

NAMING WOULD-BE OVERTHROWERS OF MEN  
 IN THE NOVELS OF MICHELE PERREIN

Martha Onan

State University of New York  
 College at Brockport

The would-be overthrowers of men in the novels of Michèle Perrein are characters named Odile Charret, Camille, and Germa Lapidaire<sup>1</sup> who represent the spirit and determination of French feminists after 1945, the year French women gained the right to vote. The characters are contemporary with the birth of the Fifth Republic (1958); termination of the long revolution of Algeria against France (1962); law permitting women to have a bank account without authorization of their husbands (1965); revolt of students (May-June 1968) led by such war cries as "Students liberate yourselves from gods and masters. Liberate yourselves from your parents. . . . Long live madness!"; creation of a Department of Women's Affairs (1974); law permitting abortion under certain conditions (1975); and, a great setback for women, termination of the only women's studies program in a French university (1981).

Coming after Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Duras, Nathalie Sarraute, and Marguerite Yourcenar, Michèle Perrein is a contemporary of such writers as Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva. In varying degrees, these writers may be classified as feminists who denounce sexual discrimination and exploitation of

women as sex objects, who want to leave their prison-home and to exist in their own right, and who are beginning to communicate with women everywhere. These desires are similar to those presented by the Mouvement de Libération de Femmes in a tract in 1974.

Perrein sees in each woman three distinct stages which, if she were naming a girl, would be included in the combined name, Reine-Agneau-Barbara. 'Queen-Lamb-Barbara.' She defines at great length the combined name in her essay, Le Mâle aimant.<sup>2</sup> Reine means the girl who is the center of activities when, for example, still very young she can play on the sidewalk with boys and enjoy independence and then, in elementary school, when she fervently believes her admired oration of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizen. Agneau is the conventional, sacrificial, all-giving woman, a role which is taught first by, of all people, the mother and finally by the man who "devours" the woman. The third name, Barbara indicates the feminist who wears boots and cap and who knows how to stand on her own two feet and avenge herself. Reine-Agneau-Barbara, the combined name used in her essay, is too all-inclusive for any single character in her fiction. However, the heroines fall under the category of Barbara. 'stranger,' having the meaning of being different from the docile little girl mama wants to train and the adoring inferior the man wants to possess.

Perrein's Barbaras have rather disappointing names--

especially Odile Charmet and Camille, while Gemma Lapidaire is more suggestive of a combative, proud woman. It would seem that a twentieth-century French writer would invent names as powerful as those of her Precious sisters of the seventeenth century who originated terms to describe accurately a woman's age, psychology, looks, and history: Dircé who, according to the Dictionnaire des pretieuses, wants to separate from her husband and will be successful because she has a great deal of spirit; Félixerie who is a most singular person, for she is insensitive to love; and a final example is Istrine, thirty-eight years old, who once had Sidroaste, and he would still love her had he found in her as much sweetness as mind power.<sup>3</sup> But in her novels, Perrein lets the parents name their daughters.

So, the parents in her first novel, La Sensitive (1956), name their baby girl Odile, and she becomes Odile Charmet. But they do not expect her to be the real Odile, a strong woman who became a saint after having established a monastery in the Vosges Mountains in the years 660 to 720. The parents do not object to their Odile becoming "rich," the connotation of her name, and want to help her make a good marriage. Charmet is suggestive of "charm" but as a family name is a diminutive of charme 'a tree typical of a yard or estate' or 'hornbeam tree.'<sup>4</sup>

Odile Charmet, the twenty-year-old heroine of La Sensitive, is a law student at the university in Bordeaux. Making a

psychological portrait of herself from the age of six to nineteen, she finds that she has been taught to be retiring, yielding, pleasing. Here is an episode from the time when she was six:

At six, she said to the cat, "Excuse me."

She had been taught to say, "Excuse me, Sir,"  
"Excuse me, Madame. . . . [Q]uite naturally, she  
uttered, "Excuse me, Pussy." (S,9)

The little paragon of docility, even at thirteen, lets a saleslady sell her shoes two sizes too large. Docility has been dinged into her ears by her mother and teachers who try to destroy her competitive nature.

