

## **Cinderella of the Breton Polders: Suffering and Escape in the Notebooks of a Young, Female Farm-Servant in the 1880s**

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According to a persistent cultural frame, the modern history of rural France, or rural anywhere, can be viewed as a ‘clash of cultures’ arranged around a series of polarities: tradition and modernity; continuity and change; periphery and centre; region and nation . . . with outcomes ranging from acculturation to resistance. The most famous exposition of this paradigm remains Eugen Weber’s *Peasants into Frenchmen*.<sup>1</sup> It continues to influence the field despite forty years of challenges and revisions.<sup>2</sup> Weber’s argument was that rural France experienced a radical transformation in the decades before the First World War, brought about by modernizing forces including railways, conscription, market integration, compulsory schooling, political campaigning, uniform legal codes, fertilizers . . . Linguistic and cultural diversity was replaced by homogeneity as country-dwellers learnt to discuss the same issues in the same language, consumed the same diet and participated in the same experience of citizenship, including those — such as women and children — who had few political rights.

This article concerns the imagined world of just one ‘peasant’ who lived through part of this transformatory period. Her name was Virginie Desgranges (1868-1887); she spent the whole of her short life in the north-east corner of Brittany. The entries for her birth and death in the *État Civil* are almost the only occasions on which her existence was officially acknowledged, though from other documents we can deduce that her family was poor, that she worked as a farm servant from about the age of ten, and that she died of consumption.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> James R. Lehning, *Peasant and French: Cultural Contact in Rural France during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1995); Miguel Cabo and Fernando Molina, ‘The Long and Winding Road of Nationalization: Eugen Weber’s *Peasants into Frenchmen* in Modern European History (1976–2006)’, *European History Quarterly* xxxix (2009); and the dossier of articles ‘Revisiting Eugen Weber’s *Peasants into Frenchmen*’, in *French Politics, Culture and Society* xxvii (2009).

Young, female, rural and impoverished, she fell into all those social classifications whose members had the least opportunity to determine their own presentation in the archive, either because they were illiterate or because the testimony of the powerless was seldom sought. In historical writing such a person can usually only be located in categories whose parameters were determined by outsiders: justices of the peace, sub-prefects, educationalists, travel writers and all the other non-peasants on whose observations Weber relied. That such outsiders recorded elements of rural popular culture, elements from ‘a world of their own, with its own uses and traditions’,<sup>3</sup> does not necessarily help because that very exercise can be viewed as ‘essentializing’, making the peasant into an ‘other’. Such a person cannot represent herself, to paraphrase Marx, she must be represented, but not because of her inability to form social bonds but because she could not make her individuality visible to historians. Her personal choices were never registered, so no assessment of her own contribution to the ‘modernization of rural France’ can be made.

That would be Virginie’s fate too if one relied on the administrative archives of the state. But she also left behind eleven exercise books, written in her early teens and filled with ninety-four songs, thirty-five short prose texts that that might be described as ‘folktales’, and three short stories which drew on aspects of her own experiences and those of her family. These texts are my main sources.<sup>4</sup>

Using them one could locate Virginie Desgranges between the poles described above. Although she worked as an animal herder – an antique occupation – the farms on which she was employed had only recently been reclaimed from the sea by Dutch engineers. While she wrote in, and presumably spoke, Gallo, the langue-d’oïl dialect of eastern Brittany, she could use literary French when she wanted (unlike her parents who could not write at all). Many of her songs were traditional, having circulated through oral performance for centuries, but others were newly composed for the Parisian stage. When she was ten-years-old the railway

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<sup>3</sup> The quote, by Philip Hamerton, a British painter living in France in the 1860s and 70s, was used as an epigram by Weber: *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 232. It also provides the title for Stéphane Gerson’s admiring critique of Weber: “‘A World of their Own’: Searching for Popular Culture in the French Countryside”, *French Politics, Culture and Society* xxvii (2009).

<sup>4</sup> Bibliothèque nationale de France (hereafter BNF), Département de la musique, Res. VM. Coirault 54, Manuscrit Oscar Havard (hereafter Havard Ms).

arrived in the nearest town, Pontorson, and while she probably never travelled by train she used it to send letters to Paris. She was definite about her Catholic identity, and had some sense of herself as a Breton, but neither regional nor national history nor politics held much interest for her. Her stories contain witches, devils and ghosts but also more novel characters such as insurance salesmen. She appears as a peasant in mid-transformation, but that is to trap her in the categories that historians want to use: Virginie herself had other priorities. She did not see herself as traditional or modern, Breton or French (terms that she almost never used in her texts), but hungry, maltreated and abused.

Virginie lived in changing times, but she showed little interest in them. The themes that engrossed her imagination were poverty, physical labour, sickness, parental despotism, domestic violence, and sexual predation. Obviously such topics, grounded in the unequal distribution of power and resources between classes, sexes and age groups, were also subject to historical change. While Virginie did not use these terms either, she experienced inequalities bodily and expressed them in heartfelt complaint. But it is harder to fit such themes into a chronological trajectory than, say, the mutation of Breton(ne)s into French(wo)men, measured by the decline of dialects, religious fervour and Royalist politics. Even if Virginie had the language to assess her condition historically, developments such as railways, workers' protection and public health care are only indirect answers to the questions that absorbed her: 'will I get well?', 'will I get enough to eat today?', 'will I escape this life?' Virginie had to make sense of her situation, and her desires, using the cultural frames available to her. Some of these she acquired in school, or in church, but more important was what she heard from her neighbours, the songs sung by girls as they danced together, the stories told by sailors in the bar her parents ran.

This oral culture — some elements of which were purely local while others circulated at a supra-national level — we call folklore. Historians tend to be wary of folkloric sources, partly no doubt because published collections of folksongs and tales are mediated, the cultural products of literate folklorists who had their own axes to grind (as boosters of tourism, for example).<sup>5</sup> Turning to their fieldnotes might partially overcome such packaging, but still folklore appears too heavily weighted to the tradition/continuity/region pole; taking it seriously seems almost, in Michelle Perrot's words, a 'negation of history', that is the study

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<sup>5</sup> Patrick Young, *Enacting Brittany: Tourism and Culture in Provincial France, 1871–1939* (Farnham, 2012).

of change.<sup>6</sup> The aim of this article is to demonstrate that, on the contrary, Virginie's oral culture commented directly on the conditions in which she lived, and gave her the tools through which she could imagine, though not in the end enact, a change in her own life circumstances. Readers of *Past and Present* will recognize this as a revival of Robert Darnton's argument in *The Great Cat Massacre*. Darnton, however, used edited folkloric texts, bent towards literary ideals, to create a picture of a generalized, indeed national peasant culture. Although all the narrators he cites were born after the Revolution, they are invoked as sources for the realities of the Ancien Régime, for he too perceived peasant culture as static.<sup>7</sup> Darnton was criticized for accepting a literary genre, framed by folklorists, as a portrait of reality.<sup>8</sup> In this article, by using the storyteller's own manuscripts rather than the mediated published versions, and demonstrating that her narratives are particular to her own time and place, I argue that Virginie used them to discuss specific circumstances and express her individual character.

This is an exercise in microhistory, but while microhistorians tend to look for the exceptional person or the singular event whose rarity throws into relief the unspoken norms of the quotidian, I do not argue that Virginie was an outlier.<sup>9</sup> She committed no crime, she uttered no dangerous heresy. Her most flagrant atypicality might at first sight confirm her ordinariness: she wrote in dialect. It is part of the 'Peasants into Frenchmen' paradigm that, until the twentieth century, rural communities expressed themselves in local idioms. While this argument may hold for what was spoken, when rural inhabitants wrote they usually did so in standard French. Their French may have been clumsy and larded with localisms, but it was the only written language they had ever been taught.<sup>10</sup> Virginie's choice, and it was a

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<sup>6</sup> Michelle Perrot, 'La Femme populaire rebelle', (first published 1979) in Michelle Perrot, *Les femmes ou les silences de l'histoire* (Paris, 1998), 154.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Darnton, 'Peasants Tell Tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose', in Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (London, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> Roger Chartier, 'Texts, Symbols, and Frenchness', *Journal of Modern History* lvii (1985).

<sup>9</sup> Edward Muir, 'Introduction: Observing Trifles', in Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (eds.), *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe* (Baltimore, 1991), xiv–xv.

<sup>10</sup> Dialect literature may have been directed at the countryside, but it rarely issued from the countryside: Philippe Martel, 'Les Écrivains paysans dans le Félibrige (1860–1914)', *Ethnologie française* xviii (1988).

choice, to write in Gallo was not only unusual but must have involved a significant intellectual commitment. There was almost no existing literature in Gallo so she had to invent her own orthography; no easy task when in her only model, written French, sounds and symbols do not regularly correlate.<sup>11</sup> Once she had devised her rules she applied them fairly systematically, writing ‘houme’ for ‘homme’, ‘ouâzet’ for ‘oiseau’, as well as using more distinctive Gallo words such as ‘quante’ for ‘avec’ and ‘railsail’ for ‘après-midi’. Significantly, much of her dialect vocabulary referred to interpersonal violence: ‘baclail’ (a rain of blows), ‘bésereu’ (a corrective beating) . . .<sup>12</sup> (As all the quotes given below are in English translation, readers will not be able to judge the effect of this choice, but Virginie’s manuscripts are viewable online.)<sup>13</sup>

One might argue that the very existence of these manuscripts makes Virginie extraordinary. This was the reason that Alain Corbin, the historian who has done the most to reevaluate the quotidian in France, rejected using a peasant memoir as the basis for his ‘resurrection’ of one social atom, singular but exemplary of millions of others who lived in the French countryside in the nineteenth-century, the clogmaker Louis-François Pinagot.<sup>14</sup> It is true that rural autobiographies are rare, and those that exist were usually written by men towards the end of life as a reflection on personal trajectories either of political consciousness-raising or of social ascendancy out of poverty. Memoirs written in the midst

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<sup>11</sup> I have not been able to find any Gallo printed texts before the 1890s. Almost all the vocabularies of Gallo postdate Virginie’s manuscript: see Claude Capelle, *Répertoire analytique et critique des dictionnaires et des glossaires de langue gallèse* (Ploërmel, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> The prevalence of terms for violence in dialect sources has also been noted by William G. Pooley, “‘Misery in the Moorlands’: Lived Bodies in the Landes de Gascogne, 1870–1914’ (Univ of Oxford, D.Phil. thesis, 2014), 113.

<sup>13</sup> The manuscript has been digitized: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53090806q>. It is known to folklore specialists. Its contents are listed in the catalogues of French folk songs and French folk tales: Patrice Coirault, Georges Delarue, Yvette Fédoroff and Simone Wallon, *Répertoire des chansons françaises de tradition orale*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1996–2006); (Paul Delarue, Marie-Louise Tenèze and Josiane Bru, *Le Conte populaire français: Catalogue raisonné des versions de France*, 5 vols. (Paris, 1976–2000).

<sup>14</sup> Alain Corbin, *Le Monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot: sur les traces d’un inconnu (1798–1876)* (Paris, 1998).

of agricultural labour are rarer, and are almost unheard of from the women and children who made up a large part of the workforce.<sup>15</sup> However, Virginie started out by compiling a songbook, and that was not an unusual thing for young people to do in rural France.<sup>16</sup> Over time Virginie's writings would develop in unusual directions, but they originated as something commonplace. Nonetheless, it behoves me to explain how Virginie's manuscripts were created, and why they have survived.

