

March 1, 2010

### **Straightjacket or Freedom: Transgender in the Life and Works of Rachilde**

Teresa Stankiewicz, Texas State University

Rachilde is the pseudonym for Marguerite Eymery Vallette who was an important author of the decadence movement and symbolist theatre in France (Hawthorne 160). She invented the pseudonym in 1877 and later took on that persona as part of her lifestyle (Hawthorne 63, 66). There are many allusions to transgender in Rachilde's life, including cross-dressing, presenting herself as a man of letters, and possible homosexuality. Melanie Hawthorne argues that Rachilde presented herself as a man as a canny form of publicity in order to publish her works (109). Frazer Lively also comments on her cross-dressing and states that she "cultivated a scandalous persona" by cutting her hair short (270). Her transgender is evident in several of her works including her most notable novels *Monsieur Venus*, *La Marquise de Sade*, and *La Jongleuse*. Several scholarly works analyze and critique her novels, essays, short stories and poetry but few address her plays. She made a significant contribution to theatre, and transgender also influenced her playwriting. Rachilde was involved with Paul Fort's Theatre d'art and Lugne-Poe's Theatre de l'oeuvre (Hawthorne 161). She not only supported the symbolist theatre with original plays, she also participated as a subscriber to Theatre d'art and by serving on the play selection committee.

The fact that she convinced Lugne-Poe to produce Alfred Jarry's play *le Ubu roi* is testament to her considerable influence. Rachilde wrote plays with themes and characters that questioned society's dictates. In her plays gender is twisted and displayed in cross-functional dichotomy to encourage the audience to question their perception of gender roles. This paper explores the transgender in Rachilde's plays and points out careful considerations that must be made in the staging of gender in order to build the subtle points that Rachilde wants to make. It

March 1, 2010

also questions whether the transgender in her life and works granted her freedom or kept her within self-imposed boundaries.

The definition of transgender keeps changing as scholarly studies introduce new hypotheses of the relevance of gender in examination of culture and art. Initially the term is thought to have been coined in the 1980s and referred to those individuals who live their lives in a social role not associated with their natal sex. “The logic of the term is that, while transvestites episodically change their clothes and transsexuals permanently change their genitals, transgenders make a sustained change of their social gender through non-surgical means (Stryker, 1).” In the 1990s Leslie Feinberg used the term to encompass a broader role. “In Feinberg’s usage, transgender became an umbrella term used to represent a political alliance between all gender-variant people who do not conform to social norms for typical men and women, and who suffer political oppression as a result (Stryker, 1)”. The term has been used in reference to transvestites, cross-dressers, and to those who live their lives as a different gender. It has also been applied to people who refuse any definition of gender as a role and live outside the invisible boundaries of societal definitions. Transgender in this paper refers to crossing the boundaries of society’s “normative” sexual roles and explores this theory as relevant to the time of Rachilde’s life, 1860-1953.

It is clear from several scholarly works that transgender was a significant part of Rachilde’s life. Hawthorne and Gantz both refer to her cross-dressing in their discussion of Rachilde. Her peers, Ernest Gaubert and Andre David, both wrote biographies of her that also reference her cross-dressing. Hawthorne suggests that Rachilde’s cross-dressing was a “fragmented practice” (Hawthorne 101) and not a regular occurrence. Rachilde presented herself as *un homme de lettres* and asked permission to cross-dress from *le prefet* in 1884.

March 1, 2010

Michael R. Finn proposes that many of her peers included her as a character in their writings, referring to her transgender in a derogatory manner (Finn 82). Rachilde often complicated her cross-dressing by stating she was a man while wearing a woman's old-fashioned veil (Hawthorne 220). This apparent contradiction in sexual boundaries is also evidenced by her derision of lesbianism, while at the same time engaging in a homosexual relationship with Gisele d'Estoc (Hawthorne 220).

Rachilde's childhood was somewhat unconventional and that may have influenced the transgender in her adult life. Her father, a soldier, was continually away from home and he wanted a son, not a daughter. Rachilde's mother was from an affluent family and, in keeping with the traditions of the wealthy, left Rachilde in the care of a nurse. Her mother also made fun of her slight limp due to a physical defect at birth (Hawthorne 35). Rachilde tried to gain her father's affections by learning to ride, participating in hunts and wearing trousers like a boy. With an absent father and a mother who did not show maternal concern, Rachilde did not experience a warm, close relationship with either parent. In addition to rejection from her parents, she had an unusual education. She lived during a time when mandatory education was not required for girls. Therefore, her mother had a few private tutors come teach her daughter. Rachilde had free reign in her grandfather's library and read controversial books such as the works of the Marquis de Sade (Hawthorne 188).

