

# Complicity in Fin-de-siècle Literature



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Helen Rachel Craske  
Merton College, University of Oxford  
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## Short Abstract

This thesis analyses the representation and creation of complicity in fin-de-siècle French literary culture, exploring how particular genres – from murder fiction to saucy magazines – encouraged the creation of collusive relationships between writers, readers, and critics. After considering relevant legal definitions and contexts in the introduction, chapter 1 discusses writers' moral complicity and literary 'bad influence' in Paul Bourget's *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883), *Un crime d'amour* (1886), and *Le Disciple* (1889). Analysing these texts alongside their reception, I suggest that literary guilt was less a discernible category than a product of extra-literary and meta-literary interactions. Chapter 2 considers the imbrication between popular, scientific, and literary representations of crime, highlighting how murder became a source of ironic appropriation in fin-de-siècle literature. The chapter focuses on Rachilde's *Nono* (1885) and Émile Zola's *La Bête humaine* (1890): narratives whose haunting sense of guilt incriminates both characters and readers, while implicating judicial and moral discourses in unjust judgements. Chapter 3 analyses a polemical media exchange in a little magazine called *Le Zig-Zag*, and two *romans à clefs* about Jean Lorrain and Rachilde, written by their mutual friend Oscar Méténier. I examine how this group of avant-garde writers re-appropriated scandal as part of an alternative collective aesthetic and created a sense of collusion by inviting readers 'in the know' to unravel half-veiled secrets about their non-normative gender and sexual identities. The final chapter analyses *Don Juan*, an exemplary 'revue légère' (or 'saucy magazine') published at the turn of the century (1895–1900). I show that by wielding sex appeal, shared humour, and textual structures appealing for response and involvement, *Don Juan* created forms of erotic complicity between text, collaborator, and reader.

## Long Abstract

‘Complicity in Fin-de-siècle Literature’ analyses how notions of shared crime and guilt structured the production and perception of literature in fin-de-siècle France. It considers definitions of complicity from the period’s evolving legal statutes, as well as critical debates about literary ‘bad influence’, in order to seek a deeper understanding of how cultural production forges relationships of implication and collusion between writers, readers, and critics. Through its discussion of ‘bad influence’, this thesis seeks to explore the myriad ways in which fin-de-siècle writers responded to accusations of moral complicity, ranging from the vehement defences penned by mainstream authors, to the tongue-in-cheek polemic typical of the avant-garde. When analysing the representation of illicit behaviour and collusive relationships in fin-de-siècle works, I highlight how particular literary techniques encouraged readers’ identification with illicit ideas and behaviour. In the course of this analysis, we see how such ambiguous forms of identification enable the construction of alternative forms of solidarity, particularly in literary cultures situated outside the ‘acceptable’ mainstream. It is above all this tendency for complicity to leap from within to beyond the written page that this project seeks to examine and comprehend.

To do so, the introduction situates complicity as a historical legal phenomenon while unravelling its meta-literary potential. It highlights two key elements of legal complicity applicable to literary production – incitement and collaboration – before examining how their definitions evolved with regards to two contentious press crimes: outraging public decency and political sedition. Both crimes provoked sufficient concern to justify later restrictions of written expression after the breakthrough press freedom law of 29 July 1881: the 1882 obscenity law

and the 1893–4 anti-anarchist *lois scélérates*. Analysing legal statute alongside trial documents, the introduction considers how writers and editors shared responsibility for the publication of illicit or subversive material – a responsibility that they often sought to diminish or negate. This analysis demonstrates the widespread fear of moral contagion (or ‘bad influence’), the complexities involved in attributing literary responsibility in the period, and the active legal awareness demonstrated by writers and editors attempting to find loopholes in the system. By exploring the broader implications of these definitions and examples, the introduction sets up the major themes and topics for debate in the subsequent chapters.

At the fin de siècle, writers were routinely accused of complicity with the ‘immoral’ ideas and behaviour that they depicted. This accusation was linked to a vision of bad influence, premised on readers’ mimetic responses to literature. In chapter 1 of my thesis, I analyse debates about the formative and potentially corrupting influence of literary production, through the works of Paul Bourget (1852–1935). I consider how Bourget reframed the ‘bad influence’ model in the *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883) by depicting literary influence as a set of symptoms indicative of social and moral illnesses, but also as their potential cure. Known for writing psychological novels centred on adultery, such as *Un crime d’amour* (1886), Bourget became a target for conservative and avant-garde critics alike. By analysing these texts alongside Bourget’s most famous moralising novel, *Le Disciple* (1889), I suggest that literary guilt was a product of extra-literary and meta-literary interactions: authors, readers, and critics attributing and avoiding blame via the framing mechanism of prefaces and journal articles.

The intense media debate about literary influence and writers’ responsibility at the fin de siècle can be better understood when it is considered in the context of

widespread popular interest in stories about violent crime. With the birth of criminology and increasingly sensational media reporting on infamous murderers – such as Joseph Vacher and Jack the Ripper – the rise of crime fiction fed off political and judicial concerns about the ways in which literature might encourage readers to commit copycat crimes. In chapter 2, I compare two novels centred on criminal complicity in the act of murder: Rachilde's *Nono* (1885) and Émile Zola's *La Bête humaine* (1890). First, I examine how the novels' murder scenes create a haunting sense of guilt, which recurs via structural parallels charting the plot's descending spiral of crime. Second, I consider how confession creates bonds of complicity between characters and encourages further crimes, in a way that reflects fin-de-siècle debates about the influence of crime fiction on readers' behaviour. Third, I analyse the displacement of blame onto scapegoat characters that happen to fit – or deliberately play up to – popular and pseudo-scientific *idées reçues* about criminality. I suggest that the novels' trial scenes satirize criminal complicity by implicating judicial and moral discourses in unjust judgements – a gesture that mirrors the more overtly playful subversion of these discourses by avant-garde journalists.

Set apart from mainstream literature, avant-garde writers attracted criticism and litigation for their depiction of illicit themes, notably sexuality. In the latter two chapters, I suggest that this marginal, criminalised status provided a specific sense of communal identification in the avant-garde, which was frequently expressed through the medium of ephemeral reviews and magazines. In chapter 3, I analyse a group of writers – Rachilde (1860–1953), Jean Lorrain (1855–1906), and Oscar Méténier (1859–1913) – whose media exchanges created a sense of collusion by inviting readers 'in the know' to unravel half-veiled secrets. I explore these

relationships through a polemical media exchange in a little magazine called *Le Zig-Zag* and two *romans à clef* by Méténier: ‘L’Aventure de Marius Dauriat’ (1885) and ‘Décadence’ (1886). Analysing these texts in conjunction with selected correspondence, I show how biographically revealing publications created complicity not only between the writer and the reader, but also between the writers themselves, as they mutually constructed media personae based on the titillating appeal of taboos surrounding gender and sexuality. I suggest that the strategy of biographical unveiling was a productive but problematic source for avant-garde solidarity, since there were both benefits and risks involved in publicly revealing ‘compromising’ material.

As the media exchanges between these controversial writers suggest, the boundary between the acceptable and the illicit is particularly ambiguous when sex is involved. In the final chapter I analyse *Don Juan*: an exemplary ‘revue légère’ (or ‘saucy magazine’) published at the turn of the century (1895–1900). This periodical has not previously been studied, and my work on it has involved extensive and original archival research. In the chapter, I examine how *Don Juan* created forms of erotic complicity between text, contributor, and reader by wielding sex appeal, shared humour, and textual structures appealing for response and involvement. First, I explore how the review framed the reading experience as a form of erotic exchange between reciprocally desiring partners. Second, I consider how the review’s textual and visual content hovered between socially acceptable frothy eroticism and illicit obscenity, notably crossing this boundary in 1896, when its *directeur* faced trial for ‘outrages aux bonnes mœurs’. Finally, I suggest that the review enacted a form of *proxénétisme* or ‘pimp journalism’ by encouraging and enabling readers to engage in both imagined and actual erotic relations. Through its

manipulation of different advertising formats – such as personal ads, book catalogues, and veiled advertising (‘réclame’) – *Don Juan* provided space for erotic exchange, both real and imagined. By doing so, it blurred the generic and structural boundaries between advertising and main copy, pecuniary interest and artistic expression.

Four principal methodological approaches undergird the analysis in these chapters. The first employs thematic close reading to examine how criminal acts and collusive characters were depicted in fin-de-siècle fiction, and what this might suggest about contemporaneous visions of criminality and shared guilt. This approach predominates in the first two chapters and is present – if less explicit – in chapters 3 and 4. The second asks questions about critical reception, in a manner typically used by literary historians. It considers how literature was framed as an implicating medium through which writers became morally complicit with the illicit ideas and behaviour they depicted (and supposedly incited in the malleable reader). This approach forms the primary analysis of chapter 1. It recurs in chapter 2 and becomes a conceptual ‘given’ in chapters 3 and 4. The third analyses literary relationships and networks through a sociological lens. This approach, typically associated with the work of Pierre Bourdieu, explores how literature (and especially periodicals) could be used as a medium to create bonds between writers and readers via shared references, in-jokes, and instances of address. Predominant in chapters 3 and 4, the sociological approach is implicit in the earlier chapters. The fourth is what we might call a ‘cultural studies’ or ‘media studies’ approach. It focuses on the intersection of different cultural forms and on the processes by which literature is marketed and sold to both elite and popular consumers. This approach emerges



when discussing authorial personae in chapter 3 and is more fully developed in chapter 4's analysis of erotic networks.

In bringing together these four methodologies, this project contributes to a range of ongoing research conversations and extends the conclusions of earlier criticism. This notably includes work by scholars in law and literature studies – such as Yvan Leclerc, Elisabeth Ladenson, and Gisèle Sapiro – who consider definitions of literary responsibility, crime, and guilt in specific national and historical contexts. They so do by analyzing legal codes, trial documents, and judicial debate alongside incriminated literary texts. The combination of thematic close-reading and sociological analysis typical of law and literature studies can also be found in recent scholarship on ‘connivence’ (Ariane Bayle et al.) and ‘lecture complice’ (Frédéric Tinguely) in early modern French literary studies. Not limited to the early modern period, however, the ideas and approaches in this research area can be applied to later material. My project demonstrates this by examining the broader association between literature and transgression and by focusing on eroticism as a source of complicity. In responding to these broader questions, I analyse a range of authors, themes, and genres that have been considered in different contexts by other scholars. For example, the topic of authorial self-promotion appears regularly in biographical studies of Rachilde and Jean Lorrain – notably those penned by Melanie Hawthorne, Michael Finn, and Thibault D’Anthonay. Similarly, questions of criminality and shared guilt recur in critical analyses of *La Bête humaine* in Zola studies. Other notable themes that have attracted previous scholarly attention include: the popularity and perceived dangers of crime narrative (in works by Dominique Kalifa, Thomas Cragin, and Lisa Downing), literary marketing or ‘réclame’ (in volumes edited by Brigitte Diaz,

Marie-Ève Thérenty, and Adeline Wrona), and the victimised reader figure (most notably in François Proulx's 2019 *Victims of the Book*). Such scholarship treats similar genres to those featured in the following pages, including: murder fiction, the *roman à clef*, and little magazines. However, these genres have often been analysed in isolation, whereas the current project seeks to highlight their ideological and aesthetic crossover. By analysing these marginalised genres alongside more canonical works, and by considering the interrelation of different levels of cultural production, my project extends the ongoing critical questioning of the literary canon and cultural hierarchies that we find in landmark studies of popular culture by scholars such as Diana Holmes and David Loosely. This approach is especially present in chapters 3 and 4, whose focus on literary networks and sociability contributes to recent research trends in both literary and periodical studies.

My project's primary contribution to nineteenth-century French studies, and to literary study more generally, is to offer a new conceptual framework through which to analyse literary influence and reception. This critical method is applicable to a wide range of different literary periods and national contexts, although it resonates particularly well with fin-de-siècle France. With it, I reframe the established vision of authorial responsibility in law and literature studies by emphasising the shared nature of literary crime, as it was defined and redefined in the late nineteenth century. Through the lens of 'complicity' I reconsider the presentation of reader-text relations in the period, highlighting the morally ambiguous role of the reader in fin-de-siècle discourses of literary 'bad influence'. At the same time, I bring together a diverse range of material not previously considered alongside one another, and shed light on understudied primary and archival material. This research has value in its own right, widening our knowledge

of the fin-de-siècle literary field. However, it also improves our capacity to situate and understand canonical literature in relation to its non-canonical counterparts, by revealing the widespread appeal of illicit topics and subversive solidarities across the literary spectrum.

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## Introduction

Roland Barthes has famously described reading as a form of flirtation or cruising: *la drague*. In his eroticised vision of literature, the writer is constantly ‘on the pull’, aiming to draw in the reader by appealing to their innate, unspoken, and often illogical desires.<sup>1</sup> Of course, this analogy is not entirely new, no matter how captivatingly Barthes may have rendered it. After all, the seductive – and potentially illicit – influence of literature has been a longstanding trope in critical discourses about art’s immoral influence. Similarly, the reciprocal exchange implicit in Barthes’s description of the literary encounter – which requires the reader to be both ‘in the know’ and a willing, active participant – has taken various forms in modern literary theory, through concepts such as reading pacts and interpretative communities. Yet something about Barthes’s analogy strikes a chord, inciting further reflection on the seductive gap between acceptability and transgression in literature, as well as on the reader’s role in bridging this gap. It is with these ideas in mind that I ask in the coming pages: what would it mean, for our understanding of literary culture, to consider reading not simply as a seductive, immoral, or illicit activity, but also – and above all – as a fundamentally *complicit* one?

The association between literature and transgression has a long history and remarkable staying power, arousing both fascination and fear in the minds of readers, critics, and censors. I contend that this ambivalent response stems from literature’s capacity to implicate and incriminate those involved in its production, dissemination, and reception. Of course, definitions of literary transgression can differ from place to place and change over time. Yet the question of literature’s influence – that is, how and whom it affects and involves – has remained central to

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), p. 11.



debates about the role and value of literary production, from Plato and Aristotle to the present day. It plays a central and familiar part in critical narratives analysing nineteenth-century France, which witnessed a persistent conflict between ‘l’art social’, with a morally improving purpose, and the autotelic *l’art pour l’art*.<sup>2</sup> During the early nineteenth century, writers such as Germaine de Staël and Victor Cousin theorised a vision of art that sought to unite aesthetic and moral concerns.<sup>3</sup> In the Avant-Propos to *La Comédie humaine*, Honoré de Balzac asserted literature’s necessary contribution to improving society.<sup>4</sup> However, other writers rejected this attempted union between moral purpose and artistic beauty. Théophile Gautier famously claimed: ‘Il n’y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien [...] L’endroit le plus utile d’une maison, ce sont les latrines.’<sup>5</sup>

As the century progressed, France witnessed an increased antagonism between the art-utility divide. Despite benefiting from a policy shift towards greater press freedom that culminated in the 1881 *Loi sur la liberté de la presse*, writers in the Third Republic continued to face criticism for their alleged immoral influence over readers.<sup>6</sup> This can partly be explained by a conservative moral backlash provoked by the social and political upheaval of the Franco-Prussian War and Paris Commune (1870–1). Another contributing factor was the popularity of new intellectual trends, such as philosophical pessimism and scientific positivism, which heightened concerns about the loss of traditional values in the face of

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<sup>2</sup> Gisèle Sapiro offers an encompassing overview of these debates in *La Responsabilité de l’écrivain: littérature, droit et morale en France (XIXe–XXIe siècle)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Sapiro, pp. 168–9.

<sup>4</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Œuvres complètes*, 24 vols (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1869–76), I (1869), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin, double amour*, 2 vols (Paris: Eugène Renduel, 1836), I, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> On the gradual easing of press restrictions from the 1860s and 1870s, see Raisa Rexer, *The Fallen Veil: A Literary and Cultural History of the Photographic Nude in Nineteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 2021), pp. 124–5.

analytical methods perceived to be atheistic and immoral. These trends dovetailed with contentious developments in the literary sphere. The burgeoning disciplines of psychology, sociology, and criminology inspired the evolution of literary genres – including the Naturalist novel, crime fiction, and the *roman psychologique* – whose practitioners regularly responded to accusations of moral complicity both thematically within their works and rhetorically in the prefaces and articles surrounding them. At the same time, members of the avant-garde played up to the moral panic expressed in mainstream criticism by writing about illicit themes in a subversive and often tongue-in-cheek manner.

Keeping these contexts in mind, I have chosen ‘complicity’ as a key concept and analytical tool to examine the implicating power of transgression in fin-de-siècle French literary culture. In both English and French, the word refers to an individual’s implication or involvement in an illicit action committed by another person. According to the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the primary definition of ‘complicity’ is: ‘The being an accomplice; partnership in an evil action.’<sup>7</sup> The equivalent term in French appears in Larousse’s *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* as ‘Qualité de complice; coopération du complice’, with ‘complice’ defined as ‘Qui participe au crime, au délit, à la faute d’un autre’. While referring to shared criminal responsibility and guilt, ‘complicity’ can also evoke forms of cooperation, solidarity, and amicability that do not necessarily retain an illicit undercurrent. This is particularly the case in French, where the definition of ‘complicité’ includes: ‘Fig. Connivence, coopération, action commune’. In a similar way, the extended definition of ‘complice’ reads: ‘Par ext. Individu qui

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<sup>7</sup> *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles: founded mainly on the materials collected by the Philological Society*, ed. by James Murray, 11 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888–1933), II (1893), p. 728.

participe à toute action menée avec un certain secret'.<sup>8</sup> These wider definitions, which render 'complicité' closely synonymous with 'collusion' and 'connivence', have paved the way for the habitual modern French usage, which mitigates the word's legal connotations and highlights instead its relational or convivial aspect. A similar slippage occurs in the English locution 'partners in crime': although it can be used to evoke actual criminal accomplices, it more frequently describes – often in a playful, humorous way – a particular kind of amical relationship. I suggest that because of this conceptual fluidity, 'complicity' conveys the ambivalent ways in which transgressive elements in literature were employed and received in fin-de-siècle France.

Throughout my thesis, I use the term 'complicity' to pursue two main lines of enquiry. First, I propose that by analysing the representation of shared crime and guilt by fin-de-siècle writers and critics, we can better appreciate the close imbrication of legal, moral, and aesthetic discourses in the period. Second, I highlight the ways in which illicit themes offered writers and readers alternative forms of identification and solidarity that opposed or transgressed moral and artistic norms. While the former provides a historically contextualised approach, the latter combines close reading with more meta-literary discussion assessing a *poetics* of complicity: how specific literary techniques, texts, or genres create collaborative and collusive relationships between readers, writers, and critics.

In pursuing the first approach, my work contributes to a longstanding critical tradition that examines the relationship between literature, morality, and the law. This method considers how societies define literary responsibility, crime, and

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<sup>8</sup> Larousse, Pierre, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*, 17 vols (Paris: Administration du Grand Dictionnaire universel, 1866–1877), IV (1869), pp. 784–5.

guilt at given moments in history by analyzing legal codes, trial documents, and judicial debate alongside incriminated literary texts. Yvan Leclerc's *Crimes écrits* (1991) is a seminal work in this domain. It explores the legal regulation of literature in nineteenth-century France, citing as key examples the obscenity trials faced by Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire, and Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly.<sup>9</sup> *Crimes écrits* concludes with an invaluable annex containing documents relating to these primary examples as well as to a series of lesser-known literary trials. Leclerc's book has prompted broader and more in-depth studies in both Anglophone and Francophone scholarship, notably Elisabeth Ladenson's *Dirt for Art's Sake* (2007) and Gisèle Sapiro's *La Responsabilité de l'écrivain* (2011). *Dirt for Art's Sake* is a comparative study of famous literary trials from France, Great Britain, and the United States, which considers the shifting perception of obscenity and the two key arguments used in its defense: art's exemption from moral judgement ('art for art's sake') and art's duty to reflect reality.<sup>10</sup> Ladenson notes how transgressive texts are reappropriated by later audiences in a way that converts shock value into literary merit. However, this process does not necessarily require temporal distance, since it was already a key feature of avant-garde literary culture in the period. *La Responsabilité de l'écrivain* is a French-specific sociological history spanning from the Bourbon Restoration to the Liberation. In it, Sapiro considers the intersection between legal definitions of literary responsibility and wider perceptions of writers' ethical and moral position in society. Offering detailed analysis of legislation, legal trials, and surrounding debates – expressed in the media of criticism, correspondence, and journalism – Sapiro emphasizes the symbolic role played by

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<sup>9</sup> Yvan Leclerc, *Crimes écrits: la littérature en procès au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Plon, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth Ladenson, *Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

the individual writer as the source and culprit of literary crime.<sup>11</sup> She acknowledges, if somewhat underplays, the fact that throughout the period editors and publishers were usually considered the main offenders in literary trials, with writers regarded as their accomplices (since it was the act of publishing, and not writing, illicit material that was punishable by law). My thesis places greater emphasis on this distinction, highlighting instead the symbolic importance of *shared* crime and guilt in fin-de-siècle discourses of literary responsibility. As part of this analysis, I suggest that the moral panic implicit in the ‘bad influence’ model of literary reception belied fears that readers may in fact be willing accomplices in literary crime and transgression.

To examine the reader’s complicit status, I employ the second approach, considering the ways in which the presentation of illicit themes *within* literature intersected with, or enabled, illicit solidarity created *through* literature. This type of analysis brings together questions of content, form, and reception: to what extent are readers implicated in what they read? How are they encouraged to share responsibility for ideas and works considered immoral, if not outright illicit? Is this process associated with particular literary techniques or genres? If so, why might this be the case, and how effective are they? By posing these meta-literary questions, I employ a conceptual framework similar to the treatment of ‘connivence’ in early modern French literature proposed by Ariane Bayle, Mathilde Bombart, and Isabelle Garnier. In *L’Âge de la connivence*, they note the term’s association with suspect forms of moral complicity and discuss its broad (if often vague) usage in literary scholarship, particularly when analysing relations between

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<sup>11</sup> By doing so, Sapiro is clearly influenced by Foucault’s analysis of the legal context behind the ‘author function’. See Michel Foucault, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?’, in *Dits et écrits*, ed. by Daniel Defert and others, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), I, pp. 789–821.

characters, between writers, and between writers and readers. They subsequently propose a more precise working definition of ‘connivence’, understood as a secretive form of mutual understanding that is actively constructed ‘pour lier des auteurs à un public, ou des auteurs entre eux’, and which relies on ‘l’existence, réelle, postulée ou fantasmée, d’un tiers exclu vis-à-vis duquel se joue la relation’.<sup>12</sup> The ‘tiers exclu’ could either be a naïve reader incapable of perceiving the hidden, transgressive meanings of a text, or the potential censor whose accusatory gaze must be tricked or avoided.<sup>13</sup> When defining ‘connivence’ in greater depth, Bayle et al. make an interesting distinction between works that depict conniving relations at the fictional level and works that hint at a meta-literary relation between the author and reader – although they acknowledge the capacity for the former to enable the latter.<sup>14</sup> In a similar way, my project considers the fictional representation of complicity alongside, and intertwined with, the creation of complicit relations at a meta-literary level.

On this question, it is noteworthy that the contributors to *L’Âge de la connivence* adopt a historically situated approach to reader-writer and reader-text relations, rather than a general, theoretical approach. When expressed in the language of reader-response criticism, this means that the reader involved in ‘connivence’ is not the ‘ideal’ or ‘implied’ reader, but rather a *targeted* reader (‘lecteur visé’) who is historically and socially determined as part of a specific interpretative community. While recognising the role of the reader – both contemporaneous and modern – in filling a text’s ‘blanks’, this historicist approach

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<sup>12</sup> Ariane Bayle, Mathilde Bombart, and Isabelle Garnier, ‘La connivence, une notion opératoire pour l’analyse littéraire’, in *L’Âge de la connivence: lire entre les mots à l’époque moderne*, ed. by Ariane Bayle and others (Geneva: Droz, 2015), pp. 5–36 (pp. 7–9 and 15).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

emphasises authorial intention as a guarantee for a text's hidden meanings. It focuses primarily on how texts function upon their original publication, 'sans exclure pour autant d'éventuels réemplois ou relectures dans d'autres contextes où se cristalliseraient d'autres connivences, pas forcément prévues par l'auteur'.<sup>15</sup> In this way, *L'Âge de la connivence* shares my project's emphasis on historically situated readings of transgressive texts, while hinting at the ways in which complicity or 'connivence' might be built into the structure of works and thus function every time the work is read, even by entirely *untargeted* readers. It also suggests the wider applicability of this approach to different literary periods. Periodisation aside, 'complicity' and 'connivence' tend to resonate with certain genres and themes better than with others. One notable example is erotic literature: a privileged site for transgression regardless of the historical period. In *L'Âge de la connivence*, Mathieu Bermann and Mathilde Faugère consider how libertine and gallant fiction implicate and compromise readers by actively involving them in the act of unveiling and decoding erotic secrets and innuendo. They analyse particular techniques that appeal to the reader's interpretative faculties, such as metaphor and irony.<sup>16</sup> Throughout my analysis I pay equally close attention to the implicating power of specific literary techniques, while favouring genres that – in the style of *libertinage* – associate transgression with eroticism.

Despite sharing similar terminology, methodology, and themes, my analytical approach differs from the one employed in *L'Âge de la connivence* due to the emphasis I place on the legal connotations of 'complicity'. For although the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 23–5.

<sup>16</sup> Mathieu Bermann, 'Licence et connivence: les dispositifs textuels de complicité avec le lecteur dans les *Contes de La Fontaine*', in *L'Âge de la connivence*, ed. by Bayle and others, pp. 273–286, and Mathilde Faugère, 'Lecture, connivence et construction du groupe dans la fiction galante', in *L'Âge de la connivence*, ed. by Bayle and others, pp. 287–300.

term ‘connivence’ is used to evoke relationships framed as morally condemnable, it does not denote a specific legal status. This is one of the major limitations of the term, perhaps indicating why it has been used in less rigorous ways and why it remains conceptually difficult to pin down. This is not to say that ‘complicity’ is *not* difficult to pin down – quite the opposite – but rather that the legal element adds greater conceptual substance and gives clearer handles with which to grasp its relevance to literary culture. As I explain in more detail below, ‘complicity’ had real judicial weight at the fin de siècle and could be used to incriminate those involved in literary production. By using ‘complicity’ as opposed to ‘connivence’, I am therefore able to tease out even further the association between illicit themes and collusive relationships, examining how the legal framing of literature’s social and moral value intersected with subversive interpretative practices encouraged by specific literary techniques and genres.

### **Legal Definitions of Complicity**

The symbolic power of complicity in fin-de-siècle France was bound up in the term’s legal definition and its impact on literary production. Two key factors structured this relationship: first, the association of complicity with incitement (‘provocation’), and second, the framing of press crimes as collaborative action. According to Article 60 of the 1810 Penal Code, an individual charged with inciting a crime is considered legally complicit with it:

Seront punis comme complices d’une action qualifiée crime ou délit, ceux qui, par dons, promesses, menaces, abus d’autorité ou de pouvoir, machinations ou artifices coupables, auront provoqué à cette action, ou donné des instructions pour la commettre.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Code pénal de l’empire français. Edition conforme à celle de l’imprimerie impériale* (Paris: Prieur, Belin fils, Merlin, and Rondonneau, 1810), p. 8.



This definition, which applied to all criminal accomplices, was cited by subsequent laws regulating press freedom throughout the nineteenth century, including the ground-breaking *Loi sur la liberté de la presse*. Passed on 29 July 1881, this law defended the principle of press freedom and significantly reduced the number of punishable press crimes.<sup>18</sup> According to its stipulations, those involved in publishing textual or visual material could be legally inculpated primarily by their complicity with other crimes, through the act of incitement:

Seront punis comme complices d'une action qualifiée crime ou délit ceux qui par des discours, cris ou menaces proférés dans des lieux ou réunions publiques soit par des écrits, des imprimés vendus ou distribués, mis en vente ou exposés dans des lieux ou réunions publiques, soit par des placards ou affiches déposés aux regards du public, auront *directement* provoqué l'auteur ou les auteurs à commettre la dite action *si la provocation a été suivie d'effet*.<sup>19</sup>

By stating that the accused must have *directly* incited a committed crime ('suivie d'effet'), the 1881 law removed a level of ambiguity that had been present in previous legal statutes.<sup>20</sup> In particular, this limited the capacity to charge someone for exerting a broader, less specific influence over its author – a form of indirect responsibility that Sapiro refers to as 'complicité morale'.<sup>21</sup> However, there were certain crimes for which incitement alone could be punished, without requiring the incited crime to be 'suivie d'effet'. These included murder, pillage, arson, military misdemeanour, and crimes against state security.<sup>22</sup> In these cases, outlined in article 24 of the 1881 law, incitement is considered as a separate crime, which does not require the 'suivie d'effet' proof outlined in the preceding article on complicity.

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<sup>18</sup> The 1881 law suppressed crimes of opinion (*délits d'opinion*) such as outraging religious morals, attacking the Constitution, and inciting hatred or disdain for the government. However, it retained other crimes, such as outraging public decency and defamation.

<sup>19</sup> Article 23, *Loi sur la liberté de la presse du 29 juillet 1881* (Paris: Dubuisson, 1881), my emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> See articles 1 and 8 of the 17 May 1819 law, cited in Leclerc, pp. 19–20.

<sup>21</sup> Sapiro, pp. 50–52.

<sup>22</sup> On the question of 'provocation non suivie d'effets' in the judicial debates preceding the 1881 law, see Sapiro, pp. 330–3.

The legal distinctions regarding levels and types of criminal encouragement reflected the widely held view that literature could have both a direct and indirect influence over people's actions, potentially to the detriment of social and moral order. This idea was central to fin-de-siècle debates about literary 'bad influence', where morality critics depicted writers as exerting a corrupting force over their readers. As Gisèle Sapiro has noted, the debate about literature's capacity to encourage moral decline has a long history, with a key source – at least in Western tradition – being Aristotle and Plato's discussions of mimesis. Understood as both representation and imitation, mimesis relies on the identification of the reader or audience with the aesthetic object. Whereas Aristotle emphasised the role of catharsis in enabling the reader-audience to distance themselves from the impact of mimetic identification, Plato insisted upon its capacity to encourage subversive and immoral tendencies. The latter's view was increasingly medicalised during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when scientists and medics examined the immoral influence of literary production, typically employing metaphors relating to poison, infection, and contagion.<sup>23</sup> In such a vision of literary relations, the reader was usually attributed a passive and victimised role. This was particularly the case for readers who were defined by reigning ideologies as naturally inclined to corruption, such as women, children, and the working classes. These individuals were cited less for their real-life existence than for their capacity to symbolise the passive, impressionable reader in general. Yet the reader's status in this vision is ambiguous, representing both a potential criminal and the victim of illicit influence. This blurred the link between cause and effect when attributing responsibility: were writers fundamentally corrupting or were readers fundamentally corruptible? The

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<sup>23</sup> Sapiro, pp. 127–130.

vehemence with which ‘immoral’ literature was received at the fin de siècle arguably belied widespread fears that the reading population was inherently criminally inclined, requiring only a small amount of encouragement to transgress social, moral, and legal norms.

As well as evoking writers’ capacity to incite others to commit illegal actions, complicity also refers to the collaborative structure of press crimes, which implicated a variety of individuals deemed responsible for publishing illicit material. On this question, the 1881 law outlined a hierarchy of responsibility for press-specific crimes such as obscenity, libel, and political sedition. The law stated that press managers and publishers were considered the primary culprits and authors their accomplices. This distinction was made because it was the act of publishing, rather than writing, illicit material that was punishable by law. Article 42 details the hierarchy as follows:

Seront passibles, comme auteurs principaux, des peines qui constituent la répression des crimes et délits commis par la voie de la presse, dans l’ordre ci-après, savoir: 1° les gérants ou éditeurs, quelles que soient leurs professions ou leurs dénominations; 2° à leur défaut, les auteurs; 3° à défaut des auteurs, les imprimateurs; 4° à défaut des imprimateurs, les vendeurs, distributeurs ou afficheurs.<sup>24</sup>

Gisèle Sapiro has argued that the legal status of writers as accomplices, rather than the primary ‘authors’, of literary crimes contradicted what many considered the obvious moral responsibility an author had for the content and potential impact of their works.<sup>25</sup> This conflict was acknowledged in the annotated version of the law: ‘La responsabilité morale retombe tout entier sur l’écrivain, tout le monde le sent. [...] Mais, au point de vue des principes de la législation, les choses changent

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<sup>24</sup> *Loi sur la liberté de la presse*, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> Sapiro, p. 24.

d'aspect.<sup>26</sup> That said, legal theory and judicial practice notably diverged in the case of novelists tried for obscenity, who would often receive harsher sentences than their publishers. Such sentences confirmed the 'common-sense' view that associated literary authorship with criminal authorship, based on a more individualistic vision of responsibility. When it came to periodical publications, however, judgements tended to follow the statutory hierarchy of responsibility. Press directors frequently received tougher penalties than book publishers and the writers or artists who penned the offending material.<sup>27</sup> This distinction can be explained by the fact that the publication of newspapers, reviews, and magazines involved more collaborative processes than book production. Furthermore, the increased accessibility and lower cost of periodical formats heightened fears of bad influence over morally corruptible readers.

Despite benefiting from unprecedented levels of press freedom granted by the 1881 law, fin-de-siècle writers and publishers could therefore still face trial alongside one another for crossing certain moral, social, and political boundaries. In particular, two forms of boundary-crossing provoked further debate about the nature and levels of shared criminal responsibility in the literary domain: outraging public decency and political sedition. Both crimes became the focal point for later legal amendments that restricted press freedom as part of a reactionary response to perceived breakdowns in socio-political order. These amendments affirmed the transgressive potential of literature while highlighting and modifying its complicit status. In the analysis below, I consider how complicity-as-incitement and

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<sup>26</sup> *Lois annotées ou Lois, décrets, ordonnances, avis du Conseil d'Etat, etc., avec notes historiques, de concordance et de jurisprudence*, IX (Paris: Recueil Sirey, 1881–1885), p. 221.

<sup>27</sup> See Leclerc, pp. 78–80 and Sapiro, pp. 457–9.

complicity-as-collaboration functioned in these two examples, while teasing out some of the implications they had for literary culture of the period.

### *L'outrage aux bonnes mœurs*

The crime of outraging public decency has historically functioned as a keystone to the moral regulation of print media. It can refer to a range of subversive positions on society, but it has typically been associated with the related notion of 'obscenity'.<sup>28</sup> Although never systematically defined in legal statute, 'obscenity' can be understood as the depiction or discussion of sexual behaviour considered contrary to a set of moral codes inherited by tradition and ratified by public opinion. The association between sexual morality and socio-political order was so tightly imbricated in nineteenth century France that the era's most famous literary trials centred around the question of obscenity. As the mid-century trials against Baudelaire and Flaubert had demonstrated, 'obscene' works were perceived to encourage immorality by representing illicit behaviour without overtly condemning it. This view has had a long shelf life and remains in circulation today, in discussions about pornography, violent video games, and the regulation of social media content. It was notably present in the 1881 *Loi sur la liberté de la presse*, which, despite suppressing related crimes such as outraging public and religious morality, retained 'outrage aux bonnes mœurs' and gave harsher penalties for it than an earlier legal precedent set in 1819.<sup>29</sup>

However, these penalties were soon deemed insufficient to deter writers and publishers from producing and selling 'immoral' works. On 8 August 1882, only a

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<sup>28</sup> On the link between obscenity and press freedom, see Nicholas Harrison, *Circles of Censorship: Censorship and its Metaphors in French History, Literature, and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), and Ladenson.

<sup>29</sup> The 1881 law raised maximum prison sentence from one to two years, and the maximum fine from 500 to 2,000 francs. See Sapiro, p. 334.

year after declaring press freedom, France passed a new law to clamp down on obscenity. This reactive measure reflected a surge of moral panic in the minds of jurists and politicians, who viewed the new freedoms as having opened the floodgates to a wave of immoral publications. As Raisa Rexer has noted, this apocalyptic vision was propagated by journalists in the mainstream press, who from 1880 had attacked titillating popular literature for political and economic reasons.<sup>30</sup> After the government's initial proposal was debated and modified by the chamber of deputies, the leftist Republican senator Louis Devaux (1819–1884) presented a report to the senate declaring the urgency of passing a new law:

Les publications obscènes se sont multipliées, dans ces derniers temps, avec une telle fréquence et sous tant de formes, que le Gouvernement, en proposant aux Chambres un complément nécessaire de la législation existante, n'a fait que répondre à l'opinion publique révoltée d'une situation intolérable. Il n'est plus possible, en effet, aujourd'hui, de faire un pas sur la voie publique sans la trouver encombrée de crieurs, de colporteurs de ces productions scandaleuses que l'on étale effrontément sous les yeux des femmes, des jeunes filles, des enfants; qu'on leur distribue même gratuitement quelquefois, dans l'espérance que cette détestable semaille, prodiguée sans pudeur, fournira plus tard une honteuse mais lucrative moisson.<sup>31</sup>

The force of Devaux's assertions relies on his use of hyperbole and a stream of adjectives conveying reactionary moral judgement: 'intolérable', 'scandaleuses', 'détestable', 'sans pudeur', and 'honteuse'. He refers to women and children as the primary victims of cynical manipulators seeking financial gain from the encouragement of immoral instincts, thereby demonstrating both the legislators' paternalistic approach and the tangible – if condemnable – public interest in 'indecent' works, which bolstered lucrative sales.

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<sup>30</sup> Raisa Rexer, 'L'Année pornographique: The French Press and the Invention of Pornography', *Romanic Review*, 111 (2020), 260–287.

<sup>31</sup> *Lois annotées*, IX, p. 376.

To counter this trend, the August 1882 law created a special status for ‘outrages aux bonnes mœurs’, effectively removing it from the relative protection established in 1881. Maximum fines increased from 2,000 to 3,000 francs, in a clear attempt to punish perpetrators in the same way they might benefit from the crime – that is, financially.<sup>32</sup> In line with the penal code’s stipulations, accomplices could face identical sentences as the primary offenders. Most importantly, the crime would henceforth be tried by the correctional courts rather than by the assizes: that is, behind closed doors (*à huis clos*) and without a jury.<sup>33</sup> This change addressed two major concerns: first, that the lengthy processes required by the assizes prevented justice being applied swiftly enough to be effective, and second, that juries were too lenient. The correctional courts were also granted the power to seize incriminated texts and arrest the accused and their accomplices as a precautionary measure. This had already been the case for obscene images, but the 1882 law extended this stipulation to cover nearly all forms of written production, with one key exception: books remained under the 1881 law’s jurisdiction and were tried in assizes courts.

The 1882 law clearly represented a key moment in the history of press censorship in France, demonstrating how concerns over literature’s immoral influence eclipsed the desire for broader press freedom. It also raised debates about the rise of mass media formats and how to define literary value in its wake. Books were exempted from the new law’s jurisdiction, suggesting that the book format was more closely associated with aesthetic and moral value than periodicals. On

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 377.

this question, senator Devaux expressed the widespread association between press ephemera and pornography:

Le danger pour les penseurs et les écrivains n'existe pas, car ils n'auront jamais à comparaître comme tels devant la juridiction correctionnelle, et si le zèle d'un magistrat du parquet les confondait par accident avec les folliculaires flétris aujourd'hui du nom de pornographes, la magistrature elle-même les relèverait d'une aussi lamentable méprise.<sup>34</sup>

The derogatory term 'folliculaires' here implicitly evokes a particular *type* of journalism, which suggests that publication format alone was not sufficient to define obscenity. The difficulties of associating publication format with literary, social, and moral value were highlighted by a question raised in the chamber of deputies regarding the status of respected and conservative reviews such as *La Nouvelle Revue* and *La Revue des Deux Mondes*. Were these titles to be treated as the equivalent of books or aligned with pornographic ephemera? This question, unanswered during the debates, was left to be resolved by later jurisprudence.<sup>35</sup> By distinguishing between different types and levels of published material, the 1882 law encourages a broad understanding of cultural production and its relationship with legal and moral discourses. This vision, which I adopt in my analysis, recognises the importance of considering a range of incriminated material – and not just a limited selection of assizes trials – when analysing the impact of format, genre, and content in debates about literature's transgressive and implicating potential.

Devaux's attack against the journalists and peddlers selling salacious literature to an avid public implies the existence of a thriving network of businesses seeking to profit from the appeal of illicit erotic material. Despite the hyperbolic

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<sup>34</sup> *Lois annotées*, IX, p. 377.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 376.



bent of his discourse, Devaux's vision of illicit erotic networks is helpful to our broader understanding of complicity. In chapter four, I analyse a key player in fin-de-siècle erotic networks: the saucy magazine. Reviews such as *Le Courrier français* (1884–1914), *Le Fin de Siècle* (1891–1909), and *Don Juan* (1895–1900) published titillating literature, drawings, and advertisements for semi-clandestine businesses including sex shops, medical quacks, and abortionists. In the period, these reviews continued to thrive regardless of the restrictions brought in by the 1882 law. How did they manage it? One answer is that those involved in the 'industrie de l'obscénité' employed canny methods of avoiding litigation or mitigating its impact.<sup>36</sup> For example, there is evidence to suggest that the editorial team of *Le Fin de Siècle* – a saucy magazine that regularly faced trial for obscenity throughout the 1890s – paid people to sign off as the review's manager and therefore take primary responsibility for any risqué content. This tactic demonstrates an implicit understanding, and attempted manipulation, of the hierarchy of responsibility described in the 1881 press law. According to article 42, cited above, criminal responsibility would be attributed first to the *gérant* or *éditeur* of an inculpated publication, and only afterwards to its writer(s), printers, and sellers. Writers would usually be charged as accomplices and not as the main perpetrator. This structure left a degree of ambiguity regarding the role of the *rédacteur en chef*, who may not be considered a review's manager or publisher but who would make key decisions regarding its content. I suggest below that René Emery, the editor-in-chief of *Le Fin de Siècle*, exploited this ambiguity to displace

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<sup>36</sup> See Maxence Rodemacq, 'L'Industrie de l'obscénité: commerce pornographique et culture de masse à Paris (1855–1930)' (unpublished master's thesis, Sorbonne University, 2010), and 'L'Industrie de l'obscénité à Paris', *Romantisme*, 167 (2015) 13–20.

responsibility and avoid litigation – an approach that, no matter how canny, was not always successful.

### **Underwriting Obscenity: *Prête-noms* at *Le Fin de Siècle***

On 15 July 1891, the writer-journalist Louis Octave Besse (1870–1911) was tried for outraging public decency in an article he contributed to the 17 June 1891 issue of *Le Fin de Siècle*, entitled ‘Crime’. He was tried as the accomplice of Urbain Hippolyte Heurtier, an impoverished 61-year-old who signed as the journal’s *gérant*. When interrogated by the police, Heurtier explained that, after working for a train company for many years, he had spent the previous six or seven years of his life unemployed. Further intelligence revealed that Heurtier’s rent (30 francs per month) was paid by his son. When asked to explain his involvement in the review, Heurtier responded as follows:

Je suis gérant du journal *Fin de Siècle* depuis 3 mois. Je n’ai aucun traité avec la direction, mais en exécution de conventions verbales, je reçois 10 francs par numéro que je signe comme gérant.

J’avais remarqué, dans la nouvelle intitulée: “Crime”, le passage que vise plus particulièrement la poursuite. Les expressions: ‘*Les cuisses s’ouvrent à sa virilité*’ et: ‘*la fusion des ventres*’ m’avaient paru quelque peu osées. J’en avais fait l’observation au rédacteur en chef, M. Emery qui m’avait répondu: ‘Qu’à la rigueur on pourrait supprimer ces passages’, ils ont été maintenus, ce que plus tard M. Emery a attribué à un oubli.

En général la direction ne me soumet, préalablement, ni les manuscrits des ‘nouvelles’, ni les originaux des dessins.<sup>37</sup>

Although it was common practice at the time for newspaper managers and editors to avoid the appearance of guilt by claiming not to have seen the article or drawing in question, Heurtier here openly acknowledges having read the incriminated article.<sup>38</sup> However, in this instance, Heurtier’s admission serves to highlight the fact that he had little or no influence over the review’s content. Instead, he cites René

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<sup>37</sup> ‘Interrogatoire sur mandat de comparution’, Archives de Paris (AP), D2U6 93, 15/07/1891 – HEURTIER, Urbain; BESSE, Louis Octave.

<sup>38</sup> Leclerc, p. 79.

Emery as the primary decision-maker. By claiming to have remarked upon the potential immorality of the inculcated article to Emery – a comment that the latter either forgot or deliberately ignored – Heurtier shifts the blame away from himself. It is difficult to know the precise level of involvement Heurtier had in the review, since he could simply have been playing the blame game in his testimony. That said, he had very few connections with journalism and no prior convictions, but instead had several years of financial hardship under his belt. These factors suggest that he was unlikely to be the mastermind of operations at *Le Fin de Siècle* and that he was paid to sign as the *gérant* to displace blame from those more practically involved in the day-to-day running of the review.

A few months after the court's judgement against Besse and Heurtier, between December 1891 and January 1892, René Emery was implicated in a series of trials against *Le Fin de Siècle*. As a recidivist, Emery faced increasingly harsh sentences, which over the course of three trials reached an accumulated total of five months in prison and 7,000 francs to pay in fines.<sup>39</sup> He therefore stood to gain from any subsequent attempt to mitigate his responsibility. We can see this in the procedural documents from another trial that took place on 25 May 1892.<sup>40</sup> On this occasion, Emery was accused of being an accomplice in the crime of outraging public decency, after having penned an article for *Le Fin de Siècle*, suggestively entitled 'Gorges à l'air'. He appeared alongside Henry Julien, who had signed as

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<sup>39</sup> On the 1885 and 1891 laws on recidivism, see Jean-Lucien Sanchez, 'Les Lois Bérenger (lois du 14 août 1885 et du 26 mars 1891)', *Criminocorpus*, Histoire de la criminologie: Autour des *Archives d'anthropologie criminelle* 1886–1914 (2005) <<http://journals.openedition.org/criminocorpus/132>> [accessed 29/06/2021].

<sup>40</sup> The Archives de Paris retains only a limited selection of the correctional court's 'documents de procédure'. Further details regarding the earlier trials against *Le Fin de Siècle*, other than those found in the official judgement, are therefore not available because the relevant files have been destroyed.

the *gérant*. When interrogated regarding his involvement in the review, Julien stated:

Je n'ai jamais lu, pas même jusqu'à ce jour, l'article dont il s'agit; d'ailleurs M. Emery ne me soumet jamais la copie des articles qu'il insère dans son journal. Je ne suis gérant que pour la forme car je suis employé au journal "Le Soleil".

Je touche 50 fr. par mois, uniquement pour signer "Fin de Siècle" comme gérant.<sup>41</sup>

A court report on Julien's background affirmed his impoverished status: 'Il est marié, et a quatre enfants: il paraît être dans la misère.'<sup>42</sup> This evidence supports Julien's claims to be a pretend figurehead with a purely financial incentive to sign as *gérant*. It seems that Julien was desperate enough to risk taking responsibility for the review's content in any potential litigation, or that he was simply unaware of the structure of responsibility in legal statute.

By signing as *gérant*, Julien acted as a shield for the person truly responsible: René Emery. In the interrogation cited above, Julien attributes the review's ownership and management to Emery by evoking 'les articles qu'il [Emery] insère dans son journal' (my emphasis). This attribution is backed up by the latter's implication in the earlier trials against *Le Fin de Siècle*, as well as by his relatively high earnings. On 27 April 1892, the police seized copies of the indicted issue at the review's offices on rue de Provence and interrogated the editor-in-chief. When questioned about his 'moyens d'existence', Emery responded: 'Je n'en ai pas d'autre que la direction du journal "Fin de Siècle" et j'estime mon gain à 10 000 francs par an.'<sup>43</sup> Emery's annual wage was therefore significantly higher than the pro rata annual sum of 600 francs received by Julien. This disparity suggests that

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<sup>41</sup> Henry Julien's 'Interrogatoire sur mandat de comparution', AP, D2U6 95, 25/05/1892 – JULIEN, Henry, Alexandre; EMERY, René, Marie.

<sup>42</sup> 'Rapport', AP, D2U6 95.

<sup>43</sup> 'Procès verbal', AP, D2U6 95.

Emery had a more central position at the review and that he was one of the primary recipients of any profits it made. In administering justice against Julien and Emery, the correctional court recognised the latter's greater share of responsibility and his status as an unrepentant recidivist by sentencing him to thirteen months in prison and a 3,000-franc fine. As a first-time offender benefiting from attenuating circumstances, Julien avoided prison, but was still charged with an equally heavy fine.<sup>44</sup> Emery's prison sentence was the fourth he had received in five months, and to avoid serving them he subsequently fled to Belgium. If Julien's involvement in the review was indeed a mitigation strategy – which the evidence above implies – it was clearly unsuccessful, and its failure necessitated a more drastic course of action. The magistrates involved in the May 1892 trial clearly saw through the diversion tactics, recognised Emery's involvement in a series of earlier crimes, and punished him more harshly than the supposed primary culprit Julien. I suggest that this reversal of the statutory hierarchy was less a question of punishing Emery's authorship of an illicit text than an acknowledgement of Emery's more influential role as editor-in-chief at a saucy magazine that repeatedly transgressed the boundaries of acceptable morality. In this way, we can see how the collaborative nature of press publication was central to courts' decisions on the appropriate sanctions for publishing illicit material, and how those profiting from such material attempted – sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully – to displace their legal responsibility.

While indirectly acknowledging his legal responsibility through strategies of displacement, René Emery outwardly denied the charge of 'outrage aux bonnes mœurs' when questioned before the May 1892 trial. Instead, he claimed that *Le Fin*

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<sup>44</sup> AP, D1U6 428, 25.05.1892 – JULIEN (Henry, Alexandre) and EMERY (René, Marie).

*de Siècle* was being targeted for political reasons, as part of a wider clamp-down against anarchist propaganda:

Je suis persuadé que Monsieur le Juge d’Instruction s’est trompé. Il n’y a dans le numéro aucune ligne qui puisse être incriminée. Les dessins n’ont absolument pas d’inconvenant. On a cru sans doute que le journal était un organe anarchiste. Je déclare formellement qu’il n’en est pas.<sup>45</sup>

Emery’s reference to anarchism may seem at first glance incongruous with the charges laid before him. The article in question contains predominantly erotic content, juxtaposing the feasting and orgies of a Flemish *kermesse* with the banality of policed Parisian fairs. The closest it gets to political commentary is by denigrating the police’s role as moral enforcer.<sup>46</sup> That said, the tradition of *libertinage* had long established a close association between sexual transgression and subversive politics, and *Le Fin de Siècle* clearly inherited and reformulated this tradition.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, ‘Gorges à l’air’ was published at a moment in France’s history when political tensions were rocketing, and when any publication promoting transgressive ideas might be tarred with the same brush as more extreme political opinions.

### **Political Sedition**

René Emery’s comment therefore brings us to the second key area of contention surrounding press freedom and literary complicity at the fin de siècle: literature’s capacity to incite violence and social unrest. This was a controversial question in the 1890s – a period when France experienced significant socio-political upheaval through a series of scandals (including the Panama Canal scandal and the Dreyfus

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<sup>45</sup> ‘Procès verbal’, AP, D2U6 95.

<sup>46</sup> René Emery, ‘Gorges à l’air’, *Le Fin de Siècle*, 23 April 1892.

<sup>47</sup> In chapter four I analyse in further depth how such reviews’ titillating erotic content often blended with or disguised more transgressive political commentary.

affair) that incited media storms, divisive debate, and violent protest.<sup>48</sup> Members of the government, the army, and the financial sector were implicated in underhand dealings and attempted cover-ups, which shook public confidence in the authority they represented. Combined with widespread socio-economic inequalities, these scandals provided fertile ground for the dissemination of anti-establishment thought, notably anarchism: a political philosophy which valorised the individual over the collective and called for the abolition of the state. Because of the emphasis it placed on individuality, anarchist thought was popular amongst avant-garde writers and artists.<sup>49</sup> Notable anarchist sympathisers included the Impressionist and Neo-Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), the writer-journalist Octave Mirbeau (1848–1917), and the art critic Félix Fénéon (1861–1944).<sup>50</sup> At the same time, anarchism gained support from a network of working-class militants and became a hot topic discussed across the socio-political spectrum. In particular, the methods of its supporters became a controversial subject of public debate in the 1890s due to increasing violent protest and subsequent government-led repression.

During this period, France witnessed a wave of anarchist violence, referred to as ‘propaganda by the deed’, which included a series of bombings committed between 1892–4 and the assassination of President Sadi Carnot in 1894. The first major attacks were committed by François Claudius Koenigstein, alias Ravachol,

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<sup>48</sup> On the antisemitic demonstrations and attacks committed during the Dreyfus Affair, see Pierre Birnbaum, *The Antisemitic Moment*, trans. by Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> See Juan Ungersma Halperin, *Félix Fénéon. Aesthete & Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 263 and Alexander Varias, *Paris and the Anarchists: Aesthetes and Subversives During the Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 135. See also Patrick McGuinness, *Poetry and Radical Politics in Fin-de-Siècle France: From Anarchism to Action Française* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>50</sup> As we see below, the latter was arrested on suspicion of anarchist activity during a period of state orchestrated repression in the mid-1890s.

in response to police violence and judicial severity in the Clichy affair.<sup>51</sup> With the help of some accomplices, Ravachol ignited two bombs on 11 and 27 March 1892, targeting two magistrates involved in the affair: Edmond Benoît and Léon-Jules Bulot, respectively. After raising the suspicions of a waiter at a restaurant on the Boulevard de Magenta, Ravachol was arrested on 30 March and faced trial on 27 April.<sup>52</sup> The day before the trial proceedings, anarchists retaliated by bombing the restaurant where Ravachol had been denounced. Condemned to a life sentence of hard labour, Ravachol faced a second trial for murders predating the bombing, for which he was found guilty and executed (on 11 July 1892). Ravachol's execution initiated a vicious cycle of escalating violence, in which acts of anarchist vengeance were followed by judicial repression. On 9 December 1893, Auguste Vaillant set off a bomb in the National Assembly, injuring several but killing none – an act for which he was nonetheless sentenced to death. The unusual severity of this sentence increased public sympathy for Vaillant and incited further reprisals. A week after Vaillant's execution, on 12 February 1894, the young anarchist Emile Henry detonated a bomb at the Café Terminus at the Gare Saint-Lazare. Tried and found guilty on 27 April, Henry was guillotined on 21 May 1894. To avenge both Vaillant and Henry, the Italian anarchist Sante Casario stabbed President Sadi Carnot to death at a public ceremony in Lyon on 24 June 1894 – a crime for which Casario was executed on 16 August the same year.

Although all of these attacks provoked debate and controversy, it was Vaillant and Casario's crimes that, by directly targeting political authority, provided

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<sup>51</sup> On 1 May 1891, the same day as a violent repression of a workers' protest in Fourmies, three anarchists were arrested at a protest march to Clichy, outside Paris. They were beaten in police custody and subsequently faced trial for their involvement in the protest. Two received harsh prison sentences and one was acquitted.

<sup>52</sup> Note that 27 April 1892 was the same day that copies of *Le Fin de Siècle* including 'Gorges à l'air' were seized by the police.



the pretext for a state-sponsored clamp-down on anarchist activity and propaganda. Between 1893–4, France passed a series of anti-anarchist laws, known as the *lois scélérates*, that restricted press freedom even further than the 1882 obscenity law. The first ‘loi scélérate’ was passed on 12 December 1893, only three days after Vaillant’s bombing at the National Assembly. This law increased sentences for those found guilty of inciting murder, pillage, arson, military misdemeanour, and crimes against state security. It also criminalised the justification (or ‘apologie’) of such crimes, thereby targeting anarchist propaganda while implicating writers and journalists who publicly expressed anarchist inclinations. Furthermore, it allowed preventative arrest of the accused in cases of both incitement and ‘apologie’.<sup>53</sup> The second, which was submitted the same day as the first but passed a few days later (on 18 December 1893), rewrote articles of the penal code to condemn anyone directly or indirectly involved in groups formed ‘dans le but de préparer ou de commettre des crimes contre des personnes ou les propriétés’. Individuals could be charged regardless of the association’s duration. The new codification also encouraged members of criminal groups to become informants in exchange for exemption from punishment, which in this case was long-term hard labour.<sup>54</sup> The third and final law was passed on 28 July 1894, a month after President Sadi Carnot’s assassination. It moved trials for incitement or apology of crime from the assizes to the correctional courts when the crimes in question were committed as an act of anarchist propaganda. These juryless courts were also granted the power to suppress, either partially or completely, the publication of anarchist-related trial

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<sup>53</sup> ‘Loi portant modification des articles 24, paragraphe 1er, 23 et 49 de la loi du 29 juillet 1881 sur la presse’, *Journal officiel de la République française*, 13 Dec. 1893.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Loi sur les associations de malfaiteurs’, *Journal officiel de la République française*, 19 Dec. 1893.

proceedings in the name of preserving public order.<sup>55</sup> Clearly, the published written word was a key target of the *lois scélérates*, due to its perceived ability to encourage, justify, and publicise acts of political revolt. The laws implied that, by employing these tactics, anarchist leaders and sympathisers might attract wider support from a belligerent press and an increasingly disillusioned public – an outcome the French government clearly wanted to avoid.

In many ways, the *lois scélérates* were successful in enabling an anti-anarchist clamp-down. Within three months of the first two laws passing, anarchist journals such as *La Révolte* and *Père Peinard* had disappeared, and propaganda in favour of anarchism virtually ceased. Militants were either rounded up and arrested or fled France.<sup>56</sup> However, the concept of criminal association between theorists, writers, and criminals remained a hotly contested issue. To what extent could a writer who has expressed anarchist sympathies be implicated in anarchist-related crimes committed by another person? How direct or indirect was their involvement? And should they be punished alongside the main perpetrators? As we saw above, writers' complicity with anarchist violence was legally affirmed by the decision to align 'apologie' with 'provocation' in the first *loi scélérate*. Consequently, anarchist theorists and pro-anarchist authors could be considered complicit in crimes committed by anyone espousing anarchist views. The open-ended nature of 'indirect' involvement described in the second law, against 'l'association de malfaiteurs', further enabled the courts to bring together sympathisers and militants, especially when they moved in the same social circles. I examine below how this newly instated capacity to punish theorists and sympathisers alongside militants and

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<sup>55</sup> 'Loi ayant pour objet de réprimer les menées anarchistes', *Journal officiel de la République française*, 29 July 1894.

<sup>56</sup> Jean Maitron, *Le Mouvement anarchiste en France. 1. Des origines à 1914* (Paris: Maspero, 1975), pp. 251–2.

criminals was tested – and contested – during an infamous trial-cum-media-event known as the Trial of Thirty.

**Illicit Associations: *Le procès des trente***

During the government clamp-down in early 1894, hundreds of individuals were arrested and held for their involvement in anarchist activity. Out of these, thirty were selected to appear together at trial, charged primarily with the crime of ‘association de malfaiteurs’. The group included anarchist theorists (Jean Grave, Sébastien Faure, and Paul Reclus), writers and journal editors involved in anarchist activity (Félix Fénéon, Émile Poujet, and Louis Matha), and pro-anarchist thieves such as Philippe Ortiz and Paul Chericotti. Throughout the trial, the theorists refuted the idea that they were involved in an ‘association’, as they claimed the notion was fundamentally anti-anarchist. However, the prosecution emphasised the links that existed between members of the group, notably by exploring a network of anarchist periodicals. For example, Julien Ledot and Charles Chatel were accused of having contributed to anarchist propaganda through their involvement in *La Révolte*, *La Revue libertaire* (formally *La Revue anarchiste*), and *Le Père Peinard*. When questioned regarding his alleged authorship of a column in *La Révolte* entitled ‘Mouvement social’, Ledot answered as follows:

L’ACCUSÉ. – Qui vous dit que ces articles sont de moi. Ils ne sont pas signés.

M. LE PRÉSIDENT. – Mais on ne signe pas dans votre journal.

L’ACCUSÉ. – Alors poursuivez le gérant.

M. LE PRÉSIDENT. – Mais vous étiez le directeur.

L’ACCUSÉ – C’est possible; mais légalement vous n’avez pas le droit de me poursuivre.

M. LE PRÉSIDENT. – Vous avez dans un article inséré le 13 janvier 1894, fait un appel non dissimulé à l’emploi des explosifs; en outre vous avez servi de point d’union entre plusieurs anarchistes.

L’ACCUSÉ. – Quel est le journal qui n’est pas un point d’union entre ses lecteurs?<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> ‘Le Procès des 30 Anarchistes’, *Le Petit parisien*, 7 Aug. 1894.