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Virginie's manuscripts are preserved in the Music Department of the French Bibliothèque Nationale, among the papers of the cataloguer of French folksong Patrice Coirault. They came to him from Oscar Havard, a journalist of Norman origin, and a propagandist for the Catholic and Royalist cause in the Third Republic.<sup>17</sup> Virginie's exercise books were probably written between autumn 1881 and winter 1883, and they are bound with others written by different hands around the same time. Two of these authors remain anonymous; the other two were, like Virginie, girls in their teens from the commune of Pleine-Fougères on the Brittany/Normandy border.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> As has been observed by Mary Jo Maynes, *Taking the Hard Road: Life Course in French and German Workers' Autobiographies in the Era of Industrialization* (Chapel Hill, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Marcel Bénéteau, 'Le Chansonnier manuscrit come document ethnologique: considérations sur le cahier de Félix Drouillard (vers 1897–1903)', *Rabaska: revue d'ethnologie de l'Amérique française* i (2003).

<sup>17</sup> M. Prevost, Roman d'Amat, H. Tribout de Morembert, *et al* (eds.), *Dictionnaire de biographie française* 21 vols. (Paris, 1932–2011), xvii, 778-9.

<sup>18</sup> An excellent bilingual edition exists of all the folktales, not just Virginie's: Jean-Louis Le Craver (ed.), *Contes populaires de Haute-Bretagne: notés en gallo et en français dans le canton de Pleine-Fougères en 1881* (Rennes, 2007). Didier Bécam's edition of the songs is anticipated. I cite tales according to Le Craver's numbering in the published edition, adding, where possible, ATU numbers (the international typology of folktale types): Antti Aarne, Stith Thompson, and Hans-Jörg Uther (eds.), *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography*, 3 vols., Folklore Fellows Communications 284-6 (Helsinki, 2004). I cite the songs by reference to the page number in the Havard Ms and, where

In a series of articles in *La France illustrée* Havard explained the origin of this volume. While holidaying at Granville in 1881 he reviewed the first volume of Paul Sébillot's *Contes populaires de la Haute-Bretagne*. Much its contents had been collected in the fishing village of Saint-Cast, no more than forty nautical miles from Granville across the Bay of Mont Saint-Michel. Intrigued to learn that, in modern France, it was still possible to find people talking about fairies and giants, Havard set out to see if he could replicate Sébillot's endeavour. He had no success on the Normandy side of the river Couesnon, but when he crossed into Brittany he met a young shepherd who told him the story of 'Petit Mirlicochet'. This first storyteller directed him to his next, the boy's mother who lived in the hamlet of Ville-Cherel in the commune of Pleine-Fougères. Moving from one such introduction to another, Havard spent the first week of September 1881 in the hamlets of Pleine-Fougères, writing down stories. Most of the storytellers he recorded were women in their forties and fifties, the majority illiterate. However, he also mentioned that 'obscure auxiliaries were kind enough to go on my behalf from house to house, picking up the fables that I did not have time to register, which they sent in notebooks to me in Paris.'<sup>19</sup>

One of these 'devoted collaborators' was Virginie Desgranges. Havard did not explain how he came into contact with her. At the time, her family lived in the hamlet of Beauregard, just a stone's throw from Ville-Cherel. Her mother, Suzanne (known as Césarine) Fleury, had kept a bar and may still have been working in one. Havard wrote about making enquiries in the bars of Ville-Cherel . . . but this is a speculative connection.

Although Havard cultivated an image of the folklorist as intrepid social explorer, taking notes from singers and storytellers 'in the field' was a longwinded process. So contemporary folklorists — like Julien Tiersot in Savoy, Achille Millien in the Nivernais and Victor Smith in the Velay — either bought existing manuscript songbooks, or they sub-contracted locals to write out their own repertoires or to record their family and neighbours.<sup>20</sup> These sub-

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applicable, their Coirault number, if catalogued in the *Répertoire des chansons françaises de tradition orale*.

<sup>19</sup> Oscar Havard, 'Voyage d'exploration à la recherche des contes populaires', *La France illustrée* (April–May, 1882). The substance of these articles is reproduced in Le Craver, *Contes*, 19-37.

<sup>20</sup> Julien Tiersot, *Chansons populaires, recueillies dans les Alpes françaises* (Grenoble and Moutiers, 1903), i-xxix. Some of these subsidiary collectors can be identified, such as the

contractors were usually recruited among the younger members of the community who were more likely to be literate. They could overcome the silences that greeted enquiries by strangers, especially those of a manifestly different class. They were also able to act as cultural mediators, explaining dialect terms.

What motivated Havard's collaborators is not clear. He may have paid his informants directly. Although young they would already have been working, and it is hard to imagine someone such as Virginie giving up hours without some material reward. Well-connected notables might offer a range of other services: a job recommendation, a letter of good character . . . Or perhaps just the promise of seeing one's name in print was sufficient inducement.<sup>21</sup> However, we cannot rule out that Virginie came to share some of the folklorist's enthusiasm for the project; that she too felt it was worthwhile recording the oral culture of her community.

All of Havard's other collectors wrote in more or less standard French; only Virginie used Gallo. Her presentation of dialect is largely consistent across the tales and short stories, although several songs were written in standard French. This may replicate local practice: Gallo was the language of everyday communication but for prestige activities, such as singing, French was often preferred. Why she chose to write in Gallo is unclear. It was common in French oral culture to use dialect to distinguish between polite and less polite genres (with dialect reserved for comic or scabrous material), or to mark characters' social position. But this is not the case with Virginie's texts: her peasants speak Gallo but so do her lords and lawyers, she uses it for scatological humour but also for tragic and romantic genres. Most of those who, later in the century, attempted to record Gallo, were regionalist activists, but there is no evidence that Virginie was influenced by decentralist politics. Nonetheless, it suggests a particular investment in her material.

Virginie was working out how to represent the language of her community on paper, but she was simultaneously developing a voice for her own self-expression. This is tangible in the manuscript's presentation. In the first notebook there are no line breaks, limited

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Briffault cousins of Montigny-des-Amognes and Toussaint Chavanaz of Marhles. See David Hopkin, *Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> As was the case for the soldier-peasant memoirist Jean-Marie Déguignet: see Alain Tanguy, 'Anatole Le Braz sur le banc des accusés: l'affaire Déguignet à la lumière de documents inédits', *Bulletin de la société archéologique du Finistère* cxxviii (1999).

punctuation and almost no indication of where one text ends and another begins. Over time she developed strategies to distinguish one speaker from another, and to indicate where she wanted the emphasis to fall. Her growing confidence as a writer is most clear in her three short stories, which are the second unusual feature of her manuscript. Although her songs and tales show signs of personal reinterpretation, they were clearly drawn from a common culture which extended well beyond her own village. Her short stories on the other hand, though they incorporate elements of this common culture, are products of her own experiences and her imagination. She was no longer acting as a collector, she wanted to communicate something of her own.

Whether Havard appreciated Virginie's commitment is impossible to say; he never made use of her manuscripts. He remained interested in folklore, and in 1898 he published *Les Fêtes de nos pères*. Though erudite, this tome was meant as propaganda, placing the religious calendar and devotion at the heart of the everyday culture of the rural past. It emphasised the values of family, labour and proper gender roles in the creation of a harmonious society, the whole working under the authority of the Catholic Church. Copies were often awarded as prizes in Catholic schools.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the book Havard quoted from the material he collected in Pleine-Fougères, though not from Virginie. And on reading her texts it is not hard to see why. In Virginie's narratives women were the prey of men, the family a site of violence, authority existed mainly to be abused, while work was bodily destruction. Her vision, while undoubtedly marked by Catholic teaching, was utterly at odds with Havard's. In what context did her vision make sense?

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Virginie Desgranges was born on 25 August 1868 in the small, godforsaken Breton village of Saint-Georges-de-Gréhaigne. Mont Saint-Michel is visible from most points in the commune, though it is never once mentioned anywhere in her texts. Virginie died on 26 February 1887, aged eighteen, in the nearby bourg of Pleine-Fougères, where she was employed as a servant in the household of her day-labourer uncle and her aunt, a midwife.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Oscar Havard, *Les Fêtes de nos pères* (Tours, 1898).

<sup>23</sup> To establish Virginie's family tree I consulted the *État Civil* and the five-yearly *Recensements de la population* for every coastal commune between Beauvoir (Manche) and Saint-Coulomb (Ille-et-Vilaine). All of these documents are consultable online at

Godforsaken is not my opinion of Saint-Georges but the view expressed by its newly appointed vicar in 1879. The roads were impassable that winter and it took two months for his furniture to arrive from Rennes. He found ‘nothing but ruins: the church was open to the skies, people came to services with an umbrella’.<sup>24</sup> The commune as yet had no school; Virginie must have walked to another village for her education. It would certainly have been delivered by nuns because all the girls’ primary schools in the surrounding communes were run by religious orders. However dismal the religious infrastructure of Saint-Georges, she was exposed to religious teaching.<sup>25</sup>

1879 was also the year that Virginie’s father, Isidore Desgranges, died at Saint-Georges (26 May). When Virginie’s parents had married in Pleine-Fougères on 27 January 1863, Isidore had been a day-labourer, while her mother’s occupation was given as servant, but on his death-certificate he was described as a rag-and-bone man. He would have toured the hamlets and farmsteads of the bay, swapping handkerchiefs and cheap crockery for rags, old rope and rabbit skins.<sup>26</sup> This was already his trade when the Virginie’s older brother Emmanuel was born on 30 January 1865 (Roz-sur-Couesnon). However, from May 1867 Isidore also had a license to run a bar in Saint-Georges, issued against the advice of the local sub-prefecture.<sup>27</sup> It is not clear when this business failed, but there is a clue in one of Virginie’s stories where the heroine, raised in a bar, witnesses a fire that destroys the stock

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<http://archives.manche.fr/> or <http://archives.ille-et-vilaine.fr/fr>. However, the censuses are missing for most communes of Ille-et-Vilaine between 1866 and 1896. The one exception is Pleine-Fougères: Archives communales (hereafter AC) Pleine-Fougères, 1 F 3. The Desgranges family is present there in both 1881 and 1886, but not Virginie herself, suggesting she was already in service by this time. To economize on footnotes I will not cite each entry in the *État Civil* and *Recensements*, but give clear dates and locations in the text which are verifiable online.

<sup>24</sup> Amédée Ollivier, ‘Le Livre de la paroisse’, quoted in Marcel Hodebert, ‘Saint-Georges-de-Gréhaigne’, *Bulletin et mémoires du Club Javenéen d’histoire locale* xx (2007), 97.

<sup>25</sup> Archives Départementales (hereafter AD) Ille-et-Vilaine, 12 T 590: Inspection primaire, arrondissement de Saint-Malo, 1878–9.

<sup>26</sup> Yann-Ber Kemener, *Pilhaouer et pillotou: chiffonniers de Bretagne* (Morlaix, 1987).

<sup>27</sup> AD Ille et Vilaine, 4 M 276: Police. Débits de boissons, Autorisations d’ouvertures (1864–9), no. 2244.

and brings on her father's death.<sup>28</sup> We can venture that 1879 was a turning point in Virginie's life, and for the worse.

