

**Ignited Curiosity and Failed Dreams:
Nineteenth-Century Masculine Fears of Females in Guy de Maupassant's "Une
Aventure Parisienne" and "Le Signe"**

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(ABSTRACT)

Guy de Maupassant's short stories "Une Aventure Parisienne" and "Le Signe" tell the tales of two female protagonists caught by curiosity. In "Une Aventure Parisienne," a notary's wife (the *petite provinciale*) leaves her home and ventures to Paris in search of an affair with a celebrity. After finding one and sleeping with him, the *petite provinciale* becomes disillusioned with her fantasy: she returns home deflated from the realization that her celebrity snores and drools just as her husband does. The high-society protagonist in "Le Signe," Madame de Grangerie, is also disenchanted with her interest in imitating the gesture of a prostitute she notices across the street. When faced with a male client she frantically gives in to what she has offered. Needing to reaffirm her identity as an "honnête femme," she solicits advice from her friend on what to do if the client returns. While both protagonists do not face legal punishment for their affairs, they do confront personal consequences. The *petite provinciale's* dreams about celebrities burst and Madame de Grangerie's reputation appears at risk. Maupassant not only comments on feminine curiosity and adultery, but also on the internal effects such actions could potentially have on women of his time. In this thesis I argue that even though both protagonists act on their curiosities and flirt with private/public boundaries, the *petite provinciale* and Madame de Grangerie are ultimately presented through masculinized lenses. I also show how discursive nineteenth-century traditions of a limited view of female sexuality are reconstructed in Maupassant's tales.

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In 1887 with the publication of *Boule de Suif*, Guy de Maupassant's career as an *écrivain conteur français* was set in motion. He quickly became known for his novels, short stories, and dabblings in theater, best revered for his clear writing style and impeccable ability to tell a story.¹ However, early in his career sharp criticism concerning his choice of "sujets scabreux" alerted critics to his unrelenting resolution to write about whom and what he pleased even if deemed unworthy and risqué.² Even when writing the tales of two seemingly classic bourgeois characters, Maupassant confirmed his critics' observation that his protagonists often challenge and shock the decency of his reading public.

In his stories "Une Aventure Parisienne" (1881) and "Le Signe" (1886), the principal characters question social perceptions of what it means to be good, *honnêtes* wives through their curiosity and adulterous affairs.³ Though not his most famous nor most-read, these tales illuminate the complex relationship between fiction and actual life, offering a satirical commentary on bourgeois and high-society life in France.⁴ The main characters suggest that in spite of outward appearance women may easily succumb to their own inappropriate desires and hide the evidence of such passions, leaving their husbands in the dark. Yet, as argued in this study, despite the incongruence between appropriate social role and shocking actions committed by these protagonists, Maupassant's "Une Aventure Parisienne" and "Le Signe" ultimately affirm their surrounding late nineteenth-century assumption that female curiosity and sexuality need to be controlled. Therefore, these tales offer warnings to both male and female readers of Maupassant's time about the dangers of feminine curiosity and desire.

The resulting challenge to my assertion that Maupassant's fictional stories reconstruct actual Third Republic perceptions about women parallels the classic literary debate between authorial intent and textual influence.⁵ Did Maupassant intend to support the contemporary attitudes concerning women or did his text make these reflections for him, without his awareness? Did he attempt to distance himself from his narrative voice or to overtly weld his personal opinions to those of his narrators and characters? Overlap of personal beliefs and those embedded in the inescapable ideology of one's time inevitably occur in any work, whether fictional or not.⁶ In the case of Maupassant, his critics considered him to be part of the Naturalist literary camp, asserting that his writing style and direct observation skills embodied the qualities of a true Naturalist writer, able to depict people just as they are. Whether or not Maupassant intended to portray actual women or to embellish what he saw or imagined as reality is secondary to what the text itself claims about women. However, if his critical public viewed him as a Naturalist than his reading public might also have found similarities between their lives and those of his Third Republic French characters.⁷

Several of Maupassant's critics claimed that since his observations appeared so objective, he was able to distance his own morals from those of his characters, offering no judgments on their actions.⁸ Maupassant even wrote that he despises authors who preach to their readers: he prefers characters who come alive themselves.⁹ While I agree that the actions of his protagonists (as studied in "Une Aventure Parisienne" and "Le Signe") are not directly presented as being good or bad, the overarching narrative perspective in both of these stories is one which dichotomizes and limits female freedom.¹⁰ Though Maupassant may not have believed what his narrators told about

their female subjects, he did not avoid ideologies of his time period when painting the portrait of curious women who in the end wind up unsatisfied and disappointed. The fact that critics pointed to the realistic trait of his work also supports my claim that the dominant nineteenth-century views are reinforced in his stories despite what Maupassant personally thought about the issues he raised.

What, then, is this dominant nineteenth-century attitude about female curiosity and sexuality which Maupassant's "Une Aventure Parisienne" and "Le Signe" reconstruct? Nineteenth-century medical, religious, political, legal, and social discourses proliferated the claim that men and women were distinctly different.¹¹ While this in itself is not a negative assertion, when applied as the measure of all social interactions consequences were severe for women. The logic of unequal dichotomy based on the sexes asserts that if males and females are so different then one sex will "naturally" rise to dominate the other. The sexes were also divided spatially by the public/private separation which emphasized their differences.¹² Men were expected to rule over the public sphere consisting of the non-familial outside world, work time, impersonal relationships, distance, illegitimate sexuality, rationality and efficiency, immorality, artificial life and insincerity, and division and dissonance. Women were thought to possess opposing characteristics marked by leisure time, home and family, personal relationships, proximity, love and legitimate sexuality, emotion and irrationality, morality, natural life and sincerity, and warmth and harmony.¹³

However, this sexual divide affecting all areas of life was not as readily accepted as assumed: women who ventured into the public space and took on seemingly masculine duties, roles, and traits were just "invisible" to the dominant recorders of

history of their time.”¹⁴ Especially towards the end of the century, women were starting to enter public life more and to take on political and social responsibilities. Yet, on the other hand, even early feminists at the *fin-de-siècle* were torn over declaring distinction or sameness between men and women.¹⁵ For the bourgeoisie this debate raised the issue of where women should be allowed: were bourgeois wives supposed to remain in the home or should they be allowed to make a life outside of the borders of domestic life?¹⁶

A multiplicity of perceptions about women surfaced during Third Republic France, coming from both men and women. Surrounded by this encroaching debate between difference and sameness, Maupassant commented on the controversy over the “woman question” and the proper role for married women. In “Une Aventure Parisienne” and “Le Signe” he shows the female struggle with curiosity and desire which could have been cultivated by bourgeois ennui and by strictly separated spheres. His female protagonists both act out their passions and “enter” public space, approaching the borders of their private spheres.¹⁷ By pushing the limits imposed on them by their roles as wives, these characters take on masculinized traits, thus, offering a challenge to the rigid schism between the sexes.¹⁸ Yet, “Une Aventure Parisienne” and “Le Signe” do not manage to bridge the dichotomous female/male relationship. The narrators in each tale stress the femininity of curiosity and desire by portraying characters who exude the feminized qualities of irrationality and emotionality, suggesting that women are more prone than men to falling to curiosity. In the end, Maupassant’s female characters realize that they can be no happier outside of marriage than within it, offering a pessimistic view of the separation of the sexes.

By showing that women could take on masculine traits and even enter into public space in these two stories, Maupassant reinforces the fear of female emancipation from the male authority which dominated the French social order. After the Revolution this fear was heightened since women gained freedoms such as the right to divorce.¹⁹ However, with Napoleon came a return to nostalgic and traditional roles concerning the sexes. His Civil Code removed the rights which had been gained by women in the 1790s and reinforced the “metaphysics of the nineteenth-century [which was] nourished by concepts of duality, relation and unity in opposite poles.”²⁰ Throughout the long nineteenth-century, France’s political system oscillated between a Monarchy and a Republic, placing stress on the relationship between the ruling class and the people. The private/public divide between the sexes reflected the ruling class dominance of placing men legally and socially above women. Divided gendered space started with the religious model of God ruling over his people reflected in the Monarch ruling over his kingdom. This relationship also mirrored the role between men and women and a husband and his wife. If a wife were to commit adultery, then, she could potentially put her marriage and the social order in jeopardy.²¹ Therefore, when describing the affairs of two married protagonists, Maupassant questions the entire social structure of men ruling over women. In “Une Aventure Parisienne” and “Le Signe,” Maupassant explores the larger social concern surrounding this male/female relationship and its role in marriage.²² Even though he wrote in an essay that bourgeois adultery was pardoned and excused during this time period, by writing about it once again in short stories he reinforces its continued significance and the fear it could have instilled in the imaginations and lives of his contemporaries.²³

In order to show how “Une Aventure Parisienne” and “Le Signe” highlight contemporary late nineteenth-century assumptions and attitudes concerning female sexuality and curiosity I analyze the tales based on three themes: curiosity and emotionality, the public/private divide, and loss of control. First, I explain how the narrative perspective in each story appears as masculine and thus, in opposition to the point of view of their female protagonists. Through this masculinized telling, both principal characters, the *petite provinciale* in “Une Aventure Parisienne” and Madame de Grangerie in “Le Signe,” are presented as curious, overly emotional, and irrational. In the Second Chapter, I demonstrate how these characters could have represented typical bourgeois wives of Third Republic France. This section also reveals how these seemingly typical wives push acceptable social boundaries and flirt with the public world, taking on the masculine sphere. Lastly, in Chapter Three, I explicate the overarching lesson of these stories: though initially in control of their actions, females who act on curiosity and desire eventually fall victim to disappointment and dissatisfaction when their desires are realized.

Chapter One

Narrative Perspective and the Curious, Emotional Sex

Even though Maupassant's "Une Aventure Parisienne" and "Le Signe" center on female characters, these stories ultimately confirm the late nineteenth-century assumption that women needed protection from their own unruly curiosities, desires, and overly emotional behaviors. In this chapter, I show how the narrative perspective in "Une Aventure Parisienne" reinforces the masculine fear that curious women are dangerous. Though not directly referenced in the story the epitomized curious character Eve parallels the main character in "Une Aventure Parisienne". I also illustrate how the presentation of a frantic, nervous, and unstable female protagonist in "Le Signe" reconstructs the view that females are more emotional than males.¹

The Curious Woman

Guy de Maupassant wrote that adultery has always been the main preoccupation of societies and of writers.² His short story "Une Aventure Parisienne" reiterates this theme through the tale of a married provincial woman in search of an illicit Parisian experience.³ Literary critic Anne-Lise Blanc comments that at first glance this story seems a hackneyed one: used-up and even boring to readers who do not look beneath the surface of the tale.⁴ A quick survey of canonical French works starting with Beroul's *Tristan and Iseut* to perhaps the most famous, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, confirms the validity of Maupassant and Blanc's statements: depicting an adulterous affair is far from unique or original.

“Une Aventure Parisienne” offers more to its readers than an entertaining read about a female character who commits adultery. In fact, while this story can be classified as one of “dangerous liaisons,” it focuses more on the masculine narrator’s perception of the protagonist and her embodiment of curious women than on the sexual act itself.⁵ In my reading, I show how the narrator’s authoritative male voice shadows the overarching ideology concerning female sexuality in nineteenth-century France: curious women are dangerous and need to be controlled.⁶ I also relate how the main protagonist of “Une Aventure Parisienne” mirrors the classic Biblical example of *the* curious woman Eve, as also traditionally interpreted from a masculine viewpoint.⁷ This study, therefore, illuminates the literary connections between two female characters and shows how the depictions of them promote the prevailing Third Republic attitude that female curiosity is potentially harmful.⁸

Like Eve, the main protagonist in “Une Aventure Parisienne” experiences an intense curiosity which causes her to challenge her proper position under male domination. By venturing into Paris to experience one tantalizing night with a celebrity, the *petite provinciale* of Maupassant’s tale rejects her role as a bourgeois wife. Similarly, Eve defies her position of subservience in relation to God by trespassing against his command to avoid the forbidden apple.⁹ What results from their quests to quench their curiosity is not what these characters expected. The *petite provinciale* is left unsatisfied with her affair and Eve is banished from Paradise. Furthermore, neither protagonist completely breaks free from male authority: the *petite provinciale* returns home with tears of disappointment and Eve remains forever submitted to God and Adam’s control.¹⁰

When the stories are read in this manner, their lessons and implications are clear: women easily succumb to curiosity yet are unable to fulfill their desires without disappointing consequences. Thus, it can be inferred that women need to be controlled in order to protect them from inevitable disappointment. For the male characters involved in the stories there exists the possibility of male deception and defeat. Adam is misled by Eve and thus is also punished by God while the husband in “Une Aventure Parisienne” unknowingly becomes a cuckold. Therefore, the repercussions of curiosity places more at risk than the woman’s own contentment. Based on the social, legal, political, and religious importance placed on the husband and wife relationship, these characters could potentially jeopardize the social order and stability.¹¹ In order to assuage this nineteenth-century male fear of destabilization, regulations were established to help secure proper and seemingly natural societal structure: Napoleon’s Civil Code punished women more severely than men for adultery; medical views suggested women with sexual problems suffered from hysteria; religious beliefs placed husbands as the authorities of wives; and police ordinances controlled prostitutes through registration.¹² The environment in which “Une Aventure Parisienne” was written, then, nourished the negative portrayal of what could happen when women of the time acted in the same manner as Eve.

The dominant perspective in Maupassant’s story belongs to the masculine narrator whose initial and rather presumptuous remarks qualify the actions of the protagonist whose story he recounts. Ironically, even though the narrator distances himself from his female subject of inquiry, he still assumes an omniscient stance concerning women. In the first paragraph he sets out to study what he claims to be the

most “aigu” (“keen”) of emotions: a woman’s curiosity. Rather than describe curiosity as non-gendered and affecting both men and women, the narrator considers women to be more inclined to experience this intense, piercing, cutting, and penetrating sensation. His choice of “aigu” qualifies his standpoint on curiosity: it is potentially dangerous (sharp, penetrating, cutting) and even lethal to those men who become the woman’s victims. The narrator explains that when a man is caught in the deceptive game of a curious woman on a mission to fulfill her desire, he may lose himself as well, throwing himself either at her feet or even off a bridge.¹³

Throughout the paragraph, the narrator explains how this piercing feeling can cause a woman to commit hysterical and irrational behaviors:¹⁴ “Une femme, quand sa curiosité impatiente est en éveil, commettra toutes les folies, toutes les imprudences, aura toutes les audaces, ne reculera devant rien” (761). In this one sentence the narrator not only claims that a woman will go to all means to satisfy her curiosity; he also transforms her into an object of her feelings, dominated by her “impatiente” curiosity. Through syntax, sentence structure, and verb choice, the narrator repeatedly reinforces this assertion. First, the woman’s curiosity is described with “impatiente,” characterizing curiosity with its common definitions of “ardent,” “bouillant,” “nerveux,” “vif,” “avide,” and “désireux.” Each definition of curiosity emphasizes the irrational and agitated state of a woman under its control. Curiosity, though, may be described as simply wanting to learn and to inform oneself, void of the sort of eagerness and hysterical qualification “impatiente” suggests. However, the narrator assumes that all curiosity in this case must be “impatiente” and will push each woman in its grip to similar actions.

