Lèche-vitrines: Human Identity and the Mannequin in *Au Bonheur des Dames*

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Kate Foster recently defended her PhD thesis at King’s College London. Her thesis is entitled ‘Mannequins, Androids and Cyborgs: Ambivalent Corporeality in Modern Art and Literature’, and argues that prevalent discourses of mechanization and automation, as well as generalized fears that technology was outpacing the human, sustained and informed a marked increase of such literary and artistic humanoids from the 1880s to the 1930s. Her chapter, ‘The Cyborg’s Undecidable Body: A Game of “Who am I?” in Gaston Leroux’s *La Poupée sanglante*’ appeared in *Queer(y)ing Bodily Norms in Francophone Culture*, edited by Polly Galis, Maria Tomlinson & Antonia Wimbush (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021).

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The department store mannequin is often read as representative of commodity or sexual fetishism and, as a result, of woman objectified. This article posits that in Émile Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883), the mannequin can also highlight such objectification to the woman in the text. Through close readings of the mannequins in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, and their relationships with both shoppers and workers in the store, this article seeks to analyse the combination of estrangement and excitement which characterizes the experience of living under modernity. While some bodies in the text are literally broken, elsewhere a wider sense of fracture or fragmentation is at work, as human identity itself seems to be breaking up. The Zolian mannequin foregrounds this theme of fragmentation, as it is never depicted whole: instead, the always already fragmented mannequin reflects the fragmented (female) shopper, and the dismembered (male) shop employee, who works as if suffering from automatism. This article asks whether the inherent impersonality of the headless Zolian mannequin is a source of empowerment which allows the shopper to recognize and thus reject objectification of the self, or simply a disquieting reminder of the limits of one’s own powerlessness.

Keywords: *Au Bonheur des Dames*; mannequin; identity; body; Zola-Zolian; modernity

‘L’histoire du Mannequin est curieuse à entreprendre, elle est parallèle à celle de l’humanité dont elle donne la naïve grimace et l’inconsciente caricature plastique’ (Uzanne 1900, x). So claimed the preface to Léon Riotor’s *Le Mannequin*, a history of display mannequins which was a response to nineteenth-century Paris’s significance for the production and proliferation of the mannequin. Also tapping into this phenomenon was Émile Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883), which foregrounds the mannequin as avatar of woman in the newly minted department store. This article will explore how, despite its customary locale, the Zolian mannequin is more than an innocent display of clothing for sale, both enticing and repelling the woman whom it copies and who copies it.

While in the early decades of the nineteenth century the use of mannequins in the world of fashion was largely limited to tailor’s dummies, by the 1830s they were increasingly deployed by traders in the arcades to promote their wares (Matthews David 2018, 15). Yet it was only with the increase in ready-to-wear fashion (thanks to cheaper fabrics and the invention of the Singer sewing machine in the 1850s [Higonnet 2002, 353]), and the concomitant rise of the department store, that the shop-window mannequin truly became ubiquitous, and in Zola’s text, this pervasive human stand-in reveals a wealth of metaphorical potential. Among the more conspicuous mannequin characteristics which the novel exploits is the way in which their bodies are always partialized. This breaking of the body has a real-world referent: *fin de siècle* catalogues produced by the Parisian firm Bustes Stockman bespeak the partitioning of the mannequin body, where models were available with or without heads or limbs (Munro 2014, 172-173). An 1895 Stockman catalogue shows the ‘porte-étiquette’ which allowed a price-tag to be affixed to the mannequin’s neck in place of a head (Munro 2014, 173), a more permanent – and monetizable – version of Zola’s pin attaching prices to headless mannequin necks. Historical accuracy aside, Zola’s headless mannequins signal links between corporeal fragmentation and an erasure of identity, an impression that modernity was somehow rendering everyone increasingly similar.

The new department stores excelled at selling: Le Bon Marché, for example (the model for Zola’s fictional version), saw sales increase from 500,000 francs in 1852 to 72 million by 1877 (Higonnet 2002, 198). Developments in glass production allowed for expansive windows giving onto the street (Bowlby 1985, 2), emphasizing a new commerce of visuality of which the mannequin was a part. The glass-fronted store might be compared to Zola’s claims to clarity of vision in his depiction of a Second Empire family (he maintained that his new literary style, the ‘roman expérimental’, was simply ‘le procès-verbal de l’expérience’ [Zola 1880, 8]), because, as we shall see, it is far from certain whether window or novel presents a wholly objective picture. Adorning the window is the display mannequin. Product of both the industrial and the consumer revolutions, the mannequin’s existence is predicated on the mass production of the clothes it wears, and so this artificial body functions as emblem for the department store, as well as for the women who come to shop.

The female shopper in *Au Bonheur des Dames* is frequently read as alienated from herself (see, e.g., Bowlby 1985, 78; Brooks 1993, 154; Hetrick 2006, n.p.; Nelson 1993, 237; Schor 1978, 158). This estrangement results from either the loss of individual identity (as she is subsumed by the crowd of consumers); because fashion renders her indistinguishable from other women; or as a result of purchasing ‘herself’, in other words, she buys ‘the fetishized female body’, as Barbara Vinken describes it (1995, 250). Susan Harrow, while acknowledging the alienation experienced by women in Au Bonheur, sees in the disorientation wrought by the store a possibility for women to imagine themselves differently, to conceive of new, positive identities (2010, 56-57). While the headless mannequins have often been equated with headless (read senseless) female shoppers (see, e.g., Bowlby 1985, 73; Hetrick 2006, n.p.; Nelson 1993, 238), Harrow and Hannah Scott have shone a different light on the Zolian fragmented body. For Harrow, fragmentation is symptomatic of life under modernity which, she argues, is both thrilling and overwhelming, while for Scott, seeing oneself or one’s avatar in the mannequin, which itself may be further reflected in glass, represents a fragmentation of the self (Harrow 2010, 4; Scott 2016, 59-60).

