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## Homosocial Bonds and Narrative Strategies in Adolphe Belot's *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* (1870)

ABSTRACT: Adolphe Belot's bestseller *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* (1870) is a striking example of narratological tension between implied readers and the narrator. Adrien's narrative, recounting the story of his unhappy marriage to a lesbian Paule Giraud, is significantly influenced by homosocial bonds with the male reading public — the implied readers of the text. Conscious of clear expectations towards a heterosexual man and a husband, the narrator reverts to hyper-heterosexual narration in order to give legitimacy to his story and his desires. However, his narrative strategies backfire on him and, in consequence, undermine his credibility. The paper shows how tension in the choice of narrative tools subverts the blatantly anti-lesbian message of the text. By using René Girard's theory of triangular desire and mimesis, the article also proves that the narrator is a male lesbian who had to subscribe to 19th-century convention of a husband.

KEY WORDS: 19th-century literature, French literature, queer studies, male lesbianism, lesbian, narratology, René Girard, mimesis, triangular desire, Adolphe Belot, implied reader, homosocial bonds, manipulation.

### Introduction

This article sets out to examine the rhetoric of narrative as an instrument of power in the 19th-century bestseller by Adolphe Belot *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* (1870).<sup>1</sup> The central question of Belot's novel revolves around the crime of lesbian sexuality and its revelation. It contrasts the idealized, socially prescribed heterosexual relationship of a married couple with the perverse homosexual li-

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, MG and *Mlle Giraud*.

aison depicted in the novel. This paper will demonstrate how the prevalent male homosocial discourse shapes Adrien's narrative and how the narrator reverts to, what I shall term, hyper-heterosexual narration in order to give legitimacy to his story and his desires.

*Mlle Giraud* demonstrates great sensitivity towards the expectations of its implied readers. Adrien, conscious of a male reading public, constructs himself according to their expectations and values as a heterosexual husband and he overdoes it. This destabilization is accomplished by narrative means that he employs to tell his story. I wish to demonstrate that there are concealed tendencies that subvert the blatantly anti-lesbian message of the text and escape the attention of the intended recipients of the narrative. In relation to this, I also wish to prove that Adrien should be viewed as a male lesbian, that is a "lesbian's soul enclosed in a man's body" (cf. SILVERMAN 339—347).

For the purpose of this article I will apply selected aspects of narratological theory to support my argument. I will use the term *implied audience* for the male reading public, for whom I will claim the novel was written, and distinguish it from the concept of the *ideal audience*.<sup>2</sup> Whereas the latter term presupposes that the reader understands everything that the text communicates, the implied reader is the recipient, whose attention can escape concealed messages in the text. As part of my argument, I will also refer to René Girard's concept of triangular desire, which will enable me to map Adrien's lesbian desire. Finally, I will consider selected aspects of Emile Zola's preface, added nine years after the first publication and thereafter included in all editions of *Mlle Giraud*, and treat the preface as an integral part of the text, contributing to its interpretation.

### Homosocial *mise en abîme*

*Mlle Giraud* tells the story, narrated from a perspective of the unhappy husband, of a marriage doomed to failure due to lesbian tendencies of the wife. The tale starts with a young bachelor Adrien de C. who after a brilliant start to his career decides to finally marry. He rejects the string of marriageable women paraded before him, finding fault in each of them. Finally, he meets Paule Giraud and falls in love with her. He decides to marry her against the advice of Paule herself and Countess Berthe de Blangy, her intimate friend from convent school. To Adrien's astonishment, Paule refuses to consummate their marriage and so Adrien engages in desperate attempts to bed her. He uses seduction, trickery,

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Prince's distinction between "narrative audience" and "authorial audience" (8, 61); on ideal reader (cf. ISER 50—59) and implied reader (cf. ISER 59—66).

violence, tears — all in vain. Frustrated, Adrien leaves Paris and on his travels he accidentally meets the husband of Countess de Blangy. The count reveals to him the sexual nature of their wives' relationship and together they decide to separate the women. Both female characters die at the end of the novel, Paule repentant and Countess de Blangy killed by Adrien.

