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Finishing Touches:
Clothing and Accessories as Tokens of Cruelty and Evil in Rachilde and
Barbey d'Aurevilly

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In decadent fiction, evil is manifested through perversion, a taste for torment, and the creation of sexual, gender, and moral transgressions. In Rachilde's and Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly's works, manifestations of evil and demonstrations of femininity are co-constructed. Each short story in Barbey's *Les Diaboliques* (1874) foregrounds a different *femme fatale* whose beauty is perhaps only rivalled by her talent for cruelty. In each story, these women deceive, kill, and seduce with their good looks, or use their sensuality to captivate their male prey. The three stories that I focus on in this article, 'Le Rideau cramoisi' [The Crimson Curtain], 'Le Plus bel amour de Don Juan' [The Most Beautiful Love of Don Juan], and 'Le Bonheur dans le crime' [The happiness in crime], stage a cross-fertilization between appearance and cruelty that is comparable to another major piece of French decadent fiction, Rachilde's well-known novel *La Marquise de Sade* (1887) in which the protagonist, Mary Barbe, is a young and fashionable misanthrope whose distaste for men and mankind is often sartorially determined. Her peculiar beauty and extravagant garments operate as a repository of tools and weapons that she uses to harm, torture, and humiliate the men around her.

Many of the cruelties performed by the fictional women in these works are linked to their clothing and physical presentation. Through these clothes and accessories, I suggest, we can observe a cruelty leading to a fashion-related understanding of evil. In both Rachilde's and Barbey's works, actions and clothes – what is 'done' and what is 'worn' – mirror each other in their capacity to harm and deceive. The *femmes fatales* in the works of Rachilde and Barbey exploit and subvert the association of beauty with goodness via their appearance and clothing. Through fashion imagery, the equation of female beauty with evil is invoked – on the one hand, fashion reveals

contemporary anxieties related to women and morality and, on the other hand, fashion glamorizes evil. Since the nineteenth-century femininity portrayed in French decadence is associated with glamour, style, and elegance, as much as it is with temptation, sin, and vice, it makes sense that the harmful and the seductive are placed side by side. Female characters' clothes and accessories allow for the merging of beauty with vice, making the sartorial realm the perfect location from which to read the decadent woman as an idol of beauty and perversity.

What Evil?: Hidden evil and cruelty in Rachilde and Barbey

Rachilde's heroine, Mary Barbe, Alberte in Barbey's 'Le Rideau cramoisi', the Countess in 'Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan', and Hauteclair de Savigny in 'Le Bonheur dans le crime', are all tall and thin, and this sets the tone for the appearance of the ideal, fashionable female figure. In Rachilde's and Barbey's works, women stand majestically tall, steeling themselves against the fascinated and envious looks of others. Mary's blossoming into adulthood is a growth process that resembles that of a plant rather than of a person, as we see her waist sprout out of her hips like a stem from its soil: 'sa taille sortait un peu des hanches, [...] les jambes imitait les nattes, elles s'allongeaient, élégantes' [her waist sprouted slightly from the hips, [...] the legs, mimicking the braids, extended out, elegantly] (p. 102).¹ Her long limbs shape her body yet also seem to spring from it, marking her femininity as a set of innate and cultivated lean lines. Similarly, in *Les Diaboliques*, beauty is equated with tall stature: the young girl in 'Le Rideau cramoisi' is described as a 'grande personne' [tall person] and a 'grande fille' [tall girl], for example.² While, in 'Le Plus bel amour de Don Juan', the countess's statuesque and distinguished beauty rivals only that of Hauteclair who possesses a physical advantage that reads as social superiority. She is as tall as her husband and 'royale d'attitude' [royal in attitude] (p. 143). Physical height serves to equate proportion with femininity and beauty – parallels that these characters' apparel and fashion accessories are designed to bolster. In the very first scene of 'Le Bonheur dans le crime', we see the erratic Hauteclair gloved from the tip of her fingers to the bottom of her elbow; a detail that serves to reinforce the idea that flesh

is enhanced by fabric and fashion, an idea that scholars like Justine de Young, Aileen Ribeiro, and Valerie Steele have tied to representations of the feminine in fin-de-siècle art and literature.³ The agility and flexibility of Hauteclairé's athletic body shines through her silhouette-hugging clothes: 'lacée dans ce gilet d'armes de peau de chamois qui lui faisait comme une cuirasse, et les jambes moulées par ces chausses de soie qui en prenaient si juste le contour musclé' [laced in this chamois officer vest that hugged her like a breastplate, and her legs shaped by silk tights that so perfectly adopted their curvature] (p. 173). The straightness of her arms springing out in forward motions during physical activity creates a linear movement, further enhanced by the blade of the sword itself, which produces a seamless connection between the object and the body that wields it. Hauteclairé is an uninterrupted line of physical perfection, where clothing and persona are in complete alignment.

