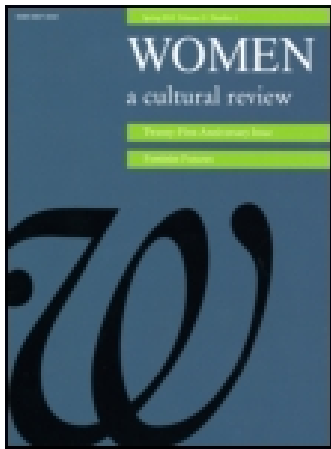


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### Catherine Breillat's Romance and Anatomy of Hell: Subjectivity and the Gendering of Sexuality

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# Catherine Breillat's *Romance and Anatomy of Hell*: Subjectivity and the Gendering of Sexuality

*Abstract: French filmmaker Catherine Breillat has consistently challenged viewers to consider the ways women negotiate sexual freedom in light of numerous forces of repression. This essay considers how Breillat's depiction of women's sexuality in *Romance and Anatomy of Hell* simultaneously evokes abjection and empowerment. Specifically, we consider Breillat's contrast between her female protagonists and male protagonists, her treatment of women and their bodies as infused with desire yet struggling towards sexual subjectivity, and the avenues available to women to define themselves outside of hegemonic masculinity. We argue that Breillat's provocative portrayals provoke consideration of the problems inherent in hegemonic female sexuality while also offering hopeful alternatives to sexual expression, sexual freedom, and changing definitions of power and pleasure.*

*Keywords: Catherine Breillat, French film, women's sexuality, sexual subjectivity, sexual desire, feminist film*

*Women want to understand their own sexuality, their sensuality. What is it they desire? In fact, women have never had the luxury to really desire. They were told what to desire. They were forced for so many hundreds and thousands of years. All these things are inside of us. It's a heritage.*

–Paule Baillargeon<sup>1</sup>

1 Quoted in Gillian, Anne (2003) in *Beyond French Feminisms: Debates on Women, Politics, and Culture in France 1981–2001*, ed. Roger Célestin, Eliane DalMolin & Isabelle de Courtivron, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 204

Director and writer Catherine Breillat has been synonymous with controversy and censorship ever since she entered the public eye at the age of 17 with her novel *L'Homme Facile*, which was deemed in France to

be too sexually explicit to be sold to anyone under the age of 18 (Catherine Breillat – Biography 2010). Claims of Breillat's 'obscenity' appeared again with the banning of her 1975 film *Une Vraie Jeune Fille*, which was based on her novel *Le Soupirail*, and again with her 1999 film *Romance*, which received an X rating in France. Breillat's films explore women's sexuality in a manner often considered shocking—perhaps grotesque—which has resulted in her work being simplistically compared to pornography. Breillat's work with abject female bodies has prioritized the crudeness and sexual honesty that have traditionally been under the purview of men. Her films allow 'women to be as crude and frank in their speech as men are normally expected to be....they elegantly appropriate the sexual vocabulary that men usually consider their private domain' (Gillian 2003: 208). This appropriation extends to popular images of women in pornography and romantic relationships, images that have often been created and dispensed by men.

In effect, what Breillat advocates is a symbolic reappropriation of a feminine realm that for centuries has been dissected by the imaginary of men. This can only be achieved by first making a clean sweep of the codes of representation imposed by tradition. That is exactly what Breillat does in her films. The two extremes of deformation of the feminine in film are pornography, on the one hand, and Hollywood, on the other: 'ass' and romance. Each in its own way caricatures, fetishizes, and exploits women. Myths of Hollywood-style, soulful love relationships, wherein the woman either loses out or is submissive, are no less pernicious than the obscene close-up of X-rated films (Gillian 2003: 204). Through her unconventional filmmaking, Breillat provokes audiences to consider the contemporary quandaries of women's sexuality and to analyse its so-called 'truth'. Through constant provocation about how women themselves feel about their sexuality—and how others, particularly men, construct women's sexuality—Breillat continually asks: How do women move towards, and away from, sexual subjectivity? How might they understand themselves in light of cultural forces that strip them of power, agency, autonomy, and self-generated desire? We consider these questions by examining two of her protagonists from the films *Romance* (1999) and *Anatomy of Hell* (2004) who take viewers on their seemingly different journeys, always attending to the complexities and difficulties—perhaps impossibility—of women becoming sexual *subjects* in their own right. In *Romance*, Marie searches for the physical attention and sexual satisfaction that her lover, Paul, will not give her, and in *Anatomy of Hell*, the nameless protagonist requests a man to 'watch her where she is unwatchable' for several nights. Throughout their journeys, Breillat configures the protagonists so that their primary impediment to moving towards sexual subjectivity mirrors the dilemma

