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Unconditional Consent as Lifestyle: *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* by Catherine Millet

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CATHERINE M. HAD SEX with 5,000 men in the 1960s and 1970s. Upon publication of *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*, which has sold 1 million copies worldwide,[1] the scandal focused on Catherine Millet, a well-known art critic who presented *La Vie* as her autobiography. The book immediately polarized reviewers. Some elevated Millet to the ranks of the great erotic writers: she received the *Prix Sade* in 2003. *La Vie* was marketed as offering "the harsh truth." Others scorned it as "un livre technique et glacé où le plaisir est absent" (Ferniot). The scandal focused on Millet the author—is she really telling the truth? How can a woman write such dirt?

For Foucault, sexual confessions have a precise historical and sociological significance that goes beyond textual representations:

> Au nombre de ses emblèmes, notre société porte celui du sexe qui parle ... savoir du plaisir, plaisir à savoir le plaisir, plaisir-savoir; [...]. La question de ce que nous sommes, une certaine pente nous a conduits, en quelques siècle, à la poser au sexe. (*Histoire de la sexualité* 101–02)

Within this context, *La Vie* offers a libertarian reflection on contemporary heterosexuality suffused with irony. As such, it belongs to a corpus of works by French women writers who share the intention to provoke and the desire to talk about the female body or about sex. These authors have attracted increasing attention since the 1990s for their challenge to established genres in various ways.[2] Like Christine Angot and Marie Nimier, for example, Millet establishes an explicit "autobiographical pact" between the author and the reader and this is directly linked to a desire to tell the truth about sex, "implicat[ing] herself in her reader's interpretation of her writing" (Rye and Worton 11). The games of identity between

extratextual author Catherine Millet and intratextual narrator/protagonist Catherine M. construct an intriguing postmodern text, an autofiction that plays with reality and fiction, producing a detached reflection on sex and identity.

We discuss why Millet's work is an autofiction and how it was marketed in France before examining *La Vie*'s radical—but non prescriptive—paradigm of female heterosexuality. At first glance, the text seems to focus solely on the repetitive sexual activities of a largely passive female. But we demonstrate how the text is also one of transgressive resistance: this passivity is undermined through the deconstruction of normative discourses on sex and gender, especially through the narrator/protagonist's resistance to religion, traditional gender roles, and her celebration of the orgiastic body.

The third section of the article turns to transgression as dislocation, pointing to other elements, disturbing and paradoxical, which constitute the overall radical paradigm. Thus, we argue that *La Vie*'s graphic descriptions of orgies sex stage a libertarian ethics of female heterosexuality that is disdainful of romantic love. Another section entitled "the ethics of unconditional consent" focuses on the key moral ambiguity of the text: should heterosexual women say yes or no to men's advances? Arguably, *La Vie*'s libertarian model dissolves the key notion of consent which has traditionally structured sexual and gender hierarchies. Finally, we situate the significance of this libertarian paradigm in relation to the public role of Millet in wider French debates on heterosexuality.

Autofiction and Generic Games

The text plays skillfully with genres, merging fiction, autobiography, and pornography.[3] *La Vie* has often been seen as high brow porn. Whatever the reader's response, the text certainly plays with the pornographic genre. Pornographic texts are usually understood to be solely designed to arouse sexual interest, often through distancing effects (from decontextualized scenes, anonymous places, obscenities, and so on). *La Vie* slips into this tradition and uses distancing effects such as unnamed lovers, lists, repetitions, and an excess of sex. However, *La Vie* also contains long passages which are not pornographic. It is a hybrid text whereby pornographic episodes are integrated with a wider autofictional narrative on the narrator/protagonist's sexual life.

