The Obscure Subject of Desire: Lucretia Borgia in Nineteenth-Century Literature

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Abstract:
This article focuses on new representations of Lucretia in the second half of the nineteenth century. From the many existing versions, those of Bulwer-Lytton, Heinrich Heine and Victor Hugo reveal different contextualizations of gender while discussing the poisoner as non-subject, a poisoner whose desire corresponds to collective ideals while her methods reflect the dark side of that same configuration and at the same time comment on the secret workings of money and murder. Non-subjecthood here is what Kristeva's term of the abject points to, as it is produced by the same logic as the subject herself, but reveals that logic in its negatory rather than affirmative power. Whereas the abject can manifest itself in any form of "uninhabitable zone" (Butler 3) that challenges the borders of the self, the female poisoner is a more complicated phenomenon as she reaches out for the status of subject, claiming free will, autonomy and reason as her defining features.

> The abject has only one quality of the object — that of being opposed to I. (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*)

> This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain [. . .], that site of dreaded identification against which [. . .] the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and life. (Butler, *Bodies That Matter*)

1 Among the norms and values that shaped the ideal nineteenth-century subject, domestic solidity, middle class respectability and concern for morality figure first and foremost. However, if we consider the many pitfalls this subject was subjected to at a time of rapid and massive technological change, urbanization, and industrialization, it is clear that the balance between right and wrong, good and evil, subject and Other was rather delicate at times. The way to money and property did not always follow moral and religious requirements; scientific discoveries shaped new methods of achieving collective goals — and new ways of doing so in secret at the same time. Where the virtues of the subject were redefined with more strictness than ever before, its shadowy Other began to haunt the collective unconscious in crime novels and magazines, in reports on bank fraud and murder scandals.

2 Rather than dealing with crime in the conventional sense — where the line between ideal subject and Other seems all to clear—, I will be concerned with the more secretive technique of poisoning in order to pursue a kind of non-subject that reaches out for subjecthood and negates it at the same time. I will use the Kristevan term of the abject in order to describe a figure whose formation reflects a) a gender economy that denies access to full subjecthood to women, b) a specific balance between surface and substance, seeming and

seeing, linked to this gender economy, and c) the edges of that economy linked to notions of the Other as much as the sublime or love. Legal offence is, from this perspective, framed by an emerging order of secrecy that renegotiates the lines between those who know and those who don't, whether on the basis of scientific knowledge, financial genius or psychological wisdom. Where poisoning draws on the secret workings of substances — and thus on scientific secrets —, its most frequent motive — bank fraud and legacy hunting — draw on the secret workings of money, which in the nineteenth century gain a new complexity especially with the spread of life insurances. At the same time the traditionally male figures of the detective, the toxicologist, and the reporter emerge on the scene to counterbalance this new configuration.

3 Within that context, the legendary star poisoner Lucretia Borgia — as myth rather than historical fact — will serve as a foil for reading the figure of the female poisoner, whose motive is money, power and respectability. The poisoner in that sense is never the common criminal and cruel barbarian we associate with murder, but an intelligent, overly civilized and often knowledgeable person, who seems to confirm rather than contradict collective ideals. As a woman she is also on the less powerful side, but in spite of her gendered position (she is rarely a scientist herself), she increases her power through knowledge, finding an ally in scientific advancements, which provide more and more elaborate means of destruction. Magazines and newspapers, from the nineteenth century onwards, collaborate with science in satisfying an ever-increasing thirst for knowledge, but they also represent a critical instance when science is abused for immoral purposes. Questions of guilt and innocence gain a public dimension hitherto unforeseen, and while the female reading public is growing steadily, categories of gender seem to become more central in public negotiations of subjecthood. If, like in the case of Lucretia, the murderer is female, a whole series of new questions enter the scene. Besides the traditional affiliation of women and poisoning and the fear of powerful women, or of the association of sexuality and death, the debate of several concrete poisoning scandals framed — and might have triggered — new representations of Lucretia in the second half of the nineteenth century.[1] From the many existing versions, those of Bulwer-Lytton,

