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"A Mother Could Not Haven Written That Novel": Georges de Peyrebrune's *Victoire la Rouge* (1883) and Narratives of Motherhood

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Abstract. Georges de Peyrebrune's *Victoire la Rouge*, published in 1883, tells the story of a farm maid, who is repeatedly shunned by her rural community because of her three illegitimate pregnancies. Although it was generally well received by the French press, Peyrebrune's depiction of illegitimate motherhood and infanticide in an explicit writing style sparked controversy. *Victoire la Rouge*, with its portrayal of motherhood as a violence exerted onto a woman's body and consciousness, presents a powerful counter-narrative to contemporary discourses that tended to idealize and naturalize motherhood. The novel also scandalized critics because of its appropriation of a naturalist writing mode, considered unsuitable for a woman writer. This article explores how Peyrebrune responded to the public debates around the 1804 law on paternity recognition by eliciting the reader's sympathy for a working-class woman excluded from her community for showing signs of her victimization at the hands of men and left with no possibility of obtaining justice. In doing so, it will both demonstrate the novel's engagement with a wide range of social and literary discourses on motherhood and highlight its significance as an example of a woman writer reclaiming the right to intervene in the public sphere through aesthetic means.
Keywords: Georges de Peyrebrune, French literature, motherhood, infanticide, nineteenth century.

„Motina nebūtų galėjusi parašyti tokio romano": Georges'o de Peyrebrune'o *Victoire la Rouge* (1883) ir motinystės pasakojimai

Santrauka. 1883 m. išleistame Georges'o de Peyrebrune'o romane *Victoire la Rouge* pasakojama apie ūkio tarnaitę, kuri ištremiama iš savo kaimo bendruomenės dėl trijų neteisėtų nėštumų. Nors prancūzų spauda romaną įvertino palankiai, Peyrebrune'o vaizduojama neteisėta motinystė ir vaikžudystė sukėlė nemažai diskusijų. Romanas *Victoire la Rouge*, vaizduojantis motinystę kaip moters kūno ir sąmonės patiriamą smurtą, pateikia stiprų atsaką XIX a. diskursams, linkusiems idealizuoti motinystę ir ją natūralizuoti. Romanas taip pat sukėlė aistrų dėl natūralistinio rašymo būdo, kuris buvo laikomas netinkamu rašytojai moteriai. Straipsnyje nagrinėjama rašytojos reakcija į viešąsias prancūzų diskusijas apie 1804 m. įstatymą dėl tėvystės pripažinimo, skatinanti skaitytojų užuojautą darbininkų klasės moteriai, socialiai atstumtai dėl atskleisto vyrų smurto ir nesulaukusiai teisingumo. Analize siekiama parodyti, kaip romanas įsitraukia į platų socialinių ir literatūrinių motinystės diskursų spektrą, ir pabrėžti, kaip moteris rašytoja, pasitelkdama estetines priemones, susigrąžina teisę dalyvauti viešajame diskurse.
Reikšminiai žodžiai: Georges de Peyrebrune, prancūzų literatūra, motinystė, vaikžudystė, XIX amžius.

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Introduction

In an article published in *L'Opinion nationale*, Camille Delaville (1838-1888), pseudonym of the journalist Françoise Adèle Chartier, introduces the author of the recently published *Victoire la Rouge* (1883) in gendered terms: "Georges de Peyrebrune has a lot of talent, and an absolutely masculine [*viril*] talent, although she belongs to the weaker sex which is no longer a mystery for anyone" (Delaville, 1833, p. 1).[1] The masculine pseudonym of Georges de Peyrebrune indeed conceals the – hardly secret, as Delaville points out – identity of Mathilde Marie Georgina Elisabeth de Peyrebrune (1841-1917). Peyrebrune, born as an illegitimate child in the Périgord, enjoyed some degree of literary fame in the 1880s and 1890s after her arrival in Paris in 1871 (Socard, 2011, p. 158). Actively involved in the literary and political circles of her time, Peyrebrune built an impressive literary network and took part in the first jury of the *Prix de la Vie heureuse*, the future Femina prize, in 1904 (Ménard, 2024a, p. 10). Her diverse oeuvre allowed her to make a living out of her literary production for some time, but she died forgotten in 1917. During her lifetime, and still to this day, *Victoire la Rouge* remains her most popular novel (*ibid*., p. 9). It tells the story of a farm maid, Victoire, who is shunned by the countryside community because of her status as an illegitimate child. Her exclusion worsens when she herself becomes pregnant after a rape. After giving birth and returning to work, Victoire finds herself pregnant for a second time and kills her newborn child in a moment of despair. Upon her return from prison, she is once again confronted by a violent man and, finally, takes her own life when she sees no hope for the future. Her nickname "la Rouge" (*the Red One*) is given to her by the rural community, originally as a reference to her red hair and later as an allusion to her act of infanticide. The colour red is also reminiscent of the blood that is shed throughout the novel, the blood of sexual violence and of infanticide (*ibid.,* p. 7). Although it was generally well received by the French press, Peyrebrune's depiction of illegitimate motherhood and infanticide in an explicit writing style sparked controversy, as witnessed by Delaville's article (*ibid.*, p. 11).