### Zola's Preface

The purpose of a preface, according to Genette, is to provide information and guidance for a reader and thus imperceptibly impose on her the "proper" reading of a novel (GENETTE 209). Emile's Zola preface to *Mlle Giraud* conforms to this description. It was written as a reaction to the "curiosités malsaines" and "appétits de scandale" of the reading public who, in his opinion, treated *Mlle Giraud* as one of the "récits épicés" rather than a useful book of high moral value (MG 4). In his preface, Zola addresses the honourable fathers of families, the male public, warning them against the crime of lesbianism, which allegedly originates in convents: "si vous avez des filles, que votre femme lise ce livre avant de se séparer de ces chères créatures et de les envoyer au couvent" (MG 5). By this direct address to the reader and the guidance he is offering in the preface, Zola is determining exactly who the reader should be: a man, an honourable father of a family (GENETTE 212): "Ne baissez pas la voix, parlons tout haute de cette œuvre dont vous voulez faire une de ces œuvres que vos femmes et vos filles cachent sous l'oreiller" (MG 4).<sup>3</sup>

Zola thus creates a homosocial bond between himself, the author Belot, and the male reading public, which is intended to ward off the threat of lesbianism.<sup>4</sup> The reader, even if not falling into this homosocial category, is automatically colonized with a set of moral ideas that are expected of her, and her reading experience is thus strongly influenced. Zola's rhetoric in the preface, designating his addressees, that is the male reading public, is replicated in narrator's story: Adrien is also addressing men. Yet, in the latter case, the narratee Camille and the male public influence Adrien's narrative. He feels obliged to meet their expectations as a husband and a heterosexual man, and so structures his account accordingly. The male homosocial bonds thus shape Adrien's narrative, as demonstrated below.

<sup>3</sup> On the corrupting power of literature on women's sexuality (MATLOCK 199—282).

<sup>4</sup> More on the term "homosocial bond" as employed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (see KOSOF-SKY SEDGWICK 1—20).

## Framing Narrative

In the framing narrative (ABBOTT 28), Adrien meets his old friend Camille after fifteen years apart at “une fête sans nom” (MG 13). Their intimate relationship is depicted in the immediacy of their exchange of details and intimate secrets about their lives. When Adrien is reticent about his personal affairs, Camille is appalled: “Quoi! Je t’ai livré tous mes secrets et tu gardes les tiens!” (MG 16).<sup>5</sup> He invokes their former intimacy and emphasizes their passionate mutual affection, verging on a lover’s relationship: “Un coup d’œil nous a suffi pour nous reconnaître [...] et avant que nos mains se fussent rejointes, notre cœur nous entraînait l’un vers l’autre” (MG 17). Camille refers to himself almost as Adrien’s other self (“ton seul ami [...] ton frère,” MG 17) who knows Adrien as well as he knows himself.

The strength of the homosocial bond between these two, who confide in each other “tous [ses] secrets”, is apparent.<sup>6</sup> In order to make amends for his initial reserve, Adrien writes down his story with the intention of publishing it: “Je te l’enverrai, et si tu penses qu’il peut être utile à quelqu’un de la savoir, je t’autorise à la publier” (MG 19). He targets the manuscript not only at his “cher ami” Camille, its narratee, but also other male readers who could be saved by his tragic life story, assigning to it a performative function. On the surface level, this is perceptible in the language where Adrien changes his form of address from the familiar “tu” that he uses while writing to Camille, to the more formal “vous”, aimed at the male reading public. In the last sentence of the framing narrative, the narrator’s voice changes and a curious “nous” unexpectedly appears — a note from the publishers: “Adrien de C... a tenu sa promesse ; nous publions le manuscrit qu’il a fait parvenir à Camille V..., et que celui-ci a cru pouvoir nous confier” (MG 19). This is again an instance of men confiding in men and entrusting their secrets to yet other men. The homosocial bond is then introduced in Zola’s preface, emphasized by the framing narrative through Camille and the publishers and reinforced in Adrien’s story, as a safeguard and protection against the vice of lesbianism.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> On the importance of same-sex confidences in the development of personality, (see PERROT 472—474).