Written in the future tense, the verbs “commettra,” “aura,” and “reculera,” indicate the narrator’s certainty that a woman will do anything to satisfy her curiosity. While the result of this “aigu” emotion may be the same for all women (being overtaken by their desire and going to all means to satisfy it despite responsibility and rationality), the possessive adjective “sa” suggests that even though curiosity may start as a common feeling--“la curiosité chez la femme” (761)--it is triggered by different things for different women. Additionally, from the second sentence the reader learns that curiosity is merely ammunition for the desires and dreams already residing within the woman: “ce qu’on a rêvé!” (761). Suggesting that the dreams for each woman may be different complicates the fear associated with curiosity: what are the passions she must fulfill and do they reside outside of her proper role in society? Thus, to the narrator, curiosity represents a dangerous trigger to whatever may tempt a woman, linking directly to the nineteenth-century view that a woman’s emotions and sexuality were to be feared and needed harnessing due to their uncontrollable and impatient nature.

If this penetrating passion is awakened, irrational and harmful actions may follow. After she is struck with curiosity, her imagination is unleashed and she acquires a boldness to commit any act in order to fulfill her passion. In Eve’s tale the serpent tempts her to taste the forbidden apple (forbidden to her by the authority of a masculinized God), compelling Eve to succumb to her desire to know what God knows. She then offers the apple to Adam, provoking him to reject God’s mandate as well. She desires to acquire God’s knowledge and decides to eat the apple despite his direct order not to touch the fruit. This traditional male reading claims that social order is forever tainted by the lack of control Eve displays and her power to seduce Adam and

mankind. In “Une Aventure Parisienne,” the narrator’s concern surrounding “la curiosité chez la femme” is deeply rooted in prevailing nineteenth-century religious ideology. Though the allusion is not made directly in the text, the Biblical tradition weights the narrator’s description of women with an authority reaching beyond the fictional narrative.

Almost immediately the narrative focus in “Une Aventure Parisienne” switches from the topic of curiosity to the female character herself.¹⁵ In the Biblical tale, Eve rather than curiosity, becomes the one accused of deceiving Adam and directly causing the couple’s fall from God and banishment from Eden. Maupassant’s narrator also redirects the reader’s attention from the emotion to the woman herself, reinforcing the feminine aspect of curiosity:

Je parle des femmes vraiment femmes, douées de cet esprit à triple fond qui semble, à la surface, raisonnable et froid, mais dont les trois compartiments secrets sont remplis: l’un d’inquiétude féminine toujours agitée; l’autre, de ruse colorée en bonne foi, de cette ruse de dévots, sophistique et redoutable; le dernier enfin, de canaillerie charmante, de tromperie exquise (761).

From the surface this woman’s “ruse” (cunning, trickery) is disguised by her outwardly “raisonnable” appearance.¹⁶ Yet, this seemingly rational ability to disguise, watch, and deceive contrasts with the woman’s tendency to collapse into curiosity’s power as the narrator previously claimed. From this angle, woman appears simultaneously weak—giving into curiosity-- and decisive—able to take her yearning in her own hands and trick those who stand in her way. The narrator, thus, tells of women who not only become controlled by their emotions, but who also are able to trick others through false pretenses. If the very women most susceptible to curiosity are also talented in covering

it up, then who can tell which women are under its spell? According to the narrator, it is the inability to distinguish which women hold the aptitude to deceive in order to selfishly fulfill which causes men to fear the nature of women. At any moment, any woman could succumb to curiosity's temptations.

According to the narrator, the *petite provinciale* exemplifies this type of woman. First, her curiosity about celebrities is heightened by her daily reading of the Parisian society pages. While she appears "raisonnable et froide" on the outside, beneath the surface "son coeur [frémit] d'une curiosité inassouvie" (761). She desires to experience just one taste of a celebrity's life. The narrator extensively describes this consuming passion, employing adjectives, verbs, and phrases which highlight his initial assessment of an impatient curiosity. Her heart trembled ("frémissait"). She dreamed constantly about Paris ("elle songeait à Paris, sans cesse"). The accounts of parties made her desires boil ("le récit des fêtes...faisait bouillonner ses désirs"). Each verb indicates not only a sense of impatience but also an obsession awakened by her interest in these seemingly ravishing lives so far from her own.

From the *petite provinciale's* standpoint (as outlined by the narrator), the lives of these city dwellers contrast with hers as a provincial wife. From the surface it seems that she should be content, her life resembling the idealized one of a wife in the Third Republic: "Sa vie, calme en apparence, s'écoulait dans son ménage, entre un mari très occupé et deux enfants, qu'elle élevait en femme irréprochable" (761).¹⁷ Here the reader first meets her husband, simply described as "très occupé." The next time the reader sees him he is asleep, steadily snoring next to the dreaming *petite provinciale*. No interactions take place between them. Rather, during the night her fantasies are

centered on “ces hommes connus dont les noms apparaissent à la première page des journaux comme de grandes étoiles dans un ciel sombre” (762). Her life is further depicted as “régulière,” “monotone,” and “banale,” contrasting with the celebrities’ “debauches, des orgies antiques épouvantablement voluptueuses” (762). Therefore, obvious oppositions arise between her perceptions of the wild affairs in Paris and the stark dullness of her regular routine.

After describing her insatiable thirst to taste these exhilarating adventures, the narrator lays out the *petite provinciale*'s plan for capturing her dream hence approaching phase two of the curious woman's downfall: going to all lengths to make it happen. Even with the severe social, marital, and legal consequences for adultery looming in the Third Republic setting of this story, the protagonist decides to go through with her journey to Paris.¹⁸ Planning ahead, she realizes that she must deceive her husband in order to avoid punishment and his awareness of her dreams and actions:

Avec une longue persévérance, elle prépara un voyage à Paris, inventa un prétexte, se fit inviter par des parents, et, son mari ne pouvant l'accompagner, partit seule (762).

From this point on in the story, the *petite provinciale* takes control of her adventure. She wanders the streets of Paris looking for a celebrity. When she discovers the writer Jean Varin in an antique store, she confidently enters and devises yet another plan. She purchases the Japanese antique he had desired and tells him she did so solely because he liked it. Beneath this excuse, though, the reader knows of her true yearning to get closer to him than through a mere antique purchase. She proceeds to convince Varin to allow her the chance to follow him for a day. At the end of the day she boldly

asks what he does at night and proceeds to his home and into his bed. However, after an uneventful and mismatched sexual liaison, the *petite provinciale* is left unfulfilled by her affair.

When she leaves his apartment early the next morning, she is absorbed by the sweepers cleaning the streets of Paris. During her journey home all she can think of is the monotonous sound of the sweeping. Ironically, her long-awaited and much-hoped-for dream falls to the same repetitiveness she experiences at home:

Elle rentra, essoufflée, glacée, gardant seulement dans sa tête la sensation de ce mouvement des balais nettoyant Paris au matin. Et, dès qu'elle fut dans sa chambre, elle sanglota (767).

In the concluding sentence, her sobs reveal the disappointment she experiences after her fantasy is realized, mirroring Madame Bovary's famous words that adultery is the same as marriage.¹⁹ The final stage of a curious woman's downfall occurs with her disillusionment and her learning that life is no better outside than within the male's authority in marriage.

While "Une Aventure Parisienne" and the tale of Adam and Eve center on female protagonists, the dominant masculine narrators and their interpretations of female curiosity and satisfaction crowd out any female voices. Perhaps if the *petite provinciale* were to have told her own story, the conclusion would have been different and she would have explained her sobs. Perhaps if Eve could have recounted her intimate struggle with the serpent and her decision to eat the apple, the blame would be shifted. No matter what possible versions could be told, though, these two stories remain limited by their masculine framing concerning views on women. This framing comes from the

male author and the masculine narrator. While we cannot be certain as to Maupassant's personal beliefs about curiosity and women from his fictional tales, he does hold the power to choose which details and which perspectives he presents through his writing. In "Une Aventure Parisienne," the narrator immediately distinguishes himself from the women he analyzes, separating himself from the emotions and actions he declares as strictly feminine.

Nineteenth-century male fear of female curiosity is reinforced through the comparison of the *petite provinciale* and Eve: even when the female protagonists obtain the freedom to do what they desire, they are left unsatisfied and tied to the male authority they tried to escape. The narrator's observations about women could have been seen as a warning both to men and women of the time. To men, "Une Aventure Parisienne" might have confirmed the fear that any woman—married and apparently happy—could secretly act on her selfish interests. For women, it could have served as a caution that even if they act out on their fantasies they will not end up happy.

The Emotional Woman

In another of Maupassant's short stories focused on the adultery of a respectable wife, curiosity is also linked to a male fear of female curiosity which results in irrationality. In "Le Signe," however, most commentary on feminine curiosity comes from the main protagonist herself rather than from an introductory paragraph from the narrator. While such differences between "Une Aventure Parisienne" and "Le Signe" exist, similar lessons emerge concerning what happens to a woman who acts on curiosity: female curiosity is to be feared due to what women might do under its grasp.

After the *petite provinciale*'s interest is sparked, she decisively makes a plan to go after her dreams. However, with Madame de Grangerie in "Le Signe," after her curiosity is ignited she immediately questions her subsequent actions: her initial excitement is transformed into panic and worry. Madame de Grangerie's presentation in the text as a frantic, nervous character supports the belief that women are "unpredictable and irresponsible."²⁰ This depiction parallels that of the *petite provinciale* in "Une Aventure Parisienne," suggesting that women are more susceptible to curiosity's uncontrollable nature and to emotions than are men.²¹ In both cases, the notion that women need protection and limits is supported, reflecting the dominant social and legal perceptions of the late nineteenth century.

Madame de Grangerie's worried state is shown through a comparison with her friend and confidante Madame de Rennedon. In order to depict their differing comportments, the narrator opens with a picture of the blissfully sleeping Madame de Rennedon:

La petite marquise de Rennedon dormait encore, dans sa chambre close et parfumée, dans son grand lit doux et bas, dans ses draps de batiste légère, fine comme une dentelle, caressants comme un baiser ; elle dormait seule, tranquille, de l'heureux et profond sommeil des divorcées (1047).

Madame de Rennedon and her surroundings--her room, bed, and sheets--are all described with ethereal adjectives, depicting delicacy and peacefulness: "parfumée," "doux," "légère," "fine," "tranquille," "heureux," and "profond." Visual and sensual, this initial image emphasizes her sleeping body, caressed by her lacey bed sheets. Rather than say that Madame de Rennedon sleeps happily *and* is divorced, the narrator

describes the sleep of “divorcées” as being tranquil, implying that Madame de Rennedon sleeps carefree because she is “seule” and divorced. Madame de Grangerie, on the other hand, is married and overtaken by her emotions. In fact she visits Madame de Rennedon to solicit advice on how to free herself from the possible consequences of her actions from the previous day.²² It is evident from Madame de Rennedon’s character that not all women in this story are painted as uncontrollable and irresponsible simply because they are females. Yet, since Madame de Rennedon is divorced, she represents a minority of women during this time. Since she also is not in a situation to be overcome by curiosity, the reader does not know what this character would do if her desires were ever aroused. Outside of this subtle commentary on the differences between married and divorced women, the main purpose of painting Madame de Rennedon in such a peaceful light, is to oppose the frantic state of Madame de Grangerie.

The narrator’s use of the imperfect twice with “dormait” reinforces that Madame de Rennedon was steadily sleeping when Madame de Grangerie suddenly appeared, syntactically creating a contrast between their comportments. Madame de Rennedon is awakened by voices in her *salon*. Upon recognizing her friend’s voice, she finally arises and allows Madame de Grangerie to enter, though moving slowly as shown by the list of verbs: “Alors la petite marquise se leva, tira les verrous, tourna la serrure, souleva la portière et montra sa tête, rien que sa tête blonde, cachée sous un nuage de cheveux” (1047). Unlike Madame de Rennedon who is described with a lengthy introduction, Madame de Grangerie is first presented with three short adjectives, reflecting the abruptness of her arrival. While Madame de Rennedon is “tranquille,” Madame de

Grangerie is “très pâle,” “nerveuse,” and “fiévreuse” (1047). Her anxious speech appears more rushed and out of control than Madame de Rennedon’s. Madame de Grangerie explains her visit, unable to separate herself on this day from what happened to her the day before. She repeats her words “abominable” and “minute” to indicate the importance of what has happened to her and to show that she still is under its control: “Il faut que je te parle. Il m’arrive une chose horrible [...] Oh, ma chère, c’est abominable, abominable, ce qui m’arrive. Je n’ai pas dormi de la nuit, mais pas une minute; tu entends, pas une minute. Tiens, tâte mon coeur, comme il bat (1048).” Madame de Rennedon’s only words are few: “Entre ma chérie” and “Allons, raconte” (1047). Here, an obvious contrast between the two characters is clearly made. Madame de Rennedon is calm and collected and Madame de Grangerie is frantic and anxious about her actions and their possible consequences.

