

Beauty and Borderlands in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*

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Ce roman, ce conte, ce tableau, cette rêverie continuée avec l'obstination d'un peintre, cette espèce d'hymne à la Beauté, avait surtout ce grand résultat d'établir définitivement la condition génératrice des œuvres d'art, c'est-à-dire l'amour exclusif du Beau, l'*Idée fixe*.

Baudelaire, "Théophile Gautier"

"[E]tes-vous amoureux d'une madone ou d'une Diane?—votre idéal est-il un ange, une sylphide ou une femme? Hélas! c'est un peu de tout cela, et ce n'est pas cela," writes Théophile Gautier's narrator/protagonist, d'Albert, in *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (82). Conditioned by the romantics, Gautier's dream of ideal beauty proceeds from a transcendent desire: "Qui que tu sois, ange ou démon, ... toi que je ne connais pas et que j'aime!" (80).¹ Both Gautier and d'Albert are in search of an abstract ideal beauty that they sense, but cannot find in their own sphere. Nevertheless, d'Albert writes that "[r]ien n'est fatigant au monde comme ces tourbillons sans motif et ces élans sans but" (63). As a result, the soul's quest is modified by exterior beauty which Gautier finds in classical statuary, the surface of painting, or in the physical beauty of a woman. Gautier's vision of beauty therefore occupies the border between the eternal and the fugitive, the material and the abstract. The art that he creates responds to the perpetual war between his soul and his body: the irony of the real in the face of the ideal, of reality juxtaposed with dream, can only be tempered by art—or artifice. Overcoming the rift between these two poles, art makes present, or "represents," the ideal to the point where dream and reality are no longer separate entities.

Double amour, the subtitle given to the first editions of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, describes the art of erotic love as well as a love of aesthetics. The conjunction of these two devotions is displayed by Gautier's theory of *la transposition de l'art*, which not only reveals his explicit attempt to transpose static art into temporal

prose, but also implies a fundamental ambiguity of gender and genre. Contradictions and ambiguity structure the text of *Madeleine de Maupin*. Its genre, for instance, displays letter format, dramatic dialogue, and an outside narrator who arranges the letters, provides personal commentary and acts at times omnisciently. He interrupts in chapter six, for example, writing,

Encet endroit, si le débonnaire lecteur veut bien nous le permettre, nous allons pour quelque temps abandonner à ses rêveries le digne personnage [d'Albert] qui, jusqu'ici, a occupé la scène à lui tout seul et parlé pour son propre compte, et rentrer dans la forme ordinaire du roman, sans toutefois nous interdire de prendre par la suite la forme dramatique, s'il en est besoin, et en nous réservant le droit de puiser encore dans cette espèce de confession épistolaire que le susdit jeune homme adressait à son ami (161)

The story itself, deferred in narrative sequence after a long series of letters by the poet d'Albert to his friend Silvio, begins midway through the novel with Madeleine de Maupin's letters written to her confidante in which she recounts her adventures disguised as young Théodore de Sérannes. One might question the reasons for such an organization of the letters: it produces the effect of oscillation between what is real and imagined, intensifies the desire for information regarding Madeleine/Théodore's sex, and puts into question the terms "space" and "time." Such an arrangement would satisfy d'Albert, who writes: "Je ressemble assez ... à ces gens qui prennent le roman par la queue.... Cette manière de lire et d'aimer a son charme.... le renversement amène l'imprévu" (70).

The key to the success of the plot is based upon a gender twist in a love triangle between the poet chevalier d'Albert, Rosette, and Madeleine/Théodore. In chapter twelve, thematically the beginning of the atypical love story, Madeleine/Théodore has just been introduced to the widow Rosette who immediately takes an interest in the masked woman. Their relationship develops to the extent that Madeleine/Théodore, who wishes to maintain her virile disguise, departs, leaving Rosette to become in time the mistress of d'Albert. When Madeleine/Théodore returns to Rosette's home, rekindling the widow's amorous affections for the personage she believes to be a man, s/he captures d'Albert's attention by his/her

exquisite features which the poet would like to classify as womanly. Although they could boast of an amiable affair, Rosette and d'Albert forget each other in their pursuit of the Beauty.

The relationship between gender and genre implicit in the structure and themes of this novel is key. W.J.T. Mitchell asserts that "[t]he decorum of the arts at bottom has to do with proper sex roles" and that the laws of genre correspond to the laws of gender. Masculine gender relates to poetry, time, and to the mind while femininity is designated by painting, space and the body (*Iconology* 109-110). Movement between gender polarities and identities such as subject and object therefore corresponds to the binaries of genre involving text and image, and by extension to the oscillation between life and death, reality and fiction. These elements are not only put into play at the level of Madeleine's body, but also in the reenactment of Shakespeare's play *As You Like It* (in which Madeleine plays the part of Rosalinde), and especially in the tapestry which reflects Madeleine's ideal beauty.

