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Gender as Performance in the Plays of Michel Tremblay

by

Lisa Todd Warden

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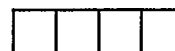
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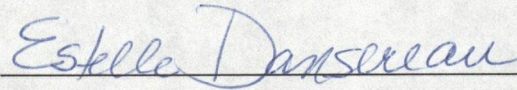
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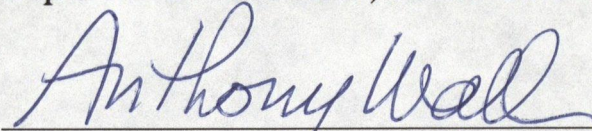


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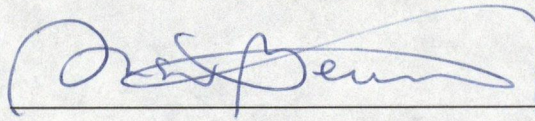
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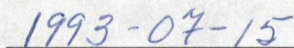
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ABSTRACT

Common to contemporary feminist theory is the practice of essentialising the female gender. Essentialist theorists ascribe metaphysical qualities to woman and propose liberatory prescriptions based on these attributes.

In the present analysis, such theorizing is revealed to be problematic as it constrains the subjects it sets out to liberate. I provide an alternative to essentialist theories, proposing that gender be interpreted as something we do, instead of something we are. In the thesis, I develop a framework for reading gender as performance and then proceed to illustrate this paradigm through an analysis of selected plays by the Québécois playwright Michel Tremblay.

One of the principal objectives of the project is to determine whether the subject with no primordial identity is reduced to silence, or if she is still able to elaborate an oppositional politics. I conclude with a discussion of how the paradigm of performative gender does not preclude the contestation of dominant discourses.

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“You can't assume that just because I'm in a dress I left my dick at home.”

Anonymous (cited in Garber, 1992, 147)

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Is gender something we do, or something we are?

Contemporary feminist theory is engaged in debates about strategy. Is gender, or "the feminine", an essence that can be discovered or revealed, or is gender discursively produced? My analysis assumes the latter position -- that gender can be interpreted genealogically. I develop this theoretical approach through readings of selected plays of the Québécois playwright, Michel Tremblay.

A genealogical approach to gender necessitates the denaturalization of notions of gender. Deconstructed, gender then becomes a performance, characterized by things one does rather than by descriptions of who one is. Gender read as performance rather than as substance, essence, or epistemic anchor, defies the problematic practice of essentializing woman -- a trend common to some contemporary theorists. As such, gender, like post-structural meaning, comes to be constituted by its signifiers and not by a priori principles.¹ It follows then, that theatre is an interesting genre in which to examine the semiotic performance of gender.

¹ It must be noted that in using the term "signifier" I am not referring to the structural sense of the word in which there is a net and direct relationship between the signifier and the signified. Rather, I am referring to the post-structural, or floating signifier in which there is always a degree of slippage between the signifier and what it represents. The post-structural signifier already means something, but it continues to acquire meaning through usage. The post-structural signifier is thus more contextual than the structural, or Saussurean signifier.

The plays of Michel Tremblay are particularly appropriate for this project. His theatre is replete with homosexuals, transvestites and performers who exist within his own performance script. Such characters emphasize the constructed and performed aspect of gender. In the case of the transvestite, for example, the role is one of multiple gender play. Gender identity does not necessarily follow from biological sex. Gender is a cloak worn by the character. The transvestite serves to illustrate more dramatically the notion of gender as a disguise chosen consciously or unconsciously by the subject.

The bulk of Tremblay criticism has focused on questions of national identity, language and homosexuality.² Questions of nationalism have figured predominantly in the critical literature. For example, Jacques Cotnam writes, "Michel Tremblay est en train de créer une dramaturgie *nationale* authentique, qui reflète les frustrations accumulées depuis trois cent ans" (Cotnam, 1976, 367). Tremblay's work has been largely dismissed by feminists as misogynist portraying women, as it does, in a somewhat frivolous and punitive manner. My reading of Tremblay therefore provides a relatively new approach, concentrating on the subject of gender identity and construction. This interpretation may also function to revindicate Tremblay's plays for rereadings from a feminist perspective.

² See, for example, Robert Schwartzwald's article "(Homo)sexualité et problématique identitaire", in Simon, S., et. al., 1991, 115-150.

I begin my analysis with a theoretical chapter in which I outline the case for a genealogical interpretation of gender, basing my argument on the work of thinkers such as Kathy Ferguson, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. I then further develop the notion of gender as performance and articulate the strategic benefits of such a reading for feminist politics. Each subsequent chapter consists of an analysis of one play, selected for its pertinence to the development of my theoretical framework. The plays will be read not as dramatic productions, but as literary texts and hence will be treated in the same manner as novels.

In my reading of Bonjour, là, bonjour (1974), I discuss how the cultural narrative of the incest taboo sets in motion forces that govern and police the formation of gender identity. The play challenges the traditional prohibition of incest through its juxtaposition of the "proper" against the "improper". As such, it functions to subvert accepted ideas about the pathology of incest. My reading of the text further reveals how such regulation of desire is bound up with the conservative politics of patrilineal, heterosexual reproduction.

Chapter 4 is a comparative study of homosexual transvestism in La duchesse de Langeais (1968) and Hosanna (1973). In this chapter I remark on how behaviours deemed marginal, such as incest and homosexuality, provide sites from which to critique dominant social discourses relating to gender. I then address the question of transvestism more specifically, pointing out how cross-

dressings emphasizes the performative aspects of gender. Although considered marginal, transvestism illustrates the means by which gender is constituted. Further, gender interpreted as performance calls into question the notion of fixed, stable identities and reveals such a notion to function in a regulatory manner.

Finally, in my analysis of Sainte Carmen de la Main (1975), I examine the political implications of reading gender as performance. If the subject has no primordial mask or substance, is she reduced to silence, or is it still possible for her to elaborate an oppositional politics? I answer affirmatively to the latter question and show how Carmen, a performer whose identity is constituted through masks and disguises, functions as a revolutionary political hero. I then proceed to articulate the relevance of such an analysis to gender criticism.

In the conclusion, I reiterate the relevance of Tremblay's work for an examination of gender as performance. I note more specifically that there are alternatives to the common practice of reading gender as a metaphysical essence. Gender can instead be interpreted as a performative effect. Such a reading affords a wider range of possibilities for the "embodiment" of gender, as opposed to the traditional male/female opposition that the essentializing of woman perpetuates. One of the primary objectives of the project is to determine whether the deconstruction of gender identity reduces the subject to political paralysis. I attempt to ascertain whether there remains any potential for the elaboration of political interests by the subject whose identity is perceived as engaged in an unending

process of signification. Finally, I try to determine if the liberation of gender from the chains of essentialist interpretation can indeed function in the interests of an effective, post-structural feminist politics.

Chapter II

TRANSGRESSION, PERFORMANCE AND FEMINIST THEORY

Two bumper stickers popular among fans of “alternative” or “marginal” culture read, "QUESTION AUTHORITY" and, "KILL YOUR TELEVISION". The message calls for non-conformity. However, a closer look reveals that even these anarchists have not managed to escape the common paradox of counter-discourse. Through their use of the imperative tense, the most authoritarian at our disposal, the bumper stickers reinforce the authority they intend to supplant.

Counter-discourses are not immune to the complexities of power and authority. They are produced by the very structures of power through which liberation is sought. In critiquing power structures described as oppressive, counter-discourses often establish and valorise categories which are themselves inevitably exclusive.

As a counter-discourse, contemporary feminist theory has had to grapple with this paradox. Some feminist theorizing, in its zealous crusade against patriarchy, has served merely to set up a separate theoretical "gynarchy", a mirror image of traditional societal hierarchy with a different gender at the helm. As such, its will to power is thinly disguised as a search for truth and justice.

Other theorists, such as Kathy Ferguson, have addressed the strategy issue head-on. In an article entitled "Interpretation and

Genealogy in Feminism", Ferguson identifies a persistent opposition in feminist criticism: that between interpretation and genealogy. Interpretive approaches are characterized by "the discovery of truth in an ordered universe" whereas genealogy involves "the imposition of meaning on a disordered one" (Ferguson, 1991, 325). Strategies of interpretation rest on the notion that truth is out there somewhere waiting to be discovered. Its tactics aim to reveal the disguises by which reality, or "the way it should be", is distorted, an example being the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie, or of women in patriarchal societies. Once these first principles are unveiled, the process of liberation can begin: "the truth shall set you free".

The logic of interpretivist theorizing rests on the assumption that through an accurate analysis of history, we will arrive at some ultimate, absolute knowledge; that by correctly reading the sacred text, we will attain direct access to God, the a priori, eternal reality. In a feminist context, interpretation implies that we are engaged in a historical process of liberation in which it is possible to make absolute advances. We criticize the current state of affairs with a more positive alternative in mind and anchor these recommendations to the liberatory truths we have discovered about patriarchy. Interpretive feminism does not view its truth claims as necessarily complicitous with the will to power over truth.

Enter the Nietzschean concept of genealogy, which is characterized primarily by an impulse against order. In order to explain specific modes of domination, interpretation looks to origins,

such as capitalism, or foundations of knowledge, such as nature. Where interpretation finds explanations in origins (ie., women are the second sex because they are by nature physically weaker), genealogy looks to beginnings in order to trace discontinuities, or the series of historical accidents that result in a particular situation. The search for origins depends on the discovery of a primordial truth upon which one can establish a cause-effect relationship. The genealogist refuses this approach, rejecting the notion that there can be a final unmasking of the truth or cause. Instead, the genealogical inquiry focuses on dissension, disparity and difference, and retains a stance of suspicion toward any fixed meaning claims.

Where the interpretivist looks for the truth under the mask, the genealogist finds only an endless series of intertwined masks and disguises. Interpretivist theory asks **why** a particular group is oppressed where genealogy focuses on **how** specific structures function in a hegemonic manner. The genealogist is suspicious of liberatory movements themselves as they necessarily participate in the will to power. Fundamental to genealogy is the idea that "those structures and processes that we take to be thoroughly liberating will also be constraining" (Ferguson, 1991, 333).

The relationship between the two approaches is somewhat dialectical. Interpretation relies on genealogical investigations in order to contest dominant truth claims. Interpretivist strategies, in turn, provide the genealogist with something to deconstruct. Where genealogy is often accused of deconstructing itself into apolitical nihilism, interpretation is plagued by a lack of self-criticism

regarding the ideological aims of its own discourse. There is no need for a synthesis of the two strategies if dissension is handled ironically; that is, if one accepts that final resolution is not always necessary nor desirable. Of course all of feminist theory does not fit neatly into one approach or the other. Rather, the two categories serve a general descriptive purpose and help to highlight some divergent trends within feminist theory.

There is nothing inherently negative about the battle between interpretive and genealogical feminism. I fully support dissension among the ranks. It often serves to sharpen the sensibilities of those who participate in the debate. Toril Moi expresses a similar opinion in the preface to her book Sexual/Textual Politics:

Should feminists criticize each other at all? If it is true, as I believe, that feminist criticism today is stifled by the absence of a genuinely critical debate about the political implications of its methodological and theoretical choices, the answer to that question is surely an unqualified affirmative. The suppression of debate within the camp has been a prominent feature of precisely the kind of male leftist politics to which feminists have objected. To let the idea of sisterhood stifle discussion of our politics is surely not a constructive contribution to the feminist struggle. (Moi, 1985, xiii-xiv)

I am predisposed to take the genealogical, or post-structural, side of the argument. My practice of directing unrelenting criticism at those feminist theorists who persist in making interpretivist or essentializing claims about gender will appear ideologically motivated. It could be accurately described as such, if one were to

identify genealogy as an ideology. As an ideology though, it has no transcendental values except the call for continual self-examination. Genealogy does not imply political paralysis. It does not mean that one has no ethical values, but rather that any value-based system one tries to impose in the name of justice or liberation must be continuously analyzed for its tendency to re-impose the oppression it intends to supplant.

Much has been written about the interpretivist/genealogical debate within feminism, also referred to as “essentialist” versus “constructivist” strategies. In some senses, the reduction of all feminist theory to two categories functions to oversimplify a complex issue. However, the debate has in no way been resolved, and I would argue that such an opposition does have a certain usefulness, however limited, for demonstrating the constraints of particular kinds of theorizing. It is my view that a critique of essentialist positions (from which my own work is not entirely free), should be an ongoing process of honestly examining the assumptions that govern one’s own discourse.

Indeed, these comments would be made in vain were it not for the fact that much feminist thought, still considered very influential, is interpretivist in nature. Even more interesting is the way interpretivist theorists employ the tactics of genealogy in a limited sense and then surrender to transcendental alternatives. Two examples of major feminist thinkers whose work is heavily shaped by strategies of interpretation are Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray.

In La jeune née, Hélène Cixous attributes the position of woman as low-other to the binary nature of patriarchal thought. Borrowing heavily from Derrida's analyses, she describes how Occidental literary and philosophical thought has always functioned in terms of oppositions such as high/low, speech/writing, culture/nature, day/night, logos/pathos, and so forth. These oppositions are always hierarchically structured, one being superior, the other inferior. General symbolic systems such as art, religion, family and language have developed around these oppositions.

Cixous notes that in Western philosophy, woman has always been associated with passivity and man with its superior inverse, activity. The essence that underlies each opposition is a correspondence between male/female and positive/negative. There is therefore a not-so-hidden agenda between the philosophical and the literary, on the one hand, and the phallogentric, on the other: the subordination of the feminine to the masculine appears to be the essential condition for the functioning of the philosophical apparatus. Cixous reveals a connection between the subjection of philosophical thought to a binary system, and the power relations between man and woman. That is to say, the philosophical and literary project of the West functions to reinforce male hegemony, a phenomenon known as "phallogocentrism". Cixous' project is to examine the solidarity between logocentrism (the privileging of the word as metaphysical presence) and phallogocentrism (the privileging of the phallus as the symbol or source of power) in order to destabilize the

masculine structure which presents itself as eternal and natural.¹ One of her tasks is therefore to unmask the way in which our philosophical tradition creates, perpetuates and justifies the binaristic structure of phallocentrism.

In her analysis, Cixous relies on the strategies of genealogy. As opposed to asking why women have been silenced, she discusses how binary oppositions and hierarchical structures function to maintain that silence. At this point however, she slides into the interpretive mode, providing a prescription which entrenches the categories she rejects.

