Facing *L'Origine du Monde:*
The Model's Role in the Studio Romance

By

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Dedication

For Cookie

Abstract

Gustave Courbet’s provocative painting *L’Origine du monde* is one of several points of departure from which I examine the female model’s role in the artists’ studios depicted in six French works of art: Honoré de Balzac’s novella “Le Chef d’œuvre inconnu” (1831-37); Gustave Courbet’s paintings *L’Atelier du peintre* (1855) and *L’Origine du monde (1866)*; Edmond and Jules de Goncourts’ novel *Manette Salomon* (1867); Émile Zola’s *L’Œuvre* (1886) and *J’étais l’origine du monde* (2000) by Christine Orban. Each work contains a representation of the studio romance: an erotically charged relationship between the masculine painter and feminine model, with the reader or viewer positioned externally as masculine voyeur. Within the stereotypically gendered framework of the studio romance, the painter is a heterosexual male, and his artwork expresses his virility; the female model is a willing sacrifice, giving her body and energy to sustain the artist’s career; and the external viewer is a voyeur of the model’s nudity and of her relationship with the painter. However, within the same works, many details and structural elements do not align with traditional gender stereotypes. Therefore, each work also subverts rigidly binary constructions of masculine/feminine identities and roles. The female models are the subject of masculine artistic and erotic visual interest, but each model also has her own gaze, symbolizing feminine subjectivity. In Balzac’s “Le Chef d’œuvre inconnu” and Courbet’s *L’Atelier*, the female models are important to the organization of the work, yet they remain predominantly within their assigned gender roles. The Goncourt brothers and Émile Zola use their models’ point of view as an essential part of their novels’ composition, thereby portraying women with more fully developed individuality. Christine Orban’s novel *J’étais l’origine du monde* is a fictional first-person account of a model posing for Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde*, making the woman’s subjectivity the dominant organizing factor in the text. In these works, the female models gain increasing agency over time; later examples contain more richly nuanced characters whose perspectives become part of the deliberate design of the narratives.

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Facing *L'Origine du monde*: The Model's Role in the Studio Romance

Introduction

I stood facing Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (1866), a beautifully painted and anatomically correct representation of a nude woman's torso, with the figure's legs opening toward the viewer, her sex clearly visible. The foreshortened and cropped female body portrayed on this 46 x 55 cm canvas has neither limbs nor head. What a shocking image it was to me, as I stood before it on the first day of my first trip to Paris in the summer of 2003. *L'Origine du monde* was displayed on the first floor of the Musée d'Orsay, and it was one of the first paintings I saw that day upon entering the museum. Looking at it, I was stunned by Courbet's frank and accurate depiction of a female body. My reaction was an emotional cyclone, instantaneous and turbulent.

Initially, the overt nudity offended both my moral code and feminist sensibilities. My sense of personal modesty remains infused with a conservative religious upbringing and twenty-first-century American culture, neither of which generally accepts a public display of human genitals. I felt that this image was not meant for my eyes, that it was meant for private and masculine viewing. Simultaneously, having studied feminist theory avidly as an undergraduate, I was instantly alert to the gendered power structures inherent in this overt appeal to masculine desire. As a woman raised in a society where females are disproportionately subjected to all types of sexual abuse, knowing the body on display was like my own, I identified with the figure. I felt a sense of helplessness and vulnerability, as if it were my own body exposed to a predatory gaze. The figure's missing head and limbs also deeply disturbed me; it seemed as much a dismembered corpse as an adored lover. Amid these turbulent emotions, as an artist and a lesbian, I was also drawn to the painting's beauty: It is skillfully rendered and erotically charged.

The fact that I was experiencing all these conflicting emotions while standing in a public, visible location increased my sense of disorientation. I felt a collision between the intense emotional intimacy of viewing *L'Origine du monde* and the impersonal communal context of the museum space. Then I read the title on the museum placard, and the meaning of the painting shifted again, from a response of shock to one of contemplation. I recognized layers of associations in the words "l'origine" and "du monde."[1] In my own art practice, I had studied and created images of the archetypical Mother Goddess, the mythical origin of the Earth and human beings, and I suddenly understood Courbet's painting as a powerful evocation of this archetype. I considered the relationship of sexual desire to the origins, creation, and viewing of art. I wondered if this painting was typical for the artist's work, and about the model's identity. Then I moved on, to look at other paintings in the museum.

For long after that museum visit, the memory of *L'Origine du monde* stayed with me. It seemed to superimpose itself onto every work of art I saw afterward in the Musée d'Orsay that day and for the rest of my trip through France. Even more, my reaction to *L'Origine du monde* affected my experience of viewing art from that moment forward. Somehow, I intuited something that day which my research has now led me to understand and express more clearly: Courbet's painting simultaneously evokes the human urge to procreate and the equally human desire to create art. Thus, it brings to the surface and distills the deep complexities inherent to both sexual and aesthetic desire. The frank composition of *L'Origine du monde* directly confronts the viewer with the binary biological reality of human male/female reproduction. However, Courbet's canvas also ignites awareness that individual experiences and responses to sexuality, bodies, and artistic creation are infinitely complex and almost always ambivalent, defying any effort to reduce them to a simple binary structure.

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[1] The painting's title, displayed alongside it in a museum exhibition, is part of how we, as viewers, experience it today. It is important to note, however, that the title was probably not Courbet's own. Thierry Savatier estimates that the title appeared sometime between 1867 and 1882, but there's no indication of who assigned it to the painting (*L'Origine du monde: histoire d'un tableau de Gustave Courbet*. [(2006) Paris: Éditions Bartillat, 2019], 83.) The first instance of the title "L'Origine du monde" used in print is in 1929 (Bernard Teyssèdre, *Le Roman de l'Origine*. [(1996) Paris: Gallimard, 2nd edition, 2007], 401-8.)

Courbet's canvas provokes this clash between the simplicity of binary thinking and the complexity of human experience by framing the female body to eliminate the figure's face, thereby revealing what is usually kept hidden: "[...] non seulement le sexe d'une femme, mas LE sexe de LA Femme, et, au-delà, toutes les femmes, amantes et mères incluses."[2] A heterosexual cisgendered male viewer like Savatier saw evocations of his lovers and mother when looking at Courbet's painting. However, the experience might be very different for other observers. In concealing the model's identity, Courbet effectively invites viewers to "fill in the blanks" with projections of their own experiences and desires. Amongst my own complex responses, I could not help but wonder about the model, her experience posing for this painting, and her reaction when she saw it. Courbet's faceless figure also led me to later reflect upon the status of models in artists' studios and upon the ways in which male artists and writers represented them in the nineteenth century.

In this dissertation, *L'Origine du monde* is one of several points of departure from which I examine the female model's role in the artists' studios depicted in six works of art by French writers and painters. All of the works in question contain a representation of "the studio romance," which I define for the purposes of this discussion as: an erotically charged relationship between the male painter and female model, with the reader or viewer positioned as external—and presumed male—voyeur.[3] Included are Honoré de Balzac's novella "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu" (1831-37); Gustave Courbet's paintings *L'Atelier du peintre: Allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique et morale* (1855), and *L'Origine du monde* (1866); *Manette Salomon*, by Edmond and Jules de Goncourt (1867); Émile Zola's *L'Œuvre* of 1886, and *J'étais l'origine du monde* (2000) by Christine Orban. All of the nineteenth-century artists and writers were male, a fact which will play a role in our discussion. Christine Orban's novel serves as a more recent version of the atelier fantasy, told from the perspective of the female model. Each work contains elements within its structures or compositions that create a gendered role for the members of the studio trio (artist, model, viewer). Yet, my analysis will show that these same works contain details that do not neatly align with commonly accepted gender stereotypes. Therefore, each work of art simultaneously resists traditional binary gender-based constructions of the artist as active (masculine), the viewer as complicit voyeur (masculine), and the model as passive (feminine).

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[2] Savatier, *L'Origine*, 11. Emphasis in the original.

My analysis will focus on the woman's gaze within these works, considering both the woman as subject of the male artist's and spectator's gaze and as the owner of her own perspective. The creators of the works in my corpus purposefully represented female models as having subjectivity, where subjectivity means portraying the woman as an individual with thoughts, goals, and desires separate from those of the artist. This study accepts that the role reserved for the female model within the atelier fantasy is restrictive and heteronormative. However, representation of feminine subjectivity via the female model's active gaze affects the overall composition of the works themselves. Thus, each work in the corpus obliquely challenges underlying stereotypes about gendered roles within the studio romance. Resistance to rigidly dichotomous constructions (due to the artist's intentions or unconscious responses) leaves gaps or fissures in meaning where the gender binary breaks down. These intentional or unintentional lapses can allow us to identify new roles for the model, the artist, and the viewer—particularly for individuals who do not fall within the gendered expectations for those roles, such as a female artist, a woman who models for her own pleasure, or a lesbian viewer.

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[3] I will also use similar terms, such as "studio fiction" or "atelier fantasy," to refer to the same concept.

For the literary works in my corpus, I will use close readings and textual analysis techniques, considering each work's specific historical context, while also consulting critical sources from a range of disciplines, including narratology, feminist theory, and gender studies. Although literature is the emphasis in this dissertation, I address the visual works in a parallel fashion, using careful visual analysis in combination with art history research methods. These strategies allow a targeted investigation of the concepts of gender, power, art, desire, and the gaze within the studio romance. To limit the scope of this study, I have not, for example, included works where a woman artist looks at a male model, or those where a woman artist looks at a female model, or examines her own image.[4] I have also limited the corpus to depictions of painters (as opposed to representations of sculptors at work, for example) to better allow comparisons of any applicable textual references to artist's tools, the medium of paint, and painterly methods.

Additionally, the artist and writers under consideration cover several generations and span the nineteenth century and–with Christine Orban's novel–include the late twentieth century

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[4] See Tamar Garb. "The Forbidden Gaze: Women Artists and the Male Nude in Late Nineteenth-Century France." In *The Visual Culture Reader*. Edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 617–24. For an example of an image of a male model by a female painter, see Marie Bashkirtseff's painting *In the Studio* of 1881 (Museums of Dnipro, Ukraine). Marie Bashkirtseff, Berthe Morisot, and Mary Cassatt each created portraits of mothers and children as well as self-portraits.

(2000), thus affording a comparison of various iterations of the studio romance over time: Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), The Goncourts (Edmond 1822-1896 and Jules 1830-1870), Émile Zola (1840-1902), and Christine Orban (1957–). As we will see, in these literary texts, the emphasis on the model's individuality and subjectivity becomes more observable as the century progresses. The Goncourt brothers and Zola, writing in the later part of the nineteenth century, endow their fictional models with much more richly nuanced individuality than Balzac does in "Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu," and include the female character's point of view as an inherent part of their narrative structures. In Orban's novel, the model-protagonist's shifting sense of self is part of the narrative.

Furthermore, during the nineteenth century, writers and painters often worked in dialog, creating purposeful liaisons between images and texts. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing proposed in his *Laocoön* (1766) that literature lends itself more naturally to expressing the passage of time while painting is more suited to spatial communication.[5] William Berg, however, demonstrated that nineteenth-century writers and artists experimented purposefully with incorporating qualities normally associated with the other medium.[6] As Berg explains, writers such as Émile Zola and the Goncourt brothers sought to capture visual and spatial effects within their texts, using strategies that interrupt the temporal flow of the narrative or that create a sense of space.[7] Conversely, painters wanted to capture the passage of time in their canvases, as Monet did with his cathedral series.[8] Each mode of creative expression, writing and painting, thus influenced the development of the other. This mutual influence caused an identity crisis ("crise de plume") amongst the writers in question: according to Nicolas Valazza, as painters moved away from subjects based solely on Biblical, mythological, or historical narrative, they gained independence from the doctrine of *ut pictura poesis,* threatening the dominant role literature had held since the Renaissance.[9] The increasing amount of writing about painting (such as Diderot's art criticism, or Baudelaire's and Zola's reports on the Paris Salons), the evolution of the artist's novel, and the increasing use of visual tropes in French literature is largely a result of writers' response to the growing independence of artistic creation.[10] Alexandra Wettlaufer, too, addresses the interconnections and rivalries between the writer's pen and the artist's paintbrush.[11] Using Balzac and the painter Girodet as her examples, Wettlaufer parses the Pygmalion myth as a foundational fable used by both men to confront and control the threat of the other art form (writing or painting) and the Other that is woman.[12] The interactions of image and text have therefore long provided critics with fruitful comparisons.

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[5] Cited in William J. Berg. *Imagery and Ideology: Fiction and Painting in Nineteenth-Century France*. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 15.

[6] Berg, *Imagery*,16.

[7] Berg, *Imagery*,16.

[8] Berg, *Imagery*,16.

Containing characters who are painters, models, and viewers of art, the works in my corpus thus share more than the studio fantasy narrative: although each piece is viewed as artistic creation with its own formal structures, the paintings and texts each establish an interplay of gazes among the characters or figures and the external viewer/reader. These gazes are frequently tied explicitly to gender roles and relate to the acts of creating art, posing for a painter, and/or viewing art.

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[9] *Ut pictura poesis*, translates from Latin as "as is painting, so is poetry." First proposed in Horace's *Ars Poetica* (c. 19 BCE), *ut pictura poesis* became a paradigm asserting the supremacy of letters over visual art and remained a powerful cultural belief until the late eighteenth century (Nicolas Valazza. *Crise de plume et souveraineté du pinceau: écrire la peinture de Diderot à Proust*. [Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013], 12-13).

[10] Valazza, *Crise,* 18-20.

[11] Alexandra Wettlaufer. *Pen vs. Paintbrush: Girodet, Balzac, and the Myth of Pygmalion in Post-Revolutionary France*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2001.

[12] Wettlaufer, *Pen*, 25-30.

I. The Studio Romance: Inherent to the Artist's Novel

The studio romance implies a fantasized sexual relationship between a male painter and a female model, with the reader/viewer positioned as unseen external voyeur. Such relationships were not necessarily an accurate depiction of nineteenth-century atelier life.[13] However, painters and writers alike found a rich source of dramatic potential in artists' attachment to the women who inspire their work. Exploring "[…] the artist's purported problem with his models allowed writers [and painters] to grapple with issues of sexuality and representation."[14] The atelier fantasy itself is merely one aspect of a larger framework. Representations of artists and models in a studio space were common in French painting and literature during the nineteenth century.[15] The studio fantasy reoccurs powerfully as one common trope within these texts and canvases. Examples of paintings that fall into this popular subgenre include *Raphael et la Fornarina* by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Jean-Léon Gérôme's *The Artist Sculpting Tanagra*.[16]

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[13] Frances Borzello. *The Artist's Model*. (London: Junction Books, 1982), 122-136.

[14] Marie Lathers. *Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist's Model*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 4.

[15] See Giles Waterford, *The Artist's Studio,* (London: Hogarth Arts and Compton Varney, 2009) for an extensive study of paintings depicting artists' workspaces.

[16] Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Raphael et la Fornarina* (1813, Fogg Museum, Harvard University); Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Artist Sculpting Tanagra* (1890, Dahesh Museum of Art, New York). For a study of the theme of the artist's model in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British painting and photography see: Martin Postle and William Vaughn. *The Artist's Model, from Etty to Spencer.* (London. Merrell Holberton Publishers, 1999).

Theodore Robert Bowie identified 42 French literary works in which painters appear as characters, beginning in 1803 with Charles Nodier's *Le Peintre de Saltzbourg*, to the 1938 publication of André Billy's *Nathalie*.[17] Of course, Balzac's novella "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu" is included on Bowie's list, as are the Goncourts' *Manette Salomon* and Zola's *L'Œuvre*. These three works deserve our scrutiny because they echo one another, and they paradigmatically illustrate the recurring romance schema.

According to Bowie, ten tropes are common to the nineteenth-century artist's novel in France. Only *Manette Salomon* and *L'Œuvre* contain all ten tropes, which he lists as follows:

1) a description of the painter's early days and of his training in art school
2) a description of his *milieu*, which breaks down into:
    a. his studio […]
    b. his points of contact with Nature […]
    c. his points of contact with fellow-craftsmen, usually cafés
3) the faithful notation of shop-talk with other painters and with models and dealers […]
4) lengthy discussions of esthetic and technical questions […]
5) a tendency, beginning with the Goncourts, towards violent criticism of the entire official system and the academic tradition
6) lengthy accounts of *Salons* and exhibitions […]
7) the introduction of literary figures as foils to the painter
8) involvement of the artist in sentimental complications, usually of a kind which threatens his artistic integrity
9) the introduction of actual painters, either under their own names or transparent disguises […]
10) […] showing the painter at work on a painting […].[18]

In many respects, Christine Orban's novel *J'étais l'origine du monde* (2000) fits nicely into the subgenre of the artist novels as defined by Bowie. Jo, Orban's protagonist, is the supposed model for *L'Origine du monde*, and the story recounts her romantic relationship (#8) with a fictionalized version of Gustave Courbet (#9). It also includes their conversations while he is at work on *L'Origine du monde* (#10). Jo describes Gustave's studio and the café where he meets up with his painter friends (#2). Gustave speaks of an experience while at art school (#1) and discusses his planned painting in detail with Jo (#4). Thus, containing six of Bowie's ten criteria, Orban's book can be considered a late twentieth-century addition to the tradition of the French artist's novel.

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[17] Theodore Robert Bowie. *The Painter in French Fiction*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1950). Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/49744. 57-9. Nodier's short story is about a painter suffering from the death of his beloved and Billy's novel is about several painters who become involved in a plot to assassinate Napoleon III. Further examples of similar works not discussed in this study include Balzac's novel *Le chat qui pelote* (1829) and Guy de Maupassant's novella "Le Modèle" (1883).

[18] Bowie, *Painter*, 5-7.

This study will focus on the eighth trope on Bowie's list: the "involvement of the artist in sentimental complications, usually of a kind which threatens his artistic integrity," or the studio romance. Most of the relevant critical studies on Balzac, the Goncourts, and Zola have focused on the artist's perspective and on the issue of failed genius. Our inquiry, by contrast, will bring the model's perspective to the foreground.

Models and their role in French art and literature have already been the subject of several studies. Frances Borzello's historical study of modeling demonstrated that the assumption models were always women who always posed nude is a myth, largely based on masculine erotic fantasy.[19] Susan Waller further deconstructed the stereotype of the sexually available female model, contrasting the myth with the actual practices in nineteenth-century ateliers. She proposed that models were not simply "the passive objects of the gaze of artists and caricaturists, but [were] active participants in the artist/model transaction," and that these transactions were mostly temporary and strictly commercial.[20] Wendy Steiner revealed the changing history of Western definitions of the female model, seeing the model as an active agent in the communicative exchange between the artist, model, and viewers of the work.[21] Most relevant to the current study is Marie Lathers' *Bodies of Art: French Literary Realism and the Artist's Model* (2001), as well as her extensive scholarship regarding the history and representation of models in nineteenth-century France. Lathers describes a model's work and purpose thusly:

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[19] Borzello, *Model*, 5. In fact, male models formed the foundation of most French academic art training. Only male nude models were permitted at the École de Beaux Arts until 1863 (Susan Waller. *The Invention of the Model: Artists and Models in Paris, 1830-1870*. [Aldershot, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006], 1). Of course, one purpose of limiting the sex of posers in the classroom was the concern that the young male students might fall into temptation (Claire Maingon. *L'Œil en rut: Art et érotisme en France au XIXe siècle*. [Paris: Éditions Norma, 2021], 97). Furthermore, according to traditional academic theory, masculine bodies more clearly displayed important anatomical features such as musculature, tendons, and skeletal structures, which meant they were more appropriate to artistic study (Borzello, *Model*, 21). Behind the design of this official training were Renaissance ideals regarding masculine and feminine gender roles: male bodies were believed to be stronger than female ones, more active, capable of maintaining a wider variety of poses, and therefore able to embody humanity's nobility more effectively (Waller, *Invention,* 4-5 and Borzello, *Model*, 21). In fact, artists' desire to have easy access to female nude models was part of what motivated a nineteenth-century movement toward studying and working in private studios (Maingon, *L'Œil*, 97). This meant that male painters were now more frequently alone with beautiful and naked young women, increasing the erotic potential for their otherwise professional exchange and fueling fantasies (Lathers, *Bodies*, 3-4). The studio model was different from the academy model because in the academy, nude male models were part of a professional

> Models are professional self-objectifiers. Their job is to pose, to simulate the stillness and formal artistry of an image. They actively make themselves passive, we might say, but […] they do so in the service of art rather than lust […].[22]

Lathers identifies repeated tropes and categories of female models that were popular in French art and literature. Models were classified according to contemporary stereotypes of their class and race, notably Jewish, Italian, and Parisian women.[23] Lathers argues that the representation of the model's body in literature "parallels the growth and aging of the female body:" her "birth" occurs in Balzac's "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu," she is a mother in her middle years in the

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group interaction in an environment of brotherhood, while in the studio the nude female posed in a private interaction where she became the Other, subject to both a professional and a personal gaze (Martin Postle. "Behind the Screen: The Studio Model." In *The Artist's Model: From Etty to Spencer*. [London: Merrell Holberton Publishers, 1999], 55).

[20] Waller, *Invention*, xvi and 18

[21] Wendy Steiner. *The Real Real Thing: The Model in the Mirror of Art*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[22] Lathers, *Bodies*, 1.

[23] Lathers, *Bodies*, 7-13.

Goncourts' *Manette Salomon* and Zola's *L'Œuvre*, while Guy de Maupassant's *Fort comme la Mort* presents an aged model with a grown child.[24] My work extends Lather's analysis by questioning the gendered representation of fictional models, identifying areas in the works where the masculine/feminine binary breaks down.

II. Gender Roles in the Studio Romance

Each iteration of the studio romance creates specifically gendered roles for the members of the atelier triad, evoking a binary conceptual framework. This can be traced in the paintings and literary texts under consideration, and we will identify and compare similar gendered power structures among the three characters in the studio fantasy (artist/model/viewer). In each novel, the painters and the other artists included in the narrative–such as the sculptor Mahoudeau in Zola's *L'Œuvre*–are male. Eroticized visions of creative life directly link masculine genius to virility. The creation of art is the painter-protagonist's supreme goal, and the model's identity is determined by her effect on his creative powers, which are metaphorically linked to his sexual prowess. Even qualities usually associated with femininity, such as sensitivity and intuition, become absorbed into the myth of the virile male artist. In fact, "The history of artistic identity, from [the end of the eighteenth century] onwards, can be seen to a certain extent as the attempt to control and contain the feminine connotations of creativity."[25] The artist/model relationship becomes a powerful narrative, imbued with the erotic energy of fantasy, and exploited in artistic representations by writers and painters alike.

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[24] Lathers, *Bodies*, 14.

[25] Lynda Nead. "Seductive Canvases: Visual Mythologies of the Artist and Artistic Creativity." *Oxford Art Journal* 18, no. 2, (1995): 61.

Common to all versions is a male artist seeking artistic inspiration and finding it in the beautiful body of his nude female model.[26] An assumption that the female model is sexually available to the male painter is also inherent to the studio romance.[27] The woman's role is to be both muse and lover, willingly sacrificing herself for the artist's career.[28] Another recurring trope in the representation of the female model is a persistent conflation of woman (representing life) and canvas (representing art), beginning with Balzac's "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu," wherein Frenhofer believes that he has created a living being on the canvas in his studio.[29] Each literary work in the corpus also contains instances of fragmentation of the female body, a strategy that enacts masculine castration anxiety and reduces the woman to a collection of manageable, fetishized parts that can be reassembled to the artist's specifications.[30] Often, the fetishization of the young female body is paired with a rejection of aging and maternal bodies. Erotic desire turns into disgust, an emotional response that epitomizes the ambivalence of desire. *Manette Salomon*, *L'Œuvre*, and *J'étais l'origine du monde* all contain examples of male painters who experience revulsion towards the formerly inspiring body of their female models. Furthermore, in both *L'Œuvre*, and *J'étais l'origine du monde* the models themselves are repulsed by their lovers' representations of their bodies. Christine (from *L'Œuvre*), and Jo (from *J'étais l'origine*

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[26] Borzello, *Model*, 128.

[27] Borzello, *Model*, 128.

[28] Borzello, *Model*, 5.

[29] Nead, "Seductive Canvases," 59.

[30] Roland Barthes. *S/Z*. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970), 112-113.

du monde) also experience moments of shame towards their own bodies. Additionally, the studio romance is often constructed to appeal to an understood masculine viewer of the intended finished masterpiece and/or of the process of its creation, thereby extending the female model's role as an object of masculine viewing pleasure: she exists to be seen by the artist and by the beholder.

Because the atelier drama inherently links the male painter's sexual desire to possess the body of his female model to his equally strong desire to create great art, human procreation becomes a recurring metaphor for artistic production in each of the works in the corpus. The man's desire to create lifelike art might be interpreted as a kind of womb envy because the artist wishes to appropriate woman's ability to give birth.[31] This desire finds a foundational myth in the story of Pygmalion, who fell in love with his own sculpture and was rewarded for his piety when Venus brought the cold marble to life. The writers of the nineteenth century removed the goddess from the story and chose instead 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."[32] Balzac's Frenhofer attributes the life-giving power to the sculptor when he says: "Nous ignorons le temps qu'employa le seigneur Pygmalion pour faire la seule statue qui ait marché!"[33] Such a reframing of the Pygmalion myth places the creative power in the hands of the male artist and reinforces patriarchal dominance.[34] In order to succeed, the painter must have access to a beautiful female body, a woman who willingly poses for him and allows him to appropriate her image. The risk, however, is to give precedence to sexual desire over creative labor. The artists who fall in love with their model and who conflate aesthetic research with erotic passion are doomed to failure.[35] With all its promises and pitfalls, the atelier fantasy is heteronormative.

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[31] Brady, Patrick. *Interdisciplinary Interpretation of Art and Literature: The Principle of Convergence. With Illustrative Essays on Watteau, Delacroix, Manet, Zola, Proust, Camus*. (Knoxville, TN: New Paradigm Press, 1995), 56-9.

[32] Juliana Starr. "Pygmalion Politics in Balzac's 'Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu.'" *French Studies Bulletin*, 30, no. 110, (March 2009): 17.

[33] Honoré de Balzac. "Le Chef-d'œuvre Inconnu." In *La Comédie Humaine*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, vol. 10. Edited by René Guise. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 425. All page numbers refer to this edition.

The gender roles and power structures within the studio depend upon who is the owner of the gaze and who is the object of it. In the studio romance, the act of looking is a masculine position assigned to the artist and the presumed male viewer, while the feminine role is to be the object of the gaze.[36] An artist's studio is a place of purposeful looking, a space where the sense of sight is used deliberately and with precision. Looking closely and learning from careful visual observation is a hallmark of the painter's profession.[37] Then, with the skills and tools of his craft, the artist creates an object to communicate with others using visual means. Studio visitors are there to see something or someone: to meet the painter, to see his work, or perhaps to observe the process of creation. For example, much of the plot of Balzac's "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu" revolves around the fictional male artists visiting each other's workrooms. The tale begins with the young painter, Poussin, and the master, Frenhofer, arriving simultaneously at Porbus' home and studio, while the closing scene takes place in Frenhofer's atelier. Studio space also features in Zola's *L'Œuvre*, where visitors to Claude Lantier's studio include an art dealer, friends and colleagues, and potential models. Claude also visits others' ateliers. Just as Poussin and Porbus visit Frenhofer's workspace to view his closely guarded masterpiece, most people are in the studio *to see*. However, the model's specific role is *to be seen*.

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[34] Starr, "Pygmalion Politics, 17.

[35] Stéphane Gougelmann. "Manette Salomon, Allégorie (Anti-) Sémite." *Cahiers Edmond et Jules de Goncourt* Manette Salomon, no. 12, (2014): 166.

[36] See James Conlon, "Men Reading Women Reading: Interpreting Images of Women Readers." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 26, no. 2, (2005): 37–58; Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. (London: Penguin Books, British Broadcasting Corp, 1973); Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality*. (New York: Routledge, 1992); Marcia Pointon, *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting, 1830-1908*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Postle, Martin. "Behind the Screen," 55–65

[37] Roxana Monah. "Les Enjeux du regard dans Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu." *Thélème. Revista Complutense de Estudios Franceses* 27, no. 0, (May 2012): 267

Private studios are places of creation, mirrors of the interior world of the artist and frequently a manifesto of artistic beliefs.[38] Therefore, the presence of a model, the type of model chosen, and the particular poses the painter expects are essential parts of a studio's organization. To portray a model posing before a painter invites observers to witness art in the making. In the novels we consider, the ongoing fascination with the studio romance signals that beyond the erotic plot, writers are interested in the act of creation itself. Their work tells a story about art and the creation of art.[39] It is a representation of the process of creation, of the process of seeing and being seen, and of the impact of human desire upon these processes played out in the painter's atelier. Representations of studio scenes deliberately put nudity on display just as the art itself is created for display. In the studio romance, art is infused with erotic energy both for the artist and the beholder. When artists paint a nude model, the spectator is put in the position of a voyeur, meaning someone who can observe or imagine the physical intimacy between the artist and the model. Inherent to the role of voyeur is holding a position outside of the central action, a perspective that is built into visual works of art, which are generally created with the intention of exhibition, even if only privately rather than in a gallery or museum. For the spectators, then, a presumed sexual relationship between the artist and his model adds to the erotic aura of the atelier fantasy narratives.[40] The voyeuristic point of view is also fundamental to the novel, which the writer creates purposely for others to read. Certainly, the act of looking at an image of an unclothed human fits neatly into the definition of "voyeur," and watching intimate acts between others is also an act of voyeurism. Even more, in nineteenth-century painting, there was a presumed relationship between the model and the observer, and many male patrons of the Salons regarded the nudes as sort of a display of bodies accessible to them.[41] In this case, the appeal of the images is due to an assumption that the bodies on view were available to the artist, and therefore could be available to other men (i.e., spectators).

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[38] Emilie Sitzia. *L'artiste entre mythe et réalité dans trois œuvres de Balzac, Goncourt et Zola*. (Finland: Åbo Akademis Förlag, 2004), 56.

[39] Borzello, *Model*, 165; and Giles Waterfield. "The Artist's Studio." In *The Artist's Studio*. Edited by Giles Waterfield. (Hogarth Arts and Compton Varney, 2009, London), 165.

Each of the works under consideration in this dissertation contains at least one manifestation of the external observer, an inherent part of the studio romance framework. For example, in Courbet's *L'Atelier*, the painter is Courbet himself, with his nude female model standing close behind him and a young boy observing the proceedings. The boy is a surrogate for the external viewer. If his youth minimizes the presumed eroticism of his look, it also casts him as a naive observer. In this case, as a central figure in his studio allegory, Courbet provides the example of a masculine spectator who is ready to receive the master's lessons, a role thus offered to everyone who views the painting. When the text or painting adopts the point of view of the male painter, the external masculine viewer's gaze is allowed, even invited. Thus, on the surface it may seem like the studio romance is yet another trope that can only reinforce the same traditional gender roles propagated in the Western world. As such, key points of my analysis attend to the frequent shifts and variable changes in gendered expectations for each character in the studio romance.

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[40] Borzello, *Model*, 72.

[41] Waller, *Invention*, 59, and Steiner, *Real Thing*, 20.

III. Gender as a social construct

The primary and critical works discussed in this dissertation exhibit a perpetual tension between binary gendered structures and individual nuances that multiply, change, and slip beyond the confines of traditional masculine and feminine classifications. The existence and reinforcement of binary representations betray the desire to contain, control, and define reality into comprehensible and readily identified categories. Yet, as noted psychoanalyst Joyce McDougall says, "The remarkable aspect of human beings in their psychic structure–as in their genetic structure–is their singularity."[42] No one fits neatly into either gendered category, regardless of their biological sex. So why do the gendered stereotypes seem to reassert themselves so stubbornly? These persistent stereotypes are the result of Western culture's division of human qualities according to notions of what is "masculine" or "feminine," superimposed onto the biological reality of sexual reproduction. As Judith Butler reminds us, "The presumption of a binary system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it."[43] As such, these gendered associations seem unavoidable in Western discourse, perhaps because they are so linked to the inevitable necessity of a male and female human to create a child, investing them with a similar permanence. Thus, we need to take the gender binary as a provisional starting point in order to understand its role in the studio romance, even if the ultimate goal is to question its rigidity.

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[42] Joyce McDougall. *The Many Faces of Eros: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Human Sexuality*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), 172.

[43] Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble*. ([1990] New York: Routledge, 2007), 9.

This study assumes that gender roles are a societal construct rather than biologically determined, meaning individual personality characteristics are not inherently linked to sex. The binary concept of masculine/feminine (and all the associated matrices of active/passive, culture/nature, public/private) is destined to break down as soon as it is constructed because these dichotomies are false simplifications of complex human experiences. As Judith Butler explains:

> The very complexity of the discursive map that constructs gender appears to hold out the promise of an inadvertent and generative confluence of these discursive and regulatory structures. If the regulatory fictions of sex and gender are themselves multiply contested sites of meaning, then the very multiplicity of their construction holds out the possibility of a disruption of their univocal posturing.[44]

Expressing ideas outside the binary of gender stereotypes is a form of conscious or unconscious resistance to their restrictions. Therefore, any work of art that contains narrative or compositional elements that do not conform to these stereotypes can be said to resist or subvert them. One powerful way that the texts and paintings in my corpus subvert patriarchy and the gender binary is to portray female models who have their own perspective on the atelier fantasy, represented by picturing a woman as the holder of a gaze or creating a female literary character whose point of view becomes the focus of the narrative.

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[44] Butler, *Trouble*, 44.

IV. The Gendered Power Structure of the Gaze within the Studio Romance

It is important to define in more detail the meaning of the term “the gaze” because the gaze is more than simply the act of looking at someone or something; it is the power inherent in the act of looking and it has traditionally been a power reserved for the male painter within the fantasized studio drama. Most notably, Laura Mulvey described the masculine gendered role of the gaze in cinema and its effects on the visual portrayal of women, and Mulvey’s work has more broadly informed feminist visual and literary theory beyond film studies. Mulvey built upon Freud’s definition of scopophilia, meaning the active power and erotic pleasure in looking at another human being, to describe the social power of the male gaze in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”[45] She argued that in Western cinema, the image on the screen is deliberately constructed to appeal to male viewers. Mulvey’s analysis focuses on masculine reaction to the sight of female bodies. Additionally, she uses the words male/female interchangeably with masculine/feminine, thereby conflating physical sex with cultural gender. Mulvey explains the gaze as follows:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.”[46]

According to Mulvey, the masculine spectator not only projects his sexual fantasy on to the female character on screen (as described above), but he also adopts the male protagonist as a representation of himself: the man on screen is a surrogate for the masculine viewer, who can thereby vicariously experience the actions of the protagonist.[47] The confluence of identification with the male hero and erotic pleasure in looking at the female body allows the observer to indirectly possess the woman on display.[48] The eroticism of looking, the merging of visual and sexual pleasure, is the cornerstone of the studio romance. Just as the masculine moviegoer can imagine himself as the action hero in a blockbuster, the viewer of a studio romance painting or the reader of a text can assume the position of the artist and enjoy fantasized access to the model's body.[49]

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[45] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, 14-26.

[46] Mulvey, *Pleasures*, 19.

In nineteenth-century France, the studio romance was part of a larger cultural framework that explicitly targeted the heterosexual male spectator. Men were not only the primary producers of art of all kinds, they also held the economic power to control the market; therefore, masculine desires determined the content of paintings—nude female bodies—and the manner of representation—nude female bodies displayed for maximum visual effect.[50] As John Berger claimed: "In the average European oil painting of the nude the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture, and he is presumed to be a man."[51] As such, erotic art of the nineteenth century consisted mostly of images of women created by and for men.[52] Even when such images depicted women in homoerotic scenes, such as in Courbet's *Sleep*, the lesbian viewer was not the intended audience.[53] We can therefore assume, unless the text or image indicates otherwise, that the intended reader/viewer of nineteenth-century works of art is likewise masculine.

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[47] Mulvey, *Pleasures*, 21.

[48] Mulvey, *Pleasures*, 21.

[49] Mulvey later acknowledged that the gendered binary understanding of the gaze was limited in its ability to explain the complex dynamics of human interactions. It was useful, she explains, in the early stages of feminist studies, but grew less useful as it became apparent that being locked into the binary analysis was merely a result of being trapped in a phallocentric world view: merely reversing the male/active vs. female/passive binary opposition can accomplish nothing towards a more nuanced analysis (Mulvey, *Pleasures*, 162). Thus, Mulvey's essay "Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience," written in response to her own earlier "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema," proposed the possibility of creating a narrative model based on something other than a binary or polarization (Mulvey, *Pleasures*, 159-76). For example, rather than insisting on dénouement, closure, and a return to stability, a story could focus on the transition states and middle phases (Mulvey, *Pleasures*, 160-2). The actual phrases "transition states" and "middle phases" are only loosely defined in Mulvey as potential alternative narrative structures to the parabolic rising action, climax, and falling action of traditional plot formats (Mulvey, *Pleasures*, 167-9). What's important about Mulvey's proposal is that she engaged in this process of acknowledging the binary and attempting to think outside of it.

[50] Linda Nochlin. "Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art." In *Woman, Art, and Power and Other Essays*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 138-9.

Beyond the specific cultural and historical context, the masculine gender of both the artist and the viewer are encoded in other ways as well. For one, women's bodies depicted in art frequently face the viewer of the painting, or turn provocatively towards him.[54] Kenneth Clark reminds us that the human body as a subject in art "…is rich in associations, and when turned into art these associations are not entirely lost."[55] Thus, the physical reality of lived sexuality is an essential part of one's experience creating and/or viewing art. Although scholars can and do analyze the "associations" of the body from many perspectives, in the context of the quoted section, Clark is clearly referring to specifically male and thus, according to his paradigm, also masculine associations of what it means to live in a male body and to look upon a female body. Given this context, Clark maintains that erotic feelings inspired by nudes are a definitive part of

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[51] Berger, *Ways*, 54.

[52] Nochlin, "Eroticism," 137.

[53] Nochlin, "Eroticism," 137.

[54] Berger, *Ways*, 53-6. See, for example, Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (c.1534, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy).

[55] Kenneth Clark. *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*. (New York: MJF Books, 1996), 16.

"good" art.[56] Human (masculine) erotic instincts come to the surface with the nude so that visual art can "hold in solution" a high level of erotic content and make it simultaneously visible yet socially acceptable.[57] Clark contends that the masculine desire to paint and look at unclothed women is part of a natural desire "to grasp and be united with another human body."[58] However, in these paintings, Berger contends that nudity is not "a function of [the female model's] sexuality, but of the sexuality of those who have access to the picture."[59] Thus, the poses of most nudes communicate submission, passivity, and availability.[60] Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* is a supreme example of a female figure composed to invite the fantasies of masculine viewers. Likewise, in literary texts, the masculine reader is encoded in nude scenes which are constructed to appeal to his fantasies.

While Clark's and Nochlin's analyses present the nudes in art as potential sexual partners for the viewer, Berger argues that some paintings of loved women are not "nudes" — per his definition of "nude" as nakedness on display for the observer — because the viewer is not presented with the unclothed female body as a potential partner, but instead is invited to witness the loving relationship between the artist and his model.[61] As an example, he specifically cites Rubens' portrait of his wife wrapped in fur, *Het Pelsken* (c.1630, RKD, The Hague,

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[56] K. Clark, *Nude*, 8.

[57] K. Clark, *Nude*, 8.

[58] K. Clark, *Nude*, 8.

[59] John Berger "The Past Seen from a Possible Future" in S*elected Essays and Articles*, (New York: Penguin 1972), 215. Cited in Nochlin, "Eroticism," 143.

[60] Nochlin, "Eroticism," 142.

[61] Berger, *Ways*, 57-8.

Netherlands).[62] Berger says that “The way the painter has painted her includes her will and her intentions in the very structure of the image, in the very expression of her body and her face.”[63] It matters that she is loved, as Berger points out above, because her desire plays a part in the construction of the image. However, despite the limited amount of flesh on view in Rubens’ portrait, or in other similarly themed images, this present study proposes that the presumed sexual relationship between the artist and his model is part of what drives the eroticism of these paintings — at least within a heteronormative schema — because the masculine viewer can imagine himself in the place of the artist: loved, admired, powerful and in possession of the woman on display.

The masculine identity of the artist and viewer means that the male is the subject, or the person doing the action in the scenario. One can understand this patriarchal structure through a grammatical analysis of the following sentence: “The artist and the viewer look at the model.” Here the artist and viewer are the subjects of the sentence, and the object is the model. But “artist,” “viewer,” and “model” are not merely words playing grammatical roles, because, at least in nineteenth-century works, these words reinforce the idea that the subjects are masculine and the object is feminine. As James Conlon explains:

> This identification of the male with subjectivity is evident not just in the content of the image, but in the imaging process itself. Thus, the spectator of an image is usually assumed to be male, and the image is structured around the male gaze. The gaze itself, as a fundamental act of consciousness, as subjectivity, is conceived as masculine. The feminine then becomes inherently constituted as merely an object of the male gaze, as itself lacking the fundamentals of subjectivity.[64]

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[62] Berger, *Ways*, 57-8.

[63] Berger, *Ways*, 58.

[64] Conlon, “Men Reading,” 46.

If works of art including nude women are meant to entice male spectators, then female figures positioned to block the viewer’s access to their bodies and women characters who demonstrate agency and/or their own sexual desires are potential challenges to the role of woman as a passive object of the masculine gaze. Furthermore, if individual subjectivity itself is defined as inherently masculine, then works of art resist traditional gender power structures when they include female subjectivity, desire, and choice.

Without crediting male creators of the nineteenth century with any proto-feminist leanings (that are not only anachronistic but are not borne out by extended study of their lives and works), we can recognize that they did not completely ignore the perspectives of the women in question—the female models in the studio. Instead, as this study will show, the feminine perspective was viewed and skewed through the masculine point of view. Even more, it was heavily encoded into the myth of studio romance. Representing studio models as having their own gaze in a painting or ascribing a point of view to female characters in texts nevertheless introduces subjectivity and a multiplicity of perspectives on the myth of the studio romance. However, ultimately, within this multiplicity, in the works by nineteenth-century male artists, the woman in the studio romance fiction remains the object of the artist’s gaze.

V. The Model’s Gaze: Undermining Patriarchal Paradigms

Despite the prevalence and power of the various myths, stereotypes, and cultural beliefs about studio models, literary and visual strategies can serve to undermine them and to present alternatives. One technique used by many painters is to portray the model returning the gaze of the spectator, a gesture that marks her as an individual.[65] A reciprocated gaze indicates self-awareness and represents the active choice to look at something or someone. A powerful example of this strategy can be seen in Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). Here, the main female figure directs her look towards the viewer, emphasizing her personhood.[66] This look asks the viewer to acknowledge his own gaze.[67] This same gesture can be repeated in literary compositions by giving the model her own point of view, thereby introducing an element of subjectivity. In Balzac's "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu," for example, when the model, Gillette, explains her thoughts and feelings about posing for Frenhofer, her perspective is acknowledged within the narrative even if the male characters discount it. Although a woman's gaze in a work of art or her voice/point of view in a narrative are still constructions of a male painter or writer, readers and viewers are given a glimpse of perception outside the dominant masculine-active and feminine-passive dichotomy.

Another strategy to question the validity of the gender stereotypes is to present the female model as somehow active or dominant, thus overturning associations of passivity.[68] Courbet's drawing *Model Reading in the Studio* (c. 1849, Art Institute of Chicago) for example, depicts the model as the central figure in the composition. Although her bared breast undoubtedly eroticizes the image and emphasizes her as an object of display, she owns a gaze that is focused on the pages of a book. That she has chosen to read and engage with the text suggests an element of active, deliberate choice and therefore individuality.

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[65] Borzello, *Model*, 164.

[66] Borzello, *Model*, 164.

[67] T. J. Clark. "Olympia's Choice." In *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1984), 131-2.

[68] Borzello, *Model*, 165.

A third strategy for disrupting traditional gender boundaries emerges when observers and critics provide reinterpretations of the act of posing. For example, one can interpret modeling as an artistic interaction where the model has an active role; she has chosen to pose.[69] Recognizing her privileged position of intimacy and knowledge about details of the studio, the work, the life of the artist, and the process of creation of the work can also underline the active participation of the model.

In this dissertation, I will argue that in spite of the stereotypical objectifying representations of artist models in studio romance, each work in the corpus also resists traditional binary gender-based constructions of the male artist as active, the presumed male viewer as complicit voyeur, and the female model as passive sacrificial victim. Each of the works uses compositional tropes to represent the woman's subjectivity, portraying the fictional models as having desires and goals that drive their choices. As mentioned earlier, the models gain increasing agency over time, with the later works containing more richly nuanced characters whose perspectives become part of the deliberate design of the narratives.

The first chapter will focus on the artist's model primarily as an object to be seen in two of the earliest nineteenth-century works that portray the model in the artist's studio. The first work is Gustave Courbet's *L'Atelier du peintre. Allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique et morale* (1855). *L'Atelier* contains a portrait of Courbet himself, seated before his easel, with a nude female model standing behind him. The second work, discussed in conversation with Courbet's *L'Atelier*, is Honoré de Balzac's novella "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu" (1831-37), a story of a young painter who bargains his mistress' posing services for a peek at an older master's greatest work. Both *L'Atelier* and Balzac's tale are firmly rooted in patriarchal paradigms, yet each also contains elements that do not entirely support a binary gender schema, producing what I refer to as 'gaps.' These gaps allow us, as present-day readers and viewers, to see the model as more than merely a passive recipient of the artist's gaze. As this study proposes, Courbet's *L'Atelier* centralizes the female model using an underlying compositional structure shared with many of the painter's other works, including *L'Origine du monde*. Additionally, I will offer insight into the meaning of the title of Balzac's tale, demonstrating that Gillette herself is an unknown masterpiece.

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[69] Steiner, *Real Thing*, 2-3

The second chapter will focus on Edmond and Jules de Goncourt's novel *Manette Salomon* (1867). Here again, the authors activate existing myths and stereotypes about the male painter and his female model while simultaneously creating or allowing gaps in meaning that undermine strict gender categories. In *Manette Salomon,* the authors go further than Courbet or Balzac because their fictional model, Manette, is endowed with a subjectivity and an agency that is more emancipating than Gillette's role in *Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu.* Although the Goncourts unfortunately use many negative anti-Semitic and misogynistic stereotypes in their portrayal of Manette, they also created a character who can be read against the grain. The present study highlights how Manette can also be seen as a representation of powerful feminine subjectivity.

Chapter three will examine the essential role of the character Christine in the narrative and composition of Émile Zola's novel, *L'Œuvre* (1886). Beginning in the first few paragraphs, the text shifts perspective between the painter, Claude, and his model and eventual wife, Christine. This exchange in focalization between the artist and model creates two co-existing, interdependent, and competing narrative threads. I offer an analysis of four important scenes when Christine poses, demonstrating the importance of her point of view to the structure of Zola's text. The author assigns the model a central role in the narrative and frequently uses her perspective to create emotional ambiance in important scenes. Incorporating the female model's gaze in the organization and structure of the novel undermines the myth that she is merely a passive object and invites a multiplicity of readers into the space of the text.

The final chapter analyzes the artist's model as a fully realized literary character with her own voice in Christine Orban's novel *J'étais l'origine du monde* (2000). I read this literary work by a twenty-first century woman writer in conjunction with its source of inspiration, Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (1866). Orban's novel gives a voice to the model, whom the author presumes is Joanna Hiffernan. Orban's novel directly activates gender binaries, like Courbet's painting, and confronts socio-cultural myths about the artist, the model, and the studio romance. Yet, within these dichotomous structures and even with all the heteronormative and gender stereotypes intact, Orban uses Courbet's painting as a starting point for a literary portrayal of a model who creates her own work of art in writing her memoirs, her first-person narrative encompassing the entire novel. Orban sees the model as an individual acting in accordance with her own desires and motives, and the text presents a variety of ambivalent emotions, motives, and reactions that undermine gender dichotomies.

Chapter One: The Model Poses -- "un souvenir dans ta palette"

"Entrons, ce sera vivre encore que d'être toujours comme un souvenir dans ta palette."[70]

She stands behind the painter in Gustave Courbet's *L'Atelier du peintre: Allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique et morale* (1855). She holds a demure pose with her head tilted, looking down upon the artist's work like a benevolent saint or protective goddess. Various elements of the composition call attention to her nudity. First, the light tones of her skin contrast starkly with the rest of the painting. She also holds a piece of cloth in front of her body while her own clothing is piled on the floor before her, emphasizing the absence of dress, especially in contrast to the other fully clothed figures in the painting. The placement of the nude woman creates a visual and spatial comparison with a richly dressed female figure standing confidently in the right foreground, further emphasizing the model's nakedness. We, the viewers of this work of art, cannot help but notice this undressed woman standing near the painter and his canvas, so close to the artist that she is in contact with the back of his chair. Her place designates her role as an important one. If we know this work is meant to depict the painter's studio, as announced in the title, her presence can only be explained if we read her as an artist's model. Yet, the painter is not looking at her, nor is her figure depicted in the canvas he is working on. Perhaps she is posing for the painting we are viewing, since she is clearly not modeling for the one on the artist's easel. Why is she there? What is her role in this painting?

Scholars have interpreted Courbet's model in a wide variety of ways: as an object of erotic desire, an artistic necessity, a symbol of Art, a painter's muse, a wife or mistress, a mother of Art, or a representation of Nature and Truth (each of which will be detailed later in this chapter). So many distinct readings of one figure may seem illogical or inconsistent. However, as Linda Nochlin explains, this mutability of meanings assigned to Courbet's model is not exceptional because "[…] the sign 'woman' is infinitely malleable in the representation of representation, and can stand for any or all of these positions in its anonymous objecthood."[71] In other words, within patriarchy, the woman is whatever the man needs her to be, a construction fueled by whatever desires he projects upon her, regardless of her own wishes or self-understanding. Courbet's *L'Atelier* seems, therefore, to primarily reinforce the dominant patriarchal paradigm in its construction of the role of the artist's model. Nochlin also reexamines Courbet's painting from a personal and feminist scholarly perspective.[72] She focuses her analysis on a figure placed behind the easel in *L'Atelier*, the Irish woman nursing a child.[73] This figure had previously been largely ignored within the critical discussion of the canvas. In Nochlin's analysis, the Irish woman becomes a symbol of class and gender oppression.[74] This exploration of Courbet's painting from a new perspective creates a paradigm shift that allows Nochlin to discover areas of new meaning. Similarly, this study identifies vantage points from which readers can recognize feminine agency and likewise question the myth of masculine genius.

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[70] Balzac, "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu," 433.

This chapter will examine the role and representation of the artist's model in nineteenth-century French literature and art by focusing on two iconic works: Honoré de Balzac's novella "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu" (c. 1831- 45), and Gustave Courbet's painting *L'Atelier du peintre:*

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[71] Linda Nochlin, "Courbet's Real Allegory: Rereading *The Painter's Studio*," in *Representing Women*. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999, New York), 129.

