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## Decadent Feminism: Mentorship in Jane de La Vaudère's *Les Demi-sexes* (1897)

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In roughly two decades, Jane de La Vaudère (pen name of Jeanne Scrive) published over thirty novels and collections of short stories, four volumes of poetry, numerous journalistic pieces, and five plays, including an adaptation of a story by Zola (“Pour une nuit d’amour!”).<sup>1</sup> In many of her writings she grapples with social issues impacting women such as education, divorce, and the population crisis, though she may be best known for her plagiarism of works by Joris-Karl Huysmans and Guy de Maupassant.<sup>2</sup> After earning a wide readership before World War I, La Vaudère fell out of favor, only recently attracting some well-deserved attention from critics, including a biography by Sharon Larson (*Resurrecting Jane de La Vaudère: Literary Shapeshifter of the Belle Époque*, Penn State UP, 2022). *Les Demi-sexes*, published in 1897 (and in its twentieth edition by 1900), tells the story of Camille de Luzac, an eighteen-year-old who has her ovaries removed in order to be free from the fear of pregnancy. In so doing, she becomes part of an exclusive group of women recruited by a formidable mentor figure, Nina Saurel, whose overarching message is that women should be able to opt out of motherhood and to explore their sexuality to the fullest. But Nina’s mentorship turns out to have mixed results, as Camille engages in a variety of sexual experiences only to question the validity of Nina’s beliefs and practices. The novel’s very structure mirrors this process of self-discovery, with part I devoted to Nina’s principles, part II to Camille’s implementation of them, and part III to the consequences of her decision to reject them.

The female mentor is something of a stock character in a number of Belle Époque novels that Juliette M. Rogers calls “novels of professional development” (the subtitle of her 2007 book, *Career Stories*, Penn State UP), such as Marcelle Tinayre’s *La Rebelle* (1905) and Colette Yver’s *Princesses de science* (1907). As I explain in an article on Léontine Zanta’s *La Science et l’amour*, these novels have certain features in common: a traditional or absent mother, feminist characters

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and references to feminism, anti-feminist male characters, a troubled romantic relationship, and a mentor figure. The latter, typically an older, experienced woman, helps her protégée navigate the male-dominated workplaces of professions like medicine and law while offering advice on balancing the professional with the personal (16). *Les Demi-sexes* is different because neither work nor love figure into the mentoring; feminism for La Vaudère—though never labeled as such—is expressed not in those contexts but in that of sex. It bears mentioning that neither representation of feminism resembles the kinds embraced by real-life women who took up such causes as suffrage, infant mortality, and workers’ rights. In her seminal book, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870–1920*, historian Karen Offen writes about Charles Turgeon who, in *Le Féminisme français* (1902), identifies four “varieties” (worker, bourgeois, *mondain*, and professional) and three “strands” (revolutionary, Christian, and independent) of feminism (348–49). Offen herself notes, elsewhere, the practice among partisans of qualifying the term feminism with an adjective, then names no fewer than seven additional types (socialist, radical, republican, conservative, syndicalist, familial, individualist/integral) (“Depopulation” 654). Scholars continue to follow that trend even now, with Rachel Mesch referring to Belle Époque *literary* feminism (*Having* 6) and Per Faxneld to *satanic* feminism (also the title of his 2017 book). My analysis of the mentoring relationship in *Les Demi-sexes* will make a case for adding *Decadent* feminism to this already extensive taxonomy, using as a point of departure Faxneld’s theory that Decadence and feminism are linked.<sup>3</sup>

The ovariectomy (*ovariotomie*), a key component of the Decadent feminism on display in *Les Demi-sexes*, was first performed in France in 1882<sup>4</sup> to treat hysteria, soon becoming a controversial form of birth control that engendered heated debates between, on one side, feminists and neo-Malthusians (whose primary interest was contraception), and on the other, panicked pro-natalists intent upon repopulating France after the Franco-Prussian war. The efforts of the latter group included a scare campaign triggered by an 1896 medical thesis (eventually shown to be based on falsified data) by Étienne Canu, who claimed that between 1883 and 1896, 40,000 Parisian women had had ovariectomies, that in France as a whole, half a million women had been “robbed [. . .] of the joys of maternity” (Finn 31),

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and that in each hospital under the aegis of the *Assistance publique*, two surgical wards were being used for the operations, which meant that “one component of the public health system was undermining the population effort of the nation” (Finn 31). Canu also speculated on the role of female sterilization in destroying the family “and liberating unmanageable sexual desire” (Finn 31).<sup>5</sup> In the introduction to his 2018 translation of *Les Demi-sexes* (along with *Les Androgynes*), Brian Stableford explains that in 1899, physician André Couvreur published *Le Mal nécessaire* in order to address the “moral and political cause” presented in *Les Demi-sexes*, contending that the surgery that became a popular form of contraception among Parisian *demi-mondaines* and *mondaines* was in reality a hysterectomy (xx).<sup>6</sup> Whatever the exact nature of the surgery, this highly politicized issue proved to be an appealing plot device that found its way into a number of contemporary novels besides La Vaudère’s, such as Camille Pert’s *Les Florifères* (1898), Armand Dubarry’s *Les Femmes eunuques* (part of a series titled *Les Déséquilibrés de l’amour*) (1899), and Emile Zola’s *Fécondité* (1899).<sup>7</sup>