The family had already been slipping down the social hierarchy. Both of Virginie's grandfathers were customs officers from Normandy, who had followed each other to Breton postings around the Bay of Mont Saint-Michel; they undoubtedly knew each other. These were uniformed, and pensioned, state officials and while not necessarily beloved by the communities in which they were stationed — this was a smuggling coast — they carried a certain status. They were literate, but neither of Virginie's parents could sign their wedding certificate. Rag-and-bone men had a fairly negative reputation in Brittany where 'housewives distrusted them and feared they would be cheated', according to Paul Lebois, recalling his own childhood encounters in Pleine-Fougères circa 1900.<sup>29</sup> The agricultural population was suspicious of all itinerants, particularly those who called on women at home while men were away in the fields. Rag-and-bone men were equated with pedlars and beggars as they too relied on charity for food and a place to sleep the night. It was an occupation associated with poverty, theft, and also immorality and specifically drunkenness, for like all people on the road they frequented bars. Perhaps this is the reason for the 'unfavourable opinion' that nearly prevented Isidore receiving a license to sell alcohol.

The social decline of Virginie's mother, is also clear. In 1856 her parents, retired customs officer Jean Fleury and Thomasse Voroquet, were living at Saint-Marcen with her brother, Jean Marie Fleury, who received a state pension because he had lost his arm in naval service: as the family had two guaranteed incomes they were practically rentiers. But by the census of 1861 the household had completely dissolved and the former customs officer, then in his late seventies, was described as a day-labourer, sharing the home of his servant daughter in the hamlet of Louvrie in Pleine-Fougères. Some crisis had scattered the Fleury family up-and-down the coast.

If Virginie's parents inherited neither education nor status from their fathers, they did acquire their peripatetic habits. Isidore, born in Beauvoir across the Couesnon, had lived in Saint-Coulomb, Saint-Méloir and Roz-sur-Couesnon before setting up his own household, first in Pleine-Fougères, then in Roz, and then in Saint-Georges. Over the same period the

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<sup>28</sup> Havard Ms 284.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Lebois, *Douze métiers, treize misères: souvenirs du début du siècle* (Rennes, 1976), 275–7.

Fleury family moved from Cancale to Saint-Coulomb, then Saint-Méloir, Vivier, Cherrueix and Saint-Marcen. All of these habitations were on or near the old coast road from Pontorson to Saint-Malo that separated the ‘cliff’ (as it is known locally) from the ‘polders’ to seaward, then still in the process of being reclaimed for agriculture. Their parents’ itinerancy was a consequence of state service, but that of Virginie’s own family is characteristic of the poor, and there is no doubt that, whatever her standard of living before her father’s death, thereafter the family can be classed among the most necessitous.

This can be demonstrated in several ways. Widow Desgranges never paid local taxes in Pleine-Fougères, which puts her in the lowest quintile of household incomes.<sup>30</sup> In October 1880, in circumstances that betoken desperation, the cantonal magistrate organized an auction of her belongings. It is a sad list, consisting mostly of kitchen utensils (‘two bowls to Jean Marie Leloup of Pleine-Fougères for thirty centimes’, ‘a plate, a fork and a spoon to Jean Lemetayer of Mesnil, one franc’ . . . ). The total value of sales amounted to 62 francs and 25 centimes.<sup>31</sup> In March of the following year the family had a further run-in with the law. Virginie’s brother Emmanuel, then sixteen and following in his father’s footsteps as a rag-and-bone man, was sentenced by the police-court of Saint-Malo to one month of prison for stealing sheets, shirts and some old sacks from a neighbour, a beggar-woman. He also stole a loaf from a road-mender. However, according to the newspaper’s report, his mother had encouraged him in these acts, and therefore she got the more serious sentence of six weeks.<sup>32</sup>

One year later, in March 1882, Emmanuel became a sailor, a *terreneuva* in the local parlance. Terreneuvas spent the best part of the year fishing for cod on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, only returning to port in the late autumn.<sup>33</sup> Just after he left on that first

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<sup>30</sup> AC Pleine-Fougères, 1 G 31: Matrices générales des contributions foncières, personnelle-mobilières et des portes et fenêtres de la commune de Pleine-Fougères, 1878–99.

<sup>31</sup> AD Ille-et-Vilaine, 4 U 26 80: Justice de la Paix, canton de Pleine Fougères, 10 October 1880, acte 264.

<sup>32</sup> *L’Union malouine et dinannaise*, Sunday 27 March 1881, ‘Saint-Malo, Tribunal correctionnel du 10 mars. Vol au préjudice d’une mendiante’.

<sup>33</sup> The French state kept close tabs on its sailors and in consequence Emmanuel’s career can be followed in detail. AD Ille-et-Vilaine, 4 S 1567: Inscription maritime, syndicat du Vivier, quartier de Cancale, matricule des mousses et des novices, fo. 1250, no. 500; 4 S 1571,

voyage his mother again called on the services of the magistrate, to convene a ‘family council’ to appoint a guardian for her two children. The ‘family council’ was a normal administrative practice for orphans, but uncommon when one parent was still living. The reason in this case was that, under article 378 of the Code Civil, parents judged as instigators of a crime committed by their children forfeited all legal authority over them. In these circumstances the council named a guardian who had control over the children’s finances.<sup>34</sup> It cannot be a coincidence that this council was called just as widow Desgranges hoped to receive a large sum. Terrenewvas’ wages took the form of advances against their share in the voyage’s profits. The amount was substantial; not less than 300 francs even for a ‘novice’ sailor like Emmanuel.

As no member of the Fleury family lived locally, Césarine Desgranges named three acquaintances to serve on the council. Two of these ran bars, suggesting she still had some connection to the drinks trade. The guardian appointed by the council, Joseph Etiennoul, came from the Desgranges side: he was the uncle for whom Virginie was working when she died.

Over this short period, between the death of Isidore Desgranges and the establishment of the guardianship, the family had lived at three different addresses. Shortly afterwards they moved again, to the hamlet of Le Goulet. It was from this address that Virginie sent her manuscripts to Havard.

This family history is not just the background in which Virginie heard, told and wrote her stories. These characters — the rag-and-bone man, the sailor brother, the magistrate — and these events, such as the theft of the sheets, would reappear in Virginie’s narratives.

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Virginie Desgranges came from the poorest social stratum of a poor province. What cultural materials were available to someone in her position? What tides of knowledge and entertainment washed up on the shores of the Bay of Mont Saint-Michel? Beyond the

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matricule des inscrits provisoires, fo. 1027, no. 53; 4 S. 1553, matricule des inscrits définitifs de 1883, fo. 3248 no. 248.

<sup>34</sup> AD Ille-et-Vilaine, 4 U 26 82: Justice de la Paix, Pleine Fougères, 20 Mars 1882, acte No. 49, ‘Subrogé-tutelle des mineurs Desgranges’.

mention of her mother's songs in her one surviving letter to Havard, Virginie said nothing of her sources: nonetheless we can deduce something about what she read and heard, where and from whom, as will be demonstrated in this section on her songs and folktales (her own stories will be considered later). What she heard mattered more than what she read; her parents', poverty, illiteracy and the limited resources of the local schools all suggest that reading material was hard to come by. Her decision to express herself in Gallo confirms that the oral predominated over the visual in her cultural formation. Virginie did not name a single author, and the only books she mentions were generic religious books and books of magic. In her tales the trustworthy source of knowledge was the spoken advice of the 'vailsine', the female neighbour, a recurrent character, and whose social authority is confirmed by other studies of rural Brittany.<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, Virginie's cultural world was not completely cut-off from literary France. The influence of the printed word is most obvious in her song repertoire, though even there it is secondary. Well over half of Virginie's songs had been circulating orally from the eighteenth century, if not long before. Some of these orally diffused texts had appeared in song-books, and some had literate origins, such as the ballad of the 'La Cane de Montfort' in which a girl effects her escape from would-be rapists (a recurrent theme in Virginie's repertoire) by the miracle of turning herself into a duck.<sup>36</sup> Songs based on this Breton miracle had been published in mid seventeenth century, but although print had played a part in the diffusion of this legend, the adaptations in Virginie's version show that she had an oral source.

Among her texts there were more recent items from known authors, such as the poet Alfred de Musset.<sup>37</sup> Some derived from the Parisian stage, such as the song 'Zéphoris' from Adolphe Adam's 1852 operetta 'Si j'étais roi'.<sup>38</sup> The maudlin style and melodramatic content of these more recent, literary additions were illustrated by the two orphan laments

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<sup>35</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 7 (ATU 500), no. 8 (ATU 504), no. 37; Isabelle Le Boulanger, *Enfance bafouée: la société rurale bretonne face aux abus sexuels du XIXe siècle* (Rennes, 2015), 63.

<sup>36</sup> Havard Ms 12 (Coirault no. 1302).

<sup>37</sup> Havard Ms 328, 'Rappelle-toi'.

<sup>38</sup> Havard Ms 269.

Virginie knew.<sup>39</sup> Also typical of this production were the songs ‘Jean le pêcheur’ by Labarre and Carcassi, in which the homebound hero is shipwrecked and drowned at the entry to his port (his fiancée throws herself into the waves to be reunited with him in death), and ‘Le départ du marin’, by Angelo Agostini, who returns only to find his beloved mother has died. The relevance of such songs to this semi-maritime community is obvious.<sup>40</sup> The last named song had appeared in a cheap songbook of the kind sold by pedlars at fairs and one can readily imagine a similar volume finding a market on the Breton coast.<sup>41</sup>

Most of Virginie’s tales derived from an oral source, but in a few cases a literary origin is plausible. Virginie’s version of ‘La Belle aux cheveux d’or’ is very close to Madame D’Aulnoy’s text, which circulated widely as a chapbook from the eighteenth century onwards.<sup>42</sup> Madame Leprince de Beaumont’s famous version of ‘Beauty and Beast’ also lurks behind Virginie’s ‘Conte de la bête’.<sup>43</sup> However, in a manner quite characteristic of Virginie’s texts, the setting became more realistic and the characters have taken a social tumble. In Leprince’s version Beauty’s father is a rich merchant fallen on hard times, and when he asks her sisters what they would like him to bring back from his journey ‘they begged of him to buy them new gowns, headdresses, ribbons, and all manner of trifles’.<sup>44</sup> In Virginie’s telling the father is merely trying to sell a swarm of bees, and Beauty’s two sisters ask for an apron and a handkerchief. Virginie’s tales were disenchanted, though this is less a reflection of contemporary Realist literary fashions than a common characteristic of plebeian storytelling.

If most of Virginie’s texts derive from oral performance, this meant she heard them from someone present in her community. There is a temptation to imagine that this implies a

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<sup>39</sup> Havard Ms 40 and 120, ‘Pierre, pauvre Pierre’, and ‘L’Orphelin du hameau’.

<sup>40</sup> Havard Ms 23, 343.

<sup>41</sup> *La Fille du pêcheur* (Mont-de-Marsan, n.d.). As one of the other songs in this collection was sung Virginie’s neighbour, Françoise Thébault, I suspect this or a similar publication was known to both of them.

<sup>42</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 22 (ATU 531).

<sup>43</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 24 (ATU 425C).