[1] Female poisoners are central in nineteenth-century novels like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Wilkie Collin's *Woman in White*, Hoffmann's *Fräulein von Scudery*, Chamisso's *Die Giftmischerin*, or Thackeray's *Catherine*. On Lucretia and the Borgia family see for example J.H. Stocqueler, *Lucretia Borgia: A Romance of History* (1844), Swinburne, *The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei* (1861), F.E. Paget, *Lucretia; Or the Heroine of the Nineteenth Century* (1868), Felice Romani, *Lucretia Borgia: A Lyric Tragedy* (1839), Ferdinand Gregorovius, *Lucretia Borgia* (1904), Antonio de San Martin, *La Raza Impura - Lucrecia Borgia* (1889), W. Grothe, *Die Kinder des Papstes* (1867), Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, *Angela Borgia* (1891), Ludwig Scoper, *Lucrezia Borgia, oder: des Papstes Tochter* (1834), Richard Voss, *Unter den Borgia* (1897), apart from the versions of Hugo, Heine and Bulwer-Lytton discussed here. There will be more, of course, in the twentieth century, and it is only then that female authors pick up the theme on a massive scale.

Heinrich Heine and Victor Hugo reveal different contextualizations of gender while discussing the poisoner as non-subject, a poisoner whose desire corresponds to collective ideals while her methods reflect the dark side of that same configuration and at the same time comment on the secret workings of money and murder. Non-subjecthood here is what Kristeva's term of the abject points to, as it is produced by the same logic as the subject herself, but reveals that logic in its negatory rather than affirmative power. The abject is the hidden underside of the subject, it is, as Kristeva says, "opposed to 'I'" and in that quality resembles the object, which is always in some way subjected to something. Abjection in that sense is the rejection of "that which is not me" (Kristeva, *Powers* 2), the rejection by which "I" is made possible, through the exclusion of Not-I. Whereas the abject can manifest itself in any form of "uninhabitable zone" (Butler 3) that challenges the borders of the self, the female poisoner is a more complicated phenomenon as she reaches out for the status of subject, claiming free will, autonomy and reason as her defining features.

4 To begin with, a few words on the historical Lucretia Borgia, who entered history as the daughter of Pope Alexander VI: The originally Spanish family of the Borgias came to Italy in the late Renaissance, and became soon known for cold-blooded murder, bribery, and sexual orgies. Lucretia's son Giovanni was thought to be the result of incestuous relations with her father or brother. Like many others who stood in the way of the Borgias' political or economic aspirations, one of her husbands as well as several of her lovers died under mysterious circumstances, and considering the Borgias' traditional stratagems of swords, daggers, garrotting and poison, the identity of the murderer was never questioned. There is no historical evidence, though, that Lucretia participated actively in any of these murders: In spite of her reputation as husband-killing wife and master-poisoner she might not have killed a single person in her whole life. Nevertheless, history chose her as an icon in a long tradition of female poisoners, which is closely associated with Italy herself, and continued to have different repercussions in the following centuries.

5 In the nineteenth-century, representations of Lucretia were strongly influenced by a renewed interest in the poisoning business in general. A whole series of new poisons was discovered: Morphine, strychnine, brucine, quinine, conium, and nicotine are just some of items added to an already substantial list that included arsenic, antimony, mercury, and opium. Another important factor in this revival of interest is the birth of modern toxicology, triggered by the work of the Spanish scientist Orfila. He published his *Treatise on Poisons, Or General Toxicology* in 1814/15, and was soon consulted as a kind of court of last appeal where he decided whether somebody had been poisoned or not

6 While chemistry thus claimed a new kind of authority in the domain of law and justice, the media collaborated with science in that they provided the common reader with information he/she would otherwise not have been able to access. Needless to say that some of the information was inaccurate or mere speculation, and that the reader's desire was not always for mere knowledge. Murder trials were well documented in most European countries, and the reading public eagerly followed every detail, not only in newspapers, but also in magazines that included both fiction and fact, accounts of real murder cases and murder stories.<fn>The line between fact and fiction could be thin at times. Thus Dickens' short story "Hunted Down" is about two real murder cases that scandalized the public at the time.</fn> De Quincey comments on the voyeuristic inclinations, the addiction to scandal of his contemporaries, in his essay "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" (1827), pointing to the effects of "mixed horror and exultation," and the "sublime sort of magnetic contagion" (55) that murder scandals had on the public. Newspapers and journals then — further transformed by the advent of photography —, not only produced new ways of writing, but answered to newly emerging public expectations.

