

GISÈLE D'ESTOC: PORTRAITS OF A DECADENT WOMAN

Melanie Hawthorne

Decadence as an aesthetic movement has always illustrated the fact that interesting things are more likely to be happening on the margins than at the center. Decadence appealed to those who wanted to escape mediocrity, especially in its French, fin-de-siècle incarnation, and thus the eccentricity (ex + centric) of the dandy, the invert, the aesthete, and all the other colorful characters of the fin de siècle flourished in the marginal spaces, the shadowy places where the spotlight did not reach.¹ This article will look more closely at the margins of decadence itself, taking as its starting point a casual remark in an eccentric review in order to delve into the margins of the margins: the place of women within the movement. Decadence was a male-dominated movement, but it would be a mistake to assume that no women played a role in this movement, even if it is true that they have been pushed aside in much literary history. This article aims to recover the story of one particular decadent woman, and to use her case in order to bring the place of women to light and to think more broadly about issues of identity, both within and beyond decadence.

Let us begin, then, by evoking a moment in the history of Anatole Baju's ephemeral yet lastingly influential review *Le décadent*.² Back in the fall of September 1888, everyone interested in the emerging literary movements of Paris read this periodical, and in the issue of September 1-15, they were treated to a review essay about the poet Charles Cros by one of the central figures of the decadent movement, Laurent Tailhade. This article – with the not particularly exciting title “Notes sur Charles Cros” – was to become significant for what it said about its ostensible subject (the poet Cros) but for some casual remarks about people quite marginal to the main topic.

In this article, Tailhade did two things – things that involved naming names – that would end up earning him jail time, and neither one of those things had to do with Cros, his central concern, in any direct sense. The first thing he did was to give away the sex of a person hitherto known publicly only as “G. d'Estoc.” This person, he revealed in this article, was a woman. And the second thing he did was to link the name of G. d'Estoc to that of the novelist Rachilde (Marguerite Eymery Vallette, 1860-1953), the darling of the decadents who had won instant notoriety with the publication of her novel *Monsieur Vénus* four years earlier in 1884. Both disclosures were incidental to Tailhade's main purpose: he was intent on introducing his readers to another woman poet, Marie Krysinska. He described her as an “excellent girl,” and to add to her praise he suggested that she would supply the stuff of passionate daydreams for a generation “ignorant encore Mlle Rachilde et Mme G. d'Estoc,” a generation that had not yet heard of Mademoiselle Rachilde and Madame d'Estoc.

If some things have changed in the century plus since 1888, other things have not. Several generations have come and gone since Tailhade's time, and if some people have learned of Rachilde, many still have *not* heard of Gisèle d'Estoc, despite the efforts over

several decades of French journalist Pierre Borel to draw attention to her existence.³ This article aims to rectify that situation somewhat by presenting some portraits of this figure who skirts the margins of the decadent movement. What follows will reveal something of who d'Estoc was, but it will focus on the question of what she looked like and the question of identity in general.

Gisèle d'Estoc is best remembered today because she was one of Guy de Maupassant's lovers, but often this is the *only* thing remembered. For example, a "biopic" of Maupassant by Michel Drach includes a role for Gisèle d'Estoc (played by the actress Miou-Miou), even though no one really knew who d'Estoc was at the time of the movie (1982). Still it is possible to retrace other details about her life, for example the fact that through Maupassant, d'Estoc met other decadent writers, such as Catulle Mendès and Rachilde. But D'Estoc also had a colorful life of her own that extended beyond her relationship with Maupassant (which in any case lasted only approximately five years). For example, when a bomb exploded at the Foyot Restaurant in Paris in 1894 in the midst of a wave of anarchist bomb attacks, Gisèle d'Estoc was one of the main suspects.

These facts and a few others have been known for over a century, but what remained a mystery until relatively recently was the true identity of the person who hid behind the pseudonym of Gisèle d'Estoc. It is now established that d'Estoc was really Marie Paule Alice Courbe, who became Madame Parent Desbarres, born in Nancy in 1845, died in Nice in 1894, and that in addition to being a writer and journalist, she was an artist who exhibited regularly at the Paris salon,⁴ but one of the interesting aspects of her story is how it took so long to establish these facts and the parallel between the difficulty in pinning down her identity in what the French call the *état civil* and in establishing what she looked like.

But let us return to the story of Tailhade's remarks on Charles Cros that had such unfortunate consequences for him. With the two seemingly trivial and marginal acts of revealing that G. d'Estoc was a woman and of linking her name to that of Rachilde, Tailhade set off a firestorm. Referring to d'Estoc and Rachilde in the same sentence may not seem so inflammatory at first glance, but to understand what was at stake in this association in print and why d'Estoc reacted as she did, today's reader needs to know the backstory that would have been familiar to the readers of literary journals such as *Le décadent* in 1880s Paris. It is a story that centers on Rachilde and her manipulation of scandal to create her reputation. At some time in the mid 1880s, Rachilde and d'Estoc had a brief affair.⁵ Every day, according to Borel, Gisèle wrote "des lettres de folle passion impossible à reproduire," but the young writer upon whom she lavished this epistolary "mad passion" shied away from commitment (she was only interested in brief affairs, "des passades"), and dismissed Gisèle abruptly. Gisèle did not give up easily, however, so much so that she earned the nickname "la ventouse" (leech or bloodsucker). It is not clear when or how the two women met, but by 1887 their relationship had soured. We know this because in that year d'Estoc published a tell-all *roman à clé* about Rachilde entitled *La vierge-réclame*.⁶ Presented as a novel, it takes a young writer named "Racliffe" to task for hypocrisy: she pretends to be virtuous, but she is really a slut; she leads men on through her sexually suggestive fiction but heartlessly allows

them to kill themselves over her; she pretends to care about literary values but is only interested in self-promotion. One of Fernand Fau's black and white illustrations for the book sums up this charge by depicting a naked woman who shamelessly puts up posters promoting her own work.⁷

So when d'Estoc found her name linked (linked still, linked again) to that of Rachilde in 1888, moreover in the suggestive formulation of Tailhade (something to fantasize about), those were fighting words. The editor of *Le décadent*, Anatole Baju, immediately received a threatening letter from d'Estoc. Its exact contents were never disclosed, but it was described as a crude letter, a “lettre grossière,” and it was deemed too rude to print by the editors, though in the pages of the review they acknowledged receiving it.⁸ Feeling provoked, Tailhade responded on his own behalf in a letter that *was* printed in the journal later that month (in the issue of 15 September 1888). He even drafted a second letter though it was never published. (We know about it because he referred to it in a letter to his mother.⁹) Denied satisfaction in print, d'Estoc invoked the law and brought suit against Baju (as the publisher) and Tailhade (as the author) of the original offense. They were acquitted at first, on February 27, 1889, but d'Estoc won on appeal and the two men were fined. Tailhade found himself unable to pay, though, and as a result was arrested and served some time in the Sainte-Pélagie prison in May, 1890. He was released on May 17, after a friend paid the fine for him. The bad feelings continued to fester through the following years, pitting d'Estoc and then her new associate Pillard d'Arkaï against Tailhade, Baju, Rachilde, and others affiliated with the *Décadent* journal, so that the rivalry seemed still fresh and unresolved when a bomb exploded at the Foyot restaurant in 1894. Tailhade was the main victim of the attack – he lost an eye – so it seemed natural to suspect that d'Estoc was involved, all the more so since the bomb had been “planted” (in both senses of the word) in a flowerpot, a sure sign of a feminine hand at work. The police created a reconstruction of what they thought the bomb looked like, and photos of this supposedly damning piece of evidence survive in the police archives to this day.¹⁰

The conflict with Tailhade shows that his nemesis had a very combative nature, but this much was clear from her choice of pseudonym, since an “estoc” is an old word for a sword (in particular for the medieval kind of sword that saints or crusaders carried, the kind that implies that its wielder has justice on his – or her – side). Those who knew her were probably not surprised by her tenacious pursuit of Tailhade, indeed it was already apparent. The publication of *La vierge-réclame* shows how she struck back when spurned by Rachilde, and on at least one occasion in the past, d'Estoc had fought a duel with another woman. Such “petticoat duels” (or “duels en jupon”) were not unknown (despite being illegal), both in life and in fiction,¹¹ and in the 1880s fencing was an increasingly popular sport in general, and one that attracted a number of women.