Western women face more broadly: If women's sexuality has been constructed 'as a response to male sexuality' (Levy 2005: 79), and the heterosexual female sexual imaginary has been scripted towards dependency, can women *possess* subjectivity? Or, must they, by necessity, defer it? Further, how might these characters function as a fantasy of submission and denigration while also paradoxically empowering women both as viewers and as sexual subjects?

This piece explores these questions by examining Breillat's treatment of women's sexuality in these two films—*Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell*. In doing so, we consider the ways in which women move towards sexual subjectivity—particularly as the women protagonists engage in masochistic sex—and how they move away from sexual subjectivity—particularly as they struggle towards 'little deaths'. We consider critical work that examines the discursive meaning of Breillat's films and then focus on our argument to reveal that, though Breillat's films are meant to stimulate thought rather than depict actual relationships, she elucidates the problem of heterosexual women's sexuality requiring male affirmation in order to exist.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, we analyse how, within these films, men's sexuality dominates women's self-definitions as well as how Breillat uses various methods to maintain and reveal this hierarchy. Finally, we consider what alternative avenues—if any—women have as they move towards their own sexual subjectivity.

Most centrally, we suggest that, by positioning men as both conduits for, and impediments against, women moving towards sexual fulfilment and subjectivity, Breillat highlights the duality of the many simultaneously empowering and disempowering moments women face in their sexual lives. Curiously, both women protagonists rely upon men as avenues to gain their sexual subjectivity—one through adhering to masculinist constructions of female sexuality, and the other through attempting to vicariously accept her body through male validation—yet they continue to behave masochistically, always outwardly viewing reminders of their powerlessness. In essence, these women are being divided into 'active seeker[s] and passive object[s]' on their journeys, where they '[remain] the object of man's visual and tactile curiosity' (Angelo 2010: 50).

How can women simultaneously surrender their subjectivity and also possess it? In a world where women embrace *Girls Gone Wild* and pole dancing, and where they pose for magazines such as *Playboy* as a means to 'liberate' themselves, this quandary is evidently something contemporary women contend with. As addressed in the preface of the first edition of *The Hite Report on Female Sexuality*, 'There has rarely been any acknowledgment that female sexuality might have a complex nature of its own which

2 These two Breillat films contend with the issue of women's heterosexual sexuality, and, because we are discussing how these films speak to issues of hegemonic masculinity (largely read as heterosexual), we are focusing primarily on heterosexuality as well. This does not suggest that other modes of queering these films are not available, particularly by reading them as an indictment of heterosexuality and its 'perverse' pleasures, but this is beyond the scope of this particular essay.

would be more than just the logical counterpart of [what we think of as] male sexuality' (Hite [1976] 2004: 17). Reflecting on this permanent deferral of 'truth' and 'knowledge', Breillat's films illustrate how women's masochistic self-objectification is not only a logical extension of their cultural context, but one predicted by the deferral of sexuality that is inherently their own. Still more, during the protagonist's interactions with male characters, Breillat suggests that when women 'possess themselves' (Irigaray [1977] 1985), men act as observing bodies, willing participants, or as forces that exacerbate women's self-hatred or contempt.

In *Romance*, Breillat configures Marie's various sexual encounters and internal dialogue to reveal how 'her agenda remains completely imprisoned within male fantasies about women' (Katzarov cited in Wells 2002: 63), thus revealing how hegemonic male sexuality is the reactionary basis for female sexuality. After Marie and her boyfriend Paul arrange that she can look outside of their relationship for sexual fulfilment due to his lack of interest in sex, her initial sexual encounters reveal her odyssey as male-centred. As John Phillips explains,

Marie does not so much 'look at' as 'look for': she is positioned by the film narrative as a searcher. Marie's quest for sexual fulfillment which structures the entire diegesis becomes also a metaphorical quest for the missing phallus. (Phillips 2001: 134)

