ARTICLE

The Elephant in the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable in Adolphe Belot's *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* (1870)

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SUMMARY

Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme, which first appeared as a serial in *Le Figaro*, so scandalized readers with its focus on female homosexuality that publication was soon suspended for fear that the work might endanger the public. A huge success when published in book form, it soon fell by the scholarly wayside until recently, with critical editions appearing in 2002 and 2020. The narrator, Adrien de C…, tells the tale of his fraught relationship with his wife, Paule, who refuses to consummate their marriage. It is only after he meets the estranged husband of Paule's best friend, Berthe de Blangy, that Adrien realizes that the two women have been lovers since their convent years. The most striking aspect of the work is how, as Christopher Rivers puts it, "unshocking Belot's 'shocking' novel about lesbianism is." This study examines the narrative strategies that allowed Belot to both titillate and outrage the public while remaining circumspect on the very issue his novel showcases, ultimately arguing that the novel suppresses the voices that challenge heteronormativity and reasserts the dominant masculine order.

KEYWORDS: Adolphe Belot, *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme*, lesbianism, homosexuality, sexuality, narrative, gender, women

Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme, which first appeared in 1869 as a serial in *Le Figaro*, so scandalized readers with its focus on female homosexuality that publication was soon suspended for fear that the work might endanger the public. A smashing success after coming out in book form, it would be reprinted forty-five times in the next five years (Powell 264). Zola, signing as Thérèse Raquin, the eponymous heroine of his 1869 novel, defended Belot against accusations of immorality in an essay which eventually became the preface to Belot's novel.[1] Though it received a great deal of attention in the contemporary press, it fell by the scholarly wayside until fairly recently, with critical editions appearing in 2002 (Christopher Rivers) and 2020 (Sophie Ménard). In the opening, the narrator, Adrien de C…, has a chance encounter with Camille V…, an old school friend who tries, without success, to get to the bottom of why Adrien has aged so much. Adrien hints that if he has the courage someday to write his "curieuse et exceptionnelle histoire" (19), he will send it to Camille for publication in case it might be edifying to others. The resulting *récit* tells the tale of Adrien's fraught relationship with his twenty-two-year-old wife, Paule, who remains steadfast in her refusal to consummate their marriage. It is only when Adrien meets the estranged husband of Paule's best friend, Berthe de Blangy, that he realizes that the two women have been lovers since their convent years.

Complicating any analysis of *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* is the structure of the narrative, whose first chapter presents the reunion of Camille and Adrien from the perspective of an extradiegetic narrator, the individual who received the manuscript from Camille. David Powell explains in his article on queer narrative strategies that Belot utilizes both types of intradiegetic narrators, with Adrien as the homodiegetic one, the author of the memoir who participates as a character in his story, and Camille as the heterodiegetic one who provides the frame.[2] While absent from the story proper, Camille has an almost palpable presence thanks to the sustained effort Adrien makes to pull him into it, addressing him directly (especially with "mon cher ami," which appears constantly) in order to pose questions and to anticipate, and sometimes manipulate, his reactions. Camille's role overlaps that of the reader who "want[s] to respond positively to the narrative invitation to empathize with the protagonist [but who] cannot get past Adrien's blindness (or is it slow-wittedness?) concerning his wife's proclivity" (Powell 266). In a nutshell, Powell concludes, "the hide-and-seek nature of the subject matter is cleverly, and frustratingly, mirrored in the novel's very narrative structure" (266).

One might say that a similar hide-and-seek is at play in terms of the novel's place in the fictional spectrum, its audience, and even its title, where the disjuncture between "mademoiselle" and "femme," while certainly suggestive of female homosexuality, could also allude to male impotence (Seillan 538). As for the work's generic classification, Gretchen Schultz states that Adrien's story reads more like a journal than a retrospective account since he reports events without alluding to the knowledge he would later acquire (17–18). Jean-Marie Seillan, for his part, likens the work to a *roman à clé* because of Belot's abbreviation of Adrien's and Camille's last names and his allusions to *actualités* (527). Although there is a critical consensus that the novel exemplifies the *roman populaire* (a work typically set in Paris, featuring stock characters, sensationalism, and content shaped by "the author's astute reading of the preoccupations, tastes, and sensibilities of his audience" [Rivers, Introduction xxvii]), it goes decidedly against type in its portrayal of socially privileged women instead of working-class ones.[3] The narrator himself alludes to the class issue when he says "j'avais cru de bonne foi que la naissance et l'éducation avaient élevé une barrière infranchissable entre certaines classes de la société et de telles misères" (150–51). Ménard casts the widest net, proposing that *Madame Giraud, ma femme* shares certain features with the *roman érotique* (its eroticism "surgissant de l'entr'aperçu et l'incompris" [22]), the *roman de mœurs*, and the *roman naturaliste*.

