

The Gendered Discourse of Charles Double

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Alexandre Lacassagne was a prominent French criminologist from 1886 until his death in 1924. While working as a professor of legal medicine at the University of Lyon, Lacassagne developed groundbreaking theories in the field of criminal anthropology. Whereas his Italian counterpart Cesare Lombroso believed in the physically identifiable “born criminal,” Lacassagne understood the development of crime as “the result of an interaction between the individual and [its] social environment.”¹ To Lacassagne, the criminal’s Lamarckian predisposition to crime is recessive unless triggered by something in their socialization. Lacassagne’s theory bridged the intellectual divide between new revolutionary sociology and the psychobiological pseudoscience that dominated 19th century medical discourse. In a way, his “was one of the last expressions of the naturalistic human science movement” that connected criminology and biology.²

Lacassagne conducted research on criminals in part by asking them to recount their lives autobiographically. For a project he called *Le Livre des vies coupables*, Lacassagne asked a handful of convicted murderers to describe their life stories in detail, paying close attention to “their motives and their states of mind.”³ Lacassagne claimed that his collection of autobiographies “added significantly to his theory on the origins of crime.”⁴ Rather than publishing his research outright, Lacassagne decided to give his “notebooks, along with the rest of his papers, to the Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon” where they have since been preserved.⁵

One interview—the autobiography of self-professed ‘mental hermaphrodite’ Charles Double—is particularly pertinent to the study of crime, discourse, gender, and sexuality in late

¹ Marc Renneville, “Lacassagne, Alexandre (1843-1924)” in David Scott Clark, *Encyclopedia of Law and Society: American and Global Perspectives*, (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2007), 908.

² *Ibid.*, 908.

³ William A. Peniston, Nancy Erber, *Queer Lives: Men's Autobiographies from Nineteenth-Century France*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 80.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

19th century France.⁶ Lacassagne found Double in Saint Paul prison in Lyon where he was being held for the murder of his mother. Originally “he had been sentenced to death, but his sentence was commuted to a life sentence at hard labor in the prison colony at Cayenne in French Guiana.”⁷ Before Double was shipped across the Atlantic, he was able to write down his life story, the events leading up to and directly following his mother’s murder, and the proceedings of his trial in notebooks given to him by Lacassagne. Unfortunately, Double struggles to relay the way the relationship between his masculine and feminine personalities—what he calls his ‘Mental Hermaphroditism’—played a role in his decision to murder his mother.

We know from Michel Foucault that there are power dynamics imbedded in the relationship between language, representation, and discourse.⁸ The power embedded in the language of oppression is in part useful because it becomes self-evident among the oppressed. In the homosexual context, Foucault notes that: “homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.”⁹ The public’s discourse on homosexuality directly informs the way Double defines himself.¹⁰ In this paper, I attempt to use Double’s representation of his own queer identity to identify what Foucault would call the

⁶ It is worth noting that from a modern perspective, Charles Double would certainly conceive of himself as transgender. He describes himself as a ‘mental hermaphrodite’ simply because those were the only words he believed could accurately describe his condition. Double describes his dysphoria in detail, and writes that he knew many other men for whom the “masculine physical makeup was as painful to endure as the dress of Dejanire was heavy on Hercules’ shoulders.” The term transgender, however, is not historically cogent, and, for his contemporaries, neither was ‘mental hermaphrodite;’ Double would also call himself an invert. For the sake of this paper, I will refer to Charles Double as either ‘queer’ or via the terms he uses to define himself. Charles Double, “Mental Hermaphrodite,” In William A. Peniston, Nancy Erber, *Queer Lives: Men's Autobiographies from Nineteenth-Century France*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 149.

⁷ Peniston et. al., *Queer Lives*, 79.

⁸ The relationship between power, sex, and discourse has already been explored by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁰ Male queerness during this period was often conflated with homosexuality (called pederasty or inversion).