[72] Nochlin, "Courbet's Real Allegory," 106-51.

[73] Nochlin, "Courbet's Real Allegory," 121-4.

[74] Nochlin, "Courbet's Real Allegory," 125.

Allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique et morale (1855). Balzac's text and Courbet's painting both present a female model whose symbolic role can be interpreted in a variety of ways that seem to shift and multiply. Each work activates various stereotypes and myths regarding the nude woman in an artist's studio, maintaining a patriarchal power structure in their representations of painters and models. In spite of this masculine-centered paradigm, both works contain gaps that invite us, as a present-day audience, to see the model as more than a passive recipient of the artist's gaze. An alternative reading identifies the model's power and redefines her as an active agent rather than merely a victim of patriarchal domination. When understood from this perspective, Gillette emerges as a previously unacknowledged powerful heroine. She is thus an unknown masterpiece and one possible manifestation of Balzac's title. Similarly, Courbet's nude model becomes a meaningful evocation of feminine strength.

I. Balzac's "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu:" A Tale of Contradictions and Paradoxes

Balzac published several versions of "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu" (c. 1831-45), beginning with its appearance in *L'Artiste* in 1831. Balzac re-worked the novella numerous times and included it in his *Études philosophiques* in 1837.[75] This last version was changed very little when it was included in the 1847 publication of *Le Provincial à Paris*. The story begins when the young painter, Poussin, visits the home of an admired and successful artist, Porbus. While these first two characters are based on actual painters (Nicolas Poussin 1594-1695 and Frans Porbus

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[75] The Pléiade edition ("Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu:" "L'histoire du texte" and "Notes et variantes," pages 1401-1428 by René Guise) contains extensive information about the variations in each published version of Balzac's text.

1569-1622), the third artist, Frenhofer, whom Poussin meets on the doorstep at Porbus' home, is fictional. Frenhofer is a master painter who explains his theories of art to the two younger men. Adding his own brushwork to Porbus' painting *Marie égyptienne*, Frenhofer demonstrates techniques that will allow the younger men to add a sense of life to their figures. Frenhofer also speaks at length about his own unfinished masterpiece—which he has spent ten years attempting to perfect—entitled *La belle noiseuse*. It supposedly depicts a well-known courtesan, Catherine Lescault. He describes it in terms that portray the painting as a living being, even a lover and wife. The younger artists are understandably curious and wish to see the work, but Frenhofer guards it jealously. Poussin decides to offer the modeling services of his beautiful mistress, Gillette, in exchange for a view of Frenhofer's mysterious portrait. Gillette initially resists but finally agrees to model for Frenhofer. Poussin and Porbus wait outside the studio door while Frenhofer is alone with *La belle noiseuse* and Gillette. When they finally enter the room, they ignore Gillette herself and instead study Frenhofer's work. Instead of a masterful portrait, they see nothing more than confusing layers of paint obscuring everything but one perfect foot in a corner. Their comments anger Frenhofer, who claims they are merely jealous of his talent and throws them all out of his studio. The next morning, Porbus discovers that Frenhofer died in the night after burning all his paintings.

Balzac's tale is a labyrinth of paradoxes, contrasts, and dualities, beginning with the title of the novella itself. Indeed, the phrase "le chef-d'œuvre inconnu" is a paradox. The quality of being unknown ("inconnu") negates the definition of a masterpiece ("chef d'œuvre"), which is defined as a work that is among an artist's highest-quality and usually best-known achievements.[76] Balzac also frequently emphasizes the differences among characters using dualities and contrasts. For example, Poussin's youth and poverty are a foil to Frenhofer's age and wealth. Even more, the novella is built on dualisms that ultimately oppose carnal desire with aesthetic desire, or more simply, life and art. The tension between these two poles is played out upon the female model's body, which becomes the male artists' main object of desire, the principal commodity exchanged among the men, and the primary subject of artistic representation.

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[76] Claude E. Bernard, "La problématique de l'échange dans 'Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu,'" *L'Année Balzacienne* 4, (Jan. 1983): 201.

"Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu" was written before Balzac began his overarching literary project, which he called *La Comédie humaine* and described in his *Avant-Propos*, published in 1842. Although Balzac used verifiable facts (such as the identities of the painters Poussin and Porbus) and the names of known locations (like the address of Porbus' studio), the tale retains elements of the supernatural that link it to Hoffmannesque Romanticism.[77] It is also a powerful narrative that has influenced artists, writers, scholars, filmmakers, and thinkers. More than any other of Balzac's work, it has become a springboard to launch creators' imaginations.[78] Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) identified with Balzac's failed painter, famously saying "Frenhofer c'est moi."[79] Cézanne felt Frenhofer's relentless quest was similar to his own difficulties representing visual sensations.[80] Pablo Picasso, too, identified strongly with Frenhofer.[81] He even rented a studio on the rue des Grands-Augustins, mistakenly believing it to be the location of Frenhofer's atelier.[82] His connection to Frenhofer culminated in his creation of a series of illustrations for a 1931 edition of "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu," published by Ambroise Vollard. The French director, Jacques Rivette (1928-2016), was also inspired by "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu" for his 1991 film *La Belle Noiseuse*, titled after Frenhofer's beloved painting. More recently, Portuguese painter Paula Rego (1935-2022), created a series of paintings based on Balzac's tale. Each creator or scholar who responds to "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu" adds another layer to the rich tapestry Balzac created.

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[77] See note #101, page 46, below.

[78] Thierry Dufrêne. "Faire voir le chef-d'œuvre inconnu," in *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu: Texte intégral*. (Paris: La Maison de Balzac, Paris-Musées, 2021), 43.

[79] Michael Doran, *Conversations avec Cézanne*. (Macula, Paris. 1978), 65. Cited in Dufrêne, "Faire voir," 56 and Jon Kear, "'Frenhofer, c'est Moi:' Cézanne's Nudes and Balzac's 'Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu.'" *Cambridge Quarterly* 35, no. 4, (2006), 346.

[80] Kear, "Cézanne's Nudes," 345-6.

[81] "Picasso ne peut qu'être touché par ce roman dont le sujet principal est l'insatisfaction perpétuelle du créateur devant sa propre création qu'il retouche sans cesse pour la perfectionner, mais, ce faisant, la rend illisible" (Jeanne-Yvette Sudour. "'Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu' illustré par Pablo Picasso." *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu: Texte intégral*. [Paris: La Maison de Balzac, Paris-Musées, 2021], 77).

A. The Pygmalion Myth: Revered and Revised

Balzac calls upon a well-known fantasy of masculine creative and sexual power when his character, Frenhofer, compares himself to Pygmalion. This is indeed a notable comparison since the conflict between physical love and artistic passion seems to be resolved and fulfilled in the Pygmalion myth. Ovid's Pygmalion was a sculptor "shocked at the vices/Nature has given the female disposition."[83] He lived alone alongside a perfect woman he sculpted in ivory. He "gave it greater beauty/Than any girl could have, and fell in love/with his own workmanship" (242). Ovid details Pygmalion's extensive investment of emotional and erotic energy in his ivory sculpture. The sculptor dressed his figure, bought it gifts, caressed, and kissed it. Pygmalion sometimes thought his statue truly lived: he "believe[d] his fingers almost le[ft]/An imprint on her limbs, and fear[ed] to bruise her" (242). As an artist so skilled that his work seemed alive, Pygmalion embodies the highest of artistic achievements. When the goddess Venus rewards Pygmalion's piety by giving life to his sculpture, he is also able to fulfill his erotic longings. Thus, in the Pygmalion myth, erotic desire merges seamlessly with the desire to create art.[84] In "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu," on the other hand, sexual and aesthetic desire cannot comfortably co-exist.

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[82] In "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu," it is Porbus' studio that is located on the rue des Grands-Augustins. This studio was where Picasso painted *Guernica*, one of his best-known works (Kear, "Cézanne's Nudes," 345; and Yves Gagneux. "'Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu:' interprétations, adaptations, inventions," in *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu: Texte intégral*. [Paris: La Maison de Balzac, Paris-Musées, 2021], 65).

[83] Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Translated by Rolfe Humphries. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), 241-2. All subsequent page numbers refer to this edition.

The primary attraction of the Pygmalion myth is the ability to control the body of the other as an object of desire.[85] This fantasy object is "a woman who is not a woman, but rather a man-made creation, a projection of the imagination rather than an independent entity."[86] This fictional creature proves much easier to control and therefore much more attractive than any real woman. Speaking of his *Belle noiseuse*, his mysterious painting, Frenhofer tells Poussin that he has worked for ten years to perfect his work, making an explicit reference to "le seigneur Pygmalion" (425). Frenhofer thus compares himself to Pygmalion, claiming to have created life in his portrait of the *Belle noiseuse*. He says his mentor, Mabuse, taught him the secret of painting figures that seem to breathe, and further, like Pygmalion, he seems to believe his own creation has, at times, come to life: "Hier, vers le soir, dit-il, j'ai cru avoir fini. Ses yeux me semblaient humides, sa chair était agitée. Les tresses de ses cheveux remuaient. Elle respirait!" (424). Frenhofer treats his painting in many ways as his wife.[87] He calls her "mon épouse," saying, “Voilà dix ans que je vis avec cette femme, elle est à moi, à moi seul, elle m’aime” (431). Frenhofer sublimates his sexual desires into the creation of his art, causing him to be abnormally attached to his painting and to fantasize that it is alive.

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[84] Diana Knight. *Balzac and the Model of Painting: Artist Stories in "La Comédie Humaine."* (London: Legenda, 2007), 1.

[85] Wettlaufer, *Pen*, 24.

[86] Wettlaufer, *Pen*, 24.

[87] Wettlaufer, *Pen*, 98.

Indeed, Frenhofer’s fetishistic obsession with his *Belle noiseuse*, and more broadly, the relationship of male artists to their female models in Balzac’s tale, can be defined along the lines of Pygmalion’s story: the artist is masculine while the object of his desire is simultaneously his own work of art and an idealized feminine figure. While the artist’s erotic energy drives the creative process, it is essentially an autoerotic fantasy because the painter invests that energy in a projection of himself. Pygmalion’s and Frenhofer’s wish to be creator – i.e., both god and father – as well as lover to the perfect woman is, as Lynda Nead describes it, a “fantasy of what may be called male autogenesis.”[88] This fantasy establishes the role of supreme creator for the male artist and narrowly defines the woman’s role. As such, both in Ovid’s tale and Balzac’s story, the woman is a pure creation of the artist’s imagination. Ovid says Pygmalion gave his ivory statue a form more beautiful than any real girl could possess. Similarly, Frenhofer bemoans the inadequate models available for his would-be masterpiece:

> […] il m’a manqué jusqu’à présent de rencontrer une femme irréprochable, un corps dont les contours soient d’une beauté parfaite, et dont la carnation … Mais où est-elle vivante […] cette introuvable Vénus des anciens, si souvent cherchée, et dont nous rencontrons à peine quelques beautés éparses ? (426)

No individual woman possesses enough beauty to satisfy Frenhofer because the woman he envisions is a non-existent perfect being. With Frenhofer’s reference to Pygmalion, Balzac thus calls upon a set of cultural conceptions of artistic creation that portray the female model as a passive repository for masculine desire.

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[88] “Seductive Canvases,” 59. See also Olivier Bonard. *La Peinture dans la création Balzacienne. Invention et vision picturales de ‘La Maison du chat-qui-pelote’ au ‘Père Goriot.’* (Geneva, Switzerland: Librairie Droz, 1969), 83.

In accordance with the Pygmalion myth, the woman's wishes or motives are never considered, but Balzac's novella subverts parts of the original myth. In Ovid's version, the goddess Venus brought the sculpted figure to life.[89] In the Balzacian nineteenth-century male-dominated paradigm of artistic creation, however, "the male artist [is] not only the creator of the art object, but also […] the one who, through the quasi-magical powers of his genius, breathes life into that object."[90] "Elle a une âme, l'âme dont je l'ai douée," proclaims Frenhofer (451). He therefore describes his own talent as god-like, able to give a soul to a two-dimensional figure.

Further diverging from Ovid's myth, Gillette's physical presence challenges the idealized imaginations Frenhofer relied upon. Gillette was supposed to help him achieve his masterpiece by providing a model body that was close to the perfect beauty he had envisioned. Instead, she contributes to the unraveling of his elaborate fantasy and delusion of being able to create life, alone, in his studio. His dream of perfection is revealed as not only misguided but ultimately destructive—and fatal. Thus, in Balzac's "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu," the Pygmalion myth is both celebrated and undone.

B. The System of Exchange as a "Marché de Dupes"

Porbus' painting entitled *Marie égyptienne* introduces the theme of exchange and prostitution as a central trope in the text. Balzac's invented canvas is based on the tale of Marie l'Égyptienne, a fifth-century saint who gives up a life of prostitution for a life of prayer in the desert. Not having the fare for the boatman to carry her across the Nile, she must sell herself one last time to gain access to her sacred goal.[91] Balzac's choice of a narrative of prostitution for the subject of Porbus' painting foreshadows the request that Poussin will make of Gillette.[92] She will be asked to make her body available for a higher purpose, to pay the price of her lover's passage into the status of the professional artist. The painter, too, metaphorically resembles a prostitute because he must use his talent to please his clients.[93] In the economics of Balzac's tale, the women become objects of exchange for the artists' potential gain, while the men decide what is valuable and worthy of exchange. As Juliana Starr explains, citing Luce Irigaray's analysis of patriarchal economy, in Balzac's story "all means of artistic production, knowledge and exchange are controlled exclusively by men."[94] The painters value knowledge and artistic ability, as well as fame and the resultant economic gain. Porbus trades access to his *Marie égyptienne* for increased knowledge; Poussin offers Gillette's naked body to Frenhofer as the price of professional training; and Frenhofer offers his companions the right to view his *Belle noiseuse* in exchange for Gillette's posing. Thus, the female figures in the novella are traded among the men like interchangeable objects, as Porbus says, "femme pour femme" (432). However, as Claude Bernard explains, each of the characters in *Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu* falls victim to a fool's bargain, a "marché de dupes" because no one gets what he or she wants in the end: When the *Belle noiseuse* is perceived as meaningless by the younger painters, Frenhofer's claim to have achieved a new depiction of beauty is called into question; Porbus and Poussin gain no new knowledge of artistic techniques; Poussin's career is not "made" by this moment as he and Gillette hoped it would be; and Gillette's sacrifice is useless.[95]

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[89] Starr, "Pygmalion Politics," 17.

[90] Starr, "Pygmalion Politics," 17.

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[91] Lathers, *Bodies*, 97.

[92] Bernard, "problématique," 205.

[93] Michael D. Huston. "L'Artiste comme prostituée dans 'Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu' d'Honoré de Balzac." *Romance Notes* 37, no. 1, (Fall 1996): 91.

[94] Starr, "Pygmalion Politics," 17.

In Balzac's tale, the painting *Marie égyptienne* becomes the focus of economic, social, and professional exchange. The figure of the saint passes through the hands of all three of the artists: Porbus paints her, Poussin sketches her and Frenhofer enlivens her figure.[96] Balzac's narrator explains that the painting was created for Marie de Médicis and sold "aux jours de sa misère" (416). This emphasizes the purely economic and transactional value of art. However, Frenhofer is already wealthy and Porbus is an established painter. Poussin equates their financial security with their superior artistic skills. He speaks of his wish to be a great artist, yet this desire is directly linked with wealth and celebrity. Poussin's first words to Gillette when he returns to his studio indicate the high value he places on the interdependence of fame and money:

> … Je me suis senti peintre! J'avais douté de moi jusqu'à présent, mais ce matin j'ai cru en moi-même ! Je puis être un grand homme ! […] nous serons riches, heureux! Il y a de l'or dans ces pinceaux! (428).

Poussin has thus longed for the gold coins his paintbrushes might produce, seeing it as a guarantee of happiness. The young painter, who has very little in his own atelier, is hypnotized by the variety and the number of supplies in Porbus' studio, well before the portrait of *Marie égyptienne* captures his attention. The expensive tools and materials of the artist represent his dreamed-of future.[97] Thus, it was not until Poussin saw Porbus' and Frenhofer's wealth, equated with their artistic ability and renown, that he felt himself an artist and believed in his future—that one could make a living as a painter.

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[95] Bernard, "problématique," 209.

[96] Knight, *Balzac*, 18.

[97] Michel Butor. "L'Atelier du peintre: 'Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu.'" *Energeia: Recherches Doctorales* 2, (Jan. 1996): 10.

The scene of Frenhofer's retouching of *Marie égyptienne* also underscores and reinforces fraternal social interactions in the text. The professional knowledge exchanged between the master and the younger artists centers on the representation of a nude female figure. The saint's body thus becomes a site for the enactment and display of masculine power. Although the painting they are discussing contains two figures, the boatman and the saint, the men focus their attention on the representation of the woman's body.[98] Their gaze is therefore both erotic and aesthetic, while Frenhofer's brushwork heightens the sensuality of the image.[99] Frenhofer boasts of his ability to depict the satin suppleness of the young woman's flesh, as he gives the figure lifelike dimensions and "l'unité de ton que voulait une ardente Égyptienne" (422). The word "ardente" suggests both sensuality and eroticism. Frenhofer uses the body of *Marie égyptienne* as an eroticized aesthetic object to demonstrate his painting techniques and therefore further establish himself as the master.

The painters value knowledge and artistic ability, as well as the master's validation of their skill. Porbus' response to Frenhofer's criticism is to request further knowledge and commentary, calling him respectfully "mon cher maître" (417). When Frenhofer begins his lesson, neither of the younger men protests at all and Porbus permits the retouching of his work. Both men stand, unmoving, on either side of the canvas as Frenhofer lectures and demonstrates, both soaking up the lesson, "plongés dans la plus véhémente contemplation" (421). Because Frenhofer's brushwork is, in fact, effective—so much so that "on aurait dit une nouvelle peinture trempée de lumière," the younger artists look to him for further knowledge (421). In fact, they are so enamored with Frenhofer that Poussin almost immediately begins to contemplate the trade of his mistress for a view of Frenhofer's unseen *Belle noiseuse*. As for Frenhofer, he hopes to perfect his painting at last and thereby gain more than mere artistic power. His identification with Pygmalion demonstrates his desire to breathe life into his *Belle noiseuse*, gaining god-like powers and realizing his erotic fantasy of creating the perfect body. Alas, the exchange is ultimately worthless and destructive.

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[98] Monah, "Les enjeux," 263-4.

[99] Monah, "Les enjeux," 263-4.

C. Conflicting Desires: A Painter Cannot Serve Two Mistresses

In Balzac's tale, erotic and artistic desire are melded, but incompatible—like the paradox contained in the title: "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu." In the world of the text, one cannot successfully be both artist and lover. Yet to be an artist is to be devoted to one's creative pursuits, and this devotion is dangerously similar to romantic attachment. Ultimately, the artist's erotic energy needs to be sublimated toward the completion of the work of art. Otherwise, the artist faces creative sterility and failure. The first paragraph establishes a connection between erotic and artistic desire that is maintained throughout the text by a consistent blending of the two lexicons. Balzac's novella begins with the young Poussin pacing, hesitating to approach the home and studio of the great painting master, Porbus. Here, Balzac compares Poussin to an inexperienced youth, shy before his first mistress. Poussin falters "avec l'irrésolution d'un amant qui n'ose se présenter chez sa première maîtresse, quelque facile qu'elle soit" (413). Additionally, the narrative voice compares Poussin's feelings in this moment to passionate love:

"Parmi nos émotions fragiles, rien ne ressemble à l'amour comme la jeune passion d'un artiste commençant le délicieux supplice de sa destinée de gloire et de malheur" (414).

Balzac further merges the lexicons of sexuality and painterly technique in the scene wherein Frenhofer retouches *Marie égyptienne*. The artist's emotional and physical investment in both the act and the product of creation is marked by erotic imagery. The narrator emphasizes the physicality in the act of painting and the perceived tangibility of the represented figure's body, imagining intimate touch. Speaking about Porbus' painted nude and its lack of lifelike dimension, Frenhofer says: "Il me semble que si je portais la main sur cette gorge d'une si ferme rondeur, je la trouverais froide comme du marbre!" (417). Mentioning the "gorge" of the figure draws attention to the figure's uncovered breasts and increases the eroticism of Balzac's description.

In this same scene, Frenhofer talks about the process of painting a lifelike figure the way one would talk about a planned seduction. He tells Poussin, "vous ne la poursuivez pas avec assez d'amour et de persévérance dans ses détours et dans ses fuites" (418). He continues, explaining that to attain beauty, one must pursue it relentlessly: "l'épier, la presser et l'enlacer étroitement pour la forcer à se rendre" (418). Here, Balzac's character includes hunting and predatory metaphors of watching, pressing and finally entrapping the prey, forcing it to surrender. Continuing the theme of seduction and rape, Frenhofer then uses militaristic imagery, calling successful painters "les victorieux lutteurs" and "ces peintres invaincus" saying: "ils persévèrent jusqu'à ce que la nature en soit réduite à se montrer toute nue et dans son véritable esprit" (419). Thus, in the schema Frenhofer creates, the painter becomes a combination of persistent lover, determined hunter, and successful soldier, which, in all, provide a quintessentially stereotypical example of domineering masculine virility.

As soon as Frenhofer prepares himself to paint, the evocative imagery increases in frequency and intensity. As Diana Knight remarks, the scene when Frenhofer retouches *Marie égyptienne* "contains elements of the erotic Pygmalion phantasy played out in a Parisian brothel."[100] First, his movements become more pronounced and even uncontrolled as emotion and even pathological excitement take over: "Le petit vieillard retroussa ses manches avec un mouvement de brusquerie convulsive" (420). He acts possessed and seems threatening, his pointed beard emphasizing his masculinity: "et sa barbe taillée en pointe se remue soudain par des efforts menaçants qui expriment le prurit d'une amoureuse fantaisie" (420). He is overcome with passion: "Il travaillait avec une ardeur si passionnée que la sueur se perlait sur son front" (421). He utters expressive sounds that punctuate the narrative: "Paf, paf paf!" and "Pon, pon, pon!" (422). Balzac's portrayal of Frenhofer's frenzy is a dramatic representation of a painter's sublimated sexual energy.

The author further appeals to masculine fantasies of the possession and control of women's bodies when Poussin brings Gillette to Frenhofer's home. Porbus pulls Gillette into the room, presents her to Frenhofer, and declares her better than all the masterpieces in the world. The reader then observes as Poussin watches Frenhofer appraise Gillette's body:

> Frenhofer tressaillit. Gillette était là, dans l'attitude naïve et simple d'une jeune Grégorienne innocente et peureuse, ravie et présentée par des brigands à quelque marchand d'esclaves. Une pudique rougeur colorait son visage, elle baissait les yeux, ses mains étaient pendantes à ses côtés, ses forces semblaient l'abandonner, et des larmes protestaient contre la violence faite à sa pudeur. En ce moment, Poussin, au désespoir d'avoir sorti ce beau trésor de son grenier, se maudit lui-même. Il devint plus amant qu'artiste, et mille scrupules lui torturèrent le cœur quand il vit l'œil rajeuni du vieillard, qui, par une habitude du peintre, déshabilla, pour ainsi dire, cette jeune fille en devinant les formes les plus secrètes. Il revint alors à la féroce jalousie du véritable amour. (433)

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[100] Knight, *Balzac*, 8.

While Gillette is fully clothed here, the description of her stance as “naïve et simple” and the comparison of her situation to that of a kidnapped and ravished woman being sold at a slave market heightens the emotionality of the moment and emphasizes the implicit commodification of her body. The physical description of Gillette emphasizes her feelings, focusing on her hanging arms, downward look, and teary eyes that protest “contre la violence faite à sa pudeur.” Yet, the interplay of gazes in this scene effectively erases Gillette, even while her body is central to the action. The men’s emotional investment in possessing her becomes predominant, and they regard her as a treasured object: “ce beau trésor.” Frenhofer undresses her with his suddenly younger painter’s eye, as his “oeil rajeuni” perceives the secret shapes of her body. The implication is that Gillette’s beauty awakens his desire both as a man and as a painter. Poussin’s awareness of Frenhofer’s desire arouses his jealousy and possessiveness, although he is the one who proposed “lending” Gillette to the older painter in exchange for a look at the hidden masterpiece. Through the artists’ simultaneously erotic and aesthetic gaze, Balzac’s story entices the reader, creating space for fantasies and encouraging continued engagement with the text.

D. Frenhofer’s Failure: Authority’s Downfall

Despite their seeming omnipresence, these fantasies of masculine superiority and domination prove to be destructive. Frenhofer’s over-investment in his work and his eroticization of the process result in failure and death. Although Poussin and Porbus see Frenhofer as a respected master with enviable talent and skill, Balzac alerts the reader to his dangerous nature at the start of the novella. When Poussin first perceives Frenhofer on the steps of Porbus’ home, he looks at him closely hoping to see “la bonne nature d’un artiste” in his face, but instead “il y avait quelque chose de diabolique dans cette figure" (414). Using the word "diabolique" immediately gives Frenhofer an air of evil and foreboding.[101] Comparing the aged painter to the devil likewise suggests his artistic skill might be supernatural and even predicts the seductive temptation of increased knowledge that leads Poussin to sacrifice Gillette. When Frenhofer is retouching *Marie égyptienne,* Balzac describes his manners and movements with a vocabulary of illness, suggesting imbalance and insanity. First, before beginning to paint, "Le petit vieillard retroussa ses manches avec un mouvement de brusquerie convulsive" (420). Balzac emphasizes the suddenness of Frenhofer's behavior, underlining its menacing unpredictability:

> sa barbe taillée en pointe se remua soudain par des efforts menaçants qui exprimaient le prurit d'une amoureuse fantaisie. […] Puis il trempait avec une vivacité fébrile la pointe de la brosse dans les différents tas de couleurs (421)

This paragraph contains more medical language, and thus reinforces the reader's sense of Frenhofer's mental imbalance. A "prurit" is an itch, but with the implication of a disease.

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[101] The description of Frenhofer as "diabolique," is reinforced several times within the text with references to his bizarre behavior, as if he were possessed by a demon (422) and descriptions of his "violence passionnée" (432). These characteristics, along with Balzac's original subtitle of the tale as "un conte fantastique," suggest "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu" was influenced by the popular tales of German writer E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822). His tales were widely read throughout Europe, particularly during the 1830s. For a detailed, chronological account of French translations of Hoffmann and contemporary commentaries on his work, see Elisabeth Teichmann, *La Fortune d'Hoffmann en France*. E. Droz, 1961. For example, Hoffmann authored *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* (*Nussknacker und Mausekönig,* 1816), the inspiration for Tchaikovsky's well-known ballet, *The Nutcracker*. The first French translation of Hoffmann's works appeared in a short-lived journal (*le Gymnase*), of which Balzac was the editor (Pierre Laubriet, "Influences Chez Balzac: Swedenborg, Hoffmann." *Les Études Balzaciennes* 5, [Dec. 1958]: 172). Balzac overtly referred to reading Hoffmann in letter to Mme Hanska on 2 novembre 1833: "J'ai lu Hoffmann en entier," (cited in Peter Whyte, "Le Chef d'oeuvre de Balzac: Esthétique et Image." In *Text(e)/Image*, [Durham, NC: University of Durham, 1999], 100). Although he also claimed not to have read Hoffmann's works until after conceiving his own (See Whyte, "Esthétique," 100-101. See also Lucie Wanuffel, "Présence d'Hoffmann dans les oeuvres de Balzac (1829-1835)." *L'Année Balzacienne* 0, [Jan. 1970]: 45). Many scholars have demonstrated the intertextuality between the two writers, noting Hoffmannesque elements throughout Balzac's body of work. In addition to those sources cited above, see for example, the following: René Guise, "Balzac et l'Étranger." *L'Année Balzacienne* 0, [Jan. 1970]; and Dominik Müller, "Self-Portraits of the Poet as a Painter: Narratives on Artists and the Bounds between the Arts (Hoffmann-Balzac-Stifter)." In *Text into Image: Image into Text*. Edited by Jeff Morrison, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 169–74.

"Prurit" can also indicate a pleasurable sensation, thereby further suggesting that Frenhofer finds erotic pleasure in the act of painting. The adjective "fébrile," meaning "feverish," is another word from the domain of medicine. These words carrying connotations of disease and desire, combined with the sudden, aggressive movements of Frenhofer's pointed beard and his paintbrush, add an undercurrent of sexuality to this sequence. Balzac skillfully emphasizes the blending of erotic and aesthetic in the retouching of *Marie égyptienne*. Furthermore, he demonstrates Frenhofer's volatile personality and questionable mental status: the purported master is dominated by uncontrolled passions and compulsions.

Frenhofer is ostensibly the prime authority, the patriarch of his profession, and the embodiment of artistic mastery. His effective retouching of Porbus's *Marie egyptienne*, the exceptionally fine works Poussin and Porbus see in Frenhofer's home, and the perfection of the recognizable foot on the surface of his *Belle noiseuse* clearly demonstrate Frenhofer's skill. In fact, some scholars have interpreted Poussin's and Porbus' inability to see a recognizable figure on Frehofer's canvas not as a mark of the master's impotence, but as a sign of their blindness and ignorance.[102] Poussin and Porbus fail to understand Frenhofer's lessons.[103] In these readings, Frenhofer is a visionary, and Balzac becomes a kind of prophet, predicting the development of abstract expressionism and other forms of non-figurative visual art.[104] These interpretations are insightful and acknowledge Balzac's literary skill in creating such a rich text that it continues to prove fruitful and inspiring for scholars and artists alike. However, they ultimately rely on anachronisms and credit Balzac with knowledge to which he could not have had access.[105] Only in a world where Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky, and Jackson Pollock have already revolutionized visual representation can Frenhofer's painting become a prediction of abstract art. Furthermore, the theme of the failed artist peppers Balzac's work, demonstrating that the author most likely conceived of Frenhofer along the same lines.[106] Whether we assign the deficit to Poussin and Porbus or to Frenhofer, the master's demise suggests a failure of creative expression and communication. Frenhofer's downfall undermines his position as master and authority. Frenhofer's fall represents a collapse of masculine authority. The painters do not see the truth, yet, as artists they are supposed to have superior vision. Furthermore, the patriarchal model is also questioned by Gillette's character. From a strictly feminist vantage point, treating Gillette as a transaction object seems to make her nothing more than a victim of patriarchy. However, she is also the catalyst for Frenhofer's downfall and her lucidity contrasts with Poussin's blind devotion to Frenhofer, in fact, she may be viewed as the true hero of "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu."

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[102] Bongiorni, Kevin. "Balzac, Frenhofer, 'Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu:' ut poesis pictura.'" *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 33, no. 2, (2000): 88.

[103] Bongiorni, "Balzac," 89-90.

[104] Yves Gagneux cites Ségolène Le Men (1985), Françoise Pitt-Rivers (1993), and Michel Serres (1987) are scholars who have proposed this theory ("interprétations," 67-69.) See also: Dario Gamboni, "Tu ne troueras point." In *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu: texte intégral*. (Paris: Paris-Musées, La Maison de Balzac, 2021), 129-137; and Jean-Luc Filoche. "'Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu:' peinture et connaissance." *L'Année Balzacienne* 1, (Jan 1980): 47-59.

E. Gillette: A Truly Unknown Masterpiece

As "une de ces âmes nobles et généreuses qui viennent souffrir près d'un grand homme" (428), Gillette is a woman who accepts traditional gender roles. Even so, she is also an active character with a voice, personal choice, and power; an astute participant who is more aware of nuances than the male characters; and a dominant figure in the text because her choice to pose drives the narrative action. Her role within the narrative thus resists reductive gender stereotypes. Although Gillette does not appear in the narrative until the end of the first section, Balzac used her name as the title of the first half of his novella, which signals her importance to the text. Interestingly, the narrator never describes Gillette's physical appearance. All the details provided are external ones, relatively brief and presented in general terms– there is no specific description, for example of her hair or eye color, just that she is beautiful, "parfaite." For example, the narrator compares Gillette to the light in the poor attic where she lives with Poussin, with a smile that "dorait ce grenier et rivalisait avec l'éclat du ciel" (428). Radiant and lovely, she is "parée de toutes les richesses féminines et les éclairant par le feu d'une belle âme" (428). On the one hand, Balzac's portrait of Gillette depersonalizes her and allows her character to be more freely allegorized.[107] Lacking individual physical characteristics, Gillette is primed for projection of the painters' and readers' fantasies. On the other hand, Balzac endows her with qualities that resist a reductive definition. Gillette is not a silent victim. In fact, most of what readers learn about her comes from direct discourse, a narrative strategy that gives the model her own voice. She speaks her mind, naming her feelings and voicing her thoughts. Additionally, the third-person omniscient narrator usually reinforces or extends Gillette's words. One powerful example is at the end of the first section. The narrative voice says Gillette thinks to herself: "Il ne m'aime plus" (430). Then, she begins to wish she had not given in and agreed to pose for Frenhofer: "Elle croyait aimer déjà moins le peintre en le soupçonnant moins estimable qu'auparavant"

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[105] Gagneux, "interprétations," 66-7.

[106] Gagneux, "interprétations," 68.

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[107] "[...] le narrateur dépouille Gillette de toute caractéristique personnelle: figure conventionnelle dans un cadre d'idylle parisienne, elle est vouée à l'indéfini, apte à s'allégoriser, et ne fait l'objet d'aucune description détaillée; femme-synthèse, elle rassemble les charmes épars dans tous les corps féminins […]" (Bernard, "problématique," 207).

(430). The adjective "estimable" implies a value judgment, and succinctly communicates Gillette's own depreciation of this man who would so easily trade her away.

Furthermore, Gillette's active choice to pose, even after Poussin repeatedly withdraws his request or tells her that she is not obligated to do it, establishes Gillette as a thinking character with her own motivations for her decisions. She explains some of her reasons when she and Poussin arrive at Frenhofer's studio. She hesitates at the doorstep and Poussin offers to take her home, but she persists, saying: "[…] si notre amour périt, et si je mets dans mon cœur un long regret, ta célébrité ne sera-t-elle pas le prix de mon obéissance à tes désirs? Entrons, ce sera vivre encore que d'être toujours comme un souvenir dans ta palette" (433). Balzac's inclusion of this scene clearly demonstrates that Gillette makes a deliberate decision, thereby rejecting the idea that she is merely a passive muse. Instead, the author uses direct citations that mark Gillette as a thinking individual and express her perspective far more directly than would have been accomplished by a description focused only on her physical appearance.

Additionally, Gillette is more aware of the nuances and the ramifications of posing than are any of the men. She is particularly attuned to how the male characters treat her.[108] Early on, she says she will no longer pose for Poussin because she recognizes that her lover does not truly see *her* when he is painting. She is fully aware that her lover wants to sacrifice her for his own fame. She understands further that he does not value her sacrifice as he should, and that he treats her like a child who must be cajoled and cannot make up her own mind: "Suis-je à moi quand tu me parles ainsi? Oh! non, je ne suis plus qu'une enfant" (433). Later, when they are at Frenhofer's home, she notices Poussin engrossed in studying a painting. She realizes that he looks at the art with more passion than he shows when looking at her: "Il ne m'a jamais regardée ainsi" (434). As Max Milner explains, Gillette is aware of the absorbing power art holds for the painters: she witnesses "l'intensité et la profondeur du drame du regard."[109] She thus is more than simply one-dimensional, even in her brief appearances.

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[108] Knight, *Balzac*, 22.

Gillette's choice to pose or not drives the entire narrative, from Poussin's asking her to pose for Frenhofer, her decision to do so, and the build-up to the scene where she finally disrobes in the master's studio.[110] This makes Gillette a dominant feature of the novella and therefore moves her character to a position outside of the strictly gendered binary structure. The actual nude scene takes place beyond the visual frame of the narrative, as Porbus, Poussin, and the reader are excluded from Frenhofer's studio. Gillette's decision to disrobe for Frenhofer does not extend to the other artists or to the reader, reinforcing the significance of her choice. Unlike what we will see in *L'Œuvre* and *Manette Salomon*, there is no description of Gillette's nudity, and so there is no great lingering on the details of her body. Yet, this absence of detail enables the imagination of the reader to freely picture Gillette's nakedness, according to one's own desires. Thus, her disrobing is the narrative climax that not only engages the reader's fantasies, but initiates the revelation of Frenhofer's painting, its failure and his death.

Although one may assume that the "chef d'oeuvre inconnu" in the title of Balzac's story refers to the great painting with which Frenhofer is obsessed and the portrait for which Gillette is meant to model, Gillette herself is at least one possible interpretation of the title.[111] She, the loving and living woman, is the true "chef d'oeuvre inconnu." Numerous textual signals indicate that Gillette is an unknown masterpiece: the author's use of the title words "chef d'œuvre" throughout the text, as well as her final status as "oubliée;" the male painters' lack of understanding of Gillette's value and their failure to recognize her sacrifice; and her symbolic role as a foil to the men's unrealistic fantasies.

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[109] Max Milner, "Le peintre fou," *Romantisme*, 66 Folie de l'art, (1989): 6-7.

[110] Lathers, *Bodies*, 95.

[111] My reading of Gillette expands Marie Lathers' work: "Frenhofer's sacrifice as prophet of modern art loses its central importance in this reading, whereas the model/mistress Gillette's sacrifice of her naked body appropriates the pivotal position of the unknown masterpiece" (Lathers, *Bodies*, 49).

Throughout the text, the term "chef d'œuvre" appears only four times, none of which refer to Frenhofer's painting. Besides the title, the first instance is in the introductory section, which describes Poussin's feelings before entering Porbus' home. The young painter finds himself trembling with love for art as if approaching a true genius or "quelque chef-d'œuvre" (414). Twice "chef d'œuvre" is used to refer to Porbus' painting *Marie égyptienne*: first, by the narrator when Poussin first enters Porbus' home: "Ce chef-d'œuvre, destiné à Marie de Médicis […]" (416); secondly, Frenhofer uses the term to deny the greatness of Porbus' work: "C'est un chef-d'œuvre pour tout le monde, et les initiés aux plus profonds arcanes de l'art peuvent seuls découvrir en quoi elle pèche" (420). Then, when Poussin takes Gillette to Frenhofer's home, Porbus pulls her before the master and says: "Ne vaut-elle pas tous les chef-d'œuvres du monde?" (433). These uses of the title words "chef-d'œuvre" create a chain of reference that leads from *"Marie égyptienne"* to Gillette, then merely by extension to Frenhofer's *Belle noiseuse*. Yet, on the level of the vocabulary used within the text, Frenhofer's canvas is called many things: "mon oeuvre" (424), "ma peinture" (431), and "mon épouse" (431) for example, but never a "chef-d'œuvre." The title terminology can be presumed to refer to Frenhofer's portrait, but it is used directly to refer to Gillette and never to the portrait itself. Additionally, the word "oubliée," used to describe Gillette in the final climactic scene, can be considered a synonym for "inconnu," particularly with regards to artistic celebrity where "connu" and "renommé" would serve as direct antonyms to "inconnu." Gillette is therefore referred to within the text using vocabulary that directly repeats or invokes the title, and thus can be interpreted as a "chef-d'œuvre inconnu."

In terms of her subjectivity, Gillette is also unknown or "inconnue" to the men in the text. Poussin, who as her lover should know her intimately, seems largely unaware of the depth of her feelings for him and her discomfort in posing for Frenhofer. Although he apologizes and repeatedly declares his love for her, the fact that he looks more closely at the artwork than at Gillette demonstrates that his true passion does not lie with Gillette. As for Porbus, he only looks at her beauty, dismissing her individuality and the sincerity of her love for Poussin. In Gillette's presence, just before she enters the studio with Frenhofer, Porbus tells Poussin "Les fruits de l'amour passent vite, ceux de l'art sont immortels" (434). He plays the roles of procurer and voyeur, first convincing Frenhofer to consider using her as a model, then standing at the door of the studio and describing, step by step, the posing scene, which takes place behind closed doors. Porbus recounts: "Ah! elle se déshabille, il lui dit de se mettre au jour!" (434). He sees Gillette merely as currency that will buy the artists a view of Frenhofer's work. Frenhofer considers showing his painting in exchange for Gillette's modeling as "une horrible prostitution" (431). He believes Gillette will betray Poussin sooner or later, but his painting will always be faithful (432). The painters, who supposedly possess superior abilities to discern visual nuances, are blind to Gillette's qualities beyond her beauty.

Furthermore, Gillette's symbolic role as the only living woman in the text (the others are painted figures) is equally underplayed. To the best of the reader's knowledge, Frenhofer uses Gillette only as a comparison to his *Belle noiseuse*.[112] As a mediator between the real and the ideal, Gillette could serve to anchor Frenhofer's work in reality. Yet, Frenhofer persists in his fantasy, and "Gillette, whose role should be the crucial one of model and lover, turns out to be a pretext for a theory of art that excludes the real woman."[113] Gillette is correct when she says "Tu ne penses plus à moi, et cependant tu me regardes" (429). None of the men see Gillette as a valuable, living person but only as an object of exchange so she remains forever unknown to them.

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[112] Marie Lathers. "Modesty and the Artist's Model in 'Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu.'" *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 46, no. 1, (1992): 56.

II. Courbet's *L'Atelier du peintre*: A Shifting Allegory of Artistic Creation

Courbet created *L'Atelier du peintre: Allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique et morale* for the Paris World's Fair of 1855. The work is currently held at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and underwent extensive restoration in 2016.[114] It is an unusual picture, simultaneously compelling and disconcerting. The odd arrangement of figures, the lack of interaction among them, and the hazy, hovering background create a dream-like scene. It is quite large—about twelve by twenty feet—and the figures are approximately life-sized. The composition is divided into four main areas: a compact grouping of people on the left side, a central area where an artist is shown at his easel, a second set of figures to the right of the easel, and the wall space in the background. Due to an episode of jaundice, Courbet was unable to complete the painting before the deadline, even with a two-week extension; he submitted it unfinished, and although he had plenty of time to alter it later had he wished to, he never did.[115] As a result, some of the figures are more richly rendered than others, and parts of the image—the background, for example—seem hazy or dissolved, even in updated photos of the recently restored painting.

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[113] Lathers, *Bodies*, 94.

[114] See the Musée d'Orsay's publication "L'Atelier du Peintre de Gustave Courbet restauré" for an account of the restoration process and a photographic comparison of the painting before and after restoration. (Musée d'Orsay. *L'Atelier du peintre de Gustave Courbet restauré*. [Paris: Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musées de France. December 13, 2016.]).

Critics have tried to identify not only the figures themselves but also the specific source materials used to construct the image. In an essay published as part of the Louvre's Courbet retrospective in 1977-8, Hélène Toussaint identified most of the figures on the left and traced Courbet's visual source materials, finding that he included many recognizable faces among those on the left of the easel, including Emperor Napoleon III, portrayed as the seated figure with hunting dogs on the far left.[116]

Courbet discussed *L'Atelier* in several letters, the most detailed of which is a letter to his friend Jules Champfleury wherein he described the work, identifying many of the figures and the main compositional elements.[117] He explained that it was meant to express his "manière de voir la société dans ses intérêts et ses passions" by showing "la société dans son haut, dans son bas, dans son milieu."[118] Courbet claimed that *L'Atelier* would show the world "je ne suis pas encore mort, et le réalisme non plus:"

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[115] Benedict Nicolson. *Courbet: The Studio of the Painter*. (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 77; and Linda Nochlin, "Courbet's Real Allegory," 117.

[116] Hélène Toussaint. *Gustave Courbet: 1819-1877: An Exhibition Organized by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux, at the Royal Academy of Arts, 19 January-19 March 1978.* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), 248-85. Beyond Toussaint's description, a more complete catalog of the figures in Courbet's *L'Atelier,* including comparisons with the various source materials, can be found in several critical texts. See: Nicolson, *The Studio*, 14-60; James Henry Rubin, *Courbet*. ([1997] London: Phaidon, 2003), 135-54; and Klaus Herding, *Courbet: To Venture Independence*, translated by John William Gabriel, (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 46-7.

[117] The full text of this letter is provided in *Correspondance de Courbet,* Edited by Petra ten-Doesschate Chu. (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 121-3. Jules Champfleury (1821-89) is the *nom de plume* of Jules-Antoine-Félix Husson, a Realist critic and author. He frequented the same circles as Courbet, Baudelaire and Proudhon (Rubin, *Courbet*, 333).

> C'est le monde qui vient se faire peindre chez moi. […] La scène se passe dans mon atelier à Paris. Le tableau est divisé en deux parties. Je suis au milieu peignant. À droite sont les actionnaires, c'est à dire les amis, les travailleurs, les amateurs du monde de l'art. À gauche, l'autre monde de la vie triviale, le peuple, la misère, la pauvreté, la richesse, les exploités, les exploiteurs, les gens qui vivent de la mort.[119]

In this letter, Courbet lists the figures to the left of the easel according to their occupation or station, purposefully including a wide range of social levels: a Jew, a priest, a poor withered old veteran, a hunter, a reaper, a strong-man, a buffoon, a textile peddler, a workman's wife, a worker, a death's head on a newspaper, an Irishwoman suckling a child, an artist's dummy, and a cloth peddler. He then describes the central grouping and the figures on the right as follows:

> Puis vient la toile sur mon chevalet, et moi peignant avec le côté assyrien de ma tête. Derrière ma chaise est un modèle de femme nue. Elle est appuyée sur le dossier de ma chaise, me regardant peindre un instant; ses habits sont à terre en avant du tableau. […] À la suite de cette femme vient Promayet,[120] avec son violon […] Par derrière est Bruyas,[121] Cuenot,[122] Buchon,[123] Proudhon[124] (je

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[118] Rubin, *Courbet*, 139.

[119] Courbet, *Correspondance*, 121-3.

[120] Alphonse Promayet (1822-1872) was one of Courbet's lifelong friends. He was a violinist and taught music to Courbet's sisters. He frequently posed for the artist and is an identifiable figure in many of Courbet's major works, such as *L'Enterrement à Ornans* (1849, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) and *Une après-dînée à Ornans* (1849, Palais des beaux-arts, Lille, France) as well as *L'Atelier* (Nicolson, *The Studio*, 40-2).

[121] Alfred Bruyas (1821-77) was the son of a wealthy banker. He believed that he could use patronage of the arts as a method for improving society. Bruyas became an avid collector of Courbet's work and one of the foremost patrons of Realist art (Rubin, *Courbet*, 140).

[122] Urbain Cuenot (1820-67) was Courbet's schoolmate, a political liberal who was imprisoned in 1851 and temporarily exiled to Algeria. He lived in Ornans and frequently accompanied Courbet on his travels (Rubin, *Courbet*, 140).

[123] Max Buchon (1818-69) was Courbet's schoolmate, a Realist poet and political writer. Buchon wrote the first article about Courbet's art, calling him an artist of the people (Rubin, *Courbet*, 140).

> voudrais bien avoir aussi ce philosophe Proudhon qui est de notre manière de voir, s'il voulait poser j'en serais content; si vous le voyez, demandez-lui si je peux compter sur lui). Puis vient votre tour en avant du tableau. Vous êtes assis sur un tabouret, les jambes croisées et un chapeau sur vos genoux. À côté de vous, plus au premier plan encore, est une femme du monde avec son mari, habillée en grand luxe.[125] Puis à l'extrémité à droite assis sur une table d'une jambe seulement est Baudelaire[126] qui lit dans un grand livre. […] [Mais] je vous ai fort mal expliqué tout cela, je m'y suis pris au rebours. J'aurais dû commencer par Baudelaire, mais c'est trop long pour recommencer: vous comprendrez comme vous pourrez. Les gens qui veulent juger auront de l'ouvrage, ils s'en tireront comme ils pourront.[127]

The final version of the painting does not correspond exactly with the description Courbet sent to Champfleury. First, in this same letter, Courbet said he was going to include a self-portrait and that he would be painting "un tableau d'ânier qui pince le cul à une fille."[128] In the final version, instead, he chose a landscape from his native Franche-Comté and added several figures he did not mention, most notably the two children: the one staring up at the canvas and the other lying on the floor, drawing. Additionally, there was originally a female figure near Baudelaire on the far right: "À côté de [Baudelaire] est une négresse qui se regarde dans une glace avec beaucoup de coquetterie."[129] It was probably a portrait of Baudelaire's mistress Jeanne Duval, whose

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[124] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-65) was an economist and philosopher (Rubin, *Courbet*, 140). His philosophy of social egalitarianism greatly influenced Courbet, who was an admirer and friend.

[125] The well-dressed woman and her husband are probably the singer Caroline Sabatier-Ungher and her husband François Sabatier, who both admired Courbet's work and were patrons (Rubin, *Courbet*, 140).

[126] Charles Baudelaire (1821-67) was a poet and art critic, the author of *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863) and many critical essays on literature and visual art (Rubin, *Courbet*, 140).

[127] Courbet, *Correspondance*, 121-2.

[128] Courbet, *Correspondance*, 121.

[129] Courbet, *Correspondance*, 122.

image may have been painted over at the request of the poet, perhaps because their relationship was fading.[130] The woman's face has become visible as the paint has thinned over time.

A. Courbet's Model: Her Many Roles

To sufficiently parse the role of the model in this painting, layered as it is with meanings and with decades of art historians' interpretations, it is helpful to survey previous scholarship on Courbet's nude. Hélène Toussaint's identification of the figures included an analysis that proposed a hidden Masonic role for Courbet's model. According to this schema, the model serves as one of the two pillars of the Masonic Lodge: she represents the pillar of Boaz or the eternal feminine while the male artist's dummy behind the canvas is the masculine, the pillar of Jachin.[131] Klaus Herding built on Toussaint's research and proposed a reading of *L'Atelier* as an "adhortatio ad principem," an exhortation to the ruler.[132] Herding suggested that Courbet used *L'Atelier* and the occasion of the Paris World's Fair to offer an image of peaceful co-existence among diverse social types where the artist serves as a visionary messenger and mediator between them.[133] Within Herding's framework, the model is one part of this diverse society. Similarly, James Rubin identified the artist's role as society's redeemer in his analysis of Courbet's painting as a Proudhonian allegory.[134] Finally, in her extensive work on Courbet,

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[130] Rubin, *Courbet*, 140.

[131] Toussaint, *Gustave Courbet*, 261.

[132] Herding, *Independence*, 57.

[133] Herding, *Independence*, 57.

[134] Rubin, *Courbet*, 145-53.

Nochlin analyzes the relationships between gender and power in Courbet's painting.[135] She sees the central grouping of Courbet, the nude model, and the young boy as a "group in which the major players literally replicate the Oedipal triangle."[136] The composition of this group of figures is arranged in a triangle, with the three points of the triangle being the model's head, the boy's head, and the model's feet. Therefore, the three figures form a physical triangle as well as a psychological one. Nochlin asserts that in Courbet's allegory, the creative power is centered in the male artist and is purposefully opposed to the passive female body.[137] Taken together, this body of scholarship allows us to construct an understanding of *L'Atelier* as a deliberate social commentary on the painter's position in society.

