

Gender: The Hidden God in Yasmina Reza's *Le Dieu du Carnage*

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Acclaimed playwright Yasmina Reza has enjoyed success both in France and abroad for her work. In particular, her play “Art” (1994) has maintained its popularity years after its debut (Jacomard 1). Reza has won numerous awards, including the *Prix de l'Académie française* in 1997 and a Tony in 2009 for *Le Dieu du Carnage* (*The God of Carnage*) (2007). Reza's theatrical texts, best characterized as psychological dark comedies, frequently comment on social expectations and the human condition. Her earlier plays, specifically *Conversations Après un Enterrement* (*Conversations After a Burial*) (1987), “Art,” *L'Homme du Hasard* (*The Unexpected Man*) (1995), and *Life x3* (2000), all treat similar subjects of parenting, etiquette, and appropriate behavior. In several of these plays, polite conversation among the characters eventually yields to yelling, accusations, and verbal attacks.

In *Le Dieu du Carnage*, two couples, Michel and Véronique Houllié and Alain and Annette Reille, meet for the first time at the Houlliés' Parisian apartment to discuss a recent fight between their adolescent sons. Because he was refused entrance to the other's “bande” (38) ‘group of friends,’ Ferdinand Reille hit Bruno Houllié with a stick and knocked out two incisors. Drawing upon years of social training in etiquette, the four adults attempt to maintain a civil atmosphere and conform to the behaviors expected of them as courteous hosts and guests. Their politeness, however, does not last long as Véronique, Michel, Annette, and Alain become increasingly rude to one another. Doing away with societal codes that dictate civility, Alain declares that he believes the God of Carnage governs everything (98).

Gender and performance theories provide insight into understanding this night's descent into chaos. They bring to light how expected social roles are naturalized and passed off as innate qualities. Judith Butler argues that while gender presents itself as always already present, there is no originary femininity or masculinity on which women's and men's behaviors are based (175). Instead, posits Butler, the social construction of gender is performative, manifesting itself through the repetition of gestures and acts that then create the sense of an inner feminine or masculine self (179). Richard Schechner argues that even the smallest of our actions is, in fact, always already rehearsed, if not by us, then by others in society. He calls these actions “restored behavior” or “twice-behaved behavior” (29). If all of our actions can be viewed as iterations of earlier acts, do we do something because we want to, or because we have been conditioned to make that choice? There is no biological gene forcing women to wear makeup or smile

frequently; instead, repeated association of these actions with femininity reinforces the underlying gender stereotype that the ideal woman is beautiful and welcoming. However, gender conditioning also reveals itself through other more insidious and naturalized twice-behaved behaviors, ranging from how one argues to how one parents, as we see in Reza's play.

I show that the night's carnage in *Le Dieu du Carnage* is fueled by the characters' attempts to successfully adhere to normative gender roles that are based on socially constructed gender ideals. The couples appear to embody fairly stereotypical gender norms. Véronique, for instance, seems to embrace her domesticity, while Alain exhibits no desire to be a caregiver. The play takes a turn when Annette announces her contempt for domesticity and shortly after vomits violently onto the coffee table (53). The characters then begin to attack each other, often implying that the others are not adequately feminine or masculine. Even when a character attempts to conform to gender stereotypes, other characters, the play's subtext, or the hypocritical nature of the character's own actions make a mockery of that person. I argue that by trying to conform to masculine and feminine roles, the characters break down and resort to violence. In other words, the play does not strip away the layers of artifice to reveal carnage as several reviewers suggest; rather, it shows that the attempt to put on these layers by being "good" men and women leads to disorder.

While *Carnage*, Roman Polanski's 2011 cinematic adaptation of Reza's text, closely follows the play thanks perhaps to the fact that Reza was one of the screenwriters, I refrain from analyzing the film and focus instead on a close reading of the original theatrical text. Many facets of my argument nonetheless apply to the film, and I do engage with some reviews of the film that address aspects of the plot and subject matter shared by the play. In this article, I first discuss the reception of Reza's play and how my reading of *Le Dieu du Carnage* brings to light aspects of the work that have previously gone unnoticed. I then show how gender norms figure prominently as points of contention in many of Reza's earlier plays, which can therefore be read as precursors to *Le Dieu du Carnage*. The God of Carnage, I argue, is gender itself.

