

**Woman as a Wonder as a Monster:
on Mathilde The Woman Who Loses A Sex War**

FEMME MERVEILLE OU FEMME MONSTER:

**SUR MATHILDE, LA FEMME QUI PERD UNE GUERRE DE SEXE
SOMMAIRE**

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Abstract: In Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, the second leading female character Mathilde appears a quite "monstrous" young woman yet with fascination. She is neither mystery nor enigma but simply of a psychological sex a "man+woman woman" in my concept, a dilemma typical of Her as Other as an Object meanwhile so self-consciously struggling for subjectivity, for transcendence. Noble, proud, passionate, a little hysteric, obsessed with fantasy. There buried, repressed deep, and, "hidden skilfully" in her is the "120% of 'masculinity' in her 120% femininity". She takes efforts to behave like a woman, yet she seeks to realize her transcendence in the man she loves. Though the man, Julien, shares with her the same wild imagination and ambition, though they both are addicted to dream of heroism, he finally comes to the point of not loving her any more, for he gets tired of heroism. Mathilde loses in the war, for she fights, but fights in order to realize her heroism in love, in her lover, a man.

Key words: psychological sex; sex war; French Feminism; transcendence; rival

Résumé: Dans *Le Rouge et le Noir* de Stendhal, le deuxième personnage féminin Mathilde semble plutôt une "monstrueuse" jeune femme avec fascination. Dans mon concept, elle n'est ni mystère ni énigme, mais simplement d'un sexe psychologique "homme + femme femme", un dilemme typique d'Elle et d'Autre comme un Objet, et en même temps elle lutte avec une auto-conscience pour la subjectivité et la transcendance. Noble, fière, passionnée, un peu hystérique, obsédée par la fantaisie. Il

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* Received 10 July 2009; accepted 2 August 2009

y est enterrée, reflouée profondément et "dissimulée habilement" en elle une "120% de masculinité dans sa 120% de féminité". Elle prend des efforts pour se comporter comme une femme, mais elle cherche à réaliser sa transcendance à l'homme qu'elle aime. Bien que cet homme, Julien, partage avec elle la même imagination sauvage et l'ambition, et qu'ils soient adonnés au rêve de l'héroïsme, il finit enfin par ne plus l'aimer, car il se fatigue de l'héroïsme. Mathilde perd la guerre. Elle se bat, mais elle se bat pour réaliser son l'héroïsme dans l'amour, chez son amant, un homme.

Mots-Clés: sexe psychologique; la guerre de sexe; le féminisme français; transcendance; rival

Their first encounter was one of their gazes: Julien thought that he had never seen such beautiful eyes, signaling "great emotional coldness"², of "watchful boredom that none the less remains mindful of the duty to appear imposing"; "they glitter." Mathilde saw as well that Julien had beautiful eyes, and "nervousness made them shine, now hesitatingly, now radiantly when he had given a good answer". This is prophetic of fatality of the love between Julien and Mathilde, and so much in contrast with Julien's first meeting Mme de Renal: she saw his "pale face" with "signs of recent tears", "so fair a complexion"; they were standing "very close together", while Julien found her with "such a dazzling complexion". At that moment the reader has "the first discreet hint" "of the skin-to-skin closeness" Julien and Mme de Renal will attain,³ the gentle eyes they saw in each other later witness their passionate, genuine, far more innocent love. Stendhal himself claims that Mme de Renal represents "natural love", true love, love of the heart, while Mathilde de la Mole represents "love of the head"⁴. But it's not so simple at all as to the relationship between Julien and this *fabulous* Mathilde.

1. LOVERS

Mathilde, the marquis's daughter, an aristocratic girl of nineteen, is herself quite extraordinary: beautiful, witty, spoiled, wildly imaginative; her pride "knows no bounds"; so arrogant that she gets bored with her own position and circle, so arrogant that if he is only "a common sort of person", her window will be right "hermetically shut". Now she finds the newly arrived Julien, her father's secretary only, son of a carpenter from Verrieres, yet with "fresh ideas", "unquestionable superiority" in Horace; he, later, when learning the art of hypocrisy of Paris high society, turning into a dandy, behaves with "exemplary coldness" towards her. Mathilde could not but recognize that he's "a wise man", "like a philosopher". She finally discovers "that Sorel is quite out of ordinary". And at that time she's proclaiming: "I want to see a real man!" She's hunting for her Hero.

As Stendhal says, it's this young girl's misfortune to own "a sharper intellect" than the gentlemen in the salons. Her Romantic self is obsessed forever with a heroic dream, a dream in which her lover, her master and God, her hero comes to her, to conquer her, and dominate her. So she wonders: "could Julien be a Danton?" And she sees Julien has "something of the look" her father, the Marquis de la Mole adopts when he does "such a good imitation" of Napoleon. And Julien, the monster of ambition, is himself a *hidden* Napoleon! He contains "at the bottom of his character something frightening", which leaves the Marquis de la Mole wondering; also quite baffled by the enigmas of Julien's character, M. de la Mole at least arrives to the conclusion: "he can not stand contempt...he cannot stand contempt at any price."

