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Abstract

Marie Darrieussecq's *Clèves* (2011) shocked readers with the vulgarity of its language and spurred controversy over its status as a literary text. In this article, I show how the novel's "bad" language is a foil for Darrieussecq's larger project of rewriting the adolescent female body, removing it from the sexualized and objectified optic through which it is usually viewed in order to stage it instead as a body in process, as a situation. For this body in process, gender and sexuality are not givens, but deeply unfamiliar experiences that resist the social order's dominant framing narratives, its scripts for normal and normative subjectivation. The novel, through a Wittigian universalization of the particular point of view of the female adolescent, gives readers access to the experience and the knowledge provided by her body in process.

Keywords

Darrieussecq, Wittig, adolescence, body, sexuality, gender, bad literature, obscenity, *Clèves*, intertextuality, contemporary literature

Cover Page Footnote

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Marie Darrieussecq's *Clèves*: A Wittigian Rewriting of Adolescence

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Marie Darrieussecq's controversial 2011 novel, *Clèves (All the Way)*, her fourteenth published work of fiction in a prolific career that began in 1996 with *Truismes*, begs an immediate association with Madame de La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves (The Princess of Clèves)*, widely considered to have inaugurated the modern French novel in 1678. *Clèves* was published at a moment when *La Princesse de Clèves* was on people's minds, as the French had rallied around the novel when President Nicolas Sarkozy dismissed it as unimportant in public remarks made in 2009.¹ The publication of *Clèves* thus came at a moment when the name *Clèves* was firmly inscribed in the public imaginary, and readers who bought the novel would have expected some intertextual revision or revisiting of the seventeenth-century classic. When *Clèves* turned out instead to be a raw, uncensored account of a young teenaged girl's entry into sexuality in a provincial Basque town, written in the vulgar vernacular of *bites et chattes* 'cocks and pussies,' the reading public was shocked by the novel's "bad" language and what it deemed to be gratuitous obscenity. Reviewers for the mainstream press and informal bloggers alike latched onto this bad language in their discussion of *Clèves*, compulsively counting how many times Darrieussecq used this or that obscenity, and turned this bad language into the focal point of their responses as readers. As we will see, however, focusing on Darrieussecq's bad language to charge *Clèves* with being unlitrary is to miss entirely the point of the novel. What initially reads as a tawdry account of a teenaged girl's entry into sexuality and her obsession with genitals and what is done with them turns out to be a rewriting of adolescence that defamiliarizes such identities as woman, man, boy, girl, and questions the *cela-va-de-soi* or given-ness of such concepts as sexuality, which is considered more often than not an innate or natural drive. Darrieussecq upends staid notions of adolescence and a static view of humanity by writing the adolescent female body in a way that removes it from the sexualized and objectified optic through which it is usually viewed and stages it instead as a body in process. For this body in process, gender and sexuality are not givens, but deeply unfamiliar experiences that resist framing by the social order's dominant narratives, its scripts for normal and normative subjectivation. The novel, for Darrieussecq, becomes the way to gain access to the experience and the knowledge that such a body in process provides.

In what follows, I show that *Clèves*'s bad language and vulgarity is in fact a foil for Darrieussecq's larger literary project. What is interesting about *Clèves* is not really its language, as shocking and crude as it may be, but the way in which it

can be seen as taking up Monique Wittig's radical lesbian feminist project, which calls for the transformation of the novel into a site for rewriting the world and universalizing a minority point of view in order to combat a patriarchal, heteronormative regime of hierarchies and oppression. Wittig, in her acclaimed novel *L'Opoponax* (*The Opoponax*) (1964) uses the figure of the child and the experience of childhood to displace the typically masculine subjectivity privileged by the *bildungsroman* with that of a young girl in order to unbundle masculinity from universality. Darrieussecq does the same in *Clèves*, but uses the figure of the adolescent girl and the experience of adolescence instead. But before exploring the feminist and universalizing dimension of *Clèves*, let us start at the very beginning, before the book is even opened, and turn first to its back cover.

“Solange se demande s’il vaut mieux le faire avec celui-ci ou avec celui-là” ‘Solange asks herself if it would be better to do it with this one or that one.’ This is the only line to grace the novel’s minimalist white back cover. Who are ‘this one’ and ‘that one,’ who is Solange, and what are they doing? Any French reader, having read *La Princesse de Clèves*, might, upon browsing the shelves of a bookstore and picking up Darrieussecq’s book and looking it over, think that the decision Solange is grappling with mirrors the princess’s struggle to choose between her husband, the Prince de Clèves, and her lover (or suitor, given that the relationship is never consummated sexually), the Duc de Nemours. But the moment one gets to the second page and sees “La bite de son père, boudin blanc bondissant, est très différente de celle de Monsieur Bihotz” (12) ‘Her father’s cock, a jumping white wiener, is very different than Monsieur Bihotz’s,’² it becomes apparent that this *Clèves* is up to something very different than Madame de La Fayette’s *La Princesse de Clèves*. Darrieussecq, in an interview, describes *Clèves* as “un remake de *La Princesse de Clèves*” ‘a remake of the Princess of Clèves,’ with the very important difference that her protagonist, Solange, “elle, elle couche” ‘her, she has sex’ (“Marie Darrieussecq, Pourquoi aimez-vous *La Princesse de Clèves*?”).

Darrieussecq lays out two points of commonality from which she started to write her “réécriture à l’envers” ‘inside out rewriting’ (Leyris) of *La Princesse de Clèves* and through which she excavates this novel for her own purposes: first, the importance of having the story take place in a *huis clos* ‘closed space’ to recreate the sealed-off and suffocating dynamic of the king’s court, and second, the love triangle. The *huis clos* is the village of Clèves that gives its name to the novel, and it is localized generally in the Southwest of France. The love triangle in question is between Arnaud, an adolescent boy, and Monsieur Bihotz, Solange’s longtime babysitter who has taken care of her since she was in diapers.