At the end of the nineteenth century, slenderness was a synonym for fashionableness since long, svelte lines hinted at overall equilibrium, balance, and proportion, aspects perceived as alluring in fin-de-siècle fashion. The long and lean feminine silhouette sent both socio-economic and moral messages. The ideal woman, who critic and writer Eugène Chapus described in his *Manuel de l'homme et la femme comme il faut* [Manual for the Correct Man and Woman] (1862), had 'le cou long, les épaules fines, les mains petites, blanches, effilées' [a long neck, thin shoulders, and small, pale, slim hands]. Supposedly, such a woman did not have to work and her spine had not been arched by the hardship of manual labour or the struggles of day-to-day life: 'ce sont là des caractères auxquels s'associent des idées de noblesse d'origine, d'inoccupation, de grandeur et de fortune' [these are characteristics with which are associated ideas of nobility, idleness, grandeur and fortune].⁴ Thinness, as George Vigarello has posited, was to remain physically ideal throughout the second half of the century.⁵ Where it had previously hinted at the physical idleness symptomatic of social privilege, in the last few decades of the nineteenth century slenderness became evocative of youth and athleticism. As Eugen Weber notes,

it also reflected the growing interest in hygiene; the reaction against overeating (now denounced as gastrolatry) and toward greater sobriety in diet; and with this a changing ideal of femininity, from the opulence and pallor of the midcentury to a slimmer, healthier type of beauty, less plump, more sportive.⁶

If thinness was the hallmark of a select few of a certain kind of social standing and financial situation, it was also an embodied quality achieved through self-regulation, not purchased at a store.

Framed by the long vertical shapes of their bodies and tight-fitting clothes, these majestic women of decadent fiction not only tower above their male counterparts, but they glow and shine too. In 'Le Rideau cramoisi', the young woman's cuirasse [breastplate] is 'luisante' [shining] (p. 78). In *La Marquise de Sade*, Mary's celestial corset shines just as bright, 'constellé d'un paillon mordoré à multiples reflets' [studded with a golden motif of multiple reflections] (pp. 212-13), and the countess in 'Le Plus bel amour de Don Juan' is compared to a fairy, clad in a dress with 'un reflet d'argent' [a silver reflection] (p. 120). Several of these women appear to represent notions of celestial majesty and moral purity. The female protagonist's name in 'Le Bonheur dans le crime', for instance, is a combination of the French adjectives 'haute' [high] and 'claire' [light]. The first dress Rachilde's heroine wears is a little Sunday dress whose symbolic whiteness echoes the purity of her namesake, the Virgin Mary, and prefigures her gentle handling of the Christ-like lambs she nurtures with care at a garden party in her childhood years.

The portrayal of women as luminous, pure, and angelic takes on new meaning against the backdrop of the technological advances in the fin de siècle. In his fashion atelier, the celebrity designer Charles Frederick Worth (regarded as the father of haute-couture) conceptualized a showroom called the 'Salon de lumière': the gas lamps he later upgraded to electric ones allowed women to see his garments in an environment that simulated those in which they would be worn if purchased.⁷ While this novelty stemmed from practical concerns it allowed for the symbolism of women as angelic and ethereal beings to remain undimmed: we are to imagine the well-dressed

woman entering a *soirée* like an angel out of a cloud, draped in coloured garments that shimmered in the light.

In the work of Rachilde and Barbey their protagonists are not clearly gendered. In *La Marquise de Sade*, the combination of Mary's first and last name (Barbe, the French word for beard) is an amalgamation of virginity and virility that merges feminine and masculine attributes. This also comes to mind when we think of the 'cuirasse' worn over Mary's dress at the beginning of Chapter Eight and the 'gilet d'armes de peau de chamois' worn by Hauteclair in 'Le Bonheur dans le crime'. Hauteclair also continues to manage the family business after the passing of her father by keeping his fencing school running and teaching the lessons he once gave. Despite entertaining an all-male audience and teaching an almost exclusively male-dominated sport, Hauteclair stands out as the most skilled and talented fencer of them all. Similarly, Mary's interest in anatomy and biology is initially mocked by the men around her but their initial contempt quickly fades when they come to realize her obvious scientific knowledge. In both cases, it is their clothing that both invites and undoes male disdain.

In Barbey's and Rachilde's works appearance is a façade; a front that prevents us from seeing that both authors have already begun preparing for the arrival of evil. If the moral value of righteousness is symbolically couched in physical slenderness and sartorial luxuriance, then their characters appear to be angelic beings. The value given to bodies and clothing reinforces this parallel, so that the lines of the silhouette, as well as the shape, colour, and lustre of the garments, appear to provide a complete picture of the character's personality, interiority, and social status. The reader soon realizes, however, that they have been fooled by such positive connections and harmonious echoes.