Autofiction is a notoriously ambiguous subcategory of autobiography. It is a practice which, for Serge Doubrovsky, "abandons chronological-logical discourse ... the scale is tipped against realist narrative in favour of a fictional universe" ("Autobiography" 40). Millet's relationship with the fact/fiction paradigm is complex. In *La Vie* there are no dates, no chronology, but a series of themes such as the number of lovers, locations and so on. In the preface, the extratextual author Millet signals the neces-

sarily speculative nature of writing one's life story from souvenirs, videos, films and discussions with past lovers in order to construct a literary text (*La Vie* viii).[4] This is part of the "autofictional pact" as analysed by Serge Doubrovsky and others, which demonstrates through various self-referential strategies the invention of the personality of the intratextual narrator/protagonist from lived experience. Millet makes the reader aware that memory is flawed, language (in this case, about sex) is problematic, and therefore the author might as well aim at a deeper truth through fiction. Thus in *La Vie,* Catherine recalls apparently true facts thanks to her impressive memory, but this claim is undermined as she also describes herself as a "fabuliste fabuleuse" (128). There are many other inventions which reveal the interplay between autofiction and reality. For instance, at first glance, spaces such as the Bois de Boulogne or Brittany appear to confer authenticity onto the tale. Of course, both places have long been connotatively erotic, but the slippery sense of realism they provide is undermined as there are also other public, anonymous and featureless spaces such as roadsides, car parks or offices which could be anywhere. These spaces are re-invented by the intratextual narrator/protagonist into *non-lieux,* both abstract and concrete, anonymous places disconnected from identity and history. Space and time fascinate Catherine, providing the main structure of her meanderings. Throughout the tale, Catherine moves in a space of deliberate ambiguity, teasing the reader about who speaks in the text: "Une fois, j'ai pensé que si je devais 'dire la vérité de tout ça', le livre s'intitulerait *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* Ça m'a fait rire toute seule" (93). Thus, just as Catherine's experiences take place nowhere/everywhere, there is also both unity and fragmentation between extratextual author and intratextual subject. At the same time, the decentered, playful subject, intent on exposing the singularity of her experience through the autofiction, sets in motion a confessional interrogation of sexuality as truth. This is reinforced by the extratextual author Millet's repeated declaration that *La Vie* is her life story. In the preface, she explains that she intended to write a book which allowed author/narrator/protagonist to cohabit "en parfaite intelligence" (vi). Thus, the autofiction is a deliberate strategy used by both an extra- and intratextual female to reclaim her own space within the low-status genre of autobiography—a space in which women notoriously struggle to make their voices heard (Hughes 4–5; Swindells 27–28).

However, in addition to *La Vie*'s games of truth underlined above, it is also important to point out Millet's other extratextual games of truth, and show how, with the help of the media and publishers, her text as well as her alleged "knowledge" of sexuality have been legitimized as truth telling. Promoting the book as autobiographical has played a key role in this process. Thus, French publishers *Le Seuil* called the novel "un récit" and thus signaled some ambiguity since the term evokes both a precise

genre—a *récit de vie* with a claim to reality and a more generic connotation with *récit* as fiction. In an interview, Millet presented the book as autobiographical with pornographic passages wherein she evokes "sexual reality through obscene language."[5] Her media persona also claims a foothold in women's everyday life: "I am not a nymphomaniac ... not a porn star. What I really wanted to do was to have the most honest and personal debate possible on sexuality—using my own experiences. This is why I wrote the book" (BBC interview). *Le Monde* called her a "confidente publique" as she responded to thousands of readers' letters (Dagen). This process of authentification focused on the truth of the text and took on a further dimension with the entrance of Jacques Henric, Millet's husband, whose book *Légendes de Catherine M.* came out a month after *La Vie* in April 2001 (*Légendes*). The two titles echo each other in a clever marketing duet. *Légendes* complements *La Vie* by presenting a photo diary of Millet in various states of undress alongside Henric's reflections on the role of the female nude in his own erotic life as well as in novels and photography. Despite the generic ambiguity of *La Vie,* this marketing device has led to Millet the extratextual author presenting herself as telling the truth about her own experiences as well as sexuality generally. Moreover, the participation of the media and the debates that have ensued have given Millet further authority and the seal of authenticity to her narrative, in spite of the autofictional slant of the text.