Although the focus on female perspective and gaze gives primacy to female desire, this does not mean that Marie 'operat[es] outside a phallicist economy' (Phillips 2001: 139). Marie's seduction of Italian porn star Rocco Siffredi—who simulates sexual desire and intercourse on film for a living—is not accidental. Breillat's choice of Siffredi, as well as the bondage scenes involving Marie and school headmaster Robert, imply that 'desire and the sex act are never "real," are always conducted with reference to a set of given cultural and personal fantasies' (Wilson 2001: 152) and their associated scripts. Breillat crafts Marie as simultaneously empowered and disempowered, sexual and paradoxically stripped of sexuality. Marie lying silently while Paolo moans above her reveals the emptiness Marie is meant to feel. Here, the duality of women's sexual lives is illuminated, as Marie seduces this desirable man and yet constructs the act almost as an ordinary, boring performance with a routine, 'stale' partner. Marie's character comments:

I don't want to see the men who screw me, or look at them. I want to be a hole, a pit, the more gaping, the more obscene it is, the more it's me, my intimacy, the more I surrender...I disappear in proportion to the cock taking me. I hollow myself. That's my purity.

Her language, quite reminiscent of pornography, equates her to an objectified and passive woman who mechanically offers her 'gaping hole' to men. As the desired woman, Marie also becomes empty, reducible, struggling to retain any uniqueness or desire. She wallows in shame, stating that she does not want to see him (literally or figuratively). Here, she only feels pure by removing herself psychologically from the encounter; Breillat plays with the notion that one *feels* sexy when constructed *as* sexy, as clearly Marie feels nothing even when this man sees her as sexy. This dichotomy is revisited later in a rather provocative fantasy where she imagines a room where her upper body is separated from her lower body by a wall; her face is being caressed by Paul in a white room, which appears to be a sterile hospital or maternity ward while her lower body is in a dark, red-lit, damp corridor where anonymous men with erections are moving from one woman's vagina to another. This fantasy becomes an exercise for the duality of shame and desire women often feel when moving towards sexual subjectivity. Breillat carefully constructs men, here, as freely able to explore their sexuality, even in acts that would otherwise be considered shameful, and men's sexual voraciousness and lack of control stand in sharp contrast to women's silent and erased sexuality. These women play along with their expected role as those disinterested in sex; pleasure is deferred. Breillat reveals that women's sexual desire is accompanied by shame and impropriety. This interconnectedness between desire and shame within hegemonic female sexuality permeates *Romance* and challenges viewers to negotiate their own conflicts and contradictions.

Breillat and some critics view Marie's sadomasochistic experiences as a conduit to subjectivity, as she becomes a willing participant with demonstrable arousal; while it is inarguable that Marie is exhibiting arousal, these constructions continue to relegate women to the role of object. The second bondage scene shows Robert using various instruments to place her into a contorted position where she lies on her back, head to the side, with her legs spread open by a metal bar. Robert cuts open her underwear, inserts his fingers into her vagina and pulls them out, demonstrating her arousal with his wet fingers. This is the first indication of Marie's pleasure in the film. As Douglas Keesey states,

Lying bound and gagged in her red dress on the floor of Robert's apartment, Marie may look like dead meat, but she approved the costume and props and she is now consciously acting the part of a rape/murder victim, of the soulless flesh or hole to which men have reduced her. (2009: 133)

Like many critical accounts of her work, Breillat herself finds this scene a liberating demonstration of Marie's sexuality. In an interview, Breillat states that this scene represents a rebirth and transformation where Robert 'takes her...into a consciousness of herself' (Sklar 1999: 25). Kristyn Gorton supports this, stating: 'Robert allows Marie the sexual pleasure of being dominated without feeling like an object of his fantasy' because she gives consent to the acts (2007: 117). However, Keesey also questions this argument, asking '[w]hy in her scenes with Robert does Marie conform her body to male fantasies of woman as passive victim rather than breaking out of this mould to shape some more empowering fantasies of her own?' (2009: 133) One cannot disregard the importance of the fact that this rebirth is ultimately within a context where Marie lets Robert view her as a submissive object for his pleasure. Wells further states, 'What really turns Marie on and validates her sexual identity is to be constructed (quite literally) as the fetishistic object of Robert's desiring gaze' (2002: 59).

