

“I must have a mask to hide behind”: Signature, Imposture and Henry Handel Richardson

FIONA MORRISON
UNSW

In a last note to her old school friend and long-time correspondent (1912-1946), Mary Kernot, Henry Handel Richardson declared how delighted she was to be included in a list of great pseudonymous women writers: George Eliot, George Sand and the Brontës: ‘As if I wldn’t be proud to be compared to GS, GE – Cosima! Etc – the first writers of their time’ (*Letters* 722).¹ Richardson’s identification of the category ‘the first writers of their time’ collocates nineteenth-century European women writers who signed their fiction with male names and the achievement of serious and secure reputation. I would argue that Henry Handel Richardson had always had a strong, even strategic, consciousness of this particular group of women writers and perhaps an especially strong affiliation with the figure of George Eliot, the shape of whose early career and the interests of whose partner were so strikingly similar to her own.² Through an examination of Richardson’s letters, autobiographical writing and first novel, this paper investigates the rhetorical, generic and modal possibilities and associated literary agency afforded by Ethel Florence Lindesay Robertson’s adoption of the male pen name Henry Handel Richardson. The rhetoric of signature, authorship, gender and authority revealed in these sources is crucial to this investigation, especially in light of matters of production and reception of Richardson’s early and middle career. Attendant questions of respectability and the implications of a highly detached late naturalism and the disruptive and transgressive dynamics of a transvestic narrative gaze will be also be raised and explored with reference to Richardson’s first novel, and her first work under her pseudonym, *Maurice Guest* (1908).

Taking issue with Gilbert and Gubar’s seminal and longstanding position on nineteenth-century women writers, male pseudonyms, phallic generativity and the patriarchal right to authorship in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, literary historians such as Gaye Tuchman, Mary Poovey and Catherine Judd have suggested that the taking of a male name in the mid to late nineteenth century was relatively rare; in fact, a writer was much more likely to adopt a false name of the correct gender. Of the nineteenth-century women writers who specifically used *male* ‘pen names’, the shared desire was to be *taken seriously* – to avoid the critical standard applied by male critics to the ‘amateur’ lady novelist. George Eliot’s invocation of this category appeared in *The Westminster Review* in October 1856, in a sustained and scathing assessment of most contemporary novels by women writers:

Silly Novels by Lady Novelists are a genus with many species, determined by the particular quality of silliness that predominates in them – the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic. But it is a mixture of all these – a composite order of feminine fatuity, that produces the largest class of such novels, which we shall distinguish as the mind-and-millinery species. (Eliot 442)

Eliot's attack was published anonymously, as was most of her work as a reviewer, before her adoption of the male pseudonym, George Eliot, for *Scenes from Clerical Life* (1858) and all her later novels. The desire to avoid the *a priori* critical category of 'feminine fatuity' was paramount in Eliot's mind, as was the need to protect an unorthodox private life. For Richardson, fifty years later (1908), the male pseudonym afforded a means to negotiate equally pressing, but differently marked, questions of vulnerability, freedom and vocation. The difference of a half-century and the transition into a new century of print makes Richardson's choice seem clearly belated and therefore emphatically marked.

The pseudonym, or pen name was the invented name of the writer wishing to shield his or her identity from the literary marketplace. The proper name of the writer is the centre of an exhilaratingly complex literary and theoretical field of authorship and signature, in which questions of identity, interpretation and categorisation have been especially vexed since the 1960s. The signature, or signing of the 'proper' name, concerns the designation of authenticity and this designation rests on the assumption that 'true' identity inheres in the singular mark of the individual, a singular mark that, paradoxically, must be iterable or repeatable in order to function as a guarantee of identity. The paradoxical signature is also an enigmatic 'place' where writing/signing and embodied subjectivity (the material 'hand' that signs the paper) meet. The iterable truth of the singular signature inheres in the assumption that there must be a correct mark by a correct body or being, one that is symmetrically representational of that body's identity. When a false name is used to sign for the true body (a male name for a body gendered female) then, in the eyes of the law, at least, fraudulence or forgery has occurred; a legal fiction has ensued. The use of a pen name or pseudonym is an inaugurating fiction in a field of production and distribution where, by laws of copyright and property, the name is strenuously required to be absolutely non-fictional, or 'true'.

