

Partners in Crime? Scandalous Complicity Between Rachilde and Jean Lorrain

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<ABSTRACT>

Rachilde (1860–1953) and Jean Lorrain (1855–1906) co-opted the titillating appeal of taboos surrounding gender and sexuality for the means of self-promotion. Their approach constitutes a particularly productive yet ambivalent form of fin-de-siècle literary complicity, integral to avant-garde sociability. This article analyzes their media-savvy contributions to a polemical debate surrounding the *bas bleu* figure, in a review called *Le Zig-Zag*. In these exchanges, their adoption of sexually ambiguous media personae was fundamentally ambivalent, acting simultaneously as collaborative performance and self-defense mechanism. By orchestrating the revelation of risqué biographical anecdotes, the pair wagered their reputations and friendships in exchange for infamy. They were enabled and abetted in their construction of subversive solidarity by structures and techniques specific to periodical culture. As exemplary “partners in crime,” Rachilde and Lorrain manipulated the appeal of the illicit alongside avant-garde forms of mediatized sociability, demonstrating the potential gain and risk involved in the process.

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At the fin de siècle—an era of highly mediatized political, sexual, and criminal *affaires*—writers cannily manipulated the appeal of the illicit, adopting self-promoting marketing strategies that played up to the frameworks of criminality and immorality used, by friends and critics alike, to condone and condemn them.¹ In this article, I consider Rachilde (1860–1953) and Jean Lorrain (1855–1906) as key players in a wider group of media-savvy writers who collaboratively traded on infamy.² Critics have discussed each writer separately, noting their proclivity towards self-promotion.³ Their friendships also feature predominantly

in biographical accounts of their literary careers.⁴ However, these accounts do not always provide close textual and intertextual analysis of the specific forms employed in mutually productive self-promotion strategies. This article extends and reframes existing criticism by offering detailed analysis of a series of media exchanges, suggesting how this is representative of wider avant-garde tendencies, and highlighting the importance of periodical culture to critical discussions surrounding fin-de-siècle literary figures and their production. I suggest that the pair's mediatized friendship, which blossomed from the mid-1880s onwards, represents and reveals a particularly productive—if often ambivalent—form of fin-de-siècle literary complicity, integral to avant-garde sociability. I use the term “complicity” here to refer primarily to a relationship of implication in actions considered criminal, guilty, or immoral. Its scope of meaning ranges from specific legal definitions, to wider connotations evoking potentially illicit forms of sociability, cooperation, and *connivence*. The analysis below represents an early step towards a wider understanding of the ways in which fin-de-siècle French literary culture can be fruitfully examined according to structures of implication, involvement, and communal activity—particularly when this activity is framed as somehow criminal or immoral. By analyzing exchanges in four consecutive issues of a review called *Le Zig-Zag*, I show how fin-de-siècle writers could become “partners in crime,” mutually constructing literary infamy through a combination of polemical posturing and autobiographical unveiling—a process enabled and abetted by textual structures and visual cues specific to periodical culture.

Le Zig-Zag was a weekly illustrated review originally published in Lyon. Its first series ran from 24 Dec. 1882 to 25 Oct. 1885, and its second series from 16 May 1886 to 26 Dec. 1886. During the hiatus between the two, the review briefly changed its name to *Gil Blague*, for a single specimen issue dated Dec. 1885. The editor-in-chief, Aymé Delyon, worked alongside an administrator, Erüal, and later a series of *directeurs*.⁵ *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* (1882–86)—that valorized 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.⁶ The writer-journalist Léo d’Orfer contributed a regular column, “La Chronique parisienne,” from March to Oct. 1885, and became the review’s *directeur* in May 1885.⁷ Despite being infamous for setting up a series of short-lived reviews throughout the early 1880s, d’Orfer had enough influence in Parisian avant-garde circles to encourage the collaboration of up-and-coming writers: Rachilde, Jean Lorrain, and Jules Renard.⁸ Whilst 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.⁹ These elements of the review offered the conditions of possibility for the mutual self-promotion employed by Rachilde and Jean Lorrain in the October 1885 issues.