Breillat also plays with the notion that sexual empowerment for women may reference danger, pollution, the violation of innocence, or catastrophe (Douglas [1966] 2002). In the previous sadomasochistic scene, where Marie is bound in a position similar to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, Wilson compares Marie's expression to that of 'agony and ecstasy' on Bernini's statue of St. Theresa. This equation speaks to Barbara Johnson's conceptualization that our society sees the 'archetypal embodiment of female sexual pleasure in a silent and lifeless statue' (cited in Wilson 2001: 153). According to Johnson, 'There seem [...] to be two things that women are silent about: their pleasure and their violation. The work performed by the idealization of this silence is that *it helps the culture not to be able to tell the difference between the two*' (emphasis in original) (cited in Wilson: 153). Robert placing the gag in Marie's mouth in both scenes reinforces this statement. Marie, like many women, may have been socialized to not know the difference between pleasure and violation and, in her silence of being gagged, she relies on the reaction of another—specifically Robert—to inform her of what she should be experiencing.

This scene also perfectly exemplifies the masochistic element to hegemonic female sexuality that Breillat has referenced in interviews and that second wave feminists like Simone de Beauvoir have illuminated. Sartre's definition of masochism, which Beauvoir utilizes, is 'an attempt not to fascinate the other by my objectivity, but to be myself fascinated by my objectivity in the eyes of the other' (cited in de Beauvoir [1952] 1989: 399). Beauvoir continues by stating that 'the sham abandon of the masochistic woman creates new barriers between her and enjoyment; and



at the same time she is taking vengeance upon herself by means of this inability to know enjoyment' (de Beauvoir [1952] 1989: 400). When Marie becomes more in touch with her sexual self, she cannot *enjoy* sex because such enjoyment must be validated by another (typically, a man). Women's sexual pleasure, it seems, runs the risk of withering away in the absence of another. Breillat questions whether women can experience pleasure outside of (male) validation, whether they can *know* themselves outside of the way men *see* and *understand* them.

Alternatively, in these scenes Marie takes on a submissive (performance) role where she is *acted upon* within these sadomasochistic acts, thus giving her the ability to deny ownership over her sexual pleasure and, therefore, deny her 'very real sexual agency and pleasure' (Williams 1989: 212). This allows her to maintain her 'good girl' status as someone who does not actually desire sexual pleasure. The sadomasochistic elements in this scene allow her to conform to traditional notions of femininity, albeit via 'extreme' sex. Much like rape fantasies (Fahs 2011: 255), surrendering to S&M may allow her to maintain that she only *responds* to others rather than *initiating* desire (and pleasure).

Breillat even shows that there are times, even in the absence of men, women cannot know pleasure without viewing themselves through the male gaze and objectifying themselves by embracing inescapable sexual shame. When Marie is alone masturbating in her bedroom, with her fingers in between her crossed legs, her narrating voice states that she does not need a man to resort to this, that she can offer her body to herself and 'rape herself'. According to Keesey's analysis,

Because Marie is ashamed of her own desires, pleasure is not something she can admit to wanting...without resistance, and she can only reach orgasm by violating her sanctity[...]. Masturbation is Marie's attempt to get beyond self-censorship and shame to discover an unknown part of herself, the female desires that have been forbidden to her as unacceptable in a 'proper' woman. (2009: 120–1)

The French advertisement for *Romance* features a large red X over an image of a woman's hand between her nude legs, which Breillat stated represents her 'sexual shame...the female chromosome' (Breillat cited in Keesey 2009:1 21, n.52), again demonstrating their inseparability. She can only give herself pleasure by viewing herself with contempt, as an object deserving of violation and forced submission. Even in a private situation where she should be able to explore her body freely, she cannot do so without responding to a deviant form of sexuality, specifically that of the rapist, which is typically exhibited by men; therefore, again, we find



Marie needing to identify with a masculinist form of sexuality in order to explore her own sexuality.