To Julien, ambition is the "motor of his rise",⁵ and it is the source of abundance where his pride and

² All the quotations hereafter of the primary text are from *Stendhal, The Red and the Black*, edited and translated by Catherine Slater, published by Oxford University Press, in 1991.

³ Alter, Robert (in collaboration with Carol Cosman). *Stendhal: A Biography*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1979. p.193.

⁴ Adams, Robert M.. (1959). *Stendhal: Notes on a Novelist*, London: The Merlin Press, p.42.

⁵ Haig, Stirling, (1989). *Stendhal: The Red and the Black*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge, p.56.

energy derive. Energy, the heroic essence, is clearly prized in the novel's value system, especially valued by Mathilde, for she lives in Paris without vitality, in the bloodless nineteenth century, in such contrast with the remote history where she takes her model. Julien has a "black ambition" and this ambition energizes him, makes him prey to moments of enthusiasm. Yet in eyes of Mathilde, he represents power: Julien appears different, sometimes a little strangely cruel towards Mathilde, and all the way naturally or otherwise artificially indifferent, cold, which conforms to what Mathilde is seeking in a real man with superiority. Especially a real man who appears in the course of such heroic act as if a religious cult in her ideal. Her ancestor, Boniface de la Mole, had had the honor of having his head cut off, in retribution for loving a queen; she is enamored of the grandeur of this bloody *cult* on a guillotine, the cult of the religion of love. She takes Julien's shooting Mme de Renal as "a noble act of revenge", and sees "a lofty heart" beating inside his uncommon chest. She sees the same grandeur of Julien when he shows himself "capable of an equally distinguished destiny."⁶ Her noble ancestor, Boniface de la Mole, now seems to her to have been "resurrected" in this young peasant boy, "only more heroic." So she finally gets a man at hand worthy of being made her God; "she will enthrone him as supreme value and reality: she will humble herself to nothingness before him. Love becomes for her a religion."⁷

In fact, though she is "so proud a monster" in terms of Julien, for she's a woman, she is even moved for being ignored as Other: Julien's indifference and scorn gets her no power to forget him though she's shocked for meaning nothing to this young man. This unpredictable Mathilde, as in Beauvoir's theory, she is just a woman who's looking for a man who represents male superiority. A man who deserves to dominate her, a hero. But not a single gentleman of high rank in her father's drawing room can meet this expectation of her. When Julien seizes a sword from the wall in a fury to kill her, Mathilde, "happy at such novel sensation", which right conforms to her wild fantasy of an ancient hero, watches "in amazement", much delighted that she's "on the verge of being killed by her lover", and that moment "her mind is being taken right back into the most heroic moments in the century of Charles IX and Henry III".

Thanks to her mad imagination and her aspiration for a real man, which is typical of a woman, and her "idiosyncrasy", she'd love to "relapse into some form of weakness for him"; she wonders: "this time round he would indeed believe himself my lord and master." She seems in desperate desire for a man to manipulate her: Julien accuses her of "letting a so-called Mr. De Luz take a flower from her hand", which is an invented story, and she's sure of its ridiculousness, yet she apologizes for it, hardly with reluctance. She likes to be his slave. And, if the lover is not tyrannical enough, she may even love to "educate" him to be. The narrator tells that "she was actually about to *make* him her lover, perhaps even her lord and master." Indeed, he can be made one: when Julien confirms Mathilde's love with her letter in his hand, he's intoxicated with a feeling of "his own power". "He was a God." He did feel like that.

2. PARTNERS

Their love story is rather bookish affair which begins appropriately in the library. Both Julien and Mathilde are the two great readers in *The Red and the Black*. He is one "literary creation" "whose folly or perversity must be blamed on an abuse of literacy"; his father damns this "book worm"; addiction to reading has turned his brain or corrupted his morals⁸, spoiled his accurate comprehension of the world and justification of himself. Reading fascinates him with a far-away world of imagination, thus his deepest impulse is to follow "a private dream"⁹, one of ambition, and he does wallow in the world of imagination and ambition. As for Mathilde, this arrogant noble young girl has been in hot imaginary pursuit of love, and with Julien, her love has "ripened in a library, nourished on the chronicles of

⁶ Adams, Robert M.. (1959). *Stendhal: Notes on a Novelist*, London: The Merlin Press, p.42.

⁷ Beauvoir, Simone de.(1997). *The Second Sex* (ed. & trans. H. M. Parshley). London: Vintage, p.653.

⁸ F.W.J. Hemmings, (1969). The Dreamer, pp.521-38. (Adams, Robert M. Trans & ed), *Red and Black: A New Translation, Backgrounds, and Sources, Criticism*. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, p.521.