<sup>6</sup> On homosocial bonds in the story between Camille and Adrien and between M. de Blangy and Adrien (see RIVERS XIV—XVIII).

<sup>7</sup> Lesbianism, like other non-reproductive sexual activities, was “pleasure without purpose” and thus a perversion. “It pointed to a disturbing loosening of desire from the moorings of the procreative impulse” (FELSKI 178); it was an extension of the “autoerotic pathology of the feminine mind” and an enigma to men (DIJKSTRA 147, 153). On the pathology of homosexuality (see MICALE 167—180; PERROT 539—544).

## Adrien's Narrative and Homosocial Pressure

### Meeting the Implied Readers' Expectations

Adrien is constantly aware of the presence of his addressee, Camille, representing his male reading public, and their expectations of him. While recounting his story, he relentlessly anticipates his narratee's reactions (*anticipatio* in rhetoric): "que voulez-vous? Je ne savais qu'imaginer!" (MG 87), "'peine inutile', me direz-vous, [...] Vous avez parfaitement raison" (MG 78). Such statements are usually followed by Adrien's long explanations of his actions in order to make them acceptable to his implied readers. He is particularly careful to make a connection with his readers, even through pity: "me voyez-vous, mon cher ami, dans cette posture et le costume [...] Vous me trouvez bien ridicule, n'est-ce pas?" (MG 82), and he wishes them to identify with his pitiful position. This, in turn, contributes to gaining the readers' sympathies for his situation.

Adrien needs to provide excuses to combat the readers' impression that the misery he experienced was his own fault. As Mme Blangy succinctly expresses it: "Décidément, cher monsieur, vous êtes un imbécile" (MG 45). He explains his actions and transfers responsibility for his unhappiness to destiny: "cependant j'aurais sans doute renoncé à mes projets et oublié [Paule] [...], si le hasard n'avait pris plaisir à me mettre de nouveau sur son chemin" (MG 40). Adrien ignores Mme Blangy's warnings against the match and Paule's discouragement: "je ne suis pas coquette. Je vous avais conseillé de ne pas m'épouser, et je ne devais pas me faire valoir. Vous ne m'aviez pas écoutée" (MG 55). The only way to neutralize this impression that the narrator meets a well-deserved fate is to gain his readers' sympathies completely.

### The Art of Guiding Readers' Sympathies

The narrator skillfully guides the readers' sympathies fashioning himself in four different yet highly effective ways. Firstly, he directly compliments himself on a particular achievement or quality of character: "Mon air innocent, l'honnêteté de ma physionomie" (MG 149), "malgré mes trente ans passés, j'étais resté un naïf, un pur" (MG 134), "parfaite candeur" (MG 150), "ma pacifique nature" (MG 103). He compliments himself on his intelligence and cunning in dealing with the concierge: "je jouais mon rôle avec tant de conviction, que le concierge, comme je l'espérais, me dit" (MG 107) or towards Mme Blangy: "Je m'attendais à cette question [...] c'était moi qui l'avais provoquée" (MG 140).

Secondly, he refers to situations that shed a highly positive light on his person and morality in his readers' eyes. He suggests he is serious and hard-work-

ing: “les travaux excessifs auxquels je m’étais livré depuis l’enfance” (MG 62), patient towards Paule when she refuses to have sexual intercourse with him: “je fus remarquable de patience, de discrétion et de délicatesse. Je n’exigeai rien, je ne demandai rien” (MG 62).

Thirdly, he interprets what others think and feel about him. Although it might seem, at times, doubtful, this narratological strategy is a much more powerful and dangerous means of persuasion and gaining the reader’s sympathies than direct self-praise:

Ses manières franches et ouvertes *semblaient dire* : [...] j’ai pris des renseignements sur votre compte et ils sont excellents. Je suis ravi que vous songiez à ma fille [...] et je donne à votre union avec elle mon consentement le plus empressé.

