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## The Feminist Agenda in Rachilde's *La Jongleuse*

### The Artist and Her Creative Power

*La Jongleuse* or *The Juggler* written by Marguerite Eymery, otherwise known as Rachilde, in 1900, describes a female character's efforts to preserve self-determination and an identity of her own in a male-dominated 19<sup>th</sup> century France. The enigmatic protagonist Eliante Donalger deliberately ignores social expectations concerning female behavior, and as a hostess she enchants her guests with passionate dancing and artful juggling with sharp knives. She refuses to be seduced by a man, and lives out her erotic and artistic dreams in a private room (in both a figurative and a concrete sense), where she makes all the rules. She crosses gender boundaries, acts in confusing and ambiguous ways, and manifests her power to whomever she chooses – mainly with the intention of marking her personal boundaries. These characteristics are all part of her desire for a fair, independent and free life in a bourgeois and patriarchal society.

*La Jongleuse* can without any doubt be read as a feminist novel. “With her hair worn in the style of a helmet, she [Eliante] is a *guerillère avant la lettre*, and a champion of women's independence” (Hawthorne, 1990, p. xvii). However, Rachilde (1860–1953) never proclaimed herself a feminist, quite the contrary. In her essay “Why I am not a feminist” (1928) her misogynistic statements mirror the attitudes of the male-dominated Parisian decadent movement of which she succeeded in becoming a part: “Women are men's inferior brothers, simply because they have physical weaknesses that prevent them from putting ideas into a logical sequence, as even the least intelligent of men can do” (quoted in Holmes, 2001, p. 73). However, while her essay *might* seem to settle the question, some see a feminist dimension to her work. Rachilde's strong, determined and self-centered female characters tell a story about self-assertion and willpower. The typical Rachildian woman is smart, calculating, violent, stubborn, vindictive and at times murderous.<sup>1</sup> Equality between the sexes does not seem to be her primary goal; by successfully manipulating her male victims she also proves the superiority of her intellect. Oftentimes her destructive behavior is rooted in abuse and injustice at an early age. She seeks fairness (or vindication) by all means, most of the time with a sense of desperation and contempt for established standards of conduct. A recurrent trait of hers is the reversal of gender roles. Titles like *Monsieur Vénus*, *La Marquise de Sade* and *Madame Adonis* speak for themselves. As Diana Holmes puts it, this ‘gender trouble’ makes Rachilde a “Butlerian avant la lettre” (Holmes,

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1 Raoule de Vénérande in *Monsieur Vénus* and Mary Barbe in *La Marquise de Sade* fit all these characteristics.

2001, p. 3).<sup>2</sup> While the subversive woman seems to have the narrator's sympathy, the traditional feminine woman, especially the mother figure is despicable. By and large, her novels promote a poor opinion of society's traditional pillars like marriage and family.

Instead of applauding women in general, Rachilde may have wanted to defy specific gender roles. She identified strongly with being a writer. However, the 19<sup>th</sup> century woman was supposed to cultivate writing or painting only for her own or a private circle's pleasure, whereas publishing or exhibiting her works were considered inappropriate and provocative, even immoral. In a letter to Rachilde, the writer and art critic Remy de Gourmont stated that women's literature was their polite form of lovemaking in public.<sup>3</sup> Similar remarks might have nourished her official anti-feminism. Holmes claims that "Rachilde distanced herself from other women writers and fought hard to be recognized as a gender-neutral 'writer'" (Holmes, 2001, p. 34). Being a writer seems more important than her identity as a woman.

In this chapter devoted to fairness, I aim to show that *La Jongleuse's* allegedly feminist agenda includes a stand for women's right to be artists at the same level as men. I will argue that beside being part of a troublesome love story, Eliante Donalger exhorts a reflection on Art and the artist. In this perspective, the novel may be considered as a parable of the artist's creative power, ambiguous destiny and exclusive passion for her art.

In order to identify and grasp the novel's aesthetic discourse, we need to go beyond the story's realistic realm. From the very beginning the description of Eliante Donalger deviates from mere realism. Eliante reveals her supernatural side by referring to herself as dead and at the same time as a burning goddess of love. She identifies with a statue, and her magical touch seems to transform a human-sized Greek amphora into a living humanlike being. These elements get their full significance as parts of a bigger picture where traditional myths about the artist play a decisive role, especially the myths about the sculptor Pygmalion<sup>4</sup> and the musician Orpheus.