But the higher she advances in school, the more decisive she becomes. She loves literary quarrels. With other students, she "interprets the classics as if those works were about her own glory" (S, 44). In fact, she is not lukewarm to the classics. Quite the contrary, she foams them (S, 44). When she is fifteen, she identifies herself with those heroines (people like the historical Odile, the Alsatian saint whose name she bears) who renounced happiness and human weaknesses for the gods, rules, and laws (S, 44).

At this time, the school principal, a rotund man with a drooping mustache, takes her aside and advises:

"Remember, Mademoiselle, what I tell you. . . . I'll

not always be able to save you. You must never take the bull by the horns. . . . Don't say what you think." (S, 45)

But this type of advice is contrary to Odile's ambition which soon is to lead her to Bordeaux to study law with the hope of becoming the greatest lawyer of her time and a member of the highest court.

In Bordeaux, she discovers that her parents, teachers, and men have been trying to teach her to play the role of *La Sensitive*, or *Mimosa pudica*, a plant which loves light, frequent waterings, and hot houses, which has leaves so sensitive that they roll up at the least touch, and which exudes a poison from its bark. However, she lets the wishy-washy mimosa in her die and, in great irony, begins to live her real name, Odile, a name which her family never intended her to follow. To become Odile, a strong woman, a "saint," she determines never to be the victim of any man. "Armed to detest men, to no longer suffer" from them (S, 203), she makes progress toward becoming a lawyer, a defender of victims like herself who have to live in a world of oppression.

Oppression is also the major question in La Chineuse (1970), a novel about Camille, a journalist-illustrator sent to the war-disturbed Orient of the 1960s to make sketches of people and places in Cambodia, Saigon, Hong Kong, Macao, and Singapore--all areas oppressed by varying forms of colonialism. She is paid to make a pretty picture which is the significance of La Chineuse, a word meaning "a Chinese artisan who dyes different colors on threads

before weaving a material in order to obtain a design in the woven fabric." Her conscience refuses to let her paint a picture in order to present a preconceived idea of how well France is governing in the Orient. She prefers to be a rejected ("maudit") artist who works for truth and not for money and glory. That goal makes her mock her employers who are partners of oppressors, an action which shows her to be une chineuse in the sense of a person who mocks or ridicules others.

Her outrage in front of oppression is intensified by ten years of marriage to Clément 'merciful' who insults her by his double standard: he has a mistress but will not tolerate his wife having an affair. He reasons that it is all right for men to have mistresses, but extramarital love affairs of women threaten the very foundations of marriage itself. Shocked by his point of view, Camille refuses to live in an unequal, onerous situation. She has to take a stand in order "to know once and for all whether [she] is a subordinate or a human being" (CHIN, 170). Finally, she leaves him, "decolonizes him. . . . [She] tells him to leave, [she] pushes him outside the borders" (CHIN, 80). Her action is just one example of the theme of oppression which dominates Michèle Perrein's novelistic world--oppression of the powerless by the powerful who are always men.<sup>5</sup>

Camille, personally freed from her husband, is not yet politically freed from one meaning of her name which is related

to camillus 'a young man who helps in various ceremonies.' Even though as an artist she does work mockingly, she is involved with the oppressors of the Orient--that is, she helps them in their ceremonies. Yet, she is becoming the Camille of Corneille's Horace, a heroine who "revolts against the male values of old Horace."<sup>6</sup> Once in the Orient, Perrein's Camille, like Virgil's Camilla, Queen of the Volsci, throws herself into battle. There is a sensitiveness inside her as an oppressed woman which makes her empathize with all the downtrodden she sees in the Orient: men who pull rickshaws, children given away, the homeless, defenseless people, all the humiliated and the starving. She blushes crimson because of France--particularly because of its "vanity which is the product. . . most commonly exported abroad" (CHIN,175).

She realizes that the responsibility for colonialism and war rests with men: "No war," she says "is a woman's war. . . . For centuries, women have been watching men plan wars. . ." (CHIN,122). "On the left and on the right, a woman is a woman; her position is restricted" (CHIN, 78). The result is that at last Camille "decolonizes" herself of all respect for colonialism, for oppression--political and personal--and remains in Cambodia where the mornings "used to be pure in bursting light" and where she may perish in battle, for the Orient is too real, too gigantic for any victory, but the continent is a place for her to begin being a conqueror of men and their oppression.

