

The Beast Within: Male Fantasy in the Art of Gustave Moreau

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Abstract

Due to France's humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the subsequent panic generated by the nation's slow-rising birth rate, the authority of the bourgeois male, both on the battlefield and in the boudoir, was threatened. As a result, revenge against the German 'barbarians', repopulation and the maintenance of gender differences became national imperatives. However, against this backdrop of reproduction, nationalism and patriarchy, some Symbolist artists put forward an alternative and disruptive model of male sexuality and masculine identity. For the decadent avant-garde of the fin-de-siècle, their reality resided in the fluidity and ambiguity of fantasy. It was not sexual inversion, but rather bourgeois masculinity, gender difference and reproductive normalcy, which were, as Huysmans submitted, 'against nature'.

This paper will focus on the implications of Symbolist fantasy for the construction of alternative male sexualities. Gustave Moreau's highly detailed and decorative narratives will be specifically analysed in terms of their projection of a reality far removed in time and place from the preoccupations of Third Republican bourgeois France. In turn, Moreau's fantastic imagery will be read as a space characterised by psychic conflict, anxiety, gender ambiguity and the uncontrollable workings of the unconscious. Through a close analysis of Moreau's *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* (1869-76), which was produced at the time of the Franco-Prussian War, masculinity comes to represent a fractured and fraught identity, threatened by a frightening female hyper-sexuality, an encroaching state of hysteria and the uncontrollable impulses of the unconscious. Thus, fantasy, as a genre embraced by Moreau, figures not merely as the psychological meandering of a lone recluse, but as a window onto another 'nature' characterised by social and sexual divergence.

During the latter decades of the nineteenth-century, French masculinity was in a state of crisis, a crisis recognisable in some symbolist representations of gender. As a result of France's humiliating military defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, along with the nation's slow-rising birth rate, rapid modernisation and the growth of feminist politics, late nineteenth-century French society experienced a 'crisis of masculinity'. Modernisation and urbanisation were corroding the authority of traditional patriarchal institutions, such as the army, Church and family, and, in turn, the honour and virility of France's men were being questioned. Whereas it was previously held that the French 'race' was at the apex of the evolutionary pyramid, it now became apparent that it was, in fact, degenerating. In response to the apparent decline and feminisation of France's men, politicians, physicians and sexologists instigated interventionist measures that were intended to reverse the laws of degeneration and revive the health of the nation. Modern sport and physical culture were advocated and sexual restraint advised. For instance, fitness programs and paramilitary 'battalions scolaires' were introduced into schools and gymnastics became a civil duty.¹ By engaging in physical training, it was believed that the process of

physical and moral degeneration could be reversed and revenge against the Germans ultimately achieved. The new Republican man was healthy, stoic and restrained. Upholding the legacy of his classical forebears, it was believed that he could mould his body and mind through self-restraint and modern sport. Furthermore, there was a reassertion of the importance of gender differentiation and the bourgeois family, along with the demonisation of 'deviant' social types that appeared to compromise bourgeois sexual order by obscuring the hallowed divide between man and woman. These included homosexuals, Jewish men and feminists. As George Mosse observes, during this time, attention was increasingly drawn to "otherwise respectable middleclass men who could not live up to the manly ideal because in some manner they were considered sick or unmanly".² Thus, the fin-de-siècle 'crisis of masculinity' lay in the inconsistency between the aforementioned masculine ideal of the Third Republic and the lived experience of masculinity at a time when it was threatened by Prussians, feminists, the uncontrollable forces of the unconscious mind and the iron-clad laws of Darwinian evolution.

