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FEMALE FETISHISM

The Case of George Sand

NAOMI SCHOR

French, Brown

In this age of feminism and poststructuralism I shall surprise no one by asserting that theory has a body and that that body like all bodies is sexed. The widespread use of the epithet “phallogentric” to qualify conceptual systems which place the phallus and the values it represents in a hegemonic position implicitly recognizes that sexual morphology informs the most apparently disembodied theories. In the past few years I have begun to explore the ways in which feminist modes of reading might be grounded in representations of the female body. My concern is not to counter phallogentrism by gynocentrism, rather to speculate on the modes of reading that might be derived from representations of the female body, a sexual body whose polycenteredness has been repeatedly emphasized by feminist theoreticians (Irigaray 1977). Specifically I have been concerned with the appropriation of psychoanalytic concepts (e.g. paranoia in Schor 1981) to ends for which they were not originally intended. In what follows I move from a striking representation of the female body in works by George Sand to the elaboration of a textual strategy specifically geared to taking this seemingly aberrant representation into account. Thus the writer’s fetishism becomes the critic’s, fetishism on fetishism we might say.

In George Sand’s early novel, *Valentine*, there occurs a scene which bodies forth in lapidary fashion the challenge posed by Sand to psychoanalytic, and perhaps to all feminist critics. I am referring to an episode in one of the final chapters, where the constantly deferred consummation of the adulterous passion of the low-born Benedict and the aristocratic Valentine is about to take place. Benedict has surprised Valentine in her oratory at the very moment

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when she is renewing her vow to the Madonna not to succumb to her illicit desires. In deference to Valentine's pleas, Benedict respects her vow, but at great cost: his diminished physical resources strained to the breaking point by this final heroic effort at sublimation, he swoons into a death-like trance. Distraught by Benedict's cadaverous appearance, Valentine drags him into her bedroom, that *sanctus sanctorum* into which Benedict had smuggled himself on Valentine's wedding night. There Valentine proceeds to brew him some tea. Thus, in the space of less than a page, the sublime heroine is metamorphosed into a bustling nineteenth-century angel of the hearth, ministering to the needs of an exhausted Byronic hero: "At that moment, the kind-hearted and gentle Valentine became the active, efficient housewife, whose life was devoted to the welfare of others. The panic terror of a passionately loving woman gave place to the sollicitude of devoted affection" (1869:303-304; 1978c:306).¹ It is at this critical juncture, when what is being emphasized is Valentine's sudden dwindling into domesticity, that the passage I want to comment on is located:

When she brought him the calming beverage which she had prepared for him he rose abruptly and glared at her with such a strange, wild expression that she dropped the cup and stepped back in alarm.

Benedict threw his arms about her and prevented her running away.

"Let me go," she cried "the tea has burned me horribly."

She did, in fact, limp as she walked away. He threw himself on his knees and kissed her tiny foot, which was slightly reddened, through the transparent stocking; then almost swooned again; and Valentine, vanquished by pity, by love, and, above all, by fear, did not again tear herself from his arms when he returned to life (p. 304; p. 306).

What, we cannot fail to ask, is the significance of this unusual foreplay, this pre-coital wounding followed by the eroticization of the injured limb? Freud's essay on fetishism seems to provide the elements of an answer: what we have here is a classical instance of fetishistic eroticism, on the order of Chinese footbinding. The adoration of the previously mutilated foot typifies the fetishist's double attitude to "the question of the castration of women"; whereas the mutilation of the foot corresponds to the recognition, indeed the reinscription of woman's castration, its adoration signals a persistent denial of the same fact.

Now if the masculine signature of the author were backed up by a certifiable male identity — if George Sand were really a man — the enlisting of the fetishistic model in our decoding of this episode

1. All quotations from Sand will be in English, but page references to corresponding French editions will also be provided, and will precede the page references to the translations.

would be relatively unproblematic, except, of course, for those readers who reject the psychoanalytic approach to literature altogether. But George Sand was, as we well know and cannot ignore, a woman. And that fact, I will argue here, complicates the task of the feminist psychoanalytic critic, for it is an article of faith with Freud and Freudians that *fetishism is the male perversion par excellence*. The traditional psychoanalytic literature on the subject states over and over again that there are no female fetishists; female fetishism is, in the rhetoric of psychoanalysis, an oxymoron.² If such is the case, the question becomes: what are we to make of an episode imagined by a woman author which so clearly, so prophetically rehearses the gestures of what has come to be known as fetishism? I insist on the word prophetically, for my argument hinges on the fact that Sand is pre-Freudian. The inscription of a scene of fetishism in a novel by a post-Freudian woman author would have a very different resonance.