Elizabeth Grosz sees the signature existing as a hinge or even a kind of fold between the inside and outside of texts, as 'never quite outside the text, nor at home within it... a trace resonating and disseminating the textual exterior with its interior' (Grosz 13). In this inside-outside formulation she arbitrates between the poststructuralist position of Peggy Kamuf (there is not a relevant body that writes, there is just pure textuality) and the more materialist position of Nancy K. Miller (a gendered body with political agency and historically situated holds the pen and writes). In 'Sexual Signatures' Grosz demonstrates the difficulties of embracing a metaphysics of writing, but also negotiates pressing questions of the materiality (labour) of writing. As this *précis* suggests, the signature, as an 'exposed condition' of textual production, is beset by an almost fantastic conceptual ambiguity, as Derrida indicated in 1971 in 'Signature, Event, Context'. Twenty-three years later, in *Archive Fever*, the archive emerges as another of Derrida's enigmatic

places of origin, authoritative interpretation and belonging. The archive was, like the signature, a phenomenon that was vital *and* whose origins and foundational status was incurably ambiguous, paradoxical and uncertain. The mark of the proper name is nevertheless a crucial constituent of the archive as the stable and stabilizing engine of attribution, taxonomy and value. For the archive to function, however, the proper name does not need to be the 'true' name. The *nomos* of the archive is not constitutively legal; consistency of category and reference is much more important. The false name works in an archive, as long as it was agreed upon *as* the mark of attribution. Stability of reference through repetition is much more significant in this context than the truth of the name or its capacity to reference authentically any actual historical body. This formulation is reminiscent of Judith Butler's position that gender identity is not essential, but comprises a series of repeated and conventional performances.

This interest in the proper name is not about 'getting behind' the 'veil of signature' to the 'real' woman writer behind the textual/sexual performance. The foundationalist Gordian knots of identity, textuality and the category of woman do, of course, relate to Henry Handel Richardson's deployment of a male pen name, but I am interested not as much in questions of foundation or origin, as in aspects of discursive and rhetorical *use*. I am interested in the way in which Henry Handel Richardson occupied the authorial position in the *fin de siècle* literary marketplace that greeted her first novel, and in that sense I read the pseudonym as being as much about position and positionality as performativity. Richardson's literary career started, like George Eliot's, with an early and strict division of authorial signature into a modality of sexual difference according to labour: feminine-translator, masculine-novelist. Ethel Florence Lindesay Richardson (legal name by birth) had two signatures: Ethel Florence Lindesay Robertson (married name of the woman translator) and Henry Handel Richardson (hybrid invented name of the male novelist) as well as the marks of 'Henry' and 'HHR'. As Richardson moved from the production of translations and reviews to the production of fiction at the turn of the century she used a male pseudonym and these labours were thereby strictly demarcated and gendered. The 'secret' of her 'real' gender and national identity was successfully and ferociously kept, until, in the case of Nettie Palmer, 1928 (*Letters* 399).

Richardson's own, very uneven, rhetoric of truth about the secret of her invented name, and her artistic interest in the uncompromising truth of naturalistic realism, seem very compelling in this context, especially in their cross-implication in the question of gender, genre and authority. The rhetorical system evident in her personal correspondence relies on the opposition of feminine (private, dark, hidden) to masculine (public, light, displayed). In 1911, after the publication of *The Getting of Wisdom* but when she was still being reviewed as a male author, Richardson wrote to Mary Kernot that the critics were 'in the dark as to my sex at present - the authorship has been kept a dead secret over here' (*Letters* 104). In this new correspondence with her old school friend, Richardson characterises the sexed body as the secret body, about which everyone is 'in the dark' and the truth of her authorship as a 'dead secret'. In these early letters, Richardson claims that her pseudonym was a form of 'thumbing my nose at reviewers, who thought that MG was the personal confession of some misguided youth' (*Letters* 104). Later in 1911 she wrote 'all the critics over there put it down as a young man's naughty and shocking confession

which in one way was flattering enough' (*Letters* 134). She was obviously pleased to have passed so successfully as a male author, and her delight in her successful secret is quite telling, especially as many of her letters in 1911 deploy the rhetoric of truth and sincerity when it comes to describing Laura Rambotham, Louise Dufrayer and even herself.