The question of the novel's intended audience is no less thorny: Rivers and Powell consider the intended reader to be male, echoing the stance that Zola advances in his preface, while Schultz cites the lack of explicit language as evidence that the novel was "presumed directed to and consumed primarily by women" (75), with Jennifer Waelti-Walters narrowing that field to *young* women who, she says, would learn of the danger of relationships with women but would have no way of knowing "where the danger begins, and so all interaction between women becomes tainted for her" (37).[4] In short, it is as challenging to say what the novel *is* and who it is *for* as it is to pin down how, to quote Rivers, "unshocking Belot's 'shocking' novel about lesbianism is" (Introduction xv).

However eager critics have been to comment upon what is missing from *Mademoiselle Giraud*, *ma femme*, none have gone much beyond stating that fact. Powell mentions Belot's reliance, stemming from a desire to please readers and sell books, on preterition, a rhetorical device that entails saying something by saying you are not going to say it, while Rivers refers vaguely to

the novel's "prudish and indirect language" (Introduction xxx). Ménard goes a bit further by flagging such features as *sous-entendus*, *doubles phrases*, and *périphrases*, as does Schultz, citing portraiture, comportment, association, periphrasis, and euphemism, but both do so only in passing. This study extends and deepens existing scholarship on this subject by examining the narrative strategies that allowed Belot to both titillate and outrage the public while remaining circumspect on the very issue his novel showcases, ultimately arguing that *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* effectively silences the voices that challenge heteronormativity and reasserts the dominant, masculine order.[5]

The most obvious way to reduce the shock value of a work that dares to suggest that a woman could find sexual fulfillment with another woman is to eschew the term *lesbienne*, coined in its sexual sense just three years earlier, not to mention popular slang equivalents such as *tribade*, *saphiste*, *fricarelle*, *fricatrice*, *frotteuse*, and *ribaude*, "or any of the many other scientific, argotic, metaphorical, genteel, or vulgar terms used to designate the female homosexual during the nineteenth century" (Schultz 75). Stéphane Gougelmann puts it more colorfully: "il paraît abusif de ranger *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* parmi 'les livres qu'on ne lit que d'une main.'" Waelti-Walters notes as well the absence of

> suggestive scenes, eroticism, and impropriety of any kind…. Neither the women in their relationship nor the men in their exchanges of confidences provide any information about what a forbidden relationship between women might entail; they name nothing, describe nothing, evoke no sensuality, no love, no passion…. [The novel] is a *tour de force*: it is an absolutely proper novel that is clearly about perversity and vice. (37)

The restraint required to walk the fine line between the proper and the perverse must have taken a toll: Sarane Alexandrian tells us that in 1883 Belot began writing erotic novels, signed with his initials, "pour se défouler, exprimer sa libido frustrée par les à peu près de ses autres livres" (605). The first of these, *L'Éducation d'une demi-vierge* (1883), about a woman who not only becomes a prostitute but recruits her adolescent daughter, is, according to Alexandrian, "d'une immoralité sereine et d'un libertinage démonstratif" (605). It seems that Belot had fewer qualms about writing eroticism in the context of mother-daughter prostitutes than he did in that of lesbians.

On a microtextual level, Belot employs various narrative strategies to speak the unspeakable. Characterization is an ideal point of departure since the opening scene of Adrien's embedded story is devoted to his first glimpse of Paule and Berthe as he sits smoking a cigar on the Champs-Élysées. Contrary to Waelti-Walters's assertion that the novel lacks sensuality, the descriptions of Paule's physical appearance exude it, drawing on multiple sensory impressions, especially the visual: Adrien's interested gaze homes in on Paule's "poitrine amoureuse," her "hanches accusées comme celles d'une Espagnole" and especially her eyes, worthy of a pair of nearly identical exclamations about their "volupté" and "sensualité" (24). The sensory impressions include as well the olfactory ("D'âcres et de mystérieux parfums s'échappent d'elle"), the auditory ("sa voix [est] vibrante, accentuée, presque masculine"), and the tactile ("Que de sensualité sur ses lèvres rouges, un peu épaisses, pour ainsi dire roulées sur elles-mêmes et recouvertes d'un irritant duvet!") (24). Adrien's initial descriptions of Berthe likewise center on a sensuality that appeals to men (including Adrien himself) and women alike: "les femmes elles-mêmes ne pouvaient s'empêcher d'admirer ses épaules d'un modèle parfait et les hommes ne songeaient pas à se plaindre qu'elle fût décolletée jusqu'à la dernière limite" (27). Adrien also mentions Berthe's

