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Nos ancêtres, les pervers: Reading Queerly and Constructing the Homosexual Before the Closet (1810-1830)

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Nos ancêtres, les pervers: Reading Queerly and Constructing the Homosexual Before the Closet (1810-1830)

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May 6, 2013

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Abstract

Homosexuality is, popularly imagined, a twentieth-century phenomenon wherein medicine created homosexual identity and society worked to stigmatize it. Yet the proto-homosexual role can be traced to several notable historical figures before the rise of medicine at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, especially through literature, and this is most apparent in France, which had been the first country to decriminalize same-sex relations in private after the adoption of the Napoleonic Code. But how do we understand same-sex desire and homosexuality before the homosexual existed as such while respecting the oftentimes-unclear nuances of human sexuality? In this paper, I argue that in the case of the Marquis de Custine and the literature that his unconventional life inspired, ambiguity or secrecy does not indicate impotence or homosexuality, and that attempts to decode and demystify these secrets by nineteenth-century and contemporary analysts alike reflects an anxiety towards sexual ambiguity, as well as changing notions of gender representation. Finding comfort and accepting this sexual ambiguity, then, mark the practice of reading queerly.

Introduction

Less than two decades after the French Revolution, the adoption of the Penal Code in 1791 effectively decriminalized same-sex behaviors in private, but such acts were generally not accepted socially and considered taboo, particularly in the public sphere. From the 1820s onwards, after the document was revised, French morality laws – which subverted the Code’s influence – led to frequent legal harassment of non-gender conforming individuals and those engaged in same-sex behaviors, entirely under the pretext of protecting public decency. Medical discourse reinforced and was reinforced by the law’s accusations of depravity; according to Jennifer Terry, when the first medical interpretations of same-sex behavior were produced in Western Europe during the 1820s, three types of explanations could be identified: the naturalistic, which postulated that sexual inversion was responsible for deviation from heterosexuality, wherein homosexuality was seen as an inborn but benign desire; the degenerationist, wherein homosexual behavior was the result of inborn constitutional defects; and the psychogenists, like Freud, who interpreted same-sex desire as an outcome of early childhood experience and a perversion of the sex drive.¹ Before the construction of these explanations, though, same-sex behavior was largely linked to social factors, most importantly class, as homosexuality was a signifier of the decadence of the rich, weakness of will of the middle class, and barbarism of the poor.²

Consequently, in the context of contemporary queer history, many historians would argue that homosexuality is a twentieth-century phenomenon wherein medicine

¹ Terry. *An American Obsession*, pg. 43.

² *Ibid.* *An American Obsession*, pg. 42.

created the homosexual and society worked to stigmatize him, and it is not my intention to debate such perspectives. Yet the proto-homosexual role can be attributed to several notable historical figures before the rise of medicine at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century. For example, although inquiry into his personal life and writings is still (and perhaps should still be) marked by uncertainty, a possible case presents itself with the Marquis Astolphe de Custine, a French aristocrat and author best known for his travel writings which were completed during a visit to Russia. Born in Lorraine in 1790, Custine was raised by his mother after his father and grandfather, renowned porcelain workers, were guillotined during the French Revolution. At the behest of his mother, Custine was betrothed to the daughter of the duchess, salonnière, and novelist Claire de Duras, a promise that was broken in 1818. A couple of years later, Custine formed a relationship with an Englishman, Edward Saint-Barbe, who would remain his life companion and to whom he would leave all of his belongings. In October 1824, Custine's unconscious body was found outside of Paris, beaten, and robbed. According to popular newspapers and now-destroyed court documents, the attack had been carried out by a group of soldiers with whom Custine had attempted to initiate a sexual encounter. It is highly likely that this scandal, as well as Custine's relationship with Duras's daughter, inspired Duras's *Olivier*, Henri de Latouche's *Olivier*, Stendhal's *Armance*, and Custine's own novel, *Aloys* (referred to collectively in this paper as the Olivier novels).

Each text follows the relationship between a wealthy gentleman and his fiancée, usually his cousin. The relationship inevitably fails due to a secret that the former character hides from the latter, heavily implied to be either impotence or homosexuality.

At the end of each novel, the young man either dies or withdraws from public life. And while it may be compelling, especially for contemporary readers, to label each of the protagonists, as well as Custine, as homosexual, doing so reinforces notions of minoritizing and universalizing discourses of sexuality, making queer identity ahistorical and static.

The questions that guide my research are thus: How can we read texts, particularly those based on Custine's life in a queer fashion that resists minoritizing and universalizing discourses? Is there space for sexual ambiguity? How do we understand homosexual desire before the homosexual existed as such? How does Custine fit into this equation? What made him such a transgressive figure? What does this say about nineteenth-century French society? Ultimately, I argue that each character's secret does not necessarily indicate impotence or homosexuality, and that attempts to decode and demystify these secrets by nineteenth-century and contemporary analysts alike reflects an anxiety towards sexual ambiguity, as well as changing notions of gender representation. Finding comfort and accepting this sexual ambiguity, then, mark reading queerly.

Chapter One provides context for how same-sex desire was conceived before and after the construction of the closet in the Olivier novels. As historians of sexuality posit that queer identity was born in the earliest years of the twentieth century, as it is my intention to present an example of the proto-homosexual in Custine, I must outline the material conditions in France during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Chapter Two serves as a way to connect the real world to literature. A brief biography of the Marquis Astolphe de Custine serves as this link, as Custine's life

undoubtedly inspired his own novel, as well as those of Duras, Latouche, and Stendhal, although the extent of which is debated.

Chapter Three discusses theories behind sexuality and sexual identity, particularly those posited by Eve Sedgwick. While Sedgwick's contributions to queer theory are undeniably important, her notions of minoritizing and universalizing discourses of sexuality, particularly in regards to literature, do not allow for any ambiguity. In order to successfully posit a manner to read texts that respects sexual ambiguity, it is first necessary to outline what has been said about sexuality.

Chapter Four discusses the novels themselves and the manners in which they deal with sex and sexuality, essentially putting theory into practice. In each of these novels, the protagonists are veritable enigmas, their sexualities scrutinized and instinctively receiving the label of homosexual or deviant, largely due to aforementioned notions of minoritizing or universalizing discourses of sexuality. Although arrows may indeed point to a deviant or non-normative sexuality on the part of each narrative's protagonist, I posit that ambiguity prevents such a distinction and that assigning such a label is presumptuous at best.

Finally, Chapter Five expands on the concept of queerness and how there can possibly be such a notion before the identity of queer, as articulated by each of the novels in the time of Custine, and what reading queerly (that is to say, minding the ambiguity and even finding comfort in the unknown) can do for queer theory.

Literature Review

As the majority of this paper will concern analyzing the novels by Duras, Latouche, Stendhal, and Custine, including them in this section would be redundant. However, it is important to outline societal attitudes towards homosexuality and gender roles in the early nineteenth century to discuss how this project differs from what has already been said. Moreover, contextualizing the theoretical pieces concerning sexual identity will allow the argumentation to become clearer when attempting to analyze literature from the nineteenth century.

One of the defining characteristics of early nineteenth-century France is the highly militaristic culture that permeated art, literature, music, and public thought, as well as the backlash to this culture. As discussed by Martin in *Napoleonic Friendship* (2011), “As France prepared itself for another century of brutal warfare, the Napoleonic origins of modern military friendship may have been forgotten, but their effects remained embedded in the institutionalized notion that to serve one’s country was to live and die in the care of other men.”³ This assertion is important for several reasons. For one, it provides evidence of the patriarchal, militaristic culture of the time that came to define masculinity at the beginning of the nineteenth while also setting the stage for the so-called “new man” or *mal du siècle* masculinity that was embraced by Custine’s generation, particularly men of the upper classes, which found itself tied to art and music, particularly that of the Romantic movement, and eschewed the older, more traditional masculinity. Furthermore, this statement also confirms the homosocial nature of the era. Men and women, particularly in the public sphere, rarely associated, and mandatory

³ Martin. *Napoleonic Friendship*, pg. 3.

military conscription during the Napoleonic Wars exacerbated this. Faced with the suffering intrinsic to the military, soldiers formed intimate relationships from which they could derive comfort and affection, and in some cases, such relationships were actively encouraged. However, the extent to which they could be called gay relationships is debated; while many critics would assert that intercourse is necessary for such a designation, Foucault argues that the focus on sexuality over affection is troubling. He states, “I think that is what makes homosexuality so ‘troubling’: the homosexual way of life is more than the sexual act itself. To think of sexual acts that do not conform to law or nature, that is not what bothers people. But when individuals start to love one another, then there’s a problem.”⁴ Acknowledging this, Foucault broadens the conception of gay relationships as not necessarily sexual, but rather based on emotions inherent to one’s daily life and long-term intimacy. However, returning to Martin’s text, it is important to recognize that the ambiguous relationships and sexualities described here, gay or not, would be strictly in the context of the military and not always applicable to the general populace. While the information on what defined a normative and “new” masculinity is enlightening, it is necessary to branch out to provide a greater depth of contextual information. My project thus will build on Martin’s text by engaging with the dialogue between the older, more militaristic masculinities and newer, *mal du siècle* masculinities that embraced the Romantic movement and were more invested in art and literature.

An increasingly urbane population led to a proliferation of prostitution in large cities such as Paris, and male prostitution was certainly no exception. Revenin’s work, *Homosexualité et Prostitution Masculines à Paris* (2005), which details not only the geography and sociology of homosexuality in Paris, but also the repression aimed at these

⁴ Foucault. *History of Sexuality*, pg. 187.

individuals by presenting police archives, press articles, medical journals, and biographical texts. This is particularly important in the context of this paper due to a distinct lack of concise information about the topology of (homo)sexuality in Paris available in most of the other sources. Moreover, most of the other texts fail to discuss the myths that circulated the nineteenth century about nonheterosexuality, such as the belief that such behaviors were confined to the privileged classes. Unfortunately, aside from periodicals and newspapers, there is very little reference to popular literature of the nineteenth century, nor is there a discussion of how men who allegedly engaged in same-sex behaviors resisted the state's oppression, as in the case of Custine. Another text similarly shares this oversight.