With the *huis clos* and the triangle connecting *Clèves* to its seventeenth-century predecessor,³ Darrieussecq then sets out to create and immerse us in a world the likes of which we have never seen before in literature—the world of a

young girl entering adolescence, her discovery of sensuality, her negotiation of her transforming body, her response to new forms of desire. What is new is not the subject matter: we have seen female adolescence and burgeoning sexuality alluded to and dealt with in older iterations such as the biblical Song of Solomon or Diderot's *La Religieuse* (*The Nun*), and in more contemporary ones such as Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* (*Hello Sadness*) and Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant* (*The Lover*). Rather, what is new is Darrieussecq's refusal to aestheticize, or perhaps a better metaphor would be, to apply foundation and concealer to the portrait of female adolescence that she creates in *Clèves*. She boldly ventures into unexplored areas of female adolescence, holding nothing back. She writes, in the voice of a young teenaged girl, Solange, of her numerous and enthusiastic masturbation sessions, of getting her period for the first time, of feeling the blood-soaked maxi pad between her legs, of getting fingered by a fireman at a nightclub while pretending to be older than she actually is, of observing an erection forming in someone's pants, of the burning sensation of a yeast infection, of smoking marijuana, of keeping a diary, of feeling the inferiority of her social class when she visits richer, more cultured classmates' homes, of putting on makeup to try to look older and more sophisticated, of the first time she performs fellatio (poorly, according to the boy), replete with details about the smell and taste of his penis. Nothing is off limits, and this is perhaps the most comprehensive portrait of female adolescence that exists in literary form. What follows are some selections from throughout the book that show how Darrieussecq constructs this portrait using a discomfiting language that had its reviewers and readers on edge:

Solange's first time performing fellatio:

Le goût a disparu. La salive, abondante, coule un peu sur son menton et la chatouille, autant que les poils qui entrent dans son nez. Elle s'est habituée à l'odeur, c'est un peu dommage quand même cette impression de lui nettoyer la bite. Elle voudrait qu'il lui lâche les cheveux, ça tire, et elle a un bras bloqué façon judo.

Elle commence à avoir mal aux mâchoires. Les muscles crampent sur les côtés. Clairement elle ne les utilise pas assez, en tout cas pas comme ça. Ça doit être une question d'entraînement. Ça suppose quand même d'ouvrir beaucoup la bouche, cette affaire. (159)

The taste has gone. There's a lot of saliva and a bit of it is running down her chin, tickling her, like the hairs sticking up her nose. She's gotten used to the smell; but it's kind of a pity that she feels as if she's cleaning his cock for him. She'd like him to let go of her hair, it's hurting, and she has one arm stuck in some kind of judo position.

Her jaw is starting to hurt. The muscles on the sides of her mouth are cramping up. Clearly she doesn't use them enough, in any case not like this. It must be a question of practice. Even so, this business requires opening your mouth a lot. (112)

Solange's first time having sex is while she is on her period, thus inspiring Arnaud to have anal sex with her:

Elle baisse la tête et regarde entre ses jambes. Elle a des couilles. Deux couilles qui lui pendent et se balancent, *gling glong*. . . . En se penchant encore, fesses en l'air et front au matelas (si Bihotz la voyait) elle voit nettement la bite, c'est drôle, un museau qui viendrait la fouiner, un long corps saucisse avec un nuage de poils frisés – avec ses quelques poils à elle, ça fait comme un caniche rasé de partout sauf la tête et le cul. Un caniche qui s'allongerait et se raccourcirait, un caniche à ressort, *dzoing, dzoing*. (216)

She lowers her head and looks between her legs. She has balls. Balls hanging down from her and swinging, *gling glong*. . . . Leaning further forward, her butt in the air and her forehead on the mattress (if Bihotz saw her), she sees the cock, it's funny, a snout that's come to nose around there, a long sausage body with a cloud of frizzy hair—with the few hairs she has, it all looks like a poodle that's been shaved everywhere except for the head and ass. A poodle that gets longer and then shorter, a poodle on a spring, *dzoing, dzoing*. (152–53)

Solange's first attempt at inserting a tampon:

[Nathalie] lui a prêté un tampon pour essayer. Mais ça fait un mal de chien, même en le trempant dans de l'huile comme elle lui a conseillé.

Pourtant, le pompier avait mis tout un doigt, ce n'est pas rien un doigt (et quand on pense au reste, à la taille du reste – mieux vaut ne pas y penser.)

« Mais tu mouillais, lui a expliqué Nathalie. Ça fait glisser. »

Elle a essayé en se *masturbant* mais elle a beau respirer genre sa-mère-en-lotus, rien à faire. Et les tampons, Nathalie l'a prévenue : une fille avait oublié et le type lui a poussé le tampon tellement loin que ça lui a percé l'intérieur et elle est morte dans des flots de sang. (187–88)

[Nathalie] lent her a tampon to try. But it hurts like a bitch, even after dipping it in oil as she had advised her to do.

Still, the fireman had put in an entire finger, and a finger isn't nothing (and when one thinks of the rest, the size of the rest—it's better not to think about it.)

"But you were wet," Nathalie explained to her. "That makes it slide in."

She tried while *masturbating* but however much she breathed like her-mother-in-lotus-position, there was nothing to be done. And Nathalie had warned her about tampons: a girl had forgotten and the guy had pushed the tampon up so far that it pierced her insides and she died in a flood of blood. (132)

Solange's first time suffering from a yeast infection: "Son sexe la démange, moite et grumeleux comme une poire blette" (304) 'Her sex itches, moist and lumpy like an overripe pear.'

In her refusal to make female adolescence "literary" by hiding or glossing over the ugliest, most embarrassing, or most unseemly parts of Solange's experience, Darrieussecq makes an important literary contribution. She takes seriously the exhortation of Nathalie Sarraute, "un peu [sa] grand-mère spirituelle" (Lambeth 809) 'sort of her spiritual grandmother,' to explore new terrain, a conviction that Sarraute expressed in *L'Ère du soupçon* (*The Age of Suspicion*) by quoting Flaubert in order to articulate the novelist's "obligation la plus profonde: découvrir de la nouveauté, et . . . son crime le plus grave : répéter les découvertes de ses prédécesseurs" (Sarraute 79) 'most profound obligation: discover something new, and . . . his gravest crime: repeat his predecessors' discoveries.' Darrieussecq certainly does not repeat the discoveries of her predecessors, but because of the novel's crudeness, Darrieussecq's literary innovation got lost in the controversy this novel stirred up over whether it was a good book—literary, with redeeming aesthetic qualities—or whether it was gratuitously obscene, disgusting, pornographic, and self-indulgent.