In his replies, Ledot refuted the prosecuting lawyer's vision of anarchist journals having a specific tendency to bring people together in an illicit association by highlighting the fundamentally collaborative nature of journalism, regardless of political affiliation. By doing so, he ridiculed the prosecution's attempt to use involvement in journalism as proof of criminal complicity. Furthermore, he demonstrated a clear awareness of the legally instituted hierarchy of responsibility set up by the 1881 press law by insisting that the prosecution should direct their questions to the *gérant* rather than to him.

A few days later, Charles Chatel redeployed this argument when he interrupted the *réquisitoire* of prosecuting lawyer Léon-Jules Bulot (one of the intended victims of Ravachol's 1892 bombings). Chatel claimed that he did not write the articles attributed to him and that his role as 'secrétaire de rédaction' at the *Revue libertaire* meant that he was not legally responsible for its content. Bulot's response to Chatel's interruption was noticeably more confrontational than it had been during Ledot's interrogation:

Ah! Vous n'êtes point le gérant, et, en conséquence, vous n'êtes pas responsable? Vous oubliez que le gérant n'est qu'un simple garçon de bureau, la plupart du temps, ignorant, et vous, vous étiez le secrétaire de la rédaction! Eh bien, dans votre situation, vous lisiez les articles, vous en connaissiez, mieux qu'un gérant, la portée; vous les avez approuvés, vous les avez laissé passer, j'ai le droit de vous en demander compte comme à l'auteur de l'article!<sup>58</sup>

Bulot's response highlights the stakes involved in legally distinguishing the hierarchy of shared responsibility, which did not necessarily match up with actual decision-making roles. By noting that 'le gérant n'est qu'un simple garçon de bureau, la plupart du temps', Bulot indirectly confirms our suspicions about the

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<sup>58</sup> 'Le Procès des 30 Anarchistes', *Le Petit parisien*, 10 Aug. 1894.

paid signatories at *Le Fin de Siècle*. Furthermore, by insisting that, regardless of the hierarchy established by law, he had the right to consider Chatel responsible for the *Revue libertaire*'s content, Bulot valorises 'common-sense' views of press responsibility and suggests that jurisprudence may need to supplement the unresolved ambiguities created by legal statute. Bulot may also have been referring to the 1881 law's attribution of responsibility to *gérants* and *éditeurs* 'quelles que soient leurs professions ou leur dénominations', which suggests room for interpretative manoeuvre in the legal delineation of press roles.

However, despite his best efforts, Bulot was unable to convince the jury to convict anyone other than three of the most notorious thieves. The jury's verdict reflected the views expressed by fin-de-siècle commentators, who questioned a nonspecific form of complicity that could render strangers responsible for one another's crimes. In an article written for *Le Figaro*, Albert Bataille stated that there was insufficient material evidence to consider the group to be enacting a wider anarchist plot:

Que tous ces hommes aient formé une association, ourdi un complot, le ministère public ne pourrait essayer de le soutenir en s'en tenant aux faits matériels.

Pour conspirer ensemble, la première condition est de se connaître.

Suffit-il d'avoir obéi à une idée commune, d'avoir isolément prêché, écrit ou volé, pour réaliser ce que Caserio appelait l'idéal anarchiste?

C'est cette théorie qu'il soutiendra sans doute, car, autrement, la prévention ne tiendrait pas debout.<sup>59</sup>

A few days later, another article appeared in *Le Figaro*, stating that the trial had been 'aussi mal entamé que mal mené' and that the prosecution's approach demonstrated 'une rare maladresse'. It framed the trial as a misjudged use of

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<sup>59</sup> Albert Bataille, 'Gazette des Tribunaux', *Le Figaro*, 7 Aug. 1894.

repressive force: ‘Rien de plus dangereux que la force employée à contre-temps’.<sup>60</sup>

This was an opinion shared by Henri Bauer, who discussed the ongoing ‘vaudeville judiciaire’ in *L’Écho de Paris*, concluding:

Ce procès aura démontré en quel désarroi s’agitent les pasteurs de ce siècle finissant. Incapables de réformes et d’améliorations matérielles, ils ne savent même pas défendre le vieux monde contre ses terribles assaillants. Ils brandissent malencontreusement les nouvelles armes qu’ils ont en mains et les émoussent sur les cailloux; ils ont compromis la répression dans une aventure dont le ridicule n’aura pas atténué l’iniquité.<sup>61</sup>

Bauer’s conclusion juxtaposes impotent defenders of the status quo with its powerful assailants, ridiculing the trial as a wasted, poorly timed effort. But did the Trial of Thirty completely miss its target? Some journalists suggested that regardless of the result, it functioned as a warning to pro-anarchist writers.<sup>62</sup> Others reminded readers that such embarrassing results would not be repeated because the third *loi scélérate* moved future trials from the assizes to the correctional courts (much like trials for ‘outrages aux bonnes mœurs’ post-1882).<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, although the prosecution may have failed in defending a broader definition of complicity, anarchist propaganda was significantly restricted by the *lois scélérates* and political tensions receded – however briefly – in the trial’s aftermath.<sup>64</sup>

### **Literary Implications**

As a highly debated media event, the Trial of Thirty emphasises the influential, if polemical, notion that press publications served as a medium for illicit influence and association. Demonstrating both complicity-as-incitement and complicity-as-collaboration, the trial contributed to fin-de-siècle discussions regarding literary

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<sup>60</sup> F. M., ‘Echos. La Politique’, *Le Figaro*, 13 Aug. 1894.

<sup>61</sup> Henri Bauer, ‘Le Procès des trente’, *L’Écho de Paris*, 14 Aug. 1894.

<sup>62</sup> Anon., ‘A Travers la Politique’, *Le Fin de Siècle*, 19 Aug. 1894.

<sup>63</sup> F. M., ‘Echos – La Politique’, *Le Figaro*, 14 Aug. 1894.

<sup>64</sup> These tensions would be swiftly re-awoken during the Dreyfus affair.

‘bad influence’, based on readers’ mimetic identification with and enactment of transgressive ideas and behaviour. It also highlighted concerns about the criminal potential of collaborative press practices and the difficulty of attributing responsibility to those involved in the publication of illicit material. In both the Trial of Thirty and the trials against *Le Fin de Siècle*, writers and journalists attempted to avoid litigation by citing the technical distinctions made in legal statute regarding levels of press responsibility. These divisions were particularly loaded in cases against periodical culture, which was targeted more frequently than book culture due to its association with questionable morals and reduced aesthetic value. We have seen how the perceived danger of obscenity and political sedition was sufficiently alarming to Third Republic authorities that the relative freedoms brought in by the 1881 press law were swiftly and repeatedly mitigated throughout the 1880s and 1890s. These legal changes – and the debates surrounding literary bad influence and illicit press collaboration that they involved – simultaneously responded to and shaped literary production of the period. In the chapters that follow, I consider how fin-de-siècle writers and journalists contributed to these debates while appropriating ideas about illicit influence and association in creative and often subversive ways.

To do so, I examine a broad range of well-known literary schools and genres – such as Naturalism, Decadence, and the psychological novel – as well as more obscure literary forms, including biographically revealing novels (‘romans à clef’), little magazines (‘petites revues’), and saucy magazines (‘revues légères’). Within this corpus, critically recognised writers – including Émile Zola, Rachilde, Jean Lorrain, Paul Bourget, and Octave Mirbeau – appear alongside lesser-known literary figures, such as Oscar Méténier, Maurice Beaubourg, and René Emery.

What brings this range of writers and genres together is a shared tendency to respond to, twist, or subvert fin-de-siècle notions of illicit influence and association. This tendency can be divided into two major currents, which line up approximately with the incitement and collaboration models of legal complicity, respectively. The first includes writers who provoked discussion about notions of guilt and responsibility within and beyond their texts, often in response to the ‘bad influence’ model of literary reception. The second includes writers who appropriated the appeal of the illicit and created an alternative aesthetic identity based on transgression. As we see in the summary paragraphs below, the first set of responses features primarily in chapters one and two, and the second set in chapters three and four (although there is some cross-over, notably in chapter two).

When fin-de-siècle writers treated shared guilt and responsibility as a theme, they often did so in response to the ‘bad influence’ model of reception. This model was premised on readers’ mimetic responses to literature and was regularly cited by critics who accused writers of complicity with the ‘immoral’ or illicit behaviour they depicted. To examine the importance of this model in the formulation of literary complicity, chapter one analyses the works and reception of Paul Bourget (1852–1935) – an exemplary figure whose contribution to debates about the formative and potentially corrupting influence of literary production shifted throughout his career. First, I consider how Bourget reframed the ‘bad influence’ model in the *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883) by depicting literary influence as a set of symptoms indicative of social and moral illnesses, but also as their potential cure. Second, I consider the ambivalence of his position in the mid-1880s, when he wrote a series of psychological novels centred on adultery, such as *Un crime d’amour* (1886). Analysing this novel alongside Bourget’s critical



reception in the period, I suggest that his increasing notoriety depended on his reputation hovering ambiguously between acceptability and immorality. Finally, I turn to Bourget's most famous novel, *Le Disciple* (1889): a *roman à thèse* through which the author responded to his implication in a highly mediatised murder trial. I analyse the novel's presentation of seduction and corruption, its confessional structure, and its reception, ultimately evaluating readers' capacity to respond to – and reject – the novel's 'thesis' of bad influence. Through the course of the chapter, I demonstrate that literary guilt at the fin de siècle was less a discernible category than a product of extra-literary and meta-literary interactions, with authors, readers, and critics frequently attributing and avoiding blame through the framing mechanism of prefaces and journal articles.

The intense media debate about literary influence and writers' responsibility that greeted the publication of *Le Disciple* can be better understood when it is considered in the context of widespread fin-de-siècle interest in stories about violent crime. With the birth of criminology and increasingly sensational media reporting on infamous murderers (such as Joseph Vacher and Jack the Ripper), the rise of crime fiction in the late nineteenth century heightened political and judicial concerns about literature's capacity to encourage readers to commit copycat crimes. Yet the sensational appeal of violent crime, typically associated with denigrated 'popular' genres such as melodrama and the *roman feuilleton*, was irrepressible. As a key theme and plot development, the transgressive act of murder nourished fiction and journalism from across the literary spectrum, leading one fin-de-siècle critic to hail the emergence of a 'littérature des assassins'. Using this term as a springboard, chapter two considers the imbrication between popular, scientific, and literary representations of crime, highlighting how murder became a source of ironic

appropriation, especially for avant-garde writers. I compare two novels – Rachilde’s *Nono* (1885) and Zola’s *La Bête humaine* (1890) – whose plotlines, character development, and primary themes centred on criminal complicity in the act of murder. First, I examine how the novels’ murder scenes create a haunting sense of guilt, which recurs via structural parallels charting the plot’s descending spiral of crime. Second, I consider how confession creates bonds of complicity between characters and encourages further crimes, in a way that reflects fin-de-siècle debates about the influence of crime fiction on readers’ behaviour. Third, I analyse the displacement of blame onto scapegoat characters, Bruno and Cabuche: sexually naïve men who happen to fit – or deliberately play up to – popular and pseudo-scientific *idées reçues* about criminality. I suggest that the novels’ trial scenes satirize criminal complicity by implicating judicial and moral discourses in unjust judgements – a gesture that mirrors the more overtly playful subversion of these discourses by avant-garde journalists.

By depicting adultery and murder, fin-de-siècle writers fed the popularity of illicit topics while also responding to, critiquing, and in some cases subverting the ‘bad influence’ model of literary reception. This is particularly the case for avant-garde writers, who were more regularly posited as occupying – or deliberately inhabited – a subversive and ‘criminal’ space in the literary field. Set apart from mainstream literature, whose values and moral guidelines they often rejected, such writers attracted criticism and litigation for their depiction of illicit themes, notably sexuality. In the latter two chapters, I suggest that this marginal, criminalised status provided a specific sense of communal identification – a ‘solidarité du délit’ or illicit solidarity – between writers associated with the avant-garde. We see this especially in the culture of ‘petites revues’ (‘little magazines’),

which enabled fin-de-siècle writers, readers, and critics to collaborate in the construction of non-normative aesthetic values. In chapter three, I analyse a group of writers – at their centre: Rachilde (1860–1953), Jean Lorrain (1855–1906), and Oscar Méténier (1859–1913) – whose media exchanges created a sense of collusion by inviting readers ‘in the know’ to unravel half-veiled secrets. I explore these relationships through a polemical media exchange in a little magazine called *Le Zig-Zag* and two *romans à clef* by Méténier: ‘L’Aventure de Marius Dauriat’ (1885) and ‘Décadence’ (1886). By analysing these works in conjunction with selected correspondence, I show how biographically revealing texts created complicity not only between the writer and the reader, but also between the writers themselves, as they mutually constructed media personae based on the titillating appeal of taboos surrounding gender and sexuality. Highlighting the close imbrication between self-promotion and self-defence in these exchanges, I suggest that the strategy of biographical unveiling was a productive but problematic source for avant-garde solidarity, since there were both benefits and risks involved in publicly revealing ‘compromising’ material.

As the media exchanges between these writers suggest, the boundary between the acceptable and the illicit is notably ambiguous when sex is involved. In the final chapter I consider how the production of erotic material established networks of complicity between fin-de-siècle writers, reviews, and businesses. To do so, I analyse *Don Juan*: a ‘revue légère’ that published a range of literary and artistic works, from the popular to the avant-garde. This exemplary but previously unstudied review offers a window onto the networks of illicit erotic businesses vilified by jurists in 1882. Through my analysis, I show that *Don Juan* created forms of erotic complicity between text, contributor, and reader by wielding sex appeal,

shared humour, and textual structures appealing for response and involvement. First, I explore how the review framed the reading experience as a form of erotic exchange between reciprocally desiring partners, in a reformulation of earlier traditions of gallantry and *libertinage*. Second, I consider how the review's textual and visual content hovered between socially acceptable frothy eroticism and illicit obscenity, notably crossing this boundary in 1896, when the review's *directeur* Alfred Hippolyte Bonnet faced trial for 'outrages aux bonnes mœurs'. Finally, I suggest that the review enacted a form of *proxénétisme* or 'pimp journalism' by encouraging and enabling readers to engage in both imagined and actual erotic relations. Through its manipulation of different advertising formats – such as personal ads, book catalogues, and veiled advertising or 'réclame' – *Don Juan* provided space for erotic exchange, both real and imagined. By doing so, it blurred the generic and structural boundaries between advertising and main copy, pecuniary interest and artistic expression.

Four critical approaches intertwine throughout these chapters. The first employs thematic close reading to examine how criminal acts and collusive characters were depicted in fin-de-siècle fiction, and what this might suggest about contemporaneous visions of criminality and shared guilt. This predominates in the first two chapters and is present – if less explicit – in chapters 3 and 4. The second asks questions about critical reception from a literary historical perspective. It considers how literature was framed as an implicating medium through which writers became morally complicit with the illicit ideas and behaviour they depicted (and supposedly incited). This approach forms the primary analysis of chapter 1. It recurs in chapter 2 and becomes a conceptual 'given' in chapters 3 and 4. The third analyses literary relationships and networks through a sociological lens. This

approach, associated with the work of Pierre Bourdieu, explores how literature could be used as a medium to create bonds between writers and readers via shared references, in-jokes, and instances of address. Predominant in chapters 3 and 4, the sociological approach is implicit in the earlier chapters. The fourth is what we might call a ‘cultural studies’ or ‘media studies’ approach. It focuses on the intersection of different cultural forms and on the processes by which literature is marketed and sold to both elite and popular consumers. This approach emerges when discussing authorial personae in chapter 3 and is more fully developed in chapter 4’s analysis of erotic networks.

Overall, my analysis suggests that the widespread interest in criminality in late-nineteenth century French culture constituted a source of creative inspiration for writers across the literary field, and that notions of complicity were central to the ways in which writers, readers, and critics conceptualised and presented their involvement in this field. To demonstrate this, I have chosen to concentrate primarily on novels and periodicals due to their shared tendency to depict, evoke, or create relationships of complicity. As we see in chapter one, the novel regularly featured at the heart of fin-de-siècle debates about literary ‘bad influence’. This was partly due to the frequency with which novelists depicted illicit behaviour such as adultery and murder. It was also due to the accessibility of novels, which appeared serially in low-cost newspapers and then increasingly as cheaply produced paperbacks.<sup>65</sup> The question of accessibility and immoral influence also implicated the fin-de-siècle press, and we have seen above how the community-producing

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<sup>65</sup> See Diana Holmes, ‘The mimetic prejudice: the popular novel in France’ in *Imagining the Popular in Contemporary French Culture*, ed. by Diana Holmes and David Loosely (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 85–122 (pp. 89–90).

element of periodical culture lends itself well to the formation of complicit bonds – not only between writers and publishers, but also between writers and readers.

Of course, a research project is defined as much by what it excludes as by what it includes, and poetry is notably absent from my study. This is not to say that questions of shared guilt and illicit solidarity are irrelevant to poetry. Indeed, much like their novelist counterparts, nineteenth-century poets readily implicated readers in transgressive topics – we need only think of Baudelaire’s ‘hypocrite lecteur’ in *Les Fleurs du mal*. Fin-de-siècle poets also regularly faced prosecution for crossing normative moral values, although this was especially the case when their works appeared in mass print periodicals.<sup>66</sup> That said, I maintain that prose fiction and journalism enabled writers to pay more consistent, if not indeed obsessive, attention to illicit topics and collusive relationships in the period. As Patrick McGuinness suggests, even the most radical Symbolist poets demonstrated their sense of ‘engagement’, or communal endeavour, through their writing *about* poetry *in prose*, rather than through their actual poetic production.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, although earlier models of collusive collaboration existed for poetry, such as the iconoclastic *cercle zutique*, the primary form enabling such relationships at the fin de siècle was undoubtedly the periodical press.<sup>68</sup> These factors explain why I have chosen to exclude poetry from my study and to concentrate instead on novelistic and journalistic prose forms.

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<sup>66</sup> Key examples include: Guy de Maupassant’s ‘Une fille’, published in *La Revue moderne et naturaliste* (1 Nov. 1879) and condemned on 28 February 1880, Raoul Ponchon’s ‘Vieux messieurs’, published in *Le Courrier français* (13 Sept. 1891) and condemned on 11 November 1891, and Georges Bonnamour’s ‘Amies’, which first appeared in his 1891 novel *Représailles* but was subsequently condemned on 24 February 1892 for its republication in *Beautés de Paris* (29 Jan. 1892). See Leclerc, pp. 387–91 and pp. 427–32.

<sup>67</sup> See McGuinness, pp. 76 and 89.

<sup>68</sup> See *Models of Collaboration in Nineteenth-Century French Literature: Several Authors, One Pen*, ed. by Seth Whidden (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

Poetry aside, my corpus includes a range of works spanning across the literary and social spectrum, from the avant-garde highbrow to the popular low brow and passing through the bourgeois middle. On the tricky question of delineating one ‘brow’ from another, Diana Holmes notes:

[no] text is essentially and forever middlebrow, any more than the categories of ‘high’ and ‘popular’ are fixed and definitive: novels may and do shift from one ‘brow’ to another at different periods and under different regimes of publishing and readership.

That said, Holmes delineates a ‘middlebrow poetics’, based on mimesis and immersivity.<sup>69</sup> Historically denigrated by a critical canon that valorises the ‘difficulty’ of French modernism, ‘middlebrow’ works typically appeal to a non-specialist readership. Rather than viewing such readers as deluded victims of immersive and vicarious pleasure, Holmes suggests (alongside Jean-Marie Schaeffer) that they can choose to participate in ‘a voluntarily shared, playful act of make-believe, a contract between author and reader rather than an imposture’.<sup>70</sup> This vision of a playful and voluntary contract resonates with my project’s analysis of literary complicity. However, I highlight forms of immersive reading that encourage readers to identify with illicit or immoral content, in a way that did not necessarily help to ‘make provisional sense of their characters’ lives and thus, by extension, of those of their readers’.<sup>71</sup>

The examples I analyse frequently combine elements from different levels of literary production, thereby adding aesthetic transgression – the act of crossing

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<sup>69</sup> Diana Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters: Women’s Reading and the Literary Canon in France Since the Belle Époque* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), pp. 2–3. In this study, Holmes focuses on novels, leaving the relation between ‘brow’ and periodical culture largely untreated.

<sup>70</sup> Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction?* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999), p. 148, cited in Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters*, p. 18.

<sup>71</sup> Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters*, p. 13.

boundaries of ‘taste’ and ‘value’ – to its thematic and meta-literary counterparts.<sup>72</sup> These elements frequently intertwined, and writers’ adoption of them could shift over time. For example, Paul Bourget moved from promoting an avant-garde appreciation of literature in his early criticism to publishing middle-brow (if slightly risqué) adultery novels, before finally adopting a conservative moralising stance in a series of *romans à thèse* (chapter 1). Following a different route, some writers of the period – from both the mainstream (Zola) and the avant-garde (Rachilde, Mirbeau, Beaubourg) – appropriated elements of popular crime narrative while satirising the moralising framework of ‘scientific’ criminology (chapter 2). Others employed scandal and titillation to construct controversial media personalities, combining an avant-garde interest in illicit topics with publicity strategies associated with denigrated forms of popular entertainment (chapter 3). At the same time, inexpensive illustrated magazines such as *Don Juan* published an eclectic range of contributions from avant-garde authors and popular writers of titillating fiction, which appeared alongside gossip, satire, and erotica (chapter 4). By analysing these examples, I highlight how mainstream and avant-garde writers appropriated themes and techniques associated with both popular and middlebrow literature, thereby revising the typical placement of these phenomena at opposing ends of the literary spectrum.<sup>73</sup> With this wide range of material considered through the lens of complicity, I hope to contribute new findings to – and offer a fresh critical perspective on – French literary and cultural studies.

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<sup>72</sup> ‘Thematic’ transgression here refers to the representation of transgressive subjects. ‘Meta-literary’ transgression evokes the construction of collusive relationships, through specific techniques that implicate readers in illicit content.

<sup>73</sup> See Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters*, p. 35.



## 1. Framing Literature: Bourget, Guilt, and the Fin-de-siècle Novel

Should a writer depict *all* types of human behaviour? To what extent can writers be held responsible for the perceived moral decline of their readers? How might they respond to accusations of moral laxity and complicity? These questions recurred in discussions about the relationship between literature and morality in nineteenth-century France. As we saw in the introduction, nineteenth-century French writers' responses to them typically fell under two key categories: *l'art social* and *l'art pour l'art*.<sup>1</sup> In the period, debates about literature's status and purpose were often framed as a battle between writers and morality critics who feared the negative impact of 'mauvaises lectures' on individual and public life.<sup>2</sup> In the latter part of the century, it evolved in response to socio-political upheaval and in conversation with new intellectual trends, such as psychology and criminology. These discourses inspired the evolution of literary genres – Naturalism, crime fiction, and the *roman psychologique* – whose practitioners posed questions of moral complicity thematically in their works and rhetorically in the prefaces and articles surrounding them.

Paul Bourget was a key figure in fin-de-siècle debates about the formative – and potentially corrupting – impact of literary production. His early work was influenced by evolving philosophical and scientific trends, notably experimental psychology. Recurring themes throughout his works included the social implications of literary influence, the balance between scientific neutrality and moral responsibility, and the dangers of over-analysis. Bourget achieved recognition with a collection of literary criticism, *Essais de psychologie*

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<sup>1</sup> Gisèle Sapiro, *La Responsabilité de l'écrivain: littérature, droit et morale en France (XIXe–XXIe siècle)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2011), pp. 168–9.

<sup>2</sup> Sapiro, pp. 126–9.

*contemporaine* (1883), and wider popularity with his adultery novels, including *Un crime d'amour* (1886). In the former, Bourget insisted on the centrality of literature to understanding a society's intellectual and moral atmosphere. In the latter, he charted the psychological complexities of characters engaging in illicit sexual behaviour, notably adultery. Unsurprisingly, Bourget became a target in debates about literary immorality. Responding to the hostility that punctuated the early stages of his career, Bourget eventually adopted a more conservative position, which he developed through a series of *romans à thèse*, from *Le Disciple* (1889) onwards.

The content, reception, and evolution of Bourget's works offer insight into the ways in which literary production, at the fin de siècle, was widely considered to be implicated in – and complicit with – immoral ideas and behaviour. In this chapter I explore how Bourget's presentation of literary influence in the *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* framed literature in pathological terms, as a set of symptoms indicative of social and moral illnesses, but also as their potential cure. Examining the prefatory material Bourget added to the *Essais* over time, I suggest that the medical analogy left room for the work's later recuperation according to a traditional Christian framework. To understand why such a recuperation was necessary, I consider Bourget's application of psychological principles, outlined in the *Essais*, to the novel format. By analysing *Un crime d'amour*, an exemplary *roman psychologique*, alongside its reception by a range of fin-de-siècle critics, I show how the genre's perceived moral ambiguity led Bourget to become a target for avant-garde critics such as Jean Lorrain and Octave Mirbeau. Finally, I turn to Bourget's most famous work, *Le Disciple* (1889), which actively responded to, and fed, ongoing media debates about literary complicity. I highlight the importance of

reading pacts within and around the novel, suggesting that the processes of literary implication and exculpation it represents cannot be fully recuperated by a clear moral framework. What emerges from my analysis is that literary immorality and guilt were not discernible categories, despite being repeatedly posited as such by fin-de-siècle critics. Rather, they were a product of extra-literary and meta-literary interactions: authors, readers, and critics attributing and avoiding blame via the framing mechanism of liminary material and criticism. This may seem like an obvious point to make, since what 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader would take the ideologically loaded claims of fin-de-siècle critics at face value? However, the rhetorical and reactive nature of morality debates in the era is worth highlighting because it demonstrates the role played by networks of reception in redefining shared literary and moral values, while emphasising the magnetic pull of illicit topics for writers across the literary spectrum.

### **Literary Influence: Illness or Cure?**

In the *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883), Bourget studies, in a quasi-scientific manner, how literature shapes collective psychological tendencies. By doing so, he aligned himself with the thought of Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893), whose analytical framework of *race*, *milieu*, and *moment* charted the influence of contextual factors on a writer's literary approach. In the *Essais*, Bourget extended Taine's vision while reversing its emphasis. Rather than viewing literature purely as a *product* of determining contextual factors on an individual, Bourget posited literature as a causal factor affecting wider social and psychological trends. He analyses five authors who influenced the fin-de-siècle moral and intellectual atmosphere, defined by a proclivity towards pessimism, disillusion, and decadence: Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), Ernest Renan (1823–1892), Gustave Flaubert

(1821–1880), Stendhal (pseud. Henri Beyle, 1783–1842), and Hippolyte Taine himself. In the first Avant-Propos to the *Essais*, Bourget describes his analytical approach as diverging from more traditional author-centred criticism. Rather than assessing writers' talent or providing biographical anecdotes, he emphasises their wider emotive and intellectual influence: 'Je n'ai voulu ni discuter des talents, ni peindre des caractères. Mon ambition a été de rédiger quelques notes capables de servir à l'historien de la Vie Morale pendant la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle français.'<sup>3</sup> By framing his criticism as a moral history, Bourget further demonstrates his links with Taine, who was known for his positivist and historicist approach.

A clear example of this approach within the *Essais* is Bourget's frequently cited definition of decadence, which appears in the essay on Baudelaire. Here he uses an extended analogy of society as an organism to explore the reciprocal relationship between literary and social phenomena. He states that decadence, when considered as a social phenomenon, happens when individuals become independent of the whole and threaten society's ability to function as a coherent system: 'Si l'énergie des cellules devient indépendante, les organismes qui composent l'organisme total cessent pareillement de subordonner leur énergie à l'énergie totale, et l'anarchie qui s'établit constitue la décadence de l'ensemble.' As a literary phenomenon, decadence represents a *stylistic* breakdown, where individual words and phrases take precedence over the unity of a given work: 'Un style de décadence est celui où l'unité du livre se décompose pour laisser place à l'indépendance de la page, où la page se décompose pour laisser la place à l'indépendance de la phrase, et la phrase pour laisser la place à l'indépendance du mot.'<sup>4</sup> In these definitions,

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine: Baudelaire, M. Renan, Flaubert, M. Taine, Stendhal*, 3rd edn (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1885), pp. v–vi.

<sup>4</sup> *Essais*, p. 25.

Bourget hints at the ‘bad influence’ model of literature, since he suggests that literary breakdown can lead to social breakdown, and vice versa.

Bourget’s vision of the mutual imbrication of social and cultural phenomena attributes to authors an influential role over society’s wider functioning (and its potential *dysfunction*). He explores this influence via educational and pathological analogies in the *Essais*’ liminary material. This expands over time to include a second Avant-Propos, dated 1885, and a preface added to the 1899 *Œuvres complètes* edition of the work.<sup>5</sup> In the first Avant-Propos, Bourget depicts literature as a primary educator of young French people: ‘le *Livre* devient le grand initiateur’.<sup>6</sup> By doing so, he repeated the widely held view – propounded across the medical, judicial, and legal realms – that reading was an influential form of education.<sup>7</sup> In the period, writers and their works were viewed as offering ‘discours tutélaires’ which could then be interpreted – potentially very freely – by their young readers.<sup>8</sup> In a lengthy evocative anecdote, Bourget describes how reading creates an intimate bond between author and reader:

[Le lecteur] passe tout entier dans les phrases de son auteur préféré. Il converse avec lui de cœur à cœur, d’homme à homme. Il l’écoute prononcer sur la manière de goûter l’amour et de pratiquer la débauche, de chercher le bonheur et de supporter le malheur, d’envisager la mort et l’au-delà ténébreux du tombeau, des paroles qui sont des révélations. [...] De cette première révélation à imiter ces sentiments, la distance est faible et l’adolescent ne tarde guère à la franchir.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For the 1883 Avant-Propos, see the third edition of the *Essais*, published in 1885 (cited above). For the 1885 Avant-Propos and the 1899 Preface, see Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, 2 vols (Paris: Plon, 1920) I, pp. xix–xxvii and pp. ix–xiv, respectively. To avoid confusion, hereafter I refer to this later edition as *Essais I*.

<sup>6</sup> *Essais*, p. vi.

<sup>7</sup> See Denis Pernot, *Le Roman de socialisation, 1889–1914* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> See Pernot, pp. 26 and 120.

<sup>9</sup> *Essais*, pp. vii–viii.

The relationship Bourget evokes is based on fraternity and mentorship, where the process of initiation leads to imitation. The verb ‘prononcer’ aligns authorial voice with the action of a teacher or preacher, and the noun ‘révélation’ has clear religious connotations. Philippa Lewis explores models of personal relationships between readers and writers in nineteenth-century France, highlighting how the vocabulary of intimacy, love, and friendship was used by theologians and religious writers of the period as ‘a model for an individual’s affective relationship with the divine’. She cites Hubert Lebon’s Catholic handbook, *Coeur à Coeur avec Jésus* (1857) and Ernest Renan’s *Vie de Jésus* (1863) as key examples.<sup>10</sup> In Bourget’s reformulation of this model, writers take on a guiding role that replaces and supplements more traditional forms of paternal and spiritual authority.

If writers take on positions of influence traditionally associated with institutionalised authority, such as the Church, to what extent can readers respond to, or re-appropriate selectively, the material they read? Bourget discusses this question in later prefatory material, offering a conflicting vision of literary influence. On the one hand, he suggests that literature functions as ‘une irrésistible, une constante propagande d’idées et de sentiments’. This vision of literary propaganda seems to leave little room for interpretative independence. Yet Bourget also claims that readers have sufficient freedom to respond to their literary lessons in a way that transcends direct imitation. He states that literature transmits a certain vision or emotional state to readers who experience, respond to, and re-appropriate it:

Les jeunes gens héritent de leurs aînés une façon de goûter la vie qu’ils transmettent eux-mêmes, modifiée par leur expérience propre, à ceux qui viennent ensuite. Les œuvres de littérature et d’art sont le

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<sup>10</sup> Philippa Lewis, *Intimacy and Distance: Conflicting Cultures in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), p. 28.

plus puissant moyen de transmission de cet héritage psychologique.<sup>11</sup>

Bourget's vision of literary transmission is therefore not a direct or complete imposition. Rather, it transforms upon reception by the reader, whose predecessors' 'façon de goûter la vie' is 'modifiée par leur expérience propre'. This process involves a level of reciprocity that, according to Lewis, was essential to the creation of literary intimacy in the period. She notes how the reader was frequently posited as the friend of the writer or protagonist and how the reading experience relied on a strong identification between readers and writers.<sup>12</sup> In the *Essais*, the notion of reciprocity also functions to mitigate authors' sole responsibility for the impact of their works. We see this idea in the 1899 preface, where Bourget depicts the author as a paternal figure who has limited control over his child's actions:

Il y a donc dans l'œuvre littéraire, si son auteur lui a vraiment insufflé ce mystérieux pouvoir de la vie, une force d'action indépendante de cet auteur lui-même, et qu'il n'a pas pu mesurer plus qu'un père ne mesure à l'avance les énergies du fils émané de lui.<sup>13</sup>

This mitigates the author's responsibility by emphasising the reader's inclinations and choices ('les énergies du fils'). By shifting moral responsibility between writers and readers in the process of literary education, Bourget offers an increasingly ambiguous vision of the balance between direct influence and indirect re-appropriation.

Alongside the educational analogy, Bourget employed the language of science and pathology to explore the writer-reader relationship. Despite attributing some level of moral responsibility to the author figure in later frame texts, Bourget repeatedly asserted the writer-analyst's position of neutrality throughout the

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<sup>11</sup> *Essais I*, p. xx.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> *Essais I*, p. xi.

original essays. He also relativized the moralizing framework underlying discourses surrounding literary influence as a form of illness to be cured. In the essay on Baudelaire, Bourget analyses the word ‘malsain’ often applied to the poet’s works. In doing so, he rejects moral prejudice and asserts a more neutral, quasi-scientific vision of morality:

Il n’y a pas à proprement parler de maladies du corps, disent les médecins; il n’y a que des états physiologiques, funestes ou bienfaisants [...]. Pareillement, il n’y a ni maladie ni santé de l’âme, il n’y a que des états psychologiques, au point de vue de l’observateur sans métaphysique [...]. Un préjugé seul, où réapparaissent la doctrine antique des causes finales et la croyance à un but défini de l’univers, peut nous faire considérer comme naturels et sains les amours de Daphnis et de Chloë dans le vallon, comme artificiels et malsains les amours d’un Baudelaire dans le boudoir qu’il décrit.<sup>14</sup>

In this section, Bourget puts forward a mechanistic scientific approach that considers both the body and mind as a system that experiences different states as neutrally equal until valorised or demonised by external agents. He takes issue with critical language that relies on polarised notions of nature/artifice and health/illness, due to their socially constructed nature. By referring to religious faith as a mere ‘préjugé’, he also rejects the Christian framework that would condemn writers like Baudelaire. Bourget’s position in the first edition of the *Essais* therefore seems openly scientific and implicitly atheist, focusing on neutral analysis rather than moral condemnation.

The 1883 *Essais* highlighted intellectual, moral, and psychological tendencies – pessimism, disillusion, and decadence – that were widely perceived as having a negative influence on society’s moral health. Bourget’s interest in, and perceived glorification of, these tendencies (which he was initially unwilling to

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<sup>14</sup> *Essais*, pp. 12–13.



condemn as immoral) attracted criticism from journalists and commentators across the political spectrum. Emmanuel des Essarts (1839–1909) expressed concerns about Bourget's pessimism leading to 'le grossier fatalisme du bétail imitateur'. While acknowledging that pessimism was part of Bourget's originality, he valorised a more optimistic outlook, asserting that:

les plus bienfaisants penseurs sont encore ceux qui ont donné à l'humanité confiance en elle-même et prêché, par leurs chefs-d'œuvre, l'enthousiasme invincible, l'action infatigable, la foi permanente aux idées, en dépit des trahisons individuelles et des défaillances de l'espèce.<sup>15</sup>

For an anonymous commentator in the *Revue chrétienne*, Christian faith was the only positive alternative to demoralising intellectual trends: 'Au pessimisme de la génération contemporaine il n'y a rien à opposer, si ce n'est l'amour chrétien: l'amour qui se donne, qui croit et qui espère.'<sup>16</sup> These critiques imply that the *Essais* have a negative impact on the moral and psychological health of Bourget's readers. While attacking philosophical pessimism, considered the central cause of society's moral decline, critics targeted Bourget's vision of scientific determinism, his presentation of decadence in the essay on Baudelaire, and his appraisal of intellectual dilettantism in the essay on Renan. The moderate Republican politician, journalist, and future President of the Republic Paul Deschanel (1855–1922) highlighted these factors when assessing Bourget's criticism:

Ainsi le dilettantisme des idées, en détruisant tout principe de certitude, affaiblit la volonté et la puissance d'agir [...]. L'âme se déconcerte sous l'effort du doute; la foi patriotique et l'amour disparaissent avec la loi morale. En goûtant la décadence, on y travaille, et l'on hâte (inconsciemment) la décomposition de son pays; on ne se contente pas d'assister, en spectateur impassible, à

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<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel des Essarts, 'Variétés: Études littéraires', *Le Soir*, 15 Nov. 1883.

<sup>16</sup> E. M., 'Un critique psychologue: M. Paul Bourget', *Revue chrétienne*, May 1884, 279–296 (p. 296).

l'affaiblissement de sa race; la curiosité y trouve plaisir, s'enivre des senteurs de la corruption et y contribue.<sup>17</sup>

By linking together intellectual curiosity, pleasure, and moral corruption, Deschanel reworks the 'bad influence' model. According to this model, an author's decision to describe a phenomenon considered to disrupt the status quo, and to do so without overtly condemning it or offering solutions to the problem, amounts to moral complicity with the negative impact of that phenomenon. Bourget's claim to impartial observation (as a 'spectateur impassible') is negated by the opportunity for pleasure gained from the analytical act, which contributes to corruption by rendering its effects attractive to readers.

These criticisms provoked a change in Bourget's approach between 1883 and 1885. Around this time, he started to adopt the language of morality critics and shifted the analyst's role from neutral analysis of social ills to offering a potential cure. As early as 27 December 1883, in an article appearing in *Le Parlement* suggestively entitled 'Vers l'Idéal', Bourget started to distance himself from the scientific trends evoked in the 1883 *Essais*.<sup>18</sup> Two years later, Bourget reframed his earlier work in the second Avant-Propos, added to the 1885 *Nouveaux essais de psychologie contemporaine*. Here, Bourget describes a morally contaminated youth: 'la jeunesse contemporaine [...] offre les symptômes, visibles pour tous ceux qui veulent regarder sans parti pris, d'une maladie de la vie morale arrivée à sa période la plus aiguë'.<sup>19</sup> He claims that the 1870 Franco-Prussian war and the 1871 Paris Commune played a central role in encouraging widespread moral decline:

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Deschanel, 'Critique contemporaine: Paul Bourget', *La Revue politique et littéraire*, 23 Feb. 1884, p. 232.

<sup>18</sup> Cited by Marie-Ange Voisin-Fougère, 'Émile Zola et Paul Bourget: Une amitié littéraire', in *Champ littéraire autour de Zola*, ed. by Béatrice Laville (Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2004), pp. 177–191 (p. 185).

<sup>19</sup> *Essais I*, p. xxii.

‘quelque chose nous en est demeuré, à tous, comme un premier empoisonnement qui nous a laissés plus dépourvus, plus incapables de résister à la maladie intellectuelle où il nous a fallu grandir’.<sup>20</sup> These additions responded directly to the criticisms of Paul Deschanel, who condemned not only Bourget’s moral complicity with social decay, but also the absence of references, in the 1883 edition of the *Essais*, to the events of 1870–1 as an influential factor affecting the younger generation:

Dans cette étude sur l’âme contemporaine, on ne trouve pas la moindre trace de l’année terrible; le livre aurait pu être écrit en 1869. [...] Il faudrait peu connaître la nature humaine et les lois de l’histoire pour ne pas prévoir une réaction dont on peut déjà noter les signes avant-coureurs, et qui sans doute, comme toutes les réactions, aura ses excès.<sup>21</sup>

With these changes, Bourget shifted his position to fit better with contemporaneous views of literature’s immoral influence. However, Bourget does not distance himself from the affected group he analyses, but rather acknowledges his inevitable involvement. By using the word ‘nous’ and emphasising the universal impact of a generation’s socio-political inheritance (‘à tous’), Bourget occupies a dual position of critic-analyst and patient-sufferer, implicating himself in potentially contagious phenomena.

Bourget’s response to early critics of the *Essais* made room for the development of an analytical position that adopted a religious and moralising lens more agreeable to conservative reviewers. He would later join their ranks by converting to Catholicism in 1901. As early as 1885, in the second Avant-Propos, Bourget hints at this revised religious framework by directly responding to his critics:

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<sup>20</sup> *Essais I*, p. xxvi.

<sup>21</sup> Deschanel, p. 232.

Quand le premier volume de ces Essais fut publié, les critiques me dirent: apportez-vous un remède au mal que vous décrivez si complaisamment? Nous voyons votre analyse, nous ne voyons pas votre conclusion. Et j'avoue humblement que, de conclusion positive, je n'en saurais donner aucune à ces études. Balzac, qui s'appelait volontiers un docteur ès sciences sociales, cite quelque part ce mot d'un philosophe chrétien: «Les hommes n'ont pas besoin de maîtres pour douter.» Cette superbe phrase serait la condamnation de ce livre, qui est un livre de recherche anxieuse, s'il n'y avait pas, dans le doute sincère, un principe de foi, comme il y a un principe de vérité dans toute erreur ingénue. Prendre au sérieux, presque au tragique, le drame qui se joue dans les intelligences et dans les cœurs de sa génération, n'est-ce pas affirmer que l'on croit à l'importance infinie des problèmes de la vie morale? N'est-ce pas faire un acte de foi dans cette réalité obscure et douloureuse, adorable et inexplicable, qui est l'âme humaine?<sup>22</sup>

Bourget here summarises his critics' argument that analytical writers may indirectly promote the social ills they describe if they do not condemn them overtly. By failing to offer a 'conclusion positive', such analyses enact a form of immoral indulgence (or *complaisance*) towards social and moral ills. In this passage, Bourget evokes Balzac's use of a phrase attributed to the counter-revolutionary philosopher Louis de Bonald (1754–1840), which in its entirety reads: 'Un écrivain doit avoir en morale et en politique des opinions arrêtées, il doit se regarder comme un instituteur des hommes; car les hommes n'ont pas besoin de maîtres pour douter'.<sup>23</sup> Bonald suggests that showing problems in God's design without offering solutions is irresponsible and immoral, since men are naturally inclined to incredulity. By citing Bonald, Balzac therefore endorses the view that writers must actively encourage moral behaviour and religious sentiment in their works to counteract this inclination. Considering Balzac's position – itself part of a defensive response to criticisms of his works' immoral influence – Bourget effectively concedes that his essays are worthy of condemnation. However, the rhetorical questions mitigate this

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<sup>22</sup> *Essais I*, pp. xxvi–xxvii.

<sup>23</sup> Balzac, p. 6.

condemnation on the basis that his doubt was an innocent error that he could rectify and transform, with the benefit of hindsight, into an indirect act of faith. Contemporaneous critics recognised the shift in Bourget's position in the mid-1880s, highlighting the nostalgia for religious certainty hiding deep within Bourget's earlier pessimism. They suggested that despair at a lost ideal implied an unconscious desire for a return to the Catholic faith and the reassurance it provides.<sup>24</sup>

In the 1890s, Bourget increasingly suggested that scientific approaches may support religious teaching, rather than undermining it. This can be seen in the preface of the 1899 *Œuvres complètes* version of the *Essais*, where he writes:

La psychologie est à l'éthique ce que l'anatomie est à la thérapeutique. Elle la précède et s'en distingue par ce caractère de [...] diagnostic sans prescription. Mais cette attitude d'observateur qui ne conclut pas n'est jamais que momentanée. C'est un procédé analogue au doute méthodique de Descartes et qui finit par se résoudre en une affirmation.<sup>25</sup>

In this passage, Bourget responds, rather belatedly, to the vision of experimental literature formulated by Émile Zola (1840–1902) in *Le Roman expérimental* (1880). Zola's vision of human psychology in this work was fundamentally materialist and determinist. He claimed that '[un] même déterminisme doit régir la pierre des chemins et le cerveau de l'homme.'<sup>26</sup> He also attacked idealism, particularly in its religious forms, and asserted the superiority of scientific reasoning. According to Zola, proponents of experimental literature could contribute actively to scientific progress through observation and experimentation. They were 'moralistes

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<sup>24</sup> See Sutter Laumann, 'Revue littéraire', *La Justice*, 2 March 1886, Paul Lallemand, 'Variété: La jeunesse contemporaine d'après les livres récents', *Le Français*, 23 Aug. 1887, and Ernest Tissot, 'Les Évolutions de la critique contemporaine: M. Paul Bourget, étude analytique', *La Revue Générale*, 15 Aug. 1888, pp. 361–372.

<sup>25</sup> *Essais I*, pp. xi–xii.

<sup>26</sup> Émile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental*, 5th edn (Paris: Charpentier, 1881), p. 16.

expérimentateurs', who, like omnipotent doctors, could cure the social and moral maladies they analyse ('se rendre maître de la vie pour la diriger').<sup>27</sup> In the 1899 preface, Bourget evokes notions that recur in Zola's essay, including the alignment of psychology with anatomy, and an insistence on scientific neutrality ('diagnostic sans prescription', 'observateur qui ne conclut pas'). However, by claiming that scientific neutrality is a transitional step between doubt and faith, Bourget clearly differentiated himself with his contemporary's atheistic positivism and his insistence that the true experimental scientist (and writer) does not conclude.<sup>28</sup> As Marie-Ange Voisin-Fougère has noted, there are early resemblances between Zola and Bourget's position in the late 1870s and early 1880s: both defended realism, took an interest in the theme of heredity, admired Hippolyte Taine, and applied the concept of experimental science to literature. However, from as early as 1883, their positions diverged, as Bourget's writing became increasingly spiritual and idealist in nature.<sup>29</sup>

The fact that Bourget returned to the question of experimental literature in 1899 demonstrates its importance as a springboard for his renewed moral and literary perspective. In this preface, Bourget turned scientific neutrality and doubt into a means of attaining truth and 'affirmation', by tapping into the discourse of scientific discovery while also harkening back to an earlier Christian model: Cartesian doubt. Already implicit in the 'doute sincère' of the 1885 Avant-Propos, '[le] doute méthodique de Descartes' mentioned in the 1899 Preface acts a bridge between Bourget's vision of religion as a mere 'préjugé' in 1883 and as a positive

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 23–4.

<sup>28</sup> 'Souvent j'ai dit que nous n'avions pas à tirer une conclusion de nos œuvres, et cela signifie que nos œuvres portent leur conclusion en elles. Un expérimentateur n'a pas à conclure, parce que, justement, l'expérience conclut pour lui.' Ibid., pp. 28–9.

<sup>29</sup> Voisin-Fougère, pp. 183–5.

source of moral ‘affirmation’ in 1899. Bourget strengthens the Christian credentials of his works by claiming that they contribute to an ‘apologétique expérimentale’.<sup>30</sup> The word ‘expérimentale’ clearly invokes Zola’s earlier essay, uniting seemingly contradictory scientific and religious vocabularies. Bourget returns to this paradoxical notion in the preface to the *Œuvres complètes* edition of his early novels: ‘Cette apolégétique [*sic*] consiste à établir [...] qu’étant donnée une série d’observations sur la vie humaine, tout dans ces observations s’est passé *comme si* le Christianisme était la vérité.’<sup>31</sup> By re-framing his earlier psychological approach as a stepping-stone towards Christianity, Bourget adopted an idealist position and moral standpoint increasingly in line with Catholic dogma. In many ways, Bourget could not have been more different from the anticlerical Zola, and the pair’s ideological differences were exacerbated by the Dreyfus affair. However, despite being frequently posited as opposites by both their peers and modern scholars, Bourget and Zola employed a similar language and logic to support their supposedly antithetical viewpoints. It is also well known that, like Bourget, Zola eventually moved away from his earlier anti-idealist stance and wrote a series of utopian thesis novels.<sup>32</sup> Regardless of their ideological differences, then, these similarities reveal the shared structures of knowledge and interpretation that undergirded fin-de-siècle discussions about literary influence and responsibility, which served to justify a morally improving literature as much as it condemned immoral contagion.

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<sup>30</sup> *Essais I*, p. xiv.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Bourget, *Œuvres complètes. Romans I. Cruelle énigme, Un crime d’amour, André Cornélis* (Paris: Plon, 1900), p. x. References to novels in this edition hereafter appear parenthetically in the text, preceded by the abbreviation *OC*.

<sup>32</sup> For a recent study of Zola’s later thesis novels, considered in relation to those penned by Paul Bourget and Maurice Barrès, see Béatrice Laville, *Une poétique des fictions autoritaires. Les voies de Zola, Barrès, Bourget* (Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2020).

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, Bourget honed his vision of literary influence. From a quasi-scientific analysis of literature's impact on wider social and moral trends, he moved towards a more prescriptive position, which reinserted the traditional authorities that his earlier vision seemed to undermine. Depicting the reading relationship as both an intimate process of mentorship and an ambiguous conduit for moral contagion, Bourget returned incessantly to the question of authorial responsibility and moral complicity. The dominance of this theme was due, at least in part, to Bourget's clear desire to respond to others' critique of his early works, and, eventually, to re-frame them according to a more traditional moral outlook. Before analysing the novel that marks this moralising shift – *Le Disciple* (1889) – it is worth considering why Bourget faced so much criticism in the first place. To do so, I will analyse his contributions to another literary genre: the *roman psychologique*. Although the *Essais* were key to launching Bourget's career, he became equally (if not more) well-known for publishing psychological novels centred on adultery, such as *Cruelle énigme* (1885), *Un crime d'amour* (1886), and *André Cornélis* (1887). I explore below how, as the genre's leading exponent, Bourget was frequently perceived to be morally complicit with, or compromised by, the forms of human psychology and behaviour he depicted.

### **The *roman psychologique*: Conscience or *Complaisance*?**

Emphasizing interior characterization and motivation, *romans psychologiques* examine the reasons for fictional characters' behaviour and how the intricacies of their mental lives influence external events and drive forward the story's plotline.<sup>33</sup>

Evolving from the *roman d'analyse*, spearheaded by Madame de La Fayette's *La*

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<sup>33</sup> Christopher McNab, 'Psychological Novel and Roman d'analyse', in *Encyclopedia of the Novel*, ed. by Paul Schellinger and others, 2 vols (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), II, pp. 1057–1059.



*Princesse de Clèves* (1678), the psychological novel flourished in France during the late nineteenth century. Its popularity increased through the influence of writers such as Stendhal and Dostoevsky (whose works were translated into French and published from 1884 onwards). It gained further impetus from scientific developments, notably the positivist and experimental psychology pioneered by Hippolyte Taine and Théodule Ribot.<sup>34</sup> Cited as Naturalism's opposite, while rivalling it as one of the most influential and successful novelistic genres at the turn of the century, the *roman psychologique* combined mainstream appeal with the added cultural cachet of new intellectual trends. As we saw above, Bourget and Zola were united by their adoption of quasi-scientific principles based on readings of Hippolyte Taine. However, they appropriated Taine in slightly different ways, as Gisèle Sapiro notes: 'les romanciers psychologues spiritualisent la psychologie en la purgeant du déterminisme qui la constitue comme science'.<sup>35</sup> In fact, most of the leading practitioners of the *roman psychologique* were united in opposing Emile Zola's literary school.<sup>36</sup> As Rémy Ponton explains, psychological fiction writers – such as Anatole France (1844–1924), Paul Bourget, Édouard Rod (1857–1910), Jules Lemaître (1853–1914), and Maurice Barrès (1862–1923) – had greater cultural capital and participated in more traditional literary networks than their Naturalist competitors. They benefited from the patronage of the mainstream press and *mondain* salons, eventually gaining official recognition in the form of elections to the *Académie Française*. Their works focused on questions of psychology,

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<sup>34</sup> Alexander McCabe, 'Dostoevsky's French reception: from Vogüé, Gide, Shestov and Berdyaev to Marcel, Camus and Sartre (1880–1959)' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Glasgow, 2013) p. 26.

<sup>35</sup> Sapiro, p. 358.

<sup>36</sup> Rémy Ponton describes the psychological school as 'un réseau de relations de soutien réciproque dont l'hostilité au naturalisme formait le principe unificateur' in 'Naissance du roman psychologique: capital culturel, capital social et stratégie littéraire à la fin du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1975), 66–81 (p. 67).

morality, and the complexities of human behaviour, through characters who typically belonged to their own social milieu.<sup>37</sup>

The *roman psychologique* offers an intriguing example of how even the most socially legitimate literature could be accused of complicity with immorality. Despite the *mondanité* of his protagonists, Bourget's early novels analysed destructive psychological tendencies framed through a pathologizing yet morally ambivalent lens – an approach widely criticised by his peers. Above all, Bourget's repeated depiction of adulterous passion provoked disapproval from a range of critics, in both the mainstream and avant-garde press. In the analysis below, I suggest that Bourget's notoriety depended on the ambivalence of his position, hovering somewhere on the line of acceptability, between conscience and *complaisance*.

*Un crime d'amour* (1886) is an exemplary psychological novel that recounts the story of an adulterous affair between Hélène Chazel and her husband's best friend, Armand de Querne. Armand, a cynical philanderer, seduces Hélène under the false impression that she has already had an affair. In fact, Hélène is deeply in love with Armand, who seems more in tune with her sensibilities than her husband, Alfred – an awkward but devoted mathematician. Initially blind to Armand's heartless indifference, Hélène is convinced her feelings are reciprocated. Their affair lasts a few months before Armand starts to reveal his cynical nature. When Alfred raises his suspicions regarding the affair, de Querne decides to end his relationship with Hélène in the name of male solidarity and honour. During the break-up scene, Armand reveals his true nature to Hélène, who then takes vengeance by having sex with the man he thought to be his predecessor. When

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<sup>37</sup> Ponton, p. 74. See also Sapiro, p. 358.

Hélène confesses this ‘crime d’amour’, Armand recognises his responsibility and feels guilt for her moral decline. To alleviate his suffering, de Querne flees to England. After returning to Paris, he meets with his former lover, who has since decided to act nobly by returning to her role as a committed wife and mother. Awed by Hélène’s generosity, Armand is converted to living a moral existence.

Throughout the novel, Bourget uses pathologizing language to depict Armand as both a victim and perpetrator of intellectual and moral disease – seen notably in his inclination towards pessimism and over-analysis. Excerpts from Armand’s diary are given the status of a pathological case study: ‘cette sinistre monographie d’une maladie secrète de l’âme’ (*OC*: 163). The language of poison and contagion returns when de Querne faces his actions’ negative consequences: ‘il se trouvait placé comme devant un être auquel il aurait de ses mains versé du poison’ (*OC*: 276), and ‘[son] âme n’était pas seulement morte, elle avait répandu autour d’elle la contagion de sa mort intime’ (*OC*: 280). The pathologisation of Armand’s actions reflects the processes of literary influence that Bourget explored earlier in the *Essais*. The meta-literary implications of this depiction come to the fore via instances of mise-en-abyme: characters’ literary tastes are shown to reflect and contribute to their moral ‘decline’ in the novel. For example, Bourget highlights Armand’s preference for ‘des romans de desséchante analyse’ and ‘des moralistes d’une misanthropie aiguë et retournée sur elle-même’ (*OC*: 164). On the surface, Bourget appears to align himself here with a conservative viewpoint of literary influence by demonising his cynical protagonist. However, there is a note of irony here, since Bourget’s own novels could be considered as ‘des romans de desséchante analyse’. Bourget heightens this sense of irony when depicting Hélène’s decision, in the build-up to her moral ‘suicide’, to buy a series of risqué

novels: '[elle] fit venir, pour les avoir sur sa table, les ouvrages dont elle avait entendu parler ces dernières années comme étant les plus audacieux' (*OC*: 247). It is implied that Hélène does not necessarily read the books she buys. Rather, she puts them on display ('les avoir sur sa table') as an outward marker of immoral inclinations that she does not fully personify. Through these details, we are reassured of Hélène's underlying virtue, in such a way as to enable the novel's 'moral' ending. However, by aligning literary taste with false appearances, Bourget also suggests that at least some of the moral panic around literature, and the 'bad influence' argument that supports it, is largely superficial hype constructed through external framing rather than reflecting a work's inherent qualities.

Compared to Bourget's other psychological novels, such as *Cruelle énigme* and *André Cornélis*, *Un crime d'amour* has a morally uplifting ending that hints towards a tacit acceptance of Christian morality as an alternative to pessimism.<sup>38</sup> However, until Armand's final volte face, the trajectory of *Un crime d'amour* is predominantly pessimistic, offering a fatalistic view of human experience and morality. Just before the denouement, Armand internally rehearses questions of morality and religion, offering a cynical vision of human injustice and sin: 'le péché de chacun, s'il y a péché, porte son fruit empoisonné dans l'âme d'un autre, et la même solidarité gouverne tous les rapports des hommes entre eux. Les fils expient pour les pères, les justes pour les méchants, les innocents pour les coupables' (*OC*: 281). The word 'solidarité' hints at the cross-over between moral and legal

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<sup>38</sup> *Cruelle énigme* (1885) tells the story of a young, respectable man, Hubert Laurian, who falls in love with a married woman, Thérèse de Sauve. The story charts the progress – and gradual debasement – of their affair. After Thérèse is unfaithful for no apparent reason, Hubert resumes their relationship, thereby sacrificing his moral fortitude to her sensual appeal: 'Quelque chose était mort dans sa vie morale, qu'il ne devait plus jamais retrouver. C'était un de ces naufrages d'âme que ceux qui les subissent sentent irrémédiables' (*OC*: 126). *André Cornélis* (1887) is a Hamlet-inspired story that ends with the protagonist's despair that, having finally murdered his stepfather (who, many years earlier, had orchestrated his father's death), his revenge remains incomplete, because he was unable to destroy his mother's love for the deceased.

connotations of complicity, discussed in the introduction. Furthermore, this passage reformulates a section from *La Philosophie de la liberté* (1848), by the Swiss philosopher Charles Secrétan (1815–1895). The original passage includes the following lines : ‘Qu’ont fait les enfants pour souffrir des fautes de leurs pères? Quel est le sens moral de cette solidarité qui enchaîne les hommes aux hommes, les peuples aux peuples, les générations aux générations?’<sup>39</sup> By evoking the work of a Christian philosopher, Bourget responds to earlier criticism and strengthens his work’s religious credentials.

These credentials are fully realised in the denouement. Unable to convince himself of God’s existence or of the validity of Christian morality through reason alone, Armand is finally won over by the example of Hélène’s compassion and self-sacrificial repentance. Bourget here shows that the logic of influence works both ways: through the vicissitudes of de Querne’s fate, we witness the possibility of a ‘good influence’ model of literature, which offers an idealistic and implicitly religious twist to an otherwise largely pessimistic tale.<sup>40</sup> In the novel’s final lines, Armand’s realisation is framed as a conversion:

Ainsi le principe de salut qu’il n’avait pu obtenir de l’impuissante raison et que les dogmes de la foi ne lui avaient pas donné, puisqu’il n’y croyait pas, il le rencontrait dans cette vertu de la charité qui se passe de toutes les démonstrations et de toutes les révélations, – mais ce précepte de charité ne fut-il pas la révélation suprême? [...] Et Armand éprouva qu’une chose venait de naître en lui, avec laquelle il pourrait toujours trouver une raison de vivre et d’agir: le respect, la piété, la religion de la souffrance humaine. (*OC*: 290–1)

The religious lexis (‘salut’, ‘révélation’, and ‘piété’) moves the novel distinctly away from psychology to morality, and from cynical doubt to restored faith. This mirrors the trajectory of the supplementary prefatory material that Bourget added

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<sup>39</sup> Cited by E. M., ‘Un critique psychologue’, p. 294.

<sup>40</sup> The ‘good influence’ model is a vital component to the *roman à thèse* – a genre Bourget adopted later in his career. I explore the *roman à thèse* at greater length below.

to the *Essais*, discussed above. However, rather than appeasing his contemporaries, this ending attracted criticism for its lack of verisimilitude. When reviewing *Un crime d'amour*, writer and critic Édouard Rod wrote: 'que le remords puisse être fécond dans une âme dévastée par l'*incroyance*, – qui le croira?'<sup>41</sup> Rod's criticism targets the volte face experienced by a character whose cynicism appears boundless for most of the novel. The Protestant theologian and critic Edmond Schérer (1815–1889) also expressed his incredulity regarding Armand's conversion: 'je n'attends, pour ma part, aucun redressement de cet homme; il ne sera qu'un blasé'.<sup>42</sup> If we doubt Armand's sudden ethical conversion, *Un crime d'amour* remains predominantly a pessimistic adultery novel, with an ambiguous moral status. The ending's *invraisemblance* undermines any moral value the novel might otherwise have, because it seems too contrived to be believable ('qui le croira?'). By breaking the realist reading pact, the sudden shift in *Un crime d'amour* provoked more doubt than certainty regarding the novel's moral status.<sup>43</sup>

Bourget's peers also questioned the moral value of novels such as *Un crime d'amour*, due to the primary position given to adulterous passion in their plotlines. Conservative critics condemned Bourget's interest in the subject, whereas avant-garde critics celebrated it in a tongue-in-cheek way. For example, Edmond Schérer justified his disbelief at Armand's conversion by highlighting and condemning the work's illicit sensuality:

Il y a là, dans les cent premières pages, [...] [des] descriptions licencieuses et qui sont là pour leur compte, d'images de sensualité que le sujet n'exigeait point et dans lesquelles il faut bien conclure que se complait l'esprit de l'écrivain.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Édouard Rod, 'Variétés. Un crime d'amour', *La République française*, 18 Feb. 1886.