<sup>44</sup> The first English translation, quoted here, appeared in 1757: *The Young Misses Magazine, Containing Dialogues between a Governess and Several Young Ladies of Quality her Scholars*.

collective, almost democratic culture, in contradistinction to written sources with their air of distant but absolute authority. However, hierarchy is also present in oral communication, for instance in school or in church. What impact did these institutions make on Virginie?

Virginie often referred positively, even wistfully, to school, but beyond the mechanical skills of making signs, it is difficult to detect an intellectual influence. This period is associated with rampant nation-building, with the school as agent, but whatever national geography and history she had learnt made no appearance in her texts. Virginie lived through the transition from Franco-Prussian War and establishment of the Third Republic, but these developments seem not to have marked her imagination. Even though the region saw bitter conflict between whites and blues in the 1790s, no direct reference to historical or contemporary political struggles surfaced in tales. Her only acknowledgement of the revolutionary past was her use of the word 'chouans' to designate 'brigands'.<sup>45</sup> However, it would be dangerous to infer a Republican political identity from this one usage; all one can say is that, unlike some of her neighbours, she did not identify positively with the historic chouans, whose memory was very much part of the oral tradition of the region even if it was of little interest to her.<sup>46</sup>

In fact it is quite hard to tell where Virginie's loyalties lay. She appeared unaffected by efforts at nation-building. Although she knew a numerous conscripts' songs, few of these gave any indication of what the conscripts were fighting for. One does mention 'le grand Bourbon', but this might just be an archaism rather than a statement of royalist convictions.<sup>47</sup> Only two songs even mention the existence of a country called France, and just one of these, the weepy 'L'Orphelin du hameau', is unambiguously patriotic. However, there is little more evidence that she felt any strong attachment to Brittany, whether as subjacent or antagonistic to her French identity. Virginie knew she was Breton: on the covers of her notebooks she wrote that they belonged to 'Virginie Desgranges, from Le Goulet, in Pleine-Fougères, Ille-et-Vilaine, capital Rennes, Province of Brittany'. However, only two of her songs made even the most passing reference to a Breton provincial identity or culture.

These absences are all the more striking given the outpouring of both national and regional patriotic song in this period. Other manuscript song books from the early Third

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<sup>45</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 15, no. 29 (ATU 130), no. 35 (ATU 1540 + 1653).

<sup>46</sup> Paul Lebois constructed a whole novel from these traditions: *Les trois amoureuses de Villeclair* (Blainville-sur-mer, 1968).

<sup>47</sup> Havard Ms 256 (Coirault no. 6511).

Republic, including those penned by schoolgirls, are rife with evocations of the lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine and paeans to the heroes of the Franco-Prussian war.<sup>48</sup> None of these songs made an appearance in Virginie's notebooks, and one is tempted to think this silence was a deliberate rejection of their bombast, especially as the one political song she did include was a pacifist ballad. Delormel and Villemer's 'Le Forgeron de la paix' would become a standard among anarchists and trade unionists in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>49</sup> However, while positive about the values of peace and the heroism of manual labour, the song is not intrinsically radical but became so by association. It did not have these connotations when Virginie wrote it down.

The Church had rather more of an impact, either directly or through the schooling she received. Her heroines are consciously Catholic, 'strong and courageous in religion'.<sup>50</sup> They interact directly with the Virgin, God and his saints and criticize those who did not attend mass. Virginie offered few of the humorous tales and songs at the expense of the clergy that were part of traditional culture even in overtly Catholic regions such as Brittany. However, her Catholicism is not overwhelming, and she certainly did not confine herself to moralizing stories. Her heroines tried to escape from the convent, not enter it.<sup>51</sup> Some of her religious lessons appear to be only half learnt, and when she did repeat a sermon, in the tale of 'The Golden Calf' (a popular topic at the time, as Breton clerics warned against the influence of rich, Protestant tourists), she converted it into a more demotic form.<sup>52</sup> Instead she had a predilection for the scatological: her very first text was a song in which a woman made cheese out of cowpats; everyone who ate it got the runs.<sup>53</sup> There is an earthy, not to say crude bent to many of Virginie's songs and tales.

The religious material is more likely indicative of shared local and regional culture than evidence of an intense personal religiosity. The presence of some rare religious songs in her repertoire is explained by a particular custom specific to the vicinity of Pleine-Fougères,

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, the four 'Cahiers de chansons' belonging to the schoolgirl Madeleine Prat and written c. 1893, available on the website [www.philippemorize.com](http://www.philippemorize.com).

<sup>49</sup> Havard Ms 263.

<sup>50</sup> Havard Ms 305.

<sup>51</sup> Havard Ms 99, 276, 277 (Coirault no. 1203).

<sup>52</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 17 (ATU 366).

<sup>53</sup> Ms Havard 9 (Coirault no. 12103).

where neighbours gathered on hilltops during Advent to sing carols.<sup>54</sup> A number of Virginie's folktales border on saints' legends, but that was quite common among storytellers in Brittany. For instance she told the tale of the boy who learnt the language of animals, to the despair of his parents who considered him a wastrel, but who after various adventures became Pope.<sup>55</sup> This story was popular in Brittany and was often, though not in Virginie's version, associated with the founding bishops of Breton dioceses. Likewise she recorded a version of 'The Receipt from Hell', again a more popular tale in Brittany than in other parts of France.<sup>56</sup> A farmer pays his annual quittance, but fails to get a receipt before his 'bourgeois' dies. Harassed by the heirs, the farmer accepts the offer of a mysterious stranger to take him to his deceased landlord. He receives a receipt but when the farmer comments on his old landlord's salubrious surroundings the latter reveals that he is really in Hell (or Purgatory).

Even though these texts have a religious colouring, it does not follow that Virginie received them at the hands of the clergy. Mothers are the prime source of moral lessons in her stories, 'you who brought me up so well and gave me nothing but good examples and good advice'.<sup>57</sup> What it meant to be Catholic was defined for her as much, if not more, by her neighbours and kin. It was this more plebeian society that was the formative influence on Virginie's culture.

Her poverty and mobility probably aided her acquisition of such a substantial repertoire. For those at the edges of the social hierarchy, storytelling and singing were forms of cultural capital that could gain them entry into more established circles. This was likely the case with her father. Itinerant professions were expected to have something to tell; if not gossip then a joke, if not a joke then a song. Their facility with language was part of their persona as a salesman and a traveller. A good yarn might get one a free meal or a bed for the night.<sup>58</sup> The expectation is voiced in one of Virginie's stories when a poor man finds shelter

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<sup>54</sup> Havard, *Les Fêtes de nos pères*, 273–6. A CD with a number of such carols has been issued by Dastum under the title *Chansons traditionnelles recueillies à Sougeal*.

<sup>55</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 21 (ATU 671).

<sup>56</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 16 (ATU 756C).

<sup>57</sup> Havard Ms 164.

<sup>58</sup> Guy Haudebourg, *Mendiants et vagabonds en Bretagne au XIXe siècle* (Rennes, 1998).

with an old woman who asks him, ‘You who travel, my friend, don’t you have any news?’<sup>59</sup> This vagrant turns out to be Jesus himself, and the rest of the unwelcoming village is swallowed up overnight. Vagabonds themselves often drew attention to their spiritual kinship with Christ: ‘If my father begged, that is no dishonour, he followed in the footsteps of Jesus Christ our saviour’, as one of Virginie’s songs expressed it.<sup>60</sup>

That Virginie grew up in a bar is significant. Many of the best-known female storytellers shared this youthful experience. The Grimms’ famous ‘Märchenfrau’ Dorothea Viehmann was an innkeeper’s daughter.<sup>61</sup> Nearer in space and time, the civil servant and folklorist Adolphe Orain, opened his collection with a homage to his principle storyteller Marg’rite Courtillon, who ran ‘a miserable inn’ in Bain-de-Bretagne. There a peripatetic population — tinkers, sweeps, mole-catchers, and rag-and-bone men — would gather round her fire, drink cider and eat roast chestnuts while exchanging ‘all that they had learnt during their travels’.<sup>62</sup>

A large repertoire of songs and stories almost always means exposure to a substantial number of sources, and the bar was where travellers congregated and shared what they knew. In the case of the bar of Saint-Georges-de-Gréhaigne, sailors making their way along the coast road to Saint-Malo or Granville must have been among the clientele, and some of Virginie’s material came from this source. For example, she told a version of the tale type ‘The Princess Transformed into a Deer’ which was particularly popular among Breton sailors.<sup>63</sup> Another group of visitors that may have helped her build up her stock were the travelling fairground and ballad singers, who were assiduous in their visits to Pleine-Fougères to judge by their frequent appearances before the local magistrate.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 11.

<sup>60</sup> Havard Ms 27 (Coirault no. 2524).

<sup>61</sup> Christa Kamenetsky, *The Brothers Grimm and their Critics: Folktales and the Quest for Meaning* (Athens OH, 1992), 116–21.

<sup>62</sup> Adolphe Orain, *Trésor des contes du Pays gallo* (Rennes, 2000: 1st edn 1901), 15-16.

<sup>63</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 27 (ATU 401A).

<sup>64</sup> They included: Yves Fichet from Kermaria-Sulard in 1872; ‘le sieur Poidevin’ and ‘la fille Louis’, in 1873; Adolphe Boutinier and Marie Louise Desmains from the Manche in 1873; Robin and Léonie Letexier in 1878; and Joseph Carré in 1884.

The practice of bar-room singing is well attested in the local press; for instance, Léon Baudoin, a sailor, suddenly died while singing a song in the café Blémus in Pleine-Fougères in 1879.<sup>65</sup> The bar also hosted communal events which were always accompanied by singing. Even if it had not yet become the habit to hold the wedding breakfast there (too expensive), nonetheless the bar would host some of the wedding festivities, especially the celebrations of the ‘garçons d’honneur’. The conscript class would meet there to toast their good or bad luck in the military lottery, and the sailors bound for Newfoundland would have one last carouse before they set sail in March, and a binge on their return in the autumn (possibly the occasion of Baudoin’s death). All these festivities demanded songs, and all are well represented in Virginie’s collection.

The wedding party forms the most coherent cluster of songs in Virginie’s notebooks, with specific verses in the voices of the bride, her mother and father, the bridegroom, the maid of honour and the best man. The picture painted of marriage was equivocal. Her first four songs on the theme were either warnings or highlighted the downside of marriage. In the first, the bride wears the rose of penitence and the ribbon of suffering: within a week she is back at her father’s complaining her husband is at the bar every night. According to the second marriage is the end of pleasure, and the worst of it is that one never knows what one is getting: the bridegroom might be a ‘stop-out’ who demands money for tobacco and drink, though hopefully he might be a dutiful husband and who will save money to send the children to college. The fourth, traditionally sung by the bride’s former companions while presenting her with flowers, is simply a list of duties that she is about to take on: goodbye to ‘girls’ freedom’, from now on it is housework, caring for animals, bringing up children . . .<sup>66</sup> It should be said that the bridegroom’s expectations are similarly downbeat: in one the new husband discovers that his new wife is running around with other men, while in another the husband moans that his wife sends him to plough with nothing to eat and drink.<sup>67</sup> Both the ‘maumariée’ and the ‘maumarié’ are common characters in French folksong, and some of these representations were comedic. However, the overall impression of marriage is rather

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<sup>65</sup> *L’Union malouine et dinannaise* 9 November 1879. ‘Morte subite, dans un café’.