Both were extraordinary artists. The former gave life to a statue, Galatea<sup>5</sup>, thanks to Venus's intervention, the latter suffered the definitive loss of Eurydice after he had almost retrieved her from the Underworld. Power and suffering rep-

2 Holmes alludes to philosopher Judith Butler and her theory of performativity, as set out in *Gender Trouble* (1990).

3 "La littérature des femmes, c'est ma chère amie, leur façon polie de faire l'amour en public" (quoted in Hawthorne, 2001, p. 241, note 1).

4 Pygmalion is a recurrent figure in Rachilde's works. Steven Wilson refers to *L'Heure sexuelle* (1898) (the novel was published under the pseudonym Jean de Chilra) and its "crafted effigy which, Pygmalion-like, becomes endowed with life" (Wilson, 2015, p. 4). Hawthorne and Constable state that the Pygmalion myth is one of *Monsieur Vénus's* "key intertexts". "Raoule is a female Pygmalion who fashions from Jacques a corporeal ideal of male beauty after her own desire, 'a being in her own image'" (Hawthorne & Constable, 2004, p. xxiii).

5 The name Galatea did not exist in the original story but was given to the statue in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Geisler-Szmulewicz, 1999, p. 43).

resent two sides of a Romantic aesthetics which can be recognized in Rachilde's novels – with a significant modification. The heroes of these myths are originally men; however, Rachilde usurps male power and dominance by systematically giving their roles to women.

Before digging any deeper into the subject, a short summary of the novel, followed by a few more facts about Rachilde are in order.

## Summary

Eliante Donalger, a forty-year old widow, is a most virtuosic juggler and dancer surrounded by an aura of mystery. She is characterized as a *femme fatale*, a queen (p. 3), a love goddess (pp. 113, 127), a snake (p. 111), a vampire (p. 90), a nymph (p. 4) and a statue (p. 4). A medical student, Léon Reille, is infatuated with her, but his scientific mind is unable to fathom who she really is. She declares her love for him and at the same time keeps him at a distance. When she demonstrates her independence and skill by juggling with knives in front of her guests, Léon is deeply shocked and “absolutely scandalized” (p. 111), and seems to react as a typical 19<sup>th</sup> century male in the presence of female performance or “indecent” exhibitionism. Furthermore, he is baffled when he discovers that Eliante leads two different lives. In one part of the house she is an ordinary bourgeois woman living with her late husband's uncle and her niece, Missie who, unlike her aunt, represents a modern lifestyle. In another part of the house, Eliante enjoys a private life filled with sensuality and beauty. In this secret space of hers, she cultivates a strange passion for a Greek alabaster vase, an amphora, which seems to come alive under her caress. Léon is invited into her privacy and becomes the involuntary and horrified witness of an erotic scene between Eliante and the amphora, a shocking proof that women's erotic pleasure does not depend on a man. However, despite his revolt against what he perceives as disturbing and perverse, Léon never stops dreaming. Finally, Eliante makes him believe that he will be rewarded for his efforts, and he is looking forward to spending a night with the woman of his dreams. However, in the morning he discovers that the woman lying beside him and with whom he has spent the night is Missie, not Eliante. Eliante is responsible for this unexpected deception. Knowing that her niece was in love with Léon, she had been trying to persuade the young man into marrying her, but in vain. Eliante has more in store for them. Shortly after the couple wakes, she enters the room and in a melodramatic and bloody scene kills herself with one of her juggling knives. After an ellipsis, we understand that Léon and Missie are now a married couple and parents of a baby girl. The novel ends with Léon expressing an enigmatic desire, namely that his daughter will be favored with Eliante's dreamy eyes.