<sup>42</sup> Edmond Schérer, 'Variétés. Un crime d'amour', *Le Temps*, 4 March 1886.

<sup>43</sup> On the realist reading pact, see Susan Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre*. Second edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 72–3. I explore Suleiman's discussion of reading pacts in more detail below.

<sup>44</sup> Schérer, 'Variétés'.

According to Schérer, a writer may evoke erotic themes to advance the plot or character development, but anything beyond this amounts to moral complacency ('se complaire'). This sensuality attracted the attention of avant-garde writers, Octave Mirbeau and Maurice Barrès, who – unlike Schérer – celebrated the ambiguity of Bourget's moral position. In *Le Gaulois*, Mirbeau described the novel as a 'livre hardi' containing 'certaines brutalités d'analyse', while admitting its limited suitability for impressionable readers:

Je n'en recommande point cependant la lecture aux jeunes filles. Je me permets seulement de la conseiller aux femmes; car, si cette œuvre entre violemment dans des questions scabreuses et délicates à traiter, elle éloigne de la dépravation, et reste toujours "de bonne compagnie", comme on dit.<sup>45</sup>

By proscribing the act of reading for women at different life stages, Mirbeau redeploys a trope typical of moral literary criticism, while highlighting literature's dual potential for both corruption and edification. He further implies that Bourget sugar-coats erotic material so that it can pass the standards of social acceptability required by his upper-class readership ("de bonne compagnie"). In a similar gesture, Maurice Barrès – a fellow proponent of the *roman psychologique* – humorously celebrated Bourget's ability to make audacious material palatable to high society: '[le] piquant, c'est que Bourget se fait lire de la meilleure société. [...] [P]eut-être ce qui vaut à Bourget qu'on lui passe ses sincérités, c'est qu'il fait ses personnages toujours délicats ou de manières raffinées'.<sup>46</sup> Both Mirbeau and Barrès lace their tongue-in-cheek appraisal with a side-note of mockery, since Bourget's skill at sugar-coating risqué material implicitly denotes his status as a panderer, subservient to an adulcorated and hypocritical literary taste.

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<sup>45</sup> Octave Mirbeau, 'Un crime d'amour', *Le Gaulois*, 11 Feb. 1886, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Maurice Barrès, 'Notes sur M. Paul Bourget', *Les Lettres et les arts*, 1 Feb. 1886, pp. 256–263 (p. 260).

With his unusual proclivity for both quasi-scientific psychological analysis and sentimental – if not melodramatic – plotlines, Bourget seemed too risqué for traditionalist critics, and not risqué enough for the avant-garde. Barrès captures this ambivalent position when he describes Bourget's writing as hovering between pessimism and idealism, science and sentimentalism: 'Très réfléchi, Bourget ne néglige aucune des ressources de son tempérament sentimental. De la tendresse vague de son cœur, il fait cet idéalisme précis, ce mystisme [*sic*] que nous avons exposé; de l'appétit des sens, il prend des notes.' Barrès suggests that Bourget, by blending scientific accuracy ('prendre des notes') with idealism and mysticism, takes on the position of a religious moral guide: 'd'élégiaque devenu mystique, d'*inquiet* devenu presque directeur de conscience, [...] il tient un rang fort particulier parmi nos écrivains.'<sup>47</sup> By comparing Bourget to a 'directeur de conscience', Barrès taps into a wealth of social and literary stereotypes that evoke the ambiguity of priests' moral influence.<sup>48</sup> Charged with guiding the everyday behaviour of aristocratic and upper-bourgeois women, *directeurs de conscience* held an influential position within privileged social circles. They were widely perceived to hold a significant and potentially dangerous sway over women through the practice of confessional. Literary depictions of the figure abounded in works by writers such as Balzac and Zola – with a degree of sympathy in the former, and varying levels of anticlericalism in the latter.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Barrès, 'Notes', pp. 260–1.

<sup>48</sup> Bourget was compared to a *directeur de conscience* throughout his career. See Roman Frary, 'Un roman d'analyse', *La France*, 2 March 1885, Félicien Champsaur, 'La Vie littéraire et artistique: Brelan de critiques', *Le Figaro, supplément littéraire*, 5 Oct. 1885, pp. 194–5, Gustave Larroumet, 'Paul Bourget à l'Académie française', *Le Gaulois*, 13 June 1895, and Gibrac, 'Actualité: Sous la coupole', *Le Signal*, 15 June 1895.

<sup>49</sup> On the figure of the *directeur de conscience* in Balzac, see Jean Malavié, 'Présence du directeur de conscience dans les couples de *La Comédie humaine*', *Les Lettres Romanes*, 56 (2002), 223–233.



Jules Michelet's *Du prêtre, de la femme, de la famille* (1845) was a key anti-clerical reference point for literary depictions of the *directeur de conscience*. In this work, Michelet depicts priests as unwelcome intruders in the family setting, whose influence over women's intimate lives distances them from their husbands. He employs a lexis associated with adultery to highlight the dangers of women's shared loyalties: 'Le maître de la pensée est celui à qui la personne appartient. Le prêtre tient l'âme, dès qu'il a le gage dangereux des premiers secrets [...]. Voilà un partage tout fait entre les époux, car maintenant il y en aura deux, l'âme à l'un, à l'autre le corps'.<sup>50</sup> According to Michelet, the Catholic practice of confessional encourages an unhealthy bond between confessor and confessant. He claims that priests experience sensual pleasure through their influence over faithful penitents: 'Il y a pour celui à qui toute jouissance naturelle est interdite [...] une sensualité malade à exercer cette puissance, [...] à désoler pour consoler, blesser, guérir et blesser encore'. However, the relationship is not purely predatory, but reciprocal and complicit: 'Ils se sont troublés ensemble, c'est une complicité... Tous deux savent (sans le savoir bien, d'instinct confus, de passion) qu'ils ont prise l'un sur l'autre, elle par le désir, et lui par la peur.'<sup>51</sup> Here we see how a figure charged with guiding others' moral conscience is attributed with the power – and the inclination – to corrupt this conscience through moral *complaisance*.

Michelet's account is emblematic of a broad cultural attitude towards confession that supplies a metaphor for Bourget's critics in their attack against his perceived moral *complaisance*. In *Dans l'Oratoire* (1888), Lorrain mounts a scathing attack against popular writers who traded on tacit permissiveness in erotic

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<sup>50</sup> Jules Michelet, *Du Prêtre, de la femme, de la famille*, 2nd edn (Paris: Hachette, 1845) p. 221.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 267 and 270.

themes, thereby encouraging illicit desires and actions in their (predominantly female) readership. Lorrain aligns such writers with the perverted priests evoked by Michelet decades earlier.<sup>52</sup> In the preface, Lorrain draws out the similarities between Catholic confessional and the literary production of his peers, considered a form of ‘oratory’ literature. As the *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* explains, an oratory is a ‘[pièce] qui, dans une maison, est destinée aux exercices de dévotion.’<sup>53</sup> By using this term, Lorrain creates an analogy between a personal and contemplative religious space and the intimacy created through the act of reading. This space, like the literary relationship it represents, blends sensuality with mysticism:

L’oratoire, ce boudoir psychique, où la femme catholique est en coquetterie réglée avec Dieu: l’Oratoire, où le prêtre a régné près de sept siècles sur les sens et l’imagination de la femme: l’Oratoire, où le Christ prend de languides attitudes d’Adonis Syrien, et la dévote, des prosternements aspirants de prêtresse: l’Oratoire, lieu de mystère et de clair-obscur, [...] mi-partie sanctuaire, mi-partie gynécée, inquiétant et troublant comme un amour de moine.<sup>54</sup>

Lorrain here frames women’s relationship to oratory literature as a love affair, where writer-priests take on an ambiguously eroticised position. This vision borders on sacrilege, with Christ becoming the sexualised object of a pagan cult. Lorrain targets proponents of this literary genre for reducing religious sentiment to sensual froth, and for tapping into the fantasies of frivolous women to further their careers.

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<sup>52</sup> Jean Lorrain, *Dans l’Oratoire* (Paris: C. Dalou, 1888). *Dans l’Oratoire* is a collection of articles that first appeared in *L’Événement* and *Le Courrier français* between March and July 1887. The articles are gossip portraits and critiques of partially veiled targets. The portrait of Bourget (‘Mademoiselle Baudelaire!’, pp. 11–21) appears alongside a series of satirical articles on other popular writers: Octave Feuillet (1821–90) in ‘L’Aumonier du château’ (pp. 22–31), Ernest Renan (1823–92) in ‘L’Abbé de Joie’ (pp. 32–41), Elme-Marie Caro (1826–1887) in ‘Monseigneur Psycho’ (pp. 42–46), Catulle Mendès (1841–1909) and René Maizeroy (1856–1918) in ‘Les Pères saphistes’ (pp. 47–55), and a celebrity priest, Jacques Monsabré (1827–1907) in ‘Frère Hépicius’ (pp. 56–67).

<sup>53</sup> Pierre Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*, 17 vols (Paris: Administration du Grand Dictionnaire universel, 1866–1877), XI (1874), p. 1411.

<sup>54</sup> *Dans l’Oratoire*, p. 1.

This canny manipulation of sensual mysticism is part of Lorrain's wider comparison between writers and *directeurs de conscience* in *Dans l'Oratoire*. After describing the erotic appeal of the oratory mode, Lorrain cites a list of writers – 'MM. Octave Fleuret, Paulin, Bourget, Caro et Jules Lemaitre' – who take on the role of Michelet's priests.<sup>55</sup> They become *directeurs de conscience* for upper-class women and their novels become a secular replacement for the oratory space. The aim of these writers, referred to as 'révérends pères titillants, directeurs laïques de mondaines consciences', is to arouse quasi-illicit desires in their female readership, while turning a blind eye to moral responsibility:

Ces Messieurs doivent tout éveiller d'un doigt discret et savamment mené dans leur moral organisme de femme, mais ils ne doivent qu'éveiller; [...] ils ne prêchent pas, ils chuchotent [*sic*]; ils ne confessent pas, ils frôlent.

*Frôleurs et Frôlées!*

Un titre pour un roman de M. Catulle Mendès... et pourquoi pas?  
Le frôlement est exquis, parfois.

C'est une complicité toute de demi-teintes, de demi-gestes et de demi-sourires et, entre ouailles et prédicants, un délicieux échange de tacts et de contacts... effleurants.<sup>56</sup>

Lorrain here evokes the sensuality of oratory literature through extended references to physical touch – such as 'doigt discret', 'frôlement', and 'contacts' – that hint at forms of sexual intimacy. They also combine physical sensuality with psychological and moral ambiguity, as seen in the 'complicité toute de demi-teintes' and the 'délicieux échange de tacts et de contacts... effleurants'. The prefix 'demi' mitigates the clarity of the relationship between 'ouailles et prédicants' (where 'ouailles' are readers and 'prédicants' are writers). Furthermore, the pun 'tacts et contacts' extends Lorrain's implicit accusation against writers who adopt

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

the role of moral guide in order to corrupt their readers, while avoiding moral censure by corrupting them *tactfully*.

As the leading figure associated with tacit permissiveness in erotic themes ('la casuistique des sensualités'), Paul Bourget is targeted for his feminised writing style and readership. In 'Mademoiselle Baudelaire!' – the portrait opening the first sub-section of *Dans l'Oratoire*, 'Leurs confesseurs' – Lorrain responds to an article by Catulle Mendès, who used the eponymous appellation to refer to Bourget.<sup>57</sup> By highlighting the ambiguous gender status attributed to Bourget, Lorrain hints at his target's latent homosexuality, and criticises the feminised appeal of his writing style:

Mlle Baudelaire! Singulier nom pour un abbé! Ah! c'est que celui-là est si peu abbé et si profondément mademoiselle, si féminin, si souple, si câlin d'allures et, dans tous ses sermons, d'une subtilité si féminine et qui plaît tant aux femmes! Ce n'est pas un confesseur, mais un confident et plutôt une confidente, que Mlle Baudelaire.<sup>58</sup>

Through religious vocabulary ('abbé', 'sermons', and 'confesseur'), Lorrain extends the ongoing analogy that aligns writers of the *roman psychologique* with the moral indulgence of religious confessors. Like the priest figure, Bourget is accused of pandering to women's desire to be excused of their misdemeanours, and of doing so for personal gain. What is more, it is clear that, for Lorrain, the questionable taste of Bourget's readership lowers the value of his works:

c'est à la femme, [...] à son besoin d'être plainte, attendrie sur elle-même, un peu méprisée, mais toujours excusée, cajolée, caressée, traitée en petite fille, en malade, toujours à la lectrice et jamais au lecteur, que s'adresse le jeune et très pratique futur académicien.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> I have been unable to find the article to which Lorrain refers.

<sup>58</sup> *Dans l'Oratoire*, p. 13. On Bourget's latent homosexuality, see François Proulx, *Victims of the Book: Reading and Masculinity in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), pp. 144–8.

<sup>59</sup> *Dans l'Oratoire*, p. 14.

In a clearly misogynistic gesture, Lorrain implies that male readers are more discerning of literary quality than their female counterparts. By framing Bourget's writing as titillating and frivolous – qualities typically perceived as feminine – Lorrain feminises his target while associating him with a denigrated readership. However, there is an edge of bitterness to Lorrain's critique, since above all he mocks Bourget's popularity with a limited sphere of distinctly upper-class women, whose influence over literary *salons* could contribute positively to a writer's career prospects.

Even after his election to the *Académie Française*, Bourget could not shake his earlier reputation as a casuist panderer. Reporting on Bourget's admission ceremony in *Le Signal* – a daily newspaper run by the Protestant Eugène Réveillaud (1851–1935) – one critic remarked that '[q]uoi qu'il fasse et quoiqu'on dise, M. Paul Bourget restera le petit maître de la littérature contemporaine.'<sup>60</sup> Bourget's mainstream success clearly ruffled a few feathers, prompting hostile responses and mockery targeted at the perceived erotic source of his morally ambiguous appeal. Although these criticisms were not limited to the avant-garde literary scene, they certainly flourished there. A key example of this tendency can be found in the sarcastic vitriol penned by Octave Mirbeau, which rivalled Lorrain's antagonism towards Bourget with its visceral force.

In 1886, after ten years of amicable rapport, Mirbeau started to treat Bourget as an object of mockery, before making their 'rupture' public in 1889.<sup>61</sup> Within only a few months of having praised *Un crime d'amour* in *Le Gaulois* (11 February 1886), Mirbeau published a disguised portrait of Bourget in the 27 July 1886 issue

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<sup>60</sup> Gibrac, 'Actualité'.

<sup>61</sup> See Octave Mirbeau, *Combats littéraires*, ed. by Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet (Lausanne: Éditions L'Âge d'Homme, 2006), p. 591, footnote 14.

of *Gil blas*. In this article, he depicts ‘Loys Jambois’ – an effete artist whose declarations about the poetic value of umbrellas reveal tendencies that recur in Bourget’s works, including Anglophilia, melancholy, ‘hamlétisme’ and ‘[le] pessimisme du non-amour.’<sup>62</sup> However, the official break-off happened in early March 1889, when Mirbeau read the third instalment of the serialised version of Bourget’s *Le Disciple*.<sup>63</sup> In a letter to Paul Hervieu, Mirbeau claimed that he had discussed his upcoming work *Sébastien Roch* with Bourget, only for the latter to steal two key details about his eponymous character’s First Communion. These details appeared in *Le Disciple* before the publication of Mirbeau’s novel, thereby forcing the latter to edit his work to prevent accusations of plagiarism.<sup>64</sup> In response to Bourget’s apparent indiscretion, Mirbeau penned a lampooning article, ‘Manuel du savoir écrire’. Here Mirbeau took his former friend to task for focusing on self-promotion and for achieving popularity by adopting a literary style appealing primarily to women.<sup>65</sup>

The similarities between Mirbeau and Lorrain’s critiques are unmistakable: both attacked Bourget for appealing to a female readership, who are presumed to lack artistic judgement. At the fin de siècle, references to women readers were almost always ideologically loaded, with gender acting as an automatic disqualifying factor. Women’s involvement in, and appreciation of, artistic and intellectual pursuits was perceived as libidinally interested, due to the underlying patriarchal tendency to align women with the body.<sup>66</sup> In the autumn of 1897,

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<sup>62</sup> Octave Mirbeau, ‘Portrait’, *Gil Blas*, 27 July 1886. This article was republished, with some modifications, as ‘L’Unique – Scène de la vie décadente’, *L’Écho de Paris*, 22 Mar. 1889, and ‘Portrait’, *Le Journal*, 24 Nov. 1895.

<sup>63</sup> I discuss *Le Disciple* in the third section of this chapter, below.

<sup>64</sup> Proulx, p. 136.

<sup>65</sup> Octave Mirbeau, ‘Le Manuel du savoir-écrire’, *Le Figaro*, 11 May 1889.

<sup>66</sup> See Rachel Mesch, *The Hysteric’s Revenge: French Women Writers at the Fin de Siècle* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006).

Mirbeau published a series of caricatural articles in *Le Journal*, entitled ‘Chez l’illustre écrivain’, which offered an extended critique of Bourget’s implicitly feminised tendencies – notably his frivolity, obsession with outward appearances, and tendency to court media attention.<sup>67</sup> Mirbeau further weaponized misogyny against Bourget in ‘Têtes de Turcs’, a collection of polemical portraits appearing in the satirical journal *L’Assiette au beurre*:

Anglomane subtil et psychologue respectueux. [...] A inventé l’adultère chrétien, le canapé chrétien, le bidet chrétien, la garçonne chrétienne, le chapelet obscène et le scapulaire transparent. [...] A transformé les cabinets de toilette de ses héroïnes en oratoire, et, dans ses bidets changés en bénitiers, on voit flotter des fragments d’hostie, au lieu de mousse de savon.<sup>68</sup>

In this eye-watering attack, Mirbeau aligns religion with obscenity and scatology through the list of Bourget’s literary ‘inventions’. The fact that, many years after the publication of *Dans l’Oratoire*, Mirbeau adopted Lorrain’s oratory metaphor demonstrates the clear resonance it had with avant-garde sensibilities.

Both Lorrain and Mirbeau used polemical and sacrilegious analogies to cut down an opponent with increasing popularity in outwardly conservative – if covertly sordid – literary circles. Indeed, their critiques are directed as much at the *mondain* literary circles to which Bourget belonged as they are at Bourget himself. By taking issue with the influence of female readers on the literary marketplace, and specifically with the upper-bourgeois hostesses of salons from which they were excluded, Lorrain and Mirbeau demonstrated the strengths and limitations of their avant-garde literary position. Their aesthetic judgements were structurally opposed to the institutional mainstream, from which they found themselves barred largely

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<sup>67</sup> Octave Mirbeau, ‘Chez l’illustre écrivain’, *Le Journal*, 17 October to 28 November 1897.

<sup>68</sup> Octave Mirbeau, ‘Paul Bourget’, *L’Assiette au beurre*, 31 May 1902, p. 1019.

due to socio-economic factors beyond their control.<sup>69</sup> But despite the insecurity of this position, it enabled writers such as Mirbeau and Lorrain to offer incisive comment on wider literary phenomena. In their analyses of Bourget, they emphasise how mainstream writers could achieve fame and success through their hypocritical complicity with, and pandering to, debased or corrupting tendencies.

By the late 1880s, Bourget was clearly a divisive figure, condemned simultaneously for promoting deterministic philosophical trends and for appealing to a wider, feminised audience with sugar-coated eroticism. The most virulent criticism targeted the hypocrisy of a writer whose apparent shift towards moral conservatism belied a success based on tacitly promoting immorality to a *mondain* readership. In the first section we considered the early signs of Bourget's eventual transition from avant-garde pessimist to traditionalist, demonstrated by the evolution of liminary material to the *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*. This transition strengthened in the late 1880s and 1890s, leading to his conversion to Catholicism in 1901. Of course, this conversion was unlikely to convince Bourget's harshest critics (most of whom were fiercely anticlerical) of his moral integrity. Indeed, both Zola and André Gide (1869–1951) would go on to produce à-clef characters based on Bourget, portraying him as a hypocritical Catholic seducer of women (Santerre in *Fécondité*) and a possibly homosexual corrupter of young men (Passavant in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*), respectively. That said, it is clear that Bourget's increasing religiosity towards the end of the century significantly influenced his shifting approach to questions of literature, morality, and

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<sup>69</sup> Bourdieu explores the impact of sociological variables such as class on the way writers responded to one another and contributed to the wider literary community (i.e. the 'literary field'). See Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), pp. 192–233.



responsibility. In the following section I consider a key turning point in this transition: Bourget's most famous work, *Le Disciple*.

### **Implication and Exculpation: *Le Disciple***

*Le Disciple* (1889) marked Bourget's most significant contribution to fin-de-siècle debates about authorial responsibility and complicity. These debates regularly flared up around criminal trials, where literary works or intellectual trends were cited as having influenced or inspired the accused's actions. In 1888, the year Lorrain published *Dans l'Oratoire*, Bourget was implicated indirectly in one such trial. François Proulx has perceptively examined the literary implications of the Chambige affair.<sup>70</sup> The following analysis expands Proulx's findings by considering how Bourget's novelistic response to the trial, and the critical polemic it provoked, demonstrates the widespread unease surrounding notions of shared responsibility and guilt in the fin-de-siècle literary domain. I argue that this unease played an important part in structuring the fin-de-siècle literary field and compelling writers and critics to adopt strategies for defining and justifying their position towards it.

In November 1888, French newspapers obsessively reported on the sensational murder trial of Henri Chambige in Constantine, Algeria. On 25 January that year, Chambige had used a gun to kill a wife and mother of two, Magdeleine Grille, before shooting himself in the mouth. He survived his wounds and claimed to have committed the crime to uphold his side of a suicide pact with Magdeleine, who was his lover. Media attention intensified when it was revealed that Chambige had ties with the Parisian literary scene – including Paul Bourget, whom he had met

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<sup>70</sup> Proulx, pp. 122–9.

on several occasions during his time spent studying in Paris (1886–7).<sup>71</sup> Because of Chambige’s literary aspirations and connections, the affair led commentators to debate the role played by fin-de-siècle intellectual trends in encouraging individuals to commit violent crimes. Proulx notes that Bourget was ‘implicated from all sides’, as the primary model of literary bad influence over the accused. He explores the myriad literary references used throughout the trial, which placed moral responsibility on Bourget’s shoulders. For example, the lawyer representing Magdeleine’s family during the trial, Ludovic Trarieux – who later fought for revision during the Dreyfus Affair and gave testimony to support Émile Zola in the *J’Accuse...!* defamation trial – mentioned unnamed (but identifiable) leaders of a literary movement deeply imbricated with determinism and pessimism. Proulx also notes the references to Bourget in an article by the poet, playwright, and critic Émile Bergerat (1845–1923).<sup>72</sup> In ‘La Rime en “bige”’, Bergerat accuses psychological writers of glorifying a perverted vision of love – ‘un amour un peu rabique, teinté d’assassinat et guillotinatoire’ – subsequently reflected in Chambige’s actions.<sup>73</sup> He depicts the *roman psychologique* as complicit in real-life murder, and implicates its chief practitioner. Bourget’s name appears twice in the article, leaving readers in no doubt regarding the identity of Bergerat’s principle target. If that were not enough, Chambige published an autobiographical account of his early obsession with pessimistic and deterministic philosophy – intellectual trends strongly associated with Bourget – which gave further fodder to morality critics and ultimately prompted Bourget’s response.

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<sup>71</sup> Albert Feuillerat, *Paul Bourget: histoire d’un esprit sous la troisième république* (Paris: Plon, 1937), pp. 139–141.

<sup>72</sup> Proulx, pp. 122–8.

<sup>73</sup> Émile Bergerat, ‘La Rime en “bige”’, *Le Figaro*, 8 Nov. 1888, p. 1.

Finding himself compromised in the Chambige affair, Bourget responded to his critics by publishing *Le Disciple* a few months after the trial. Repurposing an earlier unpublished manuscript, written between 1877–8 and originally entitled *La Passion d'Armand Cornelis* [sic], Bourget took elements from the affair while contributing further to the debates it originally incited.<sup>74</sup> Initially serialised in six instalments in the *Nouvelle revue*, from February to May 1889, the novel charts the story of Adrien Sixte and his 'disciple' Robert Greslou. Sixte is a psychologist and philosopher whose works amalgamate ideas by influential real-life intellectuals, including Hippolyte Taine, Ernest Renan, and Théodule Ribot. Greslou is a gifted student charged with murdering a young aristocrat, Charlotte de Jussat. *Le Disciple* recounts Greslou's story through a series of narrative and meta-narrative layers. Its central nested narrative (or *récit enchâssé*) is framed by a *récit cadre*, introduced by an authorial preface. The *récit enchâssé* is styled as Greslou's self-analytical confession, describing how he intentionally seduced Charlotte as part of a psychological experiment inspired by Sixte's theories. The 'experiment' culminates in Robert and Charlotte consummating their affair after agreeing to a suicide pact – a promise Robert fails to uphold in the moment of post-coital satisfaction. This pact provides the novel's clearest link with the Chambige affair, although Bourget changes one key element: Charlotte, unlike Magdeleine, dies by her own hand rather than by her lover's. Devastated by Greslou's cowardice, Charlotte reads his case study notebook, which reveals the former's heartless cynicism. She then commits suicide, after sending a letter to her older brother André that recounts the events leading to her death. Greslou's confession appears as a letter to Sixte, within

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<sup>74</sup> On *La Passion d'Armand Cornelis*, see Marc Angenot, 'On est toujours le disciple de quelqu'un, ou le Mystère du pousse-au-crime', *Littérature*, 49 (1983), 50–6 (pp. 51–2).

the *récit cadre* narrating Sixte's involvement in the trial and its conclusion. This frame narrative is introduced by an overtly moralising preface, 'A un jeune homme', which Bourget added to the novel when it was published in book form. The preface emphasises the importance of writers' responsibility and offers the story as a warning to Bourget's young readership about the dangers of pessimism and determinism – the very intellectual trends he had championed a few years earlier.

*Le Disciple* was a defining moment in Bourget's career, marking a turning point towards a more conservative and moralising outlook. Proulx suggests that it 'transformed [Bourget's] literary persona, within the space of six months, from a fashionable women's novelist loosely compromised in a notorious affair, to that affair's most eminent and celebrated commentator, a model of rigorous and trenchant analysis'.<sup>75</sup> The novel's presentation of Greslou and Sixte's relationship mirrored events recounted in the Chambige trial, while posing wider questions about literary influence and complicity. These questions extended his earlier explorations of the same themes in the *Essais* and the *roman psychologique*, but with an increasingly moralising edge. The novel's primary 'thesis' – stating that writers and thinkers have an influence over and responsibility towards their readers, which ought to be used for the wider good of society – prompted divergent interpretations and fed the 'rancorous public debate' surrounding literary responsibility at the fin de siècle.<sup>76</sup> It infamously provoked a literary quarrel between respected critics Anatole France and Ferdinand Brunetière (1849–1906). France argued that philosophical doctrine had little direct influence over human

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<sup>75</sup> Proulx, p. 138.

<sup>76</sup> Leon Sachs, 'Literature of Ideas and Paul Bourget's Republican Pedagogy', *French Forum*, 33 (2008), 53–72 (p. 61).

behaviour. He supported freedom of speech, asserting that ‘tout système philosophique peut être légitimement exposé.’<sup>77</sup> Brunetière, on the other hand, criticised writers for failing to accept responsibility for the impact of their works (whether intentional or not), and defended limitations to freedom of speech in the name of social order: ‘Toutes les fois qu’une doctrine aboutira par voie de conséquence logique à mettre en question les principes sur lesquels la société repose, elle sera fausse’.<sup>78</sup> Liberal critics, such as Anatole France and an anonymous reviewer at the *Revue scientifique*, responded to Brunetière’s comments by aligning him with moral prejudice and an imposed ‘doctrine officielle’.<sup>79</sup> The force of this polemic shows the extent to which questions of moral implication, guilt, and complicity were not only central to Bourget’s career, but also to the fin-de-siècle literary field more generally. To explore this further, I analyse below how Bourget depicted relationships of exemplarity in *Le Disciple*, highlighting how the ambiguities of seduction and corruption blur the boundaries of moral responsibility between individuals and external influences. I show how the confessional structure of Greslou’s narrative indicates how readers can be morally implicated in what they read. Finally, by analysing the novel’s reception I suggest that the capacity for readers to respond to and reject the novel’s ‘thesis’ is central to the wider debate surrounding literary complicity and to modern critics’ continued interest in Bourget’s career.

Greslou’s formation in *Le Disciple* offers an exemplary warning about the corruptive power of reading, through two intertwined narratives of seduction and

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<sup>77</sup> Anatole France, ‘La Vie littéraire. M. Paul Bourget: “Le Disciple”’, *Le Temps*, 23 June 1889.

<sup>78</sup> Ferdinand Brunetière, ‘Revue littéraire. A propos du *Disciple*’, *La Revue des deux mondes*, 1 July 1889, pp. 214–226 (p. 220).

<sup>79</sup> Anatole France, ‘La Vie littéraire. La métaphysique devant la morale’, *Le Temps*, 7 July 1889, and Anon., ‘Causerie bibliographique’, *Revue scientifique*, 17 Aug. 1889, pp. 213–215 (p. 215).

corruption. Greslou is corrupted by Sixte's deterministic analytical philosophy and then corrupts Charlotte by seducing her. The latter action is posited as a consequence of the former, since Greslou frames the seduction quest as a psychological experiment inspired by his readings. Bourget confirms this causal relationship in the preface, by asserting the formative role of writers and by encouraging readers to act differently to Greslou: 'Que ni l'orgueil de la vie ni celui de l'intelligence ne fassent de toi un cynique et un jongleur d'idées!'<sup>80</sup> Appealing to the reader's experience and to their capacity for identification supports the morally improving impact of the novel, since, without these, the reader would not fear or avoid the dangers it relates. The *récit cadre* mirrors Bourget's prefatory warning by depicting a magistrate's interpretation of the philosopher's work. During Sixte's interrogation, the investigating magistrate emphasises the hazy distinction between legal and moral responsibility for crime, and attributes the latter to Sixte, as Greslou's 'directeur intellectuel' (38–9). Upon terminating the interrogation, the magistrate makes the following remark to his clerk:

En voilà des fous que l'on ferait bien d'enfermer [...]. C'est avec des idées comme celles de ce toqué sur le crime que les jeunes gens se perdent [...]. Savez-vous qu'il pourrait bien faire couper le cou à son disciple avec ses paradoxes?... Mais ça paraît lui être fort égal.  
(54)

The magistrate here functions as the mouthpiece of the bad influence model of reading. His comments offer a stark contrast to Sixte's own perception of his work's positive contribution to public wellbeing: '[Pour] modifier la marche des événements, il fallait d'abord modifier les notions reçues sur l'âme humaine, et installer à leur place des données précises d'où résulteraient une éducation et une

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<sup>80</sup> Paul Bourget, *Le Disciple* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1889), p. x. Hereafter references to *Le Disciple* appear parenthetically in the text.

politique nouvelles' (61). This vision – similar to the arguments used by Bourget and Zola earlier in the decade – creates dramatic irony and allows for conflicting readings of the passage. Sixte's inability to understand his complicity in Greslou's crime can be read as either naïve innocence or extreme cynicism. Furthermore, the discrepancy between the two men's interpretations highlights both Sixte's disconnect with 'common-sense' views and the reductive nature of the magistrate's condemnation, which demonises intellectual positions that fail to adhere to the status quo.

Upon the novel's publication, critics highlighted the complexity of Sixte's position, noting how Bourget mitigated Sixte's responsibility by depicting the multiple factors influencing Greslou's moral and psychological formation. Augustin Filon (1841–1916) suggested that *Le Disciple*'s tragic love affair could be recounted without any reference to Sixte's determinist philosophy.<sup>81</sup> Paul Janet suggested that Greslou's character had sufficiently negative traits to produce 'un être malfaisant' without requiring any further assistance from theoretical doctrines.<sup>82</sup> Or, as an anonymous reviewer at the *Revue scientifique* put it: 'Ce déséquilibré [...] n'a pas eu besoin d'un maître pour être un malfaiteur'.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, Bourget's novel reveals multiple – and intersecting – forms of initiation that contribute to Greslou's corruption. The first form of initiation is literary: Greslou finds a passion for reading the books in his father's library. When his mother locks these away, Greslou discovers the 'sensualité mystique' of modern poetry by reading proscribed modern works ('volumes clandestins') with his friend Émile

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<sup>81</sup> Auguste Filon, 'Courrier littéraire', *La Revue politique et littéraire*, 20 July 1889, pp. 89–92 (p. 90).

<sup>82</sup> Paul Janet, 'De la responsabilité philosophique, à propos du "Disciple" d M. Paul Bourget', in *Principes de métaphysique et de psychologie: leçons professées à la Faculté des lettres de Paris, 1888–1894*, 2 vols (Paris: Librairie Ch. Delagrave, 1897), I, pp. 305–327 (pp. 312–13).

<sup>83</sup> Anon., 'Causerie bibliographique', p. 214.

(124–6). Bourget’s description of Émile as a sickly figure, destined to die young, is an over-determined affirmation of the fatal consequences of over-reading, which – like masturbation – was frequently perceived to be an unhealthy and anti-social adolescent obsession. The sensual appeal of proscribed literary works paves the way for the second form of initiation: physical sex. Greslou loses his virginity to a working-class woman, Marianne, in a sequence that reads as the logical continuation of his earlier reading practices (133). The final initiation is primarily intellectual: Greslou finds his vocation for philosophical and psychological reflection through the revelatory medium of Adrien Sixte’s writings: ‘Le voile tomba. Les ténèbres du monde extérieur et intérieur s’éclairèrent. J’avais trouvé ma voie. J’étais votre élève’ (135). The relationship between student and mentor resembles a religious vocation (‘trouver sa voie’), where Sixte takes on the role of a prophet and guide. Alongside religious vocabulary, Greslou’s depiction of Sixte’s influence repeatedly involves erotic imagery: his mind is ‘penetrated’ by Sixte’s reasoning (135) and he is ‘seduced’ by Sixte’s method (137). Furthermore, Greslou’s philosophical awakening mirrors its sexual counterpart: ‘Ah! comment vous raconter ces fièvres d’une initiation qui fut pareille à un premier amour par les félicités de l’enthousiasme et ses ferveurs? J’avais comme une joie physique à renverser, vos livres à la main, tout l’édifice des croyances où j’avais grandi’ (137). The power of Greslou’s ‘initiation’, both intellectual and erotic, is here unambiguously tied to a destructive anti-social urge, premised on the elimination of earlier beliefs associated with religious dogma.

These destructive urges subsequently take form in Greslou’s seduction experiment on Charlotte Jussat and her resulting suicide. Through a relationship of influence and imitation, Greslou’s seduction by Sixte’s work is mirrored in



Charlotte's seduction by Greslou's *interpretation* of that work. The link between reading and action is affirmed by the role of storytelling in Charlotte's seduction. Greslou's first attempt to seduce Charlotte involves recounting a 'fable tentatrice' (194) that romanticises his role as a dejected lover:

Je comptais obséder de la sorte cette tête inoccupée, jusqu'à la minute propice où, pour compléter ce travail de hantise quotidienne, je me déciderais à lui raconter sur moi-même une histoire qui, justifiant mes tristesses et commentant mes attitudes, achèverait d'accaparer cette imagination que je jugeais déjà troublée. (193)

The reference to self-justification and self-analysis ('justifier' and 'commenter') in this section offers a mise-en-abyme of Greslou's self-analytical confession to Sixte.<sup>84</sup> However, this initial attempt at seduction through storytelling is not immediately successful, so Greslou turns to others' writings in order to advance his experiment. Taking inspiration from Sixte's vision of the 'âme littéraire' – 'ce modelage inconscient de notre cœur à la ressemblance des passions peintes par les poètes' (208) – Greslou influences Charlotte by reading Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet* aloud to the Jussat family over several evening gatherings. When Charlotte subsequently asks him for reading suggestions, Greslou reflects on the power of 'l'intoxication littéraire' (213): a popular metaphor for literary influence that also hints forward to Charlotte's physical poisoning later in the story. In this way, Greslou is both the victim and perpetrator of negative literary influence.

However, throughout the seduction narrative, the binarism between the seducer and the seduced is not clear cut. Rather, it is complex and reciprocal: 'Je m'étais préparé à la séduire, et c'était moi qui me sentais séduit' (204). This role reversal recurs as their relationship strengthens, culminating in the sex scene that

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<sup>84</sup> I explore the relationship between Greslou's self-analysis and self-justification in more detail below.

marks the success and failure of Greslou's seduction experiment. After succumbing to Greslou's advances, on the understanding that their union will be followed by joint suicide, Charlotte takes on the active role of storyteller when she confesses her feelings for Greslou: 'c'est avec une voix de fantôme, une voix d'au-delà de la vie qu'elle me parlait, me racontant la longue histoire de ses sentiments pour moi' (286). The otherworldly status attributed to Charlotte places her story beyond the power of her supposed seducer. Her act of revelation is rendered sublime, compared to an 'extase du martyre' (287), which clearly contrasts with Greslou's subsequent cowardice (295). Charlotte's story, culminating in suicide, therefore constitutes both the pathos-inducing consequence of Greslou's seductive narratives, and the space in which the victim's own self-narration and agency transcends the banal seduction quest.

The role reversal that occurs between Charlotte and Greslou offers a structural parallel to the connection between Greslou and Sixte, further highlighting the reciprocity of the seducer-seduced relationship. In the *récit cadre*, Bourget deploys imagery relating to corrupted innocence to describe Sixte's reaction to Greslou's confession. Sixte clearly perceives himself to be sullied by his contact with Greslou's actions:

A mesure que Sixte avançait dans le manuscrit, il lui semblait qu'un peu de sa personne intime se souillait, se corrompait, se gangrenait, tant il retrouvait de lui-même dans ce jeune homme, mais un "lui-même" cousu, par quel mystère? aux sentiments qu'il détestait le plus au monde. (316)

Bourget reinforces the parallel between Sixte and Charlotte by using the verbs 'se souiller', 'se corrompre' and 'se gangrener'. The rhetorical question, presented via *style indirect libre*, encourages the reader to empathise with the philosopher's revulsion. Sixte feels sullied because he is faced with the vision of his writings

becoming ‘les complices d’un hideux orgueil et d’une abjecte sensualité’ (317). The adjectives ‘hideux’ and ‘abjecte’ offer an unambiguous condemnation of Greslou’s actions, while enacting a form of self-flagellation by implicating Sixte with a denigrated criminal. Sixte’s supposed ‘corruption’ of Greslou through deterministic psychology is clearly intertwined with the corrupting influence of Greslou’s *interpretation* of this psychology. The corrupter (Sixte) is therefore capable of being corrupted, much like the seducer (Greslou) is capable of being seduced, by their respective ‘victims’. By setting up these parallel structures within the novel, Bourget shows the relationship of influence and imitation between mentor and disciple, seducer and seduced, to be reciprocal and mutually implicating.

Through these relationships, Sixte occupies several intersecting and morally ambivalent roles within the novel: a mentor, doctor, judge, and confessor. He is called upon to play these roles by Greslou’s manuscript – a text with a multivalent status indicated by its various titles. The initial title of the manuscript, appearing on the first page, is ‘Psychologie moderne’. This places the text within scientific and philosophical discourse, while disguising its true content from uninitiated readers. On the manuscript’s second page, there is an alternative title, ‘Mémoire sur moi-même’, which combines the language of scientific analysis (*un mémoire*) with that of memory and autobiography (*une mémoire*). Finally, the narrator re-names the manuscript ‘Confession d’un jeune homme d’aujourd’hui’ (80), thereby placing it within the literary genre of confessional narrative and related religious practices. This final title is important because it highlights the close association between science and religion throughout the novel. When recounting his childhood in ‘Mon milieu d’idées’, Greslou emphasises his ‘goût précoce de la dissection intime’ and his fortnightly visits to confessional (115). The ritualistic verbal formulae used in

the confessional appeal to Greslou because of their captivating ‘poésie de mystère’ (116). Yet Greslou’s obsessive desire to confess borders on the pathological. During his self-analysis, ‘il entra vite plus de plaisir que de repentir’, and he prefers ‘les fuyantes complications du péché’ over ‘[les] simplicités de la vertu’ (118). Bourget here shows how Catholic devotion can enable unhealthy mental habits, which subsequently undermine religious sentiment and lead to the very sins they aim to discourage. Once Greslou loses his religious faith, scientific and philosophical methods offer an alternative means of obsessive self-analysis. During Greslou’s employment by the Jussat family, Adrien Sixte’s analytical methods align with Catholic confessional. Greslou refers to his psychological self-analysis as a daily ‘examen de conscience’, written in a padlocked diary. He describes this process as a form of ‘oraison’, ‘liturgie du Moi’, and the scientific equivalent of a *confession générale*: ‘un tableau complet de [ses] instincts divers depuis le plus lointain éveil de [sa] conscience’ (170).<sup>85</sup> Although Greslou destroys the diary after Charlotte’s death, his epistolary confession to Sixte replaces and supplements its absence in the novel, creating an increasingly ambiguous relationship between mentor and disciple.

By blending scientific and religious vocabularies throughout the narrative, Greslou places his mentor in the role of doctor and confessor, giving him the attendant responsibility of an authority figure whose judgement is sought at times of physiological, psychological, and moral dilemma.<sup>86</sup> Both the doctor and the

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<sup>85</sup> In Catholic practice, the ‘*confession générale*’ differs from ordinary confession. It takes place leading up to and during important moments in the Catholic calendar. Usually, it covers the whole period of an individual’s life, across several sessions, and could also be undertaken in writing. See Alain Corbin, *L’Harmonie des plaisirs: les manières de jouir du siècle des Lumières à l’avènement de la sexologie* (Paris: Perrin, 2008), pp. 327–330.

<sup>86</sup> Michel Foucault highlights the centrality of confession to religious and scientific practices in his discussion of the ‘*scientia sexualis*’ in *Histoire de la sexualité I: la volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) pp. 78–94.

confessor are professionally bound to a code of confidentiality. This is reflected in Sixte's decision to read Greslou's manuscript, which implies the acceptance of a tacit pact between reader and author. On the second page of the manuscript, Greslou insists that by reading what follows, Sixte is making an unspoken promise never to disclose its contents (77–8). Although initially accepting this pact, Sixte changes his mind upon reading it, since he fears becoming complicit with an injustice by remaining silent. The fact that Sixte is willing to hand over the manuscript if the Count, Charlotte's brother, does not give evidence in court therefore constitutes a betrayal of trust. In fact, a series of broken reading pacts propel the novel's plot towards the denouement. As Proulx notes, the pact created between Greslou and Sixte mirrors a similar exchange between Charlotte and her brother André.<sup>87</sup> Having received a letter containing Charlotte's pre-suicide confession, André de Jussat holds proof of Greslou's innocence, at least in the legal sense, since it is clear that he did not commit the crime for which he is arrested. However, the letter also proves Greslou's guilt in social or moral terms, for having seduced a woman on false pretences and failing to honour his promise regarding their suicide pact. This letter places André in a moral dilemma. The final chapter of *Le Disciple* describes André's unease during Greslou's trial, when he is torn between two conflicting moral imperatives: saving an innocent life and protecting his family's reputation. André initially seeks to save his sister's honour by concealing – and then destroying – the compromising letter. However, he is haunted by the voice of his conscience, 'celle qui nous défend de nous faire les complices d'une iniquité' (338). Upon receiving an anonymous letter (from Sixte) questioning his silence, André decides to reveal the truth in court, before killing Greslou as an act of aristocratic vengeance.

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<sup>87</sup> Proulx, p. 143.

In this way, both Sixte and André break – or threaten to break – the bonds of secrecy imposed by the reading pacts implicit in reading confessional texts, in the name of moral codes that function beyond the institutional legal context.

The reading pacts in *Le Disciple* highlight the contagious nature of guilt and the burden of knowledge for those occupying the role of confessor or judge, including the implied and actual reader. This burden is especially heavy for Sixte, who is placed almost forcibly in this position by Greslou's letter. At the start of his confession, Greslou insists on the 'lien' that unites him with his chosen mentor: 'Il existe de vous, le maître illustre, à moi votre élève, accusé du crime le plus infâme, un lien [...] aussi étroit qu'imbrisable' (81–2). This 'lien' is affirmed by appeals to Sixte's judgement as Greslou's intellectual and moral guide. Throughout the novel, Sixte's authority resembles that held by a confessor or *directeur de conscience*. As we saw above, the *directeur de conscience* was a highly ambivalent figure associated with questionable moral influence and tacit erotic permissiveness. This analogy is telling and contributes further to the moral ambiguity of Sixte's position. It is first suggested by Greslou's mother, who plays the role of a go-between by bringing her son's manuscript to Sixte. Employing the logic of exemplarity and influence, she accuses Sixte of corrupting her child while at the same time insisting that he use this influence for positive ends. She compares Sixte to a Catholic *directeur de conscience* by asking him to intervene on Greslou's behalf: 'ce que j'aurais demandé au prêtre, je viens vous le demander...' (75–6). According to this logic, Sixte is best placed to save Greslou precisely *because* he corrupted him.

The analogy between Sixte and the *directeur de conscience* strengthens throughout the confessional *récit enchâssé*, where Greslou addresses Sixte as a mentor and authoritative figure. Much like the penitent looks to the priest for

religious guidance, Greslou appeals to Sixte's scientific 'faith' to allay the doubts plaguing him in light of his feelings for Charlotte: "“Ah! mon cher maître, j'ai besoin que vous me croyiez dans ce que je vais vous dire [...]. J'ai tant besoin de ne pas en douter, moi non plus; besoin de me répéter que je n'ai pas menti alors. Croyez-moi.”" (276–7). Greslou's repeated appeal to Sixte's faith in, and good opinion of, his actions belies the truth value of his assertions. The imperative 'Croyez-moi' reads like a desperate and self-delusional bid for Sixte's post-hoc blessing and forgiveness, rather than a true act of contrition. Indeed, throughout the novel, Sixte is repeatedly called upon to judge Greslou's actions in a way that presumes he will understand, justify, and pardon them. In this way, Greslou's appeals read as a plea for Sixte to turn a blind eye and enact a form of moral *complaisance*. This becomes clear when Greslou recounts his change of heart regarding the suicide pact: 'Vous qui avez décrit en des pages si fortes la vapeur d'illusion soulevée en nous par le désir physique, [...] vous ne me jugerez pas monstrueux d'avoir senti cette vapeur se dissiper avec le désir, cette ivresse s'en aller avec la possession' (288). By reminding Sixte of the phenomena described, and the principles propounded, in his works, Greslou's confession forecloses the very judgement it claims to encourage. Much like the female penitents in Michelet's *Du prêtre*, or the female readers mocked by Lorrain in *Dans l'Oratoire*, Greslou seems to seek casuistry and moral laxity rather than true judgement and penance. Indeed, by the manuscript's closing lines, Greslou's emotional urgency suggests a deeply ambivalent faith in the religious system he simultaneously disavows and manipulates:

J'ai besoin d'être compris, consolé, aimé; qu'une voix me plaigne et me dise des paroles qui dissipent les fantômes [...]. Je m'étais flatté que j'arriverais à vous raconter mon histoire comme vous exposez vos problèmes de psychologie dans vos livres que j'ai tant lus, et

puis je ne trouve rien à vous dire que le mot du désespoir: “*De profundis!*” Ecrivez-moi, mon cher maître, dirigez-moi. Renforcez-moi dans la doctrine qui fut, qui est encore la mienne [...]. Dites-moi que je ne suis pas un monstre, qu’il n’y a pas de monstre, que vous serez encore là, si je sors de cette crise suprême, à me vouloir comme disciple, comme ami. (307–8)

Greslou’s exclamation of ‘*De profundis!*’ attributes to Sixte the power of divine mercy. However, the slip from past to present tense in the phrase ‘la doctrine qui fut, qui est encore la mienne’ reveals underlying doubt regarding the validity of Sixte’s scientific approach. Greslou’s self-acknowledged failure to adopt Sixte’s method and expository style in his confession hints not only at a personal shortcoming, but also at the limitations of Sixte’s theoretical framework when applied to real life. At the end of the confession, we are therefore left wondering whether Sixte’s intercession could ever restore Greslou’s faith in a determinist and positivist outlook.

Greslou’s final plea for reassurance and absolution paves the way for the moralising shift in the penultimate frame narrative, and for Sixte’s ‘conversion’ in the novel’s closing lines. In ‘Tourments d’idées’, Bourget describes Sixte’s moral repugnance after having read Greslou’s confession: ‘[il] avait tressailli de même à chaque rappel nouveau de son nom dans cette singulière analyse, à chaque citation d’un de ses ouvrages qui lui prouvait le droit de cet abominable séducteur à se dire son élève’ (316). This horror indirectly affirms Sixte’s moral complicity, since he recognises his influence over Greslou and feels guilty as a consequence. For a character who, earlier in the narrative, had no qualms in suggesting that it would be scientifically valid to encourage children to practise ‘vices’ in order to understand human psychology better (50), the sudden presence of explicit moral condemnation (‘abominable séducteur’) seems ironic and jarring. The text itself acknowledges this paradox: Sixte’s anguished guilt is described as being ‘en contradiction avec toutes



ses doctrines' (321). And yet, at the novel's close, Sixte is humbled by the tragic events he has witnessed: 'cet analyste presque inhumain à force de logique s'humiliait, s'inclinait, s'abîmait devant le mystère impénétrable de la destinée' (359). The term 'mystère impénétrable' has religious resonances, as does the physical gesture evoked by the verb 's'incliner'. The final image of Sixte crying – after mentally reciting the Lord's Prayer and quoting from Pascal's *Mystère de Jésus* ('Tu ne me chercherais pas si tu ne m'avais pas trouvé') – suggests the likelihood of his eventual conversion to the Catholic faith. In this way, *Le Disciple*'s ending clearly resembles that of *Un crime d'amour*: both Sixte and de Querne grapple with forces beyond their comprehension and accept the possibility of an alternative vision of human behaviour – a vision that fits neatly into traditional religious frameworks.

Although highly suggestive, *Le Disciple*'s denouement does not in fact clearly confirm whether Sixte ultimately accepts a Christian outlook: he may cry over his disciple's corpse, but he makes no overt renunciation of his earlier philosophical position. Furthermore, Sixte's concluding prayer and Greslou's '*De profundis!*' ring somewhat hollow when considered within the entire narrative arc. We might therefore ask: does the preface's moralising vision apply unproblematically to the text it frames? This question echoes contemporaneous responses to the work, which frequently highlighted its moral inconclusiveness. As with *Un crime d'amour*, Bourget faced criticism for the *invraisemblance* of the novel's denouement, especially when considered alongside the heavy-handed moralising in the preface. For example, Augustin Filon referred to the novel's preface as 'trop belle, peut-être, et trop éloquente!' and stated that he was not

entirely convinced by Sixte's character.<sup>88</sup> He questioned the philosopher's conversion and the work's overall 'message':

Ce "jeune homme" auquel l'auteur adressait dès le début une si ardente et si mystérieuse supplication [...] Consentira-t-il à s'agenouiller? [...] L'auteur lui-même est-il converti? Ce livre semble un adieu à la psychologie, et parce qu'on peut la pousser plus loin, et parce qu'elle est en quelque sorte réfutée par l'absurdité de ses excès. Pourtant je ne réponds de rien.<sup>89</sup>

Filon's lexis of doubt, here seen in the unanswered rhetorical questions and the verb 'sembler', emphasises the difficulty of opting for a clear-cut interpretation of Bourget's novel. Édouard Rod took a similar position by noting the contrast between the moralising preface and the centrality of Greslou's 'malsaines analyses' to the primary narrative.<sup>90</sup> He also refuses to make a clear pronouncement on the moral value of Bourget's works, insisting that he allow the reader to decide between the two interpretations.<sup>91</sup>

By attributing to readers an active interpretative role, Filon and Rod reveal an extradiegetic reading pact that reflects the intradiegetic pact between Sixte and Greslou. This is important, because readers' capacity to respond to and reject the novel's 'thesis' complicates the logic of exemplarity and imitation inherent in the 'bad influence' model. As we saw in the *Essais*, readers' capacity for resistance and re-appropriation fascinated Bourget from early in his career. *Le Disciple* returns to this question with a necessarily different approach, due to its status as thesis novel. In *Authoritarian Fictions*, Susan Suleiman defines the 'roman à thèse' as '*a novel written in the realistic mode (that is, based on an aesthetic of verisimilitude and*

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<sup>88</sup> Filon, pp. 90–1.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>90</sup> 'Est-ce que les malsaines analyses de Robert Greslou sont de bonnes leçons pour cette jeunesse à laquelle il importe d'enseigner l'amour et la volonté? Les lecteurs qu'elles ont passionnés ont-ils beaucoup réfléchi à la responsabilité d'Adrien Sixte?' Édouard Rod, *Les Idées morales du temps présent* (Paris: Perrin, 1891), pp. 105–6.

<sup>91</sup> Rod, *Les Idées morales*, p. 121.

representation), which signals itself to the reader as primarily didactic in intent, seeking to demonstrate the validity of a political, philosophical, or religious doctrine.’<sup>92</sup> She notes how the genre is caught between the conflicting demands of verisimilitude and didacticism. On the one hand, readers must be willing to ‘play the game’ by accepting the novelist’s devices as a ‘natural’ representation of the real. On the other, readers may at any point refuse to accept this naturalness if the author’s didacticism is too obvious and manipulative.<sup>93</sup> To prevent the realist pact from breaking, the writer of a *roman à thèse* must allow for some internal contradiction, so that their readers will swallow the didactic pill.<sup>94</sup> According to this logic, *Le Disciple* is an exemplary *roman à these* because it contains sufficiently conflicting elements to allow readers to arrive more willingly at its pre-empted conclusions.

That said, it is worth asking: *can* literature truly influence people, or is it simply a case of preaching to the (already partially) converted?<sup>95</sup> Considering the fierce debate surrounding *Le Disciple* upon its publication, it is probable that many fin-de-siècle readers would have approached the novel with some preconceived notions regarding its content and ‘message’. However, the polemic around *Le Disciple*’s moral message was sufficiently inconclusive to discourage readers from automatically choosing one interpretation over another. It is worth noting that Bourget rejected the label *roman à these* to define his work, preferring instead the term *roman à idées*. Using this distinction as a springboard, Leon Sachs has resituated the reader-text relationship in Bourget’s works against the backdrop of Republican pedagogical innovation – notably the *lois Ferry* – which exemplified

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<sup>92</sup> Suleiman, p. 7. Original italics.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., pp. 72–3.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 172 and p. 183.

<sup>95</sup> Suleiman discusses this interpretation in footnote 51, chapter 3, pp. 274–5.

the French state's promotion of inductive learning theories that encouraged students to participate actively in their own education. By comparing readers to students, Sachs suggests that Bourget's literature of ideas is pedagogical rather than didactic, constituting 'a literature that educates not so much by imposing its lesson but by guiding, or accompanying, the reader in his search for meaning'.<sup>96</sup> Studying *Le Disciple* as an exemplar, Sachs claims that the reader is invited to approach Greslou's confession as a scientific document, and 'to read with a rigor and circumspection worthy of a scientist'.<sup>97</sup> Sachs' argument is compelling, although we can nuance it by appreciating the multivalent status of Bourget's text. As noted above, Greslou's story is not only a scientific 'document' or 'mémoire', but also a quasi-religious confession and a fictional text inscribed in earlier literary traditions such as the *roman d'analyse*. The reading pact created by these less obviously 'scientific' traditions is structured by identification and implication with morally ambiguous content. It is precisely this loaded content that provoked furore upon *Le Disciple*'s publication and that Bourget's reader-student – whether fin-de-siècle or modern – learns to unravel.

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*Le Disciple* is, above all, a novel about the complicit nature of reading. The relationships it depicts – between teacher and student, priest and penitent, doctor and patient – all depend on tacit forms of trust and influence that are open to abuse. The meta-literary ramifications of these reciprocal and mutually implicating bonds provoked heated debate in the fin-de-siècle press. Through his longstanding contributions to questions of literary complicity, culminating in his response to the

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<sup>96</sup> Sachs, pp. 54–5 and 59.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

Chambige affair, Bourget demonstrated the power wielded by critics framing literature as the source of social ills. Although he faced no legal ramifications for his implication in Henri Chambige's crime, Bourget was put on trial by his peers in the echo chamber of newspaper columns. This 'trial' was in one sense purely rhetorical. Yet it tangibly affected Bourget's career trajectory and fed into broader patterns in the literary field. Bourget and his peers effectively asked: what connection might there be, or should there be, between a writer and a murderer? This question haunted authors in an era that witnessed the rise of criminology, crime fiction, and mass media reports on infamous criminals. Indeed, the intense media debate about literary influence and writerly responsibility that greeted *Le Disciple* can be better understood when it is considered as part of the fin-de-siècle obsession with stories about violent crime. To pursue this line of enquiry, the following chapter examines the wider cross-fertilisation between criminological discourses and literary production in the era, analysing works that fed off political and judicial concerns regarding literature's capacity to encourage readers to commit copycat crimes. As we see in the coming pages, this approach included a thriving playful aesthetic adopted by avant-garde writers and journalists, who – unlike Paul Bourget – actively fostered a reputation for criminal complicity.

## 2. Fictional Accomplices and Complicit Fictions

Crime was a hot topic throughout the nineteenth century. As a central theme and plot device, it featured heavily in a range of mass media formats, from the centuries-old tradition of *canards* to later developments such as melodrama, gothic fiction, and the *roman feuilleton*.<sup>1</sup> Broadly classified as ‘popular literature’, these genres depicted social, moral, or criminal transgression in a plotline that – through a series of complications and resolutions – pushed towards a return to order at the denouement.<sup>2</sup> By doing so, they paved the way for modern crime fiction, in which a detective deciphers clues to unravel a criminal mystery and bring justice to its victims.<sup>3</sup> The evolution, dissemination, and popularity of these crime-centred genres were closely intertwined with the changing press landscape throughout the century. Increased literacy rates, technological advances, and political censorship encouraged the rise of cheaper, more heterogeneous daily papers, which focused less on informing and guiding opinion than on capturing readers’ attention (and customer loyalty) through a stream of sensational news items, gossip, and serialized fiction.<sup>4</sup> In this context, crime stories took a central role in appealing to a burgeoning readership. Reports on real-life crimes in *faits divers* could make a

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief history of popular fiction, see Marc Angenot, ‘La Littérature populaire française au dix-neuvième siècle’, *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, 9, 3 (1982), 307–333. On the *canard*, see Thomas Cragin, *Murder in Parisian Streets: Manufacturing Crime and Justice in the Popular Press, 1830–1900* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> See Daniel Couégnas, *Introduction à la paralittérature* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), *Imagining the Popular*, ed. by Diana Holmes and David Loosely (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), and Bettina Lerner, *Inventing the Popular: Printing, Politics, and Poetics* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Detective fiction has attracted significant attention in Francophone and Anglophone criticism. Notable examples include: David Platten, *The Pleasures of Crime: Reading Modern French Crime Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), Luc Boltanski, *Énigmes et complots: une enquête à propos d’enquêtes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), and Andrea Goulet, *Legacies of the Rue Morgue: Science, Space, and Crime Fiction in France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> See Maria Adamowicz-Hariasz, ‘From Opinion to Information: The *Roman-Feuilleton* and the Transformation of the Nineteenth-Century French Press’ in *Making the News: Modernity and the Mass Press in Nineteenth-Century France*, ed. by Jean de la Motte and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), pp. 160–84 (pp. 161–3 and 177).

newspaper's fortune by expanding its circulation.<sup>5</sup> Crime also featured heavily in popular *romans feuilletons*, such as Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842–3) and Émile Gaboriau's *L'Affaire Lerouge* (1865). These genres contributed to the increasing sensationalism of press reporting, which, as Vanessa Schwartz has demonstrated, rendered everyday existence spectacular and provided readers with a sense of participation in a wider collective through their familiarity with shared cultural references.<sup>6</sup> Such references accumulated throughout the century across different popular media forms, including melodrama. Serialized novels were frequently adapted for the stage, and popular dramas were re-written for serialisation in newspapers.<sup>7</sup> As well as sharing a proclivity for crime and transgression, these popular genres employed similar techniques and stylistic tics, including an emphatic use of repetition, cliché, hyperbole, and dialogue, in plotlines dominated by fast-paced, constantly moving action.<sup>8</sup> Lise Queffélec-Dumasy groups these elements of popular narrative into three dominant traits: 'la redondance, la lisibilité et la théâtralisation'.<sup>9</sup> Such techniques appealed primarily to the reader-audience's emotive responses – via mimetic identification, suspense, and pathos – rather than encouraging intellectual distance or critique.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> On the *fait divers*'s appeal, see Adamowicz-Hariasz, 'From Opinion to Information', p. 179 and Angenot, 'La Littérature populaire', pp. 305 and 328. *Le Petit Journal*'s circulation increased by 200,000 copies within a few weeks of reporting on the Troppmann case (see Cragin, p. 37).