Over time and with the changing perspectives of viewers and art historians, the painting can be perceived as a work that ultimately undermines its own overt ideology. The numerous contrasts and dualities in the composition establish a shifting role for Courbet's nude model. In this painting, whether we read her role as political, erotic, and/or symbolic, it is defined according to her relationship to the male artist. Just as Balzac's use of the Pygmalion myth activates a series of existing and widespread cultural expectations regarding the studio romance, Courbet's juxtaposition of the unclothed female figure next to a self-portrait paradigmatically depicts the artist and the model according to their social and symbolic gender roles.

The most obvious explanation for Courbet's representation of a voluptuous unclothed woman is to titillate the viewer, which is important to consider because the roles of gender, eroticism, and desire are inherent to any investigation of depictions of painters at work with women posing before them. Rubin argues that Courbet purposely activated heterosexual male desire and that Courbet's female nudes subvert all the spiritual and historical pretense, unlike most contemporary representations of naked women as idealized goddesses or historical figures: Courbet's nudes show that inherent sexuality and desire are at the root of all representations.[138] Painting the female body, in particular, served Courbet's Realist artistic project:

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[135] For example: "The Invention of the Avant-Garde: France, 1830-80," (1968); "Courbet's *L'origine du monde*: The Origin without an Original" (1986); "Courbet's Real Allegory: Rereading the Painter's Studio," (1988); and *Courbet*, (2007).

[136] Nochlin, "Courbet's Real Allegory," 128.

[137] Nochlin, "Courbet's Real Allegory," 128-29.

> It was Courbet's masterful ability to recreate in paint the sensuousness of the flesh that was the basis of his figures' powers of seduction, and it may be possible to argue […] that he frankly accepted the fact of woman as an appropriate, perhaps exemplary, object of Realism since, for the heterosexual male, no other form could be so physically compelling.[139]

When read in this way, then the exposed female figure directly addresses the desire of the heterosexual male viewer, creating a compelling reason for him to spend time contemplating the canvas. Courbet's canvas, like Balzac's story, entices the masculine spectator, creating space for his fantasies and thus encouraging his continued engagement with the work of art.

Generally, in representations of the painter's studio, the presence of an unclothed female model is entirely unremarkable; she is part of the expected furnishings like the canvases, easel, brushes, and palette.[140] Moreover, frequent access to women's bodies was also considered as one significant advantage of being an artist.[141] In Courbet's time, the historian Théophile Silvestre described the nude woman in *L'Atelier* as a personification of "the living model."[142] A naked woman shown in an atelier could therefore stand-in for "studio doings," or normal studio activities, particularly when these activities are of questionable morality.[143]

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[138] Rubin, *Courbet*, 178-9.

[139] Rubin, *Courbet*, 180.

[140] Butor, "L'Atelier," 20.

[141] Rupert Christiansen. "Imagining the Artist: Painters and Sculptors in Nineteenth-Century Literature." In *Rebels and Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century*, (London and New Haven, CT: National Gallery Company/Yale University Press, 2006), 34-5. Although Christiansen was speaking about British literature and art when he made this statement, I believe it is appropriate in a larger context, including French works.

The presence of beautiful women also can inspire male creativity. William Vaughn explains that the nineteenth-century model frequently functioned as both muse and soulmate to the artist.[144] Since the mythological Muses were all female, any woman shown near someone engaged in a creative act can be interpreted as a representation of the Muse. Therefore, the placement of Courbet's model so close to the painter at work establishes one of her many potential roles as that of the artist's muse.[145]

Although Courbet used traditional imagery, like representing inspiration with a female "muse," he rejected idealized bodies in art. Courbet's goal was to paint the real human body in an everyday context. In his own words, he sought to "traduire les mœurs, les idées, l'aspect de mon époque, selon mon appréciation, en un mot, faire de l'art vivant."[146] Painting an imperfect body in a contemporary situation—as opposed to the idealized female figures of classicism—is one way to reconcile the ideal and reality because it creates an in-between space where reality is captured, framed, and mediated. As Rubin explains:

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[142] Théophile Silvestre. *Histoire des artistes vivants français et étrangers: Études d'après nature. Première série illustrée de 10 portraits pris au daguerréotype et gravés sur acier*. Introduction et Catalogue par M. L. de Virmond. (Paris: 1855). Gallica. http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1085893. 264.

[143] Richard Redgrave as cited in Nicolson, *The Studio,* 81-2.

[144] William Vaughn. "Models and Muses." In *The Artist's Model: From Etty to Spencer*. (London: Merrell Holberton Publishers, 1999), 79.

[145] The Musée d'Orsay website includes this reading in their description of Courbet's *Atelier,* calling her "une femme-muse." (Musée d'Orsay. "Gustave Courbet: L'Atelier Du Peintre." https://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/oeuvres/latelier-du-peintre-927. Accessed October 21, 2022.)

[146] Courbet's 1855 statement opens the pamphlet that accompanied his exhibition during the World's Fair : "Exhibition et vente de 38 tableaux et 4 dessins de l'œuvre de M. Gustave Courbet."

> All representations of goddesses and other idealized nudes ultimately embody a fixation on female sexuality under the guise of spirituality. Courbet infuses his figures with a heightened charge of voluptuousness that subverts this spiritual pretense and brings us closer to understanding why the nude becomes an ideal in the first place – that is because, despite its displacement of desire, sexuality is still at its root.[147]

Thus, it can be argued that the role of Courbet's model is similar to Gillette's: she serves as a bridge between the real and the ideal.

Because artists who seek to create portrayals of human figures are dependent upon models to pose for them, models could be considered to be essential partners in the creative process. In the heteronormative schema of the studio romance, human procreation is a metaphor for artistic creation: a human male and female are needed to create a child, and a male painter and a female model together similarly engender a work of art. When Courbet places a nude female model near the center of *L'Atelier du peintre,* juxtaposed with the canvas, the artist at work, and the figure of a child, she becomes a visual metaphor for the source of artistic generativity.[148] The male painter and the female model are visually and symbolically coupled, and the product of their union is a work of art rather than an infant—a male creative production instead of a female *pro*creative *re*production. He forms her image in the womb of his atelier.

As an extension of Courbet's unclothed model's association with reproduction, and the process of creation, the model can also represent Truth and Nature as abstract concepts. Nicolson interprets the model in this painting as a spirit of truth guiding Courbet's brush so that he will not create anything out of harmony with the natural, everyday world.[149] Yet, the woman is not the only representation of nature on this canvas. Courbet places a large landscape painting at the center of *L'Atelier* and shows himself in profile against it, with the model standing behind him. The painting of the Franche-Comté countryside—a representation of nature—and the woman are in close spatial proximity yet in opposing positions with the painter between them. This juxtaposition invites direct comparisons between the woman and the landscape, a connection further reinforced with Courbet's original intention of showing a mule driver pinching a woman's bottom. The visual connection between the female model and the natural world can be read in several ways. Rubin interprets it as Courbet's turning away from base desire—represented by the female model—to focus his efforts instead on art.[150] In interpreting the placement of woman and landscape in *L'Atelier* as a substitution of nature for woman, Nochlin suggests that "One might say that Courbet goes so far as to cross out woman in the Lacanian sense by substituting 'nature' for her as the signifier of his creation on the canvas-within-the-canvas."[151] In his study of the nude in art, Kenneth Clark includes Courbet's model in his chapter on the Natural Venus, which, according to Clark, is "a naked woman as a symbol of creative and generative life."[152] This suggests that he, too, sees this model as a representation of Nature. In Clark's interpretation, "nature"—as represented by an unclothed woman—and heterosexual male erotic desire are so interconnected as to be synonymous. He calls Courbet "the archrealist:"

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[147] Rubin, *Courbet,* 212.

[148] Nochlin, "Courbet's Real Allegory," 128-9.

> whose own impulse to grasp, to thump, to squeeze or to eat was so strong that it communicates itself in every stroke of his palette knife. His eye embraced the

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[149] Nicolson, *The Studio,* 31.

[150] Rubin, *Courbet,* 219.

[151] Nochlin, "Courbet's Real Allegory," 129.

[152] K. Clark, *Nude*, 118.

> female body with the same enthusiasm that it stroked a deer, grasped an apple or slapped the side of an enormous trout.[153]

In Clark's understanding, the fact that Courbet's model is shown as a lumpy, imperfect human form is far more representative of natural humanity than other more idealized female bodies.

Another reason to associate the unclothed woman with Nature is that the gendered opposition of nature and culture is a recurrent theme in Western art and literature, wherein women are associated with raw nature and men are linked with civilization and culture.[154] In this sense, the male painter is then the instrument of culture, creating art from the raw material of nature represented by the naked female body. Balzac's Frenhofer seems to agree that art supersedes nature, arguing: "La mission de l'art n'est pas de copier la nature, mais de l'exprimer! Tu n'es pas un vil copiste, mais un poète! […] Autrement un sculpteur serait quitte de tous ses travaux en moulant une femme!" (418). By controlling the power of physical creation, the male artist, who cannot physically give birth to a child, claims the woman's body as a product of his own power and then symbolically possesses the life-giving ability of the female body.[155] Many of the metaphors for the artistic creative process focus on masculine virility: the male artist becomes lover to the female muse and father to the work of art, thereby capturing the power of creation. Absent from such metaphors is the woman, usually constructed as an object of desire and therefore of artistic inspiration, who is essential to the establishment of the masculine artistic identity. The creative power of the female must be present, even if subverted and controlled by the male artist.

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[153] K. Clark, *Nude*, 163.

[154] Pointon, *Naked Authority*, 20.

[155] Pointon, *Naked Authority*, 101-2.

B. Courbet’s Model: “Je suis l’origine.”

While Courbet’s model may seem entirely passive at first glance, there is evidence of her active choice, physical engagement and spatial centrality, even compositional dominance. Since the artist is sitting and she is standing, she is placed above him, in a hierarchical position compositionally and spatially. Her head is at the top of a pyramid formed of the model, the artist, and the child. Furthermore, her figure dominates the image in that she immediately draws the viewer’s attention, and the compositional elements continually pull the focus back to her. The physical act of standing also suggests her choice and engagement. Although her tilted head seems pensive, the muscles of her legs and buttocks are taut. She also holds her arms tightly, with the shadows of her muscles showing clearly. In sum, her position does not seem to be one of permanent stillness but arrested movement, as if at any moment she might pull the white cloth further over her or let it drop.

The model’s gaze is focused on the painter’s hand and paintbrush, almost as if she guides his brushstrokes. Clearly, the composition aims attention at this suspended act of creation: the viewer’s eye is directed toward the painter’s hand, then to the face and body of the little boy. The white of the boy’s shirt and the shape of the white cat with its sinuous tail and outstretched paw then direct the viewer’s gaze to the swirling froth of clothing at the woman’s feet. From there, the sharp triangular shape of the white cloth she holds guides observers’ eyes back up the model’s body toward the lighter areas of the sky on the canvas in progress. This movement creates a counterclockwise spiral *around* the artist’s body, moving the focus away from him to form a circle of light embracing the artist and his work. The round shape of the medallion placed above the model’s head reinforces this encircling shape like a metaphorical womb. The model’s body is oriented so that her front is pressed up against his back, her generative center pouring forth creative energy that he absorbs and channels outward through his paintbrush. We can therefore read her as the power behind the art. He may be the body physically doing the painting, but it is her creative and nurturing energy that infuses him; he thus becomes merely a tool.

As my analysis proposes, *L'Atelier* predicts Courbet's later paintings casting the female as the origin and source of artistic creation in several ways. Specifically, these works are *L'Origine du monde* (1866) and *La Source* (1868).[156] First, *L'Origine* directly calls upon sexual drive as the center of the human urge to create. Courbet's message and the beliefs of his time may have been focused on heterosexual male desire, but Courbet does not ignore female erotic and creative energy that can be read as a source of creative power. *L'Atelier* also anticipates *L'Origine* in its basic compositional structure, and there are even some similarities with the design of *La Source de la Loue* (1864).[157] In each of these three paintings, there are two main groupings on either side that create visual lines leading to the center area (See figures 1-3 below). The lines of the overall composition in *L'Atelier* mirror the lines of the riverbank leading to the mysterious cave in *La Source de la Loue* —which can be understood as a symbolic vagina—as well as the shapes of the open legs leading to the central opening, the womb of creation in *L'Origine du monde.*

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[156] As we have discussed, *L'Origine du monde* (1866, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) is a foreshortened view of a nude woman's torso and genitals. *La Source* (1868, oil on canvas, 128 x 97.5 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) depicts a nude woman seen from the rear. She is in a natural setting and is holding her hand under the flow of water from a spring.

[157] *La Source de la Loue* (1864) is one of a series of paintings that represent the cave from which the river Loue emerges. It is located near Courbet's hometown of Ornans. The particular version that is used in this discussion is held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. For more information about the series see Lorenz Eitner. *French Paintings of the Nineteenth Century. Part 1: Before Impressionism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 118-126.

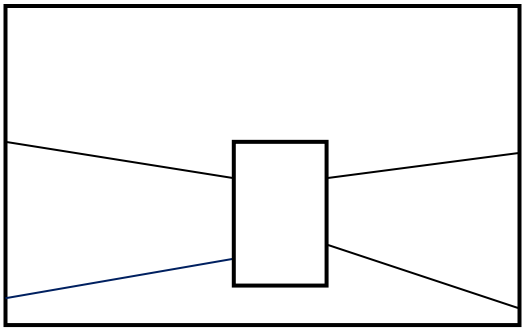

Figure 1: The basic composition of *L'Atelier* (1855).

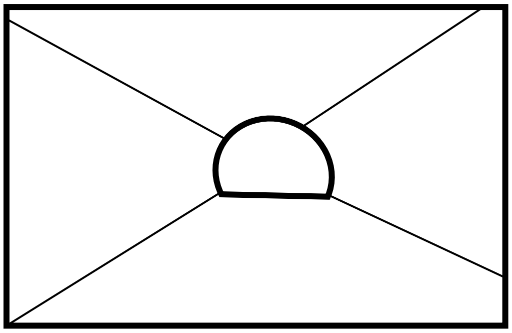

Figure 2: The basic composition of *La Source de la Loue* (1864).

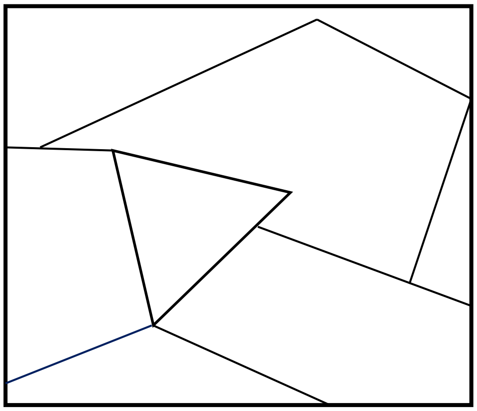

Figure 3: The basic composition of *L'Origine du monde* (1866).

When mindful of *L'Atelier*'s compositional centrality, spatially hierarchical placement, and similarity to Courbet's later works that more overtly highlight female creative power, we can consider that the model is not looking at him with a passive acceptance of her fate. Instead, she is aware of her power, seemingly saying: “I am *l’Origine* and *La Source*. You, dear painter, have access to creative and generative power only when I choose to grant it.”

III. A New Script

Balzac’s “Le Chef d’œuvre inconnu” and Courbet’s *L’Atelier* contain fissures in meaning that undermine the rigidity of socially imposed gender roles. Admittedly, it is difficult to ascribe any truly empowering view of women to either of these two works or to Courbet and Balzac themselves. This reading becomes possible if we claim the right to read the works from one’s own perspective as a present-day spectator, as Nochlin does when she insists on her right to “collaborate in the production of meaning in Courbet’s allegory,” particularly as a female viewer and “a reader who has been shut out of the house of meaning.”[158] Viewer and reader participation in making meaning of works of art prevents the fixing or closing of a work’s interpretation, allows us to re-define and re-evaluate both sides of the gender binary, and may offer multiple interpretations that inherently destabilize binary thinking. After all, the definition of woman as a passive partner in the creative process falls apart if we, the readers and viewers, refuse to accept the traditional patriarchal binary paradigm. If the woman is not painting or writing, is she *necessarily* passive, less important, powerless, and compliant? Even if the patriarchal values of the nineteenth century would assign her those attributes, we do not have to interpret everything according to that schema. With present-day perspectives, we can search for gaps in meaning, traces of unstable binaries, spaces between the lines and shapes that the painter/writer has left. We can use these lapses to re-write the script for the female model, the feminine or non-binary viewer, and ultimately also for the masculine artist and viewer.

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[158] Nochlin, “Courbet’s Real Allegory,” 112.

Chapter Two: The Model's Gaze in *Manette Salomon*

> Sous des sourcils très arqués, dessinés avec la netteté d'un trait et d'un coup de pinceau, [Manette] avait [...] des yeux bleus mystérieux qui, dans la fixité, dardaient, de leur pupille contractée et rapetissée comme la tête d'une épingle noire, on ne savait quoi de profond, de transperçant, de clair et d'aigu.[159]

Manette, the titular character in Edmond and Jules de Goncourt's 1867 novel, *Manette Salomon*, is a female model who demonstrates purposeful gaze and active choice. In the citation above, the authors emphasize the unknowable depths of Manette's mysterious blue eyes. Her sharp, clear look assigns her a visual perspective different from the observer's. No longer merely an empty object of others' contemplation, she becomes a representation of an individual with an internal world of her own. In the Goncourts' text the model's point of view does not simply exist, it is used as an integral part of the novel: Manette's perspective and decisions play a central role in the narrative. Her choice to pose nude before Coriolis, the male painter-protagonist, is as essential to the progression of the story as it is to the eventual success of Coriolis' canvas. Like Courbet in *L'Atelier* and Balzac in "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu," the Goncourts employ the studio romance trope, activating existing myths and stereotypes about the male painter and his female model which reinforce binary thinking and patriarchal power structures. The authors build narrative tension that focuses the reader's attention on Manette's nude poses. Appealing to stereotypically masculine scopophilia, this strategy crystalizes active, visually-based sexual desire into dramatically intense scenes, freezing "the flow of [narrative] action in moments of erotic contemplation."[160] The painter wishes to see the woman's body for sexual reasons as well as artistic ones; likewise, the text is simultaneously erotic and literary. In *Manette Salomon*, when the model first undresses, the action slows down while both the artist's and the reader's gaze linger on details of the female body. In that regard, the intended reader seems to be primarily a heterosexual male, according to the prevailing nineteenth-century gender representations. Yet, by introducing Manette's individual point of view, the authors undermine strict gender categories through their fragmentary use of the model's gaze as a narrative device.

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[159] Edmond de Goncourt and Jules de Goncourt, *Manette Salomon*, edited by Stéphanie Champeau. (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 297. All page numbers refer to this edition.

[160] Mulvey, *Pleasures*, 19.

In this chapter, we will explore how the Goncourt brothers simultaneously employ and challenge contemporary stereotypes. On the one hand, they rely on gendered, antisemitic, and racist stereotypes to portray Manette as a "belle Juive" and a stifling maternal figure, while also providing a racist portrait of Coriolis as a failed artist. On the other hand, they add complexity to the character of the model. As my analysis of two important nude scenes demonstrates, Manette is endowed with a subjectivity and an agency that is more emancipating than Gillette's role in "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu."

I. *Manette Salomon*: A Seductive and Fragmentary Narrative

Edmond de Goncourt (1822-1896) and Jules de Goncourt (1830-1870) are known for their labyrinthine and fragmentary style of writing, much of it based on their journals. The brothers lived and wrote together until Jules' death in July of 1870. Their works were written collaboratively, including the novel *Manette Salomon*. The novel first appeared as a serial in *Le Temps* beginning January 18, 1867 and then in book form in November of the same year.[161] The Goncourts sought to create literature based entirely on direct observation of the world around them.[162] As socialites and regulars among the bohemian crowds of Paris, they associated with many artists and writers of their day, including Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, Gustave Flaubert and Théophile Gautier.[163] Their familiarity with the art world of mid-nineteenth-century Paris provided autobiographical details and anecdotes that appear in their journals and infuse *Manette Salomon*.[164] They compiled pieces of the qualities and histories of various friends and acquaintances to create characters in the novel. Additionally, the Goncourt brothers wrote extensively about eighteenth-century painters, showing admiration for Chardin's work in particular.[165] They used details from their own experiences to anchor their fictional creations in the physical world.

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[161] Michel Crouzet, "Préface," in *Manette Salomon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 8.

Three characters take center stage in *Manette Salomon*: the young Creole painter and primary protagonist, Naz de Coriolis;[166] his classmate and companion, Anatole Bazouche; and Coriolis' model, mistress, and eventual wife, Manette Salomon. Anatole and Coriolis are students at Langibout's studio, where Anatole is known as the lively joker of the group and Coriolis is a more serious student who comes from a wealthy family. The working title of the novel was *L'Atelier Langibout*.[167] The early chapters focus on studio life and the camaraderie among the young students.[168] Two friends, Chassagnol and Garnotelle, also enter the narrative from time to time. Chassagnol, whom critics often consider to be "le 'porte-parole' des Goncourts," is the great theorist of the group.[169] Garnotelle is a fellow student at Langibout's studio. A mediocre but hard-working artist, Garnotelle is accepted to the École de Beaux Arts and wins the Prix de Rome. He serves as a foil to both Anatole, the talented but lazy artist, and Coriolis, who is gifted but inconsistent, and whose talent is compromised by his relationship with Manette.

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[162] Olin H. Moore. "The Literary Methods of the Goncourts." *PMLA* 31, no. 1, (1916): 45.

[163] André Billy, *The Goncourt Brothers*, (London: A. Deutsch, 1960), 124.

[164] See: Moore, "Literary Methods," 50 and Billy, *Goncourt*, 154.

[165] Valazza, *Crise*, 143-5.

[166] A possible inspiration for the character of Coriolis is the painter Théodore Chassériau (1819-1856), who was Créole like Coriolis, painted scenes similar to those attributed to Coriolis in the novel, and who was "tourmenté, humilié, subjugué" by his courtesan mistress (Crouzet, "Préface," 22).

[167] Robert Ricatte, *La Création romanesque chez les Goncourt, 1851-1870*, (Paris: Armand Collin, 1953), 307.

Early in the novel, Coriolis, feeling Paris is too familiar and full of too many distractions, decides to "[se] promener in Orient," leaving Anatole in Paris (155). The narrative focuses on Anatole's adventures while Coriolis sends him a few letters documenting his travels. Anatole later accompanies his uncle to Marseille, where he enjoys lively society and helps nurse the sick during a cholera epidemic. He is walking along the port one day when he meets Coriolis, who has just returned from his travels. Coriolis brings with him a pet monkey named Vermillion. They return to Paris, where Anatole moves in with Coriolis and Vermillion. Coriolis can afford to rent a large studio and furnish it well. He does not like to be alone and is willing to provide Anatole with room and board in exchange for his humorous companionship.

Manette enters the novel first as a child whose mother, a former model, is hoping someone will hire the beautiful little girl to pose. The text does not identify her just yet, and she does not reappear until many years later, when Coriolis is seeking the perfect model to inspire the masterpiece with which he plans to launch his career. Coriolis catches sight of Manette on an omnibus one evening. When she disembarks before he can approach her, he combs the city to locate her. He discovers that she is an experienced model, and she eventually agrees to pose for him. Having sworn he will never marry because he believes marriage kills artistic inspiration, Coriolis nevertheless soon finds himself possessive and jealous of Manette. From the moment of the first modeling session, he does everything he can to keep her to himself, jealous even of paintings she had posed for before they met. Coriolis eventually convinces Manette to live with him and to stop posing for others. Manette has goals of her own, the narration makes clear, because she is a Jew and—as the Goncourts' antisemitic depiction suggests—is motivated primarily by money. When the painting for which she first posed, *Le Bain Turc*, is a great success, Manette sees the potential for wealth in Coriolis' achievement, and her interest in him increases.

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[168] Langibout, the Goncourt's fictional owner of a private art school, may have been modeled after Martin Drolling (1752-1817), "dont il a l'académisme proverbial et l'indépendance absolue" (Ricatte, *Création*, 344). Students wishing to enter the École de Beaux Arts often studied at private teaching studios to prepare for the rigorous entrance examinations. For a detailed description of these studio schools and the program at the École de Beaux Arts, see John Milner, *The Studios of Paris: The Capital of Art in the Late Nineteenth Century*, (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1990), particularly pages 17-25.

[169] Crouzet, "Préface," 41.

Coriolis, Anatole, and Manette spend several months at a Barbizon inn, where the artists immerse themselves in nature. After their return to Paris, Manette announces her pregnancy. With the birth of the child, she becomes obsessed with money. Bit by bit, Manette takes control of Coriolis' life. She expects him to paint only simple canvases that are guaranteed to sell. While the couple are living in the south of France, ostensibly for Coriolis' health but more because Manette wants to solidify her control over him, the narrative again focuses on Anatole and his descent into poverty. Eventually Coriolis and Manette return to Paris. When one of his earlier paintings sells for a high price, Coriolis sees that his relationship with Manette has thwarted his dreams of making true Art. He burns his canvases in anger and tosses the molten mineral remains, still hot, into Manette's lap. He does not leave her, however, and marries her without inviting his friends to the ceremony. The novel ends with Anatole having become an employee at the Jardin des Plantes.

The novel is thus divided into two clear parts that can be represented by Manette Salomon's name: the first half recounts the days of bohemian freedom and artistic creativity when the lovely Parisienne, Manette, is an inspiring muse; the second half–represented by her family name Salomon–focuses on the negative effects of her Jewish heritage and her steady erosion of the artist's freedom.[170] The name "Salomon," further foreshadows the destructive power she wields because it is phonetically close to the name "Salomé," the seductive dancer who requested the head of John the Baptist when King Herod offered her a reward because he was pleased with her dancing.[171]

A. The Goncourts' Innovative Literary Strategies

In *Manette Salomon*, the Goncourts rely on a decentralized narrative technique that creates multiple perspectives and thematic threads. This visual and multifaceted style passes from one highly detailed scene to another, with snippets of interconnecting exposition and dialogue. The brothers deliberately deconstruct traditional literary forms.[172] Their collaboration itself breaks the tradition of the solitary author. Additionally, *Manette Salomon*'s 155 chapters offer highly-varied and non-linear textual forms: prose poetry, monologues, letters, social history, journal notes, dialogues–all filled with innumerable seemingly useless and insignificant details.[173] Throughout the novel, and with each shift in the type of text, "the baton of subjectivity" passes frequently from one character to another.[174] For example, several chapters consist entirely of the Coriolis's letters describing his travels to Anatole. While Coriolis is absent from Paris, he remains present in the chronology of the text. His first letter (Chapter XII) interrupts an account of Langibout scolding Anatole for his laziness. Chapter XI ends: "Et la semonce finissait toujours par le refrain: 'Petit cochon, vous ne travaillez pas,' qu'il jetait dans l'oreille d'Anatole en lui tirant assez rudement les cheveux" (122). After the text of Coriolis' message, the next chapter (XII) picks up Anatole's story exactly where it left off: "Langibout avait raison: Anatole ne travaillait pas [...]" (127). Thus, Coriolis' letter assumes the "baton of subjectivity" briefly before returning it to Anatole. With the strategy of inserting personal correspondence into the narrative, the Goncourts break the expectations of a central protagonist, disrupt the linear chronology of the text, and dramatically switch settings from the Parisian studio-classroom to exotic locations and back again.

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[170] Gougelmann, "allégorie," 180.

[171] Gougelmann, "allégorie," 177.

[172] Crouzet, "Préface," 44.

Reading *Manette Salomon* can be compared to strolling through a gallery of paintings, rather than experiencing a structured narrative.[175] The fleeting impressions the brothers sought to create with words echo the compositional strategies of their contemporaries among French painters; thus, the novel can be seen as "an exercise in literary impressionism."[176] However, the Goncourts sought to do more than merely describe visual phenomena: they wished to create within their readers the sensory experience of what they were describing by using metaphors of synesthesia.[177] Synesthesia is a sensory phenomenon. It occurs when a person experiences a reaction in one of the five senses when a different one is stimulated. For example, someone might perceive flavors when they see colors. A painter's ability to evoke the physical sensation of touch with skillful representations of objects is another example of synesthesia.[178] Using synesthesia in writing was a new conception of literary mimesis: "Ce n'est plus tant la représentation de la réalité qui importe que la sensation éprouvée par la personnalité du peintre ou de l'écrivain."[179] The Goncourts incorporate sensory details throughout *Manette Salomon*, frequently further reinforcing the effect they wish to create with other literary strategies.

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[173] Crouzet, "Préface," 44.

[174] Carol Armstrong, *Manet Manette*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 54.

[175] Therese Dolan. "Musée Goncourt: *Manette Salomon* and the Nude." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*18, no. 1/2, (1989): 182-3.

[176] Dolan, "Musée Goncourt," 173.

Coriolis' description of the omnibus ride when he first sees Manette serves as an excellent example of the Goncourts' innovative style. The chapter effectively incorporates sensory description and uses linguistic rhythms that echo the content.[180] Coriolis describes his experience using the first person as part of a dialog with Anatole, although the long section in question is primarily a monologue. The focalization shifts to his internal perspective so that the reader sees through his eyes. The authors use fragments of sounds, smells and sights delivered rapidly, interspaced with ellipses and exclamations to create the rhythmic feeling of riding in a horse-drawn omnibus. Coriolis repeats "Zing!" at various intervals to express the rapidity of the passing sensations (263-6). He mimics the conductor's calls as the omnibus passes through various stops along the route: "La Bastille! l'Odéon! Montmartre! Saint-Laurent!" (263). He adds odors to his description: "Ça sent toujours le chat mouillé, un omnibus!" (263). Among the overwhelming sights, the women seem all the same, sexless repetitions of each other: "Des femmes… des femmes sans sexe, des femmes à paquet… Zing!" (263). This collection of sensory experiences, recounted rapidly, increases the reader's sense of disorientation and mounting tension. Additionally, Coriolis' fleeting impressions of the various sights during the voyage echoes the seemingly disjointed structure of the overall novel:

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[177] Valazza, *Crise*, 154.

[178] The Goncourts attributed this ability to Jean Simon Chardin (1699-1799), about whom they wrote an extensive monograph published in their multi-volume work *L'Art du XVIIIe siècle* (Valazza, *Crise,* 146-152). Chardin painted many still lifes, the most well-known of which is *La Raie* (*The Skate*, 1728, Louvre, Paris). They were following in the footsteps of Diderot, who admired Chardin's ability to create life-like images (see Valazza, *Crise*, 23-64). Valazza explains: "[...] les [Goncourts] constatent que l'effet *essentiel* atteint par la peinture de Chardin est obtenu grâce à une variété de teintes apparemment discordantes [...]" (*Crise*, 150). That is to say, Chardin placed contrasting colors side-by-side: "Il ose, comme la nature même, les couleurs les plus contraires. Et cela sans les mêler, sans les fondre: il les pose à côté l'une et l'autre" (E. et J. de Goncourt, *L'Art du XVIIIe siècle*, 114. Cited in Valazza, *Crise*, 150).

[179] Leduc-Adine, Jean-Pierre. "Effets de picturalité dans *Manette Salomon*." In *Les frères Goncourt: art et écriture*. Édition préparée par J.-L. Cabanès. (Bordeaux: Presses universitaire de Bordeaux, 1997), 413. Cited in Valazza, *Crise*, 155.

[180] Chapter XLVIII, 263-266.

> […] Je regardais stupidement des maisons, des rues, de grandes machines d'ombre, des choses éclairées, des becs de gaz, des vitrines, un petit soulier rose de femme dans une montre, sur une étagère de glace, des bêtises, rien du tout, ce qui passait… J'en étais arrivé à suivre mécaniquement, sur les volets des boutiques fermées, l'ombre des gens de l'omnibus qui recommence éternellement… une série de silhouettes… […]. (263)[181]

The silhouettes of the passengers, reflected in shop windows as the omnibus passes, are like a series of portraits of the same people, the windows framing each flickering image like paintings in a moving gallery. Coriolis' omnibus ride is a microcosm of the structure of the novel itself, with its variable textual forms and moving center of focus. The authors use analogous repetitions and amplifications throughout *Manette Salomon*, creating an overall effect of fragmentary deracination that reinforces the novels' eclecticism.[182] The Goncourts therefore dissolve textual expectations with their creative collaboration and their deliberate deconstruction of traditional literary forms.

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[181] Ellipses outside brackets are in the original text.

[182] Armstrong, *Manet Manette*, 55.

While the authors challenge rigid expectations of linear narrative in the unconventional formal structure of *Manette Salomon*, they reinforce gender and racial binaries at the thematic level with the stereotypical portraits of their characters, as the studio romance between Manette and Coriolis reveals.

B. Masculine Fantasies and Prejudices in *Manette Salomon*

The Goncourts' documented misogyny and anti-Semitism infuse their novel, *Manette Salomon*. The brothers' journals and published works contain numerous examples of their prejudice.[183] Stéphanie Champeau explains that the Goncourts ardently believed women were inherently greedy and manipulative.[184] The brothers also shared a popular belief that the demands of a committed relationship to a woman would destroy an artist's career. They believed *all* female sexuality was inherently unrefined and base–like the reproductive and maternal instincts of animals; women were therefore particularly prone to being ruled by the lowest, most animalistic qualities of humanity.[185] They write: "La femme est toute sensation. Elle n'a qu'un sentiment, le sentiment maternel, parce que ce sentiment est bestial. C'est un sentiment de chair et de sang."[186] Thus, according to the Goncourts, once she has children, a woman is entirely "bestial," reduced solely to her reproductive role.[187] Worse is a mother who has a son, for she will try to live vicariously through him.[188] True to the Goncourts' unflattering view of womanhood, especially of mothers, in *Manette Salomon*, Manette's destructive influence on Coriolis' artistic career begins when she announces her pregnancy.[189]

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[183] For example, the following journal entry describes how the brothers felt when a Jewish former classmate approached them in public: "J'avais envie de lui dire: 'Mais de quel droit me connaissez-vous, me parlez-vous, me demandez-vous ma poignée de main? [...] vous êtes Juif, je n'aime pas les Juifs. C'est un sacrifice pour moi que d'en saluer un.'" (E. and J de Goncourt, *Journal*, 2 September 1866, cited in: Dorian Bell. "The Jew as Model: Anti-Semitism, Aesthetics, and Epistemology in the Goncourt Brothers' *Manette Salomon*." *MLN* 124, no. 4, [2009]: 825–47, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40606293. 31).

[184] Stéphanie Champeau traces the theme of revulsion towards mothers through the Goncourts works and their journals in the article "Manette Salomon, Renée Mauperin, et les autres, réflexions sur la femme et la jeune fille chez les Goncourt." *Cahiers Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, Manette Salomon*, no. 12, (2014): 48.

The brothers' portrayal of Manette as a negative force in the novel combines their misogyny with their hatred of Jews. Manette initially personifies the seductive stereotype of the "belle Juive," but she becomes avaricious and devious after the birth of her son, transforming into a combined stereotype of the rapacious Jewish merchant and the smothering Jewish mother. According to Marie Lathers, the "belle Juive" was thought to be a beautiful and exotic collaborator in the painter's art, but also dangerously adept at dissimulation.[190] Antisemitic prejudices depicted Jewish women as lacking the morality and refinement of Christian beliefs: they were supposedly unafraid of posing nude, as well as presumably more sexually available.[191] Manette is certainly beautiful, embodying all the physical stereotypes of the beautiful Jewess.[192] The authors specify that Manette has fine features, curly light brown hair, blue eyes, and rosy cheeks glowing on her pale skin (297). They associate these characteristics specifically with her heritage, saying it is a coloration "des juives" (297). Manette's appearance and her unashamed nude modeling exemplify aspects of the "belle Juive" ideal. The Goncourt's depiction of Manette's Jewish heritage thus serves to reinforce her perilous attraction.

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[185] Champeau, "Manette," 48.

[186] Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, *Journal, Mémoires de la vie littéraire*. Paris, Robert Laffont, "Bouquins" 1989. T.I. 23 juillet 1865: 1176. Cited in Champeau, "Manette," 46.

[187] Champeau, "Manette," 46. Champeau elaborates: "Mis à part la figure sacrée de leur mère, toutes les maternités révulsent les Goncourt (...)" ("Manette," 48). See also: Stéphanie Champeau, *La notion d'artiste chez les Goncourt (1852-1870)*, (Paris: H. Champion, 2000), especially the chapter entitled "Portrait de la femme d'après l'artiste," (297-316).

[188] Champeau, "Manette," 47.

[189] To avoid this pitfall, the brothers had a regular arrangement with a woman named Maria. "On sait que les Goncourt avaient, quant à eux, réglé le problème une fois pour toutes, en se partageant les faveurs de Maria une fois par semaine chacun" (Champeau, *La Notion*, 282). In their journal they record the following, dated 23 June 1858: "Dîner avec Maria, elle fait comme le public: elle accepte notre collaboration" (Vol I, 366, cited in Champeau, *La Notion*, note #42, 282).

[190] Marie Lathers. "Posing the 'Belle Juive': Jewish Models in 19th-Century Paris." *Woman's Art Journal* 21, no. 1, (2000): 31.

Another aspect of Manette's powerful effect on Coriolis is her "Oriental" beauty. Coriolis' attraction to anything he considers "Oriental" is a trope found throughout *Manette Salomon*, beginning with his lengthy voyage abroad during the first third of the novel. Edward Said explains that in France, the word "Oriental" refers more frequently to the Middle East and northern Africa, although most Americans consider the "Orient" to be East Asia, primarily China and Japan.[193] Jews originate from the so-called "Bible lands" in the Middle East, and thus retain an association with the "Orient." French painters of the mid-nineteenth century favored "Oriental" models who could pose for their chosen subjects of "harems, baths, slave markets, and North African, Turkish, and Greek battle scenes."[194] Coriolis' obsession with the exotic was therefore not uncommon. In fact, the Goncourts themselves had a passion for collecting Asian artifacts, although they gave Coriolis more of an interest in objects from Muslim lands.[195] The authors frequently show Manette in situations where she is juxtaposed with exotic objects. For example, the painting for which Coriolis hires Manette to pose is a *Bain turc*. It is a typical Orientalist scene depicting a nude white woman emerging from the bath, surrounded by billowing steam and attended by a nearly naked black woman (258).[196] Manette also wears a silk ensemble to Coriolis' masquerade ball, "un des costumes rapportés d'Orient par Coriolis" (320). Furthermore, the Goncourts repeatedly describe Manette using the word "orientale" specifically, associating a variety of characteristics with her heritage. Her uneducated, superstitious beliefs are described as "idées d'Orientale" (300). When Manette undresses alone in front of the mirror, the narrator mentions her "pieds d'Orientale," which she takes in her hand (304). Manette's "oriental" qualities increase her attractiveness because they are associated with the foreign and exotic cultures Coriolis loves.

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[191] Lathers, "Posing," 27.

[192] Gouglemann, "Allégorie," 171.

[193] Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. ([1978] New York: Vintage, 2014), 3.

[194] Lathers, *Bodies*, 36-7.

Coriolis is strongly drawn to things that remind him of distant lands due to his Île de Bourbon (Réunion) upbringing. "Venu tout enfant en France, Coriolis avait toujours eu le sentiment, la passion de l'exotique, la nostalgie, le mal du pays des pays chauds. [...] L'Orient l'avait toujours appelé, tenté" (313). The Goncourts tie his passion and sensuality to his créole background, which makes him especially vulnerable to Manette's seductive machinations. Being a Créole also means Coriolis is inherently more feminine than other men, according to contemporary prejudices:

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[195] Ricatte, *Création*, 321.

[196] "La baigneuse, sur son séant, se présentait de face. [...] Ses deux mains se croisaient dans ses cheveux, au bout de ses bras relevés qui dessinaient une anse et une couronne" (258). Although Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres painted a well-known *Bain turc* (1863, Louvre, Paris), Coriolis' painting is closer to *La Toilette d'Esther* by Théodore Chassériau (1841, Louvre, Paris) (Stéphanie Champeau, ed, *Manette Salomon* [Paris: Gallimard,1996], note p 258 #1, 611).

> Dans ces hommes des colonies, de nature subtile, délicate, raffinée, mettant dans les soins de leur corps, leurs parfums, l'huile de leurs cheveux, leur toilette, une recherche qui dépasse les coquetteries viriles [...] il y a, en dehors des mâles énergies et des colères un peu sauvages, une si grande analogie avec la femme, de si intimes affinités avec le tempérament féminin, que l'amour chez eux ressemble presque à de l'amour de femme. Ces hommes aiment, plus que les autres hommes, avec des instincts d'attachement et d'habitude tendre, avec le goût de s'abandonner et de sentir possédés, une espèce de besoin d'être caressés, enveloppés continûment par l'amour, de s'enrouler autour de lui, de se tremper dans ses lâches douceurs, de s'y perdre, de s'y fondre dans une sorte de paresse d'adoration et de molle servitude heureuse. (285)

In describing how a Créole man is inherently effeminate, the authors also reveal their biased view of feminine sexuality. The desire the brothers describe is narcissistic: the Créole/woman seeks not *to love*, but to *be* loved. They presume that Créoles and women desire to be passively enveloped in a soft and pleasing adoration, one to which they can abandon themselves and feel they belong completely to their lover. This aspect of Coriolis' personality contributes to his artistic failure and it weakens his ability to resist Manette. Furthermore, with this list of feminine qualities they attribute to Coriolis, the Goncourts foreshadow the steps Manette will later take when she strategically fulfills Coriolis' need for comfort and coddling to disguise her intentions.

Coriolis' gradual subjugation can be traced in the ways he embraces conjugal life, a mode of living he initially viewed as incompatible with artistic creation:

> Le travail de l'art, la poursuite de l'invention, l'incubation silencieuse de l'œuvre, la concentration de l'effort lui paraissaient impossibles avec la vie conjugale, aux côtés d'une jeune femme caressante et distrayante, ayant contre l'art la jalousie d'une chose plus aimée qu'elle, faisant autour du travailleur le bruit d'un enfant, brisant ses idées, lui prenant son temps, le rappelant au fonctionnarisme du mariage, à ses devoirs, à ses plaisirs, à la famille, au monde, essayant de reprendre à tout moment l'époux et l'homme dans cette espèce de sauvage et de monstre social qu'est un vrai artiste. (226-7)

In spite of his professed aversion to living with a woman, Coriolis paradoxically clings to Manette from the moment during her first modeling session when he refuses to allow his friend and housemate, Anatole, to work on a commissioned drawing for which her pose would be perfect (274). Subsequent chapters recount, step by step, Coriolis' efforts to control, contain and ultimately possess Manette's body, with numerous examples and descriptions. Ironically, Coriolis' desire to dominate Manette leads to his own downfall because he will, in turn, be manipulated by his spouse. Once the couple's child is born, Manette enacts all the stages of slow destruction of the artist mentioned in the sentence cited above. In fact, the entire novel can be read as a series of amplifications built around this very statement about marriage.

Manette, the belle Juive, turns out to be a mere mirage of beauty, a cliché inherited from the Romantic novels of Walter Scott.[197] She reveals her "true" nature when her son is born:

> En devenant mère, Manette était devenue une autre femme. Le modèle avait été tué en elle. La maternité, en touchant son corps, en avait enlevé l'orgueil. [...] Des entrailles de la mère, la juive avait jailli. Et la persévérance froide, l'entêtement résolu, la rapacité originelle de sa race, s'étaient levés des semences de son sang, dans de sourdes cupidités passionnées de femme rêvant de l'argent sur la tête de son enfant. (424)

Manette's negative qualities are described as unavoidable, encoded in the "semences de son sang." Her desirable exterior hides a revolting interior. Her body, now touched by maternity and age, is no longer that of a young, attractive muse, therefore it becomes a source of disgust. From the "entrailles de la mère" (her innermost parts, her womb), the hidden Jewess "avait jailli" (burst or gushed forth). This is a reversal of Christian imagery related to the Virgin Mary and the birth of Jesus. Mary's kinswoman, Elizabeth, was post-menopausal and miraculously pregnant with John the Baptist. When Elizabeth sees Mary, who is pregnant with Jesus, the child in

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[197] Gougelmann, "Allégorie," 173.

Elizabeth’s womb moves in response. She is filled with the Spirit and cries out “Tu es bénie entre toutes les femmes et le fruit de tes entrailles est béni” (Luke 1:42). In Manette’s case, instead of giving birth to a Savior, as her son is born Manette also births herself as a greedy Jewess.

As further evidence of her deceptive and manipulative nature, Manette deliberately disguises all signs of the postpartum change in her personality, while she plans her progressive possession of Coriolis’ life (424). She reenacts the Biblical scenario of Potiphar’s wife and Joseph, tricking Anatole into a romantic encounter just when Coriolis is bound to witness it, thus convincing Coriolis to separate from Anatole (439-41). She steadily makes small changes: moving Coriolis away from Paris and the artistic community (498-9); bringing her cousins to act as servants in the household (503-4); and making the household so unwelcoming that no one will come to visit (502).

To accomplish her objective, Manette first surrounds Coriolis with comfort and loving attention, showing herself to be supportive and submissive (416-17). She impresses him with her knowledge of studio life and her awareness of his needs: “Les choses du métier de l’art lui étaient familières: elle en connaissait le nom et l’usage. Elle ne disait pas de bêtises bourgeoises devant une toile. Elle respectait le silence d’un homme à son chevalet” (416). She creates a pleasing, calming environment: “Elle était pour lui dans sa vie du calme et du repos, une compagnie bonne pour ses nerfs d’artiste” (417). She soon no longer behaves like a mistress whose bags are always packed, and instead becomes “la femme à demeure, ancrée dans le domicile;” she is completely at home, “elle est chez elle chez son amant”(423). Manette’s gradual insinuation into Coriolis’ life is nearly imperceptible. The narrative recounts each step without revealing–until just before Manette gives birth–how purposeful her actions have been:

> Manette n'avait eu à peine besoin de travailler à ce changement. Il s'était fait presque tout seul, par le courant naturel des choses, par la lente et progressive infiltration de l'influence féminine, par l'habitude, par l'oreiller, par la succession de ces accroissements, pareils aux alluvions du concubinage, grandissant la position, le pouvoir, l'initiative de la maîtresse avec tout ce qui détache à la longue, dans l'amollissement du ménage, de la force de l'homme pour aller à la faiblesse de la femme. (423-4)

The incremental process of change and Coriolis' need for pampering make him blind to the effects of Manette's premeditated actions.

Coriolis' feminine qualities and Manette's domination of him reverse gender roles. The narrative emphasizes the gradual softening ("amollissement") of Coriolis' masculine strength with the metaphor of alluvial deposits, comparing Manette's growing power to the slow build-up of silt and grit on a riverbank. As Manette's power in the relationship grows, Coriolis is weakened: she steadily erodes his manly strength. In a reversal of Coriolis' jealous campaign to obtain Manette's promise to model exclusively for him, to live with him and be his mistress, Manette pursues her goal of household domination with equal–yet, far more subtle–persistence. Whereas Coriolis overtly desires to possess and control Manette, she dissimulates, hiding her purpose behind false acquiescence and deceptive nurturance. "C'est [...] moins par les charmes de l'amante que par les douceurs de la mère que Manette parvient à soumettre Corolis."[198] In becoming a controlling maternal figure, Manette now embodies the stereotype of the stifling, shrewish Jewish mother.

The authors create an underlying battle between Créole and Jew, "race contre race."[199] When Coriolis secretly follows Manette to the synagogue one evening, he recognizes that he had been ignoring her Jewish identity: "C'était la première fois que cette perception lui venait de voir une juive dans Manette, qu'il avait sue pourtant être juive dès le premier jour" (292). This realization causes indefinable negative feelings: "[...] il se dégageait en lui, du fond de l'homme et du catholique, des instincts du créole, de ce sang orgueilleux que font les colonies, une impression indéfinissable" (292). Coriolis therefore carries deep antipathy towards Manette's religion because of his ancestry. Manette, too, holds inherited prejudice against Coriolis of which she is unaware: "Sans qu'elle en eût conscience, sans qu'elle s'en rendît compte, la juive, en revenant aux préjugés des siens, revenait peu à peu aux antipathies obscures et confuses de ses instincts" (522). Her Jewish soul rises up against the Christian in Coriolis, rejoicing in his subjugation as symbolic of the triumph of her race and her sex, reveling in seeing "Coriolis sous le talon de sa bottine" (522). The Goncourts created both Coriolis and Manette through the lens of their own biased beliefs.

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[198] Gougelmann, "Allégorie," 176.

[199] Ricatte, *Création*, 321.

Thus, in the Goncourts' paradigm of prejudice, Manette is exponentially threatening because she will inevitably embody the manipulative characteristics of both woman and Jew. Coriolis, too, exemplifies the Goncourts' bias. If his Créole heritage gives him the sensitivity behind his artistic talent, it also compromises his virility, making him effeminate and therefore weak. Manette is a *femme fatale* precisely because the Goncourts designed her to have an appealing "belle Juive" exterior covering a stereotypically greedy Jewish value system. However, while we as readers are confronted with the limitations of the Goncourts' personal beliefs and the effects of those beliefs on the novel, we are not required to interpret Manette from that perspective alone. Instead, readers can also understand Manette as an example of transgressive and powerful feminine subjectivity. This power is particularly present in the scenes when Manette poses nude.

II. Visual Seduction: Manette's Nude Poses

In *Manette Salomon,* the Goncourts use several literary techniques that focus the reader's attention on the scenes where Manette poses nude, thus increasing their erotic potential. Therese Dolan believes the authors actually wished to show that when a model poses, her nudity is transformed "into the ethereal world of art" in order to minimize or erase "any notion of the erotically voyeuristic" that might occur during a nude posing session.[200] Dolan also states: "The Goncourts believed that woman was the premier object of desire and therefore subject of art."[201] However, the authors' effort to deflect the desiring gaze neither eliminates it nor minimizes it. In fact, it paradoxically serves to emphasize the sexual appeal inherent to the studio romance. The Goncourts structure the novel to create mounting erotic tension and a sense of suspense building up to the actual moment Manette poses. During the first modeling scene, the authors shift perspective between the model and the painter, peppering the descriptions with sexually suggestive details and vocabulary. The result is a sense of continual hovering between the painter's professional observation and the male's desiring gaze.