## Rachilde – a Self-Promoting *Auteur à Scandale*

Rachilde was an influential and colorful figure in French cultural life for more than 50 years. She was born near Périgueux in Southwest France where she started her literary activity by writing articles and small stories in the local newspaper. Later she moved to Paris where she – probably as the only woman – joined the French decadent movement and became a prominent figure of Symbolist theatre. She was also one of ‘the Women of the Left Bank.’<sup>6</sup> For a period of 30 years she was a prolific reviewer of contemporary literature in the journal *Mercur de France*, founded in 1890 by her husband Alfred Vallette. At the beginning of her career, Rachilde deliberately chose scandal as a means of breaking through as a writer.<sup>7</sup> Her novel *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) became a *succès de scandale* thanks to its description of subversive sexuality and reversal of gender roles. The female protagonist’s play with the male role and her efforts to transform her lover into a woman (psychologically speaking) were considered both intriguing and spicy, especially because the young author promoted herself as simultaneously innocent and perverse. The novel was published in Belgium where it was instantly banned. Rachilde was sentenced *in absentia* to two years in prison and a fine of 2000 francs. A few years later, in 1889, *Monsieur Vénus* was published in France in a censored version. Eager to keep her readers interested, Rachilde took advantage of the scandal as best she could. In real life, she cultivated her androgynous persona by cutting her hair short and by dressing like a man at a time when the permission of local authorities was mandatory for such a deviation in dress-code.<sup>8</sup> Her visiting card presented her as ‘Rachilde – Homme de Lettres’ (Man of Letters). She referred willingly to her most picturesque ancestors like the abbé de Brantôme (1540–1614), author of salacious anecdotes about the court, or a defrocked priest from the time of the French Revolution who according to a local legend became a werewolf.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, Rachilde always identified with the werewolf and other wolves. These references were probably meant to signal which kind of author she aspired to be, and to attract sensation-seeking readers.

However, the riotous and sensational side of Rachilde’s authorship hides a serious artist. Between the lines of her texts, we can sense a different tone. Later in life, in her preface to the 1935 novel devoted to her late husband, *Roman d’un homme sérieux* or *Novel about a Serious Man*, Rachilde regrets having preferred “illusion before reality, her œuvres, paper flowers, instead of love, the human flower” (my trans.).<sup>10</sup> This other and tragic side of the coin is also suggested in *La*

6 A group of American, British and French women who contributed strongly to Paris’s literary life as “writers, publishers, book sellers and *salonières*” (Benstock, 1987, p. IX).

7 Cf. Dauphiné, 1985, pp. 29–42.

8 According to a law passed in Paris on the 26 Brumaire year IX (17 November 1800), women were not allowed to wear men’s clothing without a special permission from the police.

9 Cf. Holmes, 2001, p. 10.

10 Quoted in Holmes, 2001, p. 66.

*Jongleuse*. From my perspective Eliante Donalger demonstrates the artist's constant dilemma as someone drawn between life and death, between illusion and reality. Art requires a sacrifice on the part of the artist.

By adopting an androgynous appearance and accepting (even wanting) to be mistaken for her scandalous characters, Rachilde defied misogynist prohibitions and manifested her right to have a voice.<sup>11</sup> The importance of having a voice is illustrated by a frightening episode narrated in her autobiographical narrative *A Mort* (1886). In early adolescence, she allegedly saw the ghost of a drowned man emerging from a pond near the family home. In her biography on Rachilde, Melanie Hawthorne writes: "She opens her mouth to cry out, but she is frozen and can only watch as the *noyé* walks out of the pond and between the willow trees, crying out in an unearthly voice, Tu ne parleras jamais, jamais" (Hawthorne, 2001, p. 49). It might have been a nightmare but Rachilde never forgot this frightening incident. The ghost's prediction that she would never have "a voice", meant that she would never be able to write or to express herself. Like the ghost, her destiny was to be drowned. Her authorship seems a battle for proving the ghost wrong. Water and its ambiguity – both deadly and lifegiving – remain a recurrent element in her novels. Sirens and attractive water nymphs<sup>12</sup> as well as beautiful water lilies (nymphéas) with long entangled stalks attached to underground stems capable of making their victims prisoners of profound and dangerous ponds, remind us of the water element's treacherous enchantment. In a metaphorical sense, for the artist to confront the water's deepest levels (mainly in herself) may be risky and distressing but necessary in order to emerge victorious. We know that Romanticism considered Orpheus the musician's travel into the underworld to bring his beloved back to the living, as a metaphor for the artist's efforts to bring his artwork up into the light. As already mentioned, Rachilde's aesthetic thinking has romantic traits. Deep water seems to be her underworld and she is fully determined to emerge victorious.

### Eliante – an Orphean Queen in the Aquatic Underworld?

The novel's first page reveals Eliante's queen-like appearance. "This woman let her dress trail behind her like a queen trailing her life" (p. 4).<sup>13</sup> Her majestic appearance suggests that she is in control, she knows what she wants and will respect no barriers. She is also "serious": "She always wore black: a serious woman" (p. 5). In this first scene, Eliante is about to leave a reception. However, it seems clear that she is not simply escaping a "monotonous official evening" (p. 6), she is headed

11 Cf. Hawthorne, 2001, pp. 48–62: "The Cultural Injunction to Silence".

12 See the description of Raoule de Vénérandes's tunic in *Monsieur Vénus* where ornamental details like river plants, Nymphaea and water lilies are symbols pointing to aspects of the young woman's secret dreams and personality traits (Rachilde, 2004, pp. 12–13).