Looking at reviews of the novel in the popular and mainstream press and blogosphere yields such headlines as "Marie Darrieussecq a-t-elle versé dans le trash avec *Clèves*?" (*L'Express*) 'Marie Darrieussecq, has she fallen into trashiness with *Clèves*?'; "63 occurrences de bite(s), c'est trop" (Peras) '63 occurrences of cock(s) is too much.'⁴ The ubiquity of this less-than-polite language was taken up by reviewers as a focal point, many of whom quantified Darrieussecq's vulgarity to justify their unfavorable opinion of *Clèves*. What is striking is the uniformity of responses by both professional literary critics and ordinary individuals. One reviewer took it upon herself to present a list of charges against Darrieussecq for her crudity:

Certes, il est légitime d'appeler un clitoris un clitoris. Mais l'auteur du célèbre *Truismes* (1996) en fait trop : trop de 'bite(s)' — nous avons compté soixante-trois occurrences sur 345 pages, heureusement une seule pour 'dans le trou du caca' quand il est question de sodomie ; trop de 'chatte(s),' de 'pute(s),' de 'mouiller,' de 'doigter,' etc. . . . La lourdeur du propos exaspère vite et on peine à terminer ce roman qui porte complaisamment la plume dans la culotte. (Peras)

Certainly, it's legitimate to call a clitoris a clitoris. But the author of the famous *Truismes* (*Pig Tales*) (1996) overdoes it: too many 'cock(s)' — we counted 63 occurrences over 345 pages, thankfully only one occurrence of 'in the poop chute' when it comes to sodomy; too much of 'pussy,' 'slut(s),' 'getting wet,' 'fingering,' etc. . . . These words' heaviness becomes irritating quickly and one has difficulty finishing this novel that complacently carries its pen in its panties.

A blogger weighed in with, "Si l'intention était bel et bien de retranscrire un langage de jeunes, était-il cependant nécessaire de nous abreuver de « bites » et « chattes » totalement gratuites et ce à chaque page ? Ou de nous écorcher les yeux avec des expressions telles que « malgré qu'ils sont des gauchistes »⁵ ou ma préférée, « le trou à caca » ?" (*Twenty Three Peonies*) 'If the intention was indeed to retranscribe the language of young people, was it nonetheless necessary to inundate us with totally gratuitous "cocks" and "pussies" and this on every page? Or to skin our eyes with expressions such as "even though they is leftists" or my favorite, "poop chute"?"

Even in a positive review, such as the one Raphaëlle Leyris wrote for *Le Monde*, the reviewer felt compelled to present a tally: "'Bite' apparaît une soixantaine de fois, 'chatte' le suit de près, il est beaucoup question de 'mouiller' et de 'doigter' entre deux évocations des mycoses" "'Cock" shows up about sixty times, "pussy" follows close behind, and there is much talk of "getting wet" and of "fingering" between two evocations of yeast infections.' I cannot presume to speak for all readers, but it would not occur to me to read a text by marking down how many times a vulgar word shows up or to reread the 345 pages of *Clèves* to do so. But there is something about the naturalness, or shamelessness, with which Darrieussecq throws around this language of the streets and gutters, something about the way she "ne se paie pas de mots" (Payot) 'is not taken in with fine words,' that disturbs at least some readers and reviewers, compelling them to seek refuge in the quantitative, as if numbers could serve as a defense against vulgarity.⁶ The other reaction to *Clèves* in the press was to avoid the language altogether. *Marie Claire*, for example, is squeamish about the vocabulary. Rather than cite the offending words in an act of accusation, it avoids

them, and the actions they describe, altogether: “En ce début des années 80, dans un village basque, la jeune fille parle beaucoup, fantasme un max, mais ne tarde pas – comme ses copines déchaînées – à agir. Et là, on rougirait presque d’avoir à vous en donner le détail...” (Chenaille) ‘In the beginning of the 80s, in a Basque village, the young girl talks a lot, fantasizes to the max, but—like her hyper girlfriends—can’t wait to act. And here, we might blush if we had to give you any details...’

What both positive and negative reviews of *Clèves* point to is a deep-seated discomfort that readers feel when they pick up *Clèves*, expecting a modern-day retelling of *La Princesse de Clèves*, but getting instead an uninterrupted and unedited stream of self-revelation—the cliché of the adolescent baring her soul and writing down every painfully important detail of her life for posterity. The language unsettles, and the question of this novel’s literary merits rests upon the idea of measure or degree. What the negative reviewers seem to be saying is that a little bit of vulgarity is okay—a few *bites*, a couple *chattes*, and perhaps a passing or veiled reference to the wet realities of feminine sexual arousal instead of phrases like *mouiller comme une chienne* ‘get wet like a bitch,’ and certainly not something so simultaneously juvenile and repugnant as *trou du caca* ‘poop chute.’ In other words, it is acceptable to sprinkle the text with these words to achieve an effect of authenticity—that is, after all, the way adolescents speak, isn’t it? But to make them the actual material of the text, to make this crude vocabulary the primary lexical field for the novel, is unacceptable, and, by extension, unliterary.