Dressed to Kill

From the beginning of the novel, Rachilde foregrounds the cruelty of men. Mary is consistently ignored and denigrated as a child, including by her abusive military father, but it is the slaughtering

of an ox in the opening chapter of the novel that leaves a profoundly traumatic mark on her. Mary realizes from that point onwards that there are two categories of being in the world: those who kill and those who are killed. This binarism, opposing hunter and prey, allows her to create a system of classification that places weak individuals at one end of the spectrum and their strong and cruel counterparts at the other. When she comes to the realization that women are not often in command, she vows to reverse the traditional power dynamic by turning her clothing and accessories into weapons. Garments, then, become what Emily Apter has described as ‘arsenal of beauty secrets’ – a repository of sartorial arms she uses tactically to attack men and their power.⁸ At the beginning of Chapter Eight, Mary asks her seamstress to design her a green dress for a party thrown by her uncle, a literary avatar of the notorious Jean-Martin Charcot.⁹ Her specific indications are not that the dress be ‘de couleur verte’ [green in colour] but rather the ‘couleur de souffrance’ [colour of suffering] (p. 212). While it is not uncommon for an object to lend its name to a colour, both terms are often paired to make the comparison more explicit: ‘bleu ciel’ [sky blue], ‘rouge sang’ [blood red], ‘noir corbeau’ [raven black], and so forth. Here, ‘souffrance’ is employed as a proper chromatic denomination, requiring no further explanation. As an emotion and not a tangible object, suffering is felt rather than seen – suffering has no colour in the material sense, and yet, somehow, we can understand what such a colour would be. This implies that colour-emotion associations may be as much about sensation as they are about sight.

In his chapter on colour and emotions in *New Directions in Color Studies*, David R. Simmons suggests that a strong luminous flux has the potential to evoke a response that may be more than strictly visual – a colour may invoke an associated memory or thought, giving rise to feelings or emotions and, in turn, bodily responses.¹⁰ The visual stimulus represented by Mary’s suffering-coloured gown does indeed provoke reactions and bodily responses, but it is the men who suffer, not her. What is seen – the woman’s green dress – is associated with what the men feel – frustration and suffering. The sensual torment that Mary inflicts on the men with her unapproachable looks and green gown makes the male guests increasingly aware of their own physical frustrations. The

only time the enamoured attendee Paul Richard comes into contact with Mary is through an embarrassing encounter with her dress: ‘en traversant le salon, Paul Richard mit le pied sur la traîne de la robe de soie verte’ [while walking across the living room, Paul Richard stepped on the train of her green silk dress]. Mortified by his blunder, Paul states he would rather ‘recevoir une gifle que d’être présenté à cette femme dont la robe lui faisait peur’ [be slapped across the face than to be introduced to this woman whose dress frightened him] (p. 222). Paul steps on the dress and his fear is due to the perception of the blunder he has made. This emasculates him, and he would rather be slapped than forced to continue witnessing this arresting spectacle of green.

The bottom edge of Mary’s dress is adorned with ‘des feuillages de rosier sans fleurs, criblées de leurs épines’ [flowerless roses, riddled with thorns] that ‘cour[ent]’ [run] along the folds of the skirt (p. 212). Mary comes bearing roses without petals, stripped of all softness and reduced to nothing but green leaves and thorns. Rachilde’s use of the words ‘courir’ [run] and ‘criblées’ [riddled], both belonging to a vocabulary of war, is not incidental here. The dress becomes a metaphorical battleground and Mary’s body, something of a war zone.¹¹ While a battlefield is usually more grey, black, brown, or red than it is green, it is a place where fear and anger often converge, where one is often, as the French saying goes, “vert de rage” [green with rage] or “vert de peur” [green with fear]. Twenty-five years prior to the publication of *La Marquise de Sade*, the British magazine *Punch* published an amusing but intriguing article stating that if ladies continued to wear green dresses at balls, these gatherings would soon become ‘as deadly and destructive as cannonballs’.¹² The journalist’s remark is a reference to the fashionable green dresses of the time, made with a pigment that soon became known as ‘Paris Green’ due to its popularity in the French capital.¹³ Although it produced a fabulously vibrant green, the copper acetate and arsenic trioxide compound was considered a relatively dangerous and toxic pigment, harmful to both the wearer and those who came into contact with them. As Rachilde had worked as a fashion columnist before turning to fiction, writing for provincial journals such as *L’Opinion*, *Le Henri IV*, and *L’Écho de la Dordogne*, there is evidence to suggest that she was aware of the various trends that permeated the

world of fashion. It should come as no surprise, then, that she would dress her dangerous and seductive heroine in a green ensemble to reactivate the familiar cliché of the *femme fatale*, dressed to kill in one of the century's deadliest colours and who is not a fashion victim, but an attractive aggressor, a beautiful bully.

Beauty and the Beast

Like *La Marquise de Sade*, Barbey's 'Le Bonheur dans le crime' begins with a confrontation between humanity and nature. Hauteclair, standing in front of a panther's cage in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, decides to tease the beast whose beauty is said to rival her own. She takes off her glove, slides it through the bars of the cage, and gratuitously 'fouette' [slaps] (p. 143) the muzzle of the animal. This action foreshadows the audacity and nerve with which she teases and eventually vanquishes her husband's ex-wife by disguising herself as a maid, entering her service and fatally poisoning her. Hauteclair slips her glove through the cage and challenges the animal much like she will slip through the cracks to kill her enemy.¹⁴ If the slapping glove makes the sound of a cracking whip, echoing that of the torturer, it is also reminiscent of the one used by wild animal trainers who often wore gloves themselves and cracked a whip to tame and intimidate. The glove, whose particularity is that it leaves no fingerprint, strikes a blow and leaves a mark on all who witness this confrontation. Worn for both practical and aesthetic reasons her glove conceals and reveals the shape of her arm, both covering and exhibiting it. The glove helps to shape our initial perception of her as a beautiful and elegantly dressed woman, but also acts as the principal symbol and accessory of her lack of morals and her cruelty – her glove is both a whip and a sword.¹⁵