13 All quotations are taken from Rachilde, 1990.

for something more important: “She left the brightly lit hall, taking with her its darkness, draped by a thick shadow, by an air of impenetrable mystery that came right up to her neck and clasped it as though to strangle her” (p. 4). The reference to suffocation indicates that she is either suffering or impatient to break out of a feeling of restraint. Eliante does so by metamorphosing her dress into supple and undulating water, an element of freedom and lightness: “She took small steps, and the tail of black, full, supple material fanned out, rolled a wave around her, undulated, forming the same moiré circles that are seen in deep water in the evening, after a body has fallen” (p. 3).<sup>14</sup> The sentence describing Eliante’s dress undulates like the fabric associated with the water, until it hits its target, and falls down with its whole weight, like a body falling into water. In other words, her careful entry into the water of her dress seems to mimic the slow but determined rhythm of a sentence moving adventurously but surely towards its satisfactory end or accomplishment. However, the falling body may also suggest the frightening possibility of drowning. Despite being an element of freedom, water can be treacherous. From this point on, it is a question of swimming or drowning. Eliante adapts to the element and therefore, by necessity, becomes an aquatic being, a nymph (p. 4) or a siren, “agile on her sinuous tail, as though more free without feet” (p. 49). She dives into her own underworld – the metaphoric waters of creativity – where she confronts the danger and from which she eventually emerges victoriously. Like her creator Rachilde, she has overcome the danger of drowning and the threat of silence. She playfully juggles with words in admirable love letters which “fall into water” (p. 169). They are not meant to have consequences: “Do not read that seriously” (p. 169). The recipient is confused, but in this case, instrumentality is less important than the sender’s right to express herself, to have a voice.

## The Siren’s Spell

The flexible siren contrasted with the venerable posture of the queen, but was necessary in an aquatic element. Back on solid ground, Eliante still manifests her siren agility when “her arms inert” (p. 4) and “her hands of mourning” (p. 4) come alive and her clothes begin to “float [...] on her” (p. 4). Her beauty becomes apparent: “She was so supple, she bent over so quickly that, suddenly, one guessed she was younger, more *animal*, perhaps more lighthearted, capable of running” (p. 5). Fire adds to water and she explodes: “She deployed [...] a violent stole, an adventurer’s stole, like a firework” (p. 6). Such a stunning appearance may imply a desire to impress her “secret” admirer Léon who is watching her and following her. However, what does this ‘following’ actually mean? “The somebody watched by the woman in black was following her” (p. 6); without Léon’s knowing, *she* is watching

14 Elle faisait de menus pas, et la queue de étoffe noire, ample, souple, s’étalant en éventail, roulait une vague autour d’elle, ondulait, formant les mêmes cercles moirés que l’on voit se former dans une eau profonde, le soir, après la chute d’un corps (Rachilde, [1900] 1982, p. 26).

*him*, like a siren searching to lure an unaware sailor into her trap. All of a sudden the clumsy young man gets too close and treads on her skirt: “The man stopped hypnotized. He had trodden on her skirt because he could see nothing but the woman” (p. 5). He is already bewitched by the siren who continues to descend the stairs as she seems to lift the young man into the waves of her aquatic dress. He is her prey, lured into the waters of creation to be exploited by the siren, a variety of the vampire, in other words: the siren or the vampire is the artist whose passion for art exploits and consumes the living. Later on, Eliante admits that she is “the opportunist who passes, dances and picks up sequins with which to decorate her dress” (p. 126).

After having lifted him into the waves of her dress, she invites him into her carriage “arranging the black cascade of the dress, the multicolored waves of the coat, causing light, very white petticoats to gush out, like champagne bubbles” (p. 7). The description connotes black water and the foam of waves along with colors and celebration (champagne). When Léon gets into the carriage, he is drawn even more into the aquatic realm, and he will soon be introduced into her dining room where “green silk hangings trickled into wavy folds from the ceiling like weeping willow branches, shelves held crystalware, in varied, and fluid, shades” (p. 11). The room resembles a greenhouse or an aquarium with no escape route: “neither door, nor window was visible, and a thick carpet, as soft as grass, imprisoned the ankle” (p. 11). The reader may recognize the enclosed space cherished by decadent writers, but Léon does not seem to realize that he has been made prisoner and that from now on his fate is entirely in the hands of his hostess.