Unlike the traditional *roman de formation* featuring a naïve (male) protagonist who arrives in Paris ripe for the advice of a (male) mentor (Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot* and Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le noir* come immediately to mind), *Les Demi-sexes* presents a heroine whose “education” is already well underway,<sup>8</sup> hence the opening scene *in medias res* in which Camille announces to a certain Dr. Richard that she is there on behalf of “madame Saurel” to request an operation. An orphan in the care of a baroness grandmother whose sole *raison d’être* is to preside, sometimes while dozing, over a *petit cénacle* of artists, actors, and the like, Camille comes to the reader as something of a paradox, portrayed, on the one hand, as completely alone and vulnerable (a state that the narrator emphasizes with terms like “sans protection” [48], “seule” [48], and “sans appui” [48, 52]) and on the other, unusually experienced. By day, Camille, whom the mothers in her orbit consider a positive role model for their daughters, is a capable businesswoman in charge of her grandmother’s fortune, and by night, an eager participant in hedonistic activities—drugs (morphine and belladonna), “imprudent” readings, “perverse” friends (58–59), and sex, though she is technically still a virgin. A male attendee at one of the baroness’ *salons* laments the fact that “les demi-vierges ont fait du

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chemin, dans ces derniers temps, et la fraction de pureté qui leur reste est bien minimale!” (101). The concept of “half virgins” was a *fin-de-siècle* trope most famously exploited by Marcel Prévost in his 1894 novel, *Les Demi-vierges*,<sup>9</sup> about the noxious effects of education and Parisian life on young women who are, according to Helen Craske,

‘technically’ or ‘physically’ virgins, but whose knowledge of sex, and experience of non-penetrative sexual contact, exclude them from the idealized innocence of contemporaneous gender norms—these female characters gain an uncanny subversive power through their ambiguous sexuality, which arouses and frustrates protagonists’ and readers’ epistemophilic desires. (28)<sup>10</sup>

Ironically, women’s status as “half” something, whether it be “-vierge” or “-sexe,” is empowering since what their bodies conceal was often perceived as a threat to patriarchal society. As Anne E. Linton sees it, the “page-turning anxiety” prompted by reading *Les Demi-sexes* stems from “the very unknowability of the ‘half-women’s’ true identities, or rather, the truth of their operation. These ‘demi-sexes’ are outwardly indistinguishable although their bodies have been transformed irreversibly by modern medicine” (580).

In her first conversation with her mentor, which occurs before that ‘irreversible transformation,’ Camille expresses gratitude for the opportunity to realize her dream of being a woman who no longer has to live in fear—clearly, she means that of an unwanted pregnancy, though La Vaudère leaves the object of her fear unspecified as if to underscore the tacit understanding between mentor and mentee. Stableford notes that *Les Demi-sexes* was the first of La Vaudère’s novels to “test the boundaries of the conventionally unmentionable” and emphasizes how shocking it would have been to ask for an “operation” at a time when, “in spite of the moral decadence of *fin-de-siècle* Paris and its literature, the greatest of all unmentionable topics was contraception” (xix). It is ironic, of course, that Camille considers the very thing that physically *makes* her a woman—her ovaries—to be the *obstacle* to her being fully woman. But, as Melanie Hawthorne explains, the *fin-de-siècle* woman had few options: “to be sexually active was to be (sooner or later, for the majority of women), a mother. Not to be a mother was to remain a virgin. The notion that women could be lovers, sexual

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partners [. . .] was simply inconceivable, and yet a necessary step for feminism” (187). There was no magic elixir as in Michel Corday’s 1903 novel, *Sésame, ou La maternité consentie*, to render a woman temporarily infertile. The extent to which women were desperate to control their fertility is evidenced by the astounding number of abortions performed at the end of the nineteenth century, estimated by Elinor A. Accampo to be between 100,000 and 500,000 *per year* (precise numbers are difficult to determine since abortion was illegal) (258). As drastic a step as abortion, itself “a desperate, dangerous consequence of pre-coital lack of control” (Offen, “Depopulation” 259), the ovariectomy represented a permanent and irrevocable solution to this urgent problem for sexually active women.<sup>11</sup>

Sexual fulfillment without unwanted consequences is not the only goal of Nina Saurel’s program for Camille; it also involves seeking revenge on a phallogentric society “qui nous condamne,” states Camille (47). To do that, and to attain freedom, power, and happiness (41), Camille is to choose her own lovers, vary them at will, and be the “man” in her liaisons (33), with no emotional attachments. These principles align nicely with what Simon Wilson terms the Decadent view of woman who is “no longer a victim” but “an independent creature using her sexuality to dominate men” (qtd. in Faxneld 259). Camille has learned the importance of privileging women’s intellect as well and thus aims to “placer sa vie, non dans le cœur qui se brise, non dans les sens qui s’émoussent mais dans le cerveau qui ne s’use pas aussi vite et doit mépriser le cœur et les sens” since it is only through thought and action, she claims, that women can achieve equality with men (44).

If these statements seem suspiciously eloquent coming from the mouth of an eighteen-year-old, it is because she is parroting a mentor whose authority over her is so complete that she is willing to risk her life by having the ovariectomy, claiming to prefer death to the vegetative state in which she says all the women she knows languish. Camille’s senior by ten years, Nina Saurel is a wealthy widow who brought her “instincts pervers” (79) to her marriage, the narrator observes rather cryptically, and now enjoys the life of a vagabond. That she represents danger is undeniable: in her flared nostrils there is “une décision suprême comme celle d’une mauvaise action et même

