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Mothers, MARRAINES, and Prostitutes: Morale and Morality in First World War France

IN A NOVEL describing French women on the eve of mobilization for the First World War, the popular French author Marcelle Tinayre remarked: 'Woman's patriotism is not of the same nature as that of man. It does not possess the brutality of an instinct or the austerity of an idea. It's a sentiment ... that does not know the bloody drunkenness of battle. The France of women is above all the hearth, the spouse, the child.'¹ Here was a patriotism grounded not in the abstract love of country or in ideas of duty and honour, but in home and family life. While this statement expresses one set of powerful ideas about the proper role of women in wartime, it is but one end of a wide spectrum of cues given to women during the First World War.

Within hours of the declaration of war in 1914, the president, Raymond Poincaré, had called upon the French to forge a *union sacrée* to put aside their individual differences to fortify the nation against its enemies. Although the most obvious emblem of the *union sacrée* was the political alliance between anti-clerical Republicans and religious Catholics, the maintenance of the *union sacrée*, as Jean-Jacques Becker suggests, required constant effort, even after France had been invaded and the northern part of the country had been occupied by Germany. Thus, careful attention was given to keeping up the morale not only of soldiers but also of civilians and non-combatants. In an oft-cited example of the attention focused on civilians, in 1915 the cartoonist Forain depicted two trench-bound soldiers, known colloquially as 'poilus': one says to the other 'let's hope they hold on,' and, when asked to whom he refers, answers 'the civilians'.²

Like workers and the religious, women were among the not fully

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¹ Marcelle Tinayre, *La Veillée des Armes* (Paris, 1915).

² Forain, 'Inquietude', *Le Figaro*, 1 Sept. 1915; Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People* (1983, trans. Leamington Spa, 1985), pp. 3-5, 323-4. 'Poilu' was the term most often used to refer to a French soldier.

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empowered groups who needed to be brought into the union. And as the war spread its tentacles deeper into society, the contributions of female non-combatants were seen as crucial to survival in the face of the German occupation. Everyone from the press, by way of charities, to the legislature knew that war on so massive a scale was bound to make new demands on non-combatants and had ideas about how women should contribute to the war effort. Women, seen both as a guarantee of and as a potential threat to conventional morality and the social order, were recognized to be the key to keeping up morale. The quality of their morality and maternity would either lead the nation to victory against Germany or to ignominious defeat. But if women had essential and active roles to play in societies mobilized for war, their roles quickly came into conflict with one another. How, for example, were women to go out to work to support the war effort, while simultaneously doing their duty by repopulating the nation? At the heart of the debate about the role of French women in the First World War can be heard the patriotic call to motherhood.

This essay analyses the attempts to link the behaviour of women with the quest for victory and thereby to help dissolve the boundary between the home and battle fronts.¹ Specifically, it explains the attempts to maintain morale on the home front by linking it to women's morality and sexuality.² Thus, it focuses on two related and somewhat contradictory aspects of feminine morale: sexuality and maternity.

At the heart of the wartime construction of the 'patriote' was the mother, preferably of many sons. Even the woman war worker's contribution to the nation's well-being could be compromised by her failure to reproduce a future generation of soldiers. However, even if reproduction became the primary patriotic duty of women, their sexuality had to be carefully harnessed. While the figure of the *marraine de guerre*, the wartime 'god-mother', epitomizes both romantic longing and sexual fulfilment as supports for the war effort, debates over topics ranging from polygamy to venereal disease express the fear that drawing on women to sustain the war effort might undermine both the established social structure and

¹ For women as workers, see Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality: Gender Division in the French and British Metalworking Industries, 1914-1939* (Ithaca, 1995); Mathilde Dubesset, Françoise Thébaud, and Catherine Vincent, 'Les Munitionnettes de la Seine', in *1914-1918 L'Autre Front*, ed. Patrick Fridenson (Paris, 1978), pp. 189-219; and Jean-Louis Robert, 'Women and Work in France during the First World War', in *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work, and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918*, ed. Richard Wall and Jay Winter (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 251-66.

² For feminist dissent, see Susan R. Grayzel, 'Women's Identities at War: The Cultural Politics of Gender in Britain and France, 1914-1919' (Ph.D. diss., California at Berkeley, 1994); *Féminisme et Pacifisme: Même Combat*, ed. Danielle Le Bricquair and Odette Thibault (Paris, 1985); and Judith Wishnia, 'Feminism and Pacifism: The French Connection', in *Women and Peace: Theoretical, Historical, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Ruth Roach Pierson (London, 1987), pp. 103-13.

conventional morality. Women, who might sustain morale, might also undermine it.