While describing a female character as nervous, frantic, and worried is not in itself unusual, the manner in which the narrator depicts Madame de Grangerie reveals differences between her and the opposite sex, reinforcing the stereotype that women are more emotional and irrational than men.²³ Madame de Grangerie’s frantic state not only opposes that of the peaceful and rational Madame de Rennedon, but also contrasts with the usual comportment of males. At first the narrator is not obviously masculine, yet as he continues to describe the two characters he is set apart as an outsider, an observer of the feminine. Before starting to tell her story, Madame de Grangerie bursts into tears : “Madame de Grangerie se mit à pleurer, versant ces jolies larmes claires qui rendent plus charmantes les femmes, et elle balbutiait sans s’essuyer les yeux pour ne point les rougir” (1048). Several things point to the masculine view of

this sentence. First, the narrator directly asserts that tears are “ces” (those) of women. For Madame de Grangerie, her crying indicates distress and concern over the “abominable chose horrible.” Yet, for the narrator these tears take on a more positive and light quality, described as “jolies,” “claires,” and “charmantes.” Not only does Madame de Grangerie cry but she sobs, marking an increased intensity of her feelings which again opposes the lightness with which the narrator sees these tears. Next, the narrator makes the assumption as to why Madame de Grangerie does not wipe her eyes: “pour ne point les rougir.” As with the introductory image of Madame de Rennedon, the emphasis lies on the visual aspect of the woman: *how she appears* when she cries. While Madame de Grangerie may have consciously thought not to rub her eyes or unconsciously avoided it, this indicates a frame of mind that would be self-conscious of her appearance, in obvious contrast to her agitated emotions. From this view, then, the narrator distances himself from the female character, able to call attention to her feminine qualities while at the same time highlighting the anxiety she feels. A connection, therefore, can be made between a highly emotional state and its feminine quality.

The narrator continues to concentrate on how Madame de Grangerie appears. After crying, she requests that Madame de Rennedon feel how quickly her heart beats: “Et, prenant la main de son amie, elle la posa sur sa poitrine, sur cette ronde et ferme enveloppe du coeur des femmes, qui suffit souvent aux hommes et les empêche de rien chercher dessous” (1048). Comically yet also true to a nineteenth-century masculine view, the narrator states that men do not seek to know a woman’s emotions because they are satisfied with what lies on the outside: the breasts. Actual female bodies, then,

are to blame for the lack of a male's attempt to "chercher dessous." However, while the narrator assumes men do not want to know what a woman truly feels in her heart, the remainder of the story reveals what Madame de Grangerie is hiding within her heart, allowing a window for the male readers to learn more about Madame de Grangerie.

Just as the narrator has described Madame de Grangerie as being overly emotional in the dialogue with her friend, she too emphasizes this trait as particularly feminine when justifying her actions from the previous day. To sum up her story, Madame de Grangerie's curiosity is sparked when she notices a prostitute across the street. Becoming intrigued by the prostitute's actions, she attempts to signal men in the same way as this "femme en rouge." Despite briefly considering how she as a high-society wife will be mistaken for a woman of the marginal class, Madame de Grangerie decides to follow through with the signal. However, almost immediately after she catches the eye of a man in the street and he accepts her invitation, she panics. Before continuing her tale, Madame de Grangerie explains her actions to Madame de Rennedon.

In this explanation, Madame de Grangerie aligns her views with the narrator's assumption that women are highly emotional. She also affirms the narrator's position in "Une Aventure Parisienne" that once a woman's curiosity is ignited it overtakes all of her sensibilities. Madame de Grangerie describes her fall to curiosity: "Et voilà que je suis prise d'une envie folle de le leur faire ce signe, mais d'une envie de femme grosse...d'une envie épouvantable, tu sais, de ces envies...auxquelles on ne peut pas résister! J'en ai quelquefois comme ça, moi. Est-ce bête, dis, ces choses-là !" (1050). Here the anxiety she describes having felt the day before reappears through her

hysterical recounting of the events. Repeating “envie” four times, Madame de Grangerie points to the emotion, the desire itself, as the cause for her actions. She further qualifies this “envie” as one that women experience—not men or both sexes in general, but “de femme grosse,” indicating the particularly feminine aspect of curiosity overtaking rationality. Madame de Grangerie even adamantly appeals to Madame de Rennedon for agreement in order to show that her desire was not foreign or unusual for women: “tu sais, de ces envie...auxquelles on ne peut pas resister!” Then, still searching for justification for imitating a prostitute, she calls this tendency to fall to curiosity “bête.” Rather than consider other reasons why she feels it is easy to be overtaken by desire (perhaps the ennui she experiences as a respectable wife might lead to unfulfilled passions rather than her own feminine inclinations), she immediately judges this as a negative and silly aspect of her character.

Madame de Grangerie continues to justify her actions by describing woman’s ability to succumb to desire and even to imitate others, repeating again how “bête” she finds it:

Je crois que nous avons des âmes de singes, nous autres femmes. On m’a affirmé du reste (c’est un médecin qui m’a dit ça) que le cerveau du singe ressemblait beaucoup au notre. Il faut toujours que nous imitions quelqu’un. Nous imitons nos maris, quand nous les aimons, dans le premier mois des noces, et puis nos amants ensuite, nos amies, nos confesseurs quand ils sont bien. Nous prenons leurs manières de penser, leurs manières de dire, leurs mots, leurs gestes, tout. C’est stupide” (1050).

She raises several important points about perceptions regarding women in this paragraph. First, Madame de Grangerie compares women to monkeys not only in brain size but also in soul, claiming that a doctor first told her of this connection. Textually and symbolically it is interesting that Madame de Grangerie compares women to monkeys. In French, “signe” and “singe” are written as almost mirror images, except the switching of the “g” and “n.”²⁴ The theme of copying and mirroring is thus reiterated in syntax and in action. Again, this mirroring suggests the non-difference among women. Here, she illuminates the prevailing medical discourse surrounding the division of the sexes and the belief that women were less than men in more aspects than one (such as brain size).

Much nineteenth-century scholarship has shown that males and females were believed to have been biologically different and consequently unequal. This outlook was supported medically, legally, and socially. Differences between males and females led to a concern over the sexuality of women. This concern manifested itself as a fear, best seen through the division between social classes of women: those who were married and seen as angels and those who were prostitutes and seen as filth.²⁵ Comparing women to monkeys, however, also emphasizes the difference between females and males, as when in the story the doctor told Madame de Grangerie that only female brains were similar to those of monkeys. Imitation is thus particular to one sex, as is the inclination to be dependent on emotions. From this one paragraph, Madame de Grangerie compares herself to a monkey and claims that women cannot help but imitate others; thus, she defends her crossing of the boundary between her and a woman of the marginal class.

Despite having received the medical authority for imitation, Madame de Grangerie still calls it “stupide.” Therefore, Madame de Grangerie appears as self-defeated in her struggle against curiosity and its power to overcome her rationality. At the end of this monologue, she even adds: “Enfin, moi quand je suis trop tentée de faire une chose, je la fais toujours” (1050). Thus, according to the female character herself, women appear as more emotionally unstable than men. Later on when Madame de Grangerie attempts to persuade her male customer to leave, she places herself lower than him, asking for pity and calling herself a “pauvre fille”(1050). She says: “Il aurait pitié d’une femme, d’une pauvre femme!” and “Ayez pitié de moi, monsieur” (1050-1051). With his refusal to leave, she decides to give in to his desire to sleep with her. Stammering while recounting of the event, she explains, “Alors...alors...j’ai perdu la tête...tout à fait” (1051). The only means Madame de Grangerie finds to defend her actions of actually becoming a prostitute is to appeal to her feminine inclination to imitate others, and be easily controlled by emotions and desires.

In “Une Aventure Parisienne” and “Le Signe,” masculinized fears of women’s curiosity are reinforced through depictions of female protagonists as easily overcome by their desires. Instead of wondering if reasons outside the female nature exist which would make these women more susceptible to curiosity’s power, the narrator and characters alike assume that they have no choice other than to succumb. The *petite provinciale* realizes that her life at home does not fulfill her mental images of what life could be—packed with wild affairs and parties. However, at the end of the story she returns home to her proper place as a provincial wife. Rather than tell her husband

about her fantasies, she deceives him in order to go to the city alone, thus, demonstrating the narrator's assumption that women will cover up their intentions in order to satisfy their desires. As for Madame de Grangerie, her panicked state affirms the fear she feels after committing adultery and putting her reputation as an "honnête femme" at risk. She belittles herself, claiming that it must be woman's innate propensity to fall to temptation which causes her audacious actions of acting like a woman beneath her on the social ladder.

Perhaps, though, it is not the nature of women but the nature of the role in which women are placed as bourgeois wives that feeds their unsatisfied passions and spurs their curiosity. Madame de Grangerie and the *petite provinciale* are presented as having curiosities and desires which overflow their appropriate roles and (inter)actions. They then take the next and perhaps shocking step to act out on these wishes, suggesting a lack of concern for their wifely duties. Yet, even in light of their positions as central protagonists and of their succumbing to curiosities, the *petite provinciale* and Madame de Grangerie are both ultimately presented from a masculinized lens.

Chapter Two

Colliding Spheres: The Bourgeois Wife in Public

While reading Maupassant's "Une Aventure Parisienne" and "Le Signe," late nineteenth-century bourgeois wives may have noticed commonalities between their lives and those of the principal characters. Provincial wives of the *petite bourgeoisie* might have seen similarities in their daily routines and those of the *petite provinciale* in "Une Aventure Parisienne," while those of the upper-bourgeoisie may have seen their leisure time lifestyle reflected in Madame de Grangerie of "Le Signe." Even though women of the Third Republic were increasingly frequenting the public world, whether through shopping or volunteering, the common conception remained that men and women belonged in separate spheres.¹

Although Madame de Grangerie does not physically leave her home and enter the public, male-dominated Parisian street, her subtle yet suggestive glance signals to a man on the outside, inviting him to her apartment and into her private realm. Narrative comparison and contrast between her world and the outside one as well as between her and a woman from the marginal class reinforces the danger of bourgeois women flirting with public space. In "Une Aventure Parisienne," the *petite provinciale's* challenge to the gendered spatial division is revealed by her movement: she leaves home, ventures alone to Paris, roams the boulevards, and eventually accompanies a well-known writer for a day and night. In this chapter, through an analysis of private and public space I show how spheres and social classes collide in these two stories. To Maupassant's contemporary readers, this collision could have suggested that actual bourgeois wives

might also have had the desire and opportunity to cross borders and act as these protagonists do, committing adultery.

Flirting with the Outside World

In “Le Signe” Madame de Grangerie describes a day when her usual routine is broken and her seemingly dutiful position as an “honnête femme” is tarnished. Her recounting of the tale begins with her early morning arrival at a friend’s home. She rushes to the home of Madame Rennedon to tell her about the “chose horrible” which happened to her the previous day: “Il faut que je te parle. Il m’arrive une chose horrible” (1047). Setting the scene, Madame de Grangerie recalls the time of day when she was sitting by the window in her *petit salon*:

Ça m’est arrivé hier dans la journée...vers quatre heures...ou quatre heures demie. Je ne sais pas au juste[...]Donc hier, j’étais assise sur la chaise basse que je me suis fait installer dans l’embrasure de ma fenêtre ; elle était ouverte, cette fenêtre, et je ne pensais à rien : je respirais l’air bleu (1048).

Shown by the ellipses in her speech, Madame de Grangerie’s inability to recall the precise time suggests the monotony of her typical day in which the exact minute is not of essence. Using the imperfect tense to indicate her state of being, she continues to tell how it seemed a normal day as she took to her habit of people-watching, thinking about nothing, and breathing in the fresh air. This introductory description not only offers Madame de Rennedon and the reader a background of time and place for Madame Grangerie’s activities of the previous afternoon, but also highlights the

regularity of how her day began, preparing a contrast with the unusual and singular events which occurred later in the day.

Before actually explaining the “chose horrible,” however, Madame de Grangerie further establishes the regularity of her afternoon by telling Madame de Rennedon about her habit of observing the hectic rue Saint-Lazare. Bracketed off by “Tu connais bien mon appartement” and “Donc, hier” (1048) her “manie” of people-watching is revealed. Using the word “manie” meaning “odd habit” or “mania” rather than simply “habitude” (habit) indicates that her routine borders on obsession. She describes:

Tu sais que mon petit salon, celui où je me tiens toujours, donne sur la rue Saint-Lazare, au premier; et que j’ai la manie de me mettre à la fenêtre pour regarder passer les gens. C’est si gai, ce quartier de la gare, si remuant, si vivant...Enfin, j’aime ça! (1048)

The set of ellipses interrupts the story, suggesting that Madame de Grangerie is lost in thought, enthralled even in memory by the constant activity outside her window which so greatly contrasts the calmness of her world inside the *petit salon*. She is “assise sur la chaise” while the *quartier* is “remuant” and “vivant” (1047), revealing a juxtaposition between her timeless afternoon and the ever-present clocks of a neighborhood near a train station. From the pause in her recounting of the “chose horrible” to the image of her leisurely sitting at the window, Madame de Grangerie appears as an observer, not an actor in the public, outside world. These two spheres are about to intersect when, paradoxically, the very free time she is able to enjoy as a bourgeois wife presents her the opportunity to flirt with the outside world: a world in which nineteenth-century wives were to avoid.

“Le Signe” teaches its contemporary readers that even though a woman may find nothing wrong with observing the outside world (Madame de Grangerie exclaims: “Enfin, j’aime ça!” 1047), dangers do exist in the intermediary space of the window.² The window is not only physically situated between the inside of Madame de Grangerie’s private home and the outside of the public street, but also symbolically between her identity as a high-society wife and the other social definitions which lie outside of this role. From her seat on Rue Saint-Lazare in the modern post-Haussmann Paris, upper-bourgeois Madame de Grangerie inhabits a space where prostitutes and their male customers also dwell, allowing both to enter her line of sight.³ While first viewing the busy people on the street below, Madame de Grangerie’s gaze shifts to a specific person in the window across the street: a “femme en rouge.” Immediately she distinguishes herself from this woman from the marginal class as to emphasize their opposite positions on the social spectrum. This initial contrast between Madame de Grangerie and the prostitute sets the two apart textually, making the mirroring that follows even more striking.

