Marie Claire's Transgressive Trio:

Erotic Alterity in Christine Angot, Claire Castillon, and Tatiana de Rosnay

Pauline Henry-Tierney

IN THE WAKE OF THE GLOBAL publishing sensation of E. L. James' infamous *50 Shades* series,¹ and just months before the release of its translation in France in October 2012,² the French women's monthly magazine *Marie Claire* provided readers with its own erotic offering in response to the ever-flourishing mainstream engagement with the genre. Accompanying their August 2012 issue was a trio of erotic novellas: *Mélodrague* by Christine Angot, *Le mâle en moi* by Claire Castillon, and *Constat d'adultère* by Tatiana de Rosnay.³ Unlike James' trilogy whose protagonist, according to Lisa Downing, "expresses no degree of autonomous desire outside of conventional romantic heteronorms,"⁴ the three aforementioned novellas, each in their individual ways, subvert patriarchal constructions of female sexuality and desire by foregrounding, via their protagonists, how desire can be experienced differently. Adorning the front cover of each novella is a framing title, added by *Marie Claire*, to indicate the texts' themes, labelled as "le désir," "la volupté," and "le plaisir," respectively. While, on first glance, such themes appear to conform to romantic erotica, each writer tackles the theme in a way that not only disrupts contemporary normative articulations of female sexuality and desire but also unsettles textual and generic boundaries by challenging hegemonic, mainstream configurations of the erotic. Via a comparative analysis of the three texts, in which I explore Angot's subversions of the aesthetics of desire, Castillon's subversions of gender identity, and de Rosnay's subversions of the male gaze, I will examine how these women writers transgress the parameters of conventional romantic

erotica. I will also discuss *Marie Claire*'s decision to commission these novellas as reflecting the magazine's strategy to push specific horizons boundaries of expectation for their readership.

Women's desiring writing

Before looking in detail at the three novellas, it is important to contextualize them within the wider constellation of women's erotic writing in French. Understanding what constitutes erotic writing **involves** distinguishing between erotica and pornography. While the sole premise of pornography is to be sexually stimulating, erotica, on the other hand, connotes a story that, according to Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, represents "a succession of sexual acts connected by a narrative thread, and which are perceived at some point in time as transgressive because they violate both the norms of discourse and of sexual behavior."⁵

Frappier-Mazur's assertion that the transgressive nature of erotica is both socially and temporally contingent is pertinent. In a current social climate culturally saturated with hetero-patriarchal interpretations of erotica (the *Fifty Shades* series being a case in point), to be transgressive, women's erotic writing must challenge normative discourses of sex and its cultural outputs. In his "Préface à la transgression," Michel Foucault understands transgression as a calling into question of limits or thresholds. He considers that the reciprocity in the mutually constituting and contesting dynamic between limit and transgression can be understood "selon un rapport en vrillement dont aucune effraction simple ne peut venir à bout."⁶ The notion of transgression as an infinite procedure of pushing the self towards the limit of where there is no interpretation is central to our understanding of women's erotic writing, in the sense that it is through writing at, and beyond, existing limits of textual articulations of sexual experience that women's erotic writing wins new ground

(both textual and political) in opposing hegemonic patriarchal structures, as this volume's central thematic premise of "sexual/textual boundaries" aptly suggests.