<sup>66</sup> Havard Ms 16-18 (Coirault nos 5420, two variants, and 5210).

<sup>67</sup> Havard Ms 96 and 275 (Coirault nos 5911 and 5803).

off-putting, with the wedding feast itself only a brief respite: ‘Dear relatives, let us enjoy ourselves, don’t think on misery . . .’.<sup>68</sup>

The songs marking the seasonal departures of the conscript *classe* and the *terreneuvas*, quite a substantial portion of her collection, remind us that the oral culture of a community was not only nourished by local traditions but was constantly replenished by material brought back by members who had sojourned abroad. Soldiers were among the most assiduous keepers of manuscript songbooks in the Third Republic, recording what they heard in the barracks to take back at the end of their service.<sup>69</sup> However, sailors were more influential in Virginie’s cultural formation. Even as Havard was touring Pleine-Fougères, his inspiration, Paul Sébillot, was still collecting in the fishing village of Saint-Cast. The Newfoundland fishing fleet drew on the manpower of the entire North Breton and Norman littoral, and sailors often changed both port and ship. It was not the practice for numerous men from the same village to serve on the same vessel, so the forecastles of these fishing brigs mixed up populations from all over both provinces. The potential for cultural contact between the communities is illustrated by the career of Virginie’s brother Emmanuel, who sailed on four of the same ships that Sébillot’s informants had crewed.<sup>70</sup> Deep-sea-fishing was an environment which encouraged, and rewarded, the sharing of tales, so it is hardly surprising that there were similarities between the material heard by Sébillot in Saint-Cast and by Virginie Desgranges in Pleine-Fougères.

With a couple of exceptions, Virginie’s tales belong to the repertoire of international tale-types, versions of which have been recorded across Europe and often far beyond. But the typology of tales works at the level of abstract plot descriptions: in practice specific regions (or specific groups) knew and preferred particular variants in which the plot was actualized. These local variants are termed by folklorists ‘ecotypes’, types that have adapted to the local environment. We have already met some ecotypes in the religious tales popular across the Breton peninsula. In the case of other tales one can draw an even tighter line

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<sup>68</sup> Havard Ms 275.

<sup>69</sup> Marie-Dominique Amaouche-Antoine, ‘Le cahier de chansons du conscrit’, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* xxxiv (1987).

<sup>70</sup> The information on Sébillot’s informants comes from the Service historique de la marine (Brest), Inscription maritime, quartier de St Brieuc, syndicat de Plévenon. Storytelling aboard ship is discussed in Hopkin, *Voices of the People*, chap. 1.

around the cultural zone to include just the department of Ille-et-Vilaine and the gallophone half of the Côtes-du-Nord. For example, in Virginie's version of the tale 'The Robber Bridegroom', the victims of the cannibal brigand are not potential brides but three washerwomen sisters, tricked into his house by the ruse of delivering his linen. The only other version like this was told to Sébillot in Saint-Cast by Scolastique Durand in 1879.<sup>71</sup> In another gruesome tale, a mother promises a pair of red shoes to whichever, brother or sister, comes back first with a faggot of wood. The brother, to ensure victory, ties his sister to a tree, but when he is directed to the chest to receive his reward, his mother brings the lid down on his head. The dead child is then put in the soup and served as supper to his father and sister. This is an extremely common story in France, but only in this region was the reward designated as red shoes.<sup>72</sup>

It is unlikely that Virginie thought of such ecotypes as expressions of a Breton identity. As far as she was concerned the tale simply went that way. But this does not mean she was just a passive recorder of what she heard others tell. An oral culture, because participatory, offers limited opportunities to develop an individual voice (whereas private reading and writing are tools of the emergent self). The performer can always be corrected by the audience. Nonetheless, individual storytellers can reshape tales to fit their own character, and to express their own desires. Although Virginie's tale repertoire overlaps, to an extent, with the other storytellers Havard contacted in Pleine-Fougères, her versions are distinct. Take her tale of 'Pauvre Bête': a farmer who cannot pay his rent allows his landlord to possess his daughter for the night instead. However, he plays a trick, for he tells the landlord that his daughter's name is 'Pauvre Bête'; when the lord's servants come to collect her, they are given an old donkey instead.<sup>73</sup> This tale was popular in Brittany but not elsewhere, perhaps because of the prevalence of tenant farming in the region. Virginie's teenage neighbour Marie Laîné also told a version but in hers the characters are named: farmer Duval versus the landlord Monsieur Boibaudry, the actual local seigneur before the Revolution. In Marie's version this is only the first of a series of tricks that Duval plays on Boibaudry, culminating in

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<sup>71</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 38 (ATU 955); Paul Sébillot, 'Les blanchisseuses', *Revue des traditions populaires* xxiii (1908), 285–7.

<sup>72</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 28 (ATU 720); Paul Sébillot, *Littérature orale de la Haute Bretagne* (Paris, 1881), 223–5, 'Les petits souliers rouges'; Sébillot, *Contes populaires de la Haute Bretagne I*, no. 60, 'Les souliers rouges'.

<sup>73</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 18 (ATU 1440).

the latter's death.<sup>74</sup> Marie Laîné's maternal family had lived in the same hamlet of Pleine-Fougères for three generations: perhaps fictive victory over their flesh-and-blood lord mattered more to them than to Virginie Desgranges, whose family had changed jurisdiction a dozen times since the abolition of feudalism.

There is a commonality in language, in characters (the helpful neighbour, the man searching for a living, the chouan brigands . . .) and phraseology which generates a sense of unity to Virginie's repertoire of tales. The tone is consistently realistic, even brutal. Although she never named her community, or showed any interest in landscape, her tales unfolded in a territory not dissimilar to her own village, the characters are people she might have known. This, rather prosaic approach to a fantasy genre rooted the narratives in her world and made them relevant. When a magician appears at the bar he does so in the guise of an insurance salesman; when a married couple discover the treasure horde of a brigand band the most spectacular item is a gold watch.<sup>75</sup>

An individual voice is harder to identify in the songs which, as a genre, admit less variation. With some exceptions, Virginie's repertoire was part of the common musical stock of the entire francophone world, and one would be just as likely to hear her songs in the Auvergne, or even Quebec, as in her corner of Brittany. Nonetheless singers could introduce small changes to make them more relevant to themselves and their audience. For instance, in her version of a familiar comic song, when the village girls pen a collective letter to the priest to encourage him to find them husbands they do so in café of Malo Richard: Malo Richard was indeed the name of an innkeeper in Saint-Georges-de-Gréhaigne. In another song, Virginie's neighbour 'Nannon Thébault' gets a name check.<sup>76</sup> These teasing variations give us some clue as to the social interactions in which these songs were performed.

On the whole the world-view portrayed in the songs was necessarily more generic than that proffered in the tales. Nonetheless their contents were not irrelevant to Virginie's experience. Take, for example, the song which Virginie called 'Chanson d'une fille de

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<sup>74</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 48.

<sup>75</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 12, no. 15 (ATU 1210 + 1386 + 1009 + 1653 (2)). The place of a gold watch in a peasant girl's imagination has been unpicked by Jan Goldstein, *Hysteria Complicated by Ecstasy: The Case of Nanette Leroux* (Princeton, 2010), 111–21.

<sup>76</sup> Havard Ms 330 (Coirault no. 1111) and Ms 53.

quinze ans’, but whose catalogue title is ‘The infanticide denounced by her neighbour’.<sup>77</sup> A teenage girl gives birth to twins but kills them. A female neighbour, who for once appears in a negative role, denounces her, and she is taken to Rennes to be judged and hanged, despite her mother’s laments. Presumably this song was also known to Virginie’s neighbour in Le Goulet, Françoise Thébault. Aged sixteen, she too wrote a notebook for Havard, including another song about an abandoned, unmarried mother.<sup>78</sup> Four years later, on 5 January 1886, the still unmarried Françoise gave birth while her parents were out. She took the child and beat his head against the floor, and, when that would not stop his crying, she stuffed his mouth with earth and buried him in the garden. An anonymous letter from a neighbour summoned the mayor to investigate: Françoise Thébault was committed for trial at Rennes, and although the court often dealt leniently with infanticides, the violence perpetrated led to a harsh sentence: ten years hard labour.<sup>79</sup>

Songs are not destinies, nor are they premonitions, but they had currency because they were relevant to girls like Virginie and Françoise Thébault. Their oral culture was not just a way to pass the time; it invoked the situations in which they might find themselves.

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These discussions of Virginie’s archivally-verifiable biography and her cultural formation were necessary before considering her longer, more personal fictions. Virginie wrote three stories, each filling a separate exercise book and titled for its heroine: ‘The true story of poor Jeanneton Barbot’, ‘The story of sad Cacheline Leloup’, and ‘story of poor Suzon Deslande’. The narratives follow their eponymous heroines through myriad sufferings from childhood to adulthood. In her texts Virginie distinguished between *contes* (tales) and *histoires* (stories),

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<sup>77</sup> Havard Ms 349 (Coirault no. 9714).

<sup>78</sup> Havard Ms 72 (Coirault no. 3418).

<sup>79</sup> *L’Union malouine et dinannaise*, Sunday 23 May 1886, ‘Cours d’assises d’Ille-et-Vilaine. Infanticide. Enfant enterré vivant’. For the trial transcript see AD Ille-et-Vilaine 2 U 1156. Françoise Thébault returned to Pleine-Fougères at the end of her sentence, married and had a child. Infanticide was not a rare crime in Brittany (one in a thousand live births ended thus, according to Annick Tillier’s calculations) and juries usually took a more sympathetic view than the 1810 Penal Code, which prescribed death: Annick Tillier, *Des criminelles au village: femmes infanticides en Bretagne (1825–1865)* (Rennes, 2001).

reserving the latter term for true stories, or ones which were told as true. She meant her reader to treat her novellas as plausible narratives. All three draw on elements of her own biography, but they are not straightforwardly autobiographical; all three heroines grow up to marry and have children, something that Virginie would not have the opportunity to do. No doubt she also borrowed elements from the life-stories of people known to her, but I have not been able to identify an individual who served as the inspiration for any of these leading characters — neither among her acquaintances, nor in the literature available to her.

These fictions borrow directly from the folktales that Virginie had recorded: on the first page of Jeanneton Barbot's story, her heroine is being compared to Cinderella, while Suzon Deslandes story opens 'Gnaveu une fas' [Once upon a time]. But as with her tales, the tone is realistic and the landscape mundane, even if the stories incorporate ghosts and magic. For Virginie the supernatural was part and parcel of the experienced world.

Before going any further in this exploration of the relationship of life and art, it will be helpful to provide summaries of the three stories. Although they share some ingredients, they also exhibit differences in content and tone. Jeanneton Barbot's story was a catalogue of woes. As a child she was always ill, but nonetheless at fourteen she was sent to work on a farm, for which she earned just nine francs a year. All she got to eat was potatoes morning and night, and when she complained to her mother the latter replied, why complain when pigs get fat on potatoes? As she grew older she preferred to be a servant in town: the work was easier but a new danger presented itself in the form of predatory masters. She had to keep her door locked at night: 'I am happy here I don't work too much only my soul is in danger'.<sup>80</sup> When she finally found a decent place, with a supportive mistress, first a brother and then her mother died. Both returned to haunt her (her brother as duck, an echo of the 'La cane de Montfort', her mother as a spirit who shared her bed). Her confessor advised her to have a mass said for her mother's soul, after which the nightly visits ceased.