According to Stéphane Gougelmann "(...) les descriptions du corps de Manette sont parmi les plus flamboyantes du roman et trahissent l'auto-excitation que procure aux deux Pygmalion l'invention de leur Galatée."[202] Gougelmann thus compares the Goncourts themselves to Pygmalion, and Manette to the statue he created and loved. As a literary work of art, certainly, there are characteristics in the descriptions of Manette's body that evoke a purposefully painterly look. One of these characteristics is a focus on the coloration of Manette's skin, which Dolan believes is the Goncourts' deliberate response to Manet's *Olympia*.[203] When they wrote *Manette Salomon*, the Goncourts were reacting to Manet's painting, particularly his choice of what contemporary critics saw as un ugly model and the pallor of her skin.[204] "Their lengthy evocation of [the] nuanced tone and sculpturesque form [of Manette's body] provides a real alternative to the brutal color contrasts and abstract flatness that the critics saw in *Olympia*."[205] The Goncourts preferred the soft and rounded tones of the female bodies in paintings by François Boucher (1703-1770): "Nothing could be further from Goncourts' ideal nude than Manet's *Olympia*, with her harsh gaze and bony anatomy striped of any feminine seductiveness."[206] They may also have used the name "Manette" as a reference to "Manet" to emphasize their opinion of "his role as the destroyer of the nude in the art of their time."[207]

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[200] Dolan, "Musée Goncourt," 175.

[201] Dolan, "Musée Goncourt," 181.

[202] Gougelmann, "Allégorie," 172.

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[203] Manet's famous painting *Olympia* was painted in 1863 but not shown at the Salon until 1865 (Alan Krell, *Manet and the Painters of Contemporary Life*, [London: Thames and Hudson, 1996], 47). It depicts a reclining nude woman attended by a black servant who holds a bouquet of flowers, while a black cat arches its back at the foot of the bed. The nude woman engages the viewers with her gaze, while her left hand, firmly posed, covers her genitals. Contemporary viewers found the painting shocking, seeing a frank depiction of prostitution and, worse, working-class ordinariness. For more details see: T.J. Clark "Olympia's Choice," in *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his followers*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1984), particularly pages 96-99.

[204] Dolan, "Musée Goncourt," 177. Several contemporary critics compared the color of Olympia's skin to that of a corpse, saying she looked "dead of yellow fever and already arrived at an advanced state of decomposition" (Victor Fournel, cited in T.J. Clark, "Olympia's Choice," 97).

[205] Dolan, "Musée Goncourt," 177.

[206] Dolan, "Musée Goncourt," 182.

[207] Dolan, "Musée Goncourt," 182. A possible source for the name of the Goncourts' character is an 1865 caricature by Bertall, which mockingly refers to Manet's painting *Olympia* as "Manette, ou la Femme de l'Ébéniste" (Armstrong, *Manet Manette*, 51). The cartoon in question was part of a series called "Promenade au Salon de 1865," published in *Le Journal Amusant*, 27 May, 1865 (Armstrong, *Manet Manette*, 45). "Bertall" was the pen name of Charles Albert d'Arnould (1820-1882).

Two scenes in *Manette Salomon* will serve to demonstrate the encoded eroticism that marks the presumed reader as masculine. We will also see that parts of these scenes resist the gendered roles of the studio romance schema. The first segment is Manette's initial nude pose, including important parts of the surrounding text. Here, we will see that even when the narrative voice implies or states that the artist's gaze is dispassionate and professional, the text contains numerous elements that contradict this statement and appeal to a presumed masculine reader. The second sequence is one in which Manette poses alone before a mirror. The model's point of view is the organizing factor of the narrative in this chapter, as the mirror recalls the mythical image of Narcissus and of women's presumed vanity. The mirror also invokes the threatening image of Medusa, representing the masculine viewer's simultaneous attraction to and fear of feminine sexuality. A third interpretation of the mirror is a projection of Manette's own gaze, and therefore potentially that of an external feminine observer. Both scenes demonstrate the importance of the authors' choice to include a subjective reality for the model as a narrative device.

A. Manette's First Nude Pose: "le rayonnement d'un chef d'œuvre" (272)

The narrative builds the reader's anticipation, pointing towards the moment when Manette will finally reveal her nudity to Coriolis. First, the artist bemoans the lack of acceptable models in Paris. A similar theme appears in Balzac's "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu" and in Zola's *L'Œuvre*, where painters seek inspiration through female beauty, hoping to find an ideal woman who can model the entire figure rather than being forced to compose a perfect body by combining only the best parts of many women. According to Coriolis: "Il n'y a plus un corps à

Paris... Voyons ! voilà six mois que nous n'avons pu avoir un modèle propre…" (259). Coriolis constantly searches the city for the perfect model or spends days flipping through his albums of Japanese prints looking for just the right woman for his paintings: "Coriolis feuilletait toujours: et devant lui passaient des femmes […]" (262). The catalog of his efforts to locate the ideal body to pose for him, recounted in the Goncourts' amplifying style, increases the sense of tension as he fails again and again.

After Coriolis spots Manette during his fateful omnibus ride, which he describes to Anatole in detail (as discussed above), he hopes to locate the lovely young woman whose profile so captivated him and convince her to pose for him. Anatole knows who she is and agrees to write to her. But again, Coriolis' desires are thwarted and the narrative sense of tension continues to increase, since Manette neither arrives for the proposed modeling session nor responds to the letter (266-9). In rejecting his initial approach, Manette insists upon her personal choice from the very beginning of her relationship with Coriolis. This is a warning that she will not be a complacent woman, but Coriolis persists in his artistic fervor. Between the rejected letter and the eventual posing scene, the authors include a lengthy description of a Purim celebration in the Jewish quarter of Paris, where the men hope to find Manette. When they locate her, Manette insists that the artists show her all the respect due to a lady of Paris before she will deign to even consider posing (268-9). The men discover she was offended because the letter they sent her was written on reused paper and unsigned, scrawled on the back of a note from Anatole's friend (268). She maintains her own power by forcing the men to come to her and expecting them to earn the right to see her body, judging their quality for herself and choosing on her own terms whether or not she will pose: "[..] elle le toisa du bout des bottes jusqu'à la racine des cheveux, détourna la tête, et, après un silence, elle se décida à lui dire qu'elle voulait bien, et qu'elle viendrait ‘prendre la pose’ le lundi suivant” (269). Manette’s look, considering Coriolis’ body from his boots to his hair, is reversed when, in his studio, he studies her from head to toe. The authors acknowledge a gaze and a point of view that is Manette’s own while simultaneously leading the reader to a feeling of heightened expectation before Manette eventually disrobes.

Manette’s first modeling scene is structured in a very visual, almost cinematic way that focuses all attention on her body, slowing the pace of the narration and inscribing erotic desire in the repetition and expansion of details. The authors first create the overall ambience. They then show Manette in a full body pose, which is described in three increasingly detailed sets. The final descriptive set follows the gaze of the artist as he studies her body in micro segments, carefully and deliberately moving from head to toe, naming each body part and describing its shapes and colors.

The authors begin with a brief establishing sequence where Manette undresses. Yet the lack of description of the process of removing each item of clothing in turn, as well as the absence of commentary on her body, minimizes elements that could turn her preparation for modeling into a striptease. Instead, the authors emphasize her deliberate movements and purposeful, modest demeanor: “[…] elle commença à se déshabiller lentement, rangeant avec ordre sur le divan les vêtements qu’elle quittait” (270). She does not remove her chemise, her upper undergarment, until she is on the modeling stand and ready to strike a pose. Her undressing is not completely devoid of erotic suggestion, however, because, “elle tenait entre ses dents le festonnage d’en haut” (271). Manette holds her chemise in her teeth as she moves to the stand, which associates this action with orality and biting or chewing and adds a note of sensuality to her movements.

After Manette's meticulous process of undressing, the narrative then transitions to an intervention describing, in general terms, the behavior of professional female models. The Goncourts thought the ritual of disrobing transformed a modest woman into a model, an object of art.[208] Although they indicate that the model is transformed from woman into art at the moment she mounts the modeling stand and lets fall her chemise, underlining that she then becomes "une statue de nature, immobile et froide, dont le sexe n'est plus rien qu'une forme" (270), the Goncourts do not stop their description there, which would have been sufficient to communicate the professionalism of a live modeling session. Instead, they shift the focus to the model's point of view, her experience of sensuality in the process of undressing, "le glissement de ses vêtements sur elle" (the feeling of fabric sliding across skin), the anticipation of each bit of flesh as it appears and the knowledge of "la curiosité de ces yeux d'hommes qui l'attendent" (curious male eyes that are waiting for her) (270). She delights, too, in knowing her nudity is "pour l'art" and thus "presque sacrée" (270). The authors propose that sexuality disappears when a woman poses for art: "C'est dans la pose seulement que la femme n'est plus femme, et que pour elle les hommes ne sont plus des hommes" (270). Yet, they also emphasize a simultaneous feeling of attraction and repulsion to "les yeux d'artistes" that study "les plus intimes secrets de sa chair" (270). The description of the model's feelings and her viewpoint throughout this narrative intervention ascribes most of the vacillating eroticism to the model herself, her nervousness, her awareness of the eyes studying her, and her ambivalent pleasure.

The authors attribute curiosity and a professional gaze of "la sévérité de l'étude" to the young male art students. They describe the look of the artist as "la contemplation sereine et désintéressée" and "l'attention passionnée et absorbée" (270). However, these are paradoxical and ambivalent descriptions: the emotional interest implied in the word “passionnée” entails the opposite of disinterest, or “désintéressée.” Even if we accept that the painter’s gaze is not a sexual one, the masculine reader, an outsider to the text and therefore to the studio scene being described, can find a *doppelgänger* in the spectator present within the anecdote the Goncourts’ offer as part of this scene: A female model is posing in Ingres’ studio before thirty students. She suddenly becomes embarrassed and runs for her clothing when she notices a roofer staring at her through the overhead bay window (271). The authors thus suggest that one difference between lascivious viewing and artistic viewing is the idea of having the *right* to look at the woman’s body, being *invited* to look and having a professional purpose for doing so. During Manette’s modeling session the reader is placed in a dual position where on the one hand he is standing outside the narrative, like the roofer, watching the naked woman pose. Yet on the other hand, he is also guided through the process of looking at Manette’s body with the eyes of a painter. The look of the artist and the look of the observer conflate to communicate a multifaceted desire to possess Manette’s body.

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[208] Dolan, "Musée Goncourt," 175.

The three sets of descriptions of Manette’s body begin with an account of her behavior once she is on the modeling stand and then an explanation of the pose she assumes. The mixture of titillation and detachment continues through the entire section as the authors depict the position of her body and compare her perfection to the masses of imperfect humanity.

When Manette poses for Coriolis, her pose is reminiscent of a well-known sculpture in the Louvre. The authors evoke Greek sculpture and mythology in describing Manette’s stance as “la pose de ce marbre du Louvre qu’on appelle le *Génie du repos éternel*” (272). The narrative emphasizes Manette’s self-assurance, her admiration of her own beauty, and her deliberate construction of the image she presents to others. She becomes an artist of her self-presentation, designing the dramatic unveiling of her body and choosing for herself—without waiting for direction from the painter—how to position it.

> Soudain, elle laissa tomber de ses dents desserrées la fine toile qui glissa le long de son corps, fila de ses reins, s'affaissa d'un seul coup au bas d'elle, tomba sur ses pieds comme une écume. Elle repoussa cela d'un petit coup de pied, le chassa par derrière ainsi qu'une queue de robe; puis, après avoir abaissé sur elle-même un regard d'un moment, un regard où il y avait de l'amour, de la caresse, de la victoire, nouant ses deux bras au-dessus de sa tête, portant son corps sur une hanche, elle apparut à Coriolis dans la pose de ce marbre du Louvre qu'on appelle le *Génie du repos éternel*. (271-2)

In pushing her fallen chemise behind her "ainsi qu'une queue de robe," Manette assumes a different type of dress even as she poses nude: her skin becomes a costume of art. Again, the narration concentrates briefly on the model's point of view, although voiced externally and in the third person. Before striking the pose, she looks down at her naked body with a loving, caressing, victorious look: "un regard où il y avait de l'amour, de la caresse, de la victoire." This brief description of Manette's self-appraisal credits her with her own point of view, her own thoughts and emotions, and an evident awareness of her sexuality and power.

Most of the paragraph leans towards the erotically provocative. First, the authors indicate that the "honte de femme" is brief for Manette (271). This serves two purposes. Along with the images evoked in the rest of the paragraph, it alerts us to Manette's comfort in posing, which implies accompanying satisfaction with her own body and her sexuality. Manette's use of her teeth to hold her chemise and the sudden opening of them theatrically unveils her body while also communicating an animal, physical nature. The authors' juxtaposition of this image of orality with the description of "la fine toile qui glissa le long de son corps" focuses attention on the sensory experience, both tactile and visual, of cloth against skin, and repeats the same image evoked earlier during the narrative description of nude modeling sessions in general. The word "soudain" and the statement that "elle apparut à Coriolis" suggest a dramatic moment of unveiling Manette's naked body, the very moment the text has been building towards for so many previous chapters.

The statue whose position Manette copies, also known as "*Narcisse, dit Hermaphrodite Mazarin*," is of a male body with a feminine face and pronounced breasts, implying a sexlessness in Manette's classical pose and hinting at her role as one outside the expected standards for a woman in nineteenth-century patriarchal Parisian society.[209] Indeed, the myths of Narcissus and Hermaphroditus connected to the mentioned sculpture both contain elements that illuminate transgressive aspects of Manette's character and introduce themes of alternative sexualities and gender identities that lie outside the heteronormative studio fantasy.

The myth of Narcissus tells of an attractive young man who rejects all suitors, both male and female. Instead, he falls in love with his own reflection in a forest pool. He is so captivated that he pines away. After his death he is transformed into a white flower with an orange center.[210] Ovid's tale emphasizes Narcissus' self-absorption and his admiration of his own beauty: "Everything attracts him/that makes him so attractive. Foolish boy,/He wants himself."[211] Although the Goncourts' 1867 novel predates Freudian theory, their portrayal of Manette's obsessive self-adoration aligns with Freud's description of a narcissistic personality.[212] Narcissism, defined in the most simplistic terms, is an overinvestment in the self and in one's own body as love object.[213] Manette demonstrates Narcissus-like autoerotic qualities as she looks down at her body triumphantly before assuming her pose. As Ricatte explains: "Une seule passion [...] anime [...]: l'admiration d'elle-même, ou mieux de cette partie d'elle-même qu'elle donne à voir, tous vêtements tombés."[214] The water where Narcissus finds his reflection is a natural mirror. Manette enjoys gazing at herself, and the Goncourts devote an entire chapter—which we will discuss in more detail later—to Manette's self-admiration before the studio mirror. Ovid also includes the theme of homosexual love in his tale, introducing Narcissus as a youth so attractive both boys and girls sought his love, and his cursed pining for his own image is the goddess Nemesis' response to the ardently vengeful prayer of one of his rejected male suitors.[215] Narcissus' love for his reflection is also same-sex love, and Ovid names it overtly: Narcissus laments his own death as that also of the boy he loves.[216] While Manette does not express homoerotic attraction, the introduction of this theme creates an opening in the text, a liminal space where it can exist.

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[209] The Louvre's website identifies two different types of marble with varying crystalline structures for the upper and lower halves of this statue, suggesting it may be a composite of parts of two different sculptures.

[210] Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* 68-73.

[211] Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* 70.

[212] In 1910, Freud used the image of Narcissus to explain object choice among homosexuals. His study *Zur Einführung des Narzissmus* was published in 1914. (Jean Laplanche. *Vocabulaire de La Psychanalyse*. [Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1973], 261).

The story of Hermaphroditus is one of powerful feminine desire, desire so powerful that it attacks, overcomes, and weakens the male whom it targets. Hermaphroditus is the son of Hermes and Aphrodite. He bears both parents' names blended to form his own, foreshadowing of his bi-gendered fate.[217] A vain and covetous water-nymph, Salmacis, takes a fancy to the young man. When he refuses her, she pretends to leave, but instead watches from the foliage as he strips to bathe in an inviting forest pool: “Desire of the naked body/Held her spell-bound.”[218] As soon as he enters the water, she plunges in after him and wraps herself around him. Ovid’s account of the assault emphasizes Salmacis’ violent, animalistic desire and Hermaphroditus’ fruitless efforts to escape:

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[213] Laplanche, *Vocabulaire,* 261.

[214] Ricatte, *Création,* 317.

[215] Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* 68 and 70.

[216] Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* 72.

[217] Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* 90-93.

> “I win, I have him,” she cried, stripped herself naked,
> Dove, swam to him, and held him fast, resisting,
> Sought his reluctant kisses, touched his body,
> Stroked his unwilling breast, embraced and held him
> Whatever way she could. He fought and struggled,
> But she wrapped herself around him, as a serpent
> Caught by an eagle, borne aloft, entangles
> Coils around head and talons …
> […]
> Body to body: he would not escape her,
> Fight as he may, “O grant me this,” she cried
> In prayer to the gods, “May no day ever come
> To separate us!” and they heard her prayer,
> And the two bodies seemed to merge together
> […]
> So these two joined in close embrace, no longer
> Two beings, and no longer man and woman,
> But neither, and yet both.[219]

Seeing that he has lost his masculine power and become soft like a woman, Hermaphroditus curses the waters of his transformation, asking the gods to cause all men who enter the pool to experience the same fate.[220] With her emasculating manipulation of Coriolis, Manette is less like the resulting blended Hermaphrodite and much more like the passionate, determined Salmacis, infiltrating Coriolis’ life and ultimately rendering him artistically impotent. The Goncourts portray Manette’s sexual power as dangerous and devouring, a destructive force in the life of the painter. She knows how to use her body to her advantage, a fact reinforced by her choice to assume the position of the "*Génie du repos éternel*" (262). This stance, with her arms above her head is clearly meant to display her body to its fullest potential. As in her careful, precise procedure of undressing, Manette's actions are deliberate and calculated.

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[218] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 91.

[219] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 93.

[220] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 93.

The narration then pauses once more, as if to let the reader take in the fullness of Manette's nude body on display. After cataloging masses of imperfect human bodies, the narrative voice tells the reader that Manette is one of Nature's own artistic triumphs, polished with love and pride to show the divine example of Beauty:

> [...] De la pâte humaine, on dirait [que la Nature] tire, comme un ouvrier écrasé de travail, des peuples de laideur, des multitudes de vivants ébauchés, manqués, des espèces d'images à la grosse de l'homme et de la femme. Puis de temps en temps, au milieu de toute cette pacotille d'humanité, elle choisit un être au hasard, comme pour empêcher de mourir l'exemple du Beau. Elle prend un corps qu'elle polit et finit avec amour, avec orgueil. Et c'est alors un véritable et divin être d'art qui sort des mains de la Nature.
>
> Le corps de Manette était un de ces corps-là: dans l'atelier, sa nudité avait mis tout à coup le rayonnement d'un chef-d'œuvre. (272)

Manette's body is exceptional because it is already a masterpiece: "son corps, loin de reproduire un style, l'*invente*, et [...] propose à l'art non un modèle dont celui-ci puisse s'inspirer, mais, comme réalisé par avance, un chef-d'œuvre."[221] From this moment when he first sees Manette nude, the artist in Coriolis wants to keep "cette oeuvre vivante" to himself, so he alone can create the masterpieces Manette's body inspires, and also so he can maintain exclusive rights to his mistress's body.[222] Coriolis, "habitué à garder ses pensées, à refouler ses émotions, à se renfoncer le coeur dans la poitrine," sublimates his erotic desires into painting (28). He loves her for how he feels about himself in her presence. His artistic talent becomes visible to him when he looks at her: “Il aimait cette femme pour son corps, pour les lignes qu’elle faisait, pour un ton qu’elle avait à la place de la peau. [...] Il l’aimait pour sentir devant elle une inspiration et une révélation de son talent” (285). Nature created Manette’s body, Manette herself composes the living sculpture, and Coriolis falls in love with his own fantasized aesthetic ideal projected onto Manette’s body. Yet, Coriolis confuses aesthetic desire with erotic desire.[223] He soon takes Manette to bed, and his physical attraction to her only increases: “Ce caprice, qu’il croyait user en le satisfaisant, s’était enflammé, une fois satisfait. Il s’était changé en une sorte d’appétit ardent, irrité, passionné, de cette femme; et dès le lendemain, Coriolis se sentait devenir jaloux de ce modèle [...]” (282). It is not Manette herself that Coriolis loves, it is her body and the artistic talent her physical beauty unleashes in him.

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[221] Anne-Marie Christin. "Matière et idéal dans *Manette Salomon*." *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 80e année, no. 6, Littérature et peinture en France (1830-1900), (Dec. 1980): 932.

[222] Crouzet, "Préface," 17.

The second descriptive set, elaborating upon Manette’s physical features, focuses primarily on the details of her pose (272-3). Still in the third person with Coriolis as implied focalizer, the description moves slowly from her head, where her hands are crossed above her, to her feet. The first part remains anatomical and impersonal, mentioning merely the position of each body part without elaboration. For example, the paragraph begins: “Sa main droite, posée sur sa tête à demi tournée et un peu penchée, retombait en grappe sur ses cheveux” (272). However, the text then evokes Manette as representative of ideal feminine beauty, as if her body radiated “tout le dessin de la femme,” a template of womanly physical perfection. While the artist himself—at this point—does not touch Manette, his gaze substitutes for physical contact and the reader follows each step as Coriolis studies his model’s body. The desire for physical contact becomes instead the movement of the light, caressing Manette’s perfect form: “Et l’on eût cru voir de la lumière la caresser de la tête aux pieds” (272). The artist may be required by his professional code to remain dispassionate (although, as we have seen, in this case he definitely does not), but readers are under no obligation to do so, and the text offers these visually enticing details that seduce them, just as Coriolis himself is seduced.

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[223] Crouzet, “Préface,” 16.

The third and final description of Manette's body is lengthy and highly detailed. The narrative action slows even more to follow the artist's eye as he studies her, moving from head to toe, lingering on each tiny feature, focusing on the colors and textures, the shapes and curves, the lines and planes, the highlights and shadows (273-4). The variety of descriptors that appeal to visual imagination indicate that the authors are, as stated before, guiding the reader's eyes through the process of studying human forms as a painter would. In particular, an artist would appreciate the rich, poetic description of the subtle colors in Manette's skin:

> ces imperceptibles apparences d'un bleu, d'un vert presque insensible, ombrant d'une adorable pâleur les diaphanéités laiteuses de la chair, tout ce délicieux je ne sais quoi de l'épiderme de la femme, qu'on dirait fait avec le dessous de l'aile des colombes, l'intérieur des roses blanches, la glauque transparence de l'eau baignant un corps. (273)

Yet, even in this "artistic" description, there are words that evoke the erotic, such as "adorable" and "délicieux." Special attention is given to her breasts and nipples: "le bout du sein [qui] était de la nuance naissante de l'hortensia" and on the way the light makes her underarm hair glow golden, details which focus particularly on intimate body parts (273).[224] The narration also emphasizes the youth and innocence of Manette's body, creating an elision of mature female sexuality and an impression of childlike purity. Manette's joints have "la fragilité et la minceur des attaches de l'enfant" (273). Her ankle bones stick out like a little girl's and her torso is like a budding flower: "encore contenu et comprimé dans sa grâce, à demi mûr, serré dans sa jeunesse comme dans l'enveloppe d'un bouton" (273). Finally, her belly is simultaneously voluptuous and virtuous: "la douce et voluptueuse ondulation d'un ventre de vierge, d'un ventre innocent, presque enfantin" (273). Furthermore, Coriolis' lengthy process of looking, the dwelling and lingering on each detail is, in itself, erotically charged. The snail's pace of the narration as Coriolis so carefully studies each micro section of Manette's body indicates an overwhelming investment in this moment.

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[224] Women's body hair is rarely portrayed in traditional western art (Anne Hollander. *Seeing through Clothes*. [New York: Viking Press, 1978], 136-7). The Goncourt's choice to describe it adds a titillating element of the forbidden.

The aesthetic gaze and the erotic one merge for Coriolis. The Goncourts show this change through their characters' behavior.[225] Coriolis loses himself in the leisurely study of Manette's body: "Un moment, il s'oublia à s'éblouir de cette femme" (273). Manette becomes uncomfortable because she can sense a change in Coriolis' gaze: "Sous cette attention qui semblait ne pas travailler, Manette à la fin éprouva une sorte d'embarras" (274). The combination of artistic rapture and physical desire present in this scene signals the motives for Coriolis' efforts to control access to Manette's body. While his focus on colors and shapes indicates his painter's gaze, phrases highlighting his emotional reaction demonstrate his fascination and bedazzlement. Coriolis' look is clearly at least as sexually motivated as it is artistically focused.

B: Manette's Mirror: "un musée de sa nudité"

Manette, whom the Goncourts portray as increasingly manipulative, superficially complies with the model's stereotypical studio romance role of voluntary self-sacrifice to the great artist's career. However, even after she begins living with Coriolis, she resists his efforts to control her body, to possess her, to keep her from posing for other artists, and she refuses to give up her apartment: “En tout, elle avait l’idée de s’appartenir, de garder son coin de liberté” (283). She attempts to deceive him, continuing to pose secretly for other painters and for photographers. Coriolis is fiercely jealous and, little by little, convinces her to pose only for him. It is at this point that the authors focus an entire chapter on the model’s perspective, recounting a personal ritual that Manette uses to maintain her individual identity and her control over her body. Manette waits until Coriolis leaves and she is certain he will be gone for several hours. She then strips and poses nude before the mirror, replicating the familiar studio modeling activities for her own satisfaction. The scene is recounted using the same third person voice as the overall text, but it is focused on Manette’s experience. Additionally, the authors use the French imperfect past for the entire sequence, which indicates a habitual, repeated action, giving Manette’s solo posing sessions the ambiance of a personal ritual.

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[225] Crouzet, "Préface," 17.

Manette’s mirror is a complex symbol: the meanings shift depending on one’s perspective, moving as one changes position like reflections on its glass surface. It alternately stands in for the gaze of the various players in the studio fantasy, creating three different interpretations for Manette’s private mirror-gazing. Although these readings may initially seem to be contradictory, they are, in fact, interdependent and exist simultaneously. The key to all three readings is the multifaceted symbolic role of the studio mirror.[226] First, the mirror replaces the eyes of the male artists whose attention Manette craves. Second, it is her own gaze as she takes sensual pleasure in her body and constructs her self-image. Finally, the mirror provides the reader with a window into the model's private space. "[Manette] se sculpte elle-même, devenant devant cette glace qui est seule à la voir à la fois le modèle, l'artiste, et l'amant."[227] Manette, looking at herself, temporarily assumes all three roles in the studio romance. The variety of meanings for Manette's mirror allows a variety of viewers to gaze through that metaphorical window, opening the role of external observer beyond the presumed masculine perspective.

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[226] The trope of a woman gazing into a mirror has been a frequent and changing symbol in Western art (See Martha Lucy, “Impressionism and the Mirror Image,” in *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Art*, edited by Michelle Facos, [New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2019], 263-79; and Guy Michaud. “Le thème du miroir dans le symbolisme français,” *Cahiers de l'Association internationale des études françaises* 11, [1959]: 199-216.) For examples of the mirror associated with Venus and the concept of beauty see: Titian, *Venus with a Mirror* (c.1555, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.); Diego Velázquez, *The Toilet of Venus* (*The Rokeby Venus*, c.1647-51, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.); and Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus in Front of the Mirror* (c.1614-15, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.). The mirror can also symbolize vanity and deception because its surface can distort vision. Impressionist artists took up the theme of women and mirror, using it as one metaphor for the

Manette uses the studio mirror to adopt the visual role of the male artist, providing herself with an audience and deriving pleasure from the exhibition of her body. She has finally promised to stop posing for other artists, as the introduction to her solo nude scene indicates: "Fidèle à la promesse qu'elle avait fait à Coriolis, Manette ne posait plus pour les autres" (303). Yet, she cannot tolerate not being seen, so she creates a ritual where she poses for herself and imagines posing for others:

> Quand Coriolis sortait, et elle le savait parti pour plusieurs heures, elle restait immobile à regarder la pendule, attendant pendant un certain temps qu'elle comptait. Puis, se levant, elle allait à la porte de l'atelier dont elle ôtait la clef, retirait d'un coffre des petits fagots de bois de genévrier, qu'elle jetait sur le feu du poêle, en regardant autour d'elle comme une petite fille qui est seule et qui fait une chose défendue. (304)

Manette is not precisely breaking her promise to Coriolis, but the text signals the defiance of her act: the rebellion is part of the pleasure. She waits for him to leave before locking the door and watches the clock to make sure he is truly gone. This elaborate private nude scene is a climatic

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subjective, shifting nature of visual perception (Lucy, "Impressionism," 276). Examples include: Edgar Degas, *Madame Jeantaud in the Mirror* (c. 1875, Musée d'Orsay, Paris); Edouard Manet *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882, The Courtauld Gallery, London); and Mary Cassatt, *Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge* (1879, Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA).

[227] Crouzet, "Préface," 8.

demonstration of Manette’s need to be seen, especially unclothed and particularly by artists. In early chapters, as Coriolis seeks to persuade Manette to pose only for him, he has great difficulty convincing her, partially because he can offer her nothing to compete with her craving for the artistic masculine gaze. She seems to have no other vices, neither drink, nor food, nor craving for rich gifts and jewels (283). She knows only “la coquetterie de son corps” (283). Manette even refuses to allow Coriolis to cover her body in drapery or clothing, telling him: “Pour qui me prenez-vous? Est-ce que je suis un mannequin, moi? Vous n’avez droit qu’à ma nudité pour vos cinq francs…” (277). Manette not only enjoys the gaze of the artist, but she is completely aware that when her body has become part of a work of art, it will be seen by many others beyond the studio walls and perhaps long after her death. Coriolis tells Anatole that for Manette, posing is her creative expression, her bid at immortality:

> Elle est persuadée que c’est son corps qui fait les tableaux… Il y a des femmes qui se voient une immortalité n’importe où, dans le ciel, dans le paradis, dans des enfants, dans le souvenir de quelqu’un …. elle, c’est sur la toile! (277)

She looks at Coriolis’ painting after each session, not necessarily to evaluate the quality of his work, but to look at herself, to see the contribution she has made to the progress of the canvas. Coriolis tells Anatole: “Elle venait regarder avec une petite moue, en se penchant … Elle ne disait rien…elle se regarde … une femme qui se voit dans une glace, absolument” (276). Manette’s desire to be seen is a display of erotic exhibitionism. Beyond the pleasure she derives while posing, she thrives on her contribution to works of art, believing herself to be an artistic co-creator.

However, the Goncourts portray Manette’s active sexual desire as disturbing and destructive—although also attractive, intoxicating, and inspiring. Manette’s practiced posing allows her to construct the image she wishes to present. She becomes a seductive serpent hypnotizing her victims—and herself via the studio mirror—with her gaze: "[Manette] montrait des coquetteries de chèvre et de serpent, comme les autres femmes montrent des coquetteries de chatte et de colombe" (298). The authors associate Manette with goats and serpents, evoking the Biblical traditions assigning evil attributes to these animals. Snake imagery also connects this moment to the myths of threatening feminine power, Medusa and Salmacis. Medusa was the Gorgon with serpents for hair and whose paralyzing gaze turned men to stone.[228] Salmacis, whose story is cited above, wrapped herself serpent-like around Hermaphroditus and merged with him, thus stealing his male virility[229] Coriolis is spellbound, wanting to capture in paint Manette's sensual, animal-like body and mannerisms: "Coriolis voulait peindre cette tête, cette physionomie, avec ce qu'il y voyait d'un autre pays, d'une autre nature, le charme paresseux, bizarre, et fascinant de cette sensualité animale que le baptême semble tuer chez la femme" (298). The authors juxtapose Manette's nude body with furs spread across the divan. Coriolis' studio is filled with exotic objects, offering a rich backdrop for Manette's flesh. "Le divan était recouvert de peaux de panthères et de tigres, aux têtes desséchées" (220). While she poses alone, Manette lounges on the furs and luxuriates in their rough surface:

> Elle allait se glisser sur les peaux fauves garnissant le divan, s'étendait en se frottant sur leur rudesse un peu râpeuse, et là couchée, elle se caressait d'un regard jusqu'à l'extrémité des pieds, et se poursuivant encore au-delà, dans la psyché au bout du divan, qui lui renvoyait en plein la répétition de son allongement radieux. (304)

Contrasting Manette's smooth flesh with the skins of wild animals creates a powerful visual metaphor of her untamed sexuality.

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[228] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 106.

[229] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 96.

As she examines herself before the mirror, Manette becomes an artist, mimicking not only the actions of posing for painters but their focused visual study of the shapes and lines created as she moves her body:

> Manette recommençait cette patiente création d'une attitude, cette lente et graduelle réalisation des lignes qu'elle ébauchait, remaniait, corrigeait, conquérait avec le tâtonnement d'un peintre qui cherche l'ensemble, l'accord et l'eurythmie d'une figure. (305)

She thus composes and creates the image of herself she wants to project. The Goncourts suggest more than simple exhibitionistic pleasure, underlining the performative aspect of her modeling. Coriolis is deeply attracted to Manette precisely because of her creative and deliberate use of her physical attractions, which is, perhaps, why he does nothing to suppress it when he returns home to discover her engaged in her private ritual.

Enacting her personal ceremony before the studio mirror, Manette claims her own body, her sensuality, and her erotic power. Significantly, she locks out the physical male presence before beginning, creating an enclosed feminine space. The repeated nature of her actions, the burning of incense, and the other-worldly "enchantement" evoke a sense of ceremony and religious experience: the object of worship is her own body for "rien ne pouvait l'arracher à l'adoration de ce spectacle d'elle-même" (305). The sentence "Elle était nue, n'était plus qu'elle" is a paragraph unto itself, underlining Manette's solitary strength and self-possession (304). The narrative emphasizes her cultivation of sensory experience, the sensations of being in her body, feeling it, seeing it, experiencing its beauty and power.

The same sensory details that mark Manette's autoerotic enjoyment of her body also serve to enhance the text's sexual appeal to the external reader. The inherently forbidden nature of Manette's actions, signaled when Manette locks the door and behaves like a disobedient child, creates an erotically charged scene. Details appealing to all the senses increase the physicality of the text: for example, the odor of burning juniper wood; the sound of her silk stockings on Manette's skin as she removes them; the tactile caress of her bared feet as she holds each of them between her hands; and the visual description of how the tips of her toenails turn a little white when she stands. Furthermore, her leisurely, deliberate actions—the care and length of time she spends on each step of the process—slows the narrative flow to focus it on each moment and increases the reader's feeling of participation in Manette's enjoyment of her body.

She first removes her shoes, slowly and gently: "Elle commençait à se déchausser, mais tout doucement, peu à peu, avec une lenteur où elle mettait comme une paresseuse et longue coquetterie" (305). Manette then caresses each of her feet and stands looking down at her legs appreciatively. She takes down her hair and luxuriates in the sensations of her skin.

Each detail mentioned as she consciously engages all her senses adds to the scene's erotic appeal.

In effect, her prolonged appreciation of her own body provides the reader with increased voyeuristic pleasure. Additionally, the visual description of Manette's body recalls some of the vocabulary and images the authors used during her first modeling scene. As she reclines or stands before the mirror, the various shapes and movements of her muscles, the curves and inflexions of her skin are "[p]resque invisible[s]," "à peine perceptibles," or "insensibles," all similar adjectives to those used to describe the nuances of shape and color that Coriolis contemplated in the earlier sequence (304-5). The near invisibility of these traces of "les beautés, les voluptés, la grâce nue de la femme" that Manette finds and relishes as she studies her reflection require careful, extensive, and sensitive observation (304). Manette's own gaze becomes the final powerful image, cycling self-adoration from her body to her own eyes: "deux pupilles pareilles à deux petits points noirs dans le bleu aigu de ses yeux" (308).

In this reading of Manette's personal ritual, the mirror becomes a symbol for the mythological figure of Narcissus, recalling the initial pose she took for Coriolis as the sculpture called *Génie du repos éternel* or *Narcisse, dit Hermaphrodite Mazarin*. Manette adores her own reflection, inviting feminine self-love and same-sex attraction. If the male artist's point of view can create a surrogate for a masculine reader's vicarious participation in a text or painting, then the same can be true of Manette's perspective creating a surrogate for a feminine gaze. Manette's experience of her body invites a feminine reader to similarly claim and appreciate her own physical being and erotic potential. Likewise, particularly with the male presence excluded from the room, potential female homoeroticism becomes more visible.

The Goncourts' acknowledgement of Manette's perspective goes beyond the mere suggestion of individuality that is present for the women in Courbet's *Atelier* and Balzac's "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu." Although the authors' own biases against women and Jews influence their portrayal of Manette, they create her to be a woman with a mind of her own. She acts to fulfill her own desires. Her point of view is essential to the construction of the novel, and her choices affect the course of the plot. The authors evoke the stereotypical fantasy of the studio romance when, in the early stages of her relationship with Coriolis, Manette seems to embody the beautiful young model, prepared to sacrifice herself for the male painter's career. When she receives pleasure from posing, her desires align with the artist's goals. Coriolis sees her as an inspiring "belle Juive," a muse whose body inspires masterpieces. Conversely, when she pursues the goal of financial gain, she pushes Coriolis' day-to-day life away from risky creativity and towards comfortable stagnation. Manette's transformation into the manipulative maternal figure destroys the studio romance, yet maintains biased racial and heteronormative binaries. Likewise, the brothers' prejudiced view of Créoles colors their portrait of Coriolis. They design him to be passionate and sensitive, feminine traits that increase his artistic talent but weaken his resistance to Manette. The Goncourts therefore reverse gender opposites in their novel, *Manette Salomon*, superficially disturbing the atelier fantasy schema, while simultaneously reinforcing the underlying patriarchal binary-based power structure. However, the novel's fragmentary narrative structure and mobile focalization resists reductive categorization and using Manette's point of view creates openings for alternative readings that trouble biased assumptions.

Chapter Three: The Model's Subjectivity in Zola's *L'Œuvre*

> Mais je suis vivante, moi! et elles sont mortes, les femmes que tu aimes… Oh! ne dis pas non, je sais bien que ce sont tes maîtresses, toutes ces femmes peintes. Avant d'être la tienne, je m'en étais aperçu déjà, il n'y a qu'à voir de quelle main tu caressais leur nudité, de quels yeux tu les contemplais ensuite, pendant des heures.[230]

In the scene cited above, Christine names the primary conflict in her marriage to Claude, her husband and the painter-protagonist of Émile Zola's novel *L'Œuvre* (1886). Christine's emotional response to Claude's obsession with his art constitutes a major element of Zola's text. Zola gives Christine not only her own point of view throughout the novel, but complex motivations and a richly developed psychology. Zola constructs the novel around a series of contrasting characters, scenes, and themes that reinforce binary thinking and patriarchal power structures while also undermining gendered stereotypes about the male painter, his female model, and the process of artistic creation. The novel recounts the story of Claude Lantier's efforts to become a successful painter, his continual failures, and his dramatic suicide when he hangs himself before his final unfinished canvas. Like Balzac's Poussin and the Goncourts' Coriolis, Claude is a young and ambitious painter who dreams of creating masterworks that will revolutionize visual art. Claude, akin to the previous painter-protagonists, depends upon the presence of a model who willingly sacrifices herself for his career, giving her body as well as her time and energy to support him. However, *L'Œuvre* also subverts the atelier fantasy because Zola deliberately assigns a central role in the narrative to Christine, Claude's model and eventual wife. Zola establishes a constantly shifting perspective between Claude and Christine beginning immediately in the first few paragraphs of the novel. The exchange in focalization between the artist and his future model creates two co-existing, interdependent, and competing narrative threads. Claude and Christine respond to shared events differently: he filters every experience through the lens of its effect on his art, while she consistently evaluates her relationship with Claude through the lens of love. This strategy allows the author to communicate a destabilizing sense of tension that is never fully resolved. Furthermore, similar to the way Manette's nude scenes occur at pivotal moments and affect the direction of the plot, Christine's nudity drives the narrative action and influences Claude's career. When Christine is posing, the narrative frequently pauses to allow "moments of erotic contemplation."[231] Zola also creates a build-up of tension to the moments when Christine reveals her body. Thus, the author moves the model from a position of voiceless passivity to an active and essential role within the novel.

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[230] Émile Zola, *L'Œuvre*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, vol 4, edited by Armand Lanoux, études, notes, et variantes by Henri Mitterand. (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 346. All page numbers refer to this edition.

From the earliest stages of his design, Zola planned for Christine to have strong physical desires: "La sensualité de Christine est indiquée tout au début."[232] As we will see, Christine's sensual nature frequently motivates her choices throughout the novel, particularly those that transgress social expectations. Thus, Christine is not merely a passive object of the gaze. Her perspective, her desires, her choices, and her voice are essential at every level of the novel. Close reading of four pivotal scenes when Christine poses nude for Claude in his studio will reveal Zola's deliberate use of literary devices that focus on Christine's individual perspective and the psychology behind it. These moments when Christine's point of view dominates the narration move beyond the patriarchal masculine-centered binary because they acknowledge and validate feminine subjectivity within the narrative. Yet, Christine ultimately fails in her attempt to win Claude away from his art, and her role as self-sacrificing muse maintains the stereotypes of the studio romance. Zola's decision to assign Christine a more palpable personhood than Balzac and the Goncourts gave to their female models creates a persistent tension between the complexity of Christine's character and the constraints of the gendered atelier fantasy.

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[231] Mulvey, *Pleasures*, 19.

[232] Patrick Brady, *L'Œuvre d'Émile Zola: Roman Sur Les Arts*, (Geneva, Switzerland: Librairie Droz, 1967), 370.

This chapter will analyze four important nude scenes when Christine poses for Claude in his studio. First, during the morning after the couple's first meeting ("le lendemain"). Claude sketches Christine's head and upper torso as she sleeps. The second scene occurs when Christine poses fully nude for the first time, lying lost "dans son néant" while Claude paints for hours (114). The third pivotal segment occurs when Claude is working on his final canvas. He compares Christine's aging, maternal body to the figure she posed for "dans son néant," treating her with disgust, as if her body were responsible for his artistic impotence. In posing for the painted figure that is Claude's obsession, Christine has helped him create her own competition, "sa propre rivale" (254). Finally, the night before Claude's suicide, Christine bares herself to stand before Claude's final portrait of her, provoking "une scène de bataille" between the forces of love and art.[233] Although Christine poses for Claude numerous times throughout the novel, these four scenes interconnect, each simultaneously foreshadowing those to come and/or and referring to the previous ones in both imagery and language. Zola's use of repetition marks these four sequences as key moments in the text and positions Christine as a central figure. Zola credits her with subjectivity and agency, moving beyond the merely passive role stereotypically assigned to the female model, and inviting readership outside the heteronormative masculine-centered paradigm.

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[233] Zola, cited in Henri Mitterand, "Étude Sur *L'Œuvre*, Notes et Variantes," in *Les Rougon-Marcquart: Histoire Naturelle et Sociale d'une Famille Sous Le Second Empire,* vol. 4, (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1960), 1363.

I. Zola's *L'Œuvre*: "a poignant study of the artistic temperament"

L'Œuvre appeared first as a serial in *Le Gil Blas* from December 23, 1885 to March 27, 1886, and the first complete edition was published by Charpentier in April of 1886.[234] It is the fourteenth in Zola's twenty-novel cycle entitled *Les Rougon-Maquart: histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire.* Published between 1871 and 1893, each novel in the Rougon-Macquart series focuses on a different descendant of the two families named in the title. Drawing on the ideas of Hippolyte Taine and Claude Bernard, Zola created a hybrid process of literary creation and scientific study called "naturalism" to explore the history of the fictional Rougon-Maquart family in France during the Second Empire (1851-70).[235] Taine's preface to *Essais de critique et d'histoire* (1866) "develops a parallel between the naturalist and the historian, the essential task of both being to examine man as but one member of the animal kingdom and just as subject as its other members to the shaping influences of heredity and environment."[236] Taine believed that individual humans are inevitably a product of three combined influences: heredity, history, and environment, or "race, moment, and milieu."[237] Zola describes his adaptation of Claude Bernard's experimental method in his essay "Le Roman expérimental" (1880), titled in homage to Bernard's *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale*.[238] Bernard advocates the use of objective scientific study based upon direct observation to develop effective medical treatments. Zola believed he could adapt the process of scientific research to writing novels by making direct observation of details in his environment and taking careful notes.[239] He argues: "... si la méthode expérimentale conduit à la connaissance de la vie physique, elle doit conduire aussi à la connaissance de la vie passionnelle et intellectuelle."[240] Therefore, Zola observed the world around him very closely, and he believed it was part of the novelist's job to portray the world as it was, not as an imaginary ideal.[241] To construct his literary experiment, Zola created the Rougon-Macquart family and traced the effects of the inherited traits of addiction and impulsivity upon each member of the family, adding variations of gender, class, and location.

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[234] Robert J. Niess, *Zola, Cézanne, and Manet: A Study of L'Œuvre*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), 2.

[235] For more about Zola's theories and working methods, see William J. Berg and Laurie Martin-Berg, *Emile Zola Revisited*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 10-11.

[236] Roger Pearson, "Introduction," in *The Masterpiece*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xiii.

[237] Cited in Berg and Martin-Berg, *Zola Revisited*, 10. "Race" in this context means ancestry, according to Berg and Martin-Berg (note #3, 167).

Zola's working documents for *L'Œuvre*, including meticulous notes taken from daily observations and his careful planning, are preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale.[242] *L'Œuvre* is the most autobiographical work of the Rougon-Maquart cycle and the author was intimately familiar with its milieu.[243] Zola was well-known in the Paris art world and wrote in defense of

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[238] Émile Zola, "Le Roman expérimental," in *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Cercle du livre précieux, 1966), 1175–205.

[239] Berg and Martin-Berg, *Zola Revisited*, 10-11.

[240] Émile Zola, "Le Roman expérimental," 1175.

[241] Pearson, "Introduction," x.

[242] See Henri Mitterand's "Études, Notes, et Variantes" on *L'Œuvre* in the Pléiade edition (pages 1338-1405) for a thorough discussion of Zola's use of notes and an analysis of his working documents.

[243] Mitterand, "Études," 1341.

Édouard Manet (1832-1883) and the Impressionists. Manet even painted a portrait of Zola (1868). Zola and the painter Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) were childhood friends. Zola used his and Cézanne's personality and life experiences as inspiration for many details in *L'Œuvre*. For example, Claude has similar physical characteristics and temperament to Cézanne.[244] Similarly, in many respects, Pierre Sandoz, a writer and childhood friend of Claude, shares many traits with Zola himself. Zola even used the pronouns "I" and "me" to refer to Sandoz in his notes.[245] According to Robert Niess, the consensus of critical opinion among Zola scholars is that Sandoz is a "direct and exact self-portrait of Zola himself."[246] Many of *L'Œuvre*'s other characters are also partially based on well-known individuals of Zola's time. For example, Paul Jory is probably based on Paul Alexis, a journalist whom Zola knew well, and Fagerolles resembles the painter Henri Gervex.[247] The author was included in group studio portraits by Frédéric Bazille (1841-1870) and Fantin Latour (1836-1904) alongside Édouard Manet, Claude Monet (1840-1926), Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), Alfred Sisley (1839-1899), and others.[248] Zola's notes on *L'Œuvre* and the Rougon-Macquart series show that from the beginning he envisioned one of the novels as being devoted to art.[249]

> The artist in question would exemplify a "singular effect of heredity" whereby his "genius" would be inherited from illiterate working-class parents. Where other offspring of the illegitimate Macquart branch of the family would suffer for the intemperance and insanity of their forebears through being ruled by insatiable

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[244] See Mitterand, "Études," 1372 and Niess, *Zola*, 78-86.

[245] See Niess, *Zola*, 62-4; Mitterand, "Études," 1364-6; and Brady, *Zola*, 155.

[246] Niess, *Zola*, 62.

[247] Mitterand, "Études," 1366.

[248] See Mitterand, "Études," 1341-7; Brady, *Zola*, 197-204; and William J. Berg, *The Visual Novel: Emile Zola and the Art of His Times*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 1-13.

[249] Mitterand, "Études," 1374.

> physical appetites and the need for alcohol, this one would have unbridled "intellectual" appetites of such a violent kind that ultimately they render him powerless to create. [...] In short, the work would present a "poignant study of the artistic temperament in a contemporary context" and "the terrible drama of a mind devouring itself."[250]

Claude also appears as a child in *L'Assommoir* (1877) and as an adult in *Le Ventre de Paris* (1873). In *Le Ventre de Paris* he is working on a painting depicting the life of the great Paris market of Les Halles. *L'Assommoir* is focused on his mother, Gervaise, who exhausts herself working as a laundress to support abusive and alcoholic men. *Nana* (1880) tells the story of Claude's half-sister who becomes a prostitute and eventually a high-class courtesan before dying of smallpox. His brothers are Jacques Lantier, who is a violent murderer in *La Bête humaine* (1890), and Étienne Lantier, a miner and revolutionary in *Germinal*, (1885). At the same time, Zola emphasized the singularity of artistic representation. He famously said "une oeuvre d'art est un coin de la création vu à travers un tempérament," acknowledging the effect of the creator's individual experience upon the formation of a work of art.[251]

L'Œuvre opens on a dark and rainy night in Paris. It is two in the morning and Claude Lantier, painter, is returning to his Paris studio after spending the evening "en artiste flâneur" (11). He encounters a young woman, soaked from the rain and trembling with fear, who has sheltered in the alcove of his building's entry. This is Christine, although we do not learn her name until the next morning. Between sobs, she explains that she has just arrived in Paris to begin a job. She had taken a cab from the train station, but the driver attacked and abandoned her. Claude takes pity on her, although he usually avoids entanglements with women, and conducts her to his one-room studio to wait out the storm. The next morning, he discovers her asleep, lying with her breasts exposed and one arm behind her head. Her pose is perfect for his current Salon painting, so he sketches her while she sleeps.[252] As the novel progresses, she returns frequently to his studio and the couple begins a chaste courtship. She eventually agrees to pose nude for the full body of the figure in his Salon painting, although they do not consummate their relationship until after the canvas appears in the Salon des Refusés. They move to the countryside where they enjoy a brief idyllic time together before returning to Paris. They conceive a son, Jacques, whose life is pathetically short. The couple marries several years after Jacques' birth. Claude's art career has some successful moments, but the fatal flaw he inherited from his Rougon-Macquart ancestors causes him to continuously strive for his imagined ideal.[253] He obsessively overworks his canvases, destroying their initial charm and beauty. He never achieves the artistic success he so desires. The novel ends with Claude's burial after his suicide: he has hanged himself from the studio scaffolding in front of his last painting.[254] Christine is left destitute.

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[250] Pearson, "Introduction," viii. Remarks in quotations are translations of Zola's preparatory notes.

[251] Émile Zola, *Mes Haines: Causeries littéraires et artistiques*, (Paris: 1866). Gallica; *gallica.bnf.fr*; https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9603604x. 250.

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[252] Zola describes the composition of Claude's Salon painting, entitled *Plein air*, as a forest glade where a nude woman lies on the grass with one arm behind her head. There are also two smaller nude women, a blonde and a brunette, laughing and tumbling together on the grass in the background. In the foreground is a male figure leaning on his left arm with his back to the viewer (33). This fictional work of art resembles Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, which scandalized the public at the Salon des Refusés in 1863 (Brady, *Zola*, 228-9 and Niess, *Zola*, 116-7). Both paintings contain a nude female figure accompanied by fully dressed men in an outdoor setting.