2. The theoretical consequences of this traditional view are far reaching. For example, Mary Ann Doane demonstrates that the task of theorizing the female spectator is complicated by the female spectator's presumed inability to assume the distancing built in to the male spectator's fetishistic position: "In a sense, the male spectator is destined to be a fetishist, balancing knowledge and belief. The female, on the other hand, must find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to assume the position of fetishist" (1982:80).

The question of female fetishism — why it does not exist, what its clinical specificity would be if it did — is one that has elicited only sporadic interest in the literature of psychoanalysis. In the remarkably complete bibliography included in the special issue on Perversion of the *Revue Française de Psychanalyse* (Luissier, 1983), André Luissier lists four references to case studies of female fetishism: 1) G.A. Dudley (1954); 2) Ilse Barande (1962); 3) G. Zavitzianos (1971); 4) G. Bonnet (1977). To this list one should add an article which appears in the same special issue as the bibliography: François Sirois (1983). While all these articles reiterate the rarity of cases of female fetishism, all are case studies of female patients exhibiting sexual perversions on the order of fetishism. The major theoretical stumbling-block for these analysts is the Freudian equation: fetish = maternal penis (see below). Dudley attempts to circumvent this obstacle by dephallusizing the fetish altogether, arguing that the "fetish may... be a substitute for other infantile objects besides the penis" (p. 33). Zavitzianos, on the other hand, concludes that in the case of his female fetishist patient, "the fetish symbolized not the maternal penis (as is the case in male fetishism), but the *penis of the father*" (p. 302). While taking Zavitzianos's hypothesis into account, Bonnet displaces the problem by rereading Freud via Lacan and introducing the crucial Lacanian distinction between *having* and *being* the phallus. For Bonnet, "the female fetishist... is inscribed in both the problematics of having and of being" (p. 244). The female fetishist, according to Bonnet, is less concerned with having/not having the penis, than with being/not being the maternal phallus. Ultimately, at least in the case study presented, the female fetishist is more "fetished" (*fétichée*) than fetishizing. The female fetishist is a woman who responds to her mother's desire by wanting to be her (missing, absent) phallus. This theoretically sophisticated and innovative case study has interesting implications for the case of George Sand because it involves an Oedipal configuration bearing some resemblance to Sand's: an absent father — Sand's father died when she was four years old, the patient's parents were divorced when she was small — and a possessive mother who uses her daughter as a phallic substitute. For an earlier Lacanian approach to the question of female fetishism, see: Piera Aulagnier-Spairani, Jean Clavreul, et al. (1967).

Before going on to review Freud's arguments in favor of the exclusive masculinity of fetishism, I would like to bring into play a passage drawn from another novel by Sand. The benefit to be derived from this superimposition of the scene from *Valentine* on its homologue in *Mauprat* is threefold: first, it lends to our inquiry the urgency inherent in a recurrent scenario; second, it serves to make manifest the mobility of the fetish, its aptitude to press into service any wound inflicted on the female body (the fact that the female fetish par excellence in Sand should be a wound is not insignificant, for wounds *per se* are not generally fetishized by men); third, it eliminates any doubt as to the agent of the injury — for in the scene from *Valentine*, the spilling of the tea is not clearly assumed by either of the participants. In *Mauprat*, the wounding takes place in the course of a long conversation between Edmée and Bernard throughout which they are separated — *more* Pyramus and Thisbe — by the wall of Edmée's chapel. Once again we find the female protagonist sheltered from the intrusion of male desire by the protective walls of her religious sanctuary. If, as Nancy Miller has shown, the pavilion in *Valentine* — but also in *La Princesse de Clèves*, perhaps the paradigmatic novel of female fetishism — is the u-topic locus of "ideality and sublimation" (Miller 1983:137), the oratory — a female space *within* the patriarchal château walls — figures a liminal space where the struggle between male desire and female sublimation is played out. In this instance the inside/outside barrier is breached by the female character, as Edmée reaches her hand through the barred window of her chapel to touch the unsuspecting Bernard, who stands sobbing against the wall. At one point in their interminable dialogue, Bernard reverts back to his earlier wild child behavior and tries to force Edmée to kiss him:

...Edmée, I order you to kiss me."