In this paper I intend to show that the art of Gustave Moreau illustrates a 'crisis of masculinity'. Rather than reaffirming the Republican ideals of self-mastery through physical culture and sexual restraint, his works illustrate the threatened and crumbling nature of fin-de-siècle masculinity in light of the social and sexual upheavals that were taking place at the time. Such upheavals included France's military defeat in 1870, the subsequent siege of Paris by the Prussians and the Paris Commune of 1871. In particular, the Paris Commune ignited terror in the bourgeois imagination as it signified a working-class revolt against the accepted social order. Likewise, France during the latter decades of the nineteenth-century witnessed the emergence of a thriving homosexual subculture and the extension of greater professional opportunities to women as a result of the demands of feminist politics. Both feminists and homosexuals were seen to constitute an affront to bourgeois morality and sexual order. It will be argued that the art of Moreau visually deconstructs the masculine ideal propagated by the State, by depicting masculinity as divided and conflicted. Taken a step further, Moreau also reconfigures gender in such a way that it becomes representationally fluid, unpredictable and problematic.

By employing Klaus Theweleit's psychoanalytic analysis of the male fantasies pertaining to the dread of woman, the internal battle against the uncontrollable unconscious and the fear of dissolution, Moreau's *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* (1869-76) (see Figure 1) with its engulfing swamps, disembowelled male figures and multi-headed Hydra, comes to be understood as indicative of the process by which psychological monsters are externalised. It explicitly depicts the re-emergence, in the form of a mythological monster, of that which was being socially suppressed in pursuit of a psychological wholeness, namely the fragmenting and destabilising effects of the unconscious. Although Theweleit's investigations into the nature of male fantasy are primarily concerned with the period in Germany following the nation's military defeat in World War One, the texts are nonetheless useful in understanding Moreau's fantastical representations of masculinity in crisis produced approximately fifty years earlier. Both Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* and Moreau's *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* deal with male anxieties and the ways in which they are articulated; it is here that these two disparate texts find their commonality. Just as Theweleit probed the fantasies of the Freikorps in such a way as to undermine the safety and security of their memoirs and novels, so too do I intend to uncover the fraught masculine identity that lies beneath the fantastical façades of Moreau's art.

Gustave Moreau's fantastical and highly decorative works have been traditionally dismissed as aesthetic aberrations amidst the predominating Realism and Impressionism of the avant-garde French art scene during the 1870s and 1880s. His use of mythological and biblical narratives has been seen to indicate the artist's lack of engagement with the era in which he lived and therefore devoid of the critical components necessary for inclusion in the grand, modernist, avant-garde tradition. Alternatively, his art

has been upheld in formalist terms as part of a trajectory leading to the canvases of Mondrian and Reinhardt. In contrast to these two approaches, I intend to read fantasy, as a genre employed by Moreau, as facilitating the infringement of the boundaries between man and woman, the conscious and unconscious mind, reality and imagination. But the relationship between artworks that are purposefully divorced from contemporary reality and history, is somewhat more complex. The employment of fantasy and mythology constitutes a defence mechanism, which distances the artist and his audience from the confronting and violent nature of the scenes depicted. Situating the drama in a mythological or biblical past lessens the immediacy and offensive character of the works. As stated in the foreword to Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, Vol. II, "the purpose of this writing is to combat the aliveness of experiences, to turn it into something lifeless".³ The experiences of fear, desire and dread are rendered lifeless and dead when rearticulated in a mythological past, in a time and place far removed from contemporary France.

