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(Un) Dressing Renée: Clothing and Identity in Zola's novel *La Curée*

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Abstract

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This thesis analyzes themes of female sexuality and identity in relation to clothing in Emile Zola's *La Curée*. The novel's protagonist, Renée Saccard, adorns her body with clothing that alters her sense of her own identity and how others perceive her. Her dress allows Renée to negotiate her surroundings in new and unconventional ways, through undressing, transvestive representation, and as a visual sign of her incestuous relations with her stepson Maxime Saccard. Yet, using dress to identify herself also allows the men in her life, namely her tailor, Worms, her husband Aristide Saccard, and Maxime, to manipulate her. This project traces how Renée's use of dress leads to her own downfall, which she realizes in her *prise de conscience* at the end of the novel.

This thesis also explores Zola's naturalist approach, which permits us to view Renée as a reflection of Second Empire French society. It delves into Renée's *vie à outrance*, as a window into her inner-identity. Beneath all of the jewels and layers of fabric that ornament her body, Renée is naked, searching for something to fill the *vide* in her life. Finally, as these themes are evinced through dress, this project considers the role of sight and visual perception in making and unmaking Renée's identity.

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Introduction:

Cette étrange femme de soie rose: Clothing as a Literary Device

When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for things! One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive.¹

The second novel in Emile Zola's twenty-volume series, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, La Curée depicts the extravagance and excess that characterized the *nouveau riche* class of Second Empire Parisian society. Among its myriad effects, this emerging social class radically altered conceptions of female sexuality, particularly in relation to clothing. These changes were due in part to the advent of the department store, which dramatically diversified and increased the availability of women's clothing. The shiny windows of such retail giants as Le Bon Marché and La Samaritaine, which opened in the mid 19th century, lured the masses. The eleventh novel in the series, Au Bonheur des Dames, deals primarily with the rise of the department store: this perplexing new world of women centered upon the cult of female beauty and the female body, materialized by fashion. As Zola demonstrates in this novel, the department store was where women were encouraged to find their lives' meaning in conspicuous consumption. Thus, the department store played a significant part in the evolution both of contemporary society and of women's place in that society.

In La Curée the theme of commodification of women through the rise of mass fashion comes to the fore through the fixation of the main character, Renée Saccard, on

¹ Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady (New York: Penguin Books, 1881) 179.

clothing and self-presentation. Part of Renée's fascination with dress is that it provides her with a tool to negotiate her surroundings in a predominantly masculine world. It allows her to test social limits by transcending her natural physical constitution. Joanne B. Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins have discussed this usage. "[Clothing] can also be an alterant as it serves...as a microenvironment and an interface between body and the macroenvironment."² At surface level, Renée's identity is that of the resplendent and alluring wife of Aristide Saccard, the conniving speculator. An object of male desire and feminine envy, she exists as an icon of her husband's wealth and the lavish lifestyle of Second Empire high society. Renée internalizes the masculine assumptions about her proper social persona, at times becoming the agent of her own construction. Consequently, her identity becomes subsumed by material objects, to the point that her clothing becomes her means of self-identification. Due to this manipulation, Renée's sartorial buffer between "body" and "macroenvironment" completely subsumes her identity. La Curée explores the role of the woman in the normatively masculine culture of Second Empire society, a role which Renée both enacts and challenges throughout the course of the novel.

Further, this novel is situated in the naturalist movement of French literature. As one of the leaders of this literary current, Zola defines and expounds upon what constitutes a naturalist novel in Le Roman expérimental. He writes that a naturalist author is commissioned:

² Joanne B. Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, "Definition and Classification of Dress: Implications for Analysis of Gender Roles", Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts (Oxford: Berg, 1992) 26.

Pour montrer le fonctionnement du mécanisme de sa passion...Le problème est de savoir ce que telle passion, agissant dans tel milieu et dans telles circonstances, produira au point de vue de l'individu et de la société; et un roman expérimental...est simplement le procès-verbal de l'expérience...Au bout, il y a la connaissance de l'homme...dans son action individuelle et sociale.³ (Zola Le Roman expérimental, 5)

Thus, Zola views himself solely as an observer of his society, whose work is to analyze humans in their social and individual actions. Using this method, Zola argues, an author can depict his surroundings in the most meaningful and candid way to that society. He advances that it is not the function of the author to extrapolate from human experience, as it is rich enough as it is. Rather, the naturalist author, according to Zola, develops *une connaissance* of his social surroundings by studying the people that comprise it.

This technique entails a precise, quantitative procedure, similar to the scientific method. This is partially a reaction to the corresponding rise in scientific inquiry of the time.

Le roman expérimental est une conséquence de l'évolution scientifique du siècle; il continue et complète la physiologie, qui elle-même s'appuie sur la chimie et la physique; il substitue à l'étude de l'homme abstrait, l'étude de l'homme naturel, soumis aux lois physico-chimiques et déterminé par les influences du milieu; il est en un mot la littérature de notre âge scientifique, comme la littérature classique et romantique a correspondu à un âge de scolastique et de théologie. (Zola, Le Roman expérimental, 12-13)

³ Emile Zola, Le Roman expérimental (Paris: Livres & Ebooks, 1880) 11.

The ripple effect of this scientific approach can be seen in La Curée, as Zola repeatedly provides meticulous descriptions of Renée's clothing and surroundings, as if to provide a visual documentation of her character. Zola's portrayal of Renée's use of *la loupe*, to be discussed in this context, also suggests a scientific influence.

The naturalist novel portrays an individual as inextricably linked to his or her surroundings.

Dans l'étude d'une famille, d'un groupe d'êtres vivants, je crois que le milieu social a également une importance capitale. L'homme n'est pas seul, il vit dans une société, dans un milieu social, et dès lors pour nous, romanciers, ce milieu social modifie sans cesse les phénomènes. (Zola, Le Roman expérimental, 11)

This *milieu social* is central to the reader's understanding of Renée's relation to her environment. Renée's social status as a member of the nouveau riche class of Second Empire France defines her, dictating how she relates to everyone with whom she comes into contact. All members of society are interconnected « de telle sorte que, si un organe se pourrit, beaucoup d'autres sont atteints, et qu'une maladie très complexe se déclare. » (*Ibid.* 15) In La Curée, Zola uses the Saccard family as a mirror of what he views as the moral degeneration which characterizes this society.

Zola has defined the force that drives this societal deterioration, demonstrating how societal conditions have an indelible influence on human character.

[L]a Curée, c'est la plante malsaine poussée sur le fumier impérial, c'est l'inceste grandi dans le terreau des millions. J'ai voulu... montrer à quel effroyable écroulement on en arrive, lorsque les mœurs sont pourries et que les liens de famille n'existent plus. Ma Renée, c'est la Parisienne affolée, jetée au crime par le

luxe et la vie à outrance ; mon Maxime, c'est le produit d'une société épuisée, l'homme-femme, la chair inerte qui accepte les dernières infamies; mon Aristide, c'est le spéculateur né des bouleversements de Paris, l'enrichi impudent qui joue à la Bourse avec tout ce qui lui tombe sous la main, femmes, enfants, honneurs, pavés, conscience. Et j'ai essayé, avec ces trois monstruosité sociales, de donner une idée de l'effroyable borbier dans lequel la France se noyait.⁴

Thus, each character in La Curée embodies a different aspect of what Zola views as the general moral degeneration of society. Accordingly, I will analyze Renée's *crime*, particularly as it is expressed through clothing. I will demonstrate how Renée and Maxime each typify the *homme-femme* as they use clothing to create ambiguous gender identities. I will also discuss *la chair*, as it is exposed and linked to clothing, and its role in Renée's and Maxime's incest.

Additionally, I aim to discuss Renée's *vie à outrance* through analysis of her sartorial representation, as descriptions of clothing are a critical element of naturalist literature. Oswaldo Voysesst has analyzed this role.

Fashion in naturalist literature, as an expression of an attitude that responds to the influence of the environment, shapes the personality of the character and decides largely his destiny. Therefore, viewed from this angle, we must first examine the clothing the characters wear, own, and show as an entrance into their attitude towards life as well as a reflection of their inner life and their destiny. Secondly, characters are not portrayed simply in relation to things as signs or a token of their personality. It is also instructive to observe the characters' reactions in the

⁴ Zola, Emile. Letter to Louis Ulbach. 6 November 1871. *La Cloche* du 8 novembre, à la suite de l'interruption de la publication de la *Curée* en feuilleton.

presence of things. Thus, their reaction to clothing others wear, the ones they buy, the dresses they like, etc., will typify an environment and a concrete expression, since life, in the naturalist world, is dominated by things.⁵

Taking this approach towards the detailed descriptions of clothing in La Curée, I will use them as a point of analysis, given the premise that « Les vêtements sont le dehors qui explique l'intérieure. »⁶ I will discuss how Renée's "inner life" and "destiny" are manifest in her clothing choices.

Further, one effect of Renée's living in a world "dominated by things" is that she experiences a deep sense of emptiness which she seeks to fill through various measures throughout the novel. It is not surprising that Renée has trouble discerning a deeper meaning in her society. As Adam-Maillet has illustrated, Second Empire France was an extremely turbulent period of sweeping societal, cultural, and political change.

Ce que Renée arbore sur la scène mondaine, c'est la négation de la culture, l'impossibilité même de toute représentation, la mort du symbole, bref, le chaos, régime du Second Empire... Dans le tourbillon, la distinction s'efface entre tenue mondaine et costume du théâtre ; la confusion des normes esthétiques, morales, politiques s'instaure.⁷

⁵ Oswaldo Voysest, "Fashion and Characterization in Mercedes Cabelo's Blanco Sol and Emile Zola's *La Curée*: Tailored Differences", Excavatio: nouvelle revue Emile Zola et le naturalisme international, Vol. 10 (1997): 117.

⁶ Philippe Bonnefis, « L'innommable : Essai sur l'œuvre d'Emile Zola », Présences critiques. (Paris : Société d'enseignement supérieur, 1984) 23.

⁷ Maryse Adam-Maillet, "Renée, poupée dans *La Curée*", Les Cahiers Naturalistes, (1995; 41 (69)) 54.

Zola reflects this reality in La Curée by demonstrating the impact these changes had on fashion, conventional gender roles and morals, and familial relationships in his study of the Saccard family.

Given these points of departure, in the first section I will trace Renée's gradual process of undressing herself both literally and figuratively throughout the novel, as she gives way to the pressures of a consumerist society and squanders her fortune on the latest fashions. In the second section, I will discuss how Renée's and Maxime's sartorial representations call their sexual identity into question and cause them to oscillate between genders, testing the boundaries of their society. In the third section, I will discuss the relation between clothing and incest, and demonstrate how Renée's dress becomes more boldly imagined as the novel progresses. Lastly, I will discuss Renée's ultimate disillusionment with her surroundings and her *prise de conscience* that allows her to see her nakedness at the end of the novel.

Finally, a crucial element of the naturalist approach is that it does not strive to explain or justify the society it describes. « Il est bien entendu que je parle ici du comment des choses, et non du pourquoi. Pour un savant expérimentateur, l'idéal qu'il cherche à réduire, l'indéterminé, n'est jamais dans le comment. » (Zola, Le Roman expérimental, 21) In keeping with this vision, my approach is not to speculate reasons behind the *tourbillon* of Second Empire society, or why such a society produced a family like the Saccard's. Rather, I strive to analyze the sartorial descriptions of Renée in La Curée in an attempt to understand better « la moins analysable des femmes. » (Zola 147) However, these descriptions are inevitably linked to the social milieu in which the story

is based (Paris in the 1850's and 60's), and can offer new ways of thinking about the novel in this historical context.