“tactical productivity” and “strategical integration” that accompany his discourses on sexuality; in other words, “what reciprocal effects of power and knowledge they ensure,” and “what force relationship make their utilization necessary.”¹¹ As population decline, national embarrassment, and a burgeoning feminist movement caused a “crisis of masculinity,” sexuality became conflated with biology, and gender norms became more polarized; ‘man’ and ‘woman’ were to be placed into two separate, opposite, and disjointed categories.¹² While the homosexual man, in the words of 19th century medical expert Louis Reuss, “gathers in himself all the flaws of a woman,” he is still trapped in the body of a man—a body that requires “unambiguous demonstrations of normal masculine sexuality.”¹³ Because Double is a ‘mental hermaphrodite,’ the language Double employs to describe his own masculine and feminine traits reflects the polarization of gendered norms. It then follows that 19th century discourses on sexuality had direct negative psychological implications for Double and other queer men. As Double’s homosexual ‘femininity’ was contrasted by societal pressure to project biological masculinity, his mind was torn between the two gendered extremes. As a result, Double reflects male bourgeois anxiety in the form of a ruthless self-critique of his feminine mental state.

There are a few caveats to this analysis. The first is one of context. Double wrote his account under duress to a medical doctor. This had an influence on the way he chose to relay information. As translators William Peniston and Nancy Erber note, Double’s “final notebook ended with a personal appeal to Lacassagne: ‘Charles Double recommends himself very respectfully to Dr. Lacassagne. He would be very grateful if he could write a letter of

¹¹ Foucault, 102.

¹² Michael D. Sibalis, “Defining Masculinity in Fin-de-Siècle France: Sexual Anxiety and the Emergence of the Homosexual,” *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* 25 (1998): 254.

¹³ Dr. Reuss, “Des aberrations du sens génésique chez l’homme,” *Annales d’hygiène publique et de médecine légale: Attentats aux mœurs* (Paris, 1896), 224-25, in Robert A. Nye, “Honor, Impotence, and Male Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century French Medicine,” *French Historical Studies* 16 (Spring, 1989): 69, 71.

recommendation on his behalf to the medical doctors in charge of the prisoners at SaintMartin-de-Ré.”¹⁴ Each of his notebooks also came with the warning: “To be read by medical doctors only.”¹⁵ These appeals reflect the purposeful way Double structured “his account of his crime as a legal brief arguing in his own defense and condemning a cruel society that had no place for men like him.”¹⁶ It is important to consider the way Double’s possible exterior motives—to reduce or get out of his hard-labor sentence, for instance—informed his writing. If Double is consciously aware of the way the discourse around his sexuality generates meaning, he might be attempting to put himself in a box crafted for him by others for his own benefit. If we read Double as less of a conscious agent, it is possible that the aforementioned discourse around his sexuality is subconsciously ingrained. For the sake of this paper, I will choose to assume that Double is a fully competent agent in his choice to employ the language he does. This suggests Double’s communication with Lacassagne is purely to satisfy his own means, and that the language he chooses to employ is working to satisfy those means.

Double begins his autobiography with some exposition about his mental hermaphroditism. He acknowledges two separate individual beings that exist within him absolutely:

If you want to examine and understand my crime accurately, you must acknowledge first that two completely distinct and different selves coexisted in me: one that was instinctive and natural and another that was rational and religious. These two beings lived side by side, always at war with each other. My religious self watched and studied my instinctive self exactly the way a doctor would examine and watch over a patient that he wanted to cure of a disease and its painful crises.¹⁷

¹⁴ Peniston et. al., *Queer Lives*, 81.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁷ Charles Double, “The Characteristic Mental and Psychological State of a Parricide Invert,” In William A. Peniston, Nancy Erber, *Queer Lives: Men's Autobiographies from Nineteenth-Century France*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 129.

Double defines his female being as ‘instinctive and natural’ and his male being as ‘rational and religious.’ While the “monotonous nights of the Victorian bourgeoisie” were characterized by images of the chaste and desexualized female, pre-Victorian conceptions of gender suggested the opposite.¹⁸ The 17th century man was rational, religious, and ‘chaste’ while the female was instinctual, fleshy, and corrupt. Double’s insistence on the previous gender structure indicates to the reader that in some way the bourgeoisie system has failed; the features that define Double’s female being are not chaste or reserved, but are instead ‘instinctive and natural.’

As Elinor Accampo writes, men in fin-de-siècle France were obsessed with the “compensatory reinforcing of gender difference, based on the ‘naturalness’ of women.”¹⁹ Women’s sexuality was problematized as the French became more anxious about the perceived decline of their society. When Double writes that his masculine, rational self is analyzing his instinctive, female self like a doctor would a patient, he is conducting a microcosm of the same gendered analysis that was happening at the societal level. His choice to employ the doctor-patient relationship as a metaphor for the problems of gendered difference is consistent with the idea of the bourgeoisie professional examining his subject. Double has internalized the problematization of contemporary femininity. Because he sees in himself both a masculine and feminine being, his mind is in conflict with itself. On another level, the insistence on homosexuality as an inherently feminine imposition on the masculine male body suggests this kind of self-problematization could have broader implications for other queer French men during this period.