In a survey of the “salles d'armes” (fencing galleries) published around 1887, Albert de Saint-Albin noted how the Franco-Prussian War had demonstrated the need for more attention to physical fitness in France which in turn led to an explosion of interest in fencing, starting around 1880.¹² To belong to a fencing club was increasingly fashionable, and Saint-Albin lists some of the more famous ones to be found in Paris

around this time. (They are still to be seen in Paris, for example in the rue gît-le-coeur, not far from the boulevard St. Michel.) Each “salle” had its characteristics, for example the Salle Caïn in the passage de l'Opéra was favored by artists and writers such as Guy de Maupassant and René Maizeroy (141). Many clubs opened their doors to women. Saint-Albin notes that the painter Louise Abbéma, for example, was an expert: “une escrimeuse des plus alertes et des plus habiles,” (67); moreover she had illustrated a book on the subject. The Salle Chazalet on the chaussée d'Antin boasted “une clientèle spéciale et choisie de jeunes Américaines, qui font des armes par ordonnance du médecin” (151), but in addition to the American young ladies who fenced for their health, there were women who appealed to no pretext other than love of the sport. Fencing was so popular among women that it even made its way into theater, writes Saint-Albin (226), noting that the actress Marguerite Ugalde, who played d'Artagnan in the *Three Musketeers*, frequented the salle Caïn along with the artists and writers. The rumor that d'Estoc fought a duel with another woman can thus be seen against this backdrop of public interest in fencing in general and the spectacle of women fencing in particular. But the story takes on additional significance because it became the subject of a painting that capitalized on this fashion, a painting that had a lively reception when it first appeared and went on to have an afterlife that continues into the present day.¹³

Do you know the work of Emile Antoine Bayard (1837-1891)? You probably do, though you may not realize it. Can you picture that moon-faced waif with the wild hair who has come to represent the Broadway musical now referred to by its abbreviated title, “*Les Mis*”?¹⁴ Cosette is her name, “une petite chose,” a little scrap of a thing. That image was created by Bayard, at least originally. He is not a household name today, but he was well known in his own time, and his illustrations captured the popular imagination well enough that he created a face still known to millions today. He worked in various visual media but became best known as an engraver of illustrations of novels. He gave visual form to the imaginary inventions of Jules Verne, but his most enduring legacy has proved to be his renderings of scenes from Victor Hugo's novel *Les misérables*. In particular, an adaptation of his version of the character Cosette, has become the poster child--literally--for this work, and is seen by millions around the world, wherever the musical is playing.

Before finding his niche as an illustrator, Bayard produced paintings of a rather stodgy academic style, one of which, “Une affaire d'honneur,” was exhibited at the Paris salon that opened on May 1, 1884, alongside works by mainstream academic painters such as Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and William-Adolphe Bouguereau.¹⁵ The work reached an even wider French audience when it was reproduced (as a black and white engraving) in the large-format, popular, illustrated newspaper *L'illustration* on Saturday May 3, 1884.¹⁶ The painting depicts two women fencing. (Both this painting and its companion piece discussed later can be viewed online at <http://www.kingstonfencingclubs.com/bayard.shtml>.)

Both women are stripped to the waist, though the woman facing the viewer retains her hat with decorum, and each fights with one hand behind her back (holding her skirts out of the way?); both appear to be right-handed. The understanding of this encounter as a

duel, a matter of honor, is shaped by the title of the painting (“Une affaire d'honneur”) as well as by the presence of four onlookers, presumably the two seconds for each party. Two women huddle together behind the duelists, leaning in for a better look, perhaps in consternation. A third woman stands or leans against a tree with her arms crossed in a pose of aloof detachment and wearing just one black glove.

It has been suggested that this last witness looks a bit like Rachilde.¹⁷ As noted above, Rachilde had a brief affair with d'Estoc that ended badly (with a literary if not literal duel), though probably not until well after the time this picture was painted and displayed. In May 1884, when Bayard's painting appeared in the Salon, Rachilde was busy writing her shock novel *Monsieur Vénus* and her affair with d'Estoc was still ahead. Parenthetically, though, *Monsieur Vénus* reminds us of Rachilde's own fencing connections. In addition to being an accomplished horsewoman, Rachilde was an avid fencer, as the fencing scenes in *Monsieur Vénus* attest (the heroine Raoule has her own private fencing gallery at home). Moreover, Rachilde originally published *Monsieur Vénus* with a co-author, Francis Talman, a young man she claimed she met at a fencing gallery. The purpose, she maintained, of listing him as a co-author was that if there were challenges to a duel as a result of the publication of the scandalous novel, he would be the one to provide the defense. He was the insurance policy, as it were. Rachilde herself, apparently, while as happy to wield the sword as the pen, found that the former was in fact mightier, even if only as a threat. Perhaps Rachilde and d'Estoc first met through their mutual interest in fencing, and it may have been her service as a second in a duel that drew Rachilde into d'Estoc's orbit and led to their affair.

The fourth and last woman in Bayard's painting stands back among the trees and is barely more than a silhouette, though we can see that with her right hand she appears to be lifting her dress as she picks her way through the undergrowth. She holds what looks like a handkerchief (a white, blobby object) to her mouth with her left hand, like a member of the Greek chorus commenting on the drama that unfolds before her.

In the foreground of the painting, clothes are strewn around, presumably the garments shed by the fighters, and in the bottom left hand corner lie a hat and what looks like a riding whip. The whip is a visual link to a chain of semantic associations that increased the titillation of the painting. The whip can be seen first of all as alluding to horseback riding, and hence serves initially to evoke Rouër's claim to fame as a trick pony rider. But the allusion to riding also reminds the viewer of the side-saddle position that “proper” women typically adopted when riding in the nineteenth century. This position was known, paradoxically, as riding “à l'amazone” (in the Amazon position), a mode more suitable for ladies because it did not entail an undignified spreading of the legs as in the normal (masculine) riding position astride the horse. Its name appears to be a paradox because the figure of the Amazon (as understood through classical sources such as Herodotus) was the antithesis of the proper woman in the nineteenth century. Amazons were first and foremost rebels in the popular imagination, warrior women who declared war on men, and were therefore sometimes used to hint at lesbianism. Thus the presence of the whip in the painting serves to bring out sexual undertones and suggests the deviant sexuality of the women who duel. Even those viewers who did not know that

the women in the painting were ex-lovers might nevertheless gather something of this sexual history from the amazonian reference of the whip. Amazons were also reputedly skilled horseback riders (not unlike Rouër, the other woman in the painting, about whom there is more below), and in order to perform better as archers, they supposedly cut off their right breast, a shocking form of voluntary sacrifice but one that fits in with the late nineteenth-century preoccupation with how women were un-sexing themselves in their quest for equality with men. The undress of the two duelists in Bayard's painting reassures the viewer that these women are not in fact Amazons – they proudly display *both* breasts! – but even as the image reassures, the whip unsettles because of the associations it puts into play. And this is without mentioning the hint of sadomasochism that the whip further allows.