7 In his 1846 novel *Lucretia, Or, The Children of the Night*, Bulwer-Lytton uses the Lucretia-legend as the source of inspiration for his utterly British version of the Italian heroine. This is particularly interesting because Italy in general was — at least since the Renaissance — often used to represent anything England felt it was not, and the poisoner in particular stands in stark contrast to an English puritan ideal. A female poisoner for the Victorians is even more of a clash, as it figures as the Other of the Victorian angel in the house, or the Other of the conventional female biography as, for example, illustrated in Jane Austen's novels. More than that, the image of Lucretia seems to hold the hidden romantic spirit of the Englishman who, in Stocqueler's version of the legend two years earlier, falls in love with what is clearly quite un-English: "Italia! oh Italia! thou who hast/ The fatal gift of beauty, which became/ A funeral dower of present woes and past,/ Oh thy sweet brow is sorrow, plough'd by shame,/And annals graved in characters of flame" (2).

8 The main issue in Bulwer-Lytton's narrative is, of course, a poisoning scheme that covers well over 500 pages, and which is essentially motivated by economic interest: Lucretia wants to inherit her uncle's estate and money, and on the way, her first husband is murdered, the second poisoned, and the daughter of her half-sister nearly killed by poison as well. Varney, her consort, serves as the male subject needed for the confrontation with the world of money, and is actually taken from the real world: England had its most famous poisoning case with Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, who had killed most of his family by poison and inspired

not only Bulwer-Lytton, but also Dickens, and, most famously, Oscar Wilde's essay "Pen, Pencil, and Poison." What is striking about the real Wainewright, and what appears rather new in the nineteenth century, is that he was far from figuring as the traditional Other of society, and rather documents how the Other, the criminal can look pretty much like the Same: He was right in the center of civilized society, a friend of Charles Lamb's, a poet and painter, an art-critic and an antiquarian. But he was also, as Oscar Wilde stresses in his essay, "a subtle and secret poisoner almost without rivals in this or any age" (no pag.).

9 While Dickens puts Wainewright in the center of his short story "Hunted Down" (1859), which basically deals with a poisoning case revolving around life-insurance fraud, he remains a rather marginal figure in Bulwer-Lytton's novel, securing the link between the main figure and the complicated world of finances, which women presumably cannot master by themselves. Thus he leaves Lucretia free to construct her scheme with all its moral and aesthetic ambivalence. In that respect Bulwer-Lytton echoes Thomas de Quincey, who rejects poisoning as a dishonest, illegitimate, and therefore effeminate version of the art of murder. Correspondingly, Lucretia's French husband Dalibard comments on poisoning as the "saturnalia of the weak" (Bulwer-Lytton 214). But then he gives his argument a strange twist, one which recalls a curious version of the Burkean sublime, that mixture of utter pleasure and horror which seizes body and mind equally. Considering the historical context of the French revolution — which Burke had commented on —, it also forms part of the connection between a woman's descent into crime and the fear of a nation's collapse into political turmoil:

> It is a mighty thing to feel in one's self that one is an army, — more than an army. What thousands and millions of men, with trumpet and banner, and under the sanction of glory, strive to do, — destroy a foe, — that, with little more than an effort of the will, with a drop, a grain, for all his arsenal, — one man can do. (Bulwer-Lytton 215)

Poison here turns into the agent of a sublimity that for Kant marks the edge of the subject, and that for Kristeva is linked to the abject — and a notion of the sublime which fuses Kant's metaphysical and Burke's psychological sublime, empowering challenge to the powers of the subject and utter loss of self:

> As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it, the sublime triggers — it has always already triggered — a spree of perceptions and words that expand memory boundlessly. I then forget the point of departure and find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one where "I" am — delight and loss. Not at all short of but always with and through perception and words, the sublime is something