Madame de Grangerie calls the prostitute by several names: “une femme en rouge,” “une nouvelle locataire,” “une vilaine fille,” “cette araignée,” and “la pauvre fille” (1048-1049). Through the very act of observing and naming, Madame de Grangerie authoritatively places herself above the other woman.⁴ While the prostitute is “une femme en rouge,” Madame de Grangerie is “une femme en mauve.” The prostitute is “une nouvelle locataire” and Madame de Grangerie sits at her window daily. And above all, when the prostitute is “une vilaine fille” Madame de Grangerie is an “honnête femme,” “une femme mariée.” From the perspective of an upper-class wife, someone

who would never need to sell herself in order to eat, Madame de Grangerie realizes her economic and social superiority over the prostitute.⁵ However, while she was initially shocked to be in a similar location with the prostitute, Madame de Grangerie is struck by both pity and amusement in watching her actions: “Comme ça doit être terrible tout de même de gagner son pain de cette façon-là, terrible et amusant quelquefois[...].” “Tu ne te figures pas comme c’était drôle de la voir faire son manège ou plutôt son métier” (1049). Madame de Grangerie has the opportunity not only to see a prostitute but also to study how she attracts men to her apartment. Maupassant, thus, comments on the placement of prostitutes in the city during the later part of the century: while these women were supposed to be officially registered and work only in certain areas, in actuality prostitutes could have been anywhere and working on streets across from high-society women, putting the upper sector of society at risk.⁶ As mentioned before, it is from the very window inside of her private, seemingly protected sphere, that Madame de Grangerie is able to observe this woman. Madame de Grangerie crosses the social boundaries between two different classes of women.

Physically facing a woman of another social class, Madame de Grangerie’s self-defined title as an “honnête femme” also confronts transformation when she acts as a prostitute. Here, she merges her feminine female world with that of the masculinized outside one. Madame de Grangerie’s haughtiness changes from emphasizing the differences between her and the prostitute to creating a game out of the prostitute’s job. Since she already considers herself economically, physically, and socially better than this “vilaine femme,” Madame de Grangerie is confident that she can perform the signal better, attracting more men to her side of the street. After examining the prostitute’s

actions, Madame de Grangerie becomes consumed by a desire to make the signal herself. Ironically, Madame de Grangerie becomes the “mirror image” (Ireland) of the very woman she deemed to be her opposite, making herself purchasable and thus indistinguishable from a prostitute to the men/clients on the street.⁷ Signaling men just as the prostitute does with a slight glance and smile, Madame de Grangerie soon finds herself with a male customer whom she must satisfy.⁸

For Third Republic men reading this story, the actions of Madame de Grangerie might reinforce the fear of different classes of women appearing indistinguishable from each other, questioning the assumption that women themselves are dichotomized between angels and filth.⁹ The mirroring of Madame de Grangerie with the prostitute breaks the traditional barriers between groupings of women based on their sexual identities, deconstructing difference. This raises the fear that in almost no time, as shown by Madame de Grangerie, when faced with sexuality, any woman—even a man’s own wife—may fall prey to curiosity.¹⁰ Therefore, this mirroring of women from different statuses suggests a commonality among women based on their sexuality and a further need to control the sexual activities of women. Madame de Grangerie’s imitation of the prostitute by her signaling of men leads to her “entry” into the public sphere. Thus, social and sexual borders intersect.

For nineteenth-century women, on the other hand, this story might indicate that an apparently harmless and commonly practiced activity of people-watching may quickly turn into an identity-defying situation. Madame de Grangerie’s physical placement between the two worlds plays with her symbolic positioning in relation to marriage. Even though she is married and perceives herself as an “honnête femme,”

once she encounters a man from the busy, outside street she is caught in a confusion of identity. Until her client enters her home, she remained safe inside the refuge of her home and of her reputation as a good wife. From her spot at the window, though, she had the opportunity to portray herself as someone different.

After essentially becoming a prostitute, Madame de Grangerie frantically attempts to correct the error by emphasizing that she is bourgeois and married, not a prostitute. When the man she signals (referred to as the *grand blond* in the text) comes to her room she emphatically cries: “Allez-vous-en, monsieur, allez-vous-en, vous vous trompez, je suis une honnête femme, une femme mariée. C’est une erreur” (1051). However, rather than explain the error, Madame de Grangerie appeals to her husband’s authority over her, realizing that his masculine protection is her most immediate hope of being saved from having an affair with the *grand blond*.¹¹ However, believing that she is playing a cat and mouse game, the *grand blond* physically asserts his authority over her. Ignoring her protest, he says: “Bonjour, ma chatte. Tu sais, je la connais, ton histoire. Tu es mariée, c’est deux louis au lieu d’un” (1051). The *grand blond* takes her claim of being married as a desire for more money, rather than as a desperate cry to get out of the situation. All the power that Madame de Grangerie initially held as a woman--her dominance over the private home, her opportunity to happily observe, her game of imitating a prostitute-- collides with the overarching male authority in this story. Any control she possessed as the observer and the one controlling the initial glance of the signal is lost through the *grand blond*’s judgment of her as a prostitute. Even though she has not physically entered the outside sphere, through her conscious mirroring of a

prostitute and from the customer's entry into her home, Madame de Grangerie is no longer a simple, innocent observer.

Entering into Public

In "Une Aventure Parisienne" the *vie quotidienne* of the *petite provinciale* is presented in opposition to her vision of the adventures of the Parisian bohemian class. The first line of her story juxtaposes her upcoming quest for experiencing the life of a celebrity against her plainly uneventful routines: "Celle dont je veux dire l'aventure était une petite provinciale, platement honnête jusque-là" (761). From the next few lines the reader is able to relate this character to the ideal bourgeois wife of late nineteenth-century France who works hard managing the home.¹² The *petite provinciale* spends her days looking after her family of a busy husband and two impeccably-raised children: "Sa vie, calme en apparence, s'écoulait dans son ménage, entre un mari très occupé et deux enfants, qu'elle élevait en femme irréprochable" (761). The role inside the home does not satisfy the character of the *petite provinciale*. When not attending to her wifely duties, she passes her time reading Parisian society pages and daydreaming about "[les] fêtes, [les] toilettes, [et les] joies" (761) of the outside world. At night she embellishes on these accounts, fantasizing about the parties, orgies, and erotic sexual escapades the celebrities must enjoy in Paris.

These images vividly contrast with the sight of her notary husband who appears unexciting to the *petite provinciale*: "son mari qui dormait à ses cotes sur le dos, avec un foulard autour du crâne" (762). His snoring, bodily position, and head-covering do not entice the *petite provinciale* to conjure up dreamy images of him as she does of the

well-known men who appear to her “comme de grandes étoiles dans un ciel sombre” (762). Continuing to compare her provincial world with Paris, the *petite provinciale* thinks she should be happy since her life embodies one of the ideal bourgeois wife “qui constituent, dit-on, le bonheur du foyer” (762). Yet despite how she should feel, the *petite provinciale* is not fulfilled from this role and its activities: “Elle se sentait vieillir cependant. Elle vieillissait sans avoir rien connu de la vie, sinon ces occupations régulières, odieusement monotones et banales” (762).

The only redeeming quality for the *petite provinciale* from this sheltered life (as described by the narrator) is that “[elle] était jolie encore, conservée dans cette existence tranquille comme un fruit d’hiver dans une armoire close” (762). Her well-preserved beauty is juxtaposed against her passion for adventure, suggesting that her mundane *vie quotidienne* is actually a source of her brewing dissatisfaction. The metaphor of the “fruit d’hiver” evokes the *petite provinciale*’s superficial peaceful comportment. This tranquil existence, though, is only available in “une armoire close” where freedom, movement, and exploration are restricted. Later in the story, her conserved beauty works to her advantage by attracting a famous writer, Jean Varin. Furthermore, had she not lived an uneventful life as a bourgeois wife, she may not have had the free time to obsess over the outside world and even to imagine what else exists in life. One of the characteristics of being a bourgeois wife—staying inside the home and having leisure time—actually adds to the woman’s desires to seek fulfillment beyond the home’s confines.

While Madame de Grangerie sits at her window watching the Parisians below, the *petite provinciale* reads about the lives of celebrities in newspapers. These papers act

as her window and intermediary space to the world so distant from her own. Maupassant comments on the nineteenth-century fear that if women acquired illicit reading material then they could absorb inappropriate, risqué ideas into their imaginations.¹³ As presented in this story, society pages are the only available source for the *petite provinciale's* sentimental education and consequential fantasies about such adventures and affairs. Any experience she would have as a married woman appears limited due to her husband being “très occupé” and soundly asleep while she dreams.¹⁴ While the pages she scrutinizes would not have been considered erotic material nor have been deemed obscene, the very mention of “des fêtes, des toilettes, [et] des joies” (761) of famous city people ignites the *petite provinciale's* curiosity, imagination, and passion just as the narrator warns in the first paragraph (and as discussed in my Chapter One). The pattern follows that once a woman's interest is sparked she will do anything to obtain her wishes, even at the expense of her familial responsibilities. Unlike Madame de Grangerie who physically remains inside her home, the *petite provinciale* decides to act on her awakened desires and fully enter the outside world.

Independently and rather boldly, the *petite provinciale* travels to Paris under the pretense of visiting friends.¹⁵ After leaving her home and upon arriving in Paris, the *petite provinciale* transforms from a simple bourgeois wife into a seductive *flâneuse*, searching the streets and shopping for a celebrity.¹⁶ In the beginning of “Une Aventure Parisienne” the *petite provinciale* imagines celebrity adventures from the safety of her own home and bedroom. In her private sphere, she is repeatedly described with the imperfect tense: “Elle *songait* à Paris,” “mais elle *était* surtout mystérieusement

troublée par les échos pleins de sous-entendus,” “De là-bas elle *apercevait* Paris dans une apothéose de luxe,” “elle *songeait* à ces hommes connus,” “elle se *figurait* leur vie affolante avec de continuelle debauches” (761-762 ; my italics). Next, as she physically enters the public space of the Parisian streets, her fantasy becomes tangible and active. With her decision to chase her dreams, the tense changes to passé simple as her adventure and crossing of borders proceeds.

The *petite provinciale*'s boldness increases as she breathes the Paris air and experiences the freedom to roam the streets far from her provincial home. Nothing can stop her from attaining her goal. Her gaze is fierce as she looks all around for a celebrity: “Et elle chercha. Elle parcourut les boulevards sans rien voir, sinon le vice errant et numéroté” (762). While before she “*songeait*” now she “*chercha*,” indicating a newly found authority over her desires. However, in this new space outside her imagination the boulevards seem less exciting: “elle parcourut les boulevards sans rien voir,” and, instead, “les boulevards lui semblaient être une sorte de gouffre des passions humaines” (762). Even when her quest seems dim she continues to search, returning to her beloved newspapers for inspiration: “Elle...lut attentivement la petite correspondance du *Figaro*, qui lui apparaissait chaque matin comme un tocsin, un rappel de l'amour” (762). Yet, after a few days of not meeting a celebrity the *petite provinciale* finds herself in front of an antique shop window, peering at the man who will become her materialized dream, Jean Varin the writer. Through the female character's own decision to cross the private/public border, her more passive role of reading, looking, and imagining becomes one of action and decisiveness.

At the antique store where she encounters Varin, rather than appearing as “platement honnête”, the *petite provinciale* “était entrée tremblante, l’oeil fixé effrontément sur lui [Jean Varin]” (764). Rather than wondering what it is like to be him (and to be with him) as she did while reading, the *petite provinciale* now has the opportunity to confront him personally. After entering the store, the *petite provinciale* interrupts a dispute over the price of a *biblot* between Varin and the store owner. She decides to settle the argument by purchasing the figurine herself and offering it to Varin as a gift. Her boldness catches his eye: “Alors, elle, saisie d’une audace affolée, s’avança: ‘Pour moi, dit-elle, combien ce bonhomme?’...L’écrivain, qui jusque-là ne l’avait pas même aperçue, se retourna brusquement, et il la regarda des pieds à la tête en observateur, l’oeil un peu ferme; puis, en connaisseur, il la détailla”(764). Here, a dual-directional gaze is at work. First, the *petite provinciale* fixes her attention solely on Varin who becomes the actualization of her dream. Then he notices and scrutinizes this woman who just bought the figurine for a price he himself could not pay. To Varin, the *petite provinciale* does not appear as a meek and sheltered married provincial woman.

The *petite provinciale* is now fully in the public eye, happy to be seen with such a man: “Elle frissonnait de plaisir à être vue ainsi causant intimement avec un illustre” (765). In order to spend more time with this celebrity, she offers him the *biblot* as a gift; however, he refuses: “Il refusa. Elle insistait. Il résista, très amusé, riant de grand coeur. Elle, obstinée, lui dit: ‘Eh bien! Je vais le porter chez vous tout de suite; où demeurez-vous?’ Il refusa de donner son adresse; mais elle, l’ayant demandée au marchand, la connut, et, son acquisition payée, elle se sauva vers un fiacre” (765). Her determination to achieve what she wants is portrayed by her rapid questions and

comebacks with Varin. In this outside, public world she is able to argue and verbalize exactly what she wants as shown by her repetition and short sentences. While remaining within her private sphere, contrastingly, she kept her desires hidden inside her own mind. The couple's interactions reaffirm the narrator's initial paragraph concerning a curious woman: "Une femme, quand sa curiosité impatiente est en éveil, commettra toutes les folies, toutes les imprudences, aura toutes les audaces, ne reculera devant rien" (761). Going against appropriate male/female stranger communication in late nineteenth-century French society, the *petite provinciale* not only crosses class borders by approaching Varin, but also inquires not once but twice as to where he lives, suggesting an audacity in her pursuit of being with him that evening.

This scene highlights the nineteenth-century masculine fear associated with females entering into the public sphere. The *petite provinciale's* actions may be compared to those of a seductress, suggesting the multiplicity of personalities and characters a woman can portray. Just as Madame de Grangerie imitates a prostitute and therefore mis-represents her true role as a bourgeois wife to the men on the street, the *petite provinciale* avoids any discussion with Varin of her marital and class status, hiding that she is simply a notary's wife. When the *petite provinciale* enters the outside world, she gains authority over her being and her actions by independently purchasing the *bibelot* and suggesting that Varin allow her the chance to accompany him for a day.

For Madame de Grangerie and the *petite provinciale*, the crossing of the public/private separation is tied to their roles as bourgeois wives. First of all, the reader

does not know about the lives of the two protagonists before their marriages and is never introduced directly to the husbands. Yet, despite the husbands' textual absences, the stories revolve around how these characters experience boredom and dissatisfaction within their roles as wives and eventually "enter" into the public sphere. In both stories opportunities present themselves which aid in this collision: for Madame de Grangerie the window acts as an intermediary space while for the *petite provinciale* reading material alerts her to the sensualities available in the city. When given the freedom to enter the public sphere, whether through a suggestive and active glance or physically through an adventure, both characters highlight the possible dangers associated with leaving their private sphere. Madame de Grangerie and a prostitute appear as interchangeable and the *petite provinciale* leaves behind all traits that made her a good, bourgeois wife.

