



A gender-stereotyped representation of Marie in Jean-Philippe Toussaint's tetralogy *M. M. M. M.* (2017)

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Abstract

This article examines the portrait of Marie in Toussaint (*M.M.M.M.*, ed. de Minuit, Paris, 2017) and asks how Marie is represented as a woman in the tetralogy. The study shows that although Marie is portrayed as a modern, independent woman, she is also presented with different gender-stereotyped characteristics. The theoretical and methodological approach to this topic will be based on Simone de Beauvoir's *The second sex* (1949), in particular the chapter “Myths” that focuses on women and myths in a historical perspective. Another question the article raises is what may be the author's intention by playing with stereotyped characteristics. I will argue that the author exposes a modern woman's ambivalent situation in our patriarchal society. Furthermore, that he writes within a literary tradition that gives a stereotyped representation of women as part of the collective myths.

Keywords Myth · Gender · Patriarchal · Stereotypes · Subjective · Ambivalence

Introduction

In *M.M.M.M.*, Marie is an important character next to the nameless first person narrator. In fact, the abbreviation of her name—*M.M.M.M.*—is the same as the title of the tetralogy.¹ The novel relates the narrator's and Marie's love story, that is to say their separation, encounter with others, and a possible reconciliation at the end. The tetralogy also consists of intertextual references, allusions, and metaliterary comments. Although the love story is just *one* aspect of the tetralogy, the reader's attention is often on the story and the main character(s). The question that interests me

¹ Marie's full name (MARIE MADELEINE MARGUERITE DE MONALTE) was the subtitle of the former edition of the tetralogy as stated in *Nue*, on the page “Du même auteur”. This edition consisted of four books (*Faire l'amour* (2002), *Fuir* (2005), *La vérité sur Marie* (2009), and *Nue* (2013)). The new edition of the tetralogy entitled *M.M.M.M.* is just one book and was published in October 2017.

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is what kind of image of Marie is given in Toussaint's tetralogy. The first person narrator of *M.M.M.M.* is a male, and Marie is described through his eyes. In spite of the fact that Marie is presented as a modern woman, she is *also* portrayed with stereotyped characteristics a case I will argue in the light of the first important work of feminist thought, Simone de Beauvoir's *The second sex* (2011).

The question of gender is interesting because the tetralogy's historical context is our contemporary society. Marie and the narrator live in a world where women and men, supposedly, live in modern relationships. Consequently, what reason(s) can there be for presenting a gender-stereotyped image of a woman in a contemporary novel? Marie is portrayed through the eyes of the narrator, but, the author, naturally, is the director of the tetralogy. In my view, the author, first and foremost, reveals a woman's equivocal situation in our society. Secondly, he refers to a literary tradition where the feminine myth plays an important role. The author's attitude may be described as both playful and serious at the same time^{2,3}

Theoretical and methodological approach

The second sex, first published in French in 1949, consists of two volumes whose subtitles are "Facts and myths" and "Lived experience". Volume I is divided into three parts: "Destiny", "History", and "Myths". Part three—"Myths"—will be my main reference in this article, in particular chapter 1. In this chapter, Beauvoir

² The author stages a first person narrator with a stereotyped gaze. But what is the distance between author and narrator? Several researchers have noted a close relationship between them, as for instance Frank Wagner who, at one moment, says: "[L]e protagoniste de ses romans, c'est (un peu, beaucoup...) lui". He also says: "Qu'il s'agisse ou non de fictions, la voix qui résonne dans les textes toussainiens présente en effet les mêmes caractéristiques formelles [...]" (Wagner 2011). When it comes to type of narrator, there is a violation of narratological rules. I will return to this topic at the end of the article. But for the time being, let us keep author and narrator apart.

³ As far as I know, there has been no thorough study of gender in the tetralogy. One finds portraits of Marie, here and there, as for instance in Jacques Dubois's book *Figures du désir: Pour une critique amoureuse* (2011). Dubois, who does not focus on gender in particular, suggests a certain image of Marie when he writes: "[E]n un sens l'héroïne ne fait que reproduire une image typée de la féminité" (Dubois 2011, p. 48). The last chapter of Sarah Glasco's book, *Parody and palimpsest. Intertextuality, language and the ludic in the novels of Jean-Philippe Toussaint* (2015), is entitled "Demystifying Marie". The title seems to play on a chapter written by Elisabeth Falaize, "Simone de Beauvoir and the demystification of woman", in the book *A history of feminist literary criticism* (2007). But Glasco does not mention the word "gender". The title of her chapter refers to the way Marie is portrayed: "Throughout the novels, the narrator seeks to portray Marie in her raw human state and to demystify her otherwise seemingly stylish and sophisticated persona" (Glasco 2015, p. 202). A critic who *has* focused on gender, but only in FA, is Marie-Françoise Berthu-Courtivron. According to this author, Toussaint "confer[s] an aggressive virility to his feminine heroine. Conversely, the male character [...] finds himself deprived of the attributes of masculinity" (Berthu-Courtivron 2017, p. 169). I do agree with Berthu-Courtivron that Toussaint, sometimes, inverts gender roles. Nevertheless, Marie, in particular, is the subject of a stereotyped description. It could be interesting to focus on both Marie and the narrator, but I will use this article to do a thorough study of Marie. Since my corpus is the tetralogy, I hope to shed a more balanced light on the representation of Marie.