> added that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both here as dejects, and there, as others and sparkling. (Kristeva, *Powers* 12)[2]

The sublime nature of poisoning in Bulwer-Lytton's novel extends to Dalibard, the speaker of these words, and to Lucretia as the listener:

> There was a horrible enthusiasm about this reasoning devil as he spoke thus; his crest rose, his breast expanded. That animation which a noble thought gives to generous hearts, kindled in the face of the apologist for the darkest and basest of human crimes. Lucretia shuddered; but her gloomy imagination was spelled; there was an interest mingled with her terror. (Bulwer-Lytton 215)

Interest and terror: far more than in Dickens' strange fascination with the coolness of murderers, the nineteenth-century presents itself here in all its strange ambivalence: reason topples over and becomes its opposite — sheer violence and utter brutality. And there is a fascination about the latter that is definitely not founded in reason. While this ambivalence reaches far wider than our perspective allows for, the question of gender evoked in the situation appears interesting in itself. Like with the sublime, (male) subjecthood is challenged by a monstrous unfathomable femininity, which exceeds and negates it. Like (feminine) nature in Kant's account, the figure of the murderess threatens humanity at its core but — for the reader, of course — is kept at bay by her virtual nature. The space of the novel allows for the doubling gesture of being both self and Other characteristic of the Kantian as well as the Kristevan experience. Moreover, poisoning is evoked as a female tradition, especially in Italy, where, as Lucretia learns, seven hundred men died of a 'household epidemic' obviously initiated by husband-killing wives. Lucretia as poisoner and namesake of the legendary Lucretia Borgia is clearly part of that presumably female — aristocratic — tradition, but in spite of her central role in the novel, and as if such excess of female power needed a surplus of containment, she is depicted as a student and follower of Dalibard, the "master of the art," similar to the historical Lucretia who presumably followed her brother Cesare.

10 If we consider Bulwer-Lytton's novel from a gender point of view, so much is clear: It is the men who are the real artists, and in this respect Bulwer-Lytton echoes Wilde's celebration of the murderer as genius and his presentation of Cesare Borgia as master-poisoner:

> Murderer as he was, poisoner, and fratricide, — did blood clog his intellect, or crime impoverish his genius? Was his verse less melodious, or his love of art less intense, or

[2] Cf. Kristeva's parallel between the abject and the sublime: the abject cannot be defined, it rather "lies there quite close, but it cannot be assimilated" (*Powers* 1). There is an almost Kantian effect of its negative quality: "Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insiginificant, and which crushes me" (Kristeva, *Powers* 2). On Kristeva's notion of the abject see Wahrig 2007.

> his eloquence less pervasive, because he sought to remove every barrier, revenge every wrong, crush every foe? (459)

Bulwer-Lytton's gendering strategies are not entirely consistent, however, because Lucretia is also masculinized: she is attributed a "masculine and grasping mind" (469), which contradicts De Quincey's thesis of poisoning as feminine and positions it in a masculinized space between the Arts and the Sciences instead.

> The reader will doubtless have observed the consummate art with which the poisoner had hitherto advanced upon her prey. The design conceived from afar, and executed with elaborate stealth, defied every chance of detection against which the ingenuity of practised villainy could guard. Grant even that the deadly drugs should betray the nature of the death they inflicted, that by some unconjectured secret in the science of chemistry the presence of those vegetable compounds, which had hitherto baffled every known and positive test in the posthumous examination of the most experienced surgeons, should be clearly ascertained, not one suspicion seemed likely to fall upon the ministrant of death. (Bulwer-Lytton 532)

It is obvious, that Lucretia's methods remain as secretive as the description of them, and it is only in a footnote on page 532 that we finally learn about the method that must have fascinated Bulwer-Lytton so much that he leaves the reader in the dark about it over more than 500 pages: all we knew before was that Lucretia would secretly go to Helen's chamber and somehow find a way to poison her slowly. Now we are told that she infused a colorless and tasteless liquid in Helen's medicine. Only if we bother to read the brief footnote we learn what this liquid is: "The celebrated acqua di Tufania was wholly without taste or color "[3] (532). Apart from evoking a whole tradition of female poisoning (and the male fear associated with it), Bulwer-Lytton here points to invisibility as a crucial aspect, the fact that the crime, the poison, or, as Varney calls it at some point "these pale alchemies" (545), are not traceable.

