

## Gender and Sexuality in the Third Republic

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### Perverting Performance, Subverting Spectacle: Dirty Dancing with Rachilde

In *La jongleuse* (1900), the young widow Eliante reveals her Creole origins, a liminal *fin-de-siècle* identity that hovers visually and culturally between “European whiteness” and “island blackness.” Such hybridity (part finishing school charm, part reckless sensuality) takes shape in her compulsive desire to perform, most significantly in a series of increasingly bizarre exotic dances learned in her travels. In these spellbinding displays, Eliante dances as a kind of self-gratification; while requiring a spectator, her performances are defiantly solitary, and even when commanded by her suitor Léon, are never a dynamic or participatory act. To Léon’s profound frustration, the obvious sexual excitement Eliante experiences is in response to the dance, and not to the audience.

In *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), Rachilde chooses the waltz for the infamous dancing scene between her protagonists, an aristocratic woman and the impoverished young man she transforms into her “mistress.” Onlookers admire the beautiful Raoule and her fiancé, Jacques—here, an entirely dynamic couple, each engaged and participating with the other—until the spectators realize that their perfect waltz reveals a shocking reversal of the proper roles. Not only does Raoule lead, but it is Jacques’ feminine grace and his rounded swaying hips that cause the assembled bachelors to remark on the unbearable heat of the dance hall. The couple is oblivious to the simultaneous disapproval and the envy of the audience: they dance for their own pleasure.

The particular menace posed by the act of dancing in these novels is a subversion of its performative function; Rachilde perverts the spectacle/spectator relationship by stripping the audience of its significance, reconfiguring the power structure of traditional performance by heavily privileging the dancer’s experience. In denying the spectators any evaluative role and instead co-opting them into a strictly neutral position for the dancer’s own exhibitionistic purposes, dancing takes on dangerous overtones, true to Rachilde’s Decadent leanings: élitist, opportunist, and predatory.

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### Legs, Boas, Bellies, and Voyeurs:

#### French Performances from the 1889 Exposition Internationale to Wilde’s *Salomé*

This paper reflects on the obsessions with sexuality, class, and colonialism that mark debates not only about the theatre of the last two decades of the nineteenth century, but also battles surrounding painting, caricature, street posters, cafés-concerts, anthropological exhibits, and even fashion. The early Third Republic was famously credited with turning all of Paris into a theatre and, in turn, making every woman of Paris into an actress on its stage. While the 1889 Exposition Internationale is often credited with indelibly associating performances by actresses with sexual provocations, with turning all of Paris into a brothel, and with marketing stereotypes

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about Orientalism, it is important to see the seven months of that Exposition in the context of the ordinary everyday life of French theatricality of the first decades of Third Republic France.

Four moments of exposure will punctuate my paper: the anthropological shows of the 1889 Exposition with their provocative belly dancer (the BELLIES of my title); the café-concert's exposure of legs (and perhaps yet more) in the dances of the 'chahut' made famous in the late 1880s, the LEGS of my title; the censored caricatures of the period, particularly those mocking the prudishness of the moralists of the Ligue contre la licence dans les rues, depicting them as obsessed with women's exposed ankles and peeking through keyholes, the VOYEURS of my title; and finally, the battles over nudity in the theatre, art, and the novel, battles that I will codify here with the BOAS of my title.

This paper sets out to establish such a broader framework for research on the body in performance in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In this paper, I want to map onto the ordinary life of theatricality a few exceptional moments, peculiar conjunctions of phobia, obsession, and spectacularization that brought the censors out in force and, in turn, further focalized the bodies and the displays that moralists claimed offensive.

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### The Female Automaton, Gendered Utopias and the Construction of Identity

The figure of the female automaton is a subject that has received considerable attention in the fields of women's studies and psychoanalysis. From Freud's essay on "The Uncanny" (1919) to Donna Haraway's *Simians, cyborgs, and women: the reinvention of nature* (1991), it has been shown that the literary construction of a synthetic female has served to justify and impose matrices of male domination and desire. Likewise, the invention of the automaton as a novelistic character in the early nineteenth century has been widely examined by scholars interested in tracing the roots of the science-fiction genre, of which Alfred Chapuis's *Les Automates dans les oeuvres d'imagination* (1947) remains today a seminal example.

Yet, in spite of the symbolic role that such figures fulfill in the fantasizing about new forms of social life, few scholars have looked at depictions of nineteenth-century female automatons and the perfect worlds they are built to inhabit as particular manifestations of utopian writing. If this is so, I contend, it is because in the century following the French Revolution, utopian writing undergoes a critical transformation. Whereas its antecedents had been projected out of history, onto far away islands and lost continents, most nineteenth-century literary utopias are difficult to define precisely because they no longer present a convenient figure of otherness, but instead look at social life as a *process of becoming* in time. Utopia was not only a way of *seeing*, but also a way of *being* and as such tended to think more literally about agency through its embodiment in politically conscious subjects.

How are these subjects constituted or "constructed" in literature? From Charles Barbara's "Le Major Whittington" (1851) to Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's *Eve future* (1886), cultural figures, working across the century, in vastly different political and social climates, reiterate the fantasy of the utopia inhabited by female automatons. These gendered utopias, dominated by a solitary male inventor, postulate spaces of unending work and limitless pleasure. This paper proposes to examine what happens when the haunting figure of "otherness" reappears in the form of the

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female automation and not, as in traditional utopian constructs, in a foreign society or far-away land.

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### Questions d'archives et de corpus: l'exemple de Georges Hérelle (1848-1935)

Georges Hérelle eut une modeste carrière de professeur de philosophie pendant trente-deux ans dans plusieurs lycées provinciaux en France. Il est davantage connu et très apprécié maintenant pour ses nombreux travaux d'érudition qui portent sur l'histoire de la Champagne et les pastorales basques et pour ses excellentes traductions de l'œuvre de Gabriele D'Annunzio. Par ailleurs, il publia deux ouvrages originaux qui sont toutefois bien moins connus : *Aristote, Problèmes de l'amour physique* (1899) et *Histoire de l'amour grec dans l'Antiquité* (1930), dans lesquels il consacra son attention à une question tout à fait différente – l'inversion et l'homosexualité "fin-de-siècle". Les archives personnelles de Georges Hérelle, qu'il déposa à la Bibliothèque Municipale de Troyes, contiennent un ensemble important de documents inédits dont un manuscrit de livre inédit intitulé *Nouvelles études sur l'amour grec*. Ces diverses études publiées et inédites sur l'homosexualité nous intéressent à plusieurs titres. Les archives d'Hérelle montrent clairement qu'il se fixe, dès 1884, un projet « scientifique » précis - maîtriser les nouvelles études médicales et scientifiques traitant de la sexualité et élaborer sa propre théorie sur les causes, les caractéristiques et les effets de l'inversion. Le projet scientifique d'Hérelle, qui reste au centre de ses intérêts pendant presque cinquante ans, représente l'exemple fascinant du témoignage d'un homme, autodidacte, tantôt seul, tantôt en collaboration avec ses amis. Il constitue des archives qui représentent une véritable *Scientia sexualis* (dans le sens que Foucault donne à cette expression dans *La volonté de savoir*). Notre communication mettra en évidence l'originalité et la spécificité de la pensée de Georges Hérelle au moyen d'un examen attentif de ses archives et de la manière dont il les constituait.