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# The Modernist roman à clef and Cultural Secrets, or I Know That You Know That I Know That You Know

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## The Modernist *roman à clef* and Cultural Secrets, or I Know That You Know That I Know That You Know

Melissa Boyde

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**R**OMAN À CLEF, a French term meaning ‘novel with a key’, refers to fictional works in which actual people or events can be identified by a knowing reader, typically a member of a coterie. Seventeenth century writer and *salonnière* Madeleine de Scudéry (1607–1701) is attributed as the innovator of the genre creating it to disguise from the general reader the public figures whose political actions and ideas formed the basis of her fictional narratives. In taking up the genre a number of modernist women writers, including Djuna Barnes and Hope Mirrlees, reflected and reinterpreted this era in the early twentieth century avant-garde salon culture of Paris. From early on the salon had developed into ‘a tool of survival in a time of adversity’ (Kale 142) so it is no surprise that salons and coteries in modernist Paris, such as those of Gertrude Stein and Natalie Barney, flourished in a climate where lesbian/queer identities were increasingly being rendered secret in dominant medical and legal discourses. The *roman à clef* appealed to these coterie audiences who were able to discern in the texts information which to the unknowing reader potentially remained obscure or hidden.

Recent studies of coterie formations such as Lytle Shaw’s have examined both ‘the force of cultural marginality of the coterie and the authority of deeply established cultural interest’ found in them (Shaw 4). Deriving from the Old French word *cotier*, coterie originally referred to a collective formed by tenants in order to challenge landlords over the run-down condition of their ‘cots’ or ‘cottages’. Shaw points out that ‘as the term gets used to designate privileged circles devoted to covert political or literary activity, the force of marginality associated with the medieval term gives way to the modern connotation of the clique’ (4). The *roman à clef* is emblematic of coterie writing in controlling both the scope of its audience and the way in which its meanings are potentially located and interpreted. Circulating within the coterie environment of the salon and associated with secrecy and revelation, the *roman à clef* could be seen as a kind of currency, according value to its writer and readers, much as earlier forms of courtly poetry had done.

The *clef*, or key, is generally regarded as the *roman à clef*'s distinguishing feature. It may be published with the novel or subsequently by the author or through diaries and correspondence. Although the key is not always published openly some indication of the scope of a *roman à clef*'s concerns is usually evident in devices such as an epigraph or naming of characters and/or places. The key provides a 'technique of matching [which] ... unlocks the historical secret otherwise hidden behind the veil of fictionalised characters' (Chen 5) and thereby sets the *roman à clef* apart from novels which contain a fictionalised representation of a real-life character. The first *roman à clef* is generally considered to be de Scudéry's second novel, *Artamène, ou Le Grand Cyrus*, published in ten volumes between 1649 and 1653. Speculation by readers that it was based on auto/biographical material no doubt contributed to its immense popularity and, perhaps to satisfy that curiosity, some years after the final volume of *Cyrus* a key was produced and published as an adjunct.

De Scudéry, a prolific writer of popular fiction, was a regular participant of the Marquise de Rambouillet's leading Parisian salon and held her own salon, the *Samedi*, where she was known as Sapho. In these salons she met many of the well-known political and public figures who were to populate the fictional world of her novels as characters. Renowned for their witty and mannered conversation, the salon participants or *précieux* discussed topical issues of the day, from the mid-seventeenth century French civil war, the Fronde, to the latest religious movement, Jansenism. Mirrlees explains that:

The *Précieuses* were described by a contemporary as 'les Jansénistes de l'amour'. Jansenism was the fashionable 'high-brow' form of Catholicism, and it made it extremely difficult to save one's soul, just as the *Précieuses* hedged round love-making with all sorts of elaborate rules. (Henig 11–12)

Over several centuries the salon occupied a distinctive cultural space, characterised by its capacity to both negotiate and structure the development of liberal political discussion and aesthetic ideas (de Jean). As a social formation that was neither entirely private nor public, to some extent it appeared to traverse both class and gender divisions (Kale; Chesney). Janet Lyon draws on Michel de Certeau's concept of 'local authority' to frame the salon as a 'site of social power operating outside ... institutional state apparatuses' (Lyon 35). She points out how in privileging 'conversation over pedantry, particular experience over absolute values of truth, sociability over domesticity, debate over aggression' the salon subtly controlled the free conversation and social identities that it promoted (Lyon 35).

