



The Juggler

And her vase

THE JUGGLER

RACHILDE




Introduction and translation by
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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,



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

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



her career.

Rachilde was born Marguerite Eymery on 11 February 1860, at her family's home just outside the town of Périgueux in southwest France. Her provincial origins subsequently exercised great influence on her life and work. Although she lived in Paris from the age of twenty-one until her death in 1953 at the age of ninety-three, she never lost the ability to see society through the eyes of a "provincial," an outsider. (The present example, *The Juggler*, is no exception: the heroine is a creole whose marked difference sets her apart from the rest of society, and enables her to comment with detachment on Parisian high society.)

The members of the family home at Le Creac together

rence of a queen's argente.

This monstrous and fantastic experience of nature is explicitly recalled in the preface to the autobiographical novel *A Mort*, "To the Death," but it is also evident throughout Rachilde's work, in her extravagant descriptive style, as well as her dramatic awareness of the dark and hidden powers of nature. With this vision as background, family lore also placed more active and tangible forces on the stage of Rachilde's imagination. Popular local legend maintained that the family turned into werewolves once a year because one of the ancestors had left the priesthood. Rachilde's arrival in the world on a night when the wind raged and owls screeched only added to these rumors, giving her an early and personal connection with the sinister forces that would figure so prominently in her writing.⁵


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the sinister forces that would figure so prominently in her writing.⁵

Rachilde's father, the illegitimate son of an aristocrat, became a career army officer, and her mother, a talented musician, was the daughter of a successful newspaper editor. She remained their only child, a fact which was to have the greatest significance on her development. Her father had desperately wanted a son, and thus her early years, and arguably her entire life, became an unending attempt to compensate her father for this disappointment and gain his approval. Rachilde began learning to ride when she was four, and later participated in hunts, even though she sympathized more with the hunted than with the hunters, all in an effort to please.

Her need to gain her father's approval was evidently an

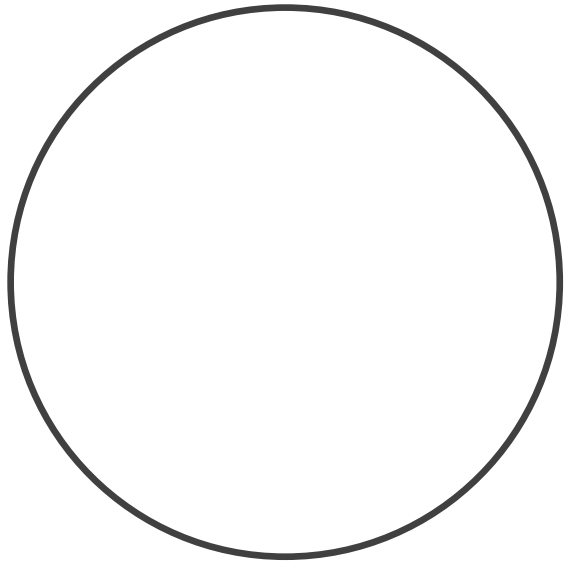




between mistress and servant.


Rachilde's struggle to escape entirely from the family triangle succeeded with *Monsieur Vénus*. After this success, her future as a writer was assured. She continued to produce approximately one book a year for the next sixty years (her last publication was in 1947). Although she would never again have the kind of *succès de scandale* afforded by *Monsieur Vénus*, she steadily accumulated an impressive list of novels, many of which received wide acclaim, including *La Marquise de Sade* (Monnier, 1887); *Madame Adonis* (Monnier, 1888), a companion piece to *Monsieur Vénus*; a collection of stories entitled *Le Démon de l'absurde*, "The Demon of the Absurd" (Mercure de France, 1894); and *La Tour d'amour*, "The Tower of Love" (Mercure de France, 1899), a horror story of madness and perversion set in a Breton lighthouse.