"Let go, Bernard!" she cried, "you are breaking my arm. Look, you have scraped it against the bars."

"Why have you intrenched yourself against me?" I said, putting my lips to the little scratch I had made on her arm (1969:127; 1977:141).

Lest we imagine that Bernard is simply kissing the scratch to make it well, further on in the novel the erotic charge of the wound, here bound up by a small piece of cloth which assumes the function of fetish by metonymy — metonymy on metonymy — is made quite clear.

At that period it was the fashion for women to have their arms half bare at all times. On one of Edmée's I noticed a little strip of court-plaster that made my heart beat. It was the slight scratch I had caused against the bars of the chapel window. I gently lifted the lace which fell over her elbow, and, emboldened by her drowsiness, pressed my lips to the darling wound (p. 36; p. 154).

If, as I noted above, the author of this scene were male, we could satisfy ourselves with the assumption that the male character somehow bodies forth male fantasies of wounding and reparation, male recognition and denial of woman's castration, ultimately male horror of female genitalia. The "darling wound" would then appear as the "*stigma indelebile*," in Freud's words, of the "aversion, which is never absent in any fetishist, to the real female genitalia" (Freud 1953-74, 23, 154). In short, if the author of *Valentine* and *Mauprat* were a man, that is so classified in the symbolic order, we would describe him as a text-book case of fetishism, before the letter.

How does Freud go about masculinizing fetishism? To begin with, as Freud states in the opening sentence of "Fetishism," his analysis is based exclusively on the case histories of *male* patients: "In the last few years I have had an opportunity of studying analytically a number of men whose object-choice was dominated by a fetish" (p. 152). One might justifiably remark that this statement does not preclude the existence of women whose object-choice would be similarly ordained. When, however, Freud goes on to explain the meaning and the significance of the fetish — it is a "penis-substitute" — the masculinity of this perverse object-choice becomes explicit: "To put it more plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis the little boy once believed in and — for reasons familiar to us — does not want to give up" (pp. 152-153). It is finally in these "familiar reasons" for the little boy's unshakeable belief in the maternal phallus that the masculinity of the fetish is grounded, as Freud's reconstruction of the primal scene of fetishism shows: "What happened, therefore, was that the boy refused to take cognizance of the fact of his having perceived that a woman does not possess a penis. No, that could not be true: for, if a woman had been castrated, then his own possession of a penis was in danger; and against that there rose in rebellion the portion of his narcissism which Nature has, as a precaution, attached to that particular organ" (p. 153). The implied threat to his bodily integrity represented by the woman's lack of a penis powerfully motivates the little boy to deny his perception. It is the fact that he has, so to speak, something to lose that makes the little boy so vulnerable to the fear of castration.

Now what of the little girl, she who is, in Freudian terms, always already castrated, thus impervious to all threats of castration? How does she respond to the evidence of sexual difference, which entails or presupposes her inferiority? A careful reading of Freud's writings on female sexual development strongly suggests that many little and big girls are engaged in a rebellion against the "fact" of castration every bit as energetic as the fetishist's. Indeed, if one takes as one of the hallmarks of fetishism the split in the ego (*Ichspaltung*) to which the fetish bears testimony, then it becomes possible to speak, as does

Sarah Kofman in *L'Enigme de la femme* (1980), of female fetishism, for the little girl's ego can be split along the very same fault lines as the little boy's. Denial is not a male prerogative, as is proven by the behavior of those women who suffer from what Freud calls a "masculinity complex":

Or again, a process may set in which might be described as a "denial," a process which in the mental life of children seems neither uncommon nor very dangerous but which in an adult would mean the beginning of a psychosis. Thus a girl may refuse to accept the fact of being castrated, may harden herself in the conviction that she *does* possess a penis and may subsequently be compelled to behave as though she were a man. (Freud 1963:188).

