

2012

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Recommended Citation

Banerjee, Ria, "Rachilde, Marguerite Eymery Vallette (1860-1953)" (2012). *CUNY Academic Works*.
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/nc_pubs/12

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FEATURED NEW WOMEN

Rachilde, Marguerite Eymery Vallette (1860-1953)

Dubbed “Mademoiselle Baudelaire” by Maurice Barres and called a distinguished pornographer by Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly, Rachilde is one of the most complex literary figures to emerge at the tipping point between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her most famous work includes the fictional novels *Monsieur Vénus/Monsieur Venus* (1884) and *La Jongleuse/The Juggler* (1900, rev. 1925), and a nonfictional work called “Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe”/“Why I am not a feminist” (1928), in which she famously claims, “I always regretted not being a man, not so much because I value more the other half of mankind but because, since I was forced by duty or by taste to live like a man... it would have been preferable to have had at least the privileges if not the appearances of [masculinity]” (qtd. in Lukacher 110). Scandalous in her youth, reviled by moralists as well as early feminists, her work ignored or forgotten in the years after her death, Rachilde remains a sign of her times. Balancing precariously between decadence and literary modernism, between virulent misogyny and a deeply-held belief in her own feminine worth, she challenges readers to codify her work or reduce it to manageable sound-bites.

Marguerite Eymery was born in February 1860, the only child of her parents’ largely unhappy marriage. A voracious reader from a young age, a lack of parental supervision gave her the run of her grandfather’s library, much of which would have been considered unfit for a young girl’s consumption at the time. Available juvenilia show her to be an avid writer since age twelve, keeping a *cahier de style* and publishing her first short stories in a local paper. These display a preoccupation with sexual identity and question extant gender scripts, themes that surface time and again in her mature works. She was not yet sixteen when she began writing commissioned pieces of fiction and non-fiction for local presses using the pseudonym, Rachilde.

In 1878, she left for Paris against her father’s will, but accompanied by her mother as chaperone. The 1880s were a literary golden age in Paris as climbing levels of general literacy, advances in printing press technology, and the Haussmannisation of the city combined to create an atmosphere in which more than fifty daily papers and many small literary journals were published. Rachilde and her husband, Alfred Vallette, founded and worked at one of these, the *Mercur de France*, where her earliest reviews and essays also appeared. Moving to Paris also allowed Rachilde, for the first time, to become part of a group of artists whose sensibilities matched her own. Her first novel *Monsieur de la Nouveauté* was published in 1880 with an introduction by Arsène Houssaye, followed shortly afterwards by the formation of a literary circle of decadents. From inside this circle, Rachilde saw herself as a werewolf: iconoclastic, impatient of petty bourgeois concerns, and disdainful of the crowd which to her was always against the individual, as she explains in her memoir, *Face à la peur* (1942; no English trans.). In 1884, faced with penury, Rachilde wrote and published *Monsieur Venus*, the story of a cross-dressing noblewoman who takes an impecunious flower-maker for her lover but slowly and surely turns his masculine characteristics into feminine ones. The conclusion of the story, where both the gender divide and distinctions between human and nonhuman become blurred, remains extremely disturbing to this day.

Rachilde was not unaware of the inflammatory nature of *Monsieur Venus*, and the subsequent court orders (two years imprisonment for the author in absentia in Brussels; a seizure of all copies in Paris) bestowed her with a notoriety that allowed her to publish further and also cross-dress and live the bohemian life. The next year she

From *Latchkey* 4 (Summer 2012): <http://www.oscholars.com/Latchkey/Latchkey4/featured4.htm>

met Alfred Vallette, a director of a small print works, and after an on-off courtship they married in 1889. Their only child was born in the next year, and together the couple also established the *Mercure de France*, whose first issue appeared on January 1, 1890. Central to Rachilde's critical output for over thirty years, the journal published the work of fellow decadents as well as experimental writers, among them the young André Gide, Alfred Jarry, and Collette. During this time, despite her conventional roles as wife and mother, an air of scandal hovered around Rachilde: although Oscar Wilde found her a little dowdy in a black woolen dress, others describe her salon attire as "'a fiery red blouse with amber necklaces and bracelets,' her hair cut like a boy's and 'her eyelashes like long pen strokes in black ink,' usually 'saying little and listening a lot' but merciless if the visitor, thus encouraged, performed badly" (qtd. in Holmes 52).

The closing decades of the nineteenth century were the heyday of the decadents and also the period in which Rachilde enjoyed her greatest literary and social successes. After her smash hit *Monsieur Vénus* in 1884, *The Juggler* was first published in 1900, and proved popular enough to be revised and reprinted in 1925 with a set of woodcut illustrations by Gustave Alaux. But although she continued writing prolifically between the two Wars, producing twenty-three more novels, three short plays, her first volume of poetry and sundry writings, Rachilde was no longer part of the literary avant-garde, as the decadent movement was displaced by even more radical, modernist literary and artistic experiments, notably Dada and Surrealism. Rachilde died at the age of ninety-three, still writing to feed herself: the death of Vallette in 1935 once again left her impecunious. Retired from the literary scene and having lost her fierceness by degrees, her death drew little attention and commanded only a brief item in the *Mercure de France*.

Surprisingly perhaps, Rachilde's personal daring had never translated into political liberalism. In *A Mort* (1886) she refers to negatively to the Blue Stockings, and her scathing attitude to the New Woman is perhaps most obvious in *The Juggler*, where the liberated young Missie is erected in stark contrast to the tormented heroine, Eliante Donalger, and serves as a mere pawn for the final vengeful liberation scenario enacted by the latter. Critics have pointed to Rachilde's problematic and largely unhappy relationship to her mother—whom she described as a frosty dragon—as one possible reason for her paradoxical attitude toward gender politics. Whatever her motivations, Rachilde espoused the decadents' sense of themselves as a cultural elite, seeing democracy as the first steps towards barbarism and regarding social action as delusory. The collective nature of the feminist movement didn't interest a writer who prided herself on her own individualism and who put up a concerted struggle to differentiate herself from others like her, in social as well as literary circles (and, indeed, the two were often one and the same). In practice, this meant writing an essay like "Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe," which was followed by several rather hollow apologies, even while she was friendly with contemporaneous feminists and important lesbian figures like Sévérine, Natalie Barney, and Aurel, and consistently approved of the work of Collette.

Similarly, Rachilde's critical writings do not display any specific theory of literature, only showing a disregard for the distinction between highbrow and popular writing in favor of literary sincerity (Holmes 55). In this she may have been influenced by her husband, who was well known for his passion for moderation and chose to adopt no explicit political position as editor-in-chief of the *Mercure de France*. The lack of clear political motivation and the rejection of any explicit theory in favor of idealized, lyrical conceptions of poetry and freedom did not stand Rachilde in good stead. Like other Decadents, she was laid open to charges of irrelevance and found herself distanced from the literary avant-garde. Melanie Hawthorne points out that it was not until the 1970s, during the so-called second wave of the women's movement, that a renewed interest in Rachilde encouraged the republication of several of her works and jogged critical interest. Even at this time, much work

From *Latchkey* 4 (Summer 2012): <http://www.oscholars.com/Latchkey/Latchkey4/featured4.htm>

on this fascinating, crucial, and radical author still remains to be done.

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