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“At the end of everything”: Confession and Critique in Michel Tremblay’s *Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra*

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DAMNÉE MANON, SACRÉE SANDRA, the eleventh and final instalment in Michel Tremblay’s *Belles-Soeurs* cycle, is a damning critique of the social conservatism of the Duplessis era (known in French as *la grande noirceur* [“the Great Darkness”]). The play comprises two contrapuntal monologues, referred to in the stage directions as “confessions,” delivered by seemingly opposite characters: Manon, the religious zealot, espouses the very conservatism and repression that Sandra, the outlandish transvestite, decries in her hypersexualized excoriation of social convention. By the end of the play, however, it becomes clear that both characters represent equally pathological responses to their circumstances, their physical and existential stasis encoding the legacy of the Catholic Church in Québec. Tremblay’s critique is heightened by the parodic use of a confessional discourse that is, in its originary form, a hallmark of Catholic dogma. By mobilizing the language of confession to speak out against the social repression perpetuated by the Church, Tremblay articulates an inchoate praxis of resistance; although the characters’ confessions record their social entrapment, their parodic redeployment of the dominant discourse anticipates the possibility of social renewal.

Parallel structures

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Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra allegorizes the effects of *la grande noirceur*, a period of extreme social and religious conservatism in Québec under Premier Maurice Duplessis.¹ During Duplessis’s tenure, which lasted from 1936 to 1959 (with the exception of a five-year hiatus from 1939 to 1944) the Church maintained direct oversight of education, health care, and social services. Although Church and state were officially separate, “in actual fact the church was deeply involved in promoting and ordering social life” and had a “considerable influence” on the operation of the government (Baum 438). The guiding principles of this era included an emphasis on religion, authority, tradition, and the family; the promotion of agriculture; “fierce opposition” to unionization, communism, and socialist principles; and a “suspicion” of democratic government (Rouillard 25). According to one sociologist, “there are few historical parallels” for a modern industrialized society so determined by Catholic ideology (Baum 438). It was only when a liberal government was finally elected in 1960 that the social climate began to change drastically, precipitating a cultural shift that became known as the Quiet Revolution. Tremblay is one of the artists most closely associated with this period of social regeneration. The premiere of *Les Belles-Soeurs* at Montreal’s Théâtre du Rideau Vert on 28 August 1968 is commonly cited as a turning point: in the words of one critic, “There is clearly a before and after *Les Belles-Soeurs*” (Durand 13).

Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra, the eleventh instalment in the *Belles-Soeurs* cycle, concerns itself with the legacy of *la grande noirceur*. The social inertia and isolation of this period are formally embodied in the stage directions: Tremblay separates the two characters on stage, placing Manon in her kitchen and Sandra in her dressing room (7). It is from these remote locations that the characters will deliver their “confessions” (10).² This *mise en scène* recalls an earlier play in the cycle, *Forever Yours Marie-Lou*, which is similarly structured by the two parallel (although antagonistic) monologues delivered by Manon’s parents. In that play, the

1 Tremblay’s critique of this legacy is developed over multiple fictional and dramatic texts from this period. Marie-Lyne Piccione coins the term “déçus du duplessisme” [“the disappointed of the Duplessis era”] to describe the various characters (Albertine of *Albertine en cinq temps*, Angéline Sauvé of *Les Belles-Soeurs*, and others) who embody the most radical refusals of social dogma. For a broader discussion of social critique in Tremblay’s oeuvre, see Piccione’s *Michel Tremblay, l’enfant multiple*, especially pages 42 to 48.

2 Early in the play, a stage direction calls for “a long pause, as if both characters were preparing their confessions” (Van Burek 10).

stage directions stipulate that “Marie-Louise and Leopold never move, never look at one another. They stare straight ahead” (4). The resultant dramatic immobility evokes the deeper social and cultural stasis at which the playwright is taking aim, the theme of which in *Forever Yours Marie-Lou* is developed in multiple relationships: that of the parents, whose dysfunctional arguments have been repeated throughout their marriage, as well as their child Manon, who is accused by her sister Carmen of being unable to move beyond a pathological mourning for their dead mother. The truth of Carmen’s accusation is revealed in *Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra* (set roughly six years later), when Manon admits that her life’s purpose has been to “perpetuate my mother” (34). Sandra’s trajectory has been similarly centripetal: she has moved back to the same street on which she grew up, “right across from the house where [she] was born” (37). The social dysfunction displayed by Marie-Louise and Leopold has been replicated in the next generation, an inheritance that Tremblay emphasizes by way of structural echo.

In addition to physically isolating them on stage, Tremblay reinforces the ideological chasm separating *Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra*’s characters through a visual opposition: Manon, “very devout and all dressed in black,” is sitting in a “completely white” kitchen. The transvestite Sandra, “all dressed in white,” is doing her nails in a “completely black” dressing room (7). However, at the same time as the opposite colour-coding distinguishes the two characters, the chiasmic *mise en scène* compels us to identify them and moreover thwarts our desire for coherent symbolism.³ Manon, the religious zealot, whom Tremblay calls a “full stop” on the religious era in Québec (Boulanger 92),⁴ is positioned in a room painted the colour of purity and virginity. Her unadorned black clothes evoke, on the one hand, the simple dress of nuns and other religious adherents. At the same time, however, black is the colour of mourning, a state Manon has been in since the death of her mother many years before. Black clothing can also have the opposite significance to religious piety: it is the colour associated with witches and the occult. This association becomes particularly significant when we later learn that Manon’s relationship to religious iconography is inflected with a dark idolatry. Sandra, conversely, is entombed in a dark chamber whose symbolic valence is largely related

3 François Laplante’s set design for the 1977 production at the Théâtre de Quat’Sous reinforces this identity: Manon and Sandra’s rooms are identical mirror images of one another. A photograph of this production can be found in *Le Monde de Michel Tremblay* (150).

