

## Camille Claudel: Seer, Seen, or Unseen?

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Recent reworkings of Camille Claudel's story show how hard it is to see her, either as a sculptor of genius or as a muse and mistress of the more famous Rodin. An existence as an unattached but impure woman, a sculptor not only of female but of male nudes, consigned her to the madhouse. The different treatments of her life in 1988's "Camille Claudel" and 2013's "Camille Claudel 2015" try to take the focus away from her collaboration with Rodin, but the visual nature of film relies on two different treatments of nudity to depict her fate.

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Was the French sculptor Camille Claudel mad, and was her madness gendered, or generic? To what degree was she actually persecuted, and to what degree did she exhibit a "persecution complex"? Did she have an Oedipus complex, or at least an Electra complex, in an era when Freud had just begun to elaborate his theories? Was her lover and mentor Rodin responsible for her success by taking her as his apprentice, muse, and lover, or did he appropriate her ideas and drive her over the edge by first mentoring her and offering a seamless collaboration and then refusing to give her his exclusive love, inconsistently promoting and undermining her? Did she inherit her madness from her parents, or from even more remote ancestors, or did she finally crack under the pressure of the double binds of her family situation and of the role of women in bourgeois society in the late 19th century?

Unlike Rodin, Claudel was born into bourgeois comfort. Her mother came from a wealthy family which was proud to descend from the 14th century ruler Charles VI (Beaucarnot, 2014), a Valois king of France. This illustrious ancestor was also a royal madman: After being named Charles le Bien-Aimé (the Beloved) at the beginning of his reign, he came to be called Charles le Fou (Charles the Mad) as his strange nature became clear. He had the illusion that he was made of glass, which made him unwilling to be touched. He did allow himself to be touched enough to father 12 children, most of whom survived, and most of whom had their own unique *grain de folie*. He also was prone to killing his own soldiers if an attack of madness was upon him (Ashrafian, 2016, p. 416).

Claudel's mother had a brother who committed suicide, and her first born was a boy who died after two weeks. When her next baby was a girl, she is said to have been disappointed that she wasn't a boy, giving her a name that was more likely to be given to boys—think Camille Saint Saens. They never seem to have gotten along, though Claudel received the strong support of her father and later on from her younger brother, the noted Catholic poet and diplomat, Paul Claudel. The third sibling, Louise, became a traditional wife and mother (Dravet, 2003).

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Paul and Louise were called upon to help Camille find the red earth that she used for clay, for she had been sculpting almost straight out of the womb. There was even a kiln on the farm where Camille was born, installed by a grandfather who made his own tile. Early on, she attracted the attention of a local sculptor, who may have been as much of an influence on her as her later famous mentor. She and her siblings were homeschooled by a gifted tutor who emphasized history and the classics. Her first sculptures were of Napoleon, Bismarck, and the members of her family. Her figure of her brother as a young Roman, finished when she was 12, was particularly admired, attracting the attention of the sculptor Alfred Boucher, who introduced her to Italian sculptors like Donatello. At time, women could not attend the Ecole des Beaux Arts, but the strong-willed young Camille convinced her father to move the family to Paris, where she could attend a woman only in school which permitted the students to draw and sculpt from nude models. Her brother attended one of the best schools in France which had produced France's leaders, the Lycée Voltaire. To pay for these schools, Camille's father had to work long hours and live separately from the family. The tensions between Camille and her mother became more intense when the father wasn't present to form a buffer between them (Paris, 1988).

After she completed her art instruction, Camille decided to rent a studio with a group of other female artists. They continued working with live models, and Boucher dropped in to give them free instruction. When he went to Italy with the Prix de Rome, he called upon Rodin to take over as mentor to the young women. When Jessie went back to England, Claudel began working as Rodin's apprentice. She worked in marble and clay, and specialized in hands and feet. When she did work on her own, the much older sculptor realized her genius, and before long they became lovers, although he had a long-time mistress who was the same age as Claudel's mother (Rodin was even older). They stayed together for a long time, off and on. When the Claudel family found out about their relationship, they all disapproved. The father was angry; the son was judgmental. Mme. Claudel called her daughter a prostitute, deeply disapproving of her bohemian lifestyle and easy morals. Paul believed that Camille had had an abortion, and judged her harshly (He had become devoutly Catholic, like his mother). After about 10 years, Rodin and Claudel definitively broke up, and Claudel as the less financially successful partner was set adrift (Paris, 1988).

Though it was believed that she owed her success to her association with Rodin, some of her most original work was from this period. Since she often couldn't afford to do monumental work in marble and bronze, she did smaller works in onyx and smaller pieces of stone. At one point she made the sculpture, "L'âge mûr" ("Maturity") of an older man being dragged away from a young woman by an old crone. When Rodin saw it, he is said to have been shocked by the reference to the broken ménage à trois and to have prevented Claudel from getting a government grant. It may also have been meant to depict Claudel's consciousness of her own aging.