MG 43 (my italics)

Adrien also provides doubtful interpretations of Paule’s actions and feelings. He repeatedly claims: “Elle avait sans doute conscience de ses torts envers moi” (MG 87), when she refused to consummate their marriage. We can observe how far his interpretations are skewed when he concocts a story of adultery: “Un voile épais couvrait son visage, un de ces voiles en laine [...] à l’usage des femmes adultères” (MG 100).<sup>8</sup>

Lastly, he puts words into Paule’s mouth that she never uttered: “Non! criaient Paule, va-t’en, va-t’en, toi qui m’as perdue! Je veux le rejoindre, lui [...] Il m’a enseigné l’honnêteté, le devoir” (MG 193). Despite his claim that these were merely hallucinations he experienced while crossing the desert, the words remain with the reader, and one is paradoxically persuaded that this is how Paule must have really felt. Adrien supports it with a long passage on the two women’s passionate arguments, which seduces the reader into believing him. This is the most concealed and effective narratological strategy that Adrien uses to win the readers’ sympathies for himself.

Adrien is conscious of Paule’s duties as a wife, which he finds in Balzac’s *Physiologie du mariage*. He seeks to persuade her to have sex with him by referring to those conjugal laws: “je vous ai épousée pour que vous soyez ma femme, il faut que vous la soyez” (MG 77) and, for this purpose, he uses the vocabulary of duty.<sup>9</sup> He pronounces regularly highly judgemental and moralistic statements: “une femme [Paule], faite comme les autres, perfide comme le plupart” (MG 102). As they occur repeatedly and are stated categorically, these make a highly exaggerated impression on the reader, contributing to the idea that Adrien is exceptionally conscious of the male reading public’s expectations and of the rules

<sup>8</sup> A subtle undercurrent of pathological tendencies can be detected in Adrien: paranoia, hysteria and hypochondria, which in men were linked to excessive work, (see MICALÉ).

<sup>9</sup> On a wife’s sexual duties (see PERROT 102—104).

that he should follow as a heterosexual man and a husband. He tries to respond to them with his narrative of duty, high morality and exaggerated heterosexual desire.

### Adrien's Hyper-heterosexual Discourse

To respond to Camille and the implied male readers' moral expectations, Adrien resorts to a hyper-heterosexual discourse when describing his struggles against Paule's denials and thus gives his narrative legitimacy. For this purpose, he uses powerful semantics of courtly love, erotic passion, duty and religion.

Adrien fashions himself as an ardent lover driven mad by sexual frustration. He employs the vocabulary of courtly love, begging his mistress to take pity on him:<sup>10</sup> "Je vous ai comblée de soins, d'attentions, de prévenance, et vous n'avez pas eu pitié de moi!... Quel motif vous a fait agir avec cette rigueur?" (MG 71). He begs Paule to have sex with him and lapses into the sentimental imagery of suffering: "Ayez pitié de moi... laissez-vous attendrir par mes prières, par mes larmes, oui, par mes larmes. Tenez, je pleure, c'est plus fort que moi, je souffre tant" (MG 67).

When he cannot enter Paule's bedroom for the second time, he exclaims frantically: "Mes nerfs étaient tellement surexcités que je fus le point de sortir de mon caractère, d'ordinaire calme et paisible" (MG 56), declaring: "mon système nerveux était dans telle irritation, que je craignais de me porter vis-à-vis d'elle à quelque extrémité" (MG 65—66). This hysterical male discours, on the one hand, emphasizes his lust for Paule, while on the other, undermines his credibility, suggesting feeble mental state and need for treatment.<sup>11</sup> Although this particular rhetoric partially backfires on the narrator, he uses another in order to reestablish his credibility.

Adrien describes his intense sexual frustration, which leads him almost to rape Paule in order to "prouver son amour" (MG 67).<sup>12</sup> The assault and other campaigns to conquer Paule's body make him look silly and artificial because of their exaggerated character. Between raving and begging, he recalls his rights as a husband: "J'avais songé plus d'une fois à faire acte d'autorité" (MG 67), yet he never really performs it.<sup>13</sup> We may ascribe his inability to act to his hopeless wish that Paule would finally desire him. On the other hand, though, he seems to lack

<sup>10</sup> Cf. SCHULTZ (145—146) on power and mercy in courtly love.

<sup>11</sup> On the symptomatology of male hysteria (see MICALE 147—156).