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d'un crime" (17); in lips said to be made for kissing, there is cruelty; she is, in short, "charmante et terrible à la fois" (80), "l'âme du vice et le vice sans âme" (63), the very embodiment of the Decadent vision of woman as "perverse and potentially dangerous" (Wilson 94). It is obviously thanks to Nina that Camille has had contact with corrupting elements of *fin-de-siècle* society that have left her "désillusionnée avant d'avoir vécu, perdue avant d'avoir aimé [. . .] la fleur hâtive et morbide épanouie des civilisations extrêmes" (59), not to mention infused with "[un] mal [qui] [. . .] avait flétri les roses de son cœur" (59). In a flashback, the narrator shows Nina and Camille early on in their relationship, gazing at entwined lovers in the Bois de Boulogne, one of several locations known for same-sex commerce in *fin-de-siècle* Paris,<sup>12</sup> according to Nancy Erber, who explains that the fashionable lady searching for a female partner would drive in an open carriage with a beribboned poodle, waiting for a woman to signal her availability with a certain mouth movement (182). Nina and Camille have the habit of frequenting, in disguise, "les endroits louches où s'amuse le peuple" (64)—lesbianism long having been perceived as the purview of the working class<sup>13</sup>—in search of new experiences and sensations, much like Huysmans's *Des Esseintes* in the quintessential Decadent text, *À rebours* (1884). In her 1922 treatise on feminism, Léontine Zanta, the first woman *docteur ès lettres* at the Sorbonne, comments on the consequences of such a quest:

Lisez certains romans de femmes, et vous serez frappés de leur recherche des sentiments compliqués et rares, du luxe des sensations, du souci de l'extraordinaire, je dirais même du morbide. La femme libre veut tout sentir, tout expérimenter, elle se déséquilibre et ce qu'il y a de plus grave, elle contribue au déséquilibre général. Le féminisme ainsi entendu aurait beau alléguer qu'il respecte la sensibilité féminine et la développe, il ferait fausse route et serait un mal social. (123)

There is no question that Camille holds her mentor in high esteem precisely because of the latter's capacity for "unbalancing" (to borrow Zanta's term) herself and society; she admires Nina's "corruption froide, voluptueusement cruelle, qui était assez forte pour commettre un crime et assez étourdie pour en rire" (63). Yet there are subtle signs of discord between the two women even before the

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ovariectomy. For all her allegiance to Nina's feminist message, Camille feels, as early as the day after meeting her mentor, "prise comme dans un filet, liée, engourdie dans les bras de la tentatrice qui l'avait conquise, sans qu'elle sût comment" (61), the unwitting fly to Nina's menacing spider. Likewise, just before the ovariectomy, Camille looks in a mirror and does not recognize herself, as if La Vaudère were suggesting that she has already lost some part of her core identity. Even worse, she has a vision of herself as a corpse, harkening back to the novel's opening scene in which she saw her future self in the sickly, emotionless women waiting for Dr. Richard—a vision nearly made real when she suffers life-threatening complications after the procedure. Her immediate reaction post-ovariectomy is to regret what she considers a "mauvaise action" and an unforgivable crime (83). Another early indication that Nina's principles might not be sustainable in the long term is the mentor's own admission that what liberates the young woman—forgoing marriage and motherhood—will lead to solitude and a loss of femininity later: "Quand nous ne sommes ni mères, ni épouses, quand la vieillesse nous met un masque flétri, paralyse tout ce qu'il y a de femme en nous et sèche la joie dans les regards de nos amants, que pourrions-nous bien regretter?" Nina asks. Old women, she tells Camille, "n'ont plus qu'à mourir, car l'homme ne leur a pas fait de place dans l'existence!" (70–71). Nina reiterates this idea in a later scene where she pulls her mentee into a passionate embrace with a Ronsard-worthy "Aimons-nous, Camille, profite de ta jeunesse, de ta beauté" (125). In short, all of these seemingly innocuous details, when taken together, have the effect of subverting Nina's message.

It is noteworthy as well that Camille decides to move forward with the ovariectomy not to please Nina but for the most old-fashioned of reasons—a young man, Julien Rival, has piqued her interest. Nina approves of him as her first male "test" partner even while conceding that it does not matter if it is "[J]ui ou un autre" (103) since it is not the individual man but the entire male gender that is under indictment. The problem, in terms of the legitimacy of Nina's principles, is that Julien does not really fit the profile of the kind of man that Nina has posited as revenge-worthy: naïve and sensitive, he tells Camille he loves her almost immediately then proposes marriage, to which Camille responds with a firm "On ne m'épouse pas. Perdez

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tout espoir” (106), clearly having taken to heart Nina’s dictum to avoid “[les] grandes passions. Ne lui laisse pas le temps de s’attacher” (95). Rather than lose hope, Julien abandons his studies, follows Camille everywhere, and furnishes an apartment with her favorite things. He is said to be “tout sentiment” (46), fulfilled sexually but frustrated by the lack of emotional commitment on Camille’s part. Faxneld tells us that “the feminized Decadent male was in a way a male counterpart to the masculinized New Woman,<sup>14</sup> both being part of a broader ‘gender trouble’” (325). Even if Camille follows Nina’s advice by making Julien her plaything and slave—“sans cesse à ses ordres, et elle *était* vraiment le mâle de cet accouplement” (133)—the subjugation of such an easy target hardly constitutes the kind of triumph over men that Nina has in mind.