Hawthorne maintains that Rachilde's cross-dressing and eccentricities are exaggerated (Hawthorne 108). Whether Rachilde presented herself as a man of letters and made a point of dressing like a man in order to be accepted by the writing community or merely as a form of self-promotion, transgender became a straightjacket rather than a vehicle for freedom. Rachilde states that she stopped cross-dressing when she married Alfred Vallette in 1889 (Hawthorne

March 1, 2010

125). When she became an accepted and well-known writer, perhaps the lure of eccentricity lost its use and appeal. It is hard to know whether her fight against traditional roles and values was a reflection of her transgender or if simply it was a tool for her antagonism against the bourgeois. Nonetheless, she continued her rebellion against society's power hierarchies and social mores through her writing. She did, in fact, become a respected member of the writing community in her time and had a great deal of influence in the writing and theatre communities. In Christine Kiebuszinska's article, she notes that Rachilde held Tuesday salons that attracted notable figures of literature, such as Alfred Jarry, Oscar Wilde, Maurice Ravel, and artists, such as Toulouse-Lautrec, Vuillard, Gauguin and Henri Rousseau (30). This attests to the position that she was indeed a remarkable woman regardless of her reasons for living in transgender. As a noteworthy member of the decadent and symbolist theatre movements, the influence of transgender or opposition to normative societal roles is apparent in her works.

Transgender can be seen as part of the decadent movement with Rachilde in the center. The decadent movement was a short literary movement focused primarily on a small group of writers that included Oscar Wilde, Bram Stoker, W.B. Yeats, and Rachilde (Holmes 37). The decadent writer rebelled against naturalism and realism, tradition and convention. Decadent writers were often called pornographic because of their inclusion of unconventional sex in their works. Barbey d'Aurevilly pronounced Rachilde as a distinguished pornographer in reference to her novel *Monsieur Venus* (Lively 270). Rachilde is most notably known as the queen of decadence. Along with her future husband Alfred Vallette, she contributed to Anatole Baju's journal *Le Décadent* in 1886 (Holmes 38). The decadents espoused "ennui or world-weariness" and retreated from an imperfect world (Holmes 38). They opposed the French Third Republic's social worlds of progress and democracy. While the realists wanted to portray the common man

March 1, 2010

in realistic settings and incidents, Rachilde's writing style was in opposition to the realist novel and used eroticism that was violent and "that rejected both the binary complementarity of orthodox gender codes and the necessary connection between sex and reproduction" (Holmes 39). Rachilde's twists on gender are revealed in the portrayals and actions of the characters of her plays. The reversal of roles, the melding of the sexes and the mutiny against the norm in Rachilde's plays reveal methods that can be employed in staging gender today. For example, many of the characters have androgynous descriptions such the son, Terror-Stricken, in *L'Araignée de cristal*

*L'Araignée de cristal*, (The Crystal Spider), was performed in 1894 at Théâtre de l'oeuvre. There are only two characters, The Mother and Terror-Stricken, her son. The mother and son are talking one evening when the moon is full. The mother is concerned for her son and tries to find out what is troubling him. He resists her attempts and finally declares his fear of mirrors. As he succeeds in frightening her with his own fears, she asks him to get the light. He runs off to obey her and crashes into a mirror. His throat is cut, but the audience is left wondering if he dies or recovers.

In *L'Araignée de cristal*, the description of the son shows Rachilde's ambivalence toward men: "He is thin, as if floating in his loose shirt of pure white twill. His complexion is wan... He has even features which recall his mother's beauty, a little like a dead man who resembles his own portrait" (*The Crystal Spider* 273). This description is somewhat androgynous in an attempt to meld the sexes. This deliberate blurring of male and female roles shows in *The Crystal Spider* in several different ways. One of the first distortions Rachilde places on traditional roles for the sexes has incestuous overtones. The Mother is sensual, and her first spoken words and movements are sensuous. Rachilde starts with the lines, "The Mother (*Stretching out in her*

March 1, 2010

*armchair*) What an aroma this honeysuckle has? Do you smell it? It makes you dizzy. It is like a lady's liqueur.... (*She smacks her lips*)" (*The Crystal Spider* 273). The telling incestuous line is "The Mother (*Lowering her voice and drawing her armchair closer*) Well then... you are not going to be angry, Sylvius?... If my own flesh were sick... well. (*Delicately*) we would take care of ourselves..." (*The Crystal Spider* 273). This is an understated suggestion that if he is having trouble with women then she will take care of his sexual needs. The mother is certain that his troubles are due to a woman when her subtle advances are rebuffed.