4 All translations of secondary sources are mine.

to her social role as a fixture in the seedy nightlife of The Main.⁵ The darkness evokes not only Sandra's physical isolation from society but, moreover, connects her marginal sexuality to the unknown, the esoteric, and the evil. Offsetting this association, however, is the fact that Sandra is dressed in white. It is unclear at the beginning of the play exactly what this colour coding is meant to signify, particularly insofar as it is contrasted with Manon's black outfit. Is the white dress meant as an ironic counterpoint to the distinctly unchaste monologue Sandra will proceed to deliver? Or is it meant to redeem the hypersexualized transvestite from the pejorative discourses that surround her by drawing the viewer's attention to a more fundamental human purity?⁶ Moreover, Sandra is painting her nails green, a colour with which she is associated throughout the play, at one point calling herself "Sandra the Green" (23). Green is a colour that is outside the conservative sartorial spectrum (particularly as pertains to nail polish), but it is one to which there are no definitive moral connotations outside the world of the text.⁷

The moral uncertainty provoked by the play's *mise en scène* is borne out by the characters' confessions. As multiple critics have noted, while monologue occupies pride of place in Tremblay's oeuvre, in this play the stage directions establish the specifically Catholic underpinnings of the text.⁸ This religious undercurrent is introduced in Manon and Sandra's

5 The Main, as Montreal's Saint Laurent Boulevard is commonly known, is, as André Brassard put it in the program notes to *Sainte Carmen de la Main*, "the kingdom of the marginals, the homosexuals, the lesbians, the prostitutes, the transvestites" (quoted and translated in Usmiani 19). Usmiani explains, "For the women who are caught in the emotional and physical trap of frustration that the family constitutes within the limitations of an inbred neighbourhood, the Main stands for glamour, freedom, life itself. However, seen within its own context, the world of the Main turns out to be ultimately as inbred, frustrating and limiting, in its own kinky way, as the petty household world around the Rue Fabre" (19).

6 As Gilbert David points out, this blurring is announced in the play's title, which attributes the adjectives "damned" to the pious Manon and "sacred" to the heretical Sandra. David also draws our attention to another subversion, noting that these words have sympathetic or even positive connotations when applied to people (154 n10).

7 As the play progresses, green nail polish becomes associated with marginal, so-called deviant characters, beginning with Sandra's cousin, Thérèse, who wore it as a child "to drive her mother crazy" (16) and reaching its apex in Sandra's assertion that she is going to cover her lover in green graffiti, "anoint his sex with green blood" (23), and then "crucify" him "with green glue" (24).

8 In the introduction to one of the most comprehensive studies of Tremblay's oeuvre, *Le Monde de Michel Tremblay*, Gilbert David and Pierre Lavoie go as far as to argue that the monologue "fundamentally structures" Tremblay's entire corpus (drama and fiction alike) (21).

opening lines, when the women profess adherence to opposing doctrines: whereas for the former, “The solution to everything ... is God” (7), the latter posits, “It doesn’t matter who, doesn’t matter when, where or why, the answer is always to fuck” (7). Parallel lines of dialogue confirm this opposition:

MANON: And me, I’ve found the truth!

SANDRA: When you get to the point where you’ll take no matter what, then a fuck from no matter who will make you happy, no matter how badly he does it.

MANON: God is at the end of everything.

SANDRA: As long as it’s still a fuck.

MANON: God is at the end of everything. (9)

The language here is credal: Manon speaks in the Christian terms of truth and ultimate meaning. For her, truth is to be found in God, whom she reiterates is “at the end of everything.” Sandra likewise professes her adherence to the order of the flesh, “a fuck from no matter who.” The similarity of the two positions is conveyed not only through their parallel structure but through Tremblay’s use of a pun: the phrase “at the end of everything” simultaneously evokes the metaphysical and the corporeal. For Manon, “at the end of everything” is God, the alpha and omega, whereas for Sandra, more or less everything ends at the genitals.

Tremblay’s twinning of Manon and Sandra’s confessions sets up a contrapuntal dialogue between the two characters. Their opening pledges of allegiance to opposite (meta-)physical orders introduces a sustained juxtaposition that creates dialectical tension. Sandra’s contradictory assertions at the end of the play that Manon is “my sister, my twin” (39), but “my antithesis, my contrary” (40) can be read as governing the structure of the work as a whole:

In their confessions, each character takes us through the activities of the day, which follow a pattern consisting of complementary variations on basically identical situations: Manon awakens in the morning, Sandra in the afternoon; both have a sudden, inexplicable impulse to purchase a particularly outrageous tool to be used in the exercise of their separate professions or avocations—a grotesquely oversized rosary in the case of Manon, a grotesquely coloured set of lipstick and nail polish for Sandra. (Usmiani 134)

The parallels occur not only on the level of action but in the topics addressed by each character in her dialogue: when Manon talks about trying to decipher God's messages, Sandra fantasizes about inscribing "secret graffiti, hermetic signs" on the body of her lover (23). When Manon recounts her sheltered, static life, Sandra likewise describes her unchanging life on the Rue Fabre.⁹ The parallels give form to thematic and expressive oppositions: religion is always offset by sexuality, the "serious and sincere tone" by a "flippant, cynical and [...] bawdy sort of humour" (Usmiani 135). The structural analogy between the two confessions formally enacts Tremblay's social critique: the failure of both characters to achieve fulfilment, albeit by opposite means, represents the existential vacancy of a repressed society.