Cixous' strategy of resistance is writing, the only site that she feels is not obligated to reproduce the system. She calls this writing "l'écriture féminine" (Cixous, 1975, 169). "L'écriture féminine" is not dependent on the gender of the author, but is characterized rather by certain qualities present in a text. It is said to be more open to difference, based as it is on the valorisation of otherness and of the body and its desires.²

Where the notion becomes problematic, or interpretive, is in its anchoring of certain qualities onto an identity said to be essentially feminine. We note that Cixous does not accept the binary opposition between femininity and masculinity. However, in her attempt to establish the concept of feminine writing, she continually insists on the distinction between a **feminine** and a **masculine** libidinal

¹ Definitions of logocentrism and phallocentrism are taken from Moi, 1985, 179.

² The present analysis would not be considered an example of feminine writing. By Cixous' standards, my prose would be deemed phallic, if not ejaculatory, based as it is on a linear progression of logical ideas.

economy, thus reinforcing the oppositions she attempts to subvert (Moi, 1985, 110). The obvious danger of attaching to woman qualities such as an emphasis on the imaginary and the emotional is that it attributes to woman the same criteria that are often used to justify her exclusion. As Toril Moi states:

In her eagerness to appropriate imagination and the pleasure principle for women, Cixous seems in danger of playing directly into the hands of the very patriarchal ideology she denounces. It is, after all, patriarchy, not feminism, that insists on labelling women as emotional, intuitive and imaginative, while jealously converting reason and rationality into an exclusively male preserve. (Moi, 1985,123)

To continue to essentialize the feminine amounts to handing over one's ammunition to the misogynist enemy.

We see in the example of Hélène Cixous how interpretivist theories make use of genealogical strategies. Genealogy is then abandoned once an alternative system based on ideological truth claims is proposed. By means of a genealogical analysis, Cixous rejects the male/female opposition. She then erases what she has established through a return to an interpretivist erection of categories formerly deemed oppressive.

Another feminist theorist who makes extensive use of genealogical analysis but who then proceeds to attribute to woman a certain essence is Luce Irigaray. Ex-disciple of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Irigaray uses deconstructionist techniques to unmask the subjectivity of phallogocentric discourse. She deconstructs

Freudian premises which she reveals as marked by the dominant concepts of Occidental philosophy.

For Freud, sexual difference is based on visibility (Freud, 1929, 112-135). The male sexual organ is visible where the woman's is not. He defines feminine sexuality in relation to masculine sexuality and the former is thus represented as lack or absence. Establishing a correspondence between having nothing to see with having nothing ("rien à voir" with "rien avoir" in Irigaray's words), Freud constructs his theory of penis envy, according to which the realisation of woman's ultimate desire rests in the appropriation of the phallus or, its substitute, giving birth to a male child.³ Thus, in the Freudian paradigm, "the female difference is perceived as an absence or negation of the male norm" (Moi, 1985, 132), the Other to the patriarchal Self, as articulated by Simone de Beauvoir five decades ago: "Il est le Sujet, il est l'Absolu: elle est l'Autre" (de Beauvoir, 1949, 15).

Thanks to feminist critics such as Irigaray we can now view the theory of penis envy in a different light:

To hold that woman first sees her clitoris as a small penis and then decides that she has already been castrated, can be read (. . .) as a projection of the male fear of castration: as long as the woman is thought to envy the man his penis, he can rest secure in the knowledge that he must have it after all. (Moi, 1985, 133)

³ To which popstar Madonna's sensual carnivalesque reply is most appropriate: "Why do I need a penis between my legs? I have one in my head." She makes the point quite bluntly that his analysis ignores the existence of the feminine libido.

A genealogical analysis of Freud's ideas on femininity shows us that his claim that woman perceives her genitals as insufficient can be read differently. In this case, the idea of penis envy is deconstructed to mean that its author is concerned about losing the use of his.

Fundamental to Irigaray's thought is the postulate that woman is outside representation. Philosophical discourse is constructed by means of a process of reflection on the self, which is then assumed to be an ensemble of thought about the general human condition. According to Occidental philosophy, woman does not have an autonomous representational space in patriarchal society. She appears simply as the negative reflection of man. In the view of Aristotle, "la femelle est femelle en vertu d'un certain manque de qualités" (cited in de Beauvoir, 1949, 15), which leads de Beauvoir to conclude: "L'humanité est mâle et l'homme définit la femme non en soi mais relativement à lui; elle n'est pas considérée comme un être autonome" (de Beauvoir, 1949, 15).

Irigaray then goes on to reread the Freudian notion of feminine sexuality. For example, in order to denounce the notion of lack, she opposes feminine genitals to the phallus saying that feminine pleasure is multiple:

La femme 'se touche' tout le temps, sans que l'on puisse d'ailleurs le lui interdire, car son sexe est fait de deux lèvres qui s'embrassent continûment. Ainsi, en elle, elle est déjà deux - mais non divisibles en un(e)s - qui s'affectent. (Irigaray, 1977, 24)

She claims that feminine sexuality is more closely linked to the sense of touch whereas male sexuality privileges the visual (Irigaray, 1977, 35).

For Irigaray, woman's diffuse sexuality is linked to that which she calls "le parler-femme", or womanspeak, a language specific to women. She notes that there is a manner of speaking amongst women that is different from that spoken in the presence of men. This diffuse language is governed by the emotional and is not constructed on the model of linear coherence. On one hand, Irigaray refuses to define "le parler-femme": "Mais du 'parler-femme' je ne peux simplement vous rendre compte: il se parle, il ne se méta-parle pas" (Irigaray, 1977, 141). However, elsewhere she is quite precise about what constitutes "le parler-femme":

Paroles contradictoires, un peu folles pour la logique de la raison, inaudibles pour qui les écoute avec des grilles toutes faites, un code déjà tout préparé. C'est que dans ses dires aussi - du moins quand elle l'ose - la femme se retouche tout le temps. Elle s'écarte à peine d'elle-même d'un babillage, d'une exclamation, d'une demi-confiance, d'une phrase laissée en suspens Quand elle y revient, c'est pour repartir ailleurs. (. . .)

Inutile donc de piéger les femmes dans la définition exacte de ce qu'elles veulent dire, de les faire (se) répéter pour que ce soit clair, Et si vous leur demandez avec insistance à quoi elles pensent, elles ne peuvent que répondre: à rien. A tout. (Irigaray, 1977, 28-29)

Womanspeak, like Cixous' feminine writing, is supposedly free from the constraints of linear discourse. The two theorists use a similar interpretation of feminine sexuality as an analogy on which

to base their meta-theories. Female sexuality is here viewed as consisting of multiple erogenous zones as opposed to the phallic linear model where pleasure is derived from one organ. It corresponds to the conclusion reached by Teiresias of classical mythology, who experiences the sex act, as both a man and a woman, at different times:

This same Teiresias was chosen by Zeus and Hera to decide the question whether the male or the female has most pleasure in intercourse. And he said: "Of ten parts a man enjoys one only; but a woman's sense enjoys all ten in full." (cited in Paglia, 1990, 46)

In her writing (according to Cixous), or her speech (as in the work of Irigaray), woman is multiple and non-linear. She is more likely to incorporate difference and otherness. These models may be more than just a simple reversal of the rationality and linearity that has come to be associated with patriarchal discourse. They may elude a totalizing classification because they emphasize open-ended discourse. They can be infinitely clever in their resistance of category except that ultimately these strategies attach metaphysical claims to gender and in so doing become problematic. The task, as I see it, is not to design a liberatory paradigm that somehow defies classification. It should be, rather, to critique the tendency to construct paradigms dependent on totalizing truth claims.

In attempting to unmask the myth of woman's situation as lack under patriarchy, Irigaray commits an error similar to that of Cixous. The project of the former is primarily to demystify phallogocentric discourse. Yet she proceeds to construct a theory of femininity

rooted in women's sexuality and linguistic tendencies that is necessarily metaphysical, exactly like the discourse she has just deconstructed. Attendant to her practice of defining characteristics of woman or femininity, is the anchoring of a specific essence to a particular gender. That which follows, instead of being a subversive discourse that challenges the basis on which certain power structures stand, is a battle between meta-theories that are opposed in content but identical in form. Every attempt to name or define what is feminine results in essentialism, a strategy that mirrors the way in which the masculinist signifying economy has functioned to justify woman's exclusion.

I have already suggested that interpretivist theorizing does play an important political role. Nevertheless, the contributions of this genre of critique are not the central issue here. The advantage of a genealogical approach to feminism is that it provides us with what I consider to be a more sophisticated, subversive paradigm, subversion here implying the revelation of power structures as arbitrary. Genealogy incorporates the ideological goals of feminism into a post-structuralist framework.

Post-structuralism has provoked a crisis of legitimation with regard to knowledge and rationalism, as has feminism to a lesser extent. Post-structural theories of language, such as Derrida's critique of logocentrism, imply that the existence of a priori or transcendental meanings are fictitious. The constant posture of deferral between signifier and signified and the ensuing postulate that meaning is itself constituted by this process of infinite

incompletion and non-fixity suggest that the speaking subject does not have access to absolute truths.

Certain fictions, such as freedom or liberal bourgeois feminism, nevertheless come to be accepted as transcendental truths which are then considered immune to criticism because they appear to stand outside relative value systems. One of Derrida's contributions has been the activity of deconstruction, whereby the production of meaning is revealed to be an exclusionary process. That is, the production of truth requires a hierarchization that necessitates the exclusion of many possibilities. For example, a resulting hierarchy of the Western literary and philosophical tradition has been male domination. One opposition upon which it is based is male/female, male being the essential or the author/ity, and female being its excluded, inessential opposite. Feminist theorists such as Cixous and Irigaray have used deconstructionist strategies to show that patriarchal structures preclude woman from having her own autonomous representational space.

Deconstruction then is more than just a textual practice. Ultimately it serves as a political critique in its dismantling of the logic upon which supposedly neutral ideologies are based. Michel Foucault writes:

[T]he real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them. (Foucault,

cited in Rabinow, 1984, 6)

It is therefore no surprise that feminism has found a strong ally in the deconstructive strategies of post-structuralist criticism.

Feminist theory shares with post-structuralism its suspicion of rationalist claims concerning the possibility of unbiased knowledge as a product of the free play of the intelligence (McCallum, 1992, 430). Knowledge is thought not to be immune from determinants such as gender, class and race: it is shaped by the subjective experience of the knower. However, where post-structuralist critiques have resisted the establishment of new systems and have generally limited themselves to exposing the history of domination such as in the work of Foucault, feminism has manifested itself as an oppositional politics that requires a priori or transcendental values. The discourse of interpretive feminism here becomes problematic in various ways. First of all, as Judith Butler points out, feminism is based on the implicit assumption "that the term **women** denotes a common identity" (Butler, 1990, 3). She writes further that:

Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism. The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms. (Butler, 1990, 13)

If, as a feminist, one accepts post-structuralism's linguistic claims, one cannot at the same time view feminism's principles as transcendental or anterior to language. The egalitarian utopia for which the feminist strives is then informed by a fiction. Feminist

discourse is among many discursive modes that engage in an ideological battle for a dominant position in societal hierarchy. Interpretive feminism however, which appears to be the prevailing force in anti-patriarchal critique, does not see itself as fiction -- as another mask or costume in the latest act of power relations between the sexes. It grounds itself on fixed meaning claims as does any other ideology that poses itself as natural, neutral and good.

A fundamental task of feminist criticism that has been informed by post-structuralist strategies is the undermining of the male/female opposition. As I have shown in my discussion of Cixous and Irigaray, some theorists succeed in their dismantling of this binary but then proceed to re-entrench it by anchoring metaphysical values to femininity. I will take this particular opposition as my starting point. The binary in question divides people into two genders and rests on the dominance of male over female. One aim of feminist theory has been to challenge this structure; to reveal it as a cultural construct rather than an absolute truth. My position is that it is possible and desirable to perform gender criticism without theorizing in an interpretivist manner. The binary opposition of male/female can be disturbed, disrupted or put into question without positing a new meta-theory in its place. I will focus on one genealogical approach to gender criticism, that of performative transgression. Even though this technique does not provide liberatory prescriptions, it does succeed in revealing status quo notions of gender as arbitrary fictions that have been privileged by dominant ideologies.

We can challenge the categories of male and female themselves, and not just the relative positions of the two components, by tracing what I will identify as transgressive elements: marginals who do not fit into either category and thus pose a threat to "normal", "natural" boundaries.

The most obvious case of gender transgressed is that of the hermaphrodite, an individual who has both female and male sex organs. In 1978, Michel Foucault published Herculine Barbin, dite Alexina B. The work, introduced by Foucault, contains the actual memoirs of a nineteenth century French hermaphrodite, followed by a dossier of medical and media reports about the case. The story, briefly, is as follows: Herculine is born in 1838 with some genital "irregularities" but passes through childhood and adolescence believing she is a woman. As an adolescent at a convent school she experiences alienation based on perceived physical differences such as facial hair. She becomes a teacher at the convent school and begins having an affair with one of the other female teachers. They are eventually discovered, Herculine's "irregularities" revealed, and she is expelled. After medical examinations, Herculine is forced to legally change her sex (her gender identification). Living now as a man (Abel), in poverty in a Paris tenement apartment, he finds himself unable to adapt. The narrative ends with Abel's suicide. Upon medical examination and dissection of the corpse it was concluded that Herculine/Abel Barbin was a man who suffered from "incomplete hermaphroditism" (Foucault, 1980, 128).

In his introduction to the English translation, Foucault discusses the tenacity with which modern Western societies have insisted on the individual belonging to a "true sex" (Foucault, 1980, vii-xvii). One role of the medico-legal establishment became that of deciphering the true gender of these "aberrant" individuals. Each person has a discoverable true sex despite any "anatomical deceptions" (Foucault, 1980, viii). Outer forms are illusory. Each person belongs to one of the two categories: "these mixtures of sex were no more than disguises of nature: hermaphrodites were always 'pseudo hermaphrodites'" (Foucault, 1980, ix). Sexual irregularity, whether in the domain of anatomy, sexual orientation, or vestimentary practice, is thought to be informed by fiction. Sexual normality, including heterosexuality, is assumed to be based on truth:

And then, we also admit that it is in the area of sex that we must search for the most secret and profound truths about the individual, that it is there that we can best discover what he is and what determines him. And if it was believed for centuries that it was necessary to hide sexual matters because they were shameful, we now know that it is sex itself which hides the most secret parts of the individual: the structure of his fantasies, the roots of his ego, the forms of his relationship to reality. At the bottom of sex, there is truth. (Foucault, 1980, xi)

The individual thus becomes a text whose gender can be determined by reading between the lines of anatomy. Anatomical signifiers can be illusory, yet through careful examination one can arrive at a definitive interpretation of a person's sex. In accordance

with the interpretive mode, gender is a transcendental signifier, accessible through an accurate reading of the text/sex. Gender truths are out there, waiting to be discovered by the keen observer.

