, n'est-ce pas! Elle s'était placée devant une glace. Maxime allait et venait derrière elle, pour la voir sur toutes les faces” (106).

Renée spends many days at the dressmaker Worm's studio where she, Maxime, and the designer scrutinize her mirrored image for hours: “Le maître [...] faisait mettre Renée debout devant une glace, qui montait du parquet au plafond, se recueillait, avec un froncement de sourcils, pendant que la jeune femme émue, retenait son haleine, pour ne pas bouger” (114-15). And during the Emperor's ball, mirrors serve to reassure her that she is beautiful enough to make her entrance: “Quand elle fut dans les salons et que son mari l'eut quittée [...] elle éprouva un moment d'embarras. Mais les glaces, où elle se voyait adorable, la rassurèrent vite [...]” (162). During the ball, she receives an admiring gaze from the Emperor, a leader described as old and doddering; nonetheless, this is a gaze that she considers the high point of her life. The great value that she places on this moment suggests that her sense of self and self-worth do not reside within herself, but lie rather in the approving looks of others. If those others happen to be famous, like the Emperor, they enhance her sense of self-esteem even more. In other words, her self-worth is proportional to the prestige of the one offering the look.

Here, a feminist take on Sartre’s concept of consciousness can help us understand Renée’s obsession with her objectified self as the result of rape trauma. Sartre views the body as inseparable from the self, offering a theory of embodied consciousness according to which consciousness and the body form a suffused, unobjectifiable unity. What he gives us in his theory of embodiment is a positive account of what “feeling at home” in one’s body involves, including, among other things, the pre-reflective, unmediated experience of oneness with our body that allows us to form the habit of forgetting its objectifiability. Rape destroys this unity of body and unmediated consciousness. In rape, the woman’s body is severed and reified into an object-for-the-other. A rape survivor becomes frightfully aware of her body, not merely as a target of objectification, but as a target of violence. The survivor’s heightened awareness of her body’s vulnerability often turns her body into a persistent object for her, clouding her consciousness and coloring her sense of reality. To undo their objectification as body-for-the-other, rape survivors often resort to various forms of self-objectification, including constant body washings, eating disorders, self-mutilation, and other means of obsessive bodily control, as ways of conquering a body that has betrayed them. Self-objectification can be seen as the person’s attempt at re-establishing her status as a subject by holding her own body as object. Renée’s obsession with capturing her image in mirrors and her constant need for approval in the form of admiring glances can thus be interpreted as her efforts to re-establish her self as a subject and thereby regain the control over her body that she lost in the rape.¹⁴

Experts tell us that most rape survivors experience a stronger psychological impact in the initial period after their assault; however, many survivors experience long-term psychological trauma. Self-blame, which combines the feelings of shame, guilt, and self-loathing, is one of the most common of both short-term and long-term effects of sexual assault.¹⁵ Renée associates her rape with evil, believing that it plunged her into evil – “ce viol qui l’avait jetée au mal”(309) – and that because of it she no longer had to struggle against evil, as it resides inside her: “Elle pensa qu’elle n’avait plus à lutter contre le mal, qu’il était en elle [...]” (125-26). The notion of being infected with evil is at the root of her feelings of shame and self-hatred. Early on, her over-jealous efforts to hide her pregnancy suggest feelings of shame: “Elle s’était tellement serrée pour dissimuler sa grossesse, qui, d’ailleurs, disparaissait sous l’ampleur de ses jupes, qu’elle fut obligée de garder le lit pendant quelques semaines” (82). Again, she expresses shame after her initial coitus with Maxime, her stepson – “Alors elle sentit toute sa honte” (170) – and she conveys self-loathing in reflecting on the relationship: “Elle aima avec son emportement [...] de femme qui se noie dans son propre mépris” (202).