At first it is tempting to interpret Manon and Sandra as emblemizing the periods before and after the Quiet Revolution: Manon's faithful adherence to religious dogma would accordingly convey the conservatism of early twentieth-century Québécois society, whereas Sandra's sexual libertinism could be seen as occurring in the context of more open attitudes to sexuality, particularly homosexuality, in the 1970s. However, the blending of the two monologues, fully realized by the play's end, suggests that both forms of extremism are equally pathological and ultimately empty. Gilbert David calls *Damnée Manon*, *Sacrée Sandra* postmodern insofar as it dramatizes the way in which "by substituting himself for God, the modern individual sees opening before him the chasm of his liberty, in the exaltation and the anguish of having nothing but himself as the final meaning of his fate" (153–54). David's statement applies not only to the godless Sandra, as we quickly come to realize that hidden behind Manon's zealotry is a deep sense of alienation and doubt. This postmodern skepticism is formally encoded in the play's parody of the Catholic confession. That both characters make explicit use of its rhetorical hallmarks demonstrates their indebtedness to ecclesiastical tradition; however, as I will argue, Tremblay turns the form on its head in order to articulate the "incredulity toward metanarratives" that Lyotard associates with the postmodern (xxiv). Tremblay's target in this play is *the* metanarrative par excellence of modern Western culture; however, his skepticism of Christianity, which is shared by many postmodern writers, is steeped in the particular history of repression enforced by the Catholic Church in Québec.

9 The Rue Fabre, specifically "its back alley, with its filth and stench, peopled by colourful, but desperate characters," is the setting for many of Tremblay's plays and novels, including the *Belles-Soeurs* cycle and *The Fat Woman Next Door is Pregnant* (Usmiani 17–18). Usmiani comments that in Tremblay's mythology, the Rue Fabre "is not just a street: it is a way of life" (17).

Parodic confessions

Many critics have identified, and problematized, the determining effect of Catholicism on contemporary subjectivity. Following the theoretical trajectory outlined in Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Peter Brooks argues that

The institution of confession by the Roman Church [is] a key to understanding other uses of confession, and our cultural views of confession [...] because it appears to offer the quintessential form of confession, the form that is closely linked to our understanding of the self, its private sphere, its inwardness, and the needs both to express this self, and to maintain the privileged status of the expression. (90)

Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra tackles a similar theme; however, whereas Brooks and Foucault are concerned with a religious tradition they date back to the Middle Ages, when the Fourth Lateran Council codified the sacrament of penance in 1215, Tremblay is commenting on a much more immediate history (Foucault 58). He articulates his critique of the legacy of Catholicism in Québec through the use of parody, in Linda Hutcheon's sense of "imitation characterized by ironic inversion" (6). There are many clues that point to the Catholic confession (and to Christianity more broadly) as the source text for this inversion, the most obvious being Tremblay's reference to the practice in his stage directions. Among the additional formal indicators are the characters' physical isolation, which—as reinforced in François Laplante's set design for the original production at the Théâtre de Quat'Sous in 1977—evokes the sheltered space of the confessional booth, as well as their use of a "discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement" (Foucault 61). The content of their avowals is likewise inflected by Catholicism, including their admission of personal failings to an implied interlocutor; their use of the language of guilt and shame; their exhortations to be forgiven and/or elevated beyond their current state; and, significantly, their mutual reliance on Christian ideology and iconography.

The transformation of the latter into its opposite, profane sexuality, is one of the primary sites of parodic reversal in *Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra*. In Manon's case, the *volta* occurs when her religious fervour degenerates into a sexual interaction with the body of Christ. Sandra, by contrast, while utterly renouncing Christian virtues, expresses her sexual proclivities in the very language of the dogma she rejects: regarding her lover, aptly named Christian, she tells us, "I'll write a pornographic book

The transformation of the latter into its opposite, profane sexuality, is one of the primary sites of parodic reversal in *Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra*.

on his body. My own Bible. The Book of Genesis according to Sandra the Martian. The Pentateuch, the Song of Songs, the Old Testament and New Testament according to Sandra the Green. And above all, the Apocalypse according to me!" (23). Her postmodernist parody "bawdlerizes" the Christian idea of the word made flesh, literalizing it to the point that it becomes sexual. This form of parody is similar to that of Leonard Cohen in *Beautiful Losers* (1966). Linda Hutcheon's statement about that novel holds equally true of Tremblay's play, where "[t]he official church discourse [...] is parodically inverted in form and content. There is a specific and wholesale transfer from the elevated, spiritual, ideal plane to the material and bodily reality of life" (73). Likewise in *Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra*, both characters end up fusing religion and sexuality such that one becomes indistinguishable from the other. This subversion presages the ultimate act of parodic reversal that occurs at the play's end, where, in the place of divine or clerical absolution, the characters are "ontologically liquidate[d]" through the playwright's metatextual intervention (David 153). This final act of annihilation crystallizes the pointlessness of Manon and Sandra's lives: the former has squandered her life in the service of religion, while the latter "really can't think of anything but fucking to keep [her] alive" (8).