The existence of the categories male and female, and the obsession to classify each individual as belonging to one or the other, does not tell us much about gender identity itself. It reveals, rather, the complicity of such a classification system with the maintenance of order and the status quo. Was Herculine Barbin really a man? Perhaps we should be asking why the definition of Herculine's gender is so important. How does the practice of maintaining distinct gender categories function hegemonically? Monique Wittig writes that "'men' and 'women' are political categories, and not natural facts" (Wittig, 1981, 48). Judith Butler echoes this view, stating that "there is no reason to divide up human bodies into male and female sexes except that such a division suits the economic needs of heterosexuality and lends a naturalistic gloss to the institution of heterosexuality" (Butler, 1990, 112). If gender boundaries are blurred, then the man/woman binary is threatened with dissolution and phallogentric structures are undermined. The case of Herculine is precisely so unsettling because s/he does not fit into established categories. Herculine transgressed the boundaries and in so doing threatened gender truth claims.

In order to clarify my use of the term "transgression", I will briefly touch on Bakhtin's discourse of the carnivalesque as employed by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in their book The Politics and Poetics of Transgression. In Rabelais and his World,

Mikhail Bakhtin develops his reading of carnival "into a potent, populist critical inversion of all official words and hierarchies" (Stallybrass and White, 1986, 7). Bakhtin writes: "Carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (cited in Stallybrass and White, 1986, 7).

Bakhtin makes a distinction between the "classical" and the "grotesque" body. The grotesque body is associated with exaggeration, protuberant characteristics, a lack of discipline, impurity and filth. The classical body, by contrast, represents symmetry, eternity, individualism, moderation, reason and fasting rather than feasting. From the perspective of the classical body, high, inside and central, the grotesque body comes to designate the marginal, the low and the outside. The high or classical body attempts to reject and eliminate the low grotesque body in a bid to maintain and reinforce its prestige and status. Stallybrass and White reiterate several times in their analysis however that what is socially peripheral is symbolically central. The subjugation of the grotesque by the classical body is based on simultaneous desire and repulsion. As the authors show, the repression of the threatening low is necessary for the maintenance of social order. During the liberatory period of carnival, however, it is the grotesque body that reigns.

Bakhtin does not include an analysis of gender relations in his study. The model of carnival does hold much potential for gender criticism, and interesting studies have been undertaken in

this area.⁴ My interest is to use carnivalesque strategies not simply to invert the male/female opposition so that woman is on top, so to speak, but in order to disrupt the category of gender altogether. For my purposes then, the grotesque body is that which does not correspond to the net heterosexual male/female distinction. The hierarchy to challenge thus becomes gender/non-gender, or, definitive gender versus questionable or mocking gender, such as in the case of homosexuals, transvestites, or hermaphrodites. One possible way around the male/female polarization is to look for textual strategies that renounce the opposition and reject its categories through the use of misfits or marginals, such as Herculine Barbin, that don't correspond to the standard male/female classification. Another method is to look at cases in which sex roles are parodied through the use of exaggeration or mimicry, as with the cross-dresser or drag queen. Both techniques serve to take the focus off defining gender and function to put into question the very existence of gender categories.

I propose that, in the context of cultural production, gender be read as a mask or performance in what can be described as an ongoing play within the theatre of discourse. In his essay On the Genealogy of Morals, Friedrich Nietzsche writes that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed - the deed is everything" (cited in Butler, 1990, 25). Judith Butler's corollary to this is that "there is no gender

⁴ See, for example, Mary Russo's article "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory", in de Lauretis, 1986, 213-29.

identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1990, 25). For Butler, gender is nothing other than impersonation. It is a performance that with much repetition passes as substantive and real:

Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body. . . . such acts, gestures, enactments generally construed are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (Butler, 1990, 136)

The idea of a sexed identity at the core of gender functions to police sexuality and restrict its expressions to the parameters of reproductive heterosexuality.

If one reads gender as performative⁵, then the notion of true gender identities is revealed to be "a regulatory fiction" (Butler, 1990, 141). Interpreting gender as mask or performance avoids the interpretivist trap of essentializing gender while demonstrating how the dual concept of gender itself functions in a hegemonic way. Of course there are some "natural" or "biological" differences between the broad grouping known as "men" and "women". My goal is not to

⁵ I will be using the concept of performance not in the sense of a theatrical production in which actors consciously impersonate a role different from that which they consider to be their own. Rather, in this analysis, gender is said to be performed in the same way any task is performed, that is, consciously or unconsciously. Gender roles are, for the most part, performed unconsciously. Some of the plays of Tremblay, especially *La duchesse de Langeais* and *Hosanna*, emphasize the conscious adoption of gender roles by the characters. As such, these works provide clear examples for the illustration of gender as performance.

seize upon these points of difference and use them as a basis for grand schemes. What is significant is that the cultural elaboration of these differences occurs by means of masks and disguises. The task is to identify and examine various signifiers of gender and how they function in a transgressive manner. In the genealogical vein, I am not proposing a liberatory paradigm but rather a critical one from which one may or may not draw political implications.

My reading presupposes then that gender, or the "feminine", is not something that can be discerned, discovered, or revealed. Gender is discursively produced, as is any "truth" at a given time. In order to theorize about gender then, would it not be more interesting to conduct an analysis of the masks and disguises used to connote and signify woman or man, instead of trying to arrive at some ultimate definition of the "feminine" or what it means to be a man? One could then look at the strategies used to signify woman and/or man in various texts and see how these devices function -- in whose interest, at whose cost? Using Foucauldian techniques, we can look at the cracks in the established categories, the marginal elements, such as incest, homosexuality or transvestism, and see how these deviant elements subvert the status quo, the status quo being the heterosexual binary opposition of man/woman, or, the clear-cut dual notion of gender itself. This approach, it seems to me, would be far more effective in subverting, or, rather, unmasking, the hierarchy on which writers such as Cixous claim that patriarchy is based. The feminist paradigm, rather than looking for specificity in women's writing, or commonalities in women's experience, should focus

instead on becoming aware of its own mask in the theatre of discourse and the effects these masks/performances have with regard to its ideological project.

The prospects stemming from an alliance of feminist and post-structural theory are promising. A genealogical approach to gender criticism would not be anchored on a particular gender-based identity, but would focus instead on mask, disguise, and the conscious/continuous adoption/ adaptation of roles informed by gender stereotypes. We cannot peel away layers and masks in such a way as to ultimately arrive at truth or objectivity. We can only be aware of the masks and how they function in ideological ways. As such, the value of lucidity is not the truth-seeking, scientific, dissecting gaze, but the consciousness of power relations and their ever-evolving scripts. To view gender as mask or disguise is not to engage in the misleading Cartesian search for origins or first principles. It is simply a manner of attempting to maintain a consciousness of one's own position in discourse. There is no final unmasking -- only a continual change and play of masks, disguises, roles. The path of least mystification is not an eventual unmasking, the discovery of gender truths, raw and naked beneath a bush somewhere. It lies in the observation of the roles themselves. Hierarchies, binary oppositions, power relations -- call them what one may -- will never be cracked open and obliterated; they will only evolve.

If nature is indeed "an 'idea' generated and sustained for the purposes of social control" (Butler, 1990, 125), then there is nothing

truly natural about being designated a man or a woman. It would be more natural to conclude that there are as many genders as there are individuals (Butler, 1990, 118).

I have chosen various plays by Michel Tremblay to illustrate the theoretical framework of gender as performance. In his work, Tremblay uses homosexuals, transvestites and performers/ showgirls inside his own performance script. Tremblay's focus on individuals marginalized by the mainstream and the possibilities for their empowerment may prove insightful for the analysis of the problematic trend in feminist theory of essentializing woman. Through an examination of these characters, I will attempt to show how identity is not forcibly attached to gender and how the binary opposition of male/female is itself parodied and rejected. This kind of genealogical critique reveals man/woman categories to be arbitrary and hence provides an alternative to essentialist theorizing about gender.

Chapter III

INCESSANT DISRUPTION: THE DISCOURSE OF INCEST IN BONJOUR, LÀ, BONJOUR

The central issue of Bonjour, là, bonjour is that of incest. The larger question raised by Tremblay in the play is the inconsistency of a cultural code that condemns certain behaviours as unacceptable whilst blind to its own pathologies. Prior to an analysis of these themes, I will discuss how the cultural regulation of desire, such as the prohibition of incest, plays a significant role in the formation of gender identity.

Psychoanalysts and anthropologists have produced most of the literature regarding the incest taboo and the incest fantasy, both deemed to be "universal truths of culture" (Butler, 1990, 42). In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler provides a challenging critique to some of the assumptions upon which these key concepts are based. She maintains that psychoanalytic theory, rather than being "an antifoundationalist inquiry that affirms the kind of sexual complexity that effectively deregulates rigid and hierarchical sexual codes", instead serves to perpetuate "an unacknowledged set of assumptions about the foundations of identity that work in favor of those very hierarchies" (Butler, 1990, x). My analysis of Bonjour, là, bonjour is informed by Butler's rereading of theorists such as Claude Lévi-

Strauss and Jacques Lacan, whose work has included an examination of incest.

The question of how the subject of incest is relevant to the current project should be reiterated. As I suggest in my introduction, one of my tasks is to identify textual incidences that subvert commonly held assumptions about gender identity. Incest, the culturally forbidden sexual desire for the mother or the sister on the part of the male child, serves as a crack, or "fêlure", in the established gender categories.¹ The notion of incest challenges the concept of exogamy as "natural" and "neutral". It also disrupts the patriarchal politics of reproduction in which women's bodies become commodities on the maternity market. Incest can thus be read as a point of tension in the cultural portrayal of "natural" gender identities and the ensuing postulation of exogamy as an unassailable corollary. Incest does not necessarily undermine the actual polarization between male and female. However, as social systems are vulnerable at their margins, an examination of this marginal behaviour provides critical insight into the arbitrary nature of the codes that govern the system. As such, an analysis of incest enables us to begin to chip away at the cultural construct of gender identity that disguises itself as objective and eternal.

The centre of dramatic tension in Bonjour, là, bonjour is the incestuous relationship between the protagonist, Serge, and the

¹ The primary category in question is, of course, the heterosexual, exogamous binary opposition of man/woman.

youngest of his four older sisters, Nicole. The play begins with Serge's return from a three month holiday in Europe during which he tried to gain some critical distance from his "problematic" situation in order to resolve it. The "resolution" of the situation amidst the interfering company of two generations of mostly self-preoccupied family members is the central action of the work. Interspersed with my reading of the discourse of incest in the play itself and of Tremblay's techniques of narrative disruption/disruptive narration will be a discussion of several key psychoanalytic concepts regarding the prohibition of incest as treated by Judith Butler.

Butler draws on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan in order to formulate a framework for reading incest. Butler notes that for Lévi-Strauss, exogamy functions to consolidate bonds between clans of men using woman, or the bride, as the object of exchange: "Patrilineality is secured through the ritualistic expulsion of women and, reciprocally, the ritualistic importation of women" (Butler, 1990, 39). The prohibition of incest, or "endogamy", functions to bolster this masculinist economy of kinship. Butler notes however that Lévi-Strauss posits heterosexual incest "as the ostensibly natural and pre-artificial matrix for desire", and that desire is thus assumed to be a privilege unique to the male heterosexual (Butler, 1990, 42).

Because all cultures seek to reproduce themselves, and because the particular social identity of the kinship group must be preserved, exogamy is instituted and,

as its presupposition, so is exogamic heterosexuality. Hence, the incest taboo not only forbids sexual union between members of the same kinship line, but involves a taboo against homosexuality as well. (Butler, 1990, 73)

The notion of incestuous desire as man's prerogative is challenged in the play in two ways. In contrast with Freud's identification of the incest fantasy as the Oedipal complex, in which the son is the subject and the mother the object of desire, in Bonjour, là, bonjour the sisters, as well as Serge, are subjects in the discourse of incest. The desire of the women is not directed toward Armand, the father, as Freud's revision of the Oedipal complex into the Electra complex would have one expect. Instead, Serge himself, the youngest and the only male, is the locus of their collective libido and "thus becomes the target of a threefold sexual frustration" (Usmiani, 1982, 56).

Denise, the character most verbally direct about her desire for her younger brother, has trouble holding herself back when she first sees Serge: "Ben, assis-toé, reste pas dans'porte de même, t'es trop sexy quand t'es deboute, tu me donnes des chaleurs!" (Tremblay, 1987, 37) Her excitement is accentuated by the lack of full stops in the run-on sentence. Punctuation is defied by desire. The violence of her appetite is evoked by her use of the word rape: "Si j'me r'tenais pas, j'te violerais dret là!" (Tremblay, 1987, 39) Remembering their childhood, Denise recalls how each sister would anxiously await her turn to babysit Serge every Saturday night when

their father went out: "On avait chacune une fois par mois pour te garder, pis j'te dis qu'on en profitait!" (Tremblay, 1987, 83) Finally, alluding to his present relationship with Nicole, Denise complains of the injustice of Serge's choice of only one sister when she also wants him:

Ben pourquoi c'qu'y'en arait rien qu'une
qui profiterait de toé, hein? T'as quatre
soeurs, t'en n'as pas rien qu'une! Pis y'en
a au moins une, la plus grosse, la plus
ragoûtante, qui s'rait prête à te faire des
affaires (Tremblay, 1987, 73)

Denise claims at one point, after her advances are refused by her brother, that she's just joking, that "[c']est juste des farces . . ." (Tremblay, 1987, 75) But is she? Rejected by her brother and frustrated by an empty marriage in which her husband is ashamed of her "vulgarity", Denise displaces her sexual hunger and becomes a compulsive eater. She asks Serge to move in with her and promises that she'll adhere to a strict diet if he does, willing to submit to his policing gaze. She says that he is too thin and that she will fatten him up, substituting meals for caresses. On his arrival, Denise offers Serge the favourite family meal, roast beef, which he refuses, having just come from a roast beef dinner at his father's house. The offer of roast beef in the different households of the same family evokes simultaneously the carnal aspect of their relationships, and the displacement of this physicality onto a socially acceptable substitute.

Another one of Serge's sisters, Monique, also betrays signs of attraction toward her brother. Suffering from a form of manic

depression, Monique copes with her constant anxiety through an addiction to prescription drugs. She asks Serge to pick up her pills at the pharmacy on his way to visit her. When he arrives, she takes her pills and then needs to lie down. She asks Serge, her "trésor" (Tremblay, 1987, 98), to take off his sweater and shirt and to come and lie down with her. At his reluctance, Monique attempts to reassure him: "Aie pas peur, j'te violerai pas . . ." (Tremblay, 1987, 80). In this quotation, we note once again the semantics of sexual aggression. She claims that his presence relaxes her: "Reste à coucher, t'es bon pour mes nerfs . . ." (Tremblay, 1987, 97).