* * *

The female war worker became one of the most obvious emblems of the contribution of women to the national effort. Although women factory workers and women workers in the war industries were neither new nor a problem unique to the French, the increase in their numbers and the nature of their work did arouse public interest and discussion. Specifically, although women war workers were praised for strengthening the defences of France, as soon as both the death tolls and their numbers increased, critics began to argue that women were neglecting their more fundamental role as mothers. Ongoing concern about *denatalité* led to public debates and eventually to the government regulating the working conditions of women factory workers who went back to work immediately after giving birth.¹

The debate was opened by Dr Adolphe Pinard, a leading pro-natalist, who made public in early December 1916 his fear that women workers paid a high price for working in factories, especially war industries. In a front-page story in *Le Matin*, repeating arguments he had made to the Academy of Medicine, he proclaimed the factory to be the 'killer of children'. Basing his claim upon the figures for infant mortality and the birth-rate in Paris during the first two years of the war, Pinard concluded 'with an absolute certitude' that factory work was responsible for the decline in successful births. He recommended that pregnant women, nursing mothers, and all women who had given birth within six months should be forbidden to work in factories. Anyone worried about a fall in the production of weapons should recognize that 'woman ... has but one natural aptitude for which she was created: *the production of the child*.'²

From January through March 1917, largely in response to Pinard's proposals, the Academy of Medicine discussed the measures the government should require of the war industries in order to protect mothers and children. The question was set in the context of the need to repopulate France after the war, given the loss of men, the falling birth-rate, and the rising level of infant mortality. Thus, the discussion focused less on the extent to which women should be prohibited from working in factories or protected while doing so, than on the conflict between the women's need to support themselves and their children by factory work, the state's need to avoid disrupting the war work necessary for the liberation of France, and the

¹ Mary Lynn Stewart, *Women, Work, and the French State: Labour Protection and Social Patriarchy, 1879-1919* (Montreal, 1989), pp. 193-4.

² A. Pinard, 'L'usine Tueuse d'Enfants', *Le Matin*, 6 Dec. 1916. Italics in original.

nation's need to ensure that its present and future mothers were adequately protected.¹

Looking to the post-war future, Pinard stated that the children produced by women 'were as ... indispensable for the second victory as munitions were for the first'.² As factory work and motherhood were incompatible, he proposed both that pregnant women and nursing and recently delivered mothers should be forbidden to work in factories, and that their lost wages be made up with a state subsidy of five francs a day. His most vocal opponent, Dr Paul Strauss, a senator, replied that not only was the evidence that women's factory work had caused the decline in the birth-rate insufficient, but also that closing factory doors to pregnant women and nursing mothers would have an effect opposite to the one desired. If childbirth became an obstacle to economic survival, women would choose 'voluntary sterility, abortion, [or] abandonment'.³ Rather than removing women from the factories, which would harm the war effort, the state should do what it could to protect them while they were at work.

Pinard's article provoked a similarly strong response from feminist journals such as *L'Action Féminine*. Jeanne Bouvier, a feminist and union activist, blamed not the factory itself for the declining birth-rate, but the 'economic and social anarchy' that forced women to work under harsh conditions: closing factory doors to women in need of work would only cause far more social damage to both women and their families. Instead, Bouvier urged both the adoption of changes in factory life aimed specifically at women, such as the creation of nursing rooms or crèches, and of workplace innovations, such as eight-hour shifts.⁴ Feminists, in general, strongly defended the right of women to work.

The Academy of Medicine, however, eventually decided that Pinard's proposals would be unworkable and too expensive. Instead, it recommended that pregnant women and nursing mothers should do light work for shorter hours and not work at night or with toxic substances. They should be offered medical advice and tips on hygiene from doctors and new women superintendents and, to encourage breast-feeding, factories should ensure that women could nurse their children while at work.⁵ The

1 Rapport Doléris, 'Sur la proposition de vœux relatifs à la protection maternelle et infantile dans les usines de guerre', *Bulletin de l'Académie de Médecine*, 30 Jan. 1917, pp. 116-19.

2 A. Pinard, 'De la Protection de L'Enfance Pendant la Deuxième Année de Guerre', *Revue d'Hygiène et de Police Sanitaire* (Jan. 1917), p. 36. This report was delivered to the Academy of Medicine and also printed in the *Bulletin de l'Académie de Médecine*.

3 Paul Strauss quoted in *Bulletin de l'Académie de Médecine*, 2 Jan. 1917, pp. 30-1.

4 Jeanne Bouvier, 'L'usine de guerre, tueuse d'enfants', *L'Action Féminine*, no. 47 (March 1917). Pain responded to Pinard in *La Française*, 23 Dec. 1916.

5 'Sur la proposition de vœux relatifs', pp. 367-8. A copy of the final report by Dr Jacques-Amédée Doléris was reprinted in *Revue d'Hygiène et de Police Sanitaire* (April-May 1917), pp. 277-83 and was

government, following the Academy's lead, made no radical changes. However, it did pass legislation that gave women time off during the working day, without docking their pay, to breast-feed their children. The legislation recognized the difficulty of *not* using women in wartime factory work even when it interfered with what they regarded as their other duties to the nation.¹ Although motherhood remained, rhetorically, women's most important task, reproduction was joined by production as the overt expression of women's patriotism.

* * *

Other wartime roles allowed women to express their patriotism from the home itself. In a gesture of support to soldiers either without a family to send them letters and parcels or whose families were cut off in the occupied areas of the country, several women involved in charitable work launched in January 1915 the *Famille du Soldat*, which assigned such men an 'adopted' *marraine de guerre*.² Uniquely French and more commonly known simply as a 'marraine' or, literally, godmother, this woman would keep up the morale of a soldier – known as her 'filleul' or godson – at the front by writing to him, sending him supplies, and helping him not to feel cut off from family and friends. When several newspapers, notably *L'Écho de Paris* and *L'Homme Enchaîné*, took up the idea and created their own organizations to match marraines with filleuls, they were flooded with applications from women who saw the opportunity to play a role on the front line. By 1916, an article in the *Revue de Deux Mondes* on 'Women and the War', which praised the *Famille du Soldat* and similar organizations, claimed that the marraine was already 'too well known for us to lay stress on'.³

In a history of the marraine published in 1918, Henriette Vismes praises the charities that gave women, ranging in age from grandmothers to young girls, this opportunity to help the war effort. The relationship between unknown men and women gave women a role to play and men a personal reason to fight on. And because marraines, like soldiers, could transcend

also issued separately under the title 'La Protection des Femmes et des Enfants dans les Usines' (Paris: Académie de Médecine, 1917). A copy of the latter can be found in A[rchives] N[ationales] F22 444.