⁹ Adams, Robert M..(1959). *Stendhal: Notes on a Novelist*. London: The Merlin Press, p.222.

Brantome and Aubigne and the novels of Rousseau and Prevost¹⁰. They come to love, in a way in accordance to their fancy.

They both are dreamers. Julien and Mathilde, wandering in their dreamlands, are entirely preoccupied with what has been invented by their fantasy, and so proud of this. Only one can understand the other in case that they are two *estrangers* in the nineteenth-century society, far beyond their own realization. There's only spontaneous affinity: it is only Julien who recognizes Mathilde's boredom with her life. He sees this "watchful boredom" in her most beautiful eyes at the first sight of this girl; he tells Father Pirard that he sees "Mlle de la Mole herself yawning" when dining "with Her Ladyship". And it is Mathilde who overhears this who sighs: "There's a man who wasn't born on his knees!" Julien finds "nothing at all to say" to Parisian dolls but "Mlle de la Mole was an exception." He finds her learned and even sound in ideas. Julien's qualities are also recognized by Mathilde. Mathilde, who cannot find one the same resenting towards life as she herself, so until she finds the uncommon trait in Julien, she dwells in her private world of reading in exploit of her sixteenth-century ancestors, of the past heroism. She is, as well as Julien, desperately bored with and out of place in the society. "[T]hey are bound to one another in the innermost depths of being" exactly.¹¹

Julien and Mathilde both are committing self-invention, each according to their own borrowed model. Mathilde's was in the remote past, the queen of Navarre, Marguerite, the mistress of one of her ancestors, while Julien's his Napoleon. They are two of a piece. So they are in fact comrades, partners in imaginary struggle for fascination. They hence, initially, have their secret sympathy¹². Mathilde's bookishness projects herself and Julien into heroic models, appropriating the 'grandeur and audacity' of another age. For the sake of her pride taken in her lineage, the favorite roles are traced out in the family chronicles: the love of Marguerite de Valois for the young La Mole. And for Mathilde, for her enthusiastic heroic dream, she needs to locate obstacles to surpass: Julien's lack of birth becomes "a desirable barrier".¹³ Her heroic dream also conforms to the Revolution, so she even casts Julien as Danton and herself as Mme Roland.

Julien's passion for heroism began from his earliest youth: he has been overwhelmed with the exciting ideas of the Revolution and of Rousseau, for the grandeur of the Napoleonic period. His low birth can do far from endowing him with great honors, so he has felt "nothing but loathing and scorn for the piddling hypocrisy and the petty lying corruption of the classes in power after Napoleon's fall"¹⁴. He is of too much vigorous imagination and ambition of being a hero conquering ennui of the world, ambition of command of power, he will never be satisfied with a mediocre life within the bourgeoisie, as his friend Fouque proposes to him. The same is true of Mathilde: when she was only twelve, she revealed her fascination with Queen Marguerite, who requested the head of her lover, at midnight went off to bury it herself at the foot of Montmartre.

Julien is of such "Machiavellianism" that he devotes himself to hypocrisy, simply because he has seen that it is the ruling art of the high society and it imposes on credulous people by "concealing all the worst weaknesses behind its smiling mask"¹⁵. Mathilde resorts to a little hypocrisy as well: when with Julien she utters ideas quite different from what she gives in the salons. But in no sense are they hypocrites. Julien, as a man, he is of great impulse and sensitivity: with both he becomes extremely intelligent to the dangers and expenses of being frank and honest in social life. So he works his will up to be diplomatic and skilled, he makes attempts to "repress all his impulses of loyalty, to throttle all the bold,

¹⁰ Martin Turnell. (1962). *Le Rouge et le noir*, pp.15-33. (Brombret, Victor, ed). *Stendhal: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentic-Hall, 1962. p.23.

¹¹ Martin Turnell.(1962). *Le Rouge et le noir*, pp.15-33. (Brombret, Victor, ed). *Stendhal: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentic-Hall, p.31.

¹² F.W.J. Hemmings. (1969). *The Dreamer*. (Adams, Robert M. Trans & ed). *Red and Black: A New Translation, Backgrounds, and Sources, Criticism*. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, p.525.

¹³ Haig, Stirling. (1989). *Stendhal: The Red and the Black*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge, p.80.

¹⁴ Erich Auerbach. (1969). In *The Hotel de la Mole*, pp.435-46. (Adams, Robert M. Trans & ed). *Red and Black: A New Translation, Backgrounds, and Sources, Criticism*. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, p.437.

¹⁵ Henri Martineau.(1969). *The Ending of the Red and Black*, pp.446-53. (Adams, Robert M. Trans & ed). *Red and Black: A New Translation, Backgrounds, and Sources, Criticism*. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, p.448.

wild impulses of youth which spring up so easily within him each time he forgets to stand guard over himself.”¹⁶ This kind of art to Mathilde is just the art of every woman, the art of trying to remain feminine, to be *lovable*.