In a letter to Robert Hichens in early 1917 (the year in which *Australia Felix*, the first of the Mahony trilogy, was published) she makes this claim:

My own instinct is, I must confess, to remain entirely in the shade and let the books speak for themselves...But besides this I still think a book like MG has a better chance if written by a man than a woman. Hoary prejudice lingers, whatever one might say to the contrary. (*Letters* 352)

The formulation of remaining 'in the shade' is a recurring figure in her discussion of her pseudonym, but this letter also demonstrates her additional assessment of the way in which the literary marketplace would react to a scandalous 'book like MG'. She is concerned that lingering 'hoary prejudice' on the part of male critics would mean that the critical and commercial fortunes of the work might decline if it were discovered to have been written by a woman. The critical reception of *Wuthering Heights* might be an example of the profound effects of 'hoary prejudice'. Later in 1917 she wrote to Carl Van Vechten in a similar vein:

At the same time I more than half fear publicity and shrink from the public eye. This was originally one of the reasons for not writing under my married name – although, by the way, HHR is not altogether a pseudonym. Richardson is my own name, and the two HHs were a common combination in our family. This Henry Handel is the man of straw I have set up for the critics to tilt at, while I sit safe and obscure behind. (*Letters* 353)

The earlier formulation of 'shade' is amplified here by the phrase 'shrink from the public eye', which is associated with unbearable light or scrutiny. However, as becomes increasingly clear throughout her correspondence, Richardson goes on to equivocate about the matter of her name and claims the surname as her own, her given and maiden name, even through 'this Henry Handel is a man of straw'. The public is to be shrunk from, the jousting critics are to be fooled, and the mask that will help ensure safety and obscurity is actually not altogether fake.

Ten years later, Richardson wrote to Mary Kernot that

The only stipulation that I now make is that my writing name is strictly adhered to and my private name left in the darkness to which it belongs. It was certainly not Mrs Robertson who wrote 'M.G' and his fellows, but that part of me which calls herself HHR – who is quite a different individual. Have I made it clear! As long as she leaves Mrs JG Robertson out of it, she is at liberty to say what she chooses – even down to personal details if such

are of interest. (*Letters* 399)

Written at a time when HHR was being gradually unmasked as Mrs Ethel Florence Lindesay Robertson, she imperiously commands Kernot to let it be known that the pen name is the public name, and the private name, the married name, the one to be left in the dark, is not the name of the author of 'M.G and his fellows'. Richardson's representation of HHR as that 'part' of herself 'which calls herself HHR' is a 'quite a different individual' to the married persona. The gendered demarcation of early reviews and works of translation from later works of naturalist fiction has certainly deepened into a clear cross-gendered division by 1927. The schizophrenia of this figure, and the rhetorical strangeness of referring to herself as 'me' and 'herself' and 'HHR', certainly does indicate why Christina Stead might trenchantly refer to her as 'Her Highness Royal', drawing attention to both the pronominal strangeness as well as a general imperiousness (Letter from Christina Stead to Stanley Burnshaw, 26 July, 1973). It is interesting to note in this context that Richardson had become widely known as 'Henry' to family and friends by 1917, ten years before this letter, and she consistently signed herself as (and was indeed addressed as) Henry Handel Richardson from about this time as well, or HHR, which she preferred.

The total number of epistolary comments made by Richardson about her 'writing name', of which the above is a small sample, offers an intriguing instability of explanation. It is clear that her male signature separates public and private lives, man and woman, married and unmarried. It is clear that the invented name is the inaugurating possibility of early fictional performance. It is clear that she hated publicity of any kind that required her to speak 'in person', although she was obviously ambitious for her work, and perhaps hoped for the greatest literary and critical success: to be one of the 'first writers' of her time. In telling Mary Kernot about her correspondence with her French translator of *Maurice Guest*, Paul Solanges (a three and a half year correspondence in which she never confesses her male impersonation), she relayed the following:

We carry on a very fiery correspondence. But alas, he hasn't an idea that I'm a woman, and a very awkward day is fast approaching when I shall have to face him and tell him the truth. It's so much easier to be a man and saves so many complications, I always felt half one, and am sure I went wrong in the making. (*Letters* 219)

This figure of 'half' synchronises with the schizophrenic self-representation of 'that part of me that calls herself HHR'. This may be, in some part, related to the 'complications' to which she refers and from which she wishes to be saved. Writing as a man 'saved complications', she argued, indicating that the profession of serious author could only be managed through male impersonation, which is precisely what she did on more than one occasion.

