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Bearing the Cross of Sterility
Childless Women of Les Rougon-Macquart

In *Les Rougon-Macquart*, the 20-novel series penned by Emile Zola, reproduction and mothering are essential elements of the naturalistic theme for which the author is known. Because reproduction plays a central part in the development of women characters in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Zola's method for configuring the feminine subject must be examined in terms of motherhood.

While mothers abound in this multi-volume "family history," the three characters under consideration here embody one of the most intriguing paradoxes of Zola's work. They are members of a cast created to glorify motherhood, yet they have no children of their own. Jean Borie's observation that "Souvent, les personnages de Zola se définissent par ce qui leur manque, par les caractéristiques que l'auteur leur refuse ... " (1971: 33)[1] signals us that such a strange contradiction may hold meaningful information regarding the complexity of Zola's literary creation.

Pauline of *La Joie de vivre,* Caroline of *L'Argent*, and Hubertine of *Le Rêve*—all express a strong desire to be mothers, and that desire surfaces in glorified, excessive, or harmful devotion to others. Zola's inclusion of these biologically sterile yet spiritually generous characters reveals a contradiction in the series and raises some crucial questions: why does the author implant a strong desire to mother in childless women? And how does this paradigm reflect Zola's opinion that motherhood is women's most important mission (Bertrand-Jennings, 1973: 18)? How do maternal compassion, virginity, and sterility configure the maternal subject in Zola's work?

Further complications arise upon closer inspection of these childless women, for one shared characteristic is their angelic, even saintly demeanor that recalls the literary figure commonly known as the "angel in the house."

> The ideal woman that male authors dream of generating is always an angel.... In the Middle Ages ... mankind's great teacher of purity was the Virgin Mary, a mother goddess.... For the more secular nineteenth century, however, the eternal type of female purity was represented not by a madonna in heaven but by an angel in the house.... [T]here is a clear line of literary descent from divine Virgin to domestic angel.... (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 20)

The phenomenon described here by Gilbert and Gubar can be found throughout nineteenth-century art and literature with its most notorious embodiment in Michelet's *La Femme*. Zola's spiritual mother figure incarnates qualities of the virgin Mary and of angels, which combination becomes the "ideal mother" that Zola was attempting to create (Bertrand-Jennings, 1977: 98).

Turning first to the virginal aspects of Zola's mother figure, let us recall Kristéva's discussion of the cult of the virgin Mary in "Stabat Mater." The virgin's extraordinary circumstances give her tremendous power:

> ... [T]here was the matter of drawing a parallel between Mother and Son by expanding the theme of the immaculate conception ... and, by depriving her of sin, to deprive her of death.... Next, she needed letters patent of nobility ... since Mary was to be proclaimed queen, given the attributes and paraphernalia of royalty, and ... declared Mother of the divine institution of earth, the Church. (1985: 164)

The spiritual power of the virgin is echoed by Caroline in *Le Rêve*, with her "royale couronne de cheveux blancs"("royal crown of white hair" [19: 58]), and Hubertine, whose husband " ... vivait aux pieds de sa femme, dans un culte, une de ces passions conjugales, ardentes et chastes ... "("...lived at his wife's feet, as in a cult, one of those conjugal passions, ardent and chaste"[17: 24]); both images command reverence and devotion befitting a queen. Pauline's power is described as magical, exemplified in her miraculous resurrection of a premature newborn. Her act is all the more significant because the baby is her godson (13: 327).

Kristéva asserts that the virgin Mary's position as mother of the Catholic church makes her representative of Christianity on the whole. Both divine (as mother and daughter of Christ and wife of God [1985: 169]) and mortal, the virgin is uniquely qualified to reflect both human and spiritual aspects of Christianity. A similar representation can be seen in Caroline and Pauline. The latter is described as the very soul of humanity: Pauline has "une âme commune"("a common soul"[13: 327]) with her godson; and Caroline's life is a microcosm of humanity: "J'ai pensé souvent que mon cas est, en petit, celui de l'humanité ... "("I've often thought that my case is, on a smaller scale, that of humanity..."[19: 75]). The result of this spiritual link between each woman

and the world around her is a widening of her female power, exemplary of woman's ability to transform humanity through mothering. Each character's elimination of sexual love and espousal of maternal love gives her a life force that she uses to do good works.