Transgression as Resistance

According to Foucault, sex is the privileged locus of self-recognition through which the modern subject is produced—a process which takes place through narration (*Histoire de la sexualité*). *La Vie* illustrates this vividly, occasionally with humor. The novel opens with childhood memories set supposedly in the 1950s, within the traditional Catholic Western family—a powerful locus of discipline. To be a good woman involved what Millet describes as "des images ... fabriquées" (*La Vie* 36) whose conception "constitue un séduisant mystère" (36). Her mother policed her with strict dress-codes "sous prétexte qu'une femme doit être tenue" (13). However, in these mundane scenes gender norms are both systematically revealed and challenged. For instance, tales of fallen women became the backdrop of the child Catherine's fantasies as she masturbated, prefiguring her future sexual adventures. The narrative contains a catalogue of sexual encounters with often unidentified men, and, less often, women. However, although she is indifferent to her male and female sexual partners' identities and personalities, she undoubtedly prefers men, as we shall see later. What matters is the number of lovers. In the first section of her book entitled "numbers," young Catherine counts the number of potential husbands and children. She also reflects on her duties to God and his son:

> J'avais établi avec Dieu une relation qui m'obligeait chaque soir à me soucier de son alimentation, et l'énumération des plats et des verres d'eau que je lui faisais parvenir par la pensée—inquiète de la juste quantité, du rythme de la transmission, etc. [...]. J'étais très religieuse et il n'est pas impossible que la confusion dans laquelle je percevais l'identité de Dieu et de son fils ait favorisé mon inclination pour les activités de comptage. (10)

Millet situates her tale in the Sadean tradition which ties up language and transgression, the death of God and the testing of interdictions by sex (Foucault, "A Preface" 38). Irony reverses the profane and the sacred, religious feelings are eroticized linguistically—"quantité" and "rhythme" replace God and Catholicism. Although in the child's psyche marriage was connected with producing children, the conformist picture was marred by her interrogation of how many husbands it was normal to have. She wondered:

> Une femme pouvait-elle avoir plusieurs maris en même temps ou bien seulement l'un après l'autre? Dans ce cas, combien de temps devait-elle rester mariée avec l'un avant de pouvoir changer? Combien pouvait-elle "raisonnablement" en avoir: quelques-uns, de l'ordre de cinq ou six, ou bien un nombre beaucoup plus important, voire illimité? (9–10)

Chance encounters and sex replace God and the mother.

Tongue in cheek, Catherine also reveals that she never consciously chose to engage in sexual promiscuity (11). Neither did she see any moral obstacle in her passive attitude:

> J'ai toujours considéré que les *circonstances* avaient mis sur mon chemin des hommes qui aiment faire l'amour en groupe ... et *l'unique idée que j'avais de moi-même* à ce sujet était qu'étant *naturellement* ouverte aux expériences, *n'y voyant pas d'entrave morale, je m'étais volontiers adaptée à leurs mœurs*. (11–12; emphasis added)

Thus, the opening pages reframe the myth of the profane orgy as a search for the end of individuality with, now, a female narrator rewriting the orgiastic body as a calling. Transgression in *La Vie* may thus be achieved by deconstructing the processes whereby the female subject is gendered, and whereby sexual behavior is normalized by sets of rules. Foucault saw possibilities for transgression in what appeared as a "passive" or undirected structural movement ("A preface" 28–29). Transgression does not have to set new rules. It can take many forms. Being different from the majority of young women and thus resisting normalization is in *La Vie* a form of mild transgression. Catherine contrasts the notion of a whole, unique idea of the self (that is, the normalized, constructed identity) with the idea that she was "naturally" open to new experiences and

happy to be "simply" swayed by "circumstances." She redefines herself as "vacante, je me suis trouvée être une femme plutôt passive, n'ayant pas d'objectifs à atteindre, sinon ceux que les autres m'ont donnés" (32). Her feminine "nature" is replaced by a different nature. Catherine recalls her "out of placeness": "je n'appartenais pas à la classe des séductrices, et ... par conséquent ma place dans le monde était moins parmi les autres femmes, face aux hommes, qu'aux côtés des hommes" (16).[6] Catherine did things "avec naturel," without acting "la femme qui veut faire plaisir à son mec ni [à] la grande salope" (46). The intratextual narrator invents Catherine as a new hybrid or a "copain-fille" (46). By virtue of her sexuality she is therefore an outsider.