<sup>6</sup> Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 32–43.

<sup>7</sup> Angenot, 'La Littérature populaire' p. 323, Couégnas, *Introduction*, p. 138, and René Polette, 'Mélodrame et roman-feuilleton sous le second Empire', *Europe: revue littéraire mensuelle*, 703–704 (1987), 82–9.

<sup>8</sup> Adamowicz-Hariasz, 'From Opinion to Information', p. 165 and Couégnas, *Introduction*.

<sup>9</sup> Lise Queffélec-Dumasy, 'De quelques problèmes méthodologiques concernant l'étude du roman populaire' in *Problèmes de l'écriture populaire au XIXe siècle*, ed. by Roger Bellet and Philippe Régnier (Limoges: Presses universitaires de Limoges, 1997), pp. 229–266 (pp. 242–4).

<sup>10</sup> Couégnas, *Introduction*, p. 78 and pp. 123–4, and Diana Holmes, 'The mimetic prejudice: the popular novel in France' in *Imagining the Popular*, ed. by Holmes and Loosely, pp. 91–3.

In her recent work on empathy, Maria Scott notes that ‘empathic responsiveness to narrative fiction has often been framed as a dangerous kind of openness’, where the affective impact of immersive literature manipulates readers through a dangerous form of ‘seduction’.<sup>11</sup> As we saw in chapter one, notions of seduction and contagion were essential to the ‘bad influence’ model of reading prevalent in the nineteenth century. This model largely explains the vehemence with which popular literary forms, and in particular crime narratives, were demonised by critics, scholars, and jurists throughout the period – reaching fever pitch at the fin de siècle. However, crime was not only a literary motif, but also a contested object of scientific study, judicial scrutiny, and socio-moral authority during the Third Republic. In this period, which witnessed the dual rise of criminology and crime fiction, a recurrent debate was the question of criminal responsibility, as well as the role (and potential limitations) of the justice system in defining, regulating, and punishing it. These questions were discussed by specialists in the emerging disciplines of medical pathology and criminal anthropology, as well as by jurists debating penal reform during the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Against the backdrop of these debates, medicine had an increasingly important role to play in the criminal justice system. It gained an unprecedented level of social and cultural authority from increased professionalisation and vested political interests. In an era marked by civil unrest, from the spectre of the Commune to workers’ strikes and anarchist bombings, there was growing support for theories that would justify a social defence approach to judicial procedure.<sup>13</sup> Debates raged about

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<sup>11</sup> Maria Scott, *Empathy and the Strangeness of Fiction: Readings in French Realism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp. 25–8.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) pp. 97–131.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22–48. See also Dominique Kalifa, *L’Encre et le sang. Récits de crimes et société à la Belle Époque* (Paris: Fayard, 1995) pp. 234–70.



extenuating circumstances, notably the insanity defence, and the role of the jury in the attribution of criminal responsibility and in the severity of punishments. Reacting to jurors' perceived laxity, the government passed repressive laws such as the *Loi de relégation* (27 May 1885), to provide harsher sentences for re-offenders. Similarly, the *Lois scélérates* (1893–4) aimed to assuage alarmist viewpoints expressed in the press about anarchism and social disorder.<sup>14</sup>

This repressive approach to crime extended to its cultural representations. Scientific and judicial inquiry was not limited to real-life criminals – it also scrutinized the depiction of crime in literary production and mass media formats. Frequent targets included newspaper reports of criminal trials, popular crime narrative in *romans feuilletons*, and melodrama.<sup>15</sup> This was caused by literature's perceived capacity to influence readers to the point of encouraging them, through the aesthetic representation of transgressive actions and the heroization of criminal characters, to reject normative morality and commit real-life crimes. This fear escalated when the readers in question were considered to be inherently corruptible, and when their corruption posed a threat to the status quo – that is, when these readers were women or members of the working class.<sup>16</sup> To suppress the perceived danger of moral 'contagion', repeated attempts were made throughout the century to control the media forms attributed with its propagation. For example, in 1835, theatre censorship was restored after a brief period of press freedom. This censorship targeted portrayals of glorified criminal characters, particularly those

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<sup>14</sup> Kalifa, *L'Encre et le sang*, p. 235.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 203–8 and 216–23.

<sup>16</sup> On the gender- and class-based prejudices informing discourses on criminality, see Ann-Louise Shapiro, *Breaking the Codes: Female Criminality in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 26–32.

inspired by the bandit-cum-dandy figure Robert Macaire.<sup>17</sup> Then, as part of the 1850 censorship laws, the Riancey amendment temporarily suppressed the rise of the *roman feuilleton* by adding an extra one-centime stamp on each issue of any newspaper that published a serial novel.<sup>18</sup> Later in the century, and despite the greater freedom enabled by the 1881 press law, crime narrative and drama could still be targeted – and its authors and publishers prosecuted – for outraging public decency and inciting crime. These structures of censorship, whether effective in practice or not, highlight the disquiet caused by the ever-popular appeal of criminality as a literary motif and source of mass entertainment.

Despite providing intellectual and ideological justification for the attempted suppression of popular crime narrative, authoritative discourses were often complicit with the ‘contagion’ they condemned. Highlighting this irony in her study of fin-de-siècle female criminality, Ann-Louise Shapiro writes that ‘while professionals saw their expertise compromised by popular accounts [...] [they] were in part responsible for both the seepage of this material into popular culture and for the slippage between popular and scientific writing’.<sup>19</sup> To support her vision of cultural contagion, Shapiro cites the increasing theatricality of trials held at the *cour d’assises*, memoirs published by former chiefs of police, and criminological studies:

Seemingly oblivious to the paradox, criminological studies endlessly repeated the sordid details of sensational cases as they ritually condemned prurient interest in crime, soon producing a stock of familiar criminal lore and a long list of infamous *causes célèbres* that were so well known as to become reference points in both high and low cultural forms.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Odile Krakovitch, ‘Robert Macaire ou la grande peur des censeurs’, *Europe: revue littéraire mensuelle*, 703–704 (1987), p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Adamowicz-Hariasz, ‘From Opinion to Information’, p. 177.

<sup>19</sup> Shapiro, p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

To this list of complicit discourses, we might also add the *Gazette des Tribunaux*, which disseminated summaries of criminal proceedings, offering writers a wealth of primary source material. Furthermore, while contributing to popular ‘criminal lore’, specialists in criminal anthropology and psychopathology regularly cited literary examples to support their analyses, and in some cases treated famous writers as case studies.<sup>21</sup> This practice was mirrored by writers with scientific pretensions – most famously Émile Zola – who justified their depiction of criminal and transgressive behaviour by claiming that their fictional works contributed productively to their contemporaries’ understanding of these phenomena. In this way, the boundaries separating a denigrated popular culture from the bastions of literary and scientific authority were significantly blurred by the interchangeability of their crime-centred content.

Writers were not oblivious to the ironies and complicities at play in the network of shared criminal references that criss-crossed generic boundaries, literary schools, and authoritative discourses at the fin de siècle. For although the theme of criminality was associated with mimetic and entertainment-driven popular literature on the one hand, and with ‘serious’ scientific study on the other, this did not prevent members of the literary avant-garde from appropriating it for more satirical and subversive ends. The most notable example of this phenomenon was the creative exploration of an analogy between art and murder. As Dominique Kalifa and Lisa Downing have demonstrated, the ‘infamous *causes célèbres*’ shared by nineteenth-century writers, journalists, scientists, and jurists were dominated by

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<sup>21</sup> Notable examples include Cesare Lombroso’s work *The Man of Genius* (*L’uomo di genio*), which was first published in 1888 and subsequently translated into French (1889) and English (1891). This work highly influenced Max Nordau, whose *Degeneration* (*Entartung*, 1892–3) was dedicated to Lombroso. Both works contributed to wider debates about literary bad influence in fin-de-siècle France.

high-profile murderers – including Pierre Rivière, Pierre Lacenaire, Marie Lafarge, and Jack the Ripper – who gained celebrity status through the proliferation of texts recounting and debating their crimes.<sup>22</sup> Referred to by one fin-de-siècle critic as ‘la littérature des assassins’, this wide range of criminally inspired literary production included works that appeared (however ironically) to glorify criminal actions, while offering meta-literary commentary by allying the writer with the murderer. Using the term ‘murderer literature’ as a springboard, this chapter considers the imbrication between popular, scientific, and literary representations of crime, highlighting how murder became a source of ironic appropriation for writers across the literary spectrum. In the first section, I consider the playful association between murderers and artists in avant-garde literary culture. In the second, I offer extended close analysis of two key examples of ‘murderer literature’ by writers associated with Decadence and Naturalism, respectively: Rachilde’s *Nono* (1885) and Émile Zola’s *La Bête humaine* (1890).

### ***La Littérature des assassins***

Why is a murderer like a writer? How might one be in league with the other? And can violent crime be considered an aesthetic object without jeopardising the moral compass of its creator or audience? These questions were most famously posed by Thomas De Quincey in his essay ‘On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts’ (1827): a fictional speech addressed to the ‘Society of Connoisseurs in Murder’, whose members describe themselves as ‘amateurs and dilettanti in the various modes of bloodshed’.<sup>23</sup> In a later ‘Postscript’ to the essay, De Quincey expanded on his art-murder analogy by describing the Ratcliffe Highway murderer John

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<sup>22</sup> See Kalifa, *L’Encre et le sang*, and Lisa Downing, *The Subject of Murder: Gender, Exceptionality, and the Modern Killer* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *On Murder*, ed. by Robert Morrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 8.

Williams as an ‘artist’, London as his ‘studio’, and the murders as a ‘performance’.<sup>24</sup> As both Kalifa and Downing have noted, this text was a key reference point for French authors associated with Decadence and the literary avant-garde, who used it to parody authoritative discourses and to create an ironic reformulation of ‘l’art pour l’art’.<sup>25</sup>

Inspired by the satirical, polemical approach employed by De Quincey, writers such as Rachilde and Octave Mirbeau wrote criminally inspired material that subverted the moral status quo by asserting the social utility and artistic value of murder. Throughout the late 1880s and 1890s, Mirbeau published a series of articles on the topic, which he subsequently amalgamated to create the ‘Frontispiece’ to *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899). Published at the height of the Dreyfus affair, *Le Jardin des supplices* attacked bourgeois corruption and colonial violence, while offering an ambivalent moral position laced with violent eroticism. The central narrative describes the male protagonist’s relationship with a mysterious *femme fatale* called Clara, who gives him a guided tour of the different forms of torture practised in a Chinese prison. Framing this narrative, the ‘Frontispiece’ describes a male-only post-dinner discussion, during which a member of the ‘Académie des sciences morales et politiques’ makes the following claim:

S’il n’y avait plus de meurtre, il n’y aurait plus de gouvernements d’aucune sorte, par ce fait admirable que le crime en général, et le meurtre en particulier sont, non seulement leur excuse, mais leur unique raison d’être... Nous vivrions alors en pleine anarchie, ce qui ne peut se concevoir...<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> De Quincey, *On Murder*, pp. 98–9 and 103. The Postscript was first published in volume 4 of *Selections Grave and Gay* (1854), which also contained revised versions of the 1827 and 1839 essays.

<sup>25</sup> Kalifa, *L’Encre et le sang*, p. 188 and Downing, *The Subject of Murder*, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Octave Mirbeau, *Le Jardin des supplices*, ed. by Michel Delon (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 44.

In this section, Mirbeau subverts the ‘social defence’ approach to criminal justice by suggesting that society is in fact best defended by encouraging crime rather than by preventing it. In a similar way, Sylvain d’Hauterac – the protagonist of Rachilde’s *La Sanglante Ironie* (1891) – reverses the logic of fin-de-siècle depopulation fears by asserting the social utility of murder through an extended medical analogy, claiming that ‘[le] sang habilement répandu fait la santé des corps, et trop de sang conservé mène à la pourriture’.<sup>27</sup> Through their reformulations of politically loaded discourses, Rachilde and Mirbeau opposed traditional moral authority, adopting a counter-discursive, paradoxical, and humorous literary position typical of the avant-garde.

Characters in *La Sanglante Ironie* and *Le Jardin des supplices* further reflect De Quincey’s earlier essays by asserting the respectability of murder as a vocation and art form. For example, Sylvain d’Hauterac refers to fellow murderers as ‘philosophes opérants’ and disdains those who kill for gain rather than for the act’s inherent value and beauty.<sup>28</sup> This vision of murder as an autotelic art form is voiced at greater length in the central narrative of *Le Jardin des supplices*, when an executioner discusses with Clara the art of killing well (which he juxtaposes with English colonialist mass murder):

L’art, milady, consiste à savoir tuer [...]. C’est-à-dire travailler la chair humaine, comme un sculpteur sa glaise ou son morceau d’ivoire... [...] Mais, tout se perd aujourd’hui... [...] tout ce qui rend la mort collective, administrative et bureaucratique... toutes les saletés de votre progrès, enfin... détruisent peu à peu, nos belles traditions du passé... [...] Nous sommes vaincus par les médiocres... Et c’est l’esprit bourgeois qui triomphe partout...<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Rachilde, *La Sanglante Ironie* (Paris: L. Genonceaux, 1891), p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Mirbeau, *Le Jardin des supplices*, pp. 206–7.

Mirbeau's depiction of the executioner as a maligned artist is clearly an attack against bourgeois culture shot through with serious moral indictment. Yet it also functions ironically, in a self-aware and self-implicating gesture. First, there is the fact that, in different sections of the text, Mirbeau aligns pro-murder positions with members of the bourgeois elite and yet also with the avant-garde rebelling against them. Then, through the executioner figure, Mirbeau satirises avant-garde snobbery that sets itself apart from the mainstream while relying on this mainstream as a source of oppositional self-definition. In this way, the analogy between artist and murderer enables Mirbeau to enact social critique while recognising the ambiguous complicity of his own polemical, avant-garde position.

The question of authorial complicity resurfaced in articles by avant-garde journalists who extended the murder-as-art trope by aligning literary solidarity with criminal association. In the opening issue of *La Revue blanche*'s Parisian series, Maurice Beaubourg (1859–1943) remarked upon the growing literary obsession with murder. Loosely disguised as a personal anecdote, the article functions as literary criticism laced with irony and dark humour. In it, Beaubourg recounts having recently sat next to a flea-ridden ruffian on a park bench. Despite his appearance, Beaubourg's interlocutor is an educated man from a similar milieu to his own: 'Malgré les haillons qui le couvrait, il avait un esprit orné, paré.' As in De Quincey's 'On Murder' essay and Mirbeau's 'Frontispiece', Beaubourg's article depicts a discussion between educated men about controversial topics. During their conversation, Beaubourg's new acquaintance coins the term 'la Littérature des assassins' to refer to writers such as Émile Zola, Rachilde, Alfred Vallette, and

Raoul Minhar, ‘qui patronnaient l’assassinat dans des opuscules’.<sup>30</sup> The ‘des’ in the term ‘littérature des assassins’ is playfully ambiguous, since it could be interpreted as literature that is *about* murderers, *for* murderers, or *by* murderers. This ambiguity blurs the ethical boundaries between characters, readers, and writers. The genre’s extended definition reads as follows:

[II] m’expliquait comme quoi M. Zola, le créateur du Lantier de la BÊTE HUMAINE, avait véritablement fondé l’école, en niant la responsabilité des individus, et en démontrant que les donneurs de coups de couteaux ne faisaient que remplir une des fonctions naturelles de leur existence [...] Mme Rachilde, dans un livre bien plus curieux encore, avait empiré sur la théorie du maître de Médan. Son héros, Sylvain d’Hauterac, qui ressemblait du reste au précité Lantier, [...] établissait en principe que les assassins, les bêtes féroces, les chats sauvages [...] sont, à l’exclusion de tout animal domestique, l’homme vulgaire compris, les seuls personnages intéressants de la création! [...] Si chez Mme Rachilde les meurtriers se montraient les seuls gens intéressants, ils apparaissaient dans le À L’ÉCART de MM. Minhar et Vallette les seuls vraiment artistes et philosophes. Il fallait absolument avoir assassiné quelqu’un, pensaient ces auteurs, pour pouvoir saisir et étudier le jeu de sa personnalité.<sup>31</sup>

In this section, Beaubourg brings together writers working in different schools and genres – Naturalism, Decadence, and the *roman psychologique*, respectively – to form a literary network that valorises murder against the grain. That said, there is a clear hierarchy established between these literary schools: murder evolves from a natural impulse in Zola to an aesthetic object in Rachilde, before finally achieving the status of an artistic imperative in Minhar and Vallette.

Beaubourg’s presentation of murderer literature creates a form of illicit solidarity between the writers he analyses, who are united by their family resemblance and shared tendency to valorise murder, regardless of their real-life sympathies or antipathies. This solidarity extends towards the knowing reader, who

<sup>30</sup> Maurice Beaubourg, ‘La Littérature des assassins’, *La Revue blanche*, Oct. 1891, pp. 35–41 (p. 38).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.



is expected to appreciate the article's irony and paradoxes. Such relationships are represented via *mise-en-abyme* at the end of the article, when the drinking companion expresses his regret at never having met Maurice Beaubourg, who is in fact the very person he is addressing:

– Maurice Beaubourg!... m'écriai-je suffoqué, mais c'est moi!...  
Et nous tombâmes dans les bras l'un de l'autre.  
Depuis lors je me suis affligé d'un secrétaire, qui n'est au fond  
qu'un complice anticipé!<sup>32</sup>

The ending creates an important link between literary friendship and criminal complicity: a friend acting as a 'secrétaire' becomes '[un] complice anticipé'. Yet the tone of the final exclamation is undeniably ambivalent, since the verb 's'affliger' negatively contrasts with the affectionate embrace described in the preceding sentence. This slight off note in the article's denouement hints at the ambiguity of complicit literary friendships and the burden of solidarity. I return to this burden in chapter three, which analyses a network of literary friendships that demonstrate clearly the ambivalence hinted at in Beaubourg's otherwise humorous and celebratory article.

Two months later, in *La Grande revue*, Romain Coolus (1868–1952) published a response to Beaubourg, who is referred to as the 'patron des assassins' in the opening dedication. The primary conceit of this later article takes the form of a treatise in favour of state support for murderers. In it, Coolus adopts the language of political solidarity by depicting murderers as demanding 'réparation[s]' for the way society treats them, and as considering syndicalisation in order to gain recognition for their working community ('corporation').<sup>33</sup> The text subsequently lists a series of 'axiomes liminaires' setting forward the guiding principles behind

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 40–1.

<sup>33</sup> Romain Coolus, 'Théorie rationnelle de l'assassinat propre', *La Grande revue*, 25 Dec. 1891, pp. 575–83 (p. 575).

the murderers' syndicate, which range from the importance of a healthy diet to the value of attending classes in medical dissection.<sup>34</sup> This structure parodies discourses related to workers' rights, but also specific genres such as the scientific treatise, etiquette manuals, and political tracts. By codifying murder according to a set of principles and practices, Coolus attributes to it the status of a professional vocation. The article concludes with a proposal that murder should be considered a respectable career path, to be taught and recognised at a national level:

Nos assassins sont des artistes de décès: il est temps qu'on le reconnaisse et qu'on leur fasse jouer le rôle social auquel ils aspirent et ont droit. Quelqu'un ne proposait-il pas que l'État les enrégimentât et les prît à son service? Pourquoi en effet n'y aurait-il pas une école normale supérieure et nationale du meurtre?<sup>35</sup>

Coolus's use of hyperbole and paradoxical rhetorical questions here satirises state-sponsored professionalisation, epitomised by the education of civil servants via the *Grandes Écoles*. By doing so, Coolus continued a satirical tradition bound up in the art-murder debate. An earlier example of this can be seen in the spoof review *Le Journal des Assassins* (1884), whose editorial board asserted the need for a 'corporation' of murderers to be 'brevetée comme les autres industries'.<sup>36</sup> The review subsequently offered a murderers' certificate (the 'brevet d'assassin') as a supplement to its readers, so that professionals in the field could gain official recognition (figure 1). As these examples demonstrate, the recurrent analogy made between criminal association and professionalisation in avant-garde circles was clearly tongue-in-cheek. However, it also reflected these writers' perception of their position in the literary field. By exploring the implicating nature of crime narrative and presenting writers' need for solidarity through the lens of criminal association,

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 577.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 582.

<sup>36</sup> 'Notre supplément', *Le Journal des Assassins*, 18 May 1884, p. 2.

they raised questions about the attribution of professional and cultural recognition, employing satire and parody to creative and polemical effect.



Figure 1. 'Le Brevet d'assassin', *Le Journal des Assassins*, 1 June 1884 (BnF)

From *romans feuilletons* to melodrama, criminology to avant-garde obfuscation, the fascination for criminal figures and their misdeeds was clearly widespread in fin-de-siècle France. Crime stories from across the literary spectrum became, as Ann-Louise Shapiro puts it, a 'lightning rod that gathered the social and cultural tensions of the period'.<sup>37</sup> At the intersection between popular, scientific, and avant-garde appropriations of the topic, we have seen the question of complicity recurring in various forms, whether that be through writers' association with denigrated popular genres, scholars' and jurists' implication in the mania they condemned, writers' moral complicity with the crimes they depicted, or meta-literary questions about community and solidarity. In the following pages, I propose

<sup>37</sup> Shapiro, p. 44.

to analyse two works situated at this cultural intersection that further demonstrate the importance of the accomplice figure and the notion of complicity more generally in nineteenth-century French crime narrative. To do so, I consider two novels by Rachilde and the Émile Zola – leading figures of Decadence and Naturalism, respectively – whose plotlines, character development, and primary themes are centred on criminal complicity in the act of murder.

### **Rachilde's *Nono* and Zola's *La Bête humaine***

A year after achieving infamy with her *succès de scandale*, *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), Rachilde published *Nono*: a story of corrupted innocence, cold-blooded murder, and thwarted love. The story's female protagonist Renée Fayor uses a suspended boulder in her father's garden to murder Victorien Barthelme, a penniless Don Juan figure who tries to blackmail her into marrying him, after having seduced and 'deflowered' her two years earlier. After initially fearing that her father's secretary, Bruno Maldas (the eponymous 'Nono'), may have witnessed the murder, Renée falls in love with him. Unable to confess her crime, for fear of making Bruno complicit with it, Renée attempts suicide, only to be rescued by a blasé Duke, Edmond de Pluncey, whom she tricks into marriage. Bruno's subsequent flight from the Fayor family home is interpreted as proof of his guilt in the investigation surrounding Barthelme's disappearance. He is later arrested and faces trial for murder after Victorien's corpse is unearthed from General Fayor's garden. When informed of Renée's criminal responsibility, Bruno ensures that he is found guilty, in a gesture of amorous martyrdom that ends in his execution and Renée's sudden grief-stricken death. Like *Monsieur Vénus*, *Nono* recounts the story of a *femme fatale* whose idealised but impossible love for a socially inferior and feminised man catalyses a series of social and moral transgressions that ultimately lead to the

destruction of the protagonist's beloved. However, unlike *Monsieur Vénus*, it includes motifs and techniques typically associated with popular romance, melodrama, and crime fiction. This unusual generic status helps to explain why, unlike its infamous predecessor, *Nono* was – and remains – largely neglected by critics.<sup>38</sup>

The same cannot be said for *La Bête humaine*, the seventeenth volume of Émile Zola's Rougon-Macquart cycle. The novel was serialized in *La Vie populaire* between 1889 and 1890, when it was subsequently published in book format. Its plotline centres on the murder of Président Grandmorin by Roubaud and his wife Séverine, instigated by the latter's unwitting revelation that the victim (her patron and protector) had been sexually abusing her since she was sixteen. This first murder is witnessed by the novel's protagonist Jacques Lantier, who willingly helps to cover up the crime and becomes Séverine's lover. When Séverine recounts to Jacques her experience of murder, the latter's inherited flaw of pathological homicidal desire is reawakened, and their plan to murder Roubaud ends with Jacques killing Séverine instead, in a lust-induced frenzy. Through a combination of ineptitude and corruption, the criminal justice system is unable and unwilling to uncover the truth behind the murders, sentencing the half-guilty Roubaud alongside an innocent man, the marginal Cabuche, to life sentences of forced labour. Zola's murder story maintained the pseudo-scientific pretensions of the wider Rougon-Macquart cycle by appropriating elements of fin-de-siècle criminal anthropology.

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<sup>38</sup> To my knowledge, no Anglophone or Francophone Rachilde specialist has analysed *Nono* at length. When mentioned, the novel only appears in passing. For example, Melanie Hawthorne offers a brief analysis of *Nono* as symbolising Rachilde's relationship to writing, in *Rachilde and French Women's Authorship: from Decadence to Modernism* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001). While acknowledging that 'parts of *Nono* represent a carefully plotted murder story' (p. 126), Hawthorne dismisses the work's melodramatic style: 'Although certain twists of plot are indeed thriller material, many of the details of this long novel are hackneyed, and the ending exploits romantic cliché to full effect' (p. 128).

According to this vision, the primary characters, and notably Jacques Lantier, could be considered the fictional equivalent of real-life case studies. Yet as I explore below, alongside the work's pseudo-scientific pretensions we also find swathes of impressionistic detail and melodramatic plot devices, which demonstrate Zola's creative assimilation of a range of genres.

Despite clear differences of style, position within their authors' wider oeuvre, and posterity in the canon, *Nono* and *La Bête humaine* share a marked preoccupation with criminal responsibility and complicity. Both novels' plotlines rely on an integral association between murder and sexual transgression, with the former posited as a punishment for the latter. Both place emphasis on the haunting presence of murder scenes, the implicating power of confession, and the social injustice of criminal prejudice. In the pages that follow, I analyse these aspects at key moments of the novels' structure: (i) crimes scenes, (ii) confession scenes, and (iii) trial scenes, respectively. Through this analysis, I consider how the representation of criminal complicity and accomplices in *Nono* and *La Bête humaine* contributed to ongoing debates about criminal responsibility while raising meta-literary questions about the complicity of writers and readers in the crimes depicted, and in the perceived aesthetic debasement associated with popular literary forms.

(i) *Haunted by Guilt: Crime Scenes*

When discussing the importance of setting in late nineteenth-century narrative, Charles Grivel writes:

Le lieu ne consiste pas tant dans la description ou la définition de l'espace réservé à l'action, mais en sa *disposition dramatique*. Le lieu du roman est voué au drame. Qu'il soit indiqué signifie qu'il s'y

est passé (qu'il va s'y passer) quelque chose. *Simplement l'inscrire* provoque l'attente du fait: *pas de lieu qui ne soit complice*.<sup>39</sup>

At first glance it may seem odd to describe fictional settings as 'complicitous'. However, Grivel's use of the word 'complice' helps to convey something of the implicating power of setting and its close imbrication with plot in fin-de-siècle fiction. His references to drama align narrative setting with the atmospheric potential of theatrical *mise en scène*. These ideas are useful when analysing literary works inspired by popular crime narrative, because one of the key tendencies shared by nineteenth-century popular forms (notably melodrama and the *roman feuilleton*) was a proclivity for theatricality.<sup>40</sup> In *Nono* and *La Bête humaine*, the association between setting, plot, and theatricality is prevalent and insistent. In particular, the novels' crime scenes are imbued with symbolic and structural significance reflecting the shifting nature of criminal responsibility in their respective narratives. This tendency reflects the importance of space to crime fiction more generally. Andrea Goulet has dedicated a book-length study to crime fiction's 'spatio-scientific' imaginary, and several critics have emphasised the importance of crime scenes to the genre.<sup>41</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that, when analysing *La Bête humaine*, Zola specialists frequently highlight the novel's spatial elements.<sup>42</sup> My study extends these earlier inquiries by considering how setting in murder scenes can function to enable crime and criminal association. By analysing Rachilde and

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<sup>39</sup> Charles Grivel, *Production de l'intérêt romanesque. Un état du texte (1870–1880), un essai de constitution de sa théorie* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), p. 107.

<sup>40</sup> Couégnas, p. 138 and Queffélec-Dumasy, p. 241.

<sup>41</sup> See Goulet, David Geherin, *Scene of the Crime: The Importance of Place in Crime and Mystery Fiction* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2008), and Dominique Kalifa, 'Les lieux du crime. Topographie criminelle et imaginaire social à Paris au XIXe siècle', *Sociétés & Représentations*, 17 (2004), 131–150.

<sup>42</sup> Henri Mitterand, 'The Genesis of Novelistic Space: Zola's *La Bête Humaine*', trans. by Anne C. Murch, in *Naturalism in the European Novel: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Brian Nelson (New York: Berg, 1992), pp. 66–79 and Brian Nelson, 'Blood on the Tracks: The Uses of Space in Zola's *La Bête humaine*', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 43 (2006), 13–18.

Zola's use of description, narrative focalisation, and structural parallelism, I suggest that the haunting presence of guilt for the characters in these scenes is mirrored by an ambiguous identification between reader and criminal.

The murder scene in *Nono* is highly aestheticised, eroticised, and morally ambiguous. The boulder in General Fayor's garden acts simultaneously as the murder weapon, crime scene, witness, and accomplice to Renée's crime. After the opening sequence, where labourers attempt to shift the boulder in the hopes of finding a water source for the *salle de bains* that Renée has had commissioned, we witness an unsolicited night-time rendez-vous between the former lovers. Victorien, in a moment of panic, hides beneath the now-suspended rock. Acting on impulse, Renée removes the architect's lever, causing the boulder to crush Victorien beneath its weight. The scene is worth quoting at length:

Aux douces lueurs des étoiles, il voyait les cheveux de Renée se strier d'or [...] et, dans son visage levé, ses prunelles lui parurent rayonner comme rayonne le regard des fous qui se souviennent. [...] De capiteux parfums vagabondaient par les brises tièdes; des senteurs de verveines et des senteurs de roses se mariaient cavalièrement à tous les coins de leurs routes aériennes pour se répandre ensuite en fumée odorante. Tombant du sommet de la roche, venaient des odeurs fraîches de verdure sauvages [...].

Victorien se disait, la contemplant toujours, qu'une grande faiblesse se préparait pour eux. Il clignait les paupières, ayant des moiteurs dans les mains, et sans l'appeler, la voyait approcher malgré ses yeux fermés.

Renée se baissa. Elle prit, par terre, une chose lourde qu'elle brandit, soudain avec une force surhumaine et il y eut un choc métallique, sonore, vibrant, un choc de marteau sur une enclume. C'était un outil de maçon que Renée Fayor soulevait.

Le pic soutenant la roche sauta en éraflant la pierre qui rendit des notes aiguës.

Alors, dans l'ombre, se passa un phénomène étrange qui fut rapide comme un truc de féerie. Cet homme jeune eut tout à coup le dos voûté, la tête enfoncée, le crâne élargi. Sa poitrine devint une masse, ses pieds disparurent, tandis que ses jambes rentrèrent dans son torse... puis deux jets brillants jaillirent de sa face disloquée... On ne distingua plus rien [...].

Renée Fayor resta là, devant son crime, ne sachant plus bien si elle venait de le commettre... La roche avait repris son air entêté,



sournois, et la morne immobilité d'une chose qui veut être complice.<sup>43</sup>

In the first part of this scene, Rachilde builds up a sensual atmosphere, emphasising the impact of romanticised lighting effects – seen in the starlight, Renée's golden hair, and her gleaming eyes – alongside the heady floral perfume diffused in the night air. This atmosphere is suggestive of amorous union ('se mariaient cavalièrement') and were it not for hints of dramatic irony and foreshadowing, the reader might share Victorien's interpretation of the scene as initiating a sexual encounter. His reaction to Renée's approach is emphatically one of erotic arousal: he has 'des moiteurs dans les mains'. However, Rachilde ensures that the reader predicts the crime Renée is about to commit, by describing Renée's glance, when she realises the fortuitous position that Victorien has taken beneath the rock, as 'le regard des fous qui se souviennent'. In this way, we are encouraged, via dramatic irony, to position ourselves through Renée's viewpoint, even though the scene is, up until this moment, largely filtered indirectly through that of Victorien.

The shifting narrative viewpoint in *Nono's* murder scene balances vicarious identification with distancing effects. In the first half of the sequence, Rachilde's evocative description encourages mimetic absorption in the unfolding events. However, the scene suddenly takes on a supernatural, spectacular, and theatrical atmosphere. It is described as 'étrange' and 'comme un truc de féerie', which makes identification with the action more difficult. This estrangement is coupled with narrative distancing techniques. For example, when Renée knocks away the lever, the narrative viewpoint shifts away from the characters: 'Alors, dans l'ombre, se passa un phénomène étrange [...]'. In this sentence, the reader is invited to view the

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<sup>43</sup> Rachilde, *Nono* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994), pp. 41–2. Quotations from *Nono* will henceforth appear parenthetically in the main body of the text.

scene from afar, before being snapped back into the gruesome detail of Barthelme's body as it is crushed by the boulder. However, these details are rendered through impersonal constructions, seen in the way the narrative refers to Victorien as '[cet] homme jeune' and employs the impersonal 'on' in 'On ne distingua plus rien'. This impersonality reduces our capacity as readers to empathise with Renée's victim. In a similar way, Renée seems unable to accept complete responsibility for the crime: 'ne sachant plus bien si elle venait de le commettre'. Moreover, by describing events as if they were part of a stage production with special effects ('truc[s] de féerie'), Rachilde conveys Renée's self-positioning as a spectator of, rather than an actor in, the scene. The personification of the boulder further serves to question the attribution of criminal responsibility, since it is described as Renée's accomplice: 'La roche avait repris son air entêté, sournois, et la morne immobilité d'une chose qui veut être complice.' The adjectives 'entêté' and 'sournois' reflect elements of Renée's character, projected onto an inanimate object. This projection is ambiguous: on the one hand, we are reminded of the rock's non-human status through the word 'chose'. On the other, the verb 'vouloir' clearly attributes a form of agency to the boulder: a compliancy with and willingness to enable Renée's action. When considered within the sequence as a whole, it is as if the serendipity of the boulder's location, and Victorien's decision to hide beneath it, absolves the protagonist's crime, much like the earth underfoot absorbs the physical evidence of it.

Beyond the initial crime scene, the boulder gains symbolic meaning through its association with the *salle de bains* that Renée has built nearby. Later in the novel, a highly charged but unconsummated erotic encounter between Renée and Bruno occurs here. Chancing upon Renée powdering herself after a bath, Nono becomes

sexually aroused, with ‘les narines dilatées, la bouche brûlante’ (163). He mistakenly interprets his erotic thirst for physical thirst, drinking avidly from Renée’s used bathwater to quench it (164). The *gaucherie* of Bruno’s virginal innocence only heightens the erotic attraction between them. When they finally kiss, the narrative notes the irony of their physical positioning: ‘[le] canapé était près de la fenêtre donnant sur la roche. C’était adossée à son crime que Renée recevait les baisers de Brunos Maldas’ (165). Rachilde here unambiguously aligns Renée’s act of murder with erotic desire, which is consistently posited as inevitably illicit. It does not take long for the room’s haunting presence to corrupt and disrupt their embrace:

Nono colla ses lèvres au cou penché de la jeune femme... il y eut un suprême silence... les pierres écoutaient! Mais, brutalement, Renée s’arracha de l’étreinte ardente de Bruno, elle avait ouvert les yeux. Au sommet de la roche, dominant le vitrail et leur couche, un spectre s’était dressé; une ombre d’homme, gigantesque, interminable, s’allongeant toujours... Cet homme tenait un pardessus sur son épaule comme un voyageur, il était de taille moyenne, avait le front découvert... et il grandissait, grandissait sans cesse.

– Victorien Barthelme!... cria Renée.

Son cri fut tellement déchirant que la salle vibra. Nono, les poings serrés, l’œil brillant de rage, voulut se précipiter. [...] Renée lui saisit le bras.

– Sauve-toi... je suis maudite... [...] Elle le couvrait de son corps pour l’empêcher d’être atteint par l’ombre surnaturelle.

– Tu es folle! dit Nono. (166–7)

The ghostly reminder of Renée’s crime repeats the eroticised atmosphere of the earlier murder scene, which was also framed as a potential sex scene. Tension builds because the reader discovers the ghostly figure’s identity at the same time as Rachilde’s protagonist. Deprived of dramatic irony, we are therefore encouraged to share Renée’s fear in this sequence, which is rendered in highly melodramatic terms. This tendency towards hyperbole, typical of melodrama and the *roman feuilleton*, was criticised by Rachilde’s contemporaries, who despaired at the

novel's hackneyed romanticism and *invraisemblance*. Émile Goudeau (1849–1906) compared these elements of the novel to 'les plus mauvais jours de 1840', and Jules Boissière (1863–1897) condemned the work's 'excentricité vieilloté', citing the unusual murder weapon as a prime example of its lack of verisimilitude.<sup>44</sup>

However, Rachilde's hyperbolic melodrama does not preclude a more self-aware and ironic reading. After all, even Bruno acknowledges the absurdity of Renée's reaction to the shadow, by exclaiming 'Tu es folle!'. Furthermore, rather than resolving the build-up of dramatic pathos with a 'satisfactory' conclusion, the scene ends in bathos: the ghost's identity is revealed to be the Duke, with whom Renée ends up having sex instead of Bruno. The underwhelming banality of this chapter ending highlights the extent to which Rachilde's novel diverges from popular melodrama and the *roman feuilleton*, while appropriating some of their generic tropes. For although Rachilde creates a fast-paced plot with a series of complications and partial resolutions, there is no satisfactory 'return to order' at any point, let alone at the denouement. Instead, the parallel displacement of characters' desires and readers' 'satisfaction' becomes a central part of the novel's themes and structure. In the *salle de bains* scene, Renée's displaced desire (from Bruno to the Duke) inadvertently reveals the implicit eroticism of her otherwise idealised chaste love, while re-enacting the seduction model of her first sexual encounter. The Duke can therefore be interpreted symbolically to be the ghost of Victorien Barthelme. In this episode of structural and symbolic haunting, Renée's well-intentioned actions fail to counteract the novel's trajectory, which leads her further down the spiralling path of crime and ultimately enables Nono's arrest, condemnation, and execution.

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<sup>44</sup> Émile Goudeau, 'Impressions d'un lecteur', *L'Écho de Paris*, 20 January 1885, and Jules Boissière, 'Notices bibliographiques', *La Presse*, 27 January 1885.

The obsessive, cyclical structure of crime, where desire is displaced onto an ambiguous ‘other’, against the backdrop of a recurring, haunting, crime scene, is similarly found in *La Bête humaine*, through Zola’s presentation of La Croix-de-Maufras: the central stage for the majority of crimes depicted in the novel. In the opening chapter, we discover that the house at La Croix-de-Maufras served as the theatre to Séverine’s lost innocence at the hands of her ‘protector’ and eventual abuser Grandmorin. Then, in chapter two, the house and its surrounding area become the backdrop to the attempted sex scene and almost-murder scene between Jacques and his chaste and proud cousin Flore. To save Flore’s life, Jacques flees into the barren countryside that reflects his psychological state: ‘Ce pays désert, coupé de monticules, était comme un labyrinthe sans issue, où tournait sa folie, dans la morne désolation des terrains incultes’.<sup>45</sup> The ‘morne désolation’ of La Croix-de-Maufras – much like the ‘morne immobilité’ of the boulder in *Nono* – adds to the scene’s pathos and reflects the protagonist’s destructive and guilty mental state. The image of the inescapable labyrinth symbolises Jacques’s cycle of psychological stability and instability, while also implying the inevitability of the latter. This is confirmed by the fact that, after half an hour spent desperately fleeing across the countryside, Jacques returns serendipitously to the tunnel entrance just in time to witness Grandmorin’s murder (*LBH*, 1046). In this way, the forceful sense of structural inevitability in Zola’s depiction of La Croix-de-Maufras demonstrates how narrative setting implicitly enables – or *sets up* – the crimes committed within it.

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<sup>45</sup> Émile Zola, *La Bête humaine*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart: histoire naturelle et sociale d’une famille sous le Second Empire*, ed. by Henri Mitterand, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1960–67), IV (1966), pp. 997–1331 (p. 1042). References to *La Bête humaine* are to this edition and are given in the text, preceded by the abbreviation *LBH*.

In a further analogy to the boulder in *Nono*, La Croix-de-Maufras and its environs return throughout Zola's novel as a form of structural *hantise*, through which sexual desire is repeatedly aligned with violent crime. After witnessing Grandmorin's murder in a passing train, Jacques is eager to see the corpse. The crime scene, now situated alongside the train tracks bordering La Croix-de-Maufras, is compared to an amorous rendez-vous: 'C'était comme un désir physique, ce feu intérieur qui précipite la marche des amants, aux heures de rendez-vous. Il avait peur de ce qui l'attendait là-bas, et il y volait' (*LBH*, 1049). Jacques's visceral excitement culminates in his confrontation with Grandmorin's corpse, described in an extended sequence of *style indirect libre*:

l'autre, l'homme entrevu le couteau au poing, avait osé! l'autre était allé jusqu'au bout de son désir, l'autre avait tué! Ah! n'être pas lâche, se satisfaire enfin, enfoncer le couteau! Lui que l'envie en torturait depuis dix ans! Il y avait, dans sa fièvre, un mépris de lui-même et de l'admiration pour l'autre, et surtout le besoin de voir ça, la soif inextinguible de se rassasier les yeux de cette loque humaine, du pantin cassé, de la chiffé molle, qu'un coup de couteau faisait d'une créature. Ce qu'il rêvait, l'autre l'avait réalisé, et c'était ça. S'il tuait, il y aurait ça par terre. Son cœur battait à se rompre, son prurit de meurtre s'exaspérait comme une concupiscence, au spectacle de ce mort tragique. [...] Oui! il oserait, il oserait à son tour! (*LBH*, 1050)

This section clearly evokes Jacques's vicarious desire, identification, and self-denigration in comparison to the idealised murderer figure, while foreshadowing his later copycat crime. In fact, Lantier's homicidal urges are displaced for nine chapters, until finally, in chapter eleven, he kills Séverine in the same way Roubaud killed Grandmorin.<sup>46</sup> In a moment of emphatic structural parallelism, Séverine's death is depicted as the consummation of Jacques's longstanding murderous desires:

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<sup>46</sup> Susan Blood also notes the importance of displacement to *LBH*'s narrative structure and emphasises the mimetic logic of Jacques's crime, in 'The Precinematic Novel: Zola's *La Bête humaine*', *Representations*, 93 (2006), 49–75 (pp. 53–6).

Enfin, enfin! il s'était donc contenté, il avait tué! Oui, il avait fait ça. Une joie effrénée, une jouissance énorme le soulevait, dans la pleine satisfaction de l'éternel désir. Il en éprouvait une surprise d'orgueil, un grandissement de sa souveraineté de mâle. La femme, il l'avait tuée, il la possédait, comme il désirait depuis si longtemps la posséder, tout entière, jusqu'à l'anéantir. Elle n'était plus, elle ne serait jamais plus à personne. Et un souvenir aigu lui revenait, celui de l'autre assassiné, le cadavre du président Grandmorin, qu'il avait vu, par la nuit terrible, à cinq cents mètres de là. Ce corps délicat, si blanc, rayé de rouge, c'était la même loque humaine, le pantin cassé, la chiffé molle, qu'un coup de couteau fait d'une créature. Oui, c'était ça. Il avait tué, et il y avait ça par terre. [...] Ah! n'être pas lâche, se satisfaire, enfoncer le couteau! (*LBH*, 1298)

The parallel structure of these scenes is highlighted by an overt reference to 'le cadavre du président Grandmorin', but also by key verbs and phrases lifted from the earlier episode, such as: 'se contenter', 'faire ça', 'loque [...] pantin [...] chiffé', and 'qu'un coup de couteau fait d'une créature'. A sentence in the conditional, from chapter two: 'S'il tuait, il y aurait ça par terre' is transformed into an affirmative past tense: 'Il avait tué, et il y avait ça par terre'. Zola's use of repetition here exemplifies what Calvin Brown refers to as 'the key passage' – something that Andrew Counter has more recently examined as a form of foreshadowing that works 'by strikingly enacting the necessity and inevitability of the plot's ultimate unfolding'.<sup>47</sup>

Zola's insistent use of repetition and foreshadowing leads to a hyperbolic association between *La Croix-de-Maufrais* and the various crimes committed in the novel. As noted above, it is the setting for Grandmorin's sexual exploitation of young women: actions that pre-date the narrative while provoking the initial murder. In chapter two, it is further revealed to host a variety of crimes or would-be crimes in the making: Grandmorin's murder, Jacques' desire to kill Flore,

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<sup>47</sup> Andrew J. Counter, 'Zola's Repetitions: On Repetition in Zola', *The Modern Language Review*, 116 (2021), 42–64 (p. 45). Counter cites Calvin Brown on p. 44.

Phasie's gradual poisoning at the hands of her husband Misard, and the train derailment caused by Flore's jealous revenge against Jacques and Séverine. The latter crime is foreshadowed when Lantier watches Flore helping Cabuche's cousin to get a quarry vehicle across the train tracks: 'Fichtre! déclara le jeune homme, il ne faudrait pas qu'un train arrive... Il y en aurait une, de marmalade!' (*LBH*, 1033). However, the sheer number of crimes that take place in one setting (and indeed in one novel) was perceived by Zola's contemporaries to cross the limits of verisimilitude for the sake of dramatic appeal – a tendency associated with the denigrated *roman feuilleton*. When reviewing Zola's novel for *Le Siècle*, the critic Charles Bigot (1840–1893) wrote: 'Jamais on n'a tué plus, même dans un roman de M. Xavier de Montépin. [...] On le voit, la matière ne manque pas ici aux amateurs du genre "sensationnel". Six personnages: six crimes.'<sup>48</sup> Edmond Lepelletier (1846–1913) expanded on this point by reminding *L'Écho de Paris*'s readers that 'tout cet ensemble dramatique est certainement entaché d'invraisemblance, mais il ne faut pas oublier que nous sommes en plein feuilleton criminel'. Furthermore, Lepelletier made explicit a prejudice only implied by other critics: that the sensationalist tendencies of *roman feuilleton* crime narratives were inextricably bound up in their appeal for a lower-class readership: 'Le crime est rendu avec une grande abondance d'effets d'horreur et tout se passe dans les conditions ordinaires de ces tableaux farouches destinés à être reproduits peinturlurés sur les murailles afin d'attirer la clientèle à un sou.'<sup>49</sup> In fact, Zola had already faced criticism for the sensational poster published by *La Vie populaire* to

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<sup>48</sup> Charles Bigot, 'Chronique littéraire. *La Bête humaine*', *Le Siècle*, 10 March 1890. Xavier de Montépin (1823–1902) was a prolific writer of serialised fiction and popular plays. His bestseller *La Porteuse de pain* – serialised in *Le Petit journal* between 1884 and 1885 – deployed the popular topos of the 'jeune fille persécutée' (Angenot, 'La Littérature populaire', p. 324).

<sup>49</sup> Edmond Lepelletier, 'Chronique des Livres. *La Bête humaine* par Émile Zola', *L'Écho de Paris*, 11 March 1890.



advertise the novel's serialised publication (figure 2).<sup>50</sup> By highlighting the belaboured dramatic effects in *La Bête humaine* and reminding readers of its status as a *roman feuilleton*, critics accused Zola of pandering to, and cynically exploiting, vulgar tastes. In this way, they denied his writing literary merit while reaffirming the association between crime narrative and mass media culture.



**Figure 2. Poster advertising the serialised version of *La Bête humaine* (BnF)**

While the structural and thematic *hantises* in Zola's novel are far from subtle, the dismissive tone adopted by many fin-de-siècle critics veils its more

<sup>50</sup> In the 16 November 1889 issue of the *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, one journalist wrote: 'Personne n'est forcé de lire les livres de M. Zola. Mais tout le monde est forcé de voir un placard, surtout quand il prend les dimensions de celui dont nous parlons, et nous ne sommes pas convaincus que le droit de scandaliser les promeneurs fasse partie intégrante des conquêtes de 1789.'

complex, unnerving elements (which may have implicitly provoked his contemporaries' vehemence in the first place). For it is undoubtedly an unsettling experience to read Jacques's jubilation as he contemplates the corpses of Grandmorin and Séverine. In chapter two, Jacques's morbid curiosity, sexual arousal, and destructive copycat urges are evoked through *style indirect libre*, placing the reader in an ambiguous position of identification. I suggest that the displacement of criminal responsibility within the narrative is mirrored by its displacement beyond it, onto the reader, who – like Jacques standing before Grandmorin's corpse – recognises him- or herself in the murderer's image. The ambiguity of this displacement is extended in the parallel section from chapter eleven, cited above, which describes the protagonist's satisfaction in having finally murdered a woman. As Andrew Counter and Lisa Downing have noted, Jacques's destructive desires are implicitly presented as the logical extreme of widely accepted visions of masculine sexuality in patriarchal society: male supremacy ('la souveraineté du mâle') is reaffirmed by man's destruction of woman, and murder can be justified by masculine jealousy and possessiveness: 'elle ne serait jamais plus à personne' (*LBH*, 1298).<sup>51</sup> The intensely erotic misogyny of this episode is conveyed through vast swathes of *style indirect libre* that prevent readers from orientating themselves morally in response to Jacques's experience of murder. We are made to experience it vicariously through him. Much like Lantier, whose homicidal desires receive the necessary spark of inspiration from witnessing another person's crime, Zola's readers take on the symbolic and moral weight of

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<sup>51</sup> Andrew J. Counter, 'The Legacy of the Beast: Patrilinearity and Rupture in Zola's *La Bête humaine* and Freud's *Totem and Taboo*', *French Studies: A Quarterly Review*, 62 (2008), 26–38 (p. 29), and Lisa Downing, 'The Birth of the Beast: Death-Driven Masculinity in Monneret, Zola and Freud', *Dix-Neuf*, 5 (2013), 28–46 (p. 35).

the novel's criminal *hantises* through the shared experience of witnessing their evocative representation.

As we have seen, the emphatic association between setting and criminal action in both *Nono* and *La Bête humaine* adds a further interpretative level to Charles Grivel's phrase: '*pas de lieu qui ne soit complice*'. The haunting presence of guilt in both novels' crime scenes is suggestive of the mutable, transferable nature of responsibility, which spreads from characters to readers through processes of identification enabled by shifting narrative focalisation. Beyond the implicit moral collusion evoked in the novels' crime scenes, however, there are other moments of complicity that require further analysis. To do so, I explore in the following section how the ambiguous experience of witnessing murder – both within the novels and through the process of reading them – is mirrored and extended by the acts of sharing, revealing, or hiding criminal knowledge.

(ii) *Criminal Suggestion: Confession Scenes*

In *La Bête humaine*, Séverine's relationship with Jacques is defined by the elision of criminal confession and sexual consummation. In the early stages of their acquaintance, Séverine aims to ensure Jacques's complicitous silence: '*elle s'efforçait de faire de lui sa chose, pour n'avoir plus à le craindre*' (*LBH* 1120). In the Batignolles Square scene in chapter five, she seeks to control Jacques through shared illicit knowledge, which is described as a moment of mutual possession: '*Sans doute, ce qu'elle venait de faire là, c'était le don de sa personne [...]. Mais le lien était noué entre eux, indissoluble: elle le défiait bien de parler maintenant, il était à elle comme elle était à lui. L'aveu les avait unis*' (*LBH* 1122). Confession here creates criminal complicity whilst acting as a forerunner to, and the equivalent of, sexual consummation. However, Séverine's confession is only a partial truth

because she confesses through a form of denial and does not give any details about the crime itself. This half-truth mirrors Séverine's attempt to maintain her relationship with Jacques in platonic limbo. As the 'complicité d'amitié' between Séverine and Jacques grows stronger, the former insists on having a chaste relationship:

Cela lui semblait si tendre, de s'aimer, sans toute cette saleté du sexe! [...] [Et] cela était si bon d'attendre, de laisser à leur amour même le soin de les unir, quand la minute viendrait, dans l'évanouissement de leur volonté, aux bras l'un de l'autre. (*LBH* 1145–6)

The idealisation of deferred desire here is shot through with hints at the inevitability of the couple's relationship falling towards the sexual ('quand la minute viendrait'). Consummation of both erotic and confessional desire is implicitly feared as a negative, destructive force ('saleté'). This fear is confirmed when the couple consummate their relationship:

Lorsqu'elle le serrait d'une étreinte, il sentait bien qu'elle était gonflée et haletante de son secret, qu'elle ne voulait ainsi entrer en lui que pour se soulager de la chose dont elle étouffait. C'était un grand frisson qui lui partait des reins, qui soulevait sa gorge d'amoureuse, dans le flot confus de soupirs montant à ses lèvres. [...] Il flairait un danger, un frémissement le reprenait, à l'idée de remuer avec elle ces histoires de sang. (*LBH* 1155)

In this scene, Séverine's desire to confess mirrors her state of erotic arousal. Zola combines imagery of erection and ejaculation – seen by Séverine's desire to 'entrer en lui' and by the description of the past rising up within her, threatening to inundate Jacques in a 'flot confus' – with vaginal imagery, through the metonymically eroticised attention to Séverine's mouth and lips. In this erotic exchange, storytelling – particularly recounting stories about crime ('ces histoires de sang') – is given the potential to encourage further crime through the power of vicarious and mimetic desire.

By evoking the potential dangers of criminal narrative, Zola employs *idées reçues* surrounding moral contagion, while offering a meta-literary *clin d'œil* to his readers and critics. For much like Lantier perceives the danger of Séverine's confession arousing his suppressed homicidal desires, fin-de-siècle critics raised concerns over the novel's capacity to inspire copycat crimes. In *Le Siècle*, Charles Bigot wrote:

jamais cauchemar d'un cerveau malsain et hanté n'a été déroulé avec une plus effrayante logique. Si de telles pages tombaient sous les yeux de quelque détraqué glissant sur la même pente de l'obsession sanguinaire et n'ayant plus besoin que d'un léger coup dernier pour rompre ce qui, chez lui, résiste encore, l'effet pourrait être terrible.<sup>52</sup>

The danger posed by Zola's novel appeared sufficiently great for Bigot to discuss it again, a month later, in the *Revue bleue*:

Je ne dirai pas au chef de l'école nouvelle et à ses disciples [...] que la littérature a toujours son action réflexe sur les mœurs et que si, en représentant des héros on aide à faire des héros, à force de représenter des êtres vils on risque aussi d'en faire. Ils me répondraient que l'artiste n'a pas charge d'âmes, que les conséquences que tirent ceux-ci ou ceux-là de ses œuvres ne le regardent pas.<sup>53</sup>

Bigot's paralipsis here emphasises the seemingly pernicious capacity for Naturalist writers to find counter-arguments to all criticisms levelled against them. He condemns such writers' denial of immoral influence and moral responsibility towards their readers. For although Zola thematises the question of crime narrative's insidious effects within the novel itself (and most notably through its confession scenes), he fails to condemn these effects sufficiently to appease critics like Bigot.

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<sup>52</sup> Bigot, 'Chronique littéraire'.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Bigot, 'Psychologue naturaliste', *La Revue politique et littéraire*, 5 April 1890, pp. 425–7 (p. 426).

As the novel progresses, the fatal unity of confession, sex, and murder gains further power through Zola's use of structural repetition in two parallel scenes that take place in mère Victoire's apartment. These scenes depict Roubaud and Jacques reacting to Séverine confessing to having been the victim of sexual assault and an accomplice in murder, respectively. In the opening chapter of *La Bête humaine*, Séverine accidentally reveals the truth behind her relationship with Grandmorin, provoking Roubaud's violent jealousy: 'Il frissonnait. L'idée de la posséder [...] venait de le traverser d'une flamme. Et, dans la nuit trouble de sa chair, au fond de son désir souillé qui saignait, brusquement se dressa la nécessité de la mort' (*LBH*, 1019). Knowledge of crime here leads to the desire to *commit* crime. Not only does this scene evoke the 'nécessité' of the murder that follows, but its haunting presence later in the novel leads to Séverine's full confession to Jacques in chapter eight. When Séverine finishes recounting her experiences, the couple engage in intense, almost bestial, sex: 'Ils se possédèrent, retrouvant l'amour au fond de la mort, dans la même volupté douloureuse des bêtes qui s'éventrent pendant le rut' (*LBH*, 1205). Zola clearly posits sexual desire as emphatically destructive, although this passion is experienced mutually and is not (in this instance) emphatically gendered. However, Séverine's confession *does* arouse Jacques's murderous desires, leading him to try to kill a random woman in the street, during a post-coital pathological frenzy. It removes the layer of protection that the previously half-veiled confession had provided, and ultimately leads to Séverine's demise at Jacques's hands. In this way, the temptation to confess one's crimes in *La Bête humaine* creates a form of complicity that, rather than strengthening a relationship, leads to its bloody destruction.

The destructive force of criminal confession and sexual consummation is also one of the primary plot motivators in *Nono*. Early in the novel, Rachilde's heroine initially intends to make Bruno an accomplice in covering up her crime. On the night of the murder, she considers asking Bruno to help wash off the imaginary blood she thinks has stained her shoes (44). However, upon later realising that she has fallen in love with him, Renée changes her mind: 'La moindre complicité avec Bruno ignorant devenait monstrueuse, puisque la fatalité le lui faisait aimer' (90). She aims to maintain Bruno's innocence by refusing either to confess to him or to sleep with him. Unlike Séverine, Renée succeeds in maintaining their relationship in platonic limbo. It is noteworthy that the first person Renée confesses to is the Duc de Pluncey, whom she despises. She does so on their wedding night, in the following exchange:

– Que savez-vous de l'assassinat? Au moins répondez, puisque je dois aller plus loin sur le chemin de ce calvaire.  
 – Vous m'aimeriez jusqu'au pardon?  
 – Je te désire jusqu'à me faire complice de tes infamies! s'écria le duc ivre de rage en l'enlaçant éperdument. A peine eut-elle reçu le premier baiser de l'époux, qu'elle le repoussa, ses prunelles eurent des éclairs. (249)

The Duke's desire to consummate their relationship pushes him to demand knowledge of Renée's illicit actions, which he presumes are sexual rather than murderous in nature. His use of the term 'complice' indicates a willingness to participate in any future cover-up. Rather than offering the couple, as in *La Bête humaine*, a pathway towards greater union through complicity and sexual intercourse, confession provides Renée with the means to ensure disharmony in her marriage and to prevent her husband from claiming his conjugal 'rights'. By revealing the truth, Renée makes Edmond her accomplice in covering up the crime while asserting the impossibility of ever loving him. The crime stands in the way

of their sexual union, and their relationship – like that between Séverine and Roubaud after Grandmorin's murder – remains sexless and mutually distrusting.<sup>54</sup>

As it becomes clear that her plans to avoid judicial suspicion have endangered Bruno's life, Renée tries to exonerate her beloved through a series of attempted – but ultimately failed – confessions. The first example occurs when Barthelme's corpse is discovered and disinterred in chapter nine. Renée briefly escapes the marital home, Les Combasses, only to chance upon the police's successful discovery of the crime scene and of Barthelme's corpse beneath the boulder. Tired of her ongoing pretence and hoping to clear Bruno's name, she intends to confess her crime once Victorien's corpse is revealed. The Duc de Pluncey, who has followed her, prevents her from doing so:

Le duc, d'instinct, avait deviné sa fuite, il croyait, lui, à la fatalité qui ramène le criminel sur le lieu de son crime pour le châtement, et comme ce hasard était juste, il avait simplement aidé le hasard en apparaissant derrière l'épaule de Renée à la minute suprême où la jeune femme épuisée allait peut-être se trahir.

– Je veux tout avouer, avait-elle déclaré, mon silence me pèse plus que ce meurtre, laissez-moi passer.