From “la robe de Pierrot” to “le costume en Otaïtienne”: (Un)Veiling the Female Body

On peut suivre l'évolution de Renée en étudiant ses différentes robes, depuis la toute première que sa tante lui a offerte au costume qu'elle ose au bal masqué de la Mi-Carême : son corps se dénude progressivement jusqu'à s'offrir comme nu aux regards.⁸

In *La Curée*, Zola gives meticulous sartorial descriptions of Renée. An analysis of these descriptions reveals that Renée is gradually undressing herself throughout the novel⁹. Through episodes from Renée's act of undressing as a little girl, to her nude-colored Tahitian costume at the end of the novel, I will explore Renée's clothing as a synecdoche for Renée herself. Indeed, her identity becomes completely subsumed in her physical representation, which is expressed through clothing¹⁰. Through the examples of Renée's childhood scene of undressing, Maxime's readjustment of her wardrobe and her Tahitian beauty costume, I aim to analyze how Renée externalizes and manipulates her identity through clothing. This manipulation also highlights Renée's artificiality as « une grande poupée. »¹¹ Finally, Renée's patterns of undressing provide a rich analytical starting point, as they coincide with events that shape Renée's life by stripping her of her inner-self and her wealth.

The catalyst in the process of Renée's undressing is an experience in her childhood. Yet, as Zola manipulates the chronology of the novel in various ways, this scene does not occur until the very end of the novel, where it is juxtaposed with the final

⁸ Henri Mitterand, *Genèse, structures et style de La Curée* (Paris: Sedes, 1987) 74.

⁹ In *La Curée*, Renée gradually undresses as the novel progresses; her outfits become increasingly revealing as the novel reaches its climax. The painful moments of self-revelation in front of her mirror coincide with the end of her long process of undressing. Hannah Thompson, *Naturalism Redressed: Identity and Clothing in the Novels of Emile Zola* (Oxford: Legenda, 2004) 48.

¹⁰ “Les vêtements sont le dehors qui explique l'intérieur.” (Bonnefis 23)

¹¹ Emile Zola, *La Curée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981) 311.

unveiling of Renée's body in her Tahitian costume, forming a parenthetical juxtaposition of her sartorial and life journeys. In this scene, she has a flashback to the day when her Aunt Elisabeth gave Renée and her sister Christine brand new dresses.

On était à la Noël. Comme elles étaient contentes de ces deux robes semblables. La tante les gâtait, et elle poussa les choses jusqu'à leur donner à chacune un bracelet et un collier de corail. Les manches étaient longues, le corsage montait jusqu'au menton, les bijoux s'étalaient sur l'étoffe, ce qui leur semblait bien joli. Renée se rappelait encore que son père était là, qu'il souriait de son air triste. Ce jour-là, sa soeur et elle, dans la chambre des enfants, s'étaient promenées comme de grandes personnes, sans jouer, pour ne pas se salir. Puis, chez les dames de la Visitation, ses camarades l'avaient plaisantée sur "sa robe de Pierrot", qui lui allait au bout des doigts et qui lui montait par-dessus les oreilles. Elle s'était mise à pleurer pendant la classe. A la récréation, pour qu'on ne se moquât plus d'elle, elle avait retroussé les manches et rentré le tour de cou du corsage. Et le collier et le bracelet de corail lui semblaient plus jolis sur la peau de son cou et de son bras. Était-ce ce jour-là qu'elle avait commencé à se mettre nue? (Zola 310)

A priori, this scene appears to be the tale of a loss of childhood innocence. Renée perceives herself in a manner that is completely out of sync with the way the world perceives her. When she is faced with this new reality in the form of the taunts of her peers, it shakes her to her core. Such teasing might seem to be a normal childhood occurrence, causing Renée to adapt to her surroundings as a part of growing into adulthood. Yet, the crux of this tale of childhood ridicule is Renée's reaction to her deriders. She *internalizes* their jeering and adjusts her perception of her own beauty.

Renée subsequently adapts herself to project the perceptions of her classmates, of which her dress is an extension, to satisfy the norms and expectations of others. In this scene, Renée becomes aware of societal expectations for her gender for the first time. Rebecca Ross Russell has discussed the cultivation of gender norms.

Gender in culture must be understood through the socialization that males and females undergo as part of developing an identity...not as a result of innate differences between the sexes, but one of many methods used to inculcate difference, in status and in self-perception.¹²

Thus, the scene of *la robe de Pierrot* marks the beginning of Renée's process of socialization that is both linked to her clothing and her highly sexualized representation.

From this moment on, Renée is never truly herself. Perhaps it was on this unexpected day of Renée's childhood that she began to undress herself through the inclusion of external perception of gender norms into her conception of her self. This creates a duality within Renée between her own identity and the way she is perceived by others. For Renée, this duality comes to fruition through her attire. Pierre Bourdieu has analyzed the objectification of women that results from this internalization.

Tout, dans la genèse de l'habitus féminin et dans les conditions sociales de son actualisation, concourt à faire de l'expérience féminine du corps la limite de l'expérience universelle du corps-pour-autrui, sans cesse exposé à l'objectivation opérée par le regard et le discours des autres.¹³

¹² Rebecca Ross Russell, Gender and Jewelry: A Feminist Analysis (New York: CreateSpace, 2010) 3.

¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, La Domination Masculine (Paris: Seuil, 1998) 70.

Hence, there exists a continuous dialogue between a woman's external and internal perceptions of herself as influenced by others.

Consequently, this day inaugurates Renée's perception of her body as a decorative object for others to appreciate. Her exposed coral necklace against her pale flesh highlights the ornamental nature of her jewelry. "Jewelry, as an art form defined by interaction with the body, is deeply bound up with the social structures vying for control of those very bodies." (Ross Russell 12) Renée's *collier* and *bracelet* are tangible manifestations of the societal constraints that are enforced upon her. Further, as external forces have used dress and jewelry to place Renée in a subordinate societal role, this process of adornment forces Renée to assume the position of the passive *surveyed* female. Given her youth and thus her lack of pronounced feminine physical traits, the *collier* is used to differentiate her otherwise gender-neutral form from the male body, which encourages Renée to become aware of and follow a gender-specific norm.

Thus, in La Curée, Renée's bodily expression of her self-identity is partly due to her social surroundings. Zola also engages with these themes in Le Roman expérimental. Living amid the culture of lavish dress of mid-to-late 19th century bourgeois Parisian society submerges Renée in a world where appearance is paramount. Yet, behind these societal customs lurks the reality that in Renée's society, individuals do not exist. The only means of self-identification are clothing, lovers, and other transient things. Consequently, a person's self worth and sense of self come exclusively from external factors. John Berger has established language for discussing the relation between the external and internal components of female identity.

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself...from earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman...Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.¹⁴

In Renée's childhood scene, the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* seem to interact with one another for the first time. She becomes aware of how prudish her high-neck collar and full-length sleeves appear on a young girl. Instead of maintaining the modesty and decency that her father and Aunt Élisabeth had so highly favored, she begins to expose her flesh. The act of uncovering her body purely for the spectator's viewing pleasure appeals to Renée. Indeed, she finds her freshly adjusted appearance attractive, despite the fact that her high-collared dress once delighted her. From this moment on, Renée views and evaluates herself through the eyes of others.

Further, the high collar and long sleeves of her dress, as well as the bright coral color of her jewelry, make what little skin she bares even more apparent. Zola adds to the objectification of Renée's body by portraying her almost as the subject of a painting, contrasting her *robe de pierrot* with her bright *collier de corail* to draw the eye of the spectator to the uncovered area of her body. Thus, Zola is using clothing to accentuate her nudity, a technique present throughout the novel. This choice, fairly startling in the description of a young child, foreshadows Renée's sexual manipulation and perversion, as Renée has become an "object of vision." (Berger 47) Once Renée realizes she is an

¹⁴ John Berger, Ways of Seeing (London: Penguin, 1972) 46.

object of sight, she can begin to use this to her advantage. Even at a young age Renée seems to understand that her capacity to seduce others is completely predicated upon her ability to show her skin without being completely nude. Covering an increasingly small patch of skin arouses the eye of the spectator, yet also leaves him wanting more. Karl Kraus has considered this technique. “The excitement of exposure consists in the *isolated* display of a body part against the clothed surrounding area.”¹⁵ Thus, Renée’s act of exposing her body in suggestive ways is a clear manipulation of herself for the benefit of others. This childhood scene simultaneously inaugurates Renée’s exposure of herself to the opinions of others and the baring of her flesh.

As described in this scene, Renée’s childhood seems to be anything but innocent. Zola writes that Renée and her sister do not engage in play with the other children so as not to get themselves dirty. On the one hand this gesture indicates that Renée is not a child. She wears constricting clothing and her refusal to dirty her new dress indicates that she possesses mature tendencies. The shift to wearing restrictive clothing is often associated with a girl’s transition into womanhood. It signifies a transformation in the utility of the female body from one of carefree enjoyment to one of staunch regulation and careful representation. Further, it diminishes a woman’s control over her own body, placing her in a passive societal role. Simone de Beauvoir has pursued this issue. “The purpose of the fashions to which [woman] is enslaved is not to reveal her as an independent individual....The skirt is less convenient than trousers, high-heeled shoes

¹⁵ Karl Kraus, “The Eroticism of Clothes”, The Rise of Fashion: A Reader (Minnesota: Univ of Minnesota Press, 2004): 242.

impede walking.”¹⁶ Thus, Renée is in a sense already submitting herself to womanly constraints, which indicates an overly sexualized nature for her young age, and contributes to her manipulation of self. Further, the fact that Renée can suppress her own desire to engage in play to maintain her unblemished physical appearance shows that even as a child she has begun to value her physical representation, and the way she is perceived by others, more than herself.

On the other hand, this scene is also a metaphor for the rest of Renée’s life. Although she may try to avoid it, in one way or another Renée is perpetually dirtying herself or being dirtied. Her rape, her marriage to a freshly widowed man, her debt, and her incest with Maxime all dirty the life of a once naïve young girl who wept over grade school taunting. Renée’s sartorial perversion of revealing her virgin flesh foreshadows the ultimate perversion of her flesh in her rape and her incestuous relations with Maxime.

Yet, Renée’s practice of expressing her identity through her clothing confines her. Since Renée’s sense of self is bound to her presentation of herself as a visual image, material objects control her. As the story of her childhood demonstrates, Renée ceases to be the protagonist in her own life. Eventually, Renée is objectified by her body to such an extent that she is no longer an individual. Susan Harrow has explored this subject. “The production of Renée as an object of visual fascination – the site of erotic curiosity and aesthetic pleasure – involves the staging of the female body in its socially acceptable clothes form...it reveals the complex “materialization” of the image of femininity.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, “‘Social Life’ from *The Second Sex* (1953)”, *The Rise of Fashion: a Reader* 128.

¹⁷ Susan Harrow, “Myopia and the Model: The Making and Unmaking of Renée in Zola’s *La Curée*,” *L’écriture du féminin chez Zola et dans la fiction naturaliste* (Bern: Peter Lang SA, 2003) 254.

Renée's identity as a woman has been externalized and as she manipulates her dress, she manipulates herself. Yet, while Renée is "staging" herself in different forms of visual representation, she is undressing or stripping herself by self-identifying as an object of vision, rather than a conscious, reasoning human being. Thus, this childhood scene of undressing is also perhaps the first of Renée's many attempts to escape the constricting societal expectations of her gender, of which her dress is a manifestation.

Renée's gradual undressing continues in the scene when she meets her stepson Maxime for the first time. A boy of 14, he has just arrived from his boarding school in the countryside of France. Renée at first pays little attention to the boy: she is preoccupied by her tailor Worms's latest invention for her, fretting that something in her elaborate ensemble is amiss. Maxime, despite his complete isolation from the frivolity of the Paris fashion scene, puts his finger (both literally and figuratively) on the necessary change.

Le collégien, rassuré par la camaraderie de la jeune femme, avait repris tout l'aplomb de sa nature effrontée. Il s'éloigna, se rapprocha, cligna les yeux, en murmurant : 'Non, non, il ne manque rien, c'est très joli, très joli...Je trouve plutôt qu'il y a quelque chose de trop.' Il rougit un peu, malgré son audace, s'avança encore, et, traçant du bout du doigt un angle aigu sur la gorge de Renée: 'Moi, voyez-vous, continua-t-il, j'échancrerais comme ça cette dentelle, et je mettrais un collier avec une grosse croix.' (Zola 132)

Renée receives this suggestion ecstatically. Peculiarly, this "Queen of Second Empire fashion" (Voyses 118) has been unable to see the glaring remedy to her sartorial dilemma: exposing more skin! In this scene, Maxime begins undressing Renée with his

eyes and with his hands. He absorbs Parisian style rapidly and uses Renée's body as an object of its reflection. It is not until Renée's body flawlessly reflects Parisian fashion that she can feel comfortable in her own skin. Indeed, in this scene, physical and sartorial discomfort become synonymous. Bourdieu has elucidated the disparity between physical reality and idealized physicality as embodied in this scene.