The dark clothing of the well-covered onlookers contrasts sharply with the lighter colors of the exposed flesh and petticoats of the duelists *en déshabillé*. A brief comment on the painting accompanying its publication in *L'illustration* referred to “cette délicieuse *Affaire d'honneur*, de notre collaborateur et ami M. Emile Bayard, qui a mis dans ce duel de femmes, avec tout son esprit et son entrain, toutes les élégances de la grace la plus raffinée” (this delicious *Matter of Honor* by our friend and colleague Mr Emile Bayard, who, with all his wit and enthusiasm, has put into this duel between women all the elegance of the most refined grace, p. 290).

The wording in *L'illustration* does not explicitly tell us that there is a connection between the painting and any real event (as Pierre Borel, the journalist who tried to draw attention to d'Estoc's existence, would later claim), but it is entirely possible that such a connection was well known unofficially and in literary circles. Whether the painting is connected to any event in her life or not, it has become part of the story of d'Estoc that she is one of the duelists in this painting, and the afterlife of Bayard's depiction of the event has taken on a life of its own.¹⁸

First of all, the pseudonym Gisèle d'Estoc has not been attested before 1884, the date of Bayard's painting and thus of the purported duel, so it is tempting to connect the fact that d'Estoc took up the literal and figurative swords at the same time. Both the duel and the name were codified choices, ritualized and rhetorical. When it came to dueling, there was little risk that such an encounter would prove dangerous to either party; French dueling in the late nineteenth century was well known for its ritual rather than its risk.¹⁹ In any case, the duel was to be fought with swords, not pistols, thereby cutting down on the likelihood of fatal injury. Both d'Estoc and Rouër had studied fencing with an expert, Arsène Vigeant (1844-1916) who, among other things, had served as Napoleon III's personal fencing master. A native of Metz, he also published books about fencing such as *La bibliographie de l'escrime ancienne et moderne* (Paris: impr. de Motteroz, 1882). Having studied with the best, then, d'Estoc and Rouër were not simply posturing for a painting when they agreed to a duel, but were engaging in a ritual whose codes they understood. The duel supposedly took place in the bois de Vincennes to the east of central Paris. D'Estoc was the winner when Rouër was wounded in the left breast in the fourth round.²⁰

Bayard's depiction of an affair of honor thus would seem to enable us to date the end

of d'Estoc's (love) affair with Rouër, since we know that the painting was exhibited in the salon of 1884. There are problems when trying to reconcile this date with the more extended account of the love affair given by Pierre Borel in *Maupassant et l'androgynie*, his book about d'Estoc, but a more extended consideration in these pages of those issues must be set aside in order to pursue a further analysis of the painting itself.²¹

The story of a duel fought between two women over a third woman was taken up in a novel a few years after the 1884 salon in terms that made explicit reference to Bayard's painting. The novel, *Zé'boïm* by Maurice de Souillac (the pseudonym of one Madame Lefèbvre), is forgotten today but was first published by Alphonse Piaget in 1887 (references in parentheses are to this edition of the text). *Zé'boïm*, the author claims, is another Gomorrah, and this long (322 pages!), and mainly trashy novel tells the story of Madeleine, who attracts all the wrong kinds of attention. Other people are always falling in love with her, beginning with her schoolgirl friend Hermance, who is rapidly displaced by Mlle Dufaut, one of their teachers, followed in the holidays by Cécile (Madeleine's cousin), Pierre Gardot (Cécile's husband), and Louis Gardot (Madeleine's cousin's husband's brother). To the relief of the reader (who by now is exhausted from trying to keep track of these characters), Madeleine eventually escapes this predatory milieu when she marries a baron and minor politician, which places her in different social circles. Naturally, however, all the old crew turn up sooner or later, and Madeleine, unable to continue resisting the advances her seductive effect elicits in others, is sucked back into her life of vice. After another series of adventures in Algeria (where Madeleine meets Hélène, the Comtesse de Terville, and the two women survive abduction and shockingly bad treatment by Algerian rebels), the baron eventually catches the women *in flagrante* and finally figures out what is going on (he is a little slow on this score). The women flee to Italy where they pass as a young married couple, the count and countess d'Eon (Hélène taking the part of the man). Of course the name "Eon" should be a clue to all around them that all is not as it seems, since it is a rather obvious reference to the chevalier d'Eon (1728-1810), the French diplomat who lived the first half of his life as a man and the second as a woman, but no one seems to pick up on it.²² The "honeymoon" ends when the couple spend the winter back in France in Pau where they run into Cécile (Madeleine's cousin) once more. After recognizing her old acquaintances, Cécile calls on them and insists on fighting a duel with Hélène over Madeleine. It is at this point in the novel that Bayard's painting is invoked.

Cécile is a girl on a mission and has come prepared, so the duel takes place right away, indoors. When Hélène asks if they don't need seconds, Cécile pours scorn on the idea. Cécile dismisses the need for seconds, male or female, since she sees the only reason for them would be for Hélène to pick her next lover (indirect support, perhaps, for Picq's thesis that Rachilde was one of d'Estoc's witnesses). More pointedly in light of the success of Bayard's painting, Cécile criticizes the impulse to play to the gallery by settling a private dispute in public, by offering a catfight as a spectacle.

On the one hand, this may appear an implied critique of the way the d'Estoc-Rouër duel became fodder for journalistic (and even artistic) exploitation. On the other hand, Souillac is also contributing to that publicity. Although there are no diegetic witnesses to

this fictional indoor duel within the novel itself, the *reader* is a willing, indeed perhaps eager, witness to what transpires, and Souillac is clearly using the risqué content as a bid for publicity for the novel (just as Bayard had exploited the them in his painting). The reader watches a kind of striptease as the two women prepare their “toilette de combat”: Cécile removes her hat and coat, the upper part (the “corsage”) of her dress, followed by her corset and blouse, until she appears a “singulière vision, le buste nu jusqu'à la ceinture” (234; a singular vision, her upper body naked to the waist). Hélène follows suit, and both pick up a fencing sword (Cécile came prepared with weapons), and the author explicitly compares the scene to Bayard's painting with the words “Alors s'entama cette fameuse *affaire d'honneur*” (234; and so this famous *matter of honor* got underway).