In the modernist era, the *roman à clef* would be used by writers like Barnes and Mirrlees to bring to light the debates, ideas and cultural production of the coterie associated with salons such as Barney's. Salon culture in the modernist era might have been highly privileged but it also offered a space to articulate non-normative ties, that is, kinship bonds that were not paternal/heterosexual but (homo)sexually and aesthetically oriented. The *roman à clef* hinted at

cultural realities while simultaneously disavowing them through its construction as a fictional text. It claimed particular authenticity through its use of a coded subcultural discourse and gained currency through its very secrecy.

As the representation of same-sex identities and narratives was increasingly delimited through medical and legal discourses, the modernist *roman à clef* was particularly suitable as a tool to assert and explore an identity that was culturally marginal. Significantly, at the same time as human sexuality was being defined and classified through typologies of identity, in literature ‘the notion of reality was transformed into the more formalistic concept of realism, and this realism in turn, was made to rest on an author’s personality and experience’ (Azim 90). The mimetic quality attributed to the classic realist text ‘from its earliest and varied enunciations, posits a truth relation between world and word, model and copy, nature and image, or, in semiotic terms, referent and sign, in which potential difference is subsumed by sameness’ (Diamond 363). The truth value imbued in realism meant that excerpts from fiction could be used as evidence of moral corruption of its author, as demonstrated in the use of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* during his trial for gross indecency. The conflation of art with life prompted author Robert Hichens and his publisher William Heinemann to withdraw the *roman à clef* *The Green Carnation*, a satire on Wilde and aestheticism, since ‘both men saw with horrid and prophetic clarity, how easily the book could be used against Wilde’ (Hennegan 186).

The *roman à clef* dangerously teased the conventions of realism, flouting its elitism and the need for a knowing reader. As a genre, it seemed to offer a ‘key’ to determining individuals and their value within a coterie. Yet, as this essay demonstrates, there were also ambiguities of identification and secrets only guessed at, even by their projected readership. The modernist *roman à clef* would gain resonance through its allusion to the paradoxical experimentalism and tradition of the *roman à clef* genre; the hierarchical aesthetic subculture that generated its production; and cultural secrecy surrounding non-normative sexuality circulating within that community.

### ***Ladies Almanack***

In *Paris Was Yesterday* Janet Flanner describes Djuna Barnes as ‘the most important woman writer we had in Paris’ (xvii), and in his introduction to the American edition of Barnes’s novel *Nightwood* T.S. Eliot refers to ‘the beauty of phrasing, the brilliance of wit and characterisation’. *Ladies Almanack* (1928) by Barnes takes the almanac for its style and structure, a genre which, since it embodies both the scientific and the ethereal, undoes the apparent authority and certainty of scientific/medical objectivity and rationality through which sexuality was then being promulgated. In a foreword to the 1972 edition, written when Barnes was eighty, she writes:

This slight satiric wiggling, this *Ladies Almanack*, anonymously written (in an idle hour), fearfully punctuated, and privately printed (in the

twenties) ... hawked about the *faubourg* and the temple, and sold, for a penny, to the people ...

That chronicle is now set before the compound public eye.

Neap-tide to the Proustian chronicle, gleanings from the shores of Mytilene, glimpses of its novitiates, its rising “saints” and “priestesses”, and thereon to such aptitude and insouciance that they took to gaming and to swapping that “other” of the mystery, the anomaly that calls the hidden name. (Barnes 3)

The foreword explains the conditions of the book’s publication and circulation – anonymously ‘written and illustrated By A Lady of Fashion’, and distributed by hand to residents of the Left Bank and at Barney’s salon. The limited edition and private publication shows an understanding of censorship issues at the time: a decision was made to produce a coterie publication, a point reinforced by the choice of the genre of the *roman à clef*. Given its bawdy lesbian content, *Ladies Almanack* would never have achieved mainstream publication, as de Scudéry’s novels had. It became, however, ‘one of the best-known pieces of “coterie” literature of the period’ (Benstock 249), achieving a notoriety that extended beyond its readership in the same way that de Scudéry’s novels were widely-known and talked about because of their *à clef* qualities.