While critics such as Dällenbach have treated the play as a *mise en abyme*, they have failed to give attention to the *mise en abyme* presented by the tapestry. The consideration of this structural element has heretofore been inadequate because the play itself does not recognize the movement of static and temporal binaries which the tapestry promotes. Looking at the tapestry in conjunction with Madeleine's body helps to clarify Gautier's entire aesthetic: both offer a "vérité de convention et d'optique" (252) and are regarded as works of art theorized as both static and temporal. As angel and woman, Madonna and Diana, Théodore/Madeleine becomes the *beau rêve réel*.

Madeleine's feminine voice relates directly to the art object, an *image* such as that of the tapestry, while d'Albert's masculine voice translates into the *temporality* revealed in the production of the play *As You Like It*. The tapestry serves as a mirror which (spatially) reflects and (temporally) sets the stage for d'Albert's rendition of aesthetic beauty. Stressing the importance of the role of Madeleine's narrative reinforces the type of aesthetic ideal that Gautier wishes to demonstrate by the image of the tapestry. It designates the importance of the transposition of art by means of combining feminine voice and masculine voice into a supreme work of art. We see the likeness between Madeleine/Théodore's and d'Albert's

aesthetic attractions, for instance, in the following meditations. Of the tapestry, Madeleine writes:

De grands arbres à feuilles aiguës y soutenaient des essaims d'oiseaux fantastiques ; les couleurs altérées par le temps produisaient de bizarres transpositions de nuances ; le ciel était vert, les arbres bleu de roi ... les chairs ressemblaient à du bois, et les nymphes ... avaient l'air de momies démaillottées ; leur bouche seule, dont la pourpre avait conservé sa teinte primitive, souriait avec une apparence de vie. (286)

D'Albert's description of the only type of theater which he likes is strikingly similar:

Les décorations ne ressemblent à aucune décoration connue ; ... tout y est peint de couleurs bizarres et singulières : la cendre verte, la cendre bleue ... les lacques jaunes et rouges y sont prodigués.... Les personnages ne sont d'aucun temps ni d'aucun pays.... Leurs habits sont les plus extravagants et les plus fantasques du monde.... En lisant cette pièce étrange, on se sent transporté dans un monde inconnu, dont on a pourtant quelque vague réminiscence ; on ne sait plus si l'on est mort ou vivant, si l'on rêve ou si l'on veille.... (243-247)

These musings are reproduced throughout the novel on a variety of levels and to varying degrees. But the significant aesthetic moment for my analysis remains that of the sighting and citing² of the tapestry (found in chapter twelve) as a locus of descriptive and narrative function.

As the structure and weave of the tapestry indicate, there is a constant and necessary intertextual relation between two differing elements—such as image and text, subject and object—which co-exist in a criss-cross manner. Such a weave symbolically mirrors the visuality set up by the tapestry and the discursive nature of the protagonists' letters: static and temporal art are brought together in the structure of this tapestry. Undeniably, image (the static classical ideal) and text (the temporal romantic ideal) converge at the level of the tapestry and Madeleine's body. Moreover, the *glissement* of one pole to the other—of other and same, illusion and reality—occurs due to this tapestry's function as a *mise en abyme*. A type of mirror, the tapestry then reveals or re-presents a hidden history/story (*histoire*).

Because of the nature of the *mise en abyme*, which is not only an indicator of what has happened but of what is yet to come, past and future come together in the present; dream and illusion become a type of reality. As Dällenbach writes, the *mise en abyme* causes a “blurring of the demarcation between within and without in order to produce a vacillation in the categorization of the fictive and the real” (37). The past is settled, clear, and sterile; the future involves instability, uncertainty, and excitement. Yet we are never quite in either past or future, for as Gautier states in his preface, “c’est toujours aujourd’hui” (34). Juxtaposing image and text enables Gautier to displace the past and the future into an eternal present in which they become dream-like realities.

The aesthetic premises put into *abyme* in the tapestry will show Madeleine to occupy the same space/time dichotomy as the descriptive/narrative function of this image.

Je te parle longuement de cette tapisserie, plus longuement à coup sûr que cela n’en vaut la peine ; — mais c’est une chose qui m’a toujours étrangement préoccupée, que ce *monde fantastique* créé par les ouvriers de haute lisse. J’aime passionnément cette végétation *imaginaire*, ces fleurs et ces plantes qui n’existent pas dans la réalité.... Lorsque j’étais petite, je n’entrais guère dans une chambre tapissée sans éprouver une espèce de frisson, et j’osais à peine m’y remuer. Toutes ces figures debout contre la muraille, et auxquelles *l’ondulation de l’étoffe* et *le jeu de la lumière* prêtent une espèce de *vie fantastique*, me semblaient autant d’espions occupés à surveiller mes actions pour en rendre compte en temps et lieu, et je n’eusse pas mangé une pomme ou un gâteau volé en leur présence. Que de choses ces graves personnages auraient à dire, s’ils pouvaient ouvrir leurs lèvres de fil rouge.... De combien de ... monstruosité de toutes sortes ne sont-ils pas *silencieux et impassibles témoins!* (287-288; emphasis added)