The actors portraying Michel and Véronique Houllié and Alain and Annette Reille have the task of representing characters who, through their actions, attempt to fulfill gender expectations. Although the actors decide how to convey their roles, the stage directions contribute to the characters' gender performativity. For instance, they suggest that Véronique and Annette are more emotional and unreasonable than their male counterparts: Véronique cries (80) and later is described as exhibiting "*un désespoir désordonné et irrationnel*" (100) '*disorderly and irrational despair*.'<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Annette loses her patience and, according to the stage directions, impulsively throws her husband's phone into the vase of tulips (105). The men, in contrast, seem to maintain a rather composed

exterior and do not display their emotions, save for exasperated comments directed toward their wives. However, the characters ultimately do not adhere to strictly feminine or strictly masculine behavior.

In her review of the play for the French news magazine *L'Express*, Laurence Liban recognizes the actors' portrayal of femininity and masculinity when performing their characters. She writes: "Sous [le] regard de [Reza de] metteur en scène, les comédiens sont à leur meilleur: [André] Marcon, mi-homme, mi-enfant, [Eric] Elmosnino, cynique, lâche et grossier, Valérie Bonneton, féminissime, délicate et déterminée. Et Isabelle Huppert qui fonce sans restriction dans l'art de la comédie et y trouve une seconde nature, si ce n'est la vraie" 'Under the directing eye of Reza, the actors are at their best; André Marcon, half-man, half-child, Eric Elmosnino, cynical, cowardly, and crude, Valérie Bonneton, ultra-feminine, delicate, and determined. And Isabelle Huppert who charges full-force into the art of comedy and finds there a second nature, if not her true nature.' Liban praises Bonneton's feminine portrayal of Annette while questioning the masculinity of Marcon's character Michel by calling him a man-child. Interestingly, Liban talks about Huppert's second nature as a comedian in ways that evoke the notion of gender essentialism that Butler rejects. While Liban does highlight the performative nature of the gendered characters, she, like other reviewers, does not discuss how Reza's play actually critiques gender norms through the characters themselves.

Reviews of *Le Dieu du Carnage* focus primarily on Reza's deconstruction of etiquette and social behavior. Liban writes, "[o]rganisé en une série de rounds vifs à géométrie variable (couple/couple, hommes/femmes, etc), le spectacle commence en toute douceur et civilité" 'organized as a series of boxing rounds lively with changing dynamics (couple/couple, men/women, etc), the play opens with softness and civility.' Noah Isenberg, in *Film Quarterly*, explains that the "critique that Reza embedded in her play ... is a critique of humanity, namely, that underneath the veneer of bourgeois civility ... we're all savages. It's simply a matter of peeling away those layers of artifice" (45). J. Kelly Nestruck writes succinctly that the play is a "comedy of poor manners." According to Randi L. Polk in *The French Review*, "[t]he characters Reza (purposefully) fails to fully develop might seem shallow, but they do not shy away from their own critiques of literature, art, and socially (un)acceptable behavior" (436). Michael Phillips notes that, in Polanski's film, "[t]hese civilized citizens are only a drink or three away from pure chaos." Referencing the veneer of civilization that the characters peel away, Adam Mazmanian argues that the "conflict that eventually emerges ... is all too predictable. The juxtaposition of civilization and savagery feels like a parable from an introductory seminar on Rousseau." His lukewarm review of Polanski's film, which Mazmanian deems "perhaps too true to its theatrical source

material,” hinges on what he sees as the predictability of the unmasking of civility’s artifice.

The artifice of civility is also central to the argument presented in one of the few articles on *Le Dieu du Carnage*.<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Lindley examines “Reza’s use of masquerade and role-play. The theme of disguise demonstrates Reza’s gift for wry observation, exposing both the absurdities of social life and the small self-deceptions we each create to survive” (33). She convincingly argues that Reza’s play unveils the metaphoric masks people wear in order to conform to social etiquette and behavior. According to Lindley, “Reza effectively undoes disguises of neatness and social acceptability” (42). While the play clearly depicts a breakdown in civility, *Le Dieu du Carnage* anchors it in the social construction of gendered behavior. By neglecting the aspect of the play that portrays men and women as masculine and feminine beings who have internalized social expectations, we miss what constitutes the basis of the play’s social commentary. Gender stereotypes help set the characters up against one another and become points of attack when characters both attempt and fail to conform fully to masculine and feminine norms. A large part of “disguised” human nature to which Lindley refers depends on the characters remaining within their gender roles.