As she became more isolated, Claudel became more eccentric, living alone with just a chair and a bed and her sculptures. When her work didn't sell, she would destroy it with picks and hammers. When she sold something, she would throw wild parties with all the drunks of the neighborhood, wearing eccentric dresses decorated with feathers and scarves. And yes, she herself had become an alcoholic, and had started to neglect her appearance and hygiene (Paris, 1988).

When we try to determine what kind of crazy she was, we can easily and anachronistically determine that she was a crazy cat lady. "On me reproche (ô crime épouvantable) d'avoir vécu toute seule, de passer ma vie avec des chats" (I am reproached (Oh horrible crime) with living alone, with spending my time with cats (Wilson, 2010, p. 213). She sculpted one of her feline friends at some point (there is no date on the sculpture).

As Claudel started to cause her family concern, her only champion, her father, died in 1913. When her brother saw her on his return from a diplomatic posting, he was shocked at her weight gain, her untidy clothes, and her poor hygiene. Only a few days after the father's death, her family had her committed to an insane asylum. Despite her doctor's recommendation that she be allowed to live in her mother's house, she remained in the hospital until her death 30 years later. Her family continued to re-commit her, each member for his or her own reasons.

Paul Claudel was involved in his own irregular romantic relationship, fathering a child with a married woman, and involved in a diplomatic career all over the world. He later married and had more children. He didn't have the time or inclination to take care of his sister, and judged her bohemian life style. The mother said she was too old to take care of her daughter, whom she had never really liked. She also said that she was sure that Claudel only seemed cured because she was shut away, and that she would relapse if she went back into society. The mother died in 1929, never having seen her daughter, whom she convicted of "all the vices", again. Louise, the younger daughter, just wanted a bigger share of the inheritance when her mother died. Rodin had lost contact with his former lover. Both he and his mistress, whom he had married, died in 1917. Paul only visited his sister seven times in 30 years. His daughter Reine, remembers visiting her as a young child. Later she was shocked to learn that her crazy aunt had been one of the greatest sculptors of her time, and ended up writing a biography and catalogue raisonné of her notorious relative (the source of the biographical details I have used in this paper).

When Claudel died in 1943, she may have starved to death, since Vichy France did not want to allot food to the mentally ill. She had at any rate grown very frightened of being poisoned, and did not eat in the hospital cafeteria but was allowed to cook herself a daily potato and hardboiled egg, as is depicted in the movie *Camille Claudel 1915*.

So, in what sense was Claudel insane? And to what extent was her insanity due to her status as a female artist in a society that thought that only males could be artists. Two other French female artists of the period, Rosa Bonheur and Berthe Morisot, seemed to have a successful artistic life, but they were very different from Claudel. Bonheur mainly painted horses, whose nudity did not offend, and lived a very female-defined life. She cross-dressed, and was probably gay. Morisot was an example of what was called "Art féminin". She married Edouard Manet's brother, and had one child who was her frequent model. She gained support from her participation in the Impressionist movement. She did sketch and paint nudes, but these were not her most famous works.

Claudel did not want to have children, and was not gay. She broke off relations with her best friend and fellow sculptor Jessie when she became pregnant, saying that Jessie was ugly and her baby would be ugly as well. Claudel's relationships with women, which might have brought her some emotional support, were never strong, perhaps because of her difficult relationship with her mother and sister. Jessie came to visit Claudel in the asylum, and with the old hostilities forgotten, they had a warm correspondence.

Though Claudel suffered from not conforming to women's role in society, she was not merely a victim. Unlike Rodin her bourgeois education gave her an instant advantage in the art world. Though neither of them could attend the Beaux Arts, his non-attendance was due to poverty. She was able to attend an alternative school and hire mode Claudel was paranoid, but her delusions were symbolic reworkings of things that had really happened to her. Rodin and his "gang" didn't break into her studio and steal her work, but he did deprive her of credit for her own work, since she was viewed as his shadow and imitator. Her collaboration with him

which was so artistically enriching to both of them made it hard for her to see him so rich and admired while she was so miserable and poor while still doing strong work.

The sign of a sane man in this period was his ability to support himself by working. The sign of a sane bourgeois woman was her ability to keep house for her family (either by using servants or doing it herself). Poor women were allowed to work and even to live alone, but the middle-class woman who did so was in danger of losing her independence and even ended up in the hospital. Hypochondriacs sometimes get sick. Paranoid schizophrenics are sometimes persecuted.

If living with a dysfunctional family involves trying to satisfy two incompatible requirements at the same time (what R. D. Laing and Gregory Bateson called the double bind, see S. Wilson "Gender"), if being a female genius in a society where genius is only of the male gender, gendered madness may ensue, as it did with Camille Claudel.

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