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Manet's *Olympia*: The Figuration of Scandal

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The woman, I look at her, I examine her. A white flesh, arms, shoulders that show down to the small of the back; shoulderstraps that barely hold and partially hide the armpit; big beautiful eyes, a little round; a pear-shaped nose with a flattened end; heavy wings to the nose; the mouth without inflection, forming a straight line the color of rouge in the face, completely white from rice powder. Wrinkles in all this which the light, playing on this white, make seem black; and on each side of the mouth a deep furrow in the shape of a horseshoe that comes together under the chin, which it severs with a big wrinkle of old age. A figure that, underneath the appearance of a courtesan still young enough for her profession, is one hundred years old and takes on at times the undefinable terror of a painted corpse. Edmund and Jules de Goncourt, *Journal* (I, 348)

It is in these terms that the brothers Goncourt describe one of the most desirable women in Paris, La Paiva, the famous courtesan to whose gaudy new mansion on the Champs Elysées they were invited in 1867. Their sadistically charged look takes possession of the courtesan's body by recreating it as an arbitrary montage of partial objects. Even individual features are divided within themselves (the red mouth crosses the white face, the nose is foreshortened, a furrow severs the chin). The potentially threatening sexuality of this brilliant professional of desire is thus defused, dismembered, derealized. The Goncourts gain imaginary control over their terror of woman by transforming her into an artificial construction, a painted corpse, to be assembled and disassembled at the will of its male designers.

The Goncourts' mortiferous gaze was no aberration in midcentury France. The most scandalous representation of a prostitute in nine-

teenth-century painting, Manet's *Olympia* (Figure 1), met with a strikingly similar deadly gaze from the most articulate critics of the 1865 salon, at which it was first exhibited. For example, Victor de Jankovitz (cited in Clark 1985: 288–89) wrote that “the expression of [Olympia’s] face is that of a being prematurely aged and vicious; the body’s putrefying color recalls the horror of the morgue.” The critic Geronte (ibid.) called Olympia “that Hottentot Venus with a black cat, exposed completely naked on her bed like a corpse on the counters of the morgue, this Olympia from the rue Mouffetard [a notorious haunt of prostitution at the time], dead of yellow fever and already arrived at an advanced state of decomposition.” Flaubert’s friend Paul de Saint-Victor (ibid.) described “the crowd thronging in front of the putrefied *Olympia* as if it were at the morgue.” A. J. Lorentz (ibid.) saw Olympia as “a skeleton dressed in a tight-fitting tunic of plaster.” Another journalist, Félix Deriège (ibid.), found that “her face is stupid, her skin cadaverous,” and that “she does not have a human form.” And a critic calling himself Ego (ibid.) remarked that Olympia, “a courtesan with dirty hands and wrinkled feet, . . . has the livid tint of a cadaver displayed at the morgue”.¹ T. J. Clark (1985) notes quite rightly that these journalistic disparagements of Manet’s work are displaced descriptions of Olympia’s sexuality, but he deemphasizes the psychoanalytic implications of this displacement, choosing instead to stress issues of class. In my reading of the painting, which will proceed in dialogue with his strong and challenging interpretation in *The Painting of Modern Life*, I will try to show that the process of fetishism at work in the displacements Clark observes are critical to the disconcerting effects caused by the painting. *Olympia*’s scandalous modernity, I argue, is due to its simultaneous activation and exposure of the dynamics of the production of woman as fetish object in patriarchal consumer society.

The word *scandal* originates in the Greek *skandalon*, which means “trap, snare, stumbling block.” The viewers of *Olympia* at the 1865 salon acted as if they were trapped by this provocative image, able to respond only with derisive hostility and contempt. Indeed, the bourgeois public took such offense at this apparent affront to its morality that the painting had to be rehung high up out of its retaliatory reach. Not even professional critics, as Clark has demonstrated, were able to articulate any kind of coherent, intelligent response to *Olympia* in terms of form, content, technique, sources, or purpose.² They did

1. I have relied entirely on Clark’s (1985) thorough documentation of the contemporary criticism. All translations from French in this article are mine. For later critical response to Manet’s painting, see Reff 1977: 16–41 and Hamilton 1954.

2. Clark (1985: 139–44) notes one exception, a short text by Jean Ravenel, the pseudonym of Alfred Sensier, a friend of the painter Millet. Ravenel mentions Baudelaire and Goya in a suggestive listing of allusions and qualities, but he fails nevertheless to produce a coherent interpretation.



Figure 1. Manet, *Olympia*. Paris: Musée d'Orsay.

little more than confirm the public's offended incomprehension. Like the Goncourts viewing *La Païva*, the journalists seem to have relished their reduction of the prostitute to a dead and decomposing body, a painted corpse. Their rhetoric may be sensational and hyperbolic, but its emphasis on absence, negativity, lack, and decay reveals a deep-seated anxiety that is at once expressed and controlled through this morbid imagery.

Traditional representations of the nude put woman on display for the pleasure of a spectator presumed to be male. Her naked body becomes nude insofar as it is seen as an erotic object offered to the man's gaze, to his imaginary knowledge. The terms of that offering in the European artistic tradition are subject to conventions calculated to flatter the male viewer and to stimulate his fantasy of sexual domination. Thus, as John Berger (1972: 56) has observed, "almost all post-Renaissance European sexual imagery is frontal—either literally or metaphorically—because the sexual protagonist is the spectator-owner looking at it." The convention of not painting female body hair, Berger further notes, contributes to the representation of female submission by eliminating the hint of animal passion and physical desire suggested by hairy growth. The nude, like the prostitute, is an erotic commodity. Her nakedness is valuable not for its individuality, the marks of one woman's fleshly embodiment, but for its transcendence of these marks in a formalized language intended to feed male fantasies while it erases any potentially threatening signs of woman's desiring subjectivity.