It is important to note that some analyses of Reza’s play do address gender, but they tend to situate it as a subcategory of the play’s commentary. French reviewer Alice Granger points to the role that the *question femme* [woman question] plays in *Le Dieu du Carnage* by focusing specifically on the domestic role the female characters are supposed to fulfill. “C’est la question femme qui vole en éclats. De mère à fille cela se dit enfin qu’elles ne peuvent continuer à vivre en cage” ‘It’s the woman question that explodes into pieces. From the mother to the daughter, they finally admit that they cannot continue to live in a cage.’ The assumed domesticity and subsequent feeling of entrapment experienced by Véronique and Annette certainly are linked to their feminine roles and play a part in the evening’s unraveling. However, this is merely one piece of the larger picture. The women’s and men’s gendered behavior ultimately is the source of the play’s conflict.

In her book *Les Fruits de la Passion: Le Théâtre de Yasmina Reza* (‘Fruits of Passion: The Theater of Yasmina Reza’) (2013), Hélène Jaccomard devotes a section to sexism in *Le Dieu du Carnage*, arguing that in a play that highlights the conflict between biology and society, it is impossible not to consider gender (224). Jaccomard makes the insightful comment that “[m]ême si les femmes tentent d’y résister, leur rôle reste traditionnel ... Devant la résistance des hommes à partager le pouvoir et à dominer leurs instincts, elles sont dans la contradiction de devoir lutter contre la violence (symbolique) par la violence (effective)” (223) ‘even if the women try to resist, their role remains traditional.

Facing the men's resistance to sharing power and controlling their instincts, the women find themselves paradoxically having to fight against (symbolic) violence with (actual) violence.' Jaccomard concludes this brief discussion with the observation that "[les] femmes semblent victorieuses, mais bien entendu la fin ne justifie pas les moyens: on n'impose pas la civilisation par la barbarie" (226) 'the women appear victorious, but the end does not justify the means: one does not impose civilization through barbarism.' Jaccomard's argument centers on the idea that the women are fighting for the freedom to be just as powerful as the men, with the underlying assumption that their femininity prohibits this; instead, my reading of the play shows that the discontent with gender expectations on behalf of both men and women fuels the rejection of civilized and gendered actions.

While Jaccomard writes "[s]i l'amour conjugal a pratiquement disparu, la faute en est, dans *Le Dieu du carnage*, et pour la première fois dans l'œuvre de Reza, au sexisme ordinaire" (223) 'if conjugal love has practically disappeared, in *Le Dieu du Carnage*, and for the first time in Reza's work, the fault belongs to everyday sexism,' there actually are clear cases of sexist beliefs and gender expectations that the characters try to impose on one another in Reza's other theatrical texts. Several female characters are critiqued for not being feminine enough: Edith is told she needs to wear makeup and dress up if she wants to find someone special (*Conversations Après un Enterrement* 65), and Serge reveals that he has always strongly disliked Marc's wife Paula because he finds her "laide, rugueuse et sans charme" (Reza, "*Art*" 95) 'ugly, rough, and lacking charm.' Even more telling, in the English translation of "*Art*," Serge's claim that Paula is "négative" (Reza 98) is translated by Reza and Christopher Hampton as "life-denying" (53). Serge therefore positions Marc's wife as the antithesis of the feminine and nurturing ideal woman.

Furthermore, themes of masculinity or lack thereof often appear in Reza's plays. Serge and Marc try to dissuade their friend Yvan from conforming to society by getting married; they fear that marriage and domesticity will tame him. Marc remarks, "Regarde ce malheureux Yvan, qui nous enchantait par son comportement débridé ... Bientôt mari ... Un garçon qui nous apportait sa singularité et qui s'escrime maintenant à la gommer" (Reza, "*Art*" 110-11) 'Look at sad Yvan, who used to enchant us with his chaotic behavior. Soon a husband ... a boy who brought us his originality and now he's trying to throw it away.' The underlying worry is that Yvan renounces his wild and irreverent behavior by settling down. His friends accuse him of ruining the evening by lamenting over his "pépins domestiques" (Reza, "*Art*" 116) 'domestic woes.' Indeed, Yvan's failure to disassociate with the domestic sphere, traditionally linked to the feminine, causes much of the evening's tension. Additionally, in *L'Homme du Hasard*, Georges's masculinity is critiqued by his friend: "Le mot poussette dans la bouche de Georges! Le moins domestique des hommes. Croyais-je. Un homme