¹ For the law of 5 Aug. 1917, see 'Loi concernant l'Allaitement Maternal dans les Établissements Industriels et Commerciaux', in *Revue d'Hygiène et de Police Sanitaire* (July-Aug. 1917), p. 522.

² For a wartime overview, see Henriette Vismes, *L'histoire authentique et touchante des marraines et des filleuls de guerre* (Paris, 1918). For more modern accounts, see the chapter devoted to 'Les Marraines' in Gabriel Perreux, *La Vie Quotidienne des Civils en France pendant la Grande Guerre* (Paris, 1966). See also 'L'arrière qui fascine', in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *14-18 Les Combattants des Tranchées* (Paris, 1986) and Françoise Thébaud, *La femme au temps de la guerre de 14* (Paris, 1986), pp. 141-7.

³ Louise Zeys, 'Les Femmes et la Guerre', *Revue de Deux Mondes*, 1 Sept. 1916, p. 188.

generation, class, and region, they could also epitomize the *union sacrée*. Vismes, however, concedes that ‘among the crowd of marraines ... and despite close surveillance ... [some had] usurped the good name of honest workers.’ Vismes distinguishes between ‘true’ and ‘frivolous’ marraines, noting stories of deception in their relationships with filleuls, which she attributes to those who selected a filleul independently of a charitable organization. Even if every marraine did not help her filleul, most of them did play, none the less, the role of the patriot. When soldiers thought of France, they thought of ‘our marraines’ and of ‘our mothers’.¹

The motives ascribed by Vismes to both marraines and filleuls were ‘purely altruistic’. However, the relationship became more complicated as it spread and as periodicals such as *Le Rire* and *La Vie Parisienne* began to list the names of men and women wishing to correspond. The role of marraine offered an alluring opportunity to violate the conventions governing social relationships between women and men. In letters, marraines who began as surrogate mothers could easily turn into the objects of sexual fantasies and, if the correspondents met during leaves, sexual partners.

As a result, cautionary tales about marraines appeared in newspapers almost as soon as the role was invented. In February 1915, *Le Journal* published ‘La Marraine’, which recounts the experience of a young wife who, through mistaken patriotic zeal, has begun to conduct a virtual love affair with her poilu. Fearful of the consequences for her marriage and respectable bourgeois life, she asks an older, unattractive friend if she can send the friend’s photograph to her soldier to douse his sexual longings. In the end, however, she cannot bear to send the false photo, as ‘the poor boy ... fights for France’ and it would be ‘very wrong to deceive him’.²

The sexual aspect of the marraine’s role in wartime popular culture revealed in such stories was also represented in songs and postcards aimed directly at soldiers, and in silent films. In songs such as ‘La Marraine des poilus’ and ‘Chère Marraine’, the marraine was welcomed not only for what she sent to the soldier in the trenches, but for what she might offer when he came to Paris on leave to meet her.³ The potentially comic results of such encounters were the subject of a popular Parisian comedy by Maurice Hennequin, Pierre Veber, and Henry de Gorse, *Madame et son filleul*, which ran from September 1916 until after the end of the war, and exploited the classic elements of farce by playing upon the potential for mistaken identities between marraines and filleuls who had never met. The filleul, Brichoux, does not in fact write his letters to his married marraine,

¹ Vismes, *L’histoire authentique*, pp. 1-3, 251-3.

² Pierre Valdagne, ‘La Marraine’, *Le Journal*, 18 Feb. 1915.

³ See Regina Sweeney, ‘Harmony and Disharmony: French Singing and Musical Entertainment during the Great War’ (Ph.D. diss., California at Berkeley, 1992), pp. 204-7.

Georgette Marjolin; his married buddy Lambrisset writes them. Lambrisset, who decides that he has fallen in love with 'his' marraine, sets up a sequence of comic misadventures when he decides to visit her while on leave, pretending to be Brichoux. In the course of a day, two marriages almost fall apart and the careers of Brichoux and Lambrisset are almost jeopardized by Mme Marjolin's colonel uncle. In the end, however, some of the characters are able to enjoy, in Mme Marjolin's words, 'the frisson of adultery without the remorse', and the colonel agrees to forgive everyone who has deceived him on the condition that 'in nine months we can count two more little Frenchmen!'¹ Although the play implies that the marraine might inspire more than one sort of poilu, and that the relationship might disrupt family life, it also affirms motherhood to be the ultimate form of patriotism for women. It touched so deep a popular chord that, in 1917, the government displayed the character of Brichoux on posters for the Third Defence Loan.²