Clark's analysis of academic paintings of the nude done in the mid-1860s by painters such as Alexandre Cabanel, William Bouguereau, Félix-Henry Giacomotti, and Paul Baudry shows that the genre, as defined in the above terms, was in disarray. Although presented in allegorical form as mythological figures flaunting their unnatural lack of pubic hair, the women in these paintings seem to collaborate a little too eagerly with the male gaze, as if they were actively soliciting it and desiring its sexual consequence. The female body is only partially abstracted from the signs of its sexuality, signs that critics of the time read as referring quite specifically to the all-too-modern world of the *courtisane's* erotic expertise. In some cases, the identity of the idealized model was an open secret: *La Païva* was supposed to have posed for the figure of Night Baudry painted on the ceiling of her own salon. In other cases, the prurient pose was enough to suggest a venal scenario. Thus the critic Castagnary (cited in Clark 1985: 295, n. 127) wondered sarcastically about the lady "with the pretty face of a Parisian *modiste*," whom he found lolling on some rocks in Baudry's *La Perle et le vague* (1863), if she might not be "lying in wait for a millionaire gone astray in this wild spot." The important point to note is that the crit-

ics, whether they were taken in by the seduction of these voluptuous images, as some were, or denounced their hypocrisy, as the majority did, articulated a reasoned response to these problematically sexualized nudes. When faced with *Olympia*, however, they could only cry scandal and see death. Why?

Clark's answer is detailed, nuanced, and complex. Essential to it is the perception that *Olympia* took the embarrassing uncertainty about female desire expressed by Baudry and his ilk and resolved it by making desire "the property now—the deliberate production—of the female subject herself" (ibid.: 131). That property, however, is by no means unambiguous. There is, first of all, what Huysmans (cited in Reff 1977: 28), in a marginal note, called the "irritating enigma" of Olympia's gaze. Olympia's strangely ambivalent address to the viewer could well be described in the terms Walter Benjamin (1968: 192) associates with the self-protective wariness of the prostitute: "The deeper the remoteness which a glance has to overcome, the stronger will be the spell that is apt to emanate from the gaze. In eyes that look at us with a mirrorlike blankness the remoteness remains complete. It is precisely for this reason that such eyes know nothing of distance." Remote yet blatant, "poised between address and resistance" (Clark 1985: 133), Olympia's look is unmistakably hers; it is particular and individualized in a way the nude's dreamily abstracted gaze is not—this is Clark's point. But individualization does not entail readability. It may not even give access to a clear perception of class or gender. Clark suggests that the prostitute's look is not "evidently feminine," and elsewhere he notes that diverse critics in 1865 and since have found Olympia somehow masculinized, or androgynous. As far as he is concerned, this response is a "wrongheaded" reaction to the figure's nonconformity to the traditional notions of Woman. "Surely Olympia's sexual identity is not in doubt," Clark (ibid.: 132) remarks. "It is how it belongs to her that is the problem." But I think that in an important sense Olympia's sexual identity *is* in doubt. Her depiction, as I read it, deliberately activates in the male viewer doubts whether her sexuality can indeed belong to her, whether it is not always displaced, always re-presented elsewhere. I will return to this point.

For the moment, I want to concentrate on aspects of Olympia's portrayal other than her gaze that produce effects of ambiguity and shifting semiosis. Clark notes the incompatible graphic modes of Manet's drawing. On the one hand are the emphatically linear outline of Olympia's form and the hardened breaks and intersections that appear to sever her body into distinct pieces, the black ribbon being, of course, the most striking instrument of this disarticulation. On the other hand, coexisting with this representation of a *corps morcelé*, is a kind of soft, fluid bodily territory where transitions are not clearly defined, as in

the elusive contour of the right breast and the whole area spreading in an almost uniform tonality from that breast down to the thigh. Thus Olympia is at once mutilated and whole, her bodily parts at once dislocated and fused. Her stature is similarly uncertain, the monumentality of the image leading the viewer to think of her as imposing, her scale in relation to the bed, the black servant, and the flowers producing, on the contrary, a sense of almost childlike proportions. The unusual positioning of Olympia's body within the frame reinforces these disconcerting effects of instability and equivocation. Perching on two mattresses and two immense, puffed-up pillows, she is placed just too high to offer the viewer easy access; yet she does not look down at him, either. Moreover, the pillows are tilted at a sharp downward angle that is strangely out of relation with the head-on perspective from which the mattress is viewed. Even the manner of Manet's painting is ambiguous, juxtaposing passages of sophisticated realistic illusion with overtly simplified, rudely abbreviated areas where paint seems to call attention to its mimetic inadequacies.

Clark argues that this proliferation of signs inscribed in different orders of representation is a positive achievement insofar as it dismantles the decaying language of the nude and gives its female subject a particularized identity. With this interpretation I entirely agree. I part company with Clark, however, when he implicitly reproaches Manet for identifying class with this circuit of shifting signs. Manet incorporates the signs of class in Olympia's nakedness—this for Clark is both the painter's great originality and his failure of nerve. Olympia's nakedness, he argues, is an arbitrary construction of codes so inconsistent among themselves that the prostitute's class can only be glimpsed elusively, not read and understood. The glimpse that Clark believes the painting affords of Olympia, in her blatant but ambiguous nakedness, is of a common whore, the *fille publique* of the sidewalks and brothels. This working-class subject was systematically excluded from representational practice because she signified for the bourgeoisie its own subjection to animal lust, to dark instinctual drives and shameful perversions, and because she exposed the fragility of its class dominance over the proletariat. *Olympia* afforded a glimpse into the arena of class conflict, Clark argues, by subversively challenging the flamboyant figure through which the bourgeoisie masked its fears of the *fille publique*, that is, the courtesane. The courtesane was the theatrical emblem for the bourgeoisie's indulgent play with the duplicities of Desire on the stage of the *fête impériale*.