On 4 Oct. 1885, *Le Zig-Zag* published a special issue on the *bas bleu* (no. 146), which provided Rachilde and Lorrain a springboard to promote their controversial public personae.¹⁰ Léo d’Orfer frames the debate in his opening article, “Chronique raisonnable.” Rachilde, in “Une fois pour toutes,” depicts bluestockings as hypocritical man-haters, and Lorrain, under the pseudonym Jack Stick, offers a vituperative attack on his female counterparts, citing Rachilde as one of the only praiseworthy exceptions. In the subsequent issue (no. 147), d’Orfer publishes responses to the debate in “Guichet de réclamations,” including those penned by Camille Delaville and Rachilde.¹¹ It is likely 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 Oct. 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 Oct. 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. In the following analysis, I will highlight how these articles from *Le Zig-Zag* set the stage for the representation and creation of literary complicity between its star contributors, inciting their readers and critics to become, in turn, accomplices in the process.

Collaborative Staging

In the mid-1880s, Rachilde and Jean Lorrain were at the start of their literary careers. They both 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” authorial persona,¹² parallel the homo-eroticism and Decadent themes found in Lorrain’s early poetry, his interest in criminal and lower class social *milieux*, alongside 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, such as the Café de l’Avenir and the Soleil d’Or (D’Anthonay 171–77),

and contributed to reviews such as *Le Zig-Zag* (1882–86) and *Le Décadent littéraire* (1886–89). Through these media, Rachilde and Lorrain supported and promoted one another, enacting forms of avant-garde sociability based on polemical “réclame.”¹³

In the October 1885 issues of *Le Zig-Zag*, Rachilde and Lorrain manipulate and appropriate controversial elements from the *bas bleu* debate in order to maintain one another’s scandalous personae. They do so with a certain level of ambivalence and self-aware hypocrisy.¹⁴ For example, Rachilde, in “Une fois pour toutes,” mocks bluestockings for hypocritically moralizing about virtue whilst titillating their readers with illicit autobiographical material:

les femmes de lettres ont l’absurdité, faisant sexe à part malgré leurs désirs
immodérés, de dire tout ce qu’elles font entre leur repas du soir et celui du matin... de
la perturbation dans nos mœurs. Elles assaisonnent, ensuite, leurs récits, de phrases
sur la vertu qui font d’elles les plus lâches hypocrites que la terre ait jamais produit
[sic]. (no. 146)

Rachilde’s position on her own gender status was ambivalent throughout her career.

Identifying with avant-garde and Decadent individualism, she denigrated most of her female peers, only readily praising those who fit into her own model of exceptionalism.¹⁵ By mocking *bas bleus*, Rachilde appropriates the controversial status of the figure, whilst distancing herself from perceived sources of criticism.¹⁶ She acknowledges her ambivalence in the article’s closing line: “Après cela, Monsieur, je suis femme de lettres, vous savez!...”

In a similar gesture, Jean Lorrain, in “Le troisième sexe,” mocks female writers, referred to as “le clan des Tétonnières hors d’âge.” He calls for a return to clear gender roles (“Classons les sexes, bon Dieu!”), whilst glorifying figures such as Heliogabalus and Sappho, whose sexual ambiguity earns them the appreciative title “jolis monstres.” On the one hand, Lorrain appears to reproach *bas bleus* for their failure to adhere to sexual norms. The irony of this

reproach would have been plain to readers “in the know” regarding Lorrain’s sexual preferences. On the other hand, Lorrain simultaneously bemoans the bluestockings’ inability to subvert these norms with sufficient panache. In a gesture of collusive—if somewhat ambivalent—friendship, he goes on to make Rachilde the exception to this general rule: “Mademoiselle Rachilde est, paraît-il jeune, vierge et jolie personne. Cela fait d’autant plus son éloge que *Monsieur Vénus* [...] est d’une corticante dépravation. Tous mes compliments à la stupéfiante précocité de son cerveau.” Lorrain’s presentation of Rachilde is a tongue-in-cheek celebration of her supposed status as a perverse virgin. His mock-appraisal ironically counterbalances d’Orfer’s mock-condemnation in “Chronique raisonnable.” D’Orfer writes: “Et vous, Rachilde, jeune Éphèbe mal sexué, dit-on, [...] selon la grammaire, pourquoi bouderiez-vous vos compagnes au sujet de leurs passions? C’est bien plutôt contre des jolis monstres de votre espèce que je voudrais m’élever.” The term “joli monstre,” which d’Orfer lifts pre-emptively from Lorrain’s article, combines moralizing reproach with playful appreciation. Both men contribute to a collaborative staging of Rachilde’s illicit literary persona, which they mitigate 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 implicitly questioned whilst being ironically promulgated.