Chapter Three

Lost Control, Failed Dreams, and Power of Perception

Tony Tanner argues that adultery holds the power to disrupt not only individual marriages but society itself.¹ Legally, during the nineteenth century women were more severely punished for having an affair than were men. A woman's extra-marital liaison could result in a child and thus could put the child's proper paternity in question. If a husband found his wife and her lover in bed together and killed them both he could be deemed not guilty. Concerning adultery, obvious differences rise between the sexes, placing men as the authorities over women.²

However, in Maupassant's "Une Aventure Parisienne" and "Le Signe," adultery does result in a complete disruption of the social and legal institutions of marriage since the women do not get caught. The *petite provinciale* and Madame de Grangerie never consider abandoning their husbands or their appropriate positions in society. They do not even take lovers in the full connotation of the word: their affairs are spurred more by curiosity than by a desire for love outside of marriage.³ Madame de Grangerie does not desire to put her social reputation as an "honnête femme" at risk and thus confesses to her friend and solicits advice on what to do if her "client" returns. The *petite provinciale* realizes that her husband is not much different than her celebrity lover and returns home.⁴ In both tales the lack of marital and social breakdown indicates a more subtle yet equally powerful disruption: one within the protagonists themselves.⁵ In this chapter I argue that even though these two characters are seen as seductive, ultimately they lose control over their situations and over their own contentment.

The Unspeakable Tangibility of a Fantasy

“Une Aventure Parisienne” illuminates the personal side-effects which could result for married women who decisively act on the desire to venture away from home and have an affair. While contemporary female readers of Maupassant may have noticed similarities between their lives and that of the *petite provinciale*, the sobering lesson made clear by the end of this tale is that acting on “inappropriate” fantasies ultimately results in female disappointment and sobs which come with the realization that desire truly resides in an “ever-ending process of continual deferral,” unable to ever be fulfilled.⁶ This message is demonstrated through the *petite provinciale*’s textual silence during her sexual encounter with a celebrity and her loss of control over the direction and fate of her adventure.

The *petite provinciale*’s hope to experience the life of a celebrity materializes as she enjoys a day of gossip, meeting socialites, and being seen at the theater with the writer Jean Varin. Certain that the society pages only reveal glimpses into the celebrities’ lives, she convinces herself that there is more to discover: “Le récit des fêtes, des toilettes, des joies, faisait bouillonner ses désirs; mais elle était surtout mystérieusement troublée par les échos pleins de sous-entendus, par les voiles à demi soulevés en des phrases habiles” (761-762). Now, with Varin as her guide she has the chance to peek beneath the veil. The following use of “falloir” suggests the intensity of her desire to hear salacious details about the well-known: “Il fallut qu’il lui nommât toutes les femmes connues, surtout les impures, avec des détails intimes sur elles, leur vie, leurs habitudes, leur intérieur, leurs vices” (765). Next, the *petite provinciale*’s wish to meet others in this bohemian class is also realized when Varin introduces her to his

colleagues. At this moment, the *petite provinciale* appears more blissfully content than anywhere else in the story: “Elle était folle de joie. Et ce mot sonnait sans répit dans sa tête: ‘Enfin, enfin!’” (766). Her joy whirlwinds at its height, described by “folle” and the internal resonance of “Enfin!” “At last, at last,” the *petite provinciale*’s dreams are achieved.

Her initial fantasies, however, did not stop at meeting a few famous people in a chic café—she dreamed of more, of secret pleasures unimagined by the society papers: “et toutes leurs maisons recélaient assurément des mystères d’amour prodigieux” (762). To uncover these mysteries, she demands that her day with Varin continue into the night, dismissing and interrupting his parting kiss and words with one final question: “La représentation finie, il lui baisa galamment la main: ‘Il me reste, Madame, à vous remercier de la journée délicieuse...’ Elle l’interrompt: ‘A cette heure-ci, que faites-vous toutes les nuits?’” (766). Prepared to take their separate paths, Varin answers, somewhat shocked at her suggestion shown by his stuttered repetition: “Mais...mais...je rentre chez moi” (766). The *petite provinciale*’s own anxiety in accompanying him home is revealed by nervous laughter: “Elle se mit à rire, d’un rire tremblant” (766). Here, nervousness is contrasted with her former decisiveness concerning the progression of their activities. Earlier while questioning Varin, the *petite provinciale* is described as having “une voix résolue,” (766) quickly and directly giving orders for the pair’s next moves: “Eh bien, Monsieur, allons au théâtre” (766). Now, however, she pauses before her command: “Eh bien, Monsieur...allons chez vous” (766). On their way up to Varin’s floor, physically in the grips of her fantasy, the *petite provinciale* struggles with what lies before her: the anticipated sexual encounter itself.

Yet despite her hesitation, she realizes that if she does not go with him, her dreams of experiencing a truly erotic night would forever remain incomplete.

The *petite provinciale* does not describe this encounter in terms of adultery and a breaking of the marriage contract; rather, she sees the affair as her last chance to truly live: “Elle vieillissait sans avoir rien connu de la vie” (762). Up until this point the dream remained inside her imagination; therefore, with the approaching actualization of her deepest fantasy comes the uneasy mélange of uncertainty and of determination: “Elle frissonnait par instants, toute secouée des pieds à la tête, ayant des envies de fuir et des envies de rester, avec, tout au fond du coeur, une bien ferme volonté d’aller jusqu’au bout” (766). This description shows that while the *petite provinciale’s* body quivers, she rationally knows her choice in the situation, of whether to sleep with Varin or not. Yet, “tout au fond du coeur,” she is more determined to continue than to flee, displaying not only her determination to achieve a dream, but also her present lack of concern for the potential outcomes of their sexual act.

The knowledge of what female infidelity legally meant during this time period might have caused the *petite provinciale’s* momentary uncertainty. With each move forward toward adultery, the *petite provinciale* may be weighing the possibility of losing her husband, being fined, or even being imprisoned.⁷ However, despite keeping her dreams and true reason for visiting Paris hidden from her husband (“elle prépara un voyage à Paris, inventa un pretext” 762), little textual evidence suggests her fear of adultery’s potential consequences. Thus, the *petite provinciale’s* nervous comportment indicates her anticipation for her affair with Varin than a fear of what could happen if she were caught. She is caught in the whirlwind of her desire and does not rationally

consider what her passion could create.⁸ The narrator tells that “Dans l’escalier, elle se cramponnait à la rampe, tant son émotion devenait vive” (766). Her emotions mount as she physically climbs closer to her dream’s realization, previously described as “des raffinements de sensualité si compliqués qu’elle ne pouvait même se les figurer” (762). Even with apprehension, the *petite provinciale* follows through with the affair, reinforcing the narrator’s initial statement that women caught by curiosity and desire will go to all ends to achieve their goals.⁹

Immediately upon entering Varin’s room, the *petite provinciale* undresses, slips into bed, and waits for him, neither one uttering a word: “Dès qu’elle fut dans la chambre, elle se déshabilla bien vite et se glissa dans le lit sans prononcer une parole” (766). With “dès que” and “bien vite” the narrator emphasizes not only the *petite provinciale*’s anxiety, but also her eagerness to reach the final pinnacle of her fantasy. However, while she seems in control of the situation, being the one to undress and enter the bed first, her silence suggests a loss of power over her adventure’s destination and a continued submission to her desire.¹⁰ During the day while her desire was still rising, the *petite provinciale* and Varin talked continuously. With her very first words to Varin, the *petite provinciale* herself suggests that speech acts as a vehicle of authority. After purchasing the *biblot* Varin had fancied, she says, “Pardon, Monsieur, j’ai été sans doute un peu vive; vous n’aviez peut-être pas dit votre dernier mot” (764). He not only allows her to purchase the *biblot* but also gives her agency in the situation, responding that he had said his last word in negotiating, “Je l’avais dit, Madame” (764). As the day unfolds, the *petite provinciale* acts as the guiding subject of the two by asking what he does at each hour and insisting that they do it together. In the present

scene, however, their chatter ends, marked by “Et ils ne parlèrent pas” and “elle...sans prononcer une parole” (766). They do not speak again until dawn while the *petite provinciale* quietly prepares to leave. Again, her lack of words and quick dressing is highlighted: “Elle se leva, s’habilla sans bruit, et, déjà elle avait ouvert à moitié la porte, quand elle fit grincer la serrure et il s’éveilla en se frottant les yeux” (767). After her adventure is complete, she can find no words.

Not only silence but also a lack of narrative detail point to the loss of fantasy and control for the *petite provinciale* in the description of her adultery with Varin. In only two sentences the narrator describes the mismatched couple: “Mais elle était simple comme peut l’être l’épouse légitime d’un notaire de province, et lui plus exigeant qu’un pacha à trios queues. Ils ne se comprirent pas, pas du tout” (767). No lightning bolts passionately striking or crashing waves roaring are metaphorically used to suggest a wild affair.¹¹ Instead, the *petite provinciale’s* adventure sadly ends with a repetition of “pas,” reinforcing the pair’s vast miscommunication and the *petite provinciale’s* realization that her dream has burst. Not even depicted metaphorically, this undetailed encounter strikingly contrasts with the numerous images of sensual nights that the *petite provinciale* had envisioned. In her fantasies, passionate adjectives reveal her expectations for a night with a celebrity: “mais elle était surtout mystérieusement troublée par les échos plein de sous-entendus...et qui laissent entrevoir des horizons de jouissances *coupables* et *ravageantes*,” “De là-bas elle apercevait Paris dans une apothéose de luxe *magnifique* et *corrompu*,” “elle se figurait leur vie *affolante*, avec de continuelles débauches, des orgies *antiques* épouvantablement *voluptueuses*,” “elle se demandait si elle mourrait sans avoir connu toutes ces ivresses *damnantes*” (italics

mine 761-762). Previously able to control her fantasies in intensity and volume, the *petite provinciale* is now faced with an inability to make them happen as she had visualized.¹² Even though Varin is described as having a ravishing sexual hunger as she had suspected, the comparison of him to a “pacha” is far less glamorous than her visions of the “grandes étoiles” with “leur vie affolante” (762). In the scene of adultery, the reader is textually reminded of the *petite provinciale*’s true role in society—outside of her dreams--as a notary’s wife, unable to be anything else *even* in the arms of an artist who is “plus exigeant qu’un pacha” (767).

The *petite provinciale* stammers the next morning when Varin asks her a question. Here, her inability to verbalize her thoughts and desires suggests a continued loss of direction over her dream’s outcome. Now, it is Varin who makes the inquiry, reversing their previous positions of authority.¹³ Since their encounter was less than expected, leaving her “navrée” (767), the *petite provinciale* is no longer filled with the hope of an exhilarating affair as she had been earlier in their day. He asks: “Eh bien, vous partez?” (767) Caught in the aftermath of her crumbled hopes, she appears dazed and unable to confidently answer him in the same assertive tone she had previously used: “Elle restait debout, confuse. Elle balbutia: ‘Mais oui, voici le matin’” (767). Next, Varin asks the final and most telling question of the adventure: “Vous m’avez bigrement étonné depuis hier. Soyez franche, avouez-moi pourquoi vous avez fait tout ça; car je n’y comprends rien” (767). Interestingly, even though Varin admits that he does not understand her emphatic desire to accompany him everywhere and even into bed, he went along with her requests. He let her lead the way, acting as a man under the influence of a curious woman who is powerless to free himself from her grasp just as

the narrator had foreshadowed: “Je parle des femmes vraiment femmes...qui poussent au suicide les amants imbécilement crédules, mais ravissent les autres” (761). However, in the daylight of the morning after, the *petite provinciale* can no longer maintain the comportment of a courageous, adventurous, and seductive woman. Here, she reverts back to the woman she was before her curiosity had been awakened: a provincial notary’s wife who internally dreams. The reality of the situation and of her placement in relation to Varin as a notary’s wife in the *petite bourgeoisie* is highlighted by her inability to explain her actions: “Elle se rapprocha doucement, rougissante comme une vierge: “J’ai voulu connaître..le..le vice..eh bien..eh bien, ce n’est pas drôle”(767). Her verbosity and decisiveness have been replaced by a stammering defeat and disappointment of a much awaited affair.

After they sleep together, the *petite provinciale* sees that this hungry “pacha” is just like any other human: tangible. The comical depiction of Varin’s less-than-ideal qualities counters the larger than life images of the “grande étoiles” (762) about whom she dreamed from her bed at home. Reminiscing about her conjugal nights lying awake envisioning someone else, the *petite provinciale* watches her “étoile” in the flesh. Here, with the veil of mystery lifted, Varin is no longer described as “beau” but as a man with thinning hair who snores and drools just like her husband: “Il ronflait avec un bruit de tuyau d’orgue...Ses vingt cheveux profitaient de son repos pour se rebrousser étrangement, fatigués de leur longue station fixe sur ce crâne nu dont ils devaient voiler les ravages. Et un filet de salive coulait d’un coin de sa bouche entrouverte” (767). The *petite provinciale* can no longer visualize exactly what she wants when her fantasy becomes a reality. And ironically this reality is exactly what she has at home, another

example of a Bovaryism.¹⁴ Therefore, after realizing her dream now lost, the *petite provinciale* returns home and sobs: “Et, dès qu’elle fut dans sa chambre, elle sanglota” (769). It is left up to the reader to decipher whether these tears are indicative of guilt for her actions or for her lost fantasy.¹⁵

Do Actions Speak Louder Than Words?

Just as in “Une Aventure Parisienne,” the events leading up to the scene of the adultery in “Le Signe” place the main protagonist, Madame de Grangerie, in control of her situation and her curiosity’s destination. While the *petite provinciale* sets out to intimately learn the sensual secrets of the Parisian artists, Madame de Grangerie’s primary goal focuses on learning and implementing the gestures of the “femme en rouge” across the street. Yet, before Madame de Grangerie plays the part of the enticing and powerful woman, she must learn the role from the professional herself.

Upon noticing the prostitute across the street, Madame de Grangerie becomes intrigued by the prostitute’s interactions with the men on the sidewalk. Recounting the events to her friend, Madame de Rennedon, she explains: “ça m’amusa de l’examiner. Elle était accoudée, et elle guettait les hommes, et les hommes aussi la regardaient, tous ou presque tous” (1048). At this point in the tale, multiple and multi-directional gazes are evident. First, the prostitute watches the men on the street who consequently look back at her. Meanwhile, Madame de Grangerie observes these interactions between the “femme en rouge” and the men. And finally, Madame de Grangerie shifts her watchful eye to the men in the street, interacting with them in the same manner as the prostitute does by leaning forward, catching their eyes, and motioning with a nod of

the head for them to come up to her apartment. Both the prostitute and Madame de Grangerie instigate an active female gaze from which the traditional order of men watching women is reversed and complexified.¹⁶ Even though the men do look at the women, the prostitute and Madame de Grangerie initiate the play of gazes, placing themselves in the position of the seductress.