While Delaville and Peyrebrune were friends, as evidenced by their correspondence (Sanchez, 2010), the journalist's opinion on Peyrebrune's *Victoire la Rouge* is highly critical, especially regarding how Peyrebrune handles her controversial subject matter:

> *The author succeeds in making maternity, the sweet and supreme expiation of a woman's sin, particularly vile and repulsive by dint of details of a refined (and excessive) triviality on the aspect of the mother before the birth of the unlucky baby, the whole surrounded by strong scents, the pungent smells of human flesh and other mating which constitute the shop of accessories of all these sous-Zola. […] A woman could have written* Victoire la Rouge; *a mother would certainly not.* (Delaville, 1833, p. 1)

This critique highlights the dual scandal that underpins Peyrebrune's novel: the appropriation of a naturalist mode of writing by a woman writer and her negative portrayal of motherhood. In what follows, I explore this double transgression and how Peyrebrune,

[1] All the translations from French are my own, unless otherwise noted.

in *Victoire la Rouge*, uses naturalist aesthetic tools – still heavily criticized in the French press in the early 1880s (Sanchez, 2002, p. 179) – to intervene in a contemporary debate around motherhood, addressing its legal, social, and literary dimensions. I argue that *Victoire la Rouge* challenges the contemporary idealization and naturalization of motherhood by showing how social factors negatively impact vulnerable mothers. In post-1871 France, motherhood was upheld as an ideal to be attained by women to repopulate France and protect the social order (Cole, 1996, p. 641). Numerous public and literary narratives naturalized motherhood, portraying it as women's natural drive and duty, culminating in the rise of natalist discourses in the 1890s (*ibid.*, p. 643). *Victoire la Rouge*, through its depiction of motherhood as a violence exerted onto a woman's body and consciousness presents a powerful counter-narrative. In this article, I discuss the novel's engagement with a wide range of social and literary discourses on motherhood, presenting it as an example of a woman writer reclaiming the right to intervene in the nineteenth-century French public sphere through aesthetic means.

Delaville's comment that a mother could not have written such a novel – Peyrebrune indeed was and would remain childless (Socard, 2011, p. 33) – draws an interesting parallel with nineteenth-century debates around women's writing. In a proposal for a law forbidding women from learning to read published in 1801, Sylvain Maréchal asserts: "It is proven that Women-Writers [*les Femmes-Auteurs*] are less fertile than other women" (Maréchal, 1801, p. 36; quoted in Mesch, 2006, pp. 14–15). By taking up the pen, women writers were perceived by thinkers such as Maréchal as disrupting the social equilibrium by rejecting what was believed to be their innate drive: namely, to become mothers. Women's intellectual activities were perceived as dangerous for their health and fertility, and it is significant that Peyrebrune chose to counter the culturally dominant idealization of motherhood in a fictional work. As Sophie Ménard demonstrates, *Victoire la Rouge* is also written in response to the renewed debates that took place in 1883 in the French parliament and press about the law of 1804 which prohibited women from seeking paternity determination (Ménard, 2024b, p. 213). The 1804 law, which remained unmodified until 1912, was meant to protect men and legitimate families from women who were considered responsible for illegitimate pregnancies for their presumed "yielding" to men's sexual advances (*ibid*., p. 215). In an article responding to a critique by Aléthof, who mocks her novel's subject matter and serious tone, Peyrebrune underlines the gravity of the debates and denounces the unfairness of the 1804 law:

> *If we refuse to introduce this law in our legal code, it is not because we are loyally convinced of the material and moral impossibility to apply it fairly, but because such a law would hinder the easy seductions, promiscuity, irresponsible pleasures, and life would become absolutely unbearable if a man was now condemned like a woman to assume his part of responsibility in the consequences of their love.* (Peyrebrune, 1833, p. 2)

Peyrebrune defends *Victoire la Rouge* as a novel written in response to what she perceives as widespread indifference toward a critical issue, that of vulnerable women's "seduction" which she denounces as violent: "We have handled with a disdainful nonchalance this

painful question of hidden maternity; we have even joked, agreeably, on all sides, on the topic of seduction, denying that a woman could be seduced. This negation alone is a monstrosity!" (*ibid*., p. 1). "Seduction" must be understood as synonymous with sexual violence in this context. Peyrebrune's novel makes the distinction between women "consenting" and "yielding" to men's advances, clearly denouncing the impact of male violence on women's experience of motherhood (Ménard, 2024a, p. 21). *Victoire la Rouge* uses aesthetic means to elicit the reader's sympathy for a working-class woman who is excluded from her community for showing signs of her victimization at the hands of men and left with no possibility of obtaining justice (*ibid*., p. 27).

Peyrebrune's explicit style is reminiscent of that of Émile Zola, leading Delaville, in the article mentioned above, to call her "the youngest and nicest disciples of Zola" (Delaville, 1833, p. 1). Peyrebrune defended Zola in 1880, as he was attacked in the press after the publication of *Nana* (Sanchez, 2002, p. 178), and shared with the naturalist writer the detailed descriptions of a character's trajectory in a set milieu which is, in *Victoire la Rouge*, rural France. As in Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1877) and *Pot-Bouille* (1882), Peyrebrune depicts the impact of her character's class on her experience of motherhood. Themes such as bestiality, the depiction of gender relations as marked by violence, and the emphasis on the "belly" and its instincts, all present in *Victoire la Rouge*, also recall the works of Zola (Ménard, 2024a, pp. 14–15). But as Delaville's article makes clear, the scandal of naturalism is heightened when a woman chooses to adopt its style and tropes, as another critic, Pellerin, notes: "I have never gotten used to the indifference towards a… *naturalist* book written by a woman" (Pellerin, 1883, p. 3; quoted in Ménard, 2024a, p. 23). The contemporary association of a naturalist mode of writing with masculinity – an association upheld by Zola himself (Schlieper, 2013, p. 77) – helps to explain the shock of some contemporary readers upon reading *Victoire la Rouge*. This sense of scandal was heightened when considering how Peyrebrune appropriated the naturalist mode of writing to intervene in contemporary discourses on motherhood, poverty, and patriarchal violence.

Peyrebrune constructs her narrative around repetitions: Victoire is the victim of sexual violence and becomes pregnant three times over the course of the novel. The repetitions of Victoire's illegitimate pregnancies appear as parodying – albeit in a cynical manner – the contemporary idealization of motherhood: Victoire's extreme fertility – as she becomes pregnant after every sexual encounter – is not a blessing but a curse that only heightens her vulnerability. My analysis of the novel traces this narrative pattern, exploring Peyrebrune's representation of Victoire's three pregnancies and how it illustrates the escalating violence she endures. Examining Peyrebrune's careful narrative construction will highlight how the novel portrays the contemporary expectations of a "good mother" as unattainable for a vulnerable woman like Victoire and thus challenges the widespread idealization and naturalization of motherhood that was pervasive in the discourses of her time. This analysis examines Peyrebrune's aesthetic decisions and how they reinforce her challenge to prevailing conceptions of motherhood.

Victoire's First Pregnancy – Sexual Violence and Motherhood

Victoire la Rouge opens with Victoire being employed on a farm after leaving a religious orphanage. Vulnerable and isolated as an illegitimate child, it is on that farm that Victoire is raped and becomes pregnant for the first time. Peyrebrune describes the rural setting as conducive to promiscuity and it is through conversations with other workers that Victoire first becomes aware of sexuality: "Victoire learned how she came into the world, and she was a bit surprised, although this topic amused her above all else; she experienced some pleasure thinking that these things would happen to her one day" (Peyrebrune, 2024, p. 46). Victoire's first encounter with sexuality is marked by a natural curiosity, yet the phrase "these things would happen to her" signals that Victoire interiorizes the contemporary construction of women's sexuality as passive. Victoire is constantly reminded of her outcast status and her inferior position in the social and sexual hierarchy: "She understood that she did not matter like the girls who were not bastards, raised in the orphanage, and who had a family, people caring about them" (*ibid*., p. 50). Victoire's desperate desire for affection unveils the contradictions of a patriarchal society which makes women compete for male attention when it can lead to their victimization and ostracization. While Victoire is depicted as having sexual desires of her own, those desires never align with the violence she experiences. Victoire's passivity regarding her own sexuality mirrors her experience of pregnancy: both are portrayed as forced upon her and misaligned with her own will and aspirations.