Just when things were getting on an even keel, her younger sister, whom she herself had raised, decided to become a nun, leaving no one at home to care for their elderly father. Jeanneton reluctantly took on this role. Her father, a weaver, was still paying off the debt on his loom. Unable to manage the machine in his debilitated state, the beam crushed his head and he died. Jeanneton's brother, 'that diabolical monster', then emptied the house right down to the sheets off the bed (note the similarities to the case against Virginie's own

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<sup>80</sup> Havard Ms 161.

brother).<sup>81</sup> Jeanneton, to escape her poverty, married a rag-and-bone man. He proved to be a jealous, vicious type. Although her neighbours advised her to report his violence to the gendarmes, Jeanneton preferred to suffer patiently both for the love of God and so as not to dishonour her own two children. (This might be a Freudian slip as by the next line Jeanneton's offspring had increased to four; Virginie, daughter of a rag-and-bone man, was one of only two.)

God finally released Jeanneton from this husband, but reduced to penury, she married a beggarman. Her children were soon starving; when they complained the beggarman beat both them and her. He turned out to be a regular Bluebeard who had killed five or six wives before by tying them to a table and thrashing them with a stick (the same method used by the robber bridegroom in Virginie's version, whose heroine was 'strung up on a bench like one does to a pig').<sup>82</sup> Jeanneton was ready to suffer as her Lord suffered — these religious references are recurrent — but even she was forced to flee when her youngest was threatened with being skinned alive. After a night in the wild, mother and son returned home, but the 'old devil' tried to kill her; again she was only saved by the intervention of the neighbours, who appear frequently as sources of social solidarity.<sup>83</sup> She and her children endured four more years of brutality, which only ended when the beggarman hanged himself.

Unlike the story of Jeanneton Barbot, which has little reported speech, Catherine Leloup's story is written in the first person, only consistently using the third person towards the end. The first half of her story is not dissimilar to Jeanneton's: at home she was treated as less than a dog (a recurrent metaphor). Thus she was quite happy to go into farm service. Unfortunately too much work and too little food made her ill. Doctors prescribed meat and chocolate. However, no sooner had she recovered than a punch in the ribs from her 'bourgeois' left her languishing again. 'I wanted to die but I didn't die I just suffered'.<sup>84</sup> More doctors were called. Doctors appear in a number of Virginie's texts, exhibiting both positive and negative characteristics: on the one hand they offer bed rest and nice things to eat, on the other hand they are fat and well-dressed, take all her heroines' money and find no cure. When she wrote a tale about the Devil, she called him 'the great physician of the

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<sup>81</sup> Havard Ms 177.

<sup>82</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 25 (ATU 956B).

<sup>83</sup> Havard Ms 183.

<sup>84</sup> Havard Ms 223.

world'. Cacherine frequently changed employer, so frequently that one of them took her to the magistrate for breach of contract. On this occasion the magistrate was her ally, and it was her bourgeois who was carted off to prison for losing his temper. Finally she got a position in town — 'Paradise' — working for an extremely ugly man. (Virginie excelled at descriptions of male ugliness, with ferret-faced suitors frequently encountered.) Cacherine had two boyfriends, a local described as an 'imbecile' and another working far away in a big city. When she chose the latter, the broken-hearted local lover departed on a long voyage. Cacherine married, and had a son who went to teacher training college and then became a notary. But happiness does not last in any of these stories: Cacherine's husband fell ill, more expensive doctors failed to cure him and he died.

Up till this point the writer's sympathies have been with 'poor Cacherine who never had any luck',<sup>85</sup> but as Virginie adopts a third person narration it is not clear that she is still on her side. The widowed and middle-aged Cacherine became engaged to a man of eighteen. While promenading, the pair accidentally met her old fiancé. Insults and fists flew, and the old fiancé brought the new before the magistrate. The magistrate blamed Cacherine whom he called 'as stupid as an old [donkey]' and told her that rather than thinking of remarrying 'you should really be thinking of preparing yourself for death'.<sup>86</sup> Her fiancé lost his temper again and attacked the magistrate, spitting in his face and knocking out one eye before running off with the rest of the court in pursuit. Then it was Cacherine's turn: she stuffed old clothes into the magistrate's mouth to stop him calling out, and then beat him black and blue. It took two gendarmes to get her in a cell where, still mad with rage, Cacherine stabbed two of her fellow female prisoners. Sentenced to twelve years in the galleys for these murders, her mind ran on more bloodletting. But she had no weapon, until a bourgeois couple with their young son visited the prisoners. Moved by the sight of Cacherine eating her bread without a knife, the boy offered her his. A saintly chaplain lived among the prisoners, voluntarily wearing their ball and chain. As Cacherine went to receive communion, she plunged her knife into his heart. For this murder she was guillotined; her son lost the will to live so his wife and children were forced onto the streets to beg.

This macabre ending might owe something to a murder ballad or a Sunday School text, but if so I have not been able to trace it. However, one wonders whether the imagined

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<sup>85</sup> Havard Ms 244.

<sup>86</sup> Havard Ms 237-8.

thrashing of the magistrate expressed Virginie's resentment of the justice system's interference in her own family's life.

The inspiration for Virginie's final story lay closer to home. Even the name 'Suzon Deslandes' is more personal: Suzon was her mother's name, and Deslandes is similar to Desgranges. Suzon and her brother Pierre lived with their parents who ran an inn and a grocery. They went to school every day taking sweets for the other children. But this idyll was destroyed by a fire; her father inhaled the smoke and lingered ten months in bed before dying. Suzon was then nine and a half, her brother fourteen (roughly the ages of Virginie and Emmanuel when they lost their father), but it was she, not he, who was removed from school and sent out to work as a shepherd. Her first employers were not too bad, but her mother spoilt the arrangement by insisting that Suzon should be paid, or at least get a skirt. In the meantime Pierre decided to become a sailor, and Suzon, now fourteen, accompanied her brother Pierre to Granville while he looked for work. They lodged with their uncle Eugène, their mother's brother and a former sailor. Pierre found a place on a yacht owned by Monsieur Allot operating from Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, off Newfoundland (as did Emmanuel in 1883) and returned home to tell his mother the good news. Suzon stayed in Granville with her uncle and aunt: 'Suzon liked it very much at her uncle's the poor girl was fortunate she ate meat and fish every day and had nothing to do but to clean shoes for her uncle and aunt'.<sup>87</sup>

A month later came the moment for Pierre to collect his 300 francs advances. With his mother he returned to Granville, and, even though most of the money was spent equipping the boy, still a carnival air reigned. Suzon put on a special Granville headdress and all three made a rare trip to the café. It was while walking back from the café that Suzon made the following confession to her mother. She insisted she liked it at her uncle's, but one thing upsets her. Her aunt is becoming jealous because of her uncle's attentions. He keeps on making licentious propositions. Recently he had enticed her for a walk on the cliffs. While Suzon rhapsodizes over the sea and its immensity, he leads her into a cave, and starts the same licentious talk. When she reproves him, he throws her against the rocks. 'I say to him "you are my uncle the brother of my mother who has never taught me anything but good lessons and now you trying to take my maidenhead get away you unnatural man you man without decency'. She escapes his clutches and flees along the beach, but he runs after

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<sup>87</sup> Havard Ms 288.

threatening to drown her in the ocean. She replies 'my body is in your hands but my soul belongs to God never will I stain it by such a sin'. Just as he leaps on her, a woman collecting shellfish intervenes.<sup>88</sup>

Her mother wept bitter tears as she listened to this story, but also tears of joy at her daughter's steadfast behaviour.

You are as pious as you are wise it's a good work that you've done because it is better to die than to offend God in this way but I am poor and sometimes poverty causes unhappiness just as sometimes it brings happiness if I had any means I would say to you to come back with me now but as you are so fortunate at his house apart from this and you are so strong you can deal [with him] be always like that my child and God will bless you.<sup>89</sup>

Suzon had to endure three further months of her uncle's assaults before her mother, summoned by the jealous aunt, finally came to fetch her home. On the long walk back, Suzon declares her desire to become a seamstress, but her mother has already arranged for her to go into farm service for 40 francs annual salary. Unfortunately her new masters were misers who kept the bread under lock and key and obliged Suzon to plough the fields like a man. At the end of her time, her mother was still opposed to her becoming a seamstress, and instead hired her out again. This place turned out to be even worse as she had to take thirty beasts out into flooded pastures: her feet became so enflamed from standing in water that she could not walk, a plausible scenario in the marshy lands beyond 'The Cliff'. The doctor ordered 'good food, rest and warmth'.<sup>90</sup>

Suzon's next adventure starts with the arrival of a witch-like woman who made an offer to Suzon's mother: she was old with nobody to look after her, if Suzon came and lived with her, she would have her property. Suzon set off on another long walk, the whole time her companion made 'infamous suggestions', but Suzon was a 'strong and courageous in her religion'. The next day, without any food and with her clothes wet through, she was taken into the woods to the house of an old man who asked her to marry him. When she refused the old woman locked the pair in the house together; when she realized what was intended, Suzon fainted. Fortunately, even as the old man was removing Suzon's clothes, some of his

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<sup>88</sup> Havard Ms 292–6.

<sup>89</sup> Havard Ms 297–8.

<sup>90</sup> Havard Ms 304.

relatives arrived and saved her. Unfortunately she had to return to the old woman's house to fetch her things. The old woman persuaded her to read a book of magic: her intention was to summon the Devil to seize the girl, but when the Devil arrived, he wanted the old woman! The latter managed to tear the book from Suzon's hands just in time.<sup>91</sup>

Suzon went home, still intent on becoming a seamstress, and a relative offered to pay her apprenticeship, but her mother, 'her heart as hard as stone', hired her out again. Suzon was staying with a neighbour whose husband was a weaver (the Desgranges' neighbour was the weaver Louis Thébault) when her intended employer arrived to fetch her; she refused to leave. Furious, her mother put her clothes and a loaf into a sack and threw her out. That night she slept under the stars, but, in a very rushed conclusion, she nonetheless learnt the seamstress's trade, married well, and she had one boy and a girl, 'so she was not burdened with children'. Meanwhile the 'good and brave sailor' Pierre Deslandes returned from Newfoundland and voluntarily joined the Navy, even though as the eldest son of a widow he was exempt from military service (Emmanuel made the same choice in November 1883). Suzon's mother, meanwhile, was starving, but Suzon forgave her and brought her food.<sup>92</sup>

Many aspects of Suzon's story tally with Virginie's own. She actually had a sailor uncle Eugène, her mother's brother. However, the relationship between fiction and fact is not clear-cut. Eugène Fleury lived in Cancale, nor have I found any Fleury relatives in Granville. In the story, it was Pierre's first voyage that prompts the Granville interlude, but when Emmanuel Desgranges went to that town in 1883, it was his second Newfoundland contract: his first voyage started from Saint-Malo. If this is a *roman à clef* then the key can only be partially reassembled.