As Peter Corrigan has more broadly suggested of clothing, the accessory 'is an object to which things happen but that also provokes things to happen'.¹⁶ In this scene, fabric functions in a similar way, as the rivalry between the 'she-panther' and the real panther is in the texture itself. After jokingly calling the interaction a fight of panther versus panther, which might suggest an equalization of woman and beast, the narrator nonetheless turns to textiles to contrast and oppose

the two: ‘panthère contre panthère! [...] mais le satin est plus fort que le velours’ [panther versus panther! [...] but satin is stronger than velvet] (p. 143). At the time, notes Valerie Steele,

there was [...] a mania for using zoological terms. A dandy (*le lion*) would call his mistress *ma tigresse*, if she were a well-born woman, and *mon rat*, if she was a dancer. His groom was *mon tigre*. One of the novels of the July Monarchy opened with the words: ‘Le lion avait envoyé son tigre chez son rat’.¹⁷

The quip ‘panther versus panther’ could very well be a playful reference to this linguistic trend, especially as it applied to the fashionable circles that Barbey had come into contact with.¹⁸ The most interesting aspect of this scene, however, is that the textiles, traditionally associated with softness, become totemic symbols of a power struggle that disrupts the order and hierarchy of the species. The textile is the catalyst for putting the animal on a par with the human, and it gives Hauteclaira an animal-like status (putting the woman on a par with a beast): ‘la femme, qui avait une robe de cette étoffe miroitante – une robe à longue traîne [...] noire, souple, d’articulation aussi puissante, [...] était comme une panthère humaine, dressée devant la panthère animale qu’elle éclipsait’ [the woman, who sported the dress of such shimmering fabric – a dress with a long train [...] black, supple, with an articulation so powerful, [...] was like a human panther, rising before the animal panther she outshined] (p. 143). The panther is no longer a panther but a piece of velvet, a transformation foreshadowed by the description of the animal as like a piece of fabric:

la panthère est un magnifique échantillon des redoutables productions de son pays. Nulle tache fauve n’étoilait sa fourrure de velours noir, d’un noir si profond et si mat que la lumière, en y glissant, ne la lustrait même pas, mais s’y absorbait, comme l’eau s’absorbe dans l’éponge qui la boit’

[the panther is a magnificent sample of the fearsome products of its country. No tawny stain spangled its black velvet fur, a black so deep and matte that the light, gliding over it, could not make it shine, but rather absorbed it, like water is absorbed in the sponge that soaks it up] (p. 141).

While the panther does not manage to sink its claws into Hauteclaira, Mary Barbe does everything in her power to ‘griffer l’homme’ [scratch mankind]. Her identification with cats begins early, as we see her alternately loved and harmed by her cat, Minoute, her only childhood friend. The terms used by Rachilde to qualify the little girl and her pet are often used interchangeably,

revealing that, much like the scene in 'Le Bonheur dans le crime', there is both a power struggle between species and a 'concomitant hierarchy yielding to a sameness' between female and feline.¹⁹ Mary plays dress-up with Minoute, forcing the animal into human clothes and adorning her with accessories: 'elle finissait par lui mettre un bonnet à elle, garni de broderies, un corsage de sa poupée' [she would end up by putting a bonnet on her, trimmed with embroidery, or one of her doll's bodices] (p. 41). She also tells herself that Minoute will be her constant companion, accompanying her through the reality of an existence where women have tails and cats wear lace: 'Oui, Minoute, nous irons sur la grande montagne, nous aussi, tu auras un bonnet de dentelles et moi j'aurai ta queue de soie jaune!' [Yes, Minoute, we too will climb up the big mountain, you will have a lace bonnet and I will have your yellow silk tail!] (p. 44). Mary's garments and accessories are not part of an attempt to dominate nature, as in the case of Hauteclair, but are worn in such a way as to apply the dynamics of the animal world to society. Because Mary believes that the men of her time are the weak, living proof of what happens to society when the strongest fail, she uses her clothing and accessories to maintain a traditionally appealing feminine exterior while asserting a predatory superiority aimed at punishing the emasculated men around her.

The Devil in the Detail

Barbey uses the adjective 'cramoisi' [crimson] to describe the colour of a curtain the narrator sees hanging from the window of a house while he is on a trip. He catches a glimpse of the curtain from the inside of his car and begins to reminisce about his first sexual experience with a young girl named Alberte, an event that happened in the very same house, many years ago. 'Cramoisi' refers to the deep red shade of coagulated blood and shares a phonetic closeness with the French word 'moisi', meaning mouldy or decomposing. The narrator recalls that during a passionate night of love-making with Alberte, she had fallen dead in his arms. Terrified by this sudden reaction and scared that the girl's clueless parents sleeping in the other room might come to find out, he cuts her open with his blade, draining her blood in the desperate hope of bringing her back to life.²⁰ As