Later, her shame in the presence of her father causes her to lose the courage to ask him for money. His cold treatment and cutting remark about her manner of dress form a classic example of what we call today “slut-shaming,” the act of stigmatizing a woman for engaging in behavior judged to be promiscuous or sexually provocative.¹⁶ This moment, occurring a decade after the rape, is a demonstration of the victim blaming that rape survivors can suffer years after the initial trauma. It also shows how victims can interiorize the blame and turn it into a sense of their own shame:

¹⁴ Mui 157-60.

¹⁵ See the following online article: “Effects and aftermath of rape,” accessed 21 Nov. 2021 < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Effects_and_aftermath_of Rape >.

¹⁶ See “Effects and aftermath of rape,” accessed 21 Nov. 2021 < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Effects_and_aftermath_of Rape >.

Tout le silence de l'hôtel lui pesait sur les épaules, et elle eût donné beaucoup pour que les dentelles de sa robe fussent noires. Le regard de son père l'embarrassait au point qu'elle trouva Worms vraiment ridicule d'avoir imaginé de si grands volants. [...]

–C'est un peu blanc, dit-il. Une femme doit être bien embarrassée avec ça sur les trottoirs.

–Mais, mon père, on ne sort pas à pied! s'écria Renée, qui regretta ensuite ce mot du cœur.

Le vieillard allait répondre. Puis il se leva, redressa sa haute taille, et marcha lentement, sans regarder sa fille davantage. (222)

Renée's Catholic, bourgeois upbringing feeds her guilt and her belief that she should accept punishment: "Elle ajouta qu'elle signerait l'acte de cession le lendemain, et que, si c'était réellement là un désastre, elle acceptait ce désastre en punition de ses fautes" (257). Shame is again the predominant emotion as her relationship with Maxime is discovered: "Elle a vécu au pays de la honte, et elle était châtiée par l'abandon de tout son corps [...] (301-02); and "[E]lle resta devant l'arbuste à grelotter sous la fourrure que ses bras ramenaient [...] avec un grand geste de honte terrifiée" (305). Feelings of self-loathing resurface along with memories of the rape and a recognition of its profound effects: "La faute qui amena plus tard son mariage avec Saccard, ce viol brutal qu'elle subit avec une sorte d'attente épouvantée, la fit ensuite se mépriser, et fut pour beaucoup dans l'abandon de toute sa vie" (125). It is interesting to note that this revelatory moment occurs when Renée is twenty-eight years old, a full nine years after the rape. Zola thus underlines the lasting impact of sexual assault and its enormous power to shape not only the survivor's psyche and sense of self, but also her behavior, the "abandon de toute sa vie" (125).

In fact, experts tell us that sexual assault may lead to short or long-term behaviors known as "acting out" – erratic or harmful behaviors driven by the survivor's attempt to keep difficult feelings and memories from awareness. Acting out is the symbolic, veiled, indirect way by which painful feelings and memories are given expression.¹⁷ One very common example is the development of an addiction.¹⁸ Here, Renée's compulsive spending is a case in point: "Renée, grisée, folle, emplissait Paris du bruit de ses équipages, de l'éclat de ses diamants, du vertige de sa vie adorable et tapageuse" (98). She refers to her absent husband as a "banquier obligeant" (124) and her relation with her stepson is based on money: "Ils allaient s'ennuyer à mourir, elle et Maxime, s'ils n'avaient pas quelques louis à dépenser par jour" (220). Unsurprisingly, in her final years, she quickly squanders her last inheritance and spends most of her time gambling: "Elle mangea en une saison l'héritage de sa tante. Elle jouait, maintenant. Elle avait trouvé un salon où les dames s'attablaient jusqu'à trois heures du matin, perdant des centaines de mille francs par nuit" (325).

¹⁷ See the following online article: "Sexual Acting-Out as Response to Childhood Trauma," accessed 22 Nov. 2021 < <https://newyorkpathways.com/sexually-acting-out-as-response-to-childhood-trauma/> >.