Hahn's 2006 text, *Nos ancêtres, les pervers*, is divided into three main parts: after a lengthy introduction that contextualizes the rest of the work, the author segues into "The Gaze of the Policeman,"⁵ followed by "The Expert's Words,"⁶ and concluding with "Slices of Life."⁷ The foremost section discusses nonheterosexuality in relation to the law, while the second largely concerns the rise of medicine and medical discourse towards the end of the century, and the third provides more specific examples of texts that were written before and after medicine pathologized sexuality. By far the most useful section of this work is the foremost section; the second is, unfortunately for this project, focused on the final years of the nineteenth century, and while the third part provides interesting examples of literature produced during the Second Empire that evoke nonheterosexual themes, such as several of Zola's works. Custine is never mentioned in any of these sections, although this is understandable considering that Custine's life

⁵ Hahn. *Nos ancêtres*, pg. i. Original text: "Le regard du policier." Translation mine.

⁶ *Ibid.* *Nos ancêtres*, pg. i. Original text: "La parole est à l'expert." Translation mine.

⁷ *Ibid.* *Nos ancêtres*, pg. i. Original text: "Tranches de vie." Translation mine.

ended five years after the Second Empire began in 1852. This paper will extend Hanh's record of homosexuality in France during the first half of the nineteenth century by incorporating Custine into this genealogy. Furthermore, adding a critical lens to Hanh's text, one that scrutinizes possible interpretations of the popular literature of the nineteenth century based on minoritizing and universalizing discourses, adds an even greater amount of depth and nuance to Hanh's work.

An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society, written by Jennifer Terry in 1999, while perhaps one of the more easily understood texts, also has its own limitations. In the past two or three decades, historians of sexuality such as Jonathan Ned Katz and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg have produced texts about the modern phenomenon of homosexuality and its construction by medical discourse, but Terry's work is one of the few that meticulously scrutinizes the medical model as it appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. She begins with Europeans, such as Ulrichs, Hirschfeld, and Freud, who defined and pathologized (and, to a lesser extent, still define and pathologize) the vocabulary that surrounded homosexuality. She then discusses American contributors, including Kinsey, Bergler, and Mead. Although Terry's great restraint when analyzing the source material is admirable, there are two problems with her work in the context of this paper. Firstly, Terry spends a surprisingly little amount of time discussing other issues that the American and European middle classes were obsessed with, most notably venereal disease and prostitution, that oftentimes overlapped with the perceived societal ill of homosexuality. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Terry's analysis is a bit too contemporary and United States-centric for the bulk of this paper, as it tends to focus more on the latter half of the

nineteenth century in urbane centers of the United States, perspectives that compose the vast bulk of sexuality studies. Adding a French consciousness to sexuality studies will undoubtedly benefit the discipline.

Both of Custine's biographies, written in 1999 and 2001 by Anka Muhlstein, essentially provide the same information, offering a great deal of analysis about the events in Custine's life. The author clarifies the more important details of his life, particularly his relationship with Duras's daughter and the assault that took place in 1824. Including these texts are of paramount importance, even though Muhlstein does not include information that would be pertinent to this paper. Although she does provide a nuanced analysis of the major events in Custine's life from start to finish, Muhlstein fails to explain why these events occurred in the context of discourses of power in nineteenth-century France, instead taking a more observational standpoint. Again, the notion of anxiety towards men like Custine, whose masculinity and sexuality were unconventional, remains unanalyzed. Perhaps more problematic is her assertion that Custine was "a homosexual adventurer"⁸ imparting an identity upon him that didn't exist while presuming that Custine's relationship with Saint-Barbe was sexual and romantic, buying into notions of minoritizing and universalizing discourses that this work seeks to resist.

⁸ Muhlstein. *The Last French Aristocrat*, book jacket.

Nos ancêtres, les pervers: French Non-heterosexual Behavior in Context

Before the Penal Code was passed in 1791, non-heterosexuals in France largely lived a marginal existence. Sexual acts, at least in the minds of lawmakers and the general public, were not linked to one's identity; rather, they defined who one was and were thus intrinsically linked to one's morality. Mayer states, "Christian monotheism judges the deviant in relation to orthodoxy and only intentional marginality is possible to his eyes; those who are monsters by their actions and their thoughts are sinners."⁹ Put differently, sexual deviants were judged by how moral their actions were in the eyes of the government and the Catholic Church. Those who engaged in sexual acts that were not condoned by priests were branded as "monsters" or "sinners" because of their actions, thereby defining themselves through their sexual desires. Self-identification during this time was inconceivable, largely due to the lack of vocabulary and incontestable nature of judgments by the Church and, to a lesser extent, those of the State.

However, despite these relatively virulent attempts at repressing non-heterosexual behavior before the nineteenth century, one must remember the legality of same-sex relations during this time, although the extent to which this changed the broader public's minds about nonheterosexual desire is negligible. In 1791, the Committee on Criminal Legislation submitted two penal codes to the Constituent Assembly. The first, which contained laws on municipal and correctional policing, defined the police as maintainers of public order and decency. Concerning sex and sexuality, this particular document contained articles against the public violation of morality, including offenses against the

⁹ Mayer. *Les marginaux*, pg. 16. Original text: "*Le monothéisme chrétien juge le déviant par rapport à l'orthodoxie et seule la marginalité intentionnelle est envisageable à ses yeux : ceux qui sont monstres par leurs actes et leurs pensées sont des pécheurs.*" Translation mine.

decency of women, attempts to debauch or corrupt young people of either sex, the selling or displaying of obscene images, and other “dishonest acts.”¹⁰ Those who were found guilty of any infraction were fined fifty to 500 livres and given a prison term of six months, although anyone convicted of attempting to corrupt young people received at least a one-year prison sentence and repeat offenders had their penalties doubled.¹¹ The second code, known as the Penal Code, concerned felonies, such as castration, rape, and the procurement of underage girls for prostitution and prescribed harsh punishments for committing such crimes.¹² What is the most remarkable about both documents is the silence surrounding the regulation of sexual activities between consenting adults in private. Neither mentioned criminalizing same-sex relations in private.

Just before the dawn of the nineteenth century, the label of sodomite had largely been replaced with pederast, denoting anyone who engaged in non-procreative sexual acts but largely referring to those committed by two men. The term additionally changed from describing a relationship between an adult man and an adolescent boy to one describing any sexual relationship between any two men.¹³ During this time, despite repression from French government (and, to much lesser extent, the Catholic Church), a budding non-heterosexual subculture was present in larger cities.¹⁴ This proliferation of non-heterosexual behavior was most visible in Paris, particularly with regards to prostitution, perhaps as a response to the decriminalization of same-sex acts. Based on police reports, however, one could easily ascertain where men would meet one another

¹⁰ Peniston, *Pederasts*, pg. 15.

¹¹ *Ibid*, *Pederasts*, pg. 16.

¹² *Ibid*, *Pederasts*, pg. 16.

¹³ *Ibid*. *Vocabulaire*, pp. 191-98.

¹⁴ One must note that the Church lost a great deal of influence after the French Revolution, when property of the Church was seized and the clergy became employees of the state in an arm of the state that was subordinate to the secular French government.

for sexual relations. For example, a particular report from the early nineteenth century that describes one incident reads:

...the arrest of three individuals who roamed separately at the Tuileries Gardens without a doubt with the intention to have sexual meetings, one can identify a journeyman tailor and a soldier of 23 and another of 21.¹⁵

Similar reports can be found for several other public areas in Paris, mainly parks such as the Luxembourg Gardens, the gardens of the Palais Royale, and the pre-Haussmanian Champs-Élysées. Other popular locations for men to meet other men for sexual encounters included the quays of the Seine, the Saint-Germain market, various cabarets, and the boulevards from Saint-Antoine to Saint-Denis. The existence of networks of non-heterosexuals was also a novelty that appeared at the turn of the century, propagated by pamphlets and salon culture based solely on sexual preference. One example of the former, *Les enfants de Sodome à l'Assemblée*, first published in 1790 but lasting for several years after, makes explicit references and the group's relationship to non-heterosexuality:

...the famous Order of the Cuff [a euphemistic manner of referring to non-heterosexual men collectively] has remained to this day inactive but however assembles itself from time to time in the Tuileries Garden, in the gardens of the Palais Royal, in the cloister of the Carthusians, and at the Vinnet Abby...¹⁶

¹⁵ Archives de la Bastille, Ms 10258. Original text: "...l'arrestation de trois particuliers qui rôdaient séparément au jardin des Tuileries sans doute dans le but de faire des rencontres on peut identifier un garçon tailleur et un soldat de 23 ans et un autre de 21 ans." Translation mine.

¹⁶ Cardon. *Les enfants de Sodome*, pg. 3. Original text: "...l'ordre fameux de la manchette était resté jusqu'à ce jour dans l'inaction, et cependant s'assemblait de temps à autres, aux Tuileries, dans l'allée des soupirs, dans le cloître des Chartreux, et chez l'abbé Vinnet..." Translation mine.

While networks of non-heterosexual men such as *Les enfants de Sodome* were useful in creating a sense of community and solidarity for men who sought relationships with other men, they were also helpful for the police. Non-heterosexuals who were arrested were often offered a lighter sentence if they turned in a certain number of their acquaintances; the police would then attempt to “prove” that the accused was also non-heterosexual.¹⁷ Despite the legality of same-sex relation in private at the end of the eighteenth century, the public sphere was still under constant surveillance by the state. Police officers would typically watch public areas of the city where they arrested men whom they had caught in the midst of sexual acts, also following men who they suspected of unusual activities. It was also not uncommon for detectives to entrap men in public urinals or other locations well-known for non-heterosexual behavior, particularly as the nineteenth century loomed ahead.¹⁸

From 1800 onwards, pleasure in French society was largely founded on moderation, control of one’s sexuality, and a repression of the body and nudity. Industrialization contributed to developments in familial structure. Family represented the locus of governmental control over one’s bodily subjectivity, particularly in the form of monogamous, heterosexual marriage, and this is particularly evident with the numerous legal initiatives that were passed. With the Bourbon Restoration of 1814, there came several legal and social changes that attempted to preserve traditional family structures, such as the ban on divorce in 1816 and increased persecution of prostitutes and non-heterosexuals by the police force, once again despite the legality of such relationships in

¹⁷ Pastorello. *Sodome à Paris*, pg. 212.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* *Sodome à Paris*, pg. 213.

the private sphere.¹⁹ Yet the repression of same-sex behavior that permeated French society cannot only be traced back to the law; indeed, many other discursive agents of nineteenth-century France, such as governmental and religious agents, as well as medical agents towards the end of the century, were also obsessed with regulating same-sex desire, although some of these institutions were consequently attacked for promoting same-sex behavior.