Lest there be any confusion, the reference is followed by a more explicit comparison:

Est-ce qu'on se rappelle? Il y a quelques années figurait, au Salon, parmi les toiles à succès, un tableau de ce genre: deux femmes impudiques sirènes, les mamelles au vent, ferraillant ensemble. La reproduction – en photographie ou en chromo-gravure – de cette toile affriolante s'exhibe à mainte vitrine des passages, à la grande satisfaction des *potaches*, qui s'arrêtent inmanquablement pour dévorer ce plat égrillard de leurs yeux en boules de loto. (234; Does anyone remember? A few years ago, among the successful canvasses in the Salon, there was a painting of this kind: two women, shameless sirens with their mammaries to the wind, crossed swords. The reproduction of this savory canvas--a photograph or a chromo-engraving--is on display in many a shop window in the passages, to the great satisfaction of schoolboys who never fail to stop and devour this tasty dish with eyes the size of lottery balls).

The author goes on to suggest that Cécile and Hélène could have been the models for this painting, before concluding that “la vie a de ces drames, de ces drames vrais, invraisemblables parfois...” (235; life has these dramas, true dramas, improbable sometimes). In presenting Bayard's painting, originally displayed among “toiles à succès” (as though Bayard's painting was not one of these successful canvases), then displayed in reproduction in shop windows as merely eye candy for hungry schoolboys, the author appears to be condemning such objectification of women. Souillac is at pains to emphasize that Cécile and Hélène's duel takes place in private, not in public. But in *describing* the duel, particularly in such a lurid manner, Souillac presents the events once more to the public in the same sensationalizing way – though in words rather than pictures – as Bayard's painting. Once again, d'Estoc is made into a spectacle. It was far from the last time, but the painting has gradually become iconic in its own right in ways that move farther and farther from designating d'Estoc herself.²³

While Souillac's novel might still bear a connection to d'Estoc, even if it is a connection we have lost sight of today, subsequent invocations of Bayard's painting gradually lost their association with the women it was reputed to depict as it made its

voyage around the world and through time. The image was quickly plagiarized to sell cigars in the United States, for example. Already by 1887 a cigar box produced by L. Newburger and Bro. of Cincinnati, Ohio, offered a gaudy reproduction of the painting with the title “For honor,” while a trade card advertising D. Buchner and Co. with an 1887 calendar on the reverse side cropped the picture to fit a portrait-shaped frame (rather than landscape), eliminating some elements of Bayard's original composition while adding a pair of fighting roosters and modestly placing camisoles on the dueling women to encourage consumers to “smoke Victory tobacco.”²⁴ There is no sense that American smokers had any idea about who these women were meant to be or that the images did any more than call up well established stereotypes about the virility of smoking and perhaps the volatile Latin temperament of women associated with cigar manufacture that were familiar from stories such as Prosper Mérimée's *Carmen*.

By 1898 Bayard's painting had given rise to a racy theatrical adaptation of the duel, but again the interest was more in the excuse to depict half-naked women than in any historical reality that might have underlain the picture. In a “pantomime” version of the spectacle that retained the French title of “Une affaire d'honneur” when it was performed in New York at Koster and Bial's in December of 1898, the pretext for the duel was a quarrel between the women over a French officer, and the main interest of the reviewer for the *New York Times* was whether the police censor in attendance was going to shut the performance down (he did not). The reporter noted that the “startling sensation” was based on two paintings by Bayard (the “Affaire d'honneur” already discussed and a second, “Reconciliation,” that was understood to show the aftermath of the duel) and commented that “the portrayal of the artist was faithfully carried out,” which seems to be more a coded reference to the fact that the women performed a striptease on stage in order to fight in the same state of undress as in the painting, rather than a reference to faithfulness to the pretext of the fight or to any other details about its history.²⁵

Most recently, Bayard's painting has served as inspiration for plays on the theme of “Babes with Blades,” again invoking the theme of women fighting in general without reference to d'Estoc explicitly. “Babes with Blades” is a professional organization based in the USA that exists to promote acting action for women, and the group decided to sponsor a play-writing competition that would provide more such roles for women. Their website explains the inspiration for the competition: “The inaugural theme was proposed by Fight Master David Woolley, inspired by the print of Emile Bayard's 'An Affair of Honor' that hung on his living room wall.”²⁶ (While the present whereabouts of the paintings are unknown, there are plenty of copies of the engraved version.) Bayard's painting has thus become almost as well known as his depiction of Cosette, although no one (or almost no one) today would connect the image of two women dueling with the story of Gisèle d'Estoc. While the image survives, the name has been lost.

In some way, then, both Bayard's painting and Souillac's novel are about the problem of identifying Gisèle d'Estoc, but not simply because they depict her. The point is not to suggest in some simplistic way that “Une affaire d'honneur” offers a portrait of d'Estoc or that the character Cécile in *Zé'boïm* is d'Estoc; rather, it is to suggest that there is something about the dynamics of duelling in both the painting and the novel that evokes

the problem of d'Estoc's identity. A second visual representation of d'Estoc, again involving a competitive sport (this time tennis) and the erosion of names may facilitate thinking more about what that “something else” might be. This second image appeared in Borel's 1944 book about d'Estoc, *Maupassant et l'androgynie*. It was subsequently reprinted in the *Album Maupassant*, one of the authoritative iconographies of canonical authors published in the Pléiade series, in 1987.²⁷ The illustration is a black and white reproduction of a painting by Louis Edouard Fournier, taken (the Pléiade volume's notes tell us) from Borel's book. This picture once again depicts a sporting exchange. The painting is horizontally bisected in the middle from left to right by a tennis net, with a dog lying in front of it perhaps ready to act as ball boy. On the left half of the painting, a group of three tennis players stands on the far side of the net in the background. There appear to be two men, both in light-colored suits (perhaps tennis whites?). One stands casually with a hand on his hip and one leg crossed. Both are holding racquets, but neither seems ready to play. A woman in a long dress, holding her racquet out as though to receive the ball completes the trio. In the foreground, and occupying the right hand side of the picture are three women: one seems clearly poised to launch an underarm serve. The wind catches her skirt as she moves to pull back her racquet with her right hand and throw up the ball with her left. (The ball is nowhere in sight; the picture resembles those newspaper competitions where the readers are invited to guess the position of the ball based on the posture of those in the picture.) Next to her, another woman stands listlessly in a shawl holding a racquet but with no apparent intention of engaging in play, while a third woman bends daintily from the waist and holds her racquet stiffly out of the way of her serving partner. As in Bayard's painting of the duel, the women are decorously (if casually) hatted despite their exertions, while garments lie strewn in the bottom left hand corner.

For those who turn to the *Album Maupassant* hoping to find out something about d'Estoc, though, this painting only adds to the enigma. The caption provided in the album tells the reader that the title of the painting is “Maupassant au tennis” and helpfully names the players “from left to right”: Georges Legrand, Guy de Maupassant, Hélène Lecomte de Nouÿ [sic], Gisèle d'Estoc, Emmanuela Potockà. The viewer begins to match the names to the figures. From left to right... but there are four women in the picture and only three women's names. The identity of the men is clear, but which woman is which? Gisèle d'Estoc is one of the two women in the middle, but which one? The one facing the viewer, or the one with her back to us?

It is interesting to note that this problem does not arise in the reproduction of the image in Borel's original text. Here, the players are identified by lines pointing to each one. Whether the identifications are correct or not, at least there is no confusion about who they purport to refer to. According to Borel, Gisèle d'Estoc is the active player with her back to us.