Sandra's idiosyncratic, parodic discourse uses religious terms to describe sexual experiences, producing the inverse of Manon's sexualized religion. Whereas Manon struggles to suppress her bodily urges, Sandra indulges them with what can only be called religious fervour. Jacques Cardinal describes the latter as "a profanation of, an assault on the Holy Mother": "The Catholic imaginary of the glorious body, of the baroque exaltation of the flesh, serves in this instance to retranslate a religious discourse identified more with the modification and denigration of the flesh" (172). Sandra's "charitable, active and effective"¹⁰ penis is thus personified as an obedient Boy Scout; wittily, she dubs herself "the Immaculate Cuntception," continuing the bawdy metaphor with the assertion that "it's tonight the Black Sparrow of the Holy Ghost will pay me a little visit ... to bring me the Big News" (33); she dreams of turning her lover into a "beacon on my balcony, lighting the way to heaven for all the pilgrims in search of a fuck" (25). Sandra's play with opposites occurs within her general program of living life "upside down" (16): a transvestite, her biological reality is at odds with her gender identification. Sandra gives voice to this oppositional project by yoking religious imagery into the service of her sexual self-fashioning.

10 Translation mine, as Van Burek's translation inexplicably omits this line ("charitable, active et efficace") (37).

Sandra's confession will reverse every postulate of its Christian template: in the place of the unified subject,¹¹ Sandra offers a perpetually shifting series of masks designed expressly to "lure into a thousand nameless traps the thousands of victims my cock is lusting after with his appetites voracious and his instincts ferocious" (32). Instead of guilt and shame, her monologue conveys pride in her industrious self-fashioning. The rhetoric of truth-telling is subjugated to the reigning power of "a fuck." The desire to be readmitted into a community first takes the form of disdain for the narrow-mindedness of the Rue Fabre's inhabitants and subsequently becomes a plea to be lifted out of her circumstances altogether. For although her lifestyle is transgressive by conservative standards, Sandra, like Manon, is trapped in an apartment across the street from where she grew up, still shocking the same people in the same way: "I'll keep doing my number," she announces, "perpetuate my role of comic transvestite for all the neighbours who must already be waiting for me, wondering what I'll come up with today" (37). Nothing changes on the Rue Fabre, Sandra elaborates, "Not at all. At least half my childhood friends, especially the girls, have stayed here, married here and had kids that look like us" (38).

Sandra attempts to overcome this stasis by rejecting conventional religion and morality, thus becoming, to an extent, her own creator. Whereas Manon is quick to attribute her destiny to God, Sandra consistently makes reference to herself as a quasi-divine figure, vested with the powers to transform herself and others. Her discussion of writing "[m]y own Bible" on Christian's body (23) serves as a counterpoint to Manon's assertion that she is always attempting to decipher God's hidden signs. Sandra, by contrast, is both the author of her own erotic language and the only reader capable of deciphering the hermetic vocabulary scrawled in green lipstick. Ironically, however, Sandra's putatively autonomous self-creation ultimately leads to a form of self-annihilation. She periodically experiences a compulsion to excavate her "true self"; during one such episode, she recounts,

11 The unified subject is best embodied by St Augustine, whose *Confessions*, published in the fourth century, inaugurated the genre of confessional writing. Linda Anderson characterizes *The Confessions* as an instance of "the unified subject of modern liberal ideology successfully allegorizing their own history" (20). Although Augustine's path to illumination is circuitous, compelling him to dally with fleshly temptations and deviant religious sects before finding his true faith, the model of subjectivity he develops involves a sense of interiority wholly informed by God's divine presence. The truth revealed by God becomes the ultimate grounds for the subject's identity. It is this same model of interiority that the Catholic catechism describes in its description of the "inward conversion" brought about through confession (4.1430).

I ran to my mirror, took off all my clothes and slopped my puss with make-up remover ... I scrubbed and scrubbed, I think I used up two boxes of Kleenex, Man Size. I wiped my face completely away. I pulled my hair back with an elastic. *Silence*. I have the honour to officially declare that of the man I was not a single trace remains. Nothing! However much I looked, dug, examined ... I could not find myself. My own face has ceased to exist. Completely vanished beneath the tons of make-up to which I have subjected it. (31)

Sandra's language is archeological: verbs such as "to scrub" and "to wipe away" anticipate a truth that might be located under the surface, but attempts to "dig" and "examine" fail to uncover the buried artifact. After submitting herself to this examination, Sandra is incapable of finding any original self. In the place of the man she was formerly, Sandra now tells us that the "hundred other faces of women that I've drawn, that I've created myself, look more like me than what's left underneath" (31). By contrast with the agency that Judith Butler famously argues can be created through subversive gender play (185), Sandra's assertion that she "cannot find herself" points to an abiding sense of emptiness at the core of her being. Sandra thus displays the "loss of identity, as well as impotence" that Usmiani associates with all transvestite figures in Tremblay's oeuvre (22). Tremblay makes the political dimension of this symbolism overt in his assertion that "We are a people who have disguised ourselves for years to resemble another people. It's no joke! We have been transvestites for 300 years" (quoted in Usmiani 22). Sandra's transvestism accordingly allegorizes a self-abnegating culture struggling to articulate its own voice.