Madame de Grangerie further emphasizes the prostitute's seductress role by comparing the men to hunting dogs, attracted to the prey of the prostitute herself: "chiens [qui] flairent le gibier" (1048). With one man, Madame de Grangerie notices how the prostitute "l'avait pris, celui-là, comme un pêcheur à la ligne prend un goujon" (1049). She next notes the amount of time it takes the prostitute to signal a man, for him to enter her room, and for him to leave. Madame de Grangerie is fascinated by this game of signaling men and satisfying them in less than twenty minutes total. At this point, she nicknames the prostitute "cette araignée" (1049), realizing the prostitute's power of enticement over men.

After intently analyzing the work of "cette araignée" Madame de Grangerie envisions this same seductive power as her own. She asks herself: "Est-ce que je pourrais le faire aussi bien, ce petit coup de bas en haut, hardi et gentil? Car il était très gentil, son geste" (1049). Here, Madame de Grangerie's next object of interest is revealed: the gesture itself. She is intrigued by how "léger," "vague," and "discret" the signal appears and the power it holds while seeming so "gentil." With a simple return of this glance and smile, men passing by can instantaneously be transformed into customers, naturally understanding what the prostitute's slight inclination and subtle look propose. Perceiving herself as a woman of class and capable of such a "gentil"

gesture, Madame de Grangerie decides to “l’essayer devant la glace” (1049), insisting and proving that she can perform the signal better than the prostitute does: “Ma chère, je le faisais mieux qu’elle, beaucoup mieux! J’étais enchantée; et je revins me mettre à la fenêtre” (1049). Originally being “très degoutée et très choquée” by the “femme en rouge,” at this point in the tale, Madame de Grangerie’s disgust turns to pity when she herself finds great success in making the signal: “Elle ne prenait plus personne à present, la pauvre fille, plus personne. Vraiment elle n’avait pas de chance” (1049). Affirming her egotistical comparison to the prostitute, further textual evidence supports Madame de Grangerie’s newly acquired power over the men on the street: “Maintenant ils passaient tous sur mon trottoir et plus un seul sur le sien. Le soleil avait tourné. Ils arrivaient les uns derrière les autres, des jeunes, des vieux, des noirs, des blonds, des gris, des blancs” (1049). When more men frequented the prostitute’s sidewalk than hers, Madame de Grangerie compared them to dogs and fish. Now, however, with the men flooding her side, Madame de Grangerie sees them with their human qualities of age, hair color, and comportment as being “très gentils,” further enforcing her confidence in attracting men. This comparison suggests that Madame de Grangerie views her actions as a competition rather than as a true attempt to *be* a prostitute.

After describing the men with human characteristics, Madame de Grangerie realizes that their interest in her may be misleading. By making the signal, however, she imagines herself as a prostitute, giving her appearance of availability validity from the men’s perspective.¹⁷ While *she* knows that she is not a prostitute, she wonders what the men might think: “Si je leur faisais le signe, est-ce qu’ils me comprendraient, moi, moi qui suis une honnête femme?” (1049). Here, even though she was intrigued

by the gesture and the potent power she felt after men moved to her side of the street, Madame de Grangerie considers the two-directional gaze between her and the men as possibly being detrimental to her reputation as an “honnête femme.” However, directly after stating this concern, she describes a terrible desire which overtakes her rationality: “Et voila que je suis prise d’une envie folle de le leur faire ce signe” (1050). She decides to go through with the signal despite her worry about being mistaken for a prostitute. After pausing to recount and defend this “envie folle” in detail to her friend, Madame de Grangerie returns to her concern about a mistaken identity by questioning what a man might actually do when she directs a slight yet seductive glance his way: “Je me dis donc, ‘Voyons, je vais essayer sur un, sur un seul, pour voir. Qu’est-ce qui peut m’arriver? Rien! Nous échangerons un sourire, et voila tout’”(1050). She justifies her actions as a sort of innocent game assuming that the men would decline her proposal.

However, Madame de Grangerie not only fulfills her inclination to make the signal, but succeeds beyond belief when a man affirmatively responds: “Je le regarde. Il me regarde. Je souris; il sourit; je fais le geste; oh! À peine, à peine; il répond ‘oui’ de la tête et le voila qui entre, ma chérie! Il entre par la grande porte de la maison” (1050). Here, Madame de Grangerie begins each gesture, as the initiator of the situation. She has become the “araignée,” catching her prey of a blond, the type of man she generally likes: “J’aime les blonds, tu sais” (1050). Even though she panicks when he responds affirmatively, as represented with “à peine, à peine,” Madame de Grangerie’s action of making the signal contradicts this anxiety. She portrays her interest in the gesture as a game and defends her actions by claiming an uncontrollable desire seized her.

However, she decidedly chooses the man with whom she wants to interact: “J’en voulais un qui fût bien, très bien. Tout à coup je vois venir un *grand blond*, très joli garçon” (italics mine 1050). There she sits at her window, acting as bait for her chosen target: she looks at him and he looks at her, she smiles, and he smiles back. He then enters her home, meeting her servants at the front door. With his acceptance, though, comes a reversal of power and a realization that she has invited a man to her apartment—the *grand blond* suddenly puts Madame de Grangerie on the defensive when she must explain that he is mistaken and that she is not a prostitute as he has understood.¹⁸

In a panicked state, Madame de Grangerie asks Madame de Rennedon what she was supposed to do, repeating the intense fret she felt when the *grand blond* neared her room: “Que faire? dis? Que faire? Et il allait sonner, tout à l’heure, dans une seconde. Que faire, dis?” (1050). Not knowing what else to do and hoping that he will understand that she is not a prostitute, she decides “de courir à sa rencontre, de lui dire qu’il se trompait, de le supplier de s’en aller” (1050). However, at the very moment she is about to open the door, he touches it first, “posait la main sur le timbre” (1050), symbolically indicating that he is now holds authority over their encounter. While Madame de Grangerie initially felt confident in her interactions with the men on the sidewalk, the very gesture she seductively performed spurs a miscommunication and an inability for her to escape the *grand blond’s* attainment of what he has been offered through her glance. In other words, it seems that from the moment Madame de Grangerie acted on her curiosity by making the signal, she lost all power over its destination. In the following scene of adultery male speech prevails as the literary

vehicle of masculine authority. Madame de Grangerie's speech, on the other hand, is overshadowed by her actions of making the signal. Any vocal attempts she makes to correct her mistaken identity are belittled by her previous actions. To the male customer, her identity has already been verified by her solicitation from the window and to the *grand blond*, Madame de Grangerie's gesture speaks louder than her words. Similar to the scenario in "Une Aventure Parisienne," male dominance triumphs in the bedroom through the protagonists' loss of control. Madame de Grangerie's curiosity has gone beyond what she originally envisioned and she can no longer direct its destiny.

Madame de Grangerie first appeals to the *grand blond's* forgiving side and suggests that she has mistaken him for someone else: "C'est une erreur, une affreuse erreur; je vous ai pris pour un de mes amis à qui vous ressemblez beaucoup. Ayez pitié de moi, Monsieur" (1051). At this petition, he simply laughs and assumes she desires more money. While she appears out of control ("Je balbutiai, tout à fait folle" 1051) he is in complete control, using the imperative to speed up their encounter: "Allons montre-moi la route" (1051). Then, his authority is further emphasized by the contrasting sentence structure in the description of their initial interaction from afar ("Je le regarde. Il me regarde. Je souris; il sourit" 1050) and their physical meeting in person ("Et il me pousse; il referme la porte, et comme je demeurais, épouvantée, en face de lui, il m'embrasse, me prend par la taille et me fait rentrer dans le salon qui était resté ouvert") (1051). From her account, Madame de Grangerie's original interest in the *grand blond* seems to be forgotten. Rather than comment on his appearance that she noted from the window in stating he was a handsome blond, she emphasizes his

physicality and forcefulness. Here, her defensive comportment is highlighted by the switch of subject: not only is she the object (“me”) of the sentence but also of the situation. In one sentence, broken up by commas, and a repetition of “il me” the quickness of what happens is portrayed. While Madame de Grangerie might have had the option to turn and run, the sentence indicates that there was no time for her to do so, as he physically takes her by the waist and guides her to the salon.¹⁹ Emotionally frantic and physically overpowered, Madame de Grangerie begins to realize that her hopes of persuading him to leave are limited.

The *grand blond*'s sexual quest is interrupted, however, when he takes note of her elegant apartment. He realizes that a woman living in such a place would not normally be a prostitute. Instead of affirming the possibility of an error, though, he immediately assumes that she must be “dans la dèche en ce moment-ci pour faire la fenêtre!” During his scan of the apartment, Madame de Grangerie takes the opportunity to appeal to him once more: “Oh! Monsieur, allez-vous-en! Allez-vous-en!...Je vous jure que vous vous trompez” (1051). Her repeated use of “se tromper” (“de lui dire qu’il se trompait,” “vous vous trompez, je suis une honnête femme,” “je vous jure que vous vous trompez”) indicates another miscommunication in perception between the two. Madame de Grangerie insists on telling him that he is mistaken, but does not directly state that she is not the prostitute he imagined. Again, her verbal pleas cannot replace what he has seen from the window. The *grand blond* continues to assume authority as he attempts to calm her, again positioning her as the object: “Et il me répond tranquillement: ‘Allons, ma belle, assez de manières comme ça’” (1051). The *grand blond*'s calm and rather amused demeanor greatly contrasts the comportment of

Madame de Grangerie.²⁰ He then mocks her husband and even asks if he may be introduced to her friend (Madame de Rennedon) in the picture on the mantel. For the third time in the tale, Madame de Grangerie describes herself as feeling out of control and having “perdu la tête” (1051), unable to dictate what happens next. Also at this point, her speech becomes slower and more repetitive as she nears the climax of her recounting:

S’il revenait avant que l’autre fut parti, songe donc! Alors...alors...j’ai perdu la tête...tout à fait...j’ai pensé...que...que le mieux...était de...de...de...me débarrasser de cet homme le...le plus vite possible...Plus tôt ce serait fini...tu comprends...et...et voilà...voilà...puisque’il le fallait...et il le fallait, ma chère...il ne serait pas parti sans ça...Donc, j’ai ...j’ai...j’ai mis le verrous à la porte du salon...Voilà (1052).

Recognizing that her supplications for him to leave were failing, Madame de Grangerie decides to give in to his desires and become his prostitute. Through her anxiety and his physicality, this scene of adultery appears more as a scene of rape.²¹ Even though she initiated their interaction, Madame de Grangerie vehemently pleaded for him to leave. Yet, only upon realizing his dominant, male authority and her inability to vocally and even now physically reverse the control, does she succumb to his misperception of who/what she is. From her perspective and worried state at the end of the tale, Madame de Grangerie knows that she would still be judged for what she has done. Even if the act was ruled rape, her original desire to play with prostitution would have condemned her reputation as an “honnête femme.”²²

In many classic tales of adultery the couple flees the city to escape social rules and public knowledge of their affair.²³ However, in “Le Signe” and in “Une Aventure Parisienne,” the adultery scenes both take place within the city walls, suggesting the protagonists’ initial lack of concern for what possibly could result from their actions. In both stories as well, the affair is not with a long-term lover. No mention of *amant* or *amour* is made, showing another contradiction with typical tales of adulterous affairs which tell the stories of women seeking true love outside of marriage. From several of Madame de Grangerie’s own statements, she proves that taking a lover and being unfaithful was not uncommon for high-society women.²⁴ When describing her burning desire to “faire ce signe” she equates her actions to those of any woman caught imitating the ones she loves: “Nous imitons nos maris, quand nous les aimons, dans le premier mois des noces, et puis nos amants ensuite, nos amies, nos confesseurs quand ils sont bien” (1050). Her use of “nos” suggests that she considers herself part of the general group of women who are wrapped up in emotions and willing to do anything—even give up their own identity for that of a husband or a lover.

When Madame de Grangerie says that she likes blonds, she also suggests possible sexual promiscuity: rather than note an attraction to her husband she comments on and interacts with other men. After recounting the entire event to her friend, Madame de Renedon, Madame de Grangerie claims that she did indeed find the *grand blond* handsome. Madame de Renedon asks, “Et...et...il était joli garçon?” (1052) Madame de Grangerie succinctly replies: “Mais oui.” Through her embedded narrative, she reveals a continued panic and fear concerning what has happened between her and the *grand blond*. Yet, as shown by her actions and admitted

inclination towards other men, Madame de Grangerie is not presented as a woman worried about the possible effect infidelity could have on her marriage. Rather, she fears following through with what her signal suggests and thus, verifying a misperception of her true social group.

Even though she may not be officially punished according to the law, Madame de Grangerie still struggles with what will happen as a result of her imitation of a prostitute and her adultery.²⁵ She tells her friend that the *grand blond* wants to return the next day at the same time, but that she cannot perform this role as a prostitute again. Madame de Rennedon suggests that she demand protection from the police, insisting that they will believe whatever she says since she is “une femme du monde irréprochable” (1052). Yet, another dilemma presents itself: the *grand blond* has left Madame de Grangerie *deux louis* with which she does not know what to do. Rather than encourage hysterical worrying over the situation, Madame de Rennedon takes a more rational approach than her friend. She “hésita quelques secondes, puis répondit d’une voix sérieuse. ‘Ma chère...Il faut faire...Il faut faire... un petit cadeau à ton mari...ça n’est que justice’” (1053). Thus, in just a few sentences Madame de Rennedon has solved her friend’s problem without causing any public tarnish of Madame de Grangerie’s reputation. Here, Madame de Rennedon reverses the power again through her advice, disabling the *grand blond*’s authority over Madame de Grangerie. The *grand blond* will not be able to return if Madame de Grangerie seeks police protection, and her husband will never know of the affair if she buys him a gift. Throughout this tale, Madame de Grangerie remains in a state of panic and of need, in contrast to the sliver of authority she had experienced when first making the signal.