11 The invisibility of the substance is the more relevant as it is linked to the invisibility of women in public life, their absence as full subjects in contemporary society. Moreover, it underlines the feminization of murder by poison, as apparent in Bulwer-Lytton, or latently in

[3] Tofania di Adamo, the famous seventeenth-century poisoner, after whom the substance was named, invented a kind of poison based on arsenic, but completely colourless and hard to detect even for the experts. She did use her invention on more than 600 people — at least this is what she confessed under torture —, and was strangled for her crimes in 1709. The poison she invented, however, continued to fascinate posterity and participated in a long tradition of female poisoning that included the famous Marquise de Brinvillier in seventeenth-century France, who entered nineteenth-century literature in E.T.A. Hoffman's *Fräulein von Scudery*, the German Anna Zwanziger, or the English Mary Blandy. In the mid-nineteenth century, while poison was gaining a new relevance on a more general scale with the murder scandals of Wainewright and Palmer, the French case of Marie Lafarge, who had poisoned her much-hated husband, was reported on widely in English newspapers. Even though there was as much evidence against as in favor of her, the English press joined the French in expressing general sympathy, but, apart from taking the case as a consequence of an ill-arranged marriage with a man who showed all traces of a barbarian, they presented it as a symptom of the evil French judicial system (see Hartmann).

Dickens in his comments on Wainewright, when he deplores the emergence of "a new race of poisoners."

12 If Bulwer-Lytton's British Lucretia seems inspired by both her famous namesake and the media scandals around mostly male poisoners, her main interest remains *money*, and thus a completely different concern from Victor Hugo's version of the story a decade earlier: Hugo's heroine is not about money but motherhood, — even though class or family are central factors here, too. In short, the play tells the "true story" of Lucretia and her beloved son Gennaro, who does not know about their family ties because he was brought up by a fisherman. The fisherman has just told him about his real mother, who started writing him letters, and he came to love her deeply without ever having met her in person. Now Lucretia, who cannot reveal her true identity, accidentally poisons her son and then tries to rescue him by handing him an antidote. He refuses to take it, as it would only save him, but not his friends, who were given the same poison. To take revenge he stabs her with a knife instead, and her last dramatic words before she dies are: "I am your mother"(103).

13 In Victor Hugo's romanticized version, then, there is an open conflict between the female poisoner and the idealized figure of the mother, two terms which appear incommensurable. Lucretia cannot be condemned wholesale, as she is situated in a corrupt judicial system, and like her son, she is a Borgia. There are several hints in the play that characterize the Borgia family as a family of devils, with the familiar associations of incest, murder and corruption: Borgia reads "orgia" (40) on a bench in front of the Palace, the settings are described as the "palace barbarigo" (passim) or the palace of sin, of murder, etc. Crime is thus not a matter of free will, but of family ties, and this is equally true for her son: When Gennaro considers murdering Lucretia, whom, at this point, he takes for his aunt, he ponders whether he would commit a crime: "Oh, my brain is confused," he says, "[. . .] and if I did commit a crime? My God, I am a Borgia" (Hugo 100; my translation).

14 Both Gennaro and Lucretia are located between intrinsic evil and victimhood of evil circumstances — where categories become confused, boundaries between good and evil, poison and antidote questioned. Both are at once self-obscuring subjects of murderous deeds, objects of desire, and morally abjected. Crime turns from action to identity, from a question of doing to a question of being: They are Borgias, so they must kill. While identity is essentially premodern and context-bound, the question of subjecthood is here intricately linked to the question of abjection and intensified by the association between motherhood and the monstrous. Where the subject would be guilty, the abject — as non-subject — is cursed. Poison here has infected the holy dyad between mother and son; the moment of terror

