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Article title: Enjoy Their Symptom: Of Woman, Men and Other Interesting Figures in Greek Literary Texts

Year of publication: 2004

Citation: Voela, A. and Tamboukou, M. (2004) 'Enjoy Their Symptom: Of Woman, Men and Other Interesting Figures in Greek Literary Texts', *Women: a cultural review* 15 (1) pp. 83-100.

Link to published version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0957404042000197206>

DOI: 10.1080/0957404042000197206

Enjoy their symptom:

Of Woman, men and other interesting figures in Greek literary texts

Zizek has noted that in Lacanian terms the woman can often be described as a symptom of man and discusses male enjoyment, or lack of enjoyment, via a vis this formidable Other (1992). In this paper we have tried to do the opposite, focus our enjoyment on men's symptoms. Within this context we are charting a map of female figures appearing as men's symptoms in the literary work of Gregorios Xenopoulos (1867-1951), a well known Greek writer whose work bridges the nineteenth and twentieth century. Was it however pure enjoyment that led us to such an endeavour? Not really, although it has actually played a big part in inciting us to conduct research for this project. This paper is part of a collaborative on-going work within the matrix of discourses, phantasies and power relations involved in the construction of female subjectivity in fin-de-siècle Greece. In excavating the emergence of the modern woman we draw on psychoanalytic theories as well as Foucauldian insights. Butler has noted that, 'thinking the theory of power together with a theory of the psyche [is] a task that has been eschewed by writers in both Foucauldian and psychoanalytic orthodoxies' (1997:3) ¹. Responding to Butler's invitation, we will attempt to contribute to the dialogue between the two, using both perspectives in mapping the conditions of possibility for the figure of the woman to emerge from.

At the turn of the 19th century, the emergence of the modern woman in Greece is inextricably linked to profound socio-cultural changes, political and historical upheavals and the gradual passage from a predominantly agricultural economy to capitalism (Veloudis 1983:58). Yet, at a time when talk of personal values and individuality begin to dominate the male world, the woman is expected to be content with being defined in relation to her husband (Varika, 1994:150). Even when her individuality is acknowledged – almost exclusively in intellectual circles (Varika, 1994:150) – she is still seen as vulnerable and in need of protection.

This is the background against which the early feminist movement in Greece seeks to make a difference and in which Xenopoulos writes about women. His massive work is inhabited by a wide variety of heroines, ranging from the mildly non-conformist to the hysterical saint and from the rebellious daughter who claims her freedom through

death to the 18th century peasant who drives a stake into the dead lover's heart in order to stop him from haunting her dreams. Unlike many others who turned to the vanishing village world for inspiration and consolation and idealised the rural life in reaction to the stark socio-political realities, Xenopoulos primarily writes urban novels (Beaton 1999: 100). Compared to many of his colleagues who bemoan women's liberties or conceal their ambivalence towards them by claiming that the city is too dangerous a place for such delicate creatures (Varika 1994:155), Xenopoulos writes about women in an unprejudiced and straightforward manner. What is more, he frequents the literally salon of Kalliroi Parren (1859-1940), a pioneer feminist and editor of the first feminist journal in Greece, and declares himself a gynophile, supporting the early feminist movement².

The three short stories we are discussing in this paper emerge from this tense background. Clearly, Xenopoulos is not the only force shaping the dominant paradigm of the constitution of the female subject in Greece but he nevertheless plays an important role, both as a major literary figure of his time and a stable presence in the literary curricula in all three educational sectors ever after.

Compared to Xenopoulos' numerous other short stories which are snapshots of real life seen through the eyes of an uninvolved narrator, 'The Bracelet', 'The Life and Death of Argiroula' and the 'Madman with the Red Lillies' are first person accounts of traumatic experiences which converge on the themes of madness, death and the failure of love. 'The Bracelet' is the confession of the break up of the narrator's marriage, attributed to his jealousy and to his wife's persistence in wearing a cheap bracelet, the attachment to which she refuses to explain. The second story is an idiosyncratic deathbed scene in which a young woman, Argyroula, arranges a lavish family dinner as a farewell to life. In the 'Madman with the Red Lillies', the story of a young man's morbid obsession with his dead beloved is told by the narrator-friend in a Poesque manner.

All three stories explore the tensions in the relations between the two sexes which are explicitly constructed as oppositional: men fail to deal with women in a 'viable' manner and women resist being dealt with in a predictable fashion. There is no apportioning of blame or taking sides: both sexes are and are not responsible for the

breakdown of relationships. There is no possibility for mediation or reparation: madness and death cut human affairs short or precipitate a hasty conclusion. The 'I' speaks of a traumatic experience which remains painful for a long time but being a masculine 'I' also attempts to keep the pain at bay.