In a second male lover, an Austrian count named Philippe de Talberg, Nina offers her mentee Julien’s polar opposite, the very type of man whom Nina aims to make pay for his sins against women, and one who rivals her in cruelty and self-interest. Joëlle Prungnaud includes him, as a matter of fact, in her list of examples of “le personnage type du décadent” (228). But Philippe is even less meaningful a conquest for Camille than Julien because his relationship with her is rooted in blackmail: he knows about her ovariectomy and lesbian activities and demands, in exchange for his silence, daily rendez-vous which leave Camille as much “une bête dans un filet”—La Vaudère uses the very same phrase—as she is in her relationship with Nina, “liée, jetée aux pieds de cet homme qui osait la braver” (119). Though Philippe promises to be her slave, she is very much his, not to mention his rape victim. That the relationship with Philippe is decisive for Camille where Nina’s mentoring is concerned becomes obvious when she goes to her mentor after the rape only to be accused of being melodramatic, after which Camille not only rejects her sexual advances but accuses her in turn of leading “une horrible vie d’erreur” (125). “Même l’emportement de tes sens exceptionnels ou malades ne suffirait pas,” she declares, “à expliquer une telle démente!” (125).<sup>15</sup> In a nutshell, both of the male partners Nina selects for Camille miss the mark when it comes to the dual goals of her feminism: sexual fulfillment on par with that enjoyed by men and revenge against them. Unsatisfied sexually with both men, Camille is bored and incapable of being her authentic self with Julien

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(“Elle jouait son rôle [. . .] en actrice consommée” [131]), and utterly powerless with Philippe.

With heterosexual relations proving problematic, to say the least, one would expect La Vaudère to build a solid argument for same-sex relations as the solution for her heroine. But in fact, when Camille asks Nina if it is possible for two women to love each other absolutely and completely, Nina responds that they love each other *solely out of hatred for men* (27). Lesbianism is thus figured not as a means of sexual expression with its own intrinsic value but simply as part of Nina’s revenge agenda. In her discussion of Victor Margueritte’s 1922 novel, *La Garçonne* (which shares some striking parallels with *Les Demi-sexes*), Jennifer Waelti-Walters refers to the heroine’s sexual relationships with women as a “lesbian phase” stemming from an “understandable and acceptable cause in a heterosexual society—revulsion for unfaithful, untrustworthy men” (83); she maintains that the lesbian lover is simply a motif “to indicate [the heroine’s] freedom and change of fortune. There is no interest in the relationship *per se*” (83). According to Christine Bard, it was widely believed in the nineteenth century that there were two kinds of lesbians, the “lesbienne native” and the “lesbienne devenue,” the latter referring to a woman who can stop having sexual relations with women if she so desires (61–62). Given the power differential between mentor and mentee, not to mention the fact that Nina seems far more dependent on what Camille can offer her sexually than vice-versa, the heroine would seem to fit the profile of the “lesbienne devenue,” with lesbianism just one option out of a range of sexual experiences. Stableford does well to consider La Vaudère’s linking of lesbianism and the ovariectomy, both manifestations of libertinism, to be a “trifle paradoxa[l],” noting, further, that Nina is a “corrupter of young women in two entirely different and contradictory fashions, and Camille an uneasy and eventually regretful victim of both persuasions” (xxi). At the risk of stating the obvious, however clearly lesbianism might represent an act of defiance against heteronormativity and patriarchy, it obviates the need for an ovariectomy.

This may explain why it is not the sexual relationships between women *per se* but their banding together in a sort of sisterhood of the ovaryless that leaves the most lasting impression on the reader of

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*Les Demi-sexes*. Nowhere does La Vaudère send this point home more unforgettably than in a scene featuring one of Nina's *soupers des demi-sexes* whose participants are described as "de frêles poupées, inventées et créées par le diable lui-même pour la damnation des grands enfants à barbe" (147). Nina ceremoniously strips one of these devil-spawned dolls, lifts her on top of a table and makes a toast to woman and "l'abolition de l'esclavage qui nous a si longtemps courbées dans une honteuse soumission" (154), while Camille, imbued with her mentor's ideology, addresses her peers as "chers modèles de toutes les vertus répréhensibles"—the oxymoron reminiscent of the marquis de Sade's upheaval of the moral universe—and orders them to "[d]istille[r] le désir et la désespérance, enfièvre[r] les simples mortels jusqu'à la frénésie, et, ne craignant rien, reste[r] sans pitié!" (150). If ever there were evidence of Faxneld's theory that the Decadents aimed to "aestheticize and give an eloquent voice to evil" (277), it is here. Nina herself comments on the concept of good vs. evil while emphasizing the primacy of nature when she tells Camille that "Le mal n'existe pas plus que le bien [. . .] Il n'y a que la nature, et nous ne sommes pas coupables de suivre les penchants qui sont en nous" (125). Ironically, in scripting women's empowerment, La Vaudère only fueled the fear expressed in nineteenth-century medical texts that the removal of a woman's reproductive abilities would unleash, as Larson puts it, "insatiable and pathological sexual desire" ("Feminine" 234).

As it turns out, that remarkable scene is the last one in which Nina and Camille speak as one. The straw that breaks the back of the Decadent feminist-in-training is Nina's obvious delight at the news that Julien has become suicidal as a result of the poor treatment to which Camille has dutifully subjected him. Faxneld's observation that "the Decadent speciality was a perverse intertwining of sexuality and death" (259) is pertinent here, what with Nina's statement to Camille that Julien's demise would signal "la consécration définitive" of Camille's power, because "Tant qu'un homme ne s'est pas tué par nous, il manque quelque chose à notre gloire" (191). Proof that Camille's views have begun to diverge from those of her mentor comes in the form of the heroine's shame for having made Julien suffer and, more generally, her remorse for having given "des droits sur elle à des hommes qu'elle méprisait si profondément" (174). To highlight this

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pivotal moment, *La Vaudère* has Camille again look in a mirror, where she now sees an *old woman*—and we know from Nina’s speech earlier what that means—who has not risen in glory but fallen “au-dessous de la honte, au-dessous de la nature même” (177). This time there is no comment about Camille not recognizing herself; she sees all too clearly the kind of woman she has become under Nina’s tutelage.