This double movement—where writers simultaneously distance themselves from, and yet perpetuate, the sexually ambiguous personae they adopt (or have had attributed to them)—is part of a wider phenomenon of provocative banter between literary *camarades* in *Le Zig-Zag*. Rachilde does not leave her colleagues’ comments unanswered—she responds to them in the “Guichet de réclamations” of the subsequent issue (no. 147). Although the “Guichet” responses seem largely fabricated for comic effect, I treat Rachilde’s contribution *as if* she wrote it. Her position as a minor celebrity and friend to Léo d’Orfer makes it unlikely that prose with her signature would have been printed without her knowledge or

permission.¹⁷ In the “Guichet,” Rachilde addresses d’Orfer with 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 playfully implicates her “critic” in the sexual perversity he mock-condemned, according to the logic that it takes one to know one.¹⁸ She then contradicts Jack Stick, initially mis-identified as the Naturalist writer Paul Bonnetain, by distancing herself from his perpetuation of her perverse virgin persona (“le brevet de virginité qu’il me délivre me paraît inutile”).¹⁹ Finally, she advises her female peers: “Je vous conjure, mes chers amies [sic], ne posons pas trop pour les vierges, tout le monde se moquerait de nous.” There is irony here, since Rachilde repeatedly encouraged the dissemination of her virginal persona at the beginning of her career.

However, this “advice” to female colleagues highlights the potential risks of constructing scandalous media personae, which can lead to critical mockery and reductiveness. Even the most collusive collaboration can potentially backfire on its participants. The provocative banter between Rachilde, Lorrain, and d’Orfer reveals how writers could promote their friends’ controversial personae alongside their own, whilst remaining aware of the potential limitations of their mediatized performances.

Collaborative *réclame* works as much in self-defense as it does in self-promotion. This can be seen in the writers’ playful self-presentations in number 148, which respond not only to the *bas bleu* debate, but also to an attack written by Félicien Champsaur against Decadent literary personae.²⁰ In “Poètes décadenticulets,” published in the literary supplement of *Le Figaro* on 3 Oct. 1885 (the day preceding the *bas bleu* special issue), Champsaur criticizes Decadent writers such as Lorrain for playing up to sexual ambiguity.²¹ He suggests that their homoeroticism is nothing but attention-seeking farce: “c’est un simple genre, une attitude de décadenticulets. [...] Le vice? Ils n’en sont pas capables.”²² Champsaur’s condemnation can be read ironically, since he seems to criticize writers less for

experiencing homoerotic desire than for *playing up to* homoeroticism for the ends of self-promotion. Proclaiming their inability to live up to the vice they pretend to incarnate (“Le vice? Ils n’en sont pas capables”), Champsaur could therefore be interpreted as encouraging more “authentic” homoeroticism. I suggest that Lorrain deliberately adopts this ironic reading of Champsaur’s logic in “Le troisième sexe,” by criticizing *bas bleus* for not being sufficiently monstrous and thereby further undermining his critic through an intertextual *clin d’œil*. He then directly addresses Champsaur in “Encore les réclamations,” when Jack Stick refers back to Lorrain as a “poète décadent, sacré décadenticulet par Félicien Champsaur.” Furthermore, Lorrain’s article is full of implicitly autobiographical 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 “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. Lorrain further plays up to this shared ambiguity by referring to the four *bas bleus* dedicatees as “quatre jolis hommes,” and by citing Shakespeare as a justificatory precedent for homoerotic verse. By signing two letters under different pseudonyms Lorrain deploys precisely the kind of personality-splitting posturing for which he was criticized. Similarly, his “apology” to the *bas bleus* simply further enacts the mocking behavior for which he is supposedly apologizing.

