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## THE DEVIL IN DRAG: MORAL INJUNCTION OR SOCIAL LEAVEN?

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On September 25, 1792, the Revolutionary tribunal sentenced the elderly Jacques Cazotte to death for his counter-revolutionary activities. Unrepentant, he declared on the scaffold: “Je meurs comme j’ai vécu, fidèle à Dieu et mon Roi” (*Oeuvres* cxxix). The passages in his correspondence in which Cazotte criticizes the nobility and declares himself in favor of the *Tiers-état* have done little to nuance the stigma he acquired by plotting with the *émigrés* to reinstate the King.<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that Cazotte wrote *Le Diable amoureux* some years before he began his counter-revolutionary scheming, publishing the original version in 1772 and the revised version in 1776, critics tend to read Cazotte’s novella in light of his conservative politics. It is my contention that though Cazotte privately strove to persuade his contemporaries to return to traditional values, his fictional work contributes to a more liberal vision of society. To substantiate this view, I will first reinterpret a passage from his text that is commonly perceived to be anti-Enlightenment as a Cartesian discourse; a discourse which could support critical readings of the text as misogynist. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of performance, I will then argue that Cazotte’s text effectively undercuts the potential misogyny of the Cartesian divide by purveying a notion of identity that is fully in keeping with a feminist politics.

First, a word about the common critical approach to Cazotte’s text. Georges Décote and Claudine Hunting, among others, read *Le Diable amoureux* as a moral allegory which casts

aspersion on philosophes and women.<sup>2</sup> While Cazotte readily acknowledged that his text lends itself to an allegorical reading, he nevertheless warned his readers to beware of reducing it to a single meaning (*Diable* 128). He frequently referred to his novella in an offhand manner, claiming to have written it “dans un instant de gaieté” (*Correspondance* 134). Décote astutely takes the relative insouciance of Cazotte’s comments to mean that he did not in the least consider his text to be an accurate representation of his mystical leanings; leanings that he was not to develop until much later (Décote 261, 265). Such evidence should help dispel the notion that Cazotte invested his novella with his political or moral convictions or that he intended it to dictate those of his readers. Though my primary aim below is to reassess the view of women which Cazotte’s depiction of Biondetta promotes, this aim is part of my more general interest in combatting a critical tendency to reduce Cazotte’s ingenuous phrasing to just so many harbingers of his final years, when he did ultimately perceive the devil in philosophers, women, and revolutionaries alike.<sup>3</sup>

In his study *L’itinéraire de Jacques Cazotte (1719–1792): De la fiction littéraire au mysticisme politique*, Décote argues that by placing theories of a systematically ordered universe and a defense of passionate human nature in the mouth of Biondetta—a creature of doubtful origin—Cazotte meant to warn his readers against the insidious views of the philosophes (296). Décote also notes, but does not elaborate upon, Biondetta’s conviction that “les passions constituent le ressort de l’union comme de l’interaction réciproque de l’âme et du corps” (295). Though Décote only employs such Cartesian terminology in passing, Biondetta’s defense of passionate human nature can be entirely reinterpreted in Cartesian terms, indicating that she need not be exclusively viewed as a fall-guy for the philosophes. Cazotte first evokes Descartes’s dualism when he has Alvare (the hero) address the following words to Biondetta, who is either the devil (as Alvare suspects) or a sylph (as she claims) in human form: “*Esprit qui ne t’es lié à un corps que pour moi, et pour moi seul, j’accepte ton vasselage et t’accorde ma protection*” (*Diable* 73). As a spirit in human form, Biondetta is in the unique position of being able

to contrast her extra- and intra-corporeal experiences. Because Descartes's mind/body divide has come to be understood as the difference between thought and physical machinery, Biondetta's description of her experience may not initially strike the reader as particularly Cartesian, for she refers neither to the pure thought of the mind nor to the pure mechanics of the body. In their recent re-examination of Descartes's dualism, however, Gordon Baker and Katherine J. Morris attest that the notion of sentience, which has dropped out of modern interpretations of Descartes's thought, was an essential component of his writings. They suggest that early modern readers of Descartes would have understood the mind/body divide as follows: the mind is the realm of rational thought and moral consciousness, the body the realm of sensory experience (essentially a "sentient machine"); at their juncture lies a set of internal senses, the seat of the passions, which govern the interactions of the two.<sup>4</sup>