For Julien and Mathilde are both *estrangers*, or ‘outsiders’, in the society of their time, they hate “the muddle and lack of vitality of this society”¹⁷, it is their duty to be singular, to keep themselves away from the people. In their sense “singular” is, for them the two Romantic individualists, it is “the outward sign of an indispensable uniqueness, an unsocialised independence.”¹⁸ So they both get themselves great tasks of performing duties. Julien’s self-fulfilling “duties” are: to grasp Mme. de Renal’s hand, to mount a ladder to Mathilde’s window by moonlight, and when he has achieved that, he is satisfied with himself that “he had done his duty, and a heroic one”. Also the “iron hand of duty” serves him well” during his combat with Mathilde.¹⁹ He maintains his inauthentic self when facing her and all the way sees it his solemn duty. Mathilde herself is prone to just “as chimerical and imperious a sense of duty” as Julien. Even her eyes keep “mindful of the duty to appear imposing”.

And they both get their duty well performed to satisfy their heroic dream, something, to them, of a religion. They make it sacred. Julien’s devotion to Napoleon bears “all the marks of a private cult”, such that it may be “his substitute for religion”, a “secret cult”.²⁰ Mathilde’s fantasy of her ardent and romantic temperament grants her a kind of heroism of love. Love for woman is originally holy enterprise, and Mathilde gets it even more highly up-lifted. Some of the parallels between fantasy and reality in her story with Julien are of course arranged by Mathilde herself: she sends Julien to Villequier, the one estate which the marquis de la Mole has inherited from Boniface and she buries her lover’s head.²¹ She has her belief in providence. She does make the burial of her lover’s head a cult: twenty priests celebrate a Mass on the summit of one of the highest mountains in the Jura in the little grotto magnificently lit by candles, while Mathilde appears in the midst of all the mountains inhabitants at the strikingly strange ceremony, wearing long mourning attire, having several thousand five-franc coins flung to the crowd, and she buries the head with her own hands.

It is broadly viewed that Mathilde represents inauthenticity, in contrast to Mme de Renal, who is “always authentically herself”,²² who perpetually represents instead naturalness, innocent of her charm, naïve in love, sin, who only follows her heart, gives herself up to her passion intuitively, who contrasts to Mathilde, and lets her appear so “histrionic”²³ in eyes of Julien. And the Julien who used to play hypocrisy who has been skillful at the art of calculation now calls Mathilde “mad woman”. But isn’t he who owns the same Romantic self as Mathilde’s all the time? His fantasy of heroism follows the route of heroic grandeur, sublimity in history, while Mathilde is performing the grandeur and beauty of *love*. Her self-formation of aesthetics can be called *poetically true*. Are women, exactly “excluded from practicing an aesthetic of self”, “the aesthetics of existence”?²⁴ And never could their esteem of self prevail their passionate emotions?

Julien and Mathilde, since they are *estrangers*, and the *estrangers* have no recognized mode of feeling, they of course turn to books and imagination for a model. They are essentially individuals at odds with society, so they are left alone to “work out their destiny” in chaotic society, and they are on the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Martin Turnell. (1962). *Le Rouge et le noir*, pp.15-33. (Brombret, Victor. ed). *Stendhal: A Collection of Critical Essays, Englewood Cliffs*. N.J.: Prentice-Hall, p.19.

¹⁸ Haig, Stirling, (1989). *Stendhal: The Red and the Black*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge, p.67.

¹⁹ Ibid. p.63.

²⁰ F.W.J. Hemmings, “The Dreamer”, pp.521-38, in Adams, Robert M. (trans & ed), *Red and Black: A New Translation, Backgrounds, and Sources, Criticism*, New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1969. p.523.

²¹ Pearson, Roger, *Stendhal’s Vision: A Novelist and His Reader*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988. p.129.

²² F.W.J. Hemmings, “The Dreamer”, pp.521-38, in Adams, Robert M. (trans & ed), *Red and Black: A New Translation, Backgrounds, and Sources, Criticism*, New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1969. p.525.

²³ Alter, Robert (in collaboration with Carol Cosman), *Stendhal: A Biography*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1979. p.193.

²⁴ Diprose, Rosalyn, *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference*, London and New York, Routledge, 1994. pp.32-34.

support of their own “immense force of character and their own genius”, and that “genius is absolute and inexplicable”.²⁵ Rather tragically, though they are allies against society and are united by “a bond which goes far deeper than their antipathy”,²⁶ though Mathilde acts as the partner of Julien’s struggle to be singular in the society, she finally loses his understanding, sympathy, and appreciation, loses him as comrade as lover.