"grands yeux bleus réfléchiss[ant] à la fois l'ingénuité et la hardiesse" (27), her "charme tout particulier" (27) and her "toilette excentrique" (25), all features that signal her singularity. Her *pince-nez* catches his eye but does not register as the popular accessory it evidently was among lesbians in the *fin-de-siècle*. Most importantly, the two women are said to complete each other: Mme de Blangy is blonde, with "un léger embonpoint," while Paule is a slender brunette: "Elles avaient… tous les charmes et atteignaient à la perfection la plus complète" (53). According to Schultz, physical complementarity was "stock in trade of lesbian fictions" with the masculine brunette and feminine blond considered "requisite types" by the early 1880s (79).[6]

Belot also speaks the unspeakable by attributing to Paule and Berthe certain behaviors that hint at their otherness, beginning with a fundamentally rebellious spirit. Paule demonstrates her willingness to flout authority as early as the opening scene when she refuses to comply with her father's order to change chairs; her first word in the novel, Gougelmann notes, is "non." Other behaviors point to non-heteronormative sexuality. During that same scene Paule is not only oblivious to Adrien's interested gaze but completely indifferent to the admiring male passersby, reacting with pleasure only when a pretty blonde, Berthe, joins their ranks. Setting a pattern for the rest of the novel, the narrator presents her displays of friendship in a way that benefits him: "Il devait y avoir dans son cœur des trésors de tendresse, des ardeurs encore contenues, mais toutes prêtes à s'épandre" (30). In other words, Adrien sees signs of homosexual desire as those of a nascent heterosexuality from which he is sure to profit. Paule's indifference to Adrien continues during and following the courtship period. On the morning after her wedding, Paule extends her hand to Adrien, who has spent a sleepless night on a divan, as to a friend. The narrator's comment that "On n'aurait jamais dit une nouvelle mariée, tant elle était à l'aise" (51) calls to mind the description in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* of Emma, who, unlike her husband, "ne laissait rien découvrir où l'on pût deviner quelque chose" (64) the morning after their wedding. The difference is, of course, that the Bovary marriage is at least consummated.

Those behavioral notations are fairly subtle signs of Paule's sexual orientation, though, compared to her nightly locking of the bedroom door. Actions speak louder than words when, the day after the wedding, Paule invites Berthe to join her in the very room from which she has banned her husband; when they emerge, "[l]eur physionomie respirait le bonheur, et leur teint animé, sans doute par la flamme du foyer, avait plus d'éclat que lorsqu'une heure auparavant elles avaient quitté le salon pour échanger leurs confidences dans la chambre à coucher" (54). Paule's reactions to Adrien's repeated attempts to possess her physically speak volumes, running the gamut from disengaging herself calmly with her prettiest smile and pushing his hands away to pinning him in place (*clouer*) "par un regard, où [il] cru[t] lire une menance [*sic*] qui [lui] fait trembler" (67) to playing dead after he tries to kiss her: "toute sa personne devint insensible, inanimée, inerte; elle se galvanisa pour ainsi dire. Au lieu d'une femme, j'avais encore, j'avais toujours, un cadavre dans mes bras" (127). In a rather comical scene in which Adrien tries to leap onto his bed to join Paule, she laughs out loud, a more effusive expression of her feelings than her typical mocking smiles. Impervious to Adrien's efforts to make her jealous by taking a lover, Paule shows displeasure only when he forbids her to visit Berthe. But the clearest indication – to the reader, at least – of the true nature of Paule and Berthe's relationship is the position of their bodies when Adrien finds his wife "à demi étendue sur un divan aux côtés de son amie" (69).

The divans are, as a matter of fact, one of several object-motifs that articulate a non-verbal language of lesbianism in the novel, the one in Adrien's study representing his inability to obtain

what he believes is rightfully his (Paule's body) and the ones belonging to Berthe, Paule's ability to fulfill her same-sex desire. The locks on the bedroom door, likewise, symbolize Paule's independence and resourcefulness as she systematically replaces every one that Adrien breaks, up to seven total (for Seillan, the fact that "le mari devant qui demeure close la porte du corps féminin est un ingénieur spécialisé dans le percement des tunnels" is an example of Second Empire humor [535]). The bed itself is a metaphorical battleground between Paule and Adrien, who is haunted by Balzac's "theory of the bed" in *Physiologie du mariage*, which holds that "c'est au lit seulement [que le mari] peut savoir chaque nuit si l'amour de sa femme croît ou décroît. Là est le baromètre conjugal" (48). Furthermore, Berthe's library includes such "sapphic classics" (Schultz 81) – though there is no indication that Adrien recognizes them as such – as Diderot's *La Religieuse*, Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Ernest Feydeau's *Mme de Chalis*, and Balzac's *La Fille aux yeux d'or* and *Une Passion dans le désert*. Other objects serve as "[des] poncifs culturels ordinairement mobilisés pour représenter la déviance": Berthe's white cashmere peplum representing "la décadence romaine"; cushions, perfumes, and cigarettes "la volupté orientale"; and Louis XV-style furnishings "l'esprit libertin" (Gougelmann).