Mais M. de Pluncey *n'était pas un bourreau*, il sauvait les gens malgré eux pour les abandonner plus tard à leur conscience, et deux bras solides avaient enlacé Renée la forçant à suivre tous les détails de l'horrible opération. (292)

In this scene, questions of chance, fate, and justice are interlinked in ironic ways. The duke's apparent 'intuition' regarding Renée's (also supposedly instinctive) desire to return to the crime scene is less an opportune coincidence than an overdetermined literary trope, typical of *faits divers*.<sup>55</sup> The word 'hasard' appears twice, referring to slightly different meanings each time. The first instance ('ce

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<sup>54</sup> This pattern, where criminal complicity kills off a couple's sex life and promotes relationship disharmony, can also be found in Zola's earlier novel, *Thérèse Raquin* (1868), which acts as a precursor to *La Bête humaine*. A ghost of Camille's corpse lies each night between the newly married (and formerly adulterous) couple.

<sup>55</sup> Schwartz, p. 81.



hasard [...] juste’) refers back to the duke’s instinctual or fortuitous guesswork, while the second functions as a synonym for the earlier word ‘fatalité’. In this context, the idea that Pluncey is *aiding* (or *abetting*) fate appears somewhat contradictory, since if Renée’s silence was truly fated, why would he need to intervene? The implied answer to this question is that the duke’s conception of ‘fate’ is conveniently aligned with his personal vision of justice. This interpretation is hinted at by the word ‘juste’ in the syntagm ‘comme ce hasard était juste’. On one level, ‘juste’ renders the English words ‘correct’ or ‘accurate’, to confirm the Duke’s intuition regarding Renée’s escape. On another level, the word also evokes fairness and implicitly *justifies* the Duke’s interventions. Yet the Duke’s vision of justice reveals itself to be a form of psychological torture: ‘M. de Pluncey *n’était pas un bourreau*, il sauvait les gens malgré eux pour les abandonner plus tard à leur conscience’. Rachilde here plays with the word ‘bourreau’, meaning both executioner and torturer: Pluncey may wish to save Renée from the gallows, but only because he prefers that she torture *herself* with remorse. Similarly, he is perfectly content to let an innocent (and lower-class) man be executed in Renée’s place, thereby saving the family name from public opprobrium. Pluncey’s claim to ‘sauver les gens’ is therefore highly suspect.

As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that ‘justice’ in the Duke’s eyes means enacting personal vengeance and maintaining family honour, based on an aristocratic vision of social elites being beyond the reach of the ordinary judicial system. This can be seen in Renée’s second failed attempt at confession. In chapter nine she visits Bruno’s former sweetheart, Amélie, who is married off to a pharmacist to help pay her father’s business debts. The Duke accompanies Renée, ostensibly to support her endeavours: ‘Nous aurons la complicité qu’il vous plaira

d'avoir madame' (302). In fact, the Duke uses his presence to ensure that Renée's good intentions are undermined. After entering M. Chauvol's pharmacy and demanding an audience with his now-pregnant wife, Renée dramatically confesses to Amélie and asks her to hand over Bruno's love letters, which would help prove the Duchess's guilt in court. However, Renée fails to gain any sympathy: Amélie lies about having kept the letters and then destroys them later that night.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, Edmond reduces the potential danger of Renée's confession by passing off her words as hysterical ramblings. Amélie and her husband are eager to accept the Duke's version of events, to avoid having any 'démêlés' with the police and to benefit from the bribe that buys their silence (312). In the episode's closing lines, the narrator notes: 'Le duc pouvait être content. Le résultat qu'il avait voulu obtenir en sacrifiant sa dignité devant un pharmacien était obtenu... et désormais la duchesse, sa femme, serait vraiment folle!...' (313). The word 'résultat' clearly implies that this is an active ploy to frame Renée's confessions as the ravings of a madwoman, thereby casting an ironic shadow over the word 'vraiment'. As Melanie Hawthorne notes, the principal drama in the story's latter chapters 'rests on the irony that the murderer is unable to make her confessions credible', and Renée's decision to marry the Duke ultimately 'proves her undoing'.<sup>57</sup> The pharmacist, by accepting Edmond's bribe, and Amélie, by withholding and then destroying Bruno's letters, become complicit with the Duke's plot to ensure a miscarriage of justice, in the name of the latter's personal form of honour-defending vengeance. Through these failed confession scenes, Rachilde places emphasis not only on the

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<sup>56</sup> In a similar gesture, Camy-Lamotte destroys the note that Séverine wrote to lure Grandmorin into Roubaud's trap, after initially keeping it as a safeguard. See *LBH* pp. 1118 and 1317.

<sup>57</sup> Hawthorne, pp. 126 and 128.

tragic inevitability of her lovers' fate, but also on the ways in which shared knowledge can be manipulated to condemn an innocent man.

In *Nono* and *La Bête humaine*, the act of confessing crime creates complicity between speaker and interlocutor, particularly when the latter agrees to hide their newly acquired knowledge from the official channels of criminal justice. Whether this is Jacques silencing his instinctual recognition of Roubaud as the killer when they meet outside the *juge d'instruction*'s office, the Duc de Pluncey usurping Renée's attempted confessions, or the Chauvol couple destroying evidence and accepting the Duke's bribe, it is clear that characters' responses to gaining criminal knowledge implicate them in the guilt of the crimes' perpetrators. The accomplices' silence in both novels leads to the accusation and condemnation of innocent men in the murderer's stead: scapegoat characters who facilitate a satirical condemnation of the justice system's complicity with the crimes it claims to condemn.<sup>58</sup>

(iii) *Displaced Blame: Trial Scenes*

*Nono* and *La Bête humaine* depict miscarriages of justice that lead to the displacement of criminal responsibility on to male characters – Nono and Cabuche, respectively – who are 'innocent' in the judicial and sexual sense. These characters are presented as simple, caring, and loving individuals who are rendered almost completely powerless by their low socio-economic position. They both experience a doomed, chaste romance that predates events in the novel. These failed romances include the subplot of Louissette in *La Bête humaine* and Bruno's childhood sweetheart Amélie in *Nono*. Both characters subsequently fall in love with another, less sexually innocent, woman with the same chaste idolatry as the first, and then

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<sup>58</sup> Susan Blood considers René Girard's theory of the scapegoat as a means to maintain social order in 'The Precinematic Novel', pp. 59–60. She notes that the irony present in *LBH* points more towards social disintegration than to social order – an idea I expand on throughout section (iii).

provide the ideal scapegoat for a justice system unable (or unwilling) to uncover the truth behind the crimes being judged. Bruno and Cabuche's sexual inexperience and modesty prevent them from consummating their love and enable their unwitting victimisation. The narrative frame presents their naivety through a combination of pathos and irony: the reader is encouraged simultaneously to sympathise with, and to mock or denigrate, these emasculated figures. Consider, for example, Rachilde's description of Nono's love for Amélie Nevasson: 'Nono n'avait pas de passion. Nono, adorable et naïf jusqu'au ridicule, ne connaissait pas les femmes. Nono aimait sa Lilie, Lilie en robe montante, voilà tout!' (53). By combining the adjectives 'adorable' and 'naïf' with the noun 'ridicule', Rachilde encourages an ironic reading of Nono's idealising approach to love. However, the narrative voice is ambiguous in the last sentence, where the exclamation 'voilà tout!' reads as *style indirect libre* channelling Nono's uncomplicated vision of amorous relations. In a similar gesture, Zola describes Cabuche as a simple brute or gentle giant, whose seeming savagery involves a simpler relation to desire than the more complex psychology of Jacques Lantier: 'mais il y avait comme un besoin de soumission tendre, dans la bouche large et dans le nez carré de bon chien' (*LBH*, 1098).

Nono and Cabuche's passive submissiveness ends up working against them by rendering consummation of their love impossible and by placing them in the position of convenient scapegoat. The second chapter of *Nono* hints at the fatality of chastity, when Bruno remembers Amélie's reaction to a kiss on the cheek:

Elle parla de confiance, de dignité, et Bruno, anéanti, jura de ne plus recommencer; du reste, il la considérait comme un ange! Et il avait une telle nature, que, si on lui avait mis alors, de force, Lilie toute nue, dans les bras, il n'aurait plus osé. Eh bien, ce fut sa perte. Lilie aurait voulu qu'il recommençât, elle, à l'instant même! Ô femme, éternelle torture de l'homme! (56)

Lilie's secret desire that Bruno continue kissing her exposes the hypocrisy of bourgeois discourses surrounding feminine virtue and honour. It is only by disrespecting these codes, the narrative suggests, that sexual consummation can take place. Bruno's sexual modesty therefore condemns him to impossible, idealised love that ultimately works against him. Zola pushes this tragic logic even further in *La Bête humaine*, where Cabuche's 'pudeur' ultimately enables his criminal condemnation. Upon discovering Séverine's naked and bloody corpse, Cabuche's first response is to protect her modesty: '[il] la saisit d'un élan fraternel, à pleins bras, la souleva, la posa sur le lit, dont il rejeta le drap, pour la couvrir. Mais, dans cette étreinte, l'unique tendresse entre eux, il s'était couvert de sang, les deux mains, la poitrine. Il ruisselait de son sang' (*LBH*, 1300). By doing so, he is caught at the scene covered in Séverine's blood, thereby validating others' suspicions regarding his involvement in the crime.<sup>59</sup> Respecting Séverine's modesty quite literally gets Cabuche unjustly framed, tried, and condemned for murder. These narratives therefore suggest that male sexual innocence and chaste respect for women are self-defeating within a society whose predominant mode of masculine sexuality is one of aggression and possessiveness. Although there is implicit critique of the sexual double standard and masculine sexuality in the novels – through the reader's awareness of the injustice of the trial scene outcomes – the ineluctable narrative logic of doomed male chastity seems to offer little room for alternative models of amorous union.

Nono and Cabuche show ignorance not only of sexual matters but also of judicial procedure. They are unable to explain or understand the murders of which

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. *Le Ventre de Paris*, where Florent is wrongly arrested for political agitation, after being found on the barricades with his hands covered in blood. This blood in fact came from the corpse of an anonymous woman, shot by soldiers on the rue Vivienne, as part of the violent suppression of opposition to the December 1851 coup. See Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, I (1960), pp. 610–12.

they stand accused. Their lack of judicial expertise – which exists alongside, and is intertwined with, their sexual naivety – ultimately leads to their condemnation. In *Nono*, Bruno is repeatedly associated with verbs relating to ignorance. We are told, in the novel's opening pages, that 'je ne sais pas' is his go-to response to most questions: 'C'était le mot de Bruno. Il ne savait jamais' (7). This seemingly irrelevant detail becomes significant later in the novel, when Bruno is unable to explain the presence of a letter, addressed to him, found in Victorien's remains. His only response is his catchphrase: 'Il lut la lettre, puis il la laissa tomber par terre. – Je ne sais pas! murmura-t-il. Ce fut tout. Nono avait compris qu'il était perdu' (298). Bruno's inability to explain the increasingly damning evidence against him further serves the purposes of his condemnation. Cabuche finds himself in a similar situation in *La Bête humaine* when he is interrogated about the gloves and handkerchiefs found in his woodland home. Too ashamed of his feelings for Séverine to explain his magpie-like hoarding, he can do nothing but repeat Bruno's phrase, 'je ne sais pas':

Puis une honte, une pudeur invincible, le fit se taire. [...] [À] quoi bon raconter cela? [...] Déjà on ne croyait rien de ce qu'il disait. D'ailleurs, lui-même commençait à ne plus comprendre, tout se brouillait dans son crâne d'homme simple, il entraînait en plein cauchemar. Et il ne s'emportait même plus, à l'accusation de meurtre; il restait hébété, il répétait à chaque question qu'il ne savait pas. Pour les gants et les mouchoirs, il ne savait pas. Pour la montre, il ne savait pas. On l'embêtait, on n'avait qu'à le laisser tranquille et à le guillotiner tout de suite. (*LBH*, 1310)

The inability to explain events satisfactorily is interpreted as a sign for, and as synonymous with, criminal guilt. When faced with an overwhelming accumulation of uncanny and unfortunate coincidences, Cabuche and Bruno can only respond with confusion to the events that have piled up against them.

Indeed, Rachilde and Zola use a series of plot twists and unfortunate coincidences to highlight the irony behind the injustices that take place within their respective narratives. In *Nono*, Bruno inadvertently raises suspicions by leaving Renée's home just as the police come to question him. He then contradicts his own testimony by going back on a lie that Renée had asked him to maintain. Finally, his alibi for the night of the murder, which he spent writing a letter to his sweetheart Amélie, is destroyed when Amélie refuses to hand over the letters to Renée and then burns them, so as not to become caught up in criminal proceedings. In *La Bête humaine*, Cabuche happens uncannily to resemble the person the Roubaud couple make up in order to displace the *juge d'instruction's* suspicions. He then inadvertently gets himself covered in Séverine's blood upon finding her body at La Croix-de-Maufras. Finally, when interrogated, Cabuche is unable to explain how he came into possession of Grandmorin's watch. The frequency of these coincidences is reminiscent of the genres of melodrama, popular crime fiction, and the *roman-feuilleton*. This tendency towards serendipity further bolstered the accusations of *invraisemblance* wielded by critics on the novels' publication, discussed above.

However, it is not only unfortunate coincidence that condemns the innocent male characters in *Nono* and *La Bête humaine*, but judicial prejudice: they happen to fit into models of criminality that were hotly debated at the *fin de siècle*. In *La Bête humaine*, Cabuche is described as a 'repris de justice', since he had previously served a prison sentence for accidentally killing a man in a fight (*LBH*, 1091). This term reflects contemporaneous anxieties surrounding *récidivisme*.<sup>60</sup> Cabuche's status as an ex-convict renders him socially and criminally suspect by default,

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<sup>60</sup> See Nye, pp. 49–96.

therefore justifying his mistreatment and false imprisonment. Zola presents other characters' interpretations of Cabuche in narrative vignettes that are shot through with dramatic irony, including the first interrogation scene in Denizet's office: 'Saisi brutalement au fond de son trou, de grand matin, arraché à sa forêt, exaspéré des accusations qu'il ne comprenait pas, il avait déjà, avec son effarement et sa blouse déchirée, l'air louche du prévenu, cet air de bandit sournois que la prison donne au plus honnête homme' (*LBH*, 1098). The treatment Cabuche receives starkly contrasts with the polite, *mondain*, and collusive atmosphere of the interrogations preceding his entrance, where Denizet ensures that the witness statements for the Lachesnaye couple and Mme Bonnehon are purged of any incriminating evidence (*LBH*, 1093). It also reflects typical police procedure in the era, where suspects – particularly those of the lower classes – were considered guilty until proven innocent.<sup>61</sup> In this context, Cabuche's physical appearance – his 'blouse déchirée', 'air louche', and 'air de bandit sournois' – acts as unofficial evidence justifying Denizet's presumption of his guilt.

Later in the novel, the trial audience's interpretation of Cabuche parallels this negative and preemptive interpretative gesture: 'Quant à Cabuche, il était bien tel qu'on se l'imaginait, vêtu d'une longue blouse bleue, le type même de l'assassin, des poings énormes, des mâchoires de carnassier, enfin un de ces gaillards qu'il ne fait pas bon rencontrer au coin d'un bois' (*LBH*, 1320). Zola here implicitly criticises the criminological theory inspired by Lombroso's work on the 'born criminal', where certain physical traits are interpreted as betraying the innate criminality of an individual. This criticism is conveyed through dramatic irony – since we, as readers, know that Cabuche is innocent – and through hints at the

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<sup>61</sup> Cragin, p. 194.



socially constructed nature of criminal typology. Zola depicts Cabuche as fitting the audience's expectations of criminality: he is 'tel qu'on se l'imaginait', 'le type même de l'assassin', and 'un de ces gaillards [...]'. The verb 'imaginer' situates the audience's viewpoint within the realm of a shared social, cultural, and moral imaginary, where appearances can be 'read' according to pre-formed typologies. Similarly, the syntagm 'un de ces' is a typical linguistic marker of generalisation and *idées reçues*. Realist fiction abounds with these markers, because its verisimilitude necessarily depends on the reader's recognition of normative types. The communal nature of *idées reçues* and *évidences* brings together ideas, discourses, and people in such a way as to implicate the latter in the consequences of actions influenced by these shared preconceptions. Importantly, *idées reçues* are typically transmitted through shared cultural forms, especially through the written word. Cabuche's lack of education, his probable illiteracy, and his general lack of cultural know-how therefore place him at a distinct disadvantage when perceived through the lens of others' judgement.

Zola's critique of socio-judicial *idées reçues* in *La Bête humaine* gains strength through the juxtaposition between Cabuche's 'uncivilised' simplicity and the complex mechanisms that contribute to his arrest and condemnation. These mechanisms are epitomised by the *juge d'instruction* Denizet's obsessive need for complex explanations that confirm his own prejudices. Zola's portrayal of Denizet is undeniably satirical. Colette Becker speaks of the author's 'ironie amère' when discussing the myriad ways in which stereotypes and *idées reçues* succeed in condemning an innocent man.<sup>62</sup> We can see this when Zola describes Denizet's

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<sup>62</sup> Colette Becker, 'Zola et Lombroso: A propos de *La Bête humaine*', *Les Cahiers Naturalistes*, 80 (2006), 37–49 (p. 44).

overly complicated psychological ‘finesse’ (*LBH*, 1084) as a carefully constructed ‘édifice de logique’ that would collapse if a single piece were removed (*LBH*, 1318). Denizet further confirms the association between judicial logic and socially constructed *vraisemblance* by flatly refusing to consider the possibility of Jacques being Séverine’s murderer:

Et puis, un amant n’égorge pas sans raison une maîtresse qu’il adore [...]. Ce serait absurde. Non! non! il n’y avait qu’un assassin possible, un assassin évident, le repris de justice trouvé là, les mains rouges, le couteau à ses pieds, cette bête brute qui faisait à la justice des contes à dormir debout. (*LBH*, 1308)

The use of the present tense and *style indirect libre* in the first sentence emphasises how Denizet considers his interpretation of human psychology as a universal truth. The irony of Denizet’s misreading is emphasised by the word ‘évident’ in the phrase ‘il n’y avait qu’un assassin possible, un assassin évident’. In Denizet’s vision, it is precisely only *évidences* – or interpretations that go without saying, and therefore require no actual *evidence* – that are considered logical, acceptable, and ‘true’.

Whereas Cabuche ultimately remains an unwitting scapegoat whose naivety and ignorance prevents him from being able to master the justice system, Bruno, by the time he faces trial, actively manipulates criminological discourses and judicial *idées reçues* in order to ensure his own condemnation. After finding out the truth regarding Renée’s guilt, Bruno is intent on sacrificing himself to save his beloved in an act of amorous martyrdom (323). At the trial, he uses knowledge of others’ prejudices to the ends of self-condemnation, by deliberately playing up to the role of the unrepentant criminal. He does so by addressing the jury in the following way:

– Messieurs, dit-il d’un ton ferme, je suis un monstre; je le reconnais et m’en fais gloire! [...] Mon Dieu! j’ai vécu comme tous les jeunes gens de mon âge ayant plus d’esprit que moi. J’ai fait l’amour et j’ai bu, ce qui a égaré ma main souvent. [...] Vous n’avez pas pitié d’un de vos semblables... je vous souhaite de n’avoir jamais rencontré votre rival à la portée d’une roche branlante. Je vous souhaite de

n'avoir jamais eu faim d'un corps bien blanc!... [...] Je ne me recommande pas à votre indulgence, vous n'en avez pas. Pourtant, je vous préviens, si vous me faites grâce, je vous affirme que je tâcherai de vivre mieux encore!... Désormais je tuerai la première créature qui me dira: je t'aime, pour qu'elle ne puisse plus me trahir!... (339)

By proudly confessing to Victorien's murder, and by emphasising his lack of remorse, Bruno undermines any mitigating circumstances a *crime passionnel* might otherwise have granted him. He also disables any argument in favour of his rehabilitation by asserting that, if pardoned or released, he will murder the first woman who falls in love with him. At each stage of this self-implicating confession, Bruno evokes fin-de-siècle legal debates: the *crime passionnel* and mitigating circumstances, Lombroso's 'born criminal', and *récidivisme*.<sup>63</sup> Not only this, but in the phrase 'un de vos semblables', Bruno posits his audience as equally capable of, and therefore morally complicit in, his crime, while framing the jury's condemnation of him as hypocritical. Bruno's ability to make this speech is ironic and marks his sudden transition from naïve and chaste young man, 'le doux naïf', to masterful manipulator and cynic (even if his cynical posturing is ultimately a mask). This transformation occurs when he discovers the truth behind Renée's crime. No longer ignorant or naive, Nono takes on an interpretative role that requires the manipulation of both evidence and *évidences*. Like Denizet in *La Bête humaine*, Nono creates an explanatory vision of the murder that adheres to psychological, social, and judicial prejudices, which the audience and jury will accept as true, but which is ultimately false. However, unlike Denizet, he manipulates these prejudices for altruistic ends, rather than perpetuating them unreflectingly.

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<sup>63</sup> See Nye, pp. 49–131.

Rachilde and Zola's novels critique and parody social discourses surrounding criminality, highlighting the ease with which responsibility and blame are displaced onto innocent victims of cultural prejudice. I suggest that Rachilde takes this critical gesture further by emphasising Bruno's performance and deliberate manipulation of judicial prejudice in *Nono's* trial scene. Bruno's capacity to recognise and manipulate *idées reçues* is bound up in his educational and professional background. Working as General Fayor's secretary, Bruno takes on a position akin to a ghost writer, helping to transcribe and edit his employer's memoirs and political speeches. He does so with a degree of success and flair that is commented on by other characters in the novel. In chapter six, during one of General Fayor's public speeches, an undercover police inspector (pretending to be one of the servants of Fayor's rival, the duc de Pluncey) says to Nono: 'vous avez fièrement fait gloser votre général' (187). Of course, this quality does not make up for Bruno's lack of social and economic authority, which places him in a victimised position. However, it does offer the character some control over his fate towards the end of the novel. Although Bruno Maldas is not actually a murderer, his self-presentation during the trial plays up to an image of the violent criminal as a mirror of social prejudice and hypocrisy. By implicating the jury and trial audience in his supposed guilt, he suggests that the desire to commit murder is natural and innate: it is simply a question of who has the opportunity or wherewithal to act on it. This twist on the ethical norm that views murder as an aberration marks the keystone to a more radical paradoxical approach employed by avant-garde writers, whose 'littérature des assassins' – as we saw earlier – frequently presented murder as something to be valued, praised, and appreciated on a social, political, and aesthetic level. By twisting criminological discourses to his own ends, Bruno therefore takes

on a similar role to the Decadent and avant-garde writers, who, like Rachilde herself, celebrated the more transgressive elements of criminality and twisted the arguments of their more conservative, traditionalist contemporaries through paradox, parody, and satire.



As we have seen throughout this chapter, the appeal of crime narrative in fin-de-siècle France was such that it was used by writers across a range of genres and discourses, from the popular to the scientific and the political to the avant-garde. Debates about criminal and moral responsibility existed alongside, and intersected with, a widespread morbid interest in tales of violence and transgression – which sometimes, but not always, ended with a reassuring ‘return to order’. We have also seen how Rachilde and Zola refused their readers this reassurance, in stories that end in accumulated bloodshed and injustice. Instead, these stories highlight the ambiguities of criminal responsibility in ways that implicate readers, who, like the novels’ characters, both witness the crimes depicted and receive the murderers’ confessions. Moreover, it is clear from the play of identification and focalization in these novels that the reader’s desire is not – or is not supposed to be – for the criminals to be brought to justice. Not only this, but by describing the fatal role played by *idées reçues* in the condemnation of innocent men, Rachilde and Zola highlight the way scientific, judicial, and political discourses around crime parallel literary typologies, ultimately creating criminal fictions that work against the justice they claim to support. It is precisely these intersecting layers of complicity, hinted at in *Nono* and *La Bête humaine*, that avant-garde writers such as Mirbeau, Beaubourg, and Coolus knowingly manipulated when they presented the murderer figure of as a figurehead and symbol for their counter-discursive

positioning and controversial solidarity. Far from taking themselves too seriously, however, they explored the value of criminality with a tongue-in-cheek attitude that poked fun not only at the moralising discourses they parodied, but also at their own identification with an aestheticized version of the murderer figure. By engaging in these debates, such writers extended the metaphor aligning art with murder, while creating new forms of identification and association between their peers, premised on a shared valorisation of the illicit. To explore this tendency further, I consider in the following chapter a network of avant-garde writers who used media exchanges to create and maintain infamy – a process which relied on, but also risked damaging, their mutually productive friendships.

### 3. Scandal and Collusion in Avant-Garde Media

In a literary marketplace increasingly dominated by mass consumerism, sensationalism, and celebrity culture, avant-garde writers cannily manipulated the appeal of the illicit by adopting self-promotion marketing strategies that played up to the frameworks of criminality and immorality used, by friends and critics alike, to condone and condemn them respectively. Unlike their mainstream peers, such as Paul Bourget, they actively co-opted the ambiguous appeal of illicit themes and collusive relationships in order to establish their subversive aesthetic. Members of avant-garde literary groups – including the *Hydropathes*, Decadents, and Symbolists – took up a bohemian, anti-bourgeois stance that blended youth culture, popular culture, and an aestheticised criminality. Their sense of group identity depended on a rejection of normative models of acceptable behaviour, moral codes, and aesthetic tradition.<sup>1</sup> This subversiveness was an integral part of the public image cultivated by avant-garde writers, who employed media strategies to promote themselves and one another in the press. Recent Francophone scholarship, inspired by the sociological approach to literature spearheaded by Pierre Bourdieu, has highlighted the importance of literary networks and media strategies in nineteenth-century French culture. For example, Anthony Glinoe and Vincent Laisney note how literary networks offered writers of the period survival strategies and pathways to success in the cultural marketplace.<sup>2</sup> Two recent volumes edited by Brigitte Diaz, Marie-Ève Thérenty, and Adeline Wrona have further shown how nineteenth-century writers formed exclusive literary groups, adopted recognisable public

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<sup>1</sup> See Bénédictine Didier, *Petites revues et esprit bohème à la fin du XIXe siècle (1878–1889)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Glinoe and Vincent Laisney, *L'Âge des cénacles. Confraternités littéraires et artistiques au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2013), pp. 25–6.

personae, and appropriated marketing techniques to heighten their visibility and legitimacy in an increasingly commodified literary sphere.<sup>3</sup> Throughout this chapter I suggest that the strategies evoked by French critics – namely: group identity, public image, and self-promotion – all involve an element of collusion or complicity, when understood figuratively to evoke wider notions of ‘connivence’, ‘coopération’ and ‘action commune’.

As demonstrated in my thesis introduction, the actions that bring individuals together in collusive, cooperative relationships do not necessarily have to be overtly criminal or immoral. However, they are usually shrouded in some level of secrecy or mystery.<sup>4</sup> Applying this conceptual framework to the literary field, the current chapter considers how writers and readers could become metaphorical accomplices with one another by identifying with a specific literary ‘in-crowd’, whose inner workings and secrets are made available only to those in the know. This metaphorical complicity is especially visible in the ‘échange de bons procédés’ typical of *cénacle* culture.<sup>5</sup> As Glinoyer and Laisney demonstrate, the exchange of epigraphs, dedications, and laudatory reviews created a sense of ‘conspiracy’, ‘complot’, and ‘connivence’ between members of exclusive literary groups whose proclivity towards secrecy increased public curiosity and cultivated readers’ desire to be ‘in on it’.<sup>6</sup> The tension between elitism and mass appeal, or between secrecy

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<sup>3</sup> See *L'Auteur et ses stratégies publicitaires au XIXe siècle*, ed. by Brigitte Diaz (Caen: Presses universitaires de Caen, 2019) and *L'Écrivain comme marque*, ed. by Marie-Ève Thériault and Adeline Wrona (Paris: Sorbonne Université Presses, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*, 17 vols (Paris: Administration du Grand Dictionnaire universel, 1866–1877), IV (1869), pp. 784–5.

<sup>5</sup> Glinoyer and Laisney define a *cénacle* as: ‘un cercle restreint d’écrivains et de peintres animés par des liens d’amitié réciproques et par des convictions esthétiques convergentes, qui se retrouvaient périodiquement au domicile de l’un d’entre eux pour confronter leurs idées, unifier leurs vues et raffermir leur volonté’ (p. 10).

<sup>6</sup> Glinoyer and Laisney, pp. 441–451. Cf. Vincent Laisney, ‘Une “franc-maçonnerie de la réclame”: le *cénacle* à l’âge de la littérature industrielle’, in *L'Auteur et ses stratégies publicitaires*, pp. 145–153 (p. 152).



and publicity, was an ideologically loaded dilemma for literary groups situated at the margins of mainstream popularity.<sup>7</sup> It also regularly featured in wider debates about the impact of cultural commodification on literary creation in the era. Analysing this tension further, the volumes edited by Diaz, Thérenty, and Wrona consider the links between literary culture and advertising practices, highlighting the creation of literary ‘brands’ associated with authorial personae, fictional characters, and literary movements or schools.<sup>8</sup> These recent studies emphasize the necessarily collective nature of self-promotional strategies, where literary camaraderie is considered as a form of ‘cross-marketing’ *avant la lettre*.<sup>9</sup>

Writers’ complicity with advertising strategies, widely denigrated in the era, can be interpreted as a necessary evil in the financially driven market of cultural consumerism. But it also begs the question: to what extent were writers in control of their self-image? José-Luis Diaz has argued that nineteenth-century French writers created public personae based on stereotypical images of themselves – or ‘scénographies auctoriales’ – in order to become more visible, recognisable, and (implicitly) attractive to the public eye.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Ruth Amossy suggests that writers’ self-branding requires the adoption of simple, coherent traits, since ‘les discours de promotion ne peuvent créer ou maintenir une marque que s’ils convergent dans une représentation identitaire unifiée et simplifiée’.<sup>11</sup> These analyses suggest that although writers may demonstrate creativity in assembling the

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<sup>7</sup> Glinoyer and Laisney, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Marie-Ève Thérenty and Adeline Wrona, ‘Introduction’, in *L’Écrivain comme marque*, ed. by Thérenty and Wrona, pp. 7–29 (p. 20).

<sup>9</sup> Brigitte Diaz, ‘Du puff au buzz: naissance de la publicité littéraire’, in *L’Auteur et ses stratégies publicitaires*, ed. by B. Diaz, pp. 9–19 (p. 18) and José Luis Diaz, ‘Les écrivains en vitrine ou la “réclame personnelle” à l’œuvre (1830–1865)’, in *L’Auteur et ses stratégies publicitaires*, ed. by B. Diaz, pp. 37–50 (p. 49).

<sup>10</sup> J.-L. Diaz, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Amossy, ‘Ethos, image d’auteur, marque’, in *L’Écrivain comme marque*, ed. by Thérenty and Wrona, pp. 165–174 (p. 169).

diverse elements of their public persona, their reliance on stereotype limits its complexity. That said, such a reading is belied by the ways in which critics have depicted – and implicitly celebrated – nineteenth-century writers’ capacity for savvy self-promotion. This interpretation, prevalent in biographical accounts of avant-garde writers such as Rachilde and Jean Lorrain, was – as we see below – actively encouraged by the authors themselves. However, this celebratory vision of authorial marketing prowess does not tell the whole story. In *Before Trans* (2020), Rachel Mesch takes issue with the popular vision of Rachilde as a ‘savvy self-promoter who cultivated shocking behavior in the interest of publicity and fortune’.<sup>12</sup> Instead, Mesch proposes to study the more ‘human’ side to Rachilde, with a critical viewpoint that acknowledges the existence of vulnerability alongside audacity.<sup>13</sup> Rather than choosing between the two critical extremes of savvy self-promotion and heartfelt self-expression, I propose to demonstrate that playfulness and affect are not mutually exclusive, but in fact mutually imbricated.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, and to rephrase Mesch: without vulnerability, there would be no audacity in the first place.

In this chapter, I contribute to recent debates about literary networks and marketing strategies by applying the lens of complicity to a series of media exchanges in the mid-1880s, exploring the ways in which avant-garde authors promoted themselves and their wider literary circle by half-revealing and half-staging collusive relationships across a variety of media. I analyse a group of media-

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<sup>12</sup> Rachel Mesch, *Before Trans: Three Gender Stories from Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), p. 127.

<sup>13</sup> Mesch, *Before Trans*, pp. 127 and 152.

<sup>14</sup> Recent analyses of writers’ self-promotion strategies go further to acknowledge the role of affect alongside literary playfulness. See Thérenty and Wrona in *L’Écrivain comme marque*, ed. by Thérenty and Wrona, pp. 19–20 and Yoan Vêrilhac, ‘*Hoc signo vincas: le pur poète symboliste comme marque?*’, in *L’Écrivain comme marque*, ed. by Thérenty and Wrona, pp. 175–186 (p. 185).

savvy writers – at its centre: Rachilde, Jean Lorrain, and their mutual friend Oscar Méténier – who achieved literary infamy by engaging in polemical debate, manipulating an ‘in-crowd’ rhetoric of company keeping, and disseminating scandalous gossip. By analysing their involvement in two key genres associated with avant-garde literary complicity – the *roman à clef* and the *petite revue* – I chart the fine line between collusive and compromising literary relationships at the fin de siècle.

### **Collusive Genres: the *roman à clef* and the *petite revue***

The rhetoric of complicity and collusion, based on shared insider knowledge and a sense of being ‘in on it’, is prevalent in two genres favoured by members of the avant-garde: the *roman à clef* and the *petite revue*. Melissa Boyde defines the former as ‘fictional works in which actual people or events can be identified by a knowing reader, typically a member of a coterie.’<sup>15</sup> Originating in French salon culture of the seventeenth century, and finding a new lease of life in the nineteenth-century *roman cénaculaire*, the *roman à clef* became a genre favoured by elite or exclusive literary groups who traded on readers’ vicarious pleasure by partially revealing the group’s inner workings and secrets. In essence, *romans à clef* offer ‘fictional’ representations of thinly-veiled (but recognisable) literary, artistic, or society figures. They posit the existence of a ‘knowing reader’ who can unlock the work’s keys by recognising and understanding the veiled references. The *roman à clef* therefore relies on the appeal of speculation and mystery. Referential clues hint that there is something veiled or hidden – that is, something *to be known* – which in turn prompts the reader’s desire to uncover and know it. The genre also

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<sup>15</sup> Melissa Boyde, ‘The Modernist Roman à Clef and Cultural Secrets, or, I Know that You Know that I Know that You Know’, *Australian Literary Studies*, 24, 3–4 (2009), 155–166 (p. 156).

perpetuates a sense of elitism or snobbery, since not all readers are able to unlock the work's secrets.

The inevitable exclusiveness of these texts means that they have not tended to age well, nor have they been celebrated in the literary canon. When lacking the contextual and intertextual knowledge required to unravel a novel's clues, modern readers come up against the genre's seeming opacity. Because of the genre's historical situated-ness, and despite the prevalence of *à-clef* literary structures in elite and avant-garde literary circles, the pleasures associated with reading *romans à clef* have often been posited as culturally illegitimate. Sean Latham notes that the *roman à clef* is typically perceived as a 'guilty pleasure', because it fails to live up to an ideal of literature as a purely aesthetic object, divorced from historical and biographical referentiality.<sup>16</sup> He questions the validity of this demarcation by highlighting the fact that Modernist writers, who ostensibly idealized formal innovation over concerns of realism, frequently published works that depended on a presumption of referentiality and of biographical knowledge in their readers. According to Latham, modern critics have too frequently dismissed the *roman à clef* as glorified gossip, without appreciating its potentially disruptive and innovative power. This power is located in the 'infectious or 'viral' quality of the genre's 'conditional fictionality', whereby any fictional text can potentially be transformed into a factual narrative, and implicate its readers in the process.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, by relying on recognition and interpretation, *romans à clef* shift interpretative authority to readers as opposed to writers.<sup>18</sup> In Francophone criticism, the growing interest in *romans à clef* led to an edited volume entitled *Romans à*

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<sup>16</sup> Sean Latham, *The Art of Scandal: Modernism, Libel law, and the Roman à Clef* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Latham, p.15.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

*clés: Les ambivalences du réel*, analysing à-clef structures across a range of novelistic and journalistic genres.<sup>19</sup> In this chapter I expand on previous scholarship by exploring the ways in which avant-garde French *romans à clef* posit the reader as an accomplice in the act of uncovering secrets and hidden meanings.

At the fin de siècle, the act of partially revealing hidden or veiled meanings to a select, knowing readership extended beyond the generic limitations of the *roman à clef* and featured heavily in avant-garde journalism. À-clef literary structures were found across a range of journalistic sub-genres, such as gossip columns, interviews, and literary portraits.<sup>20</sup> In particular, there is a telling cross-over between the *roman à clef* and the *petite revue* ('little magazine'), which avant-garde writers such as Rachilde, Lorrain, and Méténier exploited to great effect. Like the *roman à clef*, the *petite revue* was a culturally marginal literary phenomenon that reflected the interests of a specific coterie, addressed a knowing reader, and relied on the appeal of spectacle and of the illicit. *Petites revues* were an eclectic range of literary and artistic reviews that varied significantly in format, periodicity and durability. These reviews supported lesser-known writers by offering them a medium through which to publish their works and make a name for themselves. Through them, aspiring authors could disseminate their public image through polemical debate, portraits, and *mises en scène* of their wider social and literary circles. The genre flourished and fluctuated in the mid-1880s and became increasingly professionalised in the 1890s – a decade that witnessed the foundation of notable titles such as *Le Mercure de France* (1890–1965), *La Revue blanche* (Belgian series: 1889–1891, Parisian series: 1891–1903), and *La Plume* (1889–

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<sup>19</sup> *Romans à clés: Les ambivalences du réel*, ed. by Anthony Glinioer and Michel Lacroix (Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> See Glinioer and Lacroix.

1914).<sup>21</sup> Amounting to more than a literary genre, however, the culture of *petites revues* was also a social phenomenon that blended real-life friendships with media-friendly performance. In many cases, members of the reviews' editorial board hosted literary salons, dinners, or parties that brought contributors and their extended social network together on a regular basis. The depiction of these gatherings in the periodicals' pages involved a rhetoric of exclusive company keeping, since the events were usually organised on a 'by invitation only' basis. That said, by describing these otherwise closed-off social gatherings, *petites revues* expanded their impact by encouraging readers to participate vicariously in the group's socio-literary enterprise.<sup>22</sup>

Associated with café and cabaret culture, *petites revues* blended a polemical, bohemian spirit with bawdy humour, in-jokes, and witty jibes. These stylistic tendencies frequently subverted mainstream norms of moral acceptability and good taste. Bénédicte Didier refers to this subversive positioning as 'la bohème des contrebandiers':

Le terme de contrebande implique détournement de la loi, stratégies secrètes, mise en place d'une société parasite qui profiterait des ressorts de la société (publicité, mentalité de la "clientèle" bourgeoise, industrialisation de l'art, succès de l'image du bohème) mais en refuserait paradoxalement les principes.<sup>23</sup>

Didier's comments are useful because they evoke the avant-garde gesture of appropriating and subverting commercial advertising strategies and bourgeois consumerism. This gesture of appropriation can be considered ethically and aesthetically dubious, since the avant-garde risked undermining their own anti-

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<sup>21</sup> See Yoan Vêrilhac, 'Petites revues', in *La Civilisation du journal: histoire culturelle et littéraire de la presse française au XIXe siècle*, ed. by Dominique Kalifa and others (Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2011), pp. 359–373.

<sup>22</sup> See Julien Schuh, 'Les Dîners de la Plume', *Romantisme*, 137 (2007), 79–101.

<sup>23</sup> Didier, p. 208.

establishment ideals by being caught up in mainstream practices. The little magazine's ambiguous status is confirmed by the language used by modern critics to examine its practices. Yoan V  rilhac describes avant-garde promotional techniques as an '  change de bons proc  d  s' bordering on 'copinage',<sup>24</sup> while Didier compares little magazines to a 'soci  t   parasite' and to freemasonry.<sup>25</sup> By using such language, V  rilhac and Didier highlight the complicit nature of the literary relationships they analyse. To unravel further the implications of these analogies, I explore below the ways in which a group of avant-garde writers, journalists, and editors manipulated scandal and subversion for the purposes of self-promotion, while creating alternative forms of solidarity based on the mutual construction of illicit media personae.

### **Partners in Crime: Rachilde and Jean Lorrain**

Rachilde and Jean Lorrain were key players in a group of media-savvy avant-garde writers who collaboratively traded on scandal in order to build and maintain their literary infamy. In the mid-1880s, they constructed their reputations as innovative Decadent writers and adopted self-promotion strategies that co-opted the titillating appeal of taboos surrounding gender and sexuality. The overtly gender-bending protagonists of Rachilde's early Decadent novels, her decision to wear men's clothing, and her highly contested 'perverse virgin' persona, parallel the homoeroticism and Decadent themes found in Lorrain's early poetry, his interest in criminal and lower class social *milieux*, as well as his dandified posturing and 'open secret' homosexuality. It was also in the mid-1880s that Rachilde and Lorrain became friends. They frequented similar haunts of the avant-garde literary scene,

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<sup>24</sup> Yoan V  rilhac, 'Petites revues', in *La Civilisation du journal*, ed. by Kalifa and others, p. 367.

<sup>25</sup> Didier, pp. 209–212.

such as the Café de l'Avenir and the Soleil d'Or in Paris.<sup>26</sup> Throughout their respective careers, the pair produced *romans à clef* and other biographically revealing fictional works.<sup>27</sup> By doing so, they courted controversy and provoked retaliation, including duels and legal action in Lorrain's case.<sup>28</sup> They also contributed to little magazines such as *Panurge* (1882–3), *Le Zig-Zag* (1882–6) and *Le Décadent littéraire et artistique* (1886–1889), before acquiring more stable literary and journalistic positions.<sup>29</sup> Through these media, the pair supported and promoted one another in the early stages of their careers, enacting forms of avant-garde sociability based on self-promotion, referred to by the trade term 'réclame'. According to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 'réclame' refers to a specific form of veiled advertising: '[se] dit, dans le Journalisme, d'Un petit article inséré dans le corps d'un journal, et qui a pour objet d'attirer l'attention sur un livre, une marchandise, un médicament, etc., plus sûrement que par une annonce ostensiblement payée'.<sup>30</sup> As this definition suggests, the practice of 'réclame' was viewed with suspicion, since it blurred the aesthetic and ethical boundary between

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<sup>26</sup> Thibault d'Anthonay, *Jean Lorrain: miroir de la Belle Époque* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), pp. 171–7.

<sup>27</sup> Several of Rachilde's novels, such as *Nono* (1885), the preface to *À mort* (1886), and *La Marquise de Sade* (1887), contain autobiographical details about the author's childhood and adolescence. She later published *Le Mordu, mœurs littéraires* (1889): a *roman à clef* depicting various figures from the avant-garde literary scene. Lorrain also published novels with à-clef elements, including *Très Russe* (1886) and *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901).

<sup>28</sup> A thinly veiled and scathing portrait in Lorrain's 1886 novel *Très Russe* led its target, Guy de Maupassant, to challenge the author to a duel (which Lorrain avoided, thereby damaging his reputation). Lorrain would later face a defamation trial, instigated by the artist Jeanne Jacquemin, for an article, 'Victime', published in *Le Journal* on 11 January 1903. See Éric Walbecq, 'Le procès de Jeanne Jacquemin contre Jean Lorrain en mai 1903', in *Jean Lorrain, produit d'extrême civilisation*, ed. by Éric Walbecq and others (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2009) <doi: 10.4000/books.purh.1251> [Accessed 31 March 2021].

<sup>29</sup> Rachilde became a regular contributor to the *Mercure de France*, whose weekly salon she hosted as the wife of its founding member and director, Alfred Vallette (1858–1935). Lorrain contributed to a variety of newspapers during his lifetime, including *Le Courrier français*, *L'Événement*, and *L'Écho de Paris*.

<sup>30</sup> *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 7th edn, 2 vols (Paris: Librairie de Firmin-Didot & cie, 1878), II, p. 585.



paid advertising and main copy.<sup>31</sup> Understood figuratively, the term also evoked promotional strategies more generally: ‘*Faire de la réclame*, Faire des appels bruyants à la publicité, chercher par tous les moyens à attirer l’attention du public’.<sup>32</sup> As we see below, the perceived benefits of ‘réclame’ for writers in search of notoriety were counterbalanced by the strategy’s negative associations with conniving behaviour.

Critics have frequently discussed Rachilde and Lorrain’s individual proclivity towards self-promotion.<sup>33</sup> Their interconnecting friendships also feature in biographical accounts of their literary careers.<sup>34</sup> However, these accounts do not always provide close textual and intertextual analysis of the specific forms employed in their mutually productive and revealing self-promotion strategies. This chapter extends and reframes existing criticism by closely reading a series of textual and journalistic exchanges between the pair and their extended literary network in the mid-1880s. Throughout my analysis, I suggest that Rachilde and Lorrain’s promotional strategies are representative of wider avant-garde practices, while highlighting the importance of periodical culture to critical discussions about fin-de-siècle literary figures and their production. I use a series of articles appearing in four consecutive issues of a review called *Le Zig-Zag*, published throughout

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<sup>31</sup> On the wider cultural phenomenon of ‘réclame’ in nineteenth-century France, see Marie-Ève Thérénty, ‘La réclame de librairie dans le journal quotidien au XIXe siècle: autopsie d’un objet textuel non identifié’, *Romantisme*, 155 (2012) 91–103.

<sup>32</sup> *Dictionnaire*, II, p. 585.

<sup>33</sup> On Rachilde’s self-promotional strategies, see Jennifer Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France, 1870–1914* (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1986), Melanie Hawthorne, *Rachilde and French Women’s Authorship: From Decadence to Modernism* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), and Diana Holmes, *Rachilde: Decadence, Gender and the Woman Writer* (Oxford: Berg, 2001). For Lorrain, see D’Anthonay, Philippe Jullian, *Jean Lorrain ou Le Satiricon 1900* (Paris: Fayard, 1974), and Robert Ziegler, ‘The Author of Public Opinion in Jean Lorrain’s “Les Lépillier”’, *Dalhousie French Studies*, 26 (1994), 39–47.

<sup>34</sup> See D’Anthonay, Hawthorne, and Michael Finn, *Hysteria, Hypnotism, the Spirits, and Pornography: Fin-de-Siècle Cultural Discourses in the Decadent Rachilde* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009).

October 1885, as the springboard for my discussion. I consider these exchanges alongside two biographically revealing novellas written by Oscar Méténier: ‘L’Aventure de Marius Dauriat’ (1885) and ‘Décadence’ (1886). By analysing the impact of polemic, media posturing, veiled portraiture, and revealing anecdote, I propose that Rachilde and Lorrain’s mediatised friendship, which blossomed from the mid-1880s onwards, reveals a particularly productive, if often ambivalent, form of fin-de-siècle literary complicity, integral to avant-garde sociability.

### **An Avant-Garde Little Magazine: *Le Zig-Zag***

*Le Zig-Zag* was a weekly illustrated review originally published in Lyon. Its first series ran from 24 December 1882 to 25 October 1885, and its second series from 16 May 1886 to 26 December 1886. During the hiatus between the two, the review briefly changed its name to *Gil Blague*, for a single specimen issue dated December 1885. The editor-in-chief, Aymé Delyon, worked alongside an administrator, Erüal, and later a series of *directeurs*.<sup>35</sup> *Le Zig-Zag* framed itself from the opening issue as a literary, artistic, and humorous review, with the tagline: ‘Tous les genres sont bons, hors le genre ennuyeux.’ It was part of a wider community of burgeoning (if frequently short-lived) avant-garde little magazines – such as *Le Chat noir* (1882–97) and *La Nouvelle Rive Gauche / Lutèce* (1882–6) – that valorised novelty, diversity, and youthful exuberance. This avant-garde approach solidified as *Le Zig-Zag* gained offices in Paris, which it held from December 1884 to the end of its print run, but then waned during its second series.<sup>36</sup> The writer-journalist Léo d’Orfer contributed a regular column, ‘La Chronique Parisienne’, from March to

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<sup>35</sup> Little is known about Aymé Delyon beyond brief descriptions found in the review itself. In 1884, she published a novel, *Mademoiselle Éliane*, first serialised in *Le Zig-Zag* (23 March 1884–4 May 1884).

<sup>36</sup> During its second series, with the sub-title ‘Journal de la Maison’, *Le Zig-Zag* took on a format more typical of women’s magazines, with columns on fashion, recipes, health, and beauty.

October 1885, and became the review's *directeur* in May 1885.<sup>37</sup> By this point d'Orfer was infamous for setting up a series of short-lived reviews throughout the early 1880s. In spite of these failed enterprises, he retained enough influence in Parisian avant-garde circles to encourage the collaboration of up-and-coming writers: Rachilde, Jean Lorrain, and Jules Renard (1864–1910). While enhancing the review's literary credentials through his friendship network, d'Orfer encouraged contributions foregrounding gossip and scandal, thereby appeasing the review's supposedly frivolous readership.<sup>38</sup>

On 4 October 1885, *Le Zig-Zag* published a special issue on women writers, or 'bas bleus' ('bluestockings'), which provided Rachilde and Lorrain a springboard to promote their controversial public personae (No. 146). In the opening article, 'Chronique raisonnable', Léo d'Orfer frames the debate and summarises key contributions. Rachilde, in 'Un fois pour toutes [*sic*]', depicts bluestockings as hypocritical man-haters with a proclivity for over-sharing intimate secrets in public.<sup>39</sup> Lorrain, under the pseudonym Jack Stick, offers a vituperative attack on his female counterparts, whom he associates with eroticised self-promotion. He cites Rachilde as one of the only praiseworthy exceptions to this general rule. In the subsequent issue (No. 147), d'Orfer publishes responses to the debate in an article entitled 'Guichet de réclamations', including those penned by

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<sup>37</sup> Léo d'Orfer (1859–1924), pseudonym for Marius Pouget, undertook military service in the colonies before living and working in Paris from the early 1880s onwards. He founded and ran a series of short-lived reviews, including: *La Jeunesse*, *Le Molière*, *Le Capitan*, and *La Revue de Paris*. D'Orfer and Rachilde were probably lovers for a period during the 1880s. See Hawthorne, pp. 120–1 and Finn, *Hysteria*, pp. 51–64.

<sup>38</sup> '[C]es furieux [les lecteurs] me demandent de l'actualité, des racontars, des cancons de boulevards et de coulisses, toute sorte de piment pour désaffadir [*sic*] cette pauvre littérature trop saine pour leurs estomacs blasés.' ('Chronique Parisienne. Projets', *Le Zig-Zag*, 21 June 1885.)

<sup>39</sup> The initial misspelling in the title is clearly a typographical error. Henceforth I refer to Rachilde's article as 'Une fois pour toutes!'.

Camille Delaville and Rachilde.<sup>40</sup> It is probable that these responses were mostly, if not entirely, fabricated, in order to increase the humorous appeal and polemical impact of the debate. Rachilde then starts a new column, ‘Zig-Zag Parade’, which opens the 18 October issue (No. 148). In a metaliterary mise-en-scène, Rachilde depicts herself performing on an upturned barrel, promoting *Le Zig-Zag* to potential readers, and defending it from potential detractors. The audience heckles her with questions, and Jack Stick appears dressed in drag, before revealing his identity. In the same issue, Lorrain contributes an article, ‘Encore les réclamations’, structured as a bipartite letter addressed to Léo d’Orfer. The first part, signed ‘Lorrain’, refers to Jack Stick as a friend for whose antics he is apologizing. The second part, signed ‘Jack Stick’, offers a tongue-in-cheek ‘amende honorable’ to the offended *bas bleus*. Finally, in the 25 October issue (No. 149), Rachilde offers portraits of her fellow contributors in the second and final ‘Zig-Zag Parade’ article, ‘Auteurs et décors’, which includes a positive appraisal of Lorrain.

As this summary suggests, the *Zig-Zag* exchanges represent a microcosm of journalism’s contribution to the reputation of fin-de-siècle writers. To explore this relationship further, I examine below the structure of polemic and response in the *bas bleu* debate, demonstrating how writers defined themselves as much by their antipathies as by their sympathies. I explore the ways in which this polemic acted as a springboard for Rachilde and Lorrain’s media collaboration, combining

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<sup>40</sup> Françoise Couteau (née Chartier), writing under the pseudonym Camille Delaville (1838–1888), was a proto-feminist writer and journalist. Unhappily married, Delaville came to Paris to separate from her husband, before obtaining a divorce in 1885. She wrote for *L’Événement*, *L’Opinion Nationale*, *Le Gaulois*, *La Presse*, and *Le Grand journal*. She founded and ran two smaller reviews: *Le Passant* and *La Revue verte*. Known for hosting parties and receptions, she was involved in Jeanne Thilda’s ‘dîners des bas-bleu’, discussed below. Despite disagreeing on female emancipation, Delaville and Rachilde were good friends. See *Lettres de Camille Delaville à Georges de Peyrebrune 1884–1888*, ed. by Nelly Sanchez (Brest: Publications du Centre d’étude des correspondances et journaux intimes des XIXe et XXe siècles, 2010), pp. 24–74 and Finn, *Hysteria*, pp. 41–43.

controversy and scandal with promotional tactics. Playing up to the ambiguities of their gender identity and sexuality, the pair manipulated the appeal of the illicit for their own purposes. By doing so, they adopted revealing promotional strategies associated with the bluestocking figure they claimed to revile – strategies which earned them vituperative critique in turn. This cycle of opposition and implication reflects Latham's vision of the *roman à clef* as a viral, contagious genre. In the final section, I consider how this effective (if controversial) tactic involved an element of risk, because the public revelation of private information – however playful or theatrical – inevitably exposes the vulnerability of those involved.

### **The *Bas Bleu* Polemic**

By the late nineteenth century, the figure of the *bas bleu* had been a longstanding source of contention, satire, and polemic across Britain and France. First used in 1653 to evoke the plain clothes worn by puritans under Cromwell, the term 'bluestocking' came to refer to 'witty or learned people of both sexes' by the eighteenth century. From mid-eighteenth century onwards, a group of British women writers – including Hannah More (1745–1833), Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800), and Hester Thrale (1740–1821) – appropriated the term to refer to themselves and to the coterie who would attend their respective literary salons.<sup>41</sup> As a group, the bluestockings cultivated public personae 'built around intellectual accomplishment [...], female friendship, an Anglican-centred piety, and social responsibility'.<sup>42</sup> However, by 1782 the neutral or complimentary aspect of the term was lost and replaced by a predominantly pejorative one, evoking 'a learned,

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<sup>41</sup> Arnold Anthony Schmidt, 'Review: Bluestockings, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Sociability', *Nineteenth Century Studies*, 25 (2011), 271–278 (p. 273).

<sup>42</sup> Betty A. Schellenberg, 'Bluestocking Women and the Negotiation of Oral, Manuscript, and Print Cultures', in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1750–1830*, ed. by Jacqueline M. Labbe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 63–83 (pp. 64–5).

pedantic lady'.<sup>43</sup> Moyra Haslett associates this negative shift with the evolution of anti-feminist satire in the late eighteenth century, when the bluestocking was as much 'a figure in satiric discourse' as a historical group of individuals.<sup>44</sup>

The close association between the bluestocking and satirical tradition can be seen in the emergence of a French equivalent in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The term 'bas bleu' primarily translated the negative version of 'bluestocking' and retained little association with the historical English bluestocking group.<sup>45</sup> In France, it circulated in dictionaries, panoramic literature, and caricature during the July Monarchy. Notable examples included Honoré Daumier's *Le Charivari* caricatures and Frédéric Soulié's *Physiologies du bas-bleu* (1841). Satire turned to vitriol in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the figure was increasingly perceived to be a threat to society by rejecting maternal and domestic responsibilities. In a collection of critical essays entitled *Les Bas-bleus* (1878), Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly depicted professional female writers as a threat to conventional femininity and social order.<sup>46</sup> By the time Rachilde and Lorrain became published authors and journalists, the *bas bleu* had therefore come to represent a longstanding polemical tradition, bound up in socio-political concerns about gender roles and the literary marketplace. This tradition resurfaced in July 1884 when Jeanne Thilda (aka Mathilde Kindt, 1833–1886) announced a series of bluestocking dinners in *Gil blas*. According to Thilda, the dinners were attended by leading female writers, including Camille Delaville, Georges de Peyrebrune (1841–

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<sup>43</sup> Evelyn Gordon Bodek, 'Salonières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism', *Feminist Studies*, 3 (1976), 185–199 (p. 188).

<sup>44</sup> Moyra Haslett, 'Bluestocking Feminism Revisited: The Satirical Figure of the Bluestocking', *Women's Writing*, 17 (2010), 432–45 (p. 433).

<sup>45</sup> Karen L. Humphreys, 'Bas-bleus, filles publiques, and the Literary Marketplace in the Work of Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly', *French Studies*, 66 (2012), 26–40 (p. 29).

<sup>46</sup> Sharon Larson, "'Elle n'est pas un 'bas-bleu', mais un écrivain": Georges de Peyrebrune's Woman Writer', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 40 (2018), 19–31 (pp. 21–22).

1917), and Olympe Audouard (1832–1890). In the article, Thilda situates her peers within a respected lineage of women writers, citing the *précieuses* as literary forebears. Rather than completely rejecting feminine stereotypes, she plays up to an eroticised image of the woman writer: ‘si nous avons les bas de couleur bleue, ils sont si transparents qu’on voit la jambe rose au travers’.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Thilda’s monthly dinners capitalised on the French tradition of literary *salons*, where women actively participated in, and had tangible influence over, intellectual exchanges.<sup>48</sup> Long regarded as ‘antechambers of the academy’, *salons* offered networking opportunities and publicity to a select coterie.<sup>49</sup> By framing the dinners as an extension of aristocratic practices, and by insisting on the *bas bleus*’ acceptable femininity, Thilda implicitly responded to the criticism of Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly, who had politely but wittily rejected an invitation to attend the event.<sup>50</sup>

Thilda’s efforts to reframe and counteract criticism of the *bas bleu* demonstrate the challenges of the status quo: women writers in fin-de-siècle France faced an ambivalent audience at the best of times, and a vitriolic one at the worst. This range can be seen in the *Zig-Zag* special issue, which used the bluestocking’s controversial status to promote the review’s status as an arena for avant-garde discussion. The *bas bleu* debate is framed as a polemic, attracting a series of responses that continue beyond the initial special issue. This structure creates an atmosphere of controversy, which enables a combative form of social identification. Léo d’Orfer highlights the power of polemic to divide and unite in the special issue’s leading article: ‘Je commence par déclarer ici que, d’une part, je prends la responsabilité des articles de mes rédacteurs et que, d’autre part, je ne suis

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<sup>47</sup> Jeanne Thilda, ‘Le Dîner des bas-bleus’, *Gil Blas*, 10 July 1884.

<sup>48</sup> Schmidt, p. 273.

<sup>49</sup> Bodek, p. 191.

<sup>50</sup> Thilda publishes Barbey’s rejection letter in her article, without his permission.

aucunement de leur avis.’<sup>51</sup> These opening comments set the tone for polemical diversity and present *Le Zig-Zag* as a forum for debate. By taking responsibility for the special issue, d’Orfer implicates himself and his colleagues in its titillating contents and controversial spirit. He also hints at the legal responsibility held by editors, directors, and publishers in the period. As I discussed in the introduction, it was the act of publishing – and not simply writing – illicit or provocative material that was punishable by law.<sup>52</sup> Before summarising and responding to the issue’s primary articles, d’Orfer defends bluestockings against their (generally negative) critique. He asserts the appeal of women writers as lovers and muses, exclaiming: ‘Qu’importe que le bas soit bleu, pourvu que la jambe soit rose et blanche!’ In a similar gesture to Jeanne Thilda in *Gil blas*, d’Orfer appeals to the sensuality of female nudity to underscore the *bas bleu*’s essential femininity.

Following d’Orfer’s opening comments, the editor-in-chief Aymé Delyon offers a typological study of the much-contested figure in ‘Paris-Bas-bleu’. In a nod to the literary tradition of *physiologies*, she defines sub-genres of the *bas bleu* according to their financial, social, and artistic means, as well as their attitude towards literary production.<sup>53</sup> Examples include the *bas bleu* ‘riche’, ‘humanitaire’, ‘amateur’, ‘sérieux et bon’, ‘prud’homme’, ‘genre pion’, ‘docteur’, and ‘incompris’.<sup>54</sup> Rachilde takes Delyon’s light satire towards polemical critique in the subsequent article ‘Une fois pour toutes!’ Opening her contribution with a complaint regarding the topic’s unoriginality, Rachilde goes on to depict

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<sup>51</sup> Léo d’Orfer, ‘Chronique raisonnable’, *Le Zig-Zag*, 4 Oct. 1885.

<sup>52</sup> On fin-de-siècle authors and publishers’ legal responsibility, see Yvan Leclerc, *Crimes écrits: la littérature en procès au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Plon, 1991), pp. 13–128, and Gisèle Sapiro, *La Responsabilité de l’écrivain: littérature, droit et morale en France (XIX<sup>e</sup>–XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2011), pp. 323–518.