In addition to incest, another point of transgender in *The Crystal Spider* is in the son's name Sylvius and his cousin's name Sylvia, suggesting male and female counterparts of a whole. He played with his cousin as a child and is very close to her. As he grew older his voyeuristic view of her in a mirror showing her naked and in a provocative pose frightens him. This relationship postures the confusion of sexual desires and fears that Rachilde often includes in her work. The staging of gender in this play must achieve the delicate balance of contradictions that Rachilde exposes in her writing. Besides the fear of sexual desire and incest, Rachilde also reverses traditional roles by showing a woman in power over the man.

The domineering mother is an example of a woman with power over a man in another reflection of transgender and is one of the strong themes in *The Crystal Spider*. In this play the son accuses his mother of smothering him and trying to kill him with mirrors. She controls him by paying off his debts, and she manipulates him by offering to bring young girls and women over so he can find one to assuage his sexual affliction. He attempts to resist her insistence by telling her he needs to be left alone. The Mother is the antithesis of the female qualities of beauty and sensitivity as well as the male attributes of dominance and power. Kiebuszinska points out the dichotomy of the Mother's sensitive description that is reversed by the description

March 1, 2010

of her black *dishabille* (34). Rachilde continues the contradictory view of women as distrustful and duplicitous when Terror-Stricken or Sylvius, maintains that women and young girls have mirrors in their eyes. He compares shop windows to whores. He cannot believe that as an intelligent woman, his mother sees only herself in the mirror while he sees monsters in the reflection. He is “stunned, every morning, to see you are still alive, you, women and young girls who look at yourselves incessantly in the mirror!” (*The Crystal Spider* 274). The staging of gender in this play is a carefully studied flip in gender roles as dictated in the early nineteenth century.

The themes of female power over male, melding of the sexes and androgyny that are found in *The Crystal Spider* are repeated in *Madame La Mort* (Lady of Death). *Madame La Mort* was first performed in 1891 at the Théâtre d’art and tells the story of a young man flirting with suicide. The young man envisions death as a woman and engages in a game of Russian roulette involving the injection of poison into a cigar that is placed among several cigars to choose from each night. He is obviously melancholic and his freeloading friend tries to cheer him up. When the doctor realizes Paul has stolen poison from him, he describes the taste and effects of the poison and demands that Paul return it. Paul returns the cigars keeping only one. As Paul smokes the cigar he hid from the doctor, he realizes he has finally drawn the one that will lead him to death. He dies in a dreamlike state, dallying with The Veiled Woman of death.

The description of Paul in *Madame La Mort* is somewhat androgynous as was the description of Terror-Stricken in *The Crystal Spider* and is indicative of the typical feminine man seen in Rachilde’s works. He is described as a young man who is “pale, tall, thin, with a delicate, weary face” and “at his neck, a woman’s scarf” (*Madame La Mort* 120). In addition to feminine men, when Rachilde writes of women who are to be adored, she makes them ethereal in

March 1, 2010

some manner as is The Veiled Woman. Death is represented by The Veiled Woman who “is an image, not a living being” (*Madame La Mort* 122). The staging of gender in *Madame La Mort* is a complicated mix of blending genders and showing conflicting opposition in the remaining characters.

Besides the use of androgynous characters, Rachilde once again shows women as duplicitous and manipulative in her rebellion against the traditional views held of them. Lucie is Paul’s mistress who “sometimes falls into a sort of forced sentimentality, which she fakes on purpose” (*Madame La Mort* 121). This also displays Rachilde’s general disdain for prostitutes. Lucie portrays Life in the second act “in a pink evening gown, with flowers, diamonds, and a fan. Her hair is loose” (*Madame La Mort* 122). The prostitute is thus described in a provocative manner as the opposite of the ethereal Death in a satirical manner.