That those objects all belong in private, interior spaces is no surprise since, as Gougelmann explains, "le 'crime' est perpétré porte fermée." The exception among the *motifs* is the streets in Paris, the object of Adrien's watchful gaze when Paule leaves their domestic space. On one occasion, they are the means by which he follows her to what he expects to be the apartment of a male lover, not the *pied-à-terre* that Berthe has rented for her assignations with Paule. The urban landscape is posited as a sort of labyrinth that reflects the lengths (literal and figurative) to which both Paule and Adrien are willing to go, in the case of the former, to see to her sexual needs (clearly compelling, though Belot gives us no reason to believe Ménard's claim that she is a nymphomaniac [45]), and in that of the latter, to solve the mystery of her resistance to normative marital behavior.[7] Schultz aptly compares *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* to a detective novel thanks to its "itinerary from ignorance to knowledge" and a character who "pursues the truth about a crime and subjects the criminal to the law" (80). Adrien's meandering as a seemingly cognizant Paule tries to throw him off is akin, then, to that of a police officer hot on the trail of a perpetrator.

A final key word/motif, *le hasard*, may seem tangential to Belot's overall cat-and-mouse treatment of the novel's central issue, but in fact it demonstrates that Adrien sees himself not as the victim of his wife's lesbianism but of nebulous forces beyond his control. As it turns out, chance intervenes only once with respect to Paule, putting Adrien in her path after their initial encounter and solidifying his desire to have her ("j'aurais sans doute renoncé à mes projets et oublié ma jolie voisine des Champs-Élysées, si le hasard n'avait pris plaisir à me mettre de nouveau sur son chemin" [40]). By its next occurrence, some ninety pages later, *le hasard* has turned against Adrien, casting him in a role diametrically opposed to the one he wants ("je devais être satisfait et je l'aurais été, si, au lieu de jouir du triste privilège d'être son mari, le hasard s'était contenté de me faire son oncle" [131]). But it is when Adrien makes the acquaintance of Berthe's estranged husband that *le hasard* becomes a positive force in Adrien's life, providing him, in M. de Blangy, a tablemate at the hotel in Nice, where Adrien has gone to escape his troubled marriage, then "un fort agréable compagnon" (137), and finally "la seule personne qui pût me… faire connaître [les particularités ignorées de moi]" (148); *le hasard* is even credited with revealing Adrien's identity to Blangy ("Mon nom, que le hasard lui avait déjà sans doute appris, ne lui rappelait aucun souvenir" [138]). Chance thus affords Adrien the opportunity for a new male homosocial bond that replicates the one between him and Camille.[8] Later, *le hasard* propels (*conduire*) Adrien, with

Paule in tow, south to Algeria (while Blangy takes Berthe north) (169), before giving way to the more ominous *fatalité* which "poursuivait [Adrien]" (189) as he himself pursues the reunited Paule and Berthe. In the end, the blame for Adrien's misery is deflected from the lesbians to *le hasard* and *la fatalité* which conspire against him ("le hasard me conduit, la fatalité me poursuit" [193]).

A systematic analysis of the two women's direct speech to Adrien reveals that it, too, is a narrative device enabling Belot to write lesbianism without appearing to. Berthe's speeches alone should by all logic constitute a red flag for Adrien. When he reveals his plan to marry Paule, for example, Berthe tells him that he is wasting his time. She also tips her lesbian hand, as it were, by announcing, as she rebuffs Adrien's advances, that her husband sufficed "pour [lui] faire prendre tous les hommes en grippe; je n'éprouve pas le désir de le remplacer" (28).[9] Berthe makes no effort to hide her attraction to Paule, whom she describes to Adrien as "délicieusement jolie" (33) and endowed with "qualités… charmantes… [qui] ne seraient… pas appréciées de son mari" (34–35), one of the many wink-wink moments in the novel. She states that Paule will continue to love her after marriage and, no fewer than three times, with an irony lost on Adrien, that since Paule, dowryless, has no choice but to marry, he is *precisely the husband she needs* (40), that is, a man too dense to interpret the signs of lesbianism. When Adrien proposes marriage, Berthe calls him an imbecile (45), and when she tells him of her plan to whisk Paule away to Le Havre, he is naïve enough to think that Berthe will instruct her on her wifely duties. After Adrien discovers the women's love nest, Berthe vociferously defends her right to the space and her chosen lifestyle: "J'arrange ma vie comme je l'entends, moi, mon cher monsieur, je ne dépends de personne, je suis un garçon" (118) – her "mon cher monsieur" something of a counterpunch, from the reader's perspective, against Adrien's incessant appeals to "mon cher ami."