3. ENEMIES

For Julien, his love affair first with Mme de Renal then with Mathilde is at least in the beginnings a class war. It is in one evening, when Julien happens to touch Mme de Renal’s hand in the dark, that hand withdraws, that Julien decides that the hand should not withdraw again when he touches it the next time, lest he suffer “a feeling of inferiority”. The next morning he observes Mme de Renal with a strange look “as if she were an enemy he [is] going to have to fight.” The first night of love leaves him feel “like a soldier.” He loves Mathilde “as much for reasons of class hatred as for genuine tenderness”.²⁷

And it has been that the love is rather a combat, a race of their pride. The inconstant Mathilde first yields to this mere secretary of her father’s, then immediately rebels, resents the power she has let him obtain over her, then once again plunges into his arms, then suspects this man’s worthiness. Later again she is so blessed in the sensation of becoming Julien’s “slave” on seeing his amazingly heroic impulse to kill her with a sword seized from the wall, then she resents him again, and finally, through Julien’s strategy of arousing her jealousy, of demonstrating an inauthentic indifference and pride towards her, she makes a decisive surrender on her knees. But nobody gets so optimistic as to believe this is the final victory of poor Julien.

Pride is the ruling passion of Mathilde, and Julien can get power over her only by affecting an “even icier counter-pride and indifference”.²⁸ For Mathilde, from high class, of social superiority, values her aristocratic birth to such an extent, she, Mathilde de la Mole, loves Julien, or rather, must be made to love him, artificially and unnaturally. She is a mistress who must be “perused, won, lost, recaptured, disputed—a tempting and perilous bit of quicksilver, lawless.²⁹ And Mathilde is perhaps “too preoccupied with the idea of love and with conforming to her literary and historical models for us to grand great depth to her emotions.”³⁰ “Mme de Renal used to find reasons for doing what her heart dictates: this girl from high society only lets her heart be moved when she has proved to herself with sound reasons that it ought to be moved.”

It is far from accurate to say that Julien and Mathilde are “practically never both in the same mood in the same day” and this is the source of their clash, but it is exactly correct to say that their love, so painful for Julien especially, is “a psychological obstacle race in which they take it in turns to be pursuer and pursued, executioner and victim.”³¹ Mathilde will despise the young peasant Julien, the son of a carpenter from Verrieres, whenever she suspects he owns maybe merely “exterior superiority”; and she’ll be cruel if he commits some “weakness”, for example, of asking her, “in the most tender and heartfelt of tones: ‘So, you don’t love me anymore?’” Her cruel answer could be: “I’m appalled at having given myself to the first man who came along.” The art of warfare of this woman warrior is: if the male counterpart shows any hint of fragility, which always is categorized as kind of femininity, she will

²⁵ Martin Turnell, “Le Rouge et le noir”, pp.15-33, in Brombret, Victor (ed), *Stendhal: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962. p.19.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p.25.

²⁷ Henri Martineau. (1969). *The Ending of the Red and Black*, pp.446-53. (Adams, Robert M. Trans & ed). *Red and Black: A New Translation, Backgrounds, and Sources, Criticism*. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company,p.450.

²⁸ Adams, Robert M..(1959). *Stendhal: Notes on a Novelist*. London: The Merlin Press, p.41.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p.40.

³⁰ Haig, Stirling. (1989). *Stendhal: The Red and the Black*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge, p.79.

³¹ Martin Turnell. (1962). *Le Rouge et le noir*, pp.15-33. (Brombret, Victor, ed). *Stendhal: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, p.31.

humiliate and destruct any pride left in him. But she wept, with rage, for she feels herself insulted by loving and having been loved by such an inferior weak man.

So even sometimes Julien, weak and prone to collapse, on the verge of “falling at her feet”, “destroyed by love and misery”, on the verge of “crying: Mercy!” he can do exactly nothing but stay indifferent, for to the sensitive and alert Mathilde, who keeps ruthlessly on watch of his shameful hidden “softness”, his sufferings will be “intense enjoyment” for her. She is to torture a man falling prey to his weakness. He, since once was different, singular, is energy, power in eyes of Mathilde, he must forever be. Thus this attraction-and-repulsion is not as much a theatrical episode as the confliction formula in this sex war. Stendhal’s interpretation of this “fundamental antipathy” is: it is “inspired by a desire to dominate the opposite sex.” But Mathilde does love to be dominated. Her extravagant nature of a woman enjoys “savage delight” in her experience in humiliating Julien’s pride, because she’s to beat him always at “the vulnerable spot”.³²

Julien is a man who alters between choices of “betraying his soul through hardness and betraying his spirit through softness”,³³ he frequently falls prey to his weakness, especially with his wild imaginations “always darting to extremes”. There are times when his “[i]magination raises him...to an unwarranted pitch of optimism, but it may also plunge him into equally unfounded despair”, as when, thinking Mathilde’s reaction against him to be due to “his unworthiness”, “he lapses into a paroxysm of self-loathing”.³⁴ So even he is guarding himself from making his weakness exposed to Mathilde, as he felt once free to do when in face of Mme de Renal, Mathilde is sensitive to that. Because she who aspires for male superiority, for a hero, she hates to sense any trace of this. She cautiously watches over for it, all the time ready to give ruthless destructive humiliation.