he remembers his past, the silhouette of a woman, that we can only assume to be that of his former lover's ghost, appears behind the curtain. In the same way that the crimson colour encompasses all of the story's symbols (love, passion, blood), the recounting of the story is prompted by the coloured fabric and by the outline of the female silhouette appearing against it. She looks as if she is part of the fabric and the coloured fabric *is* the story. In fact, that the mysterious, inexplicable nature of the events are staged on both sides of the crimson curtain, much like a play would be, reveals that the audience (us mortals, sitting in the car with the narrator) and the performer (the she-devil, a living-dead person inside the house) belong to fundamentally different spheres that will forever remain estranged and separated. Although this may not strike us as evil initially, several historical texts on evil, witchcraft, and demonology attest to this separation of realms as being the very prerogative of the devil. In Stuart Clark's *Thinking with Demons*, he writes that 'the devil was enormously skilled as a deceiver, [...] persuading his victims to hear, sense, see, and touch things that, in truth, were only appearances presented to their deluded senses'. Because the devil creates a realm within a realm, where he can 'make men and women believe that which is not, and imagine that which is to be something else', the coloured fabric, which creates a similar confusion in 'Le Rideau cramoisi', becomes a prominent symbol of the manifestation and presence of evil in the story.²¹

Interestingly, the notions of deception and trickery that are manifest in evil find a correlation in late nineteenth-century art critics' discussions about the instability of colour. As Bettina Bock von Wülffingen has remarked of Lichtenstein's investigations on the matter, 'colour [...] was qualified as a secondary, physical and ornamental phenomenon of lesser value' in art, its sensitivity to light and tendency to darken or fade contributing to its characterization as an overall deceitful and inferior component to art.²² Charles Blanc's infamous suggestion that 'le dessin est le sexe masculin de l'art; la couleur en est le sexe féminin' [drawing is the masculine in art; colour is the feminine] comes to mind here.²³ That which could be both real and a diabolical illusion (the silhouette of young Alberte) appears through the medium of both textiles (the curtain) and colour

(red), ensuring that femininity, colour, and fabric create a triad of deceit. In fact, this triad brings us back to fabric and clothing, for just as certain artists were concerned with the ‘serious work’ of line and drawing rather than colour, so too, says Richard Thompson Ford, were ‘tailors of the time concerned with “serious work” of fit and construction rather than fashionable decoration’. Men, he continues, were ‘not “fashion conscious” but “well dressed” – a description that suggested not vanity but civility’.²⁴

There is a striking difference between the clothes of Alberte’s father and her own structured, elongated attire as additional signifiers of evil in the text. The evidence of the father’s bad taste in clothes (he wears a green frock coat under a white waistcoat) perplexes the narrator, who wonders how such an ugly man could be related to the beautiful creature that is Alberte. Although the man telling the story, the Vicomte de Brassard, is now old, his vitality and elegance have remained relatively unfaded since his years as a captain under the Restoration – a role he is said to have taken up a few years after meeting Alberte and her father. One might suppose, then, that the young Brassard’s encounter took place at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the frock coat was still very much in vogue. The coat worn by Alberte’s father is therefore not so much a sign that the man is out of style as it is a plausible indicator that he simply fails to be stylish, preferring instead one of the most basic pieces of bourgeois clothing of the time. The father’s unattractive, unsophisticated, and practical attire accurately mirrors his boring, unimpressive, yet harmless and virtuous, nature.

Alberte’s dress on the other hand is an exquisitely tailored Spencer ‘de soie verte à franges’ [of green fringed silk] (p. 78) and a flattering white skirt. It makes her stand out. Although they look entirely different, father and daughter are actually wearing the same colours. Where the kind, helpful, and affectionately dull father wears white on his chest, as a testament to his immediately recognizable virtuousness, innocence, and purity, the young woman’s white garment runs the risk of being trampled or stepped on as it covers the bottom of her silhouette. Alberte’s colour scheme, in a sense, turns her into her father’s mirror image, casting back an upside-down reflection in the

spirit of what Barbey said of the fictional women of his book: ‘Comme le Diable, qui était un ange aussi, mais qui a culbuté, – si elles sont des anges, c’est comme lui, – la tête en bas, le reste en haut!’ [Like the Devil, who too was an angel but has tumbled, – if they are angels, they are like him, – head upside down, the rest facing upward!] (p. 51).

The ambiguity of the colour green, worn by father and daughter alike, is a notable detail. It has been best examined by the art historian Michel Pastoureau whose book, *Vert, Histoire d’une couleur* [Green, History of a colour], analyses the mutually incompatible tropes and conflicting symbolical elements associated with green through the ages. He states that: ‘symbole de vie, de chance et d’espérance d’un côté, attribut du désordre, du poison, du diable et de toutes ses créatures de l’autre’ [on the one hand it is a symbol of life, luck and hope, and on the other an attribute of disorder, poison, the devil and all his creatures].²⁵ For a long time, green was made by mixing blue and yellow dyes and, because yellow dyes were neither lightfast nor durable, they were particularly prone to discolouration. This made green a chemically unstable colour. Superstition still has it that it is bad luck for performers to wear or be gifted green-coloured items of clothing.²⁶ As a volatile colour, green came to be associated with the unsteady and the frivolous, with what could dissipate and change without warning: youth, luck, hope, fortune, and even love.²⁷ Due to its chemical properties and accumulated symbolic associations (not to mention the contemporary stigmas surrounding absinthe consumption), green became tinged with danger, anxiety, and even suspicion.²⁸