Paule's own direct discourse communicates, albeit indirectly, her need to carve out a space in her marriage to accommodate her sexual orientation. In one of her first conversations with Adrien, she warns him that he is bound to be unhappy because she has too much "imagination" for him (54) – i.e., she thinks outside the heteronormative box – and implores him not to marry her. When he takes her friendliness to mean a softening of her resolve, she explains that she simply wanted to avoid encouraging "un amour auquel je ne saurais répondre" (73) and to "[lui] rendre agréable au moins… spirituellement" (55), the *au moins* combined with the ellipsis representing a *non-dit* that in fact "says" a great deal. On other occasions, she bombards him with thinly coded messages: he will never be welcome in her bed because she only does what she wants, he will never have to worry about her flirting with his friends, she will never be anything but "la meilleure des sœurs" to him (76). Her most striking speech is the one in which she accuses Adrien of not *listening to* what she has been trying to tell him: "Au lieu de vous tenir pour averti, vous n'attachez aucune importance à ces paroles, vous persistez à me prendre pour une enfant qui ne connaît rien à la vie; avec cette fatuité particulière à tous les hommes, vous ne doutez pas de vous faire aimer et vous m'épousez" (76). In sum, the women speak a language of lesbianism that, while never explicit, is remarkably articulate, except when it falls on Adrien's deaf ears.[10]

The narrator himself plays an active role in "narrating away the gay" by constantly interjecting his own explanations and justifications for the women's behavior, thereby adding yet another layer of obfuscation. Adverbial expressions prove particularly useful in this endeavor, especially "sans doute," which appears at every turn and whose ambiguity adds another layer of hermeneutic complication. The most striking instance is that figuring in the aforementioned passage relating the women's exit from Adrien's bedroom looking flushed, "*sans doute* par la

flamme du foyer," the adverb diverting the reader's attention away from the more obvious (and scandalous) explanation, that the women are in mid-afterglow. *Sans doute* combines with the more speculative *peut-être* in a single sentence describing Paule's escape from Adrien's forcible kiss: "Cette étrange fille [était] touchée *peut-être* par ma douleur, attendrie *sans doute* comme je l'étais à la suite de la lutte qu'elle venait de soutenir" (73, my emphasis). An implied *peut-être* manifests itself as well when Adrien runs through various scenarios to make sense of Paule's actions, such as locking the bedroom door the first time: the door must have locked itself; the nervous young bride needs to be alone on her wedding night. She is concerned about "la délicatesse de mes sentiments" (50), with "sentiments" standing in for "sexual advances." When Adrien comes to realize that Paule is no "ingénue ignorante de ses devoirs" (57), he begins to attribute thoughts and desires to her, most of which serve to improve his own standing in the readers' eyes: "elle *pensait* sans doute qu'un mari pouvait se donner la peine de mériter sa femme et qu'il était délicat à lui de paraître oublier ses droits. Dans l'intérêt de notre amour, elle *voulait* se faire désirer et m'appartenir comme amante, avant de devenir ma femme" (57, emphasis mine). The locution "soit… soit" constitutes another way the narrator offers the reader options to explain Paule's behavior as Adrien prepares to go on a trip without her: "Elle ne m'en fournit pas le prétexte [d'éclater], soit qu'elle redoutât mes discours et craignit une scène, soit qu'elle eût vraiment conscience de ses torts envers moi" (126).[11]

The narrator's occasional generalizations à la Balzac about women are meant to garner readers' sympathy and to create a sort of brotherhood among male readers ("nous") who have suffered at their hands. In his account of a scene in which his younger self is on the verge of becoming physically violent with the recalcitrant Paule, the narrator takes women to task without ever specifying what their *torts* are:

> Oui, une parole trop vive est si vite prononcée, un geste trop brusque vous échappe si facilement, et les femmes savant tirer parti, avec tant d'adresse, de ces vivacités: Elles ne se disent pas qu'elles en sont cause, qu'elles vous ont poussé à bout, qu'elles ont eu les premiers torts. Elles oublient à dessein, et les paroles aigres qui nous ont froissés, et leurs réticences calculées, et les mille épingles qu'elles nous ont enfoncées dans le cœur; elles ne se souviennent que les derniers mots qui se sont échappés de notre bouche, du geste trop significatif que nous nous sommes permis, et elles s'en font une arme terrible contre nous. (66)[12]

As a result, Paule's lesbian "wrongs" end up subsumed under the broader category of women's alleged transgressions against men. Finally, Adrien effectively de-lesbianizes Paule by rejoicing, after the discovery of Berthe's secret apartment, that his wife "n'est coupable que d'avoir *spirituellement* éludé mes ordres. Je ne pouvais avoir contre elle aucun grief sérieux, aucun grief nouveau…" (123).[13] The attentive reader will note that Adrien lays claim here to the very adverb that Paule employed earlier to communicate her desire to "me rendre agréable au moins… spirituellement" since she cannot do so sexually.