This playful response works alongside Rachilde’s mise-en-scène of the review, its collaborators, and its critics, in “Zig-Zag Parade.” In this article, Rachilde reciprocates Lorrain’s playful celebration of her own perverse authorial persona by depicting him as a polemical gender-bending transvestite. She overtly frames their relationship as one of collaborative showmanship and *réclame*, against the backdrop of a circus or theatre setting. The chaos that greets Rachilde’s “performance” culminates in Stick revealing his identity whilst exchanging blows with his critics: “À 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." Rachilde here aligns Lorrain's use of a pseudonym with gender-bending disguise and its subsequent unveiling.²³ Her vision of Lorrain as a provocative transvestite settling scores with his enemies intersects with Lorrain's own combative mise-en-scène responding to Champsaur. Through their articles, they collaborate in a complex exchange of intertextual *clins d'œil*, implicating one another in mutual self-promotion, whilst re-appropriating and subverting the discourses used by their detractors.

Compromising Revelations

Rachilde and Lorrain's mutual *réclame* is bound up in a process of staged autobiographical unveiling. They simultaneously denigrate and re-appropriate biographical *déshabillage*: the indirect—but deliberate—revelation of personal anecdotes and secrets, to arouse readerly curiosity. As Champsaur's article demonstrates, critics attributed this approach not only to *bas bleus*, but also to Decadent writers. In the *Zig-Zag* exchanges, readers are posited as desiring to uncover the scandalous secrets of the periodical's contributors, who in turn manipulate this desire by playing up to sexual ambiguity. Biographical revelation is a productive source for collaborative *réclame*, and yet—as I suggest below—it demonstrates the difficulties and vulnerabilities involved in publicly revealing “compromising” material.

Throughout the *Zig-Zag* special issue, the *bas bleu* is repeatedly criticized for using scandalous anecdotal references to pique her readers' interest in the illicit. While Rachilde criticizes female writers for hypocritically combining moralizing with titillating self-revelation, Jack Stick lampoons the forms of self-display at *bas bleu* social gatherings, which are dubbed “dîner[s]-réclame”: “toutes ces horreurs, toutes ces chairs [...] exhibées,

débordantes, étalées avec une complaisance, [...] et un tel désir de plaire qu'ils en devenaient touchantes d'inconscience" (no. 146). Lorrain depicts female literary production as a public striptease, aligns them with prostitution, and thereby implicitly devalues their work. Yet as we have already seen, both Lorrain and Rachilde were equally guilty of manipulating the appeal of illicit autobiographical references in order to gain readerly interest. They co-opt techniques they supposedly criticize, whilst overtly rendering their readers complicit in the process. In "Zig-Zag Parade," Rachilde shifts the blame for biographical unveiling onto the reader, suggesting that writers are burdened with the voyeuristic desires that readers project onto them. She does so 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 "Att-on du vice, derrière le Rideau? Se vend t'on bien? Il est entendu que je ne parle pas de la feuille... mais des rédac!... [sic]" (no. 148). 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. Whilst implicitly criticizing this tendency, Rachilde also plays up to it. She publicly reveals Lorrain's authorship of "Le troisième sexe" by *undressing* his drag persona, thereby enabling precisely the kind of theatrical self-display criticized in the *bas bleu* special issue. Lorrain continues and expands on this not only by filling his bipartite mock-apology with the homoeroticism analyzed above, but also by describing Jack Stick as "nu comme un ver," when offering his mock-apology to the *bas bleu*. These references to nudity are titillating because of their compromising nature. Lorrain hints at this ambiguity in the closing lines of the first section: "J'ai dit. / Suis-je assez compromis! Que l'homme qui n'a jamais péché me jette la dernière pierre." Through an ironic reformulation of Scripture, he acknowledges the

compromising nature of his own writing, whilst implicating the reader in the homoerotic desire it depicts. Much like Rachilde's mise-en-scène of the audience's curiosity in "Zig-Zag Parade," Lorrain's playful homoeroticism encourages his reader to unravel suggestive *clins d'œil* in a way that depends upon the desire it simultaneously creates and reveals.