outlines the patriarchal myths about women in a historical and existentialist perspective, according to which, a woman is defined as the Other.

Beauvoir starts with the image of women in primitive societies. In these societies, a woman is considered close to nature because of her reproductive ability. Since she is close to nature, she is associated with uncontrollable forces. Confronted with this image of women, man is torn between “fear” and “desire”,

[b]etween the terror of being possessed by uncontrollable forces and the will to overcome them [...] (Beauvoir 2011, p. 206).

It is also said about the primitive woman that she is associated with chaos, that she is chaos. She is characterized as a witch, a sorceress, and even a vampire:

Woman is vampire, ghoul, eater, drinker; her sex organ feeds gluttonously on the male sex organ (pp. 222–223).

In modern societies, the image of women changes: “It is clear how spiritualized the figure of woman became with the birth of Christianity [...]. [D]eeper than carnal mystery, her heart holds a secret and pure presence that reflects truth in the world” (p. 231). According to this other image of women, a woman is a mediator:

[S]he is the Grace that leads the Christian to God, she is Beatrice guiding Dante to the beyond [...] (p. 232).

The access to her is no longer corporal:

[W]oman is no longer flesh, she is glorious body; rather than trying to possess her, men venerate her for her untouched splendor [...] (p. 233).

In accordance with the myths, both types of women are considered mediators between man and the world:

[Man] supposes that the woman speaks to him in the name of [...] a wisdom that he does not claim to have, more instinctive than his own, more immediately in accord with the real; these are the “intuitions” that Egeria uses to counsel and guide [...] (p. 236).

According to both images of women, they are also muses:

Being the very substance of man's poetic activities, woman is understandably his inspiration: the Muses are women (p. 236).

What characterizes the image of a woman, says Beauvoir, is that it is a *dual* image:

There is no image of woman that does not invoke the opposite figure as well [...] (p. 240). And she adds: The very complexity of woman enchants [man] [...] Is she angel or devil? (p. 246).

The second sex is the first thorough analysis of a woman's situation in patriarchal society. Beauvoir writes: “In patriarchal societies, woman [has] kept many

of the disquieting virtues she held in primitive societies” (p. 223). I intend to study the portrait of Marie in the light of Beauvoir’s assertions about the myths of women.

In the first part, “The modern, independent woman”, I will show how Marie is portrayed as a contemporary woman and contrast this portrait to the stereotyped description of her. The next part, “Some gender-stereotyped characteristics”, is the main part and divided into four subcategories which all relate to the myths of women: “The dual image”, “Femininity”, “Unpredictability” and “A muse”. In the last part “Discussion”, and before I conclude, I will briefly comment on the topic of fashion and discuss the relationship between author and narrator.

The modern, independent woman⁴

Marie is an international artist, a stylist and a plastic artist who has created her own brand *Allons-y Allons-o* in Tokyo. At the beginning of the tetralogy, she and the narrator are in the metropole, because she is to open her own art exhibition at the *Contemporary Art Space* of Shinagawa and present a part of her high fashion collection at the *Spiral*. Since she and the narrator have decided to part from one another, he speculates about her reasons for having invited him on the journey—“elle couverte d’honneurs, de rendez-vous et de travail, entourée d’une cour de collaborateurs, d’hôtes et d’assistants, et moi sans statut, dans son ombre, son accompagnateur en somme, son cortège et son escorte” (FA, p. 28). When they meet the Japanese delegation, he notices a young woman from the French Embassy:

C’était une élégante jeune femme [...] qui m’entretenait de vacuités badines et de détails bénins, comme si on l’avait chargée d’accompagner Monsieur Thatcher pendant une visite officielle (p. 102).

Since Mrs. Thatcher was frequently referred to as the “Iron Lady”, this indirect allusion to her and her nickname suggests, although amusingly, that Marie is also a tough woman in the eyes of the narrator.⁵

The events in F occur the summer before the journey to Tokyo, and at the beginning of F we hear more about Marie’s business. The narrator is on a journey to Shanghai :

[C]e n’était pas vraiment un déplacement professionnel, plutôt un voyage d’agrément, même si Marie m’avait confié une sorte de mission (mais je n’ai pas envie d’entrer dans les détails) (F, p. 171).