The claim that these silent witnesses, unable to open their mouths made of red yarn, cannot openly testify to secret occurrences of the past can be refuted, for we are led to consider Madeleine’s testimony concerning the tapestry she encounters during her *travestissement*: interestingly, these mouths do smile with the signs of life while all else remains inanimate. As Madeleine gazes at the tapestry in question, which reproduces the effects of the tapestries of her childhood, she simultaneously experiences a certain fear of

its alterity and a seductive attraction to its forms, colors and movements. She has the sensation of a past which she does not know and cannot decipher, which nonetheless becomes part of her experience as she becomes a figure of its historical experience. Madeleine's interest in the *monde fantastique* involves the desire for illusion and dream mingled with reality; her longing to penetrate this other world, intertwined with a fascinated fear, characterizes Gautier's borderland of beauty.

As a *subject* gazing at the *object* of art, Madeleine need not fear. Only when she desires to cross the limits and the space between herself and the tapestry in order to live its wonders and discover its secrets is her subjectivity put into question, for she no longer plays the active role. Rather, the figures in the tapestry are gazing at her. The gaze of these figures projects from the frame into another dimension through a *trompe l'œil* effect created by an infinity of folds that extend horizontally, and by the play of light and shadow. This gaze is then of a refractive nature not only due to the undulations and the bending of light at the level of the tapestry, but also because it passes obliquely from its own medium to another. The refracted gaze suggests not the final stability of static identity, but the deflected and detoured movement of aesthetic process.

Madeleine's relationship with the tapestry mirrors d'Albert's relationship with paintings and images of women. D'Albert admits:

Tout enfant, je restais des heures entières debout devant les vieux tableaux des maîtres, et j'en fouillais avidement les noires profondeurs.—Je regardais ces belles figures de saintes et de déesses dont les chairs d'une blancheur d'ivoire ou de cire se détachent si merveilleusement des fonds obscurs, carbonisés par la décomposition des couleurs.... A force de plonger opiniâtement mes yeux sous le voile de fumée, épaissi par les siècles, ma vue se troublait ... et une espèce de vie immobile et morte animait tous ces pâles fantômes des beautés évanouies ; je finissais par trouver que ces figures avaient une vague ressemblance avec la belle inconnue que j'adorais au fond de mon cœur.... (318-319)

Such meditation and imagination are not restricted to d'Albert's past. When he believes Madeleine/Théodore to be the incarnation of his "belle inconnue," he describes this ideal love as a work of art,

or more precisely an art *object*. The image of Théodore/Madeleine that d'Albert transposes into his text is always framed: he frames his object of desire with doors, windows, material and textures by which means she stands out against her background, yet is not quite part of d'Albert's scene. These acts provide him the means of seizing her body in a static state and of looking past the veil of her clothing in order to discover her secret in the same manner that he looks into other images or paintings.

The fact that d'Albert constantly objectifies Madeleine reveals once again the tension between static image and discursive text, the agitating force between two genres as well as two genders. When d'Albert describes Madeleine, he does so ekphrastically.³ He wants to write the image, give it life, yet fearing that the female object will usurp his role as desiring subject, the male artist simultaneously relegates this desired object to its previous space and realm. For Gautier, who is both a poet and a painter at heart, the image should not translate into and become poetry; there must be a constant and simultaneous occurrence of both, which is why he problematizes Madeleine as being both female and male, object of art and artist. The duel between gender and genre is constant in the mind of the artist. But this eternal oscillation of these dichotomies enables him and his narrator d'Albert to create an ideal aesthetic.

In a visual description of the ambiguity of Théodore/Rosalinde's gender, Madeleine's body is referred to by the outside narrator as an erotic and aesthetic image which he dares any voyeur's gaze to penetrate in order to discover truth or meaning:

Que le lecteur, s'il a la vue moins basse que nous enfonce son regard sous la *dentelle* de cette chemise et décide en conscience si ce contour est trop ou trop peu saillant; mais nous l'avertissons que les *rideaux* sont tirées (163; emphasis added)

Such a challenge develops into an insatiable quest in which all parties, all perspectives become included, not excepting the reader's, whose experience with the discursive text is analogous to that of the curtain. For as we "see," meaning or truth is located within the folds/drapery of the curtain⁴—of the stage or of the tapestry—and thus serves to reiterate Gautier's dictum of *l'art pour l'art*. Even if our imagination or intuition might grant us a glimpse of the other side of the lacy material of the shirt, our vision is arrested by the

initial barrier of the curtains. This barrier deflects the desirous gaze from the blinding center to the contours of the material itself.