[253] Claude's parents are Gervaise Macquart and Auguste Lantier in *L'Assommoir* (1877).

[254] Claude's final painting is never titled within the novel. It depicts a view of the Île de la Cité seen from a bridge overlooking the Seine. The background shows both branches of the river embankments and the skyline of the Cité. In the left foreground are workers unloading a barge ("Paris qui travaille," 216), while bathers enjoy the water on the right bank ("Paris qui s'amuse," 216). Claude adds a boat and with three female figures to the center of the composition, each woman in a different state of undress. One has on her bathing costume and is rowing, another is half-undressed and sits with her feet in the water, and the third is standing naked at the prow of the boat (234). He becomes obsessed with perfecting the nude central figure.

II. The Studio Romance in *L'Œuvre*: "le récit du deux"

L'Œuvre maintains the binary gender roles of the atelier fantasy in many ways. Although Zola clearly conceived of Christine as an active, central character attributed with rich psychology and even active sexual desire (which we will discuss in more detail below), his choice of metaphors for her role are heteronormative and polarized. Zola's use of human reproductive biology as the guiding metaphor for artistic creation imbues the entire text with patriarchal binaries and gendered power structures. Preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale among Zola's working documents for *L'Œuvre* is a list of possible titles written in the author's hand.[255] This list includes the word "œuvre" repeated several times and in a variety of phrases such as "l'œuvre d'art" (the work of art) and "l'œuvre vivante" (the living work). It shows the author's thinking process, connecting associative definitions and metaphors to the title word.[256] Zola weaves these possible title words and related tropes throughout the novel. Among the included metaphors are several references to sexuality, reproduction, childbirth, and creation: "Création, créer, procréer," (creation, to create, to procreate); "Engrosser la nature," (to impregnate nature); "enfantement," (childbirth); "accouchement," (childbirth). Another important term on the list, "l'œuvre de la chair," is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Littré defines it as "la conjonction charnelle de l'homme et de la femme."[257] Zola also lists "être Dieu" (to be God) among the associated phrases. Thus, from the early stages of the novel's conception, Zola connects artistic creation to human reproduction and demiurgic creative powers. Male and female reproductive roles merge, and the painter becomes god-like in shaping the world through his art.[258] Comparing the male painter's artistic creation to human procreation can be understood as a form of masculine womb-envy: in a painted, sculpted or written representation of a human female body made by a male artist, woman is symbolically born of man.[259] Zola further emphasizes the difficult process of creating art, comparing the male painter's aesthetic struggle to the painful process of childbirth: "le travail," (work, labor) "l'angoisse de créer, d'enfanter" (the anguish of creating, of giving birth).

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[255] For a complete list, see Mitterand, "Études," 1338; and Phillip Walker, "An Attempt by Zola to Define Artistic Creation: The List of Possible Titles for *L'Œuvre*," in *Émile Zola and the Arts: Centennial of the Publication of L'Œuvre*, edited by Jean-Max Guieu and Allison Hilton, (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1988), 121-2. Walker's text includes a photograph of the original document.

[256] Walker, "An Attempt," 121–34.

[257] Émile Littré, *Dictionnaire Littré - Dictionnaire de La Langue Française*, (Paris: L. Hachette, 1873-74), electronic version created by François Gannaz, https://www.littre.org/, Entry "œuvre."

While the narrative describes Christine's labor at Jacques' birth with a scant few words ("tout marcha très bien" [152]), Claude's endless endeavors to perfect his paintings are extended labors, "[des] enfantements continus" (236). The narrative voice describes each step in Claude's interminable aesthetic efforts, emphasizing their endless difficulty:

> Ah! cet effort de création dans l'œuvre d'art, cet effort de sang et de larmes dont il agonisait, pour créer de la chair, souffler de la vie! [...] Il se brisait à cette besogne impossible de faire toute la nature sur une toile, épuisé à la longue dans les perpétuelles douleurs qui tendaient ses muscles, sans qu'il pût jamais accoucher de son génie. (245)

Zola references bodily signs of the effort of childbirth: blood and tears ("sang" and "larmes"), suffering ("il agonisait"), pains ("douleurs"), and strained muscles ("qui tendaient ses muscles").

Conversely, the author also uses references to the children in the novel as metaphors for failed artistic creation. None of the artists in the novel has any viable children. For example, one of Claude's childhood friends, Louis Dubuche is an unsuccessful architect who fathers two disabled children. Claude and Christine both neglect their son, Jacques, in favor of Claude's art. Just as Claude expects long hours of posing from Christine, he wants Jacques to be still so he can paint. When the baby plays and laughs happily instead of posing, Claude is angry: "[Il] jurait contre ce sacré mioche qui ne pouvait pas être sérieux une minute. Est-ce qu'on plaisantait avec la peinture?" (154). Claude sees Christine primarily through the lens of his art, and similarly, he can look at Jacques solely with painter's eyes: "il ne le couvait plus que de ses yeux d'artiste" (154). Additionally, Jacques' daily needs, his normal childhood noises, and his demands for attention irritate his father. When the child knocks at the locked studio door while his mother is posing nude, Claude expresses his frustration "grondant qu'on n'avait pas une minute de repos" (242). As the boy lies dying, his father keeps a late-night vigil with his unfinished canvas instead of staying near his child (260-5). It is only when Jacques dies that he is finally still and quiet enough for his father to paint his portrait.[260] The boy's warm, active body becomes cold and immobile: "Le père le toucha, le trouva d'un froid de glace" (266). Christine tells Claude "Ah! tu peux le peindre, il ne bougera plus!" (267). As if the birth of a work of art requires the death of its model, Claude's grief transforms as he paints:

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[258] Walker, "An Attempt," 131.

[259] Brady, *Interdisciplinary*, 56-9.

> Pendant les premières minutes, ses larmes l'empêchaient de voir (...). Puis le travail sécha ses paupières, assura sa main; et, bientôt, il n'y eut plus là son fils glacé, il n'y eut qu'un modèle, un sujet dont l'étrange intérêt la passionna. (267)

The canvas Claude creates at Jacques' deathbed is "un chef-d'oeuvre de clarté et de puissance" (267). Claude calls the work *Enfant mort*, and it is his only painting to be accepted into the Salon. The living child that the couple could have cherished and nurtured was an obstacle to

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[260] The subject of Claude's deathbed portrait is reminiscent of Claude Monet's postmortem portrait of his wife, Camille, *Camille Monet sur son lit de mort* (1879, Musée d'Orsay, Paris).

Claude's creative production; but once dead, he inspires a work of art. Instead of bringing life, Claude's labors bring death.

In Zola's *L'Œuvre*, Christine's role vacillates between extreme, polarized variations which acts to maintain a binary framework. Christine embodies conflicting impulses: "Zola insiste toutefois sur le caractère composite de Christine: tendresse et passion, pureté et sensualité, vierge sage et vierge folle."[261] Christine is sometimes an ideal, beloved, and inspiring muse, but at other times she is a jealous, demanding lover. When she is the muse, she infuses the painter's work with her beauty, as when he makes the first sketches of her asleep. She supports his artwork with her time and energy, although initially she finds his brutal style disturbing (23). She learns to appreciate his work as she spends more time with him (110). However, at times she also seduces Claude away from his creative efforts, her body providing an object of desire outside his art.[262] He paints very little while the couple lives happily in the countryside at Bennecourt because his energy is focused on Christine: "Désormais, toute sa tendresse de la chair de la femme, cette tendresse dont il épuisait autrefois le désir dans ses œuvres, ne le brûlait plus que pour ce corps vivant, souple et tiède, qui était son bien" (148). As an ideal partner, Christine sacrifices herself for his career, supporting and adoring him. In fact, she turns all of her energies towards Claude, neglecting even their son: "C'était l'homme adoré, désiré, qui devenait son enfant; et l'autre, le pauvre être demeurait un simple témoignage de leur grande passion d'autrefois" (209). On the other hand, as Claude's lover, she becomes possessive and resentful when he devotes the majority of his time and energy to painting. Christine particularly resents Claude's investment in the painted version of her nude body, seeing his image of her as the supreme rival. He even refuses to make love with her when he is actively working on his canvas because he believes he needs to direct all his energies towards his art: "[C'était la] volontaire abstinence, chasteté théorique, où il devait aboutir pour donner à la peinture toute sa virilité" (541). Her sacrifice has the primary goal of recapturing his attention, time, and love. When Claude is working on his final painting, Christine poses for long hours whenever he wishes and assists him with studio maintenance, but she does it for her own purposes:

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[261] Mitterand, "Études," 1371.

[262] Brady, *Zola*, 393.

> Ah ! Comme elle aurait voulu le reprendre à cette peinture qui le lui avait pris ! C'était pour cela qu'elle se faisait sa servante, heureuse de se rabaisser à des travaux de manœuvre. Depuis qu'elle rentrait dans son travail, côte à côte ainsi tous les trois, lui, elle et cette toile, un espoir la ranimait […] peut-être allait-elle le reconquérir, maintenant qu'elle était là, elle aussi avec sa passion. (238)

She is thus also a source of destructive influences in Claude's career. Therefore, in *L'Œuvre,* the female model serves as a conflicted and unsettled intercessor between the ideal (Claude's vision of creating a new kind of art) and the real (the demands of daily life, his inability to achieve his dreams). These simultaneous but contradictory roles assigned to Christine maintain the binaries of the studio romance paradigm.

III. Beyond the Binaries: The Model's Subjectivity

A study of Zola's preparatory notes for *L'Œuvre* demonstrates that he designed Christine's role to be an indispensable element in the text. Zola's initial plan to link Claude with a worldly Parisienne changed early in the process, but from the beginning he wanted his model to be attracted to Claude and fall deeply in love with him.[263] Even before the mistress acquired a name, Zola planned for her perspective to be included. He also intended to describe both the painter's and the model's point of view, "le récit du deux," during their first morning in the studio:

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[263] Zola's first idea for "la maîtresse" was not the virginal Christine: "Pas une vierge, bien sûr, une fille de Paris, qui a roulé très jeune, très amoureuse surtout" (Notes for *L'Œuvre*, F08 279-284, cited in Mitterand, "Étude," 1357).

> Elle couche dans le lit, lui sur un canapé, et c'est ainsi qu'elle le trouve le lendemain en train de dessiner. Sa rougeur, elle veut se cacher. L'inconnu entre eux, le récit du deux, et à la fin le regret de la fille qui part. Pour cela, lui donner de la passion, une âme et une chair ardentes. L'inconnu de la chair qui la tente. Et aussi le regret qu'elle peut avoir d'avoir été respectée.[264]

Even more significantly, the author also planned to give the model strong emotional and physical impulses: "lui donner de la passion, une âme et une chair ardentes." "Ardent" is used to describe strong responses: "flamboyant" or "violent" (Littré). Additionally, throughout the novel, the author deliberately portrays Christine as having active erotic desire. For example, after her initial accidental visit to Claude's studio, Christine chooses to return repeatedly, although she could have never seen him again and enjoyed a placid, bourgeois life working for her respectable employer, Madame Vanzade. Instead, she is beset by a "désir ignoré d'elle-même," thoughts of Claude have become "l'obsession de toutes ses heures," and her only appeasement is to visit him (91). While it may not be unusual to encounter a woman in literature who has strong sexual desire, she is frequently a femme fatale whose pursuit of physical pleasure is destructive to all around her—like Manette Salomon. Zola's decision to make Christine simultaneously chaste and passionate creates a female character who does not fit nineteenth-century stereotypes about either the studio romance specifically or women in general.

In fact, Edmond de Goncourt criticized Zola's design of Christine's character precisely because, in his opinion, it was not realistic enough. In other words, it did not fit his expectations for a modest woman's behavior:

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[264] Zola, Notes for *L'Œuvre*, F08 305-308, cited in Mitterand, "Étude," 1361.

> Voici ma critique à vol d'oiseau sur *L'Œuvre*. [...]
> L'amour de Christine joliment et délicatement posé dans cette succession de chastes visites faites au peintre, mais un amour commençant et finissant par deux situations *non vraies* et qu'a seul pu trouver vraisemblables un ignorant de la pudeur de la femme comme Zola. Une femme pudique, dans certaines circonstances, acceptera peut-être l'hospitalité de nuit d'un homme, mais jamais, au grand jamais, ne se dévêtira, ne se mettra en chemise et j'ai la persuasion qu'une femme vraiment pudique est plus disposée à se laisser déshonorer par un régiment qu'à se montrer nue à un homme avec lequel elle n'a pas encore couché![265]

Zola seems to have anticipated these criticisms in his construction of Christine's psychology. Christine's decision to undress although she is alone with an unknown man is a logical one under the circumstances the author created: she was soaked to the skin in the violent downpour that led to her meeting Claude, who would not have taken her in otherwise. Additionally, it is Christine's attraction to Claude—although she may not understand it initially—that explains her choice to return frequently to his studio. Goncourt's statement that a modest woman would find group rape less dishonorable than posing nude for a painter is wildly exaggerated and does not take into account Christine's experience with Claude: because he did not touch her when she was vulnerable after the rainstorm, she knows she can trust him. Christine also does not embrace other aspects of feminine gendered stereotypes and frequently chooses transgressive behavior, as she does when she deceives her employer so she can continue her visits with Claude. She displays very little love towards their son, Jacques ("La maternité ne poussait pas en elle," 153) and she has neither interest in the traditional tasks of a housewife and mother, nor the necessary skills to perform the work effectively: "Son ancien malaise à coudre, son inaptitude aux travaux de son sexe, reparaissait dans les soins que réclamait l'enfant" (153). Thus, neither Claude nor Christine fit gendered stereotypes: he is more interested in creating art than in making love to a vulnerable woman, and she is more attracted to him than to the calm and respectable life she might have had.[266] Including Christine's viewpoint in the novel from the very beginning introduces the couple as partners in the creative process and creates dramatic tension. It also infuses Christine with a subtle and nuanced sexuality.[267] Her passionate, sensual nature creates a deliberate counterpoint with Claude's habitual sublimation of his sexual desires into the act of painting.

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[265] E. de Goncourt, *Journal*, cited in Mitterand, "Étude," 1384. Italics included in Mitterand.

A. "Le Lendemain:" The First Nude Scene

The first few pages of the opening chapter demonstrate Zola's use of free indirect style narration to express an alternating perspective between Claude and Christine. As the point of view shifts, narrative tension increases. The anxiety and discomfort created during the opening sequence alerts the reader to Christine's innocence and Claude's distrust of her while foreshadowing both her inevitable seduction and his equally inevitable artistic failure. Both characters express uneasiness in the opening scenes, although Christine is truly fearful while Claude is merely distrustful. Christine's first words to Claude are "Oh! monsieur, ne me faites pas du mal," clearly indicating her distress (12). Her vulnerability is a reality for a young woman alone at night in Paris, emphasized with her account of being attacked by the cab driver who then abandoned her, leaving her to seek shelter from the raging storm as best she can. Claude, however, believes she is "une farceuse […] quelque gueuse flanquée à la rue et qui cherche un homme" (12).[268] Zola's vivid visual description of the environment heightens the emotional intensity of the scene. The reader's first view of Paris is infused with Christine's fear.[269] The free indirect style of narration allows the author to use a combination of objective information—such as the names of specific Paris landmarks—with vocabulary indicating his character's emotional state. For example, the description cited below occurs immediately following Christine's account of how she came to be sheltering in the alcove of Claude's building:

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[266] Mitterand, "Étude," 1361.

[267] Mitterand, "Étude," 1361.

> Un éclair éblouissant lui coupa la parole; et ses yeux dilatés parcoururent avec effarement ce coin de ville inconnue, l'apparition violâtre d'une cité fantastique. La pluie avait cessé. De l'autre côté de la Seine, le quai des Ormes alignait ses petites maisons grises, bariolées en bas par les boiseries des boutiques, découpant en haut leurs toitures inégales; tandis que l'horizon élargi s'éclairait, à gauche jusqu'aux ardoises bleues des combles de l'Hôtel de Ville, à droite jusqu'à la coupole plombée de Saint-Paul. Mais ce qui la suffoquait surtout, c'était l'encaissement de la rivière, la fosse profonde où la Seine coulait à cet endroit, noirâtre, des lourdes piles du pont Marie aux arches légères du nouveau pont Louis-Philippe. (12)

The first sentence marks Christine as the focalizer for the description, seen through her "yeux dilatés," while the sudden blast of lightning emphasizes a violent sense of disorientation. The phrase "l'apparition violâtre d'une cité fantastique" evokes nightmarish hallucinations. "Apparition" is not only a sudden appearance but also carries the connotations of phantoms and ghosts, and "fantastique" implies unnatural, imaginary visions. The features of the buildings with their confusion of colors and lines, the threatening "encaissement" (encasement) and steep sides of the river are described with words evoking Christine's sense of disorientation, enclosure and suffocation. However, her feelings are not the only information the author provides. The landmarks of the Seine, the quai des Ormes, l'Hôtel de Ville, Saint Paul's dome and the two bridges, Pont Marie and Pont Saint-Louis, locate the scene in a very specific part of Paris.[270] The narrative here cannot be purely focused on Christine's point of view because as a newcomer she would not be able to name these sites, but Claude knows this part of Paris intimately. Therefore, although the narrative voice provides the information, the description can be read as a combination of his knowledge and her emotions. Their lives merge at this moment like the path of the Seine, flowing swiftly through its deep, black gap and moving towards unknowable darkness. The frightening storm and the movement of the Seine through the dark city foreshadow the couple's ultimate destruction.[271] Additionally, their respective viewpoints will shift, merge, and diverge throughout the novel like the river's flow.

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[268] See *Dictionnaire Littré*: "Gueuse" is a familiar term meaning prostitute when used in the feminine form, but its association with the idea of begging seems to imply lack of means as the motive for the prostitution. It also implies trickery and dishonesty. Christine will later use this word repeatedly to refer to her rival, the painted representation of herself in Claude's last painting. See Section D "une scène de bataille," page 157, below.

[269] Brady, *Zola*, 371.

The following morning when Claude sketches Christine's semi-nude body as she sleeps, the focalization continues to shift between their two perspectives, creating a tense emotional environment that symbolizes sexual tension between the couple. The visuality of the descriptions, the primary focus on the painter's viewpoint, and the slowed pace of the narrative appeal primarily to stereotypically masculine scopophilic sexual desire. However, Christine has her own visual perspective and an individual psychological response. From the first word of the novel to this dramatic moment, the story is fast-paced, with the rapidly shifting perspectives enhancing the swift progression. However, as Claude gazes at Christine's exposed flesh, the narrative slows to linger on a detailed description of her physique and his reaction to it. The narrative voice signals a suspension of action when Claude moves aside the screen surrounding the bed. As soon as he sees Christine, he freezes to contemplate her: "Mais ce qu'il aperçut l'immobilisa, grave, extasié" (19). Then, the description that follows blends visual ecstasy and physical defenselessness, simultaneously communicating Claude's rapture and Christine's vulnerability.

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[270] Claude's apartment is on the banks of the Seine, located on the Île Saint-Louis at the north end of the Rue le Regrattier (formerly known as la rue de La Femme-sans-Tête). See Mitterand, "Étude," note #2, 1405. The name of the street, which translates to "the headless woman," also subtly inverts and foreshadows Claude's obsession with his drawings of Christine's head.

[271] The Seine becomes an important recurring trope throughout the novel: the couple court along its banks and Claude becomes morbidly fascinated with the river. The prominent role of the river in Claude's final painting is an additional dramatic testament to the Seine's hold on his imagination.

> La jeune fille, dans la chaleur de serre qui tombait des vitres, venait de rejeter le drap; et, anéantie sous l'accablement des nuits sans sommeil, elle dormait, baignée de lumière, si inconsciente, que pas une onde ne passait sur sa nudité pure. Pendant sa fièvre d'insomnie, les boutons des épaulettes de sa chemise avaient dû se détacher, toute la manche gauche glissait, découvrant la gorge. C'était une chair dorée, d'une finesse de soie, le printemps de la chair, deux petits seins rigides, gonflés de sève, où pointaient deux roses pâles. Elle avait passé le bras droit sous sa nuque, sa tête ensommeillée se renversait, sa poitrine confiante s'offrait, dans une adorable ligne d'abandon; tandis que ses cheveux noirs, dénoués, la vêtaient encore d'un manteau sombre. (19)

The author's visual description of Christine's semi-nude body communicates her innocence, her purity, and the inadvertent exposure of her chest. Had she sought the male gaze, she would not be the sweet young girl of this atelier seduction fantasy, the virginal ingénue: she would be the wanton woman, the "gueuse" that Claude suspects her of being. Instead, the narrative describes the accidental unfastening of her chemise, celebrating "sa nudité pure" and the natural beauty of her pose. Claude's perspective provides the painterly details: she is bathed in golden light ("baignée de lumière" and "dorée"), her nipples are "deux roses pâles," her body creates "une adorable ligne d'abandon," and her dark hair contrasts with the colors of her flesh. The phrases "la manche gauche glissait" and "une chair dorée, d'une finesse de soie," contain an abundance of "s" and "sh" phonèmes. Thus, the words themselves poetically evoke the texture of Christine's smooth flesh. The eroticism of the scene is heightened by the contrast between her youth and the maturity of her body. Claude's sunlit studio has become a metaphorical greenhouse where Christine's beauty blooms. Her "poitrine confiante" offers itself readily, her breasts become vegetable material, “gonflés,” bursting with sap and “déjà mûrs,” already ripe, although she is still in the springtime of innocent youth (“le printemps de la chair”). The description evokes a contrast between the innocence of youth and virginity with the maturity of a body ready for sexual activity.

The sensory image of the stifling heat of Claude’s studio that “falls” upon Christine (“la chaleur de serre qui tombait”) juxtaposed with a lexicon of defeat, oppression and unconsciousness communicates her absolute defenselessness in this moment. The phrase “anéantie sous l’accablement des nuits sans sommeil” could mean simple exhaustion from lack of sleep, yet “anéantie” and “l’accablement” carry much stronger meanings: from Littré’s entry for the verb “anéantir,” we learn that this word means to “devenir à rien” as in the synonyms to annihilate, to destroy or to ruin, and to “plonger dans un abattement total,” to beat down or to extinguish. “L’accablement,” related to the verb “accabler,” is to “vaincre, ruiner, faire succomber,” meaning to vanquish, to ruin, or to oppress. Christine is completely powerless to prevent the voyeuristic gaze of the artist, which is shared by the reader.

As Claude begins to draw, the narrative proposes his purity of motive, positing a merely artistic gaze that justifies viewing Christine’s body and sketching without her consent:

> Légèrement, Claude courut prendre sa boîte de pastel et une grande feuille de papier. Puis, accroupi au bord d’une chaise basse, il posa sur ses genoux un carton, il se mit à dessiner, d’un air profondément heureux. Tout son trouble, sa curiosité charnelle, son désir combattu, aboutissaient à cet émerveillement d’artiste, à cet enthousiasme pour les beaux tons et les muscles bien emmanchés. Déjà, il avait oublié la jeune fille, il était dans le ravissement de la neige des seins, éclairant l’ambre délicat des épaules. Une modestie inquiète le rapetissait devant la nature, il serrait les coudes, il redevenait un petit garçon, très sage, attentif et respectueux. (19)

Here, however, there is a recognition that Claude’s sexual desire (“sa curiosité charnelle”) has not been eliminated, but instead it is beaten down (“combattu”), suppressed and redirected to worshipful contemplation of the model. This interaction between Claude and Christine as he sketches her demonstrates his primary focus on painting. As Patrick Brady notes, Claude's art is more successful when he focuses his sexual energy towards his canvases: "l'on voit aussi que son art profite de la sublimation de ses désirs."[272] The words "émerveillement," "enthousiasme," and "ravissement" carry connotations of religious adoration, affirming the acceptability of Claude's actions. It can even be read as not merely acceptable but admirable: he is fulfilling the sacred calling of artistic creation. Comparing the artist to "un petit garçon, très sage, attentif et respectueux" further underlines the purity of his professional intentions. Conversely, in the descriptions of Christine, her innocence is intended to increase the eroticism of the scene, while his is used to stress the redirection of his sexual interest. The narrative voice frequently compares Claude to a child in his relationship to Christine. For example, when *Plein Air* fails, he cries in Christine's lap, feeling "plus débile qu'un enfant" (140). Additionally, Christine will develop maternal feelings for "son grand enfant d'artiste" (247) that will overshadow her feelings for their son. The text announces several times in the opening chapters that Claude's primary creative and erotic desire is painting, not women, for he mistrusts women: "Ces filles qu'il chassait de son atelier, il les adorait dans ses tableaux, il les caressait et les violentait, désespéré jusqu'aux larmes de ne pouvoir les faire assez belles, assez vivantes" (51). For Claude, art *is* an act of erotic desire. Therefore, whether or not the character himself is aware of it, his motivations are simultaneously erotic and artistic as is the language Zola uses to describe them.

During the morning sketching scene, the author creates tension between the stated dispassionate aims of Claude's gaze and the visual descriptions within the text. The paragraph announcing Claude's chaste intentions is framed on the one side by the visually titillating description of Christine's body and on the other by his imagining detailed explanations—all of them involving a sexual fall from grace—for Christine's life circumstances. Ironically, it is Christine's air of innocence that fuels Claude's fantasies of her supposed debauchery as he envisions elaborate scenarios of "des perversions ingénues et extraordinaires" (20). Claude decides she is too fresh and youthful-looking to be the "gueuse" he originally suspected her to be. He does not believe her story of the train crash and the rapacious cab driver, so he tries to guess what the truth might be: "Et il imaginait d'autres histoires: une débutante tombée à Paris avec un amant, qui l'avait lâchée; ou bien une petite bourgeoise débauchée par une amie, n'osant rentrer chez ses parents; ou encore un drame plus compliqué [...]" (20). To support the belief that Claude's gaze is dispassionate, the narrative offers the following sentence: "Déjà, il avait oublié la jeune fille, il était dans le ravissement de la neige des seins, éclairant l'ambre délicat des épaules" (19). Forgetting the individuality of the young woman before him seems to suggest that he is not invested in her personally and is instead entirely focused on the shapes and colors of her body. Yet, from this moment forward, he never forgets about her. The action of the narrative recycles back to this scene through repeated references to the sketches from the "lendemain," the figure in *Plein Air* that is based on them, and future posing sessions for the same painting—all of them based on Claude's brief matinal viewing of Christine's exposed chest.

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[272] Brady, *Zola*, 393.

The focalization continues to move between Claude and Christine until she agrees to resume the pose. While he sketches, she looks at him and studies his studio space. The model therefore returns the artist's gaze and evaluates his appearance and behavior. The alternating focalization in the narrative voice during the "lendemain" demonstrates significant differences between Claude's and Christine's experiences of the event. Each character's personality and emotions infuse the narrative voice as the point of view shifts. Thus, Zola establishes complementary narratives which will interweave throughout the text. When Claude sketches Christine’s semi-nude body as she sleeps, he assumes he has the right to look at her. His artistic curiosity is paramount. Therefore, he does not hesitate to study her exposed body at length and does not consider how she might feel about the situation. From his perspective, he rescued her, he is not touching or hurting her, he is being generous, and she owes him this favor of helping him with his art. He becomes angry when she cries and covers herself upon awakening, demanding she allow him to continue. He is frustrated that her modesty impedes his gaze: “la pruderie de cette fille l'empêcherait d’avoir une bonne étude pour son tableau” (21). As he tells her: “[…] écoutez, ce n’est pas très gentil de me refuser ce service, car enfin, je vous ai ramassée, vous avez couché dans mon lit” (21). Although as she continues crying, he eventually stops scolding her and instead begins to plead, he demonstrates that he does not see her as an individual, only as inspiration for his painting. He will remain true to this characteristic throughout the novel.

Christine, on the other hand, initially experiences Claude’s gaze as a violation. Upon awakening in a strange place and seeing an unknown man “la mangeant des yeux,” like Claude who froze when he first looked past the screen to see her lying in bed, Christine is similarly paralyzed with emotion:

> Et une stupeur la paralysa, ce lieu inconnu, ce garçon en manches de chemise, accroupi devant elle, la mangeant des yeux. Puis, dans un élan éperdu, elle ramena la couverture, elle l’écrasa de ses deux bras sur sa gorge, le sang fouetté d’une telle angoisse pudique, que la rougeur ardente de ses joues coula jusqu’à la pointe de ses seins, en un flot rose. (20)

The narrative voice emphasizes Christine’s “angoisse pudique,” the anguish of a modest woman who has neither chosen to expose her body nor consented to the masculine gaze. The sudden blush of “rougeur ardente” that flows from her cheeks to the tips of her breasts indicates her innocence and inexperience, especially when contrasted with the images of sexual debauchery and perversion Claude entertains while she sleeps. Claude’s anger understandably increases Christine’s initial fear as she sobs uncontrollably. However, establishing a pattern of overlooking his violent outbursts that will persist throughout their relationship, Christine accepts Claude’s unspoken apology when he pleads with her, begging her to let him draw “La tête, rien que la tête” (21). Seeing that he has not moved and that he has no intention of physically assaulting her, she relaxes and resumes her original pose.

At this point, the narrative shifts to Christine’s perspective while she looks at Claude. Having calmed her initial shock upon finding herself exposed to his gaze, she decides to trust him and is beginning to find him attractive: “Il n’était pas laid pourtant, elle découvrait au fond de ses yeux bruns une grande tendresse” (22). Yet, her fear has not disappeared but is instead projected onto the studio space and the objects within it. The narrative marks the shift to her point of view, referring directly to her eyes and her surreptitious gaze between half-closed eyelids: “Et, entre ses paupières demi-closes, elle l’étudiait à son tour” (22). Zola’s description of Christine’s view of the studio is filled with words from a lexicon of violence, fear, disorder and discomfort (emphasized in bold print below):

> L’atelier, il est vrai, continuait à **l’effarer** un peu. Elle y jetait des regards prudents, **stupéfaite** d’un tel **désordre** et d’un tel **abandon**. Devant le poêle, les cendres du dernier hiver **s’amoncelaient** encore. Outre le lit, la petite table de toilette et le divan, il n’y avait d’autres meubles qu’une vieille armoire de chêne **disloquée**, et qu’une grande table de sapin, **encombrée** de pinceaux, de couleurs, d’assiettes **sales**, d’une lampe à esprit-de-vin, sur laquelle était restée une casserole, **barbouillée de vermicelle**. Des chaises **dépaillées** se **débandaient**, parmi des chevalets **boiteux**. Près du divan, la bougie de la veille traînait par terre, dans un coin du parquet, **qu’on devait balayer tous les mois** […]. Mais ce dont elle **s’effrayait** surtout, c’était des esquisses pendues aux murs, sans cadres, un flot épais d’esquisses qui descendait jusqu’au sol, où il **s’amassait en un éboulement** de toiles **jetées pêle-mêle**. Jamais elle n’avait vu une si terrible peinture, **rugueuse**, **éclatante**, d’une **violence** de tons qui la **blessait** comme un juron de charretier, entendu sur la porte d’une auberge. Elle baissait les yeux,

> attirée pourtant par un tableau retourné, *le grand tableau auquel travaillait le peintre, et qu'il poussait chaque soir vers la muraille, afin de le mieux juger le lendemain, dans la fraîcheur du premier coup d'œil*. Que pouvait-il cacher, celui-là, pour qu'on n'osât même pas le montrer ? Et, au travers de la vaste pièce, la nappe de brûlant soleil, tombée des vitres, voyageait, sans être tempérée par le moindre store, coulant ainsi qu'un or liquide sur tous ces **débris** de meuble, dont elle accentuait l'insoucieuse **misère**. (22-3, italics and bold print added)

The verb "effarer," meaning to alarm or to frighten, sets the tone for the description that follows. Just as the room itself is piled with objects, the paragraph uses a multitude of adjectives describing the "désordre" and the items that are strewn about ("débandaient," "traînait," "s'amoncelaient"), broken ("disloquée," "dépaillées," "boiteux"), dirty ("sales," "barbouillée de vermicelle"), piled up ("s'amoncelaient," "encombrée"), and generally tossed haphazardly around the studio ("jetées pêle-mêle"). The word "abandon" used previously to describe Christine's relaxed pose now carries the connotation of slovenly indifference and the same unfiltered sunlight that enhanced her beauty accentuates the filth in the studio. Additionally, the description of Claude's atelier fits the myth of the bohemian artist, living on the verge of starvation and obsessed with his work to the point of forgetting his environment. As Jacques Lethève explains, the nineteenth-century Parisian bourgeois idea of the typical artist's studio included the belief that "in such a diabolically wicked place [one] could catch a whiff of adventure, of unbridled freedom, even debauchery" (56). Or even perhaps that one could enter the studio and "[…] surprise that mysterious process of transmutation which transformed base matter, be it clay or pigment, into a work of art" (56). Zola's portrait of Claude's studio, tinted with Christine's displaced trepidation as she poses semi-nude, effectively communicates the sense of freedom seasoned with a *soupçon* of decadence that readers expected.

A final element of Christine's experience is her emotional reaction to Claude's artwork. In the phrase "Mais ce dont elle s'effrayait surtout," the author uses the verb "effrayait," which is related to “effarer” used previously in the same paragraph. They are similar not only phonetically but, in their meanings, both related also to the nouns “frayeur” and “effroi.” Here, the verb includes the reflexive “se” emphasizing the internal reaction of suddenly becoming frightened or terrified. Zola used vocabulary from the same family in the description of Christine’s view of the river as her eyes were dilated with “effarement.” Her view of the artwork shares other similarities with her perception of the river. The overabundance of details assaults her senses. The sketches and canvases flow down the walls and spread across the floor. Claude’s painting style is “rugueu[x],” an adjective to describe a rough and irregular surface. To Christine’s eyes, the canvases are explosive, violent, and offensive. The lightning that lit the river scene, the “éclair,” is similar to the “éclatante” (shocking) colors and shapes in Claude’s paintings. Discontinuity between her decision that she can trust Claude, her consent to allow him to paint her, her growing attraction to him, and her uneasy feelings about the studio and artwork create tension, evoking an erotically charged atmosphere.

The free indirect style of narration includes a phrase in this paragraph that is not consistent with Christine as focalizer. The phrase is italicized in the paragraph above and cited again here: “[…] le grand tableau auquel travaillait le peintre, et qu’il poussait chaque soir vers la muraille, afin de le mieux juger le lendemain, dans la fraîcheur du premier coup d’œil.” Similar to the author’s technique in the outdoor description of Paris, this information about Claude’s purpose for keeping the canvas turned towards the wall is not something Christine would know. The narration then moves directly, without marking the shift, to a citation of Christine’s thoughts: “Que pouvait-il cacher, celui-là, pour qu’on n’osât même pas le montrer?” The rapid shift in perspective increases the reader’s experience of instability and echoes Christine’s sense of cautious curiosity. Her uneasy interest compels her further exploration of

Claude and his atelier, engaging the reader and advancing the plot. Just as in the opening scene the narrative reveals her emotions through the description of Paris, her feelings are displaced onto Claude's studio and her perspective infuses the text. The fragmented focalization Zola uses to describe Christine's first nude pose represents the individual subjectivity of both artist and model, reconfiguring the erotic gaze to invite a multiplicity of readers.

B: Christine "dans son néant" (114): The Second Nude Scene

In the chapter leading to the first time Christine poses fully nude, Christine and Claude spend more time together and their lives become intertwined. The narrative focalization reflects the shift in their relationship and echoes the events of the plot. This strategy values the feminine perspective and positions Christine as a partner in the creative process. The fourth chapter begins with Christine's first surprise visit to the atelier. As her visits become more regular, the couple's attachment increases. She agrees, mid-chapter, to pose again, but only for the head of the figure in Claude's large salon canvas. The suspense builds as Claude's inability to complete the painting without her creates a growing professional need for access to her body, while the couple's mutual attraction increases simultaneously. The chapter ends climatically when Christine poses fully nude for the complete figure. Artistic and erotic desire blur for both Claude and Christine: true to the studio romance, painting and sex are inextricably intertwined yet inevitably incompatible. For Claude, he cares most about painting, but his attraction to Christine invades the art: she is "la nouvelle passion qui l'envahissait" (109). He becomes obsessed, thinking of nothing but his need for her body, linked erotically and artistically: "Au fond de lui, maintenant, une pensée unique montait: obtenir d'elle qu'elle consentît à poser la figure entière"

(112). For Christine, her opinion of Claude's artwork softens as her affection for him blooms. Initially, she continues to find his paintings offensive. Some of them bother her because of their subject matter—the nudes from his student days, for example ("l'anatomie terriblement exacte des études") (92). More significantly, Claude's painterly style both disturbs and attracts her. She feels fearful looking at "la peinture féroce" and "les flamboyantes esquisses du Midi" (92). However, over time Christine becomes accustomed to Claude's canvases (109). She begins to empathize with his stormy emotional response to his daily successes or failures at the easel, and because she loves the man, she loves the paintings: "elle en venait à leur découvrir des qualités, pour les aimer aussi un peu" (111). Thus, both painter and model project their emotions onto the canvas: it is a product of their union.

As the couple's connection grows and the story moves closer to the climatic moment when Christine will choose to reveal her body, Zola constructs the text to communicate the confluence of their desires with a confluence of grammatical structures and literary devices. The scene in question merits citing at length here. Relevant pronouns are in bold print, with the plural ones also italicized for emphasis:

> Et, pourtant, un soir, comme **il** s'apprêtait à **la** reconduire et qu'**elle** remettait **son** chapeau, les bras en l'air, ***ils*** restèrent deux seconds les yeux dans les yeux, **lui** frémissant devant les pointes des seins relevés qui crevaient l'étoffe, **elle** si brusquement sérieuse, si pâle, qu'**il** se sentit deviné. Le long des quais, **ils** parlèrent à peine: cette chose demeura entre ***eux***, pendant que le soleil se couchait, dans un ciel couleur de vieux cuivre. À deux autres reprises, **il** lut, au fond de **son** regard, qu'**elle** savait **sa** continuelle pensée. En effet, depuis qu'**il** y songeait, **elle** s'était mise à y songer aussi, malgré **elle**, l'attention éveillée par des allusions involontaires. La peur même qu'**il** osât le demander ne **lui** vint pas; **elle le** connaissait bien à présent, **elle l**'aurait faire taire d'un souffle, avant qu'**il** eût bégayé les premiers mots [...]
>
> Des jours s'écoulèrent; et, entre ***eux***, l'idée fixe grandissait. Dès qu'***ils*** se trouvaient ensemble, ***ils*** ne pouvaient plus ne pas y penser. [...] Bientôt, rien d'autre ne resta dans ***leur*** vie de camarades. [...] Et ce qu'***ils*** avaient évité jusque-là, le trouble de ***leur*** liaison; l'éveil de l'homme et de la femme dans ***leur*** bonne amitié, éclatait enfin, sous l'évocation constante de cette nudité vierge. Peu à peu,

> ***ils*** se découvraient une fièvre secrète, ignorée d'***eux-mêmes***. Des chaleurs ***leur*** montaient aux joues, ***ils*** rougissaient pour s'être frôlés du doigt. C'était désormais comme une excitation de chaque minute, fouettant ***leur*** sang ; tandis que, dans cet envahissement de tout ***leur*** être, le tourment de ce qu'***ils*** taisaient ainsi, sans pouvoir se le cacher, s'exagérait au point qu'***ils*** en étouffaient, la poitrine gonflée de grands soupirs. (113)

In this sequence, which occurs right before the nude scene, the focalization of the narrative initially shifts between Claude and Christine as they both think incessantly about his desire for her to pose. In the first paragraph, Zola uses primarily third person singular pronouns, alternating between the masculine and feminine as the perspectives change. Then, the plural pronouns begin to appear. "Ils" and "eux" occur a few times at the beginning and by the second paragraph the narrative has moved entirely to the third person plural. Additionally, the details Zola provides in the first paragraph combine images and language of both art and love. In the second paragraph the author emphasizes his characters' physical responses, further emphasizing their growing attraction, and adding to the building sexual tension. Details demonstrating Claude's painterly perspective include the shape of Christine's breasts and the way her clothing stretches around them ("les pointes des seins relevés qui crevaient l'étoffe") and the sun setting in a copper sky ("le soleil se couchait, dans un ciel couleur de vieux cuivre"). When the focus is Christine's point of view, the text emphasizes her emotional connection to Claude; her ability to guess his thoughts and her confidence that she can read him well enough to prevent him from speaking his request ("La peur même qu'il osât le demander ne lui vint pas; elle le connaissait bien à présent, elle l'aurait faire taire d'un souffle, avant qu'il eût bégayé les premiers mots."). Thus, Christine's subjectivity again affects the course of the novel.

The imperfect tense is prevalent in the second paragraph, communicating repetition and the passage of time. Zola emphasizes bodily experiences, beginning with "l'évocation constante de cette nudité vierge." Images of blood and heat dominate, symbolic of erotic desire: "une fièvre," "des chaleurs," "ils rougissaient," and "leur sang." Zola mentions specific body parts and physical responses. Recalling Christine's initial "rougeur ardente" on the morning of the "lendemain," their cheeks blush at the brush of a finger ("Des chaleurs leur montaient aux joues, ils rougissaient pour s'être frôlés du doigt."); their blood is whipped up with excitement ("une excitation de chaque minute, fouettant leur sang"); their chests heave with emotional sighs (la poitrine gonflée de grands soupirs"); and their feelings invade their entire being ("cet envahissement de tout leur être"). The couple's thoughts and desires are merging, flowing together inexorably like the waters of the Seine reuniting beyond the Île de la Cité. The text itself thus enacts on the linguistic level the events of the plot. Christine's perspective, her desires, and her bodily responses are equally important to Claude's, woven into the novel on every level. This strategy represents Christine as far more than the stereotypical passive model.

The first time Christine poses fully nude for the female figure in Claude's Salon painting, *Plein Air*, Zola deploys a network of narrative and literary devices that communicate her perspective and demonstrate her importance to the novel itself. The author constructs this posing scene as a spiritual union of painter and model, casting Christine as a necessary partner in the creative process. Yet, the shifting narrative focus between Christine's perspective and Claude's creates an unsettling atmosphere of coexisting contrasts because each has his or her unique response to this experience. For Claude, the moment is a spiritual merging of erotic and artistic bliss. To communicate Claude's perspective, Zola includes vocabulary of religious experience as well as erotically charged details, such as the shape of Christine's breasts (115). However, for Christine, undressing her own body is not an inherently erotic experience, nor is she interested in the artistic process for its own sake as is Claude. The reader sees Christine's step-by-step removal of her clothing through her perspective. This narrative strategy redirects the visual sexual energy that could otherwise create a strip scene. Zola invites the reader to imagine the model's body rather than describing it in detail, thus subtly increasing the eroticism of the text. Using Christine's perspective also allows Zola to describe her motives and her growing jealousy. She poses to solidify her connection to Claude, to assert her role in the creation of the artwork, and to reclaim Claude's distorted representation of her body. In posing, Christine chooses to become an object of spiritual, artistic, and erotic contemplation. Her choice advances both Claude's career and the plot of the novel. Claude completes *Plein Air* on time to submit it to the Salon, although it is instead displayed later at the Salon des refusés. At this point they have not yet consummated their relationship, but the emotional intensity of the experience increases the couple's intimacy, cementing their connection to one another through the creation of the canvas. The male painter and the female model represent complementary sides of the human reproductive binary that serves as the novel's primary metaphor of the creative act. Thus, *Plein Air* and the text itself are both products of their union.

Claude's appeal to Christine becomes a prayer of supplication, and her choice to pose is both an act of devotion and divine intervention. As the Salon nears and his painting is still unfinished, Claude's despair grows. He has worked and reworked the central female figure so many times it has lost its resemblance to Christine, and attempting to paint the figure's body using another model has increased the distortions: "la tête, si fine, disait-il, ne s'emmanchait point sur [des] épaules canailles" (112). Finally, it is clear he will fail without her, but Claude does not have the courage to ask Christine to pose:

> Les yeux brûlants dont il la regardait disaient clairement : « Ah ! il y a vous, ah! ce serait le miracle attendu, le triomphe certain, si vous me faisiez ce suprême sacrifice! Je vous implore, je vous le demande, comme à une amie adorée, la plus belle, la plus chaste! »
>
> Elle, toute droite, très blanche, entendait chaque mot; et ces yeux d'ardente prière exerçaient sur elle une puissance. Sans hâte, elle ôta son chapeau

> et sa pelisse; puis, simplement, elle continua du même geste calme, dégrafa le corsage, le retira ainsi que le corset, abattit les jupons, déboutonna les épaulettes de la chemise, qui glissa sur les hanches. Elle n'avait pas prononcé une parole, elle semblait autre part, comme les soirs, où, enfermée dans sa chambre, perdue au fond de quelque rêve, elle se déshabillait machinalement, sans y prêter attention. Pourquoi donc laisser une rivale donner son corps, quand elle avait déjà donné sa face ? Elle voulait être là tout entière, chez elle, dans sa tendresse, en comprenant enfin quel malaise jaloux ce monstre bâtard lui causait depuis longtemps. Et, toujours muette, nue et vierge, elle se coucha sur le divan, prit la pose, un bras sous la tête, les yeux fermés. (114-15)

The narrative voice speaks for Claude as if he says the words, yet it is the look of "ardente prière" in his eyes that Christine reads. With the words "prière," "miracle," and "sacrifice," Zola introduces the language of religion, echoing the spiritual metaphors invoked when Claude first sketched Christine. Christine therefore becomes simultaneously a sacrificial virgin and an adored goddess.[273]

Zola creates an atmosphere of hushed calm to enhance the sense of sacred space. From the moment Christine begins to undress, all sound is suspended and movement slowed, signaling this experience as something extraordinary: "Elle n'avait pas prononcé une parole, elle semblait autre part" (114). Mentioning her virginity as she lies upon the sofa and strikes the pose, "toujours muette, nue et vierge," compares her to a virgin sacrifice (114). Time expands, calm and quiet prevail. Christine remains still while Claude works passionately for three hours. Compared with her discomfort and shame during the "lendemain," here, Christine is calm: "Il ne remua pas, elle ne souffla pas, faisant le don de sa pudeur, sans un frisson, sans une gêne" (115). Claude's heart beats "comme devant une nudité religieuse," and Christine passes the time silently, seemingly lost in another world "dans son néant de beau marbre, avec le sourire mystérieux et figé de la pose" (115). The silence between them remains unbroken, even as

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[273] Christine's name may also evoke that of Jesus Christ, adding to the textual references to her symbolic martyrdom.

Claude kisses Christine on the forehead before she leaves (115). The act of undressing thus metaphorically transports Christine "into the ethereal world of art" that the Goncourts sought to evoke in *Manette Salomon*.[274] Zola, unlike the Goncourts, creates a spiritual environment during Christine's second nude pose, neither eliminating nor overtly emphasizing "any notion of the erotically voyeuristic."[275] Zola's use of religious metaphors to describe Claude's experience in the second nude scene along with the prevailing sense of quiet stillness create an otherworldly ambiance.

As she undresses, Christine is the focalizer for the narrative voice and Zola uses ambivalent language and imagery to represent her multifaceted emotions, her deliberate actions, and her motives for posing. He also uses plot events, language, and images to connect this scene to le "lendemain," creating an erotic undertone. The author could have simply written "Christine undressed slowly and then lay on the divan." Instead, he describes the step-by-step process as she undresses. This strategy slows the narrative pace, focusing the reader's attention on Christine's smallest action. For Christine, the removal of her garments is an everyday occurrence and the body revealed is her own. Therefore, the narrative offers no detailed description of her physique because the events are told from her perspective. However, the author names each item of clothing in order as Christine removes it, from her outer wraps to her underskirts, and, finally, her chemise. The text thus invites readers to imagine the unveiling of her body, adding an erotic tone to the scene.[276] Zola also infuses a note of otherworldly experience in her dissociated automatized (“machinalement”) behavior. The ambiance seems almost supernatural, as if Claude’s eyes have cast a spell upon her (“ces yeux d’ardente prière exerçaient sur elle une puissance”) (114). Rather than being asleep, as she was when Claude first sketched her body, she is awake but seems lost in a dream. Unlike the awkward removal of her rain-drenched clothing during the first night in Claude’s atelier, here she is undressing purposefully. The quotidian, the mystical, and the erotic blur as she removes her outer clothing “sans hâte,” undressing “simplement,” and “du même geste calme,” taking off her dress, then her undergarments “machinalement, sans y prêter attention,” as she would if she were “enfermée dans sa chambre” (114). Each of these words emphasize her slow, deliberate actions and communicate purposeful choice. Additionally, Zola repeats vocabulary and imagery from the “lendemain” scene, activating a subtle erotic echo between these two parts of the novel. When Christine undoes her shoulder straps and lets fall her last piece of clothing, the vocabulary and imagery recalls the “lendemain” sequence when Christine’s chemise had accidently slipped from her body as she slept. In the first nude scene, “le lendemain,” Zola writes: “les **boutons** des **épaulettes** de sa **chemise** avaient dû se détacher, toute la manche gauche **glissait**, découvrant la gorge” (67, emphasis added). The related sentence from the second nude scene, reads as follows: “[Elle] dé**bouton**na les **épaulettes** de la **chemise**, qui **glissa** sur les hanches” (114, emphasis added).” However, in the second scene the unveiled body part, “les hanches” (hips), is even more evocative than “la gorge” (chest/breasts) because it communicates her complete nakedness. The narrative thus contains sexual and spiritual elements, but it emphasizes Christine’s choice to give Claude the gift of her nudity.

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[274] Dolan, "Musée Goncourt," 175.

[275] Dolan, "Musée Goncourt," 175.

[276] The concept of clothing inherently includes the body parts covered by that clothing and vice-versa: "Since the erotic awareness of the body always contains an awareness of clothing, images of bodies that aim to emphasize their sexual nature will make use of this link." (A. Hollander, *Seeing*, 88.)