que j'avais connu scandaleux, insolent, réduit en miettes, dissous par la paternité" (18) 'The word stroller out of Georges's mouth! The least domestic of men. Or so I believed. A man that I had known as scandalous and insolent, reduced to pieces, dissolved by paternity.' Georges's involvement in the care-giving aspects of his son's life is considered detrimental to his manhood. Finally, *Life x3*'s Henry also finds his parenting style to be the object of scrutiny. Inez claims Henry "mollycoddles" his son and is "wrong to give in to all his whims" (*Life x3* 219 and 223). She thus implies that the father should discipline his spoiled child rather than smothering him with too much attention. In these instances, gender stereotypes cause tension among the characters who carry the burden of being expected to conform to these pre-set roles.

*Le Dieu du Carnage* brings together elements from Reza's earlier works and shows more overtly that these stereotypes are a source of violence. We can see how gender expectations fuel the play's descent into chaos by considering the beginning of *Le Dieu du Carnage* when the characters, on their best behavior, strive to fulfill masculine and feminine roles. The guests and hosts participate in social niceties that Schechner would identify as examples of twice-behaved behaviors. As one homemaker to another, Annette compliments Véronique on the tulips decorating the coffee table (13); at the end of the play, however, she declares that they are, in fact, hideous, and strikes them to demonstrate her anger (122). Véronique serves everyone an apple and pear tart and Alain admires her culinary skills, calling her a real cook (37). Véronique proudly replies, "J'aime ça. La cuisine il faut aimer ça" (37) 'I like that. You need to like cooking.' The implication is that a woman such as Véronique, a wife and mother, should enjoy performing domestic tasks. By complimenting her tart, Alain implicitly compliments an aspect of Véronique's femininity that coincides with the idea that the ideal woman cooks for her family. Véronique reveals that her "petite recette" (22) 'little recipe' is not her own concoction but rather comes from Michel's mother; Véronique's culinary skills therefore reflect a larger maternal tradition and betray themselves as yet another twice-behaved behavior. Véronique's tart, initially emblematic of her role as homemaker and hostess, will later become laden with accusatory meaning when Alain suggests that it may be the cause of Annette's nausea. Véronique's domesticity may therefore contribute to Annette's violent vomiting.

As also demonstrated by Reza's earlier plays, gender expectations situate the women as caregivers. Characters often do not expect fathers to be as closely involved with raising children; when the men are, they are mocked. While Véronique seems to embrace her domesticity, Alain enjoys being as hands-off a father as possible. He practically boasts, "je ne sers à rien. La femme pense il faut l'homme, il faut le père, comme si ça servait à quelque chose" (30) 'I am useless. Women think that men are needed, that the father is needed, as if he serves some

function.’ Alain thus echoes the sentiment of some of the characters in Reza’s earlier plays who see paternal care-giving as antithetical to masculinity. Annette confirms her husband’s detachment, stating, “Mon mari n’a jamais été un père à poussette!” (31) ‘my husband has never been a stroller-pushing father!’ Alain’s disengagement, however, causes major tension since a large amount of the evening’s fight involves Annette begging her husband to participate in the conversation and take some responsibility for their son, suggesting that this supposed ideal of masculinity leaves much to be desired.

When the female characters in *Le Dieu du Carnage* become upset, they are dismissed as crazy or irrational. This reinforces the stereotype that women are inherently unbalanced and prone to episodes of hysteria.<sup>3</sup> After having politely asked her husband numerous times to stop with his incessant phone calls, Annette finally snaps and yells, “Ça suffit Alain! Ça suffit maintenant ce portable! Sois avec nous merde!” (51) ‘Enough, Alain! Enough with the cell phone! Be part of the group, damn it!’ Alain, however, writes off this understandable outburst as an occurrence of female insanity, calling Annette “folle de crier comme ça” (51) ‘crazy to scream like that.’ In this instance, Alain refuses to admit that constantly talking on the phone annoys the group as a whole. By claiming that Annette overreacts, he ignores the validity of the complaint and situates the problem within his wife. Butler notes that if the “cause” (in this case, being crazy) of an act (screaming) “can be localized within the ‘self’ of the actor, then the ... disciplinary practices which produce that ostensibly coherent gender are effectively displaced from view” (173-74). By calling her crazy, Alain redirects the focus onto Annette and his policing of her gender passes by practically unnoticed, coded as a commentary on her individual behavior. Furthermore, his comment removes Alain from taking responsibility for how his own actions affect others.