⁴ I will use the following abbreviations when referring to the different parts/pages of the tetralogy: FA (*Faire l’amour*), F (*Fuir*), VM (*La vérité sur Marie*), N (*Nue*).

⁵ At the art museum, the narrator suddenly leaves Marie without a word, goes back to their hotel, and then takes the train to Kyoto where he stays with a friend Bernard.

In Shanghai, he meets Zhang Xiangzhi, Marie's business associate, and gives him an envelope with 25 000 dollars from Marie. According to the narrator, Zhang Xiangzhi conducts real estate affairs in Asia on behalf of Marie, and he insinuates that they are involved in corruption. However, the terms he uses suggest that this is based on mere supposition or perhaps simply his own imagination. The narrator describes Marie as a successful business manager who has several outlets in Asia:

Depuis ses premiers succès en Asie, en Corée et au Japon, Marie s'était implantée à Hongkong et à Pékin et avait souhaité acquérir de nouvelles vitrines à Shanghai et dans le Sud du pays, avec des projets déjà bien avancés d'ouvrir des succursales à Shenzhen et à Canton (pp. 173–174).

Marie is presented as a tough, hard-working, and successful artist and business manager working internationally. In N, the narrator gives supplementary information which adds to the portrait of Marie:

[M]arie, femme d'affaires, Marie, chef d'entreprise, qui signait des contrats et faisait des transactions immobilières à Paris et en Chine, qui connaissait le cours du dollar au quotidien et suivait l'évolution des places boursières, Marie, créatrice de mode qui travaillait avec des dizaines d'assistants et de collaborateurs dans le monde entier, Marie, femme de son temps, active, débordée et urbaine, qui vivait dans des grands hôtels et traversait en coup de vent des halls d'aéroports [...]. (N, pp. 564–565)

However, the narrator says that this aspect of her personality *only* describes her superficially. What *really* characterizes Marie is *la disposition océanique*, her ability to communicate with the world (See “[A muse](#)”).

When it comes to Marie's personal life, we see that Marie is an enterprising woman, and that the narrator most often jags along. After their journey to Tokyo, he moves out of their common apartment on Rue de La Vrillière. At the vernissage, Marie had met Jean-Christophe de G., a horse breeder who becomes her lover. However, he dies of a heart attack in her Parisian apartment. Marie then spends the summer alone at the Rivercina, her late father's estate on the island of Elba. She invites the narrator to join her there for a period even though they no longer lived together. He hopes that they will share their old room, but she installs him there, while she herself stays in her father's room.

According to the narrator, Marie and he become closer during the summer, but he takes no initiative to clarify the situation with her. Yet, one night when there is a terrible fire at a horse club nearby, Marie comes to *his* room afterwards and climbs into *his* bed. At the end of the summer, when they share a taxi home, he admits, (to the reader), not being able to express his feelings towards Marie. Therefore, when they are back in Paris, *he* waits for *her* to call *him*, which she does two months later, asking him to meet her in a café. Maurizio, who used to look after her father's estate, is dead, and Marie suggests that they attend the funeral.

Marie se chargea de toutes les formalités pour le voyage [...]. Elle vint me chercher en taxi [...]. (N, pp. 624–625).

They miss Maurizio's funeral, but Marie, who at one moment feels unwell, tells him that she is pregnant. When he asks her why she has not contacted him after their coming back to Paris, Marie just returns the question to him: "Pourquoi, tu m'as appelée, toi?" (N, p. 685).

At the end of the tetralogy, when they are back at the Rivercina, Marie again takes an initiative towards the narrator. She takes him into the room where she got pregnant - "[e]t, sans allumer la lumière, elle se jeta sur moi pour m'embrasser [...]" (N, p. 692).

Some gender-stereotyped characteristics

After women's liberation in the 1970s, a woman is, ideally, an independent person with her own career, she is self-confident and sexually liberated. To a great extent, this description corresponds with the portrait of Marie. However, in this section, I will show that she is also presented with stereotyped characteristics.

The dual image⁶

Marie's full name—Marie Madeleine Marguerite de Montalte—is not revealed until several pages into FA (FA, p. 53). Yet, when her name is commented on by the narrator, he says that she "weeps a lot", and thereby seems to suggest that she "weeps like a Madeleine". The expression refers to Mary of Magdala, often considered a repentant prostitute in the *Bible*. The Gospel of Luke (8:2–3) says that Jesus drove seven demons out of her.