Although they had once virulently denounced same-sex behaviors and continued to do so in the 1800s, from the turn of the century until the Bourbon Restoration, the aristocracy and the Catholic Church were criticized for and, in turn, criticized perceived leniency towards individuals who engaged in same-sex behavior. Pamphlets that were published by individuals and private companies before the rise of medicine, such as *Le Magazine littéraire*, propagated the notion that non-heterosexual behaviors were an unnatural paragon of hedonism and selfishness, as well as a glaring sign of mental and societal disorder intrinsically tied to class structure. Same-sex desire was, popularly-imagined, a mark of the upper class's decadence and moral degeneration, a product of the middle class's weakness of will, and a manifestation of the inherent barbarism of the poor, as well as a product of the clergy's structure, wherein a group of unmarried men would live together for years at a time.²⁰ Several other pamphlets that made explicit reference to non-heterosexuality in the Catholic Church followed, such as *Étrennes aux fouteurs ou le calendrier des trois sexes*, which discussed sodomy among priests,

¹⁹ *Ibid. Sodome à Paris*, pp. 104-05.

²⁰ *Ibid. Sodome à Paris*, pg. 106

accusing the clergy of indulging in and prompting excessive and unproductive pleasures.²¹

Regardless, in private, same-sex relations were still technically legal, even after the revision of the Civil Code in 1810 by Napoleon's team of legal advisors. The reasoning for this lack of concern for private relations between adults of any sex has never been clearly established, but there are some possible explanations. For one, that Napoleon did not reintroduce a policy of repression may be symptomatic that for him, the problem didn't exist. Whereas he had harsh and definite opinions on the need to control women, he seemed indifferent towards regulating men's morals, as evidenced by his choice in legal experts. Many members of Napoleon's inner circle were notorious for seeking male partners near the Palais Royale, the most noteworthy of which was Jean-Jacques Régis de Cambacérès, head of Napoleon's team of lawyers.²² In any case, although Napoleon's legal advisors retained articles related to rape and sexual assault, public offenses against decency, the incitement of youths to debauchery, and adultery and bigamy in the 1810 revision, neither document specifically mentioned sodomy, pederasty, or acts against nature, although they all applied to sexual crimes between men and women, as well as sexual crimes between men and men and women and women.²³ However, some articles, particularly those related to inciting youth, were specifically aimed at men who had sex with men, especially if seeking a partner or the physical act of sex itself took place in public. Perhaps the most obvious examples are the frequent raids that occurred in the Palais Royal throughout the mid- to late 1800s, as well as the

²¹ One must note that concerning the clergy, many scholars, including René Rémond, have interpreted this attack on Catholic morality not only as a matter of anti-homosexual discourse, but rather as a transition towards secularization in the post-Revolution French state. *Ibid. Sodome à Paris*, pg. 107.

²² *Ibid. Sodome à Paris*, pg. 107

²³ *Revenin, Homosexualité*, pg 62.

numerous crackdowns that occurred during the Second Empire that resulted in over 6,000 arrests.²⁴ However, it is important to note that during the 1870s, morality laws were used almost exclusively against non-heterosexual men.²⁵ The reasoning for this, however, is likely intrinsically intertwined with changing gender roles and representation.

The increased persecution of men who engaged in same-sex behaviors during this time can reflect the anxiety towards new models of masculinity in French society. The periods before the 1820s, the First French Republic (1792-1804) and the First French Empire (1804-1814), marked a period of intense militarization. Arguably the most noteworthy event in French military history during this time was a subsequent series of wars known collectively as the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), which worked to extend French influence over much of Western Europe and into Poland. These wars, while proving to be initially successful for France, would eventually end in disaster after the Austrian Empire was defeated and Napoleon ordered his soldiers to attack Russia. After Napoleon abdicated, though, and the Restoration occurred, the so-called “new man,” who was disillusioned with his father’s more hegemonic, militaristic masculinity and instead readily embraced art and music, particularly that of the growing Romantic movement, came into being. This new masculinity was undoubtedly linked to class, as young men of lower classes likely did not have the social and economic capital, as well as the leisure time, to devote to appreciating bourgeois culture. In the post-Revolution society, the aristocracy was already under scrutiny for their perceived excesses, and new forms of masculinity likely exacerbated the anxiety of the older generation, who worried that their sons may become too effeminate to live up to the social obligations that were a part of the

²⁴ *Ibid. Homosexualité*, pg 62.

²⁵ *Ibid. Pederasts* pp. 31-2.

old traditional, militaristic patriarchal masculinity, most notable those that revolved around marriage and child-rearing. Regardless, as the century progressed, same-sex behaviors continued to transpire and be regulated, particularly in the public sphere.

Beginning in the late 1830s and early 1840s, same-sex desire faced another form of regulation, that of the rapidly-growing medical community. As medicine grew in status, doctors sought to usurp the role of healers from priests. The non-heterosexual subject was implicated in this as a perfect specimen of neurosis and perhaps hysteria. A law passed in 1838 made asylums mandatory in almost every department, and this provided psychiatrists with ample test subjects.²⁶ Drs. Charcot and Magnan, perhaps the most well-known and respected doctors and theorists of male same-sex attraction of their time, used this to their advantage. What would become their most well-known case study was described as thus:

He was a man of a somewhat martial bearing, a little stiff in his stance, with no trace of effeminacy. It was almost certainly by way of riposte to the legal doctors, with their obsession with signs, that they emphasized his absolutely normal, genital, anatomy. The patient experienced an obsessional need to see naked men, especially the penis; given the sensitivity of their subject matter, the doctors may have deliberately chosen to write about a man whose perverse sexual predilections had in fact stopped short of any sexual fulfillment. It was also, however, essential for their professional self-respect to prove that they worked for a cure: the man had responded to their treatment to the extent of sleeping with women, and had found gratification in doing so...²⁷

Based on this case study alone, one can assume that the psychiatrists were firm advocates of heredity over environmental factors, despite their claims of a cure. Both researchers in the previous case study, Magnan in particular, were convinced that non-heterosexual

²⁶ Copley. *Sexual Moralities*, pg. 138.

²⁷ *Ibid.* *Sexual Moralities*, pg. 139.

desire was the result of both psychological impulses in the brain that were triggered by some external factor. Several years later, when communicating with the *Académie de médecine*, Magnan claimed that non-heterosexual tendencies were biologically innate and could be displayed as early as five, a reply to those who saw non-heterosexual habits as formed socially and acquired in school or some other formative agency, stating, “The beginning originates in the brain; it is in some way the brain of a woman in the body of a man and the brain of a man in the body of a woman.”²⁸ Although medicine had posited the revolutionary notion that sexual desire was inherent, the role of sexual inversion (that is to say, an inborn reversal of gender traits; male inverts were, for example, inclined to traditionally female pursuits and dress and vice versa) in non-heterosexual desire was firmly embraced by medical professionals. The shift from nurture to nature or social to biological was in full swing as doctors began to replace old theories about sexual desire. But French psychiatrists were by no means oblivious to the legal implications of such claims. Their insights would compel courts to no longer hold non-heterosexuals responsible for acting on their desire, as according to them, this desire was inherent, the subjects powerless to repress it. Yet if there was non-culpability in the eyes of the law, doctors still spoke of a cure. While non-heterosexuals were delivered from the company of prostitutes, thieves, murderers, and other social outcasts in the asylums, they were also the first in line at the psychiatrist’s office, particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Daily vocabulary surrounding nonheterosexuality was also changing during this time. Thanks to medical discourse, “*pédéraste*” was gradually phased out as new terms were invented, including “*antiphysique* [antiphysical],” “*similisexualisme*

²⁸ Magnan. *Des anomalies*, pg. 18.

[similisexualism]” or “*similisexuel* [similisexual],” “*troisième sexe* [third sex],” and “*unisexualité* [unisexuality]” or “*unisexuel* [unisexual].”²⁹ Although the term “homosexual” was invented in 1869 by the Austrian journalist Karl-Maria Benkert (who also was one of the first to posit the notions that men did not commit sodomy out of moral degeneration, as well as the argument that homosexual men were not inherently effeminate and that many of the great heroes of history were homosexual), it did not appear in French until the 1890s.³⁰ Along with the identity marker of “homosexual,” though, one would quite understandably assume that the homosexual, the individual who took on the identity would follow suit. However, there are individuals who lived before the 1890s that one could possibly assign the identity marker of “proto-homosexual” to, despite contemporary historians’ inclination to attach “homosexual” to these individuals.

²⁹ *Ibid. Vocabulaire*, pg. 129.

³⁰ *Ibid. Vocabulaire*, pp. 129-30.

The Marquise de Custine as the Proto-homosexual

Born in Lorraine in 1790, Custine was raised by his mother after his father and grandfather, renowned porcelain workers, were guillotined during the French Revolution. Custine's mother barely escaped the same fate, and although she was said to have retained close social relationships within the French aristocracy, she and her son were left in comparative poverty, with only 30,000 francs to their name.³¹ After the Restoration, the Custine fortune was rebuilt, and Astolphe, said to have been gentle, shy, and excessively well-mannered, soon found himself confronted with the prospect of marriage.

Of all the possible brides, Custine seemed to prefer Clara de Duras, his cousin and the daughter of the duchess, salonnière, and novelist Claire de Duras, although their engagement was broken off in 1818.³² On the night before their marriage contract was to be signed, Custine withdrew and failed to explain himself eloquently. He stated that although he had seen Clara two or three times a day for four months, he knew that the Duras's financial position was not what it once was, as well as that Madame de Duras likely wanted to keep her daughter by her side, while the young Marquis felt obligated to remain close to his mother.³³ None of his excuses provided any significant clarification. Madame de Duras was said to have been furious and never forgave him for rejecting the honor of becoming her son-in-law, and rumors about Custine quickly began to spread; Edouard de la Grange wrote, "Courchamps tells me that M. Duras won't give his daughter to M. Custine because he told him he was impotent."³⁴ There were also several

³¹ *Ibid. A Taste for Freedom*, pg. 166.

³² *Ibid. A Taste for Freedom*, pg. 167.

³³ *Ibid. A Taste for Freedom*, pg. 167.

³⁴ *Ibid. A Taste for Freedom*, pp. 167-68.

whispers of Custine preferring men, and the four novels that were published during this time did nothing to mitigate the gossip and instead complicated the situation. Custine's mother was determined to quash these rumors and found the ideal bride, Léotine de Saint-Simon de Courtomer, an extraordinarily wealthy Norman noblewoman. The marriage between Custine and de Courtomer took place in May 1821.³⁵ The gossip would eventually subside, at least briefly, after the announcement of Léotine's pregnancy.