Camille’s definitive rejection of Nina and her agenda takes place at a supper devoted to celebrating the acquisition of two new recruits, where Camille refuses to have sex with her and openly defies her. When Nina sarcastically asks if she plans to lock herself in a convent and do penance, Camille responds that any life would be better than the one she has been leading. Nina’s attempt to remind her of the progress she has made—“tu n’es plus celle qui se laisse séduire niaisement mais celle qui choisit et qui prend. Tu vois chez tous la supplication mendicante de la tendresse qui défaille; tu sais faire naître, avec une adresse féline et une curiosité inépuisable, le mal secret et torturant dans les yeux de tous ceux que tu veux séduire; tu ne crains rien et tu méprises les plus redoutables?” (189–90)—falls on deaf ears. Indeed, Decadent feminism results in a net loss, not a gain for Camille, who now sees herself as “une fille sans espérance, femme sans mari, amante sans amour” and, more important, as a woman with no prospects for motherhood, as the past conditional in “Je sens que j’aurais aimé un enfant” expresses quite poignantly (193). Another indication that Nina’s mentorship has failed is Camille’s acknowledgement, first, that one of the signature Decadent aspects of Nina’s doctrine, “la pleine jouissance du vice, l’entier étourdissement de la chute” (129), has brought her no pleasure, and second, that she has never felt, no matter the gender of her partner, “sa *chair* émue par l’attente troublante et désirée des étreintes” (199; emphasis mine), the pairing of an adjective signifying emotion with a noun signifying the physical heralding a new phase in her development. Coincidentally, both Philippe and Nina attest at this watershed moment to the existence of a different Camille lurking within the self she presents in public, Philippe identifying a timid, naïve girl who is “pervertie” but not “perverse,” and Nina, the soul of a poet who believes in “[de] grandes amours et [de] longues liaisons” (192).

In a last-ditch effort to preserve some vestige of her mentee,

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Nina demands an artistic rendering of Camille, inadvertently setting in motion the process by which she will lose her once and for all. Camille wastes no time acting independently, commissioning a piece from an enigmatic sculptor, Georges Darvy, who has struck her fancy. In something of a reversal of the Camille-Julien relationship, she quickly falls in love while Georges, singularly devoted to his art, remains impervious to her efforts at seduction. The account of Camille's burgeoning passion is punctuated, revealingly, by references to "firsts" for the heroine: this is the first time she feels "ce quelque chose d'inexprimable qui nous porte vers quelqu'un presque malgré nous," the first time she yearns to offer someone "la secrète intimité de son âme" (213). Her transformation is reflected in the bust Georges sculpts which shows a Camille "transfigurée, avec une expression de douceur et de joie qu'elle ne se connaissait pas!" (217). Love, not sex or revenge or vice, has purified and beautified her to the point that Georges wants her to model for none other than the Virgin Mary in his sculpture of holy women. Nina's mockery of the bust, in addition to Camille's declaration that "la Camille d'hier n'existe plus" (225), confirms the rupture of the mentor-mentee relationship. Indeed, the Camille once willing to die from a surgery affording her control over her body is autonomous enough now to threaten to kill herself if Nina or Philippe gets in the way of her pursuit of love (226).

It is admittedly hard to know what to make, as far as feminism is concerned, of the narrator's shift from the more or less straightforward prose of a Realist novel to a more flowery, Romantic kind when Camille falls in love; or, especially, of Camille's statement to Nina that she is not cut out to be "une femme libre" (189) and her apparent submissiveness when she says to Georges after he proposes marriage, "Prenez-moi [. . .] gardez-moi. Faites de moi ce que vous voudrez. Je suis à vous, vous tout entière et pour toujours!" (228). But the Decadent imagination is steeped in contradiction, at once "defiant and submissive," says Jennifer Birkett (5).<sup>16</sup> Camille's defiance in offering herself to a man portrayed not only as worthy of her but as her equal thus belies the submissiveness suggested by her words. The description of Camille and Georges' physical union necessarily requires a new kind of language, one that fuses the Romantic with the erotic with none of the rawness present in the descriptions of

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her previous sexual encounters. Making love with Georges is “une moelleuse pénétration magnétique de leurs deux corps, de leurs deux esprits” (230), an experience so unlike any other that Camille is said to have found “son *premier amant* dans son mari!” (231; italics in text). What is obvious here is that Camille can only experience the kind of pleasure that Nina promised would come from the domination of men when the connection is more than just physical, the long elusive “spasme” (233)<sup>17</sup> only possible because emotions are involved: “La passion qu’elle avait en vain cherchée précédemment se dégageait de son corps vivant, comme une électricité, une plénitude allant jusqu’aux extrémités de l’organisme de l’homme serré dans ses bras” (232). The double existence that once dictated Camille’s every move—when she expertly juggled the life of a proper young lady with that of the pleasure-seeker, and when she “faisait deux parts de sa personne” with Julien and Philippe, “se prostitu[ant] chaque jour à un autre” (141)—has given way to “[une] existence nouvelle” (293) in which she can be whole, with body, mind, and emotions fully engaged.<sup>18</sup>

In the end, then, Camille both rejects the part of Nina’s feminism that stipulates the enslavement of men and nuances the parts having to do with the free choice of partners and the privileging of women’s intellect. The relationship that ultimately fulfills Camille is framed as being not only of her own making but capable of elevating her partner as well: “transfiguré par son amour,” Georges is no longer “un homme, mais *l’homme qu’elle avait choisi entre tous* et qui portait l’auréole superbe de cette distinction” (231; my emphasis). Moreover, thanks to a choice that is not solely grounded in the sexual, Camille’s intellectual capacities can blossom such that “[e]lle sentait, elle voyait, elle jugeait mieux que par le passé et avec une bienveillance plus grande” (242). Interestingly, the verb *voir* in this passage figured as well in the portrayal of Nina/Camille’s feminism at the beginning of the novel, when the narrator stated that the heroine’s “seule ambition serait de voir. Voir, n’est-ce pas savoir et jouir intuitivement? N’est-ce pas découvrir la substance même des faits?” (44–45). It is only once she is free from her mentor that she can truly *sentir*, *voir*, and *juger*; *savoir*, *jouir*, and *découvrir*. Clearly, then, Camille’s choice of love and marriage is to be read not as a capitulation or a regression to old-fashioned values, but rather, as a means of self-realization.<sup>19</sup>

