

“Death Rather Than Dishonor” in Octave Mirbeau’s *L’Écuyère*

Before discussing Mirbeau’s pseudonymous novel, *L’Écuyère* written in 1882 under the name Alain Bauquenne, I will refer briefly to an earlier work by another writer with whose poetry, at least, Mirbeau was without a doubt familiar : a short story by Théodore de Banville called “La vieille funambule : Hébé Caristi,” published in 1859, and an important precursor to all the fin-de-siècle novels that take the circus world as their context. Banville’s passion for circus performers had already emerged in his *Odes funambulesques* (1856), and this tale continues Banville’s mythifying of the circus acrobat, a process that continued until his death. Earlier poems by Banville had established the transcendent nobility of lowly acrobats before an uncomprehending public. In “Hébé Caristi”, he went further in this process, exploring the pitfalls of the purity that journalists talking about the circus thereafter associated with the serious acrobatic performer. Not alone in the creation of the myth of the circus performer were acrobats themselves, a result surely of the industrialization of circus as an entertainment in the early nineteenth century, which made publicity an important component of their attraction. It is common knowledge that circus performers took great care to project both in and outside the ring a certain persona, shunning photographs that would portray them out of character, avoiding anything that could potentially harm the image of physical superiority that they were at such pains to produce. Whatever the source of the image spinning, whether Banville and/or the circus performers and barnums attached to circuses, the fact remains that the purity and chastity of the circus acrobat became a commonplace along with the image of artistic transcendence. That Mirbeau knew of Banville’s poems featuring acrobats is certain: the very words Banville uses to describe his acrobatic clown’s transcendence is quoted, probably as homage, in Mirbeau’s text. Drawing from “Le Saut du Tremplin” from the *Odes funambulesques*, in which the acrobatic clown cries out repeatedly in his leap towards the heavens, “Plus haut encore, jusqu’au ciel pur” and “Plus haut ! Plus loin !,” Mirbeau’s narrator describing his *écuyère* in her equestrian exercises transcribes her internal monologue, “Plus haut! toujours plus haut bondir !” and “Plus haut ! plus haut encore !” (*Odes* 290, *L’Écuyère* 827, 941-42). Mirbeau used these traits of transcendence and purity as the moral foundation of his *écuyère*. And with this ascent toward the heavens, however unlikely it may seem on a horse, Mirbeau’s *écuyère*’s purity and chastity are tightly bound. Much like Banville’s tightrope dancer in another poem (“A Méry” 1855), who scornfully looks down “Du haut des cieux irisés, Pour envoyer des baisers, À la vile populace,” Mirbeau’s *écuyère* feels “Un orgueil lui souffl[er] le cœur à les sentir si bas. Oh ! qu’elle les méprisait !” From her metaphoric position on high she glories in her “inviolabilité de vierge” (*Contes* 194, *L’Écuyère* 827). And when she has lost that inviolability, she will turn to her horse to help her make that final leap, in which she will exchange her tarnished “couronne de vierge” against a “un nimbe éblouissant d’assomption” (942).

Banville’s tightrope dancer in “A Méry” is the legendary 19th-century funambule Mme Saqui, and he used her again four years later for his Hébé Caristi. In her younger years Hébé is a proudly chaste tightrope dancer, whose destitution in later years forces her, like Mme Saqui, to continue performing well into her seventies. The young and breathtakingly beautiful Hébé learns from a fortune teller that her star will fall the day she steps in blood, and that day inevitably comes when a spurned suitor, a young colonel in the hussar regiments, and one of hundreds such suitors, blows out his brains in the lobby of the theater where she is performing. Fall she does, and heavily. Mirbeau’s *écuyère*, too, had as one of her admirers, a young officer in the Hungarian guards (the Hungarian officer is again perhaps a nod to Banville’s Hussar), who fought a duel out of love for her and died in the effort. Like Banville’s Hébé, the *écuyère*’s thoughts center on the fragility of her “propreté,” and the image that recurrently threatens to destroy that “propreté” is that of blood. Another suitor, Gaston de Martigues, seems destined to repeat that fateful duel, and for fear of her name being dragged irreparably in his blood, the *écuyère* takes measures to stop him (855). She literally falls off her horse in the effort, prefiguring the final fall in which she loses her life.