The following sequence contains the first intimate moment between Marie and the narrator:

Il était tard, peut-être plus de trois heures du matin, et nous faisons l'amour, nous faisons lentement l'amour dans l'obscurité de la chambre que traversaient [...] de longues traînées de lueurs rouges et d'ombres noires [...]. Le visage de Marie, penché dans la pénombre, les cheveux en désordre [...] restait comme en retrait de notre étreinte, à l'abandon à l'angle d'un coussin [...] (FA, pp. 33–34).

According to the narrator, only Marie's genitals seem to take part in the act—"[s]on sexe chaud que j'avais pénétré et qui bougeait de façon presque autonome, âpre et hargneuse, avide [...]" (p. 34). However, the act is interrupted by the narrator when the TV in the room announces that they have received a fax:

[L]a pénombre de la chambre fut envahie par une clarté bleutée d'aquarium, silencieuse et inquiétante (pp. 35–36).

⁶ In this section, I will briefly comment on some intertextual references and allusions in order to suggest a dual image of Marie. This will only be done sketchy, since the intertextual aspect of the tetralogy is the subject of another article. Brodahl, G.: "Jean-Philippe Toussaint. Jeu intertextuel dans "le cycle de Marie"" (2019).

At the beginning of VM, Marie is in the Parisian apartment with Jean-Christophe de G.. It is late night, the temperature is high—“38 C dans la région parisienne”—and the air is feverish (VM, p. 343). Marie puts on some music on her portable computer and starts dancing on her own—“[I]es bras comme des serpents sinueux qui improvisaient d’arabesques arabesques dans l’air” (VM, p. 346). Yet, she has trouble breathing and fetches a fan:

Le ventilateur se mit en route [...] et elle, docile, la tête baissée, offrant avec complaisance sa chevelure à l’air, ce qui lui donnait des allures de folle, ou de Méduse. Marie, et son goût [...] pour le désordre, pour le bazar, pour le chaos, le bordel noir, les tourbillons, l’air mobile et les rafales (VM, p. 347).

Even though humorously, Marie is here associated with Medusa, the antique monster who had snakes for hair.

Ils avaient fini par se déshabiller et ils s’étaient étreints dans la pénombre [...]. La pièce était silencieuse, où ne luisait que la lueur bleutée de l’ordinateur portable [...] (VM, p. 348).

There is a certain parallel between the two scenes in the mentioning of Marie’s hair in disorder in the hotel room (FA), and Marie’s taste for disorder in relation to the description of Medusa’s hair in the Parisian apartment (VM). Both scenes take place at night, but in FA, the narrator mentions the neon lights which penetrate the hotel room, while in VM, he refers to the lightning of the sky. In both scenes, there are electronic equipments (TV and personal computer) that produce a bluish light. The vocabulary the narrator uses about Marie’s genitals (“âpre, hargneuse et avide”) is reminiscent of the one Beauvoir uses to describe a vampire’s (See Beauvoir 2011, pp. 222–223). And in VM, where the narrator associates Marie with Medusa, Jean-Christophe de G. dies, in fact, after the intimate moment with her. There is a certain humor underlying these references to the myths.⁷

The very first part of Marie’s name is also a name associated with the *Bible*. In N, there are playful references to the *Annunciation to Mary* when the narrator thinks about the way Marie announced her pregnancy to him. He associates the scene, at one moment, with the ancient pictorial tradition of the Renaissance. He then mentions its iconographic details, the whiteness of Marie’s coat, and her bouquet of white lilies. However, he realizes that the approach does not make sense since Marie’s announcement “[n]’était pas un aveu, c’était un reproche” (N, p. 682). In quite an amusing way, the narrator compares Marie’s attitude to that of the Virgin’s in Botticelli’s painting in which the Virgin seems to both “accept” and “refuse” her condition (p. 682).

Here, it is also important to mention *M.M.M.M.*’s epigraph, “*Dire d’elle ce qui jamais ne fut dit d’aucune. Dante*” from *The new life* (2012). *The new life* is a collection of poetry where the lyrical *I* expresses his love for Beatrice. Since Toussaint

⁷ Dubois sees Marie as a being linked to mythology: “[M]arie a quelque chose d’une nymphe à la manière antique” (Dubois 2011, p. 50). When it comes to the intimate moment with Jean-Christophe de G., he says: “[La déité] maléfique [...] lui a [...] jeté un sort. Malaise et mort s’ensuivront sous peu” (p. 52).

borrowing Dante's phrase as an introduction to *M.M.M.M.*, it is likely that the pronoun "elle" also refers to Marie. Beatrice is a pure, idealized woman just like the Virgin Mary. She is also the subject of a discourse on love. In my opinion, the narrator's discourse may also be considered a discourse on love and Marie his muse. (See "A muse").