By that time, the marraine had become so popular that *Le Figaro* had to remind readers that it was not in the business of publishing personal advertisements. Claiming to receive packets of letters daily imploring the editor to help readers in search of 'godmothers' and 'godsons', *Le Figaro* announced that it only printed letters to the editor: 'the idyll is not our affair.'³ However, advertisements, more often seeking marraines than fileuls, continued to fill the back pages of periodicals like *La Vie Parisienne* where a 'melancholy and serious aviator' could seek a 'gay and affectionate marraine' to inspire him or to fill his dreams, and specify 'blonde' or 'brunette', 'Lyonnaise' or 'Parisienne'. One poilu revealed how far the ground had shifted: 'I have no need for socks, but would be very happy to correspond with a young, pretty, affectionate marraine.'⁴

In addition to songs and plays, the marraine became in 1917 and 1918 the subject of novels. In a review of the popular novelist, Jeanne Landre's, *L'École des marraines*, published in 1917, 'Rachilde' criticized the role of the marraine. If, when playing the role, a woman gave 'her heart, her heart knew reasons that reason did not know and acted under the influence of reckless fantasy'. Rachilde, however, praised Landre for representing the marraine as one 'who does not confine herself to sending a knuckle of ham ... and adds to it her blue silk stocking!!'⁵ The very cover of the novel –

1 Maurice Hennequin, Pierre Veber, and Henry de Gorse, *Madame et son filleul* (1917, repr. Paris, 1950), pp. 142, 183.

2 For a copy of this poster and a brief explanation, see Rémy Paillard, *Affiches 14-18* (Reims, 1986), p. 141.

3 'Pour Nos Soldats: Marraines', *Le Figaro*, 15 Feb. 1917.

4 See advertisements in *La Vie Parisienne*, 6 Jan., 13 Jan., 27 Jan., 14 Apr., 21 Apr. 1917. The cost of the advertisements was three francs a line.

5 Rachilde, 'Revue de la quinzaine', *Mercure de France*, cxxii (July 1917). Rachilde had praised Landre

which depicts a soldier in uniform embracing a fashionably dressed woman in a railway station – displayed its focus on wartime romance unfettered by class and family ties.¹

L'École des marraines opens with the wartime world of Parisian women, all asking how they may support France in its hour of need.² It plays up the patriotic motivation of a group of marraines, who are knitting for their soldiers: 'Following the example of men who totally gave of themselves, women made it a point of honour to give the best of themselves to their homeland' (p. 8). The heroine, Claude Brevin, a cynical, single, young artist, alone stands apart wondering at their energy: 'Where are they going, where are they running to? Towards what imprudence, what adventure? They can come, our heroes, these ladies are ready!' (p. 14). Although she mocks the other women, their readiness to welcome home France's heroes is more harshly criticized by other writers. In Paul Géraudy's widely read novel *La Guerre, Madame*, published a year earlier, the hero criticizes the women he passes on the streets of Paris: 'Of what are they thinking? Have they husbands and brothers at the front? Are they rushing to some rendez-vous?'³ Their 'readiness' to welcome their heroes home becomes scandalous, a hindrance to the war effort.

Landre, however, goes out of her way to ensure that her readers understand that more than a superficial interest in men transforms the lives of women. Claude contemplates the plight of waiting women:

She thought of other young, anguished spouses, of anxious mothers, of fiancées who dared no longer wait, of departed comrades, already mown down for the most part, and she did not understand why some women could still be amused by everything, by nothing, like they had been at a time when the country was not in danger (p. 17).

Here, the standard criticism of women by male authors such as Géraudy is voiced by the heroine of a woman's novel.⁴ Yet the difference in

for possessing an imagination 'not only of a woman, but of a 'lettrée' [lettered person] when reviewing Landre's earlier war novel, *Puis il mourut*. See Rachilde, 'Revue de la quinzaine', *Mercur de France*, cxv (June 1916); for other novels not discussed here, see Henry Yvignac, *J'avais une Marraine* (Paris, 1918), where the term *marraine* becomes synonymous with the soldier's love object, and [Jean Barreville], *Marraines de Paris* (Paris, 1917).

1 The same cover was used to advertise the book in newspapers; see advertisement for *L'École des marraines* in *Le Figaro*, 2 June 1917.

2 Jeanne Landre, *L'École des marraines* (Paris [1917]). Further references will be made parenthetically. For more on Landre's career and popularity as a writer, see obituaries in Dossier Landre (DOS LAN) at the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, Paris.

3 Paul Géraudy, *La Guerre, Madame* (1916, repr. Paris, 1918), pp. 34-7; Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes*, pp. 28, 34, 239 n. 89.

4 The most widely read example of such a rebuke would be Henri Barbusse, *Le Feu (Journal d'une Escouade)* (Paris, 1916), ch. xiii. *Le Feu* was a best-seller and winner of the 1917 Prix Goncourt.

perspective is evident: Landre, like other women writing of war, is criticizing women who – implicitly unlike men – make the choice to escape the conflict. The price they pay shows itself in the sense of exclusion felt by unattached women like Claude. Although Claude's thoughts are with the soldiers in the trenches, with 'the poor sons of France', before becoming a *marraine* she represents the woman so deprived she has no one to watch over (p. 20).