Skin Deep

The symbolic relevance of colour is also a key element in understanding the manifestations of evil in Barbey’s ‘Le Plus bel amour de Don Juan’. In contrast to the vibrant descriptions of the Countess’s brightly-coloured wardrobe, her daughter’s skin tone catches our attention. The little girl is the colour of burnt topaz, her ‘bistré’ (p. 129) skin suggesting the yellowish-brown shade of a flesh marked perhaps by a type of sickness.²⁹ The narrator, an archetype of Don Juan, is disliked

by the little girl, and her reluctance to engage with him is to be understood by the reader as a form of jealousy: the man, as an undesired father figure, might steal her mother away from her. The little girl, we are told, is devoutly committed, almost to an extreme. Under her clothes, she wears scapulars – small rectangles of cloth connected by cords – that have the purpose of protecting her from sin: ‘Elle tordait autour de son maigre corps toutes sortes de scapulaires et se plaquait sur la poitrine, [...] autour de son cou bistré, des tas de croix, de bonnes vierges et de Saints-Esprits’ [She twisted all sorts of scapulars around her skinny body and placed piled of crosses, good virgins and Holy Spirits [...] around her yellowish neck] (p. 129). Though soft and made of fabric, her scapulars are arranged in a peculiar way, wrapped and twisted around her body like self-administered lashes of purifying mortification. Like Christ on the cross, the little girl is restrained and immobilised, her inner thoughts and spiritual devotion seemingly trapped onto her flesh. That the narrator uses ‘tordre’ [twist] to describe not the body of the little girl but the religious objects meant to ward off evil suggests that their purpose might have in fact already failed. The protective armour of religious objects seems faulty because it has already been contorted, deformed and bent out of shape by the forces of evil: worn so tightly against the flesh in hopes of keeping evil at bay, these accessories bear the symbolic shape of the devil himself, in whom everything (body, tail, actions, words) is also twisted. The sartorial markers of her pious devotion are thus not so much preventive as they are curative. And even so, they might already come a little too late.

While we expect Don Juan’s ‘plus bel amour’ to be the Countess, we learn that it is, in fact, this religious little girl. The story reaches a disturbing climax when she confesses to her priest that, despite her immense reticence and hatred of Don Juan, he has impregnated her. The horror is threefold. Carrying the baby of an older man is a harrowing experience for the young girl, but the self-loathing that comes from feeling responsible is even worse. The most troubling aspect of all, however, is the possibility that this pregnancy is a self-fulfilling prophecy, the result of her forbidden desire for this man. Other than pressing his hand lightly on the child’s forehead, as a father would, Don Juan never seems to touch the little girl. And yet, if we turn our attention back

to the scapulars for a moment, we might be led to believe otherwise. If Don Juan is indeed innocent, how could he know about the little girl's jewellery and point it out in such specific terms? Even if he was aware of the way scapulars are worn in the Christian tradition (which does not correspond to the way the little girl styles them anyway), his acknowledgement of their specific placement on the child's prepubescent body suggests he probably saw her unclothed. Our attention is drawn to the surface in order to invite us to uncover what lies beneath: evil lives in the religious regalia, pointing to the impossibility of goodness even having its own symbol, since evil is already there.

The jewellery worn by the little girl is meant to protect her from evil, even though she is described by her priest and her mother as a model of incorruptibility, and so the protective jewellery is necessary so that she retains this innocence. As Barbey notes in his 'Préface', 'Le Diable est comme Dieu. [...] Malebranche disait que Dieu se reconnaissait à l'emploi des moyens les plus simples. Le Diable aussi' [The Devil is like God. [...] Malebranche said that God was recognizable through the use of the simplest of means. So too is the Devil] (p. 50). In 'Le Plus bel amour de Don Juan', the presence of evil is indicated through the child's necessity to repent for 'something'. This operates as a secret confession of sin which is, in turn, materializes in sartorial objects of devotion. Although they do not initially appear to be so, the scapulars could be read as a kind of disguise – a superficial layer of protection hinting at a darkness growing from within, evoking the familiar misogynistic analogy between garb as trickery and women as the treacherous daughters of Eve.³⁰ In this story, Eve could well be the little girl's mother; her clothes and accessories, though beautiful and luminous, are potential evidence of the wearer's own diabolical potential. Other than the train of her dress that 'figurait assez bien la queue de serpent' [resembled a snake's tail quite well] (p. 120), the large ruby hanging from a chain across her forehead in a *ferronnière* style is compared to her 'yeux incendiaires dont la flamme empêchait de voir la couleur' [fiery eyes whose flame prevented the colour from being seen] (p. 125). The two fiery eyes connected to the red ruby on her forehead by way of the head-piece evokes, if not a cabalistic third eye, at least a potentially

derisive inversion of the Holy Trinity.³¹ In the same way that prevention, penance, and punishment are confusingly intermingled on the body of the little girl, the mother's sartorial choices create the illusion of her body as a place where goodness as sartorial value and evil as adornment coexist. Evil appears to run in the family – a hereditary trait passed down from the mother to offspring.