There are further parallels between Banville's and Mirbeau's tales. After the preface in which he recounts the glory days of his proud tightrope walker, Banville's story joins her in her old age, wallowing in the humiliation and degradation of a desperate and sordid love, unseemly for a woman of her advanced years, and follows her to her even more ignominious death. The narrator is a Spanish *écuyère*, Martirio. At the end of her tale, one of her listeners comments on the striking similarity between her and Hébé Caristi:

Ma foi, [. . .], je comprends que ce drame du ruisseau vous ait vivement impressionnée; car enfin, nous savons que vous avez reçu le don exceptionnel de ne pas souiller vos petits pieds en traversant la fange du théâtre ! Eh bien ! si absurde que fût la prédiction d'Hébé Caristi, ce rapport entre sa jeunesse et la vôtre devait vous donner à réfléchir. (167)

The speaker isolates a connection between the two women in their youth and in their refusal to get sullied by the muck that surrounds them, but Martirio's response makes the relation even clearer. Her response testifies to the enormity of their youthful pride : "Mais je suis Espagnole et j'ai du sang noble dans les veines. . . .Moi, je me tuerais" (167). Her pride differs here from that belonging to the Hébé Caristi of humble bohemian origins. In Martirio's claim to noble blood, there is a reference to what would have been a well known facet of circus legend, widely reported in newspaper columns: the majority of the truly great circuses constituted veritable dynasties, with some dating back to the early eighteenth century, as in the case of the Franconis, and possessing a heightened sense of their bloodlines. It was a well-publicized aspect of circus lore that the greatest circus performers were not mere *saltimbanques*, as Mirbeau would himself claim, but belonged to "aristocracies" that boasted long lineages. There was a high rate of intermarriage within the great circus families like the Chiraninis, the Renzes, the Guerras, and the Franconis, first to continue a family tradition of superior physical talent, which contributed to the celebrity of a family name, and which also worked to increase the value of their acts. The Franconis, on whom Mirbeau did his research, are the same that Henri Thétard calls, "les plus grands et les plus racés qui furent jamais dans l'histoire du cirque" (166). It was also common knowledge that, not infrequently, bluebloods married circus performers from these great circus families, in particular the practitioners of the higher-brow equestrian arts, the trademark performance passed on from generation to generation. The circus in Mirbeau's novel includes instances of the latter. Mme Zélie, former acrobat, has a son from a relationship with a marquis, a viscount, a count, a baron, or a duke, her failing memory and the multiplicity of liaisons with noblemen in her past making it difficult to remember just what title the father bore. And young Catalinette, the tightrope dancer, as well, is perhaps the fruit of relations between her mother, a *trapéziste*, who died from injuries incurred in a fall, and a clown (her "father"), but the father could just as equally have been one of the mother's many noble and wealthy suitors, in particular a duke, since the clown did not discourage wealthy and/or aristocratic men from courting Eva (843). Mirbeau's *écuyère*, herself, was courted by a German prince, who asked for her hand in marriage, provided she give up the circus. She decides that a crown of fake flowers obtained during the execution of a circus number is worth more than a crown with strings attached (908). Both, however, are equally valid crowns in her eyes.

The attraction for the acrobat is not the equivalent of the attraction wealthy men felt for actresses. The latter was predominantly a relationship of financial power of the one over the other. With circus acrobats, literary myth would have it that the relationship was rather that between spiritual equals. Banville made the acrobat the metaphorical twin of the poet. The Goncourt brothers claimed in 1859, the year of the invention of the flying trapeze, that

Nous les voyons, ces hommes et ces femmes risquant leurs os en l'air pour attraper quelques bravos, avec un remuement d'entrailles, avec un je ne sais quoi de féroce curieux et, en même temps, de sympathiquement apitoyé, comme si ces gens étaient de notre race et que tous, bobèches, historiens, philosophes, pantins et poètes, nous sautions héroïquement pour cet imbécile de public. (491)

Actors and actresses, they say, pretend to have talent, whereas acrobats unmistakably possess

talent. However more cynical, Mirbeau is of much the same mind. In a newspaper article he claims that “Les gymnastes ont sur les acteurs et les fabricants de couplets cet inappréciable avantage, c’est que, s’ils font parfois des bêtises, au moins ils n’en disent jamais” (“Miss Zaeo” 28). Other writers like Philippe Daryl in his *Petite Lambton* (1886) and Gustave Kahn in his *Cirque solaire* (1899) would have us believe that the relationship between aristocrats and acrobats is symbiotic, with the former experiencing regeneration through invigorating contact with the latter. In his play, *Révoltée* (1889), Jules Lemaitre goes even further with his noblemen becoming acrobats themselves, in imitation of Ernest Molier’s real amateur Circus featuring annually his aristocratic friends.