Away from the real world and in an imaginary country, Gemma Lapidaire has a different story although it begins ominously as she passes a man on the rocky beach of a peninsula as he joyfully thinks and sings of richness--that is, sex, sex, sex (GL, 5). The eight-year-old Gemma has been reared by four "mothers": her real mother Dolorès 'sorrows,' grandmother Leone 'lion,' great-grandmother Flavie 'golden hair,' and great-great-grandmother Angeline 'angel.' The four "mothers" have been so exploited by men that they decide to spare Gemma the pain-in-the-neck her real father is and encourage her to create in her imagination an ideal father. In this lack of information about her father, Gemma is no worse off than many of Perrein's characters whose fathers are absent either because of death or indifference to their children. These fathers even in absence are patriarchal and bring oppression into the family, a type of oppression which Gemma does not suffer.

The four women who exclude men from their lives stay entirely by themselves. They indulge in female activities, those in which women have a privileged, mystical relationship with nature, such as healing with their hands and communicating with animals. But, most of all, they act and think for themselves. Even their god is female, a stone sculpture which resembles a woman to whom they pray: "I hail thee light-goddess, mother-goddess, dust-goddess, woman" (GL, 123). Many men on the peninsula object to the way these women live and begin to threaten them and call them witches.

Answering these men, the great-great-grandmother asks why they hate women so much: "Because they are women? Because the women don't believe that their own dreams and thoughts are foolish? . . . Because they are women who represent woman in her true, uncorrupted, undiverted nature?" (GL, 55).

To give the youngest woman of their family a name which will be true to their expectations, the four "mothers" decide upon Gemma Lapidaire which suggests both the precious stone and the craftsman who polishes it. Most of all, the name describes a girl who initiates actions, makes decisions, and takes the lead. As she grows up, she "threads her way everywhere. . . , no one can keep her from sliding and creeping amongst the stones or prowling along the beach. . ." (GL, 19). One day, an object from a wrecked ship is washed onto the beach. With her is Emmanuel 'God with us,' a man who is afraid of the object, for he has no idea what it is and also because it implies that there must be life beyond the peninsula. But she hurries to explore the wreck where she finds an amputated hand, so terrifying to Emmanuel that she alone has to decide what to do. When she buries it, Emmanuel thinks to himself that "Gemma has authority" (GL, 128). Soon he becomes so traumatized that his own hands become paralyzed and she has to care for him. Illness and fear cause him to withdraw from life, but she participates fearlessly in every situation.

Gemma Lapidaire is the only Perrein character whose naming,

rearing, and maturing are constant and rich. Unlike Odile and Camille, she does not discover one day that she should seek freedom to control her life. From birth, she naturally seeks freedom, controls her life, and is free from destruction and oppression of men. The reason: in the beginning she is named Gemma Lapidaire and encouraged by her "mothers" to fulfill that name.

Martha Onan  
State University of New York  
College at Brockport

## Notes

1

References to the novels of Michèle Perrein in which these three heroines appear will be listed by page in the text and the titles will be abbreviated: S, La Sensitive (Paris: Julliard, 1956); CHIN, La Chinoise (Paris: Julliard, 1970); and GL, Gemma Lapidaire (Paris: Flammarion, 1976). The translations from these novels and other works are mine.

2

Le Mâle aimant (Paris: Julliard, 1975).

3

Somaize, Le Grand Dictionnaire historique des précieuses, New Edition by M. Ch.-L. Livet, Vol. I of Le Dictionnaire des précieuses (1661; rpt. Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1970), pp. 71, 98, 114.

4

Albert Dauzat, Dictionnaire étymologique des noms de famille et prénoms de France, 3rd ed. (Paris: Larousse, 1951).

5

Susan Husserl-Kappit, "Sexual Politics in Four Novels by Michèle Perrein," Folio, No. 11 (August 1978), pp. 38-63.

6

Le Mâle aimant, p. 38.