Clearly the *dual* image of Marie is suggested through allusions and references to Mary of Magdala and Medusa on the one hand and to Saint Mary and Beatrice on the other.

Femininity

In the novel, the narrator gives quite a stereotyped portrait of Marie in scenes related to danger. In the chosen scenes (an earth quake, a heart attack, and a fire), we are introduced to typical "female" behavior.

In the first scene, Marie and the narrator are on a bridge in Tokyo when they experience a brief earthquake:

Et Marie, dans un cri étouffé, se précipita dans mes bras et se mit à trembler de tous les membres (FA, p. 81).

They retreat to a place on the side of the bridge, but they can still be observed by others. According to the narrator, Marie's fear and tension crave an outlet:

Il fallait [...] qu'elle jouisse sur-le-champ, et j'eus alors le sentiment que c'était une femme inconnue que j'avais dans les bras, qui se collait contre moi, mouillée de désir et de larmes, ses hanches s'enroulant contre mon ventre avec une détermination mauvaise à la recherche de la jouissance, la violence de son désir me faisait peur [...] (FA, p. 84).

In this scene, we do not hear much about the narrator's emotional reactions to the earth quake. Apparently, he stays calm and protects Marie. Marie, we are told, reacts with fear and tears and she reacts instinctively as a body.

In the second example, the narrator describes Marie's reaction when Jean-Christophe de G. suffers a heart attack. At one moment, Jean-Christophe de G. walks into the toilet. And when he comes out again—"[i]l fit un pas dans la chambre et s'effondra" (VM, p. 354). He is conscious and tells Marie that she should call a doctor. Since *she* panics on the phone, *he* gives the address to the operator. In the following scene, the narrator portrays a naked Marie, when she tries to give life-saving aid to Jean-Christophe de G.:

Marie s'était hissée à califourchon sur le corps tout habillé de Jean-Christophe de G., et, les mains l'une sur l'autre, les bras tendus, les cheveux en désordre, maladroite, affolée, elle appuyait de toutes ses forces sur son sternum pour enfoncer sa cage thoracique, puis, comme il ne répondait plus à ses sollicitations, se penchait sur lui pour le secouer et l'étreindre, le malmener et l'embrasser, passer ses mains sur son visage, lui transmettre sa chaleur, collant ses lèvres contre les siennes et lui enfonçant sa langue dans la bouche pour lui

souffler de l'air, comme si elle compensait la navrante maladresse de ses soins par une fougue rageuse et communicative [...]. (VM, pp. 357–358)

The narrator describes Marie as awkward during the *whole* scene related to Jean-Christophe de G.'s heart attack. Although he gives a stereotyped portrait of her as a woman, he also gives a captivating description of her (as illustrated by the rest of the sequence, VM, p. 358).

In the third example, the narrator relates Marie's behavior during the dramatic fire on the island of Elba. Marie and the narrator head for the horse club with Marie behind the wheel. When they arrive, she walks into the horse club with heavy smoke around her: “[J]e pris peur, je l'appelai, je lui demandai de revenir, mais elle ne répondait pas, elle continuait à avancer, courbée devant elle [...]” (VM, p. 521). The narrator describes Marie as impulsive and fearless (or rather foolish) and suggests that he behaves in a reasonable manner. The following scene is quite an eye-opener when it comes to the way Marie is presented in relation to the men.

Peppino, the old man and responsible at the horse club, tries to save a horse in a stable. He is described as a hero, symbolically suggested by the halo around him and the horse: “Lorsque le toit de l'écurie commença à s'effondrer [...], Peppino se jeta à l'intérieur de l'écurie [...] et il en ressortit avec le cheval, homme et cheval surgissant dans la nuit recouverts d'une auréole de feu [...]” (VM, p. 521). Shortly afterwards, Marie runs toward Peppino and into the fire burning her feet. Peppino gets furious and chases her. Marie then is portrayed spinning around like a confused woman: “[M]arie revint sur ses pas, ne sachant plus où elle allait, égarée, courant toujours, elle tournait en rond [...]”. A fireman (another hero?) discovers her and takes care of her – “[l]a ramena vers moi en la prenant sous son aile protectrice, tandis qu'elle se blottissait contre son épaisse veste en cuir” (VM, p. 523).

According to the myths, man is the One and therefore associated with positive characteristics. Here, Marie—as the Other—is described as vulnerable, awkward, and out of control.

Unpredictability⁸

“Unpredictable” has both a positive and a negative meaning. The first two examples illustrate its negative meaning (instability and caprice), and the last one its positive meaning (surprise and adventure).