Shortly after discovering that his wife was pregnant, Custine began a friendship with an Englishman, Edward Saint-Barbe, with whom he would eventually have an unusually close relationship. The two would travel to England shortly as soon as Custine's wife gave birth to a son. On the whole, Custine was disgusted by the Industrial Revolution in England and disapproved of the rampant materialism; perhaps even more so, he found the country terribly conservative, especially with regards to its persecution of same-sex behavior.³⁶ Upon returning to Paris in the winter of 1823, tragedy struck. Léotine had fallen ill with pneumonia, and nothing seemed to help her condition. She eventually died early in the following year. After a brief period of mourning, Custine's mother decided it would be appropriate for her son to remarry. By this time, Custine was also allegedly known as a devoted husband and father, charming many would-be brides.³⁷ Yet Custine did not seem satisfied with this, nor with his relationship with Saint-Barbe.

In October 1824, Custine's unconscious body was found outside of Paris, stripped to the waist, beaten, and robbed. According to newspapers and now-destroyed court documents, the Marquis had wanted to see the chapel in nearby Saint-Denis. He sent his carriage away despite the rain and, after walking a short distance, was attacked by a

³⁵ *Ibid. A Taste for Freedom*, pg. 176.

³⁶ *Ibid. A Taste for Freedom*, pg. 182.

³⁷ *Ibid. A Taste for Freedom*, pg. 186.

group of hooligans and left for dead on the roadside. He brought himself back home and reluctantly filed a complaint.³⁸ A few days later, some non-commissioned guards of the Saint-Denis cavalry regiment presented themselves to the magistrate. In their statement, they stated that Custine had attempted to initiate a sexual encounter with one of their colleagues; consequently, the men had given him the punishment that they believed him to deserve, either referring to a sexual or economic matter, not taking his perceived predilections or high social standing lightly in the post-Revolution society.³⁹ Custine ultimately dropped the complaint.

The matter was not taken lightly by members of the French upper-class, particularly by women, who felt themselves betrayed by Custine. Madame de Montcalm charitably advised Custine to get himself killed in the army; the countess de Saint-Aulaire congratulated herself that the marriage she had suggested did not take place; Madame Swetchine was surprised by the way that Custine had endured the shame that was heaped upon him and was even more struck by his lack of apology.⁴⁰ However, Custine was not completely ostracized, as many of his closest confidantes and family members continued to stick by him, at least until his mother's and son's sudden deaths in 1826.⁴¹

Thanks to the inheritances from his mother and wife, Custine was left with enormous wealth, allowing him to organize his life as he saw fit. He continued to live "as if married" to Saint-Barbe, and the two attended literary salons with some frequency.⁴² Although Saint-Barbe was from a similarly privileged background (one of his father's ancestors was allegedly a companion of William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings,

³⁸ *Ibid. A Taste for Freedom*, pg. 188.

³⁹ *Ibid. A Taste for Freedom*, pg. 188.

⁴⁰ *Ibid. A Taste for Freedom*, pg. 189.

⁴¹ *Ibid. A Taste for Freedom*, pg. 190.

⁴² Rousseau. "Made from the Stuff," pg. 1.

and his father was Justice of Peace in the county of Hampshire), the rumored nature of his relationship with Custine, as well as some of his mannerisms, caused a bit of discomfort.⁴³ The casualness of how Custine's discussed his conjugal relationship with Saint-Barbe is quite representative of its times; the Restoration had very little desire to repeat the violent repression of the Ancient Regime, and one man's physical closeness to another had yet to be pathologized, especially when it was kept in the private sphere.⁴⁴ Although police hounded men who sought partners in public, those who merely lived together did not challenge the social order as radically. Indeed, many men cohabited with other men, either sexually or platonically, the most well-known of which being Joseph Févée and Théodore Leclercq, both of whom openly discussed their sexual relationship.⁴⁵

After Custine completed his travel writings in Russia during the late 1830s, he and Saint-Barbe settled into a routine, visiting Spain and Italy occasionally but mostly keeping their social lives active in Paris. On 28 September 1857, Custine died of a stroke. In his will, he left all of his property and a sizable fortune to Saint-Barbe to ensure that he would be taken care of, although one of Custine's aunts, the Marquise de Dreux-Brézé, attempted to sue Saint-Barbe for "improperly soliciting a legacy with perseverance and by the most despicable means."⁴⁶ However, Custine's wishes were clear, and when the Marquise appealed, Saint-Barbe died shortly thereafter. Unfortunately, Custine left all of his papers, letters, and drafts with his family, causing many documents to be lost.

⁴³ *Ibid. A Taste for Freedom*, pg. 194.

⁴⁴ *Ibid. A Taste for Freedom*, pp. 209-10.

⁴⁵ *Ibid. A Taste for Freedom*, pg. 211.

⁴⁶ *Ibid. A Taste for Freedom*, pg. 378.

Discourses of Sexuality

When analyzing the life of Custine and the novels that his relationship with Clara de Duras inspired, it is difficult to assign him a queer identity, despite contemporary readers' inclination to do so. Imposing queer upon him when there is ambiguity present seems wildly presumptuous, and this is not taking into account the nonexistence of queer identity during this time. Eve Sedgwick, author of 1990's groundbreaking *Epistemology of the Closet*, combines feminist and queer methodologies to argue for the absolute centrality of sexuality to understanding modern culture. Sedgwick asserts that the homo-hetero distinction at the heart of modern sexual definition is fundamentally incoherent for two reasons:

...is organized around a radical and irreducible incoherence. It holds the minoritizing view that there is a distinct population of persons who 'really are' gay; at the same time, it holds the universalizing views that sexual desire is an unpredictably powerful solvent of stable identities; that apparently heterosexual persons and object choices are strongly marked by same-sex influences and desires, and vice versa for apparently homosexual ones; and that at least male heterosexual identity and modern masculinist culture may require for their maintenance the scapegoating crystallization of a same-sex male desire that is widespread and in the first place internal.⁴⁷

There is the persistent contradiction inherent to representations of homosexuality as the property of a distinct minority population (Sedgwick refers to this as "a minoritizing view") and a sexual desire that potentially marks everyone, including ostensibly heterosexual subjects (Sedgwick refers to this as "a universalizing view"). Yet there is also an abiding contradiction in thinking about the gendering of homosexual desire in

⁴⁷ Sedgwick. *Epistemology of the Closet*, pg. 85.

both transitive and separatist terms, where a transitive understanding locates that desire as originating in some threshold space between gender categories while a separatist understanding takes it as the purest expression of either masculinity or femininity. The former is more pertinent to this paper, and it is within this contradiction that my analysis takes shape.

Whether one subscribes to minoritizing and universalizing discourses when analyzing literature, (homo)sexuality is historicized and discussed in academic and popular literature as if it were one unbroken, ahistorical identity. Queerness, according to the notion of universalizing discourses, is a possibility that has always resided in everyone, including ostensibly heterosexual subjects. Minoritizing discourses, however, posit that homosexuality, the property of a distinct minority population, has always existed at the margins of society, and it is merely a matter for historians to point out these instances. Conceptualizing of homosexuality in such terms is limiting for several reasons.

The categories of minoritizing and universalizing discourses, particularly in the context of literature are problematic for two reasons in the context of my project. For one, such discourses do not account for contextual factors. As previously discussed, the identity marker of “homosexual” is a fairly recent phenomenon, and taking on this identity in, for example, 1900 would have a completely different signification than if one were to do so in 2013. Moreover, as minoritizing and universalizing discourses presume a strict binary between homosexual and heterosexual, those whose identities are ambiguous, as is frequently the case with notable historical figures, speculation runs rampant and identities are imposed upon these individuals based on speculation. A new

way of reading texts through a lens of sexuality is thus imperative to develop, one that resists binaries of sexual identification.

A queer reading of the Custine novels is necessary to resist the epistemology of the closet, one that ultimately respects (and perhaps even finds comfort in) the ambiguity of Custine's life and personal affairs. I utilize queer theory alongside this reading, as queer theory is not defined by a tendency to retroactively assign a nonheterosexual identity to subjects based on assumptions but rather serves as a framework for reading a text.

When reading each of the Olivier novels, epistemologies of sexuality allow the underlying reason, the protagonist's closeted homosexuality, to seem like a plausible response to the phenomena for which early nineteenth-century French society has yet to account. Whereas many literary interpretations have jumped directly to homosexuality as the protagonist's secret, I intend to demonstrate the erroneous nature of such assumptions that are founded on minoritizing and universalizing discourses of sexuality. There is far too much ambiguity in the texts to provide a homosexual explanation, and instead of assigning an identity to each protagonist based on superficial clues, comfort and acceptance in the face of this ambiguity would serve as a way to disrupt the homo/heterosexual binary inherent to the aforementioned discourses.

Pre-queer Readings: *Olivier*, the Other *Olivier*, *Armance*, and *Aloys*

Beginning with Duras's *Olivier*, the series of four novels appears to mirror the real-life involvement of Duras's daughter with Custine. In 1818, Custine inexplicably broke off their engagement, and by 1822, the Duchess Duras was musing about his reasoning aloud in her salon. The story was published the following year in 1823, although the underlying, albeit ambiguous, connotations were picked up on by Latouche, who published his own version of *Olivier* in 1826 and was found guilty of literary fraud for doing so. One year later, Stendhal published *Armance*, the most popular rehash of the tale, and by 1829, Custine's own version, *Aloys*, appeared. Each of the texts has more or less the same basic plot that follows the relationship between a wealthy gentleman and his fiancée which invariably fails due to a secret that young man goes to great lengths to keep from his lover, perhaps implied to be either impotence or homosexuality. At the end of each novel, the young man either dies or withdraws from public life.

It would not be unreasonable to assert that in many, if not all, of these novels, that the protagonist's "real" secret (relative to biographical narratives of Custine's life) behind these fictions is related to the secret of Custine's same-sex object choice, particularly considering the close nature of his relationship to Saint-Barbe.⁴⁸ But while evidence for Custine's nonheterosexual behavior seems compelling, it remains unclear if any evidence exists, as reading an author's work that is not explicitly autobiographical as directly related to the events in his life is an incredibly subjective and dangerous practice. As many readers, both heterosexual and nonheterosexual alike, would be inclined to assign Custine the marker of gay, this is incredibly problematic not only due to the lack of

⁴⁸ Custine. *Aloys*, pp. vii-xxii.

confession in Custine's voluminous paper trail, but also because of the history surrounding gay identity. It is difficult to give Custine a homosexual identity when even the word did not exist until three or four decades after Custine's death, and the pressure of minoritizing and universalizing discourses do little to accept or ignore the uncomfortable ambiguity surrounding his potential queer identity or sexual dysfunctions. However, despite each protagonist's secret remaining closeted after intense scrutiny, a queer reading will permit comfort in the unknown.