Nonetheless we can deduce some facts about Virginie's life from these three stories. Firstly, the frequent laments on the suffering of farm servants have the feel of first-hand knowledge. The details on pay and conditions of service are within the bounds of possibility. When Suzon first went out at nine years' old she received no salary, not even clothes; by the time Jeanneton Barbot was fourteen she was earning nine francs a year, whereas Suzon received 40 francs. Although these are quite large variations, they accord with Jean Choleau's findings for Ille-et-Vilaine in his survey around 1900: a shepherdess between ten and twelve years would receive no more than fifteen francs, and often only food and lodging,

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<sup>91</sup> Havard Ms 305-10.

<sup>92</sup> Havard Ms 311-12.

but by fourteen might earn 30-40 francs for guarding animals. For parents, farm service was more a way of ousting a surplus mouth than a means of obtaining an extra income (the money of course went to the parents, not to the child). Farm servants were not covered by any of the legal protections for workers that were beginning to be introduced in Virginie's lifetime, though the use of magistrates to enforce contracts, as experienced by Cacheline, did occur. Educated commentators like Choleau lauded the familial atmosphere of farm service, and were unenthusiastic about legal interference which might have changed the nature of the relationship. They extolled the absence of class conflict that characterized communications between farmers and their labourers when they shared the same table.<sup>93</sup> Popular commentators were also sometimes nostalgic for a time when masters and men worked and ate together, but they had a much more jaundiced view about contemporary labour relations. The farm-servant hero of Virginie's tale 'the great physician of the world' cannot sleep for the dust that falls in his eyes, cannot work properly because his tools are broken, but when he complains of tiredness his master replies 'Ah! If you're working you've nothing to complain about; you eat enough. Get to bed!'.<sup>94</sup>

At least this male hero is being fed: Virginie's female characters' seldom get enough to eat. She uses exactly the same language to describe the miseries endured by her story heroines as by her folktale heroines. In the first of two different versions she wrote of a Cinderella-like tale, a widower with a daughter remarries to a widow with a daughter of her own. During the courtship the stepmother promised to treat her stepdaughter well, and that both girls will go to school. After the wedding, however, she sends her stepdaughter into fields with the sheep, without even dry bread to eat. Versions of this tale have been recorded across Europe and Asia: the set-up is generic and so cannot be specific to Virginie's circumstances. Nonetheless the speech that the heroine makes to the Virgin Mary (in this Catholic region a common substitute for the Fairy Godmother), sounds like it comes from the heart:

it's not the boredom that hurts me if only I didn't ache with hunger all the days of my life and if I didn't have a stepmother who doesn't want to see me and who

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<sup>93</sup> Jean Choleau, *Condition des serviteurs ruraux bretons, domestiques à gages et journaliers agricoles* (Extrait de *La Revue de Bretagne*, 1905-6), 31, 134-57; Joseph De Marcé, *De la condition des serviteurs ruraux dans le pays de Redon* (Rennes, 1908), 73-4, 94-6.

<sup>94</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 19 (ATU 313).

beats me every day it's heart-breaking that I persuaded my father into taking this nasty beast who is so unkind and who does me so much harm I wouldn't be as unhappy as I am, my father would earn money and I would be at school while here I am left to starve to death every day in the orchard by my own fault and [living] like a hermit not ever able to play with the girls of my own age when I get home I'm forbidden to go out and I cannot talk for an instant with anyone in the village yes Madame my position is miserable.<sup>95</sup>

No wonder that Virginie's heroines preferred work in town as a domestic servant: the food was better, the accommodation superior, and the work dry and less onerous. The sexual threat was greater, but satiety made this bearable. Suzon twice told her mother that she was happy at her uncle's, despite his attempts to rape her, and her mother repeated the same phrase 'you are so happy here', meaning that she was not hungry. Visions of bountiful, though rather plain, food recur throughout Virginie's texts: if only, the poor shepherdess tells the Virgin Mary, 'I could eat some stew and drink some cider and some wine and some coffee I would be happy'. The situation is even more ideal if the hero is not obliged to work but can spend the day lying 'belly to the sun'.

However, while one can fantasize about replete idleness, Virginie's heroines aspire to become seamstresses. Lebois confirms the local status of these *korriganes* (nymphs) who spent their days visiting the farms, singing as they worked. 'One had to ask for them a long time in advance . . . and they had the knack of making themselves desirable. They were fed well. One didn't think a chicken, a rabbit or a cockerel too much.' They enchanted the eyes, and stole the hearts of the farmers' sons.<sup>96</sup> Unfortunately such an apprenticeship cost money, which explains Suzon's mother's reluctance to further her daughter's desire. It seems particularly cruel that when Virginie died she was sharing the house (and probably the bed) of her cousin Marie Etiennoul, an apprentice seamstress.

In addition to how she lived, the stories give clues as to how Virginie died. All three of her heroines fell ill repeatedly. All three suffer from swollen legs, but this is too generic a symptom to provide a diagnosis. However, there are other indications: Jeanneton's sister the nun 'died of a chest disease' and she herself was warned that she too would die of 'a chest

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<sup>95</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 32 (ATU 511).

<sup>96</sup> Lebois, *Douze métiers, treize misères*, 153–61.

illness'. Meanwhile Cacherine suffered 'an attack of the chest'.<sup>97</sup> Although 'chest complaint' might mean almost anything, in practice, in this period and location, it meant tuberculosis. It is impossible to obtain clear-cut mortality statistics for rural areas of Brittany: tuberculosis was not a reportable disease and sufferers tended to be hidden because, in communities which attached a high value to health and strength, which were considered family traits, tuberculosis was a stain on the household's reputation. Still, Breton doctors ranked it as one of the most serious public health issues in the 1880s.<sup>98</sup> And it was overwhelmingly a disease of the poor; the bacteria spread when the immune system was disabled by malnutrition (also a cause of swollen feet). This seems a plausible explanation for Virginie's early death.

The stories provide inklings into Virginie's feelings towards her closest family members. She had divided views about brothers. She told two tales about violent sibling rivalry between brother and sister in which the sister is the heroine (ATU 720 and ATU 780). One of Jeanneton's brothers was a brute, although another was more sympathetic. However, Suzon's sailor brother is a paragon of virtue, a support to his mother and protector of his sister. One suspects that, however close Virginie was to Emmanuel, in a household with such limited resources there was bound to be competition and occasional friction between them. The narrator of Suzon's tale cannot help but compare her treatment (sent out to work aged nine) to his.

The portrayal of mothers is more consistent, though equivocal. The three heroines looked to their mothers' moral precepts, especially in moments of crisis; they could talk to their mothers who were, to an extent, their companions, even after death. But mothers were also tyrants: Jeanneton quarrelled with her mother and Cacherine complained that she was treated as less than a dog. Yet both weep at the death of the woman who was, according to Jeanneton, 'her whole affection', while Cacherine comments that 'despite the pain I experienced there were some consolations when I was with my mother'.<sup>99</sup> (Virginie imagined the death of mothers occurring when her heroines were her own age.) The same ambiguity appears in Suzon's story: her mother was her source of moral authority but at the

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<sup>97</sup> Havard Ms, 171, 163, 223.

<sup>98</sup> Jacques Léonard, 'La santé publique en Bretagne en 1889', *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'Ouest*, xci (1984), 291.

<sup>99</sup> Havard Ms 162, 218.

same time she constantly placed her daughter in miserable or hazardous situations. Their conflict over Suzon's ambitions escalated to the point where Suzon was forced to leave home, only returning to deliver her own moral lesson. One suspects that this does encapsulate something of the relationship between Virginie and Césarine: the former with hopes and expectations, the latter without the means, and possibly the desire, to fulfil them.

The question whether art imitates life becomes more problematic when we consider the stories' treatment of physical and sexual abuse. There are obvious epistemological dangers in using conscious fictions as sources for historical facts; ethical dangers too. Yet, given that, for the purposes of the story, Jeanneton Barbot's abusive husband could have followed any occupation, it cannot be irrelevant that Virginie chose to make him a rag-and-bone man. Nor can it be entirely coincidental that Virginie offered such a downbeat vision of marriage in her songs, nor that, while her heroines mourn their fictional mothers, they put little effort into mourning their fathers.

Jeanneton's husbands' brutality was judged by her neighbours as exceptional, but to judge from her stories and tales, Virginie thought of non-homicidal violence between spouses, and between parents and children, as a normal part of familial relations. In her first tale, a variant of 'Rumpelstiltskin', the heroine is not a maiden courted by a prince as in the Grimms' bowdlerized and embourgeoised retelling, but a married woman who is beaten everyday by her husband because he judges she has not spun enough.<sup>100</sup> Her only satisfaction at the end of the tale is that 'that evening he didn't beat his wife at all he said that she had worked well'. This sets the tone for a depressing series of thrashings across all her narratives. For example in her second version of the Cinderella variant, a girl is sent by her stepmother to carry her father an eel for his dinner. When the eel asks to be released, the girl replies 'never, father will beat me', and indeed both parents do assault her: her father punches her in the face so that her nose bleeds, her mother hits her with a flail.<sup>101</sup> This may be resented by the victim, but there is no indication that it was abnormal: on the contrary, it was what she predicted would happen. Adults, but especially children, are constantly adapting their behaviour because of anticipated violence in these narratives. Petit-Jean was set to

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<sup>100</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 7 (ATU 500); see Ruth Bottigheimer, 'Tale Spinners: Submerged Voices in Grimms' Fairy Tales', *New German Critique* xxvii (1982).

<sup>101</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 40 (ATU 511).

watch his mother's cow in the orchard, but played with his friend instead; the cow swallowed a whole apple and choked (a real possibility). Foreseeing a whipping, he ran away.<sup>102</sup>

Jeanneton's reaction was to bear the beatings for the love of God, and so as not to dishonour her children. Virginie had obviously absorbed a religious lesson that suffering was a path to salvation. When a sinner wants to be saved in one of her semi-hagiographical stories, he has himself skinned alive.<sup>103</sup> It is his willingness to suffer that saves him. However, there were also secular injunctions never to reveal the secrets of the household to outsiders. In another story, a man receives three pieces of advice: take the straight road; don't interfere in the affairs of others; and don't act in anger. On his way home the man receives hospitality in a castle. While at dinner with the lord, the servants lead in the latter's wife on a rope and put her under the table to eat scraps. The lord asks his guest what he thinks of this behaviour: 'by my faith I find that it has nothing to do with me I don't meddle in the affairs of others'. The lord congratulates him: had he answered differently he would have been killed.<sup>104</sup> While neighbours were allowed to form judgements, and even intervene on occasions, by-and-large families were self-regulating and no one would think of involving the authorities except in cases of truly aberrant violence. The question of familial and personal honour, invoked both by Jeanneton and Suzon when they forbade neighbours to alert the gendarmes, was very real.<sup>105</sup>

Honour was also at stake in sexual assaults, including on children. Family, community and the law all sought to attach some blame to the victim as well as to the perpetrator. Even in cases where victims were evidently blameless, families attempted to suppress knowledge for fear of the damage done not just to the child's honour, but to the family's.<sup>106</sup> Suzon's retort to her uncle was couched in these terms: he would besmirch his, her and their family's honour. She also framed this as a spiritual struggle between a pious girl and a pagan, even diabolical man. Her soul was at risk if she gave way to his demands.

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<sup>102</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 33 (ATU 531).

<sup>103</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 16 (ATU 756B + 756C).

<sup>104</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 23 (ATU 910B).