Whereas Sandra overtly parodies religious discourse, Manon's confession appears conservative by contrast. On deeper examination, however, it becomes clear that her confession is also deeply unorthodox: Tremblay critiques the Church from within by showcasing the intensely flawed version of devotion practised by a putatively faithful adherent. Although Manon frames her avowal in Christian terms, she ends up railing against God, the process of self-examination having pushed her to recognize the futility of the cloistered life she has inherited from her mother. Manon's religious fervour is, moreover, masking a host of sinful lusts. In fact, her monologue reveals the presence of several of the deadly sins, including wrath, greed, pride, lust, and envy, which Manon goes to great lengths to minimize. Her first questionable act is her purchase of a gigantic oversized rosary, which she describes as a "beautiful wine red. And the crucifix is in black wood" (12). Tremblay's close attention to colour is evident in the suggestive colour

scheme of what Pierre Filion has called the “highly-sexualised beads” (12). The rosary is so enormous that later a woman mistakenly thinks she has bought it for a church. Manon admits that she is deeply compelled by its aesthetic qualities, having chosen to shop at St Joseph’s Oratory because “they have the best selection ... and the most beautiful” (10). Having virtually impoverished herself to buy this giant artifact, Manon informs us that she doesn’t even have time to get it blessed because “I was too anxious to see how it would look in the place where I wanted to put it” (14). The purchase of the rosary is steeped in envy, pride, and the greed that in Manon’s own words causes her to think, “maybe I almost committed a sin there, just thinking that someone else might buy my rosary” (11).

Manon is to a certain extent aware of the problematic nature of her preference for the physical rosary over its religious symbolism. Perpetually looking for proof of God in signs and portents, what she calls “[interpreting] the messages” (22), she sights a prayer book lying at the bottom of a garbage can and reads it as a sign that “God wanted me to sacrifice my beautiful rosary, so beautiful, that cost me so much, to help him save the sins of the world” (19). Likening herself to Abraham, Manon prepares to make the ultimate sacrifice, throwing her rosary into the garbage bin. When a young neighbourhood boy makes fun of her, however, she snatches the bag back and, in the first manifestation of a deep wrath bubbling under the surface, pushes him up against a wall. The episode of the rosary is our first glimpse into Manon’s charged relationship to her religion. The lustfulness hinted at in her bodily interaction with the rosary becomes overt when she describes her erotic interaction with the figure of Jesus on the crucifix. In another literalization of the word made flesh, Manon admits, “For a long time, I held my hands on the body of Our Lord who suffered so much for us ... when all of a sudden ... *Silence*. I felt this need ... I felt this terrible need to kiss him ... *Silence*. I couldn’t understand” (21). The need that Manon doesn’t understand is, of course, sexual desire, which here becomes conflated with the suffering of Christ on the cross. She passes her hands over him like a lover, wanting simultaneously to assuage his wounds and her own need to connect physically with another being. Later, Manon likens the feeling she gets from caressing the figure of Jesus to that elicited by a “dirty” dream she has in which she is fondled by another woman. Manon recognizes that her zeal for the body of Christ is not entirely chaste, but, unsure what to do about her feelings, she is by turns defiant and remorseful.

David contrasts the orientation of the two characters’ speeches, pointing out that “Manon monologues toward the external—her madness is

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ex-centric—while Sandra monologues toward the internal—her desire is narcissistic” (156). To be even more precise, Manon’s confession is oriented toward two very different interlocutors—at times she is clearly speaking to God, whom she addresses in the original French using the formal *vous*. For the majority of the play, however, Manon directs her speech toward the audience, or at least in the direction of the audience; David wonders “[t]o whom [...] Sandra’s libidinal boasts and Manon’s hopeless appeals [are] directed” (158). It is significant that the answer is uncertain: whereas the Catholic scenario necessitates “an interlocutory situation in which a response is expected from the confessor, a response which acknowledges that the confession has taken place, and judges it to have been efficacious” (Brooks 95), for the majority of the play, there is no explicit interlocutor. David explains this absence in terms of the “need to talk to oneself to reassure oneself” (158); alternatively, it is possible to connect the lack of priest or confidant to the social and spiritual vacuum opened up by the Church’s decline.

When Manon does begin apostrophizing God, the only overt recipient of her address, one would expect her language to assume the appropriate reverence and her confession to take on a more self-recriminatory tone. Instead, Manon launches into a series of accusations: “*Silence. She screams. Why have You done this to me? Why so much in one day? Why do You put him back on my path, that little boy I loved so much and who’s followed his sick cousin into hell! Why didn’t You send me a dream filled with Your presence instead of that other one?*” (30). She begins blaming God for the failures in her life, such as her decision not to become a nun because of a divine instruction that she should remain at home: “You told me Yourself, inside me. You softly, but firmly murmured in my ear that my place wasn’t there, but here. In my mother’s bed, in my mother’s life” (34). Later, she reproaches God for failing to solve her problems, insisting, “It was always You who made the decisions, don’t stop now. It was always You who took my fate in Your hands, so I’ll tell you once and for all, it’s Your responsibility!” (36). Her anger bubbles over into outright challenge: “I have a right to my pleasures!” she yells as she begins to give God ultimatums (35). Usmiani observes that “[h]er assertion of her right to be loved represents a complete reversal of the traditional position of mystical literature, where it is God, not the soul, who makes the demand” (143). It also reverses the dynamics of the Catholic confessional scenario, in which the “essential act of Penance is contrition” (“A Guide for Confession”). This reversal is confirmed when Manon instructs God, “come closer and I’ll forgive you for everything” (36); by claiming the power to forgive

as her own, she places herself in the role of the priest and, by extension, God himself. However, Manon cannot hold on to this radical position: in contrast to this moment of self-assertion, Manon's anger is also punctuated by the more standard implorations, "Forgive me," "Take me back" (31), and "Help me deny my body!" (42). A good Catholic, Manon has deeply internalized the catalogue of sins, foremost among which is her carnal lust. These moments of appeal to God to be forgiven, cleansed, and readmitted into the community of the faithful nevertheless fall flat within the context of her general program of divine excoriation. Her unstable oscillation between accusation and contrition emblemizes the breakdown of Christianity as a viable ordering system for her life as she is overwhelmed by bodily urges and metaphysical doubts. Manon's personal breakdown is of course the microcosm of a dynamic Tremblay is trying to expose within Québécois culture more broadly, namely the existential abyss opened up by the waning of the Church's hegemony.