### The Key

The group of women referred to in *Ladies Almanack* all frequented Barney’s salon at 20 Rue Jacob. They were mostly writers and artists, and many of them were influential within literary modernism or within lesbian social circles in Paris. The key to *Ladies Almanack* is found in the margin annotations Barney made in her copy, in which she notes the real life counterparts of a number of the characters. For example, there is Patience Scalpel (Mina Loy) who does not understand women’s attraction to women, Doll Furious (Dolly Wilde, Oscar Wilde’s niece) who amid ‘merry laughter’ (12) pursues Señorita Fly-About, One of Buzzing Much to Rome (Mimi Franchetti). There are the journalists Nip and Tuck (Janet Flanner and Solita Solana) and two British women – Lady Buck-and-Balk who ‘sported a monocle and believed in Spirits’ (Lady Una Troubridge) and Tilly-Tweed-In-Blood who ‘sported a Stetson, and believed in Marriage’ (Radclyffe Hall) (19).<sup>1</sup> Early on the central character Dame Evangeline Musset (based on Natalie Barney) is acclaimed as a saint. Like de Scudéry presiding over her *Samedis* as Sapho, Dame Evangeline is a lesbian ‘saint’ at the centre of a group of devotees. Like all saints she provides miraculous cures:

...she who was called Evangeline Musset and who was in her Heart one Grand Red Cross for the Pursuance, the Relief and the Distraction, of such Girls as in their Hinder Parts, and their Fore Parts, and in

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<sup>1</sup> The names which appear in brackets after each of the characters are from Andrew Field’s transcription of Barney’s notes (Field 124–25).

whatsoever Parts did suffer them most, lament Cruelly, be it Itch of Palm, or Quarters most horribly burning ... And why is it no Philosopher of whatever Sort, has discovered, amid the nice Herbage of his Garden, one that will content that Part, but that from the day that we were indifferent Matter, to this wherein we are Imperial Personages of the divine human Race, no thing solaces it as other Parts as inflamed, or with the Consolation every Woman has at her Finger Tips, or at the very hang of her Tongue?"(6)

Dame Evangeline (as her name implies) is, like the sexologists and legislators, on a crusade. As Monika Kaup suggests, 'the miraculous aspects of Dame Evangeline's life are treated seriously, or as non-seriously, as the myths of modern sexology – both are subjected to neobaroque procedures of artificialisation and exposed as fictions' (95). The extravagance and extremity of her crusade to save women through the practices of lesbian sex serves to underscore and render equally absurd the culturally dominant discourses at that time which constructed lesbianism as a cultural secret.

Throughout *Ladies Almanack* Barnes employs the indirect satirical form known as Menippean satire, characterised by extended dialogue conducted by a range of eccentric characters. The ludicrous nature of the characters' wordy pronouncements functions to satirise the political, intellectual or aesthetic views they advocate. In de Scudéry's novels this form of satire is achieved through the conversational strategies she pioneered which became a hallmark of the genre and which displayed both *la politesse* of the *précieux* and critiqued social and political events. For women in this milieu the performance of polite conversation and display of wit was paramount, while for men the goal was to become an *honnête homme*, which meant both to acquire military skill and attain the ideal of Platonic love. *Ladies Almanack* adopts the *roman à clef* technique of conversation to satirise a range of contemporary views, opinions and theories. There is a great deal of reported conversation between characters and use of pseudo Elizabethan English, but while this reflects de Scudéry's seventeenth-century French it does not reflect the mannered art of conversation found in her novels. The conversations which take place in the environment of the salon turn to the topical (in 1928) issue of lesbian sexuality. Gone are references to Platonic love, polite conversation and heroic military acts. In contrast Dame Evangeline's 'Crusade' is 'to lure [women] ... to the breast'(34). Early in the book Patience Scalpel gives a lengthy monologue which typifies the attitudes of the day toward lesbianism:

"In my time", said Patience Scalpel, "Women came to enough trouble by lying abed with the Father of their Children. What then in this good Year of our Lord has paired them like to like, with never a Beard between them ... Well I'm not the Woman for it! They well have to pluck where they may. My Daughters shall go amarrying!" (12–13)

Scalpel's diatribe is preceded, and undercut, by the story of Dame Evangeline's

childhood which bears a striking resemblance to the principal character, Stephen Gordon, in Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness*. Like Stephen, Dame Evangeline dresses and acts like a man and, like Stephen's father, Dame Evangeline's father 'spent many a windy Eve pacing his Library' (8) worrying about her sexuality. Barnes's final word on the matter satirises *The Well of Loneliness* for, unlike Stephen who feels her 'inversion' to be 'a mark of Cain', the young Dame Evangeline is full of bravado when she tells her father:

"Thou, good Governor, wast expecting a Son when you lay atop of your Choosing, why then be so mortal wounded when you perceive that you have your Wish? Am I not doing after your very Desire, and is it not the more commendable, seeing that I do it without the Tools for the Trade, and yet nothing complain?" (8)

Whether Dame Evangeline references Hall's character or is based on Barney is not of central importance. The broader issue is that through the use of *roman à clef* conventions, in this case satire, Barnes's text uncovers and debunks cultural secrets. Moreover, the wit and sense of play emanating from *Ladies Almanack* gave Barnes a measure of cachet within Barney's salon as until then she had been 'half in and half out of the club' (Jay 213–15). The publication of *Ladies Almanack* effected a significant change to her status – according to one of Barnes's biographers Barney 'reread *Ladies Almanack* many times and often wrote Barnes letters expressing admiration and gratitude for this delicious satire' (Herring 151).