<sup>12</sup> Women were considered to be "connoisseurs of pains." On "therapeutic rape," (see DIJKSTRA 65—118): "Once she had been taken by force, she was likely to learn to submit dutifully, for it was part of woman's nature to imitate incessantly" (120).

<sup>13</sup> On the rights of a husband to rape, (see DIJKSTRA 119—120); on his authority, (see PERROT 110—115).

any veritable inclination for sexual intercourse, which he compensates for by his exaggerated verbal passion. This will be supported in the following section.

Owing to this highly exaggerated narrative, Adrien is proving to the male readers the heterosexual nature of his desire — how much he adores Paule and wants to consummate their marriage. He juggles four familiar roles: the violent lover, the humble suppliant for love, the authoritarian husband and the good Christian: “[Paule] C’est une âme à sauver, eh bien! Je la sauverai” (MG 167). This sentence, in turn, suggests that, by isolating Paule from her lesbian pleasures and by having sex with her as her husband, he will save her soul from damnation. Adrien finally settles on the role of a good Christian and carries Paule off to another continent, far away from Mme Blangy. Religion sheds a most favourable light on his person and makes him sane and fully credible again in the eyes of his implied readers.

### The Ambiguous Bachelorhood of Adrien de C.

Bachelorhood is a haunting term throughout *Mlle Giraud* and shows that sexuality plays a crucial role within it. The novel can be summarized as the story of an eternal bachelor (“garçon”): here, a man who does not have sexual intercourse with a woman.

Adrien’s state of bachelorhood is the starting point of the novel, its constantly recurring motif and *spiritus movens*. The narrative begins with his search for a suitable wife at Mme de F’s, proceeds to capriciousness about his candidates (“Je jurais [...] que je mourais garçon” (MG 22)), continues with repeatedly grieving over his eternal bachelorhood during his marriage and leads to his final resolution to remain a bachelor (“J’étais résigné à vivre sur la côté d’Afrique en garçon comme à Paris” (MG 169)).

The term “garçon” has a highly ambiguous meaning throughout *Mlle Giraud*. On the one hand, it symbolizes sexual freedom and pleasure, as in the case of Mme Blangy, who decides to “vivre en garçon” by renting her own apartment and there meeting her lover, Paule. She proclaims: “J’arrange me vie comme je l’entends [...] je suis un garçon” (MG 118). Adrien uses this connotation when discussing his alleged “son” with the concierge: “J’osai me donner un fils, moi qui n’avais même pas de femme” and renting an apartment for him: “Mon fils est garçon; il consent à demeurer en famille, mais à la condition de jouir d’un peu de liberté” (MG 107).

On the other hand, Adrien’s life amounts to the existence of an “anachorète,” refusing sexual pleasure. At the beginning of *Mlle Giraud*, while being interviewed by Mme Blangy, Adrien explains this state of affairs:

- Étiez-vous un bon élève au collège?  
 — Excellent; j'ai toujours remporté tous les prix de ma classe.  
 [...] — Et vos classes terminées, vous avez sans doute mené à Paris la vie de garçon?  
 — Je n'en ai pas eu le temps, madame; je suis tout de suite entré à l'École Polytechnique.  
 [...] — C'était très sage [...] Alors, votre existence été d'un anachorète.  
 — A peu près, madame.  
 — Gardez-vous d'en rougir. Les anachorète ont du bon.

MG 38—39

Thus, Adrien, although a bachelor, does not lead a bachelor's life, full of sexual pleasures. He provides excuses for this sexual abstinence before marriage like his commitment to his studies, hard work or lack of opportunity in a foreign country.

When Adrien marries Paule, he grieves about his prolonged bachelorhood, his "célibat prolongé" (MG 58). He frequently refers to it by equating the status of a husband or wife with sexual intercourse: "Vous ne vous étonnez pas si je lui [Paule] donne encore son nom demoiselle" (MG 50), "J'oubliais que Paule était ma femme; rien de plus facile à oublier, du reste" (MG 95).

