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Beauty in the Beast: A Book Review of Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes*

One finds oneself laughing, perhaps as a substitute for writhing in discomfort, but laughing all the same, at Marie Darrieussecq's Bildungsroman-cum-*journal intime* *Truismes*; an exceptional attempt to destabilise the established notions of the aestheticism of the female body that had firmly left its footprints in the contemporary Parisian society in which the text is set. This often-infuriating first-person narrative was published during the third wave of feminism that had gripped the socialist nation by its publication in 1996, and details the heart-wrenching yet all-too-relatable journey of a nameless female protagonist who helplessly transforms into the foulest of domestic animals; the pig.

Throughout the text, what particularly strikes Darrieussecq's readership is the text's lack of female agency; an undeniably intentional omission considering its author was later awarded the Prix Fémina French literary prize by an exclusively female committee. Beginning with an unidentified narrator and ending in blissful anonymity, the dystopian fairy tale that Darrieussecq constructs reverses traditional depictions of intimacy and self-exposure, injecting both exile and violence into her pitiful beast's journey of self-acceptance, and thus personifying the freedom for which we fight. But what example does this set for the glass-ceiling-breaking feminists of her future? That in order to achieve happiness, we too ought to 'rôtir au soleil' (96) and live 'en laisse' (124) as *Truismes'* protagonist does? Must a world ruled by men lead to one of oppressed sows?

Despite its somewhat controversial and disturbing motif, the plot itself is easy to read and simple to follow; narrating the story of a woman who silently yearns for a life of comfort with either of her male lovers. However, while working as an undercover prostitute at a beauty-parlour-cum-brothel, she notices her ever-changing body, beginning with her fluctuating weight before, ultimately, developing the grotesque pig-like features that come to characterise her. Unsurprisingly, her first boyfriend Honoré abandons her, rendering her homeless, unwanted, and still, a pig. However, following a hairy encounter or two, our fully-transformed protagonist meets Yvan, whose metamorphosis into a werewolf, also known as lycanthropy, critiques the social order that led to the pig's initial rejection. Considered powerful and threatening, the feral werewolf serves as a stark contrast to the unidentified woman-turned-beast who is subject to man's hand, or wolf's claw, both as a pig and the prostitute she once was. Yet, following her companion's brutal death, our piggy protagonist escapes civilisation and resides in the wild, ultimately finding the pleasure she spends the text seeking, minus the threat or protection of a more formidable beast in sight.

In this, her first novel, Darrieussecq holds up a mirror to the metamorphosed pig-woman, as well as the society that both creates and constricts her. Behind the mirror's bleak projection lies a fragmented body, fearfully fighting the objectification and exploitation provoked by a culture rife with idealised expectations of the female form. In *Truismes*, the author reclaims the female body from society's unforgiving grasp through its gradual, yet complete, deconstruction and transformation. Perhaps it's the re-sexualisation of the protagonist's body that most potently battles against the androcentric culture around which this novel is based. For example, the growth of extra nipples and breasts, and therefore the excess of typically sexualised body parts, forces the protagonist to intimately engage with her animalistic form, and eventually, accept it. Ultimately, this leads to a diminished desire for the men that once dominated her, and serves as a narrative reminder of the many an Emmeline Pankhurst quote.

Nevertheless, it is the fine lines that Darrieussecq blurs between the novel's contrasting themes that break the barrier between her protagonist and readership. Be it foulness or purity, animal or human, beastliness or beauty, us women, too, exist somewhere on the spectrum between the societal ideals of which we so often fall short in our perpetual quest for perfection, and rolling

around in the mud on a farm, as *Truismes'* narrator does. However, this seeming descent into savagery is, in fact, what transforms the protagonist from objectified to humanised. In her exile from an obsessive social system, she becomes a conscious woman who finds freedom in acceptance and independence. Consequently, *Truismes* readers would find mutual motifs with Virginie Despentes and Catherine Breillat's audience, whose views of female empowerment differ somewhat to those of modern-day Le Pen enthusiasts.