In correspondence after 1930, the prevalent reason she gave about her insistence on her pseudonym is that she had worked hard to 'make' the name and wanted this fact respected (*Letters* 380). This offers a late emphasis on the materiality and labour of

creative writing and related reputation, but it is literally true that Richardson's pseudonym was made up and she became famous under it: 'my married name I shall keep out of the press as long as I can. I have worked so hard to make the other, and the Mrs JGR in brackets after it would spoil it for me (*Letters* 420). It is notable that often, in the same letter, Richardson characterises her name as 'made' but also 'true' (*Letters* 402, 445, 447, 466, 479, 481). To complicate this already mixed domain of reasons for her pseudonym, in writing to Nettie Palmer she claims two further reasons – occult belief and suffragette resistance: 'I have an almost Eastern belief in the virtue and potency of names and have never been able to see why a woman should change hers at marriage' (*Letters* 499).

Three things are persistently and notably omitted from Richardson's catalogue of reasons for her pen name: firstly that *Maurice Guest* was a quite scandalous naturalist-decadent text for its time and Richardson may have been concerned to protect the family name and academic reputation of her respectable Scottish husband, John George Robertson. Secondly, in all her commentary on the name that she had 'made' (the true name, the real name, the name that is only half false, the name that was hers) she rarely avows the masculinity of the authorial name, or sees the gendering of her signature as having any bearing on her claim about its truth. The third reason, related closely to the second, is that Richardson, her 'own' name is, of course, the name of her father, Walter Lindesay Richardson and the model for Richard Mahony, a figure who preoccupied her from 1912-1929.

Truth and gender were keynotes in discourses relating to the production and reception of *Maurice Guest* in England and Europe in the early twentieth century. The author of *Maurice Guest*, part of Heinemann's stable, was positioned in the English literary market as an Englishman, of vague origin and of European education. He was deemed to be committed to a highly serious naturalism that pushed the boundaries of realism and incorporated contemporary *fin de siècle* interests in sexuality and personality. His brand of searing naturalism was generally understood to be influenced by French and Scandinavian masters. The male author had dared to convey, with the extreme detachment of this European naturalism but without the moral focus of English realism, the scandalous story of a doomed affair between an Australian expatriate *femme fatale* and a young Englishman of insufficient talent. The homology between male author and central character implicit in many early judgements of the work secured themselves in the autobiographical reading afforded by the symmetry of young male author and character. In his introduction to the 1922 edition of *Maurice Guest*, Hugh Walpole consistently credits 'Mr Richardson' with a text of astounding 'truth': 'Never, for a single moment, from the first word of the book to the last, does the author moralise or draw conclusions from his story. He is conscious of only one thing—that he must tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. This at the last he has done' (Richardson, *Maurice Guest* ix). The 'truth' of male experience is sourced with 'Mr Richardson', and it is precisely because of extreme narrative detachment that the truth, without moralizing, can be told. It is striking that the claim to truth is based in the gendered signature, which is invented, but which affords the crucial detachment that allows the truth to be told.

Truth, and the performative textual ironies that circulate around it, is central to Richardson's correspondence with Paul Solanges, the French translator of *Maurice Guest*. Their correspondence demonstrates again that in all that concerned her books and where face-to-face contact could be avoided, Ethel Florence Lindesay Robertson was the male writer Henry Handel Richardson. This correspondence attests again to the importance of writing as a zone in which Richardson could control her authorial position through male impersonation. During their sustained correspondence (October 1910-January 1914), Richardson and Solanges exchanged letters full of news but strongly committed to the work of translation they both wanted complete. As Patrick O'Neill demonstrates in his PhD thesis, Solanges was a highly sociable, deeply musical and well-read man, for whom the translation of *Maurice Guest* was a labour of love as well as his first book-length translation from English. Richardson, who had also translated large difficult works of naturalism from one language to another, is a persistent, detailed and rigorous correspondent (*Letters* 26). Yet Richardson maintained her male impersonation, in line with the gendered demarcation of female/married translator and reviewer and male/maiden name writer. Solanges' side of the correspondence is open and sociable, but he is not a fool and O'Neill argues that Solanges was suspicious about the gender of the writer with whom he was dealing from at least 1911. Richardson was always 'Monsieur', and Solanges died before the translation could be completed and published, the day that Richardson had suggested that they finally meet, and when the truth of her identity would be known.