Transgression as Dislocation

La Vie's erotica radically debunks beauty as a key to desire, to borrow Bataille's terms (Guerlac 91). When having sex, Catherine's body vomits, farts, has diarrhea or the clap and aches with various discomforts. Thus, the grotesque (male and female) body in the narrative questions the classical model of sexuality as tied up to our deepest emotions (love, desire, etc.), which lead to traditional sexual and gender hierarchies. This leads the "copain-fille" to eschew games of seduction, "ces préliminaires que beaucoup de femmes prétendent être la phase la plus délicieuse d'une liaison, et que je me suis toujours employée à écourter" (67). This aspect of her transgression causes her to reject the romantic model of fusional love and monogamy. The tale focuses instead on fragmented body parts as well as various pleasures provided by a profusion of detailed sexual activities. Whilst always—allegedly—available, Catherine refuses to privilege any sexual object, activity or stimulus, subverting the Freudian assumption of the vagina as the route to the inner self:

> Au dernier moment je lui ai demandé de passer dans le cul. Telle était ma méthode contraceptive primitive, étayée par une vision de mon corps comme un tout qui ne connaissait pas de hiérarchie, ni dans l'ordre de la morale ni dans celui du plaisir, et dont chaque partie pouvait, autant que faire se peut, se substituer à une autre. (59)

Ironically fusing pleasure and morality, Catherine transforms the female body into a body where all parts are serviceable and potentially orgiastic for her phallocentric purposes.

Catherine claims to be indifferent to where heterosexual encounters take place, with whom, how many of them, and what they do to her. This leads the "copain-fille" to nurture a fundamental detachment. A range of activities—oral, anal, vaginal—remove her from any feelings other than complex emotions which may lead to orgasm. *La Vie* tells a tale of a female who is profoundly interested in the mechanics of sex for its own

sake while complying with the sexual demands of men. Thus she breaks away from the belief that "there exists something other than bodies, organs, somatic localizations, functions ...; something else and something more" (*History of Sexuality* 152–43). This redefinition of the phallocentric tropes proposes a reflection on the normalization of female sexual behavior.

We have argued above that *La Vie* plays with the pornographic genre. True enough, the text's clinical catalogues of body parts and sexual organs recall, aesthetically speaking, traditional, male-oriented pornographic scenes. Roger has argued, for instance, that the novel activates "an unconditional allegiance to the phallus" as in the novels of D. H. Lawrence or Henry Miller (Roger 920). The Christic tableau in which, according to Catherine's account of Eric's recollection, she seemed "clouée par les bites, comme un papillon" reduces Catherine to a single body part as men hammered "le bassin auquel j'étais réduite" (100). But within this phallocentric framework, the narrative disrupts the conventions of mainstream soft porn and group sex, in at least two ways. Catherine is a strong desiring character in charge of her own fantasies, who enjoys having sex in private and public, and knows how her body works. Secondly, *La Vie* offers constantly shifting subject positions, both male and female. There is a tension between Catherine as a subject and an object insofar as her female gaze is also capable of objectifying men: "l'étreinte, ... l'effort physique me procurent un ravissement particulier où il entre probablement un désir de féminisation de l'homme en question, voire une illusion narcissique" (149). She also shifts the emphasis from the female nude to the male nude, with an ironic twist, as the male body is frequently portrayed as unattractive: "Ce fut pour moi une source jamais tarie de perplexité que de constater qu'il ne devait jamais accomplir cet acte élémentaire de confort et d'urbanité, à savoir se brosser les dents. Quand il riait, sa lèvre supérieure levait le rideau sur un emplâtre jaune piqué de noir" (159).

There is therefore a constant interplay in *La Vie* between an intratextual narrator who is in control of the tale and undermines generic conventions, and an extratextual author who, through the autofiction, induces an effect of truth about the narrator's self-constructed sexual identity.