Through psychoanalytic lenses, 'The Bracelet', 'The Life and Death of Argyroula' and 'The Madman with the Red Lillies' can be read as narratorial/authorial fantasies (Segal 1993: 168), arrangements of conscious and unconscious elements which speak a truth when considered in their totality and exceed the narrator/author's conscious intentions in advancing effective social criticism or in championing the women's cause. These fantasies can further be framed within a Foucauldian gendered power relations matrix within which they receive their validity as stories emerging from and representing a social and historical reality.

Below, each story is introduced and discussed separately with a view to establishing, first, how feminine and masculine subjectivities are represented in man's speech; second, how unintended excesses and interruptions occur in the problematic representation of women; and third, how madness and ultimately death come to play a significant role in the power relations between the two sexes.

The Bracelet

The *Bracelet* is a straightforward confession of a man's failure to keep the woman he loved. The narrative follows the conventions of the confession: by exposing his folly to public scrutiny, the narrator both hopes to find consolation in the act and come to terms with the significant rupture in his life. The story begins with him observing that his fiancée, Mary, is wearing a cheap snake-shaped glass bracelet. Deeming it unworthy of his beloved, he buys her a gold and coral one in the same shape: 'Why deny it?' he observes, 'there is no better symbol for the woman since Eve's time' (1914:96). And since the woman has always been perceived as a surface upon which man's affluence and social position are inscribed (Bordo, 1990), the young lover does nothing more than follow the dominant conventions. Upon receiving the gift, Mary shows appreciation but later never remembers to wear it. The fiancé begins to think

that something is wrong. Unable to hide his growing discomfort, he pressures Mary to promising that she will start wearing his bracelet: 'the expression on her face was sad and so was her voice. Her decision was like a sacrifice for the sake of my love' (p.97) When he returns from a short journey, she welcomes him with both pieces of jewellery, one on each wrist. When he firmly demands that she keeps only his, she replies: 'I could not do you that favour' (p. 101) only to capitulate and promise to comply to his demand the following day. The narrator is now convinced that the glass snake has a secret history. Getting to the truth becomes his obsession. He will only be able to know who Mary is if he either persuades her to get rid of her old cheap bracelet in a symbolic act of submission or by making her tell him the truth about it, probably disclosing her untold past, the truth about herself:

I was determined that either it would go or I would leave, or die or commit suicide. I was in a state of permanent agitation. An Othello is sometimes awoken in men's souls, far more ferocious than Shakespeare's. Oh, the jealousy inspired by the past of one's fiancée (p.100)

Mary, however, has strategically chosen to dodge his obsession by neither refusing nor accepting the conditions he is trying to impose upon her. A Foucauldian power game is being staged between them. Neither of them can be easily proclaimed as powerful or powerless. Power seems to be constantly circulating between the two (Foucault, 1990) as they seem to occupy different/interchangeable subject positions vis-à-vis the truth/power regime that sustains and is sustained by the question of the bracelet. However, Foucault draws an important line of distinction between relations of power as fields of games where freedom can be exercised and relations of domination which needs resisting (1991a).

Further pressure on Mary to part with the old bracelet results in flat refusal:

Listen. You want something that cannot be done. This bracelet – I cannot take it off my hand. As a favour to you I won't be wearing yours together with it, since you seem to mind so much, but that's all. I will be wearing this one to my grave. Do not ask me about it. I will never tell you anything. Only, if you think this is unacceptable, here, take back your engagement ring. I will be very sorry if you

do, because I love you very much and I want to live with you but if you are going to deprive me of my bracelet I will prefer to live alone. This is the explanation I had to give you. Now do as you wish (p.101)

Mary wins this battle because after the ultimatum the fiancé acknowledges that his love is greater than his obsession and promises to forget the incident and suppress his jealousy. 'But deep in my heart' he says, 'I still hoped that one day my love would prevail upon Mary' (p. 102) Clearly his love is not about reciprocity but about conquest, in line with the dominant/conventional heterosexual discourse of how a man can love a woman.

They marry soon afterwards but they don't live happily ever after. Just a year has passed when the narrator decides to check how far his love has eroded her resistance and broaches the issue of the bracelet again. He finds her as determined as ever. This is when a male friend advises him to act like a man and assert his authority. Incensed by the challenge to his masculinity and by the fear of appearing weak to others, the narrator returns home determined to have his way but finds Mary asleep:

The red lampshade was shining patches of blood-red light around the room. A big patch was covering half of Mary's face, the other half blotting the pillow. Her hand was dangling out of the sheets, as if it were dead. The cursed blue thing was glittering in the red light and Mary was blissfully asleep in the snake's sweet embrace, dreaming sweet dreams. The spectacle hit me. It angered me, made my blood rush. A red cloud came over me and my heart started pounding. The idea of the crime was conceived there and then. I planned it there and then. I did not think of anything else, of the consequences. I was perhaps thinking that this was the only way to get out of this predicament once and for all. But then again was I in control of myself? Did I know what I was doing? (pp.103-4)

And so he breaks the bracelet in two. Materiality, the broken bracelet, fills the communication void of the couple's relationship. While initially the protagonist seemed to accommodate himself within the paradigm of 'complicit masculinities' (Connell, 2000), the provocation by the other causes him to shift to the register of 'hegemonic masculinities'. Thus he responds to his interpellation as a man and, at

last, the clash of man and woman culminates in male violence, an open manifestation of his power.