This literary exploitation of supposedly unliterary language and material is hardly new in contemporary literature. Indeed, one might argue that *Clèves* is not particularly original, as it comes ten years after works by Catherine Breillat, Catherine Millet, Nelly Arcan, and nearly twenty years after Virginie Despentes, all writers who delve into female sexuality and do so with an unapologetically uncensored, explicit language of the sort we encounter also in *Clèves*. There are some important distinctions to be drawn between Darrieussecq and these other writers, however. Millet’s *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M* (*The Sexual Life of Catherine M*) (2001), and Arcan’s *Putain* (*Whore*) (2001) are published as autobiographical narratives, and not as novels, like *Clèves*, and thus promise a greater referentiality, or rootedness in real experiences, than the novel. As such, by being drawn from reality as opposed to being completely manufactured by a writer’s imagination, the *récit* ‘narrative’ enjoys a sort of dispensation that the purely fictional work does not, when it comes to shocking or difficult material. Somehow, the fact that a story is to some degree drawn from real life (or claims to be) makes it more permissible to represent, as one is simply representing what is already present in the world, rather than creating something new. Darrieussecq has commented on the suspicion that readers have toward completely imagined stories, in her essay, “Fiction in the First Person, or Immoral Writing,” where she

discusses the belabored status of fiction, which, she argues, has become a form of “immoral writing,” as seen in the scandal that ensued following her publication of the novel *Tom est mort* (*Tom is Dead*) (2007), about a mother grieving the death of her son. Darrieussecq was accused of *plagiat psychique* ‘psychic plagiarism’ by Camille Laurens (“Marie Darrieussecq ou Le syndrome du coucou” 4), who had written *Philippe* (1995), a *récit* about the death of her son, and argued that certain difficult experiences, like suffering from AIDS or cancer, or having gone through the concentration camps, should only be written about by those who have lived through them and thus earned the right to speak about these unspeakable events.⁷ Darrieussecq, through her commitment to fiction, opposes the trend toward autofictional texts and narratives, which are validated by possessing some degree of truth and being voiced by narrators who are reliable or more trustworthy for having actually experienced the things they write about. As Darrieussecq describes the contemporary literary climate: “[The first-person novel], albeit a traditional [form of fiction], seemed to be upsetting the contemporary practice of reading, which has become confused with the exercise of legality and morality. . . . In our times, truth is all the rage, a truth identified with the Good. What seems to be disappearing is the very possibility of reading and understanding what a novel is” (“Fiction in the First Person, or Immoral Writing” 71).⁸ For Darrieussecq, what is important about being a novelist, “is not to have experienced an emotion in order to express it, but to find a way of expressing it that speaks to *all of us*,” and the exercise of imagination is “in fact a form of humanism” because of the novel’s potential to be a universal and universalizing art form (“Fiction in the First Person, or Immoral Writing” 74).

Despentes’s *Baise-moi* (*Rape Me*) (1994), unlike Millet’s and Arcan’s works, is identified as a novel and thus places itself under the banner of the imagination, as does Breillat’s *Pornocratie* (*Pornocracy*) (2001), which reads as fiction despite being published as a *récit*. Both *Baise-moi* and *Pornocratie* more closely resemble *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M* and *Putain* than they do *Clèves* in that all these works are narrated from the perspectives of sexually mature women. Moreover, *Baise-moi*, with its serial killer protagonists, is in conversation with the *roman noir* rather than the *bildungsroman*, and does not share the latter’s universalizing quality. And *Pornocratie*, despite having a plot, is interspersed with philosophical statements about sexual difference and the horror that femininity and the female body inspire in men, which resonate with the theoretical writings of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva—a cerebral tone that is completely absent in Darrieussecq’s rendering of Solange’s universe. Unlike Solange, these other texts’ narrators and protagonists are writing or thinking about sex as women who know what sex is and what it means—they are writing of and as women, as particularized subjects. For the young Solange, who, as a body in flux, is trying to figure out what it means to be a woman or a man, sex signifies

differently than it does for these other texts' characters. For Solange, everything and everyone is other, and femininity is as other as masculinity. Or, to put it another way, to consider *Clèves* as similar to these other texts is to reduce Darrieussecq's novel to being about sex and female sexuality *tout court* (and the bad language that is used to write sex), when the novel is about being an unfixed subjectivity contained within a transitional body.⁹

The fact that these other works are the most comparable works to *Clèves* tells us something about how few depictions of female sexuality from a female perspective there are in literature. Solange, an adolescent who has just experienced menarche, has little in common with the prostitutes, pornography actresses, and ostensibly deviant or otherwise marginalized women that populate these other works. To draw the comparison between *Clèves* and these other works is both to reduce female sexuality and its literary representations to the status of something that is always already subversive and transgressive, which shocks by its mere existence, and to flatten the important generic distinctions among these works—for example, taking the *récit*, with its promise of some sort of facticity, and equating it with Despentès's reworking of the noir and crime fiction novel, which is itself then equated to Darrieussecq's reworking of the *bildungsroman*. However, if we attend to Darrieussecq's interest in opening up the *bildungsroman* and to her attempt to tell a universal story that is undergone by half of humanity (and indeed, we could argue that *Clèves* is a completely universal story, as the male half of humanity also passes through puberty and the transformation of their embodied selves), it becomes evident that the true comparison is not with these other women who write texts that shock for their depictions of explicit female sexuality, but with Wittig, who also had the ambition of reworking a familiar genre and of writing a universalizing novel that could speak to all.

Indeed, Darrieussecq can be considered to have done for the narrative of adolescence what Monique Wittig did for the narrative of childhood with her *L'Opoponax*, which destroyed a certain pre-existing model of literature according to Marguerite Duras, who, in a glowing postface to the 1983 re-edition of Wittig's 1964 novel, wrote: "Mon Opoponax, c'est peut-être, c'est même à peu près sûrement le premier livre moderne qui ait été fait sur l'enfance. Mon Opoponax, c'est l'exécution capitale de quatre-vingt-dix pour cent des livres qui ont été faits sur l'enfance. C'est la fin d'une certaine littérature et j'en remercie le ciel." 'My Opoponax is perhaps, is even probably most certainly, the first modern book to ever have been made about childhood. My Opoponax puts to death ninety percent of books written about childhood. It is the end of a certain kind of literature and I thank the heavens for it.' We could apply Duras's words to Darrieussecq's *Clèves* as well, and see it as inaugurating a new type of literature on adolescence—perhaps the first modern book to have been made about adolescence—and as presenting a renewed vision of literature. Darrieussecq's vision is one that brings

us back to Wittig's literary project, which was absolutely invested in rendering literature truly universal as a political stance against the false universalisms that inhere in sexism and racism, particularly, and in oppressive hierarchies, generally.