According to Frappier-Mazur's study, the first French erotic novel to be attributed to a woman was Suzanne Giroux's *Illyrine, ou l'écueil de l'inexpérience* (1799). As Alex Hughes and Kate Ince's *French Erotic Fiction: Women's Desiring Writing, 1880-1990* spotlights, a sizeable body of erotic literature in French has been authored subsequently by important women writers such as Rachilde, Colette, Violette Leduc, Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous, and Marguerite Duras.⁷ As Hughes and Ince state, despite spanning a period of over one hundred years, there are important textual, conceptual, and thematic intersections in these women's erotic articulations, such as the fluidity of gendered positionings, female homoeroticism and lesbian desire, the insufficiency of heterosexual relationships as a vehicle for the fulfillment of desire, and a proliferation of sexual identities. These women writers thus move erotic writing beyond the traditional paradigms of male-authored erotica, which has typically been entrenched in motifs of voyeurism, female fetishism, and violent corporeal domination. While the aforementioned women writers are all readily identifiable as writers of high erotic literature, there has been a marked rapprochement between mainstream literature and eroticism, evidenced by the way in which women's erotic writing is more frequently tempered by "the personal, social, and often professional background of women's everyday life" (Frappier-Mazur 128). As a result, this genealogy of women's desiring writing lays down an important legacy for contemporary women writers of the erotic, albeit of a more middle-brow classification, such as with Alina Reyes (*Corps de femme*, 1999), Nancy Huston (*Infrarouge*, 2010),⁸ and Emma Becker (*Monsieur*, 2011). Turning now to the erotic trio of novellas in question, I intend to map out how these three women writers-also transgress limits of interpretation, in the Foucauldian sense, in order to challenge heteronormative models of erotic writing.

Angot's deformations of desire

Desire, the heading used to frame Angot's *Mélodrague*, is a theme that permeates much of Angot's work, particularly through her articulations of desire that work against societal norms such as the recurring theme of incestuous desire in *L'inceste* (1999), *Rendez-vous* (2006), and *Une semaine de vacances* (2012).⁹ While none of Angot's previous work could be described as erotica¹⁰ in the same way that her previous texts resist easy classification (as either works of fiction, testimony or autofiction), in *Mélodrague* Angot disrupts typical configurations of desire in this genre. As Smaro Kamboureli highlights, "erotica deals primarily with the dialectics of desire: desire as the articulation of the tension that exists between a lover's emotions and the cravings of the body, and desire as the tendency to give aesthetic form to sexual experience."¹¹ Yet in Angot's text we are immediately confronted with the narrator, a nameless, twenty-three-year-old, married law student from Reims, who announces **her** distinct lack of desire and the irrelevance of its aesthetic correspondence to the sexual act: "On fait l'amour. Sans désir de ma part, mais j'aime jouir, et je suis contente de faire l'amour" (Angot 8). This emotional estrangement from the physicalities of sex in which corporeal gratification alone outstrips any form of sentimental affect is characteristic of contemporary women's writing in French, which Shirley Jordan has noted as being increasingly "forensic in focus and de-eroticized."¹² This lack of desire becomes a common trope throughout the novella and drives the narrative. Dissatisfied in her marriage, the narrator begins to pursue desire elsewhere, first via Patrick, the brother of the bride at a friend's wedding she attends. Despite her attempts to devise an illicit Parisian tryst, their rendez-vous is decidedly uneventful. Then later, after a period of mutual flirtation with a fellow law student, Christophe, the narrator envisions another possibility for desire when he accompanies her to her car after class. Once again though, the romantic crescendo is abruptly

muted when Christophe casually mentions his girlfriend and then walks off. Bookended by another futile attempt to link up with Patrick, these three encounters all share the same anticlimactic conclusion with the possibility for desire thwarted. Furthermore, Angot's counter-mapping of these physical spaces in which desire is classically played out within the genre of erotica – the Parisian apartment, the anonymity of the out-of-town hotel, and the backseat of the car in a deserted carpark – frustrates the reader's expectations of erotic fulfilment, instead exposing the isolation of these places to emphasize further the narrator's disenchantment. These failed attempts at initiating desire are important counter-measures employed by Angot in order to deviate from the erotic master-narrative and parody the genre, challenging a reader accustomed to its heteronormative clichés. The notion of failure, therefore, as it has been conceptualized according to queer thought, is pertinent here. As Jack Halberstam intimates, "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world."¹³ Although it refers to queer identity and its ultimate success in failing (and refusing) to substantiate heteronormative constructions of being, Halberstam's claim can be extended to challenge other forms of heteronormative order. The narrator's failures to succeed in becoming the desiring object work to de-characterize her, shattering the notion of the romantic heroine and unhinging the apparent fixity of the erotic metanarrative. While Halberstam's theorization of failure engenders optimism and the promise of creating new possibilities of being in the world, in the case of Angot these alternative modes of being are not necessarily any more positive or liberating for the protagonist.