The absence of sexual activity in the lives of Pauline, Caroline, and Hubertine underscores their similarity to the virgin Mary and would seem to indicate an effort on the author's part to spare these characters the fatal consequences of sexual intercourse. Kristéva's allusion to the ancient theological premise—"... where there is death there is also sexual copulation, and where there is no death there is no sexual copulation either" (1985: 165)—reminds us that the virgin, as a result of her immaculate conception (and thus her lack of sin), does not die but rather ascends into heaven: "Mary doesn't die ... she is transported" (Kristeva, 1985: 168). Mary's avoidance of death relegates her to a super-human level of existence that can also be seen in Zola's mother figure. These women are granted sainthood, fictional immortality, and unconditional praise. They are among the very few women characters in *Les Rougon-Macquart* who are not simultaneously admired and maligned. Others, such as Félicité Rougon, Nana, Lise Fouan, la Grande (*La Terre*), and Mme. Chanteau (*La Joie de vivre*) are considered typical female characters in Zola because of their duality; capable of generosity and kindness, they are also calculating, deceitful, and selfish. Thus since Caroline, Hubertine, and Pauline lack biological children, sexual activity, and self-concern, they meet Zola's pre-requisites for sainthood. These deficiencies are potential obligations that would lead to a more imperfect and sinful existence. In Chantal Jennings words: " ... women can only be accepted as ideal or positive characters in Zola's fiction, if they have been somehow deprived of their sexuality ... " (Bertrand-Jennings, 1984: 32).

The laudatory light in which the characters are portrayed confirms Zola's satisfaction with them. This sense of admiration also stems no doubt from the hackneyed opposition between purity and desire, whereby Zola can exalt the virtuous maternal qualities of the women and describe their sensuality. As long as the women's desire remains unfulfilled, the conventional puritanical code is not violated. By suppressing sexual activity but emphasizing the loving, maternal behavior of his characters, Zola attempts to have it both ways. His physically sterile women, inaccessible yet desirable, or desirable because inaccessible, reflect the revered paradox that the virgin Mary embodies.

Turning now to the desire of the mother, I will attempt to clarify the function of maternal feeling in the development of the feminine subject. The desires to experience pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood have been analyzed extensively in psychoanalytic theory. Freudian theory maintains that woman's desire for a penis transforms into a desire to bear her father's child (Freud, 1963: 81). Lacan intimates a similar opinion in his theory of the desire of the mother, whereby the child satisfies all of his mother's desires and acts as the phallus that completes her lack (Wright, 1989: 108). Nancy Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), attempts to explain woman's desire to mother from social,

cultural, and psychoanalytical perspectives. Her thesis asserts that mothering is a psychological need that is reinforced on a cultural level and proliferated by women who mother.

All of these theories are based either on the premise that women experience a sense of lack or that women's upbringing gives them different expectations from those of men. While Zola does not delve into the psychological aspects of maternal desire, his characters' expressions of an unfulfilled desire to mother are evocative of Freud's and Lacan's theories of lack; these characters perceive their childlessness as an affliction that denies them a full life. Moreover, they confirm society's belief that motherhood is the sole mission of women and women who are childless are incomplete. In this manner, Zola leads us to believe that motherhood is the ultimate justification of feminine existence, none the less providing only sterile women as the most admirable female role models.

The most obviously ontological examination of woman's existence is seen in Pauline's regret of her childlessness: " ... [J]amais elle ne serait femme, et elle vieillirait dans la stérilité.... Elle voulait vivre, et vivre complètement, faire de la vie.... A quoi bon être, si l'on ne donne pas son être?"("She would never be a woman, and she would grow old and sterile...She wanted to live and live fully, make life...What good is being, if you can't give your being?"[13: 264]); "Elle baissait un regard désespéré vers ses hanches, vers son ventre de vierge.... Dans la largeur de son flanc, aurait tenu un fils solide et fort. C'était un regret immense de son existence manquée, de son sexe de femme qui dormirait stérile ... "("She lowered a desperate gaze toward her hips, toward her chaste belly.... In the width of her loins a sturdy and strong son would have grown. She felt tremendous sorrow for her lost existence, her womanhood that would sleep barren"[328]). These thoughts imply that a childless woman is not a woman, that she is not at all.