Breillat also presents sexual empowerment as a cruel hoax, elusive even to the most confident women. Just after Marie transforms into a more confident sexual being—wearing more vivid colours, wearing her hair down, embracing a more relaxed posture—Marie encounters a man who offers to perform cunnilingus for her in return for money. Marie agrees and the next scene shows his head between her legs and the most explicit display of Marie experiencing pleasure yet in the film. However, it begins to take a drastically different turn when he begins to force her onto her stomach and says, 'Turn over, show me your rosebud...You've got no choice, bitch'. He rapes her and, when done, exclaims, 'Whore! Bitch! I reamed you good!' Here, Breillat presents a tragic equation: Desire pleasure outside of traditional, male-defined scripts, and face the consequences of being stripped of subjectivity and pleasure. Just as Marie accepts oral sex purely for pleasure, she is soon stripped of that pleasure and jolted back into the reality that she does not and cannot *take* pleasure in the way men can. Just as she is about to orgasm in a way that prioritizes her pleasure and satisfaction, Breillat reminds us that women's pleasure is never without ramifications. This stranger rape transforms her from subject to object, thus violently preventing her from *taking* pleasure and reminding women that they should not experience pleasure outside of that which is desirable for male pleasure (or power). Breillat uses Marie to comment upon women's sexual struggles, particularly their attempts to discover sexual intimacy and subjectivity where there appears to be 'a cultural logic, unspoken but implacable, that if I want some (oral sex), I better want it all (a dick in me)' (Johnson 2002: 37), which leaves women vulnerable to physical and social consequences if they show desire (Tolman 2002: 44).

Nevertheless, Breillat does not intend her films purely as tragedy; rather, she offers up the complexities of sexual subjectivity and the gendering of pleasure. Marie resists her forced transformation from subject to object by 'eschew[ing] dominant representational paradigms of rape and victimhood' (Wheatley 2010: 31). She refuses to let her assailant make her a passive (objectified) victim by actively demanding that he compensate her financially for the sexual act that he committed against her will and by declaring afterwards that she is not ashamed. She thus resists shame and victimization at the height of both. While some critics see this scene as ambiguous, with Wilson considering it a 'humiliating near-rape' (Wilson 2001: 152), perhaps this grossly misinterprets Marie's feelings about the scenario. Viewers are faced with many paradoxes: Marie refuses to follow the script of a rape victim and yet nevertheless was indeed raped. As in her other films, such as in *À Ma Sœur* where the

young Anaïs strongly denies to authorities that she has been raped despite evidence to the contrary, Breillat plays with these notions, forcing viewers to reimagine the scripts of domination, passivity, and subjectivity. Although Marie states earlier in the film that she ‘wants to be taken by a guy’ who views her solely as a ‘pussy he wants to stuff’, the gulf between *wanting domination* and *wanting sexual assault* is one Breillat tackles in this scene. Marie’s fantasy was constructed in a far different context than one in which she must actually fear for her safety and does not give consent; these distinctions remain a notable part of the ongoing controversy about whether pornography *causes* sexual violence, or whether women ‘ask for it’ when they desire domination. Breillat knows this and offers viewers the chance to assess their own boundaries by watching Marie’s predicament. What does it mean for women to give permission to hurt them? Can women reimagine a rape experience as agentic or even erotic? Might such resistances show the flexibility of sexual subjectivity? In a culture dominated by the conflation of women’s violation and pleasure, these questions have particular relevance and immediacy.

Breillat’s complicated relationship to childbirth and sexuality—as evidenced in the last significant scenes of the film which involve Marie giving birth to her son—present an ambiguous reading of Marie’s sexual subjectivity in light of her male-dominated society. When she brings her son into the world, Paul dies after Marie purposely leaves the gas on in their apartment, thus being emblematic of the ‘female power to create and destroy’ (Keesey 2009: 134) and the ‘death of her dependency’ on Paul (Downing 2004: 270). Breillat presents motherhood as a laudatory act that should bring peace, having Marie say that ‘[a] woman isn’t a woman until she is a mother’. In one way, this simply reiterates the common assumption that women find subjectivity and fulfilment in the biological/masculinist construction of idealized motherhood and appropriate femininity; Marie’s son stands in for her fulfilment by yet another male figure. While Breillat states that his birth shows Marie that ‘she no longer needs a man...to be complete’ (Sklar 1999: 26), she nevertheless becomes ‘complete’ through the birth of a *male* child. This scene also seems to purport the belief that ‘female creativity is reducible to women’s bodily capacity to give birth’, particularly since the birth of her child allows Marie to produce imagery along with her mental thoughts (Downing 2004: 272). Additionally, from a Freudian perspective, she has accomplished her phallic quest through the birth of a male child that gives her the penis she has been searching for (Phillips 2001: 139). On the other hand, Keesey theorizes that the context of her fulfilment is empowering since she can ‘[remake] patriarchy in the image of her own