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Significantly, *La Vaudère* stops short of plotting a heterosexual happily-ever-after for her heroine (this *is* *Decadence*, after all), who is made to pay dearly for her past transgressions, or so it seems. Eager to reclaim his sex slave, Philippe tracks Camille down in Sicily and initiates a complete unraveling of the idyllic Camille-Georges relationship. Fearful that Philippe is about to reveal her secrets to Georges, Camille pretends to suffer from the heat, leading her husband to wonder if she might be pregnant, at which point Camille suddenly remembers (!) that “Froidement, inexorablement, elle s’était condamnée à la stérilité éternelle,” and asks herself “Par quel vertige de folie avait-elle donc commis ce crime?” (259). Of course, “crime” refers to the ovariectomy specifically, but we must not forget that the operation is the centerpiece of a mentorship that has left her unable to tap into what she is now sees as the healing power of motherhood: “Il lui semblait sentir son cœur de mère apaiser et purifier son horrible passé. Elle voyait dans un enfant un je ne sais quoi de céleste qui console et qui guérit; un petit ange de délivrance sorti des fautes humaines pour les racheter et les effacer” (259). Georges, now as desperate to be a father as he is obsessed with getting to the bottom of his wife’s seeming refusal to be a mother, begins to despise her because he assumes that her resistance derives from selfishness. He even insinuates that opting out of motherhood makes her “less” a woman (“n’es-tu pas [. . .] *la vraie femme* avec toutes ses tendresses, tous ses dévouements?” [260; my emphasis]).<sup>20</sup> Philippe goes further by calling her “un monstre dans la nature” and suggesting that it is only her youth and beauty that save her from being suppressed “comme une bête nuisible” (264). In a revealing exchange with him, Camille leaves no doubt that she comprehends the damage that Nina’s mentorship has done:

On avait perverti ma pensée et souillé mon âme. N’ayant fait, par une sorte de fatalité que des connaissances dangereuses dans ce monde féminin et parisien où la plus incroyable dépravation se cache sous la correction des manières et de la vie apparente, je devais succomber. Ne sachant rien encore, j’ai appris le mal aussi facilement que j’aurais appris le bien. (262–63)

The novel’s final scene brings the fraught mentorship dynamic to a dramatic close. Nina appears one last time to tell Camille, who

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she believes (erroneously) has denounced her publicly, that she has in turn denounced Camille and plans to tell Georges everything. Camille not only expresses satisfaction that Nina got caught but holds her personally accountable—notably abandoning the blame-deflecting “on” of her previous statement to Philippe—for having “gâché ma vie, sali toutes mes croyances, détruit tout ce qu’il y avait de bon et de pur en moi” (300). The passage describing what occurs next merits full quotation since the use of the subject pronoun *elle* has opened it to misinterpretation:

Elle [clearly Nina, who has just told Camille how pretty she is when she cries and demands a kiss from her] lui prit les mains, *essaya* [tries, but does not succeed] de l’entraîner. Camille avait un léger peignoir de mousseline de soie et de dentelle; elle [clearly Camille, given what follows] serra son amie, agrafa sa bouche dans un baiser violent comme une morsure, et, reculant insensiblement, *fit sauter* le bas de sa robe dans le foyer. En une minute elles furent environnés de flammes. Nina *voulut* [wants to but cannot] crier; mais, *emprisonnée* dans les bras de Camille, avec, sur ses lèvres, le bâillon vivant de sa bouche, elle ne trouva que les sons étranglés du râle dans sa poitrine, dont chaque aspiration, creusée plus avant, semblait partir de ses entrailles. (302; emphasis mine)

Mesch aptly refers to this confrontation as “enigmatic,” but misidentifies who does what, stating that it is *Nina’s* “violent embrace” that causes Camille’s dress to “catch light from the fireplace, causing an uncontrollable conflagration” (“Husbands” 99), thereby depriving Camille of her hard-won agency at the most critical juncture in the mentorship dynamic. (Linton reads the passage correctly, affirming that Camille “silences her would-be betrayer in a fiery murder-suicide by embracing her former lover and stepping into the fireplace with her” [582]). The fact that Camille’s violence is not without precedent (when threatened by Philippe in Sicily, she nearly strangles him [265]), supports a reading in which Camille is very much the aggressor, as does the fact that mentor and mentee have reversed roles from an earlier scene where Nina dominates Camille with her forceful embrace, creating a bond described as “le seul dont on ne se délivre jamais quand il a bien enlacé et quand il serre jusqu’au sang la chair

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d'une femme" (194–95). Camille not only manages to *se délivrer* in the end, but also to rid herself of her mentor for good. The flames leave their entwined bodies so disfigured that they cannot be told apart, and the attempt to separate them causes them to crumble. With its amalgam of sex, violence, and death, it is hard indeed to imagine a more Decadent finale.