4. A MAN IN A WOMAN

In fact Mathilde herself is such a wonder: the man she loves sees her “constantly as a queen”; she has “a mind of her own”; she “has enough for all [her family] put together, and she rules them all.” And one of the gentlemen asks: “who can be worthy of this sublime Mathilde?” Yet she’s monster! First and foremost, for women are supposed to rely on emotions far more than on reason, women should be naïve, innocent, pure; the “cultivated and intelligent women are monsters”³⁵. So fatally that “[h]er intelligence is malign”.³⁶ Just as the Chinese old saying goes: 女子无才便是德: woman’s owning no intellect is her virtue. Thus she’s “trapped in a woman’s body...that society victimized [her] by giving her nothing to do.”³⁷ To be fair, as for her strangeness, it is never a matter of monster, but of “a character monstrously alive, much more alive than those of flesh and bone that we meet every day and whose hand we shake”,³⁸ because she’s so empowered with her knowledge, imagination, her intelligence, with extreme passion all these traits endow her.

One is a text to the other. But neither of them can read the other as a text effectively. Especially Mathilde is to Julien a sphinx: a woman-faced lion. Julien succeeds with Mme de Renal because of his “tearful timidity”, and with Mathilde, his “indifference”,³⁹ his inauthentic coldness. “Mme de

³² Martin Turnell. (1962). *Le Rouge et le noir*, pp.15-33. (Brombret, Victor, ed). *Stendhal: A Collection of Critical Essays, Englewood Cliffs*. N.J.: Prentice-Hall, p.25. My italics.

³³ F.W.J. Hemmings. (1969). “The Dreamer”, pp.521-38. (Adams, Robert M., Trans & ed). *Red and Black: A New Translation, Backgrounds, and Sources, Criticism*. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, p.538.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p.527.

³⁵ Beauvoir, Simone de. (1997). *The Second Sex* (H. M. Parshley, ed. & trans.). London: Vintage, p.269.

³⁶ Bloom, Harold. (1994). *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. London: Macmillan, p.351.

³⁷ *Ibid*.

³⁸ G. Tomasi di Lampedusa. (1969). Notes on Stendhal: Red and Black. pp.5549-56. (Robert M., Trans & ed). *Red and Black: A New Translation, Backgrounds, and Sources, Criticis*. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, p.555.

³⁹ Pearson, Roger.(1988). *Stendhal's Vision: A Novelist and His Reader*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.128.

Renal...gave him something to admire and not to fear”,⁴⁰ but Mathilde is such a woman to be admired, to be feared. Mathilde is first typical of a woman: she’s unpredictable, changeable, whimsical, forever of her feminine inconsistency: “she may be Evil at one moment, only to be good at the next.”⁴¹ Also, Mathilde is a secret radical with most “perverse and fascinating traits”, with “her passionate, not to say morbid, interest in decapitation”⁴². She’s too severely obsessed with the story of her ancestor having his head cut off for loving a queen, she believes that’s what *great love* should just be, and she’d like one like that. As well, for her, “the love of head” means not only love of her lover’s head, but she loves the head of her own: Julien sees she’s much learned, intoxicated with her learning; and she is a woman of such reason, even as to issue of love: if she feels she loves Julien, it is that “she ha[s] decided that she [i]s in love”; she’s most determined, headstrong, intensely willed. Sometimes Mathilde desires and deserves to be “a poet of sublimity”⁴³, yet sublimity is far foreign to femininity. Julien decides this girl “would never be a woman in his eyes” on first seeing her, perhaps mainly for the sake of the “great emotional coldness” in her eyes. And he thinks her “hard, haughty, and, almost masculine.” He tells Mathilde: “heaven owed it to the glory of your race to have you born a man.”

Although born as a woman, Mathilde tends to signal transcendence from the very beginning: Julien finds her eyes with “an expression...mindful of the duty to appear imposing.” She knows well in such civilization as hers, it is “man originally represented transcendence”, yet she desires a “struggle for recognition”⁴⁴ as well. Mathilde is so extraordinary as to claim: “I shan’t go through life unnoticed.” She owns great passion for life and her passionate desire to be makes it unsatisfactory to live without doing anything. She’ll never be satisfied with remaining in immanence. Transcendence means to do, to act. Anyway, the “fundamental human project is surpassing(transcendence), not preservation(immanence)”⁴⁵;

She has strong willpower. She dare do anything she’d like. The ladder that Mathilde de la Mole sets against her window is in “tangible form, her proud imprudence, her taste for the extraordinary, her provocative courage”⁴⁶. Stendhal creates her to ensure that “courage” is “the foremost quality in her character.” So willful a young girl seems not one of enough femininity; she’s an “active soul”, she “dreads ennui more than death”,⁴⁷ she struggles for transcendence. In her mind, “personal distinction was all the fashion.” “What a colorless existence I shall lead with a person like Cruisenois!” She fears so much to live without style. As in her position and society she has nowhere to release her great passion, she resorts to the redemptive enterprise of love. It is when she decides she’s in love with Julien, she stops “feeling bored”. And, every day “she congratulates herself on her decision to indulge in a grand passion.”