In these exchanges, the implicating power of compromising *déshabillage* intertwines with the intertextual evocation of a scandalous anecdote circulating at the time, surrounding Lorrain's sexual proclivities. The story goes that Lorrain's liaison with a circus strong man ends 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* (79–92), appears in a short story, "L'Aventure de Marius Dauriat," published earlier in 1885 by one of Lorrain's friends, Oscar Méténier, in a collection entitled *La Chair*.²⁴ The link between the *Zig-Zag* exchanges and this anecdote would be tentative at best, were it not for the fact that Léo d'Orfer writes a review of *La Chair* in number 147 of *Le Zig-Zag*, appearing in-between the original *bas bleu* special issue and the issue containing Rachilde and Lorrain's mises-en-scène. In his review, d'Orfer cites "L'Aventure de Marius Dauriat" as "[son] morceau de prédilection," and hints at its *à clefs* status: "Un poète, dont le nom est à peine voilé, s'est épris d'un hercule de la baraque de Marseille [...]." Méténier's depiction of the central character as a world-weary Decadent poet, and his overt dedication of the story to Lorrain, provide the biographical "key." By highlighting this story in his review of the collection, d'Orfer further spreads the rumors surrounding Lorrain's sexual activities, encouraging readers in the know to unravel Méténier's poorly veiled references.

Rather than bemoaning the anecdote's revelation, Lorrain actively orchestrated it with Méténier, showing a clear appreciation of the promotional potential of its scandalous content. In many ways, Lorrain's relationship to Méténier mirrors the forms of literary complicity found in his mediatized friendship with Rachilde. In a letter sent on 16 Jan. 1885, 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 “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*. (Lorrain, *Correspondance* 69)

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 clearly sought approval for its content. By praising the piece and suggesting changes, Lorrain collaborates in the text’s construction and becomes complicit in the revelation of a *louche* anecdote.²⁵ The passage they discuss is the most revealing moment in the story, which enables Lorrain’s identification (Méténier *La Chair* 205–7). Lorrain thanks Méténier for his “flatteur” and “amiable” depiction. Considering the story’s *dénouement*—in which Dauriat/Lorrain is left naked in a bedroom, forced to flee the scene in mismatching clothing, and unable to report the incident for fear of the negative impact a public trial would have on his reputation (218–19)—Lorrain’s positive reception could be considered surprising. It is not certain, however, that Lorrain had access to a completed manuscript, and therefore to the *dénouement*. This might help explain his enthusiasm leading up to the story’s publication—an enthusiasm that wanes slightly once the anecdote becomes public.

In a letter dated 28 Sept. 1885—after the publication of *La Chair* and just before the *Zig-Zag* exchanges—Lorrain reveals a shifting and complex 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" (*Correspondance* 84). He also offers to provide "réclame" for *La Chair* in a review called *La Suisse romande* (84). However, in a postscript, he writes: "M'as-tu assez compromis avec ton Marius Dauriat?" (86). This addition seems incongruous—indicating irony, a change of heart, or a combination of the two. By 6 Jan. 1886, Lorrain is eager to tone down the scandalous element of their mutually-productive *réclame*, when he asks Méténier not to emphasize his 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... (90–91)

The co-existence of reproach and gratitude in Lorrain's letter shows the precarious balance involved in relationships of literary complicity: if one partner fails to uphold their "échange de bons procédés" (D'Anthonay 313), it can swiftly deteriorate. Indeed, Lorrain repeatedly reproaches Méténier for his lax attitude to their friendship, whilst insisting on his own continued devotion.²⁶ Lorrain's desire to avoid the topic of sexuality marks a shift in tone from the outwardly playful and celebratory *Zig-Zag* articles. As Rachilde's "Guichet" response suggested, writers who engage in self-promotion via autobiographical unveiling risk being reduced to biographical quirks, rather than being appreciated for their literary production. Lorrain airs this fear when he writes: "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 physically imprisoning him ("boulet"), and holding him back from being appreciated fully as a writer. The publication of *La Chair*

becomes 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 earlier laudatory article "Mlle Salamandre" in *Dans l'oratoire*. He adds a postscript condemning the autobiographical preface to *À mort* (1886) and the episode where Rachilde slaps Paul Devaux at a public lecture, for criticizing her friend Léonide Leblanc. He also refers to rumors that Maurice Barrès, the dedicatee of *À mort*, had been Rachilde's lover (*Dans l'oratoire* 215). In a subsequent letter to Barrès, 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. (Rachilde and Barrès 121)

Rachilde perceives her relationship with Lorrain to be fundamentally ambivalent: outwardly complicit ("nous avons l'air de nous entendre") but problematically compromising. Much like the brief dispute between Lorrain and Méténier—which was only temporarily alleviated by the publication of Méténier's long-awaited article²⁷—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 correspondance 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, but is at the strategies' origin. Complicity and "réclame" can in these instances even be understood as coping strategies or defense mechanisms that are playfully, and somewhat perversely, channelled into the creation of irreverent public personae.