This correspondence includes a fascinating series of exchanges, started by Richardson, about the notion of extremely detached naturalism creating 'traps' for readers who relied on the association of narrator with author (*Letters* 103, 257). Solanges accuses the 'male presenting' Richardson of being a *trappist* (a play on the name for an order of monks known for austerity and vow of silence), of setting traps for the unsuspecting reader through a sustained and complex use of free indirect speech, which makes it difficult to distinguish narrative point of view and results in a total effacement of the author. He also insinuates very charmingly that he is being equally led astray about the author's gender (*Letters* 66, 67, 105, 251, 333) but in letters in 1911 and 1913, Richardson emphatically protests her frankness and sincerity: 'How am I to make you believe that I am absolutely sincere with you, and that I have no intention to lay traps' (*Letters* 257). This breezy claim emerged from the 'male presenting' correspondent who sent photos of Goethe when pressed for a photograph by her suspicious translator (*Letters* 108, 255), and one who was inclined to deal quite coquettishly with Solanges, as he notes:

Do you know that by forcing me, as you do, to exercise my perspicacity, you could lead me to conclusions which would quite astonish you if you knew them...whatever the case, you are a terrible setter of traps and a master tease too. When I leave you alone, it's you who starts again. Hard job! (*Letters* 33)

It is interesting that these personable and friendly letters, works of non-fiction, should so strongly contravene the convention of real private selves addressing one another with true names. Richardson was, in many ways, speaking as herself, but perhaps the authority of

the male pen name in the extensive matter of translating her most scandalous text was crucial to the management of ‘complications’. In the above letter of 1914, one of his last, Solanges points out the pleasure of textual cross-dressing in terms they had invented and circulated over the previous three years for discussing questions of authorial detachment, free indirect speech and European naturalism.

In the autobiographical ‘Some Notes on My Books’ (1940) Richardson touches again on the disjunction between sexed embodiment and textual or writing identity, and some of the titillation, coquettishness and delight in controlled and controlling revelations surface in her description of her revelation of herself, in person, to her hitherto unsuspecting English publisher, William Heinemann. She chooses to ‘reveal’ herself when Heinemann requests an very large cut (20,000 words) in the length of *Maurice Guest*, and the sense of her account here is that professional pride overrides other reservations about dealing ‘in person’ with a matter concerning her creative writing:

When I learned that the book had to be reduced by some 20,000 words, I resolved to see Mr Heinemann myself.... I made my way to 21 Bedford St and climbed the steep stone stairs to his sanctum...Mr Heinemann's surprise was open and unadulterated. At that time I looked younger than I actually was; and this, and my sex, brought his natural stutter to a high pitch. Perhaps also my unfashionable attire. I can still feel his eyes travelling me up and down, from my quaint hat to my stub-toed shoes, these plainly visible beneath a skirt some inches off the ground, at a time when nearly all women wore trains. (Richardson, *Notes* 334)

This anecdote displays a series of interconnected positions that inform the field of Richardson's signature. The presentation of the young, quaintly dressed woman to the unsuspecting publisher (in his high Gothic sanctum) on the matter of how his-her slightly scandalous text is to be edited involves rhetoric of unveiling and display, of literary experiment, propriety and textual authority. As Richardson re-constructs the inspection of the full-length view of her body and her costume, she is anatomised *by herself*: ‘I can still feel his eyes travelling me up and down’. The disguise of gendered identity, which allowed the knowing woman writer to have the last laugh, is unmasked with her ‘appearance’ at the publisher’s office with the desirable effect of stuttering and staring. Her body is thoroughly central to the matter in terms of age, gender and attire.