Once the notion of sentience has been restored to the Cartesian model, the Cartesian component of Biondetta's story becomes plain. As a sylph, Biondetta recalls, she led an existence "sans sensations, sans jouissances" (*Diable* 92). Such is the state of being Descartes envisioned for the disembodied soul, for "the human mind separated from the body does not have sense-perception."<sup>5</sup> Biondetta's explanation of her initial decision to assume mortal form for Alvare's sake does, indeed, seem to be more practical than emotional, and she accounts for this impression when she suggests that she only fell in love once she acquired a body: "Quand j'eus pris un corps, Alvare, je m'aperçus que j'avais un cœur. Je vous admirais, je vous aimais" (93). The implication is, then, that feeling love, like feeling anger or pain, arises from the conjunction of body and mind (Baker and Morris 126). Biondetta thus speaks like a true Cartesian when she describes the passions as "le seul ressort au moyen duquel l'âme et le corps peuvent agir réciproquement l'un sur l'autre et se forcer de concourir au maintien nécessaire de leur union!" (*Diable* 102).

Though delighting in the novelty of her sensations, Biondetta soon notes certain repercussions of her physical state upon her mental powers. Having gained the capacity to feel, she loses the

capacity to control her feelings. Such a situation, once again, is entirely in keeping with the idea that the conjunction of mind and body is not simply the sum of its parts. Biondetta, accordingly, attributes her increasingly petulant behavior to the fact that the novelty and force of her sensory experience is disrupting her ability to reason:

Je suis femme par mon choix, Alvare, mais je suis femme enfin, exposée à ressentir toutes les impressions; je ne suis pas de marbre. J'ai choisi entre les zones la matière élémentaire dont mon corps est composé; elle est très susceptible; si elle ne l'était pas, je manquerais de sensibilité. [. . .] Pardonnez-moi d'avoir couru le risque de prendre toutes les imperfections de mon sexe, pour en réunir, si je pouvais, toutes les grâces; mais la folie est faite et constituée comme je le suis à présent, mes sensations sont d'une vivacité dont rien n'approche: mon imagination est un volcan. (101–2)

Whereas Biondetta's Cartesian discourse has, until this point, remained fairly innocuous, in this passage Cazotte clearly plays up its misogynist implications. Descartes's distinction between body and mind, for example, applies to the human condition at large. Yet with the words "Je suis femme enfin," Cazotte links Biondetta's experience to her acquisition of a *female* body in particular. Furthermore, in Descartes's schema, nature is "the mechanism by means of which the body exercises its power to act on the soul in all forms of rational sense-perception" (Baker and Morris 142); the mechanism that has clearly governed Biondetta's recent experience. Yet Biondetta defends the workings of nature over and against cultural convention as part of a design to persuade Alvare to consummate their love before obtaining his mother's permission to marry. Biondetta's Cartesian discourse thus becomes, in effect, one of the womanly wiles she consecrates to her diabolical ends.

Judith Butler condemns the inherent misogyny of both the mind/body divide and the nature/culture binary, stating that in them "reason and mind are associated with masculinity and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute

facticity of the feminine” (37). Cazotte clearly aligns Biondetta with the body and nature, and other aspects of his novella only seem to compound the evidence of his misogynyn. His choice of subject (the devil in the guise of a woman) perpetuates an inherently misogynist legend. The possibility that the mind inhabiting Biondetta’s body is the devil (gendered male) may well have helped generate the misogynist decadent trope of projecting a man’s mind into a woman’s body.<sup>6</sup> Cazotte’s apparent mockery of stereotypical female behavior, in which woman’s tenuous capacity for reason cannot withstand the force of her emotions does nothing to alleviate this impression. Nor does the fact that Biondetta repeatedly gains the upper hand in confrontations by dint of her commandeering personality and ability to cry on demand. In her book *La Femme devant le ‘tribunal masculin’*, Claudine Hunting highlights the misogynyn of Alvare’s simultaneous fear of and desire for Biondetta, noting that the solution to his quandary lies in the masculine fantasy which posits woman as seductress, allowing man to enjoy her favors without incurring any guilt. Yet something about Cazotte’s opposition of Alvare’s and Biondetta’s perspectives and his preference of an ending which implies that their romance may have been but a dream prompts Hunting to concede that “Cazotte, paradoxalement et peut-être inconsciemment, semble suggérer au lecteur . . . que la misogynie de l’homme est, en fin de compte, fondée sur des bases aussi illusoires que la création de Biondetta” (145).<sup>7</sup> In order to discern how, precisely, Cazotte eludes and even dissipates the potentially misogynistic implications of the mind/body divide, I propose that we take a second look at Biondetta from Alvare’s point of view.

