**The Marquise of O**

Goethe described the novella (in his essay ‘Novelle’ of 1828) as a realistic genre that positions at its center “an unheard-of, single striking event.” Congruent with this definition, Heinrich von Kleist’s novella, *The Marquise von O* (1808), depicts a chain of events leading to “unalterable circumstances” (Kleist, 42). The novella begins with an announcement placed in a local newspaper by the Marquise von O—, a naïve and demure widow, in which she implores the father of her unborn child to identify himself and marry her. Next, the text provides a retrospective account of the events preceding the notice’s publication. This account focuses on the Russian army’s invasion of the family’s fortress during which the Marquise is captured and abused by a group of soldiers, is rescued by Count F—, a Russian officer, and faints in his arms. Soon after, the Marquise discovers she is pregnant. She tries to understand the circumstances of her impregnation and prove to her family, which views her as a promiscuous femme fatale, that she is virtuous and innocent. Thus, the text begins by withholding important information from the reader, and, in this sense, the reader shares this lack of knowledge with the story’s main character, the Marquise, as she too does not know by whom, and under what circumstances, she became pregnant. The plot, which takes place against the background of war’s arbitrariness and violence, is ostensibly constructed as a “detective story,” in the framework of which is the proverbial “whodunit?” The attempt to solve the mysterious circumstances of the Marquise’s impregnation–which are not provided in the text–and the question of the father’s identity, triggers not only the events occurring in the narrative present, but also the reader and the reading process. Yet, given that the text does not unequivocally confirm the possibility that Count F— did indeed rape the unconscious Marquise, and that the narrator consistently omits vital details while keeping them from the reader, I will argue that the main drama in the story is not related to the question “whodunit” but rather to the text’s unwillingness to provide a definitive answer to this question.

Kleist’s work constitutes one of the literary manifestations of late German Romanticism. A significant moment in Kleist’s spiritual development as a man and as a writer was the “Kant Crisis” of 1801, which in its wake he substituted the principle of reason and objectivity of the Enlightenment project with Romanticism’s profundities of emotion, the sub-conscious, and instinct. In the context of the revolution he generated in the philosophical discourse, Kant argues that man cannot transcend the categories of thought by which he perceives the world; he cannot perceive the thing in itself (*Ding an sich*) that lies forever beyond human consciousness. The paradox faced by the post-Kantian subject largely constitutes a thematic and philosophical framework in Kleist’s oeuvre: the characters in his works operate as principle, active, and highly influential agents, but at the same time they are presented as having no direct contact with the external world. In this post-Kantian atmosphere, Kleist’s work describes a world that oscillates between the dictates of reason (*Vernunft*) and romantic emotion (*Gefuhl*); a world of nihilism and uncertainty, in which the thinking subject cannot find an epistemological anchor by means of which they can directly communicate with the world. The Marquise character embodies the paradox of the post-Kantian subject: the description of her decision to place an advertisement in the newspaper at the beginning of the novella substantiates her being an autonomous and active agent who takes her destiny in her own hands. Yet at the same time, her character is constantly in a state of ignorance and has difficulty understanding and deciphering what is happening right before her eyes. This is exemplified conspicuously in her erroneous interpretation of the Count F— character. Despite probability, common sense, and the many clues pointing to the fact that the Count raped her while she was unconscious, the Marquise insists on seeing him as an angelic and chivalrous figure and is mistaken in accepting the possibility that he is responsible for her situation. Indeed, when Count F— insists on atoning for his deeds and doing the proper thing—to marry her so that she does not give birth outside of wedlock—she calls him Satan and shuns him. The Marquise’s thought processes and reflections throughout the novella do not raise the level of her awareness and do not instigate a dialectic thought process that will render her a more competent and discerning “reader” of reality.[[1]](#footnote-1)