Madeleine's relationship with the tapestry and its material folds follows the same pattern. Attempting to delve deeper into the tapestry's narrative, she focuses her attention on a huntress who stands out amidst imaginary birds and vegetation, nymphs who seem to be alive, and enchanting castles whose balconies display beautiful women. This figure symbolizes the identity, desires and fears of both Madeleine and d'Albert:

La chasseresse était là, debout, le pied tendu en avant, le jarret plié, son œil aux paupières de soie tout grand ouvert et ne pouvant plus voir sa flèche déviée de son chemin : et semblait chercher avec anxiété le phénicoptère aux plumes bigarrées qu'elle voulait abattre et qu'elle s'attendait à voir tomber devant elle percé de part en part. —Je ne sais si c'est une erreur de mon imagination, mais je trouvais à cette figure une expression aussi morne et aussi désespérée que celle d'un poète qui meurt sans avoir écrit l'ouvrage sur lequel il comptait pour fonder sa réputation . . . (287)

In fact, the huntress is a Diana figure who inspires desire in poets yet provokes fear and anxiety since she is complex, changing, mysterious and ambiguous. The triple image—Diana, the tapestry, and Madeleine—is the instigator of desire and the guardian forbidding its fulfillment.⁵ Goddess of love, Diana entrances and disturbs the artist in Madeleine as Madeleine will later excite and frustrate d'Albert. Try as she might, Madeleine cannot "read" the discursive nature of the visual tapestry just as d'Albert cannot be sure of having successfully "read" Madeleine's gender.

Although possession of desire's object is a tempting goal, Gautier insists that one should desire *desire*, and he critiques those who do not realize this necessity or aesthetic prerequisite: "Le manque d'intelligence les empêche d'apercevoir les obstacles qui les séparent de l'objet auquel ils veulent arriver ; ils vont, et, en deux ou trois enjambées, ils dévorent les espaces intermédiaires" (260). Erotic and aesthetic desire should therefore remain in the realm of simultaneous possession and dispossession. D'Albert, for instance, fears satiety and boredom if his erotic desires are fulfilled, just as he worries over the loss of his identity if he arrives at the end of his letters or finishes a poem, which explains his status

of *poète manqué* symbolized in the huntress referred to by Madeleine in the previous quotation. If Madeleine's curiosity regarding the other sex is satisfied, she too will experience sterility. Spatial and/or temporal distance must occupy the border between the desiring subject and the desired object, for only then can the lover become an artist.

Despite the desire to erotically undress and aesthetically unveil Beauty, d'Albert explains the danger of crossing the border:

J'ai désiré la beauté ; je ne savais pas ce que je demandais.— C'est vouloir regarder le soleil sans paupières, c'est vouloir toucher la flamme.... je voudrais ce qui ne se peut pas et ce qui ne se pourra jamais (192)

It seems that no one can possess Beauty although all that artists create is dedicated to her and accomplished in her name. In spite of his awareness of the dialectic, d'Albert lets himself be drawn into the illusion. Madeleine is equally aware of the necessity of absence and disguise, for it is only a matter of time that the artist becomes disenchanted with his creation and even with his muse. And yet she participates willingly in the illusion for she writes to d'Albert: "J'ai servi de corps à votre rêve le plus complaisamment du monde. — Je vous ai donné ce que je ne donnerai assurément plus à personne" (373). Madeleine symbolizes the dream of reality and the reality of dream. Because aesthetic and erotic desire must be defined at the limit, d'Albert preserves and eternalizes the image while subjecting it to time and contingency. As a result, artistic creation is based on simultaneous creation and destruction.

The tapestry symbolizes this process by feeding and developing the spectator's imagination at the same time as it prohibits ultimate knowledge. Taken in by the colors and texture as much as by the story behind the eyes that follow her movements, Madeleine's description of this tapestry embellishes and supports her narrative at the same time as it hinders it: "Mais laissons la tapisserie et revenons à notre histoire" (288), she writes as she seems to awaken from a dream. Madeleine affects d'Albert in the same way, as I have shown to be the case regarding ekphrasis. The ideas he recounts in his letters and the method by which they are conveyed are proof of the oscillation between creation and destruction.