ideal' (2009: 35). Phillips suggests an even greater reversal: 'Marie's quest for the phallus is abandoned and the vagina [is] enthroned in its place' through its representation of motherhood (Phillips 2001: 138). Additionally, Marie has moved from viewing herself erotically as just a 'hole' to understanding that 'it is a productive, fertile hole, the sign not of emptiness but of plenitude' (Phillips 2001: 138). While women finding fulfilment through motherhood is not inherently problematic, in the context of *Romance*, Marie's particular selfhood implies once again that she finds subjectivity only through masculinist constructions of female sexuality and proper womanhood (in this case, the vagina used for the purposes of birthing a male child).

After completing the film *Romance*, Breillat stated publicly that she wanted to remake the film in a more aggressive way as a 'confrontation with that part of the female body often demonized by patriarchy as if it were a burning shame, a gaping obscenity, a den of iniquity' (Keesey 2009: 135). Her subsequent project was *Anatomy of Hell*, which centres around a nameless woman who pays a nameless man to view her where she's 'unwatchable': he watches her vagina for several nights after she attempts suicide in a club bathroom. Breillat immediately begins attacking common notions about the vagina's bloodiness and 'disgustingness' by showing the woman attempt suicide by cutting her wrists. This 'bloody slit', which society associates with femininity, reveals the connection between violence, sexuality, and masculinist ideas of female deviance. Breillat notes this repulsive quality, stating, '[S]he is eaten by her inner wound as with everything that is repulsive to her' (cited in Keesey 2009: 137, n.84). She appears to ask him because he was the only man in a club full of men, specifically a gay nightclub, who noticed her and, she believes that if he was insightful enough to see her inner distress then maybe he could also see her vagina outside of a negative light that society has attributed to it. Essentially, the film interrogates whether women become sexually empowered via validation of their vaginas—literally as well as symbolically due to the representation of female sexuality. Breillat demonstrates awareness of the complicated history of the vagina—as simply a vessel for the penis (Plante 2006: 271), as something with teeth that will devour men's penises and testicles (Beit-Hallahmi 1985: 252), as a conduit for childbirth, and as unattractive and 'smelly', particularly to men (Angier 1999: 52). By attempting to assign more positive connotations to the vagina, Breillat challenges these constructions and forces viewers to consider how much they, too, may have internalized them. The shocking quality of the film makes women themselves ask whether they may rely too heavily on others' validation of their vaginas, whether they may see reflections of these cultural

‘phobias’ in their own psyches. The lead character in this film relies upon male validation of her genitals, a struggle eerily similar to that of many women. She is nameless here because she is ‘everywoman’. The man’s homosexuality in the film implies that heterosexuality is not the driving force behind these disgust narratives; rather, all men and women face these societal messages about the vagina (Gorton 2007: 119). *All* women and men construct—and have the ability to rebel against—the idea of the vagina as repulsive.

While Gorton proposes that the woman is ‘taking responsibility for her own desires...[and is] in control of the situation’ (2007: 119), this appears to be the opposite of this claim in that she is making her ‘vaginal value’ dependent upon the man’s opinion. On the first night of their arrangement, the woman lies nude on the bed awaiting his thoughts from his observations. He refers to it using the terms *obscene*, *bestiality*, and *loneliness* and further explains that ‘[i]t’s the depth of your obscenity, its feminine depth...that make men who like you, hate you’. Perhaps this scene represents women’s internal conversations with themselves, or perhaps Breillat intends it as a more literal conversation between the characters. Nonetheless, he becomes so greatly disturbed by viewing it that he must pour himself a strong drink in order to continue. Upon finding her asleep when he returns, he vaginally penetrates her from behind in an attempt to fill the ‘obscene’ hole that is the vagina and to make it less obscene by associating it with the power, potency, and control that is culturally associated with the penis (Plante 2006: 271–2). However, upon pulling out, he starts to weep for he realizes that her vagina appears untouched. The next night, after she has fallen asleep again, he penetrates her with a pitchfork, simultaneously demonstrating the association of the vagina with hell. Since he failed to ‘dominate the “female threat”’ (Keesey 2009: 140) with his own penis, he hopes that a larger, phallic object such as the handle of the pitchfork will succeed.