From a poetic viewpoint, Kleist’s works are commentaries on the “Goethe Era” in German literature. Kleist, as Dorit Cohen explains, presents all the characteristics of the German novella described by Goethe and expresses awareness of the paradoxicality inherent in the genre, which contains “the conjunction of the true and the improbable.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Interesting in this regard is the narrator’s censorship of various details in the text—names of people and places—which, in turn, creates a de-location that renders the text an anonymous space. The concealment of this information corresponds, in my opinion, with the tendency to obscure coordinates of time and space and spawns an interesting variation on Goethe-esque romantic exoticism. Corresponding with the etymological meaning of the word “exoticism” (exo in the sense of external), Kleist pushes the plot outside of a distinctively German cultural framework: Count F— is a Russian officer with French mannerisms (“he then addressed the lady politely in French,” [Kleist, 43]); the plot takes place during an unnamed war in the vicinity of the Italian city M—; and the characters’ names are replaced by aristocratic titles and their social roles. Unlike Goethe, in whose works exoticism (e.g. in *Italienische Reise*) is expressed in the specificity of space and is based on clear contours of national or regional culture, Kleist’s exoticism is based on concealing information from the reader and rendering the specific generic and distanced. Counter-intuitively, and as implied in the author’s comment at the beginning of the novella, it is possible that the censoring of the characters’ identifying details and the distancing of the events from the German sphere in fact help intensify the realistic effect and strengthen the assumption that these devices are necessary to “defend” the characters against their definitive identification by the reader.[[3]](#footnote-3) At the same time, Kleist’s devices generate a subversive literalization of the imperative to depict unheard-of events, as they indeed turn the novella’s events into unheard-of events, and convert the particular and local story into generic and anonymous templates which, to some extent, bring it closer to the genre of the German fairy tale (*Das Märchen*) known for its influence on German-Romantic writers and thinkers.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Parallel with the events described, the novella creates a discourse of distancing and displacement that is characterized by movement around a narrative void, to which attention is deferred, suspended, and which evades the characters and reader’s grasp. The unusual use of punctuation marks in the text—the dash, or in some translations, ellipsis—disturb, suspend and even conceal information, and serve as a reminder of what escapes the imprint of the symbolic order. These signs afford a material and perceptible manifestation of that which is not conveyed, becoming an integral part of that which *is* “conveyed” but without unequivocally determining and decoding the significance they encode. This narrative deficiency can be interpreted as an effect of the Marquise’s tendency to deny and repress and as an attempt to articulate the workings of her consciousness in textual-material terms. Following Shoshana Pelman, [[5]](#footnote-5) one can say that the text itself becomes a performative text that imitates the surface of consciousness and circuitously externalizes the presence of a traumatic event or extreme experience that the Marquise is not interested in, or capable of, expressing verbally.[[6]](#footnote-6) The silent, cryptic, and gap-filled text becomes therefore, a loquacious text that “speaks” the main event without the Marquise’s control. The reading of the novella demonstrates that the characters communicate this performative dimension in “texts” generated by their bodily gestures: the text contains many instances of fainting, unconsciousness, truncated speech, a frail and stuttering voice, and silences—all of which can be read as indirect performative displays of what the characters cannot express directly or bring into the sphere of their conscious awareness.

In the context of a feminist-critical reading of the novella, one might add that the narrator’s decreed censorship of the text represents what cannot be articulated beyond the patriarchal language’s system of codes and signs.[[7]](#footnote-7) The text’s performative silences become part of events in the represented world in which speech performances are interrupted or silenced by a male agent that prevents the translation of female experiences and feelings into verbal matter: the first description of the physical discomfort experienced by the Marquise as a result of her pregnancy is abruptly interrupted when her father enters the room (“The conversation was broken off [...] the whole subject was forgotten,” [Kleist, 45]), and the Marquise’s mother is prevented from verbally expressing her feelings and thoughts regarding her daughter’s situation in the father’s silencing presence: “Her mother [...] tried vainly to initiate a discussion of this point. Each time she did so the Commandant requested her to be silent, in a manner more like an order than a request” (Kleist, 59). As these examples demonstrate, the female characters in the novella, the Marquise and her mother, cannot speak of “the problem” directly, and the Marquise’s physical experiences (the rape and pregnancy) are silenced, censored, or negatively encoded by way of dashes, truncations, and paraphrases.

Given that the Marquise’s story, becoming pregnant outside of wedlock, exemplifies the severe violation of woman’s moral status in the patriarchal order, the patriarchal language refuses to contain and represent it. The midwife—referred to not by name but by role—who comes to check on the Marquise, acts in this context as an agent of the social conventions and assists the Marquise in organizing her “feminine” narrative in a clear manner. She helps the Marquise formulate her condition and feelings in terms of a socially acceptable and “appropriate” language.[[8]](#footnote-8) The dialogue between the midwife and the Marquise is a dialogue between different social languages and registers; between the Marquise’s psychologistic-religious language and the midwife’s social, pseudo-scientific language. To some extent, this dialogue reflects Bakhtin’s arguments regarding the novel’s dialogism and polyphony as a literary form of heteroglossia that “swallows” diverse social and cultural voices and presents ideological languages in a state of dynamic and irreconcilable conflict (Bakhtin, 1981). This is particularly evident in the shifts in the novella between religious language, the language of military commands, the language of the bourgeois order, and the language of love and passion. These languages invade each other’s domains and compete for control over the textual and narrative content: sexual capitulation is described in terms of military surrender; depictions of the penetration into the fortress in the framework of the military operation seep through the Count’s discourse of love and courtship and are also employed in the description of his invasion of the Marquise’s courtyard; the bourgeois familial space is saturated with connotations of erotic capitulation and with the language of military commands; erotic passion is described as an experience of spiritual transcendence, etc. But while, as Bakhtin argues, the genre of the novel aspires toward indeterminable polyphony, the dialogism in Kleist’s realistic novella collapses into one decisive principle of a shift between the known and the unknown, between the said and unsaid, between what is permitted and what is not permitted to be said directly and publicly. The multiplicity of languages in the novella facilitates the distancing of the characters and the reader from the “thing itself”; they eclipse the “truth” by means of their unique jargons and a variety of metaphors and tropes that generate a vague and polysemic space.