Rachilde continued to write and publish with almost obsessive regularity and enjoyed continued success in the pre-




At the turn of the century, when *The Juggler* was written and published, Rachilde's reputation was at its zenith. In 1889, she had married Alfred Vallette, and one year after, the celebrated review *Mercure de France* was born, along with their daughter. Rachilde's role in the appearance of the latter has never been questioned, but her role in the former has been underplayed or even entirely overlooked. Her name and reputation were extremely important factors in attracting contributors and readers, and thus in underwriting the success of the review. To her contemporaries, her role was evident, if not explicit. As well as acting as regular contributor and reviewer, she was the famous hostess of a Tuesday salon at the office of the *Mercure de France* that attracted the foremost literary figures of the Symbolist movement, along with international celebrities and up-and-coming writers.

One such guest was the young Colette, whose first in the famous series of "Claudine" novels, *Claudine à l'école*, "Claudine at School," was published in the same year as *The Juggler*.



This interpretation opens the way for a fuller appreciation of the social analysis set forth in *The Juggler*, an analysis which marks Rachilde's departure from Decadence and her links to other modern writers. She had experimented with themes of perversion in previous novels, but in *The Juggler* the experiment is accompanied by a hypothesis. Rachilde had been groping toward insights about love and sexual desire, but in fragmented fashion; *The Juggler* presents them for the first time integrated into one unified theory. As in earlier novels, she imagines a rather eccentric perversion with which to endow her heroine, a perversion intended to shock the bourgeois, but also a further variable in a series of experiments concerning the nature of love. Eliante Donalger is in love with a Greek amphora. The choice of an inanimate entity as love object marks an important breakthrough in this series. The vase can be sufficiently anthropomorphized that it escapes simple categorization as a form of fetishism, but remains sufficiently inhuman that it avoids preconceived notions about perversions such as necrophilia. The vase further remains gender unspecific, so that the nature of the anthropomorphism escapes definition as either heterosexual or homosexual. Thanks to the grammatical gendering of nouns in French, the vase remains both "*une* urne" and "*un* vase"; as Eliante notes (chapter 4), it can be referred to as both "he" and "she," depending on the antecedent noun. This ambiguity is deliberately preserved and exploited by Eliante to illustrate not an androgyny predicated upon the recombination of two opposite sexes as in traditional



ties of human sexuality, going against the grain of her contemporaries in the then burgeoning field of psychology.

Her insight goes one step further than this important recognition, however, for Rachilde further entrusts the policing of ideologically determined sex roles to the embryonic medical profession in the person of the medical student Leon Reille. Rachilde's dislike of doctors is a recurrent theme in her work (and a further link to the theatre of Molière),¹⁹ but in *The Juggler* the problem becomes specific. Leon not only invokes the threats used to maintain traditional sexual behavior (for example, he claims in chapter 6 that Eliante will be afflicted with St. Vitus's dance and general paralysis), he believes her cure lies in acceptance of "normal" sexual relations. He interprets her resistance to his sexual advances not as legitimate expression of autonomy, but as a desire to be raped (chapter 5), just as Freud would interpret his patients' accounts of resistance to incest as a fantasized desire to seduce and be seduced. Where outright threats fail, more subtle social control mechanisms can be deployed, as Eliante recognizes. The labeling of an expression of ecstasy, of *jouissance*, which exceeds the

The Juggler

"Don't make any noise, dear sir, I have a child sleeping in the house. That's why the carriage turned in through the garden. Are you there?"

"Yes, madam, and yet . . . it would have made more sense to go somewhere else for supper . . . don't you think? so as not to wake your . . . child."

"She's not my daughter, she's my niece. And then there is my old brother-in-law, too. He is deaf, fortunately! No, I prefer to have supper at home."

So, as she went up the front steps, she took his arm, pushed him, guided him past the boxes of large, humid plants.

"There . . . we've arrived," she whispered. "I live on the ground floor, the others are above."

"That's wise," he retorted.

They found themselves in a round dining room, lit by a huge yellow tulip, that bloomed over a delicately set table at a touch of Eliante's forefinger.

One single place setting, but two partridges, two pitch-

property.

For an instant, during desert, the young man's feet lightly brushed those of Madame Donalger.

He pulled back, embarrassed, for he knew they were covered with mud.

"How vulgar you must find me," he murmured.