The feeling of existential emptiness shared by both women reaches its climax at the play's end when Sandra, like Manon, realizes she has "been invented ... by ... Michel" (43):

MANON *as if she were flying away*: Ah ... ah ... thank You! I knew it! Thank You, dear God! Thank you!

SANDRA: Climb ... higher ... climb!

MANON: Yes ... higher!

SANDRA: Keep going ... right to the end! Go to the end of your journey! Climb! Climb! Climb! And take me with you! I want to leave!

She screams.

Take me with you, because I don't exist either! I, too, have been invented! Look, Manon! Look! His light is coming!

There is a very intense light for five seconds, then a blackout. (43)

Sandra's plea to Manon marks the point at which the two characters, previously parallel but separate, come together, both arriving at the self-negating realization that they have been created. Manon and Sandra both ultimately contradict their opening thesis: Manon's professed faith in God is undermined by her admission that she has been "invented ... by ... Michel" (43). Sandra's commitment to the way of the flesh is shaken by her desire to be taken up with Manon. Bracketing for a moment the metatextual implications, it is provocative to consider in what way Manon has been "invented" by Michel, who is now Sandra, and who was once

upon a time her childhood friend.¹² Manon blames Michel's downfall on the influence of his deviant cousin Thérèse,¹³ the woman who comes to her in her erotic dream. "We hated them all, the whole gang!" she tells us; "Except Michel. I loved Michel" (27). This is the closest Manon comes to admitting that she has feelings for another human being, romantic or otherwise. It is thus possible to posit that she has been "invented" by him in the sense that he was the first to awaken within her feelings of love, attachment, sexual desire, namely the passions she has been deflecting into her religious fervour. Sandra confirms that Manon is her "twin" and that "[i]f Manon had not existed, I would have invented her" (41). The sexual dimension is certainly connoted in Sandra's assertion that she gave her "all the passion I possibly could" (40). In a sense, the two characters have invented each other: Manon knows, deep down, that her moment of childhood connectedness is somehow more meaningful than all her subsequent years of pious self-denial. Sandra, by the same token, tells us that she depends on Manon for a surprising reason, to reassure her that genuine happiness is possible: "I have found someone truly happy whom I can watch live her happy, mouse-like life, surrounded by the decor of my own happy childhood. And I am reassured" (41). Manon's imputed happiness, a word Sandra reiterates for emphasis, is the happiness of a mouse, quietly leading its unassuming life amidst the "decor of [Sandra's] own happy childhood." Sandra finds this life "reassuring" because it provides the stability and permanence that are absent from Sandra's perpetual self-redefinition.

The irony here is that Manon is far from happy; Sandra's version of the little self-satisfied mouse is but a variation on the grass is always greener fallacy. The fact that a personality as outlandish as she finds reassurance

12 In addition to the onomastic identity between the playwright and the character Michel, the description of the latter's family origins connects him to the character Jean-Marc from *The Fat Woman Next Door is Pregnant*, who "shares a good number of traits with the author himself" (Barrette 97). In *L'Univers de Michel Tremblay*, a comprehensive encyclopedia of Tremblay's characters, Barrette goes as far as to note the connection between Michel and Jean-Marc, but he stops short of identifying them as one and the same or of identifying the former with the playwright (132). A metatextual reading is nevertheless highly warranted not only by these points of convergence but by comments subsequently made by the playwright around the time of *Damnée Manon*, *Sacrée Sandra*'s publication that he was "taking myself for God, these days" (quoted in David 153 n9).

13 Although in the first edition of the play this character is known as Hélène, in the second edition, Tremblay changed it to Thérèse, likely to distance this character from her autobiographical avatar, Tremblay's eponymous cousin.

in the humble life of a woman like Manon suggests that her mode of being is, to a great extent, reactionary: her “performatively enacted” identity, the “parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meanings” (Butler 46) is only possible within a discursive framework where Manon functions as the norm. Both Sandra’s gender identity as well as her use of parodically inverted religious discourse are, in essence, constructed as a reaction against Manon. Sandra’s account of her counterpart is necessarily reductionist, suggesting that she really has invented her while simultaneously being invented *by* her. The two are suffering in different ways from a similar identity crisis.

Of course, Manon and Sandra have also both been invented by “Michel” in the literal sense, insofar as they are characters in Tremblay’s play. In the standard interpretation of the ending, “the creator takes his creatures back in hand, their speech becomes his own speech once more, and the two fly off in his light” (Filion 20). The “very intense light” that heralds the playwright’s arrival is in fact Tremblay’s second on-stage avatar, the first being Sandra/Michel; the ambiguity of the final tableau is heightened by Sandra’s “triumphant announcement” of the light’s arrival, which David suggestively argues she makes “almost in the fashion of a stage manager” (162). Tremblay’s presence is thus implicit at two diegetic levels: as a character and as the literal *deus ex machina* of the drama. The play’s parodic confession finds its apogee in the revelation that behind the curtain is only a man. Manon’s quest for an absolute is thwarted by this revelation, which for Usmani constitutes “the real tragedy in the work of Michel Tremblay” (26). The ending also reinforces the play’s social critique by underscoring the futility of its characters’ lives, particularly Manon’s, squandered in the service of a religion that proves groundless.