This critical view, that the satire in *Ladies Almanack* is driven partly by Barnes's status as an outsider negotiating with the wealthy and privileged elite of Barney's salon, finds resonances in Hope Mirrlees's novel *Madeleine: One of Love's Jansenists* (1919) in which the issue of elitism in the salon and how an 'outsider' gains entry is explored. Mirrlees's use of the *roman à clef* in *Madeleine* is arguably even more self-conscious than *Ladies Almanack* about its form and potential effects within coterie formations. In many respects, it is a metafictional text in its exploration of the principal generic conventions of the *roman à clef* and in the way it shows characters trying to recreate in their own lives the personae and situations in the *à clef* romances they read.

### ***Madeleine: One of Love's Jansenists***

The setting of *Madeleine* is the salon culture of seventeenth-century Paris, specifically Catherine de Rambouillet's salon, the *chambre bleue*, and de Scudéry's salon, the *Samedi*. The central character, a young woman named Madeleine Troqueville, is an avid reader of de Scudéry's *romans à clef* and at the back of a bookshop 'where she was safe from ogles and insolence, she would devour all the books that pleased and modelled the taste of the day ... many-volumed romances, such as ... that flower of modernity, Mademoiselle de Scudéry's *Grand Cyrus*' (*Madeleine* 50). Madeleine becomes obsessed by the idea of meeting de Scudéry although this is not easily achieved because she is an

outsider, a provincial from Lyon whose family is not wealthy. But her dreams of meeting the modern day Sappho are all-consuming and she eventually succeeds in making them come true.

The novel is not only a *roman à clef* but also makes the *roman à clef* part of its subject matter. It makes a direct link to the originator of the genre and also gives a fictional and *à clef* account of the period which discloses what de Scudéry could only hint at in her writing – lesbian passion. One of the novel's concerns, the concept of art imitating life, gestures knowingly to the limitations of realism for a writer focusing on a lesbian romance. Mirrlees demonstrates this through the use of conversation, a stylistic feature which formally links *Madeleine* to de Scudéry's works such as *The Story of Sappho* which essentially comprises a series of conversations (de Scudéry 6). Although the themes of the conversations in *The Story of Sappho* and *Madeleine* are similar – the nature of love, the undesirability of marriage, the desirability of Platonic love between men and women, women as writers – there is a difference. Most of the character Madeleine's reported conversations are rehearsed in her imagination and change significantly when played out in real life. This device, reflecting Mirrlees's modernist literary concerns, undermines the certainty of the authentic voice associated with classic realism.

Not only does Mirrlees's novel comment on female desire in seventeenth-century France but it is also a *roman à clef* about the modernist literary salons which she frequented. Mirrlees lived mainly in England but spent several years in Paris where she knew Stein and Alice B. Toklas, André Gide and Charles du Bos. In England her friends included Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, Lady Ottoline Morrell and T.S. Eliot. In 1919, the same year that *Madeleine* was published, the Woolfs' Hogarth Press published Mirrlees's highly experimental epic poem *Paris* which Virginia Woolf calls 'very obscure, indecent and brilliant' (Nicolson, *Question* 385). Woolf was not as positive about *Madeleine*, writing to a friend that she 'didn't like the book as much as I should have done' (Nicolson, *Change* 200). In a review of the novel Woolf remarks that there is 'a learned strain in the book, an analysis of religion and philosophy, quotations from the Latin, translations from the Greek' (109) and in an appraisal of her novel some fifty years after publication, Mirrlees writes: 'There are two people in me – one a sort of poet the other a sort of scholar, and in the case of *Madeleine* the scholar has killed both the poet and the book' (Henig 12). But the criticism is too harsh: apart from the novel's importance in bringing to the twentieth century the insights and concerns of women in the society of the *précieux*, and its representation of lesbian desire in both periods, it also makes an important contribution to an understanding of the function of the *roman à clef* as a genre.