As Wittig has argued in her groundbreaking work of feminist critique, *The Straight Mind* (1992), and in her posthumously published *ars poetica*, *Le Chantier Littéraire* ("The Literary Workshop") (2010), an innovative literary work can serve as a Trojan Horse, can "pulverize the old forms and formal conventions" and "operate as a war machine upon its epoch" ("The Trojan Horse" 69). Indeed, it is through pulverizing literary forms and conventions that social forms and conventions can be acted on as well. Wittig, in this political vision of literature, where the political and aesthetic cannot be separated from each other, insists that if literature is to have this political impact, it must be innovative—it must break new literary ground—and it must universalize the writer's particular point of view. As Wittig puts this last point, "It is the attempted universalization of the point of view that turns or does not turn a literary work into a war machine" ("The Trojan Horse" 75). As I will show next, Darrieussecq's *Clèves* corresponds to both criteria, as it ventures into previously unexplored literary terrain, and seeks to render the experience of female adolescence universal, to take it out of the particularity in which it is usually stuck and have it speak to all readers.

Darrieussecq is explicit about her will to write something new, to write what has not been written before. As she puts it:

la sensation d'avoir une serviette hygiénique pleine de sang coagulé entre les jambes quand on a un cours de gym en sixième, cinquième, cette sensation-là, toutes les filles la connaissent... Il y a des zones dans la littérature qui ne sont jamais abordées, et or ces zones-là, comme par hasard, la moitié de l'humanité l'a traversée. . . . La littérature, il faut toujours qu'elle essaie de grignoter sur ce qui n'a pas été exploré, sur ce qui n'a pas été dit. (Hirsch)

the sensation of having a maxi pad full of coagulated blood between your legs when you have a gym class in sixth, seventh grade—that feeling, all girls know it... There are zones in literature that are never broached—yet, as if by chance, half of humanity has crossed these zones. . . . Literature must always encroach on what hasn't been explored, on what hasn't been said.

Darrieussecq takes on this task of saying the unsaid with great aplomb, compassion, and humor. By serving as our guide into this unexplored territory, she enables the male half of humanity to have a glimpse of, to quote Madonna, what it feels like for a girl; and she enables the female half of society to remember

and re-experience that difficult period of adolescence and how hard it was to be comfortable in one's skin, both literally and figuratively.

In order to represent this new material, Darrieussecq, as we've seen, makes recourse to a language that shocked readers with its seeming unliterariness. The readers discussed earlier seem to think that Darrieussecq is trying to recreate adolescent language, to give the reader access to a different kind of language than they are used to, or rather, to return them to a past language they may have forgotten. Certainly, it is true that Darrieussecq, in preparation for the novel, spent three weeks listening to her own diary from when she was an adolescent, a diary that she had recorded on tape instead of in writing, as writing, for her, was reserved for fiction (Bourmeau). But as Darrieussecq explains, she is not interested in a retranscription of adolescent language (Hirsch), which she describes as "phrases toutes faites et de pauvres formules pour aborder ce qui est le plus intime, le plus culturel, le plus codifié et le plus socialisé: la sexualité" (Bourmeau) 'prefabricated sentences and impoverished formulas for addressing what is the most intimate, the most cultural, the most codified, and the most socialized: sexuality.' Instead, she is interested in conveying and reenacting the *sensation* of being an adolescent girl, especially as filtered through the fraught issue of sexuality, which places pressure on identity and the body in particularly pressing ways.

Darrieussecq's epigraph to the novel, a Rilke quotation, speaks to the ignorance the world has about the experience (and sensations) of being a young girl: "Est-il possible que l'on ne sache rien de toutes les jeunes filles qui vivent cependant?" 'Is it possible that we know nothing about all these young girls who nonetheless exist?' How is it possible not to know anything about all the young girls who exist in the world when they are there before us? Rilke's question both raises the possibility of this sort of ignorance and simultaneously tries to deny it—surely it isn't possible not to know when there are so many girls before and around us. Rilke's question thus begins the novel with a resounding silence, which Darrieussecq proposes to fill. Her *Clèves* is an education in what it is like to be a young adolescent girl, an experience that is inseparable from the experience of puberty and being in a transitional body that is both other to her and the object of desire of masculine bodies, which are another kind of other. *Clèves* is an education in what it is like to be a body that is immersed in a complex and confusing set of social signifiers and practices, a body that is situated but not yet set in a fixed identity, a body that is trying both to make sense of its own embodiedness and the embodiedness of others. If we consider sexuality the way Darrieussecq does, as a highly codified form of culture and socialization, it is in effect a language, and *Clèves* creates, through Solange, the experience of being immersed in and learning a completely new language that everyone already seems to speak.

Clèves's universalizing aspirations mean that this entry into the sensate world of female adolescence is directed at all readers, not just women readers who have gone through menarche and socialization into a certain sexualization. Wittig, in *L'Opoponax*, pursues the project of universalization through exploiting the indeterminate nature of the pronoun *on*, which she uses to narrate the perspective of Catherine Legrand, the little girl who is the novel's protagonist. In *Clèves*, Darrieussecq pursues her project of universalization through the indeterminate nature of Solange's body. Solange's body, though it may be indeterminate for being in flux, is far from abstract, and Darrieussecq uses it to engage our own corporeal memories through the constant interpellation of the corporeal of Solange's sensorium. This relentless exhibition of the absolute truth, evidence, and power of Solange's body (her body is the absolute arbiter of truth for her—it is her primary vehicle for thought) reminds us of the fact that we too are embodied beings whose bodies, more often than not, elude our mastery and control, and are not as fixed as the processes of socialization would have them be.