¹⁸ See "Effects and aftermath of rape," accessed 21 Nov. 2021 < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Effects_and_aftermath_of_rape >.

Other forms of acting out include not only irrational, bizarre and attention-seeking behaviors, but even dangerous ones.¹⁹ Here again, Renée provides a case in point, as she thrives on showing off and taking risks: “Renée avait souvent des besoins de fanfaronnade, des caprices de hardiesse brutale. Elle entraînait Maxime derrière un rideau, derrière une porte et l’embrassait, au risque d’être vue” (236). Her behavior becomes increasingly erratic and alarming throughout the novel. As she spirals out of control, her odd and even violent exploits reach the press and require the intervention of a family member:

Des gaietés nerveuses la prenaient, des caprices prodigieux, dont s’entretenaient les journaux, en la désignant par ses initiales. Ce fut à cette époque qu’elle voulut sérieusement se battre en duel, au pistolet, avec la duchesse de Sternich, qui avait, méchamment, disait-elle, renversé un verre de punch sur sa robe; il fallut que son beau-frère le ministre se fâchât. Une autre fois, elle paria avec Mme de Lauwerens qu’elle ferait le tour de la piste de Longchamp en moins de dix minutes, et ce ne fut qu’une question de costume qui la retint. Maxime lui-même commençait à être effrayé par cette tête où la folie montait [...]. (230-31)

It is interesting to note that these wild exploits begin at the moment when Renée starts maintaining sexual relations with both her husband and her stepson. She is thus more filled with shame and self-hatred than ever: “[C]’était surtout une croyance [...] absolue de péché monstrueux [...]” (230). The Saccards abstain from intimate relations during the early years of their marriage, but Aristide initiates them at this point in an effort to gain more control of his wife and her money. Considering that they are forced relations that she performs wholly out of a sense of fear and duty, they could be construed as rape. The particularly outrageous acting out at this time could thus be explained by the fact that, in addition to experiencing the shame of her incestuous relations with her stepson, Renée is also reliving the rape trauma on a regular basis with her husband: “Vainement elle tenta de jouir de l’infamie. Elle avait encore les lèvres chaudes des baisers de Saccard, lorsqu’elle les offrait aux baisers de Maxime” (230).

Sexual abuse takes away power, body autonomy and choice, and as such, may trigger other types of acting out such as promiscuity and developing overly porous personal boundaries.²⁰ In one study conducted over several years, child survivors of sexual assault were prone to earlier and less safe sexual activity than their non-abused counterparts.²¹ Rape may lead the survivor to compulsive sexuality enactment such as poor choices of sexual partner. The knowledge of what constitutes informed consent may be damaged by the abuse suffered.²² Renée’s long list of lovers, one of whom beats her, along with her illicit affair with her stepson and non-consensual intimacy with her husband, suggest that the boundaries of healthy intimacy are broken for her; and this promiscuity can be understood as the risky behaviors of a rape survivor. Interestingly, her overly porous personal boundaries find expression in the porous spaces where intimacy takes place, spaces that confuse the distinction between public and private. She and Maxime consummate their

¹⁹ See “Sexual Acting-Out as Response to Childhood Trauma,” accessed 22 Nov. 2021
< <https://newyorkpathways.com/sexually-acting-out-as-response-to-childhood-trauma/> >.

²⁰ See “Sexual Acting-Out as Response to Childhood Trauma,” accessed 22 Nov. 2021
< <https://newyorkpathways.com/sexually-acting-out-as-response-to-childhood-trauma/> >.

²¹ See “Effects and aftermath of rape,” accessed 21 Nov. 2021
< https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Effects_and_aftermath_of_rape >.