In this first narrative episode, Victoire is subdued by Périco, who works at the same farm and with whom she is in love, despite his cruelty and demeaning words. After playing a prank on Victoire, Périco comes to free her from the shed he locked her up in, and cynically sees this act as a new way to torment her: "he thought it was a good trick to play on Victoire. And something excited him" (*ibid*., p. 58). The next paragraph then jumps to a description of the grape harvest, silencing an act which will have drastic consequences on Victoire's life. The grape harvest is a symbol of fertility, drawing a parallel between Victoire's body and the earth fertilized and exploited by her and the farm workers, while emphasizing the violence of this parallel process. While the ellipsis of the sexual act itself could be seen as Peyrebrune adhering to tacit propriety rules, the harvest scene deliberately portrays Victoire's helplessness and frames her first pregnancy as a result of her violent exploitation by others.

Due to her limited education, Victoire remains entirely unaware of her own pregnancy. It is discovered by her employer, who is shocked upon seeing Victoire's swollen belly as she parades on Virgin Mary's day: "An enormous belly, frightening, that fell on her legs and rose up her throat. And this belly stepped forward, carrying the virgins' banner" (*ibid*., p. 65). The employer's perspective personifies Victoire's belly because it signifies a major taboo that Victoire is unknowingly breaking during a religious event, symbolizing how contemporary views on illegitimate pregnancies dehumanize individuals like Victoire. The bodily synecdoche further underscores Victoire's powerlessness as pregnancy happens to her body, without her conscious realization. When her employer chastises her for being

pregnant, Victoire innocently compares herself to the Virgin Mary: "She answered naively and with a kind of pleasure: 'A child! Like the Virgin Mary!' 'You wretch!' screamed the farmer with indignation. 'How dare you compare yourself to the one you insulted?' 'But', said Victoire, 'She has a child herself, hasn't she?'" (*ibid*., p. 67). This passage would be comic if it was not for Victoire being cast out violently by her employer afterwards. Peyrebrune's use of irony denounces the double standards of a society that both idealises the Virgin Mary and motherhood while not providing any support for vulnerable mothers.

The description of Victoire as she is about to give birth further highlights her vulnerability as Victoire thinks about her mother's fate which she inadvertently repeats with her own illegitimate pregnancy: "As she was leaving, Victoire thought that her mother, whom she had never known, must have given birth to her one evening, maybe kicked out as well, and she asked herself stubbornly, with an effort of her poor narrow mind, what harm she and her mother had done." (*ibid*., p. 69) According to contemporary beliefs, Victoire is condemned by the logic of biological determinism: her mother was a "whore" (*ibid*., p. 67) in the eyes of the rural community and therefore must have given birth to another fallen woman. Peyrebrune's portrayal of Victoire's naïve incomprehension when facing her community's rejection, however, denounces the arbitrariness of this logic and rather calls the reader's attention to the social mechanisms behind Victoire's victimization: it is her status as an illegitimate child, her exploitation by the people around her, and her isolation that make her easy prey and that condemn her to a stigmatized pregnancy. Peyrebrune's explicit style, reminiscent of naturalist texts such as *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865) by Edmond and Jules de Goncourt or Zola's *L'Assommoir*, amplifies her bold intervention in contemporary discourses on motherhood. Opposing the idealized image of motherhood – embodied by the Virgin Mary, to whom Victoire naively compares herself – Peyrebrune portrays motherhood as tainted by sexual violence and causing Victoire's bodily and spiritual alienation.