Monique, like her sister Denise, appeals to nostalgia to present the idea of a utopian incestuous past, evoking an innocent childlike sexuality before the law. At one point, she recounts how she used to bathe him when he was a child: "J'vous déshabillais, toé pis Nicole, pis j'vous mettais dans le bain, tou'es deux . . . Pis j'vous frottais fort . . . Surtout toé" (Tremblay, 1987, p. 82). Her discourse has strong sexual overtones: first she undresses them, then she puts them in the bath, and then she proceeds with physical contact, a sequence that parallels a typical sexual scene. When Monique asks Serge to stay with her, he refuses, saying that he must leave. Monique, like Denise, is rejected by her brother and unhappy in her marriage. Bitterly miserable, she makes two allusions to suicide and expresses fear that if she doesn't maintain an outward façade of normalcy she will be locked up. Wanting a new start, she says she is tempted to leave everything and go. Instead of asking Serge to come and live

with her, as in the case of Denise, Monique asks Serge not to abandon her if she happens to turn up on his doorstep. Both are willing to forgo a sexual liaison with Serge for non-sexual physical proximity. Where Denise displaces her desire onto food, Monique attempts to erase her desire and the pain of dissatisfaction through the use of tranquillizing drugs.

The case of Lucienne, Serge's oldest sister, is more complex. Lucienne's desire for Serge is not explicitly expressed in her discourse. It is alluded to more through negation and bitterness at her rejection by Serge than through any distinct articulation. Like her other sisters, it is clear that Lucienne finds her brother attractive: "Pis tu le sais encore que t'es beau, hein?" (Tremblay, 1987, 83) Also like her sisters, Lucienne wants Serge to spend the night at her place: "Reste. Finis la soirée icitte, tu coucheras dans la chambre d'amis" (Tremblay, 1987, 34). Lucienne, like Monique and Denise, has recourse to a nostalgic discourse in this attempt to portray a utopian past:

T'étais si fin, avant, Serge . . . Si fin . . . (. . .)
J'veux dire . . . quand t'étais tout p'tit, pis
que . . . pis que tu m'écoutais. (. . .) Tu t'en
rappelles, tu faisais toute c'que j'voulais
(Tremblay, 1987, 80)

She expresses a longing for an idyllic past in which she held the reins of desire in a master-slave relationship evocative of erotic sado-masochism.

That which reveals most strongly Lucienne's feelings for her brother is her bitterness. While Serge is at his father's house, Lucienne phones to ask him to come straight over to see her afterwards because she has something important to tell him. As it turns out, Serge does not consider her news important. Her angry reply is revealing: "J'voulais pas que tu coures comme un fou chez Nicole, on t'arait jamais revu!" (Tremblay, 1987, 33) She quite obviously resents that Nicole is the object of her brother's attention -- and desire.

Lucienne perceives herself as Serge's substitute mother, his real mother having been virtually absent from the children's lives and from the play itself: "Des fois . . . tu m'appelais ta deuxième moman . . . (. . .) j't'ai élevé autant qu'elle, j'avais vingt ans quand t'es venu au monde . . ." (Tremblay, 1987, 81). According to the Oedipal narrative, Lucienne should be the object-choice. Consequently, she feels that Serge is indebted to her: "T'as jamais pensé à ça, mon p'tit frère que t'avais une dette envers moé?" (Tremblay, 1987, 84)

Lucienne condemns Serge and Nicole as "maudits dégénérés" (Tremblay, 1987, 102) and as "malades" (Tremblay, 1987, 66). The hyperbolic tone of her judgement suggests that Lucienne projects onto her siblings the moral criticism of which she unconsciously feels deserving. When Serge persuades his father to come and live with him and Nicole, Lucienne directs her jealousy and rage at Nicole: "Nicole? T'es contente, là! T'as fini par gagner sur toute la ligne!"

(Tremblay, 1987, 101) Her sexual desire is hidden in projections that assume the form of moralising accusations: "J'gage que tu serais même pas capable de bander devant une fille qui serait pas ta soeur!" (Tremblay, 1987, 66)

Lucienne's final strike at Serge is to challenge his "manliness": "My God, c'est vrai que t'es t'une tapette manquée!" (Tremblay, 1987, 87) Her description of him as "failed fag" can be read as her refusal to accept defeat. If he does not desire Lucienne, it is because he is really a homosexual. If he desires Nicole, it is only because he is a failure as a homosexual. She can therefore comfort herself by thinking of Nicole, the "other woman", as a consolation prize resulting from Serge's repeated failures.

Lucienne's incestuous desire for her brother, like that of Denise and Monique, is subject to a process of displacement. That is, her fantasy of incest is repressed and transferred to another, more socially acceptable substitute, an illicit affair. Although these forms would still be considered "dysfunctional" by the standards of contemporary popular psychology (over-eating, drug dependence and, in the case of Lucienne, an extra-marital affair with a much younger man), they are not perceived as defying primordial and absolute cultural prohibitions. Lucienne substitutes Robert, an acquaintance of her younger brother and twenty years her junior, for Serge as the object of her desire. Bored in her marriage, she finds distraction in the company of the young artist. After having expressed her ennui to Serge, she is taken aback by his matter-of-

fact reply: "Ça fait que tu t'es mis à courir les serins, par désœuvrement . . ." (Tremblay, 1987, 45). Ironically, Lucienne, who condemns Serge for his relationship with Nicole, is involved in a liaison replete with incestuous connotations. Serge mockingly remarks: "T'es mariée avec un Bob, t'as un fils qui s'appelle Bobby, pis y fallait que tu tombes sur un chum qui s'appelle Robert!" (Tremblay, 1987, 38) When she replies that her affair with Robert is much more than casual, Serge warns her not to take it seriously considering Robert's tendencies: "C'est sa spécialité, à Robert, de coucher avec des femmes qui ont l'air de sa mère!" (Tremblay, 1987, 39) Through the displacement of Lucienne's incestuous desires onto Robert, and the displacement of Robert's onto Lucienne, the couple perceive their liaison as acceptable and socially sanctioned: "C'que j'fais, moé, c'est pas malade, Serge! (. . .) C'est vous autres, les malades!" (Tremblay, 1987, 66)

Nicole, like her other sisters, asks Serge to come and stay with her: "Vas-tu r'venir rester avec moé?" (Tremblay, 1987, 40) This sister, however, is not rejected. The stage directions tell us that Serge throws himself into her arms and they remain in an embrace for a very long time. Nicole is another example of female desire that challenges the notion of incestuous desire as the privilege of the male. Unlike her sisters though, she is simple and clear about her desire, not hyperbolic or obscure: "J't'aime . . . Pis chus prête à faire place à tous les . . . problèmes" (Tremblay, 1987, 50). The sole displacement that takes place in the discourse of Nicole's desire is

that she denies responsibility for it: "C'est pas de notre faute, à nous autres, Serge. C'est de leur faute, à eux-autres!" (Tremblay, 1987, 84)

Despite this displacement, the relationship between Serge and Nicole is uncomplicated: "Pour moé, tout est clair, tout est simple, astheur, chus sûr de mon affaire: c'que j'ressens pour Nicole, pis c'que Nicole ressent pour moé, c'est de l'amour" (Tremblay, 1987, 90). In fact, claims Usmiani (1982), their relationship is "the only case of genuine romantic love between a young man and a young woman in the entire Tremblay opus" (Usmiani, 1982, 57). Because Nicole does not repress her desire for her brother, and because her feelings are accepted and reciprocated by Serge, there is no need for her to deny her sentiments and displace them onto a substitute. It is interesting to note that there is very little verbal exchange between Serge and Nicole in the play. This would suggest, as I will explain further on, that language plays a role of obfuscation in the work. Without many words but with ample communication, Nicole and Serge come to resolve their dilemma. They decide to renew their commitment to each other, in spite of the risk of social condemnation: "On va s'aider à vivre, tou'es deux, pis on va vieillir ensemble" (Tremblay, 1987, 91).

The notion of incestuous desire as the unique preserve of the male heterosexual is thus challenged in Bonjour, là, bonjour by the existence of an active yet displaced incestuous desire on the part of Serge's sisters. Another way in which this cultural narrative is

subverted is through the allusions in the play to homosexual incestuous desire. Homosexual incest is first evoked by Serge's two old maiden aunts, Charlotte and Gilberte, who live with his father, Armand. The two detest each other and are constantly bickering, yet share the same room and the same bed despite accusations of snoring, spitting and other less tasteful disturbances, leaving the guest room free, supposedly in the hope that Serge will come to live with them: "A prend toute la place dans le litte, pis à ronfle comme un troupeau de boeufs, pis à tousse toute la nuitte, pis à se lève cinquante fois pour aller pisser, pis à crache pendant des heures . . ." (Tremblay, 1987, 53). The point here is not to conclude definitively that the two aunts are in fact having an incestuous relationship, nor to suggest that such a fantasy exists on their part, although it is a distinct possibility. What is interesting to note is that while the narrative of the play defers the reader's precise identification of the "real" incestuous relationship between Serge and Nicole until later in the work, allusions and connotations of the possibilities of incest permeate the entire drama and serve to blur the distinction between the "real" and the "apparent" sites of incest.

The other allusion to a homosexual incestuous fantasy is on the part of Serge himself in relation to his father. As I stated earlier, the central action of the play is the resolution of the incestuous drama between Serge and Nicole. However, throughout the play there runs a parallel drama, that of the resolution of a certain tension between father and son. In fact, Usmiani describes "the difficulty of

communication in the father-son relationship” as the play’s central theme (Usmiani, 1982, 65). The determination of this conflict acts as a backdrop for the unfolding of the brother/sister dilemma and by the end of the play becomes the predominant focus. Related to this problem is the play's theme of the lack of communication. It is rare that any of the characters succeed in communicating with each other. The only genuine exchanges are between Serge and Nicole, and between Serge and his father, and these occur in the context of interference that threatens to drown out their words. Outside and beyond the Serge/Nicole narrative is that of Serge/Armand. A summary of the key exchanges between Serge and his father will serve to further clarify the subtext of the father/son incest fantasy.

Armand at one point, despite the ongoing and bothersome chatter of Gilberte and Charlotte, manages to express to Serge something he had always been unable to tell him. Armand is almost deaf. Several years earlier all the family members contributed to the purchase of a hearing aid. Serge put on some classical music and had his father sit down to listen to it. It was the first time in forty years that Armand had heard music. Finally courageous enough to express his thanks, he tells Serge: "C'est le plus beau cadeau . . . Le plus beau cadeau de toute ma vie . . ." (Tremblay, 1987, 79). Admitting his inability to communicate meaningfully with his children, he says: "Tu pourras dire . . . que ton vieux père t'aura parlé, une fois, dans sa vie . . ." (Tremblay, 1987, 79). This is a very touching moment in

the play. As such, it rivals the thematic centrality of the brother/sister incest drama.

Another point of intensity in the work is when Serge attempts to heal twenty years of virtual emotional and verbal silence between himself and his father by telling him repeatedly and yelling loudly that he loves him, so as to be sure that he understands. Armand is overcome by emotion and breaks into tears. The final peripety of the play occurs when Serge returns hurriedly to his father's house in the middle of the night to ask him to move in with him and Nicole. Armand is extremely touched. He is unable to complete his sentence: "Ça fait tellement longtemps que j'attends qu'un de mes enfants . . ." (Tremblay, 1987, 104). When Serge attempts to bring up the subject of his relationship with Nicole to see if it will be a problem for his father, Armand silences him, saying that he is aware of it and has been for a long time, and that there is no need to discuss it.

This particular scene, the play's last, is a duo between Serge and Armand in which all extraneous voices are finally silenced. Father and son come to a fully expressed appreciation of each other, and a resolution of their emotional distance. This leads the reader/spectator to believe that their two voices are the most important, which in turn leads one to ask, ask Laurent Mailhot has, to what extent the entire drama is an attempt at the recuperation of the father by the son (Mailhot, cited in Tremblay, 1987, 15). In defiance of the currently fashionable taboo against associating the life of the artist with her or his work, it is interesting to note that

Tremblay dedicates the play to his father.² It is possible to read Serge's relationship with Nicole as a displacement of his incestuous desire for his father, in the same way that Lucienne's relationship with Robert can be interpreted as a displacement of her desire for her brother. Once again, I am not concluding definitively that such desire exists. Rather, the fact that the potential for such an interpretation is provided by the text further serves to obfuscate any clear distinction between actual incest and its possibility. Serge's displaced desire for his father is therefore another example of how the play challenges the traditional incest narrative founded on uniquely heterosexual desire.

With regard to Serge's possible homosexuality, it is interesting to examine Lucienne's explanation of his situation. Recalling his upbringing, Lucienne says: "on t'a tellement élevé comme une p'tite fille, ou plutôt on t'a tellement élevé comme si t'avais pas de sexe, qu'un moment donné j'me sus dit qu'y'avait trop de femmes autour de toé, que ça te mélangerait, que tu réagirais contre, pis que . . ." (Tremblay, 1987, 88). She is here referring to homosexuality as the logical sexual orientation of someone exposed to such circumstances. She further refers to homosexuality as his "seule porte de sortie" (Tremblay, 1987, 88). According to Lucienne, homosexuality, in light of Serge's childhood, would have been the only possible escape from a life of incest. Because he chooses to maintain his relationship with

² One could, of course, consider the dedication as part of the narrative, as opposed to factual bibliographic data outside of the text.

Nicole, she considers him a failure, "une tapette manquée". Lucienne echoes the common view that homosexuality is more acceptable than incest: "Entre deux deseases (. . .) j'aurais aimé mieux l'autre! J'aurais eu moins honte de toé!" (Tremblay, 1987, 89)

Although homosexuality is generally considered less "scandalous" than incest, it is interesting that Judith Butler believes the taboo against homosexuality necessarily precedes the taboo against incest: "it would appear that the taboo against homosexuality must *precede* the heterosexual incest taboo; the taboo against homosexuality in effect creates the heterosexual "dispositions" by which the Oedipal conflict becomes possible" (Butler, 1990, 64). In light of Butler's view, Lucienne's psychoanalysis of her brother acquires an added meaning. A synthesis of the two accounts would imply that Serge was successfully "socialized" by the primary taboo against homosexuality, but unsuccessfully conditioned by the prohibition against incest. Her description of her brother as "une tapette manquée" becomes quite accurate. If he was "une tapette réussite", he would be having an incestuous affair with his father, rather than with Nicole, since he would not have been subject to the restrictions of either taboo.