Conclusion

My study of Rachilde and Barbey has aimed to reveal two things: first, that the authors' crafting of evil involves an intentional focus on topics associated with fashion and clothing (the symbolism of thin and lofty feminine silhouettes, the allegorical charge contained in the shapes and cuts of garments, and the symbolic relevance of colour); and second, that selected sartorial elements in the stories discussed emerge as instruments of evil (the glove as sword and weapon, the green gown as a weapon of mass [masculine] destruction, and the scapular as the locus of goodness contaminated by evil). Overall, my analysis of *La Marquise de Sade* and *Les Diaboliques* has argued for the inseparability of the sartorial and the cruel in both texts, shedding additional light on the inherent symbolic duality at work in decadent fiction that other scholars have explored against the backdrop of gender (Jean de Palacio in *Figures et formes de la décadence*), semiology (Naomi Schor in *Reading in Detail*), politics (Vladimir Jankélévitch in 'La Décadence'), or aesthetics (Bram Dijkstra in *Idols of Perversity*). As I hope to have shown, the cruel deeds and desire of the characters to inflict harm on others are symbolised through clothing and accessories. In Barbey's stories, there are as many types of she-devils as there are manifestations of evil and, as a result, the reader is presented with a range of methods, strategies, and schemes of cruelty that can be understood through sartorial parallels. Deceit and revenge are manifested through sartorial disguise, through Hauteclaire's satin gloves and the poisonous allure of Mary's green dress. Alberte, a likely reincarnation of the devil on earth, is revealed by the suggestive power of the red curtains and the inverted colour schemes of the dress of Alberte and her father. In 'Le Plus bel amour de Don Juan', the cloth scapulars, wrapped tightly around the little girl's flesh become part of her skin,

tying her righteous intention for piety to the shapes that striate her body. The fabric accessory designed to ward off evil becomes a paradoxical sign of its irrefutable presence, and the innocent flesh of the pious child becomes a surface to which evil has attached itself. As this article has aimed to illustrate, the presence of cruelty and the intention of evil in relation to women, and to the femme fatale in particular, are manifested in a number of subtle ways in decadent texts; they are symbolised through women's fashion and accessories not only through the clothes they wear but through their colour, texture, and shape.

¹ Rachilde, *La Marquise de Sade* (1887; Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 102. All translations are mine. Subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the body text.

² Jules Barbey D'Aureville, *Les Diaboliques* (1874; Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1999), pp. 78-80. All translations are mine. Subsequent page references are given parenthetically in the text.

³ See Justine de Young's *Fashion in European Art: Dress and Identity, Politics and the Body, 1775-1925* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) and her contribution on fashion and nineteenth-century portraiture to *Impressionism, Fashion & Modernity*, ed. by Gloria Groom (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Aileen Ribeiro's *Dress and Morality* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1986) and *Clothing Art: the Visual Culture of Fashion, 1600-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); and Valerie Steele's *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Berg, 1998).

⁴ Eugène Chapus, *Manuel de l'homme et de la femme comme il faut* (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1862), p. 65.

⁵ See Georges Vigarello, *Les métamorphoses du gras* (Paris: Seuil, 2010).

⁶ Eugen Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 99.

⁷ For more on Charles Frederick Worth, see Valerie Steele's 'Édouard Manet – Nana', in *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity*, ed. by Gloria Groom (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

⁸ Emily Apter, 'Weaponizing the "Femme Fatale": Rachilde's Lethal Amazon *La Marquise De Sade*', *Fashion Theory*, 8.3 (2004), 251-65 (p. 255).

⁹ Otherwise known as the 'Napoleon of Neuroses' by his peers, Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) is remembered today as the most prominent figure in nineteenth-century neurology. Charcot's research was predominantly conducted on the topic of hysteria, treating and working with patients at the Hôpital de la Pitié-Salpêtrière in Paris. Charcot conducted weekly 'Leçons du mardi', in which a large group of male attendees would discuss hysterical female behaviour or conduct practical research on female patients. Rachilde's staging of a single woman amidst a male group of scientists is not incidental and recalls Pierre Aristide André Brouillet's painting *Une leçon clinique à la Salpêtrière*, dating from the same year of *La Marquise de Sade*'s publication. For more on Charcot, hysteria, and women, see Janet Beizer. *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie. Charcot et l'Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Paris: Macula, 2003); Martha N. Evans, *Fits and Starts: A Genealogy of Hysteria in Modern France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Asti Hustvedt. *Medical Muses: Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

¹⁰ David R. Simmons, 'Color and Emotion', in *New Directions in Color Studies*, ed. by Carole P. Biggam, et al., (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2011).

¹¹ Previously in the novel, a mock tournament designed to rally patriotic sentiment and celebrate the French military is organized in Mary's town. She wears a purple dress for the occasion and, as Apter notes, 'preside[s] over the entertainment [...], cast as the "spirit of war" in a costume ordered from a Paris couturier' (p. 251).

¹² *Punch*, 8 November 1862, quoted in Alison Matthews David, *Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) – 'Now if [these ladies] persist in wearing arsenic dresses, a ball will be as deadly and destructive as a cannonball, and nearly everyone who dances will be food for [arsenic] powder' (p. 91).