Conclusion

In “Une Aventure Parisienne,” the *petite provinciale* is initially in charge of her desires. By fantasizing about celebrities from her private sphere she is able to imagine anything she wishes, embellishing upon the accounts she reads in the papers and vicariously living a life outside the confines of her daily monotonous routines. After a while, however, her dream world itself is stifled by her provincial surroundings: she realizes that she has aged without ever experiencing any of the same adventures she envisions the bohemian class enjoying. Thus, the *petite provinciale* decides to make her dream a reality. When she reaches the climax of her journey to Paris—her sexual encounter with writer Jean Varin—she becomes terribly disappointed. Symbolized by the droning motion of the Parisian street sweepers, the *petite provinciale* recognizes that once a fantasy moves out of one’s imagination and into the harsh outside world, it can never be fulfilled as expected.¹

This story, though involving adultery, does not revolve around the social and legal consequences of the *petite provinciale*’s actions. Adultery is not emphasized as the worst thing a married woman could do. Instead, the text makes adultery seem slight in comparison to the inner struggles the *petite provinciale* experiences when facing her unfulfilling life at home and her equally dissatisfying liaison in the city. The adventure of the *petite provinciale* highlights what the narrator initially deems as the most dangerous feminine emotion: curiosity. Yet, rather than point to ways in which her fantasies and their fulfillment could have potentially harmed her individual marriage and the institution itself, Maupassant centers his tale on the woman and her inability to find contentment both within her own imagination and in the outside world. He wrote that bourgeois

adultery for women was just as common as for men, even though this was not always assumed to be the case during the late nineteenth century.² In “Une Aventure Parisienne,” Maupassant validates his assertion through an interesting conclusion, allowing the protagonist to return home to her husband without public, social, or legal punishment. The lesson for Maupassant’s contemporary readers, though, suggests that women who follow their fantasies and challenge their appropriate duties within the private sphere only have disappointment ahead of them. While the *petite provinciale* did experience momentary freedom, able to roam the streets of Paris and shop independently, she ultimately could not escape the reality of her role as a notary’s wife.

By creating such a tale with contemporary Third Republic features such as society papers, well-known boulevards, and typical daily routines, Maupassant places his story directly in the environment of his readership. The representativeness of the *petite provinciale* relates to what actual women could have experienced if they too fantasized and acted on their desires. However, by allowing the *petite provinciale* to chase her dreams with disregard to her wifely responsibilities, Maupassant does not paint her flight from the private world in a positive light. The potency of “Une Aventure Parisienne” thus lies in its ability to illuminate the male perspective of female curiosity as a negative trait and the struggles bourgeois wives might have experienced when dealing with their desires and the boundaries delimiting the private sphere.

In “Le Signe,” Maupassant’s subtle social commentary is seen through the character of Madame de Grangerie and her unique situation. While her act of imitating a prostitute might have seemed less likely to occur in actual life than the venturing of the *petite provinciale* to Paris, it nonetheless could have raised readers’ concerns as to the

activities of high-society wives. Here Madame de Grangerie is painted in an overly emotional and frantic state. She describes herself as being unable to control her emotions when struck by curiosity, even appealing to the medical discourse that claimed females were similar to monkeys. Yet, beneath her outward self-defense rests her initial interest in the outside world. Even before seeing the prostitute across the street, Madame de Grangerie has an obsession for people-watching. She thus sets herself up as an easy victim for falling to curiosity and whatever happens after it is sparked. For her, as Maupassant writes, marriage opened the doors to the social, public world which eventually helps lead to her adulterous encounter. Without her social position as a married member of high-society, she may not have had the leisure time to sit at her window and observe. Also, with her physical position within the city, Madame de Grangerie is left with no space or room to simply fantasize in private—from her window-seat she is too close to the outside world for her desires to remain inside her imagination. She immediately can act on her “envie” to imitate the prostitute’s signal. Thus, her positioning within Paris and on rue Saint-Lazare encourages her actions and what happens with her male client.

Madame de Grangerie, however, is not the only character in “Le Signe” with desires. Her client comes to her apartment and demands she sleep with him despite her requests that he leave.³ His male authority as the one purchasing Madame de Grangerie is enforced through their ambiguous sexual scene. Here, adultery is not the main issue of concern; rather, Madame de Grangerie’s staggered telling of what happened reveals the conflicting desires in that Parisian apartment. Should she follow through with what her glance has promised him or should she admit that she had been

playing a game by imitating the prostitute? Ultimately, though, the Madame de Grangerie is no match for this man and cannot entice him to leave. Her fear and anxiety which follow focus more on the client's return the next day than on the actual sexual act. Maupassant's story comments more on the physical positioning of a high-society lady across the street from a marginal class prostitute and the mistakes in identity that occur as a result of their mirroring than on adultery as a disruption of marriage.

Even though Maupassant allows his female characters the freedom to move beyond their typical roles as bourgeois wives and experience the crossing of worlds, both social and gendered, he does so through a masculinized exploration of specifically feminine emotionality and curiosity. Relying on these emotions and claiming they are uncontrollable offers the female characters a defense for their actions. As shown in "Une Aventure Parisienne," women cannot help doing what they do because they easily succumb to their natural propensity to be curious. Or, as Madame de Grangerie tells it, women helplessly imitate others, overtaken by uncontrollable desires. Either way, the characters in both of these tales illuminate the complex struggles women of the late nineteenth century could have experienced with realizing the limits placed on them as wives condemned to the private sphere. While Maupassant does not overtly condemn the actions of his female protagonists, he does not condemn the portrayals of them by his masculinized narrators either: "the role of the writer is here accomplished not by condemnation but by exposure."⁴ In essence, Maupassant opens doors for his readers to consider the assumptions concerning the emotions and actions of women and the often unquestioned Third Republic ideology surrounding it.

Notes

Introduction

¹ Maupassant's contemporary critic Paul Bourget comments that Maupassant "represents with great intensity some of the tendencies of the new generation...The three characteristic traits of the new literature--pessimism, scientific preoccupation, and a meticulous concern over style—are manifest to a high degree in the works of Maupassant...his preoccupation with style has not resulted in an obsession for words" (quoted in Artinian 32-33). Maupassant's contemporary "independent impressionist, Jules Lemaître" (Artinian 34) described Maupassant's style as "Classique par le naturel de sa prose, par le bon aloi de son vocabulaire et par la simplicité du rythme de ses phrases, M. de Maupassant l'est encore par la qualité de son comique" (quoted in Artinian 36).

² As explained by Artinian: "There was a double-barrelled reaction, however, the following year, when Henry Kistemaekers, the Belgian publisher of salacious works, issued the little volume headed by *Mademoiselle Fifi*. Francisque Sarcey, old friend of Flaubert [and a distinguished critic]...remonstrated with the young author upon the nature of the themes for which Maupassant seemed to have such an obvious predilection. Speaking at first in general terms of the regrettable taste of promising authors of the day for 'des sujets scabreux,' Sarcey cites Maupassant as case in point. A young man of unusual talent, he calls him; one who not only sees clearly, but conveys exactly what he observes. And yet how can one explain his penchant for such studies? Why waste time and talent on subjects so unworthy of interest? These beings, actuated as they are by animal impulses, offer a necessarily limited field for observation. To return again and again to the depiction of these same characters is to incur the displeasure as well as the condemnation of the reading public" (27).

³ "Une Aventure Parisienne" was first published in the Parisian newspaper *Gil Blas* on December 22, 1881 and "Le Signe" in *Gil Blas* on April 27, 1886.

⁴ Sharon P. Johnson notes how "Le Signe" raises issues of bourgeois standards: "The narrative structures of Flaubert's *fiacre* scene and Maupassant's short stories "Le Signe" and "L'Ami Patience" dramatize the shock-value of these works at both a narrative and an ideological level because the authors embedded counter-discourses in their texts. In this way, their stories were doubly subversive. Not only did the texts' characters engage in acts of impropriety, but other characters critiqued these improper actions. Internal (textual) voices of dissent, constructed through the characters' disapproval, reinforced bourgeois standards of normalcy. However, the texts' narrative strategies worked against these norms. Moreover, even though the authors provided a critique of the illicitness that reigned in their texts, bourgeois boundaries of acceptability were really being called into question via the irony and the multiplicity of narrative voices within these authors' works"(67).

⁵ For a discussion of this debate, see for example Vincent B. Leitch's *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*.

⁶ See Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish the birth of the prison*.

⁷ Many of Maupassant's stories deal with significant late nineteenth-century issues and events such as the Franco-Prussian war and the changing classifications of prostitutes. In "Le Signe" Madame de Grangerie lives on rue Saint-Lazare across the street from a prostitute, indicating that the story takes place after Haussmannization when the widening of boulevards had occurred. In "Une Aventure Parisienne" the time period of the Third Republic is also verified by the Parisian gossip columns the main character reads featuring such bohemian celebrities as Emile Zola and Alexandre Dumas.

⁸ Another Third Republic critic, Anatole France, describes Maupassant's story telling style as being clear and free from moralist judgments: "Il est le grand peintre de la grimace humaine. Il peint sans haine et sans amour, sans colère et sans pitié...Tous ces grotesques et tous ces malheureux, il nous les montre si distinctement que nous croyons les voir de nos yeux et que nous les trouvons plus réels que la réalité même. Il les fait vivre, mais il ne les juge pas. Nous ne savons point ce qu'il pense de ces drôles, de ces coquins, de ces polissons qu'il a créés et qui nous hantent" (quoted in Artinian 39-40).

⁹ Maupassant writes: "Dès lors que je sens un plaidoyer dans une œuvre, je me mets en garde; dès lors qu'un écrivain cesse d'être un artiste, rien qu'un artiste, pour devenir un polémiste, je cesse de le suivre, m'estimant assez grand pour penser tout seul, et ne voulant de lui que l'œuvre d'art[...]Mais ici l'auteur a été tellement sincère, tellement désintéressé, tellement vrai; il s'est tellement effacé pour nous présenter uniquement ses personnages, eux seuls, avec leurs amours, leurs mœurs (les mœurs de l'époque) et leurs physionomies lumineuses de réalité, que nous ne nous révoltons pas, nous, nous ne nous étonnons même point, nous subissons l'œuvre irrésistible et charmante dans sa sincérité brutale" (Maupassant "L'Adultère").

¹⁰ Artinian writes: "The facts recounted by Maupassant are such as occur every day...his characters are neither good nor bad. In short, Maupassant gives us life as it is, in all its simplicity and in all its horror" (Artinian 31).

¹¹ For an analysis on how gender was used as a dichotomizing system between the sexes see Joan W. Scott's article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." Here she shows how gender/sex was (and is) used as a way of historically dividing, researching, and recording people.

¹² See Bonnie Smith, Geneviève Fraisse, Martine Segalen, Sharon P. Johnson, Rosemary Lloyd, Michelle Perrot, Georges Duby and Karen Offen for discussions of the public/private divide.

¹³ Translation mine of Martine Segalen's list of the distinguishing factors for men and women as separated by private and public:

"Sphère privée:

Home

Temps de loisir

Famille

Relations personnelles et intimes

Proximité

Amour et sexualité

Sentiment et irrationalité

Sphère publique:

Monde extérieur

Temps de travail

Relations non familiales

Relations impersonnelles et anonymes

Distance

Sexualité illégitime

Rationalité et efficacité

Moralité
Chaleur, lumière et douceur
Harmonie et totalité
Vie naturelle et sincère

Immoralité
Division et dissonance

Vie artificielle et affectée” (Burguière 514).

¹⁴ Sharon P. Johnson writes: “One can conclude that throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, during the process of industrialization, the public and private spheres were highly unstable categories...Paradoxically, women accomplished great social deeds and upheld their virtue, while being ‘invisible’ to the dominant recorders of the history of their time” (28).

¹⁵ Feminists at the end and turn of the century in France belonged to several camps: one that claimed differences between the sexes and one that believed in commonalities. Oddly enough, the camp that politically prevailed claimed differences between the sexes, deeming the proper place for the woman is in the home. Karen Offen’s article “Depopulation, Nationalism, Feminism” offers insightful discussions of the reasons behind these two viewpoints and the strategies of women siding with the difference camp rather than the same. According to Anne-Marie Kappel, claiming differences allowed for a “stronger power of cultural critique” (Duby and Perrot 577).

¹⁶ The concern with women working or being outside of the home is historically directed more at bourgeois white women than any other race/class. My analysis of fictional characters thus focuses more on the division between social statuses of women (married, divorced, prostitutes, etc.) than on racial differences because these are the differences Maupassant brings up in his tales.

¹⁷ The protagonist, the *petite provinciale*, in “Une Aventure Parisienne” actually enters public space by venturing to Paris. In “Le Signe,” Madame de Grangerie only flirts with the outside world, letting her gaze communicate with the men on the street. The man from the public world enters her private home, indicating a merging of divided male/female spheres.

¹⁸ Sharon P. Johnson also explains how these stories emphasize female subversion of traditional roles: “Despite the competing ideologies in this story, the notion of feminine power, delight, and action are more dominant than the other represented points of view. Certainly “Le Signe” gives women and men new social behaviors and motivations to contemplate. Maupassant’s text creates an alternative space in which his female protagonist, in words and actions, questions social, religious, and medical norms of the nineteenth century” (66).

¹⁹ See Geneviève Fraisse, “De la destination au destin: Histoire philosophique de la différence des sexes” (Duby and Perrot, 63-101).

²⁰ Ibid: “La métaphysique du XIX^e siècle est nourrie des concepts de dualité, relation et unité de pôles opposés, dont la différence des sexes est une des représentations, voire peut-être une métaphore fondamentale” (69).

²¹ See Tony Tanner’s *Adultery in the Novel*.

²² Gerald Mead writes that while Maupassant's tales may seem to focus on individual situations and anecdotes he reveals "broader and more fundamental concerns of late nineteenth-century French society" (162).

²³ Maupassant discusses the legally and socially competing standpoints associated with marriage and adultery: "La loi, avec raison, n'est pas douce pour l'adultère. L'opinion publique se montre généralement plus clémente ; bien qu'aujourd'hui elle n'en rie plus guère. Elle pardonne, excuse, oublie, ferme les yeux ; elle n'a plus la vive gaieté de jadis." (Maupassant "L'Adultère")

Chapter One

¹ See Yvonne Knibiehler's "Corps et Coeurs" (Duby and Perrot 391-438)

² "C'est donc d'adultère qu'il s'agit dans *Pot-Bouille*. Le sujet n'est pas neuf ; il n'en est que plus difficile ; il n'en apparaît que plus intéressant, l'adultère ayant toujours été la grande préoccupation des sociétés, le grand thème des écrivains, le grand *joujou* de l'esprit des hommes." (Maupassant "L'Adultère")

⁴ See Anne-Lise Blanc, "Ecartés et séduction dans Une aventure parisienne de Guy de Maupassant."