The queen-like Eliante had entered the water cautiously, with small steps. Now she has captured Léon who becomes, simultaneously, a character in one of her stories, her inspiration, and the living creature on which she can prey – a complicated entanglement of necessities to the artist in order to live intensely a life of illusion, and consequently close to death. Despite an appearance of vibrant life Eliante may not necessarily be alive. In addition to her other identities, the novel describes her as a statue and as a form; she is a figure of the living dead between two worlds, one visible, the other one invisible: “at once very much at home and outside of all possible worlds” (p. 12). This strange form of existence authorizes her, at her own discretion, to oscillate between animation and petrification.

## The Game of Animation and Petrification

Eliante's exhibition of vibrant life reveals her beauty behind the “thick shadow” (p. 3) of her queen-like and as we shall see, statuesque appearance. However, the exhibition is momentary. According to herself, the truth is that she is “already dead” (p. 70), and the narrator refers to her dress as a “funereal envelope” (p. 3). All of a sudden, the queen who adjusted to the waves of her dress, seems arti-



ficial and motionless. Everything about her is exaggerated: Her visage resembles “a painted doll’s face” (p. 3), her hair is “too twisted, too fine” (p. 3) and “she was whiter with her makeup than any other made-up woman” (p. 3). In decadent literature the made-up woman is frequently confused with a living painting (de Palacio, 1994, p. 152), and in Eliante’s particular case a statue. Her excessive whiteness underscores her statuesque and lifeless appearance, reminding us that 19<sup>th</sup> century artists frequently equated the statue with the dead woman; both are unchangeable and immobile. Eliante’s identity as a statue is first suggested in a scene where she “stop[s] in front of a mirror. She cast a curious glance, not looking at herself, but watching someone over her left shoulder” (pp. 3–4). This “someone” is her double, her “twin sister” (p. 4), a “marble statue of a nymph holding a candelabrum” (p. 4). We notice that an aquatic being, the nymph, has turned into stone. The statue and the living woman are here assimilated by contiguity; Eliante is now “equally a statue” (p. 4). Later on, even “without much makeup” (p. 66), “Eliante’s complexion seemed even whiter from the reflections of old ivory she wore around her, and her impeccable bust stood out clearly, without a fold, under the velvet of the bodice draped seamlessly” (p. 66). Later again her garment is “stretched over her without a wrinkle, without any apparent seam!” (p. 82) and “her body resembled an ivory statue” (p. 82).

Eliante’s appearance alternates between animation and inanimation or between life and death. This leads us far beyond realism, to ancient myths about the artist. Eliante’s supernatural power seems to refer indirectly to the mysterious relationship between animation and petrification which has its roots in the myths of Pygmalion and Medusa. Her power concerns her own person as well as her activity as an artist.

Anne Geisler-Szmulewicz explains that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Pygmalion myth formed a special alliance with the Medusa myth (Geisler-Szmulewicz, 1999, p. 167f.). This evolution took place via another alliance, namely between the myths of androgyny and Narcissus which conveyed an impossible dream of fusion with the ideal. In its utmost consequence, this desire is expressed in the association between Pygmalion and Medusa where the original animation myth became a petrification myth. The reason for this strange alliance seemed to have been the conflict between life and perfect but lifeless form, or between a beautiful ideal (stones and statues that resist the ravages of time) and reality (which can never measure up to Art). As the myth developed, it incorporated the element of the living “statue” that could be petrified again if it wanted to return to its statuesque existence or if it became too troublesome to its creator.