Masculinity, in the art of Moreau, constitutes a conflicted and crumbling identity, in opposition to the stoic and circumscribed Republican ideal. *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* presents an epic battle between Hercules, the youthful hero with club in hand, and the seven headed Hydra.⁴ Moreau also pictured the victims of the Hydra at the base of the image, in various states of decomposition, some partially enveloped by the swamp.⁵ This work has been seen to depict the confrontation between the noble French race and their 'barbaric' Prussian enemy in the wake of the humiliating Franco-Prussian War.⁶ However, an alternative interpretation, which concurs with Moreau's writings about this painting, is that Hercules represents an idealised male figure boldly confronting those forces Moreau associated with woman, namely sexual excesses, the uncontrollable recesses of the human psyche and the unleashed forces of nature. Moreau conceived of Hercules as "the destroyer of monsters", man's best instincts battling the "vile" and "savage" forces of unconscious "matter".⁷ Furthermore, Hercules may be understood as one who completes arduous tasks set forth for him, one of which may be the task of revitalising Republican masculinity. Whereas artists such as Meissonier (see Figure 2) were attempting to revive the nation's honour by recalling her heroic military past through depictions of victorious Napoleonic battle scenes, Moreau was depicting a battle of a very different nature. Moreau's Hercules confronts, not the nation's Prussian adversaries, but an incarnation of his own internal beasts, namely his uncontrollable libidinal and psychological impulses. Thus, this image reveals French masculinity as being essentially divided between civilization and sexuality; control and hysteria; rationality and the unconscious. It is an image of "battle as inner experience".⁸ Moreau depicts his masculinity, and masculinity generally, in a state of crisis, unable to conform to the unified and prescribed ideal propagated by the French state.

By depicting his identity in the form of two separate and distinct entities on the brink of a mighty mythological battle in *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*, Moreau portrayed his masculine identity as fractured, ruptured. Although Moreau painted recognisable mythological and biblical narratives, he stated that these subjects were "pretexts for expressing the poetry and the flame that are with me".⁹ In turn, Moreau uses these symbols in unpredictable ways that reveal less about the symbols themselves and more about their resonance in a period of flux and instability. For instance, images such as *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* constitute the artist's imaginative reconstructions of familiar narratives in accordance with his own desires and anxieties. The robust and youthful Hercules represents the idealised classical aspect of the artist's identity; he embodies physical and psychological health. In this way, it can be argued that Hercules is emblematic of the Third Republican masculine ideal of courage, control and physical strength. Yet he is depicted as engaging in a battle with a threatening multi-headed Hydra. The Hydra reconfigures the traditional dynamics of battle, which comprise the confrontation of

two male soldiers on the battlefield. In this case, Hercules' opponent is a mythological monster that is capable of changing and metamorphosing. Whereas Hercules' power lies in his controlled and disciplined masculinity, the Hydra's power resides in its sexual ambiguity and excesses. The Hydra is both man and woman as it is phallic in shape and feminine in its association with ramped sexuality and the uncontrollable forces of nature. The Hydra stands erect, with each head suggesting a threatening and dangerous phallus. Even if the head of the Hydra is cut off, it will grow back. The creature represents the uncontrollable and hidden impulses of the unconscious mind, the fear of annihilation and 'primitive' sexual desires, which belie the 'civilised' exterior of the Republican man and will lead to his destruction. What is interesting about this image is that these two components of the artist's identity have been split. The 'alien within'—a term Theweleit gives to the bestial and primitive interior—appears in this work as completely extricated from the 'civilised' male form. Whereas Theweleit describes the 'alien within' as caged within the body of the soldier-man, waiting for discharge on the battlefield, Moreau's Hydra constitutes a separate entity. In this work the unconscious has escaped and threatens to "[lay] waste the boundaries of the body".¹⁰ The corpses at the base of the image represent the danger of falling prey to the sexual excesses that the Hydra embodies.