The problem with *Olympia's* challenge to this emblematic figure, as far as Clark is concerned, is that it is enacted through a construction of female nakedness as an interminably shifting circuit of signs, which is, finally, unreadable and indescribable. While he recognizes

that this unstable construction characterizes *Olympia's* modernity, he sees it as an unfortunate failure to picture class adequately. The *filles publiques* does not emerge from the complexity of her representation. Underlying this criticism is Clark's assumption that the category of class furnished more powerful causes for repression in the fantasy life of the French bourgeoisie at midcentury than the category of sex. I want to argue the reverse, that the shifting play of Manet's depiction of woman's nakedness may be his way of exposing the inevitable collapse of class difference under the pressure of a male gaze preoccupied with sexual difference.

The attraction of the courtesane for bourgeois writers and intellectuals derived from their vision of her artificial brilliance, ostentatious falsity, and spectacular theatricality. These women, who shone on the wonderful new stage for Parisian venality created by Baron Haussmann, on the broad sidewalks, in the bustling *cafés*, and along the animated boulevards, and whose names are legion—*lionnes*, *grandes horizontales*, *amazones*, *filles de marbre*, *mangeuses d'hommes*, *mangeardes*, *biches*, *grandes cocottes*—represented the deluxe modern commodity, the image of Desire packaged and displayed for greatest impact, not just on the potential customer but also on all those who would envy him. The courtesan did not signify the sexual body so much as its production as elaborate spectacle. She was artfully constructed according to the codes defining modern desirability. Her appeal was thus largely a function of her ability to dissolve the beastly immediacy of the female animal in a play of intriguing signs and changing masks, all of them lavish and expensive. Indeed, the courtesan's life seemed to be made up entirely of exchange, for she was as ostentatious a consumer as she was an object of consumption. The article "courtesane" in Larousse's *Grand dictionnaire universel* (1867) explains the logic of her seemingly excessive consumerism: "The *courtisane* knows that she needs a *mise en scène* that will bring her close to the man who pays her; in other words, she is a gambler who constantly doubles her stake; she receives one thousand francs per month from an *entreteneur*; by spending those thousand francs on entertainment and clothing expenses, she rarely fails to catch the eye of a spendthrift, who hastens to offer her three or four thousand, assuming that such a woman could not cost any less." Stories of the wealth of famous courtesans were an essential part of their myth and contributed to the displacement of interest away from their disturbing sexuality. The Goncourts, for example, were fascinated to find out from their maid (who saw the display *chez la portière*) the precise cost of one of the many sets of bedclothes the notorious Anna Deslions had made to the taste of each of her lovers and always sent on to his house the day before a rendezvous. "There's a dressing gown of white satin," note the deliciously scandalized brothers. "It is

quilted and piqué, with slippers of the same color embroidered in gold—a dressing gown worth 1,200 to 1,500 francs—a batiste nightdress trimmed with lace, with insertions of embroidery worth 300 francs, a petticoat trimmed with three flounces of lace worth 300 or 400 francs, a total of 1,200 francs carried to anyone's home who can afford her" (Goncourt and Goncourt 1959: I, 332–33).

The extravagance of this financial outlay produces what Jean Baudrillard (1972: 104), in an article on ideology and fetishism, calls "un travail de faire-valoir en extériorité" (a production of value through externality). The degenerate female body is covered over with cultural signs, whose artificiality and abstraction are the focus of fetishistic fascination. What is desired in prostitution understood in this manner is precisely the *myth* of the prostitute. This myth is artfully constructed as a montage of accessories that defends against the threat the female sexual body symbolizes in the unconscious, the threat of disease, contamination, and death.

Clark associates this threat not so much with sexuality as with class. But I am not convinced that the diversity of critical guesses as to Olympia's social origins primarily reflects bourgeois resistance to reading the dangerous signs of Olympia's lower-class identity. Rather, the critics' inconclusive guesses reflect the way the picture breaks down and disqualifies the social and class distinctions through which Olympia's viewer was accustomed to classify a woman as something apart from her sexual body. It was, indeed, *not* impossible for some viewers in 1865 to think of Olympia as arising from the threatening lower depths. We have seen that one critic associated her with the working-class environment of the rue Mouffetard, and another (Ravenel, cited in Clark 1985: 296, n. 144) called her a *petite faubourienne* of the kind likely to frequent Paul Niquet's notorious haunt for ragpickers and drunks. But would such an impoverished *fille publique* have had a black servant to wait on her? Is it not possible that another critic's identification of Olympia as a courtesan from the Bréda district north of the boulevard des Italiens is more accurate? Moreover, might Olympia not be a dancer or an actress, professionals who were known at the time to sell their sexual favors, or simply a kept woman?

The various categories of the sexualized and/or venal woman cannot be as neatly subsumed as Clark would have us believe under the master classifications of the unrepresentable *fille publique* and the ultrarepresentable courtesane. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1986) has convincingly demonstrated, a rich tradition of pornographic photographs portraying lower-class prostitutes in a variety of lewd poses existed in 1865. Although these images evidently were not shown in the official salons, they did circulate widely among the male spectators of salon pictures, and their conventional representations of female

sexuality may therefore have constituted a covert frame of reference for many of *Olympia's* viewers. Solomon-Godeau (ibid.: 102–5) rightly stresses that the topography of the sexualized feminine under the Second Empire was so slippery, its categories in such flux, and its gray areas so extensive that all attempts to classify women were necessarily riddled with qualification and doubt.

Recognition of this social mobility has damaging consequences for Clark's argument, since it suggests that *Olympia's* subversion of the courtesane category need not entail the revelation of a class identity once hidden. *Olympia's* class origins remain unreadable because her nakedness is a dangerous instance not of class, as Clark would have it, but of the way sex suggests the irrelevance of class.