Eliante seems to inhabit the three roles of Pygmalion, the artist, Galatea, the living art, and Medusa, living art turned to stone, as she alternates freely between animation and petrification. She is the statue whom she herself animates at will, and at other moments, she is Medusa whose power brings her back to her statuesque identity. She is simultaneously an artist and a work of art. She is thus



entirely self-sufficient and able to preserve her strength by distancing herself from any human help: "I have to remain free" (p. 49). "I'm disgusted by union, which destroys my strength" (p. 22); "I don't need a human caress" (p. 22). This is obviously a proclamation of sexual independence but her defense of freedom – which includes death or petrification by choice – may also have a sacrificial meaning. Her juggling sessions in front of her guests, always end with a symbolic suicide, a spectacular demonstration of the artist's sacrifice on Art's altar. This oscillation between life and death hides a mysterious truth: in order to create life, the creator has to be "lifeless". Eliante thus takes on the Pygmalion role while remaining petrified. This apparent contradiction is rooted in the Aesthetics of the movement of Art for Art's sake.<sup>15</sup> According to its adherents the creator cannot petrify (make a work of art of unchangeable beauty) without being petrified herself. This ambiguity underpins Eliante's oscillation between life and death, between animation and petrification: "I am dying of love and, like the phoenix, I am reborn, after burning up, with love!" (p. 22). The artist consumed while giving birth to her artwork, then returns to life before being burnt again in the process of realizing a new creation. He or she is resurrected in order to die again; the artist may never become equal to other human beings: even when his exterior form is lifelike, she is closer to death than to life. With reference to Théophile Gautier, Geisler-Szmulewicz affirms: "Tout Pygmalion qui tente de faire vivre son œuvre est nécessairement condamné à subir une forme de repétrification, parce qu'il n'existe pas de conciliation possible entre le beau et le réel" (Geisler-Szmulewicz, 1999, p. 191).<sup>16</sup>

The novel's strangest episode is the scene where Eliante shows Léon a special treasure of hers, a beautiful human-sized amphora:

there was one admirable objet d'art placed in the middle of the room on a pedestal of old rose velvet, like an altar; an alabaster vase the height of a man, so slim, so slender, so deliciously troubling with its ephebe's hips, with such a human appearance, even though it retained the traditional shape of an amphora, that the viewer remained somewhat speechless. (p. 18)

It soon becomes clear that Eliante is not simply a proud collector eager to share with her guest the sight of a beautiful acquisition. Léon is actually in for a shocking experience; he becomes the involuntary and outraged witness to Eliante making love to her gorgeous *objet d'art*. At first he too had been moved by the beauty of the amphora but his main focus had been Eliante: "Léon looked at her with superstitious admiration. He was gaining, for this woman, the respect of a young *savant* already in love with forms, colors, everything that recalled the power of the

15 According to this movement from the early 19th century, art is autotelic, which means that it has a purpose in itself. Art should have no utilitarian function, be it moral, social, political or didactic. The French philosopher Victor Cousin created the slogan in 1836 while Théophile Gautier and Leconte de Lisle are considered the leaders of the movement's literary branch.

16 Every Pygmalion who tries to give life to his work is necessarily doomed to suffer a kind of re-petrification, because no conciliation is possible between beauty and reality. (My trans.)

grace and principal beauty of his life: art, its transposition into the eternal” (p. 21). While Léon admires “the adorable chastity of line” (p. 18), Eliante accentuates the duplicity of her idol: “Isn’t it beautiful! Isn’t *he* beautiful” (p. 20). Like a perfect statue it is unchanging and immortal. Even more, to Eliante it *is* a statue, which makes it even more humanlike: “Nothing here reminds him that he was ever anything but a statue...” (p. 21). It is a pure form, deprived of its past and of its memories, a “charming body in which life has been replaced by perfume, by wine... or by blood!” (p. 21), symbols of spirituality and sacrifice. Its resemblance with Eliante is manifest, she too is pure form, a perfect statue whose hand “flashed with whiteness, and exuded a penetrating perfume” (p. 10).

In this scene Eliante demonstrates her supernatural power. She reveals herself as Pygmalion, the artist *par excellence*. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century this myth played a central role in artists’ self-perception. According to Geisler-Szmulewicz, Rousseau was the one who in his melodrama *Pygmalion* (1762) had launched the myth as a myth of creation. While Ovid’s Pygmalion story was a myth of love, Rousseau transformed it into a myth about the artist and his complex relationship with his artwork.<sup>17</sup> Gradually an alliance united the Pygmalion myth and the myth about the rebellious Prometheus who, in addition to creating man from clay, stole the fire from the gods and gave it to humankind (pp. 69–107).<sup>18</sup> As he incorporated these legendary heroes, the artist became powerful, even demonic, in his desire to usurp God’s ability to give life to his creation. The religious aspect which was central in the original myth narrated in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* has undergone a significant transformation. Pygmalion had been able to give life to his statue thanks to Venus’ intervention; the goddess had decided to reward his piety by answering his prayers. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the artist simply replaced God.