Of course part of the identification problem relates to class: the woman who remains unidentified is a maid, and therefore “has” no name since domestic staff are always invisible, especially when behaving as they should.²⁸ But even after we register how attitudes to class have evolved (servants may now be expected to have names), the larger

point about the general degradation of information remains. The loss of information that occurs when Borel's book is "reproduced" echoes what happens when books are copied whether by hand, by photocopier or by digital scanner. Although the *Pléiade* volume takes the image directly from Borel's book and explicitly acknowledges the fact, for some reason it drops the identifying lines that link each name to a player, thereby reducing the amount of information passed on to the reader. Attempts to preserve information entail a loss. As the laws of the universe state, things tend toward entropy. Preserving knowledge is not the natural state of things, but the result of an act of will that must supplement the simple act of copying.

But having seen how a sporty d'Estoc is shown playing tennis, let us now return to the painting of the duel. In this picture, too, one of the parties has her back to us. Some (including Gilles Picq) have proposed that Gisèle d'Estoc is the duelist who is facing us, but the picture itself suggests otherwise. The painting seems to depict the "touché" moment in which one duelist succeeds in landing a blow. While the woman facing us steps back and parries, it seems as though her assailant, on the attack, swerves and lunges to place a blow that will hit home. Indeed the seconds seem to be leaning in precisely to see this moment, and the triumph of the attacker is aesthetically underscored by the colors of the painting: the woman with her back to us is dressed in an eye-catching vibrant red, while everyone else wears black, brown or dark green and blue. If this interpretation that the cynosure of the painting is about to strike is correct, it would enable us to identify the purported participants, since we know that d'Estoc was the victor in the encounter. Once again, then, Gisèle d'Estoc has her back to us.

Before proceeding further with this discussion, it is necessary to acknowledge and consider the counter-arguments against this identification. First is the fact reported by Borel that Rouër was wounded in the left breast while in Bayard's picture the blow appears about to land on the woman's right side. But there is no evidence that Bayard was a witness to the duel, nor would he have felt constrained to represent everything exactly as it happened even if he were. His business was painting not history, and the elements of the picture are clearly arranged for aesthetic effect, not as watertight testimony.

A second possible objection concerns the companion piece to "Une affaire d'honneur," the second painting entitled "Reconciliation." This supposedly twin picture depicts the end of the duel, when one party has been injured and lies wounded on the path. All the same characters are present, but in different poses, everyone composed into one central cluster with a single figure off to the left in dramatic counterpoint. In the main grouping, the two seconds now seem to be conferring off to one side, perhaps sticking to their role as witnesses. The woman who had been off in the distance now solicitously holds the hand of the fallen loser. The woman thought to be Rachilde is now turning away from us and appears to be hailing with her glove a horse-drawn carriage that is just visible in the distance. But the fallen woman, the victim, who languishes with one outstretched arm is clearly the woman in red, the one who had her back to us in "Une affaire d'honneur." The one still hatted, then, leaning over her opponent to be reconciled, would appear to be the winner, hence Gisèle d'Estoc. Should this second

painting be read as proof that the woman in red is Rouër?

Not necessarily. If you look not at the figures but at the details of the landscape in the background of the two paintings, they are clearly not part of the same scenery. The continuity between the two paintings is violated. The general setting is similar: a path with trees on either side. But they are not the same trees! The birch-like trees on the right seem to have doubled in both size and number from the first painting to the second, while the tree that “Rachilde” appeared to be leaning against has receded and changed species from a sort of blighted sycamore into something resembling a species of pine. The flowering weeds that grow in the right foreground of “Une affaire d'honneur” are now in the left foreground of “Reconciliation.” These paintings are not of the same place. It could be argued that the setting has changed because the duelists moved during their encounter, but even if this were true, it does not account for the seasonal difference in tone in the two paintings: in “Une affaire d'honneur,” most of the trees have brown leaves, suggesting fall, while the trees in “Reconciliation” are a mature, summery green. In case you miss this difference, the victim on the ground is actually gesturing toward the tree that forms the strongest vertical element in the composition (the sycamore/pine), and the dramatic diagonal of her movement is prolonged and echoed by the woman hailing the coach, so that there are, in effect, two people in the picture pointing toward the tree. “Look at that tree,” Bayard seems to be saying, “Notice anything different?” A similar diagonal in “Une affaire d'honneur” points in the same direction: the naked back of the woman in red leans to the left and her head lines up with those of the two witnesses to create a series of stepping stones pointing to a coppice of trees, while the raised arm of the opponent gestures in the same direction. By pointing to the differences in his two paintings, Bayard seems to release the viewer from the obligation to treat them as related, as depicting two moments in the same story. When it is not read alongside “Reconciliation,” and when it is read in its own terms (paying attention to the use of color and composition), “Une affaire d'honneur” shows us a woman set apart from the others by her vivid clothing--red, the color of the blood she is about to draw.

A final piece of evidence that relieves us from the obligation to read “Une affaire d'honneur” and “Reconciliation” together is the fact that there is nothing to suggest that they were conceived and painted at the same time. While “Une affaire d'honneur” was widely commented on at its appearance in 1884, the critics do not so much as mention “Reconciliation.” We know that it must have been completed before his death in 1891, but it is quite possible that Bayard painted his second canvas only much later and to capitalize on the success of the first.²⁹ Given this evidence, then, it seems perfectly plausible to suppose that the person foregrounded by the color and composition of “Une affaire d'honneur” is the more dramatic and colorful of the participants, Gisèle d'Estoc, who stands with her back to us poised to deliver the winning blow.

Rather than simply depicting d'Estoc, then, both of these paintings (the duel and the tennis match) stage something about the workings of identity itself. It's not that we don't have other representations – photos, drawings, paintings – that purport to show us what Gisèle d'Estoc looked like. It's more that d'Estoc comes to represent a recurrent enigma in which identity, always hidden in plain sight as it were, is something that is

simultaneously offered and yet eclipsed (in the same way that everything about d'Estoc is always somehow obvious and yet not). The key to understanding this positioning is in the poses of the sporting exchanges. Both the duelist and the tennis player engage with their opponent. The swordswoman lunges, while the tennis player brings her right arm back and shifts her weight to her right foot, ready to swing at the tennis ball and send it shooting across the net. Since the French word for ball and bullet are the same (“balle”), there is in some ways no difference between what tennis players and duelists (at least those with pistols) exchange across the space that separates them.³⁰ If identity is not just about how one labels oneself, but about how others recognize and respond to that projection of self, the engagement of sport echoes the give and take of identity. The back and forth of the duel and the rally parallels the mutual establishment of identity, in which playing the game entails a need for an Other and a recognition of the Other's role in shaping the engagement.

This view of sport as play of identity suggests a slightly different view of the duel, including women's “right to fight.” As Simone de Beauvoir reminds us, we often mistake the universal for the masculine (as well as vice versa). When women claim the right to duel, then, they are perhaps not virilizing themselves, unsexing themselves like mastected Amazons, but humanizing themselves, claiming the right to interpellate and be interpellated. After all, it seems more than coincidence that Gisèle's chosen identity, her pseudonym, is “d'Estoc.” The Robert dictionary dates the use of the word “estoc” back to 1285 and explains that the expression “frapper d'estoc” means to hit “avec la pointe de l'épée.” In other words, the name names the gesture of the figure with her back to us in Bayard's “Une affaire d'honneur,” who seems to be *doing* precisely what her pseudonym describes, hitting home with the point of the sword. This figure is giving us the key to the way she chose to be known in public (under a pseudonym) not by showing us her face, but by enacting the assumed identity. The old word for a sword is more than just a reminder of Gisèle's aggressive personality (evident in long-running and bitter feuds with people such as Laurent Tailhade), or of her volatility. It is a symbol of the lunge that calls out for a response, a gesture of identity that aggressively provokes a reaction in acknowledgment.