In this light, Banville’s story in which the acrobat Martirio claims that she would kill herself first before she would let herself end up like Hébé Caristi, makes clear that great similarities beyond the strong feeling of blood heritage were felt to exist between great circus acrobats and aristocrats. Whether Martirio’s “noble blood” points to more traditionally recognized noble lines, or whether her ancestry is that of a circus purebred, becomes in the final analysis unimportant. Essential is that she belongs to a hermetic group that establishes its legitimacy through the transmission of shared “family” values and a certain cultural capital, to use Pierre Bourdieu’s term, from generation to generation. These values and cultural capital form the foundation of the belief in their superiority, and presuppose the existence of a code of conduct to perpetuate this superiority through time, a prime one being not to bring shame upon one’s ancestors. The difference, however, is that legitimate nobility operated within a larger social system in which members had traditionally played a dominant role and enjoyed special privileges, positions which they jealously guarded. It is these elements that the novel’s legitimate nobility will bring to bear upon Mirbeau’s *écuyère* in an effort to destroy her, and it is the presumed right to authority and privilege on the part of the nobility that Mirbeau will work to unmask.

Mirbeau’s Julia Forsell, like the Miss Zaeo of his 1880 newspaper article does not come from the “métier,” and therefore cannot boast a noble lineage. Buying wholly into circus mythology, Mirbeau claims that it is rare for an acrobat not to have been born into the profession. since within the circus world, “on est presque toujours saltimbanque de père en fils et de mère en fille” (“Miss Zaeo” 32). Roland Auguet and just about every nineteenth- and twentieth-century circus historian echoes that assessment, stating that “la proportion d’artistes venus au cirque est relativement faible. On y naît. C’est le monde des dynasties, un monde fermé où tout se transmet par héritage” (133). While Miss Zaeo was obviously an important source in the development of Julia Forsell, it did not follow that the latter had to be an outsider, too. Making Julia the first from her family to enter the hermetic circus world works to prepare her successful entrance into another hermetic world through marriage to the heir to a vast fortune.

In designating his circus acrobat as an *écuyère*, Mirbeau bypasses the aerial performer, who was the darling of the fin-de-siècle circus, to celebrate a facet of circus performance that had been eclipsed by aerial numbers since the 1860s. *L’Ecuyère’s* heroine, Julia Forsell, is an *écuyère d’école*, not an *écuyère à panneau*, the latter being defined by acrobatics performed on the back of one or many horses. On the contrary, the *haute école* was hands down the noblest number in the circus repertoire up to the end of the nineteenth century. The *écuyère de haute école* dressed in an elegant riding habit and had her horse execute difficult maneuvers. “Qu’est-ce que la Haute École en effet”, affirms circus historian Roland Auguet, “si ce n’est la projection visuelle, la mise en scène d’un idéal de classe, celui de l’aristocratie ?” The *haute école* was not just one entertainment among many : “ce fut un symbole social.” This symbolic value is nowhere more evident than in its “rigueur” and “élégance” which is “rien d’autre que le principe de base de l’éducation aristocratique” (19). It is the “rigueur” and “élégance” of Julia’s horsemanship that elicits appreciation and approval from Princess Vedrowitch, whose morning constitutional, like that of most of the aristocrats in the novel, consists in equitation. Speaking of Julia, the Princess draws this precise parallel between herself and the *écuyère*, claiming : “Et elle aime le cheval comme moi, elle est blonde comme moi, elle est belle... non, pas comme moi. Mais je l’adore” (802). It is the “rigueur” and “élégance” as demonstrated by Julia Forsell that attracts the cream of the cream of Parisian society to the circus

upon her debut. Even with the decline of the equestrian act as the *nec plus ultra* of circus numbers, the equestrienne remained a powerful symbol of circus aesthetics, and the *haute école* became, precisely at the beginning of its decline, a powerful symbol for an aristocracy singing its swan song as a significant social-political force. Mirbeau's description of Julia's performance emphasizes less the horse's maneuvers to return continually to describe how Julia's and the horse's bodies seem to form one unit, with what skill she maintains absolute control over both her and her horse's movements, counterbalancing the increasing animation of the horse's turns and leaps with her increasingly perfect immobility in the saddle.

Mirbeau notes on the ideological fit between the two aristocracies, that "Le cirque ne pouvait mieux s'établir qu'au milieu de ce monde, et les pensionnaires du cirque, écuyers et écuyères, ne pouvaient nulle part trouver un meilleur accueil, étant comme lui, du métier, et, comme lui, ayant un commun amour des chevaux" ("Miss Zaeo" 30). This bond built on a love for horses is significant. As Christian de Bartillat points out in his history of French nobility, the horse was a powerful symbol, first because noble boys had only one true friend throughout their lives: their horse (II 87). And secondly, noble girls were put on horses at least as early as fifteen years old. Bartillat suggests that, "Après tout, si les mères étaient chargées de transmettre la vertu, on pensait peut-être, non sans raison, que le cheval se chargeait d'enseigner la grâce et le maintien" (94). While early in the novel Mirbeau's clownish Général de Poilvé recalls his days in cavalry school as evidence of his knowledge of horses in an attempt to discredit Julia's performance as mere "fanatasia," as "de la basse école, pas de la haute," his critique is universally contradicted by the other aristocratic members in his circle, who recognize great skill from their own education. If the acquisition of such grace, elegance, and control were indicative of nothing more than a clever circus stunt, the novel's nobility would not go to such great pains to destroy her.