Landre provides a counterpart to Claude's devotion to France and its soldiers in the character of Lucienne Loche, who is married but bored with a husband too old to fight. Lucienne decides to adopt 'a "godson" who will be in danger. I need to be afraid for someone. Translate: I need to love someone' (p. 47). From the start, Lucienne represents one type of *marraine* and Claude, who has to be persuaded to write to Lieutenant René Gerville, represents another. The difference between them would have been readily understood by contemporary women readers. Lucienne, seeking adventure, becomes the *marraine* of a man who does not even write his own letters, but, in a plot similar to *Madame et son filleul* and Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, copies them from the letters written by a fellow-soldier to his fiancée. Whereas Lucienne represents the opportunity for hypocrisy, adultery, and deceit in the relationship, Claude represents the *marraine* as the perfect epistolary comrade.

Claude is persuaded to overcome her objections to becoming a *marraine* after being told that Gerville, who suffers from shell shock, needs a 'moral' uplift (p. 85). Quickly, however, she becomes a woman anxiously awaiting her daily letter from a soldier to whom 'a *marraine* has given back his moral equilibrium and his good humour' (p. 91). The relationship between Claude and René transforms both of them. For Claude, 'a godson at the front' ties her directly to the war; everywhere she turns, she meets *marraines* who give the same account of themselves: 'like everyone, am I not a patriot?' (pp. 95, 100). Although simply being a *marraine* makes one a 'female patriot', Claude, unlike others such as Lucienne, truly loves her *filleul*. The comic sub-plot involving Lucienne is designed by Landre to show off Claude, who loves and loses René without meeting him, as an archetype. When he dies for France, their love becomes the ultimate act of faith and patriotism (pp. 312-14). The idea that such a loving relationship between a man and a woman who never meet could regenerate not only the soldier fighting for France but also the woman at home made the tie between *marraine* and *filleul* an integral component of the *union sacrée*.

The last word on the subject, however, is spoken by one of the more cynical characters in the novel, Claude's friend, the cartoonist Trik, who calls the *marraine* 'a necessary object of war ... indispensable like a toothbrush' (p. 317). However, despite the pitfalls, he thinks that the new form

of tie between men and women is, on the whole, a good thing. Thanks to the marraines, romance has continued, regardless of the losses of the war; so life has continued. That message might have been the novel's: the marraine's most important contribution to morale was to sustain the illusion of romance despite shell-shock.

None the less, tales of the flighty marraine torn between numerous filleuls continued to recur in the daily press. An article on 'Marrainissime' from September 1917 recounts the dilemma faced by a 'true young girl' who has collected seven godsons from all ranks and types of soldier, two of whom have leave and are coming to visit her at the same time. When asked if it were not dishonest to lie to the 'poor boys', each of whom thinks she writes to him alone, she replies that filleuls often collect marraines. The marraine, the story implies, should not necessarily be taken seriously, but be seen as an inviting fantasy (a tease or a bit of fluff), part of the 'rêve du poilu' depicted on postcards.¹

The marraine, who provided an important link between the front line and the home front, embodied both the romantic and the sexual contribution of women to morale, both the sexualized icon and the spirit of the nation. Even as their promise was linked to sexual behaviour as potentially disruptive of the status quo as adultery and promiscuity, the marraines' epistolary ties to French poilus – indeed, their very existence – came to be regarded as 'necessary objects of war'.

* * *

Although the marraine might help to keep up morale by linking the front line with the home front, she might also undermine conventional morality, unless counterbalanced by the more powerful image of motherhood. As the death toll mounted, however, fears about France's falling birth-rate became more acute, and some of the solutions proposed met conventional bourgeois sexual morality head on.

A series of articles, pamphlets, and books on the dangers of the falling birth-rate urged the French, especially women, to head off the other 'casualties of war'. Books like *Mère sans être épouse* suggested that with 'our sons dead for France, our daughters must sacrifice their prejudices and their sentiments, even the most respectable, in order to assure the growth of the victorious Patrie' by agreeing to become unwed mothers. As women alone had the capacity to save France by replacing fallen soldiers and increasing the population, the loss of men offered the choice between

¹ See comments, Louis Marsolleau, 'Marrainissime', *Le Figaro*, 6 Sept. 1917. For an image of a 'rêve du poilu' [poilu's dream] that shows a soldier dreaming of, among other things, a marraine, see the postcard reproduced in Audoin-Rouzeau, 14-18 *Les combattants*, pp. 148-9, which depicts both 'la marraine: article de Paris' and 'la bourgeoise: article de ménage' as opposite poles of the poilu's dream.

'single motherhood or polygamy'.¹ Similar books called the 'mobilization of cradles' no less necessary than the mobilization of military classes and told of generals who asked soldiers returning from leave whether they had 'done their duty'. Repopulating the country was seen as another form of war.²

Proposals that compromised conventional morality, particularly as applied to women, provoked a severely critical response, especially from feminists and especially on the subject of polygamy. Jane Misme, editor of *La Française*, denounced polygamy as a barbarous response to the shortage of men. Despite the deaths of the young men which deprived so many young women of the chance to marry, polygamy would reveal 'a singular overthrow of the moral sense'. Women deprived of 'love' and 'motherhood' should be seen as 'victims of the war ... who suffered in their souls': their 'sacrifice, like that of their brothers', should bring honour to the country and themselves, not disgrace.³ Other feminists argued that an attack on alcoholism and prostitution, combined with better conditions for mothers and children, would be a better response to depopulation than polygamy. The encouragement of unwed motherhood was criticized in the pages of *La Française* as 'degrading for women, humiliating for men ... noxious for the child ... dangerous for public order and intimate happiness'.⁴ Elsewhere, Marguerite de Witt-Schlumberger emphasized the need to preserve existing moral standards to guard against the loosening of morals that always accompanied war. She linked the role of women in maintaining strict standards of morality to the 'struggles' of men on the front line; it was a fight 'no less useful'.⁵