A central theme in *Madeleine* is the conflation of art and life by readers of the *roman à clef* which the novel explores in relation to the process of writing fiction. In the preface Mirrlees suggests that:

Fiction – to adapt a famous definition of law – is the meeting-point of



Life and Art ... These two things are poles apart – how are they to meet in the same work of fiction?

One way is to fling down, *pêle-mêle*, a handful of separate acts and words, and then to turn on them the constructive force of a human consciousness that will arrange them into the pattern of logic or of drama ... The other way is to turn from time to time upon the action the fantastic limelight of eternity, with a sudden effect of unreality and the hint of the world within a world. My plot ... takes place in this inner world and is summed up in the words that dog the dreams of Madeleine – *per hunc in invisibilium amorem rapiamur*.(vii-viii) (By this love of what is invisible we are captured)

Mirrlees's ideas cast light on the importance of the *roman à clef* in rendering visible that which is decreed culturally to be unspeakable – ‘a famous definition of law’ evokes the Wilde trial and Madeleine's invisible world is the site of her secret longing for de Scudéry.

The conjunction (and confusion) of art and life is exemplified in an episode when Madeleine's fiancé Robert Pilou shows her father a screen which he has covered with ‘sacred woodcuts’ to create ‘an allegorical history’(10–11) of the seventeenth-century French civil war, the Fronde (often the topic of de Scudéry's *romans à clef*). Robert explains:

profane history is countenanced if told by means of sacred prints and moreover itself becomes sacred history ... Here you have a print of Judas Iscariot ... You observe he is a hunchback, and therefore can be taken for the Prince de Conti! (11)

Monsieur Troqueville's reply reveals more than his attitude to women: ‘sacred history becomes profane in the same way ... you could turn the life of Jesus into the history of Don Quixote – a picture of the woman who pours the ointment on his feet could pass for the grand lady who waits on Don Quixote in her castle, and the Virgin could be his niece’ (11). The misrepresentation and misrecognition of life through art shows that potentially all is not what it seems on the surface. The screen figures again in Madeleine's search for a sign to reconcile her ‘love for Mademoiselle de Scudéry’ with Jansenism. The sign comes from two passers-by, one of whom recounts to the other the response Queen Christina of Sweden received on enquiring how one defines the *précieuses*: ‘Madame, les Précieuses sont les Jansénistes de l'amour!’.

On hearing this Madeleine laughs aloud:

‘Les Précieuses sont les Jansénistes de l'amour!’ ... It was obviously a case of Robert Pilou's sacred screen. ‘Profane history told by means of sacred prints becomes sacred history’... she could sanctify her obsession for Mademoiselle de Scudéry by making it definitely the symbol of her love for Christ, not merely a means of curing her *amour-propre*. Through her, she would learn to know Him. (139–40)

The layers in this episode not only deconstruct the concept of art as reality but for an ‘in the know’ reader the mention of Queen Christina is a coded reference to lesbianism.<sup>2</sup> Jansenism, which puts forward the view that only a select few may achieve a state of Grace through ‘an agony of repentance, a loathing of things visible, and a burning longing for things invisible – *in invisibilium amorem rapiamur*’ (136), becomes a metaphor for lesbianism in the novel. Woolf notes that ‘Madeleine, a little laboriously perhaps, is both *précieuse* and Jansenist; but the labour is justified, since she remains a human being’ (McNeillie 109). By merging these apparently discordant elements and reinterpreting them in this way Mirrlees achieves what has elsewhere been called a ‘transcendence of the visible reality of heterosexuality, [which] may be consonant with art and with the impossible and invisible love between women’ (Vanita 162). Madeleine’s use of the concept of the screens as a way to legitimate her desire for de Scudéry points to the notion of layered and parallel worlds. Through this interpretation and manipulation of art and ideas one thing can pass for another – Jansenism for lesbianism; art for history; history for reality and so on. But as well, the coded representations inherent in the *roman à clef* generically contain the potential for multiple reading positions – a concept that embraces difference.

### ***The Key***

There is as yet no critical consensus about the real-life identities of the characters in *Madeleine*. A number of keys can be found in the novel but they are not like those attached to de Scudéry’s novels which give accurate information about the real people each character represents. In a letter to Clive Bell, Woolf writes that the novel is ‘all sapphism ... Jane and herself’ (Nicolson, *Question* 391) which suggests that the central characters are based on Mirrlees and the classical scholar Jane Harrison. Woolf’s comment has been influential in positioning the novel as a *roman à clef*. For example, Harrison’s most recent biographer Mary Beard notes that ‘Woolf ... spotted how Mirrlees ... encoded their relationship within the terms of literary sapphism’ (154). But another biography of Harrison refutes Woolf’s assessment on the basis that ‘Woolf often made hasty and inaccurate judgements’ (Peacock 111).

