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Mathew Rickard, *Against the Grain: The Poetics of Non-Normative Masculinity in Decadent French Literature*. Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2021. xii + 260 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$52.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781800791756; \$52.95 U.S. (pdf). ISBN 9781800791763; \$52.95 U.S. (epub). ISBN 9781800791770; \$52.95 (mobi). ISBN 9781800791787.

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Situated at the intersection of Decadence studies, masculinity studies, and queer theory, Mathew Rickard's monograph examines fin-de-siècle representations of non-normative masculinity in novels by Joris-Karl Huysmans (*À rebours*), Jean Lorrain (*Monsieur de Phocas*), Rachilde (*Monsieur Vénus* and *La Tour d'amour*), and Octave Mirbeau (*Le Calvaire*). Exploring connections between intertextuality, reading, and writing, Rickard suggests that these works offer "a system of representation, in which the narrative act—both 'active' writing and 'passive' reading—ultimately breaks with gender-essentialist notions of literature and constitutes a construction of both gender identity and literary identity via the transmission of ideas" (p. 3). The book is noteworthy for placing masculinity at the centre of academic discussion about Decadence as a literary school, which has previously attracted a significant amount of scholarly attention for its subversive (if frequently misogynistic) depictions of femininity.[1] In his re-examination of French Decadence, Rickard draws on several pioneering studies of gender, notably those penned by Rita Felski, Rachel Mesch, R. W. Connell, and David LaGuardia.[2] By analysing a range of authors, Rickard is able to demonstrate the various ways in which non-normative masculinity took form at the turn of the century. At the same time, he openly acknowledges the difficulties involved in interpreting such phenomena, particularly in a genre dominated by ambiguity, artifice, and ludic self-awareness.

To set forward the book's main arguments, the introduction opens by examining conventional associations between writing, reading, and masculinity. Citing the fin de siècle as "a key period for the production of literature which highlighted and celebrated non-normative moulds of masculinity" (p. 3), Rickard establishes the strong links between aesthetic innovation and sex/gender subversion in French Decadent literature, while noting the dangers of attributing socio-political ends to a literary movement which valorised the axiom of art for art's sake over its utilitarian or moralising counterparts (pp. 4-8). After summarising relevant trends in masculinity studies, the introduction's remaining pages outline the contextual backdrop to the material under study and the content of subsequent chapters. Among key contributing factors to the perceived "crisis" of masculinity in fin-de-siècle France, Rickard discusses contemporaneous preoccupations with inheritance law and patrilineality, reactions to France's defeat during the Franco-Prussian War, concerns about depopulation, the emancipation of women, and the

“pathologisation of perversity” (p. 27) typical of emerging sexological science. The introduction provides a valuable summary of these contexts, which are vital to appreciating the social, political, and cultural atmosphere in which Decadence emerged. However, some further expansion on legal and political history, such as the content of Article 6 in the civil code and the workings of inheritance law, as well as the various stages (and limitations) of female emancipation, would enhance our understanding of the period.

Following the introduction’s historical and scholarly scene-setting, chapter one tackles the most famous French Decadent novel: Huysmans’s *À rebours* (1884). To examine the links between literary creation and identity formation in this work, Rickard centres the erotic episode with Miss Urania: an acrobat whose masculine beauty seduces des Esseintes, but who ultimately fails to embody and transmute “idées masculines.” He notes that these “idées” are “*intangible* and *desired*, and ultimately *fictional* traits that des Esseintes projects onto Miss Urania...to compensate for his lack of traditional masculinity” (p. 36; italics Rickard’s). This episode functions as a symbol for Huysmans’s poetics of masculinity, which, by drawing on the work of R. W. Connell and David LaGuardia, Rickard presents as a “shifting and constantly evolving concept” that is inherently intertextual in nature (p. 37). After setting up this premise, which recurs as the central interpretative model throughout the book, chapter one examines the early association between des Esseintes and degeneration before analysing the novel’s primary erotic episodes (with Miss Urania, a ventriloquist, and a young man) and its extended chapters of literary criticism (II, XII, and XIV). Treating late Latin literature, Catholic literature, and modern literature respectively, the meta-literary chapters of Huysmans’s novel are infamously dense with intertextual references. Rickard analyses the references in close detail, drawing out their implications for the novel’s presentation of non-normative masculinity. He concludes by asserting that “non-normative men can appropriate a hegemonic identity through engaging with literature,” in a process that aligns narrative and identity formation, based on “the intertextual and collusive nature of masculinity” (p. 60).