Therefore, during the period when Adrien could have been enjoying socially acceptable sexual intercourse as a bachelor, he does not feel any inclination to do so. He marries a lesbian, who refuses to consummate their marriage. In both cases, bachelorhood and marriage, associated in *Mlle Giraud* with sexuality, Adrien chooses the sexless option. As his state of sexual abstinence does not alter in marriage, it seems that Paule's lesbianism is rather convenient for him. It also seems to the reader that, ironically, Mme Blangy makes a better "bachelor" than Adrien. The term pervades the narrative, structuring it into hyper-heterosexual bouts of verbal passion, which rehabilitate, in the implied readers' eyes, Adrien's lack of socially prescribed sexual intercourse with his wife.<sup>14</sup> His exaggerated desire and obsession with bachelorhood throws a new light on his sexuality.

<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note that Paule's reluctance to engage in sexual intercourse lies within the scope of socially accepted behaviour for a chaste young woman (cf. PERROT 487—491, 498—501).

## Adrien as a Male Lesbian

The term “male lesbianism” is most comprehensively elaborated on in Kaja SILVERMAN’S book on male subjectivity.<sup>15</sup> In her discussion of Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, she applies the homosexual triangular models, which she “discovers” in Freud’s writing, to Marcel’s sexuality concluding that he is a male lesbian (339—388). Although Silverman’s idea is revealing I will not follow her conceptual framework that constructs her prepositions but instead refer to Girard’s concept of triangular desire to support my argument.<sup>16</sup>

Girard’s triangular desire is defined as desire originating according to the Other “le désire selon *l’Autre*” (GIRARD 1961: 13), in contrast to desire “selon soi” — an autonomous and spontaneous expression of an individual’s preferences and wishes. It always emerges as a result of imitation or rivalry with the other, that is through *mimesis*, never independently. As Girard claims “le tiers est toujours présent à la naissance du désir” (29). Instead of having a direct relation with the object of desire, the individual has a “mediated” relation to it through a model or ideal and, therefore, it is a “borrowed” desire. It involves a triangular structure: the subject who desires, the object of desire and the “model”/“mediator” of desire (LIVINGSTON 1). The subject unwittingly imitates the mediator’s desire when he sees it and this mechanism cannot be avoided or eliminated whenever desire originates.

The scene in which Adrien meets Paule for the first time is constructed around the act of “seeing.” The characters sit on the Champs-Élysées, watching other people pass and being watched by them in return. When Adrien notices Paule, he is smitten by her beauty and compares her to the “fameux défilé” of candidates for the role of his wife. His desire is slowly awakened by her indifference to his admiration and to the admiration of the passersby, which, in the Girardian sense, is a powerful means of attraction (cf. GIRARD 1978: 393—395).<sup>17</sup> He turns to observe how other people react to Paule, how they desire her:

Son éclatante beauté attirait à chaque instant l’attention de quelques promeneurs, jeunes ou vieux; on s’arrêtait, ou bien on se retournait pour la contempler. Elle semblait indifférente à cette admiration.

MG 25

<sup>15</sup> For an overview of the concept, (see SCHOR; cf. KRISTEVA 360—362; cf. WILSON 60—94).

<sup>16</sup> On Girard’s theory of triangular desire in relation to homosocial bonds (see KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK 21—27).

<sup>17</sup> “Elle est belle, elle est froide; elle n’a pas besoin de se donner [...] Elle cherche à attirer les désirs masculins et elle y réussit parfaitement, moins par sa beauté que par son indifférence prodigieusement irritante et excitante pour le mâle” (GIRARD 1978: 393). NB: Girard is working here with a heterosexual matrix (cf. GILL).

He is enchanted by other people's reactions to Paule. When Mme Blangy joins her on the Champs-Élysées, Adrien is haunted by the image of their meeting and deeply affected by Paule's facial expression: "le plaisir qui avait éclaté dans son regard... m'avaient surtout frappé. Une jeune fille qui comprenait *si bien* l'amitié devait... comprendre à ravir l'amour" (MG 30, my italics).<sup>18</sup>

Thus Adrien notices that there is a unique intense relationship between the two women, which leads him, in turn, to meet Mme Blangy and discuss Paule. In the course of their conversation, he feels that Mme Blangy is possessive towards Paule: "la comtesse, jalouse de l'affection de Mlle Giraud, voulait, dans son égoïsme, retarder le plus possible le mariage de son amie" (MG 40). He considers this fervent same-sex sentimental friendship, similar to his own with Camille, as natural: "comtesse, le sentiment qui j'ose vous prêter serait très naturel" (MG 36).<sup>19</sup> This, in turn, throws an ambivalent light on his relationship with Camille and poses a question about the ambiguity of same-sex intimacy, which can generate a similar emotional intensity.