Similarly, the tennis player is engaged in exchange with the other player. It has been suggested that the name “tennis” is a corruption of the imperative form “tenez” (from the verb “tenir,” to have or hold), an injunction that would announce and accompany the serve that begins each round of play. The exclamation calls out to the other – “Here! Take this!” – enjoining him or her to assume a position of readiness and prepare to receive – and return – what the server will send.

In both representations – the duel and the tennis game – it is not given to us to see d'Estoc directly, that is, face on; we see her from behind. But in this position, we see her indirectly by seeing her effect on others. And perhaps, finally, this is how it is given to us to see everyone. If we lack much direct information about d'Estoc, we know about her because of the way she impacted the lives of others (others such as Maupassant, Rachilde, Tailhade, Borel). But rather than being an exception, the case of d'Estoc is perhaps illustrating the rule that identity is always revealed more profoundly in

interactions with others than in the full face but static image fixed in a portrait.

There are known pictures that purport to represent Gisèle d'Estoc, and Borel published a number of them in his book *Maupassant et l'androgynie*. In addition to a reproduction of the tennis game painting (opposite p. 64) that shows d'Estoc only from the back and a problematic photograph of an adolescent Marie-Paule Desbarres with her friend Marie-Edmée that appears to have been “doctored” in some way (opposite p. 48), Borel reproduces two images that present images of a more ambiguously gendered nature. First there is a frontispiece opposite the title page that shows d'Estoc cross-dressed “en costume de collégien.” Then there is what is described as a “portrait” of d'Estoc, an engraving of d'Estoc by Henri Louyot from April, 1891 (opposite p. 128).³¹ This portrait presents a militarized d'Estoc, so that we see a masculine face, short-haired and beetle-browed, that stares off into the distance to one side of the viewer. D'Estoc appears to be dressed in a tailored military jacket with frogging and a cross of Lorraine at the neck.³² Her left arm crosses in front of her, foregrounding a strong forearm and a pair of thick gauntlets. Her right arm, hanging at her side, holds what appears to be a sword. A fullness at the hips suggests that the tailored jacket gives way to a flared skirt, but we do not see d'Estoc from the waist down, so it is possible to maintain the illusion that she is also cross-dressed in this portrait; the masculinizing traits detailed above certainly combine to suggest and buoy (boy?) up such a fiction. Even these portraits, then, complicate her identity rather than rendering it more accessible to the viewer.

It should come as no surprise, then, that when interest in d'Estoc returned at the beginning of the twenty-first century, one manifestation of that interest took an iconographic form. The French literary journal *Histoires littéraires* published two photographs of d'Estoc.³³ One of the photographs had originally been published by Borel in *Paris-Soir* on May 28, 1939, evidently intended as publicity to prime his publication of the “cahier d'amour” in *Les oeuvres libres* the following month.³⁴ The other had not been seen publicly before. In one way, the two pictures could not be more different: one shows a seated figure tightly laced into a fussy, corseted Victorian dress that sheaths the entire body. There are provocative details – a foot that protrudes from the hem of the dress and a lace jabot that in the grainy quality of the photograph manages to suggest a revealing *décolletage* – but the abundance of clothing in this image could not be in more striking contrast to the accompanying image in which the person identified as Gisèle d'Estoc stands stark naked (except for a belt just below her breasts). She trails a length of patterned fabric that seems to be a cape and the explanatory note that accompanies the photos (by Philippe Chauvelot) suggests that this may be the photo that d'Estoc sent Maupassant in which she describes herself as Phryné, the celebrated Greek courtesan of the fourth century B.C. (*Histoires littéraires* 17, 252). Especially in light of the second of these images, it would appear that we have seen literally all there is to see of Gisèle d'Estoc, and yet... one cannot help but be struck by the fact in both of these photographs (from the same sitting, hypothesizes Chauvelot), d'Estoc's face is covered. In the “clothed” picture, she wears a vaguely oriental-looking head covering that allows only her eyes to be seen. The lower part of her face is veiled, and not with the gauzy kind of veil that reveals even as it conceals.³⁵ This veil is forbiddingly thick, the kind of thing

worn by a terrorist (which is, of course, precisely what d'Estoc would come to be suspected of being after the Foyot attack). In the second, nude image, d'Estoc appears to offer her entire body to the viewer's gaze, yet even as she makes this defiant gesture, she holds her right arm up and across her face, keeping this part of herself in reserve and reversing the usual opposition between what is thought of as the public face and the private body.³⁶ It would seem that for d'Estoc, access to her body was freely given (to sexual partners, but also to the general public through the painted representations of her), but what remains consistently shielded from view are the features of her face. If d'Estoc was known for her sword, the other accessory of the warrior – the shield – was also part of her panoply, and the iconographic record shows both accoutrements at work. D'Estoc succeeded in keeping her identity as Marie Paule Alice Courbe a secret for over a hundred years, but while this part of her identity has now been revealed, her parallel secrets remain.



Fig. 1

A fencing gallery ("salle d'armes") in Paris (rue gît-le-coeur) that traces its existence back to 1886, around the time that d'Estoc fought the duel depicted in Bayard's painting. (Photo by the author, 2009).



Fig. 2
 Reproduction of a painting (by Fournier) of d'Estoc playing tennis. (Source: Pierre Borel, Maupassant et l'androgynie).



Fig. 3

Portrait of d'Estoc by Henri Louyot from 1891. (Source: Pierre Borel, Maupassant et l'androgynie).