After they interrupted their first love-scene in Tokyo, the narrator discovers Marie in the hotel lobby: “Elle était immobile, allongée dans un des élégants canapés en cuir noir du hall, la tête et les cheveux tombant en arrière, un bras ballant au sol [...]” (FA, p. 55). Marie is wearing one of her high fashion creations, a 20,000 dollar dress, put on in a negligent way. The narrator has never seen her like this, and according to him, it does not predict any good. With this dress, Marie wears a pair

⁸ “In essence, woman is inconstant, just as water is fluid; [...]” (Beauvoir 2011, p. 243). The words “inconstant” and “unpredictable” do not mean exactly the same but they are related and they both refer to women.

of pink pale hotel slippers. When she smiles at him, the narrator says: “Elle avait un sourire ambigu que je ne lui connaissais pas, un peu inquiétant, légèrement dingue” (FA, p. 58).

Marie drags him into the night, although it is winter and cold outside. The narrator tries to be reasonable, suggests that they should at least get a coat, but she refuses. Instead, she offers *her* coat to *him* and calls him a wimp:

Tiens, puisque tu as froid, mauviette, me dit-elle, et elle s’arrêta dans le hall pour me toiser et m’adresser *un beau sourire vampant*, d’ingénuité et de défi. Et, dans l’éclair de plaisir très vif qui brilla dans ses yeux, il me parut alors la retrouver soudain intégralement, imprévisible et fantasque, tuante, incomparable (FA, p. 58. My emphasis).

On the one hand, Marie inverts the traditional gender roles when she gives her coat to the narrator and calls him a wimp. On the other, the narrator gives a clichéd description of Marie when he refers to her smile. The word “vamp” is etymologically derived from “vampire”. According to *Le grand Robert*, a vamp is a familiar expression and means “femme fatale et irresistible”. The example given is *Un sourire de vamp*. Toussaint has here created a neologism, *un sourire vampant*. Marie’s smile has two characteristics, innocence (ingénuité) and challenge (défi), which suggests “sweet and sexy”.

In F, the narrator is too late for the funeral of Marie’s father. He also disappears from the service. After the funeral, Marie looks for the narrator in Portoferraio, but she does not find him. However, she finds the hotel where he has a room, and she is on his bed when he returns. Again the narrator mentions a flash of madness when he talks about Marie as well as her unpredictability:

Je rejoignis Marie sur le lit, et je l’embrassai, l’immobilité de sa douleur, le silence, les premières caresses, timides, prudentes, inachevées, et d’un seul coup urgentes, désordonnées, quelque chose de dingue dans ses yeux, un désir de plus en plus intense [...] (F, p. 318).

After a while, the tension ceases though, and the narrator continues to caress Marie’s body. But she interrupts the intimate moment without warning—“[e]n me donnant, de toutes ses forces et pour me rejeter, un coup de chatte dans la gueule” (p. 320). However, a moment later, she is completely transformed: “[E]lle me sourit comme si rien n’était” (p. 321).⁹

Towards the end of the tetralogy, the narrator’s feelings for Marie have evolved. Marie is still capable of surprising him, and he lets himself be seduced. In the following scene, Marie is described as a little villain: “[M]arie, imprévisible, [...] avait volé un abricot à l’étalage d’un magasin de fruits et légumes de la vieille ville de Portoferraio et [...] avait gardé longuement le noyau dans sa bouche, qu’elle avait suçoté rêveusement au soleil, avant de me coincer soudain contre le mur d’un passage ombragé du port pour plaquer brusquement ses lèvres contre les miennes pour

⁹ There is more than one incident, in the tetralogy, where Marie is described going from one extreme to the other, from rage to disheartenment, and the other way round.

se débarrasser du noyau dans ma bouche” (N, p. 569). Remembering this moment, and looking out of the window in his Parisian studio, the narrator realizes that he keeps coming back to the same images of Marie—“épurées des éléments désagréables” (N, p. 569).

On different occasions, the narrator characterizes Marie as unpredictable and, at the same time, he adds other gender-stereotyped characteristics of her. She is described as a vamp, a bit crazy (*dingue*), and childlike.

A muse

A sequence inside N indicates that Marie has a gift that the narrator refers to as her “*disposition océanique*”:

Marie avait ce *don*, cette capacité singulière, cette *faculté miraculeuse*, de parvenir, dans l’instant, à ne faire qu’un avec le monde [...] (N, p. 564. My emphasis).