Sand's Lélia might provide an apt literary instance of such a viriloid woman, not so much because she appears at the ball in male travesty, but because she has adopted the costume of the dandy, and the female dandy is an oxymoron on the same order as the female fetishist. In Baudelaire's words: "Woman is the opposite of the dandy" (Baudelaire 1961:1972). Encased in the dandy's hard protective shell of impassivity, as cold and as chiseled as a classical marble statue, Lélia is an eminently phallic figure. Thus it should come as no surprise that in the remarkably complex scene by the side of the stream in which Lélia and her sister Pulchérie are precipitated from sameness into the alterity of sexual difference, Lélia is cast as a man, and, further, her masculine sexual attributes promoted as representing an aesthetic ideal:

"I even remember something you said, which I couldn't explain to myself," replied Lélia. "You made me lean over the water, and you said, 'Look at yourself. See how beautiful you are.' I replied that I was less so than you. 'Oh, but you are much more beautiful,' you said. 'You look like a man.'" (1960:158; 1978:103-104).

But there is more to fetishism than the splitting of the ego, more to female fetishism than the masculinity complex, more to Sand than the male impersonation which has garnered such a disproportionate share of attention. Sarah Kofman, who is the leading — not to say the only — theoretician of female fetishism, has recently argued that what is pertinent to women in fetishism is the paradigm of undecidability that it offers. By appropriating the fetishist's oscillation between denial and recognition of castration, women can effectively counter any move to reduce their bisexuality to a single one of its poles. In Kofman's Derridean reading of Freud,³ female fetishism is

3. On the relationship between Derridean undecidability and (female) fetishism see Kofman (1981:83-116). The very first question to arise during the discussion that follows Kofman's presentation is: "Does the generalized fetishism of *Glas* allow a female fetishism?" to which Kofman responds: "A generalized fetishism, defined as a generalized oscillation, does not exclude a female fetishism, since it implies the generalization of the feminine and the end of the privileging of the phallus, which ceases to be a fetish" (p. 112).

not so much, if at all, a perversion, rather a *strategy* designed to turn the so-called “riddle of femininity” to women’s account.

Feminists have been quick to seize on the *political* benefits to be derived from this strategy; in a review article published in the most recent feminist issue of *Diacritics*, Elizabeth L. Berg writes: “In *L’Enigme de la femme* Kofman gives us a theoretical framework for reconciling two tendencies of feminism which have tended to remain in apparently irremediable contradiction: the claim for equal rights and the claim for acknowledgment of sexual difference” (Berg 1982:13). But the feminization of fetishism has important implications for *textual strategies* as well. Indeed, if the recent special feminist issues of both *Diacritics* and *Critical Inquiry* can be taken as symptomatic of the current discursive moment, then fetishism can be said to pervade the critical debate of both Franco-American and Anglo-American feminists of the early eighties. Refusing to opt for either of the exemplary positions argued in the *Diacritics* issue by Peggy Kamuf and Nancy Miller,⁴ the “transatlantic” (Jardine 1981) feminist literary critic finds herself saying something on the order of Octave Mannoni’s legendary fetishist: “Je sais bien, mais quand même.” Anglo-American critical fetishism, on the other hand, is coded in Gestalt-like terms. As Elaine Showalter writes: “woman’s fiction can be read as a double-voiced discourse, containing a ‘dominant’ and a ‘muted’ story, what Gilbert and Gubar call a ‘palimpsest.’ I have described it elsewhere as an object/field problem in which we must keep two oscillating texts simultaneously in view” (Showalter 1981:204). In short, to borrow E. H. Gombrich’s celebrated example of a perceptual aporia, the female fetishist critic somehow accommodates her vision so as to see both the rabbit and the duck at the same time.