Through an examination of *Au Bonheur*’s mannequins, I want to draw out the dualistic experience of modernity which, as Harrow suggests, was characterized for Zola by fracture (2010, 4). The Zolian mannequin displays clothes for sale through its physical simulation of potential female customers, and it is this conjunction of object for sale and female body which has rendered it such a centre of interest for feminist critique. Yet precisely because the mannequin so accurately represents human woman, it creates a space for the imagining of new futures and new possibilities for woman (not all necessarily positive). In this text, the fragmented, dismembered body of the mannequin, which has often been remarked upon, reflects and informs a lived experience of fragmentation under modernity, in which the notion of personal identity is shifting. Although the department-store mannequin is largely about commodification, Zola’s text allows the mannequin, and the woman it represents, new ways to be.

## The Mannequin in the Window

One of the more memorable images in *Au Bonheur des Dames* occurs when Denise Baudu and her brothers, newly arrived in Paris, stumble across the gleaming glass frontage of the titular department store, and the mannequins modelling the ‘confections pour dames’. The mannequin’s purpose here, as elsewhere, is to stand in for a human body, to model clothes for sale so that they more closely resemble their ultimate appearance on a human body, rather than falling shapelessly on a clothes hanger, as Zola’s text makes clear: ‘la gorge ronde des mannequins gonflait l’étoffe, les hanches fortes exagéraient la finesse de la taille’ (Zola 1964 [1883], 392).[[2]](#endnote-2) This description evokes a hyper-feminized, even optimized, version of the female body in the artificial mannequin, a ‘culte de femme’ with which, as we shall see, real women struggle to compete. The mannequins do more than simply display the garments: they enhance and vivify them, by allowing them to hang as the dressmaker intended.

The novel is often read as emblematic of commodity fetishism and sexual fetishism, where the dual aspects of fetishism coalesce in the sexualized, objectified mannequin. According to this reading, woman is commodity and purchaser in one as she buys (a vision of) herself (Hetrick 2006, n.p.; Nelson 1993, 237). As important as the intersection of commodity and sexual fetishisms is for this text, I propose to focus here on an alternate instance of the novel’s duplexity, that is ‘the alienation and exhilaration that are triggered by living in the modern world’ (Harrow 2010, 4). In other words, it is possible to read Zola’s mannequins in a more positive sense, although they are never free of objectification. Indeed, an equally hopeful rendering of the department store and its workings was proclaimed by Zola in the *ébauche* to *Au Bonheur*, where he declared that he wanted to ‘montrer la joie de l’action et le plaisir de l’existence’ (Zola 1964 [1883], 1679). Nevertheless, Zola’s text, like his mannequins, does not neglect the dehumanizing and impersonal effects of modern commerce, as livelihoods are destroyed, and bodies are alienated and broken.

Just as the approximation or impersonation of woman is a necessary attribute of the mannequin, owners of department stores were complicit in perpetuating and reinforcing the association between human woman and her wax and, later, plaster (and then cardboard) counterpart, as Zola’s text makes explicit. Making use of the store’s windows, the mannequins’ reflections are thrown onto the street outside: ‘les glaces, aux deux côtés de la vitrine, par un jeu calculé, les reflétaient et les multipliaient sans fin, peuplaient la rue de ces belles femmes à vendre’ (392), suggesting that glass, while literally transparent, does not necessarily depict objective truth. While the obvious purpose of a mannequin is to display clothes to best effect and thus entice customers to buy them, the more hidden (yet nevertheless deliberately deployed) objective is to reinforce their resemblance to human women. In this scene, the mannequin seems almost designed to *be* a woman, to be indistinguishable from her. Mouret harnesses this physical resemblance to imply that the woman on the street, who would hopefully become the consumer in the store, could be just like this mannequin, by buying the clothes it (she?) wore. Or even, that she already was just like the mannequin.

# Woman Become Mannequin

The sense that woman is virtually indistinguishable from her mannequin avatar is a characteristic which makes mannequins simultaneously interesting and unremarkable. Yet the text pushes this one step further to suggest that rather than the mannequin copying woman, woman is becoming increasingly mannequin-like, as if contaminated by its presence. While the mannequin is constantly visible due to its placement in windows and opposite mirrors, another kind of visibility affected the *bourgeoise*, who was expected to appear in public, both in the department stores and on Haussmann’s new boulevards, buying and displaying her new purchases, becoming ‘a part of the spectacle herself’ (Harvey 2003, 217), contrasting with earlier conceptions of respectable femininity which required women to avoid public places (Pollock 2003, 95). There is a new sense, then, in which individuals are presenting a representation, an image of the self in which spectacle is vital, and that the commodities which one displays as part of this representation are more fundamental to self-image than politics or belief (Harvey 2003, 221). With the proliferation of new types of work for women, coupled with a (likely erroneous) perception that the number of prostitutes was greater than ever, it became increasingly difficult to know whose public presence connoted sexual availability and whose did not (Higonnet 2002, 103-107). In this way, the mannequin – on display in the window and advertising commodities-for-sale on its body – could easily be fused with the visible, sexual woman.