"No, I find you *natural*, which surprises me, with all the artificial young people running around these days. And that's why you're here."

"I quite understand. Do you think I'm naive?"

She examined him for a moment. Her black eyes caught one of the golden flames of the tulip. She put an elbow on the table, cupping her cheek in her palm. She thought for a moment, maintaining a grave expression. When she laughed, she had an extraordinary little-girl face. When she became serious again, she assumed a tragic mask.

"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; only the *god* is stronger than you are, and he will play some nasty tricks on you. No, I never make fun of those whom a *god* deigns to lead. I wouldn't dare."

"The god . . . is it you?"

"I'm only a woman, nothing more . . . nothing less," she added with quiet pride.

"Good. And the temple?"

She did not answer, serious still.

He lowered his head, biting his lips, regretting his an-

Around him, the deep silence, the warm atmosphere dulled his thinking. He had the feeling of sinking down into a comforter. The crystal glass cast trembling rays of moonlight, the silverware, light to handle, clinked discretely against the delicately colored porcelain, rousing only his appetite, and when he drank, the bouquet of the wine gave him the illusion of chewing flowers.

He softened.

"I think you're a good person. At first you frightened me. Now I'm not afraid . . . except of your dress. You should take it off, it's too black."

"I never take off dresses, sir."

"Do you sleep in them?"

Disdainfully, she offered him the two creams: one green, one pink.

"Pistachio or raspberry, dear sir? You have my permission to mix them as I intend to do myself, and then here is powdered vanilla, ginger, Indian pepper and grated spices. What would you like? It's a Chinese system."

She called with some small silver spoons, and . . .

her hands like moving foliage.

They went into the salon.

It was a boudoir hung in old rose crêpe, a soft material, garlanded with Bengal lights of Venetian glass which lit up as soon as they crossed the threshold. The furniture seemed fragile, also of crystal. Among the strange knickknacks of Japanese complication or Chinese tortuousness, 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. The foot, very narrow, like a spear of hyacinth, surged up from a flat and oval base, narrowed as it rose, swelled, at mid-height, to the size of two beautiful young thighs hermetically joined and tapered off towards the neck where, in the hollow of the throat, an alabaster collar shone like a fold of plump flesh, and, higher up, it opened out, spreading into a corolla of white, pure, pale convulvulus, almost aromatic since the white, smooth material with its milky transparence had such lifelike sincerity. This neck spreading into a corolla made one think of an absent head, a head cut off or carried on shoulders other than those of the amphora.

"What a marvel!" cried Leon, completely seduced by this apparition of the adorable chastity of line.

"Isn't it beautiful! Isn't *he* beautiful," continued Eliante feverishly. "Oh, he is unique. It's impossible to think of anything more charming. You would think, when the light penetrates it obliquely, that it's inhabited by a soul, that a heart burns in this alabaster urn! You were telling me about pleasure? This is another thing entirely! This is the power of love in an unknown material, the madness of silent delight. He will never say anything. He is very old, centuries old, he has stayed young because he has never cried his secret to anyone." (She came and wrapped her black arms around the amphora's neck.) "Look closely, and try to see for a moment . . . through my eyes! Come and touch. I give you permission. . . . Go very gently, too firm a caress would tarnish it." (She seized the young man's hand and moved it carefully over the innocent whiteness of the vase, its virgin's flanks.) "Feel, can't you, that hopeless softness of the curve finally delineated? It won't go any further, for it has reached perfection. It will neither grow nor diminish, it is beauty immutable. Ah, I really want you to know, for at least five minutes, how to be in ecstasy, the right way and over something immortal. You're not laughing any more? It makes you afraid, it makes you ashamed! Oh! I knew quite well you were very intelligent . . . because pleasure turns you pale. This miraculous vase is pale with the pleasure of being itself! It has no history. I obtained it through the usual intermediaries, I was going to say *procurers*! Someone sold it to me in Tunis the way they would have sold a slave. It had been discovered in the excavations. . . . Which excavations? I don't know . . . and it was broken, but I had it . . . *taken care of*, the old wound is invisible. It doesn't have a handle. It would be horrible to think his arms had been immobilized forever. And it has no jewel, no inscription, no little dog collar, coral beads or gold Greek bands. I love it for its total innocence. . . . And the things he has seen, good heavens? Terri-



Cécile
Chabaud

RACHILDE,
HOMME
DE LETTRES

romar

word, your hands are clammy. You are livening up and you seem to be living in honor . . . this pot?"