What is so striking about Solange's inhabitation of her body is the innocence, for lack of a better word, with which she speaks of her sexual experiences. We can see this innocence, which I am using to describe a certain suspension of moral judgment and abstention from inscribing events and people with signification, in the way Darrieussecq uses vulgar words. Her writing does not call attention to them in any way, despite all the attention paid to them by readers and reviewers, who treat them as the most notable feature of the text. In the context of Solange's mind, *bite* and *chatte* are not extraordinary or shocking at all. She does not connote these words or the actions they are implicated in, in one way or another; she does not pass judgment on them or come to any conclusions. She does not sexualize her sexuality. Her body is a present truth and reality and it does things, both sexual and not, but those actions do not in themselves signify anything outside of their physical reality—a cramped jaw is a cramped jaw, a finger is at least as large as a tampon, a vulva with a yeast infection feels like an overripe pear, pubic hair in one's mouth and face is ticklish. She conceives of her body and its various configurations (in sex, in menstruation, in infection, in masturbation, etc.) with an almost dispassionate curiosity. She does not conceive of her body as an abstraction, as something that exists for others as an object of desire—as a sexualized body—but as an absolutely concrete thing, as something that exists insofar as it *does*, as it enters into physical contact with itself or with others. And it is this experience of the body-in-process, the body as it functions and feels as a body, that Darrieussecq tries to transmit to us, via the body-in-process of the young Solange.¹⁰

Solange's body, in other words, corresponds to Simone de Beauvoir's theorization of the body as a situation: the body, far from being natural, is a material experience that has a specific context—that is situated—and that,

unbound by any essentialist notion of the body, is open to interpretation, open to being written and read.¹¹ *Clèves* functions as an immersive and convincing argument for the in-process nature of the body. Denise Riley, in her landmark text, *“Am I That Name?”: Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History* (1988), theorized the situation of womanhood in temporal terms, noting that “it’s not possible to live twenty-four hours a day soaked in the immediate awareness of one’s sex” (Riley 96). Solange, while she is soaked in an immediate awareness of her sex as a physical organ, is remarkably unaware of how what she does with that organ immerses her into sex as a socialized concept laden with layers upon layers of sedimented meaning. The body, for Solange, constitutes a meaning that she is in the process of making, but one she has not yet been able to make sense of. Darrieussecq presents readers with all the sensations of being a girl that are never written about elsewhere, save, perhaps, in diaries. She does this to respond to Rilke’s question by mapping out this dark continent that is even darker than Woman—the young girl—and to present Solange’s body as a situation. For Rilke’s question to be properly answered, the response must be accessible to more than just the one reader who is the author and audience of the diary—it must be made knowable to many, it must be universalized. For Darrieussecq, literature is the means for translating the sensations of an individual who does not know how to read her situation, into a text that can provide readers with an experience of this sensation even though they are able to understand her situation in a way that Solange cannot.

As she writes of all the various humiliating, confusing, and new experiences that Solange goes through, Darrieussecq refrains from passing judgment, refrains from staging Solange’s experiences as good or bad and instead presents them as a process, as one girl’s attempts to figure out who she is in relation to her own body, and who she is in relation to others—as one girl’s self-situating. Quoting Darrieussecq again, “la sexualité est une sorte de couvent” ‘sexuality is a sort of convent’ and Solange is on a “quête mystique de la sexualité” ‘mystic quest of sexuality’ where she is in the continual process of “cherchant à comprendre l’autre” ‘seeking to understand the other’ (Hirsch). This quest to understand the other, and the innocence that Solange has vis-à-vis the way bodies are socialized and sexualized, is perhaps best incarnated in the ignorant curiosity she has toward both male and female bodies. About menstruation, Solange asks herself, in an echo of the ignorance Rilke alludes to, “Est-ce que toutes les femmes ont ça? . . . Est-ce que Jacqueline Dubut a ça? Comment peut-elle se concentrer sur le pilotage? Est-ce qu’Anne Chopinet avait ça en défilant sur les Champs-Élysées, porteuse du drapeau devant tout le monde, une serviette entre les jambes?” (61–62) ‘Do all women get this? . . . Does Jacqueline Dubut get this? How can she concentrate on flying? Does Anne Chopinet get it while marching down the Champs-Élysées, carrying the flag in front of everyone, a pad between

her legs?’ (39–40). This question, which is about a universal female experience, has its male counterpart, when Solange, looking at a picture of the Treaty of Yalta, starts wondering about all the world leaders’ penises:

Les bites vivant leur vie de bite dans tous ces pantalons, les bites petits gnomes de chacun de ces hommes, les bites à leurs affaires de bites. Les bites à Yalta lavées ou pas lavées, molles ou tendues, puantes ou fraîches, irritées ou tranquilles, dont personne ne s’occupe ou, au contraire, objet des pensées de chacun. C’est ça qu’elle voudrait apprendre, c’est l’Histoire de la bite, c’est comment on fait et comment on vit quand on a ça au lieu de ça. (259)

Cocks living their cock lives in all those pairs of pants, little gnome cocks on each of these men, cocks doing their cock business. The cocks at Yalta, washed or unwashed, soft or stiff, stinking or clean-smelling, chafing or still, that no one deals with, or, on the contrary, that are the object of each of those men’s thoughts. That’s what she would like to learn, the History of the Cock, what one does and how one lives when one has that instead of this. (185)

“Quand on a ça au lieu de ça” ‘when one has that instead of this,’ resonates with the back cover: “Solange se demande s’il vaut mieux le faire avec celui-ci ou avec celui-là.” While, in the text, the *celui-ci* and *celui-là* are clearly Arnaud and Monsieur Bihotz, read with the question of “quand on a ça au lieu de ça,” the question can be reframed as that of whether it’s better to do it—to have sex, and more broadly, to live—with a vulva or with a penis. Solange is aware that these differences exist, but in her innocence and ignorance, they have yet to be hierarchized and ascribed with value, and simply represent different sorts of sensation. Solange is deeply curious about other women, about whether they live out their femaleness the way she has to with her new entry into the world of menstruation, and about men, who live out their maleness through the penises in their pants. She is curious about what difference sexual difference makes. She wants to know the other.

But how can Solange experience and know the other when she is herself so unknowable, incomprehensible, even? When she is not properly equipped to discover the truth about the body and self she is becoming? The experience Darrieussecq presents to readers is like that of trying to find one’s way in a dark cellar without a light source. Solange has no source of illumination: her friends have pitifully little knowledge about their own bodies and about sexuality, repeating misinformed stories of girls dying from tampons piercing their insides; her mother, a frigid neurotic woman constantly besieged by migraines, is both

emotionally and physically absent and inaccessible, unable to share any knowledge or wisdom with her daughter; and her father is too busy philandering to speak with his daughter about becoming and being a sexual being other than to warn her against the specter of AIDS (*Clèves* is set in 1980s France, when the disease was only recently discovered), which he characterizes as a disease spread by homosexuals and blacks, thus leading the hapless Solange to believe that she does not need a condom for her own sexual adventures, as Arnaud and Monsieur Bihotz are both white and straight. Solange thus grows up in a *huis clos* that she cannot leave and that real knowledge cannot enter. Indeed, the village *Clèves*, with its provincial inhabitants and the alliances that are formed and broken between the teenagers who go to school together, combined with the static dysfunctionality of her family, constitutes a *huis clos* similar to that of the king's court.