These considerations bring us back to the images of death and putrefaction so often evoked by the critics to describe *Olympia's* appearance. They arose, no doubt, partly in response to the unusual tonalities of Manet's rendition of flesh and to the irregularities of his modeling. But they are also responses to the dramatic immediacy of his depiction of woman defined pointedly by her sexuality. It would seem that the critics were eager to reduce *Olympia* to an object, even to deprive her of human form (Amédée Cantaloube, cited in Clark 1985: 287, called her "a sort of female gorilla, a grotesque in india rubber outlined in black"), precisely to the degree that Manet gave her strong signs of desiring subjectivity. Thus is *Olympia's* scandal figured: She is a negation of the feminine; a stumbling block to the male viewer's desire; a disobedient, morbid, inhuman body that offers no flattering consolation in fantasy. The subject of scandal is some kind of lack in the representation.

Significantly, the young Emile Zola, in the first major defense of Manet's painting, promoted the notions of lack and absence as the founding principles of his art. Like the salon critics, Zola violently erases *Olympia's* sexual challenge, but he does so by attributing the erasure to Manet's own artistic intention. In a long article published in January 1867, Zola, who had met frequently with Manet in the eight months since his first polemical article on the painter had appeared, defended his friend against critical hostility by explaining that Manet's subject matter was merely a pretext for his painting. *Olympia*, which Zola (1970 [1867]) calls the painter's masterpiece, is to be read not in terms of a particular anecdotal content—*Olympia* in herself is of no interest, "this everyday girl, whom you might encounter on the sidewalk"—but in terms of a particular formal arrangement of chromatic tonalities and juxtaposed masses. Thus the bouquet of flowers was included, Zola imagines, because Manet needed "some bright and luminous patches," the negress and cat because he needed "some black patches" (ibid.: 100). These chromatic elements are related to each

other according to an intrinsic “loi des valeurs” (ibid.: 109), equivalent to a self-referential system of aesthetic signs. Meaning is of no import. “What does all that mean?” Zola (ibid.: 110) asks. “You [Manet] do not know, and neither do I.”

Zola’s formalist approach appropriates the scandalous principle of lack (the subject itself is lacking, suppressed) in order to stress the way Manet’s painting reflects not the viewer’s desire but that of painting itself in its effort, begun anew by each truly original artist, to represent natural beauty truthfully. The violence of Manet’s transitions reflects “the austere and somewhat harsh aspect of nature” (ibid.: 109), heightened by the “parti pris” of the artist’s individual talent, which Zola considers particularly suited to “render a group of inanimate objects with great power” (ibid.: 111). Treating *Olympia*’s body as just another such inanimate object, Zola attempts to cancel out her provocative sexuality. It appears, however, in displaced form in his evocation of the bourgeoisie’s attitude toward the profession of painting in general: “The arts, painting, is for them the great Impure, the Courtesan always hungry for young flesh, who will drink the blood of their children and wring them dry, gasping, on her insatiable breast. It’s an orgy, debauchery without forgiveness, a bloody specter that sometimes arises in the midst of families and disturbs the peace of domestic hearths” (ibid.: 93). Zola is, of course, mocking the bourgeoisie’s association of flagrant immorality with an artistic calling, but he also makes a point of stressing that Manet’s own mode of life is entirely bourgeois (after working hard all day, Manet “returns to his home, where he enjoys all the calm joys of the modern bourgeoisie,” ibid.: 95). Adapting the logic of Zola’s own argument, one can imagine *Olympia* as Manet’s deliberate representation of a fantasy he may have shared with his bourgeois brothers, that art is prostitution, impurity, degenerate sensuality.

But Zola eschewed any reading of Manet’s painting that would relate it to the social context of its production. We do not know whether he did so under the influence of Manet’s own aesthetic ideas, which he may have heard the artist expound at gatherings at the café Guerbois in Montmartre, whether these ideas reflect Zola’s early formulations of a naturalist credo, or whether they were invented as a defensive strategy to draw attention away from Manet’s rebarbative subject matter. In any case, the effect of Zola’s criticism was to erase whatever might be threatening to the viewer in the content of *Olympia* and to identify this erasure as the defining gesture of Manet’s modernity.

This aesthetic liquidation of the courtesan’s sexual presence proved enormously attractive to subsequent critics of Manet’s achievement, who repeated it with a kind of contagious enthusiasm (see Reff 1977: 26–29; Hamilton 1954). The most sophisticated murder was per-

formed by Georges Bataille (1983 [1955]). Bataille quotes Paul Valéry's eloquent description of *Olympia* only to contest its accuracy. "The naked and cold Olympia, monster of banal love," writes Valéry (1960 [1932]: 1329), in terms reminiscent of Zola's description of the bourgeoisie's scandalized reaction to the artistic calling, "inspires a sacred horror. . . . [She is] the Impure par excellence, whose function requires the untroubled and candid ignorance of all modesty. Bestial vestal devoted to absolute nudity, she makes one dream of all that hides itself and is preserved of primitive barbarism and ritual animality in the ways and workings of big-city prostitution." Bataille (1983 [1955]: 62) admits that this conception may constitute what he calls the text of the painting, but he insists that "the text is *effaced* by the painting. *And what the painting signifies is not the text but the effacement.* It is to the extent that Manet did not want to say what Valéry says—to the extent, on the contrary, that he suppressed (pulverized) meaning—that this woman is there. In her provocative exactitude, she is nothing; her nudity (corresponding, it is true, to that of the body) is the silence that emerges from her as from a stranded ship, a vacant ship. What she is, is the 'sacred horror' of her presence—a presence whose simplicity is that of absence" (Bataille's emphasis).