The young woman, her eyes half closed, clung more tightly to the neck of the amphora. She pressed both arms around the collar of the stone flesh, and leaned over the corolla of the opening, kissing the void:

"No! No! You don't understand me at all . . . but I like you enough to explain. I am truly in love with everything that is beautiful, good, that seems absolute, the very definition of pleasure. But pleasure is not the goal; it's a way of being. Me, I'm always . . . *happy*. I wanted to bring you here to show you that I don't need a human caress to reach orgasm. . . . It's enough for me to be . . .—don't squeeze my arm like that—for I carry within myself the secret of all knowledge by knowing simply *how to love*. I'm disgusted by union, which destroys my strength, I find no delightful plenitude in it. For my flesh to be roused and to conceive the infinity of pleasure, I don't need to look for a sex organ in the object of my love! I am humiliated because an intelligent man immediately thinks of . . . sleeping with me. . . . Tomorrow you would love me no longer . . . if you love me as little as that. Indeed, you don't love me, sir. So what do you claim to be offering me? What confidence can one have in this man who is just passing through? You won't pass through my house . . . or you will stay. A thrill? That is not much for someone who is one living thrill! A flame? That is too little for someone who is a whole furnace! My malady? I admit it: I'm dying of love and, like

prises all the doctors. No, I never take off my dress . . . only look at me . . . I'm dying!"

Eliante, at present standing over the neck of the white amphora, became taut as a bow from head to foot. She was not offering herself to the man; she was giving herself to the alabaster vase, the one insentient person on the scene. Without a single indecent gesture, arms chastely crossed on this slender form, neither girl nor boy, she clenched her fingers a little, remaining silent, then, the man saw her closed eyelids flutter, her lips half open, and it seemed that starlight fell from the whites of her eyes, from the enamel of her teeth; a slight shudder traversed her body—or rather a squall lifted the mysterious wave of her dress—and she gave a small groan of imperceptible joy, the very breath of orgasm.

Either it was the supreme, the splendid manifestation of love, the god actually descending to the temple, or the spectator had in front of him the most extraordinary actress, an artist transcending the limits of possibility in art.

He was dazzled, delighted, indignant.

"It's scandalous! Right there . . . in front of me . . . without me? No, it's horrible!"

He threw himself on her, intoxicated by a mad fury.

"Actress! Horrible actress!"

She roused herself gently, very calm, smiling, her lips only a little paler under their artificial carmine.

"Leave me alone, then . . . I am very content, you could

I can hear my coachman getting impatient in front of the gate."

And as he didn't move . . . she quickly pressed a bell.

A servant entered, half asleep:

"Tell Jean to drive the gentleman home, it's raining too hard for me to let him leave on foot."

Leon Reille was obliged to take his leave, in spite of himself.

"The curtain falls!" he thought.



“*D*EAR madam and . . . friend,

“Thank you for the very spiritual lesson you gave me, exactly one week ago, and I am writing to apologize for not having sent the customary bunch of flowers, or having attempted the pious digestive visit, but that exquisite lesson has led, for your humble servant, to such disagreeable things that I judge it more necessary to become completely . . . the lowest of boors!

“Yes, dear madam, I feel so little enthusiasm for ancient vases in the form of a girl that I resolved, the very day after my expedition to the impossible, to cure myself of their burning memory by a little trip to the land of vulgar reality. (Please understand that I have thrown myself, prostrate, into the most dissolute debauchery!)

“I, madam, am playing, in the midst of the comedy of life, the role of the poor, austere boy, bothered because austere, barely going out except to hang around hospital rooms where he probes every human filth capable of smothering the ideal, which forces him to remain a very wretched materialist.

“I scarcely have the time to see a dream approach, before