While, as a whole, Western societies may be far from believing that men can be contaminated by food prepared by a menstruating woman (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Gilmore 2001: 25–6) or believing that menstruating women need to be secluded from society-at-large (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988: 189), Breillat forces viewers to face our current negative perceptions of menstruation. Menstrual product advertisements purport ‘sanitation’ and ‘protection’ and often refer to the menstrual cycle as something that must be hidden, thus implying that menstruation is something that is dirty, dangerous, and shameful (Coutts and Berg 1993). Research has shown that menstruating women are perceived as less ‘competent’, ‘likeable’, (Roberts et al. 2002: 136) less ‘sexy’ and more ‘angry’ and ‘neurotic’ by men and women, as well as less ‘clean and

fresh' and more 'annoying' by men (Forbes et al. 2003: 61). On the third night he is to drink from a glass that her used tampon is immersed in and does not appear visibly upset. This visually startling scene demonstrates how he is beginning to view her vagina as being equal to the penis and challenges viewers' perceptions of male and female bodily fluids. Breillat forces the film's viewers to evaluate how progressive they truly are in acceptance of the female body, as well as how far we as a society have advanced past the historical views of the very natural process of menstruation. Given our near saturation with pornography featuring images of semen-soaked women being ejaculated upon by men, Breillat argues if we truly viewed the female and male body as equals then 'his drinking of the menstrual blood should be no more obscene than her mouthful of his seminal fluid' (Keesey 2009: 142) and, therefore, this scene would not unnerve its viewers.

Through visually graphic images that connect male castration anxiety to penile-vaginal intercourse as well as menstruation, Breillat conjures historical connections to menstrual and vaginal myths. While in the initial scenes of their fourth night together, it appears that the woman has received the validation she has hoped for as the man has begun to make an emotional connection with her. However, upon pulling out after intercourse, he sees his penis covered in menstrual blood and becomes visibly upset and explains that he feels that her blood has cursed him and ruined his penis. His penis being covered with her menstrual blood references the 'associations in the male mind [of menstruation being correlated] with pain, death, battle, injury, and castration' (Delaney et al. [1976] 1988: 19), including the mythical castration abilities of the 'vagina dentata' (Beit-Hallahmi 1985: 252). This scene again speaks both to the characters' experiences, but also to long-time cultural phobias that women throughout the world face. The character grapples with these many histories—the menstrual hut, the construction of her 'disgusting' body, years of folklore and religious doctrine that dictate menstruating women unclear and impure—and ultimately suffers under the weight of the man's judgement. Upon this turn of events, the man becomes emotionally cold towards her, takes the money she owes him, and leaves. According to Angelo:

[W]oman's 'difference' – both physical and psychological – upholds the gendered and unbridgeable divide stemming from complete alterity between man and woman, and results in a failure to communicate and know the other (2010: 44).

This 'difference' is merely one that has been constructed, as some cultures, such as the Gerai of Indonesia, view both sexes as similar and

even believe that men have their own form of menstruation (Helliwell 2000: 802). Women's status as psychologically and physically antithetical creates this 'unbridgeable divide'. Overall, the movie highlights the most obvious problem with women's sexual subjectivity relying upon male sexuality: the approval and validation she seeks remains elusive, leaving sexual subjectivity always, by necessity, *deferred*.

According to Breillat, 'Women's major flaw is to ask men to bring them something that they don't ask of themselves' (Sklar 1999: 26). Breillat implies, perhaps, that in addition to the various challenges women face when engaging sexually with men, that women do not fully understand their self-hatred until they see it materialized in the hatred of men. As Wilson argued, specifically in regard to *Romance*, 'Breillat's film shows us the ways in which a woman learns to desire, and indeed perceives her affective and sexual life in terms of a set of classic fantasy scenarios' (2001: 149). These fantasy scenarios forge connections between the conscious and unconscious, making connections previously unmade, forcing awareness of that which was previously hidden and dormant. As Slavoj Zizek said, 'Fantasy constitutes our desire, provides its coordinates; that is it literally "teaches us how to desire"' (cited in Wilson 2001: 149). While the films may take these constructs to an extreme by showing the 'simultaneous denigration, violation and victimization that are at the core of the rhetorical idealization of the feminine' (Coulthard 2010: 61), Breillat's images reflect the social scripts and quandaries women face on a daily basis.