In psychoanalytic terms, masculinity is caught in a visual trap twice over: in seeing something that is not there (secret) and in wanting to be seen as something one is not or does not know how to be (an aggressive male). Xenopoulos seems to concur with Lacan who locates masculinity and femininity in the imaginary order. He further illustrates another psychoanalytic position, that the aggression directed towards the other has their roots in the ego which is built upon an internal conflict (Boothby 1991:39-45), structured as it is as a rival to itself and condemned to chasing an elusive ideal. In the case of the bracelet, man's internal clash is reactivated by the woman's secret, an object that does not exist but willed into existence and further nourished by the social-paternal Other in the eyes of whom one must appear manly and assertive. In a similar manner, the demand for love extended to the woman as a polite but firm request, also reveals aggression. Aggression breaks out as actual violence when attention is diverted from her as animate object of love to a seemingly unrelated inanimate object, the bracelet. Each new turn in the story, further exposes the fantasmatic and private origin of man's obsession with 'her truth' and 'her secret' and the imaginary nature of his superiority. However, the matrix of power relations within which man's violent performance is enacted, produces tangible effects. [His] woman who has up to that point eschewed his jealous demand is violently disrupted. Mary wakes up immediately with what he describes as a madwoman's expression on her face. She shouts:

You broke it! You broke it! You broke every bond between us. You are a liar. You are silly, egotistic, nosy, bad. No one gave this bracelet to me, there is no story behind it, no secret. It was just a whim, I was wearing it because of a whim. I hate you, I detest you. I do not want to see you again (p. 104).

Now she rises above him both morally and ethically. She simply leaves and he knows that he deserves it. A few years later a mutual friend informs the narrator that his ex-wife remarried in Istanbul and that she always wears a snake-shaped bracelet of coral and gold around her wrist.

But who is this woman and what does her disappearance mean? By leaving, she literally becomes the strange other. Because of that the narrator can use the active voice in remarking ‘that night I divorced my wife’ (p.105) although we know it was she who left town for ever. What is more, her secret is disclosed as pure nothingness: it was just a whim, he was just a fool, she was just stubborn – or wasn’t she? In the narrative plot of ‘The Bracelet’ we discern a well known Foucauldian hypothesis: when all is said and done, there is no truth to be disclosed about the bracelet and the whole story is deployed as a series of false discursive constructions enacted on the scene of gendered power relations. This Foucauldian stance – as indeed all Foucauldian stances – focuses on the how of the event, rather than the why of it.³ The latter is better addressed in the discourse of psychoanalysis.

From a psychoanalytic perspective the answer to: ‘what does this woman want and why does she leave?’ is deceptively simple: she wants a cheap, glass, snake-shaped bracelet which she refuses to part with or explain. At the same time, Mary’s departure signifies the profound changes in the relationship between the two sexes. As woman breaks away for the first time from marriage and love, from the symbolic relation and the imaginary bond respectively, she upsets the stable referents of male subjectivity. Her vanishing activates a fantasy in which she harms, traumatises and castrates. Xenopoulos uncovers this effect on the male psyche beyond his contemporaries’ attempt to hide it behind the helplessness of the ‘vulnerable creature’.

Mary’s radical emancipation, however, cuts both ways. In Freud’s phallic economy, the bracelet could be considered as a substitute phallus and Mary’s adherence to it as her reluctance to forgo the infantile organisation and accede to genital sexuality (Freud, 1991a:298). This economy, just as the society she lives in, label woman as problematic. How, then, is she to define herself outside man’s aggressive phallic demand for love? How is she to represent herself as other than the one who submits to his demand to be her only phallus? To his credit, Xenopoulos manages to show that this is an important issue in the modern world, although he avoids taking sides and upsetting his mixed readership. He is at pains to show that the woman’s purpose is neither to be excluded from the organised society nor to rent the traditional social fabric. However, the pragmatic limitations imposed on her in the attempt to represent herself for herself, mean that her only option is to turn around the signification which

fabricates her subjection. Hence she juxtaposes her little mystery, the bracelet, to being herself wholly turned into a mystery and resists male curiosity which reads too much into a piece of jewellery. Hence she appears stubborn, unyielding and completely set in her ways. And this, we are repeatedly told, is a very conscious decision.