Faxneld's assertion that "Decadence is a genre intensely concerned with negotiating inversions and counter-readings" (325) goes a long way toward accounting for the lack of critical consensus on what the conclusion of La Vaudère's novel really means. The tendency is, perhaps naturally, to see in it the heroine's defeat: Waelti-Walters, for one, observes bluntly that "the guilty meet their end in the last of the nineteenth-century lesbian monster novels" (62), and Linton writes that Camille is punished "for having attempted to wield powers that were reserved for the opposite gender [. . .]" (582). I would argue that what may at first blush seem to be a well-deserved punishment for bad behavior should instead be viewed as Camille's revenge on and ultimate triumph over her mentor. Just as Camille chose Georges as her life partner, she pro-actively chooses death<sup>21</sup> over an existence without him (and *with* Philippe, who has no intention of loosening his grip on her). Mesch opts for middle ground: after wondering if the inseparability of mentor and mentee's bodies in death indicates that Camille is indistinguishable from Nina—this analysis has provided ample evidence to the contrary—she concludes that while the novel "offers [Camille] up as the hystericized female body of naturalist and decadent convention [. . .] [it] more convincingly suggests the Camille of a competing sentimental narrative: a free-spirited New Woman, an 'être exceptionnel' [. . .] lead [sic] astray by a self-serving doctor"—to which I would add a self-serving mentor—"who ultimately deprives her of marital happiness" ("Husbands" 99).

A survey of the outcomes La Vaudère plots for her characters highlights the complexity of the novel's final message. On the positive side, Georges never finds out about Camille's sordid past and is poised to eke out of his loss the kind of inspiration that leads to the creation of masterpieces. The scheming Dr. Richard and Nina are exposed, the latter having been skimming a percentage of his earnings in exchange for providing him daily ovariectomy patients

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(not to mention the possibility of risk-free sex partners). Dr. Richard is, in fact, the sole character about whom La Vaudère expresses no ambivalence whatsoever: “fou, sadique, [et] criminel,” he and his ilk, “ces dépeceurs de chair et de conscience” (296), subject innocent young women to a procedure for which the narrator uses the verbs *vivisecter*, *torturer*, *tenailler*, and *écarteler*, “les conceptions sataniques de l’imagination la plus déréglée” (284).<sup>22</sup> On the negative side, poor Julien becomes a sacrificial lamb on Nina’s Decadent feminist altar: after Philippe insults Camille, Julien challenges him to a duel, then purposely allows his rival to kill him. In the final analysis, La Vaudère’s decision to have as her spokesperson for feminism the most unsavory of mentors and to leave as last character standing the diabolical Philippe is outweighed by her forward thinking in imagining a range of options for women’s sexual fulfillment and a world in which men and women are equals. Most important, La Vaudère sees to it that her heroine evolves past Nina’s destructive Decadent feminism toward a constructive variety (constructive, in the sense that even murder and suicide are actions that move a life—a story—forward) that is uniquely hers. If Decadence, as Birkett avers, “more than any other art form, involves the creation of imaginary solutions to real problems” (4), *Les Demi-sexes* stands as a memorable exercise in Decadent problem-solving which takes on myriad issues affecting women in *fin-de-siècle* France and whose depiction of women’s complex relation to sexuality remains pertinent today.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> La Vaudère’s adaptation was staged at the Théâtre Grand Guignol from 16 May to 20 June 1898, along with three other short plays, including *La Fille aux ovaires* by Henry Céard and Henry de Weindel. The state of women’s ovaries was obviously a hot topic at the turn of the century.

<sup>2</sup> See Sharon Larson’s study on La Vaudère’s plagiarism of Maupassant (“Jane”). Brian Stableford mentions that La Vaudère borrowed the theme and sections of prose from Maupassant’s *Notre cœur* (1890) and that *La Nouvelle Provence* published an article in the April 15, 1897 issue that juxtaposed passages from the two texts. With the aid of search engines, he adds, one can find passages in La Vaudère’s

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novels that are paraphrased from non-fiction books used for research as well (xxii).

<sup>3</sup>“Decadence and more or less feminist attempts to move away from conventional gender roles overlapped” (Faxneld 325). Decadence was a late-nineteenth-century artistic and literary movement in Western Europe that revolved around perversion and subversion. According to Faxneld, it is the “continuously present dark twin of Symbolism, much like the Gothic genre is to Romanticism,” a discourse that inverts hegemonic cultural values (255).

<sup>4</sup> Finn notes that Dr. Jules Péan performed a successful ovariectomy as early as 1864, but the first surgeries undertaken specifically to end nervous and hysterical symptoms took place in March 1882 and June 1883 (27).

<sup>5</sup> Finn tells us that the term “fraude conjugale” or “fraude” was popular in the latter part of the nineteenth-century to refer to any sexual release achieved while avoiding fertilization (37), and that Canu refused to believe post-operative interviewees who stated that they were experiencing normal sexual desire, claiming that the women were simply unwilling to reveal their “impotence” (32).

<sup>6</sup> Stableford goes on to say that the narrator “seems to be under the illusion that such an operation would leave no visible trace, in the form of a scar, and the vague descriptions of what the operation entails suggest that what is being imagined is more akin to the kind of abortion that back-street amateurs once used to attempt with the aid of a knitting needle” (xx).

<sup>7</sup> See Mesch (“Husbands”), Larson (“Feminine”), and Finn, who, in his analysis of *Fécondité*, notes that Zola goes so far as to link multiple orgasms in women to infanticide (37). For a detailed discussion of Zola’s treatment of reproductive issues, see Andrew J. Counter (“Zola’s Fin-de-siècle Reproductive Politics,” *French Studies*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2014, pp. 193–208).

<sup>8</sup> For general information on the sub-genre of the feminine *roman de formation*, see Margaret Cohen (*The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, Princeton UP, 1999); Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, eds. (*The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*,

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UP of New England, 1983); James N. Hardin, ed. (*Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*, U of South Carolina P, 1991); and Esther Kleinbord Labovitz (*The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century*, Peter Lang, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> Adolphe Belot published an erotic novel titled *L'Éducation d'une demi-vierge* (1883) featuring a divorced woman who becomes a prostitute then brings her adolescent daughter into the fold.