In a letter to Nettie Palmer a few years before her autobiography was published, Richardson wrote (more than a little disingenuously): ‘How well you do it! On the few occasions I have been tempted with journalism I have toiled and anguished in the sweat of my brow—But then, to have to speak in person is to me the most abhorrent of tasks. I must have a mask to hide behind’ (*Letters* 1010). In this formulation, fiction offers a mask; it militates against the ‘speaking in person’ of non-fiction writing like journalism. Letter writing, however, is also the most ‘in-person’ of textual genres, and here Richardson also chose on occasion to be masked. Integral to this fictional performance is the ‘made’ but ‘real’ or authentic name of writing. The mask of the male name instantiates distance and offers control. It is germane that in her 1946 autobiography,

Myself When Young, Richardson reveals her hatred of being stared at, which crystallized as a young student musician in Leipzig:

No, what did for me, and utterly, were the eyes, the thousands of eyes, all fixed like gimlets on my miserable self, stuck up aloft before them and their helpless prey. The whole time my fingers automatically carried on, I could think only of getting out of range of those eyes, somewhere, anywhere, where they could not follow me. (Richardson, *Myself When Young* 93)

Aged seventy, Henry Handel Richardson's account of her failed musical career is not an account of a provincial of insufficient talent. It is an account of eyes 'fixed like gimlets', eyes with piercing stares, looking unrelentingly at their 'prey'. The dislike of performing 'in person' surely dates from these public performances and final examinations of Conservatorium life and the phobia she claims they produced. Her initial writing 'in person' was at least at one remove: she used her *married* name Ethel Florence Lindesay Robertson to sign her early reviews. The publication of the more scandalous *Maurice Guest* became the inaugural moment for the textual male impersonation she maintained for the rest of her life. Textual performance, rather than the musical performance 'in person', became Henry Handel Richardson's chosen *métier* and 'Henry Handel' was the name she used as a mask to prevent the scrutiny of others and as a way of facilitating her own scrutiny; the naturalist gaze which could be described as being 'fixed like gimlets' on her own novelistic subjects and their desires.

Gathering together threads of masking, staring and unveiling, I would argue that Richardson's use of a pseudonym, the false 'real' name, constitutes a mode of textual and sexual masquerade. Historically connected with possibilities of license and free movement, masquerade promised a tremendous expansion for the female subject, affecting where she was allowed to go, what she was allowed to see and therefore what she was allowed to know. George Sand's cross-dressing afforded access to mobility, specularly and knowledge. Risk, scandal and transgression might be chanced with a mask and it was precisely these things that the early pseudonym, Henry Handel Richardson, facilitated. The impropriety of the kind of naturalist looking and knowing dramatized by *Maurice Guest* is authorised by the male signature. The oversight, authority and masculinity of what Wayne Booth called the 'implied author' of the text ('the part of myself I call HHR') enabled the scopophilic economy that is the heart of the decadent perversity of *Maurice Guest*: for example, 'For one instant Maurice had looked at the girl before him with unconcern, but the next it was with an intentness that soon became intensity, and feverishly grew, until he could not tear his eyes away' (38). Maurice's feverish looking is the central modality of his desire for the exotic woman, Louise Dufroyer, with whom he is obsessed—he dares to look and look: 'he did not lower his eyes, and for not doing so, seemed to himself infinitely bold'. In the darkness of a concert at night, Maurice saw that 'without fear of discovery, he might look as long or as often as he chose' (33). As the centre of Maurice's fatal fixation with Louise as the ultimately ambiguous and unavailable object, Louise's eyes are dwelt on at obsessive length. They are deeply dark and deeply set, scorching and mysterious, vital and opaque and they stand at the heart of both the libidinal economy of *Maurice Guest* and at the

centre of its naturalist textual mode.