These failures of desire extend beyond the narrator's relations with others to encompass a correlate lack of desire for the self. She is both self-loathing and self-effacing. Her sense of self-dissatisfaction is fashioned, in keeping with patriarchal conditioning, by

through her disappointment in not being an object of desire. She says, “Je ne me plais pas physiquement. Je ne suis pas à l’aise dans mon corps. Je me trouve trop grosse, trop maigre, trop petite, trop sérieuse, trop sèche” (Angot 35). Her self-loathing often culminates in a wish to inflict corporal violence: “Quand je me vois en face de la glace qui est en face de la douche, j’ai envie de couper mes seins ou de les gifler” (Angot 8). This form of self-deprecation is underscored by an acute sense of vulnerability, as illustrated by the narrator’s self-image as a sparrow (“Je suis un petit moineau des rues qui craint d’être gobé” [Angot 46]) and as a wound (“Je me vois comme une plaie” [Angot 28]). This reference to the wound joins a broader trend in women’s writing in French of the 1990s that links female corporality with ideas of illness, trauma, and death.¹⁴

Besides being self-loathing, the narrator is also self-effacing. Textually, she is pushed to the margins of her own life. Long passages are devoted to the meticulous description of the facets of her husband’s life, his daily routine, his idiosyncrasies, while, in contrast, her existence remains peripheral. She says, “Je n’ai pas l’impression de vivre vraiment. Je ne comprends pas ce que je vis” (Angot 21), and “La sensation que j’ai de moi est fausse, partielle, fondée uniquement sur des sentiments trafiqués” (Angot 26). Her impression of living at a distance from herself is compounded by the anonymity of her narration. While it could be argued that the nameless, one-dimensional woman is in keeping with the genre’s archetypal heroine, the intimacy of this first-person narration conversely renders this anonymity universal, bringing the reality of a mediocre coupledness closer to home for the reader.

Angot does not placate her reader with a conciliatory happy ending since, at the close of the text, desire has been transformed into something monstrous and threatening. Desire remains the shadowy specter that persistently lurks over the narrator’s life and marriage, to the point where it suffocates her existence: “Je voudrais vieillir d’un coup. Pour ne plus avoir

l'obligation du bonheur, tout le temps devant moi, en ligne de mire. Que tout soit derrière moi. Fini, passé. [...] J'en ai marre de chercher à être heureuse sans y parvenir. Mais l'idée me tenaille. Elle ne me lâche pas" (Angot 48). Angot paints a chillingly bleak picture of a narrator who is suspended in a marriage devoid of desire, yet remains tormented by its very absence. By the end of the text, the reader is faced with what can only be described as an erotic dystopia, with passion is circumvented by marital monotony and desire throbbing with threat.

Castillon's mutabilities of gendered identity

The theme framing the second text in this erotic trio, Claire Castillon's *Le mâle en moi*, is "la volupté." Like Angot, Castillon is now a well-known literary figure, having published both novels and short stories regularly since 2000. While her texts deal with aspects of women's lived experience such as motherhood, relationships, and sexuality, they would not be described as belonging to the erotica genre. In *Le mâle en moi*, Castillon subverts ideas of sensual pleasure as they are typically depicted in romantic erotica, namely, as contingent upon heteronormative asymmetries of reciprocity in which male desire outranks female desire. Instead, Castillon presents a powerful solo protagonist who has no need for a male partner to satisfy her sexual demands. The story concerns an unnamed, forty-year-old, high-powered Parisian businesswoman, the top decision-maker for an American company in Miami called Astor. Her towering, immitigable power as lofty as the heights of her thirty-second-floor office, she finds no complimentary alpha-male to match her prowess and so she resorts to inventing a man. The narrator states, "Imaginez seulement que j'ai avalé un homme... A présent, il est là, en moi" (Castillon 14). The cannibalistic overtone here is reminiscent of erotic horror. The corporal occupation of the narrator by her invented man queers the erotic narrative further here by positing a fluidity rather than a fixity of gender,