Both protagonists face a difficult journey towards subjectivity due to their dependence upon men for validation and self-definition; Breillat never allows the protagonist in *Anatomy of Hell* to imagine herself beyond the limitations of the male imagination she faces. As Coulthard argued, Breillat exposes the idealized version of the feminine as a 'false ideal, the obverse of which is the proximate, real and human female partner' (2010: 62). This revelation of the 'Real of the Lady' leads to abhorrence and repudiation, which is shown to be characteristic of masculine desire (Coulthard 2010: 62). These dilemmas are also evident in the many attempts some women are making today in an effort to 'claim' sexual subjectivity, however problematic the forum; *Girls Gone Wild*, performative bisexuality, and participating in pole dancing and/or striptease classes all involve objectifying themselves for male pleasure and believing they can achieve empowerment and move towards sexual subjectivity primarily through pleasuring men. Nevertheless, Breillat's films ask: Can one become a sexual subject via being a sexual object? In these 'garbled attempt[s] at continuing the work of the women's movement' (Levy 2005: 75), can women possess themselves, know



themselves? Can we construct space for women to find sexual value outside of *men's* constructions of women? If not, must women necessarily degrade themselves in order to find pleasure and sexual satisfaction? What are the other alternatives?

Perhaps Breillat's films tell us that the social construction of women's sexuality as *always in reference to men's sexuality* limits women's ability to imagine themselves outside of these terms. In *Anatomy of Hell*, the vagina is monstrous, oozing, disgusting, repulsive; Breillat asks whether this is simply a cultural phobia, or whether women themselves take on these notions and internalize them. She asks whether we can move past such notions, or whether it haunts us regardless of our resistances (even, in this case, death). Breillat asks: If they are seen in such a way, can women truly desire? As Rebecca Plante has argued:

[W]omen have much less cultural foundation for certainty. It is harder for women to know what they want, what turns them on, what they like or need sexually....Men's sexualities seem more culturally scripted and detailed. Men are encouraged to think of themselves in relation to the body parts that turn them on, the body types, the attributes of a partner, and the activities that arouse. They are encouraged to master their sexualities, act on their desires, and satisfy themselves. (2006: 224)

Some of the steps that can move us towards a more authentic and liberating female sexuality involve moving away from the fear-based tactics that encourage containing and restricting female sexual exploration and expressiveness, and giving girls and women the same permissions that we give boys and men. We should also abolish the language that teaches and socializes girls/women to view their sexuality in terms of boys/men. Examples of this include sex education discussions that explain to girls that they should save their virginity for marriage for the sake of their future husband or the construction that sex ends when the man has climaxed—language which completely overlooks female needs or wants. Furthermore, moving towards a framework that does not construct femininity and masculinity as dichotomous would assist in facilitating this reimagining of female sexuality for as long as we continue this framework within a patriarchal system, male sexuality will be considered primary to female sexuality. Breillat's films force us to confront—in a concentrated and dramatized form—the problems with our current frameworks around sexuality, forcing us to be unable to ignore them and, perhaps, asking us to act.



Most centrally, Breillat's films *provoke*; they are rarely intended as depictions of fact or truth, but rather, as a demonstration of the grotesque, the feared, the violent, and the derogatory. They are the ultimate pornography, showing us the taboos we cannot otherwise face or explore, yet still referencing what is normative and what is desired. As Breillat stated in an interview, 'We're shown things that are allowed in porn movies and we're told that that's the way we ought to behave' (Sklar 1999: 25). Breillat asks women to deeply consider this problem, and also, to imagine new possibilities for how to resist, how to escape, how to subvert these representations. If we can confront and imagine these images, and if we can work towards fuller embodiment and a more complicated notion of women's sexual subjectivity, we have already partially challenged these 'ways we ought to behave'.

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