In this focus on the visual, Zola’s text foreshadows a modernist interest in vision and optics, which Christina Walter has outlined. Walter argues that modernist writers practised ‘imagetextuality’ in their pursuit of an aesthetics of impersonality. In imagetextuality, images – previously understood as objective sensory information – and texts – supposedly revealing the interiority of the author/observer – were no longer treated as diametrically opposed. Instead, working from the assumption that any image is inherently subjective – as it may be viewed from multiple perspectives – modernists including Walter Pater and H.D. attempted to demonstrate that the human subject is more than an individual (Walter 2014, 3-7). Viewed in this light, *Au Bonheur*’s repeated motifs of glass, spectacle, and the visual connect more forcefully to Zola’s purported scientific and observational narrative. Zola’s claims to objectivity (‘le psychologue [read experimental novelist] doit se doubler d’un observateur et d’un expérimentateur’) suggest an attempt to erase the presence of the author from the text (Zola 1880, 229). This perspective is redolent of that belonging to T. S. Eliot – perhaps the most famous proponent of modernist impersonality – who alleged the superiority of the text which has undergone ‘depersonalization’ and the ‘extinction of [the author’s] personality’ (Eliot 1919, 55). The ambivalence which permeates the novel makes it difficult to know whether Zola succeeds in erasing his presence from the text, but this very uncertainty elucidates a messy distinction between subject and object, between interior and exterior, which characterizes the modernist quest for impersonality.

Another overlaying of mannequin-characteristics onto woman happens inside the shop on a sale day. Mme Desforges, one of the customers (and Mouret’s mistress) is rendered mannequin-like when the effect of the crowd and the shop cause her to stop and look, ‘saisie par la vie ardente’. When a member of staff asks her a question, Mme Desforges ‘ne daigna pas répondre’ (627-28). She temporarily loses the power of movement and speech in the face of the display and the crowd of shoppers surrounding it. Mme Desforges becomes objectified, stripped of her animation and her humanity by conspicuous capitalist exhibition. The sight of senseless, drone-like women, paralyzed like her, renders her similarly devoid of her faculties, mannequin-like in her silence and immobility. Finally regaining her senses, Mme Desforges slowly climbs the stairs, frequently stopping due to the descending crowd. On each step ‘un mannequin, solidement fixé, plantait un vêtement immobile, costumes, paletots, robes de chambre’ (630-31). Mme Desforges’s recent immobility, then, is echoed in the image of the mannequins whose own inherent stasis is reinforced by their physical attachment to the staircase. And these mannequins are headless – price tags protruding from their necks where heads ought to be – and therefore speechless, although no more so than the sea of women which crowds unthinkingly through the shop.[[3]](#endnote-3) The image evoked of hats and hair moving as if independently creates a personification of body parts, of heads separated from bodies. When Mme Desforges eventually arrives on the first floor, all she sees below is ‘un océan de têtes vues en raccourci, cachant les corsages’ (631). The link between headlessness and senselessness is easy to draw, yet such an image is equally redolent of confusion.

More than just fools enchanted by the irresistible commodity, these headless women – and their mannequin copies – speak to a loss of individuality and an overload of the senses in the new shopping experience, and in modernity more generally. The lack of individuality is a characteristic shared by both woman and mannequin: as women move into the store, their resemblance to their artificial avatar is reinforced and, simultaneously, the precarious nature of their own sense of identity is gradually revealed. Mouret has made the women instruments of their own imprisonment, as their confusion and frenzied behaviour trap them inside the store. Their heads do not individualize them here: by describing them as separate from their bodies Zola’s text enacts a figurative decapitation where the body behaves as if there is no thinking, guiding head in place.

The senseless mannequin-woman is, of course, a member of a crowd. For Naomi Schor, the Zolian crowd is another machine, and one which is powered by desire. Yet as Schor highlights, Mouret remains dependent on the crowd to make his fortune: he must seduce its members into spending (1978, 85; 153). Again, the juxtaposition of woman and mannequin foregrounds their shared properties, as each is described in equally objectifying terms. The mannequins lining the staircase form a second, different type of crowd, resembling ‘une double haie de soldats pour quelque défilé triomphal, avec le petit manche de bois pareil au manche d’un poignard, enfoncé dans le molleton rouge, qui saignait à la section fraîche du cou’ (631). The imagery here works on two levels. Firstly, the mannequins are deployed as Mouret’s troops to add to the sensory bombardment experienced by the shoppers, a further incarnation of female or female-like bodies, and another type of furtive control which he exerts over women. Secondly, the army of mannequins represents violence and fragmentation, and so they ape the supposed fragmentation which the women experience in seeing their image reflected within the store, as well as the unreflective, machine-like behaviour of an army. Their red necks have also become indisputably a mark of violence as price tickets become dagger handles, like so many soldiers marching on relentlessly despite their injuries. These soldier-mannequins suggest unthinking consumers engaged in automated acts of purchase, rendering themselves both victims and agents of their own oppression. The mannequin as soldier polices and enforces women’s purchases, but because the mannequin *is* woman – or woman is mannequin – she effectively polices herself. Yet, as we shall see, the female shopper is not quite as beguiled as she appears to be.