<sup>53</sup> The *physiologie* had gained popularity earlier in the century, partly in response to Louis-Philippe’s 1835 censorship laws, which prevented journalists from satirising the king and his ministers. See Humphreys, p. 28.

<sup>54</sup> Aymé Delyon, ‘Paris-Bas-Bleu’, *Le Zig-Zag*, 4 Oct. 1885.



bluestockings as hypocritically idolising the men they would undermine: ‘Cette lutte de la femme de lettre [*sic*] contre la suprématie du mâle qu’elle adore ressemble assez à la lutte de Monsieur Léo Taxil contre le cléricalisme: un beau jour on se retourne et on s’agenouille!’<sup>55</sup> She attacks her female contemporaries’ moral hypocrisy and compares their rise in numbers to Egypt’s plague of locusts. After criticising male writers such as Guy de Maupassant, René Maizeroy, and Jean Richepin for becoming romantically or sexually involved with pretentious female writers, Rachilde suggests that prostitutes’ love letters have more artistry than *bas bleus*’ published works. In a rhetorical flourish at the end of ‘Une fois pour toutes!’, the Decadent writer acknowledges her own hypocrisy in attacking bluestockings by writing: ‘Après cela, Monsieur, je suis femme de lettres, vous savez!...’.

Appearing alongside Rachilde’s text is the most polemical contribution to the *bas bleu* special issue: Lorrain’s ‘Le Troisième Sexe’, published under the pseudonym ‘Jack Stick’. In this article, Lorrain/Stick throws critical vitriol on his female counterparts, described as ‘un flot montant de vieilles gardes, une marée de mondaines rancies’ who turn the domain of literary production into ‘le camp des invalidées de l’alcôve et des refusées de la galanterie’.<sup>56</sup> The poet and novelist depicts Jeanne Thilda’s monthly *bas bleu* dinners, employing a lexis of visceral disgust and abjection, before citing Rachilde as the only praiseworthy exception to the general rule of female incompetence.<sup>57</sup> Following Lorrain’s vitriolic criticism, while offering a stance in direct opposition to it, Léo d’Orfer places a letter he claims to have received from Camille Delaville. In this letter, Delaville attributes

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<sup>55</sup> Rachilde, ‘Une fois pour toutes!’, *Le Zig-Zag*, 4 Oct. 1885. Léo Taxil (1851–1907) was an anti-clerical writer who ostensibly converted to Catholicism in 1885, only to reveal a decade later that this conversion was part of a series of hoaxes targeting Freemasonry.

<sup>56</sup> Jack Stick (pseud. Jean Lorrain), ‘Le Troisième Sexe’, *Le Zig-Zag*, 4 Oct. 1885.

<sup>57</sup> I examine both Lorrain and Rachilde’s contributions in more detail below.

to men an underlying fear of female rivals in the intellectual and artistic domains. She also decries the social injustice of men insisting that women hide their talents or offset them by investing time in more traditional feminine roles: '[Les] hommes sérieux vous prendront en grippe à moins que vous ne soyez jolie [...]. Même parmi celles qui ont un réel talent aucunes ne sont supportées ou appréciées qui n'ont pas effacé le côté littéraire de leur existence par autre chose.'<sup>58</sup> Throughout her letter – the only proto-feminist viewpoint in the issue – Delaville suggests that this 'autre chose' equates to domestic and sexual subservience to male prerogatives.

The range of opinions expressed within the *Zig-Zag* special issue incited further debate, encouraged by the structure of collaborative reader-response built into the review's format. In the subsequent issue, d'Orfer highlights the force of polemic in uniting opposing individuals by emphasizing the quantity and vehemence of responses sent in response to the *bas bleu* issue:

Nous recevons une pluie de réclamations au sujet de notre numéro des Bas-Bleus et nous ne pouvons pas insérer les plus jolies malheureusement!... Les femmes sont dans un état de fureur inexprimable: lire plutôt les lettres de Rachilde qui ne s'attendait pas à être malmenée par nous et de Madame Camille Delaville [...] qui a vraiment tort de tant se défendre d'avoir du talent etc....

The article's controversial tone is intertwined with a logic of outrage and defensiveness. Well-known literary personalities are portrayed as defending their reputations and opinions from the criticism and mockery aired in the special issue. The responses attributed to Rachilde and Camille Delaville are indicative in this regard. Both writers complain about being placed alongside Jack Stick's 'Le Troisième Sexe'. Delaville employs a vocabulary of moral outrage to distance herself from Stick's vulgarity: 'Il m'a été fort désagréable de trouver une lettre de

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<sup>58</sup> Camille Delaville, 'Une lettre', *Le Zig-Zag*, 4 Oct. 1885.

moi absolument intime, installée dans le *Zig-Zag*, [...] parce que j'ai horreur de me trouver avec des gens mal élevés, [...] et il m'a été odieux de voir mon nom à côté de cet article ordurier.' The physical proximity of their respective texts is seen to enable Delaville's unintentional complicity with Stick's more controversial viewpoints. Rachilde's response, placed immediately after Delaville's, reveals a similar concern: 'J'éprouve le besoin d'expliquer ma boutade: *Une fois pour toutes*, car, placée à côté des effroyables élucubrations de Jacques Stick (Paul Bonnetain, dit-on), elle semble devoir être pris au pied de la lettre.'<sup>59</sup> By rejecting certain interpretations of her writing as too literal, in the phrase 'être pris au pied de la lettre', Rachilde maintains deniability through an implicit *mise en page* metaphor. The desire for self-justification in the face of potential misinterpretation is shared by both female writers, who recognize – and indeed highlight – the fact that their articles are read *alongside* ('à côté de', 'au pied de') and *in correlation* with those produced by fellow contributors. Even if their articles differ in opinion or tone, the periodical's structure creates complicity through proximity. Yet by highlighting this process of guilt through association, Delaville and Rachilde paradoxically – and perhaps deliberately – emphasize and valorize the controversy in which they find themselves implicated.

### ***Réclame and réclamation***

To understand this seeming paradox, we need to consider more closely the relationship between 'réclamation' and 'réclame' in *Le Zig-Zag*. The former features prominently in the review's article titles, notably in the collective 'Guichet de réclamations' and in Lorrain's later piece 'Encore les réclamations'. The noun 'réclamation' is derived from the verb 'réclamer'. According to the *Dictionnaire de*

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<sup>59</sup> 'Guichet de réclamations', *Le Zig-Zag*, 11 Oct. 1885.

*l'Académie Française*, the meanings of 'réclamer' include: putting forward an insistent request or demand, acting on someone's behalf to defend or protect them, and protesting against something.<sup>60</sup> In the context of the *Zig-Zag* exchanges, the word suggests a reaction involving emphatic disagreement with, and defensiveness against, the object of complaint. Through the verb 'réclamer', 'réclamation' is related to another noun, 'réclame'. The *Trésor de la langue française* notes that both words share a root in the Latin verb *reclamare* (to cry out / call back / protest against), while 'réclame' also borrows from the later Italian verb *richiamere* (to remind / recall). Historically, 'réclame' was a term used in the printing domain, where it evoked the practice of placing the first word of the following page beneath the final word of the page that precedes it. In the theatre, it referred to the final words of a couplet that prompted other actors to reply. This meaning has suggestive parallels with the term's use in journalism, where it denoted indirect forms of advertising and publicity strategies.<sup>61</sup> Like the actors' couplets, advertising strategies attract the reader-audience's attention and prompt a programmed response: their interest in, and subsequent decision to purchase, the advertised product. In this context, 'réclame' therefore implies promotion, support, and sympathy, whereas 'réclamation' evokes rejection, denial, and antipathy. Despite their seeming juxtaposition, the two concepts are closely intertwined, as d'Orfer's opening lines in the 'Guichet de réclamations' suggest. In this section I consider the correlation between the mutual self-promotion typical of sympathetic, collusive, relationships – exemplified by Rachilde and Lorrain's mediatized friendship – and the self-defense mechanisms of polemical antipathy.

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<sup>60</sup> *Dictionnaire*, II, p. 585.

<sup>61</sup> Larousse, XIII (1875), pp. 781–3. See also Thérenty.

In the October 1885 issues of *Le Zig-Zag*, the *bas bleu*'s ambiguous gender status provided Rachilde and Lorrain with a whipping boy against which they could situate themselves, and a springboard for expressing and promoting their own non-normative approaches to gender and sexual identity. Polemical *réclamation* is thus bound up in, and paves the way for, mutual *réclame*. This process can be seen in Lorrain's 'Le Troisième Sexe' and in the responses it provoked. In the article, Lorrain depicts *bas bleus* as 'une marée de mondaines rancies [qui] bat lamentablement, désespérément le seuil des éditeurs et l'escalier des bureaux de rédaction'. The hyperbolic term 'marée' perpetuates fin-de-siècle anxieties about the increasing number of female writers in the literary marketplace. The language of abjection, seen especially in the term 'mondaines rancies', reflects the polemical nature of Lorrain's article and the underlying misogyny of the debate. Indeed, Lorrain goes on to depict *bas bleus* as an army of old, fat, and bitter women whose appetite for celebrity is only rivalled by their ridiculous attempts at erotic seduction. These attempts are described as 'des roueries de vieux dromadaires à dessiller les yeux peints du plus maquillé des poètes parnassiens'. By aligning female writers' sexuality with bestiality, Lorrain channels a form of misogynistic disgust that is shot through with homoeroticism. This is hinted at by references to effeminate 'poètes parnassiens' and by the article's title. 'Le troisième sexe' was a code word for non-normative sexuality throughout the nineteenth century. In the *Zig-Zag* article, Lorrain appropriates the term's culturally loaded negative connotations, but rather than applying them to homosexual desire per se, he applies them to *bas bleus* to depict them as even more culturally, morally, and physically abject than male and female homosexuals: 'Il y avait Sodome, il y avait Lesbos, nous avons les Bas-Bleus, le troisième sexe; ni hommes ni femmes, Bas-Bleus. Les Bas-Bleus, c'est-à-

dire le clan des Tétonnières hors d'âge, bedonnantes, ventruës, gorgiasées, velues'.<sup>62</sup>

Lorrain's adoption of homophobic discourses in his attack on the *bas bleu* was ironic and hypocritical, and would have been read as such by fin-de-siècle readers 'in the know'. By the time Lorrain contributed to *Le Zig-Zag*, he already had a reputation for depicting same-sex desire. His early poetry treated topics typically associated with the burgeoning Decadent literary school, including a notable thematic obsession with 'perverse' sexual identities and behaviours. In *Modernités*, published few months before the *bas bleu* debate, Lorrain celebrates the morally ambiguous appeal of figures he associates with a performance-centred and thrill-seeking vision of modernity: dancers, circus performers, fairground boxers, and prostitutes.<sup>63</sup> In the circus spectacle of the modern world, both men and women sold sex appeal to an avid public: 'Sous l'éclatant maillot de soie, | Mettant les yeux de femmes en joie, | Les reins vigoureux des lutteurs | Confondent leurs âcres senteurs | Avec les parfums de vanille, | Montant des seins nus de la fille | Qui songe, accoudant au rebord | Des loges son bras cerclé d'or.'<sup>64</sup> This stanza, taken from the collection's eponymous poem, blends feminine and masculine forms of eroticism in a heady celebration of sexual performance, exchange, and changeability. Male nudity, particularly that of the 'lutteur', repeatedly attracts the male poetic gaze, in a way that decentres the female body from being the primary source of erotic attraction. As well as these indirect hints of homoeroticism, there are overt references to male and female homosexuality in poems throughout the collection, including: 'Coquines', 'Little Boy', 'Darling', 'Athénienne', and

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<sup>62</sup> Jack Stick, 'Le Troisième Sexe'.

<sup>63</sup> Léo d'Orfer reviews *Modernités* in 'Causerie littéraire', *Le Zig-Zag*, 14 June 1885.

<sup>64</sup> Jean Lorrain, *Modernités* (Paris: E. Giraud & Cie, 1885), p. 10.

‘Copailles’.<sup>65</sup> We can therefore assume that, by October 1885, the association between Jean Lorrain and non-normative sexuality was firmly established in the minds of the elite literary audience that had access to his poetic production.

It is with this association in mind that we can better appreciate the layers of irony Lorrain creates in ‘Le Troisième Sexe’. In his comparison of the *bas bleu* to the culturally abject figure of the homosexual, Lorrain offers a hierarchy of monstrosity by suggesting that bluestockings are simultaneously *too* monstrous and *not monstrous enough*:

Classons les sexes, bon Dieu! Je leur ai assigné le troisième déjà si encombré depuis Héliogabale et Sapho; mais, monstres pour monstres, Ganymède, Héphestion, Patrocle, Antinoüs chez les anciens, le duc d’Epernon, le marquis d’O, et la chevalière d’Eon sous nos rois bien-aimés étaient de jolis monstres [...]. Or, parmi les monstresses de la littérature, où est-il, le joli monstre?<sup>66</sup>

In this diatribe, Lorrain seemingly calls for a return to traditional gender roles (‘Classons les sexes, bon Dieu!’). He does so while glorifying figures such as Heliogabalus and Sappho, whose sexual ambiguity earns them the appreciative and oxymoronic epithet ‘jolis monstres’. On the one hand, Lorrain appears to reproach the *bas bleus* for their failure to adhere to sexual norms. The irony of this approach would have been plain to readers ‘in the know’ regarding Lorrain’s sexual preferences. Even those not already part of *Le Zig-Zag*’s knowing readership can infer, from the presence of hyperbole, oxymoron, and paradox throughout the article, that not all is as it seems. While offering this faux naïf critique of bluestockings’ sexual impropriety, Lorrain ultimately bemoans the bluestockings’ inability to subvert gender norms with sufficient panache. Compared to a long genealogy of ‘jolis monstres’, the bluestockings are found lacking. Through these

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, pp. 22–3, 82, 90, 93, and 105, respectively.

<sup>66</sup> Jack Stick, ‘Le Troisième Sexe’.

references, Lorrain flips the negative cultural stigma attached to sexual deviance, valorising the subversive ‘monstrosity’ of non-normative sexual identities.

A lexis of perversity and monstrosity recurs throughout the October *Zig-Zag* issues, as part of the contributors’ banter-filled exchanges. In this context, Lorrain’s vision of the sexually ambiguous ‘joli monstre’ works not only to support his own controversial persona in opposition to the *bas bleu*, but also to promote Rachilde’s provocative media image via collaborative *réclame*. In the special issue, both Lorrain and d’Orfer perpetuate an already popular vision of Rachilde as an androgynous, perverse writer of risqué Decadent novels. Based on a biographical reading of her early works, this image dominated media representations of Rachilde throughout the 1880s, and only started to shift once she married Alfred Vallette in 1889. In ‘Le Troisième Sexe’, Lorrain indirectly applies the term ‘joli monstre’ to Rachilde by affirming her status as an exception to the norm:

Un ami qui lit par-dessus mon épaule me demande grâce pour Rachilde et Jacques Vincent. Mademoiselle Rachilde est, paraît-il jeune, vierge et jolie personne. Cela fait d’autant plus son éloge que *Monsieur Vénus* le seul de ses livres qu’il m’ait été donné de lire, est d’une corticante dépravation. Tous mes compliments à la stupéfiante précocité de son cerveau.<sup>67</sup>

In a gesture of collusive – if somewhat ambivalent – friendship, Lorrain offers an appraisal of Rachilde’s perversity. However, the hyperbolic nature of ‘stupéfiante précocité’ denotes a tongue-in-cheek tone suggestive of the article’s playfully provocative nature. This tone is congruent with the issue as a whole, as we see in Léo d’Orfer’s leading article. In this text, d’Orfer playfully condemns Rachilde’s hypocritical attack on bluestockings:

Et vous, Rachilde, jeune Éphèbe mal sexué, dit-on, vous qui avez trop de talent pour être une femme, et pas assez de raison pour être un homme... selon la grammaire, pourquoi bouderiez-vous vos

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.



compagnes au sujet de leurs passions? C'est bien plutôt contre des jolis monstres de votre espèce que je voudrais m'élever.<sup>68</sup>

D'Orfer highlights the ambiguity of Rachilde's gender status and sexuality by using the word 'Éphèbe', which was typically used in literature of the period to refer to effeminate male homosexuals. He also pre-emptively lifts Lorrain's term 'joli monstre' in a way that combines mock-moralising reproach with playful appreciation. In these instances, both men play a part in collaboratively staging Rachilde's illicit literary persona. However, they mitigate their appraisal of her perversity with references to hearsay: 'dit-on' and 'paraît-il'. Rachilde's status as a 'jeune Éphèbe mal sexué' or a 'jeune, vierge, et jolie personne' is therefore ironically questioned while being implicitly promulgated.

The double movement between mockery and support is part of a wider phenomenon of provocative banter between literary *camarades* in *Le Zig-Zag*. After all, Rachilde does not leave her colleagues' comments unanswered. She responds to them directly in the 'Guichet de réclamations' of the subsequent issue. Although some of the 'Guichet' responses seem to have been fabricated for comic effect, it is unlikely that prose with Rachilde's signature would have been printed without her knowledge, due to her position as a minor celebrity and friend to the *directeur* Léo d'Orfer. Furthermore, Rachilde mentions her 'Guichet' response in the later article 'Zig-Zag Parade', thereby acknowledging its content. In the 'Guichet', Rachilde addresses d'Orfer the following witticism: 'je tiens à déclarer *une fois pour toutes* à votre directeur, Monsieur Léo d'Orfer, que les mots *jeune Éphèbe mal sexué* ne peuvent m'atteindre, venant de sa part'. Rachilde here implicates her critic in the sexual perversity he mock-condemned, according to the logic that it takes one to

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<sup>68</sup> D'Orfer, 'Chronique raisonnable'.

know one.<sup>69</sup> She then contradicts Jack Stick, initially mis-identified as the Naturalist writer Paul Bonnetain (1858–1899), by distancing herself from his vision of her as a perverse virgin:

Quant à Monsieur Jacques Stick [*sic*] (autrement dit Monsieur Paul Bonnetain), le brevet de virginité qu'il me délivre me paraît inutile. Je vous en conjure, mes chers amies [*sic*], ne posons pas trop pour les vierges, tout le monde se moquerait de nous.<sup>70</sup>

The advice Rachilde gives to fellow women writers ('ne posons pas trop pour les vierges') highlights the potential risks of constructing a scandalous media persona. However, this advice seems somewhat disingenuous, because Rachilde would continue to play up to the 'perverse virgin' persona throughout the 1880s, and most notably in the autobiographical preface of her 1886 novel *À mort*. This work provoked a series of vitriolic critical responses, including an à-clef polemical pamphlet by Gisèle d'Estoc, entitled *La Vierge-réclame*.<sup>71</sup> In the pamphlet, d'Estoc aligns the self-promotional strategies employed by Decadent writers like Rachilde with exhibitionism: 'vous exhibez vos personnes comme des acteurs de tréteaux'. She refutes Rachilde's virginal status and accuses her of tricking readers (and fellow writers) into maintaining a gimmicky illusion: 'vous trichez avec le public, vous avez recours à la mise en scene et aux *trucs*'.<sup>72</sup> D'Estoc's critique, however vitriolic it may be, offers a perceptive account of writers' mutual *réclame* as a form of complicit performance.

D'Estoc's vision of Decadent *réclame* fits in with the theatrical imagery used throughout the October 1885 *Zig-Zag* issues. In 'Zig-Zag Parade', Rachilde repays the 'favour' of her colleagues' promotional *réclame* through a staged mise-

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<sup>69</sup> This comment can also be interpreted as a veiled reference to their rumoured relationship.

<sup>70</sup> 'Guichet de réclamations'.

<sup>71</sup> My analysis of Gisèle d'Estoc is indebted to the work of Melanie Hawthorne and Michael Finn.

<sup>72</sup> Gisèle d'Estoc, *Les Gloires malsaines: La Vierge réclame* (Paris: Librairie Richelieu, 1887), pp. 114 and 126.

en-scène of the review and its contributors. Throughout the article she hints at questions of gender ambiguity, such as when she addresses the audience: ‘Mesdames, Messieurs et les autres, s’il s’en trouve!...’ By acknowledging – however tentatively and playfully – the presence of individuals outside the gender binary, Rachilde extends the ambiguous celebration of sexual deviance expressed in the *bas bleu* special issue. This deviance is firmly associated with the character Jack Stick, whose drag persona is described in a stage direction: ‘(Une grosse femme très belle qui doit être Jacques Stik [sic] déguisé pour nous faire peur)’. The chaos greeting Rachilde’s ‘performance’ culminates in Stick revealing his identity to be Jean Lorrain:

A ce moment Jacques Stik [sic] saute sur le tonneau après avoir enlevé sa robe de femme. On reconnaît... qui ça? Ce drôle de Jean Lorrain (que je prenais pour Paul Bonnetain). Armé d’une cravache, il profite du désordre pour régler de vieux comptes [...] et nous tombons tous dans le petit tonneau.<sup>73</sup>

Rachilde here aligns Lorrain’s use of a pseudonym with gender-bending disguise and its subsequent unveiling.<sup>74</sup> Her vision of Lorrain as a provocative transvestite settling scores with his enemies (‘régler de vieux comptes’) works alongside, and intersects with, Lorrain’s own combative mise-en-scène. In ‘Encore les réclamations’, which appeared in the same issue as ‘Zig-Zag Parade’, Lorrain offers a mock-apology to the *bas bleus* in a bipartite letter addressed to Léo d’Orfer. The article is full of (implicitly autobiographical) gender ambiguity and homoeroticism, evident from the opening lines: ‘En ma qualité de poète des Ephèbes, [...] je comprends un peu l’horreur de Jack Stick pour les grosses poitrines.’ The word

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<sup>73</sup> Rachilde, ‘Zig-Zag Parade’, *Le Zig-Zag*, 18 Oct. 1885.

<sup>74</sup> On the mutually implicating relationship between pseudonyms and transvestism in Decadent literature, notably in the works of Rachilde and Jean Lorrain, see Leonard Koos, ‘Improper Names: Pseudonyms and Transvestites in Decadent Prose’, in *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadance*, ed. by Liz Constable and others (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 198–214.

‘Éphèbe’ – used earlier by d’Orfer to describe Rachilde – is not gratuitous, since it was frequently used as a code-word for erotic and amorous relations between men. The homoerotic implications of this term are confirmed by Lorrain referring to four *bas bleus* dedicatees as ‘quatre jolis hommes’ and citing Shakespeare as a justificatory precedent for homoerotic verse.<sup>75</sup> Through these playful references to gender ambiguity and homoeroticism, Rachilde and Lorrain’s articles in number 148 of *Le Zig-Zag* expand on the ongoing polemic and the *réclame* it enabled.

As well as combining polemic with *réclame*, Lorrain used ‘Encore les réclamations’ to respond to criticism he had recently received in the press. Much like Rachilde’s perverse virgin status, Lorrain’s dandified and homoerotic media persona attracted accusations of Decadent posturing. The day preceding *Le Zig-Zag*’s special issue on the *bas bleu*, Félicien Champsaur (1858–1934) had published an article in the literary supplement of *Le Figaro*. In it, he criticised Decadent writers such as Lorrain for playing up to sexual ambiguity, suggesting that their homoeroticism was nothing but attention-seeking farce:

Touchant la trentaine ou frôlant la cinquantaine, entre eux, les plus pervers se font des mamours, ils racontent qu’un tel est “collé” avec tel autre [...]. Et, l’hiver, à l’époque des bals masqués, ils se déguisent en mignons.

Mais c’est un simple genre, une attitude de décadenticulets. Ils sont réservés, ingénus, d’une complète respectabilité [...]. “Nous confessons bien des péchés que nous n’avons pas commis.”

Quelqu’un a dû dire cela.

Le vice?

Ils n’en sont pas capables.<sup>76</sup>

Champsaur seems to criticize writers less for experiencing same-sex desire than for *playing up to* homoeroticism for the ends of self-promotion. This approach towards non-normative sexual identity was not uncommon in the period. Andrew Counter

<sup>75</sup> Jean Lorrain, ‘Encore les réclamations’, *Le Zig-Zag*, 18 Oct. 1885.

<sup>76</sup> Félicien Champsaur, ‘Poètes décadenticulets’, *Le Figaro, supplément littéraire*, 3 Oct. 1885.

has shown that, at the fin de siècle, while homosexuality *per se* was denounced as perversion, the homosexual proclivities of specific individuals tended instead to be dismissed as mere posturing.<sup>77</sup>

Lorrain responds to Champsaur's attack in 'Encore les réclamations' by playing up to its accusations through repeated references to homosexuality. In the first half of the letter, Lorrain promotes his status as a 'poète des Ephèbes'. In the second half, 'Jack Stick' evokes Champsaur directly by referring back to Lorrain as a 'poète décadent, sacré décadenticulet par Félicien Champsaur, teneur de *massacre* à la grande foire permanente du Figaro'. Lorrain's use of two pseudonyms in this article suggests precisely the kind of personality-splitting posturing for which he was criticized. In a similar way, his 'apology' to the *bas bleus* simply further enacts the mocking behaviour for which he is supposedly apologizing. Not only this, but Lorrain implicates Champsaur in the very performance-driven media tactics his critic denigrates by describing *Le Figaro* as 'la grande foire permanente'.<sup>78</sup> Once again, we find the schoolyard logic that it 'takes one to know one' at work here. By playing up to his critic's accusations and highlighting Champsaur's complicity with what he critiques, Lorrain unravels his opponent's logic while repurposing *réclame* for the purposes of *réclamation*. In a parallel gesture, Rachilde contributes to this process in her portrait of Lorrain in the second 'Zig-Zag Parade' article:

Un bon zig!... Excellent poète, superbe lutteur, vigoureux chroniqueur. (Voir le no des Bas-Bleus.) [...] Accablé de tous les vices qu'il porte d'ailleurs crânement (n'en ayant d'ailleurs aucun, mais si heureux de passer pour un horrible monstre).<sup>79</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Andrew J. Counter, 'One of Them: Homosexuality and Anarchism in Wilde and Zola', *Comparative Literature*, 63 (2011), 345–65.

<sup>78</sup> Lorrain, 'Encore les réclamations'.

<sup>79</sup> Rachilde, 'Zig-Zag Parade. Auteurs et décors', *Le Zig-Zag*, 25 Oct. 1885.

Rachilde here celebrates Lorrain's deliberate but ambivalent adoption of a perverse persona, which she suggests is projected by detractors who accuse him of vices that are not in fact his own. Lorrain 'wears' or 'carries' these accusations off with panache ('porte[r] [...] crânement'), choosing to 'pass' as a monster and to re-deploy others' criticism to his own ends. The phrase 'si heureux de passer pour un horrible monstre' indirectly evokes Champsaur's description of Decadent posturing, while positively re-framing it as a clever way to disarm criticism through ironic appropriation. As this ongoing exchange demonstrates, *réclame* has a parasitic or infectious quality, whereby criticism of self-promotional strategies becomes implicated in, and is appropriated by, those very strategies. By collaboratively manipulating this quality through their media exchanges, Rachilde and Lorrain implicate one another in strategies of mutual self-promotion, while re-appropriating and subverting the discourses used by their detractors.

### ***Déshabillage***

Rachilde and Lorrain's *réclame* is bound up in a process of staged autobiographical unveiling. This media strategy involves the indirect but deliberate revelation of personal anecdotes and secrets (whether real or fictionalized) in order to arouse readers' curiosity. I refer to this phenomenon, which is synonymous with à-clef literary structures, as *déshabillage* due to the insistent way it is associated with exhibitionism and striptease. As we saw above, critics attributed this approach not only to bluestockings, but also to Decadent writers, who were accused of playing titillating identity games in order to gain notoriety. Although Rachilde and Lorrain were objects of criticism in this regard, they shared their critics' suspicion of *déshabillage* – or, at least, when it was practised by others. As with their position on gender, Rachilde and Lorrain took an ambiguous, hypocritical position on the

question of *déshabillage*. I explore below how Rachilde and Lorrain criticized *bas bleus* for engaging in partially veiled or fictionalized acts of self-revelation, while promulgating the tendencies they condemned and implicating their readers in the process.

Throughout the *Zig-Zag* exchanges, the pair lampoon bluestockings for using scandalous anecdotal references to pique their readers' interest in illicit (i.e. sexual) secrets. Rachilde criticizes female writers for hypocritically combining moralizing pretensions with titillating self-revelation: 'les femmes de lettres ont l'absurdité [...] de dire tout ce qu'elles font entre leur repas du soir et celui du matin... de la perturbation dans nos mœurs.'<sup>80</sup> The eroticized self-revelation Rachilde claims is rife in female-authored literary production is further aligned with sexualised self-display in Lorrain's satirical description of Thilda's bluestocking dinners:

Tous dans la presse nous avons été à tour de rôle, hésitants et curieux, comme au seuil d'une ménagerie célèbre, assister au dîner mensuel des *bas bleus*, [...] dîner-parade, dîner-réclame, dont les comptes-rendus rédigés et publiés par d'anonymes *Mitaines de soie* et d'insinuantes *Pattes de velours* pétillaient d'affriolantes et savoureuses indiscretions [...]. Et qu'y avons-nous vu? [...] [T]outes ces horreurs, toutes ces chairs *fumées*, apoplectiques et vineuses, exhibées, débordantes, étalées avec une complaisance, une effronterie, une telle bonne volonté et un tel désir de plaire qu'ils en devenaient touchants d'inconscience.<sup>81</sup>

Lorrain's critique emphasizes the close association between the deliberately staged visual availability of female nudity ('toutes ces chairs [...] exhibées, débordantes, étalées') and titillating journalistic forms. By evoking 'comptes rendus' signed under feminised and fetishistic pseudonyms ('Mitaine de soie' and 'Patte de velours'), Lorrain targets the widespread practice of recounting social events in

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<sup>80</sup> Rachilde, 'Une fois pour toutes!'

<sup>81</sup> Jack Stick, 'Le Troisième Sexe'.

gossip columns. He depicts the *bas bleu* dinners and their mediation through gossip-hungry reviews as a public striptease. This comparison aligns the *bas bleu* with prostitution and thereby implicitly devalues her work. In a similar gesture, Lorrain's postscript lampoons the well-known writer and journalist Gyp (pseud. Comtesse de Martel de Janville, 1849–1932):

P.S. Je n'ai pas fait à Gyp l'outrage de la citer parmi les bas-bleus [...]. [D]ans *Autour du mariage*, dans le *Monde à côté*, dans *Bob* et ses autres livres, Mme de Martel s'est toujours si complaisamment et si gracieusement déshabillée en public, qu'on ne peut l'accuser d'avoir jamais fait du roman.<sup>82</sup>

Lorrain's mock-compliment ostensibly suggests that the act of writing novels ('faire du roman') is more compromising than indecent exposure ('[se déshabiller] en public'), while implying that the distinction is irrelevant in Gyp's case. The adverb 'complaisamment' targets Gyp's complicity with a morally – and indeed aesthetically – suspect media strategy. In this way, women writers who engage in autobiographical self-revelation – whether in public social displays or in published novels – are stripped of value and consideration. This gesture typifies the widespread denigration of *romans à clef* as a genre.

Despite criticizing *bas bleus* for their proclivity for titillating self-revelation, both Rachilde and Lorrain were equally guilty of manipulating the appeal of illicit autobiographical references in order to gain readerly interest. This ambiguity can be seen in 'Zig-Zag Parade', where Rachilde playfully shifts the blame for literary *déshabillage* onto the reader. She suggests that writers are burdened with the voyeuristic desires that readers project onto them, by depicting audience members interrupting her presentation of *Le Zig-Zag* with questions such as: 'peut-on monter quand les réd-actrices s'habillent?' and 'A-t-on du vice, derrière le Rideau? Se vend

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.



t'on bien? Il est entendu que je ne parle pas de la feuille... mais des rédac!... [*sic*']'.<sup>83</sup>

A voyeuristic desire to watch female contributors (un)dressing is rendered synonymous with the desire for titillating anecdotes. The emphasis on individual contributors' sexual proclivities – seen in the references to nudity, vice, performance ('réd-actrices'), and prostitution ('se vendre') – suggests that readers are more interested in the review's 'behind the scenes' action than in its actual content. While implicitly criticising this tendency, Rachilde also plays up to it. She depicts herself performing in a tight-fitting 'maillot' and uses the article to reveal Lorrain's authorship of 'Le Troisième Sexe' by *undressing* his drag persona. Similarly, in the second 'Zig-Zag Parade' article, she offers readers a tantalising glimpse inside the review's offices. The description includes voyeuristic references to Aymé Delyon's bedroom: 'La chambre à coucher de la rédactrice en chef... N'entrez pas, Messieurs et Mesdames... n'entrez pas!...'.<sup>84</sup> Throughout Rachilde's articles, the relationship between supply and demand becomes blurred, and it is unclear who is to blame for the widespread literary tendency of *déshabillage*.

Lorrain also contributes to this dilemma in 'Encore les réclamations', not only by filling his bipartite mock-apology with the homoeroticism analysed above, but also by describing Jack Stick as 'nu comme un verre' when offering his versified mock-apology to the *bas bleus*. Stick's nudity suggests an act of self-humiliation, for the purposes of 'amende honorable', while simultaneously creating a relationship of compromising implication between himself and the reader. Lorrain hints at this ambiguity in the closing lines of the first section: 'Suis-je assez compromis! Que l'homme qui n'a jamais péché me jette la dernière pierre.'<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Rachilde, 'Zig-Zag Parade'.

<sup>84</sup> Rachilde, 'Zig-Zag Parade. Auteurs et décors'.

<sup>85</sup> Lorrain, 'Encore les réclamations'.

Through an ironic reformulation of Scripture, he acknowledges the compromising nature of his own writing, while implicating the reader in the homoerotic desire it depicts. When readers unravel and comprehend hints at homoerotic self-revelation, there is a risk that they might recognise themselves in the ‘perverse’ desires they discover. Or, as Latham puts it: ‘the secrets we unlock might be our own’.<sup>86</sup> Much like Rachilde’s mise-en-scène of the audience’s curiosity in ‘Zig-Zag Parade’, the underlying homoeroticism in Lorrain’s evocation of compromising nudity encourages his reader to recognise suggestive *clins d’œil*, in a way that depends upon the desire it simultaneously creates and reveals.

### **Compromising Revelations**

Rachilde and Lorrain’s contributions to *Le Zig-Zag* highlight an ambiguous association between self-revelation, self-promotion, and self-humiliation, thereby hinting at the risks of self-exposure on the public stage. These associations incite further debate surrounding the relationship between audacity and vulnerability in avant-garde media strategies. To what extent were fin-de-siècle writers in control of their public image? Where did the distinction lie between savvy self-promotion and the genuine – if indirect and playful – expression of identity and affective experience? To explore these questions further, I compare below two à-clef novellas written by one of the pair’s mutual friends, Oscar Méténier. These examples show how the boundary between collusive and compromising literary relationships was as narrow as it was fluid, and that these relationships involved real risk for, and required adroit negotiation from, those implicated in them.

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<sup>86</sup> Latham, p. 62.

Oscar Méténier worked as a police clerk in Paris before entering the avant-garde literary scene in the 1880s, befriending Lorrain in 1883.<sup>87</sup> He published articles, novels, and plays, and founded the Grand Guignol theatre in 1897. Frequenting the social and literary circles associated with Decadence, Méténier attended parties and balls with Lorrain and Rachilde by his side.<sup>88</sup> Drawing on a detailed knowledge of Parisian criminal and lower class *milieux*, Méténier's works contributed to the wider obsession with criminality and social transgression at the fin de siècle. It is widely acknowledged that Méténier shared Lorrain's homosexual orientation.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, like Rachilde and Lorrain, he created literary mises-en-scène of non-normative gender identities and sexualities. Revealing an array of personal and scandalous anecdotes about Lorrain and Rachilde respectively, 'L'Aventure de Marius Dauriat' (1885) and 'Décadence' (1886) explored the close relationship between *réclame* and *déshabillage* at a thematic and meta-textual level. Analysing Méténier's novellas alongside their reception by Rachilde and Lorrain, I suggest below that biographical unveiling was a productive (if problematic) source for fin-de-siècle collaborative *réclame*, demonstrating the benefits, and yet also the potential difficulties and vulnerabilities, involved in publicly revealing 'compromising' material.

Published in *La Chair* (1885), 'L'Aventure de Marius Dauriat' was based on an anecdote circulating at the time about Lorrain's sexual proclivities. The story went that Lorrain's liaison with a circus strong man ended in the former's being left humiliated, without any clothes, in a disreputable hotel room. The anecdote, later confirmed by Rachilde in *Portraits d'hommes*, is thinly veiled in Méténier's

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<sup>87</sup> D'Anthonay, p. 165.

<sup>88</sup> See Hawthorne, pp. 100–101.

<sup>89</sup> See Finn, *Hysteria*, p. 49, and Mesch, *Before Trans*, p. 148.

novella.<sup>90</sup> It depicts the relationship between a Decadent poet (the eponymous ‘Marius Dauriat’) and a circus strong man (‘Nicholas le Boucher’), which breaks down due to the former’s insatiable search for an increasingly gender-bending – if not gender-transcendent – relationship. After being unceremoniously jilted in favour of a female lover, Nicholas le Boucher conspires to take vengeance on Dauriat, with the help of one of his petty criminal friends, nicknamed Napoléon. Nicholas and Napoléon trick Dauriat into thinking they will help to procure him a young girl with masculine traits. They lure the poet into Napoléon’s down-at-heel apartment, strip him naked – supposedly in preparation for the promised sexual escapades – before revealing their disgust at his ‘dépravations’, assaulting him, and escaping. After coming round, Dauriat is forced to leave the apartment partially clothed in a mismatching wardrobe, which raises the suspicions of two local police officers. Unable to denounce Nicholas and Napoléon, for fear that they will comment on his sexual preferences in court, Dauriat flees the scene in a hired carriage before the police have a chance to arrest him.

A year after *La Chair*, Méténier published a second trilogy of novellas: *La Grâce* (1886), which contained another à-clef story entitled ‘Décadence’. It describes an androgynous and virginal actress, Mary Staub, who, with the help of her witty and aloof friend Le Rozay, takes vengeance on a former suitor, Arsène Meunier, who had just jilted her in favour of a more feminine lover: Mary’s fellow actress and rival Jane Normand. After a successful performance of Le Rozay’s new play, Mary attends a party organised by a mutual acquaintance. Dressed in men’s clothing, she exchanges barbed witticisms with Arsène and wagers that she can seduce Jane Normand *as a man*. Mary’s androgynous charm, and a few glasses of

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<sup>90</sup> Rachilde, *Portraits d’hommes*, 6th edn (Paris: Mercure de France, 1930), pp. 79–92.

champagne, suffice to pique Jane's desire. In a dramatic climax, Jane offers herself to Mary in the hostess's boudoir, revealing her breasts by ripping off her own bodice and passionately kissing Mary. In a heady embrace laced with a hint of sadistic pleasure, Mary bites Jane's lips and neck, before pushing her through a door back into the ballroom, for everyone to witness her humiliation. The protagonist has clear similarities with Rachilde, whose androgynous gender presentation and 'perverse virgin' persona was widely discussed in the mid-1880s. Other biographical details add to the à-clef status of the novella. It is highly probable that Arsène Meunier, described in the story as a womanising journalist known for writing frothy erotic fiction, stands in for Catulle Mendès – a writer with whom Rachilde had a brief and intense erotic (but apparently non-sexual) relationship.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, the figure of Le Rozay has traits similar to Jean Lorrain, and it is possible that Jane Normand represents Rachilde's supposed admirer-turned-enemy Gisèle d'Estoc.<sup>92</sup> In both novellas, Méténier explores the sexual ambiguity of his friends' relationships in a way that plays up to the curiosity such relationships provoked. Each story contains a vengeance plot concocted by a jilted, betrayed lover and their friend-accomplice, which results in public humiliation for their target. In these instances, public humiliation involves nudity or a form of undressing, which I read below as a metaphor for the compromising revelations at the heart of *romans à clef*.

In 'L'Aventure', the sexually ambiguous and implicitly homoerotic nature of Marius Dauriat's relationship with Nicholas le Boucher is hinted at indirectly through a double-layered description – first from Nicholas' viewpoint, then from the position of an impersonal narrator. The story opens *in media res* with a

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<sup>91</sup> On Rachilde and Mendès' relationship, see Finn, *Hysteria*, pp. 47–51.

<sup>92</sup> On Rachilde and d'Estoc's relationship, see Hawthorne, pp. 121–4.

description of a Parisian dive bar and a strong man performing for its seedy clientele. Another strong man, Nicholas le Boucher, enters the bar and recounts his woes to Napoléon, a well-known pimp and thief ('un barbe fameux [...] pour son audace et ses condamnations').<sup>93</sup> In an extended scene of dialogue written in turn-of-the-century popular slang, Nicholas describes having been stood up by 'une copaille' who owes him money. Akin to its modern equivalent 'pédé' ('poof' or 'fag'), the homophobic slur 'copaille' defines the eponymous character according to his non-normative sexual desire and behaviour before he enters the scene. However, the precise nature of Nicholas' relationship with Marius is only hinted at in the story, and never fully revealed. We see this when Nicholas reminisces about their boxing lessons and bemoans Marius's flightiness:

Un gars bath, pas vrai? Avec sa moustache blonde et bien frisée, ses douilles toujours peignées, ses mirette bleues... Il avait du nerf, c'gringalet-là! [...] Je l'adorais, c'môme-là! Ah! c'qu'on a fait des noces ensemble! [...] C'était trop beau! Ça pouvait pas durer! D'puis un moment, m'sieur avait des caprices, des lubies... Moi, j'endurais ça! quand on aime, est-ce pas?... Puis, tout d'un coup, ni vu, ni connu, je t'embrouille, disparu!

After admiring the poet's appearance ('bath' = bien / beau) and vigour ('du nerf'), Nicholas employs a romantic lexis to describe his feelings for Marius ('adorer' and 'aimer'). He goes on to explain that he lost his job at the Neuilly circus after getting into a fight with someone who mocked his misfortune and claimed to have seen Marius in the arms of a young woman. Unfortunately, the accusation turns out to be true: 'Au bout de deux jours, qui que je dégote? Mon Marius avec une gonzesse! Penses-tu qu'il faut avoir du vice!!'<sup>94</sup> The term 'vice' is loaded with irony, through

<sup>93</sup> Oscar Méténier, *La Chair* (Brussels: Henry Kistemaekers, 1885), p. 199.

<sup>94</sup> *La Chair*, pp. 201–3.

a displacement of the social stigma attached to homoerotic desire, here applied to its apparently ‘normal’ heterosexual counterpart.

Despite this seemingly incomprehensible move from same-sex to heterosexual desire, Marius’ choice of sexual partner involves – and indeed seems to require – a degree of gender ambiguity that retains a homoerotic element. The shifting nature of Marius’s desire is confirmed when the story of Nicholas and Marius’s relationship is retold by the narrator in more traditional literary language. After presenting Marius as a ‘poète décadent’ and ‘névros[é]’, the narrator describes his sudden attraction to Nicholas: ‘Un jour, à la foire de Neuilly, il était tombé en extase devant le torse élégant et musculeux de Nicolas-le-Boucher, chez Marseille’. We are told that Marius’s enthusiasm for Nicolas and his boxing lessons lasts for several months, until he meets ‘un être singulier, une sorte de fille-garçon à qui il eût été difficile d’assigner un âge et un sexe’. Breaking off his relationship with Nicolas, Marius soon tires with his ‘nouvelle conquête’ by the end of one week. Having received Nicolas’ invitation to meet him at the dive bar, Marius decides to go along, ‘non pour renouer, mais toujours en quête d’un idéal parfois entrevu, jamais atteint’.<sup>95</sup> In this way, the narrative re-telling of Nicolas’s story poeticises the relationship by describing it as part of Marius’s journey towards an unattainable ideal that blends aestheticism with eroticism. The narrator employs Decadent tropes of gender ambiguity and sexual perversion in a mystifying and obtuse way. This mystification juxtaposes the brutal clarity of the term ‘copaille’, used by Nicolas and Napoléon in the opening sequence. I suggest that, by opposing two versions of the story, Méténier makes a self-aware nod to the obtuse extremes to which Decadent literature could go in its valorisation of perversity, while at the

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<sup>95</sup> *La Chair*, pp. 206–7.

same time contributing to this obfuscation by emphasising sexual ambiguity in his own stories.

The narrative bifurcation in ‘L’Aventure’ is mirrored by a similar technique in ‘Décadence’, which serves to highlight the ambiguous sexual identity of its protagonist. Like ‘L’Aventure’, ‘Décadence’ opens *in media res*, with a conversation between men attending Le Rozay’s most recent play, starring Rachilde’s avatar Mary Staub. They discuss the nature of Staub’s relationship with Meunier and watch avidly to see the actress’s reaction when Meunier enters with Jane Normand. The conversation helps to situate the story’s principal characters, including Le Rozay, who is presumed to be privy to his protégée’s secrets, ‘dans les secrets des dieux’.<sup>96</sup> It also provides the backstory to the actresses’ rivalry, describing how Jane encouraged her journalist friends to use gossip and speculation to attack Mary:

On fit des allusions malveillantes. On épilogua sur les goûts de Mary Staub, sur son habitude de se vêtir en homme, en affectant des allures garçonnières [...]. Ce qu’on lui pardonnait le moins, c’était sa retenue. [...] C’était indécent. Alors des insinuations avaient été lâchées, perfidement. Des doutes avaient été émis sur son sexe; on avait parlé d’un vice de conformation, de maladie.<sup>97</sup>

The malicious nature of this gossip is associated with a widespread sense of frustration with Mary’s lack of romantic interest in her male ‘camarades’. By pathologizing her difference, the journalists attempt to offset her uncanny rejection of normative gender roles and sexual identity. However, these attacks lose their edge when Staub’s relationship with Meunier is made public – something which ‘dérouta absolument les médisants’. The details surrounding the rise and fall of this

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<sup>96</sup> Oscar Méténier, *La Grâce* (Paris: E. Giraud, 1886), p. 71.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74–5.



unexpected relationship remain a closely guarded secret, which only increases people's curiosity:

Lui qui, si volontiers, ouvrait à deux battants les portes de son alcôve, ne laissa jamais échapper un mot sur la nature de sa nouvelle liaison. [...] Derrière les réticences du journaliste, on devina une comédie, dont personne n'avait trahi le secret, mais qui eut le don d'exciter au plus haut point la curiosité. Que s'était-il donc passé? Comment Mary Staub, l'indéchiffrable, allait-elle accepter le lâchage du premier homme auquel elle eût accordé ses faveurs?<sup>98</sup>

The series of questions at the end of this quotation bring readers up to speed on the backstory before the narrative returns to the ongoing play and the much-awaited arrival of Arsène and Jane. The build-up functions as a *mise-en-abyme* of the curiosity aroused by *romans à clef*, and of the performance-driven nature of artistic and literary personae.<sup>99</sup> The questions reaffirm the audience's 'curiosité', which has reached fever pitch in anticipation of the climactic performance – not Le Rozay's play, but Meunier's public display of his new relationship.

The presentation of backstory in both 'Décadence' and 'L'Aventure' foregrounds the initial act of betrayal that provokes the main vengeance plot of each novella. The vengeance 'plot' can be understood in two ways: (1) as the sequence of events depicted in the story, and (2) as a secret plan concocted by a group of people to do something illegal or harmful. In Méténier's novellas, the second type of plot, or *complot*, is devised by two accomplices: the injured party, or victim of the initial betrayal, and one of their friends. For example, Nicholas and Napoléon's conversation in 'L'Aventure' culminates in the pair plotting an unknown form of vengeance. After a lengthy and detailed dialogue, the narrative silences the plot's details, describing their conversation at a distance: 'Il [Napoléon] lui parla à

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<sup>98</sup> *La Grâce*, pp. 76–7.

<sup>99</sup> This scene is reminiscent of the opening sequence in Émile Zola's novel *Nana* (1880). See Émile Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart: histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*, ed. by Henri Mitterand, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1960–67), II (1961), pp. 1095–1108.

l'oreille, longuement.' In this sentence, the adverb 'longuement' hints at an elaborate plan, arousing the reader's curiosity while refusing to satisfy it straightaway. This satisfaction is further deferred by the narrative retelling Nicholas's story through a more 'literary' lens. Despite this ambiguity, the reader can infer that the plan will involve a degree of criminal activity. Napoléon's interest in Marius's expensive clothing ('des diamants à sa limace et du jonc plein des poches') suggests that the plan will involve theft – a crime for which Napoléon assures Nicholas they will suffer no consequences: 'Pas de danger! C'est une copaille! Il jaspinerà au quart, pour la forme, mais y aura pas de pet pour toi!'<sup>100</sup> Even though Napoléon's assurances prove to be well-founded, Nicholas' concerns resurface when the men trick Marius into their trap. After helping Marius to undress, Nicholas experiences a faltering reserve and twinge of guilt: 'Il se demanda s'il ne devait pas rester et le défendre quand même contre Napoléon'. In response to Nicholas's suggestion that they leave Dauriat in the flat without carrying out their plan, Napoléon goads him on by questioning his strength of character: 'T'as donc pas de cœur?'<sup>101</sup> In this way, Napoléon plays a dual role of accomplice and leader in the vengeance plot of 'L'Aventure'.

The criminal conspiracy between Nicolas and Napoléon in 'L'Aventure' is substituted for a more loosely complicit relationship between Mary Staub and Pierre Le Rozay in 'Décadence'. The pair are presented as artistic colleagues and 'partners in crime', much like their real-life equivalents Rachilde and Lorrain. In the entr'acte following Meunier and Jane's scandalous entrance, Le Rozay rebukes Mary for being overwhelmed by emotion and refusing to continue with the performance: 'Je

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<sup>100</sup> *La Chair*, p. 204.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 212–13.

te croyais plus élégamment vicieuse, plus froidement perverse, incapable de tout sentiment'.<sup>102</sup> These reprimands successfully shake Mary out of her stupor and goad her into action. Mary's friend and mentor encourages her to carry on with the performance and to take the opportunity for vengeance that he will help arrange. Although Le Rozay leaves the specific form of revenge up to Mary, he participates in the witty sparring between Meunier and Staub over dinner. In this section, Le Rozay exchanges occasional glances with Mary, much to Meunier's chagrin: 'La tacite complicité de Pierre Le Rozay le gênait visiblement. Il avait affaire à trop forte partie'.<sup>103</sup> The tacit complicity Meunier evokes here implies a relationship of mutual support, as well as a sense of collusion or conspiracy. This is further compounded by Le Rozay's role as witness to Jane Normand's 'defeat'. After an evening of flirtation and dancing, Mary takes Jane to the hostess's boudoir. Before exiting the ballroom, Mary makes a sign to Pierre to follow them, and he plays third wheel to their tryst. As Le Rozay enters the boudoir, he sees Jane ripping off her corset as a passionate demonstration of her desire. Mary rejects her advances before offering them sarcastically to Pierre, who politely declines.<sup>104</sup> The presence of Pierre as a dispassionate observer increases the brutality of Mary's vengeful rejection, which climaxes in a heady but violent kiss. Mary bites and draws blood from Jane's lips and neck before pushing her unceremoniously back into the ballroom, adjoining the boudoir. Pierre's cold detachment juxtaposes with, highlights, while also undercutting, the erotic violence of the scene. His dual role as enabler and witness contributes to the success of Mary's vengeance, which punishes Jane's homoerotic advances with nudity and public humiliation.

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<sup>102</sup> *La Grâce*, pp. 83–4.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

The association between nudity, public humiliation, and homoerotic desire is central to the revenge plots in both of Méténier's novellas. In 'L'Aventure', Nicolas' vengeance involves stripping Marius, who is then forced to exit Napoléon's apartment in a bizarre accoutrement of mismatching clothing. As he tentatively leaves the building, Marius is described as having 'des allures de Robert Macaire'.<sup>105</sup> Robert Macaire was a popular fictional figure associated with petty crime and unscrupulous swindling.<sup>106</sup> The elegant, dandified poet's sudden forced transformation into a dodgy-looking swindler is so convincing that two police officers in the area follow him because they suspect he is up to no good. One of them refers to Marius as 'Quelqu' échappé de Charenton', while the other remarks 'Il n'a pas l'air bien catholique!'. By stealing Marius's clothes, Nicolas and Napoléon take away the sartorial veneer of social respectability, placing him in a highly compromising position in which *he* is the suspected criminal, not them. The irony of this role reversal is highlighted when Marius is once more confronted by his aggressors on the street. Nonchalantly smoking cigarettes, they call out to him: 'Bonjour, copaille!' Faced with this homophobic slur, Marius realises he cannot risk denouncing their crime to the nearby police officers:

Sa colère venait de tomber, brusquement. Il comprenait. C'était leur défense que ces hommes venaient de lui jeter à la face. Une arrestation, un jugement, c'était le nom de Dauriat traîné dans la boue!...

Bonjour, copaille!... Il entrevit la police correctionnelle avec son public de bons petits journalistes, venant voir l'affaire de ce pauvre ami Dauriat! [...] Bonjour copaille!... Il entendait déjà dans les rues les camelots clamer: – Demandez la scandaleuse affaire Marius Dauriat! derniers détails! cinq centimes!<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> *La Chair*, p. 216.

<sup>106</sup> See Marion Lemaire, *Robert Macaire: la construction d'un mythe. Du personnage théâtral au type social, 1823–1848* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2018).

<sup>107</sup> *La Chair*, pp. 217–219.

In this extended sequence of *style indirect libre*, Méténier depicts Marius's frustrated realisation about his compromised position. The homophobic slur becomes a repetitive refrain that evokes the future consequences of any denunciation on his part. The words surrounding each repetition of the name 'Dauriat' reaffirms the importance of reputation and a related fear of public scandal: 'traîné dans la boue', 'ce pauvre ami', and 'la scandaleuse affaire'. The police force and justice system are shown to be complicit with a scandal-mongering press. Although the responsibility for scandal is shifted onto fellow writers and journalists, this section constitutes an indirect avowal of guilt. When faced with the prospect of being judged morally and legally by a wider public, Marius is keenly aware that his homosexual preferences and regular frequentation of lower-class and criminal milieux would be interpreted as proof of wrongdoing by many of his peers. In this way, Marius's silence and embarrassing escape hint at the very real threat of publicly revealing non-normative sexual identities, which, as we see below, ran the risk of reducing a writer to becoming the object of gossip and mockery rather than a respected figure in the literary scene.

When discussing 'encanaillement' (or 'slumming'), Michael Lucey notes that a loss of social distinction was closely associated with the representation of same-sex sexualities in nineteenth-century French literary culture.<sup>108</sup> Analysing the identity-forming strategies of Colette, Proust, and Gide, Lucey considers writers such as Rachilde and Jean Lorrain to be limit cases of what could acceptably be written at the fin de siècle. He explains how Lorrain went further than other writers, integrating 'insalubrious' elements of popular queer culture in ways which were

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<sup>108</sup> Michael Lucey, *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

perceived as ‘inadmissible or off-limits’ to many others.<sup>109</sup> Above all, he emphasises these writers’ desire to express a particular identity or position without *losing face*, explaining that most first-person identities are ‘produced out of the need to assume a countenance, to keep face, to save face, within whatever social situation one finds oneself and at the same time out of a desire to bring to literary expression forms of experience that can be avowed only with difficulty.’<sup>110</sup> Lucey’s idea of ‘saving face’ helps to nuance our understanding of Rachilde, Lorrain, and Méténier’s interactions, because it accounts for the inevitable conflict between forms of position-taking that ‘pass’ public approval and those which bring shame or humiliation upon those undertaking more risqué experiments with self-expression.

Indeed, the centrality of humiliation to Méténier’s à-clef stories begs the question: how did Rachilde and Lorrain respond to the potentially compromising material he published? This question is particularly interesting in the case of Lorrain, whose avatar Marius Dauriat is left in a decidedly more embarrassing and compromising position than Mary Staub. As I mentioned above, the plotline of ‘L’Aventure’ was based on an anecdote circulating at the time, regarding Lorrain’s involvement with a circus strong man. Although Rachilde later confirmed the story’s veracity in her memoir *Portraits d’hommes*, it is difficult to know for certain whether the details of the anecdote were fabricated in order to endorse Lorrain’s scandalous reputation. What is clear, however, is that the pair’s avant-garde peers easily recognised Lorrain behind Marius Dauriat. For example, Léo d’Orfer comments on the thinly veiled nature of Méténier’s à-clef story. In number 147 of

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

*Le Zig-Zag*, which appeared between the original *bas bleu* debate and the issue containing Rachilde and Lorrain's *mises en scene*, d'Orfer reviews *La Chair* in his 'Causerie littéraire' column, citing 'L'Aventure de Marius Dauriat' as '[son] morceau de prédilection'. When summarising the story's plot, he hints at its à-clef status – 'Un poète, dont le nom est à peine voilé, s'est épris d'un hercule de la baraque de Marseille' – and reveals its embarrassing denouement: 'Nicolas dépouille Marius de ses habits, se sauve, et ce dernier est obligé, avec force terreurs, de regagner son domicile à moitié nu.'<sup>111</sup> Elements of Marius's character, including his status as a world-weary Decadent poet and his proclivity for wrestling with burly men, would have been recognisable to Lorrain's friends and peers.<sup>112</sup> If these references were insufficient, Méténier dedicates the story overtly to Lorrain, thereby handing readers the key before they even start reading the text. By highlighting this story in his review of the collection, d'Orfer further spreads the rumours surrounding Lorrain's sexual activities, encouraging readers in the know to unravel Méténier's poorly veiled references.

The strong-man anecdote contributed to a collective literary myth while playing a central role in Lorrain and Méténier's relationship, which – like the friendship between Lorrain and Rachilde – was situated somewhere between the public and the private realms. As a figure, the strong man combines strength and audacity with eroticised self-exposure and risk-taking performance. Because of these associations, he functions as a symbol for the kind of media strategies

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<sup>111</sup> Léo d'Orfer, 'Causerie littéraire', *Le Zig-Zag*, 11 Oct. 1885.

<sup>112</sup> 'Marius Dauriat était un vrai poète, poète décadent par exemple. D'une vieille famille bretonne. Les effluves salées [*sic*] de la plage natale n'avaient pu vivifier son sang appauvri et anémié. Comme tous les névrosés de cette fin de siècle, il avait conscience de son délabrement physique et moral.' *La Chair*, p. 205. Lorrain was from Normandy, not Brittany, but the northern, coastal backdrop remains an important 'clef'.

employed by avant-garde writers.<sup>113</sup> We can see this through the references to circus strong men in Lorrain's *Modernités*, which appeared a few months before the publication of Méténier's story. As noted above, the eponymous poem in the collection evokes the erotic appeal of '[les] reins vigoureux des lutteurs'. A later poem, 'Nostalgie', describes the reminiscences of a former strong man: 'Jadis, en casquette à trois ponts, | Il faisait des poids aux barrières | Chez Marseille, et les chiffonnières | Aimaient son beau torse aux poils blonds.'<sup>114</sup> Like Nicolas le Boucher in 'L'Aventure', the subject of Lorrain's poem used to work 'Chez Marseille'. In addition to this parallel reference, Lorrain dedicated 'Nostalgie' to Oscar Méténier, which suggests that the strong man was an important figure in the context of their friendship. This is further confirmed by Méténier's reciprocal gesture only a few months later. The strong man anecdote in 'L'Aventure' therefore functioned as a shared secret between the two men – or, at the very least, it was constructed to resemble one.

The references to attractive strong men in Lorrain and Méténier's texts function as à-clef literary structures: they provoke curiosity through a covert *clin d'œil* to shared knowledge and secrets. Tantalising hints at homoerotic desire and relationships create collusion between the author(s) and the knowing reader. As with Rachilde and Lorrain, these shared references contributed to a relationship of collaborative *réclame*. Rather than bemoaning the anecdote's revelation, Lorrain actively orchestrated it with Méténier, showing a canny appreciation of the promotional potential of its scandalous content. In a letter sent on 16 January 1885,

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<sup>113</sup> On the association between acrobats and artists in the nineteenth century, see Jean Starobinski, *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* (Geneva: Albert Skira, 1970).

<sup>114</sup> Lorrain, *Modernités*, p. 47.



Lorrain confirms that he has read, and enjoyed, a passage of one of Méténier's works in progress – a passage that, although unnamed, is clearly from 'L'Aventure':

J'ai lu le passage. Beaucoup trop flatteur, mon cher! [...] Comme je l'ai écrit à Fénéon, je suis né fatigué, et de cette fatigue l'horreur de l'amour physique et les curiosités étranges, tout le malsain d'une nature qui n'éprouve qu'à travers les sensations des autres [...]. Enfin, vous me flattez. C'est très aimable à vous. Un mot pourtant: à la place du *Rempart de Belleville* (bien roman du boulevard), mettez *Nicolas le Boucher* ou *l'Assassin de la Bastille*.<sup>115</sup>

The published version of 'L'Aventure' includes the phrase 'être né fatigué', and Méténier clearly followed Lorrain's advice about changing the lover's name to Nicolas le Boucher. By sending the story to Lorrain in advance of its publication, Méténier actively seeks approval for its content. Then, by praising the piece and suggesting changes, Lorrain collaborates in the text's construction and becomes complicit in the revelation of a *louche* anecdote.