condensed in the four words "I am your mother" exceeds by far the monstrous maternal sin of poisoning, accidental or not. Against the inextricable couple of the sublime and the abject that was central to Bulwer-Lytton's story, Kristeva's earlier — and equally gendered — couple of semiotic and symbolic becomes interesting in reading Hugo's heroine.[4] The obvious lack of language in Lucretia's minimal speech to her son reflects the semiotic as pre-verbal stage, the scene of murder as utter monstrosity in relation to the socio-symbolic contract, while the maternal appears as the threat of death and the compensation for that threat. It is thus no coincidence that portraits of Lucretia oscillate between the figures of the courtisan and the virgin Mary, corresponding to the dichotomy of whore and holy who are both situated outside the order of the subject (see illustrations 1 and 2). It is Hugo's Lucretia which comes closest to Kristeva's psychoanalytical account of the abject as well as her concern with the maternal as situated outside the symbolic. In Hugo's version, the (murderous) mother cannot speak (— the question is whether the Oedipal construction of subjectivity leaves much room for female subjectivity —), but for the son she is a continuous presence throughout the play[5], until she finally appears in person — in order to kill and be killed.

16 The second aspect emphasized in Heine's reflections is the relation between society and science as it appears in the passionate reactions of the public to the trial of Marie Lafarge. Here Heine ironically comments that the public rather suspected poison in the heart of the toxicologist than in the corpse of the murdered husband, and that they accused the deceased of having unlawfully stolen an aristocratic Parisian woman and brought her into his barbarian surroundings. Both scientific and judicial arrogance are positioned in contrast to the passionate sympathy for Marie, who had been condemned to live next to a man whom she detested. Public opinion, as Heine describes it, is of the sort that there is no doubt that Marie Capelle is innocent, and that in her place, the famous toxicologist, dean of the medical faculty of Paris should be pilloried on the market place of Tulle.[6]

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[4] Cf. Burgin's reflections on Kristeva's notion of the abject as prior to the mirror stage between the subject and the object but also as the means by which "the subject is first impelled towards the possibility of constituting itself as such &— in an act of revulsion, of expulsion of that which can no longer be contained. Significantly, the first object of abjection is the pre-Oedipal mother — prefiguring that positioning of women in society" (36).

[5] Cf. Kristeva: "The abject from which he does not cease separating is for him, in short, a land of oblivion that is constantly remembered. Once upon blotted out time the abject must have been a magnetized pole of covetousness" (*Powers* 8).

[6] "[D]ann zweifelt man nicht länger, daß Marie Capelle unschuldig ist und an ihrer Statt der berühmte Toxologe, welcher Dekan der Medizinischen Fakultät von Paris, nämlich Herr Orfila, auf dem Marktplatz von Tulle an den Pranger gestellt werden sollte! Wer aus näherer Beobachtung die Umtriebe jenes eitlen Selbstsüchtlings nur einigermaßen kennt, ist in tiefster Seele überzeugt, daß ihm kein Mittel zu schlecht ist, wo er eine Gelegenheit findet, sich in seiner wissenschaftlichen Spezialität wichtig zu machen und überhaupt den Glanz seiner Berühmtheit zu fördern! In der Tat, dieser schlechte Sänger, der, wenn er in den Soireen von Paris seine schlechten Romanzen meckert, kein menschliches Ohr schont und jeden töten möchte, der ihn auslacht: er würde auch kein Bedenken tragen, ein Menschenleben zu opfern, wo es gälte, das versammelte Publikum glauben zu

17 Public opinion, as shaped by and reflected in newspaper and trial reports, for Heine is in itself subjected to poisoning, metaphorical, of course. What we are talking about is not just a concrete case of poisoning, but a structural phenomenon that affects the social order itself, poisons collective structures and positions women as abject beings.[7] Against the fictional representations of Lucretia, abjection here is framed by science and the law, but no doubt virtual abjection had an impact on real life cases, which Heine is trying to highlight.