Christine’s feelings about posing for *Plein Air* and about the figure within it are complex and evolve throughout the story. Zola carefully constructs an opposition between Christine and

Claude's painted representation of her.[277] Christine's fascination with posing for Claude and her simultaneous jealousy of his obsessive devotion to his art are therefore essential to the logical development of the novel. Her discontent grows as the text progresses, culminating in the final "scène de bataille" between Christine and the painting when she demands that Claude choose between them. She dislikes the painted version of herself from the first time she sees it, during her second visit to Claude's atelier. He has used the sketches made of her asleep "le lendemain" to inspire the figure's face and body. Christine feels violated when she recognizes herself in the painting, partially because she feels as if her own nudity is exposed, and partially because the brutality of Claude's colors and brushstrokes shocks her:

> Christine, tout de suite, se reconnut. C'était elle, cette fille, vautrée dans l'herbe […]. Cette fille nue avait son visage, et une révolte la soulevait, comme si elle avait eu son corps, comme si, brutalement, l'on eût déshabillé là toute sa nudité vierge. Elle était surtout blessée par l'emportement de la peinture, si rude, qu'elle s'en trouvait violentée, la chair meurtrie. (92-3)

Christine identifies with the figure, experiencing the painting as if the physical surface of the paint and the exposed body were an extension of her own "comme si elle avait eu son corps," Yet, she also instinctively understands the woman on the canvas as her enemy (93). She feels similarly when she sees *Plein Air* hanging at the Salon des Refusés while the Paris crowds laugh and jeer: "C'était elle qu'on sifflait ainsi, c'était sur sa nudité que crachaient les gens (...)" (140). During her next visit, two months later, the figure no longer looks like her and she feels embarrassed at her initial response: "Non, ce n'était pas elle, cette fille n'avait ni son visage ni son corps: comment avait-elle pu se reconnaître, dans cet épouvantable gâchis de couleurs?" (94). The figure is disturbingly like her, but even more disturbingly *unlike* her. She is increasingly unhappy the more her likeness disappears because she senses the distortions as an indication of distance between her and Claude: “Ne l’aimait-il pas, qu’il la laissait ainsi sortir de son œuvre?” (110). Claude’s mention of trying another model again in the hopes that he can finish *Plein Air* on time sparks Christine’s jealousy. The narration recounts her thoughts directly: “Pourquoi donc laisser une rivale donner son corps, quand elle avait déjà donné sa face?” (114). She therefore sees other models as potential rivals for Claude’s attention as well as competition for her place in the painting. She wants to banish all other women from Claude’s studio and from his canvases. However, she also understands the figure itself as a threat, particularly because its unrecognizable features are so close to her own: “Elle voulait être là tout entière, chez elle, dans sa tendresse, en comprenant enfin quel malaise jaloux ce monstre bâtard lui causait depuis longtemps” (114). In her desire to be “chez elle,” she wishes to reclaim her body and Claude’s representation of it, seeking to dispel a distorted, strange, and horrifying version of herself, “ce monstre bâtard.” Thus, her motivations for posing are to establish her connection to Claude, to validate her role as the model for his painting, and to repossess the image of her body.

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[277] Robert J. Niess, "Antithesis and 'Reprise' in Zola's *L'Œuvre*," *L'Esprit Créateur* 4, no. 2, (1964): 70.

The narrative tone changes when the focalization moves to Claude, likewise shifting the reader’s perception of Christine. Zola infuses the paragraph with artistic, spiritual, and erotic imagery to communicate Claude’s emotional state. From Claude’s point of view, Christine’s identity as a human individual—the very thing she wishes to assert with her choice to pose—is already entirely merged with the ideal image he wishes to create. The first few sentences describe Claude’s response as he watches her undress. A slippage of pronoun referents occurs in the following citation, which begins the paragraph: “Saisi, immobile de joie, lui **la** regarda se dévêtir. Il **la** retrouvait. **La vision rapide**, tant de fois évoquée, redevenait vivante.” (115). The first time the reader sees the pronoun “la,” it clearly refers to Christine as she undresses. In the second sentence, the reader initially assumes “la” still refers to Christine, but discovers, upon reading the third sentence, that it might refer instead to “la vision rapide.” Claude’s recalled image of Christine based on his sketches from the “lendemain” is “la vision rapide.” The word “vision” activates a chain of meanings that refer to sight, the prophecies of spiritual seers, and supernatural or imaginary projections. Claude’s “vision” of Christine is clouded by his artistic ambition; he sees his image of her, not her as herself. This time, unlike the first night when Christine undressed uncomfortably behind a screen, Claude can see her as she slowly and deliberately disrobes. However, like the painters in Balzac’s “Le Chef d’œuvre inconnu” who could not truly see Gilette, Claude is blind to the woman before him.

Christine’s transformation into an object of art, spiritual though it may be from Claude’s perspective, is tinged with eroticism that obscures her identity. The narrative voice recalls the “lendemain” scene again, blurring artistic and sexual imagery to demonstrate Claude’s redirection of his erotic desires into painting. The description of Christine's young body repeats Claude’s words in both scenes. On the first morning, Claude’s thoughts become part of the free indirect narrative as he gazes at Christine asleep: “Un peu **mince**, un peu **grêle d’enfance**, **mais si souple, d’une jeunesse si fraîche** ! Et, avec ça, des seins déjà mûrs. **Où** diable la **cachait-elle**, la veille, **cette gorge**-là, qu’il ne l’avait pas devinée?” (19). Zola reprises the same ideas and some of the same phrasing when Claude again sees Christine’s body as he watches her undress: “C’était cette **enfance**, **grêle** encore, **mais si souple, d’une jeunesse si fraîche**; et il s’étonnait de nouveau: **où cachait-elle cette gorge** épanouie, qu’on ne soupçonnait point sous la robe?” (115). Claude’s surprise at her ample breasts when her body is thin (“grêle,” “mince”) symbolizes Christine’s double role of self-sacrificing partner and passionate lover.[278] Her face is also dual, both sensual and tender: “dont les mâchoires un peu massives et sensuelles s’étaient noyées sous l’apaisement tendre du front et des joues” (115).[279] The author again contrasts Christine’s youth and virginal innocence with her fully mature body, symbolically inviting the reader to visually deflower her. Claude’s artistic ability becomes sexual prowess: he is inspired, working frantically for three hours in a burst of “effort si viril” that he is able to paint the full figure in this one session (115). However, Christine is so still she barely seems to breathe (“elle ne souffla pas”) seeming to be made of marble, opening her eyes only briefly:

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[278] Zola frequently used physiognomy, or the idea that physical qualities can reveal the personalities of his characters. He emphasizes Christine’s lips, chin and jaw when her sensual side is most dominant. Her generous breasts likewise symbolize her sensuality. (Brady, *Zola*, 381-3.)

> Seulement, de temps à autre, elle ouvrait ses yeux clairs, les fixait sur un point vague de l’espace, restait ainsi un instant sans qu’il pût rien y lire de ses pensées, puis le refermait, retombait dans son néant de beau marbre, avec le sourire mystérieux et figé de la pose. (115)

Comparing Christine to a sculpture (“beau marbre”) as she poses is similar to the Goncourts’ description of Manette standing in “la pose de ce marbre du Louvre qu’on appelle le *Génie du repos éternel*” (262). Furthermore, the evocation of a living female sculpture recalls the Pygmalion myth. Ovid’s Pygmalion, like Claude, is fearful and distrustful of women yet passionately desires them; he falls in love with his own ideal creation as a way of managing those two conflicting urges.[280] While Christine is lying quietly on the divan, her body naked and exposed, her voice is silent and her thoughts are hidden. Although she opens her eyes, the narrative does not move to her perspective. Instead, the reader remains in Claude’s emotional world, where the ideal woman is present merely as an image for him to paint, “une nudité religieuse” (115). She has no needs, makes no demands, merely gives herself to him “faisant le don de sa pudeur” (115). Like Pygmalion and Balzac’s Frenhofer, Claude desires to create art so realistic that it seems alive; yet, to create the artificial representation on canvas, he needs the living, breathing woman to become still and mute--metaphorically lifeless. Her briefly open eyes indicate her consciousness, yet as soon as she closes them again, she returns "dans son néant de beau marbre" (115). The word "néant" denotes an empty state of nothingness ("le non-être," "l'état d'une âme vide de sentiments et d'affections," and "nullité, obscurité d'une personne."[281] It is also the root of the word "anéantie," which the author used to describe Christine on the first morning when she was sleeping "anéantie sous l'accablement des nuits sans sommeil" (19). Thus, in another callback to "le lendemain," Zola skillfully communicates Claude's emotional state and foreshadows the couple's fate, their eventual destruction. For, in this moment, Christine fulfills the stereotypical role of the model in the studio romance, giving of herself willingly to the point of allowing her own identity, thoughts, and desires to be nullified.

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[279] Claude’s face also reflects duality because his childlike eyes contradict his heavy beard and strong eyebrows. (Niess, *Zola*, 220).

[280] Niess, *Zola*, 219.

While Claude is working, Christine is simply a beautiful model posing, and her nudity is a sacred sacrifice to art. But as soon as he is done painting, she is merely naked, and they both suddenly become awkward. Although he watched Christine as she undressed carefully, and he studied her body as she lay on the divan for three hours, Claude hurries to turn his face to the wall while she dresses rapidly. The narrative voice refers again to the "lendemain" when Christine blushed upon awakening "jusqu'à la pointe de ses seins" (20), noting that Christine is "très rouge" as she dresses, pulling her sleeves down and raising her collar "pour ne plus laisser un seul coin de sa peau nue" (115). Christine's suddenly reawakened modesty recalls the behavior of the model in Ingres' studio who ran for her clothing when a workman was gaping at her through the window (261). The reason for her nakedness changes as soon as Claude puts down his brushes. While she was posing "Tous deux sentaient que, s'ils disaient une seule phrase, une grande honte leur viendrait" (115). The narrative voice explains that Claude and Christine maintain their silence even after she has dressed because their throats are closed with "une émotion qui les empêcha encore de parler," and they are both overcome with "une tristesse infinie […] comme s'ils venaient de gâter leur existence, de toucher le fond de la misère humaine" (115). This mysterious sadness can be understood as "une grande honte," a resurgence of "pudeur," meaning modesty, or chastity—when referring to a woman.[282] Littré's definition of "honte" (shame) includes "pudeur" as a near synonym and offers this succinct definition of both: "Les reproches de la conscience causent de la honte. Les sentiments de modestie produisent la pudeur."[283] The feeling of "honte" is therefore a natural consequence of sacrificing one's "pudeur," as Christine does. However, both Christine and Claude experience this metaphorical post-coital tristesse after their artistic union. Perhaps Claude feels such deep shame knowing that he has "already betrayed Christine, using the beauty of her body for another purpose than for the act of love, the only legitimate one."[284] He has also ascended the heights of aesthetic bliss while she posed, blending his sexual and artistic urges for a brief time to create "une ébauche superbe," thus the return to ordinary life is disorienting. Claude's limited experience with women also means his "pudeur" and shyness are part of his response. Significantly, the narrative voice uses neither character's names during the posing scene, talking about the couple using only pronouns. However, as soon as Claude is done painting, both names appear in the text.[285] This suggests that both their identities are temporarily submerged and resurface as soon as the posing session is over. Claude, as mentioned above, prefers to interact with women only in his paintings, never inviting them into his studio except to paint them and then immediately banishing them.[286] However, when he allows Christine to enter, to remain, and then to return to his atelier, he symbolically opens himself to relating to her as a subject—a person whose inner being he cannot fully know or understand—rather than merely as an object for him to study and paint.[287] Her modeling is not a professional interaction, which would allow him to keep her at a distance: it is a gift made to him as a result of her very subjectivity—her desire and her conscious choice. When her subjectivity returns as the posing session ends, his discomfort with women reappears as well. Furthermore, the couple's sense of having tapped into "le fond de la misère humaine" foreshadows their tragic destruction, just as their eyelids swollen with tears ("leurs paupières se gonflèrent de larmes") predict the years of weeping Christine will endure ("En dix ans, je ne me souviens pas d'avoir vécu une journée sans larmes" [344]) and presage the macabre image of Claude's grossly protruding and bleeding eyes staring at his final canvas as his body hangs before it (352). Claude's and Christine's overwhelming sadness when the painting session is over is another indication of their sexual investment in the painting's creation: they both respond emotionally as if they have had intercourse.

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[281] Littré, entry "néant."

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[282] Littré, entry "pudeur."

[283] Littré, entry "pudeur."

[284] M. Hemmings, cited in Brady, *Zola*, 381

[285] "Claude, d'un geste, dit qu'il avait fini; et, redevenu gauche, il bouscula une chaise pour tourner le dos plus vite; tandis que, très rouge, Christine quittait le divan" (115).

The narrative suspense builds towards the moment of Christine's posing as if the couple were going to consummate their relationship, leading the reader to expect a potentially spicy scene. Instead, the energy of their sexual union is diverted to the creation of the canvas and the couple does not yet make love. However, Zola’s interweaving of the aesthetic and the erotic make the “dans [le] néant” sequence far more suggestive than his description of the moment when Claude and Christine enjoin at last. When *Plein Air* hangs at the Salon des Refusés, the crowds mock its unfamiliar colors and jarring style. One salon visitor comments, for example: “un savonnage: les chairs sont bleues, les arbres sont bleus, pour sûr qu’il l’a passé au bleu, son tableau!” (128). Christine rushes to Claude’s atelier after her visit to the gallery, herself upset by the crowd’s cruelty. As noted above, she feels their laughter as if it were directed at her own body. But it is her awareness of Claude’s feelings, the tender and empathetic side of her nature, that sends her to his side: “Mais elle s’oubliait maintenant, elle ne songeait qu’à lui, bouleversée par l’idée du chagrin qu’il devait avoir (...)” (140). Stereotypical gender roles become troubled, as Claude loses emotional control, collapses into tears—weak and childlike—with his head on Christine’s lap, and it is Christine who pulls him into a passionate kiss:

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[286] "(…) jamais il n'introduisait de fille chez lui, il les traitait toutes en garçon qui les ignorait, d'une timidité souffrante qu'il cachait sous une fanfaronnade de brutalité (...)" (13).

[287] Dorothy Kelly, *Telling Glances: Voyeurism in the French Novel*, (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 127.

> Toute son excitation de l’après-midi, sa bravoure d’artiste sifflé, sa gaieté et sa violence, crevaient là, en une crise de sanglots qui le suffoquait. [...] Sa force entière s’en était allée, il se sentait plus débile qu’un enfant [...] Alors, elle, des deux poings, le remonta jusqu’à sa bouche dans un emportement de passion. Elle le baisa, elle lui souffla jusqu’au cœur, d’une haleine chaude:
>
> “Tais-toi, tais-toi, je t’aime!” Ils s’adorent, leur camaraderie devait aboutir à ces noces, sur ce divan, dans l’aventure de ce tableau qui peu à peu les avait unis. (140)

Thus, again, Christine’s active sexual desires and the choices she makes as a result are essential to the progression and tone of the novel. Christine metaphorically breathes life into his heart. In the ongoing battle between art and love, love seems to win temporarily. The description of the couple’s physical union is merely a few sentences that emphasize the hand of fate. Their friendship was destined to become a sexual union because the painting itself united them. The narrative moves quickly and offers no description of Christine’s body. The chapter closes with an image that symbolizes Claude’s broken dreams: flakes of gold leaf from *Plein Air*’s frame sparkle on the floor of the studio “pareilles à un fourmillement d’étoiles” (140). When compared to the erotically charged ambiance of Christine’s second pose, the description of the couple’s sexual union seems anticlimactic. The narrative itself therefore places more emphasis on the idealized merging of aesthetics and erotics than on the physical act of making love, thereby mirroring within the text Claude’s sexualization of artistic creation.

C: “Sa propre rivale:” The Third Nude Scene

As the novel progresses, Christine’s body becomes a source of disgust for both Claude and Christine. When Christine’s nude pose allows Claude to access spiritual aesthetic bliss, he paints successfully and his desire is fulfilled. Conversely, Claude feels revulsion towards his wife when he cannot paint well. For Christine, her body allows her to capture Claude’s attention and experience sensual pleasures. However, Claude’s disturbing representation of her and his negative responses to the changes of age and maternity cause her to experience a sense of revulsion towards her own body.

According to Julia Kristeva in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection* (1980), abjection is the feeling of fear and disgust that occurs when there is a perceived threat to the distinction between self and Other.[288] Anything that threatens the boundary between self/Other pulls individuals towards a loss of subjectivity, thus towards meaninglessness. Disgust as defined by Winfried Menninghaus is “(...) the experience of a nearness that is not wanted.”[289] It is also the instinct of revulsion towards something that reminds human beings of their mortality or of the uncanny alliance between life and death: for example, seeing a corpse or maggot-covered decaying flesh.[290] Disgust is inherently an ambivalent response because it is the converse of desire, where desire is a nearness that *is* wanted.[291] Thus, the strong reaction of disgust is connected to sexuality and mortality.[292] Human beings are simultaneously drawn towards and repulsed by the abject, giving the repulsive object a "macabre attraction."[293] In that regard, desire and disgust are two complementary, often simultaneous, manifestations of abjection, just as the lifeforms feeding on decaying flesh create an unsettling combination of life and death. If disgust is triggered by a threatened boundary of self/Other, as the ultimate "Other" to the human male, women stand along that precarious boundary, evoking simultaneous attraction and repulsion. The earliest in-depth theory on the human response of disgust, Aurel Kolnai's *Der Ekel* (1929), misogynistically associated the female body and its reproductive fecundity with revulsion.[294] Within the novel, Christine's nudity, as a source of desire and a trigger of disgust, becomes a metaphor for the conflicting forces of life (artistic creativity) and death (artistic impotence).

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[288] Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’horreur: Essai Sur l’abjection*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980).

[289] Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, translated by Howard Eiland and Joel Golb, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 1.

As Claude labors on his final canvas, a seemingly never-ending process that begins several years before his death, the movement of narrative voice between Claude's and Christine's perspective creates a growing tension between desire and disgust that mirrors the fluctuations in Claude's ability to paint. Chistine offers to pose hoping that the more time she

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[290] Menninghaus, *Disgust,* 1-3.

[291] Menninghaus, *Disgust,* 1.

[292] Florence Vatan, "The Lure of Disgust: Musil and Kolnai," *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 88, no. 1, (2013): 28.

[293] Aurel Kolnai (1929) cited in Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 27.

[294] Cited in Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 18.

spends “nue sous ses regards” will bring him back to her arms (240). Claude, however, does not see Christine herself, but only looks at her body as an object to paint. At one point in the early stages of his final canvas, he descends the scaffolding to touch each part of her body: “il s’approcha d’elle, il la détailla avec une passion croissante, en touchant du bout de son doigt chacune des parties qu’il voulait désigner" (241). The narration uses Claude’s own speech in this segment, his direct discourse. Claude focuses on the erogenous zones of Christine’s body: her breasts, hips, inner thighs, and belly. Yet, he is more interested in their artistic than their erotic potential. His passion increases (“une passion croissante”) as he describes each detail :

> – Tiens! là, sous le sein gauche, eh bien! c’est joli comme tout. Il y a des petites veines qui bleuissent, qui donnent à la peau une délicatesse de ton exquise… Et là, au renflement de la hanche, cette fossette où l’ombre se dore, un régal!... Et là, sous le modelé si gras du ventre, ce trait pur des aines, une pointe à peine de carmin dans de l’or pâle... Le ventre, moi, ça m’a toujours exalté. Je ne puis en voir un, sans vouloir manger le monde. C’est si beau à peindre, un vrai soleil de chair! (241)

Claude notices the shapes, colors, and tones of her body. He is particularly enamored of her “ventre,” a word that means both belly and womb. His desire to create life on canvas is a desire to appropriate Christine’s “ventre” for artistic production. Christine, however, feels dehumanized by Claude’s gaze, his touch, and his words:

> Immobile, sous la brutalité des choses, elle sentait le malaise de sa nudité. À chaque place où le doigt de Claude l’avait touchée, il lui était resté une impression de glace, comme si le froid dont elle frissonnait, entrait par là maintenant. […] Ce corps, couvert partout de ses baisers d’amant, il ne le regardait plus, il ne l’adorait plus qu’en artiste. (242)

She thus experiences a surge of disgust at her own body because of his disregard of her humanity. When Claude forgets to kiss her at the end of the session, this sense of shame solidifies: “Et c’était un mépris d’elle-même, un dégoût d’en être descendue à ce moyen de fille, dont elle sentait la bassesse charnelle […]” (243). His aesthetic desire inspires his creative achievement while simultaneously erasing her selfhood. While modeling, Christine finds that Claude looks at her but does not see *her*. She is simply an object. Posing for Claude is torturous: "c'était un métier où il la ravalait, un emploi de mannequin vivant qu'il plantait là et qu'il copiait, comme il aurait copié la cruche ou le chaudron d'une nature morte" (240). He demands endless posing sessions of her, seeing artistic access to her body as a marital right: "plus exigeant que s'il l'eût payée, sans jamais craindre d'abuser de son corps, puisqu'elle était sa femme" (240). She is reduced in her own eyes to the degraded status of model rather than feeling like the beloved wife she wishes to be: "Il la tuait à la pose pour embellir l'autre" (244). Thus, in posing she becomes her own rival and participates in her own self-negation.

When Claude finds the figure from *Plein Air*, the original nude for which Christine posed "dans son néant," he hangs it on the wall next to his unfinished final canvas, and as Christine poses, he compares her aging, post-maternal body to his representation of her virginal one. Again, using the same words seen earlier in the novel, Claude recalls his thoughts the morning of the "lendemain" and reprises the image of Christine's surprisingly full breasts that seem hidden under her clothing:

> Je me souviens de ma surprise, quand je t'ai vue avec une **gorge** de vraie femme, tandis que le reste gardait la finesse **grêle** de **l'enfance**... Et **si souple, et si frais**, une éclosion de **bouton**, un charme de printemps... Certes, oui, tu peux t'en flatter, ton corps a été bigrement bien ! (254)

Then, he details her now sagging chest, enumerating all the pouches and wrinkles in her body's formerly smooth places: "il y a là, près des aisselles, des poches qui se gonflent et ça n'a rien de beau" (254). He blames her imperfect physique for his artistic impotence: "Non, décidément, je ne puis rien faire avec ça. Ah! vois-tu, quand on veut poser, il ne faut pas avoir d'enfant!" (254). According to classical aesthetics, the ideally beautiful female body is youthful and smooth, does not have visible body hair, has no unsightly marks or irregular areas (such as scars, folds, wrinkles, or warts), and does not display open orifices.[295] Maternity has emphasized the imperfections in Christine's body, eliciting Claude's repulsion and making motherhood incompatible with the role of inspiring model. Additionally, Claude's use of the neutral pronoun "ça" dehumanizes and depersonalizes Christine; he talks about her body as if it were a useless *thing*. For Christine, the resurrection of the *Plein Air* figure is an uncanny reminder of the painful course of her relationship with Claude, her sacrifices for him and his failure to recognize them:

> Voilà qu'elle devenait sa propre rivale, qu'elle ne pouvait plus regarder son ancienne image, sans être mordue au cœur d'une envie mauvaise ! Ah ! que cette image, cette étude faite d'après elle, avait pesé sur son existence ! Tout son malheur était là: sa gorge montrée d'abord dans son sommeil; puis, son corps vierge dévêtu librement, en une minute de tendresse charitable ; puis, ce don d'elle-même, après les rires de la foule, huant sa nudité; puis, sa vie entière, son abaissement à ce métier de modèle, où elle avait perdu jusqu'à l'amour de son mari. (254)

Like Claude, she recalls the "lendemain" and the gift of her modesty "dans son néant," but she uses them to measure her connection to Claude and his love for her. When Claude blames her maternity for his failure to paint, Christine turns her negative feelings towards Jacques because her changed body diminishes her power to attract her husband's love: "elle haïssait [l'enfant] maintenant, à cette idée qu'il avait pu, en elle, détruire l'amante" (255).

D: "Une scène de bataille:" The Final Nude Scene

Christine poses nude one last time during the final hours of Claude's life. She stands before Claude's portraits of her and calls him to turn away from the copies of herself, towards love and life: "(...) elles sont affreuses, elles sont raides et froides comme des cadavres [...] je suis en vie, moi!" (348). Zola planned for the conflict between Christine and the artificial images of herself to be a central theme in *L'Œuvre*, calling their final confrontation "une scène de bataille."[296] Readers experience the events framed primarily through Christine's viewpoint, and her voice dominates the final chapter because much of the text is her direct discourse. The themes and events of the novel all meet in this dramatic scene, and Christine's qualities are essential to Zola's construction of the text.

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[295] Menninghaus, *Disgust*, 51-54.

The "scène de bataille," which comprises the majority of chapter twelve, begins in the hours immediately preceding Claude's suicide, includes a passionate scene where Christine dramatically reverses gender roles and seduces Claude, and ends with Christine's collapse beneath her husband's hanging corpse. Frantic and fast-paced in tone, this section is markedly different from rest of the novel. The sequence "mounts steadily in passion and frenzy, rising to a peak of lust not equaled in any other of Zola's novels."[297] It is a grand crescendo of emotional intensity after several chapters of progressive defeat and growing despair. Claude's annual income of a thousand francs, interest on the capital he inherited from his childhood benefactor, is insufficient to support his family and his professional expenses, even with occasional sales of small canvases. The family moves to progressively smaller and more poorly equipped lodgings before finally moving into his large studio space to save the double rent. Between the couple's return to Paris after their idyllic time together in Bennecourt and this climactic battle before

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[296] Cited in Mitterand, "Étude," 1363.

[297] Niess, *Zola*, 221. Contemporary critics found this scene unbelievable and morally outrageous. Armand de Pontmartin, who habitually criticized Zola's work on moral grounds, wrote: "Ce qu'il y a peut-être de plus révoltant dans *L'Œuvre*, c'est le rôle que M. Zola a imposé à Christine." The most appalling, Pontmartin says, is the lustful scene just before Claude's death "[cela] dépassse, en fait, de lubricité, tout ce que nous inflige, depuis dix ans, l'école naturaliste" (cited in Mitterand, "Étude, " 1390). The scene therefore seems to have been morally offensive largely due to the frank portrayal of feminine erotic desire. See also the relevant Edmond de Goncourt journal entry above, cited on page 125.

Claude's death, the narrative recounts Christine's constant love for "son grand fou d'artiste" (343) in spite of his continual failure and their increasing poverty. Claude ignores and mistreats her, blind to everything but his dream of creating life with canvas, paint and brushes "[Il] la traitait parfois en servante à qui l'on donne ses huit jours" (219). He becomes steadily more and more obsessed with the painted representations of his ideal woman. Like the mythical Pygmalion and Balzac's Frenhofer, "il voulait souffler la vie à son oeuvre" (342). Christine tragically clings to the hope that she will be able to use the delights of her body to lure Claude away from his obsessive connection to his canvases, her only rivals:

> Jalouse! oui, elle l'était, et à en agoniser de souffrance. Mais elle se moquait bien des autres femmes, tous les modèles de Paris pouvaient retirer là leurs jupons! Elle n'avait qu'une rivale, cette peinture préférée qui lui volait son amant (239).

Claude is also like Frenhofer in the redirection of his sexual energies into painting. Frenhofer calls his mastepiece "mon épouse," explaining "Voilà dix ans que je vis avec cette femme, elle est à moi, à moi seul, elle m'aime" (431). Claude, too, spends ten years loving his artwork more than his wife. Christine excoriates Claude's erotic attachment to his paintings:

> Dix années d'abandon, d'écrasement quotidien; ne plus rien être pour toi, se sentir de plus en plus jetée à l'écart, en arriver à un rôle de servante; et l'autre, la voleuse, la voir s'installer entre toi et moi [...]. Enfin, elle est ta femme, n'est-ce pas? Ce n'est plus moi, c'est elle qui couche avec toi... (344).

Where Claude shares qualities with Frenhofer, Christine is similar to Gillette in a more limited fashion. Like her, Christine shows that she is poignantly aware of what the artist himself is unable to see. Yet, unlike Gillette, who stands forgotten and "oubliée dans un coin" (438) at the end of Balzac's "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu," Christine voices her experience. Even when Claude has a brief encounter with Irma Bécot, a former model turned high-end prostitute, Christine almost finds it a relief that he turned to a woman because she has more of a chance of winning him back from a living rival than from his art: “elle l’aurait plutôt jeté à une femme” (252).[298]

Zola establishes Claude’s characteristic mistrust of women and his redirection of his sexual urges into art within the first few pages, and Claude remains true to these qualities throughout the novel.[299] Other than the brief period at Bennecourt when Claude loses himself in his love for Christine after the crushing defeat of *Plein Air*, he always chooses painting first, above all things. Claude even refuses to make love with her while working on his final canvas because he believes he needs to reserve his virility for his artwork: “Au fond, elle retrouvait la théorie répétée cent fois devant elle: le génie devait être chaste, il fallait ne coucher qu’avec son œuvre” (347). However, Claude never again achieves the ecstatic, spiritual union of artistic and erotic bliss that existed briefly the evening of Christine’s first fully nude pose. Once Claude sleeps with Christine, her body no longer gives him the same access to transcendent fusion of his competing sexual and aesthetic urges. She becomes a real person to him, a subject, and cannot continue to be merely an object of contemplation.[300] Likewise, Christine achieves her dream only fleetingly because she has Claude to herself for a short time at the beginning of their relationship while the couple resides in Bennecourt; as soon as they return to Paris, Claude returns to his easel. The text allows neither Christine’s nor Claude’s ultimate desires to be fulfilled. True to the studio romance framework, for this couple, art and love are intertwined but cannot coexist. Like Claude’s urge for artistic perfection becomes a fatal flaw, Christine’s overinvestment in him means she shares his fate. She wants to see Claude succeed, sacrificing everything she has to support him, even while she is jealous of the time and energy he spends on his paintings. Christine’s perspective, her desires, and her actions weave throughout the narrative. Her presence provides both a counterpoint and a catalyst to the events of Claude’s life as his artistic dreams remain out of reach and he descends slowly into madness.

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[298] This event, too, was part of Zola’s plans. “Ne pas faire [la maîtresse de Claude] jalouse d’une femme, elle n’est que jalouse de la peinture.” Cited in Mitterand, “Étude,” 1362.

[299] Niess, *Zola*, 219.

[300] Kelly, *Telling Glances*, 126.

Christine bears witness to Claude’s unraveling and the reader understands the painter’s mental state through Christine’s external observations. For example, she wakes in the middle of a freezing November night to find Claude dressed only in slippers and trousers, working by candlelight on the nude female figure at the center of his unfinished painting: “C’était à la Femme nue qu’il travaillait” (343). He is grinning madly and oblivious to everything around him: “(...) il avait un rire immobile aux lèvres, et il ne sentait pas la cire brûlante de la bougie qui lui coulait sur les doigts (...)” (343). She sees that the painting has grown more bizarre the more he works on it: “Plus il s’y acharnait, plus l’incohérence augmentait” (342). She knows that he has been contemplating suicide and waits until he is asleep each night before allowing herself to sleep (341). Christine also feels betrayed, “trompée pendant son sommeil, dans la pièce voisine” (343). Claude’s obsession is a physical betrayal as much as an emotional one because of his refusal to make love with her: “la virilité qu’il lui refusait, il la réservait et la donnait à la rivale préférée” (346). For Christine, “la sensuelle pudique,” whose sensual nature gives her strong sexual desires, while her modesty leads her to focus those desires within her committed relationship with Claude, his rejection of marital relations is an insult (“c’était un outrage que cette abstinence”) (346). At last, “elle éclata,” her emotional explosion is a metaphorical orgasmic release as she relieves her pent-up frustrations (344).

The passionate and powerful emotional atmosphere that Zola creates during the “scène de bataille” is a result of Christine’s love and her determined commitment to Claude in spite of his ongoing abuse and neglect. She uses her body, which has been her greatest and most reliable means of getting his attention since the morning of “le lendemain,” aggressively and seductively, wielding her sexuality like a weapon in the battle for her lover’s life. The author’s chosen metaphor of human reproduction to communicate the complexities of creative production relies on the simultaneous use of stereotypical gender roles and the reversal or transgression of these same roles. As Christine battles to reclaim Claude from his hallucinogenic obsession with his painting, she becomes aggressive and domineering, which are traditionally masculine traits. When she temporarily succeeds in reigniting their mutual passion, she laughs with pride at her triumph “avec un rire d'orgueil sensuel” (350). Additionally, stereotypically it is the male who conquers the female, yet in this scene—in an echo of her initiating the passionate kiss that began their first lovemaking—Christine overpowers Claude: “c’était elle qui le possédait” (351). Claude responds the same way in both instances: he turned to Christine for comfort after *Plein Air*’s failure at the Salon des refusés; he seeks refuge in her once again when he recognizes that instead of the reality he sought to create on canvas, he has painted a strange, otherworldly figure “[une] idole d’une religion inconnue” (347). Claude thus exhibits stereotypically feminine sexual passivity throughout the novel. Instead of mastering Christine with his strength and virility, Claude responds most ardently to her advances when he is in a position of weakness and vulnerability: “(...) il fut vaincu, il brûla avec elle, se réfugia en elle (...)” (350). With these reversals of expected gender roles, however, the couple reaches the heights of sexual bliss: “Ce fut une rage, jamais il n’avait connu un emportement pareil, même aux premiers jours de leur liaison” (350). Although her triumph is short lived, Christine’s desire and the choices she makes to satisfy them drives the progression of the narrative. In creating a scene so infused with powerful female sexuality, Zola offers an opportunity for alternative interpretive possibilities outside the patriarchal studio romance framework.

Christine's sensual side takes over as she attempts to reclaim her lover. Just as Claude becomes almost a different person when his madness is upon him, Christine's emotions overtake her and she becomes overtly passionate, sexual, and seductive.[301] Throughout the scene, she continually appeals to life and love, begging Claude to come back to her. She repeats the invitation "reviens" six times throughout the sequence, and her words are peppered with variations of "la vie" (life) or "vivre" (to live). She calls him to choose life and warmth instead of death in the freezing studio: "Voyons, il y a la vie... Chasse ton cauchemar, et vivons, vivons ensemble... (...) La terre nous prendra assez tôt, va ! tâchons d'avoir un peu chaud, de vivre (...)" (345). When her passionate pleas are not enough to coax Claude away from his painting, she engages her body directly. Whereas Christine undressed uncomfortably behind a screen her first night in the studio, and when she posed for *Plein Air* she disrobed calmly, in the final scene she casts aside her chemise suddenly, "d'un grand geste" (348). Christine herself refers to the "lendemain," comparing her naked body after pregnancy and ten years of stressful living to the nude figure in Claude's last large painting. She stands naked before the canvas, asking him to compare her living, loving body with the artificial garishly-colored one in the picture: "Va, tu peux comparer, je suis plus jeune qu'elle… Tu as eu beau lui mettre des bijoux dans la peau, elle est fanée comme une feuille sèche... Moi, j'ai toujours dix-huit ans, parce que je t'aime" (348). She thus invokes her youthful self—the one he sketched their first morning together—as the true version, preserved through love rather than through art. Then, much like Ovid's Salamacis who wrapped her limbs around Hermaphroditus so he could not escape, Christine, too, holds to Claude with every inch of her body: "Éperdument, elle le liait de ses membres, de ses bras nus, de ses jambes nues. (...) elle voulait entrer en lui, dans cette dernière bataille de sa passion" (348). In her desire to "entrer en lui," she is again like Salamacis, who pleads "'O grant me this,' she cried / In prayer to the gods, / 'May no day ever come / To separate us!'"[302] Christine represents the life-force, calling Claude to set aside the fantastic vision on his canvas.

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[301] Niess, *Zola*, 221.

Zola creates a chain of references that connect this ultimate climactic scene to earlier parts of the novel and to the two previous important nude scenes. Not only do the characters speak directly of previous events, but also the same vocabulary and imagery reappear. For example, similar to the moment when Claude first saw Christine asleep on the morning of "le lendemain," during this final scene, her chemise slips off to reveal her breasts while she pleads with him to leave the freezing studio and join her in bed: "Sa chemise, à moitié arrachée, avait laissé jaillir sa gorge (...)" (348). The repetition of the same theme also allows Zola to create contrasts that underscore the change in the couple's situation. One notable contrast is between the stifling heat present when Claude first sketched Christine and the freezing November night of the final scene. Claude's attic studio had an overhead bay window that overheated the room: "La jeune fille, dans la chaleur de serre qui tombait des vitre, venait de rejeter le drap (...)" (19). In contrast, the final scene takes place in the early hours of a freezing autumn night, chilled "par cette brise aigre de novembre qui soufflait au travers de leur chambre et du vaste atelier" (341). The alteration in temperature metaphorically communicates the couple's sexual separation: "Leur couche, depuis de longs mois, se glaçait" (341). Furthermore, in contrast with the "lendemain" when the studio was merely disorderly and communicated bohemian freedom, now the couple is living in true poverty: their home is freezing because they cannot afford to heat it. Other words and images from earlier scenes reappear as well. Christine calls the woman in the painting a “gueuse,” a term meaning prostitute. Claude used the same word to refer to Christine when he first saw her sheltering in his doorway (See note 268 above, page 127). Thus, Claude’s own representation of womanhood becomes the betraying trickster he feared he would find in Christine. In fact, “gueuse” is the last word Christine utters, hurling a curse at the painting before she falls to the floor “pareille à une loque blanche” (353). The word “loque” means “rag,” with the same connotations of emptiness and uselessness that it carries in English. Christine’s body, which had breasts “gonflés de sève” (19) when Claude first saw her is now empty, and her heart which was full of love for him has been drained: “L’excès de la souffrance avait retiré tout le sang de son coeur (...)” (353). Additionally, she has been cast off like the clothes she removed so many times to nurture Claude’s art with her nudity, linking this scene to her role throughout the novel. In another connection to earlier scenes, Christine refers to the fear she felt when she initially saw her own figure in Claude’s artwork: She exclaims: “(...) ta peinture, c’est elle, l’assassine, qui a empoisonné ma vie. Je l’avais pressenti, le premier jour; j’en avais eu peur comme d’un monstre, je la trouvais abominable, exécrable (...)” (344). Bringing together all these elements in this final scene underscores Christine’s importance to the structure of the novel.

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[302] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 93.

“La scène de bataille” and Claude’s suicide reinforce the myth that love and aesthetic creation cannot coexist in a painter’s life. Claude’s persistent sexualization of his creative practice destroys his artistic talent and his relationship with Christine. When Claude gives in to Christine’s seduction, he accepts love but dies as an artist, so he can no longer tolerate life. When Christine believes she has finally won Claude away from the vampiristic figure in his paintings, she loses him forever. The complexities and nuances of their relationship thus ultimately reiterate the underlying atelier fantasy.

On the one hand, *L'Œuvre* maintains the patriarchal heteronormative stereotypes of the studio romance schema because Christine is a sacrificial secondary partner to the male artist. Yet, on the other hand, Zola imbues her with subjectivity and credits her with erotic desire. The author assigns her a central role in the narrative and frequently uses her point of view to create the emotional ambiance in important scenes. Although Zola may not have been deliberately deconstructing gender binaries, with Christine he created a nuanced character whose qualities do not always conform to the stereotypical profile of a female model. Incorporating the female model's gaze in the organization and structure of the novel undermines the myth that she is merely a passive object and invites a multiplicity of readers into the space of the text. Her point of view is not merely decorative enhancement to the novel but an essential part of the text and of Zola's design. Yet, in *L'Œuvre,* the gendered power structures and the atelier fantasy persist, to the mutual destruction of the painter and the model.

Chapter Four

The Model Speaks: Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* and Christine Orban's *J'étais l'Origine du monde.*

A nude female torso, shown with open legs and visible genitals, dominates the composition of Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* (1866).[303] Courbet confronts the viewer with frank sexuality, activating all the concomitant cultural concepts of gender and power. He then seduces the observer with flowing shapes, subtle coloration and soft tones. Partially covered with a froth of white fabric and framed to focus on her sexual organs, the model's body is the only subject of the painting. The horizontal orientation implicitly compares her body to a landscape, one so intimate and rendered with such sensitivity that it can only have been painted from life. The viewer's position is that of a lover approaching the beloved. Yet, Courbet's composition also creates a sense of violence, with the figure's head and limbs so brutally absent, her most sensitive, vulnerable parts displayed so openly and in such detail. We cannot see her face, so we do not know her identity, and yet we perceive her as if we were her most intimate partner. For Courbet to have painted this, the model must have posed for hours, perhaps days. The canvas potentially invites viewers to imagine that event: his painting and her posing, an erotic and artistic union of artist and model. Thus, *L'Origine du monde's* subject matter and artistic rendering invoke the studio romance fantasy and its associated gender binaries. Its inherently complex composition, its appeal to deep human emotions, and its evocative title call viewers to a profound relationship with this painting.

Like the work that inspired it, Christine Orban's novel *J'étais l'origine du monde* (2000) also evokes gender binaries and incorporates socio-cultural myths about the artist, the model, and the studio romance. Yet, within these dichotomous structures and with all the stereotypes intact, Orban uses Courbet's painting as a starting point for a literary portrayal of a female model whose perspective dominates the text. Orban's protagonist is Joanna Hiffernan (Jo), the supposed model for Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*.[304] The novel details Jo's account of her experience posing, describing her multifaceted motivations and complex emotions. Orban's narrative also often includes Jo's recollections of her lover's words and actions. Orban creates a literary portrait of Gustave Courbet as a combustive mix of sensitive poet, passionate lover, creative genius, and manipulative misogynist. With these two characters and Jo's first-person narrative voice, the author constructs a text framed by heteronormativity and traditional gender roles while also including a wide range of ambivalences, possibilities, and fragmentations that challenge the fixity of gender and sexual norms. Courbet's painting and Orban's novel both powerfully evoke binary gender structures while simultaneously questioning them.

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[303] Oil on Canvas. 46.3 x 55.4 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

I. *L'Origine du monde*: "le dernier mot du réalisme"

L'Origine du monde was a commission for Khalil Bey, a Turkish ambassador and art collector who also owned Courbet's *Le Sommeil* (1866) and Ingres' 1862 painting *Le Bain Turc*.[305] It remained obscure for a long time, with only rumors and occasional written references to suggest its existence. An oft-cited mention in Maxime Du Camp's 1878 *Les Convulsions de Paris* is the first known description and commentary on *L'Origine du monde*. *Les Convulsions de*

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[304] The spelling of Joanna's last name is different across various sources. I will use "Hiffernan," which is the most common variation. However, the name is spelled "Heffernan" in James Rubin's text (Courbet, 207), while Christine Orban, Bernard Teyssèdre, and Thierry Savatier use "Hifferman."

[305] Rubin, *Courbet,* 201-12; Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 27-39.

Paris was Du Camp's denunciation of the Paris Commune, published less than a year after Courbet's death.[306] Courbet had been imprisoned for his participation in the Commune and fined for the destruction of the Vendôme column.[307] Du Camp saw Courbet and his works—*L'Origine* in particular—as representative of the excesses of the Commune.[308] Although the quote might seem humorous in its tone, it is meant as a condemnation:

> Pour plaire à un très riche musulman [...] Courbet [...] fit un portrait de femme bien difficile à décrire.
>
> Dans le cabinet de toilette du personnage étranger auquel j'ai fait allusion, on voyait un petit tableau caché sous un voile vert. Lorsqu'on écartait le voile on demeurait stupéfait d'apercevoir une femme de grandeur naturelle, vue de face, extraordinairement émue et convulsée, remarquablement peinte, reproduite *con amore*, ainsi que disent les Italiens, et donnant le dernier mot du réalisme. Mais par un inconcevable oubli, l'artisan, qui avait copié son modèle sur nature, avait négligé de représenter les pieds, les jambes, les cuisses, le ventre, les hanches, la poitrine, les mains, les bras, les épaules, le cou et la tête.[309]

A second commentary on Courbet's painting is a journal entry by Edmond de Goncourt in June of 1889, wherein Goncourt praises the work, comparing it to works of the Italian Renaissance:

> Aujourd'hui, un marchand m'écrit qu'il avait reçu des livres et des objets japonais, et, comme je regarde, de deux yeux ennuyés, le très médiocre envoi de l'Empire du Lever du Soleil, le marchand me dit: "Connaissez-vous ça?" Et il ouvre avec une clef un tableau, dont le panneau extérieur montre une église de village dans la neige, et dont le panneau secret, peint par Courbet pour Khalil-Bey, représente un ventre et un bas-ventre de femme. Devant cette toile que je n'avais jamais vue, je dois faire amende honorable à Courbet: ce ventre est beau comme la chair d'un Corrège.[310]

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[306] Courbet died December 31, 1877.

[307] See Rubin, *Courbet*, 269-304.

[308] Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 109.

[309] Cited in Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 108.

[310] *Journal* of Edmond de Goncourt, 29 June 1889, cited in Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 137.

Beyond these two nineteenth-century commentaries, there is little information about what happened to the painting after Bey's bankruptcy in 1867. According to Bernard Teyssèdre's thoroughly sourced historical account, it was first sold to Jean-Baptiste Faure, then eventually to François de Hatvany, a Hungarian painter and collector.[311] The painting's whereabouts were unknown through most of the early twentieth century until 1955, when Jacques Lacan purchased *L'Origine* for his wife, Sylvia. It hung in their home or Lacan's office until the mid 1970s.[312] The Lacans hid *L'Origine* behind a cleverly designed frame containing a wooden panel painted by André Masson.[313]

> Masson avait peint un paysage "surréaliste" sur un fond brun; un paysage étrange dont les lignes principales reprenaient les contours de *L'Origine du monde*. Un observateur qui n'aurait pas connu ce tableau pouvait y voir des collines innocentes là, où se dressaient les seins, de la végétation là où le jupon (ou le drap) avait laissé des plis ainsi qu'à l'emplacement de la toison [...].[314]

The composition of Masson's screen therefore closely matches the shapes of *L'Origine* and visually compares it to a landscape. Masson's design hints at what it hides, extending the sense of veiling/revealing that Courbet's painting so powerfully evokes.

L'Origine du monde is still surrounded with a certain amount of mystery. The identity of the model has been a topic of discussion since Courbet painted it. Until recently, scholars thought the model was Joanna Hiffernan (1839-1886), who also posed for Courbet's *La Belle*

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[311] Teyssèdre, *Roman*,185. Jean-Baptiste Faure (1830-1914) was a baritone with the Paris Opera and art collector, particularly of Impressionist works.

[312] Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 249.

[313] Masson was Sylvia's brother-in-law, married to her sister, Rose (Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 236).

[314] Savatier, *L'Origine*, 186.

Irlandaise (1866).[315] She may have been the lighter-haired model in *Le Sommeil*.[316] She was James McNeill Whistler's (1834-1903) model and lover, posing also for his 1864 *Symphony in White No. 1, The Little White Girl*.[317] Orban supposes Hiffernan was the model and chooses her as the inspiration for her protagonist, "Jo," in *J'étais l'origine du monde*. However, in 2018, Claude Schopp located compelling evidence to suggest the model was actually Constance Quéniaux, one of Khalil Bey's mistresses.[318] Another development is the discovery of a painting proposed to be the figure's missing head, which suggested *L'Origine* may have been cropped down from a much larger original painting.[319] However, in December of 2013 preservation specialists at the Musée d'Orsay examined *L'Origine* carefully and proved that the canvas is in its original format.[320] Thus, the framing and composition of Courbet's masterpiece is an essential and deliberately planned part of its meaning, as is the obscuring of the model's identity. The fact that *L'Origine* has inspired viewers to conduct extensive research and to create works of art themselves demonstrates the powerful effect of this painting: it demands a response from its viewer.

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[315] Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 331-41.

[316] Rubin, *Courbet*, 207.

[317] Rubin, *Courbet*, 206; Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 333-4.

[318] Claude Schopp recounts the details of his discovery in *L'Origine du monde: vie du modèle*, (Paris: Phébus, 2018). He was editing the correspondence between George Sand and Alexandre Dumas *fils* when he discovered a confusing word in one of Dumas' letters referring to Courbet. The letter is dated June 17, 1871, and the lines in the previously edited volume he was consulting read:

> Courbet est sans excuse [...]. Quand on a son talent, qui, sans être exceptionnel, est remarquable et intéressant, on n'a pas le droit d'être aussi orgueilleux, aussi insolent et aussi lâche – sans compter qu'on ne peint pas de son pinceau le plus délicat et le plus sonore *l'interview* de Mlle Queniault de l'Opéra, pour le Turc qui s'y hébergeait de tems en tems, le tout de grandeur naturelle et de grandeur naturelle aussi deux femmes se passant d'hommes. (Cited in Schopp, *Vie du modèle*, 13)

Schopp thought the second painting "de grandeur naturelle" of "deux femmes se passant d'hommes" was probably Courbet's *Le Sommeil*, a painting of two nude lesbians lying intertwined, and the "Turc" mentioned was probably Bey, who owned *Le Sommeil* and *L'Origine du monde* (Schopp, *Vie du modèle*, 14). This suggested that the word "*interview*" might be mistranscribed (Schopp, *Vie du modèle*, 14). He returned to the original letter in the Bibliothèque Nationale and confirmed that Dumas had instead written "*l'intérieur* de Mlle Queniault" (Schopp, *Vie du modèle*, 15). Schopp believes the juxtaposition of references to Bey and *Le Sommeil* suggest that "cet '*intérieur* de Mlle Queniault' ne pouvait être que *L'Origine du monde*, tableau provocateur que le Turc Khalil Bey avait également commandé à Gustave Courbet" (Schopp, *Vie du modèle*, 15).

[319] Anne-Cécile Beaudoin, et al. *Gustave Courbet le visage de L'Origine du monde.* (New York: Filipacchi, 2013, Kindle), XX.

L'Origine calls the observer to more than passive spectatorship of the woman's body. Although the image seems to be displaying everything openly, the truncated torso emphasizes what the viewer cannot see, cannot know. The face of the model, normally the most public part of her, becomes a secret between her and the artist, a transgressive move that enhances the erotic appeal of the image. These choices reverse the expected order: what is usually most private is now overtly displayed, and what is usually most visible is now kept private. Furthermore, the intimacy of the pose, the close-up detail—including a glimpse of the interior, with a bit of inner labia visible—are all indicators of the artist's personal knowledge of his model. Because of this sense of intimacy, the viewer can see the model's body and can even imagine having access to it, but the ultimate access is blocked.

Courbet accomplishes this tension between the seen and the unseen with his careful arrangement of compositional elements. *L'Origine* contains an abundance of triangles, beginning with the pubic triangle, which immediately draws the viewer's attention. The dark color of the negative space in the top left corner is an inversion of the pubic triangle. The overall pyramid shape of the torso, the space below the buttocks pointing upwards and the small triangles on either side all work to frame the image. These triangular shapes spiral and swirl around the vagina, pointing all attention there. Yet, there is nowhere for the viewer's gaze to go when it gets there. The vaginal opening itself is not visible: if one cannot see it, then metaphorically one also cannot enter. Viewers also cannot simply escape its pull because the composition of the painting clearly makes it the focal point. Then, the swirling triangles draw the viewer's gaze outwards again to rejoin the spinning visual dance. The movement of the observer's eye around, towards the vagina, then outward and back again metaphorically reenacts sexual touch, inviting viewers to a visual *ménage à trois*. The spectator becomes more than simply a voyeur of the model's body, but is instead invited to participate in the visual exchange between artist and model.

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[320] Bruno Mottin, "*L'Origine du monde*: une approche technique," in *Cet obscur objet de désirs: Autour de l'Origine du monde*, (Paris: Lienart, Musée départemental Gustave Courbet [Ornans], 2014) 33.