This type of collusion was not unusual for their friendship circle. Like Lorrain, Rachilde actively collaborated with Méténier in the fictionalised revelation of 'compromising' details about her private life – whether that be her early infatuation with Catulle Mendès or her potentially bisexual love interests – in 'Décadence'. She did so by giving approval of the text in draft form, which Rachilde announced publicly in her review of Méténier's trilogy *La Grâce*, appearing in Anatole Baju's *Le Décadent*:

L'histoire m'étant dédiée, et déjà offerte *sur épreuves*, je remercie en passant Méténier, le rassurant tout à fait au sujet de l'opinion du public, lequel trouve souvent mauvaises des choses qu'il n'est pas capable de juger.

(... Dis donc, Méténier, nous nous la serrons à sa barbe, n'est-ce pas ?) [...] Oscar Méténier [...] est un excellent camarade, n'oubliant pas plus les services que les injures. [...] Bref, un homme.

Va faire paraître prochainement: *La Bohème Bourgeoise*.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Jean Lorrain, *Correspondance. Lettres à Barbey d'Aurevilly, François Coppée, Oscar Méténier, Catulle Mendès, Edmond Deschaumes, Mecislas Golberg, etc., suivies des articles condamnés*, ed. by George Normandy (Paris: Éditions Baudinière, 1929), p. 69.

<sup>116</sup> Rachilde, 'L'auteur de *La Grâce*', *Le Décadent littéraire et artistique*, 11 Sept. 1886.

Rachilde's article is an extended public display of literary camaraderie, which functions explicitly through the exchange of promotional favours ('services'). These favours include: hinting at à-clef structures, exchanging written drafts, offering positive critical reviews, publicly valorising their friendship, and promoting upcoming material. When analysing Rachilde and Méténier's mutually supportive relationship, Michael Finn has suggested that the similarities between the revenge sequences in 'Décadence' and *La Marquise de Sade* indicate that Rachilde sent part (if not all) of the drafted manuscript for her 1887 novel to Méténier, elements of which he subsequently incorporated – with her permission – into his à-clef novella, as a form of pre-emptive *réclame*.<sup>117</sup> Although Finn's suggestion is difficult to prove, it aligns with the spirit of Rachilde's *Le Décadent* article, which functions in a similar way to the *roman à clef* by offering readers a chance to witness the pair's friendship unfold in the pages of the review. In the parenthetical aside addressing Méténier – '(... Dis donc, Méténier, nous nous la serrons à sa barbe, n'est-ce pas?)' – Rachilde posits the general reader, 'l'opinion du public', as both a witness to and victim of their playful and collaborative mockery. As the examples of 'L'Aventure de Marius Dauriat' and 'Décadence' demonstrate, Rachilde, Lorrain, and Méténier manipulated structures of titillating revelation in *romans à clef*, and actively orchestrated their publication and reception

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<sup>117</sup> Michael Finn, 'Imagining Rachilde: Decadence and the *roman à clefs*', *French Forum*, 30 (2005), 81–96 (pp. 84–5). Finn highlights the similarities between Jane Normand's humiliation in 'Décadence' to that of the Comtesse de Liol in the fire-poker scene from *La Marquise de Sade*. Both works share the plot device of a homoerotic rendez-vous serving as a cover for vengeance against a denigrated female rival and would-be lover. Furthermore, in each story the spurned rival bares her breasts to an indifferent protagonist, before being pushed into the arms of the man who the original source of rivalry between them. The primary difference is that Jane's humiliation happens publicly, in front of her entire social circle, whereas the only other witness to the Comtesse de Liol's degradation and branding is Mary Barbe's husband, Louis de Caumont.

in ways that contributed not only to the elaboration of their individual public personae, but also to a discourse of company-keeping and avant-garde camaraderie.

However, mediated relationships of literary complicity were not all fun and games: misunderstandings could occur, trust be broken, and reputations compromised. It is no coincidence that Méténier's novellas centre thematically and structurally on acts of public humiliation, since the *roman à clef* constantly bordered on compromising the individuals whose personal lives they partially revealed. This was notably the case for Lorrain, because – unlike Mary Staub in 'Décadence', who successfully takes vengeance on her former lover – his character occupies a humiliated position at the end of 'L'Aventure'. After initially thanking Méténier for his supposedly 'flatteur' and 'aimable' depiction in the drafted version of the story, Lorrain's enthusiasm wanes once the anecdote becomes public. In a letter dated 28 September 1885 – after the publication of *La Chair* and just before the *Zig-Zag* exchanges – Lorrain reveals an ambivalent relationship to the otherwise consensual and collaborative revelation of his scandalous sex life. He clearly identifies with Méténier's character, referring to his youthful existence as 'le passé de Marius Dauriat'. He also offers to provide 'réclame' for *La Chair* in a review called *La Suisse romande*.<sup>118</sup> However, in a postscript, he writes: 'M'as-tu assez compromis avec ton Marius Dauriat?'<sup>119</sup> The addition seems incongruous – indicating irony, a change of heart, or perhaps a combination of the two. It is of course possible that Lorrain only received a short section of 'L'Aventure' before publication, rather than the whole story. After all, Lorrain refers to having read a 'passage', which was not necessarily a completed draft. What is clear, however, is that by 6 January 1886,

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<sup>118</sup> Lorrain, *Correspondance*, p. 84.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

Lorrain is eager to tone down the scandalous element of their *réclame*, when he asks Méténier not to emphasise his non-normative sexuality in an upcoming article:

Je n'ai jamais douté de toi, *mio caro*, je me suis rappelé à ton bon souvenir et voilà. [...] Si cela ne t'est pas trop pénible, n'insiste pas, je t'en prie, dans l'étude que tu veux bien me consacrer, sur quelques bizarreries de ma vie privée. Ces bizarreries sont bien communes et n'inquiètent que quelques pourris de littérature comme toi et moi. J'aime à croire que j'ai des côtés plus intéressants que le boulet de mes vices, bien effacés d'ailleurs, bien passés à l'état de fantômes et d'évocations...<sup>120</sup>

The co-existence of reproach and gratitude in Lorrain's letter shows the precarious balance involved in relationships of literary complicity. In this instance, it seems that Méténier took his role too far. By revealing more information than necessary, and by depicting his friend in a seemingly unflattering light, Méténier's contribution to their media relationship was more compromising than constructive. Lorrain's desire to avoid the topic of sexuality marks a shift in tone from the outwardly playful and celebratory *Zig-Zag* articles. He also fears that the publication of controversial but intimate information risked reducing writers to biographical quirks, preventing them from being appreciated for their literary production. This can be seen in the sentence: 'J'aime à croire que j'ai des côtés plus intéressants que le boulet de mes vices.' The public evocation of Lorrain's past sexual exploits (his 'vices') is represented here as imprisoning him ('boulet') and holding him back from being appreciated fully as a writer. As this exchange of correspondence demonstrates, the publication of *La Chair* became as much a source of conflict between Lorrain and Méténier as it was of collusive unity.

The precarious balance between promotional and compromising *réclame* also affected Rachilde and Lorrain's relationship. In 1888, Lorrain re-published an

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., pp. 90–91.

earlier laudatory article ‘Mlle Salamandre’ in *Dans l’Oratoire* (a collection of essays examined at greater length in chapter 2). He adds a postscript condemning the autobiographical preface to *À mort* (1886), and the episode where Rachilde slapped Paul Devaux at a public lecture, for criticizing her friend Léonide Leblanc. He also refers to rumours that Maurice Barrès, the dedicatee of *À mort*, had been Rachilde’s lover: ‘nous avons également appris que M. Maurice Barrès [...] aurait posé devant elle pour le Maxime de Bryon de son livre *A mort* et qu’elle aurait... subi le charme très réel de ce délicat entre les délicats’.<sup>121</sup> Lorrain’s use of ellipsis ensures that the reader interprets the phrase ‘subi le charme’ as an erotic innuendo. In a subsequent letter to Barrès himself, dated 16 July 1888, Rachilde criticizes Lorrain’s lack of subtlety:

Vous devez avoir lu l’article de Jean Lorrain dans son Oratoire. Il est du plus mauvais goût vers la fin. Quand ce garçon me compromet il devrait bien me compromettre seule et pas avec d’autres. [...] Lorrain a des délicatesses de charretier qui se trouve pour la première fois dans une alcôve de satin bleu... Et dans celle de la Publicité il commet sottise sur sottise. Ce qu’il y a de bête c’est que je l’aime bien, le défends toujours et que nous avons l’air de nous entendre pour certain monde.<sup>122</sup>

Rachilde perceives her relationship with Lorrain to be fundamentally ambivalent: outwardly complicit (‘nous avons l’air de nous entendre’) but problematically compromising. She refutes Lorrain’s accusation of ‘ridicule’ with her own perception of his ‘sottise’, according to the perennial logic that it takes one to know one. As in Lorrain’s correspondence with Méténier, Rachilde’s letter to Barrès demonstrates that there is a fine line between acceptable and unacceptable ways of revealing potentially compromising information.

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<sup>121</sup> Jean Lorrain, *Dans l’Oratoire* (Paris: C. Dalou, 1888), p. 215.

<sup>122</sup> Rachilde and Maurice Barrès, *Correspondance inédite, 1885–1914*, ed. by Michael Finn (Brest: Publications du Centre d’étude des correspondances et journaux intimes des XIXe et XXe siècles, 2002), p. 121.

Much like the brief dispute between Lorrain and Méténier – which was only temporarily alleviated by the publication of Méténier’s long-awaited article<sup>123</sup> – this unstable moment in Rachilde and Lorrain’s friendship highlights the vulnerability at the heart of relationships of collusive and revealing *réclame*. Rather than undermining the processes of literary complicity found in *Le Zig-Zag*, Lorrain and Rachilde’s correspondence adds further nuance to our appreciation of the stakes involved. Publicity through staged biographical unveiling can function productively in relationships of mutual promotion between literary *camarades*, but the consequences are potentially compromising. Indeed, these kinds of relationship, however dynamic and playful, often rely on pre-existing vulnerability: being a female writer in the male-dominated literary field, or being a homosexual in heteronormative society. This vulnerability is not merely a consequence of the self-exposure involved in these strategies. Rather, it is at the strategies’ origin. Complicity and ‘réclame’ can in these instances even be understood as coping tactics or defence mechanisms that are playfully, and somewhat perversely, channelled into the creation of irreverent public personae.

With this in mind, it is fair to suggest that playfulness and sincerity are not mutually exclusive, and that the audacity expressed by writers like Rachilde, Lorrain, and Méténier could not exist without the vulnerability underlying their positions. This view nuances modern readings of the group’s self-promotion strategies. As I noted above, Rachel Mesch has distanced herself from earlier accounts of Rachilde’s self-fashioned identity displays as ‘striptease’ or ‘crafty manipulation’, asserting that it would be better to understand these displays as

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<sup>123</sup> Oscar Méténier, ‘Ceux de demain. Jean Lorrain’, *La Revue moderne*, 20 Sept. 1886, pp. 580–588. On 6 Oct. 1886, Lorrain thanks Méténier for the article, noting his intention to re-print the article in other reviews: ‘Quand on a une bonne réclame, comme la tienne, on l’use jusqu’à la corde’. Lorrain, *Correspondance*, p. 103.

choices ‘made out of necessity’.<sup>124</sup> I suggest that this interpretation reflects Lucey’s vision of the inevitable balancing act between self-expression and saving face by fin-de-siècle writers with non-normative sexual identities. Having analysed such balancing acts throughout this chapter, I agree with Mesch’s claim that ‘there is vulnerability alongside audacity’, and that Rachilde’s facetious self-depictions contained their own kernel of truth.<sup>125</sup> However, this position risks softening the disconcerting, even antipathetic, power of Rachilde’s (and others’) obfuscations. Furthermore, we have seen that performative mystification was a recognisable shared trait among avant-garde writers, regardless of their gender identity. That said, it is clearly not a coincidence that the writers analysed in this chapter all expressed some form of non-normativity when constructing their public personae. It seems logical, after all, that a literary movement premised on rejecting mainstream literary practices should be populated largely by individuals who felt alienated by, or disconnected from, normative identities. In this context, form united with content: alternative or maligned literary genres such as the *petite revue* and *roman à clef* offered an ‘oppositional space’ through which writers could express and explore complex identities and solidarities.<sup>126</sup>

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Rachilde and Lorrain’s media relationship offers a rich source for understanding the dynamic – if often ambivalent – forms of literary complicity that were integral to avant-garde sociability at the fin de siècle. By revealing and valorizing non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations, Rachilde and

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<sup>124</sup> Mesch, *Before Trans*, p. 172.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152, 190, and 199.

<sup>126</sup> In a similar way, Michael Lucey refers to journalism and the music-hall as collaboratively establishing a similar ‘oppositional space’ against the discourses of doctors, lawyers, and politicians (*Never Say I*, p. 131).

Lorrain capitalized on the appeal of illicit topics and the bonds created via shared secrets and the sense of being ‘in on it’. They also demonstrated the mutual imbrication between vulnerability and audacity, as they navigated the fine line dividing collusive and compromising literary relationships. I suggest that their friendships exemplify the importance of media networks in the production of individual authors, as well as in the state of the literary field more generally. By considering these connections through the lens of complicity, we have seen the tightly woven association between illicit sexuality and alternative solidarities in avant-garde literary culture. To pursue this link further, I consider in the following chapter the relationship between eroticism and complicity in fin-de-siècle France. Shedding light on an understudied journalistic genre – the *revue légère* or saucy magazine – I analyse networks of complicity between writers, readers, editors, and businesses, highlighting the productive interplay between popular culture and the avant-garde in the fascinating, if largely uncharted, realm of erotic ephemera.



#### 4. Sexual / Textual Networks: Erotic Complicity in *Don Juan* (1895–1900)

French literary culture at the fin de siècle was undeniably sex obsessed. Titillating forms of spectacle, such as the Moulin Rouge and Folies Bergères, sold sex appeal and arousal to an avid public. Bookshops and newspaper stands abounded with sensational novels and saucy magazines. Posters and adverts employed eye-catching sensual imagery to sell their wares. Although this playful eroticism is frequently eclipsed in accounts of the era by more familiar pathologizing discourses of decadence and degeneration, it nonetheless lives on in the popular imagination and in the Parisian tourism industry.<sup>1</sup> These textual and visual forms created an ambiguous erotic realm, hovering somewhere between phantasmatic representation and real-world practices and possibilities. In this chapter I explore the relationship between complicity and eroticism in fin-de-siècle French literature, considering the roles writers, readers, and publishers played in the creation and reception of literary material that frequently crossed the border between the acceptable and the illicit. I do so by shedding critical light on the ‘revue légère’ (‘saucy magazine’): literary and artistic reviews whose tone and content were defined by titillation, gossip, and risqué humour. Through my analysis of *Don Juan*, a representative but previously unstudied example of the genre, I highlight the creative interpenetration of textual, visual, and material cultures made possible by the saucy magazine format. I show how *Don Juan* wielded sex appeal, shared humour, and textual structures of response and involvement to create forms of erotic complicity between text,

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<sup>1</sup> Traditional accounts of fin-de-siècle eroticism include Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Vernon Rosario, *The Erotic Imagination: French Histories of Perversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). For a more recent popular history, see Dominique Kalifa, *Paris: Une histoire érotique d'Offenbach aux sixties* (Paris: Payot, 2018).

collaborator, and reader. By becoming willing accomplices in *Don Juan*'s imagined erotic community, we can better appreciate how ephemeral literature, the flotsam of the canon, offers flashes of light – many-hued, sometimes garish – on to fin-de-siècle literary culture.

### ***Don Juan* (1895–1900): a 'revue légère'**

The fin-de-siècle boom in French periodical production, enabled by improving print technologies and increased press freedom, led to the proliferation of cheaper, more ephemeral, literary and artistic reviews. These were often illustrated and aimed at a wide range of readerships, from the popular to the avant-garde. A notable emerging genre was the 'revue légère', associated with erotic titillation and gossip. The most well-known of these reviews is *La Vie parisienne*, which was founded under the Second Empire and lasted well into the twentieth century (1863–1970).<sup>2</sup> Other notable examples include: *Le Courrier français* (1884–1914), *Le Fin de Siècle* (1891–1909), and *Le Frou-Frou* (1900–1923). There are also many less well-known titles, such as: *Paris-Gaîté* (1891), *Beautés parisiennes* (1891–2), *La Grisette* (1894–7), *Folichonneries* (1896–7), and *La Vie amoureuse* (1897). This range of titles varied in format, publication frequency, paper quality, and price – which are all key factors when considering their potential readership and posterity.<sup>3</sup> Despite these differences, 'revues légères' share key characteristics: (1) they are illustrated, containing drawings frequently – indeed almost always – centred on

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<sup>2</sup> For a recent in-depth study of *La Vie parisienne*, see Clara Sadoun-Édouard, *Le Roman de La Vie parisienne (1863–1914): Presse, genre, littérature et mondanité* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> *La Vie parisienne* was the most expensive, at 35 centimes per issue. *Le Courrier français* and *Le Frou-Frou* cost 20 centimes per issue. *Le Fin-de-Siècle*, *Don Juan*, and *La Grisette* cost 10 centimes per issue, and *Les Folichonneries* only 5 centimes. For context, an issue of a daily newspaper such as *Le Figaro* cost around 15 centimes. Price often reflects physical and symbolic posterity: the more expensive reviews were printed on higher quality paper, attracted more well-known writers, and were aimed at a readership from higher social strata than their less expensive and more ephemeral counterparts. They were published in a format destined for album binding, and therefore were more likely to be preserved in complete collections.

eroticised female bodies; (2) they are humorous: satire, irony, word play, and jokes appear throughout their visual and textual content; and (3) they publish similar types of column, presented in similar ways: opinion pieces, gossip columns, literary and artistic reviews, *romans feuilletons*, advice / agony aunt columns, readers' correspondence, alongside less obviously 'literary' forms such as the small ad, *réclame*, and other types of advertising. As I explore below, the practice of *réclame* – where an advert's promotional text is disguised to pass as main copy – blurs generic boundaries, offering reviews such as *Don Juan* an opportunity for collaborative and collusive literary creativity.<sup>4</sup>

*Don Juan* was an illustrated literary and artistic review published between 1895 and 1900. It was founded by Alfred Hippolyte Bonnet and run by René Emery. Although these names are not well known, Emery in particular is worthy of greater critical attention. He not only ran a series of 'revues légères' but was also on friendly terms with key figures of the literary avant-garde, such as Aurélien Scholl (1833–1902) and Rachilde. From 1891–2, he was the editor-in-chief of *Le Fin de Siècle*, which was *Don Juan*'s predecessor and precursor.<sup>5</sup> We saw in the introduction how, during this short time, Emery accumulated several charges for 'outrages aux bonnes moeurs'. He was condemned alongside co-contributors of *Le Fin de Siècle* on 30 December 1891 (one-month prison sentence, 3,000-franc fine), on 20 January 1892 for having published 'La Pieuvre' by Georges Brandimbourg (one-month prison sentence, 1,000-franc fine), and on 27 January 1892 for one of

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<sup>4</sup> As noted in chapter three, the term 'réclame' refers to a specific form of veiled advertising, where businesses pay to have material inserted into the paper's main copy, and to publicity strategies more generally. See Marc Martin, *Trois siècles de publicité en France* (Paris: Éditions Odilie Jacob, 1992) and Marie-Ève Thérenty, 'La réclame de librairie dans le journal quotidien au xixe siècle: autopsie d'un objet textuel non identifié', *Romantisme*, 155 (2012), 91–103.

<sup>5</sup> On the link between *Don Juan* and *Le Fin de Siècle*, see Jean Watelet, *La Presse illustrée en France, 1814–1914*, 2 vols (Lille: Atelier national de reproduction de thèses, 1998), II, pp. 653–6.

his ‘Sapho’ articles, entitled ‘Filles de Lesbos’ (three-month prison sentence, 3,000-franc fine).<sup>6</sup> These details are listed in the procedural documents to another trial, dated 25 May 1892, where he was tried once more, for an article entitled ‘Gorges à l’air’. Demonstrating repeated recidivism, Emery received a harsher punishment for this offence: thirteen months in prison and a 3,000-franc fine.<sup>7</sup> To avoid serving his prison sentences, Emery took voluntary exile in Belgium, in the latter half of 1892.<sup>8</sup> According to a letter that Emery wrote to Rachilde, by mid-1893 he had got back onto the bandwagon, publishing from Belgium the first issue of a ‘revue morte-née’ called... *Don Juan*. This issue was swiftly seized by the authorities and appears to have left little or no other trace.<sup>9</sup> Between mid-1893 and mid-1895, Emery returned to Paris and became the editor-in-chief of Bonnet’s journal. The first issue of the Parisian *Don Juan* appeared on 8 June 1895. Within five months of its initial publication, the review claimed to have reached a circulation figure (‘tirage justifié’) of around 40,000 copies per issue.<sup>10</sup> This reflects similar figures cited by *Le Fin de Siècle* in 1896.<sup>11</sup> These figures, which might be exaggerated, are four times the circulation rate of the more expensive and fashionable ‘revue légère’ *La Vie Parisienne* – estimated between 8,000 and 10,000 copies by Clara Sadoun-

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<sup>6</sup> See Paris, Archives de Paris (AP), série D1U6, Jugements, Rôles, Répertoires, Audiences: D1U6 413, 30.12.1891 – CHARDON Hippolyte and others, D1U6 415, 20.01.1892 – EMERY René Marie and others, D1U6 416, and 27.01.1892 – CHARDON Hippolyte and EMERY René Marie.

<sup>7</sup> See AP, D1U6 428, 25.05.1892 – JULIEN Henry, Alexandre and EMERY René, Marie, and série D2U6, Tribunal Correctionnel de la Seine, Dossiers de Procédure (1828–1940): D2U6 95, 25.05.1892 – JULIEN, Henry, Alexandre and EMERY, René, Marie.

<sup>8</sup> On Emery’s self-imposed exile, see Rodolphe Bringer, *Trente ans d’humour* (Paris: France-Édition, 1924), p. 33. My chronology is necessarily approximate due to the lack of specific dates in the sources available.

<sup>9</sup> *Lettre de René Emery à Rachilde* (Paris: Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, LT Ms 10207, [ND]), [NP].

<sup>10</sup> *Don Juan*, 19 Oct. 1895. References to *Don Juan* hereafter appear parenthetically in the text, cited by date.

<sup>11</sup> ‘[Notre tirage] atteint aujourd’hui 37.5000, et les commandes que nous avons déjà reçues pour le mois de mai vont le porter à plus de 40.000, — tous chiffres constatés officiellement par procès-verbaux d’huissier.’ *Le Fin de Siècle*, 16 April 1896.

Édouard<sup>12</sup> – and approximately half that of *Le Figaro* in the same period.<sup>13</sup> In response to this sign of popularity, *Don Juan* – which initially appeared weekly on Saturdays – became a bi-weekly from 11 January 1896. However, by mid-1898, the review's success started to wane, as is suggested by its gradual reduction in size, content, and frequency. In 1900, its publication became increasingly erratic, before ceasing entirely.

The review's content was incredibly eclectic. It printed a wide range of literary contributions, from up-and-coming avant-garde writers to popular authors of titillating fiction. These texts appeared alongside society gossip columns, reader-response competitions, and satirical illustrations. The first page hosted the review's most notable regular columns: a charismatic comment-section-cum-agony-aunt column ('La Chronique de Sapho'), a gossip column ('La Vie parisienne'), and satirical pieces – initially in verse, then increasingly in prose – by 'Des Esquintes'.<sup>14</sup> The pseudonym 'Des Esquintes' is an example of the review's proclivity for word play. It is a pun on the verb 'esquinter' – in this context 'to pan' or 'to slate' – and a playful reformulation of Huysmans's protagonist in *À rebours*. The review here aligns itself with, while playfully ironizing, avant-garde literary culture, by appealing to readers' shared knowledge (however rudimentary) of a landmark Decadent text, and by adopting the critical practice of 'éreintement' typical of avant-garde little magazines.<sup>15</sup> The two internal pages of the review featured a selection of short prose pieces, poems, serialized novels, and more sporadically

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<sup>12</sup> Sadoun-Édouard, p. 62.

<sup>13</sup> See Martin, p. 95.

<sup>14</sup> 'La Chronique de Sapho' was probably penned by René Emery. An earlier version, entitled 'Chroniques perverses' and signed under the same pseudonym, appeared in *Le Fin-de-Siècle* during Emery's editorship.

<sup>15</sup> On the practice of 'éreintement', see Yoan Vêrilhac, *La Jeune critique des petites revues symbolistes* (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2010), pp. 89–96.

recurring columns, such as a reader-response column, ‘Nos Cours d’amour’, and a literary review column, ‘La Vie littéraire’. Notable contributors included: René Ghil (1862–1925), Remy de Gourmont (1858–1915), Alfred Jarry (1873–1907), Camille Lemonnier (1844–1913), Jean Lorrain, Catulle Mendès, Oscar Méténier, Rachilde, and Léo Trézenik (1855–1902).<sup>16</sup> The final page of each issue was adorned with a humorous and saucy drawing, by artists and caricaturists such as Édouard Couturier (1871–1903) and Paul Balluriau (1860–1917), who contributed to several satirical journals, such as *L’Assiette au beurre* (1901–36), *Le Rire* (1894–1971), *Le Fin de Siècle* (1891–1909), *Le Courrier français* (1884–1914), and *Gil blas illustré* (1891–1903).<sup>17</sup> The frothy eroticism and polemical humour of these drawings regularly pushed the limits of moral acceptability, attracting censorship to the review in July 1896, when Bonnet was condemned for ‘outrages aux bonnes mœurs’. These images were usually accompanied by half a page of advertisements selling a variety of wares, including books, cough medicine, and sex toys.

I have chosen *Don Juan* as my primary case study for erotic complicity in fin-de-siècle literary culture due to the insistent way eroticism is integrated into the review’s self-presentation (most obviously in its title), and into the reader-text relations it encourages and enables. Like many other reviews and papers of the period, *Don Juan* valorises the interaction between textual production and reception. Or, to employ the terminology used by Elina Absalyamova and Valérie Stiénon, in their introduction to the edited volume *Les Voix du lecteur*, *Don Juan* creates ‘fictions d’interlocution’ centred on readers’ voices, whether these be real

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<sup>16</sup> Note the presence of Rachilde, Lorrain, and Méténier, whose media relationships I discussed in chapter 3.

<sup>17</sup> In 1896, the ‘Éditions du *Don Juan*’ published a collection of Couturier’s drawings, *Des femmes en chemise*, with a preface by René Emery.

or imagined.<sup>18</sup> In a separate contribution, Valérie Stiénon notes the importance of dialogism to press culture and its links with earlier forms of *salon* culture. She discusses the ways in which readers' voices were used to define and promote a review, while distinguishing it from competitors.<sup>19</sup> Employing a similar approach to the contributors of *Les Voix du lecteur*, my analysis in this chapter offers insight into the complicitous nature of reader response created through the saucy magazine's pages. First, I examine how *Don Juan*'s editorial team reformulated traditions of gallantry and *libertinage*, framing the reading experience as a form of erotic exchange between reciprocally desiring partners. This model gave readers a sense of control over the review's content, through an idealisation of their discerning taste, and opportunities to contribute to the review through competitions and questionnaires. As we see below, this collaborative relationship was frequently accompanied by hints of the immoral and the criminal. In the second section, I consider how *Don Juan*'s titillating content frequently crossed the border between socially acceptable, often misogynistic, forms of frothy eroticism and the more overtly polemical and taboo (if not outright illicit) realms of 'obscenity'. In the final section, I suggest that the centrality of sex to *Don Juan*'s literary, artistic, and economic enterprise can be understood as a form of *proxénétisme*, or 'pimp journalism', where readers are implicitly encouraged and enabled to engage in both imagined and actual erotic relations. By highlighting the promiscuity between 'high' and 'low' culture made possible by the 'revue légère' format – where original contributions from members of avant-garde elites rubbed shoulders with titillating

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<sup>18</sup> Elina Absalyamova and Valérie Stiénon, 'Introduction. Pour une étude des voix du lecteur en régime médiatique', in *Les Voix du lecteur dans la presse française au XIXe siècle*, ed. by Elina Absalyamova and Valérie Stiénon (Limoges: Pulim, 2018), pp. 7–42 (p. 21).

<sup>19</sup> Valérie Stiénon, 'Lecteurs truqués: sur la fabrique médiatique du lectorat au XIXe siècle', in *Les Voix du lecteur*, ed. by Absalyamova and Stiénon, pp. 171–189.

titbits and sex toy adverts – I argue for a wider and more nuanced appreciation of an area of literary production that is too frequently dismissed as no more than *louche* ephemera.

### **Erotic Sociabilities: Seduction, Solicitation, and Collaboration**

Seduction is at the heart of *Don Juan*'s literary and artistic agenda. The review's imagined and projected reader is repeatedly defined by their capacity for desire, and their willingness to have this desire solicited by the periodical's content. This reader-text relation implies a reciprocal form of collaboration, situated ambiguously between gallantry and prostitution. Through a series of 'Aux Lecteurs' articles, the reading experience in *Don Juan* is structured according to an eroticised vision of readerly desire and pleasure. Reformulating traditions of courtly love and *galanterie*, the review depicts itself as a *soupirant* striving to attract the attention and favours of the reader.<sup>20</sup> By placing its readers in a position of discernment, akin to that of the *suzeraine*, *Don Juan* moves beyond a one-sided seduction model of reading, towards a form of imagined erotic sociability, where readers are encouraged to desire, identify with, and contribute towards, the review's titillating contents. In the opening column of *Don Juan*'s first issue, the review's editorial programme is unveiled. Its aesthetic stance glorifies amorous and sexual exploits, appealing to a readership of would-be or actual lovers:

– Encore un journal! grognera le passant [...] – Encore un! oui, passant. Mais celui-là, prends-le, emporte-le précieusement, comme un rayon que tu aurais dérobé; car il illuminera ta triste demeure, y fera flamber la splendeur des féeries, peuplera ta solitude des mille et une adorées que tu désires, dont tu convoites en tes rêves la caresse et l'inépuisable baiser. Il te dira d'aimer, d'aimer, d'aimer!

Et si t'attend au nid une femme que tu chéris, une douce amie dont t'espère la bouche, vous vous recueillerez, enlacés, pour entendre la parole de *Don Juan*. La jolie tête rieuse penchée sur ton

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<sup>20</sup> On the tradition of *galanterie*, see Alain Viala, *La France galante: Essai historique sur une catégorie culturelle, de ses origines jusqu'à la Révolution* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).



épaule, vous lirez ensemble les belles histoires d'amour, les chansons des poètes; et vos lèvres à chaque rime, feront éclater le rythme sonore des baisers harmonieux...

A vous toutes, les chères souveraines, les petites princesses d'amour, [...] c'est à vous que *Don Juan* lance son clair et triomphal salut. [...] Et vous viendrez à lui, sous sa nouvelle et si moderne incarnation, le journal, qui lui permettra de se trouver à la fois dans les mains de cent mille [...]. O femmes, o chères aimées, toutes, toutes, je vous aime, je vous adore... Je suis à vous... Venez à moi! (8 June 1895)

In this article, the review depicts itself as supplementing and improving amorous relations, by feeding the imaginations of lonely singletons ('peuplera ta solitude des mille et une adorées que tu désires'), and by uniting couples through repeated acts of shared reading ('vous lirez ensemble les belles histoires d'amour'). The relationship between the review and its readers is depicted as a reciprocally desiring embrace: 'vous viendrez à lui' and 'Je suis à vous... Venez à moi!' *Don Juan's* self-created role of a courtly or gallant lover returns at the end of the article, which insists on the importance of novelty to attract readers' attention: '*Don Juan* [...] sera sans cesse en quête d'attractions et de nouveautés. Il aura enfin la sollicitude, l'éveil, l'inquiétude d'un amoureux qui veut plaire, découvrir chaque jour des fleurs nouvelles et rares, pour les offrir à ses bien-aimées.' This vision of amorous attentiveness, emphasised by the lover's 'sollicitude' and 'inquiétude', places the imagined reader's taste, judgement, and pleasure at the centre of the review's agenda, thereby giving actual readers a sense – however constructed it may be – of having real influence over *Don Juan's* content and evolution, since their pleasure or displeasure is rendered synonymous with the success or failure of the review.

This vision of readers' influence is maintained across all moments of address from the editorial team, especially when they highlight the review's successes, or announce significant format changes. The first notable example of this is when the review, within only a few months of its existence, increases its

frequency from weekly to bi-weekly publication. This change is announced in advance, appearing just after the declaration of that week's notably high print run: 'Tirage justifié de ce numéro: 40,000 exemplaires. Nous remercions de tout notre cœur nos lectrices, nos lecteurs, nos correspondants, tous nos amis qui ont contribué au si rapide et si merveilleux succès de notre journal' (19 Oct. 1895). The number of issues printed is seen to reflect readers' approbation of the review's contents, and subsequently a desire for *more* of this content. When the review finally becomes a bi-weekly, three months after the initial announcement, there is a distinct emphasis on readers' desire, pleasure, and discernment:

Pour répondre aux sollicitations pressantes qui nous étaient faites, nous avons décidé que ce journal paraîtrait deux fois par semaine. Cette périodicité nous permettra d'introduire des éléments nouveaux dans notre rédaction. Le lecteur capricieux exige sans cesse de la variété, du nouveau. *Don Juan* a compris ce désir; il s'efforcera de toutes ses forces à le satisfaire, comme il l'a fait jusqu'à ce jour. (11 Jan. 1896)

Vocabulary relating to the issuing and satisfaction of demands ('sollicit[er]', 'exige[r]', 'satisfaire') emphasises the seemingly impossible task of satisfying the reader. This vision of eroticised literary discernment is elsewhere more overtly feminised. On *Don Juan*'s third anniversary, the editorial announces '[u]ne nouvelle organisation financière' that will enable the review to continue to satisfy its readers' demands for novelty: 'Cette transformation comporte tout un programme nouveau, qui comportera des gaspillages, des folies; mais *Don Juan* est un prodigue: il jette l'or à pleines mains, pour cueillir un sourire de ses lectrices' (9 Dec. 1897).<sup>21</sup> At this point in the review's existence, a new address, 34 rue de Lille, appears alongside 18, rue Feydeau, on the review's header, whose style noticeably

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<sup>21</sup> On 1 December 1897, *Don Juan*'s shareholders sold the property of the review, 18 rue Feydeau. See *Journal des papetiers*, 1 Dec. 1897, p. 565.

changes.<sup>22</sup> There is also an increased quantity of smaller drawings dotted throughout each page of the periodical, in addition to the usual half-page drawing found on the fourth page. The larger number of drawings would have contributed to the ‘gaspillage’ mentioned above, due to increased printing costs.

*Don Juan*’s self-style image as a ‘prodigue’ evokes relationships between wealthy men and courtesans, thereby marking a subtle shift from the review’s earlier emphasis placed on the supposedly disinterested figure of the courtly lover. The financial burden of pleasing the courtesan-reader justifies an even more radical format change in 1898. From its original large newspaper format, *Don Juan* is reduced in size, but increased in page number:

On nous demandait d’adopter le type des grands journaux illustrés, tels que la VIE PARISIENNE, l’ILLUSTRATION, etc. [...] [N]ous avons étudié attentivement la question et en avons atteint enfin la solution. Notre prochain numéro aura huit pages de dessins et de textes. Ainsi transformé, DON JUAN, plus coquet, plus élégant que jamais, aura donné une fois de plus à ses lectrices et à ses lecteurs la preuve que sa seule ambition est de leur plaire, à tout prix, et toujours. (31 March 1898)

The vocabulary of ‘coquetterie’ and finance (‘à tout prix’) further hints at courtesan culture: the reader’s favours are no longer being *won* through courtly feats, but rather *bought* through the review’s prodigality. The decision to change the review’s format also reflects a shift in its status and reception. By adopting a similar format to that of popular rival papers, *Don Juan* can be seen to be adapting to a shifting market. However, these changes did not seem to bring the review further success, since its decline occurred soon after (between May and June 1898). At this point it reverted to weekly publication, and contained only four sides of the smaller format, with fewer images. The changes described above therefore prefigured, and perhaps

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<sup>22</sup> This change appears from 12 December 1897 onwards.

contributed towards, the review's eventual demise in 1900.<sup>23</sup> In this way, potential future failure continually haunts the celebratory announcements in *Don Juan*'s 'Aux Lecteurs' articles. Readers' desires, much like the whims of their courtesan cousins, are perceived as constantly shifting, with their positive reception, and continuing loyalty, always threatening to wane.

As we have seen, *Don Juan* appeals to readers' desire, pleasure, and approbation, according to a reader-text relation aligned with courtly love traditions, but implicitly akin to prostitution. The review depicts itself as soliciting a positive response from its readership, who are, in turn, framed as contributing indirectly to the creative process of the review, as a discerning *suzeraine* audience. However, *Don Juan*'s creation of a reader-centred literary and artistic programme is not limited to 'response' in the sense of 'reception', but also involves structures of *textual* responses, where the reader becomes a collaborator in the production of journalistic content. From the beginning of its existence, *Don Juan* appealed for contributions through a column entitled 'Nos Cours d'amour', where readers could respond creatively to specific questions, usually oriented around erotic and amorous themes. Their writing would be published in the review's pages, and then judged in a competition. Prizes were awarded for the best submissions. The column was later replaced by quasi-scientific 'enquêtes' and 'questionnaires'. These reader-response columns – sometimes competitive, sometimes not – were a common feature of fin-de-siècle newspapers and reviews across the cultural spectrum, although the erotic nature of those found in *Don Juan* highlight the specificity of the 'revue légère'. As we see below, *Don Juan*'s 'Cours d'amour' situate the review's eroticised reader-

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<sup>23</sup> The BnF has some gaps in its holdings of *Don Juan*'s later issues. It is therefore difficult to date precisely the moment the review returned to weekly publication.

text relationship precariously between the acceptable and the illicit. Through this column, the *rédaction* encouraged solidarity between collaborators, readers, and editors, whilst feeding off the erotic – and potentially illicit – appeal of intimate stories and confessions.

The editorial team announce the ‘Nos Cours d’amour’ column in the second issue of *Don Juan*. It is presented as a modern version of courtly *jeux floraux* traditions, replicating forms of poetic competition in which men’s literary contributions are judged by a jury of noblewomen whose favour(s) they are seeking:

Aux temps joyeux où la galanterie et l’amour resplendissaient en France, du plus pur et du plus brillant éclat, de nobles dames avaient institué ces fameuses *Cours d’amour* qui étaient les plus poétiques de toutes les fêtes. Les jeunes hommes étaient convoqués; de toutes parts trouvères, troubadours, ménestrels accouraient pour se disputer la fleur symbolique offerte par les belles aux plus savants ès sciences d’amour.

Un jury composé de jolies femmes soumettait aux poètes une question subtile et délicate de controverse passionnelle. Chacun venait, à tour de rôle, murmurer sa réponse, déclamer les ballades ou les sirventes inspirés par la douce question.

Les nobles dames décernaient à celui dont la chanson ou le discours leur semblait digne de leur élection, une fleur, une simple fleur; – mais on dit que la nuit venue, si le poète se présentait, cette fleur à la main, sous les fenêtres des jolies dames, une échelle de soie se déroulait sur la muraille, une plus chère fleur à recueillir.

*Don Juan* va tenter de renouveler ces jeux, en instituant des *Cours d’amour*, las! moins brillantes que celles d’antan [...]. (15 June 1895)

The first half of this announcement is dominated by a sense of nostalgia, experienced in response to the loss of past traditions (‘Aux temps joyeux [...]'). This atmosphere is reinforced through hyperbole (‘du plus pur et du plus brillant éclat’, ‘les plus poétiques de toutes les fêtes’), and vocabulary evocative of ‘feminine’ delicacy (‘subtile’, ‘délicate’, ‘douce’). The ‘nobles dames’ who organised and judged these medieval poetry competitions are aligned metonymically with the flower they offer to their chosen winner. The erotic value

of this supposedly symbolic gesture is not left to the imagination: the ‘simple fleur’ is not quite so simple after all, but in fact represents a promise or token to be exchanged for sexual favours: ‘une plus chère fleur à recueillir’. By emphasising the exchange value of the medieval incarnation of the poetry prize, where literary merit could buy sexual favours, *Don Juan* further adds to the correlation between literature, sex, and prostitution that appears throughout the review. This correlation is strengthened by the fact that, in *Don Juan*’s version of the ‘cours d’amour’, the prize offered is emphatically material and financial: ‘UNE FLEUR EN OR ou une somme de CENT FRANCS’.

Regardless of whether the competition’s submissions were genuine, and whether the prize was ever actually awarded, the ‘Nos Cours d’amour’ column perpetuated the image of readerly collaboration, both in its promise to publish readers’ written contributions, and in its appeal to female readers to identify with, and enact the role of, the ‘nobles dames’ on the judging panel. It is worth noting that competition submissions were signed under both masculine and feminine names, offering women imaginative and textual space to contribute to the review. Although the predominant forms of eroticism of *Don Juan* seem chiefly aimed at heterosexual men, these columns hint at a wider readership, including women who were comfortable with the levels of transgression and titillation connoted by the review’s content. Indeed, as I discuss below, the existence of a female readership is implied throughout the review’s columns – notably ‘La Chronique de Sapho’ – and is supported by the presence of female-targeted advertisements on the fourth page. Ultimately, in ‘Nos Cours d’amour’, the mock-nostalgic depiction of a medieval courtly tradition works above all to flatter the review’s readers and encourage them

to share their romantic and erotic secrets ('faites-nous de chers aveux') in a public forum.

By encouraging readers to share personal anecdotes of a clearly erotic, and potentially illicit or 'immoral' nature (as is suggested by the word 'aveux'), 'Nos Cours d'amour' engages not only with early literary traditions such as *fin'amors* and *galanterie*, but also with contemporaneous cultural phenomena – most notably the rise in quasi-scientific discourses surrounding sexuality and pathology.<sup>24</sup> As the terms 'sciences d'amour' and 'psychologie amoureuse' from the quotation above suggest, there is a productive linguistic and cultural cross-over between courtly love and psychosexual case studies, where patients confess their pathological (or pathologised) secrets to medical professionals. It is therefore significant that the 'Nos Cours d'amour' column is occasionally replaced by different formats, more obviously inspired by contemporaneous scientific, medical, and journalistic uses of the 'enquête' or 'questionnaire'. In number 88, an article entitled 'Notre enquête sur l'amour' announces a new form of reader-response column:

Beaucoup de psychologues, de médecins, de statisticiens prétendent qu'on n'aime plus aujourd'hui. S'il faut les en croire, la femme surtout ressent de moins en moins les sollicitations du sexe, et perd complètement le sentiment de la maternité.

Un de nos amis, le docteur Stary, qui prépare pour *Don Juan* une étude curieuse sur ces diverses questions, serait très reconnaissant à toutes celles qui nous lisent de bien vouloir aider ses observations, en lui communiquant des réponses aussi détaillées et aussi sincères que possible au questionnaire suivant:

- 1° A quel âge avez-vous aimé pour la première fois?
- 2° Votre premier amour fut-il purement sentimental ou sensuel?
- 3° Vers quel âge la sensualité s'est-elle éveillée en vous?
- 4° Avez-vous eu plusieurs amours en même temps?

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<sup>24</sup> On this topic, see Rosario, Rachel Mesch, *The Hysteric's Revenge: French Women Writers at the fin-de-siècle* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), and Robert Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

5° Avez-vous des enfants? Le sentiment de la maternité est-il en vous violent, faible, ou nul? A-t-il quelque influence sur vos amours? (25 July 1896)

The column's new format marks a shift away from the nostalgic medievalism of the first series of 'Nos Cours d'amour', in response to fin-de-siècle depopulation fears and socio-political discourses surrounding 'degeneration'. These discourses announced a decline in socially sanctioned amorous desire, in turn attributed to the blurring of traditional gender roles.<sup>25</sup> The shift in format, towards an 'enquête' or 'questionnaire', works in tandem with a shift in the type of imaginary relationship created between the reader-contributors and the column organisers. Rather than exemplifying a reciprocal bond between courtly ladies and their would-be suitors, the column here enables a more hierarchised and gendered doctor-patient relationship. Only female readers are solicited for responses, and their amorous experiences are requested not for the artistic merit of their rendering, but for the scientific value of their content. This clearly restricts the creativity of potential reader-collaborators, and pathologises – or at least mystifies – female experience. However, much like the nostalgic medievalism of 'Nos Cours d'amour', the quasi-scientific claims of the 'Enquête' are recognisably clichéd tropes, acting above all as pretexts for borderline erotic material. This reading is supported by the evidently sexual nature of the questions asked within these response columns.<sup>26</sup> Both frameworks enable the sharing of titillating anecdotes in the public domain and encourage readers' collaboration in this material through their written contributions and imagined participation in the review's erotic sociabilities.

<sup>25</sup> See Francis Ronsin, *La Grève des ventres: propagande néo-malthusienne et baisse de la natalité française (XIX–XXe siècles)* (Paris: Éditions Aubier Montaigne, 1980), and Nye.

<sup>26</sup> After 'Quelle est la meilleure caresse?', questions in 'Nos Cours d'amour' included: 'Quelle différence y-t-il entre l'amour d'une blonde et l'amour d'une brune?', 'Que préférez-vous: aimer sans être aimé ou être aimé sans aimer?', 'Quelle est la meilleure heure du jour pour aimer et pourquoi?', and 'La femme se donne-t-elle plus souvent par curiosité, par ennui or par amour?'



The frame texts of *Don Juan*'s reader-response columns make apparent the slippage between a socially acceptable veneer of artistic and scientific pretexts, and an underlying eroticism bordering on obscenity. From as early as the eighth issue, the presence of pornographic contributions – whether imagined or actual – is acknowledged by the announcement of their necessary elimination: 'Beaucoup de réponses ont été éliminées, parce qu'elles étaient d'un... décolleté à faire frémir une demi-vierge' (29 July 1895). The column's editorial decision to censor responses is less interesting than the way they announce it. By using ellipsis and evoking the figure of the *demi-vierge* – here trembling with shame, pleasure, or a combination of the two – the frame text purposefully arouses the reader's curiosity regarding the eliminated texts, and their suspicions about the supposedly moral and artistic justifications of the column. In the latter half of 1896, the 'Nos Cours d'amour' column returns, after a brief interlude filled by Dr Stary's 'enquête'. The new signatory of the column, 'Clisson', frequently reminds readers to keep their contributions as 'clean' as possible:<sup>27</sup>

Je dois tout d'abord avertir ici mes correspondants que nos *Cours d'Amour* devant constituer une sorte de traité psychologique, je n'insérerai que les lettres dont la teneur sera d'une parfaite correction. Mes lectrices et mes lecteurs me sauront gré de sauvegarder des sentiments respectables, et d'essayer de faire une œuvre intéressante, curieuse, mais non pas égrillarde. (16 Sept. 1896)

Ai-je besoin de recommander à nos correspondants, de conserver dans leurs lettres la jolie et sérieuse tenue qu'ils ont eue jusqu'à aujourd'hui. N'oublions pas que nos *cours d'amour* ne doivent prêter à aucune critique. (4 Nov. 1896)

These reminders can be read literally, as a reflection of the type of contributions the review actually received, or more ironically as a trope intended to titillate readers

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<sup>27</sup> The first series of 'Nos Cours d'amour' were unsigned.

by reminding them of the social and moral sanctions *Don Juan* frequently disrupts and subverts. The column here doubly emphasises the obscenity it supposedly condemns. First, the repetitive nature of the reminders works to suggest that readers repeatedly ignore Clisson's injunctions, thereby framing their contributions as consistently on the verge of offering illicit or obscene content. Second, by reminding readers of the dangers of external criticism ('N'oublions que nos *cours d'amour* ne doivent prêter à aucune critique'), the column simultaneously evokes – and yet diffuses, via ironic humour – the threat of actual censorship experienced by the review.<sup>28</sup> The use of qualifying adjectival phrasing, such as 'une *sorte* de traité psychologique', '[une] *parfaite* correction', and 'la *jolie et sérieuse* tenue', combines ambivalence, hyperbole, and oxymoron in a way that encourages an ironic reading.<sup>29</sup> These framing texts evoke the slippage between *bienséance* and obscenity while ostensibly condemning it, in a gesture of complicit *clin d'œil* between the review and its readership.

The 'Nos Cours d'amour' column encourages readers' identification with, and implication in, the review's content, by offering creative space for literary collaboration. This relationship is structured according to implicitly erotic, and always potentially illicit, imagined bonds and exchanges, whether that be between idealised courtly lovers, client and courtesan, or patient and doctor. The gesture of soliciting readers' private erotic experiences in the name of artistic creation, scientific understanding, and financial reward, enables a complicit reader-text relation productive of erotically illicit and titillating material. By repeatedly

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<sup>28</sup> As I explore in more detail below, Bonnet was condemned for 'outrage aux bonnes mœurs' in July 1896. The second series of 'Nos Cours d'amour', including these mock-moralising reminders, started only a month after the trial judgement (No. 97, 26 Aug. 1896). This is probably not a coincidence, and hints at the ways 'revues légères' could respond indirectly to judicial censorship.

<sup>29</sup> My emphasis.

emphasising the necessity of restricting the erotic content of the column, in a mise-en-scène of self-censorship, the *rédaction* responds ironically to the very real threat of punishment from the correctional courts.

### **Modes of Eroticism: Titillation, Polemics, and Obscenity**

*Don Juan*'s content is primarily erotic in nature. Female nudity is obsessively depicted and lauded for its sensual appeal. This is clear not only in the drawings printed in every issue, but also throughout the review's textual copy. For example, in the gossip column 'La Vie parisienne', the bodies of actresses and *demi-mondaines* become the source of endless titillating anecdotes, such as in the following description of Jane Derval's performance in *Peur des Coups*, at the Théâtre Pompadour:

C'est un spectacle à recommander, et très artiste, parce que les jambes de Jane Derval sont superbement modelées, et toutes ses courbes, toutes ses lignes pleines et harmonieuses.

Et quand elle se penche – oh! la charitable! – sa gorge tout entière se révèle; je vous assure que ça n'a rien de désagréable pour les rétines: au contraire!

Quels apéritifs, avant minuit! (28 Nov. 1896)

This mise-en-scène of female nudity places a thin veil of artistic value ('un spectacle [...] très artiste') to a performance that is evidently geared towards erotic arousal. Derval is depicted as complicit with her visual objectification by the audience, as she offers herself to their hungry gaze ('oh! la charitable!'). The playful and conversational tone of the article contributes to the ambiguous homosociability of the gossip column as a genre, where female nudity acts as visually stimulating and tactile fodder for the erotic imagination.<sup>30</sup> This form of communal voyeurism

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<sup>30</sup> Sadoun-Édouard notes the importance of orality to *La Vie parisienne* (pp. 103–4), suggesting that such reviews use the tone of 'causerie' in order to 'créer une communauté imaginée et participative' (p. 107).

is encouraged in a series of short articles in the same column, entitled ‘Leurs seins’, which combine *demi-mondaine* sociabilities with blatant eroticism:

Pour voir un coin de chair de femme, rouler une tête sur ces blancheurs si douces, aspirer les senteurs qui s’en dégagent, je donnerais volontiers mon esprit à Brunetière et mon âme à Satan; ne vous étonnez donc pas si, avec des ruses d’Apache, une patience de serpent, [...] je me suis glissé furtivement dans les boudoirs de nos agenouillées les plus connues pour les croquer dans leur déshabillage et vous dire comment elles les ont: en poire, en pomme, en courge ou en calebasse.

Je transcrit fidèlement les notes prises dans cette enquête amoureuse. (9 May 1897)

The author here frames the series as an ode to female beauty, encouraging the reader to experience the sensual pleasure aroused by the sight, smell, feel, and taste of women’s breasts. Identification is encouraged through implicit or explicit address, seen in the ‘nous’ and ‘vous’ that unite author and reader through shared desires and experiences. However, it is supposedly for the reader’s benefit that the author offers a furtive glimpse at the naked bodies of *demi-mondaines*. It is not only erotic desire that creates readers’ complicity with this invasion of women’s personal lives, but also the playful – if somewhat disconcerting – humour found throughout the text. This can be seen in the parallels made between Brunetière and Satan, alongside the fruit- and vegetable-based sexual innuendos. By turning the voyeuristic, invasive appreciation of non-consensual female nudity into a source of humour, ‘La Vie parisienne’ contributes towards the mostly unquestioned sexism of the review.

This disquieting tendency is rendered more complex by the way *Don Juan*’s readers are posited as women. Comments and questions from the *rédaction* are often addressed to a feminised readership, ‘nos lectrices’, and the review frequently contains drawings depicting women reading *Don Juan*, in a gesture of self-promotional mise-en-abyme (figure 3). And it is not just the readers who are feminised – it is the review and its *rédaction*, too. Despite usually maintaining a

masculinised self-depiction as the eponymous lover/seducer, *Don Juan* occasionally takes on feminised self-images and voices (figure 4).<sup>31</sup> These gender-bending practices were not unusual in ‘revues légères’, which had a tendency to ‘jouer à la femme’.<sup>32</sup> Male writers would frequently sign articles under feminised pseudonyms, in a gesture that can be read less as a sign of subversion than of voyeurism, fetishism, and mythification.<sup>33</sup> The most obvious example of this practice in *Don Juan* can be found in ‘La Chronique de Sapho’ – a recurring opinion piece column that doubled up as an agony aunt column. It was signed ‘Sapho’, but in fact written by René Emery. Appearing as the leading article in almost every issue, the Sapho column acts as a *fil conducteur* to understanding the review’s wider aesthetic, political, social, and ethical positioning. The column offers a blend of opinion pieces, personal stories (supposedly originating from readers’ correspondence to the review), and agony aunt-style advice. The predominant topics under discussion relate to erotic and amorous experience, which is treated not only as a personal or private matter, but also as a reflection of wider social and political debates. These include: virginity, romance, adultery, divorce, sexual freedom, the double standard, the ‘friend zone’, and neo-Malthusianism.<sup>34</sup>

[Figures overleaf]

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<sup>31</sup> Throughout December 1897 and January 1898, Couturier contributed a series of polemical drawings which depict a female Don Juan figure.

<sup>32</sup> This phrase is used by Han Ryner in his 1899 text *Le Massacre des amazones, Études critiques sur deux cents bas bleus contemporains, 1861–1898*, cited in Sadoun-Édouard, p. 295.

<sup>33</sup> Sadoun-Édouard, pp. 296–7.

<sup>34</sup> Indicative titles from ‘La Chronique de Sapho’ include: ‘Amour nature’ (15 June 1895), ‘Contre le divorce’ (27 July 1895), ‘La Culotte et l’amour’ (7 Sept. 1895), ‘Péchons, mes sœurs!’ (25 Mar. 1896), ‘Sensuelles’ (9 Sept. 1896), ‘La Liberté de l’Amour’ (28 Oct. 1896), ‘Le Duel des Sexes’ (21 Mar. 1897), ‘Amante ou Camarade?’ (24 June 1897), and ‘Les Malthusiennes’ (1 May 1898).



Figure 3: E. Cros, 'Petit lever', *Don Juan*, 18 November 1896 (BnF)



Figure 4: Édouard Couturier, '1898', *Don Juan*, 30 December 1897 (BnF)

In these articles, social critique frequently intersects with titillating striptease, especially when they treat topics such as love and marriage.<sup>35</sup> This can be seen in ‘Nuit de nocces’ (22 Jan. 1896), which is framed as an agony aunt response to correspondence sent by predominantly female readers. The article’s tone ranges from mockery to moral *complaisance*, as the opening lines suggest: ‘Comme je vous méprise et comme en même temps je vous plains, mes bonnes petites amies, qui venez me dire vos désillusions et vos nostalgies du rêve qui hantait vos nuits virginales, avant le mariage.’ This paves the way for a lengthy appeal to women’s shared experience of the (seemingly inevitable) fall from idealised visions of marital bliss during the engagement period, towards the unpleasant, painful, and disappointing experience of sexual consummation. Sapho/Emery critiques the marital institution by emphasising the reduced agency of women entering a parentally arranged marriage, as seen in the impersonal ‘on’ of the syntagm: ‘On vous fiançait...’. On one hand, the ‘vous’ used throughout the article elides individual and collective experience, promoting a vision of shared female suffering. On the other, it also places the agony aunt’s wisdom at a distance from her readers’ naivety. Sapho’s ambivalent position, blending mockery with pity, is further affirmed when she evokes post-coital disappointment:

Pauvres amies, je vous ai vues alors, désabusées, pleurant, regrettant le beau rêve, maudissant l’amour, accusant la vie. Et j’ai compris de suite que le mariage était une chaîne, dont l’étreinte chaque jour serait plus triste, et la geôle plus affreuse jusqu’à l’heure où la fenêtre s’ouvrirait, sur les décors de l’adultère.

Je vous ai, combien de fois, entendu accuser votre mari, lui reprocher son inexpérience, comme si vous n’étiez pas, vous, les vraies coupables, les petites sottes, les impuissantes!

Avez-vous jamais songé, une minute avant le mariage, à vous préparer au mystère de la première nuit?

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<sup>35</sup> Sadoun-Édouard notes that the wedding night was a particularly privileged, and always potentially subversive, topic in ‘revues légères (see pp. 296–7 and p. 302).

From an initial attack on social institutions (through the marriage-as-prison metaphor), Sapho shifts towards a form of victim-blaming, condemning her readers for failing to supplement and subvert these inadequacies through their own ‘preparations’.

The idea of *preparing oneself* for sexual relations, metonymically represented by the wedding night, becomes the pretext for a lengthy eroticised sequence in the second half of the article. After gently berating her readers, Sapho offers her own experience as an exemplary alternative narrative. Starting with the confession ‘J’ai failli me marier’, Sapho mentions the relatively banal details of her engagement to a young man, before describing at length her wedding ‘preparations’ – a series of intimate scenes where Sapho rehearses the act of undressing and simulates erotic embraces:

J’appris à me déshabiller coquettement [...]. Dans une psyché, je me voyais, et je m’aimais un peu, à m’apercevoir ainsi, frissonnante, comme une fleur à l’instant épanouie... Et je me disais que mon petit mari, tel un fou, accourrait, me voudrait embrasser... Il me semblait déjà que sa lèvre se posait sur ma bouche. Je fermais les yeux, et je m’inclinai sur le divan, très doucement, m’abandonnant à ses adorations, à ses caresses très tendres, encore respectueuses, mais très peu...

Et mes lèvres simulaient le baiser que je lui rendrais. Ma bouche s’entr’ouvrait; mes bras se levaient pour le prendre, gentiment, par le cou, mon petit chéri, l’attirer à moi, le repousser ensuite pour l’agacer, et le reprendre...

Et cette comédie m’affolait... Je désirais la caresse simulée; j’appelais mon bien-aimé; j’aurais voulu le voir apparaître tout à coup, par quelque sortilège... avec joie, je me serais donnée...

The scene enacts a titillating striptease that incorporates the desiring male gaze into its performance. The desire and pleasure Sapho experiences by watching her performance in the mirror re-enacts structures of patriarchal alienation – whereby women are obliged to view themselves as sexual objects – while paradoxically enabling the autotelic realisation of an active subject position. There are also



homoerotic and homophobic undercurrents, with lesbian desire implicitly represented as an offshoot of and extension to female vanity ('je m'aimais un peu').<sup>36</sup>

The twist of the story in 'Nuit de nocés' comes when Sapho explains why she brought an end to her engagement: two weeks before the wedding, she finds out that her fiancé has visited a prostitute – a form of 'preparation' she finds unacceptable, and inferior to her own. This 'chute' highlights the sexual double standard of society's valorisation of pre-marital female virginity. However, Sapho's disappointment is framed not only as an ethical question, but also as an aesthetic one. By spending the night with a prostitute, her fiancé relegates sex to something banal and commercial, whereas Sapho constructs it as a performance, a work of art. Her ideal is premised on its unattainability. After all, although her experience parallels the trajectory of her readers' disappointment, evoked in the first half of the article, Sapho's wedding night – unlike theirs – *never actually happens*. Sapho escapes her readers' fate and is implicitly left free to explore her desires via extra-marital means. Not only this, but, on a symbolic or aesthetic level, Sapho's *mise-en-scène* surpasses the reality that it represents and supplements. The most erotic moment of the story is when men are emphatically absent. On one level, the column's agony aunt structure offers female readers – imagined or real – a forum for identification and shared experience. On another, Emery's *travestissement* and eroticised *mise en scène* create homosocial complicity, because the topics and anecdotes under discussion serve as titillating pretexts for a voyeuristic male gaze.