At the beginning of the narrative, it must be remembered, both Alvare and the reader are fully convinced that Biondetta is the devil in disguise. Alvare has invoked Béelzébuth, and been confronted by a horrific camel, which becomes a spaniel at his behest. Noting that the spaniel is female, Alvare gives it the name Biondetta. Never once imagining that either its physical form or its gender is stable, however, he soon orders the spaniel to dress in his livery and serve his table, addressing her as Biondetto the moment she becomes a page. Having warned the page

that he will be called upon to entertain the guests, Alvare directs his next move by announcing the arrival of the opera singer "la signora Fiorentina," upon which the page promptly exits. When the page reappears as the signora, Alvare describes the scene not, this time, as though the page has changed body, but merely as though he has cross-dressed, saying: "en assemblant les traits tels que le voile me le laissait apercevoir, je reconnus dans Fiorentina le fripon de Biondetto; mais l'élégance, l'avantage de sa taille se faisaient beaucoup plus remarquer sous l'ajustement de femme que sous l'habit de page" (64). Alvare is mesmerized by the page's beauty, and his pleasure is clearly enhanced by the ambiguity of the page's gender.

This ambiguity continues, insofar as the reader is concerned, throughout the first half of the novella. Alvare intimates that his page's gender is purely a matter of personal preference when he exclaims in surprise and frustration, "Il vous plaît donc à présent d'être femme [. . .] ?" (67). Referring to his servant as "le prétendu page," he calls him "il" until, recalling with longing the song of la signora Fiorentina, he alludes to the page as "elle" for the remainder of a restless night. Upon awakening, Alvare calls his page "il," despite evidence to the contrary, for the page's unbound hair reaches the ground. Swayed, perhaps, by the spectacle of the page's beauty, Alvare reverts to "elle" mid-paragraph. Though at first Alvare switches between the names Biondetto and Biondetta as often as he switches between the pronouns "il" and "elle," as his desire increases and the description of the page's effeminate features multiply, he gradually gravitates towards Biondetta as the name of preference, and only the pronouns keep shifting. As the memory of the horrific camel fades, it becomes increasingly difficult for Alvare to associate the vision of loveliness before him with the specter that appeared when he invoked the devil. He is not convinced of her mortality, however, until he sees her expiring in her own blood, stabbed by a jealous courtesan, at which he exclaims: "Je ne vois plus qu'une femme adorée, victime d'une prévention ridicule . . . et accablée par moi, jusque-là, des plus cruels outrages" (89). With the words "Je ne vois plus qu'une femme" all gender ambiguity vanishes, and Alvare, readily convinced by Biondetta's explanation that

she is a sylph who has assumed human form for love of him, no longer suspects her of being the devil.<sup>8</sup> Having secured the requisite medical corroboration of Biondetta's claim to be a woman—"son sexe fut avéré par la nécessité de panser ses blessures" (91)—Alvare proceeds to dress her, treat her, and have her waited upon as befits her sex. It is at this point that Cazotte presents Biondetta's side of the story in the course of which, as we have seen, every emotional outburst seems to confirm her female nature.

Having donned a body as easily as a woman would clothing, Biondetta completes her costume, in a sense, by adding layer upon layer to the image of woman she presents: feminine features, a haunting voice, flowing hair, a half-moon fingernail, a perfect thigh, modesty, the propensity to blush, languishing love, frailty, breasts, effusive emotion, uncontrollable desire—all signs of woman. The narrative thus exposes how such cultural constructs are gradually consolidated. It bears out Butler's assertion that "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core" (136), for Alvare finds it increasingly preposterous to imagine that Biondetta's interior does not match her ever-more feminine exterior, and welcomes the explanation that she is sylph instead of devil with veritable relief. Though Alvare initially seems to be aware of the performative nature of gender, he is gradually convinced by the performance, and ultimately forgets that it is one.