Having established *À rebours* as an exemplary narrative, chapter two turns to another key figure of French Decadence: Jean Lorrain. It focuses on *Monsieur de Phocas*, which was serialised in *Le Journal* as *Astarté*, from 13 June 1899 to 6 August 1900, before appearing as a book in 1901. Linking the presentation of witchcraft in the novel to that of non-normative masculinity, the chapter highlights the “Decadent strategy of empowerment, in which the marginal male’s subordinate masculinity becomes hegemonic through an interaction with the typically feminine, yet powerful, archetype of the witch” (p. 65). As a “historically marginal and transgressive force,” the occult has often been associated with sexual transgression, and with marginal identities more generally, in line with George McKay’s notion of “occulture” (p. 68).^[3] While Rickard equates the transgressive power of Decadence and the occult, due to the “reciprocity of influence” between them (p. 71), he acknowledges that the “revolt” in Decadence is less social than aesthetic (p. 74). The subsequent pages analyse the novel’s intertextual allusions to witchcraft, as well as its presentation of the blurred boundary between sacred and profane. Highlighting the close intersection of book culture with the occult, Rickard distinguishes between an “archetypal witch’s initiation” and a “traditionally masculine Faustian pact,” (p. 91) asserting that *Monsieur de Phocas* favours the feminine over the masculine model to subversive effect. He demonstrates this by closely analysing the transgressive erotic atmosphere of a Sabbatic dinner party and the protagonist’s oscillation between the “competing images of Christ” (p. 101) represented by Sir Thomas Welcôme and Claudius Ethal. The latter’s murder at the protagonist’s hands marks Fréneuse’s initiation into the cult, his rebaptism as Phocas, and his “route to liberation” (p. 108).

This trajectory supports Rickard's conclusion that the non-normative masculinities in *Monsieur de Phocas* "subvert gendered, religious, and sexual assumptions at the fin de siècle and open up a path to hegemony for those excluded from enacting it" (p. 110).

Unlike the first two chapters, each focusing on a sole novel, chapter three analyses two texts by Rachilde: *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) and *La Tour d'amour* (1899). In Rachilde scholarship, the depiction of gender transgression in *Monsieur Vénus* is a well-trodden topic, which has been analysed through a range of interconnected critical lenses: feminist, queer, and, more recently, trans.[4] It is therefore unsurprising that the chapter's opening pages focus on situating its contribution within and beyond this weighty critical inheritance. Returning to queer theory, Rickard examines how both novels "disrupt the heteronormative binary and queer heterosexuality," and how the "reification of writing" allows Rachilde to "re-write gender" (pp. 113-114). The subsequent close reading of *Monsieur Vénus* examines Jacques's status as a penetrated male, in key passages evoking gender non-conformity. A notable example of male passivity and vulnerability is the voyeuristic scene where Raoule watches Jacques bathing and "inverts the male gaze" (p. 126). The scene re-works the opening passage of Voltaire's tale "Histoire de Jenni," in which a Spanish courtesan called Boca Vermeja spies on the eponymous hero as he bathes, falling in love at the sight of his "belle chute de reins." Further examination of this intertextual allusion, largely unnoticed by previous scholarship, would have complemented Rickard's argument.[5] After analysing the ways in which Jacques undermines "the masculine ideal of impenetrability" (p. 136), chapter three discusses the novel's meta-textuality, seen in Rachilde's self-conscious use of italics and grammatical gender. Drawing on Janet Beizer's reading[6] of the bruises and scars inflicted on Jacques by Raittolbe's beating, Rickard emphasises the former's role as a "palimpsest" inscribing non-normativity meta-textually within the narrative (pp. 145-146).

Tensions between male characters feature predominantly in *La Tour d'amour*, which depicts Jean Maleux arriving as an assistant keeper at *Ar Men*, a lighthouse off the coast of Brittany. This claustrophobic setting has metaphorical value, since the phallic lighthouse represents "masculine intellect and a homosocial effacement of the feminine" (p. 148), while meta-textually evoking the marginal status of Decadence (p. 150). Citing Freud's distinction between *eros* and *thanatos*, alongside Lisa Downing's study of literary necrophilia,[7] Rickard suggests that "the separation of masculinity from textuality expresses itself in perversion" (p. 148), thereby enacting *thanatos*, whereas engaging with textuality "reasserts a hegemonic control of the Phallus," thus enacting *eros* (pp. 148-149). The older lighthouse keeper, Mathurin Barnabas, represents the former, due to his association with effeminacy, his necrophilic treatment of female shipwreck victims, and his loss of literacy. While an extended presence on the lighthouse also risks undermining Maleux's "performance of masculinity" (p. 158), the protagonist, by choosing to write his story at the novel's denouement, retains a degree of phallic authority that aligns him with *eros* and prevents him from sharing Barnabas's fate. The chapter subsequently concludes that the thematic and linguistic exploration in Rachilde's novels presents masculinity as "a mobile, performative identity position that is open for appropriation" (p. 166).