Victoire's Second Pregnancy – Motherhood and Infanticide

Victoire is forced to return to the orphanage to give birth to her child, whom she leaves behind to get back to work at another farm. There, Victoire meets a young soldier, a guest of her new employers, and is instantly seduced by his elegant manners. While the text suggests that Victoire is indeed attracted to him, it is also explicit in saying that Victoire wants to avoid pregnancy at all costs and that the seducer uses his superior social status to manipulate her. The main focus of this second narrative episode is Peyrebrune's denunciation of how upper-class men exploit and abandon women in vulnerable positions, particularly during pregnancy. Victoire herself is acutely aware of the consequences of this pregnancy: "She had told him that she did not want to! And now, all the misfortune was for her" (*ibid*., p. 96). This plot point is particularly significant for understanding Peyrebrune's contribution to the debates around the 1804 law on paternity determination as it most poignantly portrays Victoire's vulnerability and despair which lead her to commit infanticide.

The motif of infanticide, a staple of contemporary *fait divers* culture, figures prominently in nineteenth-century fiction, such as George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), reflecting the growing social and legal interest in the crime (Ward, 2014, pp. 104–08). In the 1880s, infanticide also emerged as a central concern in French legal discourses. Concerned by the declining birth rates after the 1871 defeat, various French intellectuals tried to explain a phenomenon that seemed on the rise with higher arrests and prosecutions rates in the 1860s and 1870s, notably after the closure of the public facilities that allowed for anonymous child abandonment (Rollet, 1990, p. 54; Fuchs, 1992, p. 205). Judiciary data showed that infanticide rates were higher in cases of illegitimate pregnancies, a fact that the statistician Louis-Adolphe Bertillon attributed to the restrictions put on paternity determination suits (Rollet, 1990, p. 57). Infanticide also raised the question of the validity of the so-called "maternal instincts" and of an inherently maternal feminine nature. As Marion Thomas highlights about the physician Charles Guignard's remarks on infanticide: "women who committed infanticide were 'barbaric' and 'denatured'; in these women, 'one is surprised to see that the most natural feelings […] are extinguished or void, and that they neglect those duties whose fulfilment seems so sweet' (Guignard, 1883, p. 20)" (Thomas, 2014, p. 297). Peyrebrune, I argue, subverts this contemporary vision of the infanticidal mother as an unnatural criminal to denounce the conditions that lead vulnerable women to such extremes.

Victoire's first pregnancy resulted in her being cast out of her job and community, plunging her into extreme hardship. This is why, upon discovering that she is pregnant for the second time, Victoire expresses hatred for her unborn child:

> *She had even started to hate this child that caused her so much unhappiness and suffering. If she could have torn it out of her flanks and thrown it far away from her, as one does with a beast that sticks to you and gnaws on you, she would have done it, without mercy. Mercy! Who had ever shown her mercy?* (Peyrebrune, 2024, p. 109)

At first glance, this passage might seem to foreshadow Victoire's committing infanticide, suggesting that she acted out of an instinctual hatred for her child. However, the narrative emphasizes Victoire's exposure: she is isolated, unable to contact the father, and unable to return to the orphanage a second time, knowing it would mean losing her rights over her first child. This extreme reaction is motivated by Victoire's need to survive in a milieu that she knows will condemn her for this pregnancy.

Rather than employing the motif of infanticide for shock value, Peyrebrune exploits it to denounce the double standards of a society that accepts men's violence against women, while condemning women's means of survival. A clear example of Peyrebrune's original use of the motif is the subverted foreshadowing scene taking place before Victoire's confession. Her employers and their guests express their shock and disgust upon seeing Victoire killing an animal for their meal. This leads to a discussion around maids' morals and how they are supposedly naturally insensitive. One of the guests even remarks: "Note that it is almost always countryside servants who kill their children. Habit has destroyed their sensitivity. These girls are very dangerous" (*ibid*., p. 87). This is an extreme

accusation for simply witnessing a maid preparing dinner, but, as Victoire points out, "Someone has to do it!" (*ibid*., p. 87). Victoire's killing of an animal is a reminder of her social status, not a sign of an inherent propensity to crime, underlining how Peyrebrune is careful to describe the social factors leading to Victoire's act. Contemporary statistics show that women who committed infanticide were often living in the countryside and/or were maids, single, and illiterate (Fuchs, 1992, p. 216), but unlike the middle-class guests' quick judgement, infanticide is best understood in a socio-cultural context, as Peyrebrune's narrative reminds us. This scene does not act as a foreshadowing of Victoire's act, but of how the people around her will be quick to condemn her as it confirms their social prejudices against working-class women.