Whereas Alvare gradually becomes the dupe of the reification of gender norms, the reader remains sensitive to the gender play and the homoerotic overtones which Alvare finds pleasurable but does not necessarily care to confront. Having witnessed the gradual compounding of Alvare's error, we are disinclined to make the same mistake, and less apt to forget—in the space of 75 pages—Cazotte's incessant disruption of our cultural conditioning. The shifting pronouns, our uncertainty as to whether we are up against the mind of devil, sylph, or human, and our confusion as to whether bodies or clothing are being exchanged all help dissociate the traditional alignment of sex, gender, and performance. Consider the scene in which Biondetto assumes the guise of la signora Fiorentina. Alvare is fully convinced that he is



watching the devil in the form of a page in woman's clothing. Cazotte thus forces the reader to recognize the distinction between the anatomy of the performer, the gender of the performer, and the gender of the performance (Butler 137). By distinguishing between these levels, Butler argues both against Descartes's mind/body divide, in which the mind is, in some sense, foundational and the body mere "extension" and against a cultural commonplace in which the sex of the body is foundational and gender mere extension. Contrary to expectations, Cazotte does not dwell on the foundational elements of each binary (the rational mind and the sex of the body) which constitute the conventional understanding of how an individual is constructed. Instead, he devotes the majority of his text to depicting the elements of extension, namely disruptive sensations and gender slippage. His text thus implicitly questions whether identity is mentally or physically determined, and by multiplying scenes and levels of performance, combats the notion that identity can ever be fixed.

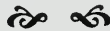
By the time we get an exclusive interview with Biondetta, who has done little but sing and serve throughout the first half of the text, we have thus been made fully aware of the factitious nature of gender norms. Biondetta's narrative appears to consolidate such norms by creating a "unified picture of woman" (Butler 137). Cazotte undercuts this unified picture, however, by sustaining the possibility that Biondetta is the devil in drag. Butler views drag as the ultimate dissociation of sex, gender and performance, stating that "*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*" (137–8). By perpetuating the possibility that Biondetta is neither what she seems (a woman) nor what she claims to be (a sylph), Cazotte renders it impossible for us to read his depiction of Biondetta as misogynist, for her stereotypical profile only serves to expose the contingency of the construct. In suggesting that the gender of a person's inner essence might differ from the sex of the body, Cazotte's text goes beyond those of his contemporaries, many of whose texts feature cross-dressed characters. It gets at the very heart of the notion of drag, which reveals both the discrepancy between gendered clothing and the

sex of the body, and between the sex of the body and the gender of the "self" (Butler 137).

Though Cazotte's political views became increasingly conservative with the years, his textual revisions had the opposite effect. In the first, unpublished version of *Le Diable amoureux*, for example, Biondetta proved to be the devil and became the bane of Alvare's existence. In the 1772 version, the first to be published, Cazotte has Alvare detect the devil's ploy before it is too late, obviating any need for a second part, but maintaining the equation Biondetta = Béalzébuth. Had Cazotte been satisfied with either of these versions, a reading of his text as misogynist would be fully warranted. Yet in the final version, published in 1776, neither the reader nor Alvare learns the truth of Biondetta's identity. The ambiguity lies in what is commonly read as the seduction scene. Ceding to Alvare's insistence that they seek his mother's permission to marry before consummating their love, Biondetta cries out "Sera-ce assez t'abaissier, malheureuse sylphide?" and bursts into tears (116). We are inclined to read the double dotted line that interrupts Alvare's efforts to comfort her as a sign that Biondetta has finally overcome his resistance to her charms. Yet the double line may also be an indication that Alvare has fallen asleep, and dreams Biondetta's subsequent declaration of victory and revelation that she is, indeed, the devil.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, we do not know whether Alvare has dreamt the entire episode as his mother suggests, has been the devil's dupe as the doctor insists,<sup>10</sup> or wrongfully suspects an innocent sylph who pines for him in the next village.<sup>11</sup> This final version of the text, fraught with uncertainties, is the most progressive solution,<sup>12</sup> for the reader's inability to point to "an 'I' that preexists signification" sustains the notion that identity is constituted through performance (Butler 143).

Using the disjuncture Descartes posits between mind and body to his own ends, Cazotte toys with what mind inhabits a given body and proliferates the bodies that house a given mind, experimenting with a subject Descartes never broached, namely when gender becomes manifest. By the end of *Le Diable amoureux* we still do not know where gender starts and how it is determined. Is the mind gendered (devil/sylph)? the body ("son

sexe fut avéré par la nécessité de panser ses blessures”)? the will (“il vous plaît donc à présent d’être femme”)? clothing (page/diva)? Far from reproducing the potential misogyny of the Cartesian divide, Cazotte multiplies its terms to dispel its implications. His text thus begins the work of displacing gender norms through performance and establishing alternative identities through repetition that Butler considers to be consistent with a feminist politics (147). Despite the fact that Cazotte himself became increasingly entrenched in his view that the Revolution was the devil incarnate, his text continues to act as a “social leaven,” the term Diderot used to acknowledge the invaluable social function performed by Cazotte’s marginal friend Jean-François Rameau: “c’est un grain de levain qui fermente qui restitue à chacun une portion de son individualité naturelle” (47).