To read Sand’s recurrent scenes of fetishistic eroticism in the perspective of female fetishism is to give full play to what I will call for lack of a less awkward term, her insistent and troubling *bisexuality*. The wounds inflicted on the female protagonist’s body as a prelude to her sexual initiation are the stigmata neither of a turning away from femininity, nor even of a feminist protest against woman’s condition under patriarchy, but rather of a refusal firmly to anchor woman — but also man — on either side of the axis of castration. In Sand’s texts this perverse oscillation takes the form of a breakdown of characterization which is quite possibly Sand’s most radical gesture as a writer. Just as her episodic adoption of male dress threatened the structuring difference of bourgeois society, her occasional rejection of firm boundaries between characters subverts the fiction of individuation that is the bedrock of conventional realism. Nowhere is Sand’s bisexuality more prominent than in *Lélia*

4. See Peggy Kamuf (1982:42-47) and Nancy Miller (1982:48-53).

where, as Eileen Boyd Sivert has noted, there is a remarkable “slippage of personality” (Sivert 1981:59)⁵ between the characters, whose identities are so unstable as to be in constant danger of an uncanny coalescence. *Lélia* is, of course, an experimental work situated at the outermost limits of nineteenth-century French fiction, yet the breakdown of individuation which it bodies forth is at work to some degree in much of Sand’s major fiction, notably in her manipulation of doubles. Indeed, I would suggest that ultimately *female travesty*, in the sense of women dressing up as or impersonating other women, constitutes by far the most disruptive form of bisexuality: for, whereas there is a long, venerable tradition of naturalized intersexual travesty in fiction, drama, and opera, the exchange of *female* identities, the blurring of difference *within* difference remains a largely marginal and unfamiliar phenomenon. Now what we might call the first generation of feminist Sand critics argued that female doubling in Sand corresponds to her failure to imagine female desiring subjects: what we have instead, the argument goes, is a traditional masculinist split representation of woman, yet another mother/whore figure who can only be synthesized in the eyes of a desiring male beholder, such as Raymon in *Indiana*.⁶ While generally in agreement with this feminist critique of Sand’s representation of woman, I would argue that the striking commutativity of Sand’s female doubles — Noun and Indiana, *Lélia* and Pulchérie, but also Louise and Valentine — causes male desire to misfire at the same time as it perpetuates the myth of the exclusive masculinity of libido. When, in a hallucinatory scene in *Indiana*, a drunken Raymon imagines that through the servant Noun travestied as her mistress he is making love to the inaccessible Indiana, he experiences bliss, but when, in an uncanny repetition of that scene after Noun’s suicide, Indiana entices Raymon with a luxuriant mass of hair shorn from the drowned woman’s scalp, Raymon’s love for Indiana precipitously and definitively dies, and he exclaims: “You have inflicted a horrible wound on me” (1862:95-96; 1978a:164).

5. This slippage might usefully be compared to the “ontological slipperiness” Leo Bersani sees at work in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* and Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror* (Bersani 1967:198). Bersani makes no distinction between male-authored and female-authored fictions of “depersonalized desire”: nevertheless, the question of the *femininity of undifferentiated characterization* must be raised if only because of the work carried out by such theoreticians of the object-relations school as Nancy Chodorow, who asserts that “separation and individuation remain particularly female developmental issues,” rooted in women’s mothering (Chodorow, 1978:110). The difficult question then becomes: how does one articulate the bisexuality of female fetishism and the metamorphoses of the “deconstructed self” on the one hand, and the perverse oscillation of female fetishism and the indissolubility of the mother/daughter dyad on the other?

6. The interpretation I am alluding to here is the one elaborated by Leslie Rabine (1976:2-17), according to whom the pure Indiana and the fallen Noun are complementary figures.

In closing I must give voice to a persistent doubt that nags at me as I attempt to think through the notion of female fetishism. What if the appropriation of fetishism — a sort of “perversion-theft,” if you will — were in fact only the latest and most subtle form of “penis-envy”? At the very least a certain unease resulting from the continued use of the term fetishism, with its constellation of misogynistic connotations, must be acknowledged. What we have here is an instance of “paleonymy,” the use of an old word for a new concept. To forge a new word adequate to the notion of female fetishism, what we need now is what Barthes called a “logothète” (Barthes 1971:7),⁷ an inventor of a new language.

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7. Barthes describes his book as: “le livre des Logothètes, des fondateurs de langues” (p. 7).

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