More interesting and scandalous by far is Louise's own active spectatorship, evoked in one of the most fascinating scenes of *Maurice Guest*—her confrontation of her rival, Ephie Cahill. When Louise is told that Schilsky, her lover and the true musical genius of the Leipzig milieu, has been unfaithful to her, Louise becomes obsessed with seeing her young rival in order to discern the truth of the claim. She will 'know' when she sees her. Her reaction to the young girl is a fascinating moment of female spectatorship, taken out of the passive register, and the subjectivity it instantiates for the *femme fatale* is one of the significantly scandalous aspects of Richardson's first novel. That the *femme fatale*, much less any woman, might have sufficient subjectivity or agency to be the author of any desiring gaze to any extent at all was virtually unthinkable:

Now she forced herself to see every line of the face. Nothing escaped her. She saw how loosened tendrils of hair on neck and forehead became little curls; saw the finely marked brows, and the dark blue veins at the temples; the pink and white colouring of the cheeks; the small nose, modelled as if in wax; the fascinating baby mouth, with its short upper-lip...as she continued to look into Ephie's face, she ceased to be herself; she became the man whose tastes she knew better than her own; she saw with his eyes, felt with his senses. She pictured Ephie's face, arch and smiling, lifted to his; and she understood and excused his weakness. He had not been able to help what had happened: this was the prettiness that drew him in...In a burst of despair she let her arms fall to her sides; but her insatiable eyes gazed on. (Richardson, *Maurice Guest* 306).

Louise looks as carefully and obsessively as her own voyeuristic admirers. Whereas the scopophilic Maurice typically looks at her under the cover of darkness at a concert, or across a ballroom at night, she boldly scrutinises 'every line' of Ephie's face in broad daylight, without apology or explanation for her actions. She scandalously empathises with the desire that drove Schilsky to pursue Ephie: 'she understood and excused his weakness'. The free indirect thought 'he had not been able to help what had happened' indicates Louise's understanding of sexual drives and desires, and is endowed here with a kind of agency hardly credible in comparison to the general characterizations of the decadent *femme fatale*.

The most intriguing moment of this extract arrives when Louise ceases to look as herself and looks instead 'as' Schilsky—'she saw with his eyes and felt with his senses'. This moment of male impersonation, the 'crossing' into the male gaze, authorises continued and transgressive feminine spectatorship, much as the crossing into a masculine signature also offered new freedoms and possibilities for female authorship and authority, especially in the context of naturalism. Louise's insatiable eyes are in action here and although *her* looking is authorized as *his* looking, it is a moment of feminine gaze – desiring, detailed, detached. Here, it seems, are all the impossible possibilities of the female author of scandalous decadent naturalist fiction whose honest scrutiny is enabled by the cross-dressed signature. The imposture of signature, the 'mask to hide behind' has everything to do with the license for the woman writer to look, at length and in detail, as

naturalistically as possible, at desire and its transgressions. For Richardson, the gender crossing of the invented name was therefore the precondition of the true writing of *Maurice Guest*.

NOTES

¹ Clive Probyn and Bruce Steele gloss this in detail in the third volume of their edition of Richardson's correspondence. Richardson was 'responding to MK's report of an article, 'Women's Entry into Literature' by H.C.M. (*Age*, 16 February 1946) which compares George Sand, George Eliot, the Brontes and HHR as pseudonymous women writers. Probyn and Steele see the exclamatory 'Cosima etc!' as a reference to her own work on Cosima Wager. (*Letters* III, 722). The inclusion of Cosima indicates Richardson's emphatic inclusion of her as one of the foremost women of her time, rather than her well-known adoption of a pseudonym or life as a creative writer under any name. *The Young Cosima* was published in 1939, seven years prior to this letter.

² The extent of her identification with George Eliot, and the related extent of her authorial ambition, is indicated in her correspondence with Nettie Palmer. Richardson inquired a number of times about a planned Nettie Palmer book on George Eliot. In June 1930 she wrote to Nettie Palmer: 'do write about George Eliot. She needs to be lit up by a woman. We have taken men's opinions on person and things for so long – for far too long' (Letter 511). Two years later, she asked again: 'I have always meant to ask you if you have begun your book on George Eliot yet. Or have you given up the idea? I looked forward to it. There's so much to be said of GE' (Letter 729). Richardson also encouraged Nettie Palmer to write about her own work. It is also interesting to note that, in a letter to Mary Kernot in 1927, Richardson commented that, while she didn't care for George Sand's writing, 'she herself remains in her life and letters, a *very vivid creature*' (my emphasis, Letter 409).

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