Thus Mary's signification starts with (re)claiming the contentious object, the bracelet, and giving it a different interpretation. Now it functions as a pure signifier devoid of meaning, which signifies her desire never to be totally known and possessed. Deprived of any other means of signification and wishing to resist the convention that wants her to be only for the other and through the other, woman reconstitutes herself and her intergity with a purely symbolic act. She uses the symbolic in its symbolic clarity, without confusing it with the imaginary demand for love and, most important, without falling for the latter. Thus, the bracelet, an everyday object which is assigned the value of a signifier, becomes the signifier of the symbolic Other, her symbolic Other, a space that will remain obscure and loaded with imaginary fears for the male. But then again, this signification inevitably marginalises her, because, by choosing to construct her Other as the bit excluded from the dominant Other, she is turning herself into the Other of the dominant order. And in this circular way she does and does not escape the exclusion to which she did not wish to subscribe. This is precisely the point where death comes into the picture qua trope of woman's impossibility.

In 'The Bracelet' Xenopoulos shows how nearly untenable woman's position can become in traditional patriarchal societies when she tries to represent herself in herself. At the same time, he shows that between the sexes there exists an irreducible and fundamental difference which should not be mistaken for a simple opposition: man and woman use signification differently. Man and woman see the same object, a bracelet, but assign different meaning to it.

At this point a Foucauldian question pinpoints the very nature of the problem Xenopoulos tries to articulate in this story: when Mary wakes up to find her bracelet broken and with 'a madwoman's expression on her face, she shouts ...' If not a madwoman, Mary is definitely presented as 'dazzled by reason' (Foucault, 2001) in Xenopoulos's narrative. Both man and woman look at the same thing, but not in the

same way. One of them, is so dazzled by reason, that she can be registered as mad, 'madwoman'. But, we might ask whose gaze is really 'dazzled' here, containing the conditions of possibility for unreason to emerge. Xenopoulos is supposed to be holding a neutral position here, but as it comes, the woman's disappearance and mutation after the night of the bracelet crisis, implicitly suggests that she is the figure which 'dazzled by reason' becomes unrepresentable within the symbolic order. The difference in signification between the sexes illuminates their relation to madness/unreason and death, which mark the limit of their affair. In the beginning man is unable to accede to the symbolic significance of the bracelet and inclined to provide an imaginary meaning to it. The flimsiness of his tactics is revealed at the moment when the man 'dazzled by reason' breaks the object and thus provokes the disappearance of the woman. In this metaphorical sequence of breakings, man himself kills the woman – the object in its concreteness – and afterwards in re-entering reason he achieves an understanding of her (its) meaning. Therefore her death, her real sacrifice, is the necessary precondition for meaning to arise. The woman is also subject to death as repetition compulsion because she is said to repeat her bracelet attachment elsewhere. However, her main attachment to death is one of resistance: with her symbolic death (departure) the woman resists being turned into a dead meaning and a dead image, into man's symptom and adjunct. Thus her tactics is both radical and desperate: she appropriates the death inflicted upon her and turns it into her own signification. 'The Bracelet' speaks of how difficult it is for woman to signify herself even at the point of death and of how man and woman are two significations that cannot realistically meet but in their incommensurable difference.

The Life and Death of Argyroula:

In 'The Life and Death of Argyroula's a young woman invites her family to a dinner party by her death bed and prepares the event as a celebration and a spectacle. Argyroula, we are told, has refused to grow up and remained a big child throughout her life. Hence her last demand, the last in a long series of whimsical demands, and the family's eagerness to satisfy it:

Sometimes they were amused but her demands, sometimes they would get angry and later succumb. They would sulk and be pretend to be indifferent; they would despair and eventually give in. Argyroula impossible to change. To them, she was the living image of the unchanchable and the incorrigible, something which is pointless, ridiculous and useless to fight: the very soul of this woman who was crazy like a child. (p.119)

Like most of her contemporaries, Argyroula is under the constant gaze of her immediate family and her local community. During the period of her illness, she has also become the object of the observing clinical gaze (Foucault, 1975) which she detests and considers a form of punishment (p. 120). Death, according to Foucault, is the only moment when we can escape power and Argyroula prepares the feast as the celebration of her final escape. In setting up her death scene she is dragging the matrix of gazes to the point of their reversal. In making her death a spectacle, she attempts to turn the gaze upon her family and take up the role of the spectator. But is this really possible? And what does it achieve anyway given the limitations imposed upon the woman when it comes to her (self)representation?