The Ethics of Unconditional Consent

At the end of the book, Catherine makes the confession that, for years, her pleasure had been unsubstantial and "secondary" to men's: "Je n'exagère pas si je dis que, jusqu'à l'âge de trente-cinq ans environ, je n'ai pas envisagé que mon propre plaisir puisse être la finalité d'un rapport sexuel" (209). At first, this appears puzzling—why do it when you don't enjoy it, are not paid for it, or do not feel, for various reasons, obliged or

coerced to do it? This is a paradox. The narrative reverses the notion of consent, a core notion of modern sexual ethics. However, Catherine's unconditional consent is the basis of her morals: "Je suis docile non pas par goût de la soumission, car je n'ai jamais cherché à me mettre dans une position masochiste, mais par indifférence à l'usage que l'on fait des corps" (214). One keyword of the book is "indifférence" (Roger 918). It also connotes with "patience" (208), "tolérance" and "confiance" (170). Most reviewers have misconstrued these moral and emotional attitudes as amorality or self-alienation. Catherine's consent has been on trial as if it called for less authenticity than a male's.

To be "always available" for sex, free of charge, is an intriguing moral position for any "respectable" adult female (45–46, 169). This libertarian transgression flies in the face of all contemporary conventions, feminist and non-feminist alike, which assume that "normally" brought-up females should say "no" to men at one time or other, holding them in check—be it in the office, the *partouze*, the dentist's, and so on—for whatever reason. Thus, Catherine's readiness is provocative. It cuts across ancient dualities policing female sexual behavior in terms of respectability and repression: these conventions dictate that "good" women know how to control their sexual passions as well as men's; they say "no" at the right moment and so on. In contrast, Catherine's sexual philosophy makes it clear that self-respect, like love and friendship with men, has little to do with what Millet the author calls "the banality" of sex ("Les Ecologistes"). For Catherine, sex is a natural need and should never be constrained. This in itself is a banal conception, but its merits are a desacralization of sex and a radical simplicity which are particularly attractive to Catherine's lovers and to Catherine herself. She knows what they want, and her "yes" is unambiguous: she is always acquiescent. The "copain-fille" grows into a "copain-femme," an ambiguous hybrid of self-negation and a Nietzschean passion for singularity, excess, and self-awareness. Moreover, the practical merit of always saying "yes" is to bypass the ambiguities of refusal—when does "no" mean "no", or when might it mean "yes"?—which is at the core of heterosexual relationships, and, allegedly, some rapes. Theoretically, if sex is always available with no need for seduction, then "no" can no longer mean "yes," and maybe dominance and submission are no longer eroticized. Is this why Catherine rarely encounters any physical or symbolic violence, except for one beating (76) and a few mild degradations, such as a man urinating into her mouth (215)? This orgiastic paradigm would remove sex from power relations, and lead to a singular philosophy of sexual freedom: "J'étais portée par la conviction de profiter d'une fantastique liberté. Baiser par-delà toute répugnance, ce n'était pas que se ravaler, c'était, dans le renversement de ce mouvement, s'élever au dessus des préjugés" (161). At the theoretical level, it presents a serious but difficult argument

whose libertarian nature wilfully desacralizes not only sex but, by implication, the symbolic power of sexual consent and sexual violence. *La Vie* demonstrates how a female can transcend

> la métaphore qui fait du sexe l'équivalent de la vie elle-même [qui] se fonde sur l'idée que vous ne pouvez pas garder face à votre sexualité une attitude distante et désinvolte, comme si vous ne vous sentiez pas impliqué personnellement, corps et *âme*, dans vos actes sexuels. (Iacub and Maniglier 288)