thus breaking away from the male-female binary intrinsic to heterocentric romantic erotica. At points, the narrator assumes a transgendered position, stating, “Quelquefois même, je deviens lui” (Castillon 16). At other times, we are presented with an intersexed subjectivity, a state of co-existence: “Les deux en moi, l’homme et la femme. Je suis un être complet. Parfait. Je suis un être parfait” (Castillon 34). Castillon’s depiction here of corporal hybridity reminds us of Judith Butler’s treatise on the inherent performativity of gender. As Butler notes, “gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself.”¹⁵ Imitating and performing gestures and modes of being that have been synonymous with masculinity and femininity, the protagonist’s complex gender position destabilizes the apparent fixity of such binaries.

These performances of gender hybridity are also linked with bodily pleasures, as seen when the narrator says, “Ma peau est érectile, mon goût est multilingues” (Castillon 14). The convergence of the phallic flesh and the sensuous multiplicity of tongues emphasizes the duality of the sexual body, revealing the narrator as being self-sufficient and self-satisfying when it comes to her sexual pleasure:

J’aime le parfum de ma peau qui commence à dorer, la sueur qui se faufile doucement sous mes bras. Au fond, j’aime tellement faire l’amour avec moi. À tel point que je me demande si j’ai déjà fait pour de bon l’amour avec un autre. (Castillon 12)

Ce que j’aime dans le sexe, c’est moi. Désormais je me fais l’amour mieux que personne. (Castillon 17)

While no explicit details are given as to how she makes love to herself, it seems that we are not dealing with masturbatory practices, but rather with cerebral processes. The narrator

states that “Certains êtres ne comprennent l’amour physique que lorsqu’il est charnel. Moi, je connais l’amour charnel quand il est mental” (Castillon 39). In this sense, the body is no longer the site of physical pleasure; instead libidinal drives manifest solely in the mind. Indeed, as has been well-documented in the field of cognitive and behavioral neuroscience, women’s orgasms can result from purely limbic impulses without the need for corporeal stimulation.¹⁶ Here, Castillon again problematizes the notion of the erotic by undermining the value typically placed on physical corporeality in this genre.

Another way in which Castillon’s text transgresses the genre boundaries of erotica is by blurring the lines between domination and submission. Within her professional capacity, the protagonist rules with sadomasochistic flair, and reprimanding her employees is a turn-on. She says, “Dominer est mon blush” (Castillon 14). Yet, in her descriptions of the male inside her, she assumes a sexually submissive position, stating, “Je domine, et, aussitôt, je sens les mains du mâle se poser sur mes cuisses. Mon homme invisible me possède plusieurs fois par jour, et c’est bon” (Castillon 19). While mainstream erotica tends to have very tightly bound definitions of who dominates and who is submissive, Castillon’s evocation suggests the possibility of the fluid adoption of different positions along a continuum of activity and passivity. As Beauvoir has commented in her reading of the Marquis de Sade, passivity in sexual union leads to a form of what she terms “intoxication,” which is necessary for the dissolution of the boundaries of the self, or, as Beauvoir terms it, the forgetting of oneself (“s’oublier”) through which the individual can come to understand the presence of the Other.¹⁷ Yet, in the absence of a (physical) Other, Castillon’s description queers this interpretation, negating the need for any form of reciprocity since it the sexual union occurs on a level of self-actualization. The duality of her pleasure derived from dominating and being dominated blurs the lines of normative narratives of dominance and submission.