In *La Jongleuse* the miracle happens as it did in both the original myth and in its subsequent versions. Under Eliante’s caresses the humanlike amphora (the statue) comes alive and the contours of a gender-neutral person appears. An invisible presence fills the room, and the text refers to “the one insentient person on the scene” (p. 23). It is like a visitation from an intangible reality, from the spiritual world of Art.

Furthermore, this female Pygmalion is also a passionate love goddess – a Venus – as well as an inspired priestess: “there is a furnace inside me, I’m inhabited by a god” (p. 113). She claims to be an incarnation of love. Over time, some versions of the Pygmalion myth had merged the statue and the goddess into one person; the living statue became in reality the incarnated Venus. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the love goddess even incarnated herself in “la femme fatale”, the dangerous woman who – like the siren – constituted a danger to men. In the role of the fatal woman, she was the chthonic Venus – dark and cruel – in opposition to the celestial and

17 Cf. Geisler-Szmulewicz (1999, pp. 34–56): “Naissance du mythe de l’artiste: le *Pygmalion* de Jean-Jacques Rousseau”.

18 It is noteworthy that Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* (1818) was given the subtitle *The Modern Prometheus*.

indulgent Venus associated with the Virgin Mary. Eliante is ambiguous and may represent both, in different situations. Furthermore, we have seen that both fire and water are her elements, which makes sense when we remember the birth of Venus – the love goddess born from the foam of the water.

Eliante – the divine artist – giving life to an amphora is totally supernatural. At the same time, it is all about the artist's exclusive passion for art. The artist makes love with Art, a rival whom no human being can equal. Moreover, this episode is a demonstration of the artist's power in front of a young man in danger of being petrified.

Eliante has chosen Léon for several reasons. He has potential: “I see you’ she said finally, ‘as you will be, if not as you are, dear sir. You’re trying in vain to resist the *god* who leads you” (p. 13). He is also able to recognize beauty, as in the case with the amphora, and he is handsome (p. 58). There is a more troubling possibility, though. Eliante-Medusa is able to transform herself into a statue (stone). Likewise, when she is finished with the human-like vase, she turns it into stone again. She might want to use her power with other beings and it seems that Léon's qualities may put him in jeopardy. He has the potential to become another piece in Eliante's collection. Renaissance artists believed that the blocks of stone already contained the statue, and that the role of the artist consisted in liberating it. Eliante may want to release the young man's full potential by transforming him into a piece of art. At the moment he is just “*natural* [...] And that's why you're here” (p. 13). However, Eliante notices his resemblance with the amphora: “you are handsome [...]. You are not taller than my dear objet d'art, standing next to each other, you could be two very white brothers. Only my alabaster vase seems more harmonious to me, less savage in its attitude, immobilized in the loveliest human position, the sexless position” (p. 58). Art is more perfect than the living person. For some reason, she resists the temptation to make him an immobilized and harmonious statue. She leaves him in his natural state and chooses instead to lure him into another trap by forcing him to marry her niece Missie. The trap seems cruel but at the same time it might have a life-saving function. Léon is rushed into a real life in the real world. He loses the woman of his dreams, in return he avoids being irreversibly petrified and transformed into a lifeless statue.

Once again, the Orpheus myth comes to mind. While Orpheus's art enables him to bring Eurydice back from the Underworld, her re-animation proves to be momentary. By defying the prohibition to look back before the couple had reached the surface, Orpheus ultimately brings eternal death for Eurydice, a death which might be akin to a work of art. The myth shows a connection between petrification and the act of “looking back”. *La Jongleuse* on the other hand ends with the birth of a child, a reassuring sign pointing to the future.<sup>19</sup>

19 Some see a parallel between the story of Orpheus and that of the biblical Lot. Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt, another form of petrification in that it freezes or stills what should be moving or animated: “But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.” (Genesis 19:26)

Despite its supernatural aspect, the episode of the amphora also makes us reconnect with the novel's realistic dimension. Its sexual meaning is obvious. "She was not offering herself to the man; she was giving herself to the alabaster vase [...] arms chastely crossed on this slender form, neither girl nor boy. [...] a slight shudder traversed her body [...] and she gave a small groan of imperceptible joy, the very breath of orgasm" (p. 23). Realism makes its entry when Léon, cries out: "It's scandalous! Right there ... in front of me... without me? No, it's horrible!" (p. 23). However, Eliante had wanted to make a point about her independence and she answers dryly: "You really needed a lesson" (p. 23). Léon is thus doomed to admire this woman from a distance. As a performer and a divine Pygmalion she indulges male spectatorship but refuses to become an object.<sup>20</sup>