In addition to depicting a battle between the conscious and unconscious mind, sexual desires and sexual restraint, *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* can be seen to reveal the psychic struggle between masculine and feminine dispositions in the pursuit of a unified gender identity. Freud's concept of 'bisexuality' posited that every human is endowed constitutionally with both masculine and feminine characteristics. An individual's gender is established by way of a struggle between these two identities. He stated that, "...the dominant sex of the person...has repressed the mental representation of the subordinate sex into the unconscious".¹¹ In turn, Hercules' battle with the Hydra, as embodying the struggle between masculinity and femininity, can be recognised as a symbolic representation of bisexuality, that is, the internal struggle necessary in order to establish a gendered identity. Although the appearance of the Hydra is reminiscent of a phallus, it can be seen to signify a frightening femininity due to its association with the uncontrollable forces of nature and a threatening sexuality. Bisexuality, as a universal psychic state preceding sexual differentiation, is a marked departure from the Republican assertion of naturally prescribed gender differences. Robert Nye in *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour in Modern France* discusses the fact that a "biomedical model of male and female" was constructed between 1789 and the end of the Napoleonic era, which "made the sexes 'naturally' suited for their respective social and familiar roles".¹² During this period the construction of different civic roles for men and women was "rationalised and sustained by a widely shared conviction that the roles the sexes took in life were a product of natural difference".¹³ In the Third Republic, the commitment to one's naturally ordained gender role became of greater significance in light of France's military defeat and alarming population figures. Gender differentiation and reproduction were seen to be inseparable from the wellbeing of the nation, as it was believed that the bearing of multiple healthy offspring would reverse demographic trends and produce strong and healthy Republican citizens.¹⁴ It was amidst this heightened emphasis on the differences between men and women, and its perceived importance to the building of a strong and healthy French race, that Moreau's *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* can be seen to represent a transgressive position, submitting a thoroughly divergent conception of gender identity.

Thus far, Hercules has been coupled with the Hydra and its associations with the unconscious mind and dangers of succumbing to libidinal desires. However, there is another visual coupling in this painting, which extends the idea that this work is representative of the artist's divided and conflicted masculinity; the coupling of Hercules and the reclining corpse in the image's foreground. The markedly

androgynous figure lies splayed on the ground in a pose reminiscent of the highly sexualised woman in Henri Gervex's *Rolla* (1878) (see Figure 3). Whereas *Rolla* pictures a naked reclining woman with her clothed lover, Moreau's image replaces Gervex's sensuous woman with a dead, effete man. Returning to Freud's notion of bisexuality, the reclining androgyne in *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* may represent the artist's suppressed femininity in order to adhere to the social demand of gender differentiation. Freud described bisexuality as a transitional stage characterised by sexual uncertainty—a fractured identity that needed to be resolved, rather than a sexual identity in and of itself.¹⁵ Therefore, the dead figure in *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* suggests that some aspect of the artist's identity had to be suppressed in order to enable Hercules to confront the Hydra. Taken a step further, whereas Freud strongly linked bisexuality to women, Moreau's image depicts bisexuality in terms of the establishment of a male identity. Kofman, in *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in the Writings of Freud* interrogates Freud's construction of bisexuality as shut up inside the figure of the woman so as to ward off bisexuality in men.¹⁶ Therefore, Moreau's suggestion of bisexuality by way of his visual coupling of the erect and robust Hercules and the reclining feminised corpse, points to a transgressive model of masculinity. Moreau's image gives visual form to that which must die within him, namely the feminine aspect of his psyche, so that he can remain standing.¹⁷

Due to Charcot's popular weekly demonstrations of hysteria and hypnosis and the proliferation of investigations into the causes and composition of mental illness at the time when *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* was painted, the work may also have been influenced by the contemporary preoccupation with hysteria. During the latter decades of the nineteenth-century there was a shift in the way that hysteria was understood, from a disturbance produced by the body that was external to the self, to a manifestation of a divided consciousness, an inner division.¹⁸ Although Charcot's theatrical displays always featured women, his studies nonetheless illustrated the possibility of male hysteria. This was, of course, extremely problematic for a gendered model of mental illness, in which hysteria was closely aligned with femininity and female sexual organs. By pointing to the possibility of male hysteria, Moreau was challenging socially prescribed male roles. Neurologists' efforts to probe and penetrate the psychological interior proved to be a source of fascination and trepidation in the late nineteenth-century imagination. The work of neurologists, such as Charcot, Bernheim, Janet and later psychoanalysts such as Freud, resulted in a model of the human mind that put it at the service of the uncontrollable unconscious. Therefore, behaviour was not the outcome of free will or measured consideration, but influenced by suggestion, desire and the impulses of the unconscious. This, of course, was a marked departure from the Republican ideals of rationality, reason and psychological self-mastery. As has already been shown, *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* depicts the artist's masculinity in a state of crisis—conflicted and fragmented. In this way the work can be understood in terms of the notion of psychic division, which characterised emerging theories of hysteria in fin-de-siècle culture. However, this paper will now focus on the iconographic parallels between Moreau's depictions of pained and contorted bodies at the base of the image and Paul Richer's drawings of hysterics.