Stendhal cites from Merimee: “I admire her beauty, but I live in fear of her mind.” This is what is in the mind of Julien, for he wins over her only when keeping her at arm’s length. He cannot own her in sense of authenticity. Having played Prince Korasov’s trick successfully and won Mathilde back, Julien compared himself to “a general who has *half* won a great battle”, and he concludes “the enemy will only obey me so far as I frighten her”; only then, will Mathilde’s “inner feminine virtue” return to her, will she turn back into a woman, will Julien resumes “all the dignity befitting a man.” Throughout this sex warfare Julien seems to be living “at close quarters with a tiger”, so he must have “his pistol loaded on his table”. He finally, quite naturally, gets tired of that.

⁴⁰ Alain. (1969). *Love in Stendhal: Love in Voltaire*, pp.556-8. (Adams, Robert M., Trans & ed). *Red and Black: A New Translation, Backgrounds, and Sources, Criticism*. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, p.557.

⁴¹ Lundgren-Gothlin, Eva. (1996). *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex*. (Linda Schenck, Trans.). London, p.176.

⁴² Adams, Robert M..(1959). *Stendhal: Notes on a Novelist*. London: The Merlin Press, p.42.

⁴³ Alain. (1969). *Love in Stendhal: Love in Voltaire*, pp.556-8. (Adams, Robert M., Trans & ed). *Red and Black: A New Translation, Backgrounds, and Sources, Criticism*. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, p.557.

⁴⁴ Lundgren-Gothlin, Eva. (1996). *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex*. (Linda Schenck, Trans.) London, p.234.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p.234.

⁴⁶ Beauvoir, Simone de. (1997). *The Second Sex* (H. M. Parshley, ed. & trans.). London: Vintage, P.272.

⁴⁷ Ibid. pp.271-2.

5. FATALITY

She can be called the “opposition between ‘masculine’ clitoral activity and ‘feminine’ vaginal passivity”.⁴⁸ She’s unique that Stendhal could depict her “tangible soul” as the “line of the cliffs as seen when approaching Arbois”.⁴⁹ There is, all in all, a man in this mythical Mathilde. It’s not that “Stendhal has projected himself” into her, but that “he regards her as being, like man, a transcendent”,⁵⁰ for Stendhal is “a man who lives among women of flesh and blood”⁵¹; he understands woman as “a human being”.⁵² In Judith Butler’s logic, “[i]f it is possible to speak of a ‘man’ with a masculine attribute and to understand that attribute as a happy but accidental feature of that man, then it is also possible to speak of a ‘man’ with a feminine attribute”—as we see femininity as well as masculinity in Julien—the human being’s gender is “performative”.⁵³ Gender means not free sets of floating human psychological attributes, it is certain patterns of union of them. According to different combination of personality attributes, the human being should be divided into seven “categories”(not “sexes”, not “genders”): man(purely 100% masculinity), woman(purely 100% femininity), woman man, man woman, man+woman man, man+woman woman, and, middle-sex, or non-sex—certainly we sometimes meet somebody not sexily appealing at all to neither sex. So, Mathilde belongs to the group of man+woman woman, with 100% masculinity in among her 100% femininity, with a psychological sex mixed both masculinity and femininity in her biological female sex. But this is, unfortunately, just the formula of female fatality to her as a woman, for being like that she becomes a dilemma typical of Her as Other as an Object meanwhile so self-consciously struggling for subjectivity, for transcendence. Mathilde loses in the war, for she fights, but as a woman, she fights to seek to realize her dream of transcendence, dream of her own heroism in love, in her lover, a man.

Julien first makes himself tell Mathilde openly what he’s thinking when he is tired of despising himself; and at the end of the story he shuts his doors to her for, “to tell the truth, he was getting tired of heroics.” His ambition has been used up, his strength which used to defeat and control Mathilde is exhausted. His heroic dream, his dream of transcendence now comes to the end. He hates to see Mathilde’s being active, energized as usual, or even more vital, for he has got fed up with his own. He calls her a “mad woman.” He no more believes in heroism. His formerly forever so intensely “extended personality” cannot go beyond the point at this moment, “it can no longer carry on”,⁵⁴ there seems nothing left for it in life. “His efforts at role playing had ended up draining all strength from this soul.”⁵⁵