²² See the following online article: “Acting Out After Sexual Abuse,” accessed 22 Nov. 2021
< <https://www.sexualrecovery.com/blog/acting-out-after-sexual-abuse/> >.

affair in the private dining room of a restaurant. Her boudoir/dressing room, compared to Versailles's Hall of Mirrors, is famous throughout Paris. And her mansion's hothouse where the lovers are often intimate is a transparent indoor/outdoor space open to houseguests.²³ Thus, her lack of personal boundaries is mirrored by the spaces that she inhabits, ones that disrupt the public/private binary, new spaces emblematic of Second Empire Paris.

Another possible result of rape trauma is stunted growth, a "freezing in time" where the emotional development of the survivor is arrested at the point where she was abused.²⁴ It is common for the survivor to develop a lingering paralysis that robs her of her will or desire to do anything, thus keeping her from re-establishing herself and developing into adulthood as an active, autonomous subject.²⁵ Renée again fits the description, as evidenced by her alarming lack of maturity and insight. When a thirteen-year-old Maxime arrives in her home fresh from boarding school, she treats him more like a toy or playmate than a son: "Sa belle-mère, les premiers jours, joua avec lui comme avec une poupée [...]" (105). Later, she assumes the role of a mischievous classmate, helping him skip classes to accompany her on tours of the Bois de Boulogne where they poke fun at the park-regulars and share the latest gossip. She enjoys confiding in him about her lovers and even engages his help with them as an intermediary and messenger. Not surprisingly, Aristide refers to the pair as "les deux enfants" (115). Renée's lack of insight and life skills is not limited to incompetent money management and obliviousness about the on-going theft of her fortune but extends also to a lack of understanding and empathy for other women and girls. For instance, she remains totally unaware of the plight of a ten-year-old girl who is sexually assaulted by one of her husband's business partners, Baron Gouraud, a senator and known pedophile.

When, at seventeen, Maxime seduces and impregnates her chambermaid, who is subsequently banished to the country with her child, Renée fails to see the kinship she shares with the servant. Just a few years earlier, she too was very young, unmarried and suffered the shame of an unwanted pregnancy. She too was isolated and banished from her home in order to save the reputation of men. Sadly, she is unable this time to see these parallels. Her only concern is Maxime's reputation, and her joking reproach of him for compromising himself with "une telle fille" constitutes another example of victim blaming. Indeed, her disappointment lies exclusively in the fact that he seduced a woman from the lower classes rather than a lady of status: "Lui, dont elle voulait faire un homme distingué, se compromettre avec une telle fille! Quel début ridicule et honteux, quelle fredaine inavouable! Encore s'il s'était lancé avec une de ces dames!" (116). Mother and stepson imagine together the situation had he seduced one of her peers, and the thought of her suffering the same fate as the servant, banished to the country on a small stipend, produces peals of laughter. This episode illustrates the extent to which Renée has accepted and internalized many tenets of rape culture. She blames the victim, defends a man's reputation to the detriment of a woman, encourages her stepson to "score" with women of status, promotes a culture of "boys will be boys," makes jokes at women's expense, uses language that objectifies and degrades women, and participates in the alienation of women from other women.²⁶ She is no longer just a rape survivor, but is now also an unwitting advocate of rape culture.

²³ See Marta Wilkinson, "Violated Boundaries and Accomplice Spaces in Zola's *The Kill* and *Nana*," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 50.2 (2017): 139-42.

²⁴ See "Sexual Acting-Out as Response to Childhood Trauma," accessed 22 Nov. 2021 <<https://newyorkpathways.com/sexually-acting-out-as-response-to-childhood-trauma/>>.

²⁵ Mui 160.

²⁶ See "Rape Culture," accessed 21 Nov. 2021 <<https://www.marshall.edu/wcenter/sexual-assault/rape-culture/>>.