Obviously Argyroula has been placed by her family in the realm of unreason, but instead of having been declared mad, she has just been characterised 'crazy like a child'. This crazy child, who refuses to lie in bed like all invalids, treats life in the same frivolous manner she treats illness. Argyroula rejects the marital bed and the invalid's bed as emplacements of confinement in the symbolic order she has refused to enter:

The confinement to bed, involuntary and uneasy, was the mirror image of her life. This was the marital bed, gilded and rich but infertile and childless. She had never occupied it properly either as a woman or as an invalid. She had never felt the need for it. She would sleep better and dream her dreams on the velvet sofa in her reception room or on the wicker armchair on the terazza (p. 121).

When the family arrives, the gathering is stage-directed by her with the authority of the dying person and the panache of the narcissistic female. She orders them to talk loudly and enjoy themselves. They comply and drink a toast to her health. She

attempts to join them at the table but they forbid her. After all, her powerful position is only relationally effective even at the time of death. The narrator wonders:

Did they love her? Not quite. She had never exhibited enough maturity to attract real love and devotion. May be because she did not really love anyone herself. May be because no one was capable of seeing the truth hiding in some unknown depths. The certain thing is that no one loved her. Her folks always treated her with concern because she was one of them. And in fact some of them did not like her at all (p. 122).

Prevented from joining them at the table, Argyroula complains that she is held captive by her relatives. She tells them that she envies the birds that fly free and wishes she were one of them. Half aggressively, half mockingly she adds: 'I want to beat you all' (p. 123). This causes mirth all around the table. As she retreats to bed, the family forget her presence and even their effort to feign happiness. Real enjoyment overtakes them. Something coming from her side of the room, we are told, makes them dizzy more than the wine (p.123). [Like Argyroula they also are 'dazzled by reason'.] Argyroula is excited by the spectacle of the happy family. She cries out: 'hurray! hurray!', darts out of bed, reaches the table, lifts a glass and drinks a toast 'to the birds' inviting the others to do the same. She adds: '*I am happy, I am so happy. This is what I want you to be like*' (p.124, emphasis added) and collapses on the floor. She dies as she crosses the line between the spectator and the spectacle. Death at that point signifies the impossibility of the disappearance of the gaze. The narrator adds a final word: 'Silence fell on the room where they feasted for her love and without loving her. Sorrow and compassion overcame them, as big as Argyroula's joy. She passed away without anyone ever having understood or loved her' (p. 125).

A visual stereotype is subverted by Argyroula's last hours, that of the typical death scene: invalid confined to bed, passive body, sorrowful relatives, whispering voices, last rites. A second stereotype is subverted by her life: the belief that woman is born to love and be for the others. What does this woman want? As in the previous story, the answer is deceptively short and simple: she wants her freedom from marriage and social convention. Yet, both her previous record and the absurd verbal form of the

desire to live 'like the birds' suggest that Argyroula appears neurotically unsatisfiable throughout her life, caught, more or less, in the vicious circle of her own demands.

From a Foucauldian perspective, she is trapped in a unique combination of the disciplinary gaze and the medical gaze. In attempting to reverse the power of the gaze, she manipulates the last event of her life so as to occupy the position of the 'eye of power'. Although her family seem to temporarily succumb to her desire, something goes wrong with the process of their subjectivation – they ignore her – and the imperative of juridical power emerges as an effect: 'I want to beat you all'. Delirium and ultimately death is given as the solution of a situation where Argyroula's figure is once again rendered unrepresented and unrepresentable.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the important question is whether Argyroula succeeds in using her death in a deliberate process of signification comparable to Mary's and whether she learns something that exceeds her intentions. On a first level, death as the end of life also erases desire. For the woman who lived her life repeating her eternal demand to see her desire for freedom satisfied – erased – death is metaphorically the definitive answer, albeit a sarcastic 'isn't that what you wanted?'. The radical Other-death responds to her demand for freedom literally and without giving her the opportunity to transform it in the usual manner – e.g. this is not what I wanted or now I want something else. At that moment, Argyroula resembles Lacan's patient who stumbles upon the crucial question of his desire in that 'he cannot fail to recognise that what he desires presents itself to him as what he does not want' (Lacan 1992: 312).

But is this to say that Argyroula's final insight is an encounter with the deadly essence of her desire? The approaching physical death, the definitive cut of all discourses and significations, acts like a filter to life and makes the role playing of the last dinner multivalent, pleasurable and liberating. Thus, Argyroula's last desire is not so much captured by the specific verbal demand to be free as a bird but by her overall attempt to stage her passing away as an oscillation between presence and absence. At the border of life and death, she stages an endless fort/da game in which the absence or death of a concrete object (the mother in Freud's example) becomes the prerequisite for its symbolic representation (by a cotton reel which is thrown away and retrieved

by Freud's grandson) (Freud, 1991b: 283-87). Bronfen, observes that in its most essential form, the fort/da does not concern the missing Other as such but the ego of the performer who puts itself in the place of the Other and structures the whole incident around her/his own vanishing (Bronfen 1992: 25). We could therefore say that at the border of life and death Argyroula plays the earliest game of loss and signification: by splitting herself into director and actor and putting the latter in the place of the missing Other she contemplates her death as unbearable for her family. From that position she poses an implicit question – can you miss me? will you miss me? – to which the family unwittingly replies in the negative.