Notes

1. On the marginality of decadence and what is to be found on the margins of the margins, see *Cahiers de littérature française VII-VIII: Décadents méconnus*, ed. Guy Ducrey and Hélène Védrine.
2. On the history of the decadent mouvement and this review in particular, see Noël Richard, *Le mouvement décadent* (Paris: Nizet, 1968).
3. Mainly in his book *Maupassant et l'androgynie* (Paris: Les éditions du livre moderne, 1944), but also in a series of articles: "Une adoratrice de Maupassant: Le "cahier d'amour," confidences inédites" in *Les oeuvres libres* 216 (June 1939): 71-100; "Une amie inconnue de Guy de Maupassant" in *Le mois suisse* 32 (November 1941): 142-168. Rpt. *La revue des deux mondes* (August 1, 1950): 481-497; "Une amoureuse inconnue de Maupassant" in *Les oeuvres libres* 151 (1958): 121-144; "Guy de Maupassant et Gisèle d'Estoc" in *Les oeuvres libres* 195 (1962): 137-180; and in the book *Le vrai Maupassant* (Geneva: Cailler, 1951). For more on Borel's story and a biography of d'Estoc, see my book *The Woman Who Didn't Exist: Finding Gisèle d'Estoc* forthcoming from the University of Nebraska Press.
4. See Melanie Hawthorne, "De nouveau du nouveau sur Gisèle d'Estoc, amante de Maupassant." *Histoires littéraires*, 16 (2003), 77-84, for an account of d'Estoc's genealogical background.
5. According to Pierre Borel, "Gisèle est rapidement devenue la maîtresse d'une jeune femme de lettres qui, à cette époque, obtient un très vif succès avec des romans et des nouvelles fantastiques dans le goût d'Edgar Poe et de Barbey d'Aurevilly" (Gisèle quickly became the mistress of a young woman writer who, at the time, was enjoying marked success with fantastic novels and novellas in the style of Edgar Poe and Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Maupassant et l'androgynie* 53). For a more extended discussion of the relationship, see Melanie Hawthorne, *Rachilde and French Women's Authorship: From Decadence to Modernism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001.
6. Paris: A la librairie Richelieu, 104 rue Richelieu. The title is sometimes mistakenly given as "Les gloires malsaines," but the title page makes it clear that this is intended as the name of a series, even though this book is the only one, apparently, ever to have appeared in it. The book features illustrations by Fernand Fau. It has just been republished by Cahiers GaiKitschCamp along with *Les fellatores* (Montpellier, 2011).
7. All the illustrations suggest a similarly intimate knowledge of Rachilde's life and career. The first chapter, "Une gamine qui promet," depicts Rachilde showing a manuscript to a publisher or newspaper editor under the watchful eye of her mother. "L'homme-Vénus" illustrates the opening scene of *Monsieur Vénus*, and so on. The detailed knowledge displayed in both the content and illustrations of the book make the story of the clerk Le Hénaff who supposedly drowned himself because of unrequited love for Rachilde extremely suggestive to those interested in Rachilde.
8. "Lettre grossière" are the words of Pierre Dufay, who edited and annotated Tailhade's *Lettres à sa mère, 1874-1891* (Paris : R. Van den Berg : L. Enlart, 1926), see page 178.
9. *Lettres à sa mère*, 177-178.
10. The photo is reproduced in Oriol's pamphlet on the *Attentat Foyot*. Gilles Picq gives a summary of these events in his article "On destocke Gisèle ou Comment donner de la chair à un ectoplasme" in *Les à-côtés du siècle*, ed. Jean-Jacques Lefrère and Michel Pierssens [Tusson: Du Lérot, 1998] 117-125, and goes into more detail in his biography of Tailhade, *Laurent Tailhade ou De la provocation considérée comme un art de vivre* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001).
11. See for example Richard Hopton, *Pistols at Dawn: A History of Dueling* (London: Portrait, 2007). For a literary example, when Emile Zola wanted to show the extent to which Renée Saccard, the heroine of his incestuous novel *La Curée* (1872), was deranged, he had her want to fight a duel--and with pistols rather than swords--with the duchesse de Sternich because the latter spilled a glass of punch on her dress. See Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Vol 1, ed. Henri Mitterand (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 1960) 508.
12. Albert de Saint-Albin, *A travers les salles d'armes*. Paris: Librairie illustrée, n.d. In the discussion that follows, the page numbers in parentheses refer to this book.
13. Such "petticoat duels" occurred at least as far back as the 1770s (Hopton, *Pistols at Dawn*, 182).
14. If not, go to the musical's website www.lesmis.com and it is part of the montage that greets you on the homepage (site consulted August 19, 2009).

15. Assuming that the rumor that the painting depicts d'Estoc is correct, the date of Bayard's work means that the duel took place before this date. The *Annuaire du duel* (Paris: Perrin et Cie) compiled by Ferréus in 1891 lists a duel between M. Destoc and M. de Bernis on November 16, 1883. The listing is based on an "écho de journal" and consisted of a "rencontre à l'épée, à Montmorency." The listing is not conclusive, since the participants are listed as men ("Monsieur") and Destoc was a popular pseudonym, but it is suggestive. If indeed this was d'Estoc's duel, it is evidence of use of the pseudonym before 1884, which otherwise stands as the earliest attested use of the name by our subject.

16. It was not unusual for the popular press to depict such sensational events. An illustration of a duel between women that reputedly took place in Madrid also appeared in *Le petit parisien* in 1891 (see the back cover of Hopton, *Pistols at Dawn*).

17. By Gilles Picq, the specialist on d'Estoc's arch-enemy Laurent Tailhade (the victim of the Foyot bombing).

18. Press reports of the painting were not limited to France. The salon was also covered by the *New York Times*, where an article on May 18, 1884, devoted an entire paragraph to Bayard's work. "Another original succès, which is sure under the guise of photographic reproduction to make the voyage around the world, is the "affaire d'honneur" of Emile Bayard. It represents a duel between two women, nude to the waist. They are not ethereal types by any means; they rather incline to be vigorously developed specimens. The idea is a queer one, but it is full of interest, and a crowd around the painting testifies to its attraction for popular fancy. The witnesses are women, and they appear a trifle more scared than the combatants themselves" (page 4). The article's prediction that the painting would make the voyage around the world (in the manner of a Jules Verne hero so familiar to Bayard) would come true in the century to follow as this article illustrates. Note that the article also manages to suggest something sexually deviant (without even mentioning the whip) by referring to the subject as a "queer" idea, though without naming anything as specific as amazons.

19. Hopton, *Pistols at Dawn*, 341-44. Which is not to say that it was never fatal.

20. Borel, *Maupassant et l'androgynie*, 55.

21. The confusion begins even with the simplest of facts. Borel states, for example, that Rouër was a trick horse rider and trapeze artist at the cirque Medrano in Paris, but the cirque Medrano did not yet exist in 1884. This famous troupe would not come into being until 1897. Perhaps Borel was thinking of the cirque Fernando or some other popular venue with horse acts; perhaps Rouër later did find a place in the cirque Medrano, so Borel conflates the two moments; whatever the explanation, the discrepancy remains. Borel furthermore suggests that d'Estoc turned to Rouër *after* Rachilde sent her packing (*Maupassant et l'androgynie* 53), but if Bayard is accurate in depicting the end of the affair in 1884, then the affair with Rouër was over before d'Estoc took up with Rachilde, which relationship seems to have flourished in the mid-1880s. The exact timing of the affair with Rouër remains vague, then, but Borel nevertheless recreates the stages of the relationship in great detail. For d'Estoc, her first glimpse of Rouër as she pulled off her latest acrobatic stunts at the circus (a circus that was not yet the Medrano, apparently) was a *coup de foudre*. The whole crowd went wild with applause, and d'Estoc threw a bouquet of Parma violets (*Maupassant et l'androgynie* 54). That same night, the two women dined together in a private room and d'Estoc wrote to Rouër the next day about how their encounter had imprinted itself literally on her body memory: "Ton image est dans mon coeur, ta caresse est dans ma chair. Je garde sur mes lèvres le goût âpre de tes baisers" (Borel, *Maupassant et l'androgynie* 54). The course of this love did not run smooth, however. At one point, Rouër ran off to Hamburg with a German sailor who beat her up. When she returned, d'Estoc took her back, so there was evidently more than one break-up and reconciliation when the affair is taken as a whole. Borel again quotes from a letter that he frames as one of reconciliation after the Hamburg incident, but a reference that d'Estoc makes in the letter to trailing Laurent Tailhade in order to administer a punishment means that the correspondence dates from around the end of the decade (1888-91) when d'Estoc was feuding with Tailhade, rather than earlier in the decade. According to Borel, it was after the Foyot explosion that Rouër abandoned her friend and began spreading rumors about her, which lead to the duel, but the Foyot affair was not until 1894 and was swiftly followed by d'Estoc's death. Clearly this chronology cannot be sustained by the evidence: Bayard's painting and the Foyot explosion

were a decade apart. Once again, Borel proves himself to be unreliable about dates. But if the specifics of the timeline are not borne out, the general picture may nevertheless have some truth to it. The on-again, off-again affair with Rouër may have extended over a long period of time (before and after her elopement with the German sailor) and perhaps it was an earlier stage of the affair that ended--though not definitively, as it would turn out--with an acrimonious duel. (We shall see that Bayard himself envisages a "reconciliation," too.)