Butler's reading of Lacan poses an interesting framework for a brief analysis of the structure of Bonjour, là, bonjour. Butler notes that for Lacan, the taboo against incest occurs through the acquisition of culture, more specifically of language, as the child passes through the Imaginary to the Symbolic phase. The rule of exogamy

prohibiting incest, which is linguistically constituted, establishes the categories of kinship. These structures of kinship are erected through language which designates specific sites, such as the mother or sister, as out of bounds. Thus, "speech emerges only upon the condition of dissatisfaction, where dissatisfaction is instituted through incestuous prohibition" (Butler, 1990, 43). The object of desire is displaced and replaced by the signifier "which seeks in what it signifies a recovery of that irrecoverable pleasure" (Butler, 1990, 43). Language read as founded on denial has ramifications for attempts at signification: "That language inevitably fails to signify is the necessary consequence of the prohibition which grounds the possibility of language and marks the vanity of its referential gestures" (Butler, 1990, 43).

(Butler is critical of the Lacanian appropriation of Lévi-Strauss' ideas about incest. For Butler, there is no original "jouissance", as sexuality always exists and is produced through the matrices of power. As such, there is no utopian and unregulated sexuality "before the law". For example, she writes that both "sanctioned heterosexuality and transgressive homosexuality (. . .) are indeed *effects* , temporally and ontologically later than the law itself, and the illusion of a sexuality before the law is itself the creation of that law" (Butler, 1990, 74). The law forbidding incest is thus not only restrictive, but simultaneously generative: through prohibition it creates the category that the taboo attempts to regulate.

This criticism notwithstanding, it is still possible to situate a reading of the play's structure and style in a context consistent with Butler's appropriation of Lacan. That is to say that we can agree with Butler that there is no utopian sexuality before the law, and still make use of the Lacanian assertion that language is intrinsically related to a process of libidinal displacement. The desire displaced by the signifier is not an a priori passion, but a desire that is not socially sanctioned, and thus excluded from mainstream culture. One can base a reading of the play's form on the notion that "language is the residue and alternative accomplishment of dissatisfied desire" (Butler, 1990, 43). Its consequent failure at the task of signification and the "vanity of its referential gestures" are demonstrated in the problems of communication central to Bonjour, là, bonjour.

The play is not structured into acts in the traditional sense. Rather, it is composed of one act divided into thirty-one scenes or "dialogues", each designated by the number of speakers in the particular segment, ranging from "solos" to "octuors". In each scene, the characters speak across each other, directing their speech to one object, Serge, often without giving him an opportunity to respond and always disregarding the voices of the other characters. The naming of each scene as a solo, duo, and so forth, evocative of a musical production, is somewhat ironic. Harmony between Serge and Nicole, and Serge and Armand is reached only through much discordant interference. Because of the criss-crossing voices, the play is difficult to read. The disruption of the discourse of each of

the characters by that of opposing characters makes the play an opera of discord, a cacophony as opposed to a symphony. It is, in fact, easier to make sense of a particular character by following her or his lines as they appear, interspersed throughout the work, than by reading the play from beginning to end. The play is thus a disruptive experience for the reader/spectator because of its schizophrenic multi-voicedness. The competing voices serve to impede, rather than encourage, an understanding between characters, with the exceptions of Serge, Nicole and Armand.

An application of Butler's reading of Lacan to Bonjour, là, bonjour thus demonstrates that language acts as a barrier to signification in the play. Despite all their talking, the characters do not say very much. The vanity of language as referential is underscored by the circumscribed yet central character of Armand: his deafness, or lack of receptivity to the spoken word, does not prevent him from apprehending and comprehending the complex situation between Serge and Nicole. The others hear, but they do not listen, and effectively use language as a strategy to prevent understanding and acceptance. As Usmiani writes, "speech succeeds speech, but no contact is established, because each character pursues his or her private train of thought" (Usmiani, 1982, 67).

The structure of Bonjour, là, bonjour is disruptive in yet another sense. As mentioned earlier, Tremblay defers satisfying the curiosity of the reader/spectator regarding the essential problem of the play. There are certain premonitions which become revealing

only in retrospect, but which in the play's chronology serve only to intensify the mystery. Language is thus used as a method of obfuscation not only by the characters' inability to communicate amongst themselves but also in its reluctant surrender of "the facts". Tremblay defers not only our understanding of the central action of the play, but also disrupts the automatic moral reflex of the reader/spectator with regard to the issue of incest. Through his juxtaposition of incest against other "dysfunctions" that are more socially sanctioned, such as Lucienne's extra-marital affair, the author succeeds in subverting the common moral code and invites a re-examination of the hidden yet oppressive link between cultural prohibitions and their "moral" disguises.

Bonjour, là, bonjour is thus an experience of disruption for the reader/spectator. Its subject, incest, brings into the light, or the word, that which normally remains unspoken. The traditional cultural narrative of incest as constituted by the desire of the male heterosexual is challenged by the presence in the play of both female and homosexual incestuous desire. The form of the play, as well as its content, is characterised by disruption. The comprehension of the essential problem by the reader/spectator is purposely delayed. The cacophony of voices add to the obscurity, and language functions as an obstacle to clarification. By the time we have grasped the substance of the drama, the juxtaposition of the sick, or prohibited relationship, against that designated as healthy and socially

sanctioned, has already served to subvert our notions about the pathology of incest.

In Bonjour, là, bonjour, Tremblay thus uses the example of incest to portray the "illness" of a cultural code that dogmatically insists on heterosexuality and exogamy whilst blind to its own severe dysfunctions. Incest is revealed as a rift in the seemingly neutral foundation of the exogamous society. The incestuous relationship can be read as subversive and menacing not because it is intrinsically unclean, as the taboo would have us believe, but because it threatens to undermine the basis for the creation of distinct gender identities that support a system of kinship bound up with patrilineal reproductive politics.

Chapter IV

BOYS IN THE HOOD: HOMOSEXUAL TRANSVESTISM IN HOSANNA AND LA DUCHESSE DE LANGEAIS

In the last chapter, I discussed how incest disrupts the commonly accepted notion that exogamous desire is somehow "natural". Exogamy does not precede culture, as an a priori law, but is rather instituted by culture itself through the regulation of desire. The taboo against incest assumes a prior heterosexual context, since it is directed toward the prohibition of heterosexual incest as portrayed by the Oedipus complex. This taboo is, therefore, necessarily preceded by the prohibition of homosexuality.

Incest and homosexuality are generally considered deviant and marginal behaviours. As social systems are vulnerable at their margins, these examples of "marginality" provide a strategic space from which to critique mainstream ideologies. The existence of marginal behaviours provides "critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of (the domain of cultural intelligibility) and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder" (Butler, 1990, 17). In this chapter, I will develop a "matrix" of transgression through a critical and comparative reading of homosexual transvestism in Hosanna and La duchesse de Langeais.

Homosexuality, like incest, subverts common assumptions about gender. It is assumed, for example, that gender identification follows from biological sex, and that from gender springs exogamous heterosexual desire. An examination of incest versus exogamy reveals such an opposition to be a cultural construct that functions in the interests of societies structured around patrilineal reproductive politics. The existence of incest implies that all desire is not necessarily exogamous. The category itself is created by the attempt to police desire. Such is the case with homosexuality. A prohibition against homosexual desire exists only as a result of the cultural regulation of desire, which then posits heterosexuality as natural and normal. Homosexuality, like incest, thus becomes the site of the "abnormal" from which one may scrutinize the "normal". Those who fail to conform to dominant ideas of the normal are portrayed as sick or as having gone astray somewhere along the course of their development.

The designation of the sexual "deviant" as ill is essential to the coherence of a social system reliant on distinct gender identities:

Inasmuch as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of 'the person' is called into question by the cultural emergence of those 'incoherent' or 'discontinuous' gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. (Butler, 1990, 17)

The concept of personhood itself is inextricably tied to clear-cut heterosexual gender identities. Theorists such as Butler and Wittig

claim that the categorization of sexes and, ensuingly, of genders, functions in the interests of reproductive politics that require exogamous heterosexuality: "the category of sex is neither invariant nor natural, but is a specifically political use of the category of nature that serves the purposes of reproductive sexuality" (Butler, 1990, 112).

The notion of man and woman as two distinct and internally unified groups is therefore a construction that attempts to disguise its ideologically motivated origins. Gender unity is a façade that obscures variation and disorder within gender "affiliations". There is no coherent and monolithic male or female gender. Rather,

[t]he construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender. . . . (Butler, 1990, 135-136)

The existence of culturally "unintelligible" forms, such as homosexuality, threatens to throw dominant ideas about gender and the person into disarray, and hence such "aberrations" are exiled to the margins and designated as ill or unnatural. The homosexual can thus be read as a disruptive figure that potentially subverts a neatly gendered world and lays bare the ideological interests that naturalize such a vision.

The sole protagonist in La duchesse de Langeais and the two characters in Hosanna are homosexuals. Their homosexuality, of course, does not conform to status quo politics of reproduction and

thus situates them on society's margins. However, it is not merely their sexual orientation that rejects the dominant gender codes dictated by compulsory heterosexuality. Each of the three characters, Hosanna, Cuirette and the duchesse, engage in transvestism to varying degrees. In her study of cross-dressing and cultural anxiety, Marjorie Garber writes:

Paradoxically, it is to transsexuals and transvestites that we need to look if we want to understand what gender categories mean. For transsexuals and transvestites are *more* concerned with maleness and femaleness than persons who are neither transvestite nor transsexual. (Garber, 1992, p. 110)

Existing Tremblay criticism tends to treat transvestism as symbolic of "a schizophrenic society engaged in an agonized search for its own identity" (Usmiani, 1982, 82). In this chapter, I will focus primarily on transvestism in the two plays as a critique of mainstream assumptions about gender identity.

In the case of the homosexual, desire is thought to be "misdirected" because it does not conform to the accepted heterosexual model. The transvestite, in his adoption of a female mask, goes beyond this carnivalesque inversion of desire to disrupt the assumed linkage between sex and gender.¹ That is, the transvestite assumes characteristics associated with the gender that is opposite his biological sex. The transvestite consciously adopts a gender in spite of his biological sex. The figure of the transvestite is

¹ The world of transvestism includes both male and female participants, gay as well as straight. The present analysis is limited to male homosexual transvestism.

therefore revealing with regard to the postulation of gender as a natural, biological fact. First of all, an individual "in drag" (that is, dressed up as the opposite sex) juxtaposes anatomy against appearance and in so doing raises the question of signification. This raises the question of which is the essential signifier of gender: the persuasive outer performance, or the concealed genital organ?

Judith Butler asks: "Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established?" (Butler, 1990, viii) In transvestism, signifiers of gender are selected and worn as props. For a transvestite, the construction of gender is literal. Marjorie Garber points out that transvestites reading transvestite magazines, in their attempt to pass as women, construct their femininity in a manner similar to women reading women's fashion magazines or even women academics reading feminist journals (Garber, 1992, 49). To be a "woman" or a "man" is to "cross-dress", to present oneself according to the cultural conventions of the given gender. The logical extension of my reading of drag is that gender is not an essence at all, but is, rather, a performance or imitation (conscious or unconscious) of a particular set of conventions associated with a specific gender. The "normal" non-cross-dressing individual, just like the "abnormal" transvestite, engages in a gendered performance whose effect involves the identification of the performer with a definite gender. Further,

[t]he replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay

is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but,
rather, as copy is to copy. (Butler, 1990, p. 31)

Gender can then be interpreted as a performative construct perpetuated by convention and reproductive ideologies as opposed to a natural and absolute epistemic anchor on which to base individual identity.

In La duchesse de Langeais there is only one character, the self-styled "duchesse". The first and most obvious indicator of transvestism is found in the initial stage directions in which the character is referred to as "elle" (Tremblay, 1969, 81). The reader knows, however, that the duchesse is a biological male because the stage directions also identify the character as "une vieille pédale" (Tremblay, 1969, 81).² This immediate transgression of gender boundaries is unsettling for the reader. One tendency might be to refer to the duchesse as "he" because "he" is a biological male. However, her gender identification is female, which she plays out to the point of caricature:

Le personnage de "La duchesse de Langeais"
doit être efféminé au plus haut point. Aucun
balancement de hanche, aucun geste de la main,
aucune oeilade "perverse" ne doivent être
épargnés. (Tremblay, 1969, 81)

The tension provoked in the reader/spectator by this "she-male" is referred to by Garber as a "category crisis". Such a situation implies a "failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another" (Garber, 1992, 16). If I refer to the

² In keeping with the text, I will refer to the duchesse in the feminine.

duchesse as "she", I feel uneasy: it is not entirely accurate since the use of the feminine pronoun overlooks or denies the fact that the duchesse has a penis, the ultimate insignia of maleness. On the other hand, the character's gender identification is not male. In fact, the skill of which she is most proud is the ease with which she persuades others that she is a woman.

The crisis incited by the protagonist's sex-gender dichotomy is further mirrored by a certain linguistic tension between "proper" French and "slang" joul: "'La duchesse' s'efforce souvent de parler à la française mais ses origines 'jouales' prennent toujours le dessus" (Tremblay, 1969, 81). In the character of the duchesse, the performance of femininity competes with biological characteristics designated as masculine. In the same way, the juxtaposition of French against joul in the play serves to emphasize seemingly conflicting identities that render impossible any attempt to classify the duchesse into existing structures: "(Elle va) aller se poudrer le bout du nez en même temps . . . C'est-à-dire qu'a va aller tirer une pisse comme la plus commune des mortelles . . ." (Tremblay, 1969, 95). In this scene, the duchesse refers to herself in the feminine, as she does throughout the play. In "correct" French she says that she is going to powder her nose, in keeping with her transvestite masquerade. In joul, she then translates: what she really means is that she is going to take a piss. The use of the verb "tirer" when referring to urination can only be done by biological males since in order to execute such an action, the subject must have an organ to "take out and fire". Thus, in the same way that her attempts at

"proper" French correspond to her mask as a woman (the powder on her nose), her instinctive use of *joual* would seem to be equated with her "real" biological underpinnings, the face without the make-up, or, her "genuine" anatomy. As Usmiani writes:

Tremblay draws a linguistic line of demarcation between her dream world, described in highly "refined" language -- a caricature of classical French -- and her life, which she describes in unabashed *joual*. (Usmiani, 1982, 98)

Such an interpretation would imply that biological sex takes precedence over gender identification, and that anatomy is the principal factor for the determination of gender identity. I reject such a reading and propose the following one instead: the "French woman" is not simply a mask concealing the real "joual man". Rather, both are masks that interact to produce a hybrid identity that refuses conventional possibilities. Even though the duchesse goes to "tirer une pisse" (implying masculinity), she undertakes this act as a female ("comme la plus commune des mortelles"). The simultaneous reference to the self as male and female not only troubles existing categories (because they are insufficient to describe the world), but it threatens the idea of category itself. A hybrid such as the duchesse dissolves the sex/gender opposition altogether because both biological sex and gender identification interact to create a new space in which such a distinction is rendered meaningless. The powder does not conceal the penis nor does the penis take precedence over the powder: both co-exist in such a way that outer (powder/French pretense) and inner (penis/joual origins)

become confounded and require the re-evaluation of conventional boundaries.