If narration is taken to be the telling of events in their temporal sequence or the unfolding of the plot, description is what slows

down this linear movement. As a result, d'Albert's prose can be considered anti-narrative. In the space of approximately twenty pages, for instance, d'Albert's descriptive images serve as a full-charged and somewhat chaotic background (*cadre*) for Beauty *par excellence*—Théodore/Rosalinde as s/he enters the stage to play her double role in Shakespeare's play. Although these poetic *tournures* are much too lengthy to expound upon in detail in this discussion, I would like to draw attention to important key phrases which refer back to the elements of the tapestry and which, in turn, reflect Madeleine. Regarding change, movement and contours reflected in the façade of clothing, d'Albert writes of "des robes étoffées, ondoyantes, avec de grands plis qui chatoient comme des gorges de tourterelles et reflètent toutes les teintes changeantes de l'iris" (244). Such flowing movement of material matter corresponds to the artist's desire for "vers luisants." Because "le style [peut] dérouler à son aise, ... tout se noue et se dénoue avec une insouciance admirable" and "toutes ces contradictions sont comme autant de facettes qui en réfléchissent les différents aspects, en y ajoutant les couleurs du prisme" (245, 246). Only through such "apparences les plus frivoles et les plus dégagées" (247), can the artist truly express himself and his innermost dreams, which is the key to Gautier's entire aesthetic.

When d'Albert writes,

Je me suis joliment laissé aller au lyrisme, mon très cher ami, ...
 Tout ceci est fort loin de notre sujet, qui est, si je m'en souviens bien, l'histoire glorieuse et triomphante du chevalier d'Albert au pourchas de Daraïde, la plus belle princesse du monde ... (85-86),

he mocks his audience, for he actually considers his lengthy prose to be the subject. His story is an aesthetic manifesto more than an erotic love mystery. D'Albert continues: "Mais en vérité, l'histoire est si pauvre que je suis forcé d'avoir recours aux digressions et aux réflexions. J'espère ... qu'avant peu le roman de ma vie sera plus entortillé et plus compliqué qu'un imbroglio espagnol" (86), a desire certainly realized with the weight of his descriptive prose. The type of beauty in which he and Madeleine take interest is extravagant, superfluous and impossible. Gautier, too, testifies to this vision of beauty in his preface to this novel, stating that "je suis de ceux pour qui le superflu est le nécessaire" (45). While descrip-

tion, which paints a picture, tends to suggest stasis and death, narration designates movement, linearity and life.

D'Albert therefore attempts to convince himself, even as he tricks his readers into so believing, that there is a great narrative at hand. Quite a capable and manipulative artist in fact, he leads us on a long descriptive "journey" which only now and then breaks to the surface of the story by means of narration. Like Madeleine, he believes that in love as in literature, "un juste retard donne de vivacité au désir" (103). However, in order to persuade his aesthetically unconditioned bourgeois reader to continue reading, d'Albert writes:

Je contenterai ton envie avec le plus grand plaisir. Il n'y a rien de sinistre dans notre roman ; ... on n'y rencontre ni longueurs ni redites, et tout y marche vers la fin avec cette hâte et cette rapidité si recommandées par Horace. (102)

It becomes quite evident, however, that Horace has little to do with d'Albert's prose: "Que veux-tu que je t'écrive ...? — ... il y a presque du ridicule à faire parcourir cent lieues à une misérable feuille de papier pour ne rien dire ... — J'ai beau chercher, je n'ai rien qui vaille la peine d'être rapporté ..." (61) and, "Je n'ai pas de hâte d'arriver, puisque je ne vais nulle part" (64). Without descriptions, enumerations, run-on sentences, ellipses, and dream scenarios, the reader would arrive at the end in no time. D'Albert pretends to prefer (like his bourgeois audience) the end or the goal, but lies and artifice are actually the main ingredients of artistic creation: "Penser une chose, en écrire une autre, cela arrive tous les jours . . ." (25), writes Gautier in his preface. Description allows d'Albert to live his dream; narration comes to his rescue before he loses himself in an illusory world in which "[il] ne sai[t] pas voir ce qui est, à force d'avoir regardé ce qui n'est pas, et [s]on œil si subtil pour l'idéal est tout à fait myope dans la réalité ..." (98). But a retreat into either realm is no solution: Gautier demonstrates his aesthetic meditation of ideal "spirituality" and ideal "materiality"—that one should be both *beyond* the world and *in* the world.

Stressing this duality, d'Albert writes that "il n'y a peut-être pas sur la terre de fantaisie plus folle et plus vagabonde que la mienne ; eh bien, ... je touche mon horizon de tous les côtés ; je me coudoie avec le réel" (62). The alternation between the first- and third-person singular in the previous quotation, in which d'Albert

addresses himself as the hunter of Daraïde, refers to this double identity or a "split" self. He attempts to be simultaneously self and other, subject and object by means of seeing and considering himself in his creation through his own eyes, as does Madeleine with regard to the tapestry. The poet's very identity is caught in the same process and structure of aesthetics, for the limits of the outside and the inside begin to fold: "tout en moi est brouillé et renversé ; je ne sais plus qui je suis ni ce que sont les autres, je doute si je suis un homme ou une femme ..." (195), a situation which mirrors Madeleine's. This state of ambiguity and metamorphosis is desirable to him, for he dreads the boredom of sterile unity and actually dreams of being able to transform his identity and become another man, another woman, or even an object—desires symbolized by the act of looking into rivers and mirrors. Both d'Albert and Madeleine wish to be self and other, artists and works of art. Madeleine creates herself and is treated as an work of art by d'Albert who is himself a poem, according to Rosette (175). Gautier's friend Baudelaire will later give voice to this thought, explaining in "Le Peintre de la vie moderne" that "[c]'est un *moi* insatiable du *non-moi*, qui, à chaque instant, le rend et l'exprime en images ... toujours instables et fugitives" (692). The ambiguity of identity whether of self or of the other therefore coincides with artistic creation.