⁵ The referenced volume of Maupassant's stories places it under the category of "Le Danger des Liaisons" accompanying 59 other short tales identified by the same theme.

⁶ For works explicating the difference between male and female sexuality in the nineteenth century see Janet Beizer, André Burguière et al.; Anthony Copley; Alain Corbin; Geneviève Fraisse and Michelle Perrot; Dominique Simonnet et al.; and Joan W. Scott.

⁷ "Among organized religious groups, centuries-old attitudes towards women were reformulated during the years of the Third Republic[...]The thrust of all papal encyclicals during this period was that woman's unchanging mission must be to devote themselves to home and family, to be chaste and modest, and, for married women, to stay out of the labor force if possible. Mary, not Eve, was the model of feminine perfection. Behind the official statements of the church, however, lay a deep distrust of the flesh and of female sexuality, which, like Eve, had long been perceived as unpredictable and irresponsible, threatening men's composure, and therefore requiring regulation at all times by the superior authority of the male. The attitude that women were dangerous to men was repeatedly revealed in the works of the novelists, dramatists, and poets of the Catholic revival, such as Francois Mauriac and Henry de Montherlant" (Karen Offen, *Historical Dictionary of the Third Republic 1870–1940*. 1068).

⁸ Michel Foucault writes that we can never escape our ideologies: the creativity of individuals is limited by their available yet often invisible contexts. From a twenty-first century perspective the prevailing ideologies of nineteenth-century France appear as Engels and Marx would call "false thought" or "false consciousness" in that views today allow for vehement challenges to the depiction that female sexuality is something to be feared. See Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?"

⁹ Genesis 3: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?’” ²The woman said to the serpent, “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; ³but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.’” ⁴The serpent said to the woman, “you surely shall not die! ⁵For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶When the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings” (*New American Standard Bible*)

¹⁰ Genesis 3: ¹¹“And He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” ¹²The man said, “The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate...²²therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden” (*New American Standard Bible*)

¹¹ Tony Tanner describes how adultery and the novel both hold the power to destabilize not only marriage but also social order: “They [protagonists] thus represent or incarnate a potentially disruptive or socially unstabilized energy that may threaten, directly or implicitly, the organization of society...Since much of what I want to write about concerns an act of transgression that threatens the family—namely, adultery” (3-4).

¹² For more information regarding social perceptions and legal regulations of prostitutes during the nineteenth century, see Alain Corbin, Jann Matlock and Charles Bernheimer.

¹³ “de toutes ces perverses qualités qui poussent au suicide les amants imbécilement crédules, mais ravissent les autres” (Maupassant 761).

¹⁴ Hysteria was a medical condition believed to have affected women with sexual issues. The narrator’s adjectives inferring a high state of emotion can be related to this “illness” which also assumed women to be more emotional and prone to sexual problems than men. For further reading on hysteria see Jann Matlock.

¹⁵ Blanc 75.

¹⁶ Blanc explains this juxtaposition: “On peut lire alors une présentation méthodique et topologique, voire topographique de la femme qui oppose nettement essence et apparence, ‘surface’ et ‘compartiments secrets” (73).

¹⁷ See Nicole Arnaud-Duc’s “Les Contradictions du Droit” (Duby and Perrot 101-139).

¹⁸ Even though the Civil Code and jurisprudence concerning adultery is not included in this story, we can infer her knowledge of its severity by the fact that she hides her destination from her husband.

¹⁹ “Il s’agit d’une parabole du désenchantement, à l’instar d’Une Vie alors en gestation, qui relate l’expérience d’une nouvelle victime du bovarysme” (Blanc 69).

²⁰ Offen, Karen *Historical Dictionary* 1069

²¹ None of the male characters in either tale are portrayed as being curious or as irrationally emotional, thus setting up a difference between the sexes.

²² Madame de Grangerie imitates the actions of a prostitute and finds herself with a male customer whom she must satisfy with what she has indicated from her window.

²³ See Yvonne Knibiehler's "Corps et Coeurs" (Duby and Perrot, eds. 391-438

²⁴ Sharon P. Johnson also discusses the resemblance of these two words, relating it to the classes of women: "All classes of women have brains similar to monkeys. In addition, one can easily switch the letters 'g' and 'n' in the word *le signe* to derive the word monkey, *singe*. The chain of associations (lexically and semantically) subsumes women, the imitation and circulation of signs, and monkeys as like terms. In Maupassant's story, two classes of women, the aristocrat and the prostitute, symbolize and reproduce these *signes/singes*" (65).

²⁵ Alain Corbin tells that "Dans l'ordre du désir, la correspondance de Flaubert le montre: on décèle une étonnante tension entre les postures angéliques du romantisme et les pratiques masculines qui se caractérisent par les exploits de bordel...L'imaginaire féminin est centré sur la pudeur: une jeune fille de bonne famille ne se regarde pas dans le miroir, ni même dans l'eau de sa baignoire (en revanche, les miroirs tapissent les murs des bordels). Les femmes connaissent mal leur propre corps...Le corps est caché, corseté, protégé" (cited in Simonnet 105).

Chapter Two

¹ From this historical perspective, then, the manner in which women acceptably could enter public, asserting themselves, remained limited.

² Sharon P. Johnson writes: "Yet, if one considers alternative spaces of modernity, such as the intermediary spaces of the theater box, the balcony, and the garden, female protagonists' experiences are privileged" (32).

³ In "Le Signe", two classes intersect (the lower class and the aristocracy) because living in a city apartment with windows facing the street allows different classes on different floors to see each other from across the street" (Johnson 41).

⁴ Sharon P. Johnson discusses the gaze between two women: "Theories on gaze place less emphasis on the fact that women were also on display for other women, and hence, were objectified by other women regarding the elegance of their toilette, or who was accompanying them, etc. Given this social context and theoretical frame, Maupassant's "Le Signe" and "L'Ami Patience" and Mary Cassatt's *In the Loge* prove to be controversial because they reverse traditional understandings of how nineteenth-century bourgeois women "look" in public and how they comport themselves" (34).

⁵“The prostitute is inferior with respect to her origins, her place in society, her profession, her moral status, and her role as a mother. Both Yvette and her mother have unknown origins” (Thomas 77).

⁶ See Wright, *Historical Dictionary*

⁷ John Ireland describes this mirroring: “Indeed, the closeness of the two women is more than geographical. The similarity of their physical station in their respective window-seats on either side of the same street obscures any apparent difference in their social station. In Maupassant’s story, they have become, at least for the man in the street, mirror images of each other” (1092).

⁸ For further details concerning this scene see my Chapter Three.

⁹ See interview with Alain Corbin in Simonnet’s *La plus belle histoire de l’amour*, 103. Shelley Thomas writes: “Nineteenth-century French literature was particularly prolific in fostering the notion of the dichotomized female: on the one hand a whore, on the other, a Madonna” (74).

¹⁰ Thomas discusses the assumed nineteenth-century difference between women: “when medical discourse joined legal discourse to define the prostitute as diseased, profane, and genetically predestined to hysteria...Time and again, nineteenth-century authors showed that the results of sexuality in fictional wives and mothers were disastrous” (75).

¹¹ Based on Christian doctrine and State regulations, the husband was to rule over the wife, reflecting the relationship of the Monarch to the State and God to the people. A wife in this time period was dependent on her husband in all manners, making her the legal minor. (Jean-Louis Flandrin)

¹² See Bonnie Smith

¹³ See Joan de Jean’s *The Reinvention of Obscenity*.

¹⁴ “The ideal of sexual relations in the Third Republic was based on middle-class morality and Catholic theology. Celibacy was prescribed until marriage, and then sexual activity was to be limited to conjugal relations for procreation. Although laws, medical counsels, and religious pronouncements tried to enforce these mores, they were often honored in the breach” (Aldrich 932).

“Léon Blum remarked that although inequality in experience was what made marriage so difficult, the French ideal remained the union of an experienced man and an inexperienced woman” (Troyansky 607).

¹⁵ When this story was written in 1881 women were still atypically seen walking the streets without an escort. See *The Flâneur* edited by Keith Testler for discussion of men and women roaming Parisian streets during the Third Republic.

¹⁶ See Johnson and Tester for discussions of the flâneur/flâneuse.

Chapter Three

¹ See Tony Tanner

² “Adultery was punishable by imprisonment, with the female offender technically liable to remain incarcerated for as long as the husband wanted” (cited in Stephens 12).

³ “Nevertheless, love does not seem to have been at the top of the list of factors in choice of a spouse. Medical texts began to point out the importance of satisfying the women sexually in the marriage, but the opinion that a wife produced heirs—while love was sought through a mistress—remained quite common throughout the period” (Troyansky 607)

⁴ In “Le Signe,” Madame de Grangerie worries that her husband will arrive home while she is there with her client. She also fears what will come of her if the client returns the next day, indicating that she knows possible risks of what she has done. The *petite provinciale* in “Une Aventure Parisienne,” does not tell her husband of her intentions for going to Paris, suggesting that her desire to have a wild experience would not have been tolerated by her husband.

⁵ See Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and punish*.

⁶ Jacques Lacan defines desire as unfulfillable by definition (cited in Evans 114).

⁷ See note 2

⁸ As Catherine Belsey writes, “Desire in all its forms, including heterosexual desire, commonly repudiates legality...and in consequence it readily overflows, in a whole range of ways, the institutions designed to contain it” (7).

⁹ “Est-il un sentiment plus aigue que la curiosite chez la femme? Oh ! savoir, connaître, toucher ce qu’on a rêvé ! Que ne ferait-elle pas pour cela ? Une femme, quand sa curiosité impatiente est en éveil, commettra toutes les folies, toutes les imprudences, aura toutes les audaces, ne reculera devant rien” (Maupassant “Une Aventure Parisienne” 761)

¹⁰ Belsey writes that “desire...is wordless”(17).

¹¹ Belsey writes that passion and desire are described through natural disturbances of flood, flame, and storms (27). See also Tanner and Rabosseau for descriptions of authors using nature metaphors to depict adulterous liaisons.

¹² John Ireland relates the inevitable distance between fantasy/imagination and reality to vision rather than sound as I note here. He writes: “All fantasy implies a problem of vision since...the use of the term fantasy cannot fail to evoke the distinction between imagination and reality/perception” (1100).

¹³ Nicholas White points out that even those female characters who do enter into the public sphere and take up a place of authority (or control over a man and her own adventure as does the *petite provinciale*), the role reversal is still temporary and acts as an analogy. This analogy and realization of fantasy (thus, “living through metaphors”) is what produces a lack of fulfillment for the *petite provinciale*. Through this logic, she will inevitably be let down with adultery even

though she had gained control. With the reversal of speech and authority “there are of course female characters who do make their way in the world...but the tragedy for so many of the women in such fiction is that Clothilde’s carnivalesque inversion of roles and this collapsing of public and private categories are nothing more than an analogy, and to live through metaphors, however potent, is still to live through Bovaryesque dreams” (84).

¹⁴ “La curiosité n’est que le désir de quelque chose de nouveau” (House 35).

¹⁵ Judith Armstrong explains that a character cannot experience fulfillment when guilt is also experienced. “The immediate reaction of the just-fallen woman brings into concentrated focus the specific relationship between gratification and guilt...if guilt can be eliminated, happiness is at hand” (104). Even though textually the tale does not point to her feeling guilty for her actions, she does cry, indicating a lack of happiness.

¹⁶ See Sharon P. Johnson for a discussion of the traditional order of gaze/regard.

¹⁷ “imagination [is] a potent form of vision, bounded by its corollary and opposite, perception” (Ireland 1101).

¹⁸ Ireland suggests that this is a “parable of misreading” (1101) as shown by the true position of Madame de Grangerie and what the *grand blond* reads from her actions at the window. He also notes that “the topography of this short story is reflexive and what it reflects on are the problems and indeed the risks for a male observer of attempting to decode the sign of female desire” (1094).

¹⁹ Johnson notes this scene as ambiguous in its telling, insisting that the physical nature and her pleading suggest rape/rapture rather than a consensual affair. In fact, I would argue that the very definition of adultery is put in question here as the text points more to Madame de Grangerie’s desire for him to leave than for him to stay.

²⁰ Deitz writes that it is elucidation of the differences that permeate [Maupassant’s] fictional works, be they perceptual, social, or sexual” (1).

²¹ Johnson writes: “In addition, he also presents the physical and sexual dangers women encounter if they let a stranger into their apartment...Madame de Grangerie experiences most likely sexual coercion, rather than sexual desire as a consequence of her ‘envie épouvantable” (65).

²² Here, Maupassant seems to play with the converging of an actual act of adultery and the desires behind it. Does the act itself need to be adultery for the woman to have had an adulterous desire? Naomi Segal seems to think not: “It is not essential for my purpose for ‘actual’ adultery to have taken place (though it usually has); adulterous desire is enough” (61).

²³ Tony Tanner writes: “Within the city the prescriptions of the law extend to both sexes because theoretically everyone can be heard. Everyone and everyone’s activities, in this case specifically their sexual activities, is contained and defined within the prevailing discourse...The same absoluteness of the law does not obtain in the field, for although there is still voice, there is no community” (19).

²⁴ See Maupassant “L’adultère.”

²⁵ While Madame de Grangerie is not portrayed as fearing the possible legal consequences for her actions, she ultimately fears social and personal judgment of what she has done. She does not want to think of herself as less than an “honnête femme.” In describing the Biblical tale of an adulterous woman at the well who is turned in to Christ by men for judgment, Tanner shows how Christ’s role is to reverse the typical social judgmental order “and suggest a limitation of the existing social categories by moving that act into the inner realm of conscience” (22).

Conclusion

¹ Jacques Lacan defines desire as being unable to be fulfilled by its definition. (quoted in Evans, 114)

² “Observons donc seulement la femme, qui, de l’avis de tous, doit rester fidèle à l’époux. Demeure-t-elle fidèle en réalité ? Vais-je être lapidé si je réponds : ‘Non’ en général. Pardon, mesdames ! “(Maupassant “Un Dilemme”).

⁴ Armstrong 128.

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