La probabilité d'éprouver le corps dans la gêne (forme par excellence de l'expérience du « corps aliéné »), le malaise, la timidité ou la honte est d'autant plus forte que la disproportion est plus grande entre le corps socialement exigé et le rapport pratique au corps qu'imposent les regards et les réactions des autres. (Bourdieu 72)

In this scene, Renée adorns herself with objects that are to make an appearance, that are to be read and interpreted by those who view her. Further, she subjugates herself to the male gaze¹⁸, as Maxime effectively makes Renée herself a prop for her attire. This scene follows a progression from Renée's childhood scene of undressing as she now extends her bodily exposure from her neck to her bosom. The more of her flesh she unveils, the more Renée exposes herself to manipulation by others. In this scene, Renée no longer acts as an independent agent, who can negotiate her inner identity and the demands of her society. She now has a young boy in her control who can aid her in this process. Yet, it is too early for her to realize at this point in the novel that Maxime begins

¹⁸ This idea of the "male gaze," which will be discussed in greater detail in the second section, is a key concept to my analysis and is synonymous with Berger's term *surveyor*. It refers to the framing of objects of beauty so that the viewer is situated in a "masculine" position of appreciation. Females are situated as passive objects of attraction, over whom viewers, designated as male, claim mastery and control through their activities of looking and evaluating.

manipulating her on this day by taking her decision-making power out of her hands. Maxime begins to usurp Renée's identity by becoming the *surveyor* within Renée.

This exposure continues until the culmination of Renée's progressive undressing, in her final portrayal as a Tahitian beauty at the end of the novel. The zenith of her physical and self-manipulation, in this costume Renée attains the highest possible degree of nudity despite being clothed. Defying all expectations, Renée manages to upstage her increasingly plummeting necklines and undress herself even further by wearing nothing more than form-fitting beige tights and a veil.

Elle était en Otaïtienne. Ce costume, paraît-il, est des plus primitifs: un maillot couleur tendre, qui lui montait des pieds jusqu'aux seins, en lui laissant les épaules et les bras nus; et, sur ce maillot, une simple blouse de mousseline, courte et garnie de deux volants, pour cacher un peu les hanches. Dans les cheveux, une couronne de fleurs des champs; aux chevilles et aux poignets, des cercles d'or. Et rien autre. Elle était nue. Le maillot avait des souplesses de chair, sous la pâleur de la blouse ; la ligne pure de cette nudité se retrouvait, des genoux aux aisselles, vaguement effacée par les volants, mais s'accroissant et reparaisant entre les mailles de la dentelle, au moindre mouvement. C'était une sauvagesse adorable, une fille barbare et voluptueuse, à peine cachée dans une vapeur blanche, dans un pan de brume marine, où tout son corps se devinait. (Zola 291)

In a sense, this concluding gesture by Renée is an act of desperation. In this scene, Renée physically embodies the emptiness that she experiences internally. Her incest has deepened to an irrevocable extent, she is bankrupt, and she is losing her sanity. Hence, Renée makes one last effort to project corporally external expectations over the reality of

the shambles of her life. In this climactic moment, Renée seems to master the art of presenting herself as an object of sight. Although her attire verges on obscene, she manages to display her body in a way that still arouses those around her and draws all eyes to her physical appearance while maintaining a fragment of intrigue.

She achieves this in part through the use of the diaphanous veil that thinly covers her body, which acquires an erotic connotation in Renée's employment. Kraus has analyzed the role of the veil.

[Veils] blur or disarray the contours of the body in order to arouse erotic fantasy, to re-create them with even greater boldness; they let nakedness glisten forth out of a delicate haze to make desire even more covetous of it. (Kraus 243)

Instead of depicting Renée in the nude, which would indicate that Renée is acting to satisfy personal desires rather than acting for the visual pleasure of others, Zola uses clothing to suggest nakedness.

For Renée, this veil bookends her coral jewelry as a child. It serves to emphasize further her nudity, and intrigue the eye of the spectator much more so than if she was truly naked. Yet despite her efforts with the veil, this time Renée has almost gone too far. Her costume is so revealing that she intensifies desire almost to the point of satiating it. She virtually exhausts any physical mystery that her clothing may have previously permitted. Zola parallels the sapping of bodily intrigue with Renée's incest with Maxime. Renée is constantly bored with her life, and the temptation of things untried is the only way for her to experience excitement, pleasure, or joy. Unfortunately for Renée who has exhausted almost every possibility, adventure and pleasure come only in the

form of some of the most illicit activities in her society: namely incest and undressing herself.

Additionally, Renée seems to legitimize wearing such a scandalous ensemble by hiding behind the guise of a costume. By representing herself as a Tahitian savage, Renée can avoid the blame for choosing to display her body so unabashedly. Yet, it is no accident that Zola has chosen such a revealing costume for Renée. Her gradual state of undress parallels her slip into savagery and her submission to her sexual desires, as Renée's Tahitian costume is merely a sartorial representation of her uncovered body in her incestuous relations with Maxime. Consequently, this final attempt by Renée to manipulate her identity through her dress becomes as transparent as her diaphanous veil. She can no longer conceal her nakedness, and the naked truth of her incest.

Further, Zola uses the costume to contrast the visible and invisible (or at least purposefully overlooked) aspects of high Parisian society of the Second Empire. Zola depicts Renée's surroundings as the apogee of wealth, class, extravagance, and ornamentation. However, he simultaneously juxtaposes this image of splendor with the shocking appearance of Renée's naked body, the antithesis of the over-dressed women and men of the ball. Yet, her body in this scene mirrors the reality behind their artifice, as the members of this *société épuisée* strip themselves naked without reservation in their promiscuity. Renée's naked body confronts their hypocrisy and the falsity of their fabricated physical appearances and glittery facades.

On the other hand, Renée's nakedness also represents the deepest and most ignored aspect of her own life: she is stripped bare in terms of personal happiness, fulfillment and contentment with her life. This constitutes the unspoken chasm under the

glossy finish of Renée's life. She has tried to disguise her dissatisfaction by ornamenting herself with material objects and people. Yet, ultimately at the end of the novel, she is completely naked and her unhappiness is complete. Renée has exhausted every possibility to entertain herself and to find happiness, even going as far as incestuous relations with her stepson. Nevertheless, she has come up empty: she has stripped herself naked. Renée emerges at the ball, as a visual representation of her own emptiness, yet she reflects that of those around her. Her physical bareness is perhaps the only way to get through to high society. Her image strikes them.

Yet, despite certain candid elements in Renée's presentation as a Tahitian beauty, her costume represents the superficial nature of her identity. She does not represent herself in her dress; she presents herself as someone else. Beauvoir has discussed this fabrication:

Even if each woman dresses in conformity with her status, a game is still being played: artifice, like art, belongs to the realm of the imaginary. It is not only that girdle, brassiere, hair-dye, make-up, disguise body and face; but that the least sophisticated of women, once she is "dressed," does not present *herself* to observation; she is, like the picture or statue, or the actor on the stage, an agent through whom is suggested someone not there – that is, the character she represents, but is not. (Beauvoir 131)

Consequently, Renée's ultimate act of undressing in this scene eclipses her self-identity with a representation of someone else. She is never free to use her body to project her own desires. She suggests a carefully crafted identity through her physical appearance, but this corporeally expressed woman does not correspond to her inner self. The lack of

continuity between her inner and outer selves makes Renée a shadow of a person, as though her identity is viewed through the distorted lens of her myopic eyes. As a result, Renée has been eclipsed by her external artifice.

In conclusion, in La Curée, Renée progressively undresses herself, until she is completely naked. Beginning with Renée's exposed neck in her childhood dress, Renée's nudity culminates in her Tahitian costume at the end of the novel. This undressing parallels her self-effacement, which is aided by the male gaze and by the exteriorization of her identity. In the final ball scene, Renée's identity becomes as blank as the neutral tights that barely cover her body. Yet, as I will discuss in greater detail in the final section, this scene is also a shocking moment of "prise de conscience" for Renée, in which she comes to terms with the duality between *surveyor* and *surveyed* for the first time in her life.

Transgressing The Limits: Elements of Transvestism in *La Curée*

Alors que l'espace de Renée se rétrécit, nous commençons à nous rendre compte de son besoin de demeurer à l'intérieur de la marge étroite qui lui prête la force de ses propres désirs en tant que sujet-en-devenir. Tandis qu'elle continue son jeu, son texte devient de plus en plus limité. Elle est prise dans l'espace concentrique de sa propre féminité, créé par le discours masculin, mais aussi dans cette sexualité qui transgresse l'espace féminin.¹⁹

In certain respects, Renée represents the pinnacle of femininity. As discussed in the previous section, she frequently bares her voluptuous body in a brash display of feminine sexuality. In Renée's society, clothing and gender are resolutely linked. The result is that certain qualities, expressed through clothing, are associated with "feminine" or "masculine" orientations that are understood by both the wearer and the viewer through an unspoken language of societal expectations. Indeed Zola demonstrates Renée's embodiment of the idealized concept of female sexuality glorified in Renée's culture, as he describes her bare shoulders as the pillars of Second Empire French society, indicating her affiliation with impeccable womanhood. Yet, in *La Curée*, Renée's female sexuality also continuously comes into question, as Zola consistently depicts Renée's employment of masculine clothing and accouterments. This section will explore Renée's transvestive²⁰ tendencies that Zola uses to highlight the duality of her sexuality. Further, I will explore Maxime's exhibition of feminine qualities in his dress, mannerisms, and physical appearance that contributes to Renée's role as the mannish figure in their relationship. Zola contrasts Renée and Maxime as is evident from the first time the two meet, when Renée wears an outfit reminiscent of a military uniform, complete with

¹⁹ Derayeh Derakhshesh. *Et Zola Créa la Femme*. (Langres, France: Dominique Guéniot, 2005) 25.

²⁰ In our approach the term transvestive means cross-dressing.

men's boots,²¹ and Maxime is portrayed as a fragile, rather androgynous child. Thompson has analyzed clothing's role in creating gender ambiguity.

Clothing does not function in the Rougon-Macquart as a set of props revealing the truth of performed genders. It functions instead to highlight the gaps between various layers of appearance, between interconnecting surfaces, which point to the ultimate instability and uncertainty of all genders, and the consequent denormalization of sexuality and gender identity. (Thompson 9)

Consequently, it seems as if Renée uses clothing to manipulate not only herself, but her sexuality as well. As will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, Renée's incestuous relations with Maxime mirror her fashion choices so that sartorially and in the bedroom, Renée takes on a masculine role. She is the protagonist of the incest, and she dominates Maxime physically, adopting the eroticized male gaze.

As Renée embodies both masculine and feminine qualities, she becomes transgressive²² in nature. Zola depicts gender identities in La Curée as malleable, and thus Renée's relationship to her sexuality constantly fluctuates. Renée's and Maxime's transvestive qualities denote that in their society, gender is something one can put on and take off with physical dress. This superficial relationship to sexuality manifests itself in clothing choices, almost transforming gender identities into a childhood game of "dress-up." For just as Renée plays the role of a woman of high society by adorning her body with elaborate dresses, she also plays the role of a man by using masculine accessories, as I will demonstrate in my analysis.

²¹ « Ses petites bottes d'homme dont les talons pointus s'enfonçaient dans le tapis, » (Zola 130).

²² In our approach the term transgressive means to go beyond a boundary or limit, to violate a command or law.

Ah! Quelle curée²³ que le Second Empire! [...] C'est du propre, et le régal est complet. Vraiment l'Empire a fait de nous une grande nation. Voilà que des hommes deviennent des femmes. Lorsque Rome pourrissait dans sa grandeur, elle n'a pas accompli d'autres miracles. Les belles nuits de l'orgie antique sont revenues, les nuits ardentes où les créatures n'avaient plus de sexe.²⁴

Second Empire French society, in all of its decadence and excess, has blurred the lines of gender boundaries to produce a sexless creature. Due to her sexual and sartorial perversion, Renée embodies what Zola describes as *l'homme-femme* that results from a *société épuisée*. This *homme-femme* has exhausted every possibility of human existence, and is left with an insatiable appetite that enlarges the boundaries of sexual experience, transforming humans into creatures that are neither fully masculine nor fully feminine.