However, despite Catherine's libertarian claims, the intratextual truth that confronts the reader is that sex is still connected with possession (of the woman). Men define the conditions in which Catherine's transgressions take place (when, choice of location, partners, sexual positions etc). Catherine rarely fucks but she is fucked, "ballottée et saisie" and "absorbée comme une grenouille par un serpent" (18), "prise" (28), "enfilée jusqu'à la garde" (43), and so on. When Catherine is described as spunk bag, cunt, or arsehole, the language reflects the traditional symbolic violence that remains inherent in this model of consent which continues to fuse dominance with sexuality (MacKinnon 34). Catherine's compliance may in fact serve to save men the trouble of having to assert control over women's availability. Is being "au côté des hommes" yet another way of always pleasing men, of being sexual commodities like prostitutes? Of making sure, in MacKinnon's words, that men are "able to have that and to be able to say when they can have it, to *know* that. That is in itself erotic" (MacKinnon 34)? As Catherine draws pleasure from men's pleasure, her consent replicates the tools pornography uses to present women as acquiescing to certain sexual acts (including rape) and legitimizing these very acts (Scully and Marolla 53).

In addition, the ethics of unconditional consent offers no radical take on female homosexuality. The activities of other female sexual partners are given little significance other than as pale reflections of Catherine's own sexual performance. Unlike the men, women have no voice of their own (94). When Catherine encounters women's bodies she interacts sexually with them "sans pourtant n'avoir jamais attendu qu'aucune d'elles me procure la moindre sensation' but 'pour ne pas contrarier la règle du jeu" (50). She enjoys watching women's bodies: "je me repais de la contemplation des femmes" (51). However, her contemplative gaze fragments their body into orifices and vessels, in the same way as the pornographic male gaze reduces the female to body parts. As a fellow-worker appreciating the skills at stake, she also likes watching women climaxing with men and usually at men's initiative. Having performed oral sex on Léone, her satisfaction derives from doing a good job rather than experiencing any sexual pleasure of her own (51). Thus, when Catherine flirts with lesbianism, her voyeuristic pleasure never departs from the phallocentric gaze of heterosexual pornography.[7]

Therefore, notwithstanding the undermining of the pornographic trope, *La Vie* remains a conventional tale with a narcissistic female take. "Chosifiée" (233), Catherine relishes her own images from mirrors, photos, or casts herself in pornographic films as in the case in *échangistes* rituals (Ley 173–74). In the final pages of the book, she is shot in home movies made by "l'homme à la caméra," her husband (234). Catherine enjoys being a man's creation as well as the fantasies she derives from visual images of herself: "j'étais déjà pleine de la coïncidence de mon corps vrai et de ses multiples images volatiles" (221). It is significant that this is the last line of the book: it recycles the pornographic genre insofar as it transforms the eroticized female body into a knowing subject whose raison-d'être is premised on "multiple" ways of seeing and being seen. Thus, (compared to prostitution) *échangisme* becomes a respectable lifestyle whereby the status of the female swinger shifts from sexual object to sexual subject (Ley 182). However, this recycling of images by the desiring subject is limited since *La Vie* relies on fixed notions of sexual desire. Although Catherine presents herself as "not-fitting," her sexual identity is ultimately understood within the terms of familiar discursive binaries, thus causing a repetition of the same (Pritsch 132).

Beyond Catherine M.

Extratextual author Millet's book has become a point of reference in France and worldwide, possibly for three main reasons other than its paradoxical nature and literary merits: Millet reflects a general shift in female sexual consciousness as well as an awareness of the increased diversity of sexual practices; her media persona is also provocative; and publication coincided with public discussion of sexual morality.

La Vie may draw upon the reader's curiosity about "swinging", since in France this trend has been on the rise recently, and commented upon by the media. By 2003 there were at least 400,000 "swingers" (des Déserts 8), but this remained a predominantly male, minority activity: in 2002 1% of women and 4% of men were "swingers" (Welzer-Lang and Chaker 101–11). Thus, Millet's book reflects this shift but is certainly at odds with most readers' experience: "Tout le monde n'a pas la vie sexuelle de Catherine Millet mais personne n'ose le dire" ("Tout le monde" 10). In this context, *La Vie* may illustrate contemporary fantasies for diverse heterosexual practices:[8] women introduced to serial sex by male partners; women passive, men active; the myth of the insatiable, always consenting woman; the banalization of sex and its exhibitionism; the recycling of collective sexual imagery. Sex as leisure (Pasino; Ley).