The scene of the infanticide itself is not portrayed directly but recounted, as Victoire confesses to a policeman who has discovered the corpse of a newborn in the forest. Victoire relates the scene of her childbirth, alone in the forest, and her fear of being discovered as the baby started to cry. Free indirect speech, employing Victoire's simplistic language, is used to highlight Victoire's desperation when she admits that "[s]he wanted to hurt it, of course, as it had come to cause her so much unhappiness. But she had never thought of killing it, never" (Peyrebrune, 2024, p. 118). Victoire confesses, but clearly states that the death of the child was an accident – she tried to muffle its cries to not get caught and smothered it inadvertently. Victoire is retrospectively portrayed as far from feeling any "maternal instinct", as she feels detached from the child and uncertain about what to do with it: "She did not even touch it, she simply looked at it. She never had any idea of doing anything with it. She did not know. Now that she was no longer suffering, she wished she could go and no longer think of it." (*ibid*., p. 118) Victoire's account underlines how she acted out instinctively after giving birth because she was preoccupied by her own survival which depended on her keeping the pregnancy secret.

The emphasis on Victoire's semi-conscious state during the act diminishes her responsibility by insisting on her lack of premeditation: "She felt the need to reiterate that she never had thought of killing it, she had done it without thinking, as she said, that was the whole truth…" (*ibid*., p. 119). By portraying a character who is always fighting to survive, the narrative draws on the Darwinian concept of the struggle for life to inspire pity for a vulnerable character led to extremes. This portrayal also builds an interesting parallel with contemporary trials for infanticide and the defence used by the accused. Jurors and judges often admitted extenuating circumstances, such as social vulnerability and temporary insanity (Fuchs, 1992, pp. 203, 211). Victoire's confession designates her direct circumstances as responsible for her desperate act, placing her again in a position of complete passivity, mirroring her experience of pregnancy.

This confession scene echoes the description of the maid Adèle in Zola's *Pot-Bouille* as she is giving birth. Zola's novel, which interweaves the stories of several bourgeois families with those of the maids serving them, also casts light on how motherhood is shaped by social factors, including sexual violence and socioeconomic exploitation. Adèle expresses the same indignation as Victoire at the injustice of her situation as her pregnancy also results from the brutality of her employers: "So it wasn't enough to be

starved to death, and the dirty drudge whom everyone bullied: her masters had to get her pregnant as well! Filthy brutes! […] they had had their pleasure, while she had to suffer for it! If she went and had her baby on their doormat, that would make them take notice!" (Zola, 2020, p. 361) Adèle, however, chooses to abandon her child rather than killing it. It is historically probable as the action takes place in 1860s Paris, at the start of the gradual closure of abandonment facilities (Fuchs, 1992, p. 219). Using free indirect speech, the narration reveals Adèle's sentiments toward her child: "Poor little thing! She didn't want to kill it, of course!" (Zola, 2020, p. 363). This interjection "of course!" is echoed in Victoire's confession in Peyrebrune's novel but to express Victoire's hatred towards her child. Contextually, Peyrebrune's use of the motif of infanticide is fitting as it resonates deeply with the legal debates at the time the novel is published. In terms of milieu, Victoire is more isolated than Adèle who, in an urban environment, can more easily abandon her child. Finally, in *Victoire la Rouge*, the scene also builds an interesting climax: while Adèle giving birth is but one episode among others in Zola's novel, Victoire's act of infanticide marks her definitive exclusion by the rural community and a turning point in her tragic story. It thus lends greater force to Peyrebrune's denunciation of the injustice of the 1804 law that hinders women from sharing the responsibility of their pregnancy with men.

Peyrebrune's use of this controversial motif subverts widely-held notions around infanticide in nineteenth-century France by portraying how Victoire's act is not determined by some kind of instinctive bloodlust, but by her direct circumstances, her fear of being discovered and her inability to provide for the child. As Marilyn Francus observes about eighteenth-century English novels' treatment of the motif of infanticide, *Victoire la Rouge* also illustrates how "as women repudiate their maternal selves or are denied their parental role, they reveal the social, economic, or psychological support required to fulfil the idealized vision of female domesticity, and that often mothers lack access to, or control over, such resources" (Francus, 2013, p. 79). Peyrebrune challenges the contemporary ideal of motherhood and the notion of "maternal instincts" by confronting them to the lived reality of vulnerable mothers.