## Denise the Mannequin

Elsewhere, the mannequin’s propensity to render woman more like itself is shared by the clothing which the mannequin displays, as clothes seem able to conjure up alternative realities for the woman who gazes upon them. The mannequins’ first appearance, viewed from the street looking directly into the department store’s window display, contrasts with their second, when Denise observes them from her uncle’s shop opposite. As the women on the street bustle and squash against each other better to see the window displays, ‘les pièces de drap elles-mêmes, épaisses et carrées, respiraient, soufflaient une haleine tentatrice; tandis que les paletots se cambraient davantage sur les mannequins qui prenaient une âme’. The shoppers’ excitement has vivified the items for sale in the window, and even the mannequins have been humanized. Likewise, a fur coat ‘se gonflait, souple et tiède, comme sur des épaules de chair, avec les battements de gorge et le frémissement des reins’ (402). The clothes seem to fit the mannequins more closely, or rather the mannequins are filling out the clothes, as the result of an ‘animus that becomes displaced onto the swelled material’ (Hetrick 2006, n.p.). The mannequins seem even more alive now than in the first scene, as the clothes react to the mannequin bodies they adorn, as if the clothes are active participants in the vivifying back-and-forth between clothing and model. Mannequin and clothing, then, symbiotically impart life to each other, the sum of their parts worth more than either is individually, a deindividuation which is simultaneously animating and enlivening.

The French word *porter*, and its multiple meanings, points to different facets of the relationship between mannequin and clothing. Firstly, the mannequin ‘wears’ (*porter*) clothing, in the sense that clothes are arranged on and cover its body. Secondly, it ‘carries’ (*porter*) clothes, the framework of its body supporting their weight in order better to display them. And thirdly, it ‘bears’ (*porter*) the weight of what is socially projected onto it. While Hetrick sees the life-force in both clothing and mannequin as representative of Marx’s commodity fetishism, nonetheless a glimmer of something more hopeful persists (Hetrick 2006, n.p.). Clothes and mannequin together bespeak the possibility of an identity differently constituted, that is by clothing and outward appearance. Although sexual fetishism is indisputably at work in Zolian depictions of women’s clothing and the mannequins which wear it, at key moments clothes and mannequin permit woman to imagine (if not necessary to live) an existence which is not wholly determined by a sexualized body. As Harrow has argued, Denise has more than one identity: mother (to her brothers); employee; workers’ champion (2010, 60). Denise can try different selves on, or at least imagine doing so, and then reject them if she wishes (as she rejects the future self who might take a paying lover when she loses her job at *Au Bonheur*). A new identity, then, can be analogous to a change of clothes.

Yet in other moments, the possibility of a new identity is bewildering. When Denise finally enters the store to ask for work, she is quickly overwhelmed: confused and unable to follow the commis’s directions, ‘elle perdait la tête’ (434). Denise straddles a divide ‘entre boutiquière et la dame’, as overcome by the store’s delights as its customers are. The shopgirls, as Zola’s narrator explains, ‘formaient une classe à part, innommée’, in a sense both employee and purchaser, yet somehow not fully one or the other (686). As Vinken puts it, ‘they are a copy, a counterfeit of the society ladies’, echoing the simulacral status of the mannequin whose visual appearance both reproduces and is reproduced by woman (1995, 253). The new, and still uncertain, status of the shopgirl is an example of modernity’s dualistic nature, which Harrow explains thus: ‘if the experience of modernity provokes alienation, it also allows identity to become more actively performative’ (2010, 60). Wyndham Lewis would later claim that ‘personality’ was nothing but a mirage of learned behaviours that we share with others; that personality was, in fact, impersonal (1926, 164). While Lewis saw this as a flaw in the modern human subject, Zola’s text exploits the same contradiction through the uncertain status of women in the store, and their relationship with the mannequin.

The back-and-forth between woman and mannequin in which each, in different ways and at different points, seems to imitate the other helps to expose the indeterminacy of women’s social position/s at this time. A proliferation of boundaries is breaking down under modernity – social class, the giving way of established occupations to new ones, technology -vs- nature – and such fluidity of formerly established categories could, in theory at least, give Denise *options*. The question as to whether this represents a positive step in female emancipation essentially comes down to a political argument: is consumption a liberating or a constricting force? Through Denise, this argument is presented in equivocal terms, part of a wider ambivalence within the novel. To a degree, Denise can choose – or dream of choosing, which is a limited type of freedom – different futures for herself, although only from a relatively limited list.

Despite being enchanted by the mannequins from the outset, Denise herself is a poor substitute for the waxen copies. When Denise is forced by Mme Aurélie to try on a coat which Mme Desforges may wish to purchase, the older woman is underwhelmed by the effect. ‘Il faudrait le voir sur madame elle-même’, Mme Aurélie reassures her, ‘il ne fait aucun effet sur mademoiselle, qui n’est guère étoffée’ (497). Denise is not sufficiently ‘stuffed’ to do the coat justice, unlike the mannequins, whose ‘gorge ronde gonflait l’étoffe’ (392) when Denise first encountered them in the vitrine. Denise, despite her animate, female body, fails in the task of adequately representing a perfect version of the same: the mannequin better incarnates such an ideal of femininity, both for the shopper and for Mme Aurélie. The word ‘gonfler’ in this scene is repeated from shortly before, when the shop ‘gonflait le cœur [de Denise]’, and she nods her head while the mannequins’ absence of the same body part is key to the way they are described (390). This mirroring technique sets up an equivalence between Denise and the mannequin, for each displays and sells clothes that they will not purchase themselves: they display to entice others to buy. Yet Denise cannot replace the mannequin, because she is too thin: she lacks their perfect form, which has been designed to showcase the clothing to best effect.