Madeleine/Théodore's ambiguous gender and beauty enables d'Albert to continue to muse and create. In d'Albert's meditation on the reenactment of *As You Like It*, by which he hopes to determine Théodore/Madeleine's sex once and for all as she interprets the role of Rosalinde/Ganymède,⁶ he writes a lengthy description of Madeleine's body in which the dualisms and interrelation of life and death, reality and illusion necessary to "true" art and "true" beauty are projected onto and reflected by the actress. The duality that Madeleine herself previously recognized in the tapestry becomes the source of d'Albert's admiration of Madeleine's body as both static and temporal. He writes that

sur le *fond* sombre du corridor ..., le chambranle sculpté lui servant de *cadre*, elle étincelait comme si la lumière fût émanée d'elle au lieu d'être simplement réfléchi, et on l'eût plutôt prise pour une *production merveilleuse du pinceau* que pour une créature humaine faite de chair et d'os.... — Comme on voit la *vie* courir sous cette transparence d'ombre, comme cette chair est *blanche*

et colorée à la fois! ...; quels ravissants poèmes dans les moelleuses ondulations de ces contours.... (264; emphasis added)

Madeleine cuts an uncanny figure. She is a living being as depicted by the blood running through her veins, yet the very mention that she resembles a work of art lends this description an atmosphere of impossibility. Madeleine occupies the borderland of beauty: subject and object, real and ideal. Above all, d'Albert admires the formal beauty of contour and shape (149) such as that of a marble sculpture (as evoked by Madeleine's white skin), yet he praises the beauty of color, sounds, and fragrances when he states "je ne circonscris point la beauté dans telle ou telle sinuosité de lignes" (150). What is the reader to make of such flagrant contradictions? These contradictions produce ideal beauty à la Gautier: Madeleine/Théodore exemplifies both painting and poetry, image and text, stasis and movement, death and life, and erotic/aesthetic beauty.

According to d'Albert, Beauty does not present herself in all her glory; she has hours of eclipse. The tapestry signifies the ambiguity between presence and absence, illusion and reality in the tension between light and dark shadows of its textures and contours which can be directly related to chiaroscuro, the technique of painting which treats light and shade in a way that produces the illusion of depth. As is the case with representation and signs, whether a picture or a word, beauty *is* and *is not*. Madeleine's beauty is both eternal and fleeting, present and absent, veiled and unveiled. D'Albert is only too aware of the dialectic as he attempts to render a totalizing description of Madeleine, but realizes that "les vers ne rendent que le fantôme de la beauté et non la beauté elle-même" (265). Even painting and sculpture are, to a certain degree, impostors.

Although classically nude, Beauty is also veiled with superfluous ornamentation characteristic of romantic painting and description. D'Albert, finally able to "possess" Madeleine aesthetically and erotically, writes that

[e]lle demeura tout debout comme une blanche *apparition* avec une simple chemise de la *toile* la plus *transparente*.... — Ainsi *posée*, elle ressemblait parfaitement à ces statues de *marbre* des déesses, dont la *draperie* intelligente, fâchée de recouvrir tant de charmes, enveloppe à regret les belles cuisses, et par une heureuse

trahison s'arrête précisément au-dessous de l'endroit qu'elle est destinée à cacher. (368-369; emphasis added)

As both a romantic and classical image, transparent and solid, Madeleine occupies the borderlands of Gautier's aesthetic ideal, which hovers between the classical lines of an Ingres and the romantic color of a Delacroix.

The transparent drapery does not only serve to evoke the ephemeral and the material, but also raises the question of ornamental and veiled beauty that Gautier considers crucial to art. This drapery "covering" Madeleine is a type of parergon theorized by Kant, whose aesthetic criticism influenced Gautier.⁷ According to Kant,

Even what we call "ornaments" [parerga], i.e. those things which do not belong to the complete representation of the object internally as elements, but only externally as complements, and which augment the satisfaction of taste, do so only by their form; as, for example, [the frames of pictures or] the draperies of statues (61-62)⁸

Ornament is superfluous. Yet it is this very "unnecessary" item that is the core of the structure of beauty as thematized in Gautier's dictum of *l'art pour l'art* and his critique of beauty as useless. A type of mask that not only protects and conceals, but also provokes and reveals, the parergon designates a version of beauty that is neither simply internal nor external. Madeleine's mask of Théodore de Sérannes typifies this duality: at times d'Albert perceives her as a man, at others the disguise allows him to intuit femininity. Even Madeleine admits that her *travestissement* renders her unsure of her gender. She does realize, however, that gender is artificial. And as art, her disguise becomes a learning procedure.