The duchesse masquerading as a woman, and its representation in theatre, both work to illustrate not merely the constructedness of the role of the duchesse, but of gender itself. In this play, gender is a prop used by the actor for the purposes of enacting a role.

Femininity is comprised of a collection of gestures associated with the feminine. In order to display her femininity, the duchesse must act it out convincingly: "Aucun balancement de hanche, aucun geste de la main, aucune oeillade 'perverse' ne doivent être épargnés" (Tremblay, 1969, 81). The sum total of these exaggerated gestures will succeed in producing the image of the caricatured woman: "La caricature doit être complète, parfaite" (Tremblay, 1969, 81). In La duchesse de Langeais, the idea of gender thus corresponds to Judith Butler's premise that "the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (Butler, 1990, 140).

Gender as constructed, as opposed to a fact of nature, is further emphasized in the duchesse's career as female impersonator. One can dissect the character into several layers: an actor playing a homosexual who plays the duchesse who then plays various other famous actresses in well known roles as, for example, when the duchesse plays Marguerite Jamois as Agrippine in Britannicus (Tremblay, 1969, 90). It becomes even more complicated when the duchesse plays women who, in their roles, play men, as when she played Sarah Bernhardt playing Napoleon's son in L'Aiglon

(Tremblay, 1969, 90). In this example, we would ultimately have an actor (male or female), playing a homosexual male who then plays the female duchesse who then plays Sarah Bernhardt who in turn plays the role of Napoleon's son. Any attempt to keep up with the twists and turns of biological sex and gender identifications in such a sequence becomes futile and ridiculous, and indeed, one gets the sense that Tremblay is actually mocking any intuitive reaction on the part of the reader/spectator to keep it all "straight".

Because the transvestite appears to have more of a "vested" interest in constructing her femininity, her performance can be more convincing than that of the "real" woman. As such, the duchesse would agree that "gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real" (Butler, 1990, x). The duchesse goes as far as to claim that: "J'ai toujours été plus femme que toutes les femmes!" (Tremblay, 1969, 101). She recounts how the prostitutes in New York used to hate her because she would steal their customers:

J'me rappelle, à New York, les putains du
port m'haïssaient assez, là . . . J'cré ben,
j'leur volais une bonne partie de leur butin . . .
Y faut dire aussi que j'étais autrement plus
femme qu'elles! (Tremblay, 1969, 101)

According to this example, the essence of femininity does not rest in the anatomy, but in the presentation. In less academic terms, the duchesse echoes the view of Judith Butler that "acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body" (Butler, 1990, 136). The surface of the body that produces this effect, in the case of the

duchesse, is not even skin deep, but, rather, only as deep as the dress and the powder.

If the crowning achievement of the duchesse were to be merely a successful surface masquerade, the game would end abruptly once her male anatomy were revealed. The duchesse's performance, however, goes much further than initial impressions in transgressing the boundaries of conventional gender moulds: "Quand tu peux arriver à faire croire à un homme qu'il couche avec une grande vedette internationale pis que c'te grande vedette féminine là c'est quand même un homme, parce que c'est avec un homme qu'il veut coucher, ben chapeau!" (Tremblay, 1969, 89) The discourse of the duchesse articulates the so-called "discontinuities of gender" that Butler claims, "run rampant" regardless of sexual orientation (Butler, 1990, 136). In this case, gender does not follow from sex, nor does desire follow from gender. Neither is there a clear inversion, or reversal, of desire. Rather, sex, gender and desire co-exist and co-mingle in configurations that would be said to be culturally unintelligible if judged by dominant notions about gender and sexuality. Homosexual transvestism in La duchesse de Langeais thus exposes the limits of these mainstream notions. The exposure of gender discontinuities not only opens up more possibilities for reading gender but also challenges the fundamental and problematic idea of true gender identities.

In Hosanna, as in La duchesse de Langeais, the principal character is a male homosexual transvestite who is referred to in the feminine both in the stage directions and in her own speech.

Whereas La duchesse de Langeais can be described as one monologue, Hosanna is a dialogue between two characters, a homosexual couple of which Hosanna is the "female" partner. Hosanna as a "she-he" has the same disorienting effect on the reader as does the duchesse. Because we commonly associate biology with truth, we are tempted to give more credence to what we believe to be a "scientific fact" as opposed to the outer appearance, which we perceive as a disguise. However, as the narrative progresses and Hosanna is increasingly identified with forms associated with femininity, it becomes clear that Hosanna defies description as a male. Provoking the same sort of uneasiness on the part of the reader as does the hybrid character of the duchesse, Hosanna's gender-sex dichotomy prevents her relegation to any pre-set classification.

To create femininity, the duchesse assembles and adopts various props and behaviours associated with the feminine. Such is the case with Hosanna. In the stage directions for the first act, Tremblay describes her dressing table:

[s]urmontée d'un très grand miroir, et couverte d'un nombre incalculable de pots et de crèmes, de rouge à lèvres, de pinceaux et de bouteilles de toutes les grandeurs, de toutes les grosseurs et de toutes les couleurs . . .
Et une gigantesque bouteille d'eau de cologne.
(Tremblay, 1973, 11-12)

It could almost be the working table of a visual artist. From amongst the various tools and materials, the artist fashions the work of art which, in this case, is the self. The evaluating gaze is reflected onto

the work of art, Hosanna herself, by means of the large mirror.

Hosanna thus possesses and works with the various component parts, down to the appropriate scent, to create the idea of woman.

When Hosanna enters the scene, the reader/spectator notes that she is dressed as Elizabeth Taylor in "Cleopatra". We know from Tremblay's stage directions that Hosanna's given name is Claude, a name itself ambiguous as to gender. As in La duchesse de Langeais, we witness another multi-layered masquerade consisting of Claude, Hosanna, Elizabeth Taylor and Cleopatra. Once again, the imitative and constructed aspect of gender is emphasized. In the same way that the actor playing Hosanna takes on her persona as a cloak, the character of Hosanna adopts various gendered roles which illustrate how gender itself is a procedure of enactment.

Tremblay offers many details regarding the construction of Hosanna, and of Hosanna's construction of Elizabeth Taylor/Cleopatra. The reader is provided with a description of this "working-class" Cleopatra, "Une Cléopâtre-de-la-Main":

Sa robe est en dentelle rouge vin ornée de dentelle or "d'époque". La perruque est en "cheveux véritables". Les sandales viennent directement de l'avenue du Parc et l'amoncellement de bijoux, de colliers, de bracelets, de chaînes, de bagues, d'épinglettes et le "cobra" qui entoure la tête d'Hosanna-Cléopâtre, et les serpents qui s'enroulent autour des bras de Cléopâtre-Hosanna proviennent de tous les quinze cents (Tremblay, 1973, 12-13)

A semiotic investigation reveals the various signs (the dress, the hair, the shoes, the jewelry) that, when assembled, come together to

signify the gendered persona of Cleopatra. The designation of the character as both Hosanna-Cleopatra and Cleopatra-Hosanna implies that there is no primordial mask or identity. One flows from and intermingles with the other, making a clear distinction between the two impossible. Hosanna's remark that it took her three hours of work to create the finished product echoes Butler's notion that gender amounts to a convincing impersonation carried out by means of particular acts, gestures and behaviours. Gender is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler, 1990, 33). Three hours of "stylization" work to produce this particular example. And the "regulatory frame" is indeed "highly rigid" in the case of Hosanna-Cleopatra. When she attempts to remove her dress, she remembers that she has fastened it firmly with hooks and has great difficulty removing it: "Cibole! J'avais oublié que c'était des agrafes! J'vas rester poignée là-d'dans, moé, j'le sens" (Tremblay, 1973, 14). The constraining dress resembles the very same unyielding gender codes that Hosanna so adeptly transgresses.

Hosanna is closely associated with another gender signifier, her perfume, which she applies generously at regular intervals throughout the performance. The perfume is to be so strong in fact, that the stage directions explicitly state that the audience should be able to experience its cheap, heavy and nauseating smell during the entire course of the play. Tremblay writes that the overpowering scent evokes imprisonment: "un parfum tellement fort qu'il sent le renfermé; un parfum qui a emprisonné Hosanna depuis des années"

(Tremblay, 1973, 12). Hosanna's identification of herself as feminine depends on her confinement and obedience to rigid gender stereotypes. Her imprisonment in this flowery choking scent, as in her dress, would seem to mirror the rigidity of the binary gender categories on which social coherence seems to depend.

In her relationship with her mate, Cuirette, Hosanna also impersonates woman. She plays the female, and he, the male of the pair. Hearing him arrive outside, she says: "V'là ton beu, Hosanna, ôte ta couvarte rouge!" (Tremblay, 1973, 14) Hosanna plays the role of the passive female vessel, waiting to accomodate the desire of her sexually aggressive man. Her impersonation though, is a subversive one as it is always delivered in a mocking, sarcastic tone. The discourse of her partner Cuirette invokes the idea of gender as a kind of permanent stage show. He tells Hosanna that he can accurately picture her when she is alone in the apartment, and that the fact that she continues to **act** like a woman when she is on her own, without an audience, proves that she is not a man: "Si tu serais un homme t'agirais comme un homme quand t'es tu-seule, mais tu continues à faire la femme quand t'es tu-seule!" (Tremblay, 1973, 47) The definitive evidence of Hosanna's femininity, according to Cuirette, is her sexual "style": "En quatre ans, t'as pas faite un seul geste d'homme, au lit, ma chérie, pas un seul!" (Tremblay, 1973, 48) Thus, for Cuirette, Hosanna's gender is defined by the ensemble of acts and behaviours that he associates as feminine.

Cuirette himself, though not technically a transvestite, engages in a form of cross-dressing which results in the construction of his

masculinity. For Cuirette, the clothes make the man, so to speak. In the play, Cuirette is referred to as Hosanna's "beu"; that is, the "male" of the homosexual couple. The term "beu" evokes images of the virile male stud. In Cuirette's case however, all that is left of the "beu" is the disguise:

C'est un beu qui a vieilli et qui a engraisé;
sa veste de cuir, jadis moulante et provocante,
ne ferme plus depuis longtemps et ses vieux
jeans trop serrés moulent plus de suif que de
muscles. Mais du beu, Cuirette a gardé l'arrogance,
l'assurance bornée (Tremblay, 1973, 14)

The use of the verb "mouler" and the adjective "moulante" stresses the notion of gender as a rigid category or pre-set mould into which one pours the self in order to conform to the so-called "natural" boundaries. His biker look is a masquerade of toughness that is not quite convincing, as his nickname Cuirette/Queer-ette (false leather/false fag) indicates. The connotations of falseness do not imply that the contrived exterior conceals an authentic or substantial self. Rather, the façade/disguise theme reveals that gender itself is dependent upon performance and role play: "the *appearance of substance* is precisely . . . a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (Butler, 1990, 141). The fact that Cuirette performs his role "in the mode of belief" is underscored by his attitudes about gender roles: he believes that, because he acts "like a man" in bed and in life (as opposed to Hosanna), he is a man. Cuirette's beliefs illustrate the view that gestures equal gender.

Despite the fact that the relationship between Hosanna and Cuirette would be considered transgressive by mainstream standards, their rapport seems outwardly to conform to traditional male-female roles. Once again, it must be reiterated that the existence of accepted gender models in non-heterosexual contexts does not mean that the heterosexual is the original and authentic model. It implies, rather, that in both gay and heterosexual situations, the assumption of binary gender roles is a mode of relating that requires impersonation and performance. However, despite its apparent conformity to man-woman stereotypes, the relationship between Hosanna and Cuirette is rife with examples of gender discontinuities; that is, instances in which behaviour and desire do not necessarily follow predictably from gender. Two examples in this play are that Hosanna is the bread-winner while Cuirette plays the domestic housekeeping role (Tremblay, 1973, 46-47), and, that Hosanna also desires to assume the sexually aggressive role (Tremblay, 1973, 48). Such gender discontinuities exist in all relationships, regardless of biological sex or gender, and serve to challenge the notion that each gender constitutes a monolithic and unified entity.

In both Hosanna and La duchesse de Langeais there is a certain discourse of unmasking, which I identify as a strip-tease narrative. A discussion of this narrative in the plays themselves will make clear my use of such a qualification. In Hosanna, the action of the play involves the "liberation" of Hosanna, and of Cuirette to a lesser extent, from the shackles of masquerade. At the start of the play,

Hosanna has just returned from a transvestite ball at which all the guests were supposed to dress up as famous women of history. Hosanna had always dreamed of dressing as Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra, and this was finally her chance. As the reader learns from the ensuing dialogue between Cuirette and Hosanna, the party was actually an opportunity for all the other transvestites to gang up on Hosanna and ridicule her, a plan engineered by a rival transvestite, an inside joke from which only Hosanna was excluded.

The plan is successful. When Hosanna arrives at the ball, she is humiliated to find that all the others have chosen the same costume, most of whom she feels have done a better job than she. Even worse, she realizes that it is a conscious plot against her. She returns home ashamed and depressed, and begins to judge herself with a far more critical eye: "Maudite k taine! Maudite k taine! Maudite k taine . . ." (Tremblay, 1973, 13). This is the start of Hosanna's critical reflexivity. After finally having succeeded in fighting her way out of the dress that was holding her captive (the gender code she is slowly beginning to crack), Hosanna considers removing her make-up. She then decides to keep it on, afraid of what she may find beneath the mask: "J'aurais envie de me coucher toute gr m e, Cuirette. J'pense que j'ai peur de c'qu'y'a en-dessous . . ." (Tremblay, 1973, 27).

Hosanna is conscious of being caught in a marginal space that does not conform to status quo ideas about identity: "chus poign e comme  a, entre les deux, avec ma t te de femme, mes sous-v tements de femme, pis mon corps . . ." (Tremblay, 1973, 29).