Similarly, when Annette asks him not to smoke a cigar, Alain responds, “Je fais ce que je veux Annette” (93) ‘I do as I please, Annette.’ He interprets his wife’s requests as orders and attempts to maintain his masculine authority by refusing to do as she asks. Later on in the play, when both Annette and Véronique mock Michel’s fear of rodents and Véronique criticizes his earlier mistreatment of their daughter’s hamster, Michel accuses Véronique of going mad in an attempt to dismiss her criticism as unfounded or even insignificant. By asking if they are insane, Alain and Michel respond to the attacks on their manliness by employing gender stereotypes to undermine their wives and reestablish their power dynamics.

As we saw earlier, Alain minimizes his position as a caregiver and supports his family through his career as a lawyer. However, Annette is an estate management consultant and finds herself tasked with the double burden of working both outside and inside the home. Her role in everyday life, which

Schechner notes “involves years of training and practice, ... of adjusting to and performing one’s life roles in relation to social and personal circumstances” (28-29), therefore changes depending on whether she finds herself in the professional or domestic domain. On a professional and perhaps financial level, Alain and Annette appear to be equals.<sup>4</sup> This equality does not transfer to their home life, where gender expectations reassert themselves. The couple’s more equal rapport in public may also contribute to the fact that Alain resists Annette’s attempts to control his actions. While Annette can be read as somewhat masculine for participating in the business world, Alain pushes back against the perceived threat to his own masculinity by imposing the feminine stereotypes of “crazy” and “domestic” on his wife. Annette seems to accept her role in domesticity since it is what is expected of wives and mothers. Therefore, in their home life, the Reilles maintain the traditional gender hierarchy.

Being independent and in control of oneself appear to constitute in large part the male characters’ sense of masculinity in this play. In addition to smoking cigars, itself a masculine pastime, the men enjoy drinking rum. They initially refuse to serve the women, causing Véronique to ask on behalf of Annette and herself, “On n’a pas le droit de boire nous deux?” (84) ‘The two of us don’t have the right to drink?’ A particular phenomenon that gender norms produce is the naturalized “configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another” (Butler 178), and trying to exclude the women helps conserve drinking rum as an exclusively male activity. Furthermore, the men maintain their authority by controlling the women’s right to drink and by refusing to extinguish their cigars. Despite being in the domestic sphere—the living room of the Houlliés’ apartment—the husbands have seemingly carved out a masculine niche for themselves while the women are expected to tend to the care-giving aspects of domesticity.

However, following the outburst directed at Alain for constantly using his phone, Annette adds more tension to the situation by denouncing domesticity outright. While her traditional husband believes that “tout ce qui est maison, école, jardin est de [s]on ressort” (52) ‘everything that is house, school, and garden is her domain,’ Annette announces that she finds the domestic sphere toxic and, if given a choice, would want no part of it (53). She rejects the association of women with domestic, maternal instincts and, in doing so, evokes Butler’s argument that a true, inner gender is merely a fantasy attributed to physical bodies. Gender expectations position women as biologically programmed to be more nurturing, yet gender is not based on biology. Rather, the stereotype that women are more caring is ascribed to their bodies due to some women’s ability to reproduce, and the repeated association of women with maternal instincts creates the illusion of an inner, maternal femininity supposedly inherent to all women. Annette does not want to conform to feminine stereotypes, and her blatant



denunciation of the domestic roles of wife and mother is followed shortly by her vomiting. Even though Alain attributes Annette's sickness to Véronique's tart, Michel believes this episode is symbolically linked to Annette's hatred of domesticity; she literally cannot stomach it. He reassures her, "C'est une crise nerveuse. Vous êtes une maman Annette. Que vous le vouliez ou non. Je comprends que vous soyez angoissée" (55) 'It's nerves. You're a mother, Annette. Whether or not you want to be one. I understand that you would feel distressed.' Michel suggests that, by unavoidably being a mother, Annette somehow has to reconcile her distaste for domesticity with her maternal role. Michel's suggestion merely reinforces gender expectations and insinuates that there is no way Annette can be a mother without embracing domesticity. However, Annette's very attempt to layer these identities results in disaster.