¹⁸ Foucault, 3.

¹⁹ Elinor A. Accampo, “The Gendered Nature of Contraception in France: Neo-Malthusianism, 1900-1920,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 34 (Autumn, 2003): 261.

Before he commits his parricide, Double writes that he engaged in a dialogue between his masculine and feminine selves. While his natural, instinctive, and feminine self attempts to convince him to engage in the parricide, his rational, religious, and masculine self tells him to have pity on his mother.²⁰ Double writes:

““Would you dare to threaten the life of the person who carried you in her womb, the one who unsparingly gave you the precious gifts of sweetness and kindness that are only found in a mother’s heart, just to spare yourself the pain of hunger, poverty, humiliation, and loneliness?””²¹

Double’s rationale in protecting his mother is informed by the ideal of motherhood. Double believes that he should refrain from killing his own mother because she gave birth to him, she protected him, and she nurtured him—things that all righteous mothers should do. His instinctive self, on the other hand, advocates for parricide, citing the suffering he will have to endure without his inheritance. While Double’s instinctive, female self is attempting to murder his actual mother, the masculine rational self justifies her existence by her gendered role. By invoking the language of motherhood in the context of protecting his mother, Double is reflecting male anxieties about the declining popularity of motherhood. Once again, outside gender conflicts are mirrored in Double’s psychological battle.

Double goes on to describe the pain he felt at being rejected by men who saw him as “nothing more than a deranged person.” To other men, Double’s love only “inspired disgust, horror, and hatred that reached the heights of abhorrence.” In his mind, men abhorred him because they could not see him for the “poor freakish woman who would have been consoled and thrilled by the illusion of love accorded to her through pity.” He then writes an anecdote that he says supports the idea that women have an innate “capriciousness, sensitivity, and morbid

²⁰ Double, “The Characteristic Mental...,” 133.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

weakness.”²² Double recounts the story of a young aristocratic lady who married an “honorable, intelligent man, who earned twenty-five thousand francs a year as the director of a big factory.” Her husband also “had an outstanding status among the bourgeoisie in the region.”²³ Unfortunately for the young bride, her husband, “tortured by suspicions” of his wife’s infidelity, went on a fake business trip to trick her into engaging in an affair. When he returned back without warning late one night, “he found his wife in the arms” of his very attractive manservant— “a stunning fellow, as robust as an oak tree, whose big, dark eyes revealed a strong soul undaunted by vain fears.”²⁴ Double finishes his anecdote with: “Oh! Feminine hearts! Only attentive observers and perceptive psychologists who can interpret and see life clearly would dare to claim that incidents of this sort are relatively infrequent.”²⁵ The emphasis in this story is on the susceptibility of the female heart to the charms of sensibility and masculinity.

Double shows once again a reflexive masculine resentment of his own feminine traits. By giving the reader this anecdote in a certain context, Double is telegraphing that his feminine impulses would also force him to engage in the adultery were he to be in the young bride’s position. Double’s choice to characterize the husband as a relatively well-off bourgeoisie factory manager correlates directly to the middle-class’s anxiety surrounding female infidelity and male impotence. Robert Nye proves that there are a “number of important early and mid-nineteenth century texts where the principles of sexual honor, sexual exhaustion, and impotence may be found in abundance.”²⁶ These texts were often “intended for middle-class male readers and treat the problems of male sexual deficiency and dysfunction with a remarkable degree of

²² Ibid., 146.

²³ Ibid., 147.

²⁴ Ibid., 147.

²⁵ Ibid., 147.

²⁶ Robert A. Nye, “Honor, Impotence, and Male Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century French Medicine,” *French Historical Studies*, 16 (Spring, 1989), 55.

frankness.”²⁷ Middle-impotence was a problem to be diagnosed and fixed. The working-class manservant who the bride moves on to is described as being as ‘robust as an oak tree.’ This imagery illustrates that the manservant possesses an erect virality that the bride’s husband does not. Double is expressing bourgeois class anxiety over being replaced by the more virulent proletariat. The working-class manservant is also not ‘daunted’ by ‘vain fears.’ Fears that could be related to the lecherous consumption slowly eroding the famous bourgeois asceticism that characterized its rise to power. Double’s final remark regarding the ‘observant’ and ‘perceptive’ psychologist repeats the image of a bourgeoisie professional taking the time to analyze the societal situation. The reality, from the perspective of someone who can ‘see life clearly,’ is not mass infidelity, but simply a projection of bourgeois insecurity.