Neither man nor woman, Hosanna is aware of her various masks. She asks Cuirette which one he prefers: "C'est-tu mes robes qui t'excitent, oubedonc si c'est moé? C'est-tu Hosanna-la-folle, oubedonc Claude-le-kétaine!" (Tremblay, 1973, 46) Hosanna in fact refers to their masked performance as a stage show:

Mesdames, mesdemoiselles, messieurs, vous venez d'entendre le un million quatorzième épisode de notre grand roman d'amour: "Cuirette et Cléopâtre", conçu, imaginé, vécu et réalisé par Claude Lemieux et Raymond Bolduc! (Tremblay, 1973, 56)

The narrative thus alternates between the disguises, and short glimpses of what poses as a genuine identity, teasing the spectator who desires increasingly to see the characters' "true selves", stripped of their disguises. A culminating point occurs when Hosanna describes the Elizabeth Taylor and Cleopatra disguises as "un gros tas de marde!" (Tremblay, 1973, 73) She states that the unsettling events at the transvestite ball served to destroy her "vie en papier mâché!" (Tremblay, 1973, 74) Hosanna rejects the Cleopatra mask, and adopts the persona of Samson, one of strength: "j'étais pus Cléopâtre, cibole, j'étais Samson!" (Tremblay, 1973, 74) With this new found strength, Hosanna is able to demolish the façade. She proceeds to remove her make-up and stops suddenly, takes off her underwear, and then, naked, turns to Cuirette, exclaiming repeatedly, "Chus t'un homme, Raymond!" (Tremblay, 1973, 75) The strip-tease is complete, the stage names cast aside, and the two characters see and accept each other as they really are. Or, at least, this is what the

logic of the strip-tease narrative would have the reader/spectator believe.

As Robert Schwartzwald suggests, the play proceeds along this narrative of progressive unmasking, to the point where we assume that the characters have attained a primordial, authentic mask or genuine essence (Schwartzwald, 1991, 118). Usmiani also proposes that Hosanna “learns to accept her real identity” (Usmiani, 1982, 91). However, the fact that the play remains a stage show, and that these supposed authentic masks are roles played by masked actors suggests a possible alternative reading. Perhaps the characters do not reach a final stage of stasis in which they decide, once and for all, who they really are in the structure of rigidly defined gender possibilities. Perhaps there is no primordial mask. Instead, it is conceivable that the characters cast aside the old disguises they were using for the Hosanna-Cuirette performance, and adopt new ones for a different show in which they play Claude and Raymond. In the same way that the duchesse's French affectations and joul origins interact to produce an unclassifiable hybrid, Hosanna's Hosanna/Claude dichotomy is not necessarily resolvable to a final and simple synthesis. Whether or not Claude ceases to cross-dress, he remains a homosexual. Whether or not his gender follows from his biological sex, his prohibited desire continues to disrupt commonly accepted notions about sex, gender and desire.

As such, Hosanna challenges not only status quo concepts of gender, but fundamental ideas about identity itself. The stage show between Hosanna and Cuirette does not end and finally turn to "real

life". Rather, the characters participate as different players in a different programme. Claude is still wearing make-up when "he" declares his new role. His failure to remove his make-up signifies that there is no role that does not require a mask. Thus, Hosanna and Cuirette have not been unmasked, only transformed. To be is to play a role and, as Hosanna exclaims, "the show must go on . . . and on . . . and on . . . and on . . ." (Tremblay, 1973, 56).

Likewise, in La duchesse de Langeais one also finds a form of strip-tease narrative. At the start of the play the duchesse is already drunk. As it proceeds and she gets drunker, the duchesse becomes more lucid and open about her feelings. The protagonist spends the first act telling us how she became "la duchesse": "Putain internationale pour commencer, pis, après, duchesse!" (Tremblay, 1969, 94) She takes pride in her skill at masquerade and has no regrets except for one, of which she provides no details.

Finally, halfway through the second and last act, the duchesse reaches the subject with which she is concerned. Hence we witness a progressive unmasking, by means of increased drunkenness, of the essential matter. The duchesse, after forty years of work in the business of "love", has finally fallen in love, only to be abandoned by her lover. Saying that she assumed she had been immunised against the virus of love, she realizes she has been stricken: "On pense qu'on n'a plus de coeur, pis on se rend compte tout d'un coup que c'est tout ce qu'y nous reste!" (Tremblay, 1969, 104) Dressed completely in white in the second act to signify the purity of her sentiments, the duchesse describes her love: "C'est . . . c'est comme si c'était mon

enfant . . . c'est quasiment pur c'que je ressens pour lui!" (Tremblay, 1969, 104) Thus after having teased the audience with the details of her glorious past for the majority of the performance, the duchesse finally admits why she is drinking hysterically. Her pretense is stripped and the source of her grief unmasked.

The logical extension of her condition is that she will remain drunk forever ("J'me dessoûlerai jamais!" (Tremblay, 1969, 105)), or that she will die of grief ("j'le sais que j'vas crever comme une chienne!" (Tremblay, 1969, 105)). Either of these options would entail the ultimate unmasking of the situation. For the duchesse, however, as for Hosanna and Cuirette, there is no final unmasking and the show must go on. The difference is that where Hosanna seems to harbour the illusion that she has reached some primordial, maskless identity as a man, the duchesse is aware that there is no life without performance. As Usmiani points out, "the duchesse is creating a role for herself, though she remains aware that it is only a role" (Usmiani, 1982, 99). She will not die of grief, but will suffer through the pain and gradually heal: "Tu mourras pas, c'est ben ça qu'y'est effrayant! Ben oui, c'est correct, t'as d'la peine, là, mais ça va se passer . . ." (Tremblay, 1969, 106). Unlike the disturbing effect of Hosanna's transvestite ball, this trauma does not trigger a big change in the life of the duchesse. Although she has no desire to play the "putain internationale" for the moment, she convinces herself to re-assume her former role:

Braille un bon coup, roule un peu sous
la table, là, pis après . . . après, fais comme
toujours: dis-toi que t'es la plus belle pis la

Chapter V

FROM PERFORMANCE TO POLITICS: THE CALL FOR LIBERATION IN SAINTE CARMEN DE LA MAIN

From the analyses of the previous chapters follow certain premises: (a) gender is constructed through cultural regulation, such as the taboos against incest and homosexuality; (b) the resulting gender code is not "natural", but politically motivated; and (c) identity itself is a concept inextricably linked to notions of binary gender. These propositions reveal gender to be more amenable to a performative reading than to an essentialist interpretation. In the present chapter, which concludes my analysis, I will examine the political implications of gender as performance through a reading of Sainte Carmen de la Main. I begin by demonstrating how gender in this play can be interpreted as an outer performance as opposed to an inner essence. I then focus on the politics of such a reading. More specifically, I examine whether the concept of gender as performative functions in a politically conservative or disruptive manner.

In the previous chapter, the performance of gender was shown to be transgressive in two ways. First, in the case of Hosanna, the gender performed stands in contrast to the character's biological sex. The resulting hybrid formation transgresses conventional gender boundaries. Second, in the case of both Hosanna and Cuirette, the

plus fine, pis que le monde est rempli
d'hommes qui t'attendent! . . . Les hommes
sont à tes pieds, duchesse! (Tremblay, 1969, 106)

In the character of the duchesse therefore, as in those of Hosanna and Cuirette, identity, as well as gender, are constituted through unending mask and performance.

In my comparative analysis of Hosanna and La duchesse de Langeais, I have attempted to develop a framework in which homosexual transvestism takes on a subversive political mask, disrupting common notions about gender and identity. A critical reading of homosexuality reveals that certain ideas thought to be natural, such as heterosexuality, are constructions that serve the interests of reproductive patrilineal politics. It is not necessarily the case that gender follows from sex, and that desire follows from gender. An examination of transvestism shows that certain behaviours deemed marginal, such as cross-dressing, are actually the means by which gender itself is constructed. Homosexual transvestism can be read as a transgressive matrix which disrupts the links that anchor gender to identity. Gender as a performative activity, instead of a fixed essence, calls into question the dominant binary gender model and, more fundamentally, the idea of true and stable identities. Such a reading shows concepts like gender and identity to function as regulatory fictions, as opposed to benign descriptions of the natural world.

characters perform their gender, whether or not it corresponds to notions of biological sex. The very perception of gender as performed is transgressive in that the constitution of gender itself is revealed to take place through performance and mimicry. This idea challenges the traditional notion that gender is an essence to which identity can be anchored.

In Sainte Carmen, as in the other plays, the protagonist's gender can be interpreted as a performative effect. This reading is underscored by Carmen's role as a show-girl inside Tremblay's performance script. As with Hosanna, gender identity for Carmen is a costume by means of which the self is constituted. The costume does not disguise an original or authentic self. Rather, masks are adopted and transformed in such a way that it is through the masking that the self is manifested.

Carmen is a country and western singer at a cheap club on Montreal's "la Main", an area inhabited by prostitutes, transvestites, hit men and other "undesirables". The play begins with the hours leading up to Carmen's first performance at "Le Rodéo" after having spent the previous six months in Nashville perfecting her yodling technique. Her persona is constituted by assembling the various component parts of femininity. Bec-de Lièvre, her attendant, helps her on with the last remaining accessories: "le chapeau de Cow-Girl, les gants, la ceinture . . ." (Tremblay, 1976, 21). Maurice, the corrupt club owner and Carmen's lover, reminds her that on stage, her role is to be no more than a "piece of ass" (Tremblay, 1976, 69). The use of this English expression by Maurice in the socio-political climate of

1970's Quebec reinforces his position of exploitative authority.

Carmen is to play the traditional temptress, using specific cultural masks of femininity to lure the club's patrons into spending their money: "Ton rôle consiste à te déguiser en cow-girl à tous les soirs en montrant tes jambes le plus possible, à grimper sur le stage pis à faire baver les hommes en te faisant aller" (Tremblay, 1976, 69-70).

Carmen longs for the day when she will be able to perform without a disguise:

Pis viendra peut-être un jour où j's'rai pus
obligée de me déguiser en cow-girl pis de
faire des yodles! Peut-être que petit à petit
j'vas pouvoir abandonner tranquillement le
western pour me trouver un style à moé.
(Tremblay, 1976, 74)

Even though she would like to remove the cow-girl mask, her discourse does not imply an ultimate unmasking. The designation of the ideal as a "style" reveals yet another mask whose effect, if successful, would evoke notions of authenticity. Thus, in Sainte Carmen, as in Hosanna and La duchesse de Langeais, gender is a series of repeated surface acts that give the impression of stemming from a substantial gender located at the core of being. Once again, this is not to say that there are no differences between biological types, faulty as that classification may be. It is to remark, rather, that these differences are elaborated by means of cultural masks. It is the repetitive performance of gender that serves to persuade and confirm the spectator of gender-coded identity categories.

The question that can then be raised regards the political implications of the perception of gender as performance. If key

components of identity, such as gender, are merely exterior masks, and if the self has no inner substance but is, rather, constituted by the sum of these variable masks, then is it possible to formulate an oppositional politics? That is, does the lack of a primordial or authentic mask/identity reduce the subject to silence and prevent her from contesting dominant power structures? Traditional ideas about oppositional politics presuppose that the subject is inseparable from her essential and stable identity. This particular identity is thought to stem from an inner essence which then manifests itself through an oppositional paradigm based on transcendental values.

For example, a woman, who unproblematically identifies herself as a woman and accepts certain assumptions about gender politics such as woman's economic exploitation in patriarchal societies, may choose to participate in contesting dominant discourses in hopes of creating a more just society. However, if we problematize the category "woman" by deconstructing its metaphysical underpinnings so that the term of reference loses its definite and definable boundaries, does the individual also lose the basis on which to resist and transform oppressive situations? Some critics would answer in the affirmative, claiming that the post-structuralist dissolution of extra-discursive meaning can lead to powerlessness and the paralysis of emancipatory politics.¹ I disagree with this claim and concur with Judith Butler that the "deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics" (Butler, 1990, 148). I

¹ See Norris, Christopher, What's Wrong With Postmodernism?. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.

will first discuss Butler's ideas on this question and then proceed to apply them to my reading of the politics of Sainte Carmen.

"The foundationalist reasoning of identity politics tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken" (Butler, 1990, 142). Butler challenges this mode of reasoning and writes that "there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed" (Butler, 1990, 142). She takes issue with the idea that the subject can only be thought to have agency by means of recourse to an extra-discursive conception of the self. She also emphasizes that being constituted by discourse is not tantamount to being fatally determined by it. It is no wonder that critics of post-structuralism reject the idea of linguistically constituted meaning, correlating the subject's constitution by discourse with the impossibility of agency.

For Butler, there is a middle ground between absolute "determination" and less rigid "constitution". Factors like gender, class and colour work to signify identity to a certain extent. Nevertheless, identity can never be fully and completely posited once and for all. The situated subject can never be fully apprehended. Therefore, "if identity is always already signified, and yet continues to signify as it circulates within various interlocking discourses, then the question of agency is not to be answered through recourse to an 'I' that preexists signification" (Butler, 1990, 143). In the same way that language is not simply a vehicle that

serves to describe an extra-discursive reality, agency is not to be found uniquely in the subject thought to be extra-discursive.

If we accept that identity is an ongoing process of signification, and that this process is governed through cultural policing that defines certain behaviours as normal and others as unintelligible, then the constitution of the "intelligible" subject occurs through repetition. Proceeding from the key concept of repetition, Butler locates agency in "the possibility of a variation on that repetition":

If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only *within* the signifying practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion becomes possible. The injunction '*to be*' a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated. (Butler, 1990, 145)

The fact that gender is constituted by repetition provides the very means by which to contest restrictive gender codes. The oppositional task then becomes one of repeating in such a way as to subvert gender norms.

Although the example of Sainte Carmen is not principally one of gender oppression, it nevertheless serves to illustrate the potential for subversive politics in the context of discursively constituted identities. In the play, oppression is linked to such factors as class (prostitution) and sexual unintelligibility (transvestism). Defined as marginal by dominant social discourses, the cause of the dignity of

these excluded characters is taken up by Carmen, portrayed simultaneously as saint and tragic hero.

Carmen's call for rebellion and a new life is directed beyond the individual and addresses an entire society -- all the poor, the downtrodden, the humble of the Main, to whom she wishes to give new hope. (Usmiani, 1982, 114)

Carmen attempts, with tragic results, to valorise and revindicate the outcasts and empower them by means of her musical talent.

Carmen's role as messenger of enlightenment and liberation is alluded to early in the play. The two choruses, one comprised of the transvestites of the Main and the other of its prostitutes, refer frequently to Carmen as the sun: "Le soleil est v'nu au monde comme un coup de poing rouge au bout d'la Catherine!" (Tremblay, 1976, 14) "C'est Carmen qui s'est levée à matin sur la Catherine!" (Tremblay, 1976, 20) The choruses also attribute to Carmen the qualities of a goddess: "(. . .) a rayonnait comme le soleil!" (Tremblay, 1976, 20) "C'est Carmen qui est au-dessus de moé pis qui me regarde!" (Tremblay, 1976, 20) Her tragic end is simultaneously foreshadowed in the description of the sun's colour: "Rouge sang" (Tremblay, 1976, 14).