Annette's first episode of vomiting serves as the pivotal moment when the evening's atmosphere transitions from forcibly polite to blatantly contemptuous. The characters, progressively becoming less reserved, begin saying exactly what they think of one another. Not only do feminine stereotypes (baking and domesticity) provoke Annette's illness and initiate the decline in all the characters' polite behavior, but the act of vomiting is depicted as utterly unladylike. When Annette is in the bathroom, Véronique criticizes her, calling her fake (59). While some may argue that this label references Annette's personality and the artifice of civility, I suggest the fakeness that Véronique identifies in Annette lies in the discrepancy between Annette appearing to be a dedicated wife and mother—a conventionally ideal woman—and her subsequent bodily rejection of domesticity.

As the night draws on, following Annette's illness and the men's consumption of several glasses of rum, the characters attack one other more pointedly, ridiculing unsuccessful attempts to be manly or womanly. Just as the men try to foster their sense of masculinity through rum, cigars, and independence, the women project their own assumptions about how the men should act. Annette reveals she has an "idée johnwaynienne de la virilité" (109) 'a John Waynian idea of virility;' by invoking a culturally specific definition of masculinity, she situates John Wayne as the embodiment of masculinity that her husband should emulate. Most would agree that John Wayne represents exaggerated machismo that borders on parody. Nevertheless, Annette desires this masculine model and, in doing so, suggests that her husband's masculinity is inferior. When Véronique dumps out the contents of Annette's purse, Annette squeals like a "*petite fille*" (115) '*little girl*' and cries for her husband to come to her rescue. When Alain does nothing, Annette screams, "Défends-moi, pourquoi tu ne me défends pas?" (116) 'Defend me, why don't you defend me?' While Annette's gender performative squeal helps re-situate her as feminine after her

earlier rejection of domesticity, Alain does not play the part of the heroic cowboy and thus, in Annette's eyes, fails to live up to her standards.

Not only does Annette expect her husband to become John Wayne, she also imposes this ideal on Michel. Although she has just made his acquaintance, Annette criticizes Michel's masculinity by mocking his fear of rodents. Annette points out the paradox in Michel claiming he has a John Wayne personality and yet being unable to "tenir une souris dans sa main" (84) 'hold a mouse in his hand.' Michel's negative reaction to this remark reveals that Annette's critiques of his manliness shame him.

Ironically, when Alain does exhibit traditionally masculine qualities, Annette is not pleased. Shortly after his wife vomits, Alain tries to excuse himself for the evening by claiming he has work to do. Annette, not wanting him to leave, snaps, "[s]ois lâche, vas-y" (67) 'be a coward, go ahead.' By implying that Alain wants to retreat from the steadily increasing tension—a very un-John Waynean action—Annette questions Alain's manliness and tries to embarrass him into staying. Alain, however, explains that he must leave because he is at risk of losing his biggest client. Clearly established as a breadwinner, he thus fulfills this masculine role. By calling Alain's actions cowardly, Annette counters this masculine role, thereby positing a paradox. Is Alain masculine because he wants to protect his job and, as a result, the wellbeing of his family, or is he cowardly for retreating from the horrific evening? As an additional paradox, Annette believes men should stay away from things that "enlève toute autorité" (108) 'remove all authority,' yet she becomes annoyed when Alain does not heed her request not to smoke or talk on the phone. As we saw earlier, by refusing to listen to his wife, Alain maintains his authority. This causes Annette to lose her patience and eventually throw his phone into the vase of tulips. Alain's masculine independence therefore causes tension in his marriage, regardless of the fact that Annette purports to prefer stoic, autonomous men.