One recognizes in this passage a strategy and vocabulary that has had widespread critical success in recent years: the text as effacement, the suppression of meaning, the articulation of silence and absence. The present context, linking Zola to Bataille, allows us to suggest one possible motive behind this strategy. Bataille uses it quite specifically against "all that hides itself and is preserved" in what Valéry perceives as a primitive, animalistic, degraded, yet imposing female sexuality. That shockingly impure sexuality is reduced by Bataille to nothing; Olympia as subject is pulverized, the power of her nudity is emptied of physical reference, her body is incongruously compared to a stranded boat, and her disturbing erotic presence is considered significant only insofar as it is effaced. Bataille himself acknowledges the violence involved in these operations. However, he attributes them not to the murderous desire at work in his own fascinated gaze but to the reductive operation performed by the painting itself. "*Olympia* as a whole cannot easily be distinguished from a crime or from the spectacle of death," writes Bataille (*ibid.*: 69), after having evoked, as Zola did, the picture's admirable still-life qualities.

Olympia is once again laid out at the morgue, this time, however, by a thinker willing to recognize his erotic attraction to this morbid spectacle. Bataille clearly enjoys his participation in the crime of Olympia's death, for, as he maintains later, the final sense of eroticism for him is death, silence, the violent transgression of the Other's individuality. That Other is quintessentially woman, woman as object of aggressive

male desire, as prostitute, prostitution being, he says, “the logical consequence of the feminine attitude” (Bataille 1957: 144). According to this reasoning, it is only logical that Olympia should be represented as a prostitute, and that her class should be undefined, because she is the generalized figure of man’s erotic drive to still woman’s animal life. It is on the basis of this suppression, according to Bataille, that Manet founds modernity in painting, *Olympia* being for Bataille (1983 [1955]: 78), as it was for Zola, the essential masterpiece that “unveils Manet’s secret.”

Bataille (1957: 158) echoes Baudelaire, and all those writers of the later nineteenth century who admired female dancers and acrobats, when he declares that “the erotic value of feminine forms is linked to the effacement of that natural heaviness that recalls the material use of the members and the necessity of a skeleton. The more unreal the forms, the less clearly they are subject to animal truth, to the physiological truth of the human body, the better they answer to the generally accepted image of the desirable woman.” Then Bataille goes a step farther, as does Baudelaire in some of his poems, to suggest that man’s most intense erotic delight comes from desecrating his de-realized idol by insisting on the filth of woman’s animality, filth whose ultimate form is the corpse. This is the secret that Bataille imagines he has unveiled in his reading of *Olympia*, the fixity of the female cadaver as source of (male) aesthetic pleasure. Bataille thus supposes himself in full control of the scandalous lack in Olympia’s representation, having defined to his satisfaction the source of that “feeling of a suppression [that] prevails when we look at *Olympia*” (Bataille 1983 [1955]: 63).

But Bataille’s mortifying definition itself conveys the feeling of a prevailing suppression, as if his sense of mastery were the deluded reflection of Olympia’s controlling gaze. What he suppresses is the entire set of inconsistencies, disparities, and ambiguities that constitute Olympia’s puzzling corporeality. As we have seen, her body is represented in terms that suggest both yielding compliance and defiant resistance; it is both violently severed and smoothly unified, decapitated by the ribbon around her neck, yet composed of a single mass of yellowish color. She appears small and easily dominated, yet imperious and coldly disdainful. If her blatant readiness to be consumed as an erotic commodity seems to invite objectification, her taut, self-assured, commanding pose appears to defy appropriation.

The ambiguity of her name accentuates this troubling indeterminacy. There is, of course, a classical echo, probably meant to be heard parodically here—Mount Olympus, home of the gods; Olympia, consort of Zeus—but also a purely modern one: “Olympe” is listed by Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet in his authoritative study of 1836, *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris*, as one of the *noms de guerre* fre-

quently assumed by upper-class prostitutes. The younger Dumas gave the name Olympe to the heartless, mercenary courtesan, modern rival of the sentimental Marguerite, in *La dame aux camélias*, and the name was used frequently in the popular literature and drama of the 1860s to designate a calculating *cocotte*. The Italianate form of the name, Olympia, was less current. To Théophile Gautier (cited in Clark 1985: 285), it brought to mind the infamous Roman courtesan of the Renaissance, Donna Olimpia Maldachini, beautiful sister-in-law, sordid paramour, and intriguing manipulator of Pope Innocent X. The name was associated with power wielded more independently, but again in a sexually controlling way, when given to a beautiful pagan queen in the grand opera *Herculanéum*, first performed in 1859 and still playing to full houses in 1863, the year in which Manet created his painting.³ Although Queen Olympia is defeated in her appointed mission to halt the spread of Christianity by seducing, when necessary, the adepts of the new religion, she is a strong-willed, defiant, regal figure, not an egotistic, scheming demi-mondaine. But the most suggestive hypothetical reference of the name Manet chose, precisely because it thematizes the play of indeterminacy, is to the mechanical doll Olympia in E. T. A. Hoffmann's story "The Sandman," the text on which Freud based his analysis of the uncanny. The captivating doll is at once human and nonhuman, alive and dead, whole yet dismemberable, female yet not female. It is associated, in obvious ways, with childhood, whence originate, according to Freud, the primitive beliefs whose recurrence after repression creates the unsettling effect of uncanniness.