Such journals were also willing to criticize women. Jean Pain challenged those celebrating the contribution of women to the war effort, as if they were afraid to acknowledge women's weaknesses, particularly 'a relaxing of morals'. For Pain, the danger from the war lay in exposing women to a 'new existence' that gave some of them the 'taste for prostitution'. Feminism should inculcate in women a corporate, national sense of identity that would enable them to fight temptation and keep up moral standards.⁶

1 Martin De Torina, *Mère sans être épouse: Pour La France et pour Soi-même* (Paris, 1917), pp. 25, 23.

2 F. A. Vuillemet, *La Mobilisation des berceaux* (Paris [1917]), p. 42. Marie-Monique Huss discusses the theme of pro-natalism in wartime postcards that also portrayed repopulation as a military obligation: see 'Pronatalism and the Popular Ideology of the Child in Wartime France: The Evidence of the Picture Postcard', in *Upheaval of War*, ed. Wall and Winter, pp. 329-68.

3 Jane Misme, 'Les Français seront-ils polygames?', *La Française*, 23 Jan. 1916.

4 Jane Misme, 'Mères Libres', *La Française*, 27 Oct. 1917; Marguerite Clement, 'Ce que Les Suffragettes Pensent de la Repopulation', *La Française*, 18 May 1916.

5 Mme de Witt-Schlumberger, 'Unité de la Morale et Repression de la Traite des Blanches', *L'Action Féminine*, no. 45 (Aug. 1916).

6 Jean Pain, 'La Guerre et les Moeurs', *La Française*, 14 Oct. 1916.

In an attempt to buttress as well as to defend the morality of French women, the Conseil National des Femmes Françaises' sub-section on morality launched in late 1917 an energetic attack on what it called an almost 'pornographic' pamphlet found in the possession of a British soldier. The pamphlet, entitled 'Five Minutes Conversation with Young Ladies', and described as one 'of the most infamous productions' designed to 'facilitate vice by foreign men', notably English-speaking soldiers, was a handbook of expressions listed in both French and English that British soldiers might need when talking to French women. 'Voulez-vous accepter l'apéritif? (Would you accept an aperitif?); Où habitez-vous? (Where do you live?); Notre bonheur sera de courte durée (Our happiness will not last long); Pouvez-vous diner avec moi? (Would you dine with me?); and Permettez moi de vous baiser la main – de vous embrasser (Let me kiss your hand, embrace you),' were among the phrases selected for being especially offensive. The pamphlet was attacked on two fronts: for the damage it would do to France by encouraging Allied soldiers to vice, and for angering American, Canadian, and British women who sent their men to defend French women and expected them to come back home 'morally and physically pure'.¹ Although, in this account, the responsibility for sexual misconduct was shared between men and women, women rather than men were required to guard against it.

More concrete threats to morale came from alcohol and prostitution. The use of alcohol by women and the connection between alcohol and prostitution had already been deplored by French politicians, but not until October 1917 were prostitutes forbidden by law to enter bars and cafés.² Two years earlier, François Dulom had opened his study of prostitution 'dans les débits' by quoting the following lines:

Chez les débitants de liqueurs et de bière
Que l'on peut voir danser avec la garnison
Ces fameuses catins à la vie ordinaire
Qui sont de notre armée un terrible poison.³

According to Dulom, alcohol created an atmosphere that encouraged prostitution, 'poisoned' soldiers, and threatened to undermine the 'physical, material, and moral health of the society'. By enabling soldiers to meet

¹ Quoted in 'Un Étrange Manuel de Conversation', *L'Action Féminine*, no. 51 (Dec. 1917).

² The law of 1 Oct. 1917 is described in Alain Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, 1990), p. 335. Local measures already restricted this in specific areas of France.

³ Translated loosely as follows: 'It's in the home of the dealers of liquors and beer/That one can see dancing with the garrison/The famous harlots of ordinary (everyday) life/who are a terrible poison for our army': François Dulom, 'La Prostitution dans les Débits' (Paris [1915]), pp. 2, 6, 10.

prostitutes, bars and cafés were ‘even more contrary to military discipline than to the health of the troops’. Dulom asked the state to punish those ‘who provide asylum to women leading a bad life or reputed to do so’, by implication the owners of the bars. He viewed the threat as both to discipline and to the fitness of the fighting man. Yet the idea of providing a sexual release for soldiers remained one of the main justifications for official *maisons tolérées*.