Zola suggests that reproduction sustains women physically and emotionally by likening sterility to a dried-out, abandoned field. Pauline is "un champ inculte, qui se dessèche à l'écart"("an uncultivated field, drying out in isolation"[13: 328]); Hubertine's desire for a child is described as a pardon that would flower inside her (17: 168).

Zola also uses biological determinism in his argument for motherhood as the primary female objective, once again seen in the case of Pauline: "Ah! misère! la pluie rouge de la puberté tombait là, aujourd'hui, pareille aux larmes vaines que sa virginité pleurait en elle. Désormais, chaque mois ramènerait ce jaillissement de grappe mûre, écrasée aux vendanges ... ("Woe! the red rain of puberty was falling, today, just like the useless tears that her purity weeped inside her. From now on, each month would bring that explosion of ripe fruit, crushed during the harvest..."[264]); "A quoi bon sa puberté vigoureuse, ses organes et ses muscles engorgés de sève, l'odeur puissante qui montait de ses chairs, dont la force poussait en floraisons brunes?"("What good was her vigorous puberty, her organs and muscles filled with sap, the powerful smell

that rose from her flesh, whose strength grew in brown blooms?"[328]) Briefly, because Pauline's body was made to bear children and does not, the female reproductive organs have no purpose. The strength of her sap-filled body and her *odor di femina* only accentuate her unrealized natural destiny.

Ironically, even though this passage emphasizes the futility of Pauline's untapped reproductive potential, the metaphors used reflect ripening and harvest: the *grappe mûre, écrasée aux vendanges*, the *muscles engorgés de sève*, and the *floraisons brunes* are peculiar images chosen for a passage that recounts the heart-breaking sterility of Pauline. Indeed, this example of Pauline's maternal desire is nothing more than a device that allows the narrator to revel in her passionate sexual nature. What surfaces from this morass of maternal grief is a thinly veiled male regret that she remains undefiled. The vivid imagery, which both affirms and denies Pauline's reproductive capacities, could be explained as a naturalist's impartial portrayal of life. But the repeated contradictions of this text undeniably mirror Zola's and society's ambivalent attitude about motherhood and sexuality.

Another angle of the wish-for-a-child paradigm is seen in the Hubert ménage in *Le Rêve*, where the lack of a child negates the Catholic ideal of marital love. Not having a child is indicative of sin, since it suggests that the couple is having intercourse for pleasure rather than for procreation. Love is worthless and Hubertine's happiness is unrealizable when not validated by motherhood:

"Non, je ne suis pas heureuse.... Une femme qui n'a point d'enfant, n'est pas heureuse.... Aimer n'est rien, il faut que l'amour soit béni"("No, I am not happy...A woman without a child is not happy...Loving is nothing, love must be blessed"[17: 168]). Hubertine's "je ne suis pas ... Aimer n'est rien" and Pauline's affirmation that " ... jamais elle ne serait femme.... Elle voulait vivre, et vivre complètement ... " are blatant negations of female existence due to childlessness. These regrets effectively define the female subject as negative, non-existent and never will be.

The final example of unfulfilled motherhood in *L'Argent* involves Caroline Hamelin, who, although married for two years, was unable to conceive a child. Her short-lived relationship with Saccard does not lead to conception either. Based on these two fruitless unions, Zola declares that Caroline is sterile; he does not provide a scientific basis for her condition. However, Caroline's traditionally masculine efforts at self-improvement offer an explanation for her barren womb: "Elle parlait quatre langues, elle avait lu les économistes, les philosophes, passionnée un instant pour les théories socialistes et évolutionnistes"("She spoke four languages, she had read the economists, philosophers, impassioned for a time by socialist and evolutionary theories"[19: 60]). Caroline condemns her advanced instruction as a sort of transgression against femininity; by devoting herself to unfeminine pursuits, she bypassed the traditional reproductive path of women: "Voyez-vous, j'ai beaucoup trop lu pour une femme, je ne sais plus du tout où je vais ... "("You see, I've read much

too much for a woman, I don't know anymore where I'm going"[75]).