22. See for example Gary Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon Is a Woman: A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

23. *Zé'boïm* is a sensationalist novel, bordering on the pornographic, despite the *de rigueur* claim in the preface that the work is realist in its principles and merely describes what already exists. The novel, whose plot has already been sketched above, presents one lascivious scene after another, and while many things are only hinted at (unspeakable things by Algerian rebels), the avid reader, like the *potache* schoolboys with their eyes the size of lottery balls, finds plenty to stimulate the imagination. The novel follows the trajectory of classic fin-de-siècle plots, in that after allowing the protagonists full rein for several hundred pages, the author punishes the deviants in the closing pages to satisfy bourgeois morality. Thus, Cécile is raped and then murdered and then mutilated by burglars who break into her house, and as if that were not bad enough, she winds up posthumously exposed to public humiliation in the morgue. Madeleine ends up destitute and in a brothel about to become a prostitute. As the (mostly) passive victim of others' lust, she is spared the final dishonor of selling herself, however: she is eventually rescued by her devoted husband Albert and is reformed by true (heterosexual) love, marriage, and maternity in an epilogue lifted straight out of George Sand's novel *Indiana*. Souillac explicitly links the duel in the novel *Zé'boïm* to Bayard's painting, and as already noted, Bayard's painting was understood to refer to d'Estoc, so it is tempting to wonder if Cécile, as winner of the duel, is not somehow a representation of d'Estoc. It is not impossible that Souillac and d'Estoc were acquainted through the circles of minor *littérateurs* in Paris of the 1880s. See Jean-Jacques Lefrère, and Jean-Paul Goujon. *Deux malchanceux de la littérature fin de siècle: Jean Larocque et Léon Genonceaux* (Tusson [Charente]: Du Lérot, 1994).

24. Images available at www.nationalcigarmuseum.com consulted on 11/30/2007.

25. In this free adaptation the duel also resulted in death for one of the participants, another deviation from the version of the d'Estoc/Rouër encounter where honor was satisfied without mortal threat. See "A New Music Hall Sketch" in the *New York Times* December 27, 1898, p. 7.

26. Their website gives an overview of the call for submissions: "Joining Sword and Pen, Babes With Blades' international playwriting competition, was launched in 2005 to increase the number of quality scripts featuring fighting roles for women [...] The inaugural theme was proposed by Fight Master David Woolley, inspired by the print of Emile Bayard's 'An Affair of Honor' that hung on his living room wall. Each entry to the contest was required to incorporate the moment depicted in the print: a duel between two women on a secluded country road. The competition netted the Babes over forty entries, from locales ranging from their native Chicago to South Africa and New Zealand. Submissions were of such quality that Babes With Blades plans to publish the winning plays and the best of the runners-up in an anthology. The two winning one-acts, Chicagoan Byron Hatfield's *Mrs. Dire's House of Crumpets and Solutions* and New Zealander Tony Wolf's *Satisfaction*, were staged at the Viaduct Theater, April 7 - May 14, 2006." (www.babeswithblades.org)

27. Jacques Réda, ed. *Album Maupassant* (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 1987).

28. See for example Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants: The Hidden Heart of Domestic Service* (London: Fig Tree, 2007), as well as Sarah Waters' fictional application of this theme, *Affinity* (New York: Riverhead, 2000).

29. Art historian Mathilde Huet states that there is no mention of a painting entitled "La réconciliation" in the salon catalogs for the years 1884-1887 (personal communication).

30. I am indebted to Mathilde Huet for reminding me about this double meaning of "balle."

31. The image is also reproduced, along with others, in the *Album Maupassant*, the definitive iconographic biography of the writer, but in a cropped version that shows d'Estoc only from the shoulders up (224). To see the details discussed here, it is necessary to consult Borel's book.

32. The jacket clearly fastens right over left, which would seem on the face of things to signal a feminine garment, but on the complication of such semiotics, see my discussion of this "code" in *Rachilde and French Women's Writing* 145-147.

33. Philippe Chauvelot "Et encore du nouveau sur Gisèle d'Estoc." *Histoires littéraires* 17 (2004): 251-252.

34. Borel, "L'inconnue masquée qu'aima jusqu'au bord de la folie Guy de Maupassant est identifiée." *Paris-soir* (28 mai 1939) 2.

35. On the play of concealment and revelation that the veil made possible in late nineteenth-century Paris, see Marni Revi Kessler, *Sheer Presence: The Veil in Manet's Paris* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

36. It is tempting to believe that this photograph is the one described in Catulle Mendès's novel *Zo'har*, first published in 1886 and reprinted in Lyon by Editions Palimpseste in 2005.. This novel forms a sort of parallel to Souillac's *Zéboïm* in that both titles refer to accursed biblical cities destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah for their sins. The principal sin in *Zo'har* is that of incest between a brother and sister who share the same father. The mother of the sister, Stéphanie, (a minor character, she has died by the end of the first chapter) is the countess Giselle d'Erkelens who, among other things is "veuve morganatique" and travels widely "avec son amie, qui passait pour sa soeur" (*Zo'har* 24). She appears in photographs including one in which she wears "presque pas de robe, le bras levé pour cacher le visage" (25).

Biographical note

Melanie Hawthorne is Professor of French at Texas A&M University (USA). She worked extensively on the decadent novelist Rachilde (Marguerite Eymery Vallette, 1860-1953), producing translations and a biography (*Rachilde and French Women's Authorship: From Decadence to Modernism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001) before turning to the figure of Gisèle d'Estoc as an outgrowth of that research. Her biography of d'Estoc has been accepted for publication by the University of Nebraska Press. She is currently working on a book about Renée Vivien (Pauline Tarn, 1877-1909). Email: m-hawthorne@tamu.edu

Summary

A quarrel in the pages of the literary review *Le Décadent* in 1888 recalls the often belligerent existence of Gisèle d'Estoc, a shadowy figure who stalks the margins of the decadent period and whose life beyond the pages of specialized reviews has long presented something of a mystery. Who was she, and what did she look like? The first question proves the easiest to answer. Tied intimately – by love, by hatred, or by both – to numerous figures of the French decadent movement (Léo Pillard d'Arkaï, Laurent Tailhade, Rachilde), d'Estoc's real name was Marie-Paul Alice Courbe Desbarres. In addition to being the lover of Guy de Maupassant, and of being accused of planting a bomb at the Foyot Restaurant, d'Estoc had an independent career as an artist before launching her literary career in the 1880s. It proves more difficult to know what she looked like, even though she was often represented in paintings, drawings, and photographs. This article analyses some of these representations in order to understand why it is sometimes so difficult to see the decadent woman even when she emerges from

the shadows of literary history.

Key words

Gisèle d'Estoc, women and decadence, French decadence, women and duels in the 19th century, "Une affaire d'honneur" (Bayard), *Ze'boim* (Maurice de Souillac)