Rachilde uses actions and dialogue to mock naturalism and the commonalities of the bourgeois as well as the transgender in her character descriptions. The dialogue between Paul and his friend Jacques is a prime example. Jacques wants his friend to celebrate the sunlight and nature. He believes Paul’s melancholy to be unhealthy and a distraction, but at the same time he wants Paul’s best cigars and borrows money from him. Paul shuns Jacques’ arguments by referring to their difference of opinion on life and gives him money as a meaningless joke. Paul’s love of the dark and his resistance to his friend’s efforts is a display of transgender in the rebuttal of what society deigns a normal lifestyle. Rachilde shows her contempt for the bourgeois by using Paul’s friend Jacques as a reflection of normative society and by portraying him as shiftless, dishonest and cavalier. Jacques not only borrows money, he suggests that he will steal the mistress, flirts with her and tries to manipulate the young man’s life. What’s more, the mistress is shown as shallow and calculating, wondering how long is appropriate to feign

March 1, 2010

grief before she can respectably become the mistress of Jacques. To add to this, the servant's only concern is that he not be blamed for the death. None of them have remorse for the loss of this man or for the loss of life. All of their artificial grief and their fear is self-serving. In this satirical look at the bourgeois, the traditional versus non-traditional gender roles must be staged in opposition to one another to illustrate the point Rachilde is making.

Rachilde often shows suicide as a desired dream state that also reflects her rejection of societal norms and is as important as her use of dialogue and actions. Rachilde's fascination with the macabre and death was not thought appropriate for a lady in the late 1800s. It demonstrates her wish to be unlike a lady, unlike a traditional woman, which is further evidence of transgender. Death in *Madame La Mort* shows a reversal of the power in gender roles as Death, a woman, holds power over the man. In addition to death and the macabre, she shows suicide as acceptable, welcomed and preferred by her protagonists. In *Madame La Mort*, Paul flirts with Death and describes her as a woman. Suicide is a game for Paul and both his friend's and the doctor's reference to suicide as inconsiderate show Rachilde's scorn for the conventional view of suicide as sinful betrayal.

Rachilde uses death again in *La Poupée Transparente* (The Transparent Doll) but this play does not involve suicide. *La Poupée Transparente* was performed in 1919 at Théâtre d'art. On the surface *La Poupée Transparente* is about a woman who grieves for the loss of her child by maintaining that he still lives. The characters involved are simply The Woman and The Doctor. The Doctor tries to talk her out of her hysteria to return to her husband. As she convinces The Doctor that her child still lives, he is seduced by her beauty and hopes that she will unite with him, as shown in his line, "Might I then hope that...the three of us could be together?" (*La*

March 1, 2010

*Poupée Transparent* 65). In the end, she rejects him and his offers, preferring to believe her son is alive. With her rejection, the Doctor dismisses her as hopelessly insane and incurable.

A more in-depth look at *La Poupée Transparent* shows that not only is the death of The Woman's child significant, it is important to note that the child she laments is her son. She lives through him and he lives through her imagination. This repeats the oneness of the sexes that is a reflection of transgender in Rachilde's plays. This statement of how women are defined through male terms is another key aspect to consider when staging gender. The subjugation of women is clear when the doctor refers to her illness as a "flight of fancy" and remarks how in spite of her "overvivid imagination" she is meant to be happy and adored (*La Poupée Transparent* 60). Janet Beizer discusses Rachilde's similar reference to hysteria in her novel *Monsieur Venus* and states that it is "...a woman's ironizing citation of nineteenth-century commonplaces about hysteria, sexuality, masculinity, femininity, and representation art" (11). The treatment of hysteria in this play uses the same satirical tone as that of the novel *Monsieur Venus*. Rachilde's influences from transgender continue to show when the woman uses madness to attain freedom from her husband and his control over her life. This is also an example of how a tool for freedom may become a straightjacket or vice versa. The view of women as objects is repeated when the Doctor hopes she will join him if he plays to her fantasy of the child. If she will not release her vision of the boy for her husband, perhaps she will do it to join the Doctor as his companion (*La Poupée Transparent* 65).

Returning to Rachilde's use of death in her works, in *La Poupée Transparent* the symbolism of death can be seen not only in the death of the child but also in the death of the marriage, the death of her husband's control over her, and the death of the doctor's desire once she spurns his offer. Death again holds power and is an ethereal illusion. The child exists in the

March 1, 2010

Woman's imagination and is as real as anything the world can offer her. This exemplifies the questioning of society's power structures, which is indicative of transgender and once again proposes a challenge in staging gender to reveal the depths of the symbolism.