Although Adrien is reluctant to attribute this jealousy and possessiveness to anything other than friendship, he is intrigued by the deeply intense relationship between the two women. He secretly observes Paule and Mme Blangy together, completely engrossed in one other: "Elles se faisaient valoir l'une par l'autre [...] Leur physionomie respirait le bonheur et leur teint animé [...] avait plus d'éclat" (MG 53—54). This scene is the only instance where the readers are allowed to participate, through Adrien's voyeuristic gaze, in the intimacy and desire between the two women. His fascination for their affection is striking and he desires one woman through the eyes of the other. In the scene in Mme Blangy's boudoir, he feels the intensity of this relationship: "les yeux de Paule étaient humides et fatigués comme si elle avait pleuré, et je remarquai plus d'animation dans les traits de la comtesse." This scene mirrors the contemporary medical view of passion as a form of energy and of sexual indulgence as dangerous to health. Paule's exhaustion, glazed eyes, and finally her violent death, caused by an excess of pleasure, embody this idea. Adrien's duty as a husband would be then to control her sexuality (PERROT 480, 499).<sup>20</sup> Yet, he feels his unsuitability in their relationship: "je crus m'apercevoir qu[e mon arrivée] gênait ces dames" (MG 68—69).

Adrien's desire seems to be entangled with the desire of the two women for each other. His interest in Paule started mimetically by observing the interest of the passersby and his desire was inflamed by seeing Mme Blangy desiring Paule. His yearning for Paule increases together with his increasing access to

<sup>18</sup> On same-sex friendship, (see FEDERMAN 145—230); on men's incapability to distinguish female lovers from female friends, (see DIJKSTRA 153).

<sup>19</sup> Such strong same-sex friendships among both sexes were socially encouraged (FEDERMAN 159—161).

<sup>20</sup> Female sexuality was uncanny to men and lesbianism even more so: "les médecins s'inquiètent de ce plaisir féminin qu'aucun homme n'est là pour régler" (PERROT 543).

the intimacy between the lesbian couple. The more Adrien sees them together, the more his desire is structured according to lesbian desire. He turns to hyper-heterosexual narrative in order to rectify this in the eyes of his implied readers. Narration is a construction, a matter of selecting from an arsenal of pre-existing devices in order to synthesize the effect on the readers (cf. ABBOTT 62). Such is the case with Adrien. His narration is not unreliable in itself (cf. NÜNNING 89—107), but it appears to be highly influenced by the presence of the implied readers. The negotiations between the narrator and the reading public are intriguing and merit closer narratological examination than the scope of this paper allows.

## Conclusion

*Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* demonstrates great sensitivity towards the expectations of its implied readers. It is moulded by the presence of the male reading public and constructed according to their expectations. From the perspective of this paper, it could be summarized as the story of a bachelor, who excuses himself to his male reading public for not fulfilling his sexual duty as a husband. The love that dare not speak its name between Paule and Mme Blangy mimetically arouses a lesbian desire in Adrien and subverts the hyper-heterosexual narrative that he imposes on himself. Lesbianism fascinates Adrien as it seems directly inaccessible to him. It symbolizes a realm of unknown pleasure that is possible without his viral masculinity, which he does not feel any inclination to use either in his bachelor or married life. Yet, in order to finally reconfirm his position in the heterosexual matrix, he must perform one final act. He has to kill Mme Blangy violently in order to reestablish morality and put Paule to a painful death in order to rehabilitate his love for her. Only through death can she repent for her homosexual sins and prove her love for him, subscribing to the late 19th-century convention that “a woman who truly loved a man must die” (DIJKSTRA 133).

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