Complicit Structures

The fundamentally ambivalent and potentially compromising impact of complicit literary relationships, seen in the *Zig-Zag* exchanges, is perpetuated and complicated by techniques specific to periodical culture. Polemical structures create an atmosphere of controversy, where opposition and antipathy act in parallel to the collusion found in mutually productive *réclame*. The *direction* frame responds to increase their impact and implicate contributors in one another's writing through the manipulation of *mise en page*. By addressing questions of form, we can better appreciate the role played by periodical culture in the construction of avant-garde solidarity.

Throughout the October issues of *Le Zig-Zag*, a structure of collaborative reader-response is built into the review's format. The *bas bleu* debate is framed as a polemic, with a series of responses that continue beyond the initial special issue. This creates an atmosphere of controversy, whilst enabling a combative form of social identification. D'Orfer highlights the power of polemic to divide and to unite in "Chronique raisonnable" (no. 146): "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 aucunement de leur avis." These opening comments set the tone for polemical diversity and present *Le Zig-Zag* as a forum for debate. By taking

responsibility for the *bas bleu* issue, d'Orfer playfully implicates himself and his colleagues in its deliberately titillating contents and spirit of controversy. He also hints at the legal responsibility held by editors, directors, and publishers, where the act of publishing—and not simply writing—illicit or provocative material was punishable by law.²⁸ The paradoxical force of polemic, which unites conflicting individuals through a form of combative sociability, can particularly be seen in the subsequent issue, where d'Orfer gleefully presents writers' responses to the *bas bleu* debate, in “Guichet des réclamations”:

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.... (no. 147)

D'Orfer's framing comments emphasize the quantity (“pluie”) and vehemence (“fureur”) of responses to the previous issue, in order to promote the polemical force of *Le Zig-Zag* within avant-garde circles. The polemical tone of the article 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 verb “réclamer” is significant here, since the derived noun “réclamation” features not only in the collective “Guichet de réclamations”, but also in Lorrain's “Encore les réclamations” (no. 148). According to the seventh edition of the *Dictionnaire de 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 (585). In the context of the *Zig-Zag* exchanges, the word suggests a reaction involving emphatic disagreement with, and defensiveness against, the object of complaint. Etymologically, “réclamation” is related to “réclame”—a term originally used to refer to forms of advertising,

and then more generally to publicity strategies.²⁹ Whilst “réclame” implies promotion, support, and sympathy, “réclamation” evokes rejection, denial, and antipathy. However, the two are closely intertwined, as d’Orfer’s opening to “Guichet de réclamations” suggests. Polemical debate, involving an exchange of “réclamations,” offers a form of unity in difference—an alternative and parallel form of solidarity to the collusive “réclame” explored in the first half of this article. Indeed, even relationships of mutual self-promotion, such as that between Rachilde and Lorrain, work against the backdrop to, and alongside, the antipathies of a staged polemic. The collaborative textual performances analyzed above combine mutual *réclame* with combative provocation or retaliation against perceived criticism, whether that be in Rachilde’s staged brawl in “Zig-Zag Parade,” or in the exaggerated homoeroticism and posturing of Lorrain’s “Encore les réclamations.” The polemical structures of the review offer an arena for promotion and opposition, contributing to the creation of ambivalent implication between its writers, readers, and critics.

The fact that writers felt the need to publish responses in *Le Zig-Zag* demonstrates their awareness of the implicating structures of periodical culture, and in particular of *mise en page*. The responses attributed to Rachilde and Camille Delaville in “Guichet de réclamations” are indicative in this regard. They complain about being placed alongside the most provocative article in the *bas bleu* special issue: Jack Stick’s “Le troisième sexe.”

