



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 3, Issue 1

Summer 2020

Review: Maxime Foerster, *The Politics of Love: Queer Heterosexuality in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2018)

Mathew Rickard

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 May 2020

Date of Publication: 21 June 2020

Citation: Mathew Rickard, 'Review: Maxime Foerster, *The Politics of Love: Queer Heterosexuality in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2018)', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 3.1 (2020), 129–33.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v3i1.1409.g1523

volupte.gold.ac.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Maxime Foerster, *The Politics of Love: Queer Heterosexuality in
Nineteenth-Century French Literature*
Becoming Modern: New Nineteenth-Century Studies
(Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2018), pp. xi + 243.
ISBN 9781512601701

Mathew Rickard

Queen's University Belfast

Published in a series that aims to explore the historical developments that inform our concepts of modernity on both sides of the Atlantic, Maxime Foerster's exploration of *The Politics of Love: Queer Heterosexuality in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* arrives at a perfect time in the post-#MeToo society in which we find ourselves. Queer theory increasingly allows us to interrogate even the most monolithic of sexual realities, many of which find their basis in the French nineteenth century. Indeed, despite recent French misgivings surrounding the rise of *la théorie du genre*, it is important to remember that both our conceptions of gender and sexuality and the deconstructions of them are equally (and ironically) informed by French thought.

While the nineteenth century, and especially the French experience therein, has been held up by many as the century of patriarchal bravado in which transgressive female protagonists are didactically castigated, the issue of sexuality and gender has of late been reopened, re-examined and reconstituted. Foerster's opening epigraph, dedicating the book to 'all those who continue to resist normalization today' (p. vii), firmly situates the study in the countercultural tradition of the decadent novels that the author examines. Perhaps more surprising to some, however, is the inclusion of Romantic literature. While decadence is well known and well studied for its provocative treatments of perverse erotic inclinations, there is perhaps a tendency to assume that in comparison to its decadent offspring, Romanticism is conventional, even tame, in its representations of the so-called politics of love. However, Foerster at once links the two, suggesting that the familiar decadent perversion of love picks up from the less-acknowledged Romantic reinvention of love.

The Introduction opens with a Rachildean reimagining of the Don Juan legend in which a woman usurps the masculine role yet continues the patriarchal heteronormative paradigm, encapsulating what Foerster refers to as 'heterosexual trouble', a framework the name of which evokes Butlerian readings of gendered relations. Don Juan features as the supreme heterosexual lover throughout French literature of the nineteenth century, yet recent scholarship has demonstrated their queer potential, making them a good starting-point for discussion. Firmly

ensconcing his argument in the now axiomatic queer interrogations of heterosexuality of the late twentieth century, Foerster's overarching thesis is that the so-called norm of heterosexuality seemed not to work in the French century of revolutions. A key aspect of his argument is the gendered facet of the French language that so many feminist critics have suggested enforces gendered expectations, but which Foerster demonstrates can be just as resistant to essentialism. This linguistic nuance is extended to Foerster's conceptualization of heterosexuality, ultimately distancing *heterosexuality* from *heteronormativity*, allowing for the queerness of 'straight' people that has been refused by other queer theorists (although increasingly common in anglophone French studies).

Foerster's study spans the length of the long nineteenth century in French literature, encompassing both male and female canonical writers in the Romantic period as well as those from the decadent tradition. Finally, he comments on the legacy of nineteenth-century queer heterosexuality moving into the twentieth century. This breadth of material and gender balance demonstrates that while challenges to heteronormativity may often be perceived as a uniquely feminine concern, men also suffer under patriarchy and have just as often critiqued its reach. *The Politics of Love* tackles the often-thorny issue of masculinity in the French nineteenth century, a time when virility was championed in official discourse, yet simultaneously openly challenged and even ridiculed in both Romantic and decadent fiction. Similarly, any conceptions of the Eternal Feminine were thrown out of kilter by the nascent feminist movement across the long nineteenth century, equally represented in the fiction of the time. However, whereas many have had recourse to the blatantly different forms of masculinity and femininity that overtly challenged patriarchal norms, Foerster's return to the original aims of queer theory through his focus on the 'default' sexual order and the subsequent unsettling of any putative claims to normalcy it holds is a welcome addition to the burgeoning queering of the nineteenth century.

The discussion of heterosexual love in the Romantic period begins with the age-old question of whether or not the concept of heterosexual love is a 'trap of masculine domination' (p. 11), and indeed, the Romantic ideals of individualism and exploration of the self would seem to be at odds with traditional formulations of 'romantic' heterosexual love. Foerster argues eloquently that this individualism paved the way for the decadent subject who turned erotic normalcy on its head. While Thomas Laqueur argued that the end of the Enlightenment brought us from a one-sex to a two-sex model of gender relations, it is suggested here that the literature which followed seemingly continued to be at odds with this conceptualization.

Foerster demonstrates that the supposed contemporaneous divide between idealism (feminine) and realism (masculine) in Romanticism was in reality indicative of the incompatibility

of heteronormative ideal sexualities. His discussion of Germaine de Staël's *Delphine* (1802) and *Corinne; ou, L'Italie* (1807) develops the concept that Romantic idealism allowed women far more agency than before, allowing for a radical reinvention of the heterosexual institution of love. Both women refuse to bow down to what Lee Edelman would later come to refer to as [hetero]sexual futurism – the institutions of marriage with children – while the men suffer from an ‘odd reversal’ of masculinity. Similarly, the discussion of the notoriously nonconformist George Sand and her novels *Lélia* (1833) and *Isidora* (1845) reveals how the author not only questioned gender roles through her fiction and real-life interactions, but also queried how these gender deviations demonstrated the impossibility of heteronormative love. However, while it could be assumed that Staël's and Sand's critiques of heteronormativity are part-and-parcel of their position as gynocritics, Foerster adroitly demonstrates that this heterosexual trouble was felt on both sides of the gender divide.