18 The three perspectives of Bulwer-Lytton, Hugo and Heine appear utterly different at first sight, and they do indeed comment on cultural differences between England, Germany and France in the nineteenth-century. What they share, however, is a subject-object-economy which is unthinkable without a third instance, the abject, in Kristeva's definition that which is "not me" (2), that which perturbs an identity, a system, an order. The three Lucretias are to a considerable extent classical subjects endowed with free will, reason and agency, regardless of whether they aim at money, motherhood or romantic marriage. At the same time, however, they are also subjected to uncontrollable drives and to circumstances that determine their actions, circumstances framed by class, family, gender. Here they are neither subjects nor objects, utterly evil or utterly innocent, precisely because these categories do not hold if the system itself turns evil or confuses the categories. As subjects, all the Lucretias can't help it, they need to poison, and in so far they are abjects in the Kristevan sense "of being opposed to 'I'"(9). The loss of self as subject implied here appears most fully where the abject merges with the sublime in the case of Bulwer-Lytton's Lucretia. Her "interest mingled with her terror" recall a Burkean sublime as a physical and a psychological phenomenon. The fact of its appearance at the edge of the subject, in a zone of abjection, triggers the experience of being one's self's Other that motivates so much nineteenth-century literature, whether in Jekyll and Hyde, de Quincey, Swinburne, or countless others. Lucretia's Jekyll-Hyde moment is closely associated with the idea of "being an army," a megalomaniac fantasy triggered by the poisonous substance, which thus turns into an agent of the superhuman. However, the same phenomenon of surplus that triggers the sublime sensation, is also the ground for the loss of the subject and the birth of the abject. In other words: the abject is produced by the same logic

machen, niemand sei so geschickt wie er, jedes verborgene Gift an den Tag zu bringen! Die öffentliche Meinung geht dahin, daß im Leichnam des Lafarge gar kein Gift, desto mehr hingegen im Herzen des Herrn Orfila vorhanden war"(Art. XX).

[7] Thus, in a different context, Heine describes how a particular slow poison, an aqua tofana, affects and destroys society: "Wir haben keinen Krieg, aber der Frieden richtet uns hin, und gehen wir nicht plötzlich zugrunde durch einen brutalen Zufall, so sterben wir doch allmählich an einem gewissen schleichenden Gift, an einer Aquatofana, welche uns in den Kelch des Lebens geträufelt worden, der Himmel weiß, von welcher Hand" (Art. LIII).

that defines the subject, but it is carried beyond its limits — to the point where it negates itself.[8]

19 The medium of abjection, the poisonous substance, is of course not poisonous by definition — its deadliness is a matter of secrecy as well as of quantity. The curing or damaging effect of the substance depends on whether it is recognized for what it is, and how much is taken in.[9] Both quantity and secrecy are linked to epistemological questions, scientific advancement and the dominant politics of knowledge, as Dickens well knew when he pleaded for public knowledge of poisons (1856). In abjection, however, — and this exceeds the secrecy-transparency issue — the dark properties of the substance[10] are complemented by the dark properties of its user, both negating and transgressing modern definitions of the subject. Insofar as Hugo's poisoners, for example, cannot help poisoning, they are not subjects anymore but subjected to drives outside their control. At the same time they are subjects pushing reason, autonomy, control, and free will — after all the determining factors of modern subjecthood — to their limits and beyond. Beyond into the dark zones of the unknown, beyond into the abyss, beyond into heaven. Whether diabolical or divine is not relevant within that particular economy of a subject in search for the secretive obscurity of the impossible — even if that means obscuring its own self.[11]

20 Interestingly, none of the rewritings of the female poisoner were authored by women; it is male writers who translate a female challenge to the symbolic order into nineteenth-century terms. Next to the economy of the sublime, an emerging media configuration that builds on sensations to feed a growing reading public triggers a development which I would like to call the "virtualization of the abject." The desire for scandal is reflected in the sensationalism of the day, a taste for an observation of the monstrous from a position of security that is so characteristic for nineteenth-century readers. With the public enactment of punishment clearly confined since the 1860s — public executions were abolished in 1868 —, it seems that a collective desire was translated into the realm of print: Right next to the Victorian newspaper the sensation novel satisfied that desire, presenting as much rape,

[8] Kristeva also points to the relation between the abject and the sublime in her opposition of the symptom and sublimation. I quote the original: "La sublimation [. . .] n'est rien d'autre que la possibilité de nommer le pré-nominal, le pre-objectal, qui ne sont en fait qu'un trans-nominal, un trans-objectal. Dans le symptôme, l'abject m'envahit, je le devient. Par la sublimation, je le tiens. L'abject est bordé de sublime. Ce n'est pas le même moment du parcours, mais c'est le même sujet et le même discours qui les font exister" (*L'Horreur* 19).