But even more of a *huis clos* is Solange's own body. Darrieussecq, through all her *bite* and *chatte*, lets us into that convent and opens its doors. The coarse language is not meant to serve as a retranscription of adolescent language, as a way of providing an exteriorized and dispassionate account of adolescence, but to serve as a way of letting us into true adolescent experience. It gives us the experience of being back in an adolescent mind again, the sort of mind that does not use proper language to conceive of its body, that does not speak of the body in anatomical terms or conceive of sexuality in terms of penises and vulvas, that is more interested in what historical figures have between their legs than in why they're famous. The key difference is that we have both the language and the experience that enables us to understand the workings of this convent of sexuality in a way that Darrieussecq's protagonist cannot. Situated outside Solange's situation, we are equipped to read her situation as a site of knowledge.

As we have seen, Darrieussecq's opening the doors of the *huis clos* of female adolescence resulted in many offended sensibilities and readerly protestations that *Clèves* is hardly literature. However, the review for *Le Monde* is the only one in the mainstream press to get at the heart of why *Clèves* is so disturbing to so many. Leyris writes, "Le corps et la sexualité envisagés comme le fait Solange par le petit bout de la lorgnette ont-ils leur place dans les rayons 'littérature' des librairies ? Il n'est pas impossible que Marie Darrieussecq choque aussi parce qu'elle est une femme, écrivant sur les émois et les déboires d'une jeune fille avec un culot stupéfiant" 'Do the body and sexuality, as Solange sees them, through the wrong end of the spyglass, belong on the shelves marked "literature" in bookstores? It's not impossible that Marie Darrieussecq also shocks because she is a woman writing about the emotions and misadventures of a young girl with stunning audacity.' Leyris suggests, and I think rightly so, that it is not so much the language in and of itself that is shocking but the fact that it comes from a woman and is used to describe a profoundly feminine, as opposed to

masculine, experience or subjectivity. The Marquis de Sade certainly spared no ink in his graphic recounting of the many possibilities of human sexuality, of what could be done by a human body to another human body, and that has landed him a secure place in the French canon. Georges Bataille employs similarly vulgar language and presents readers with writing replete with genitals and bodily fluids, and yet he is celebrated for it.¹² What shocked the press and the internet commenters was not simply “bad language,” but that language coming from the mouth of an adolescent girl—a reaction that speaks to the position of women in contemporary France and what kind of language is expected and demanded of them.

In other words, what is shocking about the language is not the language itself but its context. Darrieussecq’s *Solange*, unlike de Sade’s *Justine*, for example, is very much a subject, and the otherness of her body in no way demotes her to the status of pure object. Darrieussecq pushes *Solange* out of pure immanence into the transcendence that Beauvoir, in *Le Deuxième sexe* (*The Second Sex*), patiently and methodically points out has been stripped away from women as long as human society has existed, thus reducing them to an essential inessentialness. Rather than consigning *Solange* and her body to the less prestigious side of the mind-body split, Darrieussecq takes the reduction of woman to body—to material, to a *hystera* incapable of producing *logos*—to its limit and breaks through. She turns *Solange*’s immanence into the material of transcendence. In so doing, Darrieussecq brings to light just how much society relegates a girl’s sexuality to darkness, treating it as something that is unspeakable, perhaps even unthinkable, and certainly something that ought to be controlled. Darrieussecq refuses to keep this sexuality silent and makes us acknowledge it, an acknowledgment that leaves some blushing, others outraged, and all affected.

Alchemy, which was a practice and science devoted to both the transformation of base metals into noble ones and the development of an elixir of life that would confer youth and longevity onto its consumer, lends itself as an apt metaphor for *Clèves*. Darrieussecq, in *Clèves*, transforms the baseness of *bite* and *chatte* into a way to experience the other, either the other we do not know, or the other we have known and forgotten. She transforms the committed sensuality and sexuality of *Solange*, in all its purity (for lack of a better word) into a literary experience, thus giving readers the opportunity to access those things through language. And she also produces an elixir of life, immortalizing or at the very least, suspending, in the course of her 345 pages, the experience and sensations of youth and its embodiment. From the first page to the last, we are young again in *Solange*, but without the ignorance of youth. We are able to re-experience what it means to be in a body that has not yet been firmly ensconced in femininity or masculinity, to experience the sensations afforded by a body that is neither that of

a fully realized man or woman. Solange's body is one that is unbecoming for its becoming.

What the New Novelist Claude Simon said about Monique Wittig's stunning *récit d'enfance* 'narrative of childhood', *L'Opoponax*, applies to *Clèves*. If we replace *enfance* 'childhood' with *adolescence* 'adolescence' and *petite fille* 'little girl' with *jeune fille* 'young girl,' we get: "je vois, je respire, je mâche, je sens par ses yeux, sa bouche, ses mains, sa peau. Je ne suis plus moi, je ne suis pas non plus une certaine jeune fille: je deviens l'adolescence" 'I see, I breathe, I chew, I feel through her eyes, her mouth, her hands, her skin. I am no longer myself, nor am I a certain young girl: I become adolescence.'¹³ However, Darrieussecq, by universalizing female adolescence, does more than make it accessible to anyone who reads *Clèves*, does more than simply respond to Rilke's call for knowledge. In penetrating the *huis clos*, Darrieussecq opens previously closed doors and confronts us with the familiar question of the Other, but asked differently. She attains the political, as did Wittig, by forcing us to decenter the universal male subject and consider what sort of relationship human subjectivity can have with the other and with the world, and how that world is perceived and sensed. Darrieussecq poses the question of what sort of knowledge this subjectivity can attain and produce when it is housed in the misprized situation of a young woman's body and mind. This gesture, this *culot stupéfiant* 'stunning audacity,' contains a revolution.