A judicious deployment of semi-auxiliary verbs (*devoir*, *pouvoir*, *vouloir*), most often in the imperfect tense, serves a similar purpose for a narrator intent upon foisting other explanations (than the obvious) for Paule's behavior on a reader who is far more perspicacious than Adrien. *Devoir* is ubiquitous: after observing Paule's pleasurable reaction to the sight of Berthe, Adrien concludes, for example, that Paule "devait comprendre à ravir l'amour. Il devait y avoir dans son

cœur des trésors de tendresse, des ardeurs encore contenues, mais toutes prêtes à s'épandre" (30). Much later, when he returns to France from Italy and spring has sprung, he speculates that Paule "doit s'être laissé toucher par cette sublime harmonie, et voudra mêler sa voix au grand concert donné par la nature" (129). The verbs *pouvoir* and *vouloir* function similarly, allowing Adrien to privilege his interpretation of events: Paule "voulait se faire désirer" (57); Berthe "avait pu craindre que Paule n'eût reporté sur moi toute l'affection qu'elle avait pour elle" (85); M. de Blangy "ne pouvait plus douter de ma parfaite candeur" (150). Adrien makes liberal use of the imperfect of *aller* with an infinitive, often in tandem with *sans doute*, to guide his intended reader's expectations of what is likely to occur: "j'allais sans doute pénétrer quelque mystère" (112); "l'autre [amant] allait venir" (115); "elle était sortie avec quelque personne de la ville, une marchande sans doute; elle allait revenir" (185). Sometimes he dispenses with the semi-auxiliary entirely and just states, as if it were fact, what Paule feels: "elle ne se sentait pas suivie, mais elle se disait que sans doute le moment était venu de redoubler de précautions (99); "ses souvenirs lui suffisaient sans doute et l'aidaient à attendre l'heure du prochain rendez-vous" (114). When taken together, these examples underscore Adrien's desire to narratively empower himself while robbing Paule of her agency.

One might expect the narrator to be more straightforward in referencing Paule's homosexuality once he arrives at the point in his story where his younger self learns the truth about his wife from M. de Blangy. But the euphemistic language continues, with references to Paule's "coupables égarements" (157), her "fautes" (166), her status as "gravement atteinte moralement" (161). M. de Blangy furthers the narrator's initiative to speak the unspeakable by mirroring Adrien's prevarication in his account of the discovery of Berthe's lesbianism, even referring, like Adrien, to "[s]es torts envers moi" (152). His only elaboration on what those wrongs might be is to say that they are "d'une telle nature que les juges se refusent souvent à les admettre, pour n'avoir pas à les flétrir" (152–53). The justice system, like Belot/Adrien/Blangy, would rather cloak the unnamable in silence than to deal with it, in other words, though Blangy admits that doing so only propagates "[l]es vices de toutes sortes, certains de l'impunité, certains même d'être souvent protégés, [qui] s'infiltraient peu à peu dans nos mœurs" (153). It is of the utmost irony that by putting those words in Blangy's mouth, Belot implicates himself in the perpetuation of the perceived vice.

So narrow is Adrien's thinking about the parameters for women's sexual relationships that when Blangy discloses Paule's adultery, Adrien again assumes that his wife has a male lover, this time Blangy himself; as such, he is a prime example of the *fin-de-siècle* man who clung to the idea that women are fundamentally heterosexual (Waelti-Walters 36). After all, the only variety of adultery recognized by the Code Civil was heterosexual. Rivers points out that not only were there no laws in France banning lesbianism in 1870, there were none, since 1791, forbidding homosexual acts in private between consenting adults of either sex (Introduction xxii). That does not stop the two men from invoking the Code when devising a plan to get their wives under their patriarchal thumb: "La loi nous protège," proclaims Adrien, "servons-nous de la loi!" (155). Adrien's epiphany is marked by a *cri du cœur* addressed to Camille: "Ah! mon cher ami, je n'étais plus le jeune mari que vous avez connu, plein de délicatesse, de réserve, innocent et pudique, passant sa vie à vouloir deviner un indéchiffrable énigme. La lumière avait lui! Je savais, je voyais et je voulais!" (157). The light may have gone on, but Adrien remains silent about what it revealed, as the absence of direct objects for *savoir*, *voir*, and *vouloir* suggests. Once his and Blangy's plan to keep their wives apart is underway, Adrien sets out to erase the past from her life – canceling out her lesbianism, so to speak – by changing "le cours de ses idées" (169) when it is the desires of