Double goes on to relay the way his mental hermaphroditism played a role in his public and legal perception during his trial. There was a distinct lack of rapport between him and assizes. From Double’s perspective, the courts could not understand the way his “sexual inversion and... psychological feminism played a key role in the execution of [his] crime.”²⁸ It was his lawyer, Monsieur Moemod, who built an eloquent defense for Double:

"During the oral arguments he alone was able to move me as he described to the jury my mother’s ghost, who actually came out of the kindness of her loving mother’s heart to plead for mercy for me. My lawyer’s argument was so eloquent; he explained it so clearly. Although I wasn’t insane, I wasn’t fully endowed with all the mental capacities appropriate to my sex. Consequently, people in the courtroom thought I’d be sentenced only to forced labor, but the jury had been shaken in its convictions.”²⁹

Moemod’s argument turned Double into the second-class citizen he believed his feminine mentality deserved. From a purely legal perspective, women were sometimes afforded lighter

²⁷ Ibid., 55.

²⁸ Charles Double, “Mental Hermaphrodite,” In William A. Peniston, Nancy Erber, *Queer Lives: Men's Autobiographies from Nineteenth-Century France*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 153.

²⁹ Ibid., 158.

sentences or simply acquitted outright because of the sexist preconception that regarded them as too ‘hysterical’ or emotionally driven to control themselves under some circumstances. Although the jury would convict Double for the murder, his later reduced sentence is a direct consequence of these sexist preconceptions. As to not set a precedent, “the judge instructed the jury to condemn” Double to death. However, the judge also “recommend a reprieve, which would be accepted favorably by the prosecutor and the judge,” allowing Double to escape the death penalty.³⁰ The judge’s actions here mirror other legal precedents around homosexuality in practice.

As William Peniston notes:

Although same-sex sexual activity was not illegal in France in the nineteenth century, the police assumed that it led to crimes against both property, such as theft, blackmail, and extortion, and persons, such as assault and murder. The police, therefore, patrolled certain areas of the city that they considered dangerous, looking for any kind of unusual activity, which they often found, whether that activity was truly dangerous or not. They arrested men about whom they had received information, whom they had followed, and whom they had caught performing various sexual acts.³¹

Peniston describes here the same extralegal system employed in Double’s case working against other Parisian homosexuals. The judge’s negative assumptions about his mental fortitude allowed Double to escape the greater punishment warranted to him by the law. If we analyze both cases in conjunction with each other, queer men were both arrested and pardoned via their perceived deficiencies. Deficiencies that Double either consciously saw in himself or was attempting to project in order to interact with the legal system he existed in. In both cases, Double’s understanding of the way discourse around queerness informed public and private perceptions of him was a tool he consciously or unconsciously employed.

³⁰ Ibid., 158.

³¹ William A. Peniston, “Pederasts, Prostitutes, and Pickpockets in Paris of the 1870s,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 41 (2002): 169.

Double ends his account by comparing himself to the other prisoners condemned to die at Saint Paul. Although the others were all “completely virile, having the full complement of masculine abilities that men have,” they all “displayed much less calm and detachment than” Double did before his sentence was commuted.³² This quote embodies part of the struggle that Double has endured throughout his life. His calm detachment is not unreasonable for someone like him. As a queer man, Double was told that his so called ‘feminine’ aspects were to be criticized and hidden. The masculine bourgeoisie discourse on women, femininity, and sexuality informed the way Double conceived of his own body and mind. Middle-class anxiety over the destruction of the role of motherhood lead to a crisis of masculinity. Declining birth rates and national embarrassment created an environment conducive to blame being assigned to women and queer minorities in France. Double began to think of his feminine brain as an ‘other’ the same way straight men would conceive of him. In this case, the discourse around sexuality limited Double’s autonomy and agency. His body, which for all intents and purposes represents the masculine ideal, conflicted with his oppressed “feminine” mind.

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³² Ibid., 162.

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