In the following quotation, the vocabulary is reminiscent of the one used to describe the relationship between women and nature in primitive societies (See Beauvoir 2011, p. 236):

Marie, toujours, trouvait *intuitivement* l’accord spontané avec les éléments, avec la mer, dans laquelle elle se fondait avec délices, nue dans l’eau salée qui enrobait son corps, avec la terre, dont elle aimait le contact physique, primitif et grossier, sèche ou un peu gluante dans la paume de ses mains. Marie atteignait d’*instinct* la dimension cosmique de l’existence, même si elle semblait parfois dédaigner complètement sa dimension sociale [...] (N, pp. 565–566. My emphasis).

There is a continuation of the above quotation, where the narrator talks about Marie and the social dimension, that is clearly an exaggeration:

[E]lle se comportait avec la même simplicité naturelle avec toutes les personnes avec qui elle était en relation [...] ne voyant en chacun d’eux que l’être humain qu’ils étaient sans s’intéresser le moins du monde à leur rang, comme si, sous les atours de l’adulte qu’elle était devenue, et sa prestance d’artiste mondialement reconnue, c’était *l’enfant* qu’elle avait été qui subsistait, avec son fond inaltérable de bonté innocente (N, p. 566. My emphasis).¹⁰

The following passage gives a touching description of Marie, the child–woman, at ease in nature:

¹⁰ The myths pretend that women and children have the ability to communicate with the world. Beauvoir mentions the term “child-woman” with reference to André Breton and quotes him: “‘I choose the child-woman not in order to oppose her to other women, but because it seems to me that in her and in her alone exists in a state of absolute transparency the *other* prism of vision’” (Beauvoir 2011, p. 295).

[E]lle semblait toujours déambuler comme nue à la surface du monde, le «comme» étant même superflu avec elle, tant elle évoluait souvent vraiment nue dans la vie, à la maison ou dans les jardins de la propriété de l'île d'Elbe, au nez éberlué de créatures qui la suivaient des yeux avec ravissement, papillon qui avait trouvé son alter ego dans la nature ou petits poissons émoustillés qui frétilaient derrière elle dans la mer, quand je n'étais pas moi-même le témoin privilégié de son innocente lubie de se promener à poil à la moindre occasion, qui était comme sa signature, ou son chiffre secret, la preuve de son adéquation consubstantielle au monde, dans ce qu'il a de plus permanent et d'essentiel depuis des centaines de milliers d'années. (pp. 566–567)

The portrait of Marie is obviously subjective and belongs to a man in love. At the end of this description, he admits himself that the image of Marie is a constructed image:

[c]omme si, à côté de la Marie réelle [...] se trouvait une autre Marie [...] qui n'existait que dans mon esprit [...] cette Marie dédoublée, ma Marie personnelle [...] (pp. 567–568).

According to the myths, a woman is a mediator/a muse who makes the poet see beyond the real world. Nothing suggests that Marie has a supernatural ability. However, the description of her communication with the world is a reminiscence of certain characteristics related to the myths.

Discussion

Since Marie is a high fashion stylist, I will start this part by a comment on women and fashion. In the introduction to her seminal work *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression* (1990), Sandra L. Bartky says:

I have been interested from the first in the nature of that “femininity” that disempowers us even while it seduces us; [...] (Bartky 1990, p. 2).

In a chapter where she also refers to Beauvoir, she says that the image many women have of themselves is not only an image that has been forced upon them, but an image that, in many cases, has taken residence inside their own minds. She calls this inner self the “interiorized representative of [...] “the “fashion–beauty complex”” (p. 39). The fashion–beauty complex includes “a vast system of corporations”. “[It] seeks to glorify the female body and to provide opportunities for narcissistic indulgence” (p. 39).

Beauvoir is critical of fashion, but just like Bartky, she draws attention to women's equivocal situation. When it comes to high fashion, Beauvoir writes:

[M]an wants woman at the same time to be animal and plant and that she hides behind a fabricated armature; he loves her emerging from the waves and from a high-fashion house, naked and dressed [...] (Beauvoir 2011, p. 213).¹¹

According to the narrator, Marie is beautiful, but there are no descriptions of her. To the readers, she appears physically like a silhouette. On some occasions, we are told that she appears in stylish clothes, at other times that she enjoys walking around in the raw. However, the novel does not focus on Marie and fashion in a stereotyped way. An exception may be when she appears in her own high fashion creation, and the narrator says that she gives him “un beau sourire vampant” (FA, p. 58). As a stylist Marie is responsible for creating a certain image of women. Yet, we have no access to her thoughts about the “fashion–beauty complex”. Sometimes, Marie creates extraordinary dresses as for instance “la robe en sorbet” and “la robe en miel”.¹² In the latter case, she also reflects on dress in an artistic way: “Menant une réflexion théorique sur l’idée même de haute couture, elle était revenue au sens premier du mot couture [...]” (N, p. 539). Although these transparent dresses glorify a woman’s body, Marie’s focus as a stylist is on artistic creation and not on stereotyped representation.