Thus, Renée and Maxime are both comprised of a mixture of male and female qualities, which are constantly shifting and interacting with one another in the novel. Thompson has explored the importance of transvestive representation in La Curée.

Part of Maxime's fascination with Renée stems from her choice of costumes which depart from expected gender and social patterns. Their incest, a transgressive act within the Rougon-Macquart, is flagged in the text by another kind of transgression: cross-dressing. (Thompson 111)

As Zola uses transvestive clothing to highlight the perversion of Second Empire society, it is no coincidence that the most intense and passionate scenes of incestuous love-making between Renée and Maxime, of which the act itself is a perversion of the natural

²³ « Curée » in this context refers to the noun meaning the portion of the quarry offered to the hounds after the hunt.

²⁴ Henri Mitterand, "Notice", La Curée. (Paris: Folio, 1981) 360.

familial roles, take place in *la serre*, thus perverting nature, one of the few remaining organic aspects of Second Empire society. Further, *la serre* is itself a perversion of nature, as growing plants indoors year-round manipulates natural vegetation patterns. Given the manufactured society in which she lives, it is hardly surprising that for Renée gender identity has become almost a motif to an outfit, expressed through artificially constructed materials, which give form to the otherwise amorphous concept of human sexuality. Yet, Renée is also a point of fascination for her society, and particularly for Maxime, because she dangerously combines her tempting femininity and elements of masculine dominance.

Renée's sartorial transgression is an external manifestation of the male/female duality that exists within her. Berger elucidates this fluid relationship between the sexes when he discusses the positions of the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* (quoted in the previous section). He stresses that: "Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it." (Berger 46) Hence, through the use of clothing and accessories Renée tries to control her own manipulation by replicating the process through which others manipulate her. By dressing as a man, she tries to project an image of dominance so that she will be treated and respected as an influential member of her society. Yet, just as Renée physically mirrors societal expectations with her dress, rather than asserting herself and assuming ownership of her desire, she also mimics the behavior of her controllers by further manipulating herself, rather than taking control.

The fact that Maxime and Renée play the role of both the *surveyed* and the *surveyor* throughout the novel blurs the lines of sexuality and creates the transgressive fluidity in the nebulous relation that defines their gender identities. Their embodiment of these dual roles is evident from the scene in which they first meet (quoted in the first section). Renée is the male *surveyor* in her militaristic garb as she scrutinizes the young Maxime. Yet, she is also *surveyed* by Maxime who piercingly studies Renée's body and the inadequacies of her outfit. This duality seems to be at the heart of Zola's masculine descriptions of Renée. Her employment of masculine accessories, her mannish behavior and mannerisms, and even the masculine descriptions of her physical appearance serve to illuminate the gender ambiguity that Renée embodies. These factors, which constitute her "presence,"²⁵ are a result of her interiorization of the male gaze.

Zola seems to express visually this gender fluidity through Renée's myopic eyes, which distort her perception of the world into blurred shapes and figures. Her poor vision perverts and misrepresents the sexual identities of those around her, transforming her world into one filled with androgynous outlines. Specifically, Renée often has trouble seeing figures at a distance, as she does, for example, in the Bois de Boulogne in the beginning of the novel.

Elle continuait à cligner des yeux, avec sa mine de garçon impertinent, son front pur traversé d'une grande ride, sa bouche dont la lèvre supérieure avançait, ainsi que celle des enfants boudeurs. Puis, comme elle voyait mal, elle prit son binocle, un binocle d'homme, à garniture d'écaille, et le tenant à la main, sans le poser sur

²⁵ "[A] woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste – indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence," (Berger 46).

le nez, elle examina la grosse Laure d'Aurigny tout à son aise, d'un air parfaitement calme. (Zola 40)

At first glance, Renée is depicted as a passive figure in this scene, limited by her poor eyesight. Embodying the role of the *surveyed*, she is subject to the glance of whoever chooses to prey on her visually. Without the manipulation of gender boundaries, she is not capable of exercising a voyeuristic masculine gaze. Yet, her use of the corrective tool of *le binocle* drastically distorts the gender dynamics of this scene. Renée changes her sexuality with her accessories, as she employs *le binocle* to adapt the position of Berger's *surveyor*. Zola's description of Renée's face as she employs this instrument emphasizes the masculinity of the prosthesis. She is described as a *garçon impertinent* because her otherwise unblemished female features adapt a masculine orientation.

Further, it is not just her masculine appearance when using this instrument that contributes to Renée's transvestive actualization. She directly assumes the position of the male *surveyor* in relation to a female, Laure d'Aurigny, whom she surveys. As the male spectator, she admires Laure d'Aurigny's impressive bosom, and through this manipulation of her faculty of sight, Renée truly becomes a cross-gendered figure. Thompson has investigated the role of the male gaze in La Curée.

As her carriage moves slowly through the Bois de Boulogne, she adopts the role normally reserved for the male spectator as she openly scrutinizes her rival, the demi-mondaine Laure d'Aurigny...She is introduced into the narrative through a command to look, to assume the trans-gendered position of male admirer, thus positioning the other woman, Laure, in the role of passive female. (Thompson 104)

Thus, just as Renée uses provocative dress to test the boundaries of Parisian high society, she also uses male objects, such as *le binocle*, to test social and gender limits. She dares to occupy the social space held by *surveyors* such as Saccard and Maxime. In doing so, it is as if her poor vision comes into focus, and she can penetrate Laure d'Aurigny with her eyes, mimicking male penetration. Perhaps the versatility of these roles forms the essence of transvestism for Zola – an unnatural perversion of the “natural laws” of gender identity.

Renée employs another masculine instrument in a similar capacity when she uses *la loupe* to scour the portraits of women with which Maxime presents her. It is a scene of masculine voyeurism, as Renée and Maxime engage in the masculine activity of surveying women. Indeed, Renée even discusses which women she would prefer if she were a man. The two derive a mutual pleasure from this activity, and engage in it frequently. This scene demonstrates the perversity of their relationship. The two are depicted almost as two gossiping women, as they discuss the indiscretions of the women they see before them. Yet, they also both exercise the eroticized male glance upon these images. Thus, Renée's actions are transvestive in nature as she uses the accessories of *le binocle* and *la loupe* to transcend her femininity. However, this scene takes the transgression further, as Renée develops an obsessive relationship to the pictures of these women.

Un jour même, elle se fit apporter une forte loupe, ayant cru apercevoir un poil sur le nez de l'Ecrevisse. Et, en effet, la loupe montra un léger fil d'or qui s'était égaré des sourcils et qui était descendu jusqu'au milieu du nez....La loupe servit dès lors à épilucher les figures des femmes...Et Maxime finit par cacher la loupe,

en déclarant qu'il ne fallait pas se dégoûter comme cela de la figure humaine.
(Zola 155)

In this scene, Renée employs the prosthesis of *la loupe* to adopt the male gaze and probe the portraits of these women. This instrument also suggests parallels between her act and the almost scientific method of Zola's naturalist approach. Yet, as Renée lingers on the flaws of each of the women, she evokes much greater sexual complexity. As Zola suggests through her clothing, Renée drifts between male and female designations through her sexual and sartorial permutations. In this scene, rather than adopting the masculine position of *surveyor*, she seems to fluctuate between the eroticized male gaze and the finicky eye of a female observer. Further, not only does she step outside of her female sexuality through her transvestive actions, but she transgresses masculine gender roles as well, by convoluting them with her critical female perceptions of fellow women. This act seems to upset even Maxime, and exposes Renée's deep transgression of gender boundaries. Thompson has analyzed Renée's transgression of gender boundaries.

On one level we discern her precocious desire for the male body; on another level the juxtaposed images of male and female evoke the complexity of Renée's desire. She desires neither men nor women, but a dangerous transgressive combination: later in the novel she is most attracted to the effeminate Maxime, and her fascination with female clothing foreshadows this object choice.
(Thompson 52)

Thus, as Renée's sexuality fluctuates between genders, it follows that she is drawn to an equally transgressive gender combination.

Renée employs *le binocle* to bring the world into focus throughout the novel, as she does to examine her surroundings in Mme Sidonie's lace shop,²⁶ for example. Thus, Renée's masculinity is expressed through attempts to correct her visual impairment. Yet, if Renée's sexual transgressions are mirrored by her clothing choices, this analysis elucidates two important elements of Renée's transvestive representation: her own masculinity and Maxime's effeminacy, both of which are expressed through clothing.

Renée's masculinity is apparent in almost every aspect of her conduct and appearance. The scene of the night of Blanche Muller's ball comprehensively embodies this perhaps better than any other scene in the novel. Maxime is smoking when she steps into the carriage, and as he hastens to put out his cigar, Renée assures him that she likes the smell of tobacco, saying « Je suis un homme, moi. » (Zola 170) Although Renée does not smoke in this scene, her assertion coupled with the masculine accessory of « le cigare » (Zola 171) serves to associate her with masculinity. Further in the dark carriage, she is viewed solely through the light of Maxime's lit *cigare*, bathing her entire person in masculinity, rather than casting the two in an intimate light. In all of these ways, Renée is almost depicted as Maxime's male comrade, rather than his female companion to a ball. In general, the scene of Blanche Muller's ball evokes perhaps the greatest gender ambiguities of the entire novel, as it juxtaposes Renée and Maxime playing very "conventional" gender roles with Renée's transvestive behavior.

As the two share an intimate dinner at Café Riche after the ball, these gender ambiguities reach their peak. Once again, at Renée's suggestion, Maxime lights « un cigare, » (Zola 184) and the two are literally immersed in air tinged with masculinity.

²⁶ « Elle mit son binocle, regarda cette pièce qui avait un luxe de grand hôtel garni, » (Zola 236).

The blue smoke that surrounds her features, highlighting her manliness, taints Maxime's perception of Renée.

Par moments, il n'était plus sûr de son sexe ; la grande ride qui lui traversait le front, l'avancement bourdeur de ses lèvres, son air indécis de myope, en faisaient un grand jeune homme ; d'autant plus que sa longue blouse de satin noir allait si haut, qu'on voyait à peine, sous le menton, une ligne du cou blanche et grasse.
(Zola 184)

Thus, the night of Blanche Muller's ball Renée is dressed in perhaps her most masculine outfit of the entire novel. Hardly baring any skin, her conservative outfit challenges gender boundaries to the point that Maxime is no longer sure of her sexual identity. Thompson has explored the impetus for Renée's transvestive behavior, as described in this scene.

[O]n the night of the bal masqué she adopts male disguise in order to gain access to a previously forbidden world. At the ball she is not mistaken for a man. She is perceived as a woman disguised as a man. Her transvestite costume signifies her desire to remain unrecognizable. Her identity is momentarily dissimulated; she can move anonymously and thus freely. (Thompson 112)

Yet, adding to the perversion of gender roles, it is precisely because of Renée's unusual dress that Maxime is interested in her. Rather than being repulsed by the masculinity that Renée exudes, or viewing her more as a male companion, Maxime finds it strangely arousing. Thus, their incestuous relations pervert their sexual identities even further.

Through her relation to the masculine accessory of Maxime's *cigare*, and her mannish outfit, Renée comes very close in this scene to eradicating the already waning

feminine element of her sexuality. In this scene, the cigar smoke, symbolic of masculinity, almost suffocates Renée, and forces her to the window to draw in fresh air in respite from her predominantly masculine self-presentation. It is not until the server Charles hands Renée her hair ribbon – a hallmark of feminine sartorial expression – which has symbolically become dislodged from her hair, that Renée seems to snap back to reality. This gesture demonstrates that for Renée, articles of clothing have come to represent her feminine sexuality. Tellingly, she is unable even to re-tie her hair bow properly, so immersed has she become in her masculine expression.

Maxime's effeminate tendencies, expressed primarily through feminine dress, also serve to highlight Renée's transvestive nature. Maxime's effeminization, primarily perpetrated during his childhood and furthered by Renée, is an irrevocable process that defines his gender identity for the rest of his life.

