Christiansen on Pelletier (2016)


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Drawing from an immense corpus—there are forty-three entries in the list of primary texts—that includes works by J.-K. Huysmans, Élémir Bourges, Edmond de Goncourt, Jean Lorrain, Émile Zola, Rachilde, Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly, Catulle Mendès, and Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, and from an equally wide-ranging slate of critics (Gaston Bachelard, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Rae Beth Gordon, Susan Hiner, Dominique Pety, and Robert Ziegler; 218 secondary sources in all), Sophie Pelletier aims to demonstrate the multi-faceted role of le bijou—used in its broadest sense for diverse forms of ornamentation—in fin-de-siècle Naturalist and Decadent fiction. In addition to being purely “functional,” like the ring that operates Edison’s automaton in Villiers’s *L’Ève future* and the poison-laced one that serves as a murder weapon in Lorrain’s *Monsieur de Phocas*, jewels, along with precious metals and stones, “composent un champ lexical exploité à profusion par les auteurs de l’époque” (11). Much more than mere objects of adornment, les bijoux figure in esthetic, social, economic, and political spheres, even rising to the level of “icônes d’une esthétique chercheant à ciseler le mot comme on taille la gemme, à façonner la phrase comme on tord le métal” (11), sometimes to the point that the text itself becomes un bijou.

The book’s three sections correspond to three interrelated “axes de réflexion”: le bijou as objet “chargé de valeurs: filiale et économique,” as a central element in the construction “toute de tensions, du corps (féminin),” and as matière belonging to the world of material images which, according to Bachelard, represent “le ‘miroir énergétique’ de l’homme” (qtd. p. 20). Each section, whose internal structure consists of two chapters presenting arguments that either complement or conflict with each other, centers on a particular power struggle—among social classes, the sexes, and the arts, respectively (21). Chapter one, for example, explores the subject of jewels and the aristocracy, while chapter two examines their appropriation by the bourgeoisie; chapter three analyzes their role in women’s enslavement by men, while chapter four reveals them to be instruments of self-empowerment (21). This dialectic allows Pelletier to “prendre la pleine mesure du bijou, ce petit objet qui, pourtant bien superficiel aux yeux de certains, ouvre à des enjeux de pouvoir. Signe poétique,” she affirms, “il apparaît résolument politique” (21).

Pelletier is at her most compelling when she discusses the ways these writers utilized jewels in their portrayals of women. In chapter three, Pelletier argues that les bijoux function to subjugate the female body socially, conjugally, and economically, noting the tendency among a plethora of Decadent writers at the very end of the century to encrust female flesh so completely that it becomes petrified, “le tout afin de contrôler, autant que faire se peut, le sexe féminin” (129). Similarly, fin-de-siècle jewelers produced troves of metal serpent bracelets “comme autant de références sulfureuses et aguichantes […] au péché originel” (134). Corsets, de rigueur—pun intended—for pubescent girls (at least in Paris) served to “compense[r] la mollesse et corriger[r], visuellement du moins, les morphologies les plus insoumises” (132). But if such compression enhances the attractiveness of breasts and hips, it also signifies “une forme de coercition qui tend à rendre la chair féminine inoffensive” (132–33). The crinoline, for its part, camouflages a woman’s curves while protecting her, by its fullness, from too much physical intimacy. Even diadems and other hair ornaments “doptent, sculptent et, pour tout dire, ‘artialisent’ les chevelures les plus sauvages, sources de tentation” (133). Bolstering Pelletier’s argument are examples from Zola’s *La Curée*, Lorrain’s *Monsieur de Phocas* and *Monsieur Bougrelon*, Edmond de Goncourt’s *Chérie*, and Villiers’s *L’Ève future*. In chapter four, aptly titled “Instruments de résistance féminine,” Pelletier showcases the ways that les bijoux become veritable “machines de guerre” (167) for female characters “en quête de souveraineté” (166) in both private and public life. This is the era of “la femme nouvelle,” that freedom-seeking, often androgynous figure who aspired to enter the workplace and to claim certain basic rights, such as economic independence, exclusively afforded to men. Under scrutiny here are texts by Octave Mirbeau (“La Bague,” *Le Calvaire*), Bourges (*Le Crépuscule des dieux*), Zola (*Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*), Céard (“La Saignée”), and Rachilde, whose *La Marquise de Sade* “est placé sous le signe de la vengeance des ‘faibles’” (l’animal, la femme) sur le ‘fort’ (l’homme)” (195). The problem, as Pelletier sees it, is that even as precious gems and metals confer power on women, they also play a part in turning them into “des êtres dénaturés, des anti-femmes, froides, rigides ou stériles” (221).

At once dense and diffuse, Pelletier’s study is not always an easy read. Its meticulous documentation (chapter one, only nineteen pages long, contains eighty-six notes; chapter six, forty-two pages, has 159; on some pages, footnotes occupy nearly as much space as the text proper) bogs down the flow of the presentation. That said, no one will take issue with the high quality of Pelletier’s research and the import of her findings, sure to be a boon to specialists of Naturalism, Decadence, and fin-de-siècle culture in general.
Volume: 45.3-4
Year: 2017