Delaville writes:

Il m’a été fort désagréable de trouver une lettre de moi absolument intime, installée dans le *Zig-Zag*, [...] parce que j’ai horreur de me trouver avec des gens mal élevés, je m’en éloigne avec soin partout où je les rencontre; or, le personnage qui signe Stick est plus que mal élevé, il est *grossier à froid*, et il m’a été odieux de voir mon nom à côté de cet article ordurier. (no. 147)

Delaville employs a vocabulary of moral outrage and disdain to distance herself from Stick's vulgarity, with which she is implicated by association. The physical proximity of their respective texts is seen as enabling 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." 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 the content of their articles differs 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. After all, Rachilde, in her second "Zig-Zag Parade" article, calls Lorrain a "bon Zig," cites the *bas bleu* special issue as proof of his strength as a journalist, and offers *réclame* by referring to his recent publications as "étonnantes saturnales littéraires" (no. 149). Perhaps once Rachilde discovered the true identity behind the pseudonym, Jack Stick's comments took on a different meaning.³⁰ Or perhaps her complaint was always meant to be taken with a pinch of salt. The scandalous atmosphere of the October *Zig-Zag* issues is largely created by the perceived danger not only of being targeted by other writers' criticisms, but also of being associated with their opinions. The structures of polemic, response, and *mise en page* used in *Le Zig-Zag* incite metaliterary awareness of writers' shared responsibility for the scandalous content of the periodical, enabling forms of textual

complicity whose appeal is counterbalanced, and yet also made more tempting, by their potentially compromising effects.

Partners in Crime?

The polemical exchanges staged in the October 1885 issues of *Le Zig-Zag* show how avant-garde writers traded on infamy, collaborating with one another in the perpetuation of their scandalous media personae. They also point to more widespread phenomena: the appeal of the illicit as a driving force to avant-garde and Decadent literary production, the forms of sociability available to writers at the fin de siècle, and the contribution of periodical culture to contemporary and contemporaneous understandings of the era. Rachilde and Lorrain cannily manipulated these phenomena, demonstrating both the strength and risks involved in becoming exemplary “partners in crime.”

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² Other notable pairings include: both Lorrain and Rachilde's respective friendships with Oscar Méténier, and Rachilde's relationship with Maurice Barrès. Although extensive analysis of these interconnections is beyond the scope of this article, I highlight revealing points of comparison.

³ Jennifer Birkett, Melanie Hawthorne, and Diana Holmes (*Rachilde*) all note Rachilde's self-promotional tendencies. For Lorrain, see Thibault d'Anthonay, Philippe Jullian, and Robert Ziegler.

⁴ See Hawthorne, Finn, and D'Anthonay.

⁵ Little is known about Aymé Delyon beyond brief descriptions found in the review itself. In 1884, she published a novel, *Mademoiselle Éliane*, first serialized in *Le Zig-Zag* (23 March 1884 to 4 May 1884).

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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 likely lovers for a period during the 1880s. See Hawthorne 120–21 and Finn 51–64.

⁸ Responding to his appointment as *directeur*, d'Orfer writes: "Jadis,—il y a quelques années —je tins aussi la tête de plusieurs revues, et je n'ai pas trop désappris, je crois le *garde à vous* littéraire. / [...] *Le Zig-Zag* n'a pas à craindre, lui, le sort des feuilles où nous nous sommes connus. / Il a passé depuis longtemps le cap des tempêtes des publications similaires." ("Chronique Parisienne. Ordre du jour," No. 127, 24 May 1885.)

⁹ “[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,” no. 131, 21 June 1885.)

¹⁰ For a summary of the historical and literary evolution of the *bas bleu* figure, see Larson 21–22.

¹¹ Françoise Couteau (née Chartier), writing under the pseudonym Camille Delaville (1838–88), 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-bleus,” which Lorrain evokes in “Le troisième sexe.” Despite their divergent views on female emancipation, Delaville and Rachilde were good friends. See Sanchez 24–74 and Finn 41–43.

¹² Rachilde’s reputation as a “perverse virgin” stems from biographical readings of her early works, encouraged by the autobiographical preface to *À mort* (1886), and Maurice Barrès’s preface to the 1889 re-edition of *Monsieur Vénus*. The former caused controversy on its publication, leading to a series of vituperative responses, most notably Gisèle d’Estoc’s *La Vierge réclame* (1887). (See Hawthorne 121–25 and Finn 64–66.) Rachilde collaborated with Barrès on his psychologising preface, “Complications d’amour.” Upon receiving a draft from Barrès, Rachilde suggested and enforced significant edits. (See Rachilde and Barrès 122–24.)