Victoire's Third Pregnancy – Motherhood and Subjecthood

Victoire's trial and five years of forced labour are not recounted in the novel, which jumps from the confession to Victoire's return to her native region, hardened by her experience in prison and exhibiting "a fierce and cold mask, almost tragic" (Peyrebrune, 2024, p. 124). Victoire is forced to stay within the region where she committed her crime, and she finds work on an isolated farm whose owner has a sinister reputation. He eventually bribes Victoire by promising marriage and a refuge, both highly tempting for the definitively outcast Victoire. Ultimately, Victoire surrenders out of a desire to survive: "A weakness was overtaking her. Again the hunger, again the cold, again the wild race that would resume, if she did not die during the night in the forest" (*ibid*., p. 168). While one might argue that Victoire consents to this relationship, it is undeniably exploitative and coercive, evident in the urgency conveyed by the repetition of "again". Victoire is acutely aware

of the potential repercussions of such an illegitimate relation, yet her determination to survive outweighs her reservations.

With this arrangement, however, comes a kind of stability; the "Savage", as the owner is called by the villagers, establishes Victoire as his mistress and puts her in charge of the farm. The narrator notes the positive shift in her character since she has a shelter:

> *In this conjugal existence, where her instincts were soothed, and since she did not worry about her needs, nor about the cruel torments that had kept her in a painful stupor for so long, Victoire had almost become refined. […] It was in a way the blossoming of a moral being brought about by a ray of happiness.* (*ibid.*, p. 171)

The terms "instincts" and "needs" build a parallel with earlier descriptions of Victoire as primitive, almost animalistic, but this passage invites readers to reassess Victoire's earlier behaviour: it was entirely determined by the fact that her basic needs – food, shelter, and affection – were not fulfilled. In the last part of the novel, Victoire even flinches at the sight of blood and has become maternal with the animals she is taking care of, as the narrator notes: "It indeed seemed as if all her roughness had melted away now that she was loved" (*ibid*., p. 173). This change invites the reader to recognize that Victoire's previous naivety and "wildness" were not a fatality or a result of biological determinism, but a reaction to her circumstances.

This positive reversal also serves to heighten Victoire's despair once the farmer rejects her and her unborn child. One night, the farmer announces his marriage with a neighbour who will inherit a large amount of money. He orders Victoire to stay silent about their liaison and to even stay as a maid, upon which Victoire announces her pregnancy. The farmer's reaction is immediately violent and out of fear that the village might discover her status as a criminal, Victoire flees. She wanders through the forest, desperately aware that she cannot leave the region and will not be able to find work with "her belly" (*ibid*., p. 181). As with her second pregnancy, Victoire perceives her fertility as a curse, personifying her belly as the force driving her downfall: "Always this cursed belly, that would martyr her, her entire life, and for her eternal misfortune!" (*ibid*., p. 181). This passage echoes Peyrebrune's earlier synecdoche and personalization of Victoire's belly which becomes an entity of its own that acts against her will. The negative reversal in Victoire's circumstances reveals that her safety and comfort were built on fragile ground and marks the return of her alienation, as pregnancy once again places her in a position of complete passivity.

The narration portrays a moment of respite in Victoire's trajectory which heightens the tragic impact of her final decision to commit suicide. Victoire's inner monologue after the farmer's violent outburst highlights the change in her character that unfolded during these months of happiness: "Her former rough bestiality, which only cared about appeasing her appetites, had become, through refinement, a more demanding sensuality" (*ibid*., p. 182). Victoire has overcome the strict need to survive, has more refined needs, and this episode of happiness marks the birth of her subjecthood and her ability to consciously assess the situation. However, this change in her consciousness also marks the end of her survival instinct and will to live:

> *Might as well end this now. The despair of seeing her material comfort, her hopes for the future, taken away from her, all of a sudden, to fall back into the flight, destitution, the shame of her crime and the prison that she had endured, and the shameful surveillance she was still under, all of this gave her a sudden disgust for life, the first she had ever felt and to which she succumbed.* (*ibid.*, p. 182)

After having experienced a happy and dignified life, Victoire is no longer able to readapt to the shame and vulnerability of her past and thus decides to die. This decision stands in stark contrast with her act of infanticide which was described as semi-conscious and the consequence of her alienation. Unlike the infanticide, Victoire's resolution to end her life is an autonomous and conscious one: she is no longer acting out of her basic survival instincts, which had defined her previous experiences of motherhood, and her suicide is her first (and last) free decision. This passage also highlights how Victoire's survival instincts have repeatedly outweighed her expected "maternal instincts", revealing how social conditions deeply influenced her experience of motherhood.