At the end of life the woman who refused to submit to any socially prescribed roles seems to be learning something about the symbolic nature of all signification. When all is said and done, the game played by her and her family renders nothing new. Her death does not change them. They remain as indifferent and caring as ever. Žižek observes that 'there is more truth in the mask than in what is hidden beneath it' (1992: 34) and this case proves it: the dominant socio-cultural Other – family, husband, society – is unable to reply to her final call for love. It is nevertheless deceived into revealing its blind indifference and the flimsiness of its authority over her by falling for her simple bedded ploy. It is just as 'incorrigible' as Argyroula but now she can grasp this piece of liberating knowledge by playing a game similar to theirs.

And yet, the woman cannot have the last laugh or enjoy her unexpected liberation because it's too late. The aggressive 'I want to beat you' registers her frustration at seeing that her death makes her available to their infinite false compassion. At the moment of her death, the woman actor- director is upstaged in her attempt to represent herself as other than object of their dominant love and infinite compassion. She is fixed into a dead meaning. Her death may have retroactively revised her life but has not saved her from the overpowering signifying practices of the Other.

The madman with the red lillies

If woman can challenge and fascinate from the border of death, can she also do so from the grave? How far is man's love and grief supposed to go and what does this

reveal for love and desire? 'The Madman with the red lillies' poses these questions in extreme form. For Popos, a young and rich intellectual from Zante, the prolonged mourning signifies his refusal to abandon the dead object of his desire. Controversially, the beloved Vasiliki who is immortalised after her death had been scorned when alive. The Poesque story is told by the friend-narrator.

Returning to his island after a ten year absence, the narrator is told that his best friend is mad and lives in total isolation, served only by his old nanny. Rumour has it that he spends his days studying and tending to the large mansion garden which is now full only of red lillies. Half out of curiosity, half out of a sense of obligation to their old friendship, the narrator calls on his friend who eventually agrees to see him over dinner. The old friend informs the narrator that he is aware of the rumour about his madness and in order to prove them wrong leads him in his study, a room adorned with vases of red lillies, and offers to read his latest work, an excellent translation of Francesca's story, the fifth canto of Dante's *Inferno*. The narrator soon realises that his friend is not mad and has remained the bright intellectual he always were. Foucault, however, would have observed that in modern times, art has been the domain par excellence where madness/unreason can be manifested (2001).

After dinner the two men sit by a window overlooking the lilly garden. Popos asks the narrator if he remembers Vasiliki. When the latter replies that he does, Popos informs him that Vasiliki is dead and also that he holds himself responsible for both her death and her unhappy marriage:

It was me who committed that crime. But how was I to know? I never trusted women or anyone. I did not trust her either and now I am the unhappiest man in the world. "Don't let me marry the man they have chosen for me" she wrote a few days before her ill fated wedding, "please don't, because I will die". And that's what she did? (p.79)

As Popos fails to tell his story in a coherent manner, bursting into tears and lamentations and losing the thread of his narrative, the narrator has a strange feeling:

the red expanse in front of me begun attracting my gaze and started looking familiar and more consonant with the story I was listening to. Just like when, in the study, Francesca's story seemed to chime in with the red lillies in the vase. Suddenly I remembered: "tell me" I interrupted my friend, "didn't Vasiliki grow red lillies in her garden? (p.81)

Popos confirms the connection and says that the lillies in his garden sprung from bulbs transplanted from hers:

I look after them myself – though I never did what I should have done in good time. In the spring and in the summer the garden comes alive, as if all the love that is buried here oozes out the grave (p.81).

Alarmed by the words 'buried' and 'grave', the narrator asks his friend what he means. The latter leads him into the garden, in front of a tomb bearing the name of 'Vasiliki': 'That's her grave and all you see around here is the grave of my Love...' (p. 83) The narrator interrupts him, commenting the poetic gesture:

Your idea to built her a cenotaph and to fill the garden with lillies is worthy of your poetic nature. But you did not know what was going to happen and what happened was not your fault. No, my friend, it was not your fault. Enough with the guilt, the mourning and the misery. Do not take things to extremes. I think it's time... (p.83)

Indifferent to his advice, Popos continues: 'The priest comes regularly and reads a blessing' (p.83). And leading the narrator out of the garden he whispers: 'What you just saw is not a cenotaph. It is her buried there. I stole her from the cemetery one night' (p.84).