In parallel, 1990s France passed a series of laws acknowledging gender and sexuality as political categories in response to issues such as sexual harassment, demands for *parité*, and the recognition of lesbian and gay rights. Such interactions between private and public practices are at the

core of both Millet's book and her politics. As suggested earlier, Millet's legitimacy as a public persona is derived from her autobiographical claims. Thus, Millet's words are tied up to the production of policy-making related to sexual behaviour. When the Raffarin government attempted to criminalize prostitutes, Millet defended the rights of women to prostitute themselves by speaking against the criminalization of sexuality and for relocating consent within the private sphere ("Les Ecologistes"). Together with other well-known public figures, she also signed a manifesto widely publicized by the press that opposed further restrictions (Iacub et al.). So it seems that Millet's words belong to discursive networks of power/knowledge.

Millet's position on prostitution is consistent with the ethics espoused by Catherine: the right to give and receive sexual pleasure should apply to all females, including those who choose to be paid for it. As mentioned earlier, there are ambiguities with this libertarian position which regards both the female "swinger" and the prostitute as free agents, irrespective of the power relations with which their sexual activities are enmeshed. In this context, sexual consent is reduced to a consumerist choice, and thus assumes, in Valverde's words, "that once consent has been established there are no more questions to be asked" (Valverde 203). It is worth noting here, for instance, that *La Vie* never directly raises the issue of (male) violence and domination. By portraying sexual desire as essentially natural and arguing that it should be free from all conventions, paradoxically sexual libertarianism runs the risk of maintaining the status quo. And this could be profoundly worrying.

Notwithstanding serious weaknesses in the paradigm of unconditional consent, *La Vie* may encourage unconventional ways of thinking about sex that are non-normalizing by describing strategies of dislocation and resistance to phallocentric categorization. The interplay between the named author and the narrator, as well as the way in which the book has been marketed, bring a truth-telling effect to the autofiction. This, together with writing on orgiastic sex from a libertarian perspective, is an intrepid undertaking which reflects the body of works by French contemporary women writers. In *La Vie,* the other provocation is that female heterosexuality is detached from the norms of the sacred, producing a form of sexual female consciousness which is both puzzlingly inert and essentially paradoxical, but, in many ways, transgressive. Catherine hovers between self-awareness and self-alienation, submission and control. It is true that these fuzzy boundaries are part of the contemporary framework in which female sexuality is being performed nowadays, as in Cake parties,[9] "swinging" or the intrusion of pornographic images into the bedroom. Indeed, the popularity of *La Vie* may reflect the fact that, more than ever, libertarian models of female sexuality dissolve ethical heterosexual categories once these are forged in and out of the pleasure of

merging object and subject. This is a reassuring view of sexuality which does not blame men for the ambiguities of female consent. Thus, presenting a female speaking position for which insatiable sexual desire is not subversive any more may well be Millet's greatest act of transgression (Segal 1994).[10]

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Notes

[1]Over 350.000 copies have been sold in France since publication in 2001, and 150.000 copies were sold in Germany in less than a year. The book has been translated into 23 languages (Begley; Dagen).

[2]See for instance the work of Alina Reyes, Marie Darrieussecq, Marie Nimier, Christine Angot, Régine Détambel, Catherine Cusset, Virginie Despentes.

[3]The hybridity of the language closely reflects the hybridity of the genres but cannot be discussed in this article given the length constraints.

[4]BBC program *Newsnight*, 24 May 2002.

[5]All other quotations from *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* are subsequently included in brackets in the text.

[6]Other women in *La Vie* are mostly absent from Catherine's circle. When they are present, they are described as more sexually inhibited than Catherine who often plays the role of instructor—as suits the Sadean erotic tradition, in which the heroine is trained to provide guidance to *ingénues*.

[7]She occasionally fantasizes about men ejaculating into women, and this is a source of orgasm (79).

[8]"Blue movies" made at home with camcorders for the Internet (Corrin and Moore) and more diverse heterosexual practices reported in the last 15 years (Badinter 124–32).

[9]In Cake parties "women are encouraged to be as wild as they want to be [and explore] woman-centered sexuality in public" (Krum).

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