her body that are the real problem. His attitude suggests that he subscribes to the idea, popular in the nineteenth century, that there were "lesbiennes natives" and "lesbiennes devenues," the latter referring to women who can stop if they want, for whom, according to Christine Bard, "l'aventure saphique est passagère, comme un égarement de jeunesse" (62). It is noteworthy that, whether unwittingly or not, Bard echoes Belot's own periphrastic language.

As Adrien's story comes to a close, it becomes difficult to reconcile the uncharacteristically submissive and remorseful Paule with the fearless one who defied Adrien in order to preserve her autonomy and satisfy her own desires, the Paule whom Gougelmann calls "une 'femme damnée' baudelairienne: elle est une altérité inaliénable et mouvante, une individualité libre et romantique, elle vit son saphisme envers et contre tout." The centerpiece of this final segment is a disquisition in which Paule blames the convent, and by extension, Berthe, for turning her into "une créature déchue, perdue" (196), tainted by her contact with older, experienced girls, "[des] brebis dangereuses" (178). Further straining plausibility, Paule absolves men of all blame, professing that it is not they who "perdent les femmes" but "les femmes qui se perdent entre elles" (182). She even portrays herself as Berthe's victim, exclaiming to Adrien "Comme elle me dominait; comme elle m'avait asservie!" (195), rather than as the equal partner that she has consistently been shown to be. At no point, until Adrien takes on the task of "curing" her, has she ever acted *déchue*, *perdue*, *dominée*, or *asservie*. Then again, Paule comes to us confined in what Katherine Gantz terms "Belot's narrative airlock…. Because her motives and dimensions remain third-hand through Adrien's account to Camille, Paule remains efficiently partitioned: first from Adrien, but more significantly, from the reader, who is only left the mediated visual and discursive representations of Paule…" (4).

It is ironic that an issue handled so gingerly turns out to be threatening enough to warrant killing off both lesbian characters in order to re-assert the primacy of the patriarchy and of heterosexuality.[14] Paule is made to suffer immeasurably from an illness that asphyxiates her (*une chloro-anémie* progressing to *une pachy-méningite*, which a doctor attributes, rather incredibly, to overzealous lovemaking on Adrien's part), and Berthe meets a similar but far more dramatic end.[15] While swimming in the ocean, a strong current overwhelms her; Adrien, conveniently on hand, swims out to save her but apparently helps her drown – "apparently" because the event is presented not by Adrien but through the filter of a *fait divers* that is itself held at arm's length from readers since it is Blangy who reads it:

> On dirait qu'une lutte s'est engagée entre eux. Comme toutes les personnes qui se noient, Mme de Blangy fait *sans doute* des efforts désespérés pour se cramponner à son sauveur, et celui-ci la repousse afin d'être maître de ses mouvements. […] Le courant les entraîne toujours et bientôt on les perd de vue. Dix minutes s'écoulent… un siècle! M. Adrien de C… reparaît… Hélas! il est seul… Il n'a pu sauver la malheureuse femme et c'est à peine si ses forces lui permettent de regagner la plage. (209, emphasis mine)

With one final *sans doute*, out of place even in a journalistic piece skewing toward the sensational, Belot subverts the most logical explanation for the struggle, that a panic-stricken Berthe gets in the way of Adrien's efforts to save her. The ellipsis represents gaps in the information, as does the blunt statement that Adrien returns alone. The truth lurks in the interstices between the reportage and M. de Blangy's unsettling note of gratitude to Adrien that brings the novel to an abrupt close: "J'ai compris et je vous remercie, en mon nom et au nom de tous les

honnêtes gens, de nous avoir débarrassés de ce reptile… Le danger que vous avez couru vous absout" (209). The conclusion of *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* is thus emblematic of Belot's overarching strategy for writing lesbianism in which what is not said proves as meaningful as what is said. Just as Adrien gets to have it both ways in his final act, playing the hero while ensuring the demise of the reptile-temptress lesbian, Belot leaves the elephant in his text but lets it trumpet all the same, creating a work that clearly bears the mark of an incipient male anxiety about women's agency that will soon crystallize around the figure of the *femme nouvelle*.

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Notes

[1] Zola is said to have modeled the lesbian characters in *La Curée* on the women in Belot's novel (see Mitterand). For a lengthy discussion of the relationship between Belot and Zola, see Rivers, "Improbable."