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Georges Décote, editor of Cazotte’s *Correspondance*, cites Cazotte’s letter of January 1, 1789 to furnish evidence that certain of Cazotte’s political views seem to be in keeping with both the Enlightenment and the Revolution (*L’itinéraire* 414–15).

<sup>2</sup> The pertinent passages in Décote are as follows: for his allegorical reading see 283–292; against the philosophes, 292–297; against women, 289, 421. Almost the entirety of Hunting’s analysis addresses these themes.

<sup>3</sup> See note 2 for pertinent pages in Décote. Pierre-Georges Castex notes that the tendency to interpret Cazotte’s works as prophetic arose early in the nineteenth century. He also remarks that Nerval placed *Le Diable amoureux* “entre les fantaisies de l’Anglais Sterne et les cauchemars de l’Allemand Hoffmann” (32–33), a remark that seems

to suggest how Cazotte's text should be read. Unfortunately, though Castex states, "Convenons-en: l'intention du *Diable amoureux* n'est guère plus sérieuse que celle des contes précédents" (32), he nevertheless upholds the critical tendency to subject *Le Diable amoureux* to an allegorical interpretation (40).

<sup>4</sup> Baker and Morris's study is the result of an exhaustive review of both Descartes's writings and what they call the "Cartesian Legend," or the understanding of Descartes that has been disseminated by his most influential readers. I therefore rely on their study to identify those aspects of the mind/body divide that may have been accessible to an eighteenth-century reader of Descartes, but that have ceased to be part of the current understanding of his dualism.

<sup>5</sup> Quotation from Descartes, cited in Baker and Morris, 165. Their sources include Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1897–1910) V: 402, and *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) III: 380.

<sup>6</sup> Castex has argued, and Todorov agreed, that *Le Diable amoureux* is the French predecessor of fantastic fiction (Castex 25–41; Todorov 28–45). As E.T.A. Hoffmann and Gérard de Nerval were avid readers of Cazotte, it is distinctly possible that the themes of his novella continued to be influential throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century.

<sup>7</sup> Though Hunting's observation is quite a good one, it remains unsatisfactory in that she does not credit Cazotte with having made a conscious choice to perpetuate the paradoxical nature of his work, implying that his message remains ambiguous *malgré lui*.

<sup>8</sup> Alvare's leap of faith involves the following reflection: "L'homme fut un assemblage d'un peu de boue et d'eau. Pourquoi une femme ne serait-elle pas faite de rosée, de vapeurs terrestres et de rayons de lumière, des débris d'un arc-en-ciel condensés? Où est le possible? . . . Où est l'impossible?" (94). Alvare is thus quite far from considering woman to be man's rib, a conviction we might expect either a misogynist or a strictly allegorical text to uphold.

<sup>9</sup> This reading is suggested by Franc Shuerewegen's insightful observation that the dotted line is not necessarily an indication that the couple has consummated their union (58–59).

<sup>10</sup> The doctor's final words curtail the misogynist implications of his interpretation of Alvare's experience. He explicitly recommends that Alvare marry a woman of his mother's choosing, saying "dût celle que vous tiendrez de sa main avoir des grâces et des talents célestes, vous ne serez jamais tenté de la prendre pour le Diable" (125). His words imply both that such a woman exists (and therefore that not all women are devils in disguise) and that Alvare's belief that Biondetta is the devil may stem from his mistrust of women, which the doctor clearly considers inappropriate in most cases.

<sup>11</sup> When Alvare awakens, he finds himself fully clothed on unrumpled sheets and is told that Biondetta, having spent the night with the farmer's wife, and therefore presumably not with him, has already ventured forth as far as the next village where she expects him to join her later (120).

<sup>12</sup> Hunting notes that, between the two possible endings, "il est remarquable que Cazotte ait, en dernière analyse, choisi le second" (145). Once again, however, she stops short of concluding that Cazotte's ultimate choice of ending should perhaps persuade critics to reconsider not only to what extent his text can be read through his politics, but how his politics are to be understood.

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*Le Corps et L'Esprit*  
*in French Cultural Production*



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# *Le Corps et L'Esprit* in French Cultural Production

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The UCLA French Department Graduate Students'  
Fourth Annual Interdisciplinary Conference  
April 16–18, 1999

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de  
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici  
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,  
*Le Quart Livre*

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