The vehicle for Carmen's message of liberation is her music. During her stay in Nashville, Carmen translated the songs she learned into French, or, rather, into joual: " 'Je le sais pas si c'est en français que j'les traduis, mais faites-vous-en pas, y vont me comprendre, là-bas!' " (Tremblay, 1976, 22) She also writes new lyrics to the old songs that she used to sing at the Rodéo. Explaining her new

repertoire to Maurice, she says that the old songs had no relevance to the lives of her audience:

(. . .) y a jamais personne qui leur a parlé d'eux autres! Moé-même je l'avais pas compris! Ça fait des années que je leur parle des plaines du Colorado, pis de la lune au-dessus du Tennessee, pis de mes chagrins d'amour dans la nuit du Montana, pis des valeureux cow-boys du Texas montés sur leur chevaux blancs, pis de mes exploits au lasso, pis de mes selles en cuir repoussé représentant deux coeurs enlacés, pis des nuages chargés d'orage, pis des amoureux dans le ciel bleu, pis de l'amour qui dure toujours! Ben j'les trompais Maurice! Parce que c'est pas ça qu'y veulent entendre! (Tremblay, 1976, 65)

The repetitive list of banal themes about which she used to sing previously formed part of Carmen's identity. The variations in that repetition from the commercial to the personal and political link agency not to a new identity, but to a variation in that repetition. The subversive repetition involves a change of content rather than of form. The form of her message itself, that of song, is amenable to repetition, which augments its potential as a tool for oppositional politics. Instead of dealing with traditional cowboy themes, Carmen's songs are relevant to the dilemmas faced by her listeners. Carmen tells Maurice: "(. . .) la Main a besoin qu'on y parle de la Main!" (Tremblay, 1976, 66)

The new songs are empowering and constitute a call for liberation to the inhabitants of the Main. Carmen's attendant, Bec-de-Lièvre, as well as the prostitutes and transvestites, feel that Carmen's songs are addressed to them individually:

Carmen a parlé de moé! Carmen a dit des affaires dans ses chansons qui venaient de ma vie, a moé!

(. . .) Carmen a chanté que mon histoire était belle
 pis que moé, Bec-de-Lièvre. . . comment c'qu'a l'a
 dit ça . . . que j'étais une chanson d'amour endor-
 mie dans une taverne! Pis Carmen a chanté que je
 pourrais ben me réveiller, un jour! (. . .) Carmen a
 dit qu'au fond de moé j'étais forte! (Tremblay, 1976,
 57)

In the songs, Carmen applauds them for their uniqueness and challenges them to rise up and take pride in themselves instead of continuously allowing themselves to be denigrated by society. The performance becomes political through its call for liberation. The choruses, responding to the challenge, repeat in a liturgical fashion Carmen's admonition for the marginals to rise up: "Réveille-toé!//Réveille-toé!//Lève-toé!//Lève-toé!" (Tremblay, 1976, 58)

The tension in the drama springs from Maurice's opposition to Carmen's revolutionary ideas. He wants her to simply maintain the status quo: "Chante pis ferme ta yeule! Pis ferme-toé les yeux! Pis bouche-toé les oreilles! C'est toute c'que j'te demande, icitte!" (Tremblay, 1976, 32) According to Maurice, Carmen's role does not include politics: "T'es-t-icitte pour faire de l'entertainment, pas plus!" (Tremblay, 1976, 69) He is quite aware that her discourse poses a threat to the status quo: "Tu te rends même pas compte que c'que t'as faite à soir, c'est dangereux!" (Tremblay, 1976, 66) As a lucid and pessimistic realist, the bottom line for Maurice is profits. As owner of the club, it is in his interests that the Main dwellers remain slaves to alcohol, drugs and cheap, unchallenging entertainment:

C'est ben beau d'aider le monde à se réveiller,
 mais un coup qu'y sont réveillés, que c'est que

tu fais avec! Ben moé j'peux te dire que c'est
qu'eux-autres vont faire : y vont prendre la
porte! Y vont sacrer leur camp, c'est toute!
(Tremblay, 1976, 67)

Maurice does not believe in their desire to be "saved": "ceux qui aboutissent sur la Main, y veulent pas être sauvés!" (Tremblay, 1976, 68) Their only redeeming value, in the eyes of Maurice, is the money they spend at his club: "Y'a rien d'autre à faire avec eux autres que de leur faire cracher leurs cennes" (Tremblay, 1976, 69). As such Maurice gives her an ultimatum : either she sings her old songs or she is fired. ". . . demain tu reviens à ton ancien répertoire ou ben donc tu chantes pas" (Tremblay, 1976, 70).

Carmen, having discovered her power to influence the marginals of the Main, persists in attempting to convince Maurice of the merits of her project: "Mais moé . . . moé j'ai découvert qu'y reste une chance de la sauver . . . Maurice, avec ma voix j'ai décidé d'essayer d'aider la Main à sortir de son trou" (Tremblay, 1976, 71). Despite the fact that the Main dwellers are drunks, drug addicts and prostitutes, Carmen believes that they are worthy of respect:

D'un coup qu'a l'arait envie d'être quelqu'un qu'on
écoute pis qu'on respecte au lieu d'être une traînée
qu'on viole pour vingt piasses la nuit pis qu'on ignore
le jour sauf de temps en temps pour dire d'elle qu'on
n'a honte pis qu'a mérite pas de vivre! La Main mérite
de vivre mais y faut l'aider à s'en rendre compte!
(Tremblay, 1976, 72)

She tells Maurice that she is fully committed to trying to empower the people of the Main, that she has already begun and that she has no intention of stopping: "J'ai commencé à soir, Maurice, pis

j'm'arrêterai certainement pas là!" (Tremblay, 1976, 72) Her lines close with an ironic threat: "J'pourrais ben passer du creux de ton lit à la tête de tes ennemis" (Tremblay, 1976, 72).

Carmen's words are prophetic. Realizing the extent of her determination, Maurice has his hit-man, Tooth Pick, assassinate Carmen that very night, after her first performance and before she gets a chance to continue with her crusade. The call for liberation, however, has already been heard, and along with it are born the possibilities for "salvation" from condemnation to silence and marginality.

Though her identity is constituted through masks and performances rather than by means of an extra-discursive essence, a political voice can nonetheless be located in the character of Carmen. Carmen does have agency, despite the fact that her identity can never be fully situated and that it is always a process of ongoing signification. This agency is located in the subversive variations that characterize the performance of her identity. The transformation of the old songs into revolutionary ones implies not an outright rejection of performance or existing categories, but rather a subversive manner of performing these categories. That is to say that she does not reject her role as show-girl and become a serious and "sincere" social activist. Rather, she continues to participate in this category but does so in a subversive way, by varying the content of her performance. The deconstruction of Carmen's identity into performative effects therefore does not amount to the destruction of her potential for political action.

The relevance of my analysis of Sainte Carmen to the problem of gender politics must now be spelled out. I have attempted to propose, using the arguments of Judith Butler, that gender can be informatively read as a performance, rather than as an extra-discursive or metaphysical essence. Such an interpretation acts as a potent critique of the kind of feminist theorizing in which woman is granted a metaphysical essence, such as in Cixous' "écriture féminine" or Irigaray's "parler-femme". These theories presuppose that in order to somehow alter patriarchal structures, a stable and universal gender identity known as "woman" must be in place. In my reading of Sainte Carmen, I have shown that a stable identity need not be in place in order for political interests to be articulated, and that indeed, the existence of such a pre-discursive identity is a convenient fiction. As I explained in Chapter II, not only is such a meta-definition of woman not necessary for effective feminism, it is also counter-productive. Judith Butler states: "The internal paradox of this foundationalism is that it presumes, fixes, and constrains the very 'subjects' that it hopes to represent and liberate" (Butler, 1990, 148).

For many critics, Carmen's discourse represents "Quebec's need and desperate search for a truly national cultural identity" (Usmiani, 1982, 124). An alternative reading of the play reveals significant implications for gender politics. Carmen's objective of empowering the marginals of the Main has much in common with the goals of feminism. Both aim to give voice and dignity to those who have been silenced and humiliated by dominant social discourses, and both

attempt to subvert these discourses in such a way as to make room for difference, for other ways of being, that are equally worthy of respect. "Essentialist" feminism, that feminism which attributes to woman a particular essence, is limited in its capacity to do this, as it sets definable boundaries around the female gender. Butler writes: "The feminist 'we' is always and only a phantasmatic construction, one that has its purposes, but which denies the internal complexity and indeterminacy of the term and constitutes itself only through the exclusion of some part of the constituency that it simultaneously seeks to represent" (Butler, 1990, 142). She says further that ". . . the identity categories often presumed to be foundational to feminist politics, that is, deemed necessary in order to mobilize feminism as an identity politics, simultaneously work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up" (Butler, 1990, 147).

A more subversive feminism would be post-structuralist feminism, in which not only meaning, but gender and identity themselves are considered to be linguistically constituted. As such, gender and identity would be understood as practices of signification and, therefore, ". . . culturally intelligible subjects (would be interpreted as) the effects of a rule-bound discourse" (Butler, 1990, 145). This does not mean that there is no such thing as woman, but, rather, that such a classification is in no way absolute. It is perhaps more informative to think of woman as a repetitive performance. Subversive variations in that performance can then open up the realm of possibilities for alternative ways of embodying gender.

"The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: 'man' and 'woman'" (Butler, 1990, 146).

According to Butler, it is not possible for the critical feminist to develop an optic exterior to constructed identities. The objective, rather, is to determine what and where subversions of gender norms are possible from within repetitive performance, and to participate in such disruptive performances in order to contest oppressive gender norms. This is exactly what Carmen does. In the culturally unintelligible figures of the prostitutes and the transvestites, Carmen sees simply other possibilities for gender configurations that are nevertheless deserving of respect. By encouraging them to believe in and stand up for themselves, Carmen is challenging them to question the "naturalness" of the forms that gender around them takes. By denaturalizing oppressive gender norms, Carmen becomes a model critical feminist.

The character of Carmen has some interesting parallels with American popstar Madonna. Like Carmen, Madonna has, through her music, attempted to revindicate the culturally unintelligible. Through songs like "Express Yourself" and "Vogue", she attempts to empower the weak and marginal. Her video, film and music career has brought into the public eye homosexuals, transvestites, prostitutes and unwed mothers, and has given a high profile to multiple forms for the expression of sexual desire traditionally considered abnormal and deviant. About Madonna, Camille Paglia

writes: "Through her enormous impact on young women around the world, Madonna is the future of feminism" (Paglia, 1992, 5). As performers, both Carmen and Madonna emphasize the feminine as a performance. The presentation by these two characters of gender as literally "constructed" by props and gestures challenges the traditionally accepted notion that gender identity is a fixed and essential quality with which an individual is born. Further, their valorisation of those defined as marginal according to society's sexual norms serves to undermine the rigid hierarchical and binary structure to which people are encouraged to conform. Such a structure functions in a politically conservative manner, whether bolstered by misogynistic discourse, or the claims of essentialist feminism. As such, the subversive performances of both Carmen and Madonna serve to open up possibilities for alternative gender configurations denied by any discourse that attributes an extra-discursive essence to identity.

Although Camille Paglia and Judith Butler initially appear to be unlikely allies, it seems they have similar ideas about the performative aspects of gender. Paglia's analysis of Madonna indicates that she shares at least some of Butler's views on gender as impersonation: "Feminism says, 'No more masks.' Madonna says we are nothing but masks" (Paglia, 1992, 5). Both Paglia and Butler disagree, then, with the foundationalist reasoning behind much feminist politics. Speaking of one of Madonna's videos, Paglia writes that it impressed her with "Madonna's sophisticated view of the fabrications of femininity, that exquisite theater which feminism

condemns as oppression but which I see as a supreme artifact of civilization" (Paglia, 1992, 9). This serves to confirm Butler's view, and my own, that it is not through a rejection of the theatre of the feminine that subversion is possible, but, rather, that oppressive gender norms will be more likely to lose their dominance if, like Carmen, one participates in such a theatre in disruptive and challenging ways.

Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

Through my analysis of gender as performance in selected plays of Michel Tremblay, I have attempted to show that there are alternatives to the kind of feminist criticism in which a metaphysical essence is attached to the female gender. Such theories, like Hélène Cixous' "feminine writing" and Luce Irigaray's "womanspeak", are perhaps disruptive, but only in a limited sense. Ultimately, they mimic the very form of discourses which attempt to legitimate the exclusion of woman, and hence function to reinforce the binary opposition which limits to two the many possible configurations of gender.

Unlike essentialist gender theories, the alternative I have proposed, that of gender as performance, does not function to constrain and delimit gender boundaries. Instead, the interpretation of gender as a performative effect presupposes gender to be a process of ongoing signification. I have described such an approach as "post-structural". That is to say that in the same way that meaning is constituted by the signifiers of language, gender is likewise constituted by its signifiers. The production of meaning and the production of gender can both be interpreted as processes of unending signification. However, where post-structuralist critics usually resist the temptation to formulate new utopias, feminist

criticism has generally been motivated by visions that are necessarily anchored to transcendental values.

I have shown the recourse to first principles to be problematic in feminist discourse; this tendency functions to limit the subjects it aims to emancipate. One of my objectives in this analysis has been to show that it is possible to formulate an effective, somewhat utopian, oppositional politics without constraining such a discourse to a particular epistemic anchor. I have found that there is, in short, a middle road between dogmatic utopia, and the kind of criticism that deconstructs, but fails to reconstruct. The interpretation of gender as performance is one possible method of reading texts from a feminist standpoint without getting mired in the problematic bog of essentialism.

The application of such a reading to various plays of Michel Tremblay has revealed the following: (a) that cultural regulation, such as the taboos against incest and homosexuality, works to produce and maintain the illusion of fixed gender identities; (b) that the concept of stable identities functions in the interests of patrilineal reproductive politics; and (c) that the naturalization of gender identity serves to further entrench the binary structure that necessitates exclusion and marginalization, be it women in a man's world, or homosexuals in a heterosexual world. Reading literature from the standpoint of gender as performative is not limited, however, to cataloguing oppression. Such an interpretation also allows us to articulate and promote political interests, as in the case of *Carmen*.

The pertinence of Tremblay's work to this analysis lies in his focus on society's marginals: the poor, the drunks, the homosexuals, the drag queens, the show-girls and the prostitutes. His plays do not consist of powerful, high-calibre individuals. In his work, Tremblay tends to reveal to the reader/spectator the bleak, depressing and shabby side of life. Yet, in the texts I have chosen, there is always some aspect of hope, no matter how small. One of his messages seems to be that there is still a possibility to experience a fulfilled existence for those condemned as marginal by society's mainstream. His exclusive focus on marginal and alienated characters may even suggest that such fulfillment is only possible for those who live on the periphery of the "normal".

Such themes render Tremblay's work amenable to a criticism that is both post-structural and political. To read gender as performance provides a feminist-oriented framework that, like the plays of Michel Tremblay, unmask the ways in which agreed upon definitions of the "acceptable" and the "normal" function oppressively, while not precluding the possibility of subverting such hegemonic discourses.

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