The Romantic task of reinventing heterosexual love was intimately connected with dismantling masculine domination, and so Foerster balances his approach to the movement by referring to male Romantic writers. Of particular note is the inclusion of Benjamin Constant and Alfred de Musset, both known for their trysts with Staël and Sand respectively, adding a distinctly extratextual layer to Foerster's framework of heterosexual trouble, evidenced in real life as well as in the fiction of these lovers. Both Constant's *Adolphe* (1816) and Musset's *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle* (1836) demonstrate the Romantic urge to separate heterosexual (‘romantic’) love from the libertine legacy of the eighteenth century. The reinvention of love and the turbulence of revolution, warfare, and empire, however, remade masculinity and made it more difficult to define. Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) demonstrates this gendered ambiguity, with its androgynous protagonist embodying the very concept of heterosexual trouble. The ambiguity of gender is compounded by the ambiguity of genre and language, with Foerster revealing queerness at every level of the novel. Foerster notes that by refusing to conform to ‘natural’ heterosexual functions, these Romantic characters are often derided as unnatural or monstrous, paving the way for decadence and its lauding of artifice.

Foerster pinpoints the transition between Romanticism and decadence as beginning in 1857 with the emergence of Baudelaire's degenerate poetics, and states that while Romanticism was a pan-European movement, decadence ‘was first recognized as a distinctly French cultural phenomenon’ (p. 22). Of course, as most readers of *Volupté* will agree, decadence studies has been expanded to include the most disparate of cultural milieux, yet its distinctly French origins remain a key characteristic of the tradition, and vital to Foerster's argument for the inimitability of heterosexual trouble in French decadent texts. However, the degenerate opposition that decadence

offered did not fully hold sway until the fin de siècle, with which it is most often associated these days. The French humiliation during the Franco-Prussian war (amongst other national crises) gave decadence the foothold needed to assert itself and its poisonous poetics on a national stage. Thus, as Foerster argues, while Romanticism wrote against the Enlightenment ideals of heterosexual compatibility, decadence revelled in the degeneration of the nation, a macrocosmic rejection of heterosexual idealism.

Both Charles Baudelaire and Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly lauded the male dandy while denigrating the female, yet by framing dandyism as the refinement of perversion, Foerster reveals an often confrontational yet symbiotic relationship between the male and female dandy in their work, at once underscoring and undermining heterosexual trouble. In writing in *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (1863) that women can rise above nature through engaging with artifice, Baudelaire would seem to contradict what he wrote in *Mon cœur mis à nu* (1887) – that women were inherently natural and thus excluded from dandyism. Similarly, Barbey d'Aurevilly's decadent misogyny ironically opens up a space for female dandyism, at once refusing to identify historic female dandies of the past in *Du dandysme et de George Brummell* (1845) yet wishing to celebrate the androgyny of Lady Emma Hamilton and giving agency to monstrous women in his *Les diaboliques* (1874). Ultimately, both are shown by Foerster to blur the line between gendered individualism and patriarchal complicity, despite professing the opposite.

The discussion of dandyism dovetails with an exploration of the late nineteenth-century obsession with degeneration and normalization, with the last case study focusing on the decadent couple as embodied by the female patient and the male doctor. Decadence, despite its remit of amorality, was borne out of a reactionary impulse to reclaim all that French positivism sought to eradicate. As Foerster argues, with the rise of sexology as the new facet of masculine dominance, the male doctor and the hysteric woman were the troubled heterosexual couple *par excellence*, inevitably parodied by decadence in comparison to naturalism's upholding of the sexological agenda. Indeed, Baudelaire blurs the lines between feminine and masculine by juxtaposing them together in the name of the protagonist of 'Mademoiselle Bistouri' ('bistouri' meaning lancet, the phallic metonym for the doctors his protagonist lusts after) while giving agency to the mad female rather than to the rational doctor. Similarly, Jean Lorrain's *La dame aux lèvres rouges* (1888) deals with two men's inability to understand the morbid sexuality of the eponymous *dame*, taking the place of the male doctor in pathologizing and demonizing her, while ironically unable to stem the carnage she continues to wreak. Finally, in providing us with a commentary on Rachilde's *La Jongleuse* (1900), Foerster demonstrates not only a parody of the doctor-patient construct, but also an additional example of heterosexual trouble so dysfunctional that even the most basic of

heterosexual acts – that of sex itself – is out of the question, with autoeroticism and voyeurism replacing literal carnality.

Foerster ends his study with a welcome invitation of suggested routes of investigation readers of *The Politics of Love* may take, including those of drama and poetry, often overlooked in favour of novels. Readers of *Volupté* will also be pleased to note his acknowledgment of manifestations of queer heterosexuality in other national canons of decadence, as well as those of Romanticism and naturalism/realism, providing fertile ground for future research. Another welcome (though perhaps not original) addition is what Foerster refers to as the ‘Proustian Step’, suggesting that nineteenth-century heterosexual trouble paved the way for new and more innovative iterations of the construct in the writings of both male (notably Marcel Proust) and female authors in the twentieth century, ultimately demonstrating the importance of both Romanticism and decadence to our modern conceptions of gender and sexuality. While it may seem that Foerster treads familiar ground by interrogating gender deviance and dysfunctional sexuality in nineteenth-century French literature, his focus on the ‘norm’ of heterosexuality and both canonical and reactionary literature reframes the argument in an innovative and informative manner. The breadth and depth of material covered in a deceptively slim tome ensures that this volume will be of interest to a wide cross-section of researchers of nineteenth-century literature of all shades and beyond.