A. Reading *L'Origine du monde*: Binary Interpretations

Two opposing interpretations of *L'Origine du monde* immediately present themselves, both either supporting or resisting traditional heterosexual gender roles and the studio fantasy story line.[321] The first is the most evident, focusing on the overt sexuality, the fact that it is essentially a crotch-shot, beautifully painted and clearly meant for masculine viewing pleasure. Conceived as Khalil Bey's commission and born of Courbet's creation, the ultimate origin of *L'Origine du monde*, as Linda Nochlin argues, is masculine desire, which Courbet's painting casts as likewise the origin of art itself, thus displaying his sexual and artistic prowess simultaneously.[322] In this variation of the studio romance, the artist is a god-like creator and master of his domain. As for his patron, the spectator, his possession of the painting grants him vicarious ownership of the artist's powers and the woman's body.[323]

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[321] Scholars have proposed a variety of interpretations for *L'Origine du monde*, including seeing the painting as a form of religious iconography—perhaps representing the Virgin Mary—and understanding it as a representation of the cosmic Big Bang (See Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 331-478). However, these readings remain within the gender binary, assigning the female figure an allegorical role. They are also externally imposed, an understanding accounting for the viewer's perspective, not questioning the point of view or the experience of the model herself.

[322] Linda Nochlin, "Courbet's 'L'Origine du monde:' The Origin without an Original." *October* 37, (Summer, 1986), 76.

The second reading is a feminist one wherein the female model is a victim, nameless, faceless, passive, reduced to nothing but her sexual parts, laid out on display, subject to countless desiring and dissecting gazes, with no voice or identity of her own. In fact, *L'Origine du monde* is similar to anatomical illustrations and medical imagery.[324] One powerful example of a potential source for Courbet's composition is a wax figure depicting female genitals within a white cloth frame, *Sexe féminin après défloration*.[325] In this formula, the woman is powerless. Her inferior position within patriarchy defines everything about her. Her body is merely the stage upon which men act out their fantasies and achieve their professional objectives, while simultaneously fulfilling a deep psychological need to control and contain the potentially contaminating influences of the female body.[326] These opposing interpretations are complementary because they are both based on an either/or binary framework. However, in the case of Courbet's work, including but not limited to *L'Origine du monde*, such a binary reading proves reductive as it ignores interpretations that fall outside the gender binary.

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[323] Susan Waller describes this triangulated relationship and argues that although the stereotype of the artist's sexual relationship with his model was common during the nineteenth century, the actual implied erotic connection was between the viewer and the model (*Invention,* 58-9).

[324] Jérémie Koering, "Le tableau à venir," in *Cet obscur objet de désirs: Autour de L'Origine du monde*. (Paris: Lienart, 2014), 41–57.

[325] Koering, "Le tableau à venir," 46. This figure was part of Dr. Pierre Spitzner's "Athaeneum, Muséum anatomique et ethnologique," a collection of medically-themed wax moulages that was displayed in Paris beginning in 1865 (Koering, "Le tableau à venir," 46 and 56). Therefore, it is possible Courbet may have seen the moulage in question before composing *L'Origine du monde* in 1866.

[326] For more, see Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude*, especially Part 1 "Theorizing the female nude" (6-33).

There is simply no denying the eroticism of the *L'Origine du monde*, so much so that one could argue that this painting is merely pornography. In fact, there is compelling evidence that Courbet's composition was influenced by contemporary pornographic photography, especially hand-tinted stereographic photo cards.[327] Courbet deliberately sought to surpass photography as a visual medium, demonstrating his superior ability to depict life with *L'Origine du monde*.[328] Certainly, even today, displaying the image outside the museum might still provoke calls for censorship.[329] This frank sexuality of *L'Origine* is an important source of the work's power. The painting was purposefully transgressive, shocking enough to be kept behind a green curtain in Khalil Bey's dressing room, and shocking enough that a century later even Jacques Lacan kept it covered with Masson's screen.[330]

B. Courbet's Artistic Transgressions

L'Origine du monde's powerful effect aligns with Courbet's intentional challenges to the social and aesthetic boundaries of his time.[331] While a painting of a nude woman reclining on the banks of a river might be acceptable to the Salon audience when she is cast as a nymph or bacchante, a similar visual trope becomes a source of scandal once stripped from its mythological background. Courbet was dedicated to rejecting idealization and anchored his work in his personal sensory, physical experiences.[332] Critics accused Courbet's Realism of being crude, uncouth, and devoted to the ugly, seamy side of life because of its rejection of "the poetic aspiration to rise above nature."[333] In *La femme aux bas blancs* (1851), for example, Courbet purposefully evokes the common theme of a female figure in a natural setting, but he demythologizes it. He depicts the female body in realistic detail, defying convention and heightening the eroticism.[334] The young woman in *La femme aux bas blancs* is dressing after a swim, putting on one stocking while her ankle rests on her other knee, evocatively displaying the crevasse and cave between her legs.[335] Her white stockings connect this image to contemporary popular pornographic photos of prostitutes wearing only *des bas blancs*.[336]

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[327] Linda Nochlin, *Courbet*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2007), 12-13.

[328] Nochlin, *Courbet*, 12.

[329] In 2011, Facebook censored Frédéric Durand-Baïssas's post of a photo of *L'Origine du monde*, resulting in an 8-year court battle. The case was well-covered in the press. See for example: Caitlin Dewey. "Facebook censored a nude painting, and it could change the site forever." *The Washington Post*, 9 March 2015.

[330] Lacan reportedly enjoyed surprising dinner guests with a dramatic unveiling of "son Courbet." (Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 238-9).

[331] See the monographs by Fried (1990), Herding (1991), Nochlin (2007), and Rubin (1997/2003) for more detailed discussions about the interrelationship of Courbet's art and politics.

Two further examples of Courbet's crossing of artistic boundaries are paintings from the same year as *L'Origine's* creation, 1866: *La Femme au perroquet* and *Le Sommeil*.[337] These two paintings each disrupt the boundaries of artistic custom by combining traditional and unconventional elements. Courbet created *La Femme au perroquet* for the Salon of May 1866, declaring—probably sarcastically—that he would send the committee "des tableaux propres comme ils les aiment" and describing the large nude as "une académie."[338] The large canvas depicts a naked young woman lying on a white cloth spread upon a bed. Her upper body is turning away from the viewer while her lower body is oriented forward, her sex hidden by the fabric. She holds one arm above her head, creating a perch for a brightly colored parrot. The parrot's wings are outspread and its beak is ready to pierce the skin of her outstretched finger. She smiles up at the bird, her mouth slightly open as if laughing gleefully.

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[332] Paul Galvez, "Courbet's Touch," in *Soil and Stone: Impressionism, Urbanism, Environment,* (Edinburgh UK and Burlington VT: Visual Arts Research Institute, 2003), 20.

[333] Rubin, *Courbet,* 161.

[334] Rubin, *Courbet,* 184-5.

[335] Fried, *Courbet's Realism,* 212.

[336] Rubin, *Courbet,* 185.

[337] Scholars thought Hiffernan modeled for both *Le Sommeil* and *La Femme au perroquet* (Rubin, *Courbet*, 207). However, Margaret Macdonald's research suggests that this is unlikely because Hiffernan was in London during that time (*Woman in White*, 26).

Courbet referred to this painting as "une académie," a term used to describe the idealized nudes that students learned to draw in their official training at the École des Beaux-Arts.[339] In some ways, *La Femme au perroquet* respects the nineteenth-century conventions of the nude genre: the beautiful young woman's body is displayed provocatively; the smooth rendering of muscle and sinew demonstrate the artist's skill; and the parrot points towards mythological themes like Leda and the swan.[340] However, there are no clear references to known myths, neither through traditional attributes nor in the title of the work. Her discarded clothing, shown in the bottom right corner, hints at her loose morals and suggests she is a prostitute.[341] Although the real scandal, according to Teyssèdre: "c'est que cette demoiselle ait l'air de se passer très bien des mâles pour son orgasme."[342] Together, various elements of the painting create an enclosed space that excludes the viewer: the unbalanced composition weighted heavily to the left; the awkward twist of the woman's body; her focus on the parrot; and her clear pleasure in the depicted moment. This painting offers no easy entry into voyeurship and no proposed surrogate for the observer to inhabit. The viewer is not invited into the private exchange between woman and bird.[343] This lack of clear access to metaphorically possess and control the woman's body breaks the convention in Western painting that displays the female nude to attract "a male viewer located unproblematically at a distance from the painting that allows him easy command of the pictorial field."[344] Further, Courbet complicates the roles and characteristics upheld by the gender binary: Instead of being a passive recipient of the observer's gaze, the female figure clearly makes choices about her own sexual pleasure that do not account for male desire. Teyssèdre proposes a new title for the work that would more clearly indicate its subject matter: "une femme qui vient de se masturber s'amuse à se faire becqueter un doigt par son perroquet au moment où elle jouit."[345] Courbet's *La Femme au perroquet* is an evocative image of solitary feminine pleasure.

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[338] Cited in Daniel Arasse, *Le Détail: Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), 444. The cited quote can be found in footnote #349 on page 444. "G. Courbet (propos rapporté par le comte H. d'Ideville): 'Ils auront des tableaux propres comme ils les aiment, un paysage et une académie,' cité dans *Courbet raconté par lui-même et ses amis*, Genève, P. Callier, 1948, I, 212."

[339] Waller, *Invention*, 4.

[340] In Greek mythology, Zeus transforms himself into a swan to rape Leda. This story has inspired many artists, including Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. Additionally, the parrot became a complex and often eroticized symbol, appearing in many works, including Gustave Flaubert's *Un Coeur Simple* (1876). See: Le Juez, Brigitte. *Le papegai et le papelard dans 'Un coeur simple' de Gustave Flaubert.* Amsterdam; Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999.

[341] Arasse, *Le Détail*, 358.

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[342] Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 52.

[343] Edouard Manet created the similarly themed *Woman with a Parrot* in 1866, the same year as Courbet's *Femme au perroquet.* Mona Hadler notes a long literary tradition of women with parrots as companions–and sometimes confidants, beginning from as far back as the sixteenth century to Flaubert's *Un Coeur Simple* ("Manet's 'Woman with a Parrot of 1866,'" *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 7, [Jan. 1973]: 118-9). In Flaubert's 1876 story, a servant woman develops a deep connection to her pet parrot. Therefore, Courbet's painting is not an isolated instance of this theme amongst his contemporaries. Hadler notes that although Manet's painting was shown at the Salon in 1868, it had already been completed when Courbet's painting was on display at the 1866 Salon (Hadler, "Manet's 'Woman,'" 120). It is possible that Manet created his work in response to Courbet's, but there is no clear order of events to support that claim (Hadler, "Manet's 'Woman,'" 120). Therefore, without any further evidence, we can assume that when they created parrot-themed works of art, both Courbet and Manet were responding to similar cultural tropes but not necessarily directly to one another's work.

[344] Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, 204.

Another example of Courbet's transgressive art is the painting *Le Sommeil*, sometimes called *Paresse et Luxure* or *Les deux amies*. This large canvas is far more daring than *La Femme au perroquet*, portraying two nude women wrapped in a post-coital embrace. Khalil Bey owned *Le Sommeil* as well as *L'Origine du monde.* It was probably a commission, ordered when Bey saw the similarly themed *Venus et Psyché* and requested a copy.[346] Instead, Courbet said he would paint the scene that followed, the "après."[347] Like *L'Origine du monde*, the sexually explicit subject matter is the most noticeable aspect of this painting.

The female figures lie on a bed covered with white fabric, their discarded jewelry and clothing strewn about them, a broken strand of pearls suggesting their fallen moral state.[348] Their entwined bodies glow against the white bedding and the dark background. The composition focuses on their nakedness, emphasizing the similarities of their curves while also highlighting differing flesh tones of the brunette model and the strawberry-blonde one. As Michael Fried observes, the position of the figures presents observers with "complementary aspects" of the female body, showing both front and rear, seen from above and below.[349] The models' interlocking limbs and awkwardly rotated torsos seem to merge into "virtually a single body, embraced by a single pair of arms."[350] The two women's absorption in one another recalls the enclosed erotic space of *La Femme au perroquet*. Viewers are invited into the intimate space of the couple's bedchamber, yet they are excluded from the women's communion with one another.

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[345] Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 52.

[346] Arasse, *Le Détail*, 357-8.

[347] Arasse, *Le Détail*, 357-8.

[348] Arasse, *Le Détail*, 357-8.

[349] Fried, *Courbet's Realism,* 207.

Courbet's pattern of transgressing artistic and social norms throughout his career provides a context for the bold subject and composition of *L'Origine du monde*. Like so many of his works, *L'Origine* breaks rules dramatically, frankly presenting details that social expectations and visual tradition usually keep hidden. Portraying any woman's body hair is in itself a defiance of contemporary aesthetic conventions.[351] Courbet rejects the idealized shorn and sanitized female bodies normally gracing the walls of the Salon. Instead, he places the pubic triangle centrally and uses contrasting colors to emphasize it, evoking the animal, purely sexual side of humanity.[352] Yet, Courbet maintains the white cloth, a visual trope that so often accompanies the nude female figure in Western art. Traditionally, the drapery or cloth shown near a reclining nude softens the impact of her nakedness, comfortingly reminding viewers of the bedroom or bath.[353] However, in *L'Origine du monde*, Courbet deploys the fabric to increase the viewer's discomfort with the image: while it would normally hide her genitals, here the cloth hides her face instead. With *L'Origine du monde,* Courbet portrays the naked truth of art: "…le nu de peinture devient comme la peinture mise à nu, une peinture où l'éros du peintre est autorisé à ne plus prendre en compte les contraintes d'un raffinement social."[354] Although perhaps, as

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[350] Fried, *Courbet's Realism,* 207.

[351] A. Hollander, *Seeing*, 136.

[352] A. Hollander, *Seeing*, 137.

[353] A. Hollander, *Seeing*, 157.

[354] Arasse, *Le Détail*, 359.

Teyssèdre suggests, Courbet simply wanted to paint “un ventre de femme.”[355] Sexual desire becomes synonymous with artistic desire, both openly declaring their presence and their purposeful rejection of social conventions.

The graphic representation of female genitals created by a male painter can be read as the ultimate metaphor for the masculine domination of art itself. Theorists Susan Gubar and Barbara Johnson suggest that the paintbrush/pen can be seen as a phallic symbol, while the canvas/page represents the female body, blank until it is defined by the male’s chosen marks upon its surface.[356] Applying this idea to *L’Origine*, the image communicates directly what, according to these critics, *all* art is—a representation of male desire, an enactment of the primal heterosexual act, every painting a result of an ejaculation of color onto a virgin surface—and only Courbet dared to show the truth.

These interpretations are all indeed present to an extent, and they exemplify polarized understandings of Courbet’s painting. The subject of *L’Origine* undoubtedly activates these sorts of comparisons: woman is portrayed as what her body *is* while also being defined as what she is *not*. She is the ultimate Other to man. Yet, reading only these binary oppositions keeps the work locked into traditional gender-dependent complementary meanings. The power and richness of *L’Origine* can be read beyond these reductive points of view.

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[355] Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 397.

[356] Susan Gubar, “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity,” in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 292–313; and Barbara Johnson, “Is Female to Male as Ground Is to Figure?” in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 255–68.

C. *L'Origine du monde*: "Bigendered" Embodiment

Supporting this claim, Michael Fried identifies what he calls a "bigendered" pattern of themes and compositional elements throughout much of Courbet's oeuvre. Fried uses the term "bigendered" to describe something that simultaneously displays qualities stereotypically associated with both genders.[357] Fried reinterprets the paintbrush and the canvas as bigendered symbols in many of Courbet's works. The paintbrush contains both masculine and feminine elements, because while the wooden handle can be seen as phallic, primarily due to its shape, the brush or hair end is associated with the long flowing hair Courbet gives many of his female figures.[358] For example, in *La Belle Irlandaise* Courbet represents Hiffernan fingering her luxurious hair with her right hand. Because Courbet held his brush or palette knife in his right hand when working, Fried identifies the right hand as metaphorically associated with the act of painting. Thus, when Courbet unconsciously identifies with many of his figures and transposes his own painting activity into visual metaphors within the work, the figures' right hand is also often the active hand, while the left hand more passively holds something or is shown in a position akin to that used for holding the painter's palette.[359] Fried therefore reads Hiffernan's curling tresses as metaphor for the "business—(but also the pleasure—) end" of the painter's brush.[360]

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[357] Fried, *Courbet's Realism,* 191.

[358] Fried, *Courbet's Realism,* 198.

[359] Fried, *Courbet's Realism,* 191.

[360] Fried, *Courbet's Realism,* 198-9.

In Fried's reading, the canvas itself is also a more nuanced metaphor, becoming an extension of the artist's own body, the figures and themes frequently exhibiting bigendered traits. Courbet's Realist project, as he described in his own *Realist Manifesto*, was to "puiser dans l'entière connaissance de la tradition de sentiment raisonnée et indépendante de ma propre individualité."[361] Courbet therefore deliberately tapped into his own lived experience when he painted and, consciously or unconsciously, created compositional themes that invite viewers to become similarly aware of their own embodied presence before the works of art.[362] One way of accomplishing this is to depict human figures cropped at the waist and foreshortened, thus the bodies seem to project into the viewer's space. Examples include some of Courbet's early self-portraits, like *The Wounded Man* (c. 1844-54, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) and, of course, other works with dramatically cropped bodies, such as *L'Origine du monde*. In Courbet's self-portrait from a drawing known as *Country Siesta* (c.1840) the male figure's pose is very similar to *The Wounded Man*. Fried explains that with the composition, Courbet calls attention to the physical bulk of the figure's body, and furthermore:

> […] we are thus invited to become aware that the sitter's view of his own body, should he awaken and open his eyes, would itself be foreshortened—more precisely, that he occupies towards his own body a fixed and unchanging point of view, whereas his relation to all other objects is a function of his ability to approach or withdraw from them, to survey them from different sides, in short to adopt toward them a multiplicity of perspectives according to interest and desire, limited only by contingent circumstances. The experience of that fixed point of view, which entails the impossibility of surveying one's body as a whole, belongs to the body as actually lived […].[363]

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[361] Courbet, *Exhibition et vente,* 1.

[362] Fried, *Courbet's Realism,* 53-84.

[363] Fried, *Courbet's Realism,* 67.

Thus, the viewer's own living body is consciously or unconsciously engaged in the response to *L'Origine*, which explains part of its powerful impact.

Christine Orban's own response to *L'Origine du monde* inspired her novel. Orban builds a narrative that relies on traditional gender roles within the painter/model relationship, while also challenging the fixity of gender and sexual norms through shifting and multifaceted narrative fragmentations. In a further challenge to the patriarchal power of the studio romance, Orban's protagonist moves beyond the model's role, becoming an artist herself as she creates a literary work of art with her memoirs.

II. Christine Orban's *J'étais l'origine du monde*: the model's account of the studio romance

A. A Response to Courbet

Christine Orban's novel *J'étais l'origine du monde* invites readers to witness the model's relationship with a fictionalized version of Gustave Courbet and to consider non-binary gender role variations within the studio romance.[364] The author steps behind the canvas to give a body and voice to the woman who posed for *L'Origine du monde*. Orban presumes the model is

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[364] To avoid confusion between the literary version of Courbet created by Orban and necessary references to the historical person, I will refer to the fictional character as "Gustave." This does not always follow the conventions of the novel, wherein Jo occasionally distinguishes between "Gustave," her lover, and "Courbet," the celebrated painter: "J'étais prête à offrir mes jambes ouvertes sur un sofa à Gustave, pas à Courbet" (Christine Orban, *J'étais l'origine du monde*, [Paris: Albin Michel, 2000], 60). The same system will apply to the artist "Whistler" and the fictional character "James." I will also use either the full name "Joanna Hiffernan" or the surname "Hiffernan" to refer to the historical person, while "Jo" indicates Orban's fictional creation. Whenever I am citing the novel directly, I will, of course, use the author's words and maintain Orban's spelling of Hiffernan's name (Hifferman).

Joanna Hiffernan, called “Jo.” The author frames the narrative with letters addressed to an editor with whom Jo shares her memories and confesses that she was the model for Courbet’s masterpiece. In Orban’s tale, the traditional actors in the studio romance still play the same gendered roles as in the nineteenth-century versions: the artist is a man and his desire drives the painting’s creative process; the model is a beautiful woman, sacrificing herself for his art; and the external observer is a man—in this case, the male editor to whom Jo addresses her memoir. However, whereas within the nineteenth-century framework the model’s voice is absent or serves to support the artist’s story, in Orban’s novel, Jo’s experience determines the direction of the narration.

Christine Orban was born in Casablanca, Morocco in 1957. She has published more than twenty novels, several of them based on historical figures: Virginia Woolf in *Une Folie amoureuse* (1997), Joséphine and Napoléon in *Quel effet bizarre faites-vous sur mon cœur* (2014), and Marie Antoinette in *Charmer, s’égarer et mourir* (2016). Orban’s novels are generally well-received and discussed widely in the French press upon their release, but there is almost no scholarship devoted to her work. Only three articles appeared in academic journals, all of them about Orban’s novel based on the life of Virgina Woolf.[365] In his book about Courbet’s masterpiece, Thierry Savatier refers to Orban’s novel, noting that she attributed the model’s role to Joanna Hiffernan “dans un roman publié il y a quelques années et qui connut un certain succès [...].”[366] Teyssèdre, too, mentions Orban, adding a bit of implied literary commentary to his description of her novel: “Christine Orban s’est reconnue dans [le] pelage [de *L’Origine du monde*] et a bâti autour de lui toute une ruche de souvenirs fantasmés.”[367] Teyssèdre’s remark categorizes Orban’s work as feminine autobiography (elle “s’est reconnue”), a buzzing, disorganized “hive of fantasized memories” (“une ruche de souvenirs fantasmés”), and seems to minimize its literary value. Christine Orban’s novel *J’étais l’Origine du monde* uses heteronormative stereotypes liberally, and the text contains many contradictions and repetitions that can become disorienting for the reader. However, Orban’s focus on the model’s perspective and her use of narrative strategies that replicate the composition of Courbet’s painting merit further scholarly attention.

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[365] Robert Dion, “*Une année amoureuse de Virginia Woolf*, ou la fiction biographique multipliée,” *Littérature* 128, (2002), 26-45; Anne-Laure Rigeade, *From the Author to the Icon: A Heritage of Virginia Woolf in French Biographies and Biofictions*, (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2017); and Claudia Schmitt, “Ein Leben wie im Roman: Virginia Woolf als literarische Figur biographischer Romane,” in *Discourses on Nations and Identities*, Edited by Daniel Syrovy, (Berlin, Germany: Walter de De Gruyter, Inc. 2021), 167-182.

[366] Savatier, *L’Origine*, 54.

Using a fragmentary, non-sequential first-person narrative, Orban’s protagonist, the aging Jo, recounts her long-ago love affair with Gustave. Although Jo frequently cites her recollection of Gustave’s words, the visual and psychological perspective is exclusively hers as she grapples with what it means to look and be looked at as a body posing and as a body represented on canvas. When the painting is finished, she finds it shocking and cannot abide its presence, so she departs in the night, ending her relationship with Gustave. However, in writing her memoirs years later, Orban’s Jo creates her own work of art and thereby attempts to construct a new image of herself. Jo expresses a desire to control how others perceive her when, in the opening letter, she asks the editor to publish her confession after her death, pleading “Ne me jugez pas” (11). Therefore, Jo is simultaneously the artist writing her story, the model posing for Courbet’s masterpiece, and the observer viewing the process of creation as well as the resulting painting. Jo’s role as active creator of her own narrative moves the focus away from the painter’s perspective to the model's, and thus inherently subverts the patriarchal fantasy of the studio romance.

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[367] Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 331.

Orban assigns her protagonist a series of questions that serve as a nodal point for the complexities and ambivalences that characterize both the text and the painting. About her experience posing for *L'Origine,* Jo asks: "Que [Gustave] pouvait-il me demander de plus? […] Comment a-t-il osé? […] Comment ai-je pu accepter?" (40). Jo tells of her hesitations, her discomfort with Gustave's requested pose, Gustave's seductively pleading speeches, and her eventual acquiescence to his wishes. Her recollections of the events surrounding the creation of *L'Origine du monde* focus on her own preoccupations. She ruminates on her lost youth and beauty. She also describes her physical and emotional sensations while posing, claims her contribution to the masterpiece, and recalls her response when she finally sees the completed painting. Jo deconstructs her complex, ambivalent motives for agreeing to pose: jealousy of Gustave's other women; making a bid for immortality through inclusion in the artist's *œuvre*; pleasing her lover; and finding pleasure in exhibitionism. Her past and present feelings about her experience are multifaceted. She expresses both a sense of pride as well as deep shame about having posed for *L'Origine*. Jo embraces all these emotions as her narrative follows her fluctuating and frequently contradictory responses.

The author weaves known facts about Hiffernan, Courbet, and Whistler with imagined events to construct the novel and its characters. Examples of historical events mentioned in the text include Whistler's and Hiffernan's close friendship with Courbet while all three were vacationing in Trouville during the summer of 1865 (when Hiffernan posed for *Portrait de Jo,* and *Jo, La Belle irlandaise*), and Whistler's departure for Chile in January of 1866.[368] Other facts, such as mentions of Gustave Courbet's known works and references to other artists and writers of the time are sprinkled throughout the text, although they are not always entirely accurate.[369] As Savatier says of *J'étais l'Origine du monde*: "Un écrivain, dans le cadre d'une fiction, a la liberté, sur le base de faits réels, d'inventer ce qu'il veut."[370] Although Orban uses real works of art, facts about actual people, and verifiable historical events to anchor her work, her novel is an artistic creation, not a biography of Hiffernan and/or Courbet. The romantic relationship Orban creates between her fictionalized versions of Joanna Hiffernan and Gustave Courbet is her own construction.

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[368] Teyssèdre *Roman*, 332-3.

Adding to the complex, multi-layered meanings within the novel, the author is a female artist responding to her own initial shocking encounter with *L'Origine du monde*. When Christine Orban saw Courbet's painting for the first time, she noticed the powerful reactions of others before seeing the canvas itself:

> Après une journée d'écriture, j'aime me promener ... Ce jour-là, j'avais choisi d'aller au musée d'Orsay. Je ne venais chercher aucun tableau en particulier, lorsque j'aperçu un groupe de touristes aux visages embarrassés, des mères cachant les yeux de leurs enfants. De là où j'étais placée je ne pouvais voir *L'Origine du monde*. Je connaissais le tableau, mais je n'étais pas consciente de l'effet puissant qu'il produisait. Alors, je me suis demandé comment une femme avait pu poser ainsi.[371]

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[369] For example, Orban mentions Gustave Flaubert (63), Édouard Manet (59), Henri Fantin-Latour (23), and Charles Baudelaire (23). An example of an inaccuracy occurs in Jo's final letter to the editor, which claims that the Goncourt brothers saw *L'Origine du monde* (137). However, as cited above, it was only Edmond de Goncourt who saw the painting in 1889 at an antique dealer's shop.

[370] Savatier, *L'Origine*, 55.

[371] I contacted Christine Orban via email in July of 2020. She graciously responded to questions about her creative process when she was writing *J'étais l'origine du monde.* This quote is from our personal correspondence, July 5, 2020.

Orban embeds her initial question “comment une femme avait pu poser ainsi” and the image of the shocked viewers into her novel. Jo’s opening letter to the editor is dated 1903 (the year of Whistler’s death), a time when *L’Origine*’s location was unknown.[372] Jo then tells the editor she is sure the painting will resurface one day and people will wonder who posed for it: “Je pense à ceux qui ne me connaissent pas, qui un jour découvriront, impressionnés, choqués, émerveillés, *L’Origine du monde* et se demanderont qui est la femme qui a osé poser dans cette honteuse insouciance” (15). The expression “honteuse insouciance” (shameful carelessness) seems to conflate two polarized points of view, blending Jo’s perception of the viewer’s moralizing gaze with her own mindset. Jo’s emotional response fluctuates between these two extremes as she remembers her time with Gustave, and the dramatic focus of Orban’s novel is Jo’s embodied experience of modeling rather than the painter’s visual perspective while looking and painting. Jo’s words furthermore signal the writer’s intention and invite readers to adopt the female model’s perspective, thus undermining the male artist-centered studio fantasy.

B. Spiraling Around the Void: The Narrative Structure and Lexical Features of Orban’s novel

Christine Orban organizes the narrative of her novel *J’étais l’Origine du monde* in a similar fashion to Courbet’s design of *L’Origine du monde*. As discussed above, Courbet’s use of pyramidical and triangular shapes creates a spiraling movement around the vaginal opening of the figure represented on the canvas, focusing visual tension on the figure's sexual center. However, the vagina itself is not visible and thus the spectator's gaze cannot rest when it arrives at the focal point. Orban's text is structured similarly: she deliberately evokes the void at the center of Courbet's composition as well as the visual cyclone that encircles it. She creates a series of textual lacunae and surrounds them with an abundance of descriptors, metaphors, and intertextual references that deflect the reader's attention from these gaps.

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[372] According to Margaret MacDonald’s genealogical research, Joanna Hiffernan was born July 8, 1839, and died of pneumonia on July 3, 1886 (*The Woman in White: Joanna Hiffernan and James McNeill Whistler*. [New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2020], 15 and 31). If she had been alive, she would have been 64 when Whistler died. Orban’s timeline, placing Jo at Whistler’s funeral, aligns with what scholars thought about Hiffernan at the time the novel was written.

The novel is framed with two letters from Joanna "Hifferman" (Orban's spelling) addressed to an unnamed "Cher éditeur." These letters function like Courbet's model's two thighs, which point viewers' attention towards the pubic triangle at the center of the painting. Jo's opening and closing letters both direct readers into the text: the first one introduces the primary themes and important tropes of the novel, while the final missive subtly redirects readers back to the text, inviting a recommencement of the narrative's cyclonic movement. The first letter begins with the question "Est-ce pour moi que vous êtes venu à l'enterrement de Whistler?" (11). Orban thus opens her novel with a burial, setting the stage for the continual references to death and absence throughout the text. Furthermore, this question introduces Jo as a narcissistic character who expects that a stranger might attend a funeral merely to meet her rather than to honor a well-known painter's memory. Jo's letter continues: "Quand j'ai soulevé mon voile, vous m'avez reconnue, dites-vous, à l'ondulation de mes cheveux roux malgré les mèches blanches dont ils sont parsemés aujourd'hui" (11).[373] Here, Orban activates the trope of unveiling, suggesting that Jo will reveal herself to the editor and the reader just as she did to Gustave when she posed for *L'Origine du monde*. This suggestion invites readers to share Gustave's and the editor's desire to view Jo's body and know her secrets.

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[373] As mentioned above, the real Joanna Hiffernan could not have been present at Whistler's funeral. However, she and her sister, Agnes, raised Whistler's son, Charlie. (MacDonald, *Woman in White,* 29-31). Charlie Hanson was born to Whistler and Luisa Fanna Hanson on July 10, 1870 (MacDonald, *Woman in White,* 29). After Joanna's death, Charlie lived with Agnes and her husband (MacDonald, *Woman in White,* 29). Agnes remained in touch with Whistler and attended his funeral with Charlie Hanson in 1903 (MacDonald, *Woman in White*, 29). Orban's description of Jo's appearance at Whistler's

However, each chapter and scene circles around the central moment of Jo's posing and the painting itself like the triangles in *L'Origine du monde* spiral around the hidden innermost parts of the woman's body. She shares intimate details of her inner thoughts and physical sensations, such as the feeling and sound of the scissors when Gustave trims her pubic area before he begins to paint. Yet, the author also deliberately creates displacements and lacunae within the text that structurally recreate the sense of fragmented, veiled identity present in Courbet's painting. Another example of textual displacement is Courbet's canvas itself: although the entire novel is about her choice to model for *L'Origine du monde,* Jo ends her narrative with a letter in which she tells the editor that he will never see and cannot even imagine the painting. Orban thus negates the paintings' presence while constantly reminding readers of its existence.

Orban also creates a protagonist who cannot always be trusted, casting doubt on the narrative itself. Jo is sometimes deceptive and manipulative. Jo's relationship with Gustave begins with a flirtation while she is still with James. Later, when James takes a long voyage to Chile, Jo goes to Paris to live with Gustave. At one point Gustave leaves Jo alone in his apartment for several days while he travels to Ornans to work on a posthumous portrait of his friend, Proudhon.[374] Jo finds a box of love letters from Gustave's various women, and she reads

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graveside is most likely based upon an account by Charles Lang Freer to Louisine Havemeyer describing "a woman with thick, graying, wavy hair, whom he thought was Joanna, standing for a while beside Whistler's coffin" (MacDonald, *Woman in White,* 29). Freer mistook Agnes for Joanna (MacDonald, *Woman in White*, 29).

[374] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-65). Courbet included Proudhon among the portraits on the right side of *L'Atelier* (as discussed in chapter one of this dissertation). The deathbed drawing Orban is referring to in her novel is based on a photograph taken by Étenne Carjat on the day of Proudhon's death, 19 January

all of them while he is away. These letters partially motivate her choice to pose for *L'Origine* because she wishes to distinguish herself from all of Gustave's other lovers by agreeing to help him create the scandalous image. Jo's narrative also frequently contradicts itself. When Jo finds a message from Khalil Bey and discovers that the price of her portrait is twenty thousand francs, she feels justified in finding a way to profit from Gustave's financial gain: "Vingt mille francs, était-ce mon prix? Si je valais aussi cher, cela me donnait le droit de me servir" (55). "[P]our sécher [ses] larmes" she steals two paintings (55).[375] However, after Gustave returns from his short trip to Ornans, Jo reacts as if she were unaware of his plans for the canvas. She is overtaken by a flood of tears when she discovers that Gustave means to sell *L'Origine* to Khalil Bey: "voilà qu'une troisième personne se joignait à nous, participait au festin avant de m'emporter roulée dans une couverture avec la toile" (85). Gustave has also already told Jo that the painting is a commission created explicitly for Bey's masturbatory pleasure, a measure intended to protect

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1865 (Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, "Courbet's Last Drawing?" *Master Drawings* 12, no. 4, (1974): 391). Courbet also painted a portrait of Proudhon and his family, completed posthumously (*Proudhon et ses enfants*, 1865, Petit Palais, Paris). Proudhon's theories of social equality and individual liberty were highly influential on Courbet, who saw in them an echo of his own belief in the necessary independence of the artist (Alan Bowness, "Courbet's Proudhon." *The Burlington Magazine* 120, no. 900, (1978): 123. However, Thierry Savatier suggests that Courbet felt he could express himself more freely after Proudhon's death. Savatier writes:

> [...] depuis 1863, [Courbet] travaillait sous le regard inquisiteur du philosophe Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, qui exerçait sur lui un magistère encombrant. Là où Courbet revendiquait son individualisme dans le cadre du réalisme et d'une autonomisation de l'art, Proudhon voyait un artiste moralisateur et définissait l'art comme « une représentation idéaliste de la nature et de nous-mêmes, en vue du perfectionnement physique et moral de notre espèce […]. Après la mort de Proudhon, avec [*L'Origine du monde*], […] Courbet donne l'impression de s'être libéré du joug, pour aborder le nu féminin dans une dimension plus érotique encore que dans les années 1850, marquées par un réalisme radical. (*L'Origine*, 13)

[375] Although there are no records of the full transaction between Bey and Courbet, according to Teyssèdre, Bey paid twenty thousand francs for both *Le Sommeil* and the small unnamed painting that was *L'Origine du monde* (*Roman*, 36-40).

others because he was infected with syphilis.[376] Furthermore, the narration explicitly underlines Jo's slippery relationship with veracity: "(...) je n'ai jamais fait la différence entre le mensonge et la vérité. Le mensonge du passé est la vérité du moment et il arrive à la vérité du passé d'être un mensonge du présent. Je vivais dans l'instant [....]" (34). Jo's infidelity to James, her infiltration of Gustave's personal correspondence, her theft of artwork, and her blurring of truth and fiction establish Jo as an unreliable narrator, inviting readers to identify the contradictions and partial truths within her version of events. Orban thereby subtly points to the existence of textual lacunae using a compositional strategy similar to the arrangements of triangles pointing to the invisible vaginal opening of Courbet's painted figure.

The author calls attention to the visual void at the center of Courbet's canvas early in the novel, alerting the reader to the similarities between the text's narrative structure and the painting's composition. Jo's choice to write her story is meant to counteract the anonymous silence of the figure in Courbet's masterpiece, however, Orban packs the narrative with references to the finitude of human existence, the inevitability of death, and the empty silence of the grave.

> Le ventre de la femme, c'est le néant. Au centre, il n'y a rien. De ce rien Courbet était devenu fou. Alors il a peint les alentours et moi tout entière. Ainsi a été conçue *L'Origine du monde* dont il ne subsiste aucune trace depuis que Khalil Bey, ruiné, a vendu sa collection aux enchères. (16)

Orban seeds this citation with references to ruin (ruiné), decline (devenu fou), and disappearance (aucune trace). The term "le néant," (nothingness), here describes the human female womb, "le ventre de la femme." The word "rien" (nothing), a synonym for the empty void of the "néant," appears twice in quick succession, further emphasizing the idea of nullification and death. Analogous linguistic patterns that contain negations occur throughout the novel.

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[376] Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 28; Orban, *JLOM*, 36.

Similarly, *L'Origine du monde,* the painting by Gustave Courbet, is simultaneously ever-present within Orban's text yet it remains an unseen absence. The name of the painting is part of the title, and the characters refer to it frequently, but the author never describes the canvas as a whole, in its entirety. Instead, the text reveals different aspects of the painting with each fragment of description scattered throughout the narrative, creating a spiraling movement like in Courbet's composition. Orban also uses the title currently assigned to Courbet's canvas anachronistically, creating a purposeful gap between the world in the novel and historical fact. As Teyssèdre and Savatier both point out, the title was probably not provided by Courbet himself. There is no evidence that it was used before 1867, while the first time it appeared in print was in 1929.[377] Jo mentions the painting by name repeatedly, yet in the final letter she reminds the editor that he will never see it, that she will be dead before it is rediscovered: "Vous ne verrez pas cette toile et votre imagination aussi fertile soit-elle ne pourra vous la restituer" (137). In the same letter, Jo points to one of the titles Courbet's painting may have had temporarily: "*Le Vase de Khalil*" calling attention to the multiple mysteries surrounding the canvas itself and underlining its absence from the narrative.[378] Even assembled into one stand-alone *ekphrasis* of *L'Origine du monde*, the fragmented descriptions scattered throughout Jo's memoirs would not communicate the power of the work itself. Thus, Orban continually evokes the painting itself, yet it never fully appears.

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[377] Savatier, *L'Origine*, 83 and Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 401-8.

[378] Other titles may include: *Torse de femme*, *Sexe de la femme*, and *La Création du monde*, Bernard Teyssèdre (*Roman*, 401-8.) Savatier cites another as simply *Le vase* (*L'Origine,* 83).

In chapter one, Jo, as narrator, ends the introduction of her story with a summary of the events she intends to recount. She emphasizes her own importance and her singular knowledge of the creation and existence of *L'Origine du monde*. Models are privileged viewers, intimate with details of the creation of the work and the life of the artist.[379] However, Jo narrates from the perspective of age and distance: the artist is dead, many of his letters have been destroyed, and the painting itself has disappeared. Jo is the sole remaining witness: "le témoin muet, le modèle sans visage, l'inspiratrice cachée" (16). Jo's desire to tell her story is a need born from a loved-one's death: "Le besoin de raconter m'est venu sur la tombe de Whistler" (13). Jo seems to assume that her readers are familiar with Courbet's canvas when she says: "Ce corps tronqué, ces jambes ouvertes sur la pilosité d'un pubis fendu comme un melon éclaté au soleil, c'est moi, Joanna Hifferman [sic]" (15). Jo's description is brief but dense with metaphor. Comparing her pubic area to a melon that has burst open in the sun activates concepts of ripe fecundity and exposed vulnerability: in claiming the painter's representation of her, Jo is opening herself to the judgment of others while also reconsidering her perception of herself. Using the deictic pronoun "ce" suggests Jo is referring to something previously mentioned or something that she can point to, an object of which she and her reader share awareness. This shared awareness happens outside the timeline of the novel: it is a shared reality between Orban and her readers, a slippage between the fictional world of the text and the real world of the writer Christine Orban, the model Joanna Hiffernan, the artist Gustave Courbet, and the painting *L'Origine du monde.*

The author also invokes the image of the cyclone several times in the text, further emphasizing the novel's spiraling structure and its connection to Courbet's canvas. Gustave calls Jo his "tornade," telling her: "Tu portes en toi la révolution picturale. Tu es une tornade dans ma vie" (34). "Révolution" carries a double meaning, referring to the revolving, rotating movement of the painting's composition and to the changes Gustave wishes to inaugurate in representational visual art. Later, Gustave associates the tornado with stormy emotions and with the heartbeat of life itself when he tells Jo: "(…) même si je ne me remets pas de la tornade que tu déclenches en moi, tant pis! J'aime les ciels en colère, l'eau glacée, j'aime entendre mon cœur tonner à tout casser entre mes côtes" (67).[380] This spiraling, unceasing, cyclonic movement becomes a metaphor for the messy ambivalences of human life: "Je serai le dernier amour de Courbet. 'Sa tornade,' comme il me disait" (72). The model's body thus symbolically contains both life—the womb, the origin of each human being's swirling cyclone of feelings, thoughts, and sensations—and death, the empty nothingness of the *néant* to which being born condemns everyone.

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[379] Steiner, *Real Thing*, 25.

In Balzac's, the Goncourts' and Zola's tales, the moment of the woman's willing unveiling of her body is an important climatic moment in the narrative structure of the story. Instead of appearing during a dramatic moment of visual revelation, in Orban's novel, the detailed descriptions of the model's body occur while Gustave is seducing Jo, convincing her to pose and are told from her perspective. Even when she is citing Gustave's words, his words are framed by her experience of the events. These fragmented views of Jo's body also provide partial descriptions of Courbet's painting. Gustave discusses each detail of Jo's torso while describing his purposes and plan for the composition of *L'Origine du monde*. Orban's language is laced with eroticism and sensuality, creating a liaison between the artist's description and the reader's experience of both the text and Courbet's canvas itself. Gustave first smooths Jo's body with the palm of his hands, as if preparing to draw on its surface:

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[380] These metaphors used to describe strong emotions (ciels en colère, l'eau glacée) subtly refer to landscape paintings in Courbet's oeuvre. Some examples include: *La Mer orageuse*, (1870, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) and *La Vague* (1879, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin).

> Voilà. Je veux que tu saches ce que je vais garder et ce que je vais cacher ou laisser dans l'ombre et que tu comprennes pourquoi. Là, dit-il, en traçant une ligne au-dessous de la poitrine, je prends le sein droit, j'abandonne le gauche, un seul me suffit. Je veux la taille et le bourrelet qui la souligne, je veux le nombril—j'adore le nombril—, je veux ces hanches replètes et grassouillettes. Voilà de quoi remplir les mains d'un honnête homme. Je veux l'amorce des cuisses que je sectionnerai à vingt centimètres du genou environ, je laisserai un peu plus de la cuisse gauche pour compenser le sein que je n'aurai pas de ce côté-là. Et tes cuisses ouvriront sur la forêt, les dunes, l'oasis du désert, le gazon brun, la pelouse brûlée par le soleil, là, surtout là, à la lisière du fleuve qui serpente, le long de la virgule où s'élève une rangée de poils roux, une haie dressée, menaçante presque, pour cacher le trou, la grotte, la source de la Loue, la fente, la faille, le chemin bordé de ronces, la rivière enchantée, les lèvres magnifiques qui descendent jusqu'à la raie du cul. (77-8)

This paragraph is a condensation of both Orban's narrative and Courbet's painting. It begins with the frank "Voilà" – there it is. This one word neatly communicates *L'Origine du monde*'s bold confrontation of the viewer. It also invokes the sense of sight, a variation of the verb "voir" (to see). With his description, Gustave invites Jo into a deeper understanding of his art and includes her in his creative process. However, he also imposes his view upon his model, asking Jo to become a spectator to her own body through visualization of the proposed composition. Touch and sight merge for Orban's Gustave as he caresses Jo's flesh. His preparation for the painting becomes elaborate foreplay. Notably, there are two distinct parts to his description. The first half is centered on the artist himself, what he wants and feels. He speaks in a commanding tone, repeating "je veux" (I want) five times, every sentence peppered with the self-centered "je." The author evokes the violence of the painting's composition as Gustave inscribes lines on Jo's body, identifying where he will section (je sectionnerai), what he will take (je prends), and what he will cast aside (j'abandonne). Gustave's verbal dissection of Jo's body echoes nineteenth-century medical and anatomical illustrations, possible source materials for Courbet's composition of *LOrigine du monde*, as mentioned above.

Then, with the phrase "Et tes cuisses ouvriront sur la forêt," the tone of the passage shifts from the clinical to the poetic, the possessive adjective "tes" (*your*) also marking a turn away from the self ("je"), towards the other. The last part of Gustave's description of his planned canvas is a series of metaphors that transfigure Jo's anatomy. Of these, landscape and geography are the central themes, including a direct reference to Courbet's series depicting the source of the Loue river.[381] He begins as an artist, laying out a composition; he becomes a macabre surgeon, dissecting a body; he ends as a poet, overflowing with lively literary devices to describe Jo's vagina. Gustave's fragmentation of Jo's body and his panoply of colorful metaphors circle around her vagina like the composition of Courbet's painting. The poetic synthesis that ends the paragraph is like the frame around *L'Origine du monde*: it brings a sense of unity to the fragments, transforming Jo's seduction into an aesthetic literary experience.

Jo's body hair is an important link between Orban's novel and Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*. In Courbet's painting, the dark pyramidal shape representing the model's pelvic mound creates a dramatic visual contrast against the pale flesh tones surrounding it. This draws the viewer's attention, directing the eye towards the unseen vaginal opening and initiating the spiraling movement as described previously. Jo's pubic hair serves a similar role in the structure of the novel: it directs the viewer's attention to important scenes and its frequent reappearance adds to the feeling of circling repetition. Throughout the text, Orban refers many times to Jo’s intimate “fourrure” (84), her “pilosité” (15) or her “poils” (90). As Gustave describes his planned composition, he tells Jo:

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[381] As mentioned in chapter one of this dissertation, the Loue is a river near Courbet's childhood home in Ornans. The composition of these paintings focuses on the opening to a cave from which the Loue originates.

> Laisse-moi tes poils, ne les cache pas, ne proteste pas, j’aime cette touche d’animalité sur ton corps. Laisse-moi peindre cette touffe, je tiens à ce côté bestial, cette différence entre ta peau lisse, douce et ce mont fleuri. [...] Tu es une femme. La femme épurée de sa toison n’en est pas une. (79)

Gustave’s words animalize Jo’s mature female sexuality, reinforcing the image of her body as hunting trophy, her “toison” (fleece) collected and displayed. It also represents strong and unpredictable passion, “ce côté bestial.” Gustave expresses appreciation of Jo’s untamed “touche d’animalité.” On the other hand, he also wants to control and possess this part of her, enacting this desire by grooming her pubic area before he captures it in paint.

Sexuality, artistic creation, and Gustave’s efforts to control his art by controlling Jo’s body are allied during the most overtly erotic sequence in Orban’s novel. Gustave stimulates Jo orally to reestablish the color of her labia when it shifts tones suddenly while he is painting. Such love making brings into direct contact his mouth and facial hair with Jo’s pelvis. This act further reinforces the metaphors of body hair and secretions as signs of both sexual prowess and artistic fecundity. Aesthetic and erotic desires merge: Gustave cultivates the colors he wants to paint by making love to his model. He creates his desired palette on Jo’s body itself before capturing those hues on the canvas:

> […] Quand il terminait une toile, il lui arrivait de s’étonner qu’elle ne sente pas les sous-bois s’il s’agissait d’un paysage, la sueur d’une bête traquée quand il égorgeait un cerf ou le parfum de fourrures pubiennes quand il peignait une rousse. Quels que soient les bleus azurés, les cuivres mordorés, les carmins virulents ou anémiés qui coloraient mes chairs avant qu’un idée malfaisante n’ait tourné mon sang en blanc neige ou en brun de roches d’Ornans, l’odeur qu’il aimait demeurait et il venait humer l’entrecuisse, s’enivrer à ma source, coller ses moustaches contre mon pubis pour s’en imprégner. Et je sentais son souffle chaud, son nez se frayer un chemin, sa langue s’aventurer plus loin au fond, pour dénicher les arômes qui ne remontaient pas à la surface.
>
> […]

> Et tandis que sa langue se promenait avec bonheur dans mon sillage, il me caressait le ventre et sous ses mains mes couleurs réapparaissaient; au bleu de Chine il ne sera pas nécessaire d'ajouter l'encre de la nuit. (124-5)

The narrator attributes a type of synesthesia to Gustave, implying a connection between color and odor.[382] The male artist impregnates himself (pour s'imprégner) with his model's scent to give life to his painting. Orban further compares Gustave's creative passion to childbirth, describing his state while painting as "l'excitation, la douleur d'avant un accouchement" (124). Reversing the reproductive roles of the sexes, the male painter gestates and gives birth to the work of art. Gustave tells Jo: "Je peindrai en déchiffrant ton parfum, en reniflant tes effluves, en avalant tout ce qui sort par les pores de ta peau" (124). Jo's secretions provide the painter with a different sort of raw material—inspiration. Their bodies both contribute to the birth of the painting.

Additionally, as Gustave's nose and tongue explore Jo's body, Orban emphasizes a trope of connecting, reversing, or merging genitals and facial features. Initially, when Gustave first tells Jo of the proposed canvas, he tells her that all women wear their sex on their face: "Chaque femme porte son sexe sur son visage, Jo. On ne verra pas ton visage. Un visage est plus obscène qu'un cul, Jo" (37). Gustave emphasizes what will *not* be seen on the canvas while upending expectations about privacy and identity: her face reveals more than her pelvis and is therefore more "obscène." Gustave tells Jo he caressed her lips before he painted her portrait in Trouville "pour comprendre ton con" (38). Again, in the scene where Gustave grooms Jo's pubic hair, cited above, he tells her: "ta pelisse raconte ta bouche et tes cheveux" (90). Telling Jo he wants to paint her "sourire" (83), Gustave explains to Jo that her beauty is just as visible between her legs as elsewhere on her body, again calling attention to what will *not* be in the painting: the unseen will provide the deep meaning of what is seen: “Ton visage inondera la toile: on ne triche pas avec l'invisible. Et ton ventre reflétera le bien-être mieux qu’un sourire, aussi expressif soit-il” (69). This reversal of facial features and genital area has the curiously contradictory effect of personalizing the represented body while obscuring the model’s identity, creating another connection with Orban’s novel and the composition of *L’Origine du monde.* Gustave emphasizes the unique beauty of Jo’s privates while simultaneously reducing her entire identity to her sex and eliminating her recognizable features.