Adultery, impotence and the subverted gaze

Tatiana de Rosnay's *Constat d'adultère*, presented under the heading of "le plaisir," makes up the final text in this trio. On first appearances, this novella seems to be the closest to the archetypal romantic erotica genre, yet de Rosnay's tactical subversions of the gaze prove otherwise. Like our previous two authors, de Rosnay is a literary figure well-known for her writings in both French and English, and most prominently for *Sarah's Key* (2006), which was ~~later~~ adapted into a film of the same title by Gilles Paquet-Brenner (2010). Incidentally, while the former two authors' texts appeared only in this form specially commissioned for *Marie Claire*, de Rosnay's text was later republished in her collection of short stories, *Café Lowendal et autres nouvelles* (2014). The novella takes the form of a suite of correspondence from a private surveillance agency to a client who has employed their services to provide him with details of his wife's infidelities. Being a writer, the client specifies that he does not wish to be enlightened via the conventional method of photographs, but instead he wishes to receive detailed written accounts. Using the latest intelligence tools to intercept emails and text messages, as well as pre-installing surveillance devices to gain visual access during the couple's various rendezvous, the agency is able to fulfil this request. We learn that the wife, who is never identified by name, has a lover twenty-three years her junior. Over the course of the novella, we are given the details of ten different surveillance reports, which include accounts of the couple's sexting, phone sex, emails, and face-to-face sexual encounters. Every detail of the couple is recorded, including a meticulous description of what the wife is wearing each time. These voyeuristic details immediately raise questions about the troubling implications of the male gaze. As Laura Mulvey has stated in her seminal essay on the politics of the gaze, "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female."¹⁸ Via a psychoanalytic lens, Mulvey reads this visual fetishization of women by men as a countermeasure to quell their fear of castration

(which, from a psychoanalytical interpretation, is reified through women) by transforming the represented figure into a fetish to negate its threatening potential. While one can read the text this way, de Rosnay employs playful manipulations to undermine the male gaze. First, the information's unreliability calls into question the authority of the gaze. For example, at a recorded impromptu rendezvous in a car park, the surveillance team cannot get precise details. They say they cannot see what the wife is wearing but that "nous penchons pour une jupe" (de Rosnay 20). Similarly, there can be no real verification of the wife's pleasure: "Il semblerait que votre femme a eu un orgasme" (de Rosnay 18). These visual obfuscations undermine the agency's omnipresence, confirming their position as always being on the outside looking in, and the speculative vocabulary used highlights the voyeur's impotence to understand women's bodily pleasures.

Likewise, although the husband occupies the position of voyeur throughout the text, his retrospective access to the gaze, mediated by the descriptive reports, means that he has no power to act, since the events have already taken place, which thus underscores his lack of agency. Second, the husband is privy only to the details that the agency deems acceptable to disclose. For reasons of decorum, they choose not to type out explicit vocabulary related to the sexual act and indicate these words instead with only the initial letter followed by crosses:

M.X.: *Votre bouche, délicieusement humide, terriblement chaude, s'enveloppait autour de ma bxxx.* (de Rosnay 13)

Votre épouse: *Ton fxxxxx a très bon goût.* (de Rosnay 14)

Réponse de Monsieur X: *Rien que de te lire, je bxxxx à nouveau.* (de Rosnay 21)

M.X.: *Précise. En toi où ? Dans ta bouche ? Dans ta cxxxxx ? dans ton joli cxx?* (de Rosnay 29)

Despite the surveillance agency's justification of this practice for reasons of professionalism, their censorship means that the husband's gaze is only ever partial. The text remains ambiguous, and his own imagination must fill in the blanks. Beyond this more overt form of censorship, the company also decides which details not to divulge to their client. For example, they state that they have decided to spare their client the details of Monsieur X's genital dimensions as well as the video he sends to the wife in which he is masturbating. While in a sense this decision conforms to dominant paradigms of heterosexual pornography, in which sexual attention is diverted from the male body, in this case it has a debilitating effect, since it destabilizes the husband's sense of control over the gaze.