Moreau's painting was exhibited at the Salon approximately half a decade before Richer began publishing his drawings of hysterics in collaboration with Charcot's experiments at the Salpêtrière. Therefore, Moreau was not directly influenced by Richer's images, but was rather working in a period of increased focus on the visual signifiers of neurosis and mental strain. During the time of the Third Republic science was prioritised to the extent that it arguably constituted the new Republican religion. It was amidst this prevailing 'scientism' that the signs of mental illness—be they the curvature of the spine or a disproportionately short forehead—were inscribed onto the body of the hysteric by way of the scientific gaze. In particular, Charcot isolated physical curvature as the index of psychopathology.¹⁹

Hysterics and neurotics were continually depicted with arched backs, twisted and anguished facial features, clenched and curved fingers and toes (see Figure 4). In analysing Rodin's *The Gates of Hell* (1880-1917)(see Figure 5), Debora Silverman describes the work as a "turbulent mass of writhing half-formed bodies and fluid matter".²⁰ The disembowelled and sinking bodies at the base of *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* could be described in similar terms. Whereas Hercules stands erect, the corpses lie in a heap of contorted body parts melding into the rocky landscape. Moreau's studies show explicitly the clawing fingers and curved necks of the Hydra's victims. In particular, his *Studies of a Model (Half-Figures and a Hand)* (see Figure 6) and *Studies of Severed Hands* (see Figure 7) emphasise the arches of the body parts, in turn bearing similarities to contemporary representations of nervous tension and hysteria.

In addition to interpreting the bodies at the bottom of the image as signifier of hysteria and neuropathologies, the swampy marsh and decomposing bodies at the base of the image can also be seen to indicate the artist's fear of dissolution—"of being swallowed, engulfed, annihilated".²¹ Theweleit's pertinent analysis of the symbolism of dirt, floods, the morass and other signifiers of fluidity and decay, are useful in understanding the implications of the swamp in *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*. He states in his discussion of marshes that, "dirt is... anything that impinges on the tidy insularity of a person, on the person's anxiously guarded autonomy".²² The amalgamation of male bodies that lie partially enveloped by the swamp transgresses the distance that society demanded be maintained between men. Images of liquidity are associated with all that might threaten to deluge or flood the boundaries of the male ego. It suggests the dangers of being flooded with emotion, passion, fear and pain, these being characteristics associated with femininity and embodied in the threatening Hydra. Hence, the swamp can be recognised as the "dissolution to which a man falls prey if he comes in contact with the external incarnation of his devouring, dead unconscious".²³ Perhaps it is also the dissolution to which man falls prey if he comes in 'unnatural' contact with other men. Moreau included disembodied corpses at the base of the image in various states of decay. Many are pictured sinking into the dirty mass, having been 'opened up' and destroyed by the highly sexualised Hydra. *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* explicitly undermines the possibility of transcending the physical world by presenting images of human decay, dissolution and decomposition. In turn, the work destabilises the circumscribed and sanitised masculine ideal of the Third Republic.