Alain Corbin suggests that the vigorous suppression of brothels and prostitution increased during the early years of the war, which also saw a marked increase in venereal disease.¹ In a contemporary history of Parisian prostitution during the war, Léon Bizard records that while prostitutes initially fled the city, fearing a repeat of the siege of 1870, by mid-autumn they had returned, and Paris regained ‘if not gaiety, none the less movement and life’. While the location of prostitutes moved within Paris during the war, the number of brothels quickly bounced back and rose after 1916. Although Bizard noted the growth in prostitution and disease during the first years of the war, he claims that conditions later deteriorated despite the increasing regulation. Rebutting those who linked promiscuity with public amenities, Bizard attributes it to regulations forbidding restaurants and cafés to serve alcohol to soldiers and women and requiring them to close at nine. If soldiers and women could not go out in public, ‘what else was there to distract oneself with’ besides sex? Thus, regulations introduced in the last two years of war in an attempt to buttress conventional morality ironically encouraged ‘debauchery and prostitution’.²

Despite more regulation, letters to the Paris prefect of police complained that the prevalence of prostitutes was a threat to soldiers. One protest against the ‘deplorable spectacle and real dangers’ presented in 1916 by both registered and unregistered prostitutes near St Lazare was followed a month later by a complaint from ‘the wife of a mobilized soldier’ that the presence of prostitutes mocked ‘wives and mothers who cried’.³ Others explained that whenever concert-halls and cinemas emptied, the Opéra station of the Métro became a ‘veritable market of women’ and that numerous ‘women from Belgium and Lille’ congregated near the Gare du Nord and the Gare de l’Est. When national factories were short of workers, this indignant writer continued, ‘it is the moment for authority to be firm and inflexible, because it should not let these new and deplorable habits take root.’ Similar complainants demanded in 1917 that streets like the Rue

¹ Corbin, *Women for Hire*, p. 335.

² Dr Leon Bizard, *Les Maisons de Prostitution de Paris pendant la Guerre* (Poitiers, 1922), pp. 2, 5.

³ ‘Syndicat pour la Défense des intérêts du Quartier St.-Lazare’, letter, 2 June 1916 and ‘Une femme de Mobilisé’, letter, 4 July 1916 to prefect of police, A[rchives de la] P[réfecture du] P[olice, Seine] BA 1689.

St Denis and the Boulevard Sebastopol should be emptied of 'all women who accost men and children and above all our soldiers. It's repugnant!'¹

Reports on the morale of the population of Paris during the last two years of the war looked carefully at the activities of women, especially workers and prostitutes. The report on arrondissements 7 and 15 had this to say about the effect of four years of war on behaviour: 'In all the popular quarters prostitution has diminished. It's necessary to admit evidently that's because men are absent. But it's also quite necessary to admit that prostitution can no longer recruit among women when work, at a high wage, is assured.' However, the report also observed that well-paid women had also developed 'masculine habits' like frequenting the wine merchant. If prostitution had diminished, and reports from other districts contradicted this claim, drunkenness was increasing. After the war, Paris would need 'considerable moral amelioration'.²

Although the social-purity movement was launching a counter-offensive, insisting that moral education would reduce the level of prostitution, the government continued to support the establishment of *maisons tolérées*. Regulated prostitution had its defenders. In a review of measures taken to prevent venereal disease, Dr Paul Faivre argued that regulated prostitution did not encourage vice, and did protect the population from the threat of the 'femme isolée', the unregulated woman. Faivre noted that it had become more necessary, but also more difficult, to distinguish between women who were merely flirting and those working the streets: unmarried female war factory workers, for example, who gave themselves to specific men, while not exactly prostitutes, needed to be watched closely. Faivre did agree that heightened public awareness was needed, however, and praised the efforts of the Fédération Française des Sociétés Antipornographiques, who preached the purity of morals to soldiers on behalf of the ministry of war.³ M. Pourésy of the Fédération was even praised for his work as an 'ardent apostle of the purity of morals' in the English *Vigilance Record*.⁴

More specific measures to control venereal diseases were aimed directly at soldiers. The Academy of Medicine was invited to issue a set of guidelines telling soldiers what they could do to avoid catching them. During November 1915, the academy fine-tuned the language, changing, for example, the wording of a sentence recommending sexual continence from

¹ Unsigned letter, 7 July 1916, 'Un de vos bons amis', letter, 9 Sept. 1916, letter, 12 July 1917 to prefect of police, APP BA 1689.

² Rapport sur L'État d'Esprit de la Population Parisien: 6ème District, 9 Sept. 1918, APP BA 1614.

³ Dr Paul Faivre, 'Prophylaxie Des Maladies Vénériennes', *Revue d'Hygiène et de Police Sanitaire* (Sept.-Nov. 1917), pp. 657-704.

⁴ 'M. Pourésy's Work in France', *Vigilance Record* (March 1918).

'the most sure method' to 'evidently the most sure method'. Few of the eleven paragraphs were altered, but the sixth – which recommended the use of a 'rubber préservatif' and described how to wash properly after sexual intercourse – led to a long discussion. Disagreement over what to call 'préservatifs' – in the end, the slang terms 'condom' and 'capote' were added in parentheses – provoked a debate over the frankness of the language used and the academy's agreement to issue such guidelines. One of the more revealing alterations to the paragraph was made to the opening phrase. Originally it began 'every time you have sexual intercourse with these women don't neglect to use a rubber préservatif.' In the final version, however, it began 'every time that you have the weakness to be tempted by these women'.¹ The shift from the language of prevention to the language of morals – of male 'weakness' and female 'temptation' – reveals how far the academy was concerned with moral and social order rather than just the prevention of disease.