<sup>10</sup> Finn references Catulle Mendès's *Méphistophéla* (1890) in this context as well, positing that neither Mendès nor Prévost “seems to have had in his head the fear of depopulation” even as both express “abhorrence at the idea of the orgasm [*jouissance*] in the absence of heterosexual and potentially procreational intercourse” (32). Stableford states that the heroine of Mendès's novel is the “probable model for Nina Saurel” (xxvi) and that La Vaudère drew inspiration from Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) and *La Marquise de Sade* (1887).

<sup>11</sup> Linton references a 29 June 1879 *Le Figaro* article which claims that *Les Demi-sexes* was one of three novels inspired by the La Jarrigue and Boisieux trial that captivated Parisian society. She points out that the novel has never been analyzed in that context “likely because the case centered on abortion rather than ovariectomy” (583).

<sup>12</sup> For a fascinating discussion of the public places frequented by lesbians during the Belle Époque, see Nicole G. Albert (“De la topographie invisible à l'espace public et littéraire: les lieux de plaisir lesbien dans le Paris de la Belle Époque,” *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, vol. 53, oct.-déc. 2006, pp. 87–105).

<sup>13</sup> One of the reasons Adolphe Belot's novel about lesbianism, *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* (1870) was considered so scandalous is that the lesbian characters were from the privileged classes.

<sup>14</sup> Irish feminist Sarah Grand coined the term in 1894. La Vaudère's narrator uses it once in this rather Balzacian statement: “Il régnait dans les salons cette grâce cordiale, cette liberté communicative que donne seul aux relations sociales ce genre de femmes qu'on est convenu d'appeler les femmes nouvelles” (98). The narrator goes on to explain that the habituées include “esthètes et femmes à cheveux courts, à buste volontairement plat et insexué” (99), playing on the stereotype of the masculinized lesbian. For valuable discussions of la

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femme nouvelle and Belle Époque feminism, see Mary Louise Roberts (*Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (U of Chicago P, 2002), Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr (“New Republic, New Women? Feminism and Modernity at the Belle Époque,” in *A Belle Époque? Women in French Society and Culture, 1890–1914*, eds. Holmes and Tarr [Bergahn, 2006, pp. 11–22]), and Anne Tomiche (“Figures de ‘femmes nouvelles’ dans le premier tiers du XXe siècle.” *Sociopoétiques*, no. 4, mis à jour le 25/11/2019. <http://revues-msh.uca.fr/sociopoetiques/index.php?id=772>).

<sup>15</sup> References to la folie and related terms abound, in keeping with the Decadent spirit that privileges illness, especially toward the end of the novel: 15, 45, 48, 66, 126, 163, 188, 216, 233, 237, 259, 265, 266, 267, 276, 284, 289.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Bernheimer likewise sheds light on the contradictions inherent in Decadence in his seminal collection of essays, published posthumously (*Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, edited by T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor, Johns Hopkins UP, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> See Peter Cryle (“The Aesthetics of the Spasm.” *Sexuality at the fin-de-siècle: The Making of a ‘Central Problem,’* edited by Peter Cryle and Christopher E. Forth, U of Delaware P, 2008, pp. 77–92).

<sup>18</sup> It seems that La Vaudère was prescient: the organization formerly known as “Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays” (since 2014 simply PFLAG), includes in its glossary of terms the word “demisexual,” defined as an individual who becomes sexually attracted to someone only after an emotional bond has been established (<https://flag.org/glossary>).

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Viveiros tells us that in an article titled “Vierges modernes. Le Krach du mariage” (published 27 October 1898), La Vaudère argues against marriage, which she describes as “vil marchandage devant notaire et maire” (qtd. in Viveiros 234).

<sup>20</sup> Decades later, Clément Vautel would write *Madame ne veut pas d'enfant* (1924) whose protagonist, according to Mesch, “is driven away from his oversexed wife to a mistress who will provide him with ‘bourgeois relaxation,’ while his wife provides the sex. Eventually, his conflict is resolved when she has a baby and turns into an ‘honest woman’” (“Housewife” 75).

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<sup>21</sup> Camille has flirted with suicide before, most recently when confronted by Philippe in Sicily. In a passage that exemplifies the Decadent ethos, *La Vaudère* intertwines orgasm, suffering, and death to describe Camille's state: "son amour appelait la douleur dans le paroxysme d'excitation où elle se trouvait, sa tête, son imagination ne cherchaient même l'oubli dans la possession mais quelque chose de plus âpre, de plus poignant, et, tout bas, elle invoquait la mort, brûlait de l'éteindre dans l'agonie de ses transports" (293).

<sup>22</sup> On the role of doctors in certain novels of this period, see Lawrence Rothfield's *Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century French Fiction* (Princeton UP, 1992), Mary Donaldson-Evans's *Medical Examinations: Dissecting the Doctor in French Narrative Prose* (Nebraska UP, 2000), and Linton's *Unmaking Sex: The Gender Outlaws of Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge UP, 2022). See also Mesch ("Husbands" and "Housewife"), Guy Ducrey's "Jane de la Vaudère, la science et le sang" (*Décadents méconnus*, edited by Guy Ducrey and Hélène Védrine, L'Harmattan, 2009, pp. 145–60), and Peter Cryle's "The Open Secret: Hiding and Revealing Sexuality in the *roman de mœurs* (1880–1905)" (*Romanic Review*, vol. 97, no. 2, 2006, pp. 185–200).

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