In all of the narratives, the omission of the actual nature of the secrets themselves causes the other characters, as well as the reader, to violently probe and scrutinize the protagonist's identity, efforts that are wasted at the moment of climax, where the secret is still unknown. Readings of the texts, either from the nineteenth or twenty-first century, further construct a closet, a hiding place, from which to out the protagonist, despite the limitations of minoritizing and universalizing discourses. I will conduct the analysis of the Olivier narratives chronologically, beginning with the original text by Duras. Then I will discuss the text by Latouche, moving on to Stendhal's *Armance*, finishing the chapter with Custine's *Aloys*. Doing so will provide a clearer view of how each story changed based on the author.

Olivier : ou, (The Young Man Who Represents) le Secret (1822)

In Duras's narrative, the primary motivation for reading is established right in the title: the audience is immediately curious to know what possible secret could be contained in the narrative, and their curiosity is exacerbated by the actions of the other characters in the narrative. The protagonist's fiancée and her sister are at first curious at the enigma that is the eponymous Olivier, then desperate to use their energy in an attempt to decode him, failing to produce any meaning or reach a definitive conclusion.

The novel begins with Louise, the Comtesse de Nangis contemplating the reasons why her recent widowing has not aroused interest in her stoic cousin, Olivier. After an extended epistolary correspondence with him and her sister, the Comtesse begins a relationship with Olivier but sees it fall apart almost instantly. Olivier's secret originally arouses compassion and curiosity in the Comtesse, but towards the end of the narrative, it makes her physically ill. The last scene shows Olivier shooting himself with no explanation and dying in Louise's arms.

Early on in the narrative, Olivier's depression inspires curiosity within the sisters, although the reasoning for why he feels this way is never elaborated upon. In the earliest mention, the third letter in the book, from Louise to Adele, the former recounts a story involving an exchange with a close friend, Lord Exeter:

Lord Exeter said to me: "Whatever can be the cause of Olivier's melancholy? There are some topics that you cannot touch upon with him; he becomes sensitive; as soon as you approach, he retreats." "I do not know about his grief," I

answered. “On the contrary, nobody possesses so many means of happiness.”
 “And that is why he can’t taste it!” said Lord Exeter...⁴⁹

Having established Olivier as a veritable enigma, the Comtesse attempts to decipher the mystery that she has created. Although she considers that her own standoffishness has caused Olivier’s melancholy, she ultimately deduces in Letter IV that love is the reason for his unhappiness. Interestingly, this letter precedes a brief discussion of Olivier’s refusal to court her and follows a brief discussion of proper gender roles with regards to marriage; this, along with the Comtesse’s sympathy towards Olivier, highlights her desire to figure him out.

In addition to love, Duras also evokes the notion of physical illnesses or maladies when discussing the nature of Olivier’s secret. Letter XII from Olivier, the Count of Sancerre, to Adele closes on a rather ambiguous, pessimistic note, reading:

You said to me, “But that does not appear in the world. You have a cheerful mind, you take part in conversation, you seem interested in what happens, yet you paint only despair.” My cousin, it is a disease of the soul like those of the body, those that kill you most certainly are those that you carry with you into the living room. There are chronic despairs, if we dare say, that resemble such evils like this: they gnaw, they eat, they kill, but they do not remain confined to bed.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Duras. *Olivier ; ou, le secret*, pg. 130. Original text: “Lord Exeter me dit : « *Quelle peut être la cause de la mélancolie d’Olivier ? Il y a de certains sujets auxquels on ne peut toucher avec lui ; il ressemble à la sensitive : dès qu’on approche, il se retire. — Je ne lui connais aucun sujet de chagrin, répondis-je, personne au contraire ne possède tant de moyens de bonheur. —Et voilà, reprit Lord Exeter, pourquoi il ne peut le goûter ! ...*” Translation mine.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* *Olivier ; ou le secret*, pp. 146-47. Original text: “*Vous me direz : « Mais tout cela ne paraît point dans le monde. Vous avez de la gaieté dans l’esprit, vous prenez part à la conversation, vous avez l’air de vous intéresser à ce qui se passe, et ce que vous venez de peindre est le désespoir. » Ma cousine, il en est des maladies de l’âme comme de celles du corps : celles qui vous tuent le plus sûrement sont celles que vous portez avec vous dans le salon : il y a des désespoirs chroniques, si on osait le dire, qui ressemblent aux maux qu’on appelle ainsi : ils rongent, ils dévorent, ils tuent, mais ils n’alitent pas.*” Translation mine.

It is interesting that the Comtesse evokes the body when attempting to decipher the reason for Olivier's melancholy, particularly considering the integrality of the body to one's sexual desires. At several points in the narrative, Louise and her sister try to interpret Olivier's facial expressions while around them, a practice that seems not only forced, but also inconsistent and invasive. In Letter IX, for example, Louise attempts to interpret Olivier's reaction to a rival suitor, reminding her sister how expressive his face is, and then proceeds to muse on the slightest details of his features. Even though the sisters have created a mystery and are unable to decode him, Olivier's facial expressions have a significant degree of importance placed upon them, and this comes up later in the narrative, exacerbating the mystery and ambiguity that surrounds Olivier's character.

Later on, in Letter XX, Olivier's brooding once again drives the Comtesse to examine his expression. In particular, she remarks how his unwillingness or inability to be read places distance between him and her. Even so, she manages to imbue meaning into his expressions. Although Olivier's "disease" is seemingly caused by biological factors, notions of naturalness are also discussed, interestingly enough. Letter XLIII to Louise from a member of her inner circle recounts his stay in Rouville with Olivier.

Louise's companion states:

When I arrived in Rouville, I found everyone concerned in the castle, not that the Count was worse precisely, because he was up and dressed, but he did not eat anything all day, he was locked in his office and Thibaud told me that when he entered without being called, the Count treated him very harshly. "This behavior is not natural for him," said Thibaud. "He is very sick, I've never seen him like this."⁵¹

⁵¹ *Ibid. Olivier ; ou le secret*, pg. 198. Original text: "*Quand j'arrivai à Rouville, je trouvai tout le monde inquiet dans le château, non pas que M. le Comte fût précisément plus mal, puisqu'il était levé et habillé, mais il n'avait rien voulu prendre de toute la journée, il était enfermé dans son cabinet et Thibaud me dit*

By stressing the unnaturalness of Olivier's secret, the nature of it creates further anxiety in the reader. It is clear that Olivier's secret is biological and attached to "unnatural" behaviors, yet even at the end of the narrative, the reader is still oblivious as to what Olivier's secret actually is and whether or not it is linked to his motivations for committing suicide.

Attaching a mysterious quality to a particular character, the eponymous Olivier, in Duras's work creates a puzzle that incites the reader to solve. The detective work participated in by the sisters was only undertaken after assigning the title of "mystery" to their man, (re)producing a trope that would become useful, albeit problematic, in assigning sexual identity. Olivier's disinclination to become involved with woman, as well as the medicalized, body-focused nature of his secret, would likely lead to notions of minoritizing or universalizing discourses to label him as homosexual. Due to the unknown nature of his secret, though, as well as the lack of a homosexual identity, it seems rather presumptuous to assign such an identity to Olivier. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this anxiety also manifests itself quite clearly in the next Custine narrative, Latouche's *Olivier*.

qu'étant entré sans être appelé, M. le Comte l'avait traité fort durement. « Cela ne lui est pas naturel, me dit Thibaud, il est sûrement malade, je ne l'ai jamais vu comme cela. » Translation mine.

Latouche's *Olivier*: Implicating the Reader (1825)

As with Duras, the protagonist of Latouche's novel experiences an internal crisis early on in the novel. In this version of *Olivier*, unlike that of Duras, the reader is more directly implicated in the suspicion surrounding the protagonist's sexuality. The text itself, and more importantly, the reader's reactions to it, reflects an active preoccupation with interrogating a secret that will never be revealed. Consequently, this anxiety is actively produced and reproduced by the text.

Olivier, like the *Olivier* of Duras, has his secret established early in the narrative. Almost immediately, it is stated that he possesses qualities that "...are incompatible with a good heart and an honest soul."⁵² *Olivier*, in perhaps one of the longest descriptions of his character, states that he believes his faults to be incompatible with morality, although he does not reveal what this problem is, creating anxiety within the reader. Suspicion about his personal life is further compounded by his secrecy about any romantic affairs, as pointed out by his best friend, César. The narrator remarks, "Confidence was full and reciprocal between the two friends... except on one point, the subject of their loves. ...*Olivier*, in this matter, was reserved and excessively mysterious."⁵³ While *Olivier* refuses to discuss the subject of his romantic relationships with even those closest to him, he does frequently reference and take a great interest in Antiquity, even making a remark about pederasty at one point in the novel.

⁵² Latouche. *Olivier*, pg. 19. Original text: "...sont point incompatibles avec un bon cœur et une âme honnête." Translation mine.

⁵³ *Ibid.* *Olivier*, pg. 20. Original text: "La confiance était entière et réciproque entre les deux amis... excepté sur un point, sur le chapitre de leurs amours. ...*Olivier* au contraire était en cela d'une grande réserve et mystérieux à l'excès." Translation mine.

However, after César proposes to a fellow aristocrat, Olivier's antagonism towards women, love, and marriage intensifies, which the reader could easily associate with his unknown secret. César initiates a dialogue with Olivier about love, "[César:] 'What good deeds love has produced?' [Olivier:] 'What crime has it not brought forth?' [César:] 'It elevates the soul.' [Olivier:] 'It lowers reason.' [César:] 'It exalts the mind.' [Olivier:] 'It withers the heart. It devours.'"⁵⁴ Olivier's disdain for love and, by extension, relationships with women are referred to as a violent sort of interaction, particularly interesting considering his friend's romanticization of love and intense desire to marry. In this dialogue, the disparate natures of the two characters are exemplified. On one hand, we have César, who feels an obligation to his family and, more broadly, French society, to marry and uphold traditional models of masculinity. On the other, Olivier represents the "new man" and the perceived failures of younger men during the nineteenth century; jaded, Olivier refuses the masculine obligation to ask for a woman's hand in marriage. Instead of accepting César's wishes to get married, for some reason, Olivier attempts to break off his friend's engagement.