Il se soignait beaucoup les mains qu'il avait minces et longues... Ses camarades se pendaient à sa blouse, comme à une jupe, et il se serrait tellement, qu'il avait la taille mince, le balancement de hanches d'une femme faite... L'âge allait heureusement le corriger. Mais la marque de ses abandons d'enfant, cette effémination de tout son être, cette heure où il s'était cru fille, devait rester en lui, le frapper à jamais dans sa virilité. (Zola 133)

This scene highlights how clothing defines sexual identity in La Curée. Not only does Maxime possess feminine physical traits, but his feminine physicality is delineated through his dress. Maxime's feminine curves as viewed through his clothing indicate the ambiguity of his sexual identity.

Secondly, this depiction foreshadows the sexual dynamics in his incest with Renée, and speaks to his sexual composition in general. Maxime's sartorial perversion in this scene mirrors his sexual perversion in his incest with Renée later in the novel. Further, he submits to the effeminization perpetrated by his classmates, much as he submits to Renée's masculine domination. Additionally, Maxime's *tempérament neutre*, as described by Zola in this scene, is a distinctive feature of his sexual identity for the remainder of the novel, rendering him the *homme-femme* that Zola describes. Maxime is largely a sexless creature, whose lack of virility contrasts with Renée's voracious sexual appetite. Consequently, Maxime's feminine composition and general lack of sexuality in his sartorial descriptions emphasize Renée's masculinity.

Lastly, two other factors add another layer of complexity to Berger's *surveyor/surveyed* duality that exists within Renée. Firstly, Renée is transgressively moving through the words of a male author, and thus occupies a space between the genders. The fact that she is envisioned, actualized and interpreted through the male gaze of Zola perverts her femininity even further. She is no longer fully a woman, but a strange hybrid creation comprised of elements of both sexes. Secondly, as she materializes her identity through the use of clothing, it is only fitting that her garments are woven through the fingers of a man, her tailor, Worms. Renée's sexual identity in La Curée becomes even more convoluted as this *grande poupée de soie* is both masterminded and created by a masculine figure. She had become a mannequin upon which male visions are projected. Thus, Renée is a woman living in a society dominated by men, moving through a masculine text, and exhibiting an almost pervasive

masculinity. All of these factors serve to diminish Renée's femininity until it is almost entirely subsumed by her masculine nature, expressed primarily through her dress.

In conclusion, Renée is caught in sartorial limbo, as she cannot satisfy her female sexuality by simply taking off clothing, and she cannot satisfy her masculine inclinations by simply donning male accessories. Thompson delves into the gender ambiguity that the transvestite embodies.

Thus desire is by definition that which cannot be satisfied: it is what is left of absolute demand when all possible satisfaction had been subtracted from it. And this is another definition of the transvestite...The transvestite is the space of desire. (Thompson 75)

Renée's and Maxime's transgressive behavior highlights the artificiality of gender in their society. The fact that they must put on clothing to suggest a gender, rather than baring their real bodies, shows that authentic sexuality is not a reality of Second Empire society. What is left is the "dangerous transgressive combination" in which neither gender nor sexuality is satisfied. Consequently, clothing and sexuality become intertwined in this text, as dress and accessories serve as one of the sole means of sexual identification in Second Empire society.

La soie avait fait son crime coquet : Clothing and Incest in La Curée

Alors, l'incestueuse s'habituaît à sa faute, comme à une robe de gala, dont les roideurs l'auraient d'abord gênée. Elle suivait les modes de l'époque, elle s'habillait et se déshabillait à l'exemple des autres. [...] Le mal devenait un luxe, une fleur piquée dans les cheveux, un diamant attaché sur le front. (Voyses 122)

Throughout most of the novel, Renée lives a life of decadence and excess, consuming and spending without restraint, as her lavish dress reflects. Her illusion that she can spend her considerable dowry at will leads Renée to believe that she is completely in control of her life. One way that Renée believes she asserts her autonomy, as discussed in the first section, is through exhibitionism: using clothing to bare her flesh in a provocative manner. This allows her to feel as if she exercises her own volition over her body, rather than being manipulated and objectified by another. An alternative means for Renée to prove to herself that she lives a life uninhibited by societal or familial restrictions is through her incest with Maxime. At first, the incest constitutes a much less blatant approach to declaring her independence, yet it gets increasingly brazen. Subtle signs in the vesture of the lovers parallel this development, such as Maxime's desire to hide in her skirts as a young boy, Renée's mannish outfit that signifies the inception of their incest the night of Blanche Muller's ball, and finally Renée's dress printed with the scene of *la chasse*. Thus, I aim to analyze the entanglement of incest and clothing and the way Renée's dress becomes bolder as the incest deepens and the lovers become more ostentatious in their displays. Yet despite Renée's illusion of control, as I will discuss in the fourth section, she is unaware that she is ultimately an object of male manipulation.

Just as Renée and Maxime fluctuate between gender roles, as discussed in the previous section, so too they vacillate between playing the role of the dominated and the

role of *libido dominandi*, or “the one who dominates,” in their incest. Bourdieu has discussed these gender dynamics, which are derived from societal expectations.

[L]es hommes sont dressés à reconnaître les jeux sociaux qui ont pour enjeu une forme quelconque de domination et qu’ils sont désignés très tôt, notamment par les rites d’institution, comme dominants, et dotés, à ce titre, de la *libido dominandi*, qu’ils ont privilège à double tranchant de s’adonner aux jeux pour la domination. (Bourdieu 82)

Renée realizes that the only way to enjoy a position of power in her society is to adopt the dominant masculine position. Further, Renée exerts control over Maxime only because he fails to realize his inherent potential to dominate in his society. These dynamics are manifest in their incestuous acts and also through their dress.

Renée’s and Maxime’s incest is inextricably linked to sartorial expression from the moment the two meet, when Maxime throws himself at Renée’s neck and creases her French Guard’s jacket. This scene, which is quoted in the previous section, demonstrates the perversion of gender roles expressed through clothing. From this pivotal event in the novel onward, the two are inevitably drifting towards incest.²⁷ Further, from the moment they meet, the two are devouring each other visually. In this manner, their incest is committed through the faculty of sight, in which self-representation through dress plays an integral role. Thus, Renée and Maxime establish a fair degree of familiarity with one another’s bodies so that when the two begin their physical incestuous relationship, they

²⁷ « Leur camaraderie fut ainsi la marche lente de deux amoureux, qui devait fatalement un jour les mener au cabinet du café Riche et au grand lit gris et rose de Renée. Quand ils se trouvèrent au bras l’un de l’autre, ils n’eurent pas la secousse de la faute. On eut dit de vieux amants, dont les baisers avaient des ressouvenirs. Et ils venaient de perdre tant d’heures dans un contact de tout leur être, qu’ils parlaient malgré eux de ce passé plein de leurs tendresses ignorantes. » (Zola 212)

hardly experience shocking or novel sensations. It is primarily for this reason that throughout La Curée clothing embodies the incest between Maxime and Renée better than any other factor, even more than their sexual relations themselves.

Maxime's interactions with Renée's clothing as a child exemplify the intimacy that builds between the two, ultimately leading to incestuous contact. Later in the novel, when the lovers have already engaged in physical incest, they are discussing the events that led up to it. Maxime says:

--Tu te souviens, le jour où je suis arrivé à Paris...Tu avais un drôle de costume; et, avec mon doigt, j'ai tracé un angle sur ta poitrine, je t'ai conseillé de te décolleter en pointe... Je sentais ta peau sous la chemisette, et mon doigt *enfonçait* un peu...C'était très bon... Renée riait, le baisant, murmurant : --Tu étais déjà joliment vicieux...Nous-as tu amusées, chez Worms, tu te rappelles ! Nous t'appelions « notre petit homme »... Maxime continuait de sa voix câline :

--Quand tu venais me chercher au collège dans ta voiture, nous devons être drôles tous les deux... Je disparaissais sous tes jupons, j'étais petit. (Zola 213)

[Emphasis is mine]

In this scene when Maxime suggested that Renée lower the neckline of her gown, he used clothing as a premise with which to come into contact with her body. Further, It is particularly telling that when the two lovers speak of their building desire for one another, they speak of clothing and how their incest developed in Worms. At Worms, Renée's ornamented body is the focus of attention, and in this manner that the two can maintain a seemingly innocent relationship, despite the highly charged sexual nature of this scene. Additionally, Maxime can put his hands on Renée in such a setting because

the male touch envelops Renée at the tailor's. In this environment, her body becomes the object of male manipulation, and Maxime can come into contact with it under the guise of innocuous intentions. This manipulation of Renée's body through clothing allows Maxime the dominant male position. This scene also highlights the important role of clothing, particularly in the form of Worms' fashion, in deepening their attraction for one another, and in ultimately leading to their incest.

Yet, Maxime's act of hiding himself in Renée's skirts indicates a reversal in the power dynamics of their incest, as Renée assumes a dominant, protective role. Maxime commits a similar act as he hides behind Renée's petticoats at the Tuileries²⁸ once again allowing Renée to exercise a position of power. Thus, the dynamics in their relationship fluctuate constantly. This passage also demonstrates that Maxime has always been in familiar contact with Renée's skirts, and the intermingling of fabric and flesh builds the foundation for their sexual relations later in the novel. Despite Maxime's youth in this scene, Zola demonstrates the highly eroticized connotation that Renée's clothing has already assumed, as Maxime's penetration of her skirts in this passage foreshadows his literal penetration of her body.

Clothing provides a link to Renée's and Maxime's incestuous behaviors yet again the night of Blanche Muller's ball. The two are returning from their dinner in the private dining room after the ball, and are beginning to come back to their senses from the hazy dream-like state of incestuous interaction that occurred there.

Maxime, dans son coin, rêvait aussi avec quelque ennui. Il était fâché de l'aventure. Il s'en prenait au domino de satin noir. Avait-on jamais vu une

²⁸ « Aux Tuileries, chez les ministres, il disparaissait dans les jupons de Renée, » (Zola 226).

femme se fagoter de sorte ! On ne lui voyait pas même le cou. *Il l'avait prise pour un garçon, il jouait avec elle, et ce n'était pas sa faute, si le jeu était devenu sérieux.* (Zola 188) [Emphasis is mine]

The first time the two physically engage in incestuous actions, Renée is dressed in her most masculine attire of the entire novel. She is covered in satin up to her chin, with her hair pulled back, and her brow contorted into a masculine furrow. Moreover, Maxime uses her confusing portrayal of her sexuality as an excuse for their slip into incest.

In a sense, the incest between Renée and Maxime in La Curée is presented as a game. The lackadaisical manner with which the two enter into sexual relations reflects the prevailing attitude in Second Empire society that taking on a lover is just as perfunctory an act as putting on an article of clothing. For Renée, Maxime simply represents the latest accessory to her ever-expanding wardrobe. This depiction highlights the artificiality of their society, emphasizing how sexuality, like dress, has almost become commodified. Zola seems to depict their incest in this fashion to reveal that beneath the decadence presented at the surface level of Second Empire high society lies a complete perversion of sexual and familial roles. Thus, in this scene from the night of Blanche Muller's ball, Maxime is forced to recognize that his "game" has led him into dangerous territory. He sulks, almost as a child who has been told his favorite toy is dangerous for him to play with. Yet, this scene is far from the end of his manipulation of Renée. It is the inception of their "game" of incest, one of predator and prey, that perverts not only sexual roles but family ties as well. The two vacillate between these dual roles, the hallmark of their incest, which is expressed in Renée's dress.