A different kind of bodily deficiency is found in Mme Desforges. Denise attempts to alter a coat to fit her, but Mme Desforges complains that the garment is now worse than before. Denise replies, ‘Madame est un peu forte... Nous ne pouvons pas faire que madame soit moins forte’ (694). Thinness is not good enough, but neither, it turns out, is being too large, being too ‘stuffed’, suggesting the existence of an ideal in between the two. The question of an ideal female form relates to the newly developed mass production of mannequins. Mannequins in standardized sizes produced by couturiers such as Alexis Lavigne allowed clothing to be produced cheaply, bringing it within reach of more consumers (Munro 2014, 168-170).[[4]](#endnote-4) Yet simultaneously the fact that ‘le costume de femme s’essayait encore sur des employées de taille et de proportions régulières’(Riotor 1900, 86) meant that there was nonetheless an ideal which was not available to all, that bodies had to fit into clothes, as opposed to clothes being altered to fit bodies. This ideal, then, like Mouret’s mannequins which he deploys to show women a future, idealized image of themselves, is in many ways objectifying through its erasure of identity and individuation. It is also alienating because most women cannot live up to it: just as Denise is not sufficiently ‘étoffée’, Mme Desforges is ‘un peu forte’.

By temporarily replacing a mannequin to model the coat, Denise undermines other dualities: those between animate and inanimate, and between potential shopper and the shop-worker she will soon become. Denise is excited by the store and the items it sells but, crucially, she never seems to buy anything. Even in the final chapter, when she has become a successful – and much better paid – *vendeuse* (having accumulated eight thousand francs in savings), she still does not spend money on herself: instead ‘tout son argent allait à eux [ses frères], comme autrefois’ (777). The result intended (by Mouret, or by his mannequin designers) through the shoppers’ identification with the mannequin is an act of purchase. If the window-shopper sees herself in the mannequin, she is meant to buy the clothes worn by the mannequin. But this does not happen to Denise, who thus represents a *détournement* of the mannequin and its usual purpose. The enabling function of the detachment which Denise displays in this respect is what allows her to succeed at Au Bonheur. In this way, she is an extreme rationalist able to contain her fantasies through a strategy of mastery over any desire she might feel to purchase the items sold in the store. Like the performative identities discussed by Harrow, Denise can see the temptation of the department store for what it is without participating in it or, sometimes at least, responding to it from the perspective of a businessperson rather than a customer.

## Reflection and Confusion

The suggestion that the Zolian mannequin is a stand-in for woman or femininity has been made by critics including Hetrick (2006), Vinken (1995), and Susie Hennessy (2008). At times, Zola’s text plays on the resemblance between mannequin and woman and inverts it, suggesting that woman has become mannequinized through physical proximity to the mannequin, rather than positioning the mannequin as copy of the original (woman). Reflections reinforce this interchangeability and are deployed to blur the distinction between mannequin and woman. In Mouret’s *exposition du blanc*, an installation of purely white goods for sale, such as lingerie, bedding, towels, and lace, Madame Desforges is arrested both by the display and by the ‘foule encore très mêlée […] cette mer, ces chapeaux bariolés, ces cheveux nus, blonds ou noirs, confus et décolorés au milieu de l’éclat vibrant des étoffes’. Above this ocean of shoppers, she sees ‘tout un peuple en l’air’ which are in fact ‘des apothéoses de mannequins à demi-vêtus’, and above this, amongst the bedding, ‘un dortoir de pensionnaires qui dormait dans le piétinement de la clientèle’ (627-28). The mannequins are simultaneously deified – ‘des apothéoses’ – and rendered human, ‘[des] pensionnaires’ who are miraculously able to ‘sleep’ amid the noise and activity. The references to a dormitory and boarders evoke school children, and white implies purity, yet the mannequins undoubtedly connote sex and sexual objectification, adding a further layer of personification to the inanimate display.

The sense of overwhelming confusion which Madame Desforges experiences is heightened by the presence of mirrors: ‘partout les glaces reculaient les magasins, reflétaient des étalages avec des coins de public, des visages renversés, des moitiés d’épaules et de bras’ (627). Again, one detects the use of optics and the visual as textual device, as the reflections, designed to create the impression of an ever-increasing crowd filling the spaces of the store, render the real shoppers grotesque, dismembered and reduced to parts of bodies. In other cases, as Hetrick suggests, the reflections ‘fade into the universe of things-on-display’ (2006, n.p.). Mirrors and reflections are either used to increase the sense of excess in the store, or occasionally for some level of personal introspection (Denise looks at her unkempt hair in one scene, and elsewhere Mme Desforges examines her ageing face in the mirror). While Mme Desforges tries on the coat in front of the mirror, this takes place in her own house, not in the store. The only instance in which a customer tries on an item of clothing in front of the store’s mirrors occurs when a young girl parades before the mirror in a jacket: only children, then, succumb as Mouret intends, seduced by their own reflection. Instead of providing clarity and illumination, glass when used to reflect has more to do with blurring distinctions and creating uncertainty. Yet this confusion is all part of Mouret’s plan, to ‘disperse[r] un peu partout [les clientes], les multiplie[r] et leur faire perdre la tête’ (615). Rather than inducing customers to purchase, reflections are deployed to bemuse, and to make images of women harder to distinguish from those of mannequins. Women, then, are rendered doubly impersonal: indistinguishable from each other, and from the mannequins. In this passage, descriptions of merchandise are interwoven with descriptions of consumers, rendering everything objectified, and making distinctions between human and inanimate difficult to draw:

Mme Desforges ne voyait de toutes parts que les grandes pancartes, aux chiffres énormes, dont les taches crues se détachaient sur les indiennes vives, les soies luisantes, les lainages sombres. Des piles de rubans écornaient les têtes, un mur de flanelle avançait en promontoire. (627)

The ribbons may be worn by the shoppers, yet their location in the middle of a list of fabrics suggests that the ‘têtes’ could belong to mannequins, evoked synecdochally by their body part. Such dissolving of boundaries between animate and inanimate gestures towards more than one way of viewing the human body.