The result of these meditations is that "la beauté n'est pas une idée absolue et ne peut s'apprécier que par le contraste" (82), as in the light and dark portions of the tapestry's contoured fabric. According to the point of view of both protagonists, beauty is visualized in the female body: d'Albert admits to dressing effeminately and admires the realization of ideal Beauty incarnated in Madeleine/Rosalinde. She, in turn, is seduced by the soft contours of Rosette's body and calls her "la belle." Through this work, however, Gautier attempts to show that feminine beauty is not in

and of itself *ideal* beauty, and only since Christianity has it become a social and artistic phenomenon. Ideal beauty in the male form was celebrated in classical sculpture, which draws its aesthetic from before the time of Christ. Thus Madeleine acquires the sense of beauty in disguising herself as a man, yet she remarks “je parvins à faire d’une fille qu’on trouvait jolie un cavalier beaucoup plus joli” (221). Even d’Albert envies the beauty he sees in other men and is much more interested in Madeleine due to her virile disguise.

The coincidence of feminine contours with masculine linearity creates not only an ideal gender, but also beautiful art:

C’est en effet une des plus suaves créations du génie païen que ce fils d’Hermès et d’Aphrodite. Il ne se peut rien imaginer de plus ravissant au monde que ces deux corps tous deux parfaits, harmonieusement fondus ensemble, que ces deux beautés si égales et si différentes qui n’en forment plus qu’une supérieure à toutes deux... : pour un adorateur exclusif de la *forme*, y a-t-il une *incertitude* plus aimable ...? (212; emphasis added)

Gautier was one of the first in his day to appreciate the co-existence of masculinity and femininity in a body. His vision of ideal beauty is therefore naturally likened to an androgynous state.⁹ The body of the androgyne is not only Madeleine’s body, but d’Albert’s as well. Neither is quite sure of his/her sexuality because of the veiling and unveiling of opposites which create a space for the multiple possibilities they seem to feel and desire. Madeleine writes, “je n’étais plus moi, mais un autre” (223). The outside, her mask or veil, has determined her inside to the extent that she admits she would have a difficult time “à perdre cette habitude” (356). As a result, the linear space of the masculine combines with the tortuous space of the feminine and is integrated to a higher “androgynous” state. Madeleine destroys the woman in herself, and since she can never fully be a man, she becomes a “troisième sexe” occupying the borderland between the two.

Théodore/Madeleine plays out her ambiguity to the last. The outside narrator writes that after a one-night stand with d’Albert, Madeleine spends the same night with Rosette: the imprint of her body and two of the pearls from her costume as Rosalinde were found on Rosette’s bed.¹⁰ When d’Albert and Rosette awaken, the ideal androgynous Beauty has disappeared. At the end of the

week, d'Albert receives a letter from her saying that the only trace he has of her *image* is that of her *text*:

Si cela vous désole trop de me perdre, brûlez cette lettre, qui est la seule preuve que vous m'avez eue, et vous croirez avoir fait un beau rêve. Qui vous en empêche? La vision s'est évanouie avant le jour, à l'heure où les songes rentrent chez eux par la porte de corne ou d'ivoire. (375)

Interestingly enough, when the image of ideal beauty leaves, d'Albert's text ceases. Thus the narrative begins and ends with Madeleine: it originates and closes *by* her and *about* her. She has succeeded in enveloping d'Albert in her aesthetic charms, which will haunt him like a dream. What he learns from her will impact his erotic and aesthetic endeavors: "en amour comme en poésie, rester au même point, c'est reculer. Tenez-vous-en à cette impression,—vous ferez bien" (375).

Madeleine's last wish for Rosette and d'Albert is: "[a]imez-vous tous deux en souvenir de moi, que vous avez aimée l'un et l'autre, et dites-vous quelquefois mon nom dans un baiser" (375). But in the space between their kiss lies the very sign of deferral and ambiguity, for neither Théodore nor Rosalinde is her real name and neither Rosette nor d'Albert is aware that she is called Madeleine. Madeleine remains both masculine and feminine, both Théodore and Rosalinde in the minds and hearts of her lovers. As a result, this form of closure represents the infinite.