Let us return, once again, to the epigraph “*Dire d’elle ce qui jamais ne fut dit d’aucune. Dante*”. Who is the epigrapher? Since the epigraph belongs to the novel’s paratext, the obvious answer is the author. However, in *Paratexts: Tresholds of interpretation* (1997), Gérard Genette says: “Let us not necessarily conclude [...] that it is always the author who claims to be the epigrapher [...]. [I]n the case of a homodiegetic narrative it is advisable to hold at least the possibility of an epigraph put forward by the narrator-hero” (Genette 1997, p. 154). In this case, Genette imagines that the author chooses the epigraph and then offers it to his narrator. He also imagines a situation where the narrator chooses the epigraph, which would make him “an imagined author” (p. 155).

As far as this novel is concerned, Wagner has drawn attention to the phenomenon called “paralepsis” with reference to Genette (Wagner 2011). In my turn, I will refer to *Narrative discourse* (Genette 1988), where Genette writes: “Paralepsis can [...] consist, in internal focalization, of incidental information about the thoughts of a character other than the focal character, or about a scene that the latter is not able to see” (Genette 1980, p. 197). This description corresponds quite well with the narratological situation in *M.M.M.M.*. Sometimes, the narrator reports the thoughts of other people, for instance Marie’s and Jean-Christophe de G.’s. He also relates events from where he is absent himself (in F, VM, and N, in particular). According to Genette, who discusses this phenomenon with reference to Proust, there are things

¹¹ In *The second sex*, volume 2, Beauvoir also writes: “Precisely because the idea of femininity is artificially defined by customs and fashion, it is imposed on every woman from the outside [...]. By not conforming, a woman devalues herself sexually and consequently socially because society has incorporated sexual values” (p. 816)..

¹² “[M]arie avait créé une collection de robes en sorbet qui fondaient sur le corps des mannequins [...]” (F, p. 312). “Avec la robe en miel, Marie inventait [...] une robe [...] fluide, fondante, lentement liquide et sirupeuse [...]” (N, pp. 539–540).

which “[w]e must indeed attribute to the “omniscient novelist [...]” (Genette 1980, p. 208). When mentioning a similar case, he also uses the term “[the] omniscient narrator” (p. 209). My point is that, in this novel, Toussaint, the real author, plays with the distinction between author and narrator.¹³

In my opinion, the question of who is the epigrapher is the clearest indication of the author’s attitude. If the author were the epigrapher, perhaps the most obvious assumption, Marie would also be his muse, and he would be partly responsible for the stereotyped image of her. If the narrator were the epigrapher, the author’s attitude would be less clear, since he would dissociate himself from the epigraph. However, as Genette also says:

[I]n reality, everything comes down to the author, for he is also *the author of the narrator* (Genette 1997, p. 154).

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to study the portrait of Marie in the light of Beauvoir’s theories on the myths of women. The examples used in the section “Some gender-stereotyped characteristics” show that the topic is mostly treated in a playful way but with a serious undertone.

To sum up, although Marie is a famous artist and a business manager, she is the victim of the male gaze. In the narrator’s portrait of Marie, we recognize the dual image of her as a woman (Mary of Magdala/Medusa—Saint Mary/Beatrice). The narrator also describes Marie in accordance with what is usually considered typical “female” behavior. Marie is portrayed as irrational, out of control as well as unpredictable. Here, the stereotyped representation lies in the portrait of a woman driven by her emotions. Yet, Marie is also described as communicating intuitively and instinctively with the world. On this occasion, the narrator suggests the traditional link between a woman and nature. The tale of the tetralogy is the narrator’s and in spite of his stereotyped portrait of Marie, she is certainly his muse (“Je t’aime, Marie [...]” (N. p. 608)).

On the one hand, the author uses the narrator as a tool in order to exhibit a woman’s equivocal situation in our patriarchal society. On the other, he blurs the boundaries between author and narrator. He then creates an uncertainty with regard to interpreting the text. As epigrapher, the author refers to a canonical text and a literary tradition that stereotypes women’s roles. Although, in *M.M.M.M.*, the intention is, surely, to pay homage to Marie, the author delimits her to a similarly clichéd position. However, for the author, an underlying question seems to be: How can one describe love for a woman in a literary text today? Even if *M.M.M.M.*’s love story is an updated version of a universal theme, from a gender perspective it is a reiteration of a story recounted infinitely. In my view, the author’s intention is to express this ambivalence.

¹³ I would like to stress that in Genette’s narratology, there are only two agents: “[A] narrative of fiction is produced fictively by its narrator and actually by its (real) author” (Genette 1988, p.139). This means that Genette rejects the notion of “implied author”.

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