The tension portrayed in the novella between different social languages accords with the portrayed tension between the private and public spaces. The penetrable boundary between these allegedly separate spheres is manifested in two scenes that constitute each other’s mirror image: the first is the meeting between the Marquise and the Count against the background of the war and the Russian soldiers’ invasion of the fortress owned by the Marquise’s family. The second is the erotic and incestual moment of reconciliation between the father and his daughter, the Marquise, toward the end of the novella. By positioning these scenes opposite one another, the novella problematizes the issues of sexuality, intercourse, and sexual taboo. The “paternal” passion demonstrated by the father toward his pregnant daughter constitutes a variation on the implicit scene of the Marquise’s rape by the Russian F—. In both cases, the Marquise lies passive, motionless, and mute, and is at the mercy of the active and silencing male figure holding her: in the scene with the Count, it is said that she lost consciousness and “collapsed in a dead faint” in his arms (Kleist, 43), while in the scene with the father “[...] her head thrown right back and her eyes tightly shut, was lying quietly in her father’s arms” (Ibid, 64). These scenes’ similarity undermines the bourgeois notion of the private space as a haven, the stronghold of the stable, benevolent, and protective nuclear family. By presenting a seemingly perfect *tableaux vivant* of a unified and reconciled bourgeois family, the novella illuminates, in a parodic and critical light, the bestial dynamic and illegitimate desires within the very heart of the domestic space concealed under a façade of respectability. Not only in the public space, which is saturated with violence and sexual temptations, but also in the heart of the domestic and familial sphere, the woman is presented as a victim of male sexual desire, which disguises itself under a cloak of rescue or benevolent and reconciled paternity.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This reconciliatory situation between the father and his daughter is “supervised” by the mother who peeks at the “pair of betrothed lovers through the keyhole” (Ibid., 64-65). This scene epitomizes the narrator’s silence in that given the absence of his moral and authoritative voice, the events are conveyed through the mother’s point of view—she observes the erotic interaction between her husband and daughter with immense pleasure and joy. For this reason, the scene embodies the epistemological crisis that the characters, and, in turn, the readers, experience in the framework of the novella: the mother who observes the violation of the sexual taboo between the father and the daughter does not enable the scene to signify what it “truly” signifies; she ignores the situation’s incestual core and instills in what she sees a meaning suitable to the legitimate cultural code. In fact, the mother rewrites the scene in a way that accommodates her world view and transforms the meanings and logic that are appropriate to the ideological needs of the social gaze she represents. In this context, one may ask: does the mother’s character represent the reader who peeps through the “keyhole” at the novella’s characters?[[10]](#footnote-10) Is her erroneous interpretation of reality in line with the reader’s failing attempt to create an interpretative, coherent, and stable narrative? And, while doing so, does the reader ultimately recognize their failure to provide the text with meaning that deviates from their subjective, ideological, restricted, and biased construction of reality?

Despite the reader’s temptation to adhere to the hypothesis of probable reading—that the Russian Count is responsible for the Marquise’s rape, it appears that the text invites the reader to succumb to multiple alternative possibilities and a sense of inconclusiveness. There is no doubt that the temptation to succumb to the “rape hypothesis” is based on many details conveyed in the novella. For instance, one important detail that supports this hypothesis is the Count’s story about the swan, which can be read as his circuitous confession. Hurling mud on the swan is like the rape of the Marquise; it taints its innocence and purity, while the swan’s cleansing corresponds with the Marquise’s anticipated “purification” provided she will accept the Count’s proposal and become his lawful wife.[[11]](#footnote-11) This reading of a narrative event as an unconscious confession of the soul or an involuntary memory predicated on the existence of a deep mental structure is consistent with the development of the field of psychology in the nineteenth century and with the increasing interest, during Kleist’s time, in the human psyche and various levels of consciousness. In my opinion, however, such a reading does not satisfactorily account for the epistemological problem at the center of the novella.