### Pygmalionesque "Girl Power"

Eliante may keep Léon at a distance for an additional reason: she is not the only Pygmalion in this story. Gradually, in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the original Pygmalion acquired avatars such as the scientist and the pedagogue.<sup>21</sup> Léon who is a medical student represents the former. In Rachilde's novels scientists rarely get "good press". Léon never understands fully who Eliante really is, and dreams of seducing her and transforming her into an "ordinary" woman. His occasional disrespect reveals his lack of understanding. At some point "he pinched her full on the skin, pinched her without restraint, wanting bitterly to see her struggle, give herself away, to hear her cry out, to make her spurt, a woman and all warm, exasperated, from her siren's wrapping" (p. 50). The two of them represent different, incompatible and even competing worldviews. While Eliante represents mystery, and is rooted in a mythical, spiritual world, Léon is a product of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's confidence in reason and science.<sup>22</sup>

Eliante's late husband represents the pygmalionesque 'pedagogue' who initiates his much younger wife to adulthood and marriage. He also proved to be an artist, creating small wax statuettes in erotic or obscene postures for which Eliante was the model. "He modeled the wax himself like a real artist, and, during my absence, his fingers kneaded all these little women in my image" (p. 86). This per-

20 Concerning the male spectator, cf. Mayer, 2002, pp. 96–102 and Dauphiné, 1982, p. 15.

21 According to Geisler-Szmulewicz the pedagogical interpretation of Pygmalion constituted a parallel with the myth of the artist. She refers to Michelet and Balzac and the 19<sup>th</sup> century's preoccupation with girls' education and their role in marriage. The woman needs to be "trained", and her husband is her "trainer" (Geisler-Szmulewicz, 1999, pp. 231–232). With regard to Pygmalion as a scientist, *L'Eve future* or *The Future Eve* (1886) by Villiers de L'Isle-Adam represents a crucial moment in the development of the myth. The novel describes a fictionalized Thomas Edison who creates an artificial woman, an animated and physically perfect android but with no inner life. Anyway, the scientist with the help of art seems able to compete with God and His creative power (Geisler-Szmulewicz, 1999, pp. 357–366).

22 The subtitle of *Monsieur Vénus* is actually *Roman matérialiste* (A Materialistic Novel).

verse Pygmalion merged with Medusa (another of Rachilde's gender reversals) and transforms the living woman into "stone". He succeeds in turning the perishable human being into unchanging objects but on another textual level his act is a display of male power and dominance. Eliante admits that living with her husband had been challenging, and she even states that she is responsible for his death: "My husband is dead because of me" (p. 112). In other words, the petrified woman got her revenge by petrifying her Pygmalion. She won her independence and became Pygmalion in his place, while at the same time remaining petrified and existing in an exterior and artificial way.

Eliante has conquered her pygmalionesque rivals. Patriarchy and rationalism have been disarmed. Even though the husband's spirit continues to linger in the house he is now submitted to the victorious female Pygmalion. The obedient amphora might even be considered a metaphor for the subdued man whose destiny is entirely in the hands of a powerful woman. The vase's androgynous form symbolizes beauty but it may also suggest a belittling of masculinity.

In this chapter, the search for fairness means a claim for female self-preservation, power and personal autonomy. Moreover, it includes the woman artist's right to recognition and self-expression. I have argued that the novel's supernatural or mythological elements open a window to the narrator's aesthetic reflection. Art belongs to another dimension than mere rationalism and from a romantic viewpoint the artwork's completion may come from suffering and sacrifice. Eliante's suicide at the end may very well give us the impression that she has lost her battle as a woman and as an artist. However, in a mysterious way, her death seems to have been sacrificial and fruitful: her letting go of Léon followed by her "transposition into the eternal" (p. 21) – like a work of art – are followed by the birth of a child. Léon's words when he contemplates his and Missie's newborn daughter – "I hope she'll have *her eyes*, the eyes of dream" (p. 206) – mean what they say, but at the same time they express a desire for imagination and fantasy, for a dimension beyond what is tangible. He wants her to see what Eliante saw. In this sense, Eliante's sacrificial death has not been in vain.

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