The women, however, are not the only ones who impose their gender expectations on the men; the men compare the wives to their own ideas of femininity. Because gender ideals are based on empty models, contradictions abound. No matter what Véronique does or does not do, no matter to which stereotype she conforms or which feminine twice-behaved behavior she exhibits, Véronique receives different criticisms for failing to adhere to gender expectations. While Michel accuses Véronique of acting irrational, Alain attacks her for appearing too reasonable: "Vous raisonnez trop. Les femmes raisonnent trop" (89) 'you reason too much. Women reason too much.' He claims that Véronique is from the same category of women as Jane Fonda; they are both "les femmes investies, solutionnantes, ce n'est pas ce qu'on aime chez les femmes, ce qu'on aime chez les femmes c'est la sensualité, la folie, les hormones" (121) 'invested, problem-solving women. But this is not what one likes in women. What

one likes in women is sensuality, madness, hormones.’ Alain thus attributes women’s allure to their supposed irrationality and passion. He does not find it proper or acceptable, let alone attractive, for a woman to occupy herself with rational concerns and tells her, “les gardiennes du monde nous rebutent, même lui ce pauvre Michel, votre mari, est rebuté” (121) ‘the female guardians of the word repulse us. Even poor Michel, your husband, is repulsed.’ Alain believes Michel should embrace Véronique’s seemingly irrational actions. However, Michel lashes out at her supposed madness and thus denounces his wife. No matter which way Véronique conforms—a mad woman or an overly logical one—the men find fault with her. The layers of femininity she puts on are ripped apart and destroyed by the other characters.

Both conforming to and rejecting gender stereotypes ultimately sets the characters up for failure and leads them to conflict and antagonism. Even when Véronique eschews feminine behavior completely, Alain criticizes her. She retaliates against his Jane Fonda speech by saying that no one cares about his taste in women (122). Rather than defend himself or further justify his argument, Alain attacks Véronique’s composure and discredits her by making her look ridiculous in front of the others: “Elle hurle. Quartier-maître sur un thonier au dix-neuvième siècle!” (122) ‘She yells. Quartermaster on a nineteenth-century tuna boat!’ By evoking a nineteenth-century sailor who has to bellow his orders to be heard above the winds, Alain attacks Véronique for straying from proper feminine behavior. Ironically, Véronique’s lack of composure and departure from calm reasoning have the potential to situate her precisely as the type of irrational woman that Alain claims to love. Her behavior is thus both unfeminine, since refined women do not holler like sailors, and stereotypically feminine if one accepts Alain’s claim that women are made of madness and hormones. Although Véronique’s outburst would appear to confirm Alain’s impression that women are irrational, Alain nevertheless dismisses her.

Véronique’s behavior also appears contradictory since her words and her actions do not correspond. Rejecting Alain’s characterization of the ideal woman as mad, Véronique pushes back against this feminine stereotype by saying she is not “caractériel[le]” (79) ‘emotionally disturbed.’ She wants to be taken seriously and not be ignored or dismissed as the men have been doing to the women throughout the evening. While it would appear that she confirms Alain’s original observation that she is too reasonable, Véronique makes this statement “[a]u bord des larmes” (79) ‘on the brink of tears,’ which would then support Alain’s second assertion that women are too emotional. However, Véronique’s emotions may be considered a reasonable response to the stressful evening.

Véronique’s femininity is also called into question when she hits her husband. Shortly afterward, she declares that they live in France “avec les codes de la société occidentale” (101) ‘with Western society’s codes of conduct.’

Michel points out the contradiction between Véronique's words and her actions by dryly stating that "[b]attre son mari doit faire partie des codes" (101) 'beating one's husband must be part of these codes.' Since it is not ladylike to resort to physical violence, it would seem that Véronique departs from accepted feminine behavior. However, her learned, feminine conditioning reveals itself through the stage directions: Véronique "*se jette sur son mari et le tape, plusieurs fois, avec un désespoir désordonné et irrationnel*" (100) 'throws herself on her husband and hits him, several times, with disorderly and irrational despair.' Women are generally not taught to throw punches, and Véronique's twice-behaved behavior is described as a stereotypically feminine manner of hitting. Furthermore, this serves as an example of how a performative act reinforces the illusion of the existence of an underlying femininity.