Olivier attempts to dissuade him from marrying Madame de B. in an incredibly intimate scene that seems rather out-of-place directly after his tirade denouncing affection, comfort, and intimacy. Taking César's hand with "*une affection tendre* [a tender affection]," he tries to explain his reasoning for intervening:

"You're leaving me, my friend, you're fleeing when you need my advice more than ever. I left you in your isolation because I thought your passion for Madame de B. was a transient flame, which would vanish like so many other passions that

⁵⁴ *Ibid. Olivier*, pp. 25-6. Original text: "— *Que de belles actions n'a-t-il pas produites ? — Que de crimes n'a-t-il pas enfantés ? — Il élève l'âme. — Il abaisse la raison. — Il exalte l'esprit. — Il flétrit le cœur. Il dévore.*" Translation mine.

you have experienced, but the length of it, its distinctive character and some rumors of marriage that have spread, do not allow me to keep my silence, and I have come to ask you, César, what I must think of everything that has happened.”⁵⁵

Again we see the stark contrast between the two characters. Their views on marriage, which conform to the old masculinity/new masculinity binary, are reinforced in this dialogue, and the intimacy and physical contact in the scene exacerbate the reader’s anxiety. The reader feels compelled to actively interrogate Olivier’s secret, placing him in a space of suspicion. Despite César validating Olivier’s fears, he still plans to go ahead with the marriage. Olivier consequently decides to break the pair up, a plan that backfires horribly and causes César to renounce their friendship. Olivier does, however, find consolation elsewhere.

As with Duras’s telling of the story, this version of Olivier is equally disparaging of women’s behavior and perhaps even more disinclined to initiate a relationship with any of the women in his life, but he does not go through the story completely unfeeling and asexual. Towards the middle of the novel, Olivier develops an affection for another noblewoman, although the activeness of this attraction is questionable. The narrator notes, “...He seemed not to see her nor to hear her, his gaze, all of the faculties of his spirit and his soul were employed to follow her every motion, to interpret even her words, even her most insignificant gestures.”⁵⁶ Although the Baroness has captured Olivier’s

⁵⁵ *Ibid. Olivier*, pg. 36. Original text: “*Vous vous éloignez de moi, mon ami, vous me fuyez quand vous avez peut-être plus que jamais besoin de mes conseils. Je vous ai laissé à votre isolement tant que j’ai cru votre passion pour madame de B. une flamme passagère, qui s’évanouirait comme tant d’autres ardeurs que vous avez éprouvées ; mais la durée de celle-ci, son caractère particulier et certains bruits de mariage qui se répandent, ne me permettent pas de garder un plus long silence, et je viens vous demander à vous-même, César, ce que je dois penser de tout ce qui se passe.*” Translation mine.

⁵⁶ *Ibid. Olivier*, pg. 51. Original text: “*...Il paraissait ne la voir ni l’entendre, ses regards, toutes les facultés de son esprit et de son âme étaient employées à suivre ses moindres mouvements, à interpréter jusqu’à ses mots, jusqu’à ses gestes les plus insignifiants.*” Translation mine.

attention, one could argue that his attraction to her is passive; he does not physically see her but rather attempts to understand her, seemingly attracted to the *idea* of her. It is presumably because of this that Olivier discloses to her that whatever his secret is, it prevents them from being together, and he subsequently flees Paris to visit a monastery out of grief. Again, the reader's anxiety and curiosity is exacerbated by the ambiguity inherent in Olivier's secret and his refusal to disclose this information. The ambiguity of Olivier's secret, presumably relating to his romantic or sexual life, places him in an ambiguous space from which he can never escape, even at the conclusion of the narrative.

During Olivier's retreat from Paris, César's now-wife, still bitter at Olivier's attempt to deter César from marrying her, vows to learn his secret and reveal it to the Parisian elite. Realizing this, Olivier begins fretting incessantly about his secret's inevitable discovery; despite his retreat from Paris, Olivier's secret has not found a resolution. The narrator notes, "There is nothing hidden long in a society where conversation is the main usage of time..."⁵⁷ Indeed, César's wife becomes increasingly cognizant of the "real" reason Olivier left society as she continues to ask other members of high society, but no hints are offered to the reader; instead of informing the reader what other aristocrats have told the Baroness, the narrator instead plainly states that she merely asked them for information and some of them responded with what she wanted to hear, although she was frequently led astray. Once again, Olivier's secret is kept in the dark, and as the denouement of the novel progresses, the reader's anxiety grows with the prospect of finally learning what Olivier's secret actually is. Within the last few pages of the novel, the reader is informed that the Baroness does learn Olivier's secret, and Olivier

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* Olivier, pg. 69. Original text: "*Il n'est rien de longtemps caché dans une société où la conversation est le principal emploi du temps...*" Translation mine.

decides that he must leave high society for good, again explaining that his secret is the cause. The reader's curiosity comes to a peak at this moment, and just when the reader believes the ambiguity surrounding Olivier's secret to be stripped away, the reader learns that Olivier had completely withdrawn from public life, never providing a sense of closure or clarifying the ambiguity that surrounds his secret.

In this *Olivier*, the reader is implicated in the suspicion surrounding the protagonist's personal life. The preoccupation with regulating new models of masculinity and Olivier's unrevealed secret provide two sources of constant suspicion for the reader throughout the novel, and this anxiety is actively produced and reproduced by the text as mentions of Olivier's secret and masculinity are discussed. Although it would seem compelling for the contemporary reader to label Olivier as homosexual or otherwise deviant due to his non-normative masculinity and lack of active interest in women, this seems incredibly inappropriate due to the lack of concrete evidence and the constant presence of ambiguity during the narrative. Presuming that Olivier is homosexual not only places homosexual identity as ahistorical but also falls into the trap of minoritizing and universalizing discourses. The next novel in the Olivier series, Stendhal's *Armance*, additionally constructs sexuality in a fashion that incorporates elements of the previous two narratives to achieve the same ends.

Armance: The Tease (1827)

Arguably more so than the other narratives, Stendhal's work causes the reader to actively question what the problem is in the novel through the characters and narration. Having just turned twenty, the protagonist, Octave, is apparently stuck in a proverbial rut, a secret that he acknowledges being the cause. He immediately establishes his differences from other young gentlemen, as well as his disinclination to marry, early in the narrative, stating in response to his mother's recommendation to take a bride for an indemnity, "It will mean her marrying me. I have the misfortune to have a particular nature, I did not create myself so; all that I have been able to do has been to know myself."⁵⁸ Because of his failure to assimilate into roles expected of men during the nineteenth-century, specifically those related to family and marriage, one can assume that Octave's masculinity is based on the model of the "new man" who refuses to marry, even for the sake of his family's finances. Yet the ambiguity of what he means by a "particular nature," especially vis-à-vis marriage, strikes the reader's curiosity and confusion, and the other characters in the novel, who frequently pester Octave about his dissent in the face of marriage, further exacerbate this. The notion of duty and Octave's refusal to fulfill his masculine responsibilities by taking a bride, thereby continuing the family line, is brought up explicitly in the narrative. He not only states that he "should" be in love with someone, when speaking of his family, he additionally muses about the nature of duty:

⁵⁸ Stendhal. *Armance*, pg. 11. Original text: "*En second lieu, parce qu'elle me mariera. J'ai par malheur un caractère singulier, je ne me suis pas créé ainsi ; tout ce que j'ai pu faire, c'est de me connaître.*" Translation mine.

“...It is a very minor duty that binds me to them...” The word *duty* came like a thunderbolt to Octave. “A *minor duty!*” he cried, coming to a halt. “A duty of little importance! ...Is it of little importance, if it is the only duty I have left? ...What pettiness! And I thought myself so strong! I was nothing but a presumptuous fool.”⁵⁹

Despite Octave’s internal crisis, the reader is never informed about what prevents Octave from fulfilling his perceived obligation to his parents; furthermore, his threats of suicide only compound the reader’s anxiety. As with the other narratives, ambiguity surrounds his persona, and the other characters, particularly his parents, attempt to prod him into revealing his secret to mitigate this ambiguity. Furthermore, the reader’s sentiments of anxiety and confusion brought about by Octave’s secret and failure to fulfill a normative masculinity are further compounded when he actually does fall in love.

Towards the middle of the narrative, Octave strikes up a friendship and later romantic relationship with his cousin, the eponymous Armance, with whom he exchanges passionate love letters, although their relationship occasionally becomes strained by Octave’s secret. One of her closest friends attempts to get Octave to confess his secret, and he does so, albeit in a very roundabout fashion, explaining:

“...What often clouds my soul with darkness, what I have never confided to anyone, is this horrible misfortune : I have no *conscience*. I find myself no trace of what you call the *intimate sense*, no *instinctive* revulsion from crime. If I abhor vice, it is quite vulgarly by force of reason and because I find it harmful. And what proves to me that there is absolutely nothing divine or *instinctive* in my nature, is that I can always recall all the elements of the reasoning by dint of which I find vice to be horrible.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *Ibid. Armance*, pg. 22, emphasis in original. Original text: “C’est un bien petit devoir qui m’attache à eux... Ce mot devoir fut comme un coup de foudre pour Octave. Un petit devoir ! s’écria-t-il en s’arrêtant, un devoir de peu d’importance !... Est-il de peu d’importance, si c’est le seul qui me reste ? ...Quelle petitesse ! et je me croyais si ferme ! je n’étais qu’un présomptueux.” Translation mine.

⁶⁰ *Ibid. Armance*, pg. 49, emphasis in original. Original text: “...Ce qui souvent me met du noir dans l’âme, ce que je n’ai jamais confié à personne, c’est cet horrible malheur : je n’ai point de conscience. Je ne trouve en moi rien de ce que vous appelez le sens intime, aucun éloignement instinctif pour le crime.

Although Octave had promised to tell his secret to Armance's friend, he does so in an incredibly unclear fashion, and this only adds to the confusion and frustration with the situation, both for the other characters and for the reader. Nineteenth-century readers would likely have had a similar reaction as Armance's confidant, who expresses her anxiety about the vague nature of Octave's secret, as well as his challenging of the dominant social order and lack of concern for morality, while contemporary readers are also struck by both, although the latter probably less so. Regardless, Octave still believes that Armance is the perfect match for him, and after an indeterminate amount of time passes, a friend of Octave's suggests that he is in love with her. Octave's secret consequently arouses more anxiety for him, the other characters, and the reader.