Julien used to let Mathilde shape his self, for he would act according to her tastes, but now Julien decides to shape his own destiny. Or, we would rather admit that he cannot face the prospect of life together with Mathilde, for he never succeeds with her with his authentic self, he cannot be himself, he thus has never really achieved a victory. Now he turns to the more restful figure of Mme de Renal. She is of course the “mother-image” and the prison itself serves as “a symbol of the womb to which he wishes to return”. Julien has no “petty pride” when in the presence of Mme de Renal, and he could recount “all his moments of weakness when facing death” to her. “She showed him all her kindness and charm”. So, in fact, it is, deliberately, he chooses to finish himself rather than let his rival do it: he “takes good care” that Mathilde’s efforts to save him fail. He has withdrawn from the battlefield where he is doomed to lose yet his enemy is still there showing off her energy! In a sense Julien does not give up at all, he follows a

⁴⁸ Irigaray, Luce. (1985). *This Sex Which is not One*. (Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burk, Trans.). Ithaca/New York, Cornell University Press, p.248.

⁴⁹ Beauvoir, Simone de,(1997). *The Second Sex* (H. M. Parshley, ed. & trans). London: Vintage, p.268.

⁵⁰ Ibid. pp.277-9.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.268.

⁵² Ibid. p.278.

⁵³ Butler, Judith,(1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, pp.24-5.

⁵⁴ Martin Turnell. (1962). *Le Rouge et le noir*, pp.15-33. (Brombret, Victor, ed). *Stendhal: A Collection of Critical Essays, Englewood Cliffs*. N.J.: Prentice-Hall, p.32.

⁵⁵ Alter, Robert (in collaboration with Carol Cosman). *Stendhal: A Biography*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1979. p.202.

different route: here Julien's "psychology of heroism" is to "stick to his ideals, to go heroically to his death."⁵⁶

He once genuinely loved Mathilde: he "cursed" her character, yet "he loved her infinitely more for it"; he always felt he's "holding a queen in his arms". She has this "appalling character"! Thus our hero Julien, comes finally to the point of wit that "the only genuine happiness, must be attained in complete isolation from the world, at the door of death."⁵⁷ He willingly loses in the war of ambition, and of rivalry. Mathilde loses the war as well, for she fights for love, yet Julien deserts her morally. Women should preserve as laboriously as they could endeavor their "authenticity", their naturalness, their naivety, their generosity of love and offer, their instinct, as Mme de Renal. Never could woman's calculation be liked by man. He senses Mathilde's struggle for transcendence so powerful as if of a real man, he thus sees as if a devil in an angel, or the serpent in the Eve. She finally got only his head. But not love.

What finally raises Mme de Renal above Mathilde is "not the Oedipal satisfactions of maternal love she affords, but rather her aptitude for solitude and privacy. She and Julien are deeply joined in this predilection... 'Elective affinities'",⁵⁸ when Julien loves to withdraw from his all battling spirits. As Derrida reveals, "all great noise causes one to place happiness in the calm and in the distance; the enchantment and the most powerful effect of woman...is...an effect at a distance".⁵⁹ The secret is that woman's oppressed ambition in her immanence seeks to release in a man, but a man's defeated transcendence seeks into the quietness of a woman for consolation. It is proved that "women are denied their individuality", and when the "difference" of sex is made dominant, "[p]ersonal distinction is silenced."⁶⁰ So, as far as Mathilde is concerned, this love story is the more passionate and extremely tragic love intrigue. Because she's a woman, and for woman, "to be feminine is to appear weak, futile, docile,"⁶¹ so her fault lies in the fact that *she does something, and she feels no guilt for it.*

"Every time you discuss Stendhal, you are left with the impression that you have said nothing at all, that he has eluded you, and that everything remains to be said."⁶² Mathilde loses the sex war, only because she is a woman. The fate is a riddle without solution. This is, I guess, why "Stendhal regretted Mathilde for years, but it was a regret that perfumed his life without destroying it". Beauvoir utters the very truth of this sex war happening every day: "woman, in assuming her role as the inessential, accepting a total dependence, creates a hell for herself."⁶³

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⁵⁷ Alter, Robert (in collaboration with Carol Cosman). (1979). *Stendhal: A Biography*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, p.202.

⁵⁸ Haig, Stirling.(1989). *Stendhal: The Red and the Black*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge, p.83

⁵⁹ Derrida, Jacques. (1978). *Spurs*, (Barbara Harlow, Trans). London/Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.45-47.

⁶⁰ Eisenstein, Zillah R., (1988). *The Female Body and The Law*. London: University of California Press, p.90.

⁶¹ Beauvoir, Simone de. (1997). *The Second Sex* (H. M. Parshley, ed. & trans), London: Vintage, p.359.

⁶² F.W.J. Hemmings, (1969). *The Dreamer*. (Adams, Robert M. Trans & ed). *Red and Black: A New Translation, Backgrounds, and Sources, Criticism*. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, p.538.

⁶³ Beauvoir, Simone de. (1997). *The Second Sex* (H. M. Parshley, ed. & trans.), London: Vintage, p.664.

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Editor: John Healy