[2] Powell defines queer as "not only a homosexual character but one whose comportment does not align itself with social convention," in other words, a "disturbance of convention" (268). His study centers on the theory that Belot's novel is "a narrative about or surrounding an all but unnamed topic in which the act of not naming (a 'non-act' or an 'anti-act,' if you will) provides the narrative basis of the queer discourse" (266).

[3] Yves Olivier-Martin observes that the *roman populaire* features a struggle between good and evil (clearly à propos in *Mademoiselle Giraud*) and an amalgam of "personnages simplifiés" and "événements compliqués," with plots that appeal to the reader's imagination, "à la sensibilité, et surtout aux nerfs" (13). Ménard outlines other characteristics of the *roman populaire*: "l'euphémisation généralisée des pratiques sexuelles, les propos moralisateurs, la condamnation de l'intimité saphique et la chasteté énonciative" (21).

[4] According to Rivers, "Zola chooses to address directly the eventual readers of *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* as if they were all men. The ideal reader of the novel would be a stern patriarch, who would use the book as an admonition to potentially wayward daughters and wives…" ("Improbable" 48).

[5] One has to wonder if this text might be channeling fears of the burgeoning women's rights movements in the nineteenth century (with key figures such as Flora Tristan, Juliette Adam, Léon Richer, Maria Deraismes, Eugénie Potonié-Pierre, André Léo, and Olympe Audouard, to name just a few). (See Moses for an in-depth study of feminism in the nineteenth century.)

[6] Nicole G. Albert discusses a drawing by Abel Fichet (published in *Gil Blas*, 21 janvier 1898) depicting a lesbian couple (judging from the caption referring to the odor of garlic, "gousse" having become synonymous in slang for saphist), seated on the terrace of a café, one a feminine-looking blonde and the other, a short-haired tie-wearing brunette "[dont] l'allure et la tenue valent déclaration publique de leur sexualité" (102–03).

[7] For an excellent discussion of exterior spaces in the novel, see Gantz. For a more general treatment of lesbians' entry into public spaces (bars, cafés, etc.), see Albert.

[8] Rivers states that "The ultimate irony of Belot's novel lies in the fact that the supposedly horrifying story of intense and dangerous intimacy between two former same-sex schoolmates (female) can only be told within the intimacy of a friendship between two former same-sex schoolmates (male). That irony is further underscored by the implied homosociality of Zola's relation to his reader in the preface. All of this begs a certain fundamental question: why must intimacy and complicity be feared and mistrusted among women, leading as it can – according to Belot and Zola – to homosexuality, while it is revered among men as a source of healthy comfort, therapeutic bonding and, indeed, as the very antidote to homosexuality?" ("Improbable" 49).

[9] Lest there be any doubt about Adrien's adherence to traditional gender roles, he is said to be in a hurry to marry because "mon linge était mal blanchi, j'étais mal servi, mon valet de chambre me volait; en un mot, ma maison avait besoin de l'intelligente direction d'une femme" (31).

[10] It is noteworthy that in a narrative that is fairly heavy on dialogue, there is not a single verbal exchange between the two women.

[11] This is not Adrien's first reference to Paule's "torts." When she shows warmth toward him, he speculates that "(e)lle avait sans doute conscience de ses torts envers moi, et elle prétendait les expier par l'égalité de son humeur et les charmes d'un esprit toujours enjoué, toujours aimable" (87).

[12] There is also this: "Les femmes n'aiment pas d'ordinaire l'homme qui s'humilie et qui prie. Les supplications ne les touchent qu'autant qu'elles s'accordent avec leurs secrets désirs. Elles se donneront peut-être par bonté d'âme, mais elles n'aimeront point par charité. La mendicité est interdite dans le département de l'amour" (67). It is ironic that Adrien could claim to know so much about women and the "love department" but so little about his own particular woman. He oscillates between emphasizing his naïveté and pontificating about the nature of women: "L'expérience ne m'a-t-elle pas démontré que, dans certains ménages, les premiers torts viennent de la femme?" (89); "je me trouvais en présence d'une femme, faite comme les autres, perfide comme la plupart" (102)

[13] Waelti-Walters believes that upon discovering the women's love nest, Adrien comprehends that his wife and Berthe are lovers (34). There is no textual evidence of this, however.

[14] Iwona Janicka, who considers Adrien a male lesbian, argues that the elimination of the two women also "reconfirm[s] his position in the heterosexual matrix" (149).

[15] Waelti-Walters claims that since Paule dies in Adrien's arms and since death is a metaphor for orgasm, she is "offered heterosexual salvation and Adrien a double and belated sop to his masculine ego" (37).