What repressed primitive belief might Manet's painting be felt to evoke? In his mocking commentary on *Olympia*, one of the early hack critics of the 1865 salon made a connection that may provide us with a clue to this question. The journalist denounces Olympia as "some form or other blown up like a grotesque in india rubber" and goes on to call her "a sort of monkey mocking the pose and the movement of the arm of Titian's Venus, with a hand shamelessly flexed" (ibid.: 288). Viewing Olympia as a kind of doll, this writer is led to evoke the placement and articulation of the hand covering her sex. He does so by alluding to Titian's Urbino Venus, a reference that is now a commonplace of art history but that he was the only critic to notice

3. This context for Manet's use of the name is discussed by Sharon Flescher (1985). Flescher also identifies a self-determined Olympia in an unpublished play by Manet's friend Zacharie Astruc, whose poem "Olympia, la fille des îles" was printed in the salon catalog and much derided by the critics, especially for its last line, "L'auguste jeune fille en qui la flamme veille." Astruc has often been credited with giving the painting its title, although this cannot be proven. See Reff 1977: 111–13 for further discussion of the name.

in 1865 (cf. *ibid.*: 287–88, nn. 59–60). Not that this commonplace, I hasten to add, unambiguously clarifies Manet's intentions, since it is impossible to decide if Olympia is to be understood as the goddess of love in a new guise, an ironic subversion of that classical myth, or, as Theodore Reff (1977: 54–59) maintains, a modern counterpart of the wealthy courtesan commonly thought to have been Titian's model.⁴

To return to the hand: though the central focus of both compositions, it is very differently construed in them. The hand of Titian's Venus folds inward, fading from view as it elides with her sex. The gesture carries a certain autoerotic suggestion, but that suggestion, as I read it, in no way excludes a male viewer; on the contrary, it serves as an invitation, a sign of receptivity. Venus's look goes out toward the spectator, includes him, and brings his gaze back to the central point of her pliant sexuality, marked precisely by the vertical line of the screen behind her.

In contrast, Olympia's hand, in Reff's (*ibid.*: 58) phrase, "conveys at once greater inhibition and a more deliberate provocativeness." Her hand covers the entire pubic area in a gesture that, compared to Venus's relaxed, sensual pose, seems self-conscious and tense. This deliberate gesture of concealment, in conjunction with Olympia's ambiguous gaze, "poised . . . between address and resistance," appears provocative, even, to pursue our earlier line of argument, uncanny. It is as if Olympia were drawing attention to the noncoincidence of her hand with her genitals, as if they were not simply an inviting vacancy offered to male penetration but a presence in themselves. The viewer seems to be challenged to ask what is being concealed, what is being suppressed. As if he didn't know, one might object. But perhaps at the level of primitive belief that the uncanny evokes, the viewer is not so sure. Perhaps the subject that Zola and Bataille were so anxious to suppress is what threatens to emerge if this repressive hand is removed. But let us look more closely. Perhaps this repression has not been entirely successful and something is even now in the process of emerging. Aren't those fingers like penises, and didn't Freud (1972b [1922]: 212) maintain that "a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration"? Clark (1985: 135) himself observes that Olympia's hand may have enraged the critics "because it failed to enact the lack of the phallus (which is not to say it quite signified the opposite)." This equivocation is, from the psychoanalytic perspective, precisely what is at issue.

Laura Mulvey (1975: 13) has argued in an influential article that

4. Reff notes that one aspect of Olympia's modernity is her thinness. "Thinness," wrote Baudelaire (1961: 1251), "is more naked, more indecent than fat." The emperor's mistress, Marguerite Bellanger, was slight of build.

“woman as icon displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety [that icon] originally signified, [that is, woman’s] lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure.” Such language may seem reductive, and I do not want to suggest that once a castration threat has been identified as self-consciously staged by Manet’s *Olympia*, the anxious responses of its male viewers require no further explanation. Nor do I want to insist that recognition of the fingers as potentially phallic is the key to the unconscious operation performed by Manet’s disconcerting image. My point is that the hand focuses on the genital region specifically the extensive play of visual uncertainties and inconsistencies disseminated throughout the representational field. The dramatic ambiguity of Olympia’s manual gesture not only violates the canons of the nude, it puts her in possession of her sexuality precisely to the extent that the identity of her sexuality is thrown into doubt. This is why, as Clark (1985: 135) puts it, Olympia’s hand “enraged and exalted the critics as nothing else did.” But Clark (*ibid.*: 136) misses the symptomatic significance of those critics’ focusing upon the hand “as if there were nothing else there to be seen.” The critics’ choice of the hand as a focus for scandalized reaction was overdetermined. If Clark (*ibid.*: 137) is right to suggest that “the signifiers of sex . . . are drawn up in contradictory order” in the painting, the point of convergence of those signifiers is unquestionably Olympia’s tense hand. Its perplexing representation stimulates an unconscious anxiety about sexual difference that the male viewer thought he had mastered but that now returns. Furthermore, the painting traps the viewer in his anxiety by confronting him with a display of the very processes of fetishistic displacement that had been his preferred unconscious strategy for controlling that anxiety. I argued earlier that *Olympia* does not conform to the modes of cultural construction whereby the mythic figure of the courtesane is produced as “un travail de faire-valoir en extériorité.” Now I want to argue that in place of this finished production, the female idol as cultural fetish, Manet’s picture offers its viewer an illustration of the very processes of displacement and substitution that construct woman as fetish.

Substitutes for Olympia’s hidden pubic hair abound in the painting. The least ambiguous is the fleecy shock of fringe hanging over the side of the bed. More interesting, because it puts into play an irresolvable visual dynamic of presence and absence, is the shock of Olympia’s own reddish-brown hair that falls on her left shoulder but, as Clark (*ibid.*: 136–37) points out, is extremely difficult to distinguish from the screen behind her. This luxuriant mass of hair softens Olympia’s sharply outlined face, giving it a more traditional, feminine look, but this comforting sign of sensual female relaxation is next to impos-



MANET.

La Naissance du petit ébéniste.

M. Manet a pris la chose trop à la lettre :

Que c'était comme un bouquet de fleurs !

Les lettres de faire-part sont au nom de la mère Michel
et de son chat.