For reasons presumably related to his secret, as well as the revelation of his love for Armance, Octave refuses to let the relationship progress any further. He tells his parents that at the age of twenty, he would like to travel to Greece before getting married, while explaining to Armance that he would like to see America and stay on platonic terms with her, stating:

“As for you, Mademoiselle, people have said that I am in love with you ; I am far from making any such pretension. Indeed, the old ties of friendship that bound us should have been sufficient, to my mind, to resist the birth of love. We know each other too well to feel for each other that sort of sentiment, which always implies a certain amount of illusion.”⁶¹

Quand j'abhorre le vice, c'est tout vulgairement par l'effet d'un raisonnement et parce que je le trouve nuisible. Et ce qui me prouve qu'il n'est absolument rien chez moi de divin ou d'instinctif, c'est que je puis toujours me rappeler toutes les parties du raisonnement en vertu duquel je trouve le vice horrible.”

Translation mine.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* Armance, pg. 120. Original text: “Quant à vous, mademoiselle, on a prétendu que j'avais de l'amour pour vous ; je suis bien éloigné d'avoir une telle prétention. D'ailleurs, l'ancienne amitié qui nous unit devait suffire, ce me semble, pour s'opposer à la naissance de l'amour. Nous nous connaissons trop

Although the reader knows that Octave is being insincere due to the different explanations that he gives to Armance and his parents for his sudden change of heart, the intense amount of grief that he feels afterwards also leaves the reader even more confused as to his motivations, as the latter seems like a rather strange reaction to having consciously avoided an undesired action (in this case, getting married). This is doubly so if the reader presumes that his lies to his parents and subsequent grief relate to his still-unknown secret. Regardless, shortly after Octave departs to Paris, a rival suitor then intercepts and doctors one of Armance's letters to Octave, successfully convincing him that she has no feelings for him. Octave then decides to go through with the marriage anyway but abruptly commits suicide at the end of the novel, supposedly out of fear that his secret would be revealed and despair that Armance had only married him for his wealth.

Perhaps because of, or rather despite, Stendhal being considered one of the earliest and foremost practitioners of realism, many of the dramatic details in *Armance* seem overdone or perhaps even a bit nonsensical, especially in relation to Duras and Latouche, arguably more associated with the Romantic movement. For example, concerning his relationships with Armance and his parents, Octave claims to be on more platonic terms with her so as to avoid the already-intense pressure to marry, while simultaneously attempting to deflect this tension by stating a desire to travel. Each of these excuses seems to have been produced with the explicit intention of providing as many possible explanations to cover up Octave's secret, and taken as a whole, the reasons

bien pour avoir l'un pour l'autre ces sortes de sentiments qui supposent toujours un peu d'illusion."
Translation mine.

only confuse the situation more than clarify. Neither of the previous two narratives evoked such tactics, and when attempting to determine Octave's secret, this only heightens the reader's curiosity with constant teasing, the narrative constantly promising to disclose Octave's secret but never doing so. With his secret never revealed and ambiguity coupled with anxiety surrounding his sexual predilections and non-normative masculinity that fails to assimilate into the duty-minded version of the older, more militaristic masculinity of his father's generation, Octave, too, is placed in a sexually ambiguous space. Not only are the other characters incredibly confused as to what has upset Octave so profoundly, but the reader is, as well, and the anxiety is palpable. Yet labeling him as a homosexual seems inappropriate, given the lack of evidence, other than a professed interest in the social structures of Antiquity, which presumably includes institutionalized homosexual relations and pederasty. Perhaps more so than in the other narratives, there is even less indication as to what his secret is, and his death likewise robs the reader of any sense of closure. The final narrative in this series, Cusine's *Aloys*, works to solidify and perhaps even celebrate the sexual ambiguity that has been established in its three predecessors.

Aloys: An Open Book (1829)

Unlike the other protagonists in each of the *Olivier* novels, the eponymous protagonist of Custine's *Aloys* seems rather apathetic towards having his secret revealed. Although the reader continues to be oblivious as to what the protagonist's secret actually is at the end of the novel, when his secret is about to be disclosed to a psychiatrist by a family friend, the lack of resistance on the part of the eponymous Aloys presents the solidification of sexual ambiguity, a realization that ambiguity is itself a representational mode.

The first paragraph of the novel explains that Aloys knew neither his father, who was a victim of the Revolution, nor his mother, who died of grief shortly after her husband's death. Having been raised by an aunt, Aloys is cognizant of how this untraditional family situation has affected him. He explains that the lack of male influence in his life has "...made me different from the men with whom I was destined to pass my life."⁶² The double meaning here is curious. On one hand, it is possible to interpret the narrator's explanation in a religious context; he could, after all, be referring to the men of a monastery. Yet he could also be referring to his sexual life and the companions with whom he ends up living. It is particularly interesting to note that this discussion is immediately followed by a long discussion about the narrator's physical and emotional need to love and be loved, although he notes that inner turmoil prevents him from exploring this desire. He states, "Since then, I saw myself condemned to a secret battle, and the person against the spirit of which I defended myself silently with all of my strength, did not even suspect this inner battle. But through this continual resistance, I

⁶² *Ibid.* *Aloys*, pg. 13. Original text: "me rendre différent des hommes avec lesquels j'étais pourtant destiné à passer ma vie." Translation mine.

voluntarily went without the only intimacy that the circumstances allowed me, and during the age of the sweetest emotions, I only felt one sentiment, my isolation...”⁶³ This placement of this confession seems rather odd, as does the solace that he ultimately finds in religion. However, despite his instincts to withdraw from public life and enter a monastery, it is not his aunt’s wishes that prevent him from doing so, but rather “...the illness of my heart,” which he deduces is related to, “...the source of my pains inside of me.”⁶⁴ The incompatibility of Aloys’s secret with religion likewise creates anxiety within the reader, but Aloys does not seem nearly as bothered with his secret as the protagonists and other characters in the previous three novels. Rather, he seems melancholy, similar to Octave, although Aloys’s family is not nearly as probing.

Upon meeting a friend of his aunt’s, M. de T, however, the narrator experiences the acceptance that he has craved and seems to feel a profound sense of fondness towards him. Aloys ascertains, “Youth must have violent passions, and my heart had no other fear than not hating enough the man who made the world love him. I felt a secret satisfaction to sense that I was at war with the universe, and I exhausted during all of these years of oppression all of the pleasures of pride.”⁶⁵ It is fairly interesting to note that the narrator spends an inordinate amount of time describing his relationship with M. de T before remarking on the presumably happy days they spend together. Taken at face value, Aloys

⁶³ *Ibid.* Aloys, pg. 14. Original text: “Dès-lors je me vis condamné à une lutte secrète, et la personne contre l’esprit de laquelle je me défendais sourdement de toutes les forces du mien, ne se doutait même pas de ce combat intérieur. Mais par cette résistance continuelle, je me privai volontairement de la seule intimité que les circonstances m’auraient permise, et dans l’âge des plus douces émotions, je n’éprouvais qu’un sentiment, celui de mon isolement...” Translation mine.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Aloys, pg. 19 and 21. Original text: “...la maladie de mon cœur” and “...la source de mes peines était en moi.” Translations mine.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* Aloys, pp. 24-5. Original text: “Il faut à la jeunesse des passions violentes, et mon cœur n’eut plus d’autre crainte que de ne pas haïr assez l’homme qui se faisait adorer du monde. J’éprouvais une satisfaction secrète à me sentir en lutte avec l’univers, et j’épuisai pendant ces années d’oppression toutes les jouissances du pur orgueil.” Translation mine.

feels as though he must compete with the universe for either hating or loving M. de T. On one hand, the reader could suppose that Aloys could feel inclined to resist the universe's impulses to love him; on the other, he might feel a sense of competition to distinguish himself from the rest of the universe for M. de T's affection. The nature of their relationship is further called into question when Aloys conflates this realization with his fondness for M. de T, stating:

I felt, for the first time, movements of love, and the most lively need of my heart which I had been distracted from by bitterness until I had found company, was revealed to me by the spectacle of nature. My letters to Count T breathed a whole wave of love without object, and his imagination, as young as mine, although he had a stronger soul, encouraged me to reveal even the smallest movements of my heart.⁶⁶

Such a confession exacerbates the anxiety of the reader despite revealing a very probable possibility as to what Aloys's secret could be. The reader is left confused as to what Aloys's secret could still be, however, due to the casual nature with which Aloys discusses his affection for M. de T in his writing. Eventually, though, M. de T marries, and the narrator travels to Italy, presumably out of grief and to escape Parisian society. His aunt continually sends him letters asking him to propose to a family friend, yet the narrator continually refuses and ruminates on his desire to devote his life to religion. One day, he makes the acquaintance of Madame de M, a wealthy Frenchwoman, and the two strike up an intimate friendship. He learns that she knows M. de T after she discloses her knowledge of the narrator's secret:

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* Aloys, pg. 26. Original text: “*J’éprouvai pour la première fois, des mouvements d’amour ; et le plus vif besoin de mon cœur dont j’avais été distrait jusqu’alors par l’amertume que j’apportais dans la société, me fut révélé par le spectacle de la nature. ...Mes lettres au comte de T... respiraient tout le vague d’un amour sans objet, et son imagination aussi jeune que la mienne, quoiqu’il eût l’âme plus forte, m’encourageait à lui révéler jusqu’aux moindres mouvements de mon cœur.*” Translation mine.