¹³ For more on arsenic green and its popularity in nineteenth-century Paris, see David's *Fashion Victims*, John Emsley's *Elements of Murder: A History of Poison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and Alison Matthews David's 'Tainted Love: Oscar Wilde's Toxic Green Carnation, Queerness, and Chromophobia', in *Colors in Fashion*, ed. by Jonathan Faiers and Mary Westerman Bulgarella (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 127-42.

¹⁴ To get into her role as chambermaid, she wears the ‘costume des grisettes de la ville de V’ [costume of the grisettes of the city of V] and styles her hair with the ‘long tire-bouchons de cheveux tombant le long des joues [...] que les prédicateurs appelaient, dans ces temps-là, des serpents’ [long corkscrew-shaped locks of hair falling alongside the cheeks [...] that the preachers, back in those days, used to call snakes] (p. 161). Because the image of the Luciferian snake converges with that of the Medusa, Barbey seems to suggest that through her disguise, the woman does not simply conform to one representation of feminine evil but rather combines an entire set of them, much like a panoply of costume accessories and trinkets.

¹⁵ Even a small detail – the twelve buttons adorning her glove – reads as a mocking recuperation of the number of Christ’s apostles; ‘hidden’ in Hauteclair’s clothes, the buttons come to symbolize a sacrilegious counterfeit of divine work, especially as it manifests itself slyly, almost invisibly on the fabric. There is wealth of literature on the glove – as weapon, as love object, as metonym for the female body, particularly the kid glove in Renaissance visual and material culture. For this article, however, it is important to note the use of gloves and glovedness in Gabriele D’Annunzio’s *Il piacere* [*Pleasure*] (1889). See, for example, Lidia Hwa Soon Anchisi, ‘Bodies in Bits and Pieces: Towards a Feminist Re-Reading of Gabriele D’Annunzio’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, New York University, 2001).

¹⁶ Peter Corrigan, ‘Interpreted, Circulating, Interpreting: The Three Dimensions of the Clothing Object’, in *The Socialness of Things: Essays on the Socio-Semiotics of Objects*, ed. by Stephen Harold Riggins (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1994), pp. 435-50 (p. 435).

¹⁷ Steele, p. 65.

¹⁸ Barbey is most commonly known for his views on masculine style which he discusses in his 1843 essay ‘Du Dandysme et de George Brummell’, but he also wrote for *Le Moniteur de la mode*, a relatively popular ladies’ magazine.

¹⁹ I borrow this expression from Robert Ziegler’s *Asymptote – An Approach to Decadent Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. 148.

²⁰ Passion-red meets blood-red throughout the story and it is a detail that presents itself as significant from the very beginning for it is after he sees the colour of the crimson curtain that the narrator begins to recount the past.

²¹ Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), p. 166.

²² Bettina Bock von Wülffingen, *Science in Color: Visualizing Achromatic Knowledge* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), p. 36.

²³ Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des Arts du Dessin. Architecture, Sculpture, Peinture* (Paris: Renouard, 1867), p. 23.

²⁴ Richard Thompson Ford, *Dress Codes: How the Laws of Fashion Made History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021) p. 118.

²⁵ Michel Pastoureau, *Vert, Histoire d’une couleur* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2013), p. 9.

²⁶ In nineteenth-century French theatre culture, it is said that Molière was wearing green when he died. As John Hutchings notes, it was also commonly believed that ‘during the era of green-tinged limelight, invented in 1826 and used until the beginning of the twentieth century, an actor wearing green would not stand out well’ from his peers. ‘Folklore and Symbolism of Green’, *Folklore*, 108 (1997), 55-63 (p. 60).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Due to the widespread consumption of absinthe – the green, anise-flavoured aperitif – happy hour came to be known in Paris as ‘l’heure verte’ [the green hour] and entire districts of the city were said to smell of the drink. For more on absinthe, see Marie-Claude Delahaye, *L’Absinthe: vert et histoire* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1983); Pierre Kolaire, *Absinthe. Précis de la troublante* (Paris: L’Ampoule, 2004); and Jad Adams, *Hideous Absinthe: A History of the Devil in a Bottle* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004).

²⁹ The French word “bistre” refers to the yellowy-brown skin, like the circles beneath tired, worn, ill eyes. See ‘Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan’, pp. 127-29.

³⁰ Bram Dijkstra has best explored the manifestations of this relationship in the context of nineteenth-century visual culture and literature in *Idols of Perversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). For more, see also Patrick Bade’s *Femme fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women* (New York: Mayflower Books, 1979) and Jean de Palacio’s *Figures et formes de la décadence* (Paris: Éditions Séguiet, 1994).

³¹ When we initially see her, she is sitting at a table, ‘comme un juste à la droite de Dieu, à la droite du comte de Ravila, le dieu de cette fête’ [as a righteous man at the right hand of God, at the right hand of the Count of Ravila, the god of this festival] (p. 120). This supper, counting twelve female guests, becomes what Pierre Glaudes has described as ‘un détournement parodique de la Cène’ [a parodic twist on the Last Supper]. See *Esthétique de Barbey d’Aurevilly* (Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier, 2009).