[9] The German word *Gift* still implies the English *gift*, but it has turned into a deadly gift.

[10] Poisons might cause death, but they cannot cause the kind of death which infects life that the abject points to.

[11] As one French author describes it: "Now hell is heaven in depth. The words 'diabolical' or 'divine', applied to the intensity of feeling, express the same, that is feeling bordering the supernatural" (Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Bonheur dans le crime*). For all the criticism that this subject economy has attracted, this strange affinity between the abject and the sublime is one more zone that needs careful consideration, as it marks the limit between humanity and apocalypse — recently for example in Stockhausen's comments on 9/11.

suicide, and murder as the reader could wish for. To this day, it remains a controversial question whether literature — or, film, if we look at our own century — serves as an educational instance or a compensatory realm, an Other of reality where the reader can live out aggressive or violent instincts without damage to society — or, and that seems to be a more common argument nowadays, if that same reader is taught aggression, murder and violence. Does the virtual abject please because it is a fiction (as Dr. Johnson had it), or does the intensity of feeling grow in a Burkean manner, "the nearer it approaches reality, and the further it removes us from all ideas of fiction, the more perfect is its power" (Dallas 293)? The question remains especially interesting, where virtualization seems to hold an uncontrollable feminine at bay, a feminine threat to subjecthood that, as Kristeva has shown, is so close to the sublime.

21 In any case, the attention drawn by the abject is well-documented in mid-Victorian newspapers and it is perhaps no coincidence that the disappearance of public bodily punishment is balanced by the more virtual, but nonetheless real experience of public scandal. The emergence of sensation novels and crime fiction responds to this new cultural configuration, which includes transformations within the discourses of law, science and technology. While Dickens fully believed in the educational function of books and magazines — those who read will know how to avoid certain pitfalls — other authors articulate warnings of quite a different potential of literature. They are those who deplore the desire for scandal of their contemporaries, who complain about sensation novels as confusions of moral categories, as "hybrid combinations of the mean and the noble" (Thackeray 193). One such author was William Thackeray, who in 1839 published another story of a murderess with the simple title "Catherine: A Story." It is built on the real life story of Catherine Hayes who was burned at Tyburn in 1726 for poisoning her husband and her lover with Laudanum. In contrast to the sublimation of abjection inherent in Bulwer-Lytton or Hugo, whose Lucretias are after all elite figures, poisoning here moves from the upper classes to the masses. And other than the sensation writers Thackeray makes it clear that there is a moral purpose in writing literature, and here he claims the authority of Truth: his intent is to "counteract the injurious influences of some popular fictions of that day, which made heroes of highwaymen and burglars, and created a false sympathy for the vicious and criminal." Significantly, the sensationalist writer for Thackeray turns into poisoner himself, using literature as his drug: "The public was, in our nation, dosed and poisoned by the prevailing literary practice, and it was necessary to administer some medicine that would produce a wholesome nausea and afterwards bring about a more healthy habit" (193). Of course, none of the Lucretia stories discussed here

would fit into Thackeray's concept. By nature (and nineteenth-century culture) she remains a figure of the abject, whose "sweet sorceries," in Swinburne's account, "arouse disturbing visions in men, the antique Venus come back to the modern world, with her mercies and her cruelties" (66). As in two of the most well-known representations of Lucretia Borgia by Bartolomeo Veneto (which actually does not show Lucretia, but has always been associated with her; see ill. 1) and Pinturicchio (see ill. 2), she is positioned as both whore and holy, saintly as much as sexually alluring, a figure that for many seemed to provide a welcome contrast to the Victorian ideal woman — and the edge of the same logic.

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