The difficulties of appropriating masculine identities through literary creation provide the narrative and thematic focus to Octave Mirbeau's *Le Calvaire*, which initially appeared as instalments in *La Nouvelle revue* from September to November 1886, when it was then published by Ollendorff in book form. Chapter four interprets the protagonist's inability to write as a reflection of his questionable, because impotent, masculinity. Although this failure can be

attributed to the draining influence of Jean Mintié's lover, Juliette Roux, Rickard nuances his reading of Mirbeau's misogyny by examining the various ways in which Jean's anxiety about masculinity is a self-perpetuating phenomenon between men. Returning to David LaGuardia's notion of a collusive, intertextual masculinity (p. 168) and citing Sharon Larson's depiction of Mirbeau's "male-centred network[s] of narration and reception" (p. 169),^[8] Rickard analyses Mintié's early experiences with masculine role models, the subversion of martial masculinity in passages depicting the Franco-Prussian War, and the protagonist's anxiety about other men's judgement of his debut novel. Ultimately, it is Mintié's experience of betrayal at the hands of his writer friend Joseph Lirat that epitomises the destructive power of collusive masculinity, while pushing the protagonist to seek the redemption suggested by the novel's title. The protagonist's trajectory is interpreted both meta-textually, as a parody of Decadence and warning to readers about its impotence, and biographically, as a cathartic foil for Mirbeau's early disappointments. By providing a route for catharsis, Rickard argues, Mirbeau encouraged more successful performances of masculinity, which belied its perceived "crisis" at the fin de siècle—a crisis that was in fact "largely self-generated and self-sustaining" (p. 201). Following this final analytical chapter, the conclusion summarises the book's main arguments, discusses Decadence's impact on later writers depicting non-normative masculinity (notably André Gide, Marcel Proust, and Jean Genet), and gestures towards the ongoing relevance of Decadence to modern discussions about the links between gender, culture, and society.

Rickard's book successfully re-examines a range of canonical Decadent texts through the lens of masculinity studies, nuancing earlier readings of gender which centre femininity. A careful approach to close reading and a proven dexterity when engaging intelligently, but respectfully, with earlier scholarship are among the book's key strengths. Those working on Decadence, representations of gender, and meta-literary trends will find something of interest and worthy of debate in this debut monograph. However, those with an aversion to literary theory may find some moments less illuminating than others, and the implicit tendency to conflate fictional representation with historical "reality" may frustrate the historians among Rickard's readers. The capacity of Decadence to reflect the real-life experiences of people alive at the fin de siècle is limited not only by its self-proclaimed preference for aestheticism over engagement, but also by the relatively elite (i.e., not "popular") nature of the texts under study. That said, it is easy to forget, ignore, or downplay the fact that Decadent authors did often write for a broader audience than the chequered posterity of their printed novels might suggest, and that they participated in the collaborative enterprise of periodical culture. Huysmans, Lorrain, Rachilde, and Mirbeau all contributed regularly to press publication, whether as art critics, book critics, or journalists, and two of the novels Rickard analyses first appeared in serialised form: *Monsieur de Phocas* (as *Astarté*) in *Le Journal* and *Le Calvaire* in *La Nouvelle revue*. Some further engagement with this aspect of Decadent literary creation would have been fruitful to Rickard's study, but it is a truth universally acknowledged that all monographs in possession of a word limit must necessarily be in want of greater scope. As it stands, Rickard's book makes a valuable contribution to the field, building on existing scholarship and channelling new ways of understanding and interpreting fin-de-siècle literary culture.

NOTES

[1] For example, see Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), Mireille Dottin-Orsini, *Cette femme qu'ils disent fatale: Textes et images de la misogynie fin-de-siècle* (Paris: Bernard Grasset,

1993), Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), and Rachel Mesch, *The Hysteric's Revenge: French Women Writers at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006).

[2] Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995); Mesch, *The Hysteric's Revenge* (see [1]); ead., *Before Trans: Three Gender Stories from Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2020); R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); David P. LaGuardia, *Intertextual Masculinity in French Renaissance Literature: Rabelais, Brantôme, and the Cent nouvelles nouvelles* (Aldershot and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2008).

[3] George McKay, *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance since the Sixties* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 51-52.

[4] Rachel Mesch, "Trans Rachilde: A Roadmap for Recovering the Gender Creative Past and Rehumanizing the Nineteenth Century," *Dix-Neuf*, 25 (2021): 242-259.

[5] Voltaire, *Romans et contes en vers et en prose*, ed. Edouard Guitton (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1994), pp. 812-69 (at p. 814). Rachilde cites Voltaire's story indirectly but translates Boca Vermeja as "Bouche-Vermeille." See Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus: Roman matérialiste*, ed. Melanie Hawthorne and Liz Constable (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2004), p. 39; a note in this edition (p. 39n14) stating that "there is no character in Voltaire called Bouche-Vermeille" overlooks the name's Voltairean origin as Boca Vermeja.

[6] Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies* (see [1]), p. 253.

[7] Lisa Downing, *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003).

[8] Sharon Larson, "Femme de Siècle: Malevolent Female Sexuality, Masculinity and Linguistic Authority in the Decadent Novel" (PhD diss., Brown University, 2009), p. 59.

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