Figure 2. Cham, *La Naissance du petit ébéniste*. Wood-engraving in *Le Charivari*, 14 May 1865.

sible to keep in focus. The hair tends to be absorbed by the screen, confronting the spectator once again with Olympia's hard-edged (masculine?) silhouette. Most scandalous of the substitutes is, of course, the black cat, slang equivalent, then as now, in French as in English, of the female sexual organ. The caricaturists of 1865 who gave the curved tail of Manet's feline a tumescent erection (see Figures 2 and 3) seem to have sensed the central ambiguity in the painting's sexual imagery.⁵

5. The cat is also quite clearly a Baudelairean motif and may owe something as well, via Baudelaire's 1857 translation of "The Black Cat," to Poe's association of the dark feline with the uncanny effects of the return of the repressed (see



La queue du chat, ou la charbonnière des Batignolles.

Chacun admire cette belle charbonnière, dont l'eau, liquide banal, n'a jamais offensé les pudiques contours. Disons-le hardiment, la charbonnière, le bouquet dans du papier, M. Manet, et son chat, sont les lions de l'exposition de 1865. Un bravo senti pour M. Zacharie Astruc.

Figure 3. Bertall, *La Queue du chat, ou La Charbonnière des Batignolles*. Wood engraving in *L'Illustration*, 3 June 1865.

Finally, there are the flowers carried by the black servant. If the colorful bouquet functions as a desexualized displacement of Olympia's genitals (a point not lost on the caricaturists; note the way the cat's tail is raised into the flowers in Bertall's drawing), the connotations of the black female counteract this function. When the critic Geronte referred to Olympia as "that Hottentot Venus with a black cat," he was assimilating Olympia to her maid and underlining the meaning of the maid through the debased feline association. Sander Gilman (1985: 76–108) has shown that the Hottentot women exhibited in France in the early part of the century, whose hypertrophied genitalia and protruding buttocks were considered anatomical marks of their atavistic physiology and primitive lasciviousness, were thought to typify the pathological sexuality of black women in general. If a black woman was paired with a white female in a nineteenth-century representation, Gilman argues, the black figure's emblematic role was

Reff 1977: 96–101). Werner Hofmann (1961: 350–51) sees the cat as figuring the animal part of a portrait of woman as sphinx, a suggestion that further links the cat with a threatening ambiguity about woman's sexual nature.

to suggest her white counterpart's primitive concupiscence and sexual degeneracy, a suggestion to which Geronte evidently responded. The link was all the easier to make given Olympia's identity as a prostitute, the prostitute's deviant sexuality being popularly associated with an atavistic return to unbridled eroticism. So the black maid is not, as Zola and the formalists would have it, simply a darkly colored counterpart to Olympia's whiteness, but rather an emblem of the dark, threatening, anomalous sexuality lurking just under Olympia's hand. At least, this is the fantasy Manet's servant figure may well have aroused in the male spectator of 1865.

The maid is in many ways as difficult to interpret as Olympia herself. Her very existence, as I noted earlier, enters into the irresolvable problem of Olympia's class. We wonder just how common this prostitute may be if she can afford to hire such an exotic servant. Her look at her mistress enters into the equally irresolvable problem of Olympia's gaze. Blatantly ignoring her presence, Olympia cuts off communication with her attendant, much as her stare cuts off communication with the spectator outside the frame. Thus the spectator is, to a degree, represented in the painting by the maid, who deferentially offers flowers but is ignored. Furthermore, the maid's gesture is itself an enactment of agency. She is, we surmise, offering the bouquet in the name of a male admirer: She is a deputy, or stand-in, a servant both of Olympia and of Olympia's client. Her double subservience is an essential aspect of the maid's meaning, and the male viewer's sense of being represented by a glance emanating from a recessive position and defined through race and sex as one of servitude and mediation contributes to his discomfort with the image.

My point about the displaced signs of Olympia's sexual identity is that none of them resolves the castration threat associated with that uncanny identity. Olympia's scandalous hand initiates a circuit of displacements that reflect back to the male viewer the fetishizing desire in his gaze without fulfilling it. The fetish, according to Freud (1972a [1927]: 216), should offer "a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a safeguard against it." Such a token is what the anxious viewer wants to be invited to create as he scans the painting. Instead, he finds repetitions of his primary sexual uncertainty, hair that is and is not present, a cat that is disturbingly aggressive, a black servant whose deferential offer of flowers possibly masks a regressive if not pathological sexuality. And numerous other aspects of the painting, as we have seen, feed into this circuit of self-contesting images: Olympia's body both severed and unified, her stature both monumental and shrunken, her social status as both courtesane and *fille publique*, and so forth.

Related to the painting's saturation with images that display the fetishistic mechanism of simultaneous avowal and disavowal is Manet's saturation of his work with citations and references (see Fried 1969; Carrier 1985) that, as Jean Clay (1983: 6) puts it, "suspend the possibility of a genealogy of forms." This suspension subverts the usual cognitive and analytic procedures of art history. Olympia's pose no doubt imitates that of Titian's sumptuous Urbino Venus, but it also imitates, especially in the flatness and angularity of the image, crude pornographic photographs in many of which the women stare out at the viewer in a direct, uninflected manner reminiscent of Olympia's gaze (see Needham 1972; Solomon-Godeau 1986). (It is, moreover, quite possible that Manet's model, Victorine Meurent, posed for photographs of this kind; see Farwell 1981.) Small-scale drawings and lithographs by Constantin Guys and Achille Deveria, the first of sordid brothel scenes, the second of coy girls lounging invitingly in boudoirs, are alluded to by Manet's image, as are the exotic Oriental odalisques painted in rich sensual color by Delacroix and in flowing linear contours by Ingres. The influence of Japanese prints is perceptible alongside the influence of Goya, though Baudelaire (cited in Reff 1977: 63), defending Manet against charges that he was too indebted to Spanish painting, maintained in a letter to Thoré in 1864 that Manet "has never seen a Goya." The eclectic list could be lengthened considerably. The point is that recognition of Manet's many allusions serves less to clarify meaning by establishing relations of derivation, qualification, and innovation than it does to empty these relations of readable sense. An art historian anxiously scanning *Olympia* for the defining marks of its inscription in the tradition finds himself or herself caught up in a play of often conflicting quotations and borrowings. This play is "intellectually perverse" (Mallarmé's phrase—1876: 11) in its deliberate production of referential turbulence.⁶ Clay (1983: 6) is