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[382] Orban also reprises a Baudelairian trope in erotically connecting odor and hair, (See for example Baudelaire's "La Chevelure" in *Les Fleurs du mal*, 1857). Naming Jo's pubic hair openly increases the sensual detail in the scene and further echoes Courbet's audacious portrayal of his model's body.

The author further echoes the frank subject matter and composition of *L’Origine du monde* on the lexical level of the text with Gustave’s frequent use of vocabulary that is “cru,” both in the sense of “raw” as in uncooked and in the sense of “crude,” or uncouth and shocking: “Même ses mots étaient crus, terre à terre, taillés dans la chair comme sa peinture. Des mots d’homme” (20). For example, Gustave refers to Jo’s sex using vulgar words such as “con” (“cunt”), “cul” (“ass”), and “chatte” (“pussy”). His rough ways are signs of his independence, strength, and zest for life, “son appétit de la vie” (111). These qualities align with known aspects of Gustave Courbet’s personality and his artistic goal of boldly rejecting artistic idealization. Orban recreates the physicality of Courbet’s painterly style with Gustave’s rough language, volatile responses, and coarse behavior. Thus, the structure of Christine Orban’s novel *J’étais l’origine du monde* parallels Courbet’s painting in its subject matter and its composition.

C. Gender Stereotypes in *J'étais l'origine du monde*

In *J'étais l'origine du monde,* the author joins in the tradition of evoking the studio romance and its accompanying gender norms while simultaneously resisting them. In many respects, Orban's portrayal of both Gustave and Jo remains anchored in gendered stereotypes and reminiscent of the nineteenth-century atelier fantasy. Furthermore, like her predecessors, Orban uses heteronormative metaphors of sexual pleasure and childbirth to portray the complexities of artistic production.

Several times within her narrative, Jo mentions rumors that Gustave and others have mixed their semen into the physical material of paint, thereby aligning male sexual prowess with artistic production.

> Whistler le croyait capable, comme Titien, dit-on, de mélanger les substances vitales de son être à sa palette. Et quand Courbet se vantait d'utiliser de vulgaires tubes de peinture pour peindre ses chefs-d'œuvre, Whistler pensait qu'il ne disait pas toute la vérité, qu'il lui arrivait de diluer les couleurs de sa palette aux sucs de l'amour. […] Je ne pouvais répondre que de mon expérience. Nous étions si nombreuses à avoir posé pour Courbet et à l'avoir aimé! Toutes les fois où j'ai été son modèle, je n'ai jamais rien remarqué qui puisse donner du crédit aux suspicions de Whistler. (46-7)

The narrator activates this trope only to deny its truth immediately afterwards, saying she never saw evidence to support the claim. This establishes a contradiction and creates doubt in the reader's mind. The tubes of paint contain a material substance vital to the creation of Gustave's art, like semen is necessary to create human life. While Orban uses euphemisms such as "substances vitales" (46) and "sucs de l'amour" (47) to refer to Gustave's semen, she also compares the tubes themselves to limp penises, reinforcing the comparison of paint and sperm: "Pendant que Gustave me parlait, je regardais cet amoncellement de tubes, repliés, récupérés, comme autant de sexes d'hommes rabougris" (98). The myth of the atelier fantasy, inherited from the nineteenth-century predecessors and the Ovidian story of Pygmalion, includes the male artist's unconscious womb envy, his desire to create life with his own hands. The woman is not the one who creates life in the studio. Her role is transformed from nurturing mother to inspirational muse. Instead, the male painter claims this power for himself, displacing and sublimating his sexual energies towards artistic creation.

The author compares the completion of a painting to sexual fulfillment, a goal the female model helps the male painter obtain. Like Zola's Christine, who realized modeling for Claude only helped him become further invested in his art rather than in her, Jo assists Gustave in creating her replacement:

> (…) Cette œuvre était une longue volupté et, quoi qu'il advienne, il fallait que Gustave aille jusqu'au bout, qu'il jouisse de son art. Parce que s'il tenait à ma chair transposée, réinventée, accouchée de ses mains. Je devais renaître de tous ces tubes alignés, pointés, prêts à couler pour moi et devant moi. Gustave recréait l'ordre du monde: une femme allait être engendrée par un homme, sortir de ces cylindres verrouillés, fermés, vissés par des bouchons multicolores. (100)

Gustave's painting itself is a work of art that Gustave and Jo produce together: her body, his skill, and the material of paint (metaphorically his semen) combine to create a life-like representation of a woman. Linking creativity in this manner to the biology of human procreation establishes binary gendered roles for the male painter and female model.

Gustave is an example of masculine power and sexuality, a paragon of male genius. He radiates confidence in himself, demonstrating "une singulière connaissance de soi et de son propre génie" (21). However, his passion also makes him volatile. He is subject at times to creative furies bordering on madness; he sees everything in his environment, including the women who love him, as fuel for his artistic creation; he is powerful, aggressive, and controlling towards Jo; and, like all the painter protagonists before him, he passionately desires to create life with paint and canvas. As Jo describes her affair with Gustave, retracing the relationship from their initial meeting to her departure in the night after *L'Origine du monde* is completed, the narrative frequently mentions aspects of Gustave's personality that represent him as brutish and devouring. Like Zola's Claude, Gustave sees everything and everyone as primarily a subject to paint. "Pour cet homme-là, tout était bon à peindre. Le bonheur comme le malheur. Il aime Virginie et la peint nue; il aime Proudhon et le peint mort" (60). Gustave's behavior is unpredictable and brusque, a quality Jo associates with his manly and artistic prowess. His rough ways are signs of his independence, strength, and zest for life, "son appétit de la vie" (111). The text depicts Gustave as a man of strong physical appetites, both gustatory and sexual. "Après l'amour, Gustave avait faim" (73). He paints better after sex and a meal: "Gustave travaillait mieux l'estomac plein, les sens apaisés, les exigences de son corps satisfaites" (75).[383]

When Gustave returns after his trip to Ornans, the narrative compares him to a violent monster: "Il a poussé la porte à la manière d'un ogre qui rentre chez lui" (65). The ogre is a frequent figure in French fiction, used to represent voracious violence and predation, an apt symbol to communicate Gustave's "mauvais caractère" (27).[384] The narrative includes animalistic metaphors to communicate Gustave's uncouth ways. In a letter Jo finds in Gustave's apartment, one of his lovers addresses her letters beginning "Gros chien…," thus implicitly comparing him to a dog. Jo also describes Gustave as sexually aggressive: "pressé, bestial pour les choses de l'amour, son désir, irrépressible, indélicat, n'attendait pas" (66). For Gustave, lovemaking resembles a battle or wrestling match: "Les gémissements du plaisir ressemblent à ceux de la douleur. C'est comme une lutte mais c'est l'amour" (66).[385] This forceful sexuality is part of everything Gustave does, and most particularly of his artwork: "Gustave ne m'a-t-il fait l'amour que pour me peindre? Parfois, je le pense. Ses mains avaient besoin d'exploiter la chair pour la comprendre." Gustave's need for flesh, for a body to examine, to explore and exploit for his art is compared to a hunting instinct, a quality Gustave believes he shares with all men. Gustave tells Jo: "Il faut toujours laisser les hommes venir à soi. Crois-moi, si tu vas les chercher, fais en sorte qu'ils ne le sachent pas. Les hommes sont des chasseurs, ne leur enlève pas cette joie-là, Jo" (81). Orban's Gustave thus equates the urge to capture prey with both the pursuit of women and the desire for artistic prowess.

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[383] In this regard, Gustave is the opposite of Zola's Claude Lantier, who saw sexual activity as incompatible with artistic creation.

[384] See: Jonathan Krell, *The Ogre's Progress: Images of the Ogre in Modern and Contemporary French Fiction*, (Newark NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2009).

Orban reinforces the theme of hunting with references to Jo as quarry. Gustave often uses the common term of affection "ma biche" (my doe/hind) (34, 87), emphasizing her role as his targeted prey, his chosen model for *L'Origine du monde*. Gustave the "gros chien" is not a well-trained lap dog; he is a relentless hunting hound. His artistic desire becomes bloodlust as he doggedly pursues his goals:

> Gustave, cette fois, venait me chercher jusque dans mes derniers retranchements avec une sorte de furie, il ne voulait pas seulement mon image, il voulait ma chair, mon sang, mon âme, il abolissait vêtements et décor, je n'avais plus aucun moyen de me protéger de son regard, je devenais une proie à sa merci, une femelle bonne à peindre (…). (109-10)

Using the term "femelle" instead of "femme" animalizes Jo, reinforcing the hunting imagery. Orban's comparison of the fictional Gustave to a zealous hunter calls upon known works of Gustave Courbet, who painted many hunting scenes, often showing hind or stags either already dead or in their death throes.[386] One of the most well-known of Courbet's hunting paintings is *L'Hallali au cerf* (*Death of the Stag*, 1866-7, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), a large canvas depicting men on horseback and a pack of hounds bringing down a wounded stag.[387] In *L'Hallali au cerf*, several of the hounds display prominent male genitals, while the wound in the stag's flank is reminiscent of vaginal shapes. The juxtaposition of masculine aggression (represented by the hounds, horses and hunters) and feminine vulnerability (represented by the suffering deer's open wound) visually dramatizes the inherent violence of gender binary stereotypes. The painting portrays "a narrativizing of aggression [that] underwrites a theatricalizing of pain and suffering."[388] In Orban's novel, When Jo sees herself as Gustave's quarry and imagines posing for the proposed *L'Origine du monde*, she proclaims: "Malgré la passion que j'éprouvais pour lui, j'ai cru devenir folle en imaginant mon corps tronqué exposé, un jour, entre *La Raie* de Chardin, et l'*Hallali au cerf*, de Gustave: un tableau de chasse parmi d'autres" (40).[389] Orban thus creates a parallel between Courbet's representation of human female genitals with wounded animals and hunting trophies. In that regard, she reinforces traditional masculine and feminine gender roles, portraying the male as powerful and aggressive and the female as a pursued victim.

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[385] This reference to "une lutte" is yet another example of Orban's subtle references to Courbet's body of work. Courbet famously depicted two male wrestlers in *Les Lutteurs* (1853, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, Hungary).

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[386] Some examples of Courbet's hunting scenes include *The German Huntsman* (1859, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lons-le-Saunier, France), *The Quarry* (1856-7, Musem of Fine Arts, Boston, MA).

[387] The canvas is 355 x 505 cm, about 12.5 x 16.5 feet. The stag itself is life-sized, as can be seen in a photograph by Étienne Carjat of Courbet at work on the painting. See Fried, *Courbet's Realism*,188.

[388] Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, 188.

[389] Jean Simon Chardin's (1699-1799) *La Raie* (*The Skate*, 1728) is held at the Louvre. It depicts a table laden with various household items, fish, opened oysters, and a cat, with a gutted skate hanging above the table. "The eerily human 'face' and glistening interior of the hanging, hacked-open fish dominate the center of the composition in a recollection both of an anatomist's exploratory study and of paintings of human martyrdom." (Sarah R. Cohen, "Chardin's Fur: Painting, Materialism, and the Question of Animal Soul. *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, No.1, Hair (Fall 2004): 48).

Gustave's masculine power and artistic genius become metaphorically concentrated in his eye: "Courbet voit plus que les autres. Son œil décortique, analyse, prend, interprète, rapporte sur la toile. Il triomphe de tout, du jour comme de la nuit" (108). Jo senses the power of his predator's eye and experiences a thrilling hint of danger in modeling for Gustave. From the first time she poses for him in Trouville, his deliberate gaze dissects and defines her:

> J'ai observé son œil prêt à m'écorcher vivante. Son œil mathématique qui calculait ma carnation, son œil de légiste qui découpe le corps pour voir transparaître l'âme, les veines. Comme si c'était la circulation des passions qu'il cherchait. (20)

Gustave is not satisfied with exploring merely the surface of Jo's body; he wants to examine her from the inside. However, his absorption of Jo's essence to empower his artistic expression requires her acquiescence. He first seduces her with words, appealing to her desire to be unique in his life, repeatedly telling her exactly what she wishes to hear, slowly convincing her to pose for *L'Origine du monde*. He repeats "Tu es la seule, Jo" (34, 39, 40). His eye hypnotizes her, preventing her from refusing to pose:

> Je m'étais soumise à l'œil de Gustave. Cet œil si particulier dont l'iris et la pupille se confondaient, tant que la pupille était noire et l'iris dilaté. Quand le cercle brun disparaissait sous l'astre central, c'était l'éclipse totale: un regard de fauve, de rapace, diabolique et diabolisé par la concentration, par ce magnétisme hypnotique qui me fixait. (108)

Gustave's genius affects him like a powerful drug or illness that dilates his eyes and increases his concentration.[390] However, Jo proclaims, "Courbet voyait son pinceau à la main, le reste du temps il était aveugle" (76). Like the painters in Balzac's "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu" who are blind to Gillette's suffering, Gustave is blind to everything but his art.

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[390] Using words like "diabolique" and "magnétisme hypnotique" points to the supernatural power of artistic genius, connecting Orban's depiction of Gustave to Balzac's portrait of Frenhofer and thus to the Hoffmannesque tradition of the fantastic.

Orban's Gustave is subject to fits of creative fury like Balzac's Frenhofer. The narrative describes Gustave's paintbrush while he is working on *L'Origine du monde*. It moves frantically, like a living thing:

> Le pinceau devenu fou l'entraînait dans le tunnel, le bout de bois vibrait, se cabrait et s'enfournait dans je ne sais quelle cavité, quel labyrinthe, emporté par un élan frénétique, une nécessité physiologique, comme si la vie lui avait été transmise de la main de Courbet. (127)

The frenetic motion of the brush as Gustave creates a representation of his model's sex metaphorically reenacts phallic sexual movements as if it were penetrating a woman's body, its tip vibrating as it plunges into a labyrinth of tunnels and cavities. Orban describes Gustave's erotically charged creative frenzy using imagery similar to Balzac's Frenhofer, who works so passionately that he seems to be possessed by a demon (421-2).[391] Gustave, too, is at times feverish in his creative passion: "Son front suintait, il avait de la fièvre" (125). Orban's portrayal of Gustave is therefore consistent with the nineteenth-century myth of the male genius, thus maintaining the gendered roles of the studio romance.

In the atelier fantasy framework, the sexual and aesthetic desires of the male artists motivate the creative process. This is true for Orban's Gustave, who remains entirely in control of the painting's creation, from conception to completion. The model may choose to pose or not to pose, but she does not direct the project. A more transgressive version of Jo might have proposed the composition herself or suggested significant changes to the concept, for example.[392] In Orban's novel, Jo sacrifices herself to help Gustave achieve his artistic goals. She endures emotional turmoil and physical pain because she chooses to pose for *L'Origine du monde.* Giving voice to another typically obscured part of creation within the studio romance, Jo describes intense physical discomfort during the creation of *L'Origine.* The ability to hold a painful pose for a long time is an essential quality for a model.[393] Such difficult work comes at a price: "Voilà venu le temps de l'immobilité et du silence. Le temps des crampes, de l'ankylose et des fourmillements" (103). After the painting is finished, Jo's legs are so numb she cannot stand and Gustave must support her while he walks her around the studio to regain circulation (161). Jo is a martyr to art, a role of stereotypical feminine self-sacrifice. Additionally, Jo finds Gustave's raw, uncultivated behavior attractive: "Je préférais ses façons à celles trop raffinées de Whistler" (20). She understands Gustave's domineering behavior as simply a manifestation of his masculinity. "Il fallait croire en l'amour pour le servir à ce point, pour accepter la domination d'un homme, parce que c'est en dominant qu'ils aiment aimer" (108). Jo seems to both accept and enjoy the idea that men exist to dominate.

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[391] "Tout en parlant, l'étrange vieillard [Frenhofer] touchait à toutes les parties du tableau [...]. [...] il allait si rapidement par de petits mouvements si impatients, si saccadés, que pour le jeune Poussin il semblait qu'il y eût dans le corps de ce bizarre personnage un démon qui agissait par ses mains [...]." (Balzac, "Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu," 421-2)

[392] In this sense, Manette is more transgressive than Jo because by striking her initial pose without direction from Coriolis, she effectively suggests his painting's composition.

Furthermore, Jo's sense of self-worth is connected to her youth and beauty; they are the tools she uses to attract male painters. She seeks always to please the men around her, using their desire for her body to procure material security and to fulfill her own need for attention and physical satisfaction. Jo thus uses her sexuality as a tool, enacting a stereotype of feminine manipulative behavior. Her decision to move to Paris is partially motivated by James' departure for Chile and her subsequent need for financial support: "Si mes souvenirs ne me trompent pas, je me suis rendue au 32, rue Hautefeuille pour la première fois en octobre 1866. […] J'arrivais de Londres où Whistler m'avait laissée sans un sou" (24).[394] The narrative suggests that Jo arrived without invitation or warning on Gustave's doorstep, fully expecting that he will take her in:

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[393] Borzello, *Model*, 38.

> J'ai pensé aux femmes qui avaient dû franchir le seuil de la porte de Gustave […]. Mais qu'importe! Aucune d'entre elles n'était venue avec sa valise. Mon statut d'étrangère précipitait les choses. Si l'on m'aimait, il fallait me loger. Courbet n'a pas hésité. (25)

Jo is very conscious of the fact that her beauty allows her access to the male painters she chooses to love. Because she enjoys posing, Jo seeks painters as lovers. She feels compelled to use these powers before they fade, saying: "Surtout il y a la considération de ma beauté, ma seule richesse. Faut-il en jouer comme d'un bien qui serait gâché si je le cachais?" (17). Her decision to pose for *L'Origine du monde* is partially motivated by the awareness that she will not always be young and lovely. Jo also describes her narcissistic wish for exhibitionistic pleasure and her enjoyment in having artists' admiration, a quality she believes is simply one of her personal characteristics, something she has felt since childhood: "J'ai adoré poser nue: je me trouve toujours à l'aise sous le regard d'un homme. Petite fille déjà ma mère me traitait d'exhibitionniste" (27). Jo's awareness and enjoyment of her allure, her pleasure in her body, and her longing for the painter's gaze exemplify the stereotypically feminine quality of exhibitionistic desire. She further replicates the desire to display herself by writing the letters to the unnamed editor. Jo and Manette both find pleasure and gain security in the experience of posing for artists. They desire to be seen, and they act to increase their own enjoyment by seeking opportunities to pose.

Jo has a sense of pride in her ability to inspire works of art, a sign of vanity, which is another quality traditionally gendered feminine. The visual trope of the goddess of love and beauty, Venus, gazing into a mirror is a frequent subject of western painting.[395] Venus imagery "conflat[es] beauty, vanity, and sexuality."[396] The mirror itself functions as a dual symbol, carrying connotations of both self-deception and self-revelation because its reflective surface can distort as well as reveal one's appearance.[397] Joanna Hiffernan posed for *La Belle Irlandaise* (1865), modeling for Courbet's interpretation of the Venus-holding-a-mirror theme and providing a link to Orban's vain and narcissistic Jo. Jo sees her loveliness as a natural resource, hers to use as she pleases, declaring: "La nature m'a faite belle. Je n'y suis pour rien et je n'ai pas à me le faire pardonner" (28). In addition, like Manette, Jo desires to see her unique beauty preserved in art. Jo is attracted to the artist's need for her body to inspire his art; she believes she is essential to the creation of *L'Origine du monde*: "Il avait besoin de ma nudité pour s'exprimer […] Ce corps tronqué serait donc le mien ou ne serait pas" (62). As Jo recounts Gustave's efforts to persuade her to pose, she consistently emphasizes his need for her, thus positioning herself as the source of Gustave's inspiration.

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[394] It was probably not the case that James McNeill Whistler abandoned Joanna Hiffernan in London with no means of support while he was traveling. In fact, he left her in charge of his affairs during his absence (Savatier, *L'Origine,* 61, and MacDonald, *Woman in White,* 27).

Jo also shares with Balzac's Gillette and Zola's Christine the desire to please her lover and the hope that doing so will capture his time and attention. Certainly, an artist's entire project can unravel if the model refuses to pose, therefore the women's choice is essential to the success of the painter's plans.[398] Gustave's dependence upon Jo becomes clear because he cannot create the masterpiece he envisions without a willing woman. Knowing his art requires her presence, Jo hopes her choice to model for *L'Origine du monde* will leave an indelible impression on

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[395] Helena Goscilo. "The Mirror in Art: Vanitas, Veritas, and Vision," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* 34, no. 2 (June 2010): Article 7. 11.

[396] Goscilo, "Mirror in Art," 11.

[397] A. Hollander, *Seeing*, 391, and Goscilo, "Mirror in Art," 10.

[398] Sitzia, *L'artiste*, 100.

Gustave's work and on the man himself. She declares, "Je serai le dernier amour de Courbet" (72). Jo's desire to please Gustave is also part of her narcissistic longing for exclusive love.

While the studio romance often celebrates the youth and beauty of the model as a gateway into aesthetic ideal, women's bodies can also elicit feelings of revulsion for both males and females, the sight of female genitalia reminding human beings of the site of their birth and the inevitability of their death. Courbet's painting depicts this disturbing sight directly, potentially activating viewers' feelings of discomfort as well as desire. In Orban's novel, when Jo sees the completed canvas for the first time, her response is a violent rejection, an intense experience of disgust:

> Le choc que je reçus en plein visage fut si grand qu'il me fallut des années pour parvenir à retrouver l'image de cette toile dans ma mémoire.
>
> […]
>
> Les hommes ont mauvais goût. Je ne partage pas leur attirance. J'étais triste que ce soit la partie la plus laide du corps d'une femme qui les captive autant.
>
> Devant moi, ces lèvres carnassières souriaient férocement et s'apparentaient davantage à une sombre méduse, à une tarentule velue, qu'à une inoffensive petite chatte. (132-4)

Jo's sense of revulsion is so strong that she loses consciousness and blocks her memory of the image. Jo compares the vulva depicted in the painting to threatening, poisonous creatures: "une sombre méduse" (a dark jellyfish) and "une tarentule velue" (a hairy tarentula). The narrative repeats a stereotype that female genitals are an ugly, horrifying sight, "la partie la plus laide du corps d'une femme," that mysteriously captivates men. Using the word "méduse" activates references to Freudian theories about female genitalia being symbolized by the Gorgon of ancient mythology, the terrifying Medusa whose face paralyzed all who saw it.[399] Jo is simultaneously seduced by her own appearance, yet she also rejects the most overtly sexual parts of herself. With Jo's terror at a representation of her own body, Orban reinforces negative stereotypes about female biology and sexuality.

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[399] See Freud's essay "Medusa's Head:" "The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. [...] it occurs when a boy [...] catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother" (Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's

Therefore, in Christine Orban's novel, both the male artist and the female model have characteristics stereotypically associated with their sex. Orban maintains the gendered roles and power structures of the studio romance: Gustave is a powerful male painter, who controls the creative process and uses his model's body to achieve his artistic goals; Jo accedes to Gustave's demands while using him to provide her with financial support and a rapt audience for her exhibitionistic pleasure. Although in Orban's novel the gender roles are narrowly defined, telling the story from the model's point of view allows the author to explore these binary limits from a different perspective, ultimately challenging them.

D. A Voice of One's Own

One way that Orban simultaneously activates and then undermines her protagonist's traditional feminine role is with the recurring motif of Jo's hair, introduced in the opening letter to the editor and sprinkled throughout the text like the white hairs "parsemés" among Jo's long red locks. Jo's undone tresses symbolize both the seductive power she has over men and her desire for freedom, for a life outside domestic and marital conventions. Jo's copper curls represent her youth and beauty—her sexual allure—while the white hairs scattered amongst the russet ones represent aging, the passing of time, the inevitability of death, and the desire to reflect upon one's past. Additionally, in Western culture, red hair is a trope frequently associated

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Head," in *Writings on Art and Literature*, edited by Werner Hamacher and David E. Welbury. [Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1997], 264).

with a passionate and sensitive nature.[400] As mentioned above, Joanna Hiffernan's curly red hair was featured in works of art by both Gustave Courbet and James McNiell Whistler. Orban uses this fact to assign particular importance to Jo's hair and the attraction it holds for male artists.

Jo proclaims that all the painters who visited James' Paris studio were captivated by her tresses: "Tous s'extasiaient sur l'or de mes cheveux" (24). One of Gustave's nicknames for Jo further underlines the importance of her hair: he repeatedly calls Jo "ma Roussotte" (65, 66, 67, 90). Jo purposefully uses her curls to increase her own narcissistic power and exhibitionistic pleasure: "Avec mes cheveux libres de toute attache, j'aimais—je l'avoue—me donner en spectacle" (48). Wearing her hair down is, in itself a spectacle because in the nineteenth century the only place a woman could respectably leave her hair undone was when dressing or sleeping.[401] Therefore, there is a cultural association between long, abundant hair left to fall freely, or "les cheveux défaits," and the intimacy of the bedroom.[402] Jo's locks carry a strong erotic charge, particularly when allowed to flow around her. However, she anticipates losing her power to attract men as she ages, just as her hair will lose its bright color. This fear is one of her motives for choosing to pose for *L'Origine du monde*: "Quand les hommes ne me regarderont plus dans la rue, quand j'aurai coupé mes cheveux, quand je n'inspirerai plus aucun peintre et qu'il ne me restera rien, mis à part le sentiment d'avoir vécu, regretterai-je de ne pas avoir choisi une autre existence?" (49-50). Jo does not want to live a bourgeois life and her beautiful curls make it possible. Her red hair is distinctive and attracts artists to her, giving her the option of a life outside “les conventions de la société” (50). The author thus associates Jo’s hair with her personal power to choose a life she prefers.

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[400] MacDonald, *Woman in White*, 35.

[401] Carol Rifelj, "Le Langage des coiffures." In *Le Roman du signe: fiction et herméneutique au XIXe siècle*, (Saint-Denis, France: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 2007), http://books.openedition.org/puv/5521, 13.

[402] Rifelj, "Langage des coiffures," 13.

Orban endows Jo with awareness of her choices. Jo proclaims “Je n’ai jamais été une femme convenable” (29). She chooses to engage in her affair with Gustave, prefers relationships with painters over other men, and acts to procure both sustenance and pleasure for herself. The narrative underlines Jo’s conscious decisions and her ambivalent emotional responses—both to the options available to her and to the effects of her decisions. Jo’s repeated ruminations about her choices and their consequences are another element in *J’étais l’origine du monde* that spirals through the text, revealing nuances of Jo’s personality with each iteration: “À l’amertume d’une vie frileuse, j’ai préféré mes excès, quitte à les payer un jour” (17), she explains. “Une vie frileuse,” is a cold and timid life, devoid of passion and risk—the opposite of what Jo seeks in her amorous artistic adventures. Jo’s narrative equates the life of a respectable bourgeois wife and mother with confinement and constraint:

> […] Tourner une mayonnaise, attendre un seul homme ou le déluge, limiter, cloisonner mon univers, le clôturer comme un champ de vaches, pour être sûre de ne pas désirer plus que mon lot, ne pas prendre le risque d’avoir mal, j’en étais incapable. (50)

The narrative compares proper women who follow the rules to cattle (un champ de vaches), corralled and safe in their pasture. Jo would rather be pursued through the forest, the quarry of the passionate Gustave, than wait quietly in the enclosed (“clôturer”) safety of a respectable life. “Oser être soi-même, tout le monde en est là” (28).

By writing her memoir, Jo creates her own version of herself and also claims all the male-created ones, thereby taking ownership over her image. Emphasizing her agency, Jo insists repeatedly on her purposeful choice to live as a model, aware that each painter’s whims temporarily define her, knowing that “le choix de cette vie [...] interdisait une autre” (73-4) This mutability of identity is partly what appeals to Jo about her life as a painter's model. She imagines telling the housewives of Paris how narrow their world is:

> Vous pensez, parce que vous vous déshabillez devant un seul homme, que vous m'êtes supérieures? [...] Rentrez chez vous, attendez que votre mari revienne du bordel [...] pendant que moi, je fouille, je découvre d'autres vies, je voyage, je comprends [...]. (53)

She deliberately allows herself to assume each role, seeking a multiplicity of experiences in the gaze of the painter. Even knowing her choices might later bring regret, Jo chooses to be herself, on her own terms. Orban's strategy of emphasizing Jo's agency creates a fictional female model with a fully-dimensional personality.

If Gustave appropriates some of Jo's creative energies to create his painting, Jo, in turn, takes possession of Gustave's artistic ability in writing her story. When Gustave performs cunnilingus on Jo, his face, mustache and beard come into direct contact with her pelvis, which provides the painter with the inspiration he needs to complete *L'Origine du monde.* In the closing letter to the editor, the author again reprises references to hair, this time likening Gustave's beard to Jo's "poils," the hair of her pubic region: "[...] lorsque je me regarde dans un miroir, j'ai l'impression de voir la barbe de Courbet se mélanger à mes poils [...]" (138). Here, Jo's merging with Gustave becomes a source of power and inspiration for *her* artistic expression. Orban's Jo, in writing her own story, has adopted the masculine role reserved for the artist in the traditional atelier fantasy. Therefore, she has also claimed some of Gustave's creative powers, just like both Gustave and James use Jo's body and life energy to produce the masterpieces for which she modeled: "Les peintres qui m'ont aimée ont absorbé un peu de ma vie" (109). Jo's letter continues: "Courbet habite *L'Origine du monde* comme il m'a habitée tout au long de ce livre" (138). Indeed, Orban's fictional version of Gustave Courbet inhabits the book via Jo's remembered direct quotes of his words to her and the continual use of his name. However, if he is in control of the creation of the painting, and if his voice can be heard in the direct dialogues, Jo keeps control of the narrative. Artistic creativity is an act of expressing one’s own identity. Gustave and James each assert their version of Jo when they paint her portrait. In writing her narrative, Jo creates her own self-definition, and she claims her understanding of the two famous painters who were her lovers.

Jo’s intensely negative experience when she first sees the completed painting seems to reinforce stereotypes regarding the sight of female genitals. In her essay “Le Rire de la Méduse,” Hélène Cixous confronted the image of Medusa and urged women to reclaim it, to refuse the shame and negative associations traditionally assigned to female bodies, and to write the multifaceted embodied experience of women’s lives.[403] However, if the structure of Orban’s text is like Courbet’s painting, then it also metaphorically recreates the shapes of the female body, answering Cixous’ challenge for women to write themselves: “Il faut que la femme s’écrive.”[404] This suggests that Jo not only wishes to control how others see her, as established with her appeal to the editor to refrain from judging her, but that her narrative is also an attempt to reclaim her self-image and recreate a positive view of her own body.

In Orban’s version of the studio romance, the roles of the artist and the model remain unchanged and align with gendered heteronormative stereotypes. Orban’s novel repeats many tropes and stereotypes inherited from the nineteenth century: Gustave is the forceful masculine painter and the confluence of his creative and aesthetic impulses determine the parameters of the painting. Jo is the objectified recipient of his desiring and defining gaze, a manipulative model who is simultaneously self-sacrificing and self-absorbed. However, the studio romance gender roles are also undone. In writing her confessional narrative, Jo has become the artist of a new text, a version of the studio fantasy that includes her desires and claims her self-image. Now, she has a voice, a point of view, evolving emotions, and multifaceted motivations. Furthermore, the novel itself is written by a female author in response to Courbet's creative invitation. Hence, what is new and different in Orban's text is not what the character says, the studio romance framework itself, or even the overt eroticism of the text. The novelty of Orban's novel is that a woman writer saw Courbet's painting and responded with her own creative act, one centered on the imagined embodied experience of the female model.

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[403] Hélène Cixous, *Le Rire de la Méduse: et autres ironies*, (Paris: Galilée, 2010); and “The Laugh of the Medusa.” *Signs* 1, no. 4, (1976): 875–93.

[404] Cixous, *Rire*, 39.

Jo sees herself in the painting and takes the place of the artist as she writes her story. If the artist is a surrogate for the viewer, then in shifting the focus to the model's point of view, Orban's text creates space for a female viewer of Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*. Even more, Orban depicts Jo as a woman rich with agency and complexity. Jo's ambivalent feelings when faced with the fragmented representation of her body do not negate the erotic pleasure she experiences in posing, in being seen, in watching the sexual act, and in looking at herself. The text itself, framed as a confession, increases the sense of pleasure through telling and reliving the experience while also allowing the model to construct her own identity. Additionally, the artist is now the object of the model's gaze. Through Jo's eyes, female viewers can reinterpret Courbet and his painting: The woman claims a self-definition outside the parameters of patriarchy. Suddenly, she has a complete body and this body can accept ambivalence. In the closing letter to the editor, Jo writes "Nos existences sont d'étrange puzzles dont il manque tant de pièces quand on arrive au bout" (138). Although Orban's text evokes the absences that haunt Courbet's canvas, the novel restores the puzzle piece of the model's missing body and voice.

Conclusion

Gustave Courbet's provocative painting *L'Origine du monde* is a perfect starting point for an examination of the female model's role in art and literature. Although the image seems to be displaying everything openly, the figure's truncated body emphasizes what the viewer cannot see, cannot truly know, creating a dramatic visual representation of absence. At the same time, the canvas itself becomes a physical presence, representing the body of the model and her conscious choice to pose for this painting. The figure's open legs invite interested viewers to imagine entering her body, while her missing face and limbs also invite observers to complete the cropped image with conscious and unconscious projections of their own emotions, memories, and experiences. Deceptively simple at first glance, *L'Origine du monde* can provoke limitlessly multifaceted individual responses. This is a distillation of the complex role the model plays in depictions of the studio romance.

Honoré de Balzac's novella "Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu;" Gustave Courbet's paintings *L'Atelier du peintre: Allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique et morale* and *L'Origine du monde*; Edmond and Jules de Goncourts' novel *Manette Salomon*; Émile Zola's *L'Œuvre,* and *J'étais l'origine du monde* by Christine Orban each create a gendered role for the members of the studio triad of painter/model/observer. According to the stereotypes of the atelier romance, the painter is male and his artwork is an expression of his virility; the female model is a willing sacrifice, giving her body to bolster the artist's career; and the external viewer is a voyeur of the model's nudity and of her relationship with the painter. Yet, these same works also contain details and structural elements that do not entirely align with traditional gender stereotypes. Therefore, each work of art also subverts binary constructions of rigid masculine/feminine identities and roles. Within the texts and canvases in my corpus, the female models are the subject of masculine artistic and erotic visual interest, but each model also has her own gaze, symbolizing feminine subjectivity. The creators thus represent women as having thoughts, goals, and desires separate from those of the male painter-protagonist. The Goncourt brothers and Émile Zola use their fictional models as part of their novels' composition, thereby portraying women with more fully-developed individuality than women have in Balzac's "Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu" or Courbet's *L'Atelier*. Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* is a complex image, provocatively inviting readings that can variously buttress binary thinking or defy polarized reductionism. In response to Courbet's powerful canvas, Christine Orban's novel *J'étais l'Origine du monde* presents a version of the studio romance from the female model's point of view, making the woman's subjectivity the predominant organizing factor in the text. The fictional models in the works chosen for this study therefore gain increasing agency over time, with the later works containing more richly nuanced characters whose perspectives become part of the deliberate design of the narratives.

The first chapter focused on Gustave Courbet's *L'Atelier du peintre. Allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique et morale* (1855) and Honoré de Balzac's novella "Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu" (1831-37). Both Courbet's canvas and Balzac's tale activate patriarchal myths of the nude model's willing role as muse to the male painter. However, I identified vantage points from which we can recognize feminine agency in these works, and likewise the fallibility of masculine-dominated paradigms of artistic creativity. Gilette can be read as a powerful agent in the text: she is an astute observer of the world around her who is more aware of nuances than are the male painters; and the effects of her agency–her ability to choose or refuse to pose for Frenhofer–drives the plot of the tale, making her an essential narrative focal point. Because the men in the novel do not see or understand her, Gillette is, herself, a “chef d’œuvre inconnu.” Courbet’s model, who stands at the center of *L’Atelier*, is placed spatially above the painter, and her pose is one of active stillness. She is an evocation of feminine creative power. Traces of unstable binaries within Courbet and Balzac’s works open avenues for viewer and reader participation in making meaning of works of art, allowing a redefinition of the female model’s role as an active one.

In the second chapter, I demonstrated that in their novel *Manette Salomon*, the Goncourts activate existing myths and stereotypes of the atelier fantasy, while simultaneously creating or allowing gaps in meaning that undermine strict gender categories. The authors represent Manette as having her own desires and goals, portraying her as exercising agency. From her initial decision to pose for Coriolis to her calculated manipulations of his life, Manette’s choices are central to the structure of the novel. Although the Goncourts depiction of Manette is fraught with misogynistic and antisemitic stereotypes, they also created a female model who can be read against the grain as a representation of powerful feminine subjectivity.

In the third chapter, I established that the character of Christine plays an essential role in the narrative and composition of Émile Zola’s novel, *L’Œuvre* (1886). The author employs a shifting perspective between Claude, the painter-protagonist, and Christine, the model who becomes his wife. Like Manette and Gillette before her, Christine’s choice to reveal or hide her body is central to the action and organization of the story. Zola builds tension around four important scenes when Christine poses nude, and he uses her perspective to create the emotional ambiance in these segments. Incorporating the female model’s gaze in the organization and structure of the novel portrays her as having subjectivity, undermines the myth that she is merely a passive object, and invites a multiplicity of readers into the space of the text.

The final chapter analyzes Gustave Courbet's painting *L'Origine du monde* and Christine Orban's novel *J'étais l'origine du monde*. With its bold subject matter and skilled artistic rendering, Courbet's canvas enacts the studio romance fantasy and activates all the associated gender binaries: artist and viewers alike gaze upon the faceless female model's exposed body. The movement of the spiraling composition mimics intimate touch while the truncated figure invites viewers to complete the image with their own projections. Thus, observers are participants in the visual exchange between artist and model, each viewer's response becoming part of the painting's meaning. Orban's novel accepts Courbet's invitation, imagining the process of creating *L'Origine du monde*. On the one hand, Orban maintains heteronormativity and binary paradigms in her portrayal of the aggressively masculine Gustave and the exhibitionistic Jo. On the other hand, Orban portrays the model as an individual acting to fulfill her own desires. As she recounts posing for *L'Origine*, Orban's protagonist, Jo, is simultaneously model, artist, and observer. Jo creates her own work of art in writing her memoirs: the novel is a portrait of the fictionalized Gustave Courbet, an homage to *L'Origine du monde*, and Jo's own self-portrait. Orban uses erotic imagery and crude language to mimic *L'Origine*'s shocking effect on viewers, while structuring the text in a circular manner, similar to the composition of Courbet's canvas. Thus, both Gustave Courbet's painting and Christine Orban's novel use binaries inherent to the studio romance while also eliciting a variety of ambivalent emotions, motives, and reactions that undermine gender dichotomies.

This dissertation questioned binary representations of gender, proposing that the female model plays an essential role in the meaning and structure of the works in the corpus. The model is more than merely a secondary character who supports the painter's story arc, nor is she simply a subservient victim of patriarchy. The artists and writers whose work I have discussed each create fictional characters or render painted representations of a female model posing in a male painter's studio. I have identified compositional elements in each work that represent feminine subjectivity and undermine rigid binary gender paradigms. These binary representations are not limited to male artists. In many respects, Christine Orban's novel illustrates the persistence of heteronormative gendered representations. Her portrayal of the relations between Jo and Gustave maintains a patriarchal dynamic of the controlling male painter and the self-sacrificing female model. Yet, the narrative transgresses gendered roles within the atelier fantasy in some respects, primarily by positing the female model as the author of the text.

Towards New Understandings of the Studio Romance

Twentieth and twenty-first century creators of all genders and identities have engaged critically with the longstanding stereotypes of the studio romance and, specifically, with the representation of female bodies in paintings and texts that portray the relationships of the artist, model, and observer.[405] Studying these later works can further enrich our understanding of literary and visual means of reimagining gender binaries, particularly as social changes over time have allowed a greater number of feminine and gender fluid individuals to become artists and writers.

Picasso's body of work is a rich potential source for our analysis. Picasso, as we have seen, identified with Balzac's fictional Frenhofer and even created a series of illustrations for a

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[405] For example, Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (1946-66, Philadelphia Museum of Art) may be a purposeful response to Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 312). The nude female figure, which viewers see by peering through two small holes in a wooden door, is posed like the one in Courbet's canvas and Duchamp may have been among those who saw it at Lacan's home (Teyssèdre, *Roman*, 312).

1926 edition of "Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu." Additionally, he made over a hundred drawings, etchings, and paintings depicting a male artist (frequently resembling himself) at work in his studio with one or more nude female models posing.[406] Particularly during the latter part of his life, Picasso also reimagined a variety of well-known nineteenth-century paintings and works by old masters: Courbet's *Les Demoiselles des bords de la Seine* (Courbet 1856-7, Picasso 1950); Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Delacroix 1834, Picasso 1954-55); Velasquez' *Las Méninas* (Velasquez 1656, Picasso 1957) Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Manet 1862-3, Picasso 1959-62) and *Olympia* (Manet 1863, Picasso 1964); Ingres' *Raphael et La Fornarina* (Ingres 1813, Picasso 1968).[407] Picasso's choice to interpret Velasquez's *Las Méninas* and Ingres' *Raphael et La Fornarina* is particularly relevant to our study of the studio romance because both paintings represent artists at work.[408] Additionally, like the versions of the studio romance we have discussed, Picasso often linked sexual potency to artistic prowess; thus, his paintings depicting female figures can be interpreted as expressions of his erotic desire and personal insecurities.[409] However, this is but one reading, and it is a reductive one. As Karen L. Kleinfelder explains, Picasso deliberately resisted such restrictive interpretations:

> The "plot" [of Picasso's artist and model series] is inherently self-reflexive: an artist, Picasso, makes a picture of an artist, who is also busily at work making a picture. The theme continually turns in on itself, while at the same time Picasso is

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[406] Karen L. Kleinfelder lists 154 such works: *The Artist, His Model, Her Image, His Gaze: Picasso's Pursuit of the Model*, (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), ix-xiii.

[407] See Timothy Anglin Burgard. "Picasso and Appropriation." *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 3 (1991): 489.

[408] Diego Velasquez's *Las Méninas* (1656, Museo Nacional del Prado, Spain) shows Velasquez himself at work on a portrait of King Philip IV and Queen Mariana of Spain while their daughter, Infanta Margaret Theresa, and her entourage entertain the royal couple. Ingres' painting *Raphael et La Fornarina* (1813, Fogg Museum, Harvard University) portrays the Renaissance painter, Raphael, in his studio. He sits upon a stool and holds a beautiful young woman on his lap. While the female figure gazes obliquely at the viewer, the painter's head is turned towards his portrait of her.

[409] Burgard, "Picasso and Appropriation," 490.

> busily turning the theme outward in one variation after another. By continually suspending climax and delaying closure, Picasso's structural strategy is designed precisely to frustrate narrative expectations […]. His continual play of variations on a theme promotes a more open-ended, process orientation.[410]

Further inquiry into the strategies Picasso used in his portrayals of the artist and the female model can therefore expand our understanding of the studio romance.

Additionally, Picasso's variations on Delacroix inspired Assia Djebar's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980), an innovative text that, like Picasso's work, resists reductive readings.[411] The gender binary in many nineteenth-century French works is accompanied by a second but likewise gendered Orientalist bias. As discussed in chapter 2, the Goncourt brothers' portrayal of Coriolis' attraction to Manette as influenced by his love of all things deemed "Oriental" is an example of this colonialist perspective.[412] Naming her text after Eugène Delacroix's painting *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1834), Djebar explores and redefines the meanings assigned to Algerian women and reinterprets Picasso's variations on Delacroix, thereby challenging misogynistic and Orientalist bias. Delacroix's canvas, currently in the Louvre, depicts several women surrounded by luxurious objects and décor. The implication of the image is that the artist is offering viewers a secret window into the exotic "harems" of Algeria. In Djebar's text, the author reframes Delacroix's image as a stolen glance into private space, a manifestation of both colonialism and patriarchy that casts Algerian women as the exotic Other and confines them within a restrictive, yet emotionally isolated composition.[413] Picasso created his series of drawings and paintings based on Delacroix's work during 1954-55, coinciding with the beginning of the Algerian War of Independence (1 November 1954 – 19 March 1962). Picasso's versions all contain the abstracted figures for which he is known. Djebar views Picasso's fragmentation of female bodies as a healing image that honors Algerian women and their role in the Revolution: "Picasso renverse la malédiction, fait éclater le malheur, inscrit en lignes hardies un bonheur totalement nouveau."[414] Djebar invites readers to consider the lived experiences of Algerian women, the trauma of war, and the effect of the French outsider's gaze on the women's lives and identities. Although Djebar's text does not directly enact the studio romance through inclusion of atelier scenes, it deconstructs the patriarchal and Eurocentric power structures behind the masculine gaze. Echoing the fragmentary composition of Picasso's images, Djebar juxtaposes a variety of polyvocal textual forms that William Berg calls "kaleidoscopic:" examples include: conversations, flashbacks, anecdotes, and fragments of songs and tales.[415] Djebar thereby claims creative power for the feminine gaze, using it to redefine Arab women of the past, present and future.

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[410] Kleinfelder, *The Artist*, 6.

[411] Assia Djebar (née Fatima-Zohra Imalayen, 1936 – 2015) was the first Maghrebian author elected to the Académie Française.

[412] Orientalism is a Eurocentric view of the peoples and cultures of the Middle East and/or Asia: "The Orient […] [has] been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscape, remarkable experiences" (Said, *Orientalism*, 1). This fantasized view also presumes masculine and European moral, physical, and social superiority.

Paula Rego (1935-2022), Portuguese-born British artist, has also created a powerful feminine response to nineteenth-century works by men. Her series of three pastels in response to "Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu" dismantles binary structures. Entitled *The Balzac Story* (2011), *Marie of Egypt* (2011), and *Painting Him Out* (2011), Rego's images portray feminine possession of the act of creation. In *Painting Him Out,* a female artist covers a male figure with a layer of green paint, expelling masculine presence from the creative space.[416] *The Balzac Story* portrays three women painting portraits of themselves and one another, thereby repossessing their own images and collapsing the distance between model and artist.[417] Thus, the female figures claim their own representation, rejecting the need for a masculine gaze: "la femme-peintre et modèle à la fois se donne à soi-même."[418] A further study of Rego's work could reveal further dismantling of gendered binary power structures within the creative space of the studio.

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[413] Assia Djebar, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement: Nouvelles*, (Paris: Des Femmes, 1983), 241-3.

[414] Djebar, *Femmes d'Alger,* 260.

[415] Berg, *Imagery*, 229.

The collaborative work of Claude Cahun (née Lucy Schwob 1894-1954) and Marcel Moore (née Suzanne Malherbe 1892-1972) is a powerful reimagining of the atelier fantasy's heteronormativity. They offer a fluid version of the studio romance that ultimately confounds the gendered roles of the nineteenth-century schema. In the portrait photographs the two women created, the roles of artist, model, and viewer become shifting positions that can be occupied by the self or the same-sex other alternately and simultaneously. Cahun and Moore were stepsisters, romantic partners, and artistic collaborators, living and working together for over forty years. Cahun resisted reductive and binary categories, often expressing an androgynous gender identity.[419] Likewise, her writing defies categorization, comprising essays, poems, novellas, translations, letters, and other prose forms.[420] Moore, who was trained at the École de Beaux-

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[416] Dufrêne, "Faire voir," 56.

[417] Dufrêne, "Faire voir," 56.

[418] Dufrêne, "Faire voir," 56.

[419] Kristine Von Oehsen, "The Lives of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore," in *Don't Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore*, (New York: Aperture Foundation/Jersey Heritage Trust, 2006), 12.

[420] Francois Leperlier, *Claude Cahun: L'Écart et la métamorphose: Essai*, (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992), 15.

Arts in Nantes, wrote and illustrated articles on fashion.[421] The two women were active in Surrealist and leftist political circles during the 1930s until they moved to Jersey in 1937.[422] Cahun exhibited a sculpture and other pieces with the Surrealists in May of 1936 in the *Exposition Surréaliste d'objets* at Chez Charles Ratton.[423] The couple created a large collection of photographs, including many nudes featuring Cahun. Although Cahun and Moore could have published or exhibited the images if they had so desired, they shared only a few, suggesting they deliberately limited viewership. While these photos have traditionally been labeled self-portraits and attributed to Cahun, there is evidence that Moore collaborated with most if not all of them. For example, the photographer's shadow is frequently visible in the pictures, demonstrating the presence of the other.[424] The couple also produced two books together, with Cahun authoring the texts and Moore creating visual material: *Vues et visions* (1919), which is a very structured text, each two-page spread featuring illustrations by Marcel Moore and prose poems by Cahun; and *Aveux non avenus* (1930), for which Cahun created a fragmentary, multivocal, non-linear autobiographical text, and Moore created collages from Cahun's photo portraits. Their collaboration itself defies the patriarchal model of single authorship, and their use of homoerotic tropes presents an alternative to the masculine-dominated schema of the traditional studio fantasy.

Examining the tropes of the woman as artist's model and as creator over the last two centuries demonstrates that feminine engagement with the creative process has moved from a passive role towards a more active role where the woman becomes an observer and creator herself. Rather than merely reversing the traditional gendered power structure to make women the observers of men, women artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries redefine the gaze and the creative process itself. Close analysis of these women's works reveals a variety of visual and literary strategies that express their active engagement in the creative process.

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[421] Von Oehsen, "Lives," 11-12.

[422] Gen Doy, "Another Side of the Picture: Looking Differently at Claude Cahun," in *Don't Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore,* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2006), 75.

[423] Von Oehsen, "Lives," 16.

[424] Doy, "Another Side," 74.

A Return to the Beginning

Having followed a shifting path through various iterations of the studio romance in nineteenth and twentieth century works of art, and having posited avenues for further exploration of non-binary representations of women and artists, we return to the beginning, to the origins of this study, to my first day in Paris, on the first floor of the Musée d'Orsay where I stood, stunned, facing *L'Origine du monde*. The powerful, multifaceted, and even disorienting response I experienced upon first seeing *L'Origine du monde* stamped the image in my mind. It stayed with me, continuing to inform my understanding of art and literature and inspiring the subject of this dissertation. *L'Origine du monde* hovers between misogynistic pornography and artistic masterpiece. Savatier says of Courbet's painting "[…] par son sujet et son cadrage, ce tableau s'affirme d'emblée comme un symbole de la liberté de créer, affranchie de toute contrainte morale […]."[425] *L'Origine du monde* is, indeed, a bold claim of creative liberty–not merely the freedom allowing Courbet to paint such an image, but also the model's right to pose for it, the museum's choice to display it, and the viewer's freedom to look at and think about *L'Origine du monde*. Even more, the choice to investigate, to discuss, and even to create an artistic response to

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[425] Savatier, *L'Origine*, 16.

L'Origine du monde remains an act of personal liberty in a society that still censors and constrains individual expressions of sexuality and gender identities outside heteronormativity. When facing *L'Origine du monde,* observers become both witnesses to and participants in a moment of artistic creation that recreates the collaborative nature of all art and literature.

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