Further, the dynamics of the hunt that typify this “game” of incest are expressed sartorially when Renée wears a dress that has the scene of *la chasse* printed on the fabric. This is a prominent example of the literary technique of *mise en abyme*, a literary convention defined as « toute enclave entretenant une relation de similitude avec l’œuvre qui la contient. »²⁹

Jamais elle n’avait eu des imaginations plus hardies de toilettes et de coiffures. Ce fut alors qu’elle risqua cette fameuse robe de satin couleur buisson, sur laquelle était brodée toute une chasse au cerf, avec des attributs, des poires à poudre, des cors de chasse, des couteaux à larges lames...L’inceste mettait en elle une flamme qui luisait au fond de ses yeux et chauffait ses rires. Son binocle prenait des insolences suprêmes sur le bout de son nez, et elle regardait les autres femmes, les bonnes amies étalées dans l’énormité de quelque vice, d’un air d’adolescent vantard, d’un sourire fixe signifant : ‘J’ai mon crime.’ (Zola 226)

The *mise en abyme* portrayed in this scene is the reduplication of the concept and image of *la chasse* on Renée’s dress that aptly depicts the development of the incest between the lovers. Through her clothing in this scene, Renée blatantly expresses her incest, as the bold print mirrors Renée’s increasingly overt expression of her desire for Maxime. In a sense, Renée’s perceived role as *libido dominandi* is analogous to that of the hunters in *la chasse*. In the hunt depicted on her dress, men pursue the fleeing, vulnerable figure of a stag, until they are able to penetrate it with their weapons. As the masculine motifs on her dress suggest, Renée has assumed the role of the male protagonist in her incest. As

²⁹ Sharon Mouanda, “Mises en Abyme and Narrative Function in Zola’s *La Curée*”, *Modern Language Review*, Vol. 103 (2008): 35.

discussed in the previous section, Renée uses transgressive dress to try to surmount the restrictions her gender places on her in Second Empire society. Yet, this dress is not only a transvestive attempt to assume male dominance with its masculine motifs. It also evokes an incestual connotation, as Renée adopts the role of a masculine hunter in sexually pursuing Maxime. This print is a visual and highly public representation of the actions that the two are engaging in privately.

Thus, through images of male penetration that Renée exhibits on her dress, she is making a sartorial declaration of her incest. It seems as if she has become so enmeshed in the incest that she cannot help but physically exude it. Her dress proclaims its existence by splashing its visual representation boldly across her body. Every movement that Renée makes while wearing the dress suggests the motions of their incestuous acts. The print of the stag hunt is complete with « cors de chasse » that trumpet its existence, adding yet another sensory suggestion to Renée's outfit. Voysest has studied how the boldness of this outfit blatantly professes their sexual relations. "At this stage in the novel, Renée has abandoned herself intensely to her incestuous relation, and due to this pleasure her imagination becomes bolder as regards attire and head-dresses." (Voysest 120) The incest practically oozes from Renée's pores, and her every expression and gesture burn with it.

The vivid display of her dress mimics the boldness of her actions. As her identity is linked to her clothing, it is no wonder that this dress has such a profound impact on Renée's comportment. Renée's dress emboldens her in part because it is a physical representation of her newly assumed position of masculine dominance. Hence, Zola personifies the masculine instrument of *le binocle* as assuming Renée's audacious airs,

rather than Renée exhibiting them herself. These masculine representations of Renée have replaced her true identity, and in this manner, her incest with Maxime is another form of male manipulation. As I will discuss in the last section, this manipulation eventually leads to the dissolution of her identity.

The dynamics of the stag hunt on Renée's dress demonstrate her unappeasable lust for Maxime. She burns with the insatiable desire of *la chasse*, which is being played out eternally on her outfit. No matter how many times she commits incest with Maxime, like *la chasse* printed on her clothing, Renée will never be satisfied. Despite the overt nature of her self-representation in this scene, her dress also embodies the deepest and most hidden inadequacies of Renée's life. She is perennially chasing a myriad of illicit pleasures in search of satisfaction, but her lust for the unknown is insatiable. Renée is enmeshed in the culture of transient fashion of Second Empire Parisian society. Zola demonstrates the superficiality of this materialist culture, where happiness is contingent upon ownership and the process of obtaining a possession, and consequently becomes an emotion that can only be temporarily attained. One owns a garment, or a person as the case may be, and feels a sense of satisfaction for a time. This sense of satisfaction is more intense if the object (or person) in question is difficult to obtain (i.e. expensive, elusive, or illicit), yet it is always transient, as the newest fashions (or lovers) will always entice the consumer to discard the older object in exchange for new possessions. In this manner, Maxime has become one more garment in Renée's wardrobe. Renée is on fire with incest in this scene, as she basks in the pleasure of what she perceives as her newly acquired ownership of Maxime.

Due to the enormity of this vice in the eyes of her society, Renée feels an acute sense of satiation in its consummation. As her expression in this scene indicates: *J'ai mon crime*. Although she has not acquired permanent ownership of Maxime, Renée believes she has found a way to claim him temporarily through sexual domination. She also manipulates him by playing upon his fear of Saccard's discovery of their illicit act. Thus, Renée's ownership of this crime allows her a brief sense of satisfaction. Renée believes it sets her apart from the women around her which gives her a sense of distinction that she would not ordinarily adopt. These emotions express the unconscious link Renée has made between incest and clothing. Just as she would parade around a new gown or expensive jewels, she puts her incest with Maxime on display to impress others by what she has acquired. She feels emboldened by her ownership of the experience of incest, which produces sensations unknown to most others around her.

The *mise en abyme* in this scene completes its function to "manipulate the reader's interpretation of the novel by raising certain expectations as to its outcome." (Mouanda 35) Renée's pronounced dress foreshadows the discovery of her incest with Maxime and suggests the power dynamics in their relationship. Additionally, this tool functions as an analepsis for the reader, as in this usage of the *mise en abyme*, Renée is completely oblivious to the impending scenario that her dress illustrates. Consequently the reader has a unique window of analysis unrealized by the characters themselves. In employing this tool, Zola not only intertwines clothing and sexuality, but he also subtly brings them to the attention of the reader. One of the hallmarks of a naturalist text, for Zola this literary device reflects the act of writing and the construction of the novel. Through this tool, Mouanda argues, "[T]he naturalist writer is able to draw attention to

the process of writing...without, however, intruding directly into the text.” (Mouanda 42) Yet, while Mouanda discusses the integral role the *mise en abyme* plays in the narrative function of La Curée, she curiously fails to cite the example of Renée’s gown printed with *la chasse*: one of the most prominent examples of this literary technique. Indeed this unmentioned example of *mise en abyme* perfectly fits Mouanda’s description, showing a time when Renée’s life could have taken a different course, and foreshadowing a chain of events: in this case the ultimate demise of their love affair.

In conclusion, Renée and Maxime fluctuate constantly in their incest between the roles of the dominated and the *libido dominandi*. Their clothing, linked to the development of their incest, represents this fluidity. Clothing provides Renée and Maxime with an excuse for their slip into incest and facilitates their physical contact with one another in their interactions at Worms. Clothing serves as a mirror of the stages of their incest as Renée’s dress of *la chasse* represents the increasingly flagrant dynamic of their relationship, and Maxime’s destruction of her. Yet, Renée’s perception that she is able to overcome the constraints of her sex through assuming a powerful and dominant masculine role in her incest is erroneous.

Despite the fact that Renée is often depicted as dominant, the men around her ultimately manipulate her, as her incest with Maxime illustrates. As I will discuss in the next section, Renée believes she is dominating Maxime throughout the entire novel, until her fateful *prise de conscience* the night of the final ball at the end of the novel, where the power dynamics are radically reversed. In the scene of *la chasse*, Renée not only declares her incest, she unknowingly wears the scene of her own destruction. Renée is the object of Saccard and Maxime’s pursuit, and her dress foreshadows her slaying,

perpetrated by men, which I will discuss in the last section. Thus, Renée embodies both *le chasseur* and *la proie*. This scene captures both the ambiguity of her status and what is yet to come. Despite the fact that Renée thinks she is winning the “game” of incest, she will ultimately be the one who is manipulated by it. Bourdieu has written of the woman’s position in this game.

[E]lles sont presque toujours condamnées à participer, par une solidarité affective avec le joueur qui n’implique pas une véritable participation intellectuelle et affective au jeu et qui fait d’elles, bien souvent, des supporters inconditionnels mais mal informés de la réalité du jeu et des enjeux. (Bourdieu 83)

Renée is ultimately a pawn in the game of her life being played by her society and by the men around her. Consequently, Renée is not ultimately capable of exercising masculine dominance, incarnated in the position of *libido dominandi*, over those around her.

Qui donc l'avait mise nue: Dissolution of the "illutio fondamentale"

À la fin de la fête, elle s'aperçoit dans son miroir et c'est à ce moment-là qu'elle se rend compte de sa propre nudité qui est maintenant physique ainsi que morale. Saccard a découvert ses relations avec Maxime et elle se voit alors pour la première fois telle qu'elle apparaît aux autres. Elle sait qu'elle a été traitée en objet, que son mari et Maxime se sont servis d'elle et qu'ils l'ont laissée tomber comme une poupée déchirée.³⁰

Throughout La Curée, Renée tries to surmount male control through exposing her flesh in provocative garments, dressing in a masculine fashion, and dominating Maxime in their incest, assuming the masculine position of *libido dominandi*. She plays these “games,” believing that they allow her some control over her surroundings. Yet, what Renée does not realize is that she is playing on an uneven field, a field dominated by men and male power, and she is initially deceived into thinking that this game is worth playing in the first place. This constitutes the « *illutio fondamentale*, » which Bourdieu has defined as: « L'investissement dans le jeu lui-même, la conviction que le jeu mérite d'être joué malgré tout, jusqu'au bout, et selon les règles. » (Bourdieu 81) It is not until her *prise de conscience* at the end of the novel that Renée becomes aware that this “game” is fundamentally still governed by societal rules, which are created and maintained by men. As I will discuss, Renée engages in this “game” in part because she is continually searching for something to fill the *vide* in her life, a search that ultimately leaves her empty-handed. I will analyze her fateful *prise de conscience* and the shattering of this illusion of control, as Renée realizes that she has been a pawn of male manipulation throughout the entire novel, as evidenced by her relation to clothing and

³⁰ A. Zielonka, “Renée et le Problème du Mal: Explication d'une Page De La Curée”, La Curée de Zola ou “La Vie à Outrance” (Paris: Sedes, 1987) 165.

accessories. Lastly, the faculty of sight plays an integral role in Renée's *prise de conscience*, as it both maintains and destroys these illusions.

As depicted in the scene of her childhood undressing, Renée learns from a young age that she must adopt certain societal expectations and norms if she wants to negotiate her society and exert her influence upon it. Yet, conforming to feminine norms in Renée's society inherently limits her, as her worth is determined by masculine appreciation, as Ross Russell has explored. "Women can only extend their power over the world through their power over men, and are not, in and of themselves, inherently powerful except through their beauty." (Ross Russell 2) Thus, from the beginning of the process of socialization in Renée's childhood, when her father and aunt were trying to impose conventional gender norms upon her through dress, Renée has been forced to adapt to the expectations of a male-dominated society. She uses sartorial expression to enhance her beauty as an object of masculine desire, in order to exert some influence over the men around her.

Yet, this manipulation leads Renée to feel a sense of deep emptiness in her life that she confesses to Maxime at the opening of the novel.

Quoi ?... autre chose, parbleu ! je veux autre chose. Est-ce que je sais, moi ! Si je savais [...] Il faudrait autre chose ; tu comprends, moi, je ne devine pas ; mais autre chose, quelque chose qui n'arrivât à personne, qu'on ne rencontrât pas tous les jours ; qui fût une jouissance rare, inconnue. (Zola 47-48)

Already at the age of twenty, Renée has become jaded by the extravagance of her society. She constantly devours the latest fashions and lovers, attends the most extravagant balls, and is privy to the latest gossip. However, this life leaves her wanting something more.

Harrow identifies this chasm in Renée's life. "[T]he worldly pleasures she accumulates mask the void at the centre of her life. Excess overflows into emptiness, inducing feelings of non-social identity." (Harrow 263) Renée experiences such emptiness in part because she lacks a social role other than as an ornament to the men around her. She searches for this *autre chose* sartorially, through her increasingly bold and extravagant outfits. Further, Renée's declaration foreshadows her incest with Maxime, as their involvement is *une jouissance rare, inconnue*. Despite the fact that she does not finally find satisfaction, Renée deludes herself for a substantial portion of the novel into thinking that she has truly found the *autre chose* that will give her life meaning.