Society, the duc de Gramont is quoted as saying, constituted at the end of the nineteenth century "un groupement dont les membres se connaissent et qui par leurs alliances formaient un ensemble familial qui admettait rarement l'étranger en son sein" (Bartillat 83). Mirbeau, too, addressed the insularity of the nobility in a newspaper article, describing "Tout-Paris" as that group whose members "ont un langage à eux, clair, rapide, concis, qui peut se jeter d'une fenêtre, d'une voiture, d'un cheval. Ils ont leur tailleur, leur bottier, leurs journaux et leurs opinions. On peut être un grand homme hors du quartier, mais on n'est pas du quartier" ("Miss Zaeo" 30). Pierre Bourdieu in his work on distinction has shown that elite groups that protect themselves against the outside are not necessarily striving to hinder a social climber so much as persons from "fractions" within the same class (182). The person who is barred entry is very simply that person with the greatest chances of getting in, and Julia Forsell, the consummate horsewoman, is in many respects from a parallel group. While the novel's society members attempt to dismiss Julia as a lowly circus performer, they work a bit too hard to keep her out.

In his 1880 newspaper article "Miss Zaeo," Octave Mirbeau claims that, whereas acrobats were once "des parias de l'art," they are now recognized as "artistes." In accordance with their rise in social stature come the perks of celebrity that had heretofore been reserved for great opera singers: they "voyagent comme de grands seigneurs et vivent comme des banquiers." Mirbeau adds that they also hold court like royalty. For Mirbeau, those who best know how to receive and appreciate great circus artistes are none other than the members of *le grand monde* who ostensibly live according to a similar code of ethics. In *L'Écuyère*, Mirbeau draws on this model of circus aristocracy to juxtapose one closed society against another, an unflattering comparison that reveals an utterly craven French nobility unworthy of the social honors which it enjoys. Unlike other novels from the period (for example, Philippe Daryl's *La Petite Lambton* and Gustave Kahn's *Le Cirque solaire*), which also focus on the shared moral code between circus aristocracy and bluebloods, Mirbeau offers the portrait of a predatory aristocracy wholly lacking in moral responsibility and either wholly driven by the quest for money or the satisfaction of their base desires and petty jealousies. The impoverished Countess Giusti strives to sell her daughters to the highest bidder. Mme Henryot, eldest daughter of Countess Giusti, pays the vile Marquis d'Anthoirre 100 000 francs

to rape Julia Forsell, a rape upon which the rest of the group bet heavily. Capitalizing on Julia's firm code of honor, the members of the Vedrowitch circle prey on those values to which they pay lipservice, but which only Julia truly respects.

True aristocracy is found, it would seem, only in the circus. Mirbeau's Julia, when faced with a question of her honor, chooses death over dishonor. That Mirbeau felt it necessary to overdetermine the ethical forces at work in Julia's psyche by making her early religious formation and the Finnish landscape of her youth powerful influences on her actions is problematic, and ultimately is evidence of a Mirbeau in the formative years of his career : Julia's sense of purity is just as inextricably bound with the spiritual symbols of purity related to her protestant upbringing and homeland as it is with her career as a circus acrobat. While I believe that the circus proscriptions alone would have sufficed to motivate Julia's decision to take her life, especially since Mirbeau had read Edmond de Goncourt's *Les Frères Zemganno* from three years earlier, it seems counterproductive to separate the circus code from the religious and symbolic codes. However, since Julia's preferred space for her final gesture to reclaim her purity unfolds in the circus ring — an earlier attempt in open country is unsuccessful — an argument privileging the importance of Mirbeau's juxtaposition of the two aristocracies is warranted. Organized religion, as Pierre Michel has demonstrated in his work on Mirbeau, serves as one target of Mirbeau's exposé, but Mirbeau seems to reserve the full force of his venom for the aristocracy.

Jonathan Powis has noted that, “'Death rather than dishonour' — a commonplace of aristocratic morality down the centuries — implies that honor was a matter of proper conduct. A code existed ; dishonour was the penalty for its violation” (9). While Powis perceives equal value in the aristocratic concerns of family, rank, and honor, with wealth being merely a means to maintaining one's social position, Mirbeau's narrator presents the acquisition of wealth as aristocrats' primary objective, with family, rank, and honor as simply the means to this end. True nobility is found in the novel's heroine, Julia Forsell, whose honor is so violated that death becomes her sole recourse.

Jennifer FORREST

Department of Modern Languages

Texas State University—San Marcos

San Marcos, TX 78666

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