Furthermore, unlike the scopophilic gaze prominent in pornography, details of the sexual encounters are not eroticized but rather banalized and recounted in a sterile tone. From the outset, the agency declares that they will describe the scenes in the most detached manner possible, using the most neutral words and without recourse to superlatives, likening their report to a "constat de dégât des eaux, d'un accident de la circulation, ou d'un rapport de police après une effraction ou un délit" (de Rosnay 16). The sterility of these reports works to negate any form of pleasure from the sexual act, as these examples illustrate:

Nous pouvons vous confirmer qu'il y a eu une pénétration vaginale, puis une pénétration anale. (de Rosnay 25)

D'après ce que nous avons pu visionner, il y a eu quatre actes sexuels. Le tout a duré une heure. Dans l'ordre: une fellation, une caresse sexuelle buccale, une pénétration vaginale et un rapport anal. (de Rosnay 46)

As is clear, the two examples do not provide any form of titillation and in fact work to de-fetishize both the sexual encounter and the two sexual bodies. More important, even though

the company adopts this practice because they wish to ensure their client's "entière satisfaction" (de Rosnay 16), conversely, their perfunctory descriptions destabilize the husband's position as voyeur, thus removing the possibility for him of fetishist satisfaction typically afforded through the voyeuristic gaze in erotic writing. In fact, this de-fetishized style of writing has more in common with that of contemporary autofictional writers such as Catherine Millet and Nelly Arcan, whose graphic depictions of women's sexual experiences are intentionally de-eroticized, so as not to reinsert women into patriarchal frameworks of reference where their only possibility is to exist as objects of desire.

Interestingly, even though to a certain extent the wife does remain the object of the gaze in this text, it is Monsieur X who becomes doubly objectified when he begins a new relationship with a woman, who, according to the agency, is "possessive vis-à-vis de Monsieur X, qui ne jouit de sa liberté d'avant. Mlle. R le surveille en permanence et traque les messages qu'il reçoit" (de Rosnay 37-38). This mise en abyme of the surveillance team watching the girlfriend tracking her lover serves only to enfeeble Monsieur X, who never exists beyond the one-dimensional portrait depicted by the wife. In an email the wife sends to her best friend Vanessa B., she confesses not to know even the most basic of details about Monsieur X, such as where he was born or his profession. For her, the relationship is limited purely to the physical: "Je ne suis pas amoureuse. [...] Je suis 'accro'" (de Rosnay 23). It is only via the three emails that the wife sends to her friend, and a letter written, although not sent, to her husband, that we can deduce any form of personal perspective in this narrative. While the wife articulates her feelings about her dissatisfaction with her significantly older husband, the intensity of her physical relationship with her younger lover, and then her subsequent upset over the end of their affair, both men remain almost silent throughout the narrative. We gain no insight into Monsieur X's thoughts or feelings beyond what is reported in his sexting; ironically, the husband, who is a writer, is never in control of the pen. Both the

writer husband's privation of the pen and the agency's ability to wield a pen that is capable only of presenting a partial rendering of events symbiotically emphasizes the phallic impotency of the erotic narrative. Instead, de Rosnay inscribes her text with an alternate matrixial logic. By diminishing the power and the reach of the male gaze, de Rosnay highlights the possibility of understanding desire beyond the realms of phallic order. In her elaboration of the matrixial gaze, Bracha Ettinger emphasizes the importance of trans-subjectivity that opposes the phallic opposition of binaristic interpretations of a male/female divide, advocating instead for the co-emergence of subjectivities.¹⁹ In this sense, de Rosnay's strategy of affording the wife textual autonomy (through the letters she writes to her friend) not only redresses the asymmetries of power that typically play out in romantic erotica by underlining her subjective agency, but also invites what Lorraine Gamman terms a "female gaze."²⁰ Following Ettinger, this does not simply invert the male gaze but, as Gamman argues, disrupts the phallogocentric power of the male gaze by inviting other modes of looking. The textual space carved out by the wife through her correspondence reorients the gaze, casting light on new perspectives of sexual being that foreground women's bodily pleasures in the genre.