Caroline's sterilizing intellectual achievement stands out in stark opposition to *l'avachissement* of la Maheude (in *Germinal*), yet it is apparent that Zola approves of Caroline's instruction. This is an example of Zola's conscious desire to make women strong. However, Caroline's sterility and the corruption to which she falls prey reflect an unconscious need to punish her for her strength and for overstepping the bounds of the ideal female companion. This ideal is summarized by Bertramd-Jennings:

> [E]lle se doit avant tout de rester <<*une vraie femme*,>> avec tout le traditionalisme qu'implique l'expression.... L'effacement anonyme, le renoncement dévoué, la soumission résignée sont donc de règle dans le comportement féminin idéal où toute tentative d'accomplissement personnel apparaîtrait comme égoïste et malséante. (Bertrand-Jennings, 1972: 16)[2]

The idea that intellectual development was a perversion of femininity held substantial sway when Zola was writing *L'Argent. La femme nouvelle*, the woman who sought autonomy and education, was seen as a threat to the structure of society and to the family. "Women leaving their traditional domestic and familial havens would be transformed into "*hommesses,*" dessicated and rigid characters divested of all feminine 'coquettishness'" (Silverman, 1989: 68,69). *La femme nouvelle* was perceived as rejecting her reproductive role in the pursuit of male goals, thus effecting a metaphorical sex change. Zola does not depict Caroline as the caricatured *hommesse* seen in French publications in the 1890's (Silverman, 1989: 68). Yet when she reads the Civil Code to verify Saccard's business dealings, her infringement in male territory is obvious and she becomes an adversary: "[Cela] ... la lui montrait méfiante, prête à le surveiller, de ses yeux de femme, fureteurs et intelligents"("He saw her as untrusting, ready to watch him, with her woman's eyes, probing and intelligent"[19: 119]). In sum, Caroline's intelligence empowers her, since it protects her from exploitation. However, it also masculinizes her and bans her from the female realm of reproduction.

Contrary to the popular belief that modern women would reject motherhood, Caroline demonstrates a strong desire to be a mother: " ... elle avait coûtume de dire qu'un seul chagrin était resté saignant en elle, celui de n'avoir pas eu d'enfant"("...she was in the habit of saying that a lone sadness remained bleeding in her, the sadness of not having had a child"[19: 60]). Furthermore, the bleeding wound of maternal desire, like Pauline's incessant menses in *La Joie de vivre*, influences Caroline's actions: " ... [S]a maternité inassouvie, son amour déspespéré des enfants, l'enflammait d'une tendresse active pour tous ces pauvres êtres, qu'on tâchait de sauver du ruisseau parisien"("Her unfulfilled motherhood, her desperate love of children, lit her with an eager tenderness for all these poor beings that they tried to save from the Parisian gutter"[73]);

"[E]lle s'attendrit, émue ... profondément remuée dans sa maternité de femme restée stérile"("She melted, moved... deeply touched in her sterile motherhood"[153]). The manifestations of her yearning are characteristic of an illness—with terms like *chagrin, saignant, enflammait, femme restée stérile, faiblesse, maternité souffrante(grief, bleeding, inflamed, sterile woman, weakness, suffering motherhood)*—relegating Caroline to the realm of abnormal and incurable non-mothers.

Ultimately, Caroline's downfall stems from contradictory sources. While her masculine pursuits exclude her from reproduction, the stereotypically feminine trait of maternal affection and the unfulfilled wish for a child lead Caroline to abandon her integrity and perpetuate the suffering of those around her.