The play’s final tableau, in its refusal to grant either closure or definitive meaning, represents the most overt challenge to Christian teleology. Consider, by way of contrast, the conversion scene from Augustine’s *Confessions*. Augustine is at a similar existential impasse, having dabbled in both the ways of the flesh as well as the search for true faith. As he puts it, “[t]his debate in my heart was a struggle of myself against myself” (VIII.xi.27). Unable to find satisfaction in either, Augustine arrives at a point of crisis: “From a hidden depth a profound self-examination had dredged up a heap of all my misery and ‘set it in the sight of my heart’” (VIII.xii.28). When Augustine prays for and receives enlightenment in the famous *tolle lege* scene, he describes feeling “as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled” (VIII.xii.29). The final moments of *Damnée Manon*, *Sacrée Sandra* parody

the Christian ideal of divine illumination. This doctrine, “most closely associated with Augustine and his scholastic followers,” maintains “that human beings require a special divine assistance in their ordinary cognitive activities” (Pasnau np). Whereas Augustine describes a successful moment of religious inspiration, the play’s final scene uses a religious visual vocabulary to depict precisely the opposite. The wash of bright stage lighting in which the two characters are engulfed is the secular counterpoint to Augustine’s “light of relief” following as it does their admissions that they have been invented by the playwright. This admission and the bright light that follow represent the breakdown of metanarratives that claim to explain the being of the subject: Manon has devoted her life to religion, whereas Sandra has pursued the way of the flesh. Both end up dissatisfied as their chosen paths lead to existential dead ends, Manon proving unable to resist the desires of her body and Sandra no longer capable of denying the “anger and disappointment” that accompany the inevitable truth that, for her various lovers, “at bottom she is nothing for them but a ‘one, two, or three star fuck’” (Usmiani 142). Augustine’s conversion must be read within a teleological framework of movement toward religious enlightenment, a logic shared by the standard confession in its progress from sin to redemption. Here, there is no possibility of redemption, only a “return to the crucible of the author’s imagination whence they came, both of them testifying in their own way to that ‘eternal hunger which shall never more be satisfied’” (Usmiani 145). Tremblay’s characters will find no higher truth: Manon asks to be swept up in God’s light but instead is transported away by her more prosaic creator with Sandra in tow. The postmodern ending, which parodies Augustine’s moment of divine illumination, definitively tolls Catholicism’s death knell.

Coda: “My own style”

Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra can be described as operating on diagnostic and normative fronts, both encoding the legacy of *la grande noirceur* and simultaneously announcing the possibility of cultural renewal. Manon and Sandra are classic, if opposite, examples of the effects of social conservatism: Manon capitulates, Sandra rebels. By the end of the play, it has become clear that neither approach leads to the existential fulfilment the characters are seeking. That a work whose primary target is the Church would be structured as a confession is particularly ironic. Over the course of the play, however, Tremblay ingeniously dismantles the tenets of confession one by one, with the ultimate subversion occurring at the play’s end in the metatextual usurpation of God’s place. The curtain is pulled back,

so to speak, on the myth of divine preordination, revealing the artist at the heart of the machine.

As both Judith Butler and Linda Hutcheon have pointed out, however, “[p]arody by itself is not subversive” (Butler 189). In what she calls “the paradox of parody” Hutcheon argues that “parody’s transgressions ultimately remain authorized—authorized by the very norm it seeks to subvert. In mocking, parody reinforces; in formal terms, it inscribes the mocked conventions into itself, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence” (75). Butler follows the same logic in calling for “a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony” (189). It would thus be possible to argue that Manon and Sandra’s parodic confessions merely record the religious hegemony of *la grande noirceur* without pointing the way beyond it. The normative force of Tremblay’s social vision, however, emerges in his use of *joual*, the working-class vernacular spoken on the streets of Montreal. The 1968 production of *Les Belles Soeurs* marked the first time that a play written entirely in *joual* had ever been performed on such a large scale. Before Tremblay, *joual* was a fully oral demotic French with no corresponding typography and an extremely marginal place on the Québec stage; Tremblay actually had to develop a lexical system so that it could be faithfully reproduced for the theatre. It is not possible to overstate the “scandal” provoked by the incursion of the vernacular into a space hitherto reserved exclusively for “high” French (Dargnat 8).¹⁴ With his representation of working-class women speaking the argot of the streets, Tremblay overturned an entire theatrical tradition that “hitherto had been elitist, beholden to French models, and conformant with the dominant Catholic religious morals that prevailed under the reign of Maurice Duplessis” (Durand 15).

The stakes of his decision to employ this blue-collar sociolect—replete with Anglicisms, jargon, and swear words—become clear when one considers the historical role of the Catholic Church as guardian of the French language. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Church saw itself as the “shield” that could ensure the *survivance* of French in a continent increasingly dominated by Anglophone Protestantism (Jones 250). By the same token, nationalists such as Henri Bourassa insisted on

14 Critical opinion on *joual* was split: whereas some immediately praised Tremblay’s revolutionary use of language, others were offended by the public airing of what they perceived as “a kind of wound particular to the French Canadian, the symbol of a collective humiliation” (Biron, Dumont, and Nardout-Lafarge 456).