¹³ Réclame: “[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. [...] Fig. et fam., *Faire de la réclame*, Faire des appels bruyants à la publicité, chercher par tous les moyens à attirer

l'attention du public" (*Dictionnaire* 585). For an analysis of the wider cultural phenomenon of "réclame" in nineteenth-century France, see Thérénty.

¹⁴ Rachel Mesch analyzes a similar phenomenon of ambivalent appropriation in relation to Marcelle Tinayre's implicit—if somewhat tongue-in-cheek—critique of women's magazines in *La Rebelle* (*Having It All* 112).

¹⁵ Rachilde's ambivalent position as a female Decadent writer has been discussed by several critics, including Diana Holmes (*French Women's Writing* 63–82, *Rachilde* 69–87) and Rachel Mesch (*The Hysteric's Revenge* 119–53).

¹⁶ Michael Finn analyzes Rachilde's ambiguous relationship with her *bas bleu* contemporaries (35–47).

¹⁷ Rachilde refers back to her "Guichet" response in "Zig-Zag Parade," thereby acknowledging its content.

¹⁸ This comment can also be interpreted as a *clin d'œil* to their rumoured relationship.

¹⁹ Paul Bonnetain (1858–99) was also adept at appropriating moralizing discourses and manipulating scandal for self-promotion. On the *Charlot s'amuse* obscenity trial and subsequent acquittal, in late December 1884, see Leclerc 395–401.

²⁰ Félicien Champsaur (1858–1934) was a writer and journalist who, at the start of his career, took part in the avant-garde social and literary scene based in Montmartre. He contributed to reviews such as *L'Hydropathe* (1879–80) and *Panurge* (1882–3). Upon gaining a position at *Le Figaro*, he broke away from his former *camarades*.

²¹ D'Anthonay presents this exchange in his biography of Lorrain, 237–49. The articles analyzed here have been partially republished in edited volumes of Lorrain's correspondence (*Correspondances* 47–51 and *Lettres* 59–70.)

²² Andrew Counter has shown that, at the fin de siècle, homosexuality *per se* was denounced as perversion, while the homosexual proclivities of specific individuals were dismissed as mere posturing.

²³ On the mutually implicating relationship between pseudonyms and transvestism in Decadent literature, see Leonard Koos, who cites works by Rachilde and Lorrain as primary examples.

²⁴ Oscar Méténier (1859–1913) worked for the police before entering the avant-garde literary scene in the 1880s, befriending Lorrain in 1883 (D’Anthonay 165). He published articles, novels, and plays, and founded the Grand Guignol theatre in 1897.

²⁵ This reflects Rachilde’s collaborative editing of Barrès’s preface to the 1889 re-edition of *Monsieur Vénus*. In a further parallel, Méténier published another trilogy of novellas, *La Grâce* (1886), featuring a story dedicated to Rachilde. “Décadence” indirectly evokes her ambiguous relationship with Catulle Mendès. Rachilde gives the collection a positive and tongue-in-cheek review in *Le Décadent*, revealing that Méténier had sent her a draft version before its publication (“L’auteur”). See Finn 48–49.

²⁶ On 20 Sept. 1887, Lorrain writes: “Un peu lâcheur, l’ami Méténier!” (*Correspondance* 105), and on 13 Dec. 1890, he refers to Méténier as “l’infidèle, et l’oublieux, et le volage Oscar” (127).

²⁷ Méténier’s article, “Ceux de demain. Jean Lorrain”, was published in *La Revue moderne*, 20 Sept. 1886. 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” (*Correspondance* 103).

²⁸ See Yvan Leclerc 13–128 and Gisèle Sapiro 323–518 on the historical background to, and cultural discourses surrounding, the legal responsibility of fin-de-siècle authors and publishers.

²⁹ See note 13 above.

³⁰ It is difficult to discern whether Rachilde knew the identity behind Jack Stick's pseudonym all along, or whether her initial mistaken attribution to Bonnetain was genuine. Published letters from those involved, although approximately dated by modern editors, lack the specific temporal references to resolve this question. See Lorrain, *Lettres* 54–55 and Sanchez 115.