In the absence of a definitive key, biographical information suggests that Madeleine Troqueville is Mirrlees in her role as student and admirer of Jane Harrison who taught her classics at Cambridge University during the years 1910–1913. Several other correspondences between the character Madeleine and Mirrlees can be made. In the novel Madeleine rejects her fiancé Jacques because of her love for de Scudéry/Sappho. Similarly Mirrlees ended her engagement and Harrison’s response that she was ‘relieved’ suggests their emotional connection (Peacock 111). The two women eventually lived together on and off in Cambridge and later in Paris and London until Harrison’s death in 1928. Like Madeleine, Mirrlees is a provincial (from the north of England) and bourgeois. In a caustic

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<sup>2</sup> A reference to Queen Christina also occurs in de Scudéry’s novel *Artamène, ou le Grand Cyrus* in which she appears as the character Princess Cléobuline.

moment, Woolf refers to Mirrlees' family as 'a typical English family, devoted, entirely uncultured, owning motor cars, living in a large house' (Nicolson, *Change* 200). Madeleine, however, is more than a coded representation of Mirrlees; she is also an embodiment of the conceptual frame of the conjunction of life and art or, as Mirrlees puts it, the 'meet[ing] in the same work of fiction ... of Life and Art'(vii). The fictional character de Scudéry, known as Sappho and the centre of the salon society, may be Harrison (as Beard suggests), at the centre of a circle of students and admirers at Newnham, a revisionist of classical mythology who found traces of matriarchal and matrilineal societies in Classical Greek mythology. Julia Briggs, however, disagrees with Beard's interpretation of Harrison as de Scudéry, arguing that Harrison 'appears much later in the book as the wise Mère Agnès Arnauld, the Jansenist Mother superior of Port-Royale' (Briggs 25). It may be that Harrison is doubly represented in the novel, she certainly appears in another form – as herself, quoted in the epilogue: "“Art springs straight out of the rite, and her first outward leap is the image of the god.” – Jane Harrison' (Mirrlees 275). As the central *salonnière* in the novel, however, the figure of de Scudéry is open to other interpretations. Briggs 'suspects' that de Scudéry 'is a hostile portrait of Natalie Barney'(25). But the character of de Scudéry, which can be read not so much as 'hostile' but as a representation of a woman who does not conform to socially prescribed feminine ideals of the time, either physically or behaviourally may double for Stein as much as Barney.

The use of generic conventions of coded naming, doubles and parallels directly reflects the innovations and techniques of de Scudéry's historical novels. In *Cyrus* there is a complex doubling of characters and names which invites 'active involvement in deciphering, interpreting and evaluating its values ... [and] models and encourages the dialogue of multiple points of view, centering on many issues' (Capasso 234).<sup>3</sup> In *Madeleine* a further dimension of doubling is the parallel world signified typographically by dotted lines, italics or reduction in font size. These textual absences and differences occur whenever Madeleine retreats into the territory of her imagination – for her the place where lesbian desire can exist.

Michel Foucault writes that:

Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such

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3 For example, Cyrus takes on the name of Artamène in order to disguise, and gain freedom from, his royal connections. Artamène is the lover and Cyrus the public man. The character Artamène/Cyrus is also physically doubled in the narrative by the hero Spitridate, whose own mother mistakes him for Cyrus. Doubling occurs frequently in *Madeleine* when for example Madeleine arrives at the *Hôtel de Rambouillet* and refers to it as 'the famous "Palais de Cléomire"', the fictional name it is given in *Cyrus* (100–01).

things, how those who can and cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorised, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (Foucault 27)

Generically the *roman à clef* demonstrates Foucault's idea that cultural secrets function 'alongside', 'with' and 'in relation' to what is said. By providing a key to unlock the secrets contained within the text, otherwise knowable only to a coterie readership, the genre facilitates the unlocking of secret knowledge, points to the discretion required and exposes what is culturally relegated to silence. Although at the turn of the twentieth century lesbianism entered public discourse as secret, the use of the *roman à clef* by the writers discussed here shows strategic ways in which that secrecy was contested and negotiated.

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