Throughout the text, the narrator does not disclose a single detail that can constitute positive, irrefutable evidence of the Count’s actions, neither does the Count explicitly confess to having raped the Marquise. A meticulous reading of the novella reveals that beside the reasonable hypothesis that the Count raped the Marquise, there are at least three other reading hypotheses that can provide an explanation for the Marquise’s puzzling pregnancy. For example, we cannot negate the possibility that the Marquise was raped by Russian soldiers who “with obscene gestures, seized her and carried her off” (Kleist, 42). This option might explain the Count’s anxious behavior, given that he sees himself responsible for the conduct of the soldiers under his command. Another reasonable possibility is that Leopardo (a name connoting a predatory animal) raped the Marquise. The Marquise herself is willing to accept this hypothesis: “[...] ‘it did once happen that I had fallen asleep in the mid-day heat, on my divan, and when I woke up I saw him walking away from it!’” (Kleist, 62). Finally, there is the most ominous possibility—that the Marquise’s pregnancy is related to the incestual relationship with her father implied in the scene of their reconciliation. Since the novella’s narrator is omniscient but limited in the sense that information is withheld, we are denied the privilege of absolute knowledge and, as readers, must manage with circuitous and circumstantial evidence, which are subject to the principle of realistic coincidence (e.g. Leopardo’s appearance at the family’s home on the morning of the 3rd of the month seconds before the Count) and which put the process of “deciphering” the text in a state of crisis. Much like the false rumor of the Count’s death in the battle field, the reader understands that what they hear from the narrator is not positive and authoritative proof, and that any conclusion they come to regarding the plot (e.g. the Count appearing at the family’s house on the 3rd of the month is “evidence” of his paternity) constitute, to a large extent, the reader’s projection of their desire “to make sense” rather than a solid and stable “truth.” In this context, the role of the dash at the end of the novella’s second paragraph is important in that it ostensibly marks the moment when the unconscious Marquise is raped by Count F—. If this dash positions an event that did not occur—the untelling of an event—at the center of the novella, why must we presume that it constitutes a hermeneutic key? Why do we grant it a status different than that which we grant the many other dashes in the novella, those which we do not make an effort to interpret? Why do we presume that the dash signals a clear and definitive referent? It seems, therefore, that the attempt to provide the textual signifier—the dash—a hidden and decisive meaning invites another analogy, this time, between us, the readers, and the pregnant Marquise: instead of succumbing to indecisive and evasive movement on textual surfaces, we render the dash a signifier impregnated with meaning and nurture it with hermeneutic import that turns it, in Dorit Cohen’s words, into “the most pregnant graphic sign in German literature” (Cohen...).