Several years later, Louis Fiaux's full-length study of the sexual behaviour of soldiers expresses concern 'not only for the power of armed combatants but for the future of the race' if venereal disease went unchecked. He cites reports that its increase among both soldiers and civilians was attributable to 'the moral relaxation, inevitable in time of war'. Despite this, Fiaux denounces regulated prostitution, especially separate *maisons tolérées* for soldiers, as a way of stopping the spread of disease. As the benefits from regulation were 'uncertain and unreal', only more wholesome institutions such as the Maisons du Soldat and Foyers du Soldat – charitable establishments designed to provide soldiers with the trappings of home life – combined with education could combat disease.²

Although soldiers learned of some of the dangers of venereal disease from Bizard, his focus was the threat from unregulated prostitutes. Warning young soldiers of the 'sufferings [lurking] in a kiss', he added that disease did not require a lifetime of debauchery but 'a single imprudence, a single minute of forgetfulness'. One way to stop the spread of venereal disease, which he attributed to the pernicious influence of 'licentious' publications and other spectacles such as plays and revues that 'perverted the imagination of youth', was the proper, pious respect for 'woman who represents, let us not forget, the ... interests of the Family and of the Fatherland'. While urging soldiers to lead chaste lives, Bizard warned them

¹ 'Rapport sur la distribution dans l'armée de Notices relatives à la prophylaxie des maladies évitables', *Bulletin de l'Académie de Médecine*, 16 Nov., 30 Nov. 1915. Another description of anti-venereal measures can be found in Dr F. Balzer, 'Prophylaxie et Traitement des Maladies Vénériennes en Temps de Guerre', *Revue d'Hygiène et de Police Sanitaire* (Nov. 1915).

² Louis Fiaux, *L'Armée et la Police des Mœurs: Biologie Sexuelle du Soldat* (Paris, 1917), pp. vii, 16-17, 23, 194, 207.

of the danger from prostitutes. The war had led to an increase in the numbers of single women 'deprived of direction and good counsel', who turned to prostitution to support themselves. As these 'unregulated' women, who often appeared young and healthy, posed the greatest threat to soldiers, anyone unable to control his sexual urges, who succumbed to temptation, should seek out the regulated prostitute.¹

Despite the opinion of Bizard and other officials that regulated brothels were preferable to the alternatives, many feminists denounced the government for tolerating the growth in regulated prostitution, while 'honest women' and soldiers' wives found great difficulty in visiting their husbands.² This was not the way to promote the war effort or the rise in the birth-rate that France needed. When the French government announced on 13 March 1918 that it would create more regulated brothels, the heads of the Conseil National des Femmes Françaises and the Union Française pour le Suffrage des Femmes, Julie Siegfried and Marguerite Witt-Schlumberger, protested strongly to the minister of the interior that as 'mothers, wives, and sisters of soldiers', they regarded licensed brothels as 'a gross insult to woman and the family of which she is the guardian ... We maintain, with conviction based upon our experience of life, that the regulation of vice will not help to do away with disease.'³

If disease threatened to undermine the fitness of the troops, alcoholism, prostitution, and sexual promiscuity by 'unlicensed' women threatened to undermine France's moral foundation. Women's sexuality thus presented a paradox: while war was seen as bound to lead to more voracious sexual appetites, immorality in both soldiers and women would endanger the war effort. The *union sacrée* might unravel as prostitutes battled wives for sexual access to soldiers and as venereal disease halted reproduction. At a time when worry about the falling birth-rate could prompt such unconventional and controversial solutions as polygamy and unwed motherhood, women's sexuality – not just their labour – had to be channelled productively to the benefit of the nation.

* * *

1 Dr Léon Bizard, *Les Maladies Vénériennes: Conférence faite aux jeunes Soldats appartenant aux Corps de Troupes du Gouvernement Militaire de Paris* (Paris, 1917), pp. 13, 16, 23. Further references will be made parenthetically in the text.

2 'Rapport de l'Assemblée Générale du Conseil National des Femmes Françaises: Unité de la morale', *L'Action Féminine*, no. 50 (Sept. 1917), p. 204. The danger of sexual vice leading inevitably to venereal disease as a threat to population growth is detailed in C. Colson, 'Tâche de Demain: La Population', *Revue des deux mondes* (April 1915), pp. 870-5.

3 This letter was also used to gather international feminist support, and I have relied on the version translated and reprinted as part of 'The Women of France and Morality', in *The Vigilance Record* (Sept. 1918).

Whether as mothers, as *marraines*, or as emblems of the moral code, women were seen to play a crucial, national role in First World War France. During the first total war, *union sacrée* implied that everyone had to part to play, but left the part to be played by women undefined. Soon, in addition to their well-known movement into factories, women's more intimate connection to the war, through their ties to military men, became crucial elements of their patriotism.

First, they were asked to sustain, and ideally to raise, the birth-rate by replacing men lost in battle, channelling their sexuality into reproduction as well as production. Second, in the role of godmothers (or *marraines*), they were asked to support soldiers, even to reward them sexually for their valour, without either endangering social harmony or challenging conventional morality by unbridled promiscuity. Just as repopulation might be jeopardized by disease, the stable, moral order might be undermined by 'liberating' war work in factories, as well as by polygamy, illegitimacy, and a taste for habitual impersonal sexual intercourse. France was not unique in its wartime concern with women's sexual behaviour, but France alone created a model of womanhood as ambiguous as the *marraine de guerre*. Offering a new form of morale, the *marraine*, together with the mother, promised to make a specifically feminine contribution to the war effort, sustaining France's current soldiers and, potentially, delivering future ones.

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