Such impersonal descriptions in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, where women are presented less as individuals than as representatives of a social type, arguably speak to a search for objectivity, a privileging of greater social ‘truths’ over the narrative trajectory of a given character. In this way, two different interpretations of ‘impersonality’ come together. The search for objective authorial distance from the text – impersonality according to Eliot – also finds expression in the objective depictions of characters as members of a group rather than individuals – reminiscent of Lewis’s conception of personality as inherently impersonal. The text’s playing with the notion of impersonality at the level of both character and author/narrator is made possible through its use of ‘hybridity’ and ‘indeterminacy’ which allow it to refuse ‘straightforward Naturalist recuperation’, as Harrow has convincingly argued (2010, 17). The anonymity which Zola’s text offers up as characteristic of modern life in fact allows for a stylistic modernism *avant la lettre*, because it permits more and better metaphor (Harrow 2010, 154), as mannequins become women become mannequins. While authorial objectivity (impersonality) is desirable, at times the text suggests that being rendered impersonal or depersonalized at the individual level is experienced negatively, and so the very notion of alienation – from the text and from one’s self – remains ambivalent.

In addition to the disorienting effect of reflection in the store, the mirror also reflects the image of woman back to herself. The supposed aim behind installing large numbers of mirrors is that in her reflection the shopper sees not quite herself as she is but an image of herself as she could be, a new type of self who inhabits the department store and wears its clothes; an image which will induce her to buy. This is not vision as objective truth, but as trickery. Yet we never witness customers making a purchase as a direct result of seeing these reflections (although the huge bags of money carried up to Mouret’s office each night are evidence that such transactions are indeed taking place). For Scott, this is explained by the fact that one’s reflection is located exterior to the self, meaning that seeing one’s reflection instigates self-alienation. This fragmentation of the self is reinforced, as Scott argues, by the partialized mannequins which populate both the shop’s interior and its windows (2016, 58-60). Such self-estrangement means that the shoppers tend to buy due to other factors, like the low prices (the Paris Bonheur silk, for example, is a loss leader), and in moments when the madness of the crowd renders a visual reading of the store impossible. Yet the fragmented mannequin does not fully reveal to women the extent of their own fragmentation, instead offering only a glimpse of such a possibility, as versions of themselves wearing Mouret’s clothes are reflected in the mannequins and in the mirrors. While reflection in the mirror might hold up a fantasy identity, the mannequin signals the objectification and alienation which inheres in such an image.

As Harrow has argued, critical readings of the Zolian body tend to highlight its sexual aspects (2010, 4; 13). The logical extension of such readings might suggest that the fragmented Zolian body entails a straightforward act of objectification, as if a body in parts (whether human or mannequin) could only ever be negative and objectified. Such a perspective is redolent of a body which was always already partialized, an assemblage ripe to be broken up into its constituent parts at any moment. While the fragmented mannequin in Zola is indeed objectified (although let us not forget that it is always already an inanimate object), in combination with the fragmentation reflected by the mirror it implies a masculine gaze which is inherently objectifying and partializing. While this may be clear to a twenty-first century reader versed in feminist theory, it does not necessarily follow that the masculine gaze is exposed to Zola’s female shoppers. Nevertheless, the reflections of women’s bodies within the store are neither especially positive nor flattering, but disturbing. They confront women with a different, and possibly unpleasant, way of viewing themselves, and so women experience alienation in the face of these fragmented copies. It may be going too far to suggest that the shoppers in the novel are consciously resisting the invitation to consume thanks to the ‘truth’ of the objectifying male gaze which the mannequin exposes, yet it is possible that a vaguely unsettling sense of estrangement motivated by such fragmented images inhibits their desire to buy.

## The Injured Body

In other scenes, a different type of fragmentation comes to the fore, which is distinct from the sexualized-because-dismembered body. The fragmentation or fracture of the Zolian body, and specifically fragmentation which centres on or relates to the body of the mannequin may find expression in other ways, such as ‘pressure, rivalry, corporeal stress, [and] bodily accident’ (Harrow 2010, 4).

Embodying this last point is Lhomme, chief cashier at Au Bonheur. The male body, it seems, is differently marked by the changes of modernity. While women are frequently portrayed as interchangeable with mannequins, there are no descriptions of male mannequins in the shop, and neither are there any scenes of men buying the items which are for sale. While men are present in the store, they are either employees or family members of the female shoppers: the male body in this text, then, is not readily equated with the mannequin. There are, however, several moments when male bodies are associated with physical fragmentation: when bodily injury has been caused by technology; through repetitive, quasi-automated tasks; and via the prosthesis. Lhomme is the most obvious representation of this as he lost his arm in an accident with an omnibus: a literal representation of modern life (read technology) physically harming or even dismembering the human body.