Notes

1. In 2006, Sarkozy, then Minister of the Interior, had said: "L'autre jour, je m'amusais – on s'amuse comme on peut – à regarder le programme du concours d'attaché d'administration. Un sadique ou un imbécile avait mis dans le programme d'interroger les concurrents sur *La Princesse de Clèves*. Je ne sais pas si cela vous est arrivé de demander à la guichetière ce qu'elle pensait de *La Princesse de Clèves*. Imaginez un peu le spectacle!" 'The other day, I was amusing myself—one amuses oneself as best one can—looking at the program for the civil service exam. A sadist or an imbecile had decided to test the candidates on *The Princess of Clèves*. I don't know if you've ever happened to ask a counter clerk what she thinks of *The Princess of Clèves*. Try to imagine the spectacle of it!' As President of the Republic, in 2008, he made a speech in which he argued that in the civil service exam, community service should count at least as much as knowing *The Princess of Clèves* by heart, saying, "Car ça vaut autant que de savoir par cœur *La Princesse de Clèves*. J'ai rien contre, mais... bon, j'avais beaucoup souffert sur elle." 'Because [community service] is worth as much as knowing *La Princesse de Clèves* by heart. I don't have anything against it, but...

well, the book has caused me much suffering.’ See Clarisse Fabre, “Et Nicolas Sarkozy fit la fortune du roman de Mme de La Fayette” for an account of Sarkozy’s remarks on *Clèves* and their consequences.

2. This translation is mine. While there is an English translation of *Clèves* available, entitled *All the Way*, translated by Penny Hueston, in this instance, Hueston’s translation does not preserve the sensory and simple nature of Solange’s observations. Hueston translates “boudin blanc bondissant” as “wobbly white willy,” choosing the more passive and weak *wobbly* to translate the more energetic *bondissant* and losing the comparison to a sausage, to a food item. Where Hueston decides to translate in order to maintain alliteration, I opt for translating to preserve Solange’s peculiarly simple and innocent tone. The English translations that follow are based on Hueston’s translation, with my own modifications. There is one translation that is entirely my own, identifiable through the omission of the corresponding page number in Hueston’s translation.

3. For more on the intertextuality between *Clèves* and *Princess de Clèves*, see Chiara Rolla, “*Clèves* de Marie Darrieussecq: parcours de lecture et tentative(s) de définition(s).”

4. For more commentary on mainstream and online reception of *Clèves*, see again Rolla, who is to my knowledge the only other person to date to discuss *Clèves* in an academic context.

5. *Malgré qu’ils sont gauchistes* is a difficult phrase to translate into English as the problem lies with the fact that *malgré que* is incorrect French and no properly educated person would use it. I have tried to convey the incorrectness of the language in my translation by incorrectly keeping the verb in the infinitive form.

6. One online commenter, “biba,” instead of offering a precise tally of the number of occurrences of these terms, evoked more generally the act of tallying: “Si on comptait le nombre de ‘trou’ et de ‘bite,’ on pourrait souligner toutes les pages en rouge, et marquer dans la marge ‘répétition!’” (*Babelio*) ‘If one counted the number of “holes” and “cocks,” one could underline all the pages in red and write “repetition!” in the margins.’

7. “On peut prédire que vont fleurir dans les années à venir de ces romans à la première personne mais pas autobiographiques – surtout pas ! – où le narrateur combattra le cancer, le sida, les camps de concentration, la mort dans une débauche de précision affolante, tandis que l’auteur, en pleine santé parmi sa petite famille, assis sur des volumes d’Hervé Guibert ou de Primo Lévi

abondamment surlignés au marqueur fluo, jouira et fera jouir d'une souffrance dont il n'a pas acquitté la dette" "We can predict that the future will bring a host of these novels in the first person—but not autobiographical ones, oh no!—in which the narrator will struggle with cancer, AIDS, concentration camps, death, in an orgy of terrifying detail, while the author, in the pink of health and the bosom of a happy family, perched on books by Hervé Guibert or Primo Levi, their pages all heavily annotated in fluorescent marker, will get himself and others off on suffering for which he has not yet paid the debt" ("Marie Darrieussecq ou Le syndrome du coucou" 11).

8. Although *Clèves* is not written in the first person, but in the close third-person instead, I believe the remarks made about fiction still apply: both narrative positions share the same intimate focus on one character's point of view, and the suspicion toward writing about imagined as opposed to lived, or "real," events still applies to the third-person novel.

9. Virginie Despentes, in her defense of *Clèves*, published in *Le Monde*, makes the same mistake, situating her defense of Darrieussecq's novel as a defense of female desire and sexuality, and the right to write about such issues. See "Nous avons été cette gamine."

10. The idea of being in process is one that Darrieussecq takes up throughout her œuvre and it has been taken up in critical commentaries of her other works. See Helena Chadderton, who describes the Darrieussecquian self as "a process rather than a product" (Chadderton 66), and Shirley Jordan, "'Un grand coup de pied dans le château de cubes': Formal Experimentation in Marie Darrieussecq's *Bref séjour chez les vivants*."

11. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe*, vol. 1, 14, 72–73, 78–79. See also Toril Moi's excellent commentary on Beauvoir's theory of body as situation, "What Is a Woman? Sex, Gender, and the Body in Feminist Theory," especially pages 59–83.

12. While one might argue that both these now celebrated male authors have also encountered resistance and virulent criticism—after all, Sade was imprisoned for his writings—what is important for my argument here is not the way their contemporaries responded to their writing, but the way readers today receive it. The fact remains that these masculine literary accounts of a visceral and reportedly vulgar sexuality are now taken as signs of literary genius, whereas Darrieussecq's writing has been dismissed as unliterary.

13. Claude Simon, in his review of *L'Opoponax*, originally wrote: “Je vois, je respire, je mâche, je sens par ses yeux, sa bouche, ses mains, sa peau. Je ne suis plus moi, je ne suis non plus une certaine petite fille : je deviens l'enfance” (*L'Express*, “Pour Monique Wittig”) ‘I see, I breathe, I chew, I feel through her eyes, her mouth, her hands, her skin. I am no longer myself, nor am I a certain little girl: I become childhood.’

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