The lover, the artist and the spectator are forever caught in a process, realized in the tapestry and in its image of the huntress:

Une des choses qui me frappèrent le plus, ce fut une chasseresse qui tirait un oiseau. — Ses doigts ouverts venaient de lâcher la corde, et la flèche était partie ; mais, comme cet endroit de la tapisserie se trouvait à une encoignure, la flèche était de l'autre côté de la muraille et avait décrit un grand crochet (287)

The arrow, focus of attention and locus of knowledge, bends to the degree that, from our perspective, which is that of Madeleine's, all we are allowed to know is that the arrow was, is and will be "toujours en l'air et n'arriv[era] jamais au but."¹¹ There is therefore no such thing as a totalizing form nor a final signified. In response, both image and text converge towards this method of creation of ideal beauty, towards a modernity which, as Baudelaire explains, is

le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l'art, dont l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable.... Cet élément transitoire, fugitif, dont les métamorphoses sont si fréquentes ... [e]n les supprimant, vous tombez forcément dans le vide d'une beauté abstraite et indéfinissable. ("Peintre" 695)

The tapestry represents both eternity and decay. The arrow which is simultaneously "figée" and "fuyante," symbolizes the duality of artistic creation, Beauty, and even the crisis of identity which perturbs these former elements. In the interstitial space between two opposite forms "meaning" emerges, a ceaseless metamorphosing of both matter and soul.¹²

The image of the tapestry does not function in order to represent a copy of the world; rather, it produces a new kind of reality, a new model of truth and a new conception of beauty symbolized by Madeleine. Through these images, we see that Gautier's modern, revolutionary aesthetic tends toward the artificial, be it gender, genre transpositions, costume, jewelry, lighting, frames, language or attitudes. With wit, irony, and originality, he displays his aesthetic beliefs in this "hymne à la Beauté" which is as much painting as it is poetry, real as it is ideal. The influence of Gautier's meditations on artistic minds throughout the nineteenth century reveals itself in the works of Baudelaire, Huysmans, and Oscar Wilde. Undeniably, Théophile Gautier's ideal is carried beyond his own space and time.

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Notes

¹ Verlaine writes of a similar situation in "Mon rêve familial" and Baudelaire, too, is preoccupied with such reverie in "Hymne à la Beauté."

² W.J.T. Mitchell addresses the pun on "cite"/"sight" in his article, "Ekphrasis and the Other" (696).

³ For a provocative study of ekphrasis and the politics of gender, see W.J.T. Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," as well as Scott. For a more traditional approach to ekphrasis and genre, see Krieger.

⁴ For an elaborated discussion of the fold as an image, see Deleuze.

⁵ Diana can be directly related to the Sphinx which occupies Gautier's aesthetic meditations on beauty. In his poem "Le Sphinx," he addresses these same issues of fear and desire, attraction and repulsion. Baudelaire's poem "La Beauté" exemplifies these very meditations. See also Bronfen.

⁶ It is interesting to note the problematics of *travestissement* in both d'Albert's production of *As You Like It* as well as in the performance of this play in Shakespeare's own day: Madeleine, a woman, disguises herself as a man who in turn plays a woman who dons man's clothing. The play is over, the novel ends, but what is *she* exactly? When Shakespeare's play was performed in England, it was a male actor who dressed up as a woman, later disguised himself as a man and then reassumed woman's dress. At the end of the play, still dressed as a woman, this actor addresses his audience in the epilogue, saying: "If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleas'd me ..." (757). The play of reality and illusion is obvious.

⁷ Gautier's dictum of *l'art pour l'art* stems from Kant's aesthetic meditations in *Critique of Judgement*.

⁸ The bracketed words were added to the second edition of Kant's work in 1793.

⁹ Weil opposes the androgyne to the hermaphrodite. According to her analysis, the androgyne symbolizes harmonious oneness, classicism and masculinity while the hermaphrodite symbolizes change and metamorphosis, romanticism and femininity. But on a symbolic level, these terms can be used interchangeably. I therefore, along with many other critics, prefer to use the term "androgynous" in discussing both gender and genre.

¹⁰ The pearl is an important symbol because it designates androgyny, the fusion of two separate halves. See Fornasier.

¹¹ Gautier makes reference here to Zeno's paradox.

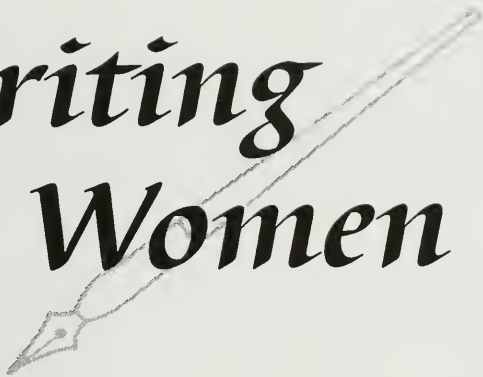
¹² Fittingly, Michel de Certeau writes that "through a ceaseless relation of each undertaking with its "opposites," it [discourse] assures a becoming, thus the possibility of a narrative for the immanence of the infinite" (31).

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Writing Women



PAROLES GELEES

UCLA French Studies

Volume 15.1 1997

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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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