6. Reff suggests that what I am calling "referential turbulence" might in part be Manet's response to a passage in Baudelaire's (1961: 1165) "Painter of Modern Life": "If a patient, scrupulous, but feebly imaginative painter faced with the task of painting a courtesan of today takes his *inspiration* (that is the hallowed word) from a courtesan by Titian or Raphael, it is entirely probable that he will produce a false, ambiguous, and obscure work." Manet may have wanted to show that a powerful creative imagination could use Titian, among other models, to intentionally create a work whose ambiguity and obscurity were its strengths. This hypothesis finds support in Baudelaire's (1952: 95) response of May 1865 to Manet's complaint about the critical insults hurled at his salon picture: "You are only the first in the decrepitude of your art." Baudelaire had probably not seen *Olympia* before he left Paris, but it is tempting to imagine him calling artistic "decrepitude" the subversive bricolage of traditional elements that is the hallmark of Manet's seminal modernity.

right to suggest that “Manet treats the [artistic] heritage as the *flâneur* of Walter Benjamin treats merchandise. The Louvre is an ‘arcade,’ a stall; the painter goes to market.”

Manet expresses empathy with the commercial status of the prostitute by saturating his picture of Olympia with elements constructed so that they mirror back to the male viewer his fetishistic appropriation of Woman. This is why the critics of 1865, faced with Olympia’s challenge, repeatedly evoked cadaver fantasies; the painting offered them no avenue of escape from their fearful association of female sexuality with castration, disease, and death. *Olympia* overtly displays the failure of the mechanisms whereby this fear is mastered. It translates the body into representational codes whose noncoincidence prevents visual resolutions; it performs displacements that reveal internal incompatibilities requiring further displacements. The male viewer witnesses Woman constructed as a fetish for capitalist consumption, but that consumption loses its appeal as the constructive machinery is exposed and the principle of lack that drives the machine regains its original fantasmatic content.

Zola and Bataille attempt to block this return of the repressed by projecting the lack in *Olympia*’s representation back onto the canvas, where they effectively neutralize its sexual meaning. A similar strategy today might claim that the painting’s multiple displacements activate a libidinal economy that generates pleasure through the very mobility of its psychic investments. Such an analysis would presuppose a viewing of *Olympia* that transcended male anxiety and caused a certain euphoria through the liberating effect of the picture’s semiotic irresolution. Although this response might account for some of the “aesthetic” pleasure the picture affords, the psychosexual origins of this pleasure are fundamentally no different from those sustaining the Zola-Bataille formalist approach. The essential motivating drive in both cases is the denial of female desire and subjectivity and the reduction of woman to inert fetish. Whereas Manet’s empathic art makes the viewer uneasily aware of the violence involved in this reduction—the black servant, emblem of woman as slave, contributes to this awareness—the formalist reading invites the reader-viewer to enjoy the spectacle of the prostitute’s corpse.

Throughout I have identified this viewer as male. My argument has been that however critically Manet’s painting may comment on the tradition of the female nude as a flattering gift offered to the male gaze, it does not subvert the gender of that gaze. What then of the position of the female viewer? According to my analysis, her position is constructed so as to render the *male*’s insecurity about sexual difference problematic to him. How may a woman respond to being placed in this position? The question is complex, and I can do no more than

allude to its importance here. The problem of describing the dynamics of the female gaze when it emanates from a position constructed as male, which, given the assumptions underlying representational practices for centuries, is nearly always the case, is one of the primary concerns of current feminist thinking about sexuality in the field of vision. Abigail Solomon-Godeau's (1986) contribution to this debate, her analysis of the many photographs the countess Castiglione had taken of herself in the 1850s and 1860s, and again at the end of her life in the 1890s, is particularly instructive in this context, since these photographs represent a rare example of a nineteenth-century woman constructing images of herself for her own gaze. Solomon-Godeau comes to the conclusion that this famous beauty, who took an active part in choreographing her poses, could see herself only as an object of the male look. Her desire for self-representation is identified entirely with male desire for the sexualized object.

As regards *Olympia*, the historical dimension of my inquiry into viewer response could not easily be extended to female spectators, since, as is typical, no woman seems to have recorded her impressions of Manet's painting in 1865. From our perspective, however, we can theorize the dynamics of female viewing in ways that recognize both the conditions that inform woman's internalization of a male gaze and her strategies to subvert the operations of that gaze. For example, my analysis of the way *Olympia* destabilizes the male agency of the look could be associated with the notion, elaborated by certain feminist psychoanalytic and film theorists (Riviere 1966; Irigaray 1985; Doane 1982; Solomon-Godeau 1986), of femininity as a deliberate masquerade, a kind of flaunting of the conventional signs of the feminine so as to prevent appropriation of the self as a stable image of masculine desire. *Olympia* could well be perceived as performing such a masquerade, as if to demonstrate diverse modes of representing her body while identifying herself with none of them; as if to refuse to be present and available in any single version of her image. Indeed it may be this refusal that female viewers today, identifying with *Olympia*'s defiant look and gazing through it at the discomfited male spectator whose desire it confounds, appreciate most in *Olympia*'s representation.

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