<sup>105</sup> See, especially, Annick Le Douget, *Violence au village: la société rurale finistérienne face à la justice (1815-1914)* (Rennes, 2014), 55–90, 99–124.

<sup>106</sup> Le Boulanger, *Enfance bafouée*.

I have no definite cause to accuse any member of Virginie's family of being the original of this violator. The circumstances described do not precisely fit with any that, to my knowledge, Virginie could have experienced. The whole conversation between daughter and mother may have been the product of her imagination. What one can say is that sexual abuse was something of which Virginie could conceive; both within and outwith the family, it formed part of the world as she knew it and with which she had to deal. Both Jeanneton and Cacherine also had to fend off sexually predatory masters. Statistics show that women frequently became pregnant in service, a sector of the workforce in which young Bretons were over-represented.<sup>107</sup> Whether they were acquiescent or forced, whether the perpetrator was the master or some other man with access to the house, one cannot always tell. The French legal system discouraged investigation. But the consequences for the woman could be terrible. Sexual predation was something young women, particular the poor who from necessity had to leave the protection (if such it was) of home, had to think about, reflect on, and prepare for, and that is apparent in Virginie's texts.

The topic of unwanted sexual advances is more prevalent in her songs than her stories. The most common genre of folksong in Virginie's first exercise-book is the pastoral. In this she reflected national tastes: pastorals were among the most popular songs throughout the country. For Virginie they served as dance songs, sung collectively as the dancers turned round and round. Though 'rondes' might be performed by mixed-sex groups, in practice it was the girls who kept up these traditions. Given this association, the pastoral is usually seen as a light, joyful genre: but its contents could be bleak. Take, for example, 'The Shepherdess and the King's Forester', which opens 'My father hired me to watch over the ewes but I couldn't guard them I was too young I went to the woods to pick violets': the image may be idyllic, but the situation, a girl too young to work hired out for her family's benefit, is realistic.<sup>108</sup> The king's forester catches her and tells her that she has stolen from the king's domain; although this is not clear in Virginie's version, the only way she pay her debt is to give him her 'loves' (her virginity). When one learns that, of prosecuted cases of child sexual abuse in Brittany, the bulk concerned exactly these circumstances — a man coming on an isolated young girl guarding her animals — the song takes on a more sinister air.<sup>109</sup> In other

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<sup>107</sup> Rachel Fuchs, *Poor and Pregnant in Paris: Strategies for Survival in the Nineteenth Century* (New Brunswick, 1992), 28-32.

<sup>108</sup> Havard Ms 13 (Coirault no. 4618).

<sup>109</sup> Le Boulanger, *Enfance bafouée*.

pastorals the shepherdess is more successful, using tricks or brute force to fend off unwanted attentions. In a few she succumbs willingly, or contrives marriage. Taken together, they form a dialogue through which young women could work out their options when accosted, and learn what words might cajole or repel assailants. But at the same time the dancers recognized that they might not always be successful.

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One of the aims of this article has been to demonstrate that the oral culture of the rural masses, which is well documented for the nineteenth century, is a valid source for the social history of the otherwise voiceless. The stereotypical characters of folklore — the half-starved Cinderella, the vulnerable shepherdess — are not just the fixtures and fittings of particular genres, trotted out regardless of location and audience; they were the condensed experience of those who sang these songs and told these tales. They were reflections of the lives they lived, and meaningful guides to their world. Virginie recognized her hamlet, her neighbours and herself in the songs and tales she heard, the occasions of performance being themselves part of the social life of her community. She reused the themes and motifs from this oral culture in the stories that she made up, to forge her own self-presentation. Both traditional narratives and Virginie's stories comment directly on her experience of vulnerability. Fiction bordered on fact, and even the most conventional elements of traditional oral culture retained their place because they were relevant.

This is not to claim that songs and tales were snapshots of reality, but by showing where Virginie's fictions drew on her real-world experiences and anticipated the life she might have led, one can use them to explore the factors that shaped the existence of a young, female farm-servant in the 1880s: her education, her relations within the family, her religious outlook . . . One might equally want to use the stories to explore her fantasies, her conscious and unconscious desires, but that can only be attempted once her realism has been established. No doubt one could also discover much from her manuscripts about other aspects of Breton rural life and culture, such as food, health, games, the life cycle. Some of this may be quite specific to Virginie's place and time, but other aspects offer more general reflections on poverty, youth and gender. However, I did not just want to use this manuscript as a source for documenting rural misery, but rather I wanted to discover how Virginie

herself understood her situation, and whether her cultural formation provided her with the means to alter it.

There is a coherence to Virginie's portrayal of her world, which finds its clearest expression in her terminology. She seldom used the word 'misery', but rather 'ennui' or 'ennouillail'. It is a recurrent term across her songs, tales and stories and carries a variety of meanings. It can, and frequently does, mean 'boredom', as in the question posed by the Virgin Mary to the girl in the fields 'you must be bored all alone like this every day especially at your age when one loves to play'; and it can mean annoyance, as in the case of the servant fed up (ennouillail) after being woken three times in the night only to find no-one at the door. But Virginie also used variations on this term to describe hunger, exhaustion, loneliness, and desperation. The wife in her version of Rumpelstiltskin is 'tired (ennouillail) of being beaten'. 'Ennouillail' was part of the common experience, the background misery of being 'badly fed and working too hard'.<sup>110</sup> It was of different to the aberrant even if prolonged suffering of, for example, Jeanneton Barbot's marriages. It was structural, not exceptional. Occasionally Virginie's are characters able to 'desennouilleu', as did Cacherine Leloup on her wedding day and Suzon Deslandes when she went to the café. But it would return.

That does not mean, however, that Virginie accepted this condition as her necessary lot. Whereas Jeanneton Barbot expressed resignation, and Cacherine Leloup explosive fury, the character closest to her own situation, Suzon Deslandes, sought a way to improve her circumstances, first by emancipating herself from her mother, the active agent of misery, and secondly through an apprenticeship as a seamstress. In the literary fairytale genre, too often deemed a useful guide to the oral culture of past societies, marriage provides the mechanism for upward mobility, but Virginie did not hope for rescue by a husband. She did not envisage marriage as a remedy for misery but as one of its primary causes. For her other characters, domestic service in urban environments offered some respite. In the lives of Jeanneton and Cacherine, domestic (as opposed to farm) service was a moment of relative autonomy and comfort. Despite dire warnings from clerics and local political leaders of all persuasions, alarmed by the rapid exodus from the Breton countryside, this was a choice that tens of thousands of Virginie's contemporaries were making. The Breton serving maid would

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<sup>110</sup> Havard Ms 160.

become a stereotype of Parisian popular culture by the turn of the century.<sup>111</sup> Although Virginie herself never had that opportunity, it is possible that she envisaged her epistolary relationship with Havard as the precursor to such a move. Virginie would then have been an agent of rural modernization, not its pawn.

Although there can be little doubt that Virginie's position had its hardships, but this is not meant to be another chapter in the black book of the peasantry. The memoirs of other rural Breton children are not so negative about the experience of poverty; they recall compensations in the dense bonds of kinship and village inclusivity. The shared oral tradition, the vehicle for the expression of Virginie's dissatisfactions, was, for Pêr-Jakez Hélias and Charles Le Quintrec, the expression of their community's cohesion and its greatest cultural achievement.<sup>112</sup> The same is true for the less well-known work of Paul Lebois, born in Pleine-Fougères a quarter of a century after Virginie and who, while not blind to the miseries imposed by poverty, ill-health and domestic violence, nonetheless found something to value in this rural life which for him was also bound up with his father's songs and his grandmother's stories. However, all three were looking back on their youth from the late twentieth century, having been propelled into very different social positions by education; whereas rural poverty would not be a passing phase in Virginie's life. And unlike almost all the best-known peasant memoirists, whether in Brittany or elsewhere, she was a woman; the freedoms and pleasures permitted the young Hélias, Le Quintrec and Lebois would not have been hers. The rarity of rural women's memoirs, even now, is another reason that Virginie Desgranges' testimony is so valuable.

My assumption is that Virginie's stories parallel her attempts to direct her own life. Just as she was not satisfied with repeating the tales she received but reworked traditional material to achieve novel endings, so I believe that she was unwilling to settle for the life of drudgery, and worse, that everything in her circumstances conspired to force upon her. To return to the historiographical polarities of 'Peasants into Frenchmen', one might speculate that this means she was able to imagine, at least, slipping the bonds of tradition and establishing a new identity for herself. And to achieve this she was using the one tool she had that her parents did not: literacy. This raises the obvious question, what did she intend

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<sup>111</sup> Leslie Page Moch, *The Pariahs of Yesterday: Breton Migrants in Paris* (Durham, 2012).

<sup>112</sup> Pierre-Jakez Hélias, *The Horse of Pride: Life in a Breton Village* (New Haven, 1978); Charles Le Quintrec, *Une enfance bretonne* (Paris, 2000).

for her stories? They are not simply a cry of pain, they are deliberate pieces of creative fiction which she directed at an audience which was in a position to do something for her. Havard was a member of that audience, but perhaps not the only one. It is quite common in oral cultures for performers to have several addressees in mind at once, and the identified addressee to whom the song or tale is formally directed might be less important than an unidentified addressee. A song sung to a king may contain a message to his prisoner; a story told to one character may wake another from enchantment.

The characters to whom Virginie's heroines speak most are their mothers. Mothers, sometimes stepmothers, are powerful figures who enounce moral principles, who establish the rules of the house, who punish. Some of Virginie's mothers offer comfort too, but they also come in the guise of torturers and murderers of their own children, cannibalistic ogres and sexual deviants. Of course this is a well-known characteristic of the folktale genre, from which have derived a slew of psychoanalytic readings. However, Virginie also introduced mothers where they might not have been expected. For example, in an idiosyncratic version of 'The White Bride and the Black One', a mother is jealous of her daughter-in-law. She sticks a pin through her head which transforms her into a goose on the pond (the pin in the head motif crops up in some of Virginie's other tales), while she takes her place in her own son's bed.<sup>113</sup> It is quite typical of Virginie's narratives that a tale which the Brothers Grimm set in a palace is here located on a farm, but the incest motif is very unusual in this particular plot. Or again, in the story of 'The Princess Transformed into a Deer' a host of devils and she-devils try to force the sailor-hero to speak; if he keeps silent then he will break the princess's enchantment. In versions of this story told by sailors themselves, it was common to characterise these devils as ships-officers, but in Virginie's version they become diabolical imitations of family members, led by a mother who, while she beats and pricks the sailor, orders 'Speak to your mother, you nasty little disobedient child'.<sup>114</sup> Occasionally Virginie's female heroines do get to speak back to their mothers. At the end of Suzon Deslandes' tale, long after she has been thrown out by her mother and has made her own way in the world, she returns to bring food to her starving parent, and tells her 'there was a time when you starved me there was a time you made me sleep under the stars but that is nothing you are my mother and I still love you'.<sup>115</sup> Given her father's early death and her brother's absence at

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<sup>113</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 39 (ATU 403).

<sup>114</sup> Le Craver, *Contes*, no. 27 (ATU 401A).

<sup>115</sup> Havard Ms 312.

sea, there can be little doubt that Virginie's mother was the most important person in her life, the person she most needed to persuade if her circumstances were going to alter. As in all Cinderella stories, the prince (Havard) is something of a cipher, the relationship that really matters is that between mothers and daughters.