1. Dorit Cohen suggests a different reading. According to her, the Marquise denies and represses her knowledge of the father’s identity (the Count) based on the assumption that the rape she experienced left its mark on the unconscious level of her psyche (Cohen, ...). This argument is in line with the Marquise’s ardent refusal to know (“Ich will nichts wissen”) and with the manner in which she denies entrance to the Count who “threatens” to provide her with the knowledge she wishes to repress: “The Marquise cried: ‘Shut the doors! We are not at home to him’” (Kleist, 65). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Interestingly, Kleist wrote the novella while incarcerated in France for espionage in 1807. Against the background of the local tension and wars between the various German principalities, Kleist develops a deep pessimism based on the political intrigues and on the censorship’s undisputed control over all forms of literary creativity. This criticism possibly explains Kleist’s use of the censoring dash in the novella. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nevertheless, Kleist is still aware that he is writing in the framework of the realistic genre, and negates, by means of the novella’s characters’ internal speech, the events’ affinity with the genre of the German non-realistic tale. After the mother confronts the Marquise’s insistence on ignoring the circumstances that led to her impregnation and on sustaining the story of miraculous conception in the sense of the Virgin Mother, she says to her daughter: “**ein Märchen** von der Umwälzung der Weltordnung” (Kleist...) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The discourse on the performative qualities of a text saturated with punctuation marks and dashes reminded me of the discourse on the performative qualities of the sound O in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, particularly given the heroine’s name in the novella: The Marquise von O. In terms of the discourse on Shakespeare’s play, Frank Kermode argues that the sound O offers a materialization of Othello’s own hollowness, while Joel Fineman argues that the O sound in the play signifies, in the context of a Lancanian reading, the desire to signify the tangible and transform what evades the symbolic order into language. XXX suggests that the letter O is derived from the Holy Mother’s name—Nossa Senhora do O—and the tendency to see in the letter O a visual representation of her pregnant belly. This reference to Maria is supported in the implied analogy in the novella between the Holy Mother and the Marquise, who is also described as a pure woman impregnated under unique circumstances. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In the framework of this reading, one can say that the Marquise’s adoption of the image of the Virgin-Mother, who is impregnated by a divine power, points to the subversive and double usage of this patriarchal image. As Gilbert and Gubar argue, representations of women in patriarchal Western culture are based on a dualism between angel and monster. To a large extent, the Marquise embodies this duality because her representations—the implicit and explicit—shift from a tainted woman consumed in the sexual act of rape, and the dedicated mother, pure and virtuous daughter of nobility. The image of the Holy Mother giving birth to her son Jesus in a virginal birth constitutes evidence of the patriarchy’s attempt to repress the sexual aspect required for conception, given, as it were, that the Holy Mother’s motherhood remains pure and virginal, and cleansed of any affinity with desires of the flesh and bodily passions. Therefore, when the Marquise contemplates the possibility that she conceived immaculately, like the Holy Mother, she ratifies the patriarchal attempt to prevent the eroticization of her desire as a pregnant woman and loses all sexual agency. However, at the same time, in her usage of the Holy Virgin, she obstructs the intervention of paternal human authority and resists the subjugation of the pregnancy to the male order which controls the female reproduction system and appropriates its progeny to preserve the patriarchal power. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As XXX demonstrates, the dialogue between the Marquise and the midwife is a biological-medical dialogue that facilitates the attempt to repress the dynamic libido associated with the circumstances of the Marquise’s pregnancy. Her appeal to the doctor and midwife helps her convert issues related to violence, sex, and desire into a physiological vocabulary that is detached from the sexual act itself and from the moral aspects associated with it. As Michel Foucault argues, the nineteenth-century was characterized by a broad medicalization of sex. The legitimate discourse on sex employed medical terms that enabled its transformation into an ostensibly scientific and objective research topic. This medicalization enabled “subjective experts” (like the doctor and midwife) to supervise and impose discursive restrictions on statements related to sex, and at the same time, position it at the crux of the public, official, and institutionalized domain. In accordance with Foucault, the Marquise’s preoccupation with the biological and medical aspects of the pregnancy grant her the legitimacy to talk about her physical experiences so long as it is moderated by certain subject attitudes (i.e. the doctor and midwife) and articulated in language that represses the question of the rape, sex, sexuality, drives, and desire. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The dialogue between the Count and the Marquise in the garden of her summer home, is located, like the battle scene at the beginning of the novella, in a closed space—an intimate and domestic sphere—which is penetrated by male power. Notably, like in *Princesse de Cleves*, Kleist’s novella contains depictions of male characters’ penetration of the feminine-private space (e.g. the Marquise’s garden and the family’s home) in the framework of courtship and in the name of the discourse of love and male desire. Thus, the penetration of the feminine space, and the difficulty to sustain a “room of one’s own” in worlds dominated by a regime of the masculine gaze and agency, is common to both novellas and points to the strong linkage between the violence imposed on women in the public space and the violence imposed on them in the domestic and private space. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. As Peter Brooks (1993) argues, the growth of the novel was aligned with the rise of the ideal of privacy associated with the growth of the modern cities and with changes in the familial architecture—a shift from life in an extended familial collective to life in the framework of the small, intimate nuclear family. In the world depicted in the novel, Brooks explains, the ideal of privacy is expressed in terms of a paradox: on the one hand, recognition of the fact that the characters engage in private lives concealed from the eyes and consciousness of other characters; on the other hand, the necessity to reveal the characters’ private spheres to the reader. Therefore, reading a novel ratifies the ideal of privacy but at the same time breaches it because to be privy to what occurs in the characters’ private domestic space, the author (and, in turn, the reader) must invade it and render public what takes place behind closed doors and in the characters’ minds. It seems, therefore, that Kleist simultaneously satisfies and challenges this need on the part of the reader, and in his choice to grant his characters a measure of anonymity he renders them “equal” to the anonymous reader, while giving them back the privacy they lose when exposed to the reader. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As XXX demonstrates, the swan, in fact, suggests a double image representing both the Marquise and the Count. On the one hand, the Marquise, who was “tainted” by the disgrace of rape, gets another “opportunity” to cleanse herself by marrying the Count—a patriarchal option that will legitimize the pregnancy and prevent the birth of an illegitimate child. On the other hand, it is possible that swan’s staining by mud and its self-cleansing are actions associated not with the Marquise, but rather with the Count who strives, by marrying the Marquise, to acquit himself of both the guilt of rape and the moral stain on his reputation. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)