Lhomme incarnates the potential dangers of modernity: what looks like bad luck is, in his case, of symbolic significance. He is dominated by his wife, the successful Mme Aurélie, *première* of the *confections*: while he spends his days counting money, his wife’s earnings surpass his own by more than double. Her superior status in combination with the unsubtle irony of the family name *Lhomme* means he could be read as incarnating a metaphorical castration. However, it is also possible to understand his backstory as one of modernity, or technology, injuring and fragmenting the body. Like the mannequins, Lhomme’s dismemberment seems to have robbed him of agency or individuation: his missing arm is the characteristic most often cited by Zola when describing him. Even the occupation of the Lhommes’ son, Albert, highlights his father’s injury, for he mans the till at the glove counter. His absence of individuation is reinforced by his occupation which, like the modern vehicle which robbed him of his right arm, physically alters him: ‘alourdi par sa vie sédentaire, il avait une figure molle, effacée, comme usée au reflet de l’argent qu’il comptait sans relâche’ (429). Surrounded by modernity, Lhomme himself is old and grey, worn down and prematurely aged by modern commerce. His body is further inscribed by his injury because ‘il adaptait à son moignon un système de pinces’ which he uses to play the horn, but during the working week he leaves it at home (523). With no monetizable purpose, his prosthesis simply allows him a temporary escape from capitalist production. Yet his one-armed status is constantly relevant and referenced in relation to his work. At the end of each day, for example, Lhomme carries the bags full of takings upstairs to Mouret’s office: ‘ce jour-là, l’or et l’argent dominaient, il gravissait lentement l’escalier, portant trois sacs énormes. Privé de son bras droit, il les serrait de son bras gauche contre sa poitrine, il en maintenait un avec son menton’ (501). Eventually, as the store’s takings increase exponentially, Lhomme can no longer manage to carry it all with his single arm, enlisting the help of his son, Albert, who ‘portait une charge de sacs, qui lui cassait les membres’ (645). Although uninjured, modern life will still leave its trace on Albert, whose limbs are metaphorically broken – and thus fragmented – by the physical and psychological weight of money and commerce on the working-class body.

Conversely, the combination of Lhomme’s injury and his work in the store have physically changed him, for counting money is one of the few jobs available to this disabled man: ‘on allait même par curiosité le voir vérifier la recette, tellement les billets et les pièces glissaient rapidement dans sa main gauche, la seule qui lui restât’ (430). As a man who works with the speed and precision of an automated machine, he is a spectacle worthy of attention: a typically behind-the-scenes task has become part of the aesthetic experience of the shop. The constant repetition of counting the takings has given him almost superhuman abilities, but these skills are simultaneously dehumanizing, as deliberate activity becomes unthinking and automated, another example of modernity’s propensity to render subjects impersonal. The loss of one limb has a compensatory function whereby the remaining limb is enhanced through training, although the objectifying nature of his skill means this is a somewhat double-edged sword. The dual emblems of modernity which have inscribed Lhomme’s body – the omnibus and the department store – have changed him into a man-machine and a visual spectacle like the mannequins, stripping away aspects of his identity. This type of fragmentation, in which the body is physically altered or damaged and thus rendered more machine-like, is as heterogeneous as the metaphorical fragmentation of woman and mannequin which happens elsewhere in the text. It speaks to objectification – as Lhomme is defined by his injury – and a loss of identity – as customers come to watch the spectacle of the one-armed man who counts cash with superhuman speed. And it also gestures towards new ways of looking at the body and, as a result, new ways of understanding it.

Other employees are also physically altered by their work. Hutin, one of the more successful and senior shop staff, has ‘les jambes cassées de monter l’escalier pour leur [les vendeuses] amener des acheteuses’ (495). Elsewhere, Bourdoncle objects to Mouret’s chaotic reorganization of the store, worrying that ‘les employés useront les jambes’. ‘Ils sont jeunes, ça les fera grandir’, Mouret replies, ‘et tant mieux, s’ils se promènent! Ils auront l’air plus nombreux, ils augmenteront la foule. Qu’on s’écrase, tout ira bien!’ (615). The staff, then, will both grow up (‘grandir’) and get taller (‘grandir’, ‘devenir plus grand’), becoming anonymous and indistinguishable from the customers, all part of the great machine which is Au Bonheur. More than simply exhausted, the staff’s bodies are altered by their work, becoming more mechanized and automated as they lose their agency in the workings of the machine, suggestive of bodies which are understood in a new way: no longer individuals but parts of a greater whole. Denise is similarly anonymized when she is ‘changée en une machine’ by being forced to model the coat for Mme Desforges (497). Her individuality and subjectivity are forgotten as the coat comes to the fore and Denise is no longer visible: rather than becoming like the shoppers, she is now part of the shop, a piece of equipment for modelling merchandise.

The sense in which the workers lose their individuality through their indistinguishability from the store is related to the anonymizing effect of bodily fragmentation. Very early in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, Zola seems to prophesy the fragmentation that the body will undergo in his text. Immediately preceding the mannequins’ first appearance, Denise and her brothers are ‘séduits par un arrangement compliqué’ in another window. Umbrellas form a roof over silk stockings, ‘pendus à des tringles [qui] montr[ent] des profils arrondis de mollets’ in different colours, including ‘les chair [sic] dont le grain satiné a[...] la douceur d'une peau de blonde’. The female body is abstracted here and reduced to components or commodities, a representation which is at some distance from realistic simulacra. The absent female body is also elicited through the gloves in this display, ‘jetés symétriquement, avec leurs doigts allongés, leur paume étroite de vierge byzantine’ (391). This reference prefigures the dismemberment of the female body in Mouret’s *exposition du blanc*, in which the clothes themselves seem to call forth dismembered bodies – or body parts – through synecdoche. In this window, just like the fantastical display of white, clothes themselves seem to have caused the body to fragment, as if by focusing on the clothes the body has become abstracted into a new form. The window display can be read as an abstraction of the female body, where umbrellas take the place of the heads they are designed to protect, stockings (legs) hang from rods, while gloves (hands) flank the ensemble. Abstracted heads and limbs here evoke their missing torsos, and the headless, legless mannequins which will feature in the *exposition du blanc*. This is an aestheticization of the body and of display into high art. By emphasizing a blond woman’s skin, or a Byzantine icon, the abstracted body in Zola becomes so far aestheticized that representation has become dissimulated. The act of aestheticization seems to separate the accessories from the body (part) which they are intended to adorn, yet this is a sleight of hand or a visual trick, intended to reduce or sublimate the unrepresented – yet ever present – body to the realm of the unconscious.