She recounted to me how the Count of T..., our mutual friend, had for years talked about me in his letters. He repeated that I was the only man who could suit him, even with my faults, because spirits such as his focus especially on those to whom they feel are necessary to; finally, he inspired such a desire in her to know more about me that she exercised all of her power over her old friend to obtain my letters. He consented to send them, and she discovered the secret of my character.⁶⁷

Like in the case of Duras's *Olivier*, the protagonist's letters compose a large portion of the novel, and Aloys can thus be read and interpreted through his writing, which Madame de M obtains through her social connections. Custine's novel allows her interpretations of Aloys's writings to connect the unhappiness that he confided in her upon their first meeting to his secret. Unlike the other *Olivier* narratives, the invitation to read the protagonist is neither a tease nor as a challenge. Quite the contrary, the reading of Aloys is far too easy for Madame de M, as she merely takes what is written in Aloys's letters at face value, unlike the other characters in the other *Olivier* novels, particularly César's wife in Latouche's novel, who must constantly interrogate those around her and ascertain what is true and what is not. Perhaps fittingly, after learning Aloys's secret, the narrative seems to shift away from an interest in Aloys to an interest in Madame de M's personal history. She, like Octave and the Oliviers, is still surrounded by mystery, while the reader knows a great deal about Aloys's personal and family history (although the reader is still oblivious as to the nature of his secret, of course). One aspect to note about this narrative decision is that it seems incredibly abrupt; after spending roughly forty percent of the

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* Aloys, pg. 39. Original text: "Elle me raconta comment le comte de T..., notre ami commun, lui avait depuis des années parlé de moi dans ses lettres. Il lui répétait que j'étais le seul homme qui pût lui convenir, même par mes défauts, puisque les esprits tels que le sien s'attachent surtout à ceux auxquels il se sentent nécessaires ; enfin il lui inspira un tel désir de me connaître davantage qu'elle exerça sur lui tout le pouvoir d'une ancienne amitié pour en obtenir mes lettres ; il consentit à les envoyer, et elle y trouva le secret de mon caractère." Translation mine.

novel discussing the misery that has befallen Aloys, the sudden appearance of Madame de M excites and is an intriguing change. She offers a possible means to understanding and demystifying Aloys's secret. Perhaps as a consequence, one must note that this text, particularly compared to the others, lacks the violent and lengthy searches for the protagonist's "real" reason for avoiding marriage, instead stressing the ease of doing so through the Madame de M's manner of discovery.

However, although it would appear as though the focus would remain on Madame de M, this is not so, and the story quickly returns to the nature of Aloys's secret. The reasoning for this likely centers around the secret that Madame de M discovered in the middle of the narrative, namely that he much prefers Madame de M to her daughter, although we do not know his other secret that prevents him from pursuing her. Is there a manner to decode Aloys's other secret? Although answering this question definitively is a bit difficult, the notion of contradiction seems to help Madame de M make sense of Aloys. After all, Aloys seems to view his existence as a veritable contradiction, such as vanity versus sensibility and vehemence versus calmness, although the effect on the reader is one of disorientation; instead of clarifying the protagonist's predicament, the contradictions surrounding Aloys's subjectivity are intentionally vague and further mystify his secrets. Yet these contradictions are not lost on Madame de M, who attempts to frequently decipher them and their relationship to Aloys's secret throughout the novel, most importantly upon learning about his hesitation to marry her daughter. Yet even though Aloys constantly offers Madame de M an answer that is not an answer at all when asked about his reluctance, the narrative structures this repetition as a secret deciphered, and indeed, Madame de M seems to have realized Aloys's secret at the conclusion of the

novel. In one of the final scenes, Aloys is ordered to see Madame de M once more, and he arrives to her home to find a full salon and a Swiss psychiatrist. Each detail seems to either promise or threaten to reveal Aloys's secret as the doctor's credentials are explained and a letter, presumably detailing both of his secrets, is produced from Madame de M's bodice. Aloys offers little resistance, and then the narrative abruptly returns to the present, with Aloys discussing his life with another young man at a monastery.

If the revelation that is almost certainly about to be revealed at the end of Custine's novel seems less than astonishing, then the lack of resistance on the part of Aloys shows a solidification of sexual ambiguity, a realization that this ambiguity is itself a representational mode. As opposed to the other narratives that privilege the notion of man-as-mysterious, *Aloys* seems content to produce a subject that is less explicitly in question and more under active construction, although what forces are constructing this is rather unclear.

In the next chapter, it is imperative to investigate the homosexual as he was before homosexual identity and how to navigate the distance between an explicit anxiety over marriage-evading or impotent men and a more socially effective manner of minorizing or universalizing them.

Structuring the Homosexual Before Homosexual Identity

In the current context of queer history, many historians would argue that homosexuality is a twentieth-century phenomenon wherein medicine created the homosexual and society worked to stigmatize him. As articulated by Foucault, (homo)sexual actions and the ways that they are conceptualized are themselves socially constructed and have different meanings based on temporal and geographical context. Before the rise of medicalized views of sexuality, an individual could be labeled as a sodomite, a pederast, or a sinner based on their actions, but these were not identities that one could, or would, willingly claim to rally around and demand rights. And if no one could actively *be* gay before the late-nineteenth century, no one could viably come out of the closet or accept and announce a filiation with an identity that did not exist.

In the context of Custine, it is difficult to assign him (and, by extension, the stories that his life inspired) the identity of queer, as doing so when there is ambiguity present seems presumptuous, although homophobe and homophile alike are equally guilty of doing so. When reading each of the Olivier novels, epistemologies of sexuality allow the underlying reason, the protagonist's closeted homosexuality, to seem like a plausible response to the phenomena for which early nineteenth-century French society has yet to account. Guessed at, implied, or assumed, each protagonist's secret is never revealed in any of the narratives. As answers (although one may more aptly call them "excuses"), such as Octave and Aloys's need to travel the world, open the door to further assumptions, they also close the proverbial door of ever explicitly stating those

assumptions. What may help clarify these assumptions would be a more critical look at post-Revolution masculinity.

Non-normative masculinity also functions in the Olivier stories as each protagonist's minoritizing and minoritized discourse. However, if each protagonist's refusal to marry is at first seen to signify cold feet, then there is room for further interpretation and speculation, of impotence or of queerness, for example, precisely to the point where the original meaning loses its interpretive force. In other words, if French readers believed that it was all just cold feet that kept the groom from marrying, then an explanation for this explanation would be that he couldn't consummate the marriage, an action that was likely seen to be a fundamental part to male identity. In the Olivier stories, the anxiety felt by the other characters and readers alike is not only a product of each of the character's secrets, but also as a new way of conceiving of a perceived widespread inability to accede to masculine privilege. If "homosexuality" isn't explicitly in the texts, there loomed a far more meaningful threat in the post-Revolutionary context of a new generation's inability to "be men" like their fathers, and this fear is fundamental in the Olivier novels.

The gender crisis of nineteenth-century French, embodied by the "new man" also has imbedded implications in the realm of gender representation. After all, this newer masculinity must invariably interact with older forms of masculinity; comparatively, the "new man" is apt to look like an ever-threatening construct, albeit not effeminate, but in this context, the far more unsettling species, unspecified and unknown. So the question is thus: How does normative masculinity respond to these "men-women" hybrids in a pre-homosexual context? One could argue that responses to non-normative masculinity can

be interpreted as an impulse to police and regulate; they motivate the construction of a container for potentially revolutionary realizations about the unnaturalness, not of the few, but all that falls outside normative masculinity. The “new man” is not synonymous with homosexual identity but the catalyst for homosexual identity, the first widely-held fear of an incoherent masculinist culture.

But on the other side of the proverbial coin, if homosexuality or impotence seem to be more compelling descriptive answers than what is actually contained in the text, it also obscures any possible conclusion. In this sense, even as impotence or homosexuality may point to perhaps more “accurate” readings, it also delays the process of reaching an answer, forestalling the reader from reaching this definitive conclusion. In the context of the early to mid-nineteenth century, if the queer diagnosis or identity has yet to be invented, its ability to pose as a final answer (or, at least, more final than impotence) seems uncertain at best.

Homosexuality seems secret in these novels not because it comes laden with cultural baggage; rather, if evocative of homosexuality as it has come to be understood, Custine’s sexuality can be read not only as a society’s (or a set of authors’) interest in overcoming so indirect of a regime of knowing, but also as a response to nineteenth-century French society’s anxiety or ignorance towards Custine’s sexual life. If Aloys, Olivier, and Octave seem inscrutable (and simultaneously so easily scrutinized), then, it is because their cases present a problem to earlier conceptions of masculine gendering, as well as their ambiguous sexualities. The homosexual identity takes the form of how to handle a new sex and gender system of being.

Conclusion

As the homosexual comes to be constructed before the homosexual identity, it seems far from clear that minorizing and universalizing discourses play so central a role. If modern men must face the menace of the homosexual as he has come to be defined, in the time of Custine and the stories he inspired, it becomes less clear that the homosexual functioned as a solidified threat. In the time before Freud and Benkert, men were not apt to understand same-sex desire and behavior as something that they would secretly *be*, but rather a set of actions that they could perform. Their masculinity was not at stake and was not on-guard for this particular threat.

And yet, the early nineteenth century had its own set of insecurities surrounding normative masculinity. The fall of the Ancient Regime, the military failures that transpired subsequent to the Revolution, and the failure of France's sons to measure up to their fathers' greatness, are all a part of the extreme crisis in patriarchy and the construction of male gender roles more generally. No longer content (or capable of) the excesses of their fathers and at odds with Napoleonic military masculinity, many men of the early nineteenth century present a problem to old ways of imagining masculinity and evoke anxiety from more traditionally-minded individuals.

Alongside this concern, the Olivier stories appear with their own particular responses to preconceptions of non-normative men. In these cases, the protagonists are depicted as "not the marrying kind," a subset who, despite presumably having a legitimate reason, refuse to marry their fiancées. Often read as the real-life break-up of Astolphe de Custine and Clara de Duras, Madame de Duras's *Olivier*, the first of the

stories, can be said to respond to the “new man” with reference to an open secret that is never confided or revealed. Whatever the secret may be, it is placed in a sexually ambiguous space.

Indeed, Duras’s *Olivier*, Latouche’s *Olivier*, and Stendhal’s *Armance* reflect an active preoccupation with probing the depths of the secret that can never be revealed. The anxiety surrounding new models of masculinity and the unrevealed secret provide two reasons for their non-normative behavior. When reading Custine’s narrative, *Aloys*, the man is, if still troubling, a center-stage figure of inexplicable melancholy, all the same no less anxiety-inducing as the other protagonists, being depicted as just plain bizarre, contradictory, and mysterious.

Reading the homosexual from a contemporary viewpoint, uncovering the “hidden history” of the identity marker is inherently problematic. If Custine appears as one of the most unproblematic representations of modern homosexuality in his era – living as if “out” with a male partner for most of his adult life – it is ambiguous if the idea even of exclusive same-sex object choice, much less exclusive object choice as identity, was a part of how Custine constructed his identity. Through the historical assault on and erasure of homosexual subjects, gestures of outing are tempting, but it may be more productive to problematize the textual and historical practice of imposing identity where identity did not exist, the ways that erasure itself has historically been accomplished. Literary scholars are likely to re-inscribe the same anxiety over definition and minoritization if new ways of reading texts through a queer lens are not implemented. Moreover, it will become difficult to envision new ways of thinking about sexuality in the future, the epistemologies after the closet.

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