Conclusion

While these three novellas, upon first reading, may appear rather disparate in terms of writing style, thematic content, and tone, the analysis undertaken above highlights pertinent synergies in this triptych through the ways in which they all work to remap configurations of the erotic. In their individual ways, they take the common female tropes associated with the genre, the dissatisfied housewife, the dominatrix businesswoman, and the adulteress, yet lead them off the well-trodden narrative path by positioning them in ways which work against their conventional depictions in this genre. Instead of seeking refuge in illicit desire, Angot's bored

housewife is plagued by its shadowy absence; instead of being tamed by an alpha-male, Castillon's iron lady is only ever self-satiated, and through her textual agency de Rosnay's adulteress refuses the reification that the male gaze tries to impose upon her. All three texts subvert the *modus operandi* of the genre, namely, its aim to act as a form of titillation or sexual stimulation for its reader. No such form of textual arousal is evident from the trio, and where descriptions of sexual encounters are explicit, they nevertheless are marked by a sense of sterility and emotional detachment.

It would seem, then, that the three texts stand as antitheses to conventional configurations of erotic writing, which begs the question of why *Marie Claire* chose to commission them in the first place. None of the authors would be readily recognizable as authors of erotic writing, so the reason for their agreement to participate in this project is not immediately obvious. Undoubtedly, this venture would have been lucrative for all three women, and a strategic one in terms of their own publishing trajectory, a fact substantiated by the promotion of Angot's then forthcoming text for the 2012 rentrée, *Une semaine de vacances*, on the back-cover blurb of *Mélodrague*. Yet, for a mainstream women's monthly magazine that in all other respects operates within heteronormative paradigms of femininity as is illustrated by the other front-cover stories adorning the 2012 August issue such as "9 secrets pour se sentir belle et sexy tout l'été" and "Faut-il rajeunir à tout prix?", the motivation behind this step outside of these conventional parameters is more difficult to explain. Although magazines tend to promote discourses on sex that appear daring and dangerous, as Carmen Caldas-Coulthard attests, the sexual acts described are only ever mildly transgressive and are firmly anchored within the rubric of heteronormative sex roles.²¹ As David Machin and Joanna Thornborrow highlight, it is possible to trace correlations between shifts in discourses on sexuality in Western culture and their manifestations as core values in women's magazines. Machin and Thornborrow chart social shifts from sex being

classified as dangerous, an act of rebellion belonging to 1960s counter-culture, to sex as non-domestic, a perspective they attribute largely to second-wave feminist ideologies, and finally to sex as choice and lifestyle, a shift they see as reflective of ever-burgeoning love affair with consumerism.²² They conclude that the discourses of sex that are perpetuated in magazines offer women only a pseudo form of freedom and agency. Nevertheless, what is important here is that they see discourses on sexuality in women's magazines as being mediated by societal shifts and informed by feminist thinking. If this is the case, then it is possible to hypothesize that *Marie Claire*, receptive to this shift in contemporary women's writing that maps out new textual subjectivities for women, even in such phallogentric-entrenched genres as erotica, wanted to push these boundaries of expectation for their readers too. Without access to a back-story and an understanding of the motivation behind this commission, this theory remains simply conjecture. Yet, these texts do exist and form part of the magazine's narrative identity, and so, ~~in this way~~, their decision to publish this erotic trio contributes to a remapping of the erotic, offering the possibility to posit alternative erotic economies.