While clothes can, through their engagement with the mannequin, proffer the possibility of new identities, in other scenes the dismembering effect of clothes on the body is foregrounded. The description of Mouret’s *exposition du blanc* is structured around the partitioning of the female body, as varieties of lingerie are invoked, part of a special display which includes ‘une armée de mannequins sans tête et sans jambes, n’alignant que des torses, des gorges de poupée aplaties sous la soie, d’une lubricité troublante d’infirme’ (780). The disturbing sensuousness of these partialized bodies speaks to an objectifying sexual fetishization in which woman – or her image – is reduced to body parts which substitute for the (absent) whole. It also suggests a seductive quality possessed by the injured female body in general, or more specifically by its amputations and/or prostheses.

Zola sets the scene of the *exposition du blanc* through a list of garments, some of which metaphorically injure the bodies they clothe:

le jupon qui bride les genoux [...] une mer montante de jupons, dans laquelle les jambes se noyaient [...] les larges pantalons blancs où danseraient les reins d’un homme [...] les chemises enfin, boutonnées au cou pour la nuit, découvrant la poitrine le jour [...] le dernier voile blanc qui glissait de la gorge, le long des hanches (781).

Even where the imagery is not of direct physical harm, the overriding sense here is of clothes with agency which have cut up the body, robbed it of its wholeness as well as its individuality, just as they do to Denise when she is mannequinized. While such dismemberment is clearly linked to a fetishization – the body reduced to sexualized parts – this is simply one of several layers of meaning to Zola’s fragmented bodies. Here, the clothes are the agents of violence, a metaphorical displacement of the physical damage wrought by the modern commodification of the human body. Elsewhere, headless bodies are equated with senselessness, of bodies moving at random, carried away by the crowd. But in this scene the feet lack both heads and bodies, which paradoxically makes them seem more conscious, and bestows upon them greater agency than the bodies which lack only heads. A headless body, perhaps, is too easily equated with mindlessness. Yet when the body is also absent, the disembodied limb seems to become sentient, as if its movement could only be due to the presence of some thinking part. The fragmentation of the self is, as Harrow argues, ‘corporeally-inscribed’ (2010, 16), as Zola’s text reconfigures the relationship between body and mind, and between the individual self and the social self. *Au Bonheur des Dames* recasts the human (usually female) body, abstracting its image in pursuit of a portrayal of dislocated subjectivity. And so Zola’s novel bespeaks an ‘aesthetics of non-representationalism’ (Harrow 2010, 16), foretelling a proto-modernism rather than the Naturalist project he claimed to be undertaking.

# Conclusion

The Zolian female body abstracted and fragmented finds expression in the headless mannequins of Au Bonheur des Dames, suggesting, in some ways at least, the possibility of projecting our own identities onto a faceless humanoid body. Zola offers glimpses of an interpretation of the mannequin which is more positive for women, yet its inherent impersonality simultaneously attracts and disquiets the female shoppers, implying a (non)representation which is uncomfortably close to the reality of women living under modernity. Yet the male body is differently inscribed by modernity, objectified through injury and automated labour. Ultimately, when one’s individuality is erased, the physical similarities between one body and the next – or between a body and a machine – are easier to see.

And the strangeness of such resemblance continued to fascinate beyond Zola’s text. Mouret’s display of undergarments foreshadow Eugène Atget’s documentary-style photographs of the early twentieth century, such as *Pharmacie, Boulevard de Strasbourg*, and *Boulevard de Strasbourg, Corsets* (both 1921), and Dora Maar’s more surrealist *Model in a Window* (1933) and *Mannequins in a Shopwindow* (1935). Both artists captured real-world examples of the partialized mannequin bodies which Zola had described decades earlier.

Yet a significant break with reality is signalled in Zola’s text by the notable absence of any male mannequins. While Stockman’s firm was certainly making male versions at the time Zola was writing, suggesting that they must have been present in real-world department stores (and Atget was photographing male mannequins in the boutiques of the 1920s and 1930s), nevertheless the male mannequin is somehow tuned out of the cultural imaginary. Like the female body, the male body may be fragmented and rendered impersonal (to a degree), yet this happens to select individuals rather than an entire biological sex. Perhaps the male mannequin could only ever be missing from the text: less likely to be reduced to their physicality, or to their desire to shop, men do not feature in the store’s crowds because they cannot be homogenized in the same way as women. Impersonality, then, only goes so far for the men of *Au Bonheur des Dames*, rendering any headless, mass-produced male body a significantly less powerful avatar.

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1. Kate Foster is now a Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Modern Languages Research, London. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. All further references to this work will be from this edition unless otherwise stated. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The price tags, while a useful device for the evocation of metaphorical headlessness and ‘women for sale’, are also indicative of the new phenomenon of fixed prices for goods, which were prominently displayed (Williams 1982, 66). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Lavigne cast women’s bodies to create moulds from which these multiple standardized models could be produced. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)