What we have here is the heterotopia of the cemetery, being transferred into the man's garden. In Foucault's analysis, heterotopias are peripheral emplacements disrupting the dominant space of lived realities (1994). Popos' madness is structured within the heterotopic spatiality of the cemetery, where his lost object lies. In the previous stories, we saw that the relation with the woman can neither be contained in the realm of imaginary love nor survive in the traditional symbolic. Mary's fiancée and the male

participants in Argyroula's story may have experience the tension at the edges of both through their affair with the dead-ly woman but have returned inside the safety of these domains. Popos, however, constructs an indeterminate heterotopic space between life and death, in which he abandons 'order' and social role, lives dispossessed of reciprocal love but gains access to his beloved.

This limbo – rather than Inferno – provides a perfect other point of view for the power relation of the sexes and desire. In 'The Madman with the Red Lillies' it is man's turn to have his desire satisfied literally: in an ironic self addressed 'isn't that what you wanted?' Popos takes possession of the woman's body and pinpoints her to a specific location. The dead beloved is now made available to his grief and devotion and, ultimately, to his subjective interpretation. She literally belongs to him. The possession of her as object, however, only accentuates the elusiveness of the woman. And as in 'The Bracelet' before that, her fictionalisation, man's effort to grasp the woman through literary stereotypes, also falls short of her 'essence'. Woman is neither literal nor literary. Are we then to admit that she is the Other which eludes the masculine powers of representation even when he pursues her beyond pleasure and reason? Or is this story an extreme illustration of the pathology through which the missing object – literally dead or symbolically lost – is transformed into the fantasmatic support of male desire?

It could be said that Popos is indeed the pathological male who insists on the dead woman because she localises the death drive for him. In Žižek's terms, the dead Vasiliki is Popos' symptom (Žižek 1992: 155), the little obstacle-construction which prevents him from encountering the depths of his own deadly desire. In Bronfen's terms, Popos attachment to the trauma of her death and his refusal to symbolise it, must be sought in a much older loss, that of the maternal body (Bronfen, 1992:35) which is far more significant than the demise of masculinity. In either case, the ego with its rational powers misrecognises the attachment to the death instinct as guilt for a crime which, as his friend reminds him, he did not even commit.

And yet, Popos is not the only desiring male in the story. The counterpart of the madman is the sane narrator who had once been part of the trio of friends. For him, who perhaps had a sexual desire for Vasiliki but never crossed to the other topoi, the

dead woman is an aberration in the symbolic, an uncanny excess which is experienced in all its uncanniness twice over: in the misplaced lillies in the study and in the frightening expanse of red in the garden. The dead Vasiliki is trapped in the narrative between two male desires and two incompatible spaces: the heterotopic space of insane desire and the symbolic space in which she cannot be accommodated. And although she reaches this no man's land through no fault of her own, she can contaminate the law-governed symbolic with her mere presence. Consequently, the narrator's desire which emerges reinforced by the voice of reason calls for her second death and burial, her elimination proper which will guarantee the return of and to normality.

Reinforced by the voice of reason, the desire to 'kill' the woman comes in complete contrast to the ethos of the previous stories. If the previous stories illustrated that the woman cannot be easily represented in the traditional symbolic, the present story suggests that she should not be represented in that space. In the previous stories man may have been unable to love her or address her demands through love but now that he finally manages to possess her he either turns her into an aberration or realises that he desires nothing more than her elimination. Turning her into an excess of representation and a violation of the symbolic, may entirely be a madman's doing but any (mad)man's decision to assume the responsibility of her life and death ultimately curtails her freedom and makes her available to his dominant desire. As for the invitation to choose between the ways of the madman and sane, an invitation appealing to the reader's 'common sense' and loathing of sacrilege, it barely disguises the fact that woman is once again turned into man's symptom and into the uncanny Other which threatens to turn him into her own symptom or a living dead.

Considering each story on its own and all together we can say that Xenopoulos displays ways in which *woman and man cut into each other* and surprise each other, revealing something which is *unexpected and uncanny* and which turns their encounter into *another scene*, the theatre in which their failure to co-exist in social terms is shown to be underpinned by psychological constructions and power relations forcefully at play.

Man's representation of woman in his speech is closely related to his own desire and the representation of himself in the dominant symbolic order. Yet the 'what *I* want?' is eclipsed by the question of *her* desire, the other unanswerable mystery which replaces 'woman' in the three narratives. For man, the desire to know himself and indeed herself is intertwined with the will to impose power frameworks within which their relation can be deployed. The confessional retelling of the stories which runs as a red thread throughout the three narratives does not simply go down the path of truth, the attempt to recognise one's mistakes and assume a critical attitude towards one's acts. The three confessional narratives are also retellings of the masculine failure to regain control after a traumatic event. And although the final outcome affords a semblance of the mastery of truth,⁴ the encounter with the woman leaves an open wound and the re-telling of the story always signifies the failure of turning trauma into symbolic meaning, into metonymy and metaphor (Ragland 1993: 97).