Rachilde used transgender in complicated forms to express her frustrations with society's view of her personally and her works. She wanted to be accepted as a professional writer, a serious writer, which in her time meant she had to be a man. She deliberately distorted gender roles and representations in her writing as a rebellion against the bourgeois. She purposely changed gender designations used in the French language to question the validity of their use, such as in the name *Monsieur Venus*. She lived a life that continually questioned the perception of gender and the designated roles of both genders and questioned the division of class and power.

Rachilde's choices made a deliberate impact on her art and seem to have placed her playwriting into a straight-jacket, limiting it to the decadent movement. The issue of whether Rachilde's transgender was publicity or a choice in lifestyle is unimportant. The fact that she felt the need to present herself as a man in order to be heard is still a part of feminist critique today. Dressing as a man and calling herself a man gave her freedom and notoriety. Holmes points out that all of Rachilde's plays were written in the 1890s except for four short plays written between 1913 and 1921 and one comic play published in 1939 (203). The influence of transgender on Rachilde's writing serves as an example for contemporary writers. It is an illustration of how the choices that today's artists make, regardless of their gender, race, religion or sexual preference, have the power to grant freedom and simultaneously place them in a straight-jacket. The significance of studying Rachilde's work is in how it serves to illuminate a fascinating author's experience of gender in our struggles to state our own. This paper explores only three of her

March 1, 2010

plays but at least fifteen plays by Rachilde have been identified, some of which have not yet been translated from French. Over and above translating her works, additional research and scholarship on the topic of the influence of transgender in her works is needed to bring this intriguing woman to the forefront of education, particularly in theatre and gender studies.

### Works Cited

- Beizer, Janet. *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994.
- David, Andre. *Rachilde, homme de lettres, son oeuvre : document pour l'histoire de la littérature franc, aise*. Paris : Editions de La Nouvelle revue critique, 1924.
- Finn, Michael R. "Imagining Rachilde: Decadence and la roman a clés." *French Forum* 30.1 (Winter2005): 81-96. *Project Muse*. Web. 19 March. 2009.
- Gantz, Katherine. "The Difficult Guest: French Queer Theory Makes Room for Rachilde." *South Central Review* 22.3 (Fall2005): 113-132. *Project Muse*. Web. 7 Oct. 2008.
- Gaubert, Ernest. *Rachilde*. Paris: Sansot, 1907.
- Gerould, Daniel. "Man of Letters." *Performing Arts Journal* 7.1 (Jan. 1983): 117-122. *Humanities International Complete*. Web. 7 Oct. 2008.
- Halperin, David M. "The Normalization of Queer Theory." *Journal of Homosexuality* 45 Issue 2, 3, 4 (Sept. 2003): 339-343. *The Haworth Press Online*. Web. 19 Oct. 2008.
- Hawthorne, Melanie C. *Rachilde and French Women's Authorship*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001.
- Holmes, Diana. *Rachilde Decadence, Gender and the Woman Writer*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001.

March 1, 2010

Kiebuszinska, Christine. "Behind the Mirror: Madame Rachilde's "The Crystal Spider"." *Modern Language Studies* Vol. 24, No. 3 (Summer, 1994): 28-43. *JSTOR*. Web. 7 Oct. 2008.

Lively, Frazer. "Rachilde: Introduction." Kelly, *Modern Drama* 269-272.

Rachilde. "The Crystal Spider". Kelly, Katherine E. ed. Goumaridou, Kiki and Lively, Frazer, trans. *Modern Drama by Women 1880s-1930s*. London: Routledge, 1996. 273-277.

---. "Madame La Mort". Goumaridou, Kiki and Lively, Frazer, trans. and ed. *Rachilde Madame La Mort and Other Plays*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1998. 118-160.

---. "La Poupee Transparente". Goumaridou and Lively 55-66.

---. *Pourquoi je ne suis pas feministe*. Paris, Les Éditions de France, 1928.

Stryker, Susan. "Transgender". *gltq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture*. (2004): 1-2. gltq, Inc. Web. 4 Oct. 2009. <[www.gltq.com/social-sciences/transgender.html](http://www.gltq.com/social-sciences/transgender.html).>

Styan, J.L. *Modern drama in theory and practice 2: Symbolism, Surrealism and the Absurd*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.