Victoire's last moments are spent reminiscing about her previous pregnancies and actions, including her infanticide: "She was only surprised at not having thought about leaving this world earlier. If she had done it on the first stroke of bad luck, she would not have committed a crime by killing her other little one, that was now on her mind." (*ibid*., p. 187) Victoire's perspective on the past is still somewhat naïve, with the term "little one" expressing her tenderness and regret, but this passage also marks her realization of the social factors behind her decision. In this introspective scene, Victoire also thinks of her first child and the one she is currently carrying:

> *And she also thought about the first one with the same pang of her heart and the love she had always had for him. Even the one she was carrying now made her anxious. She would not see it, it would not come into the world. And it was better that way, because he would be a bastard, just like her, that is, cursed*. (*ibid.*, pp. 187–88)

Victoire relies on a superstitious vocabulary to designate herself and her unborn child, but this naïve expression reveals that Victoire finally comes to understand the role of social prejudices on her life: the child will be condemned to a life of misery and shame, just like her and her own mother. Victoire sees suicide as the only way to break this cycle.

The last chapter is told from the farmer's perspective as he looks for Victoire, afraid that she has gone to the village to reveal her pregnancy. This change of perspective symbolizes Victoire's final silence and reveals the selfishness of a man who exploited Victoire, as others did before him. His discovery of Victoire's corpse further dehumanizes her as she is designated as a mere body:

> *And, as he went down, step by step, frightened and livid, he thought he saw a dark mass that was floating. Yes, that was it; and now the sun, all on fire, set the sky ablaze and, through the vanished mists, cast a torrent of light, on this round thing, floating, that seemed to spread out in the lights of heaven: the dead girl's swollen and fertilized flanks.* (*ibid.*, p. 194)

The passage aestheticizes Victoire's dead body and emphasizes the opposition between fertility, the flanks that tortured Victoire throughout the novel, and death. This final portrait dignifies Victoire, but also acts as a poignant reminder of the reason why Victoire decided to end her life. Throughout the novel, her fertility appeared to Victoire as something out of her control, that repeatedly led her to be cast out and abused, and her final awakening has made her conscious of the social factors behind her alienation. This final portrait aligns with the novel's overall negative portrayal of motherhood: while Victoire is described as capable of maternal sentiments, she is also unable to survive in a community that keeps on exploiting and rejecting her. By ending on a tragic note, *Victoire la Rouge* prompts readers to reflect on whether motherhood is truly a woman's ultimate path to happiness.

Conclusion

Through the portrayal of Victoire's victimization, *Victoire la Rouge* offers a sharp critique of a society which often reduced women's paths to pregnancy and motherhood without considering their material conditions and social vulnerability. Victoire is capable of maternal sentiments, but her repeated pregnancies resulting from sexual violence prevent her from providing for her children. Peyrebrune breaks numerous taboos by dealing in an explicit style, inspired by naturalist fiction, with topics such as sexual violence, infanticide, and suicide to awaken the reader's compassion. The novel reveals that before a woman can become a mother, she must first be recognized as a subject in the eyes of men, society, law, and ultimately, by herself. *Victoire la Rouge* uses extreme narrative situations and a tragic rhythm – with the number three punctuating the escalation of violence – to intervene in a controversial debate around paternity determination that was dominated by male voices.

Peyrebrune not only reclaims her right, as a woman writer, to participate in such discussions but also gives a voice to a female character who is repeatedly silenced. During her second pregnancy, Victoire attempts to contact the father of her second child – an action which she is legally not allowed to undertake (Ménard, 2024b, p. 223). As she cannot write, she asks an employment agent to help her with the letter which she dictates: "It's to let you know that a great misfortune has happened to me. You'll be kind enough to help me because you well know that it's not my fault" (Peyrebrune, 2024, p. 101). Victoire naively trusts the agent to send the letter in exchange for her savings although she has no address to give him. This letter – which never reaches the man responsible for her pregnancy – symbolizes Victoire's powerlessness and silence when facing social structures that make it impossible for her to attain the ideal of motherhood. This scene, portraying a woman who cannot write her own plight, can be seen as a kind of *mise en abyme* of Peyrebrune's use of aesthetic tools to convey her political message: by taking up the pen, against contemporary prejudices that condemned women writers as defying the natural order, Peyrebrune gives a voice and dignity back to an outcast figure and challenges prevalent discourses around motherhood.

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