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the interdependence of language and morality: in a tract entitled *La langue, gardienne de la foi* ["Language, the guardian of faith"] (1918), Bourassa denounced English as "the language of error, heresy, revolt, division, dogmatic and moral anarchy" (Gagnon 231). This ideology informed the instruction of the French language; up until the education reforms brought about by the Quiet Revolution, language and faith were so inextricable that in "grammar, the moral rule was inculcated alongside the agreement of the past participle" (Gagnon 233). Having been educated in this tradition, Tremblay felt constrained by its regimentation, recalling,

I had started a long time ago to balk, during my French courses, to revolt against the simplistic style that was imposed on us for our compositions: subject, verb, object, and in that order, please. The fewest inversions possible, they muddled the meaning of the sentence, and no interjections. When they felt I'd gone over the limit, they would hand me back my copies covered in red and in comments: "Did you have a fever, when you wrote this drivel?" (quoted in Dargnat 27–28)

The ideological challenge embodied in *joual's* linguistic vulgarization is perhaps best expressed in the colourful lexicon of curse words derived from religion (known in French as *sacres*). Whereas English generally obtains its foul language from scatological and other bodily functions, the religious etymology of Québécois invectives can be explained as a reaction against the Catholic Church's powerful role in society. The presence of the Church in "all events, great and small, of quotidian life (birth, marriage, death, moral life, etc.)" resulted in "a sort of saturation, accompanied by a phenomenon of rejection": "one of the ways to distance oneself from the Church was literally to 'take it at its own word' [...] by using terms designating either divine persons (Christ, Jésus) or religious objects (chalice, host, tabernacle)" (Bougaïeff 840–41). *Sacres* are one of the most powerful tools in Tremblay's arsenal: in his review of *Les Belles-Soeurs* for *La Presse*, for example, Martial Dassylva fumed that he had never heard "as many curses, swear words, trashy words" in one evening (quoted in Malone). By contrast with other plays, *Damnée Manon*, *Sacrée Sandra* in fact contains relatively few overt *sacres*: Sandra mutters the occasional mild curse word, like "maudit" [damn].¹⁵ However, Sandra's parodic play with religious identities and her vulgar puns ("I could have shoved my fist up her Anus

¹⁵ As Louise Ladouceur argues, *joual* is nearly impossible to translate: not only is the English language shaped by different socio-historic conditions, Canadian English is, "moreover, incapable of expressing the ideological statement made by

Dei” [17]) are inspired by the same semantic “playfulness” that typifies the art of *sacrer* (Bougaïeff 842).¹⁶ Therefore, while on one level Sandra allegorizes the existential abyss of a “transvestite” culture disguising its true nature, she also embodies the spirit of revolt against the officially sanctioned language imposed by the Church. Likewise, Manon, who has so deeply internalized religious rhetoric, speaks in the demotic language excoriated by that very same institution. If religion is the target of the play’s irony, *joual* is the sincere residue that remains once religion has been thoroughly dismantled.

Sainte-Carmen of the Main, which immediately precedes *Damnée Manon*, *Sacrée Sandra* in the *Belles-Soeurs* cycle, allegorizes the necessity and the difficulty of speaking one’s language when that language is deprecated by its own speakers, not to mention the rest of society. Carmen is a rodeo singer who begins her career singing the songs of others and dreaming of one day being able to perform in “[m]y own style! I started out with other people’s words and music, but maybe one day, I’ll have my own words and my own music” (56). When she comes back home to the Main, the red-light district of Montreal, after a sojourn in Nashville, she begins performing in French for the inhabitants of her neighbourhood, who are deeply moved; one person gushes, “Carmen said my life is beautiful, that I’m a love song asleep in a tavern” (46). However, in an ending deeply inflected with allegorical significance, Carmen is murdered by her manager, who wants her to keep singing in English and is intent on preventing her from performing in her native language. In all of his plays, Tremblay explores what it means to speak in one’s own tongue, whether in the broad sense of a language or in the more restricted sense of a sociolect.

It is precisely Tremblay’s use of *joual* that prevents Manon and Sandra’s discourse from becoming “domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony,” as Butler would have it. If their parodic inversions encode the legacy of *la grande noirceur*, Tremblay’s revolutionary language announces the possibility of social renewal. Rather than ruminate pessimistically on the death of God, Tremblay suggests that the only path to existential fulfilment is to develop one’s own unique voice, in opposition to those who would insist that one parrot the official discourse. The only

the recourse to a colonized idiom alienated by its close contact with a dominant language” (213). For an in-depth study (in French) of Tremblay’s use of *joual*, see Mathilde Dargnat’s *Michel Tremblay: Le “joual” dans Les Belles-Soeurs*.

¹⁶ See Bougaïeff’s article for a detailed analysis of the morphological “richness and complexity” of this art (847).

way to live in “good faith,” as Sartre would put it, is to seek “my own style.”¹⁷ Usmiani identifies Carmen as the only character in the *Belles-Soeurs* cycle who succeeds in doing so, if only briefly, before she is murdered and canonized by a society torn between upholding the status quo and moving into a new era of self-actualization. As attested to by Manon and Sandra’s failures and Michel Tremblay’s successes alike, “my own style” is not just an idiosyncratic way of expressing oneself; rather, it is the only way to resist capitulating to the oppressive metanarratives that would otherwise keep the subject in check.

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¹⁷ Sartre develops the concept of “good faith,” which he distinguishes from “bad faith,” in *L’Être et le néant* (translated as *Being and Nothingness* [1943]). As Greg Dimitriadis summarizes, the term “bad faith” refers to “all the ways we refuse our basic, human freedoms through recourse to static ideas, beliefs, and roles” (4). To act in good faith, by contrast, is to act in keeping with one’s principles, refusing to rehearse social scripts for the sake of conformism or convenience.

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