Contrary to the Third Republican masculine ideals of honour, physical and psychological self-mastery, Moreau employed the genre of fantasy so as to depict a markedly divergent masculine identity in *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*. In Moreau's work, the beast within—be it the unconscious mind or the fear of dissolution—had escaped, in turn becoming a threatening opponent to the stoic and classical male hero. Moreau's masculinity was in a state of conflict, under attack from uncontrollable unconscious impulses, an encroaching state of hysteria and a threatening hyper-sexuality. Rather than reasserting the authority and virility of French masculinity, Moreau depicted his masculine identity as conflicted, fractured and crumbling. Gender was rendered fluid and unstable through the suggestion of bisexuality and hysteria. Therefore, *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* becomes indicative of the fin-de-siècle 'crisis of masculinity' through its representational destabilisation and breakdown of the artist's masculinity and the reconfiguration of gender in such a way that it stood in opposition to the circumscribed, bourgeois masculinity of the Third Republic.

IMAGES:

Figure 1: Gustave Moreau, *Hercules and the Lernean Hydra*, (1869-76)

Figure 2: Ernest Meissonier, *1806, Jena* (1887-90)

Figure 3: Henri Gervex, *Rolla*, (1878)

Figure 4: Paul Richer, sketches of hysteria at the Salpêtrière hospital

Figure 5: Auguste Rodin, *Gates of Hell*, 1880-1917

Figure 6: Gustave Moreau, *Studies of a Model (Half-Figures and a Hand)*

Figure 7: Gustave Moreau, *Studies of Severed Hands*

¹ A. Corbin, "Cries and Whispers", in P. Ariès and G. Duby (eds.), *History of Private Life*, vol.4, The Belknap Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990, p.666

² G. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996, p.83

³ Jessica Benjamin and Anson Rabinbach in K. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies II: Male bodies: psychoanalysis the white terror*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989(first published 1978), p.XXIII

⁴ G. Lacambre, *Between Epic and Dream: Gustave Moreau*, La Réunion des Musées Nationaux and The Art Institute of Chicago, 1999, p.136

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.140

⁷ G. Moreau, *Assembleur de rêves*, p.38, quoted in D. W Druick, "Gustave Moreau and the Symbolist Ideal" in *Ibid.*, pp.36-7

⁸ Title of Ernst Jünger's reflections on World War One (Der Kampf als innerse Erlebnis) quoted by Jessica Benjamin and Anson Rabinbach in K. Theweleit (vol II), *op. cit.*, p.IX

⁹ P. Crooke, "Text and Image, Allegory and Symbol in Gustave Moreau's *Jupiter et Sémélé*" in P. McGuinness, *Symbolism, Decadence and the Fin De Siècle, French and European Perspectives*, University of Exeter Press, UK, 2000, p.129

¹⁰ K. Theweleit (vol II), *op. cit.*, p.7

¹¹ Freud quoted in J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis (translated by D. Nicholson-Smith), *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, W.W. Norton and Company, N.Y., 1973, p.53

¹² R. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour in Modern France*, University of California Press, Berkeley and L.A., 1998, p.47

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.53

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.72

¹⁵ L. Yukman, "Loving Dora: Rereading Freud Through H.D.'s *Her*" in D. E. Hall and M. Pramaggiore (eds.), *RePresenting Bisexualities, Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire*, New York University Press, N.Y and London, 1996, p.128 & p.131

¹⁶ Kofman, *The Enigma of Woman* quoted in M. du Plessis, "Blatantly Bisexual; or, Unthinking Queer Theory" in D. E. Hall and M. Pramaggiore (eds.), *RePresenting Bisexualities, Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire*, New York University Press, N.Y and London, 1996, p.30

¹⁷ K. Theweleit (vol II), *op. cit.*, p.19

¹⁸ A. Corbin, "Cries and Whispers" in M. Perrot (ed.), *A History of Private Life. Vol.4*, trans. A. Goldhammer, The Belknap Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990, p.626

¹⁹ D. L Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989, p.253

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.256

²¹ Barbara Ehrenreich in K. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies I: women, floods, bodies, history*, trans. S. Conway, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987 (first published 1977), p.XIII

²² K. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies I: women, floods, bodies, history*, trans. S. Conway, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987 (first published 1977), p.385

²³ K. Theweleit, (vol II), *op. cit.*, p.16