One way that Renée maintains this illusion of satisfaction is through adorning herself with her husband Saccard's wealth. She begins to represent herself according to this image, becoming a symbol of his monetary prowess. For example, Saccard adorns his wife's body with Laure d'Aurigny's *aigrette* and *rivière* (Zola 194) that cost 65,000 francs, as signs of his affluence, despite his bankruptcy. Harrow has discussed the significance of this act. "Thus, Renee's body is explicitly encoded, embellished with the outward signs of her husband's wealth, made to mirror Saccard's self-image and social identity." (Harrow 253) He hopes that this ostentatious display of wealth on his wife's body will mask his glaring debt, and Renée's figure will be transformed into a convincing manifestation of affluence that Saccard does not actually possess. When Renée protests, he asserts his control. « Gardez-vous-en bien! s'écria-t-il avec inquiétude. Si l'on ne vous voyait pas ces bijoux demain au bal du ministère, on ferait des cancanes sur ma situation. » (Zola 194) In a society that is so fundamentally based on visual and physical representation such as theirs, this chicanery is successful. Renée strips herself of inner-

identity by ornamenting her body with the promise of Saccard's wealth, while he simultaneously depletes her dowry.

Additionally, Renée's body is objectified to project the image of her tailor's, Worms, artistic genius. Worms relies upon his clients to advertise and legitimize his wares. Without their physical representations of his visions, he would be bankrupt financially and creatively. Yet, rather than accessorizing Renée with his designs, Worms seems to assume the position of artist or creator of her person. He exerts a position of power over Renée, as he not only strips her of her riches but also makes her a malleable, passive figure. Harrow has investigated Worms' role.

By authoring the clothes Renée wears, Worms produces himself as he produces his female client. The couturier's self-image as a creative genius demands the passivity and transformability of the female body (and, by implication, the de-animation and symbolic death of the feminine self.) (Harrow 257)

Thus, as Renée spends her inheritance on layers of chiffon and taffeta, she seems to acquiesce in this submissive role, and it contributes to the dissolution of her feminine self and the rise of its replacement with an image of masculine genius. Accordingly, an exorbitant bill from Worms for 257,000 francs is the only thing that survives Renée after her death. When Renée ceases to be the mirror of masculine constructions, the paper trail of her expenditures is the only remnant of her life.

Renée's manipulation as an object of sight is evident from the first time Worms perceives her. This scene also develops Maxime's feminine qualities as discussed in the second section.

Voilà un garçon qui aurait dû naître fille », murmura-t-elle, à le voir si rose, si rougissant, si pénétré du bien-être qu'il avait éprouvé dans son voisinage. Puis lorsque le grand Worms recevait enfin Renée, Maxime pénétrait avec elle dans le cabinet. Il s'était permis de parler deux ou trois fois, pendant que le maître s'absorbait dans le spectacle de sa cliente, comme les pontifes du beau veulent que Leonard de Vinci l'air fait devant la Joconde. Le maître avait daigné sourire de la justesse de ses observations. Il faisait mettre Renée debout devant une glace, qui montait du parquet au plafond, se recueillait, avec un froncement de sourcils, pendant que la jeune femme, émue, retenait son haleine, pour ne pas bouger. Et, au bout de quelques minutes, le maître comme pris et secoué par l'inspiration, peignait à grands traits saccadés le chef-d'oeuvre qu'il venait de concevoir. (Zola 138-139)

This scene positions Renée as a mannequin upon which Worms and Maxime project their desires. As she stands before the mirror, Renée sees herself through their eyes, and their visions for her subsume her identity.

As a consequence, Renée has become «une grande poupée dont la poitrine déchirée ne laisse échapper qu'un filet de son.» (Zola 311) She is manipulated and dressed and undressed like a doll, according to the desires of her owners. This description also indicates Renée's fabrication. Not only is she a mannequin for men to manipulate, but she depends on men (and the male gaze) for her very existence. Even in her Tahitian beauty costume discussed in the first section, Renée cannot present herself completely in the nude, because even in the most authentic human state of nudity, Renée is artificially defined. The manipulation of Renée has reversed the natural constitution of

her body, and her clothed state has become her flesh. Renée's naked body is covered in cloth just like that of a doll. The knit stockings she wears do not adhere to the contours of her body; they delineate its form. Indeed, Zola describes Renée as a *femme de soie rose* (Zola 311), indicating her stitched construction. This description illustrates Renée's relationship to clothing, because it indicates that Renée's identity has become so inextricably wed to her dress that even her person is made of cloth.

Due to these manipulations, even before the ultimate scene of *prise de conscience*, the façade begins to crack, and Renée has inklings of her blind complicity in the schemes that have been controlling her. For example, the night of the final ball scene, she and Maxime are arguing, and Maxime tells Renée that Saccard has been lending her money at usurious rates and is intending to steal from her yet again. She reacts not with anger, but with shock. Indeed, as this new information begins to sink in, her reaction foreshadows her *prise de conscience*.

La jeune femme l'écoutait, très pâle, les lèvres serrées. Debout devant la cheminée, elle baissait un peu la tête, elle regardait le feu. Sa toilette de nuit, cette chemise que Maxime avait fait chauffer, s'écartait, laissait voir des blancheurs immobiles de statue. (Zola 270)

This information stuns Renée. It is her first premonition that, rather than controlling the men around her, she has been the object of male manipulation from the outset. This news strips her of her dignity, leaving her feeling vulnerable and exposed. Although she is not yet fully naked as she finds herself in her *prise de conscience*, this scene demonstrates the parallel between Renée's emotional states and her dress as her *toilette de nuit* falls open, exposing her bare flesh.

Renée realizes the extent of her manipulation the night of her *prise de conscience*. As Renée has become nothing more than an object of sight, she realizes it by viewing her own image.

[E]lle regardait fixement dans la glace pour lire cet avenir de paix qui lui avait échappé. Mais elle ne voyait que ses cuisses roses, ses hanches roses, cette étrange femme de soie rose qu'elle avait devant elle, et dont la peau de fine étoffe, aux mailles serrées, semblait faite pour des amours de pantins et de poupées. Elle en était arrivée à cela, à être une grande poupée dont la poitrine déchirée ne laisse échapper qu'un filet de son... Qui donc l'avait mise nue ? (Zola 311)

Thus, Renée finally grasps that her identity has become completely subsumed by her dress, as she has externalized it to meet masculine expectations. Thompson has analyzed the result of this process. "In this passage 'soie' replaces 'soi' as the women's narcissistic loss of selfhood is described with reference to the silk samples which seduce them." (Thomson 77)

This *soie* plays an integral role in the disintegration of Renée's identity. The pink color of the *soie* and the pink color of her skin blend into one, helping to complete Renée's transformation into *une grande poupée*. "The colour pink, for Zola, is the colour both of blood and of the female sexual organs, and consequently of problematical female sexual pleasure." (Thompson 153) This problem arises from the fact that Renée constantly confuses the materials she wears with the skin hidden beneath her clothes to the effect that this color extends from Renée's person, eliminating any boundaries between her physical constitution and her *toilette*. Both Maxime and Saccard have physically penetrated Renée, and the night of the final ball, they penetrate her bedroom

simultaneously, effectively annihilating any lingering distinction between *soie* and *soi*. The pink color of the *soie* that has taken the place of her flesh emphasizes her nudity after Saccard and Maxime have stripped her. Lastly, this color also represents blood, emphasizing how Renée has become *la curée*, the bloody remnant of *la chasse* that Maxime and Saccard have tossed aside.

Moreover, the mirror plays an integral role in Renée's deconstruction of the masculine expectations that she has accepted in place of a self. Bourdieu has discussed the power of the mirror.

D'exister seulement pour autrui ou, ce qui revient au même, pour le miroir (instrument qui permet non seulement de se voir mais d'essayer de voir comment on est vu et de se donner à voir comme on entend être vu), d'être seulement une chose faite pour être regardée ou qu'il faut regarder en vue de la préparer à être regardée, il se convertit de corps pour autrui en corps pour soi, de corps passif et agi en corps actif et agissant. (Bourdieu 74)

The mirror embodies Berger's *surveyor/surveyed* duality better than perhaps any other tool. For the first time Renée can see herself through the eyes of the masculine *surveyor* and she realizes the extent of her manipulation. It is only through viewing her reflection that Renée finally realizes that she has become a mirror for Saccard, Worms, and others. In this final scene, Renée takes back control of her identity by interpreting it for herself, yet what she finds ultimately destroys her. Stripped of her wealth, her husband, her lover, and her clothing, Renée sees herself as what she really is, as her gaze finally passes from obscurity to lucidity. She simultaneously becomes her own spectator and her own

interpreter, realizing she has no identity left. At last Renée peels back the artifice of her life and sees her true nakedness.

As the mirror catalyzes her *prise de conscience*, Renée's myopic vision in La Curée is critical. Throughout the novel, she struggles to overcome this impediment and view her surroundings clearly. For example, she employs *la loupe* to look at a photo album with Maxime, as quoted in the second section. Yet, in this final moment of realization, by carefully studying herself, Renée's myopic eyes are able to lift the translucent veil that has been barely covering the emptiness of her life, to see the truth. At first glance, Renée cannot come to terms with the corporal image that meets her eyes. Harrow has discussed Renée's struggle as she searches for her identity in this scene.

And so, the relation of "seeing oneself-knowing oneself" is confirmed through the deployment of a gaze wrested from masculinist conflation of self and body. Renée's myopia is corrected by knowledge acquired through specular self-analysis. Renée views (and unmakes) her image as a created object in order to reconstruct herself authentically. The undoing of the body is staged as a de-animation of that image. (Harrow 269)

For the first time in her life, Renée encounters a completely candid image of herself. Abandoned by Saccard, Maxime, Worms and her family - all of her former "creators" - Renée can finally see that she is alone, and stripped naked. At this point in her life the task of reforming her identity according to her own desires proves too daunting.

The ultimate moment of crisis for Renée is when she realizes that all along she has been an object of male manipulation. Voysest describes Renée's subsumed identity.

Standing before the mirror is a familiar pose for Renée, the queen of the Second Empire fashion. This time she needs to find a person inside the clothes, and she cannot. Her agonized sensation of having been « mise nue » is the realization that she has accepted gowns in place of a self. (Voyses 118)

When Renée tries to permeate her artificial self-representation and look past her external appearance, she realizes that she is « plus nue que nue. » (Adam-Maillet 56). The façade has cracked, and Renée finally sees the emptiness that has been lurking behind it her entire life. From this point on, her life will be the *dénouement* that leads to her destruction.

Finally, Renée realizes that Maxime and Saccard have effectuated this process of manipulation.

Elle savait maintenant. C'étaient ces gens qui l'avaient mise nue. Saccard avait dégrafé le corsage, et Maxime avait fait tomber la jupe. Puis, à eux deux, ils venaient d'arracher la chemise. A présent, elle se trouvait sans un lambeau, avec des cercles d'or, comme une esclave... Ils l'avaient mise nue. (Zola 312-313)

Hence, even in her deconstruction, clothing defines Renée. As she has completely materialized her identity, only through relating her experience to sartorial representations can she understand the extent of Maxime's and Saccard's ravages of her life. “*La Curée* strips the gloss of aestheticization to reveal the female body as an object of masculine speculation in an economy of desire in which erotic and financial values become almost indistinguishable.” (Harrow 252) Renée finally recognizes that Maxime's and Saccard's intentions for her were not so different after all. She has been completely objectified for

masculine purposes, and has been casually passed off from father to son, becoming « ce louis tombé de la poche du spéculateur. » (Zola 312)

Further, the fact that Zola describes Renée as a slave reinforces the vulnerability of her position and her complete objectification. « Renée s'était crue, on l'avait crue, dominatrice, mais sa nature ultime est la soumission la plus vulnérable. » (Adam-Maillet 62) Renée realizes that all along, these men regarded her as sub-human. She was never valued as a person, but only as an object that could be manipulated for their benefit. Thus, when she has finally been stripped of clothing, Renée can finally see her *cercles d'or*, the tangible representation of male ownership, that lie underneath. Now Renée sees that she is nothing more than a possession that has served its purpose and has been indifferently discarded. This realization ultimately kills Renée.