Newcastle University

Notes

¹ The trilogy was published between 2011 and 2012 by Vintage Books in the United Kingdom.

² E. L. James, *Cinquante nuances de Grey*, Denyse Beaulieu, trans. (Paris: JC Lattès, 2012).

³ Christine Angot, *Mélodrame* (*Marie Claire*, August 2012); Claire Castillon, *Le mâle en moi* (*Marie Claire*, August 2012); Tatiana de Rosnay, *Constat d'adultère* (*Marie Claire*, August 2012).

⁴ Lisa Downing, "Safewording!: Kinkphobia and Gender Normativity in *Fifty Shades of Grey*," *Psychology and Sexuality*, 4:1 (2013): 92.

⁵ Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, "Marginal Canons: Rewriting the Erotic," *Yale French Studies*, 75 (1988): 113.

⁶ Michel Foucault, "Préface à la transgression," *Dits et écrits* 1, Daniel Defert and François Ewald, eds. (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 273.

⁷ Alex Hughes and Kate Ince, *French Erotic Fiction: Women's Desiring Writing, 1880-1990* (Oxford: Berg, 1996).

⁸ See Diana Holmes' article in this volume for an exploration of the dynamics between acceptability and the boundaries of erotic writing in relation to Huston's novel.

⁹ Shirley Jordan's article, in this volume, analyzes Angot's *Une semaine de vacances* (2012), interrogating the experience of incest, trauma, and its disruptive power over the emerging (writing) subject.

¹⁰ Despite this fact, Angot's *Une semaine de vacances* (2012) was awarded the infamous Prix Sade in 2012. Angot refused the prize, yet its award nonetheless is a reminder of the way in which women's writing can be skewed and appropriated to serve heteropatriarchal ends.

¹¹ Smaro Kamboureli, "Discourse and Intercourse, Design and Desire in the Erotica of Anaïs Nin," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 11:1 (1984): 144.

¹² Shirley Jordan, "Sexual/Textual Bodies in Contemporary French Women's Writing," *Nottingham French Studies*, 45:3 (2006): 8.

¹³ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke U P, 2011), 1.

¹⁴ See Kathryn Robson, *Writing Wounds: The Inscription of Trauma in Post-1968 French Women's Life Writing* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004) and Barbara Havercroft *Unspeakable Wounds: Personal Trauma in Contemporary Women's Autobiographical Writing* (forthcoming).

¹⁵ Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, Diana Fuss, ed. (London: Routledge, 1991), 313.

¹⁶ See C. L. Henton, "Nocturnal Orgasm in College Women: Its Relation to Dreams and Anxiety Associated with Sexual Factors," *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 129 (1976): 245-51; B. Whipple, G. Ogden, and B. R. Komisaruk, "Physiological Correlates of Imagery-Induced Orgasm in Women," *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 21 (1992): 121-33; Francesco Bianchi-Demicheli and Stphanie Ortigue, "Toward an Understanding of the Cerebral Substrates of Woman's Orgasm," *Neuropsychologia*, 45:12 (2007): 2645-59.

¹⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, "Faut-il brler Sade?", *Les temps modernes*, 74-75 (1951): 1033.

¹⁸ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, 16 (1975): 6-18.

¹⁹ Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Gaze* (Leeds: Feminist Arts and Histories Press, 1995).

²⁰ Lorraine Gamman, "Watching the Detectives: The Enigma of the Female Gaze," in *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*, Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, eds. (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1989), 8-26.

²¹ Carmen Caldas-Coulthard, "'Women Who Pay for Sex. And Enjoy It.' Transgression Versus Morality in Women's Magazines," *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*, Carmen Caldas-Coulthard and Malcolm Coulthard, eds. (London: Routledge, 1996), 251.

²² David Machin and Joanna Thornborrow, "Lifestyle and the Depoliticisation of Agency: Sex as Power in Women's Magazines," *Social Semiotics*, 16:1 (2006): 173-88.