The fact that, according to Alain's logic, Véronique is both too feminine and not feminine enough shows the sliding gauge of gender expectations. As Butler explains, one's gendered self is "structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional *discontinuity*, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this 'ground'" (179). It is therefore through these discrepancies—Véronique's reason that irritates Alain and her tears that annoy her husband—that the groundlessness of a prescribed feminine behavior exposes itself. Since the concepts of ideal femininity and masculinity are empty, these norms search constantly for different versions of femininity and masculinity on which to base themselves; as we have seen through the characters in *Le Dieu du Carnage*, these different versions provide for many contradictions. Similar to how Annette wants Alain to be both John Wayne and a more present father who defers to his wife's wishes, Butler notes that "this perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization" (176). The contradictory nature of how "real" women or "real" men act shows that there are in fact no original gender templates. Forcing these imaginary norms on one other as though they were fixed and unchanging builds the tension in an already stressful situation.

Let us not forget that *Le Dieu du Carnage* centers on a stereotypically masculine act of violence that is perhaps the best example of the destructive nature of gender expectations. The whole play takes place because the couples' sons argued over belonging to a group of friends and Ferdinand Reille, "armé d'un bâton" (10) 'armed with a stick,' hit the group's leader, Bruno Houllié. Unlike Véronique's feminine whacks at Michel, Ferdinand delivers a blow strong enough to cause significant dental damage to Bruno. While the male characters do not explicitly condone their boys' fighting, they hint at some understanding when talking about their own experience as leaders of similar groups when they were younger. Annette even exhibits some degree of pride in her son Ferdinand's

actions by declaring, “Au moins on n’a pas un petit pédé qui s’écrase!” (122) ‘at least we don’t have a little fag who gets crushed!’ This striking statement implies that Ferdinand successfully enacted his masculine role, which led to fighting and injury, and Bruno, by refusing to fight back, failed to maintain his masculinity. By calling him gay, Annette conflates Bruno’s supposedly feminine gender performance with his sexual orientation. Her comment harms both gay and straight people by reinforcing heteronormative expectations. Using gender deviance as an insult helps no one, and, as this example shows, the actual act of conforming to masculine stereotypes by using brute force ended in bodily harm to another person. Regardless of Bruno’s sexual orientation, gender norms and stereotypes clearly hurt the boy.

*Le Dieu du Carnage* thus illustrates the devastation of gender stereotypes dictated by society. The play reveals that gender norms are destructive precisely because of the divide they cause between social expectations and individual desires, and because of the actions they trigger at all levels: interpersonal, social, and international. The God of Carnage is, quite simply, gender expectations. While gender roles supposedly construct civilization by assigning specific functions to different people, the God of Carnage employs them as a tool leading to destruction. Rather than being free, the characters are compelled to tear one another apart and experience the worst day of their lives (123). They police each other through these gender norms that Butler reveals to be “regulatory fiction” (180); failing to live up to these expectations both betrays these ideals as mere fantasy and fosters discontent, resentment, and even violence. The reviews of Reza’s play indicate that while viewers are often quick to identify the characters’ departure from civility as well as its consequences, they tend to overlook the fact that antagonistic and contradictory gender stereotypes provoke this divergence. If what we consider to be civil behavior—acting like proper ladies and gentlemen—actually causes civility to deteriorate, what do we have left? While Isenberg claims that *Le Dieu du Carnage* peels away the layers of artificial civility to reveal savagery, I suggest that supposedly civilized gender roles themselves bring about carnage. It is no secret that people who diverge from traditional gender identities and roles are often targets of discrimination and/or violence. Reza’s play suggests that even the attempt to adhere to these norms leads to disastrous consequences. The artifice of imposed gender stereotypes, including the strict dichotomy of masculine/feminine, cannot help but break down, and when it does, it produces conflict. While we may not be able to fully escape the ubiquitous hold of gender expectations, pulling back the curtain to reveal the God of Carnage allows us to start dismantling its power.

## Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.
2. Hélène Jaccomard writes that the first serious study on Reza, Denis Guénoun's *Avez-Vous Lu Reza? Une Invitation Philosophique* ('Have You Read Reza? A Philosophical Invitation') (2005), was published 15 years after the premiere of her first play. In her book's appendix, Jaccomard provides a list of articles on Reza, and the majority focus on "Art," arguably Reza's most successful work.
3. Dating back to the Ancient Greeks, hysteria has long been associated with women. Paul Chodoff even argues that hysteria should be considered a "caricature of femininity" (549).
4. While Véronique also has a career—she is a writer and works part-time at a bookstore—Alain and Annette both work in the traditionally masculine corporate world.

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