Renée shows us how rape trauma compromises the victim's status as conscious subject, not simply by turning her into an object at the rapist's disposal, but also by incapacitating her from performing many of the activities that dignify her as an autonomous subject. These activities include asserting one's will, determining one's goals, choosing one's meaning, and forming one's life plan. Having been violently made into an object-for-others undermines her ability to connect with others, which is another key aspect of our existence as conscious subjects.²⁷ Clearly, her rape is the definitive event shaping Renée's life. It shatters her sense of self, determines whom she marries, and she never recovers. She cannot heal because she receives virtually no help to do so. Sadly, by failing to gain the tools that she needs to grow into adulthood, she ends up embracing the very ideology of the culture of rape that abuses her.

Zola's unflinching look at the mechanisms of ferocious, predatory cruelty and greed characteristic of the new generation of male speculators and businessmen of the Second Empire is remarkable.²⁸ The fact that virtually all these characters commit different types of financial rape, including fraud, larceny, and theft, with the goal of carving up Paris, means that rape, in the broadest sense, could be asserted as the primary trope of the novel. Indeed, the male characters could be considered modern "rapists and pillagers." Zola paints a daunting picture of a culture of rape built on the exploitation of women and in which all human relations are based on profit and force. For an author known for studying the effects of heredity, this novel speaks to the importance of our experiences, especially our traumatic experiences, as shaping us as much if not more than our heredity. Zola is ahead of his time in his insight into the plight of rape survivors and in his understanding of the long-term devastating effects of sexual assault. Rape is arguably the most intimate violation, and it becomes an ideal vehicle to convey the dangers that an inefficient legal system (that does nothing to help Renée) and an inadequate educational system (that ill-prepares her for adulthood) inflict upon vulnerable citizens.²⁹ Considered conservative in some circles, Zola published a novel in 1871, that is 150 years ago, which shows him to be remarkably prescient and progressive.³⁰

The proliferation of the marriage plot in nineteenth-century French literature combined with its portrayal of clear delineations of gender roles means that texts like *La Curée* and *La Bête humaine* (1890), another Zola novel that treats rape, can be valuable resources to teachers who want to generate discussions of contemporary issues like sexual assault on college campuses and the #MeToo movement, making literature courses timely and appealing for today's students. This kind of student-faculty collaboration can be incredibly important as we re-evaluate our systems of education and as we advocate for gender equity in the college and university communities where

²⁷ Mui 158.

²⁸ See Shoshana Marzel, "La violence comme élément constitutif de la masculinité dans *La Curée*," presented at the online colloquium *Émile Zola. La Curée. Empire et emprise de la chair*, June 22, 2021. Accessed 4 December 2021 < https://www.canal-u.tv/video/site_pouchet_cnrs/emile_zola_la_curee_politique_de_la_chair_dans_la_curee.63265 >.

²⁹ Lawrence 40.

³⁰ It is worth mentioning that *The Game is Over* (original title *La Curée*), the 1966 French language drama film directed by Roger Vadim and starring Jane Fonda (as Renée), Michel Piccoli (as "Alexandre," changed from "Aristide" in the novel), and Peter McEnery (as Maxime), makes no reference at all to the rape. In fact, this film adaptation of Zola's novel offers only one small piece of background information on Renée's life before her marriage, information that does not enrich her character, but rather serves exclusively, I would argue, to justify the choice of the English-speaking Fonda for the role. According to the film, Renée wanted urgently to leave her native Canada for an unspecified reason, and this explains the hasty and loveless union that brought her to Paris. Vadim thus changes the plot of the novel to justify the use of his then-wife Fonda, whose French was excellent but who had a distinct North American accent. I would argue therefore that the director was less interested in portraying a complex rape survivor than in creating a titillating and potentially commercially successful vehicle for his wife, only two years before their collaboration on the campy, sexually-charged *Barbarella* (1968).

we learn, work, and live.³¹ Students can be encouraged to discuss Renée's fate and the resources that are available to women like her today: the rape hotline, legal and medical help, police, counseling services, therapy, friends, and family. Indeed, teachers and students can work together to see how far we have come but also how much further we must go to restore justice and healing to survivors of sexual assault.

³¹ Stockstill and Mele 1.