In each instance, Zola alleges that the loss of a woman's reproductive potential is the loss of her potential for fulfillment. The author's repeated emphasis on the sterility of Pauline, Hubertine, and Caroline denotes the importance he attributes to the matter. Many different arguments for motherhood are seen in the texts: reproduction is woman's raison d'être, a biological imperative that leads to punishment if rejected; a sterile existence becomes synonymous with physical ailment and leads to moral corruption. In a roundabout manner, Zola elaborates variations on the same theme; first by lauding the maternal emotions in his mother figure then by describing the torment of her childlessness, Zola affirms the belief that woman's primary duty is to procreate. His assertion clashes with the sterility of the mother as it does with his paradoxical slander of motherhood among the most fertile characters of *Les Rougon-Macquart*.

These repeated contradictions reflect the author's inability to reconcile the progressive notions of feminism and female independence that he as a modern writer wanted to espouse and his bourgeois attitude about the traditional roles that women should fill. According to Zola's novels, particularly the "utopic" novels that follow *Les Rougon-Macquart*, women's primary purpose is to be a mother. Marianne Froment in *Fécondité* is an illustration of this belief; with each birth of her twelve children, she grows in beauty and strength: "Et c'était au milieu que Marianne rayonnante allaitait son douzième enfant, la chair blanche, fraîche encore, belle toujours de sa sérénité forte, de sa volonté saine"("And in the center a radiant Marianne nursed her twelfth child, her white skin, still fresh, still beautiful in her strong serenity and her healthy willingness"[28: 560]).

Although Zola attempts to create intelligent and strong women characters to demonstrate his own modernity and his advocacy of feminism (Bertrand-Jennings, 1972: 172, 173), he cannot let go of the conventional desire to describe women whose enlightenment and strength enable them to benefit mankind in general rather than further their own emancipation (Bertrand-Jennings, 1973: 10). In other words, empowered women are acceptable as long as they use their power to have a family and support their spouses. Bertrand-Jennings documents Zola's personal conflict by examining some of the same

characters discussed here. She concludes: "Aussi bien ses héroïnes idéales, même instruites, savent-elles rester à leur place et ne revendiquent-elles pas des droits qui seraient en contradiction avec le rôle que leur a fixé la nature" (Bertrand-Jennings, 1973: 13).[3]

If we cannot explain the enigmatic maternal figure in Zola's work, perhaps by considering this paradigm from the perspective of literary creation in general might we gain some insight into the why's and how's of these characters. To summarize, in Zola, ideal women are incomplete women. The female subject has no life and does not exist if she does not reproduce. Therefore, woman's only hope of being is in a reproductive union with a man. Woman's being hinges on male creation. This statement recalls one of the suppositions made by Gilbert and Gubar—that authorial desire ultimately usurps maternal creation: "Like the metaphor of literary paternity ... [is the] notion that the chief creature man has generated is woman ... " (1979: 12). Such an idea is hardly surprising today. *The Madwoman in the Attic* is one of many studies that relate examples of male authorial desire and its effects on women writers and the feminine subject.

What is intriguing in Zola is that the female subject might embody the very desires and disappointments that a male writer struggles with. If we look at the sterile maternal figure as a metaphor for the anxiety experienced by Zola as a writer, we can better grasp the reasoning behind the creation of such idealized and almost perfect characters. Indeed, their only flaw was the inability to create life. They were potentially perfect, ideal because their creation could only be imagined and never realized. The same can be said of any creation, including Zola's novels—always perfect in theory, and flawed in reality. Ultimately and perhaps unintentionally, Zola's maternal figure in her barren state is ripe with meaning, productive in her sterility, and empowered by the writer to represent human creation.

[1]"Often Zola's characters are defined by what is lacking in them, by the characteristics that the author refuses to give them."

[2]"She must more than anything remain 'a true woman,' with of the tradiontionalism that the expression implies....The anonymous erasure, devoted renunciation, resigned submission are required for the ideal feminine conduct in which all attempts at personal accomplishment appear selfish and unseemly."

[3]"Thus even his ideal heroines, even the educated ones know how to stay in their place, never laying claim to rights that would contradict the role nature assigned to them by nature."

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