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<sup>36</sup> This is reminiscent of a scene in Zola's *Nana* (1880), where Nana admires herself undressing in front of a mirror, with Muffat looking on. See Émile Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart: histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*, ed. by Henri Mitterand, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1960–67), II (1961), pp. 1269–71.

Yet for all the unmistakable misogyny and reductiveness of ‘La Chronique de Sapho’, there is still room for it to take a more polemical position within the intertwining phenomena of politics, sex, and art. In the column, Emery actively contributes to contemporaneous debates surrounding sexual liberty, marriage, and – most controversially – abortion rights. The opinions he expresses constantly border on illicit territory by defending, and implicitly encouraging, sexual practices and family planning methods that, at the fin de siècle, were not only considered immoral, but were ultimately punishable by law. In an early Sapho article, ‘L’Amour en herbe’, Emery unambiguously reveals the illicit potential of the advice column:

Je reçois, chaque jour, des requêtes étranges, des prières naïves, un peu folles parfois, mais qui jamais ne me laissent indifférente; car ce sont toujours lettres de pauvres garçons, affamés d’amour, avides de baisers, qui réclament de mon expérience une éducation rapide, la formule infaillible pour se faire aimer, et trouver à travers les foules l’amante enchanteresse que leur chair appelle; ou bien suppliques désolées des tremblantes amoureuses, qu’épouvante la fécondité de leurs flancs livrés à l’amour et qui me disent, tantôt avant l’étreinte, tantôt après l’ivresse, leur peur hideuse du gosse, la terreur du germe qui grandit, et s’adressent à moi pour exiger des conseils maudits grâce auxquels l’éclosion redoutable serait conjurée...

Et je suis désolée de ne pouvoir à toutes, à tous, tendre une main secourable; amener à un mendiant d’amour une jolie fille, prête à le consoler de ses cruelles attentes; verser à la misérable, qui demain peut-être maudira l’amour et la maternité, les breuvages meurtriers qui transforment le sein de la femme en un sépulcre flétri. (3 Aug. 1895)

The primary two forms of assistance requested by Sapho’s readers effectively amount to sexual procurement and complicity in abortion. The illicit status of these gestures is acknowledged and highlighted by Sapho’s apologetic refusal to grant her readers’ requests (‘je suis désolée de ne pouvoir [...] tendre une main secourable’). However, by apologising for her incapacities, and by emphatically *not*

condemning the validity of their desires, the agony aunt figure implicitly condones – or at least excuses – the actions in question.

In fact, Emery repeatedly promoted greater female sexual liberty in the Sappho column, arguing in favour of birth control and the decriminalisation of abortion. By doing so, he contributed to a broader social movement referred to as neo-Malthusianism. This movement drew inspiration from Thomas Malthus's warnings, in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), about uncontrolled population growth leading to decreased living standards and eventual population decline. Unlike Malthus, who proposed delayed marriage and chastity as 'moral' solutions to overpopulation, the thinkers associated with neo-Malthusianism promoted the use of contraception – and, if necessary, abortion – to control population growth.<sup>37</sup> One of the leading French neo-Malthusians was Paul Robin (1837–1912), an anarchist and pedagogue who – after spending several years of political exile in England throughout the 1870s – supervised the Prevost Orphanage from 1880 to 1894. He lost this position due to the controversy surrounding his innovative methods, which included co-education. This reaction was part of an upsurge of conservative criticism associated with the anti-anarchist backlash experienced in France throughout 1893–4. Robin was introduced to neo-Malthusian thinking during his exile in England and wrote a series of brochures and pamphlets supporting population limitation. In 1896, he founded the *Ligue de la Régénération humaine*, which, through its review *Régénération*, published articles and propaganda promoting birth control. Largely financed through the sale of contraceptive devices, the *Ligue* gradually gained wider support, establishing four

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<sup>37</sup> On the link between Malthus' political and economic thought and neo-Malthusianism, see Ronsin, pp. 28–31.

branches in Paris, and another twenty across France.<sup>38</sup> The fin-de-siècle birth control movement drew most of its support from the libertarian left, including anarchist individualists, syndicalists, and radical feminists, but it was shunned by socialists and Marxists. Notable feminist sympathisers included Marie Huot (1846–1930): the antivivisectionist who coined the term ‘grève des ventres’, Madeleine Pelletier (1874–1939): the first French female psychiatric doctor, the activist Nelly Roussel (1878–1922), and the journalists Gabrielle Petit (1860–1952) and Marguerite Durand (1864–1936). These feminists wrote and spoke in favour of women’s right to sexual freedom and to control over their bodies through contraception and legalised abortion.<sup>39</sup> In doing so, they diverged from the large majority of conservative, bourgeois feminists who valorised maternity and concentrated on women’s suffrage rather than sexual freedom.<sup>40</sup>

Despite its underlying sexism, *Don Juan* drew on the intersecting trends of neo-Malthusianism, individualism, and radical feminism in its approach to sexual politics. In ‘Couveuses’ (24 Aug. 1895), an article from the Sapho column, René Emery discusses a paper that Robin presented to the Société d’anthropologie de Paris on 20 June 1895.<sup>41</sup> Emery highlights the debate’s gendered nature and the importance of birth control to increasing women’s freedom, praising Robin for his

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<sup>38</sup> Ronsin, pp. 46–61.

<sup>39</sup> In the period, the primary form of birth control was coitus interruptus. Barrier methods – including condoms, diaphragms, sponges, pessaries, and caps – were regularly advertised in newspapers, alongside pharmaceutical products claiming spermicidal properties, vaginal syringes, and douches. Such products were relatively expensive and often ineffective unless they were employed in combination. The lack of accessible, affordable, and effective birth control led many women to have recourse to abortion, which was criminalised by article 317 of the Penal Code. See Angus McLaren, *A History of Contraception: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 178–214, Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception 1800–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 122–142, and Jean-Yves Le Naour and Catherine Valenti, *Histoire de l’avortement. XIXe–XXe siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2003).

<sup>40</sup> See Ronsin, pp. 157–1611, Angus McLaren, *Sexuality and Social Order: The Debate Over the Fertility of Women and Workers in France, 1770–1920* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1983), pp. 164–5, and Le Naour and Valenti, pp. 69–75.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Robin, ‘Dégénérescence de l’espèce humaine; causes et remèdes’, *Bulletins et mémoires de la Société d’Anthropologie de Paris*, Series 4, Vol. 6 (1895), pp. 426–433.

depiction of women's prescribed role in society as 'absurde, ridicule, [et] ignoble'. He describes how women, according to Robin's argument, are caught in a double bind between two forms of 'esclavage': either they can follow the socially prescribed role of virtuous mothers, condemned to 'corvées conjugales' and 'enfantements répétés', or they can dedicate their lives to the 'joies stériles' of sexual liberty, equated with prostitution. After noting the hypocrisy of the widespread but unspoken use of family planning methods ('les fraudes et les supercheries'), Sapho/Emery rejects the pronatalist tendency to relegate women to their reproductive capacities: '[La] Terre est trop peuplée. Et cela suffit pour réclamer, au nom des femmes, une liberté que l'on nous refuse: celle d'être femmes: non plus femelles couveuses.' By using the word 'nous' here, Emery aligns the figure of Sapho with her readers in a way that he did not do in 'Nuit de nocces'. The tone also changes, from the patronising titillation of 'Nuit de nocces', to a more forceful socio-political call to arms. The article's concluding comments, discussing degeneration theories and racial regeneration, swiftly head towards a more disturbing vision of ethnic cleansing ('laver la race'), which is uncomfortable reading for modern critics. It is important to acknowledge that neo-Malthusians employed eugenicist arguments, citing the benefits of birth control (or, if necessary, abortion) in preventing the transmission of inherited diseases and disabilities. Some critics have viewed this approach as a ploy to get conservatives and medical practitioners on board by re-working the social utility argument employed by natalists concerned about depopulation.<sup>42</sup> That said, the line between adoption and re-appropriation in this case is difficult to draw.

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<sup>42</sup> McLaren, *Sexuality and Social Order*, p. 101; Le Naour and Valenti, p. 56.

As well as promoting the acceptability of birth control, Emery defended abortion as part of a socially conscious response to the gendered inequalities of fin-de-siècle French society. In ‘Ventres honteux’, he attacked traditional moral norms that circumscribe and punish women’s sexuality in the name of ‘honour’, claiming that:

[Elle] n’est pas coupable celle qui veut aujourd’hui dépouiller son ventre de la flétrissure et de la honte – puisque l’être germé des semences de l’amour, sans le goupillon du prêtre ou l’écharpe du maire, ne sera que bâtard, méprisé, sans nom, sans héritage, sans droits, et que sa naissance comme une souillure jaillira sur la mère aussi! (12 Dec. 1896)

Emery here emphasises the hypocrisy of religious and political institutions who condemn women for wanting to abort illegitimate children. He insists that the status of ‘bastard’ is only made possible through the moral and civil codes created by these institutions, which promote the sexual double standard for their own self-serving interests. The lack of legal protection for children born out of wedlock is shown to work in tandem with social, moral, and religious taboos surrounding extramarital sex. Such arguments regularly featured in both neo-Malthusian and feminist writing of the period. They were defended in the pages of *Gil Blas*, in an article by Séverine (pseud. Caroline Rémy, 1855–1929), as well as in Marguerite Durand’s feminist paper *La Fronde*.<sup>43</sup> By expressing these viewpoints in the Sapho column, Emery enhanced the review’s rebellious self-image. That said, *Don Juan*’s politics of sexual liberation cannot be completely untangled from its aesthetics of ‘légèreté’. On the one hand, Emery’s arguments in favour of abortion rights and greater sexual freedom can be interpreted as an attempt to justify or ennoble the review’s erotically titillating and taboo content. On the other hand, this frothy

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<sup>43</sup> See Jacqueline (pseud. Caroline Rémy), ‘Le droit à l’avortement’, *Gil Blas*, 4 Nov. 1890, Marcelle Tinayre, ‘Lettre de la mère Gigogne à quelques intellectuels’, *La Fronde*, 24 April 1898, and Jeanne Caruchet, ‘Avortées et avorteuses’, *La Fronde*, 24 Jan. 1903.

content can also be seen to function as a cover for *Don Juan*'s underlying political radicalism. These readings are not mutually exclusive – as we have seen, the review clearly encouraged its readers to identify with voyeuristic and vicarious forms of desire and pleasure, while simultaneously offering them polemical social critique and subversive sexual politics. Titillation and polemic were thus interconnected phenomena that contributed to the illicit and rebellious nature of *Don Juan*'s sexual and textual networks.

The illicit nature of the bonds created between readers, writers, and publishers was not limited to the symbolic realm, but was in fact ratified by the correctional courts. In July 1896, Alfred Hippolyte Bonnet faced trial for 'outrages aux bonnes mœurs', after publishing content in *Don Juan* that was considered obscene. A series of images published between April and May 1896, alongside an article entitled 'Les Sœurs Barrisson' (25 April 1896), were cited as evidence of the crime, as defined by the law of 2 August 1882.<sup>44</sup> The inculcated images included two drawings by Léon Roze, 'Printemps sérieux!' (18 April 1896) and 'Avant le salon' (25 April 1896), and three by Édouard Couturier: 'Photographie exécutée place de la Bourse' (29 April 1896), 'La Fête de madame' (6 May 1896), and 'Le Maillot trop étroit' (13 May 1896, figure 5). The trial judgement refers to these images as 'manifestement obscène[s]', and refutes Bonnet's arguments defending their artistic merit:

[il] résulte de l'instruction et des débats [...] [que] Bonnet [...] a commis le délit d'outrage aux bonnes mœurs, par la vente, l'offre, l'exposition et la distribution sur la voie publique et dans les lieux

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<sup>44</sup> Article 1 of the 2 Aug. 1882 law reads: 'Est puni d'un emprisonnement d'un mois à deux ans et d'une amende de 16 francs à 3.000 francs quiconque aura commis le délit d'outrage aux bonnes mœurs, par la vente, l'offre, l'exposition, l'affichage ou la distribution gratuite sur la voie publique et dans les lieux publics, d'écrits, d'imprimés autres que le livre, d'affiches, dessins, gravures, peintures, emblèmes ou images obscènes'. *Lois annotées ou Lois, décrets, ordonnances, avis du Conseil d'Etat, etc., avec notes historiques, de concordance et de jurisprudence*, IX (Paris: Recueil Sirey, 1881–1885), p. 376.

publics des numéros de ce journal, [...] lesquels contiennent [...] une série de dessins présentant un caractère manifestement obscène en raison non seulement de la nudité partielle, mais aussi des attitudes et des gestes des personnages, caractère accentué par les légendes qui se trouvent au bas de chacun de ces dessins, que Bonnet a vainement au cours des débats, allégué le caractère artistique de ces dessins; que le délit, résultant d'après la loi, de haute publication d'images obscènes, ne saurait être effacé ni atténué par l'habileté de l'exécution.<sup>45</sup>

There is a marked appreciation here for the ways in which text and image functioned subversively in illustrated reviews. Visual obscenity – defined by the presence of nudity alongside undescribed ‘attitudes’ and ‘gestes’ – could, according to this judgement, be made even more illicit by the presence of humorous captions.

The definition of ‘obscenity’ remains flexible, however, as can be seen by the fact that sexual innuendo alone was not always sufficient to attract censorship. On the one hand, unsubtle linguistic evocation of female genitalia (‘chats’) in the description of a can-can performance, in ‘Les Sœurs Barrisson’, attracted the censor’s condemnation. On the other, the phallic symbolism of a drawing depicting asparagus was considered insufficiently obscene, and the image was discounted from the evidence.<sup>46</sup> ‘Les Asperges’, by Vato, depicts a young boy emerging from a cracked egg to sell asparagus to a group of half-naked women, who beckon him with eager and lustful glances (figure 6). It is unclear why this drawing escaped censorship while the others were condemned. Perhaps its erotic playfulness was sufficiently subtle to reduce its subversive potential, or perhaps indirect evocations of male genitalia were considered less threatening than the female equivalent. This judgement confirms the view that criminal categories such as ‘outrage aux bonnes

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<sup>45</sup> AP, D1U6 577, 16.07.1896 – BONNET, Auguste Hippolyte.

<sup>46</sup> On this question, the judgement reads: ‘En ce qui concerne le numéro portant la date du neuf mai 1896, lequel contient à la quatrième page, un dessin intitulé ‘Les asperges’, attendu que ce dessin ne revêt pas un caractère obscène qui permette de le retenir à la charge de Bonnet comme constituant un élément de la prévention, le renvoie des fins de la poursuite sur ce chef.’ AP, D1U6 577.



mœurs’ were highly flexible and often seemingly contradictory.<sup>47</sup> It also demonstrates the courts’ critical awareness of structures of textual reception, and the complicit relationships it created.



**Figure 5: Couturier, ‘Le Maillot trop étroit’, *Don Juan*, 13 May 1896 (BnF)**



**Figure 6: Vato, ‘Les Asperges’, *Don Juan*, 9 May 1896 (BnF)**

<sup>47</sup> On the ambiguity and flexibility of obscenity, and of the structures of censorship that define and regulate it, see Nicholas Harrison, *Circles of Censorship: Censorship and its Metaphors in French History, Literature, and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) and Elisabeth Ladenson, *Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

In response to Bonnet's trial, and eventual condemnation, the review's *rédaction* penned a series of articles defending their aesthetic stance and their *directeur*'s moral probity.<sup>48</sup> The content and title of 'Pour l'art' (20 May 1896) are clearly inscribed in the tradition of using *l'art pour l'art* as a legal defence.<sup>49</sup> In the article, the review declares its pure intentions, attacks its critics' hypocrisy, and compares obscenity debates to France's wars of religion:

[Nous] tenons à déclarer hautement – et les lecteurs qui depuis un an sont fidèles à *Don Juan* le savent – que ce journal est purement artistique et littéraire, qu'il n'a jamais cherché à exciter ni à flatter les passions malsaines. [...] *Don Juan* chante l'amour, la beauté, l'art, la joie de vivre...

Cette œuvre [...] ne vaut-elle pas mieux que [...] le cri de guerre poussé par des Français contre d'autres Français, sous prétexte qu'ils ne sont pas de la même religion? – La Direction.

The hyperbolic tone of the final question alerts the reader to its rhetorical and somewhat tongue-in-cheek nature. This can also be seen by the parenthetical appeal to readers' knowledge of the review's content. The *rédaction*'s claims to moral probity, when considered against the backdrop of the review's predominant 'légèreté', are clearly meant to be taken with a pinch of salt.

After the trial's verdict is announced, *Don Juan* publishes a second 'Pour l'art' article, depicting the hypocrisy of people belonging to 'ligues pudibondes', who enact their zeal through negative attacks on others' actions, rather than by setting a good example (25 July 1896). The reference to 'ligues pudibondes' evokes organisations such as La Ligue pour le relèvement de la moralité publique and the Société centrale de protestation contre la licence des rues.<sup>50</sup> The latter was presided by René Bérenger, popularly nicknamed 'Père la Pudeur', who becomes a recurring *bête noire* in the review's pages. In a later 'Chronique de Sapho' article entitled

<sup>48</sup> Bonnet was condemned to pay a 1,000 franc fine, alongside court fees. AP, D1U6 577.

<sup>49</sup> See Ladenson.

<sup>50</sup> See Ronsin, pp. 121–9.

‘Vive l’Amour et Zut à Béranger!’ (18 April 1897), Béranger’s moralising standpoint is framed as mere posturing (‘C’est une pose, rien de plus’). This vision of Béranger is also found in a series of texts by Emery, ‘Béranger au Salon’, published from 29 April to 16 May 1897. In the faux-anecdotal feuilleton, Béranger is depicted trying to cover artistic nudes with ‘feuilles de vigne’. The writer-protagonist debates with the senator, highlighting the unnecessary extremity, and ultimate hypocrisy, of the latter’s viewpoints. While implicitly attacking well-known zealots with satire, the *rédaction*’s response to the July 1896 trial also contains a celebratory element that aligns artistic merit with controversy. Immediately following the second ‘Pour l’art’ article is a short biography of Bonnet, affirming the latter’s moral virtue. Whilst seemingly pandering to the moralising framework of their detractors, Emery’s opening lines suggest a more subversive appropriation: ‘A la liste glorieuse des *Condamnés de la Neuvième*, après J.-L. Forain, Raoul Ponchon, Jean Lorrain, Oscar Méténier, Jules Roques, Zo d’Axa, Léon Maillard, Vignola, etc., il faut ajouter désormais le nom de notre excellent et cher ami: A. H. Bonnet’. By attributing glory to criminally inculpatated artists, writers, journalists, and review directors, Emery’s article creates a community whose artistic and literary value increases when they attract moral condemnation and censorship. The list creates ties of illicit solidarity between individuals whose published works were perceived to encourage ‘immoral’ sexual desires and behaviour. In the following section I consider how the bonds of illicit solidarity evoked by Emery in his defence of Bonnet extends to cover the relationship between the review and the businesses advertised within its pages. *Don Juan*’s paradoxical position regarding sexual politics hints at how the review’s erotic imagination influenced reality beyond the written page. I explore this question in

more depth below, analysing how ‘revues légères’ such as *Don Juan* contributed to wider networks of erotic complicity by offering a creative textual space where art, sex, and advertising collude and collide.

### **Selling Sex: Periodicals as *Proxénètes***

Periodicals like *Don Juan* encourage, enable, and profit from erotic relations – whether these take place in the reader’s imagination, through vicarious identification, or in actual sexual practices. This process can be considered as a form of *proxénétisme*, or ‘pimp journalism’. I use the term ‘proxénétisme’, evoking how magazines play the role of sexual go-between, to reframe and nuance a well-known literary trope. As Éléonore Reverzy explores in *Portrait de l’artiste en fille de joie*, the metaphor of literature as prostitution evolved and strengthened throughout the nineteenth century. She suggests that writers during the century’s later decades differed from their predecessors by overtly identifying with and appropriating the metaphor, rather than criticising and rejecting it.<sup>51</sup> The analogy took centre stage in fictional depictions of journalism in the era, most famously in Balzac’s *Illusions perdues* (1837–1843), the Goncourt brothers’ *Charles Demailly* (1860), and Maupassant’s *Bel-Ami* (1885).<sup>52</sup> Beyond fictional representation, reviews such as *Don Juan* pushed the metaphor closer to reality by intersecting text and imagery with material culture, through the medium of advertising. This tendency is particularly visible in the fourth page of the review, which featured humorous and titillating drawings (the most obvious target for censorship), and half a page of adverts. A large proportion of the adverts in *Don Juan* promote sex-related products: condoms, aphrodisiacs, and sex toys. Supported by these ‘louche’ sources

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<sup>51</sup> Éléonore Reverzy, *Portrait de l’artiste en fille de joie: la littérature publique* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2016), p. 180.

<sup>52</sup> Edmund Birch analyses these works in *Fictions of the Press in Nineteenth-Century France* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

of income, ‘revues légères’ participated in wider erotic networks that contributed to the lived sexual experiences of fin-de-siècle readers. In the analysis below, I consider the role *Don Juan* played in a wider network of criminally inculcated businesses that traded on sex appeal, highlighting a suggestive analogy between the review’s advertising column and the window of a sex shop. Then I explore a selection of personal ads in *Don Juan*’s ‘petites annonces’ (‘small ad’) column, which offered a creative space for the implication and manipulation of readers’ desire. Finally, I analyse the literary implications of *réclame*, suggesting that the intersection of, and cross-pollination between, advertising and art in *Don Juan* is a fundamentally creative one.

*Don Juan* financially profited from the sale of sexual products and services. Its advertising columns contain a plethora of adverts that, in half-veiled language, sell condoms, aphrodisiacs, erotica, and sex toys. One example is a recurring advert for ‘Maison A. Claverie’, a shop that sold a range of medical products – including hernia belts, feminine hygiene products, and prosthetic limbs – alongside sexual paraphernalia such as condoms, lubricant (‘crème de Vénus’), and sex toys. By the start of the twentieth century, the shop had gained renown and approbation for its range of corsets, which were regularly advertised in *Femina* and *La Vie heureuse*: women’s magazines with greater social legitimacy and cultural cachet than *Don Juan*.<sup>53</sup> The business had its own fabric factory at Romilly-sur-Seine, and its financial success enabled Claverie to purchase the château des Milandes in 1900. Claverie then sold his business in 1905 to the entrepreneur Georges Bos, who would

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<sup>53</sup> For a presentation and analysis of *Femina* and *La Vie heureuse*, see Rachel Mesch, *Having It All in the Belle Époque: How French Women’s Magazines Invented the Modern Woman* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013). Mesch notes how these magazines cultivated ‘identification between readers and subject matter’ by blending advertising and main copy and by promoting special offers on products such as Claverie’s ‘Liane’ corset (pp. 42–3).

later be awarded the legion of honour for his contribution to French commerce.<sup>54</sup> Claverie's range of products highlighted suggestive analogies between forms of medical, sexual, and sartorial intimacy. However, it was precisely the intimate nature of these products that created practical issues for those selling them, due to fin-de-siècle sexual taboos and laws on public decency. Consider this example of the Maison Claverie advert's usual format in *Don Juan*:



**Figure 7 – Maison Claverie advert in *Don Juan*, 18 November 1896 (BnF)**

The advert employs a vocabulary of security and discretion – ‘Prudence’, ‘Sureté’, ‘Sécurité absolue’, and ‘Complète discrétion’ – that metonymically signifies the type of products sold (most notably contraceptive devices), while confirming their taboo or illicit nature. In Claverie's market, there is a tension between the need for publicity and the need for secrecy: to avoid clients' embarrassment and legal complications, the shop must offer a clandestine service. This leads to the advert's seeming self-contradiction: the half-veiled language used to refer to condoms (‘ARTICLES SECRETS [...] garantis incassables’) and sex toys (‘APPAREILS SPÉCIAUX pour L'USAGE INTIME de l'Homme et de la Femme’) is undermined by the way the adverts draw attention to these words through capitalisation and bold typeface. Through a process of veiling and unveiling, the reader/client makes the imaginative leap to ‘uncover’ the advert's open secret. However shallow these

<sup>54</sup> See Agnès Chauvin, ‘Auguste Claverie, le parcours remarquable du propriétaire du château des Milandes en 1900’, *Bulletin de la Société Historique et Archéologique du Périgord*, 140: 3 (2013) 357–362.

covering gestures may seem, they were necessary in an era where the lines between licit and illicit sexual behaviours were routinely scrutinised and enforced through judicial mechanisms that could contribute to a business's ruin, if they were found guilty of 'outrages aux bonnes mœurs'.

Despite its prudent marketing manoeuvres, Maison A. Claverie was not immune to the censoring forces of the correctional courts. On 15 February 1897, only a few months after Bonnet's trial, Charles Delbret (1862–1914), known as Charles Auguste Claverie, was accused of 'outrages aux bonnes moeurs'.<sup>55</sup> Condemned on 24 March 1897, he joined Emery's 'liste glorieuse des *Condamnés de la Neuvième*'.<sup>56</sup> In the official 'réquisitoire définitif', Claverie is reprimanded not only for the obscene nature of the products he sells, but also for the way he displays and advertises them. The document exemplifies how judicial mechanisms regulated sexual morality and gender roles at the fin de siècle. First, there is clear sexist gender ideology at work in the court's appraisal of Claverie's 'obscene' products:

Il y a d'abord des 'préservatifs pour hommes', qui pouvant avoir pour objet de protéger les parties sexuelles de l'homme contre la contagion des maladies ou syphilitiques ou vénériennes, sont d'un certain usage au point de vue médical. Mais on n'en peut pas dire des 'préservatifs pour dames', des éponges de sûreté et de l'appareil d'un médecin allemand, nommé Hartmann, [...] tous ces instruments ont pour but et pour utilité exclusive d'empêcher le coït d'être fécond; ils ne répondent à aucun but avouable ni ne peuvent être conseillés par aucun médecin.<sup>57</sup>

The logic distinguishing between male and female contraception here seems somewhat dubious, since surely male condoms were also created with the aim to

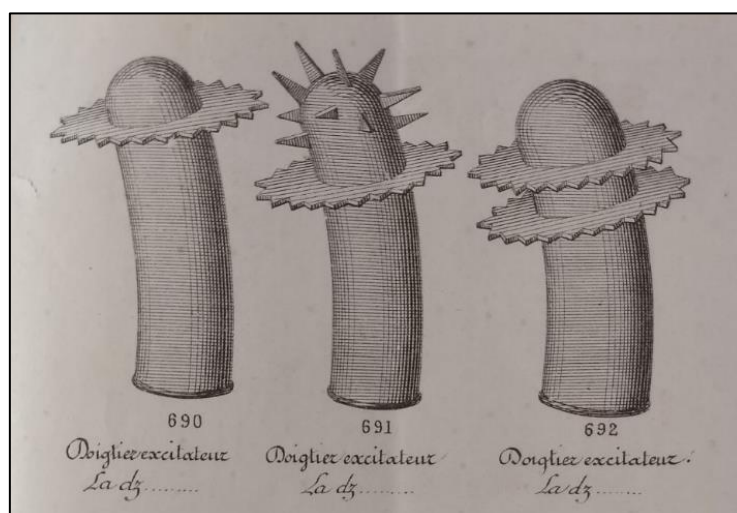
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<sup>55</sup> For the procedural documents from Claverie's trial, see AP D2U6 110, 24.03.1897 – DELBRET Charles (dit A. CLAVERIE Charles-Auguste).

<sup>56</sup> Claverie was condemned to a one-month prison sentence and a fine covering the trial's court fees. Because it was his first condemnation, the court gave him a suspended sentence, with five years' probation. AP, D1U6 602, 24.03.1897 – DELBRET Charles (dit CLAVERIE).

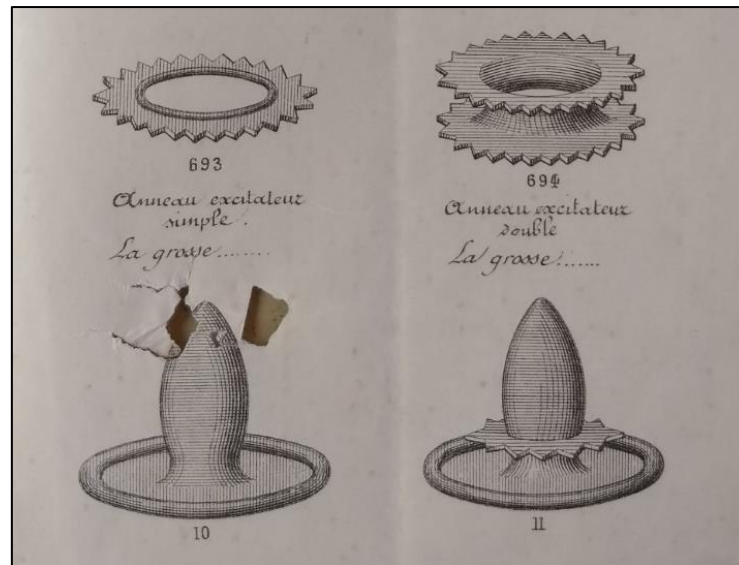
<sup>57</sup> AP, D2U6 110.

prevent pregnancies.<sup>58</sup> However, the double standard sexist ideology is clear: men can have non-procreative sex for fun and can feel justified in wanting to avoid any unpleasant consequences, but women can *only* (want to) have sex for procreative purposes. This restrictive vision of female sexuality is affirmed by the court's condemnation of sex toys created for female pleasure (figures 8). A series of items, including a form of ribbed condom ('le parisien dentelé'), a cock ring designed for clitoral stimulation ('l'anneau dentelé'), and fingering toys ('doigtiers') are cited as obscene due to the immorality of their usage: '[ils] n'ont pour but que de procurer à la femme par leur introduction dans le vagin, des sensations voluptueuses, et de concourir ainsi à des pratiques contre-nature.' The phrase 'pratiques contre-nature' is particularly loaded, due to its association with other non-reproductive sexual practices considered 'perverse' at the fin de siècle – most notably, homosexuality. Female sexual freedom and female pleasure are not only morally condemned, but indirectly criminalised, by the French correctional courts' punishing the act of selling products that enable and encourage either of them.



<sup>58</sup> A similar distinction between male and female contraception was made in the 'Loi du 31 juillet 1920 réprimant la provocation à l'avortement et à la propagande anticonceptionnelle'. See Ronsin, pp. 146–7.





**Figure 8: ‘Maison Ch. Frédéric’ Catalogue, AP D2U6 110 (author’s photo)**

The illicit power of sex shops can be productively compared to the role played by the ‘revues légères’ advertising them. *Don Juan* financially benefited from advertising businesses such as Claverie’s, and thereby took part in a wider network of erotic complicity through a form of *proxénétisme*. Not only this, but the review’s sexual politics (discussed in more detail above) represented, validated, and promoted female pleasure and agency in ways that, although riddled with their own sexist tropes, are comparable to the threat to moral order posed by Claverie’s shop. This similarity is confirmed by the fact that both businesses were punished by the correctional courts. In both examples it is difficult to draw a line between subversion and financial gain. By offering space for female agency and pleasure in their relative businesses, Claverie and Bonnet were ultimately being financially canny: they saw a market and exploited it. The financial and symbolic complicity between Claverie’s sex shop and Bonnet’s review hints at the deep-rooted relationship between literary and erotic production. Further analysis of Claverie’s ‘réquisitoire définitif’ shows that there is a productive analogy between *Don Juan*’s advertising pages and the physical, symbolically subversive, space of Claverie’s

shop. In the ‘réquisitoire définitif’, Claverie’s display cabinets, shop window, and catalogues become the site for judicial scrutiny:

Non seulement Claverie tenait ces objets dans son magasin à la disposition des acheteurs, mais il en exposait quelques uns [*sic*] dans sa vitrine, de façon à tirer l’attention des passants [...]. Il faisait mieux: ces appareils étaient décrits avec figures à l’appui et avec des indications tant sur leur objet que sur la manière de s’en servir, dans un catalogue-prospectus qui était remis sur simple demande à tout client dans le magasin.<sup>59</sup>

It is above all the sex objects’ accessibility and visibility to the public that the courts condemn, in accordance with the emphasis on publicity found in legal definitions of ‘outrage aux bonnes mœurs’. The question of ease of access – with the objects ‘à la disposition des acheteurs’ and catalogues ‘remis sur simple demande à tout client’ – evokes concerns about the potential ‘public’ of clients present in the shop. This reflects discussions of the appropriateness of literary material for readerships defined by overdetermined social, moral, and political anxieties: women, children, and the working classes.<sup>60</sup>

Much like Claverie’s shop window, *Don Juan*’s pages – especially, but not limited to, the advertising section – sell ‘obscene’ erotic and literary objects to an anonymous readership, whose potential diversity is threatening to the moral status quo. This threat is fundamentally based on ‘separate spheres’ gender ideology and the sexual double standard. It might seem logical to assume a predominantly male readership from the presence of such adverts, which are deemed irreconcilable with traditional femininity and the sexual double standard.<sup>61</sup> However, this assumption ends up re-enacting the blinkered vision of gender and class roles implicit in fin-

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<sup>59</sup> AP, D2U6 110.

<sup>60</sup> On the question of ‘suitable’ reading and its relation to periodical culture, see Kate Flint, ‘Reading in the Periodical Press’ in *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 136–183.

<sup>61</sup> This assumption is made briefly in passing by Martin, p. 65, and Reverzy, p. 156.

de-siècle moral censure. After all, there is evidence – however implicit or indirect – of mixed readerships in reviews, such as *Don Juan*, that contained morally dubious adverts. Although it is difficult to define the review’s actual readership with historical accuracy, due to the scarcity of archival sources, we can reconstruct the implied reader from material within *Don Juan*’s pages. Female readers are repeatedly depicted as a central part of the review’s intended audience, who actively responded to its content by sending letters to members of the editorial team, such as the agony aunt ‘Sapho’. Even if one were to concede that the feminisation of *Don Juan*’s readership (frequently addressed as ‘nos lectrices’) constitutes more of a performance than a direct reflection of reality, and that the letters cited by the *rédaction* might be fictional, the presence of adverts aimed specifically at women – from breast-enhancing products (‘Farine Egyptienne’) to children’s toys (‘Bébé jumeau’) – attests to a perceived female readership. After all, it seems unlikely that businesses selling such products would pay to place adverts in a paper whose readership did not include their target audience (figure 9). As I suggested above, the concerns raised in Claverie’s ‘réquisitoire définitif’ surrounding accessibility and publicity constitute an indirect affirmation of the mixed nature of his clientele: ‘mixed’ in multiple senses, whether that be according to gender, age, or class. By metonymical extension, Bonnet’s readership in *Don Juan* – who are posited as potentially becoming, if not already, a part of Claverie’s clientele – would also be mixed, and therefore equally problematic for moral and legal regulatory mechanisms. The sex shop and the ‘revue légère’ offered spaces, both physical and imagined, in which sex, desire, money, and textual production were implicated in one another, creating forms of erotic complicity that were financially, artistically, and libidinally productive for a diverse range of readers.

Figure 9: Advertising Page from *Don Juan*, 18 November 1896 (BnF)

While offering readers the ability to purchase condoms and sex toys, *Don Juan* also provided space for creative forms of erotic textual exchange. In the ‘petites annonces’ (‘small ad’ or ‘classified ad’) column, the review listed personal ads featuring messages between supposed lovers, requests for saucy correspondence, and other avowals of desire.<sup>62</sup> Examples of messages between lovers published in this column include:

- rendez-vous planning: ‘Lovely. Tout est prêt... L’échelle est posée... T’attend. ch. soir à 10 h. à partir jeudi prochain. – J.V.’ (24 June 1896)
- post-coital reminders: ‘L. X. 42, J’ai trouvé ton corset sous mon divan. Viens le chercher. Z. 17.’ (14 Nov. 1896)
- and separations ‘Pierrot: Le Carnaval est fini. L’amour aussi. Inutile me revoir. Tu perds ton temps. L. D.’ (29 Feb. 1896)

By charting various stages in erotic relationships, these messages tap into the imaginative appeal of love stories and adultery novels, whilst taking a short format more akin to the *faits divers*. They encourage readers to fill in the gaps, creating

<sup>62</sup> For a recent study of the personal ad in Third Republic French journalism, see Hannah Frydman and Claire-Lise Gaillard, “Les dessous des petites annonces”: quand les intimités se marchandent à la quatrième page des journaux (III<sup>e</sup> République), in *Les Petites annonces personnelles dans la presse française (XVIII<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, ed. by Hannah Frydman and Claire-Lise Gaillard (= *Histoire, économie et société*, 39:3 (2020)), pp. 45–66. This special issue is timely and offers interpretations that parallel my own analysis.

potentially endless romantic and erotic narratives from very few details. Where the message format encourages *Don Juan*'s general reader to posit themselves as an outsider looking in on the relationships of others, thereby gaining a vicarious, voyeuristic form of pleasure, the offer/request format places the reader in the role of a potential recipient of amorous attention. The titillating appeal of the small ad here becomes intertwined with actual – and not just implicit – appeals to reader response. In the review, there are numerous and recurrent requests for marriage, love affairs, and the exchange of correspondence. In each instance, the relationship being advertised is often overtly sexual, and 'illicit' due to its extra-marital, pleasure-centred, and implicitly non-procreative nature. The messages function as sexual solicitation, and the columns as a form of Tinder *avant la lettre*. Consider the following examples:

- 'Jeune dame qui s'ennuie, désir corresp. gaie pour distraire. Mme L., 3, b. rest. Nantes.' (18 Jan. 1896)
- 'Dame libre après-midi et 2 jours par semaine, serait recon. à M. très bien, qui voudr. procurer distract. Z. A. Z., X. V., gare Nord.' (29 Feb. 1896)

'Distraction' and 'distraire' here have clear sexual connotations. The reader is solicited both as a potential lover, and as a potential voyeur, through their imaginative implication in the future relations between the person making erotic requests, and those fulfilling them. By implicating the reader's desires and vicarious pleasure, at the same time as offering space for extra-textual erotic connections and relationships to blossom, *Don Juan* takes on the role of a *proxénète* or sexual go-between, blurring the boundary between imagined and actual sexual activity.

The correlation between small ads, prostitution, and *proxénétisme* is overtly recognised and explored elsewhere in *Don Juan*, through mises-en-scène of *petites annonces* that emphasise the complexity of readers' relationship to the advertising format. In a series of fictional correspondence, 'Lettres à Maud', published in

alternation with ‘La Chronique de Sapho’ between 30 May and 25 July 1896, René Emery charts a passionate but doomed romance that began with an epistolary exchange via *petites annonces*. The first two instalments, entitled ‘Petites annonces’ and ‘Poste restante’, describe the protagonist’s decision to use small ad columns as a means of finding his ideal beloved (who turns out to be Maud, the recipient of the letters we are reading). At the start of the series, Emery’s protagonist offers an ambivalent analysis of small ads, considered as a simultaneously debased and idealised medium for erotic exchange:

En ces listes, souvent grotesques, de demandes et d’offres galantes qui s’étalent audacieusement aux petites annonces des journaux mondains, je n’ai vu [...] qu’une sorte de Bourse de l’amour, et de quel amour? celui qui rôde sur les boulevards, vagabonde par les rues, affamé, glouton, se repaissant des plus médiocres régals et buvant l’ivresse à n’importe quels flacons. [...] Cependant, parmi les habituelles banalités et la plate similitude de ces annonces, peu à peu je découvris, dans le tas, des appels à l’amour, des cris d’espoir, des sanglots de passion qui se trahissent par je ne sais quelles paroles plus sincères, [...] mais qui pourtant éveillaient brusquement mon étrange et malade perspicacité d’impulsif. [...] [Je] reconnaissais encore l’inquiétude et la révolte des âmes altières, captives des bagnes et des galères contemporaines, condamnés à la vie bête, rêvant malgré tout l’affranchissement sentimental par la grâce de romanesques et poignantes aventures... (30 May 1896)

The opening lines of this quotation combine vocabularies of sex, money, and prostitution, evoking both visceral desire and disgust. However, this sense of abjection is mitigated with glimpses of an emphatically valorised, aestheticized type of passion attributed to ‘des âmes altières’ fighting against the restrictive bonds of social acceptability. The story’s protagonist then successfully finds his ideal lover, by employing this otherwise questionable and debased medium. Emery’s presentation of small ads in ‘Lettres à Maud’ does not only work as a thematic discussion of the genre, but it also enacts indirect *réclame* for *Don Juan*’s small ad column, by encouraging readers to consider it as a potential source of passionate

love affairs, however fictionalised. The potentially anecdotal (but probably fictional) nature of the letters also hints at the ambiguous status of *petites annonces* as a genre, which – like Emery’s story – combine unverifiable referentiality with creative re-appropriation and *réclame*. ‘Lettres à Maud’ helps to frame our understanding of small ads as an enabling textual space, which encourages complicit forms of identification and implication on the part of the review’s readership.

The small ad format offered readers not only a space for sexual exchange, but also a means of playful textual appropriation that can be understood in literary and artistic terms. Readers (or members of the *rédaction*) creatively manipulated the genre through *clins d’œil* and ironic humour:

- ‘Il commence à faire froid. Qui me veut réchauffer. Abdalah. b. d. *Don Juan*.’ (5 Dec. 1896)
- ‘Je suis myope; les laides me paraissent jolies. Avis aux laides. L. Y. N. X., bureau *Don Juan*.’ (24 June 1896)
- ‘Un fou, qui a été traité durant 3 ans dans une maison d’aliénés et qui se croit guéri, désire union avec j. femme, jolie, élég. un peu toquée. Toc-toc. 69, bur. *Don Juan*.’ (4 July 1896)

The tongue-in-cheek humour apparent in these examples fits in well with the tone of the review, while demonstrating the creativity with which an otherwise seemingly banal or purely lucrative literary form can be appropriated. Furthermore, it was not only anonymous readers or members of the *rédaction* who injected creativity into the genre. Businesses also frequently manipulated the message format’s creative potential in order to advertise their products through indirect (if not particularly subtle) forms of *réclame*, thereby confirming that the *petites annonces* column was widely perceived as something that people bothered to read. A noteworthy example of this creative re-appropriation can be found in a series of adverts selling ‘Farine Egyptienne’ – a product that supposedly encouraged breast

growth.<sup>63</sup> The small ads promoting this product replicate the lovers' messages analysed above, whilst swiftly revealing their status as *réclame*:

- 'Adèle. T'es belle, mais j'aime les gros nichons! Ecris donc à M. Laurent, 17, rue Saint-Joseph, Paris et dem.-lui une boîte de sa merveille. farine égyptienne à 3 fr. 50 la boîte franco. En un mois tu auras une gorge divine. Anatole.' (10 June 1896)
- 'Paulette. Je ne te reverrai que le jour où tu auras développé ta poitrine, ce que tu obtiendras en un mois par l'usage de la farine Egyptienne de Laurent, 17, rue St-Joseph. Paris. 3 fr. 50 la boîte franco.' (20 June 1896)

The businesses paying for small ads of this type could, with the implicit if not overt collusion of the review's *rédaction*, sell their wares with enhanced appeal to readers. This enhanced appeal was created by the adverts' similarity with, and physical proximity to, the titillating content of 'real' personal ads. Of course, the supposedly disguised nature of the advertising strategy is far from convincing. In fact, a large part of the pleasure offered by *réclame* is created by the reader's ability to spot – however easily – the attempted advertising 'ploy'. In a strangely productive yet cyclical logic, readers are encouraged to congratulate themselves on not having been duped, while effectively being 'meta-duped' into this self-congratulatory mode. These levels of self-aware, playful, and titillating reformulation hint at the perceived financial benefits of wielding the small ads' influence, while demonstrating their creative potential as a genre.

The creative potential of advertising is emphatically eroticised in *Don Juan*. Sexual vigour and literary creation are repeatedly aligned, further blurring the boundaries between adverts and art. Indeed, selling sex and selling art become interdependent and reciprocal gestures. This can be seen in the review's in-house book catalogue, the 'Bibliothèque du *Don Juan*', which offered a range of products,

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<sup>63</sup> This product was also promoted through regular inserted advertisements. See figure 9 above.



from quasi-scientific treatises on sexual topics, to contemporary fiction with predominantly erotic themes.<sup>64</sup> The practice of in-house catalogues was employed by other ‘revue légères’, selling near-identical products. This is not surprising, since many ‘revues légères’ were set up and run by an interdependent network of editors and contributors.<sup>65</sup> I suggest that these books, with their thinly veiled erotic content, were explicitly sold for their capacity to arouse readers’ libido, thereby acting as glorified aphrodisiacs. This comparison is supported visually through the review’s *mise en page*: the catalogue frequently appeared above or alongside adverts for aphrodisiac sweets called ‘Bonbons Vert-Galant’ (see figure 9, above). The vicarious erotic stimulation offered by the books sold in the ‘Bibliothèque’ exist side-by-side with their chemical counterparts, in a visual agglomeration of literature, desire, and sex.

The literature-as-aphrodisiac analogy becomes the site of creative appropriation in a series of indirect adverts or *réclame* found in the main body of the review. This gesture blurs the textual boundaries between the dedicated advertising space and the review’s main content. In May 1896, an article called ‘Pour plaire aux femmes’ appears in ‘La Vie parisienne’:

Chacun connaît le refrain qu’a illustré un chanteur à la mode;  
cependant il paraît que plaire aux femmes est chose fort difficile.  
[...]

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<sup>64</sup> See figure 9 for an example of the ‘Bibliothèque du *Don Juan*’, including works by: Camille Lemonnier, Catulle Mendès, Pierre Louÿs, Rachilde, Émile Zola, and René Maizeroy. Examples of ‘scientific’ treatises regularly advertised in the catalogue include Dr Michel Villemont’s *L’Amour conjugal*, Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathie sexuelle*, and a selection of works by Dr Pierre Garnier, discussing marital hygiene, impotence, sterility, and masturbation.

<sup>65</sup> To give some indication of the networks that existed between different ‘revues légères’, it is worth noting that *Folichonneries* (1896–7) regularly advertised the ‘Bibliothèque du *Don Juan*’, and for a time lists its offices at the same address as *Don Juan* (18 rue Feydeau). René Emery wrote the opening article in the first issue of *Folichonneries* (18 April 1896), and the two reviews occasionally republished each other’s content. *Le Fin de Siècle* also had an in-house ‘Bibliothèque’, offering a similar selection of books to the *Don Juan* catalogue. As I have noted above, René Emery was the editor-in-chief at *Le Fin de Siècle* in its early years (1891–2), and it is likely that he maintained links with the review while in charge of *Don Juan*.

Notre génération est anémiée et débilitée par les excès et fatigues de toutes sortes: pour la régénérer, un savant a trouvé un produit qui augmente la vigueur morale, intellectuelle et physique, et régularise le jeu des principales fonctions de l'organisme.

C'est surtout sur l'acte de la génération que ce produit agit: il réveille les organes engourdis ou surmenés. (30 May 1896)

The critical authority of 'Masque Rose' – the general signatory for the column – is co-opted into unsubtle *réclame*. I suggest that this lack of subtlety attracts the reader's attention in a deliberate way, as part of the review's wider constellation of intertextual meanings surrounding the aphrodisiac sweets. In order to appreciate this intertextuality more fully, we need to consider *Don Juan* not simply as a collection of individual texts, but also as a complex visual object published serially over time. Articles in newspapers, journals, and magazines do not appear in isolation, but are linked visually with one another through editorial choices regarding *mise en page*. It is therefore noteworthy that 'Pour plaire aux femmes' is placed just after the 'Le Boulevard' sub-section of 'La Vie parisienne'. The 'Boulevard' article in this issue puts forward an anti-natalist stance, typical of the review's wider sexual politics, discussed above. The signatory 'X...' mocks the dominant class's depopulation fears, justifying abortion as a way of alleviating lower class suffering: 'N'y a-t-il pas assez de victimes de l'égoïsme, de l'avarice, de la lâcheté?... D'autres? Pourquoi. Foutez d'abord du pain à ceux qui existent...'. When read alongside, or just after, such a polemical and political affirmation of anti-natalist sentiment, the vocabulary of decline ('anémiée', 'débilitée') and vigour ('régénérer', 'vigueur') in 'Pour plaire aux femmes' can be read more ironically than if the *réclame* were analysed without any reference to its textual situation or *mise en page*. The blatant juxtaposition between the two sub-sections of 'La Vie parisienne' draws attention to itself, encouraging the reader to align degeneration discourses and depopulation fears not only with the perceived moral hypocrisy of

the ruling classes, but also with the manipulative and unsubtle marketing techniques of *réclame*.

Furthermore, the intertextual meanings attributed to the ‘bonbons’ accrue over time, showing an editorial stance and advertising strategy that employ a creative form of irony. In number 98 (29 August 1896), an article appears in ‘La Vie parisienne’, entitled ‘Témoignage probant’. It is framed as a letter from an ageing aristocratic client testifying to the efficacy of the sweets. The article appears after a ‘Le Boulevard’ article attacking the Roman Catholic Church for putting Zola’s *Rome* on the Index. It precedes a ‘Chronique rimée’ by Des Esquintes, entitled ‘Histoire d’un crime’, which depicts the fateful demise of a man in his eighties who continues to frequent prostitutes despite his old age. The man vaunts his wealth and is subsequently killed by the prostitutes’ pimps. The ‘moral’ of the story is less a condemnation of the murder than a critique of the old man’s ridiculousness: ‘Voilà comment un vieux planteur | Qui ne veut pas quitter sa bêche, | Peut dans une nuit de malheur | Malgré lui faire tête-bêche.’ Des Esquintes’s dark humour, when read after the ‘Témoignage probant’ vaunting the *bonbons* for their ability to make older men sexually vigorous (‘Je suis redevenu aussi ardent et vigoureux qu’à vingt ans’), adds further irony and contradiction to *Don Juan*’s use of *réclame*. The desire to maintain an active sex life in old age – with or without the assistance of aphrodisiacs – is posited not only as ridiculous, but also as potentially fatal. As these examples show, fin-de-siècle advertising strategies were frequently self-aware. Editorial choices, particularly regarding *mise en page*, created complex intertextual meanings that accrued over time. With an eye for detail and a degree of patience, we can better appreciate the creative potential of advertising in ‘revues légères’, and its contribution to the wider textual and erotic

networks of fin-de-siècle literary culture. *Don Juan*'s readership – whether imagined or real, contemporaneous or modern – clearly have an important role to play in the construction of these networks, by appreciating the irony, satire, and *clins d'œil* peppered throughout the review's pages, as well as by investing financially and libidinally in its creative endeavours.

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As this chapter has demonstrated, the 'revue légère' is more than *louche* ephemera – it is a rich and fascinating textual source for literary scholars and cultural historians. Despite their status as a relatively understudied genre, saucy magazines like *Don Juan* encapsulate the complexities and contradictions in the fin-de-siècle reading experience, constructed according to a type of shared eroticism that was criticised for its supposed immorality, its 'obscenity', and – perhaps its most unforgivable attribute – its frivolity. By inviting readers to collaborate imaginatively and actually in the review's frothy and quasi-illicit content, *Don Juan* creates a unique textual, social, and cultural space that blends literature and sex, frivolity and polemic, the avant-garde and the popular. The forms of complicity constructed within its pages offer a window onto the sexual and textual networks of fin-de-siècle French literary culture, where playful eroticism, sexual libertarianism, and legal transgression combined and colluded under the censors' watchful – sometimes repressive, sometimes impotent – gaze.

## Conclusion

At its conclusion, this study of complicity reveals itself to be – or to have been all along – a thesis about reading and readers. This is not surprising, because the reader's ambiguous status has long haunted critical discussions about the relationship between literature, morality, and the law. With this in mind, the most significant idea recurring throughout my analysis is that the reader figure – so often posited as a victim by fin-de-siècle commentators – would, in many cases, be more astutely described as an accomplice. Or, to put this another way: in fin-de-siècle French culture, the reader is a figure presumed or constructed to be complicit with the perceived transgressions of literary works, with the authors who write them, and with the publishers who enable their public dissemination.

We can therefore place 'accomplice' firmly alongside 'victim' in fin-de-siècle figurations of the reader, while also adding: potential criminal, moral judge, and avid consumer. These roles develop at different points and in different ways depending on the material analysed, but there are some key formulations worth highlighting. Throughout all four chapters, the reader's implication in morally, socially, and aesthetically transgressive literary works appears as an obsessive *hantise*. We have seen how this question is central to fin-de-siècle debates about literary 'bad influence' and readers' capacity to respond to and reject the ideas and behaviour a writer depicts. One significant consequence of the reader's interpretative role is the burden of illicit knowledge, which I have considered across a range of reading pacts, including the confessions made by fictional characters and the precarious balancing act between collusive yet compromising media relationships. The reader figure that finally emerges from this analysis is less the passive victim of official fin-de-siècle discourses than an active participant in a

working collaboration, whether that be through the sleuth-like unravelling of hidden meanings, the activation of ‘in-crowd’ knowledge to supplement textual gaps, or the appeal to reader response both as an audience (consumer) and as a potential contributor (producer).

To understand the wider significance of this collusive, collaborative vision of literary reception, I have examined the ways in which fin-de-siècle literature implicates readers through techniques and structures that encourage identification and solidarity with illicit ideas and behaviour. The legal definitions of complicity discussed in the introduction provide the theoretical springboard from which two key conceptual models emerge. The first, complicity-as-incitement or ‘illicit influence’, predominates when discussing texts that depict illicit behaviour such as adultery and murder (chapters 1 and 2). The second, complicity-as-collaboration or ‘illicit solidarity’, provides a valuable analytical framework when examining works that highlight their own reception by targeted readers (chapters 3 and 4). In addition to the thematic and meta-literary forms of complicity analysed through these models, another type of complicity develops at the level of cultural discourse. This phenomenon, which Ann-Louise Shapiro has referred to as a ‘literary and social contagion’,<sup>1</sup> consists of writers’ and thinkers’ complicity with discourses – that is, forms of collective meaning production – situated at lower levels of the cultural hierarchy. It includes, for example, writers’ complicity with denigrated literary genres and scientists’ or moralists’ complicity with the popular phenomena they condemn.

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<sup>1</sup> Ann-Louise Shapiro, *Breaking the Codes: Female Criminality in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 39.

By selecting a range of case studies from different types and different levels of cultural production, I suggest that complicity is a central notion across the fin-de-siècle literary field. I also nuance recent critical understandings of cultural ‘brows’, which – having been examined primarily in relation to prose fiction by scholars such as Diana Holmes – clearly benefit from the inclusion of periodical sources.<sup>2</sup> This addition broadens our appreciation of fin-de-siècle media culture and emphasises the important interrelation between both ‘high’ and ‘low’, book and periodical. By shedding light on a range of understudied genres – including the *roman psychologique*, the *roman à clef*, and the *revue légère* – I promote a more comprehensive vision of the fin-de-siècle literary field, according to which canonised literary production can be better understood through its embeddedness in wider textual and material networks. In particular, my work on little magazines and saucy magazines complements broader press histories with close analysis of exchanges within specific reviews, in a critical back-and-forth between the micro and macro levels. Furthermore, the archival research I completed on *Don Juan* reveals a network of titles sharing directors, contributors, and content – a topic I will pursue further in my next research project.

One of the major contributions this thesis makes to literary studies is to offer a new terminology and conceptual framework through which to analyse literary influence and reception, applicable to a wide range of different historical periods and national contexts. For although my analysis has emphasised the specificities of the late nineteenth-century French context – notably the role played by post-1880 legal definitions and restrictions – the types of question I ask of fin-de-siècle literary

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<sup>2</sup> Diana Holmes, *Middlebrow Matters: Women's Reading and the Literary Canon in France Since the Belle Époque* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018).

texts can also be applied to earlier and later periods. For example, we saw in the introduction how the cognate term ‘connivence’ has been used by French scholars to examine literary production of the early modern period. I suggest that the material analysed in *L’Âge de la connivence* – in particular those texts associated with *libertinage* – could be productively analysed with the more specific term ‘complicity’.<sup>3</sup> Such research would necessarily integrate relevant contextual information about the legal limitations faced by writers in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries (as well as the harsher – sometimes fatal – punishments they received).

We can also look forward, to the early twentieth century and beyond. For example, the collusive media relationships between Rachilde, Jean Lorrain, and Oscar Méténier discussed in chapter 3 foreshadow the use of *romans à clef* by Modernist writers in England during the early twentieth century – a phenomenon perceptively analysed by Sean Latham.<sup>4</sup> À-clef literary structures evolved throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and the capacity for (auto-)biographical genres to create collusion between writer and reader remains a fascinating subject of critical study. When broaching the twentieth-century French context, we might start by analysing André Gide’s *L’Immoraliste* (1902), which concludes with an uneasy acknowledgement of the complicity shared between Michel’s audience – the reader included – and the events he has recounted:

Il nous semblait, hélas! qu’à nous la raconter, Michel avait rendu son action plus légitime. De ne savoir où la désapprouver, dans la lente explication qu’il en donna, nous en faisait presque complices. Nous y étions comme engagés.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *L’Âge de la connivence: lire entre les mots à l’époque moderne*, ed. by Ariane Bayle and others (Geneva: Droz, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Sean Latham, *The Art of Scandal: Modernism, Libel law, and the Roman à Clef* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> André Gide, *L’Immoraliste. Roman* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1902), p. 178.



Gide's work, poised on the threshold of modernism, offers a similar combination of ambiguous moral content and confessional framing to that which we saw in Paul Bourget's *Le Disciple*, while rejecting the trappings of a *roman à thèse*. The novel formulates just as explicitly the notion of readerly complicity while refusing either to offer a moral imperative to guide this relationship or to celebrate its perversity. In this way, *L'Immoraliste* is situated somewhere outside the condemnation / celebration binary that we have seen in fin-de-siècle formulations of complicity, and would serve as an important textual foothold for considering later French contexts. Generally speaking, the term 'complicity' is most fruitful when it is used to analyse literature containing transgressive and notably erotic themes, although it is also applicable to any literary form that thematizes and dramatizes its own reception. We might therefore benefit from thinking critically about complicity in relation to other self-reflexive and playfully transgressive works, from La Fontaine's *Contes* to Barthesian fragments.

Returning to fin-de-siècle France, there are further areas for research that, although beyond the scope of the current study, would broaden and enhance its findings. As discussed in the introduction, this thesis concentrates primarily on prose fiction and periodical culture. In addition to poetry, there remains one major literary art form that this project does not address: theatre. To fill this gap, one fruitful area of research is undoubtedly the performances staged at the Théâtre du Grand Guignol. Located only a few streets away from the Moulin Rouge in the Pigalle district of Paris, the Grand Guignol theatre was founded in 1897 by Oscar Méténier, and subsequently directed by Max Maurey (1866–1947) from 1898–1914 (before the latter took over the direction of the Théâtre des Variétés). Initially staging Naturalist plays, the Grand Guignol moved towards melodramatic and

morbid spectacle that appealed to the widespread obsession with violent crime discussed in chapter 2. As a social and artistic milieu, the theatre blended the avant-garde's proclivity for subversion with themes and genres associated with popular aesthetic forms – much like the material discussed in chapters 3 and 4. By combining the illicit, eroticised appeal of violent spectacle with reports of visceral audience responses, the Grand Guignol forged for itself a legendary status in turn of the century Paris. An analysis of the plays staged there, the role of audience response, the threat of censorship, and the theatre's reception in a range of newspapers and reviews would enhance our critical appreciation of 'murderer literature', elaborate on the intersection of popular and avant-garde cultures, while expanding our understanding of complicity as a literary phenomenon.

The analysis of different genres, forms, and writers from any given period requires a degree of methodological flexibility in order to draw out the various types of complicity created against the backdrop of these limiting factors. A play, a novel, and a series of newspaper articles will often solicit different analytical approaches, which need to be synthesised when they are considered in conversation with one another. It is precisely the conceptual and methodological flexibility required throughout this project that demonstrates the strength of what we might call a 'patchwork' approach to literary study. When making a patchwork, a sewer makes choices about colour, pattern, and embellishment, while following a pre-chosen structure without which none of the pieces would fit together. Likewise, a critic makes choices regarding content, approach, and emphasis while following a particular methodological or thematic outline. To extend the analogy further: criticism, like a patchwork, can be made collaboratively, and if any gaps appear they can be filled by later contributions. In this project on complicity, each choice,

once made, necessarily creates gaps – including the treatment or exclusion of certain genres and forms (such as poetry and theatre), as well as the application of ‘complicity’ to other periods and national contexts – which are now left open for future research. The fabrics woven into this new patchwork are made of different hues, textures, and patterns. Some pieces include recognisable motifs, while others bring forgotten or unknown figures into the foreground. Some are bright and flashy, while others are less garish. In concluding, I invite my reader to consider the broader pattern, to appreciate the finer detail, and – in the future, if they find more fabric that fits the template – to contribute a patch or two of their own.

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