To take the tread of power more intrinsically however, for the new, sophisticated, cultured man who revisits his past aware of having erred and still traumatised, the challenge of understanding means not taking advantage of his power and not using the superiority of his gender in rendering the woman transparent or discarding her as a dissolved symptom. Having being defeated in the game of dominance prescribed by the traditional order, the only position this man can occupy and the only position from which he can speak is one similar to mourning, that is, to being in the constant presence of his loss and to failing to complete the internalisation of the properties of the lost object that would eventually lead to the end of mourning. Wedged between a public eye that wants him masculine and assertive and a private experience that castrates and threatens his psycho-sexual integrity, Xenopoulos' man assumes his masculinity almost as a necessity and resembles Butler's melancholic subject (1999: 78) by partaking in an order that affords no automatic closure and renders him problematic in his own grounds.

But that game cuts both ways and the lack of interpretation which may be due to the woman's resistance or his inability/reluctance to use power, is counterbalanced by his desire to hang on to the very lack of interpretation and, like Popos, to the morbid pleasure of re-gaining access to her dead body. Thus, while man consciously avoids dismissing the woman as a dissolved symptom from his dominant world, he is still

making her the field of his own deadly desire, re-subjecting her to his unavowed desire to see her return as the embodiment of his own fascination with the death drive, asking her to turn, once again, into his symptom (Zizek 1992: 156).

For this desire to remain obscure and unconscious, a sacrifice is demanded from the woman. Woman is called to abandon her desire, whatever that is, and accede to a symbolic death, traditionally to 'being for the other', which would resolve the problem of his living in the vicinity of the trauma. This is where the burden of meaning is passed onto her as a request – be my beloved, justify my desire – and where her resistance re-turns the narrative to eternal repetition.

How does the phantasised woman respond to such a request? Her representation, enveloped within unreason, is provided by predetermined signs, the literary references (Eve, Desdemona, Franchesca da Rimini) which come from other narratives and other places and impose a dead meaning upon her. The phantasised woman cuts into signification just as death cuts into it, disrupts her traditional representations and attempts to turn herself from a passive surface upon which meanings are projected to an active generator. She chooses wisely: she appropriates the object of her subjection (bracelet) or the game of signification that pins her down as an incorrigible child. But when she abandons herself to the hands of the male in good faith (Vasiliki), she is once again swallowed up by the literary metaphors for her nature and desire.

In contrast to man's 'what does she want?' 'woman's' biggest challenge, then, is to turn signification around and provide new metaphors of being and desire, survive and play the game not as the final act of death and vanishing but as a stable process of representation. As we have seen this is almost impossible. Her attempt mostly marginalises her, turning her 'game' into one of appearance and disappearance. Thus, in analytic terms, the woman's attempt to gain control over death, be that in Argiroula's way or with Mary's symbolic suicide, could be read as the counter-measure to the call that invites her to turn herself into man's symptom. By voluntarily cutting off their ties with the imaginary and the symbolic, woman performs an act of aphanisis and transgression, through which she finally lays claim upon the ultimate 'object' of her subjection, the threat of death qua masculine threat of exclusion from

existence and meaning. For a brief moment she appears free in the literal sense of the word.⁵

Things could not have been more straightforward: masculinity and femininity and the perception of the woman as opposite of man are imaginary constructs. A viable solution to their cross-secting interests requires a change of attitude towards alterity, a *re-interpretation* in the analytic sense. No such call is advanced by the three stories and instead of that, a space of impossible relations is created, a real other space in which man and woman do not meet but as incompatible. Man and woman lay claim on the same Other and on the same signification via different routes, trying to turn it their own way, own it, or re-claim it. Thus the three narratives create a discursive space, where the sex/gender battle over meaning and signification is forcefully staged, remaining both open and unresolved.

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¹ Apart from Butler, other theorists have attempted to cross the foucauldian/psychoanalytic boundaries. See among others, Rajchman, 1991; Shepherdson, 1995; see also Copjec, 1994 for a confrontation between the two theories.

² Gynophile though he claims to be, one feels that Varika is justified in claiming that he never challenges the status quo excessively or seems unable to disengage himself from the traditional ambivalence towards the woman (Varika 1994: 147).

³ As Foucault has noted, genealogy introduces the problem of how by becoming constituted as subjects, we come to be subjected within particular configurations. (1991c: 76).

⁴ See Bronfen 1992 for a detailed discussion of several narratives of mastery in other European Literatures.

⁵ Zizek defines this act of aphanisis and transgression as of a radical ethical act, a feminine act par excellence (Zizek, 1992:44)