The personal tragedy for Renée lies in the fact that she never finds the *autre chose* that she has been searching for all her life. She has tried to find satisfaction in her *toilettes*, her *crime* of incest, and her *vie à outrance*. Yet as she looks in the mirror, she realizes that her frenetic search for meaning has ultimately left her with nothing. Indeed, the horror that Renée feels in this scene is caused not so much by seeing her reflection, but in *not* seeing anything. Renée has disappeared underneath layers of taffeta and silk, and has never re-emerged. Her reflection is a visual representation of the huge void in her life, and for the first time she sees her true nakedness. Adam-Maillet has analyzed this moment of crisis. « Renée se voit pour la première et dernière fois telle qu'elle est, et ce regard ne lui signifie que l'interdiction de signification, l'impossibilité même de se regarder. Sa formule pourrait être: je suis celle qui n'est pas. » (Adam-Maillet 49)

In conclusion, in Renée's world, the clothing eclipses the woman. As a consequence, a woman's identity and wardrobe become inextricably linked. Renée represents herself in increasing states of undress in La Curée until her ultimate dehumanization is complete. These crucial moments of sartorial and emotional realization occur simultaneously at the final ball, when Renée realizes that she has indelibly buried her self-identity under her elaborate gowns. A victim both of Second Empire society and of masculine manipulation, Renée has not managed to fill the *vide* in her life. By placing the utmost import on her physical appearance, Renée materializes her femininity and her identity, which makes her an object of male manipulation.

Conclusion

Dans l'histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le second Empire, La Curée est la note de l'or et de la chair. L'artiste en moi se refusait à faire de l'ombre sur cet éclat de la vie à outrance, qui a éclairé tout le règne d'un jour suspect de mauvais lieu. Un point de l'Histoire que j'ai entreprise en serait resté obscur. J'ai voulu montrer l'épuisement prématuré d'une race qui a vécu trop vite et qui aboutit à l'homme-femme des sociétés pourries ; la spéculation furieuse d'une époque s'incarnant dans un tempérament sans scrupule, en clin aux aventures ; le détraquement nerveux d'une femme dont un milieu de luxe et de honte décuple les appétits natifs. Et, avec ces trois monstruosité sociales, j'ai essayé d'écrire une œuvre d'art et de science qui fût en même temps une des pages les plus étranges de nos mœurs.³¹

In a sense, La Curée constitutes only one chapter in the larger “novel” of the Rougon-Macquart series. It represents « la note de l’or et de la chair, » that characterizes Second Empire society. These themes are manifest in La Curée through Renée’s progressive revealing of *la chair* that simultaneously strips her of her inner identity, the focus of the first section of this essay. The second section discusses Renée’s transvestive dress, through which she attempts to transgress social limits and the physical reality of *la chair*. The third section considers the roles of the dominated and the *libido dominandi* in Maxime and Renée’s incest, the ultimate exposure of *la chair*. It also demonstrates how Renée unknowingly becomes an object of male manipulation *de l’or et de la chair*, which is depicted in her dress. This manipulation, largely perpetrated by Maxime and Saccard, is also partially carried out by Renée herself as she searches for something to fill the *vide* in her life. The final section traces the events that lead to Renée’s destruction, which she finally realizes in her *prise de conscience*. Thus, this « histoire naturelle » serves to illuminate Zola’s depiction of the maladies of a society « qui a vécu trop vite. »

³¹ Emile Zola, “Préface”. *La Curée*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1981) 7.

As discussed in the Introduction, La Curée forms a part of the literary movement of naturalism, taking a scientific approach of studying characters in their social *milieu*.

Plus tard, sans doute, la science trouvera ce déterminisme de toutes les manifestations cérébrales et sensuelles de l'homme. Dès ce jour, la science entre donc dans notre domaine, à nous romanciers, qui sommes à cette heure des analystes de l'homme, dans son action individuelle et sociale. (Zola, Le Roman expérimental, 9)

As Zola undertakes a scientific study of the characters in their natural surroundings, the time period within which the novel is set plays an important role.

Starting with the first novel in the series, La Fortune des Rougons, Zola advances and legitimizes this approach.

Mon roman eut été impossible avant 89. Je le base donc sur *une vérité du temps* : la bousculade des ambitions et des appétits. J'étudie les ambitions et les appétits d'une famille lancée à *travers le monde moderne*, faisant des efforts surhumains, n'arrivant pas à cause de sa propre nature et des influences, touchant au succès pour retomber, finissant par produire de véritables monstruosité morales... *C'est le trouble du moment que je peins*. (Notice 409) [Emphasis is mine]

As the *milieu* is central to Zola's approach, I conclude this project by discussing La Curée itself in the *milieu* of the Rougon-Macquart series. As the literary critic Daniel Couty observed: « Lire Zola, c'est d'abord se plonger dans vingt univers différents dont la diversité voulue enrichit le projet unitaire de la série. » (Couty 1288) I advance that despite overlapping themes in Au Bonheur des dames and La Curée, the two novels provide antithetical perspectives on Second Empire society. Further, to place La Curée in

the Rougon-Macquart series, I will briefly discuss the first and last novels of the series, La Fortune des Rougons and Le Docteur Pascal, respectively, to see how themes of *la vie à outrance* are evinced from the beginning to the end of the series, and how La Curée reflects those themes.

While La Curée and Au Bonheur des Dames both deal with themes of consumerism and the link between fashion and female sexuality, La Curée is Zola's discussion of the pessimism of this culture while Au Bonheur des dames represents a more positive reaction to the consumer culture that emerged in Second Empire France.

Je veux dans *Au Bonheur des dames* faire le poème de l'activité moderne. Donc, changement complet de philosophie : plus de pessimisme d'abord, ne pas conclure à la bêtise et à la mélancolie de la vie, conclure à son continuel labeur, à la puissance et à la gaieté de son enfantement. En un mot, aller avec le siècle, exprimer le siècle, qui est un siècle d'action et de conquête, d'efforts dans tous les sens. Ensuite, comme conséquence, montrer la joie de l'action et le plaisir de l'existence ; il y a certainement des gens heureux de vivre, dont les jouissances ne ratent pas et qui se gorgent de bonheur et de succès : ce sont ces gens-la que je veux peindre, pour avoir l'autre face de la vérité, et pour être ainsi complet ; car *Pot-Bouille* et les autres suffisent pour montrer les médiocrités et les avortements de l'existence.³²

The *pessimism* that Zola references in this quote refers in part to La Curée. Renée never experiences true happiness, as she continually searches for something to fill the *vide* at the center of her life. La Curée primarily strives to demonstrate the social degeneration

³² Emile Zola, "Dossier préparatoire", Au Bonheur des dames, ébauche: <http://expositions.bnf.fr/zola/bonheur/pedago/intro.htm>.

caused by the *vie à outrance* of Second Empire society. Through Renée's and Maxime's perversion of familial roles in their incest, Renée's transgressive sartorial behaviors, and Maxime's and Saccard's manipulation of Renée, Zola demonstrates *les avortements de l'existence* in La Curée. Yet, Zola seems to balance the dark note of La Curée with the *gens heureux de vivre* that he depicts in Au Bonheur des Dames, a direct successor to Pot-Bouille. In Au Bonheur des Dames, the marriage of the department store employee, Denise Baudu, to the owner of the store, Octave Mouret, at the conclusion of the novel may seem antithetical to the conclusion of La Curée. In Au Bonheur des Dames, Octave tries to manipulate Denise, but ends up falling in love with her. Thus, their marriage perhaps signifies a victory of women over a man who refuses to be conquered and who aims to subjugate and exploit women. This *autre face de la vérité* provides a stark contrast to the *prise de conscience* at the end of La Curée, where Renée, who believed she was the *surveyor* throughout the novel, realizes she has been a victim of male manipulation the entire time. She is incapable of recovering from this earth-shattering blow and dies in crippling debt shortly after.

Despite these variations, the novels in the Rougon-Macquart adhere to the naturalist tradition. Zola's preparatory dossier shows how fiction is a particularly effective medium for a writer to communicate with the general public.

Ne pas oublier qu'un drame prend le public à la gorge. Il se fâche, mais n'oublie plus. Lui donner toujours, sinon des cauchemars, du moins des livres excessifs qui restent dans sa mémoire. Il est inutile de s'attacher sans cesse aux drames de

la chair. Je trouverai autre chose, -- d'aussi poignant...Mais toujours de la chaleur et de la passion.³³

Like Renée's fateful *prise de conscience* in front of the mirror at the end of La Curée, Zola's naturalist approach provides a mirror for the public of the realities of their society that can *prendre le public à la gorge*. Thus, rather than producing a conventional romance novel, Zola depicts deep perversion of *la chair* in La Curée, in order to shock the public out of its complacency.

Further, Zola recycles themes in his series to show as many of the permutations and possible realities of Second Empire society to reach the greatest number of people, and also to demonstrate the variety and profusion of changes that characterize this time. The author enumerates these themes in his reflections on the project of La Fortune des Rougon.

L'empire a déchaîné les appétits et les ambitions. Orgie d'appétits et d'ambition. Soif de jouir, et de jouir par la pensée surmenée, et par le corps surmené. Pour le corps poussée du commerce, folie de l'agio et de la spéculation; pour l'esprit, éréthisme de la pensée conduite près de la folie...Fatigue et la chute : la famille brûlera comme une matière se dévorant elle-même, elle s'épuisera presque dans une génération parce qu'elle vivra trop vite. (Notice 411)

The idea that « l'empire a déchaîné les appétits et les ambitions » applies to La Curée. As a result of her society, Renée experiences an insatiable search for *autre chose* to fill the *vide* in her life. Renée represents « le corps poussée du commerce, » as her body begins to exist solely for retail fashion. Lastly, the Saccard family in La Curée represents

³³ Cited in Henri Mitterand. "Notice". La Fortune des Rougon. (Paris : Folio, 1981) 408.

a *famille épuisée*. As Maxime and Saccard's toss Renée back and forth, their unrestrained appetites usurp "traditional" familial roles.

Zola depicts the myriad effects of Second Empire society in the Rougon-Macquart series from start to finish. While he bases his characters on what he sees in reality, his use of the medium of fiction demonstrates his aspiration to more than mere description. Zola's perspective permits a profound understanding of Second Empire society that is, indeed, capable of *prendre le public à la gorge*. Mitterrand has discussed the significance of Zola's technique.

On a découvert sous la trame de surface un texte second, tissu de toute autre étoffe : l'éclat du désir et du plaisir...puise ses couches les plus profondes, non dans la documentation « historique et sociale », mais dans une connaissance à la fois plus intuitive, plus moderne, plus exceptionnelle, et qu'on pourrait peut-être désigner par le terme anthropologie.³⁴

This description of *tissu* is evocative of my sartorial analysis of La Curée. The discussion of *l'éclat du désir et du plaisir* in the preface of last novel of the series, Le Docteur Pascal, demonstrates that this theme in La Curée is what helps weave the thread of this novel into the larger *tissu* of the Rougon-Macquart, and into the context of Parisian society as well.

Thus, the novels in the Rougon-Macquart series present a diverse, yet interconnected, reflection of Second Empire society. In this sense, Zola's *oeuvre*, in its totality and complexity, represents, as Couty discusses, both the work of a man and that

³⁴ Henri Mitterrand, "Préface", Le Docteur Pascal. (Paris : Folio, 2001) 48.

of a time³⁵: Zola's scientific approach of naturalist analysis, giving him the self-proclaimed title «l'analyste de l'homme dans son action individuelle et sociale,» provides a candid look at the *tourbillon* of Second Empire society, and the enormous impact such a society had on its members.

³⁵ [1] *D'emboîtements en emboîtements, de microcosme en macrocosme, un lieu vaut pour le monde, un homme est un peu le reflet d'une famille qui renvoie l'image d'une époque, elle-même symbolique d'une histoire évolutive (Germinal), après avoir été cyclique et stationnaire (la lutte des Gras et des Maigres évoquées dans le Ventre de Paris). Couvrir l'espace, faire sentir la marche du temps (de la Fortune des Rougon à la Débâcle, du coup d'Etat à la défaite de 1870), l'œuvre de Zola cherche donc à être un monde qui donnerait le monde à voir dans sa globalité : en ce sens, il est bien l'œuvre d'un homme et peut-être d'un temps.* (Daniel Couty Histoire de la littérature française, Paris : Larousse, 2002, 1289)

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