

### “Les Contes de France-Soir”: Gender and Popular Fiction in Post-Liberation France

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Not surprisingly, 1945 was an unpromising year for best-sellers. An acute paper shortage reduced daily newspapers to just two pages and severely limited book production. As André Rousseaux, the book reviewer for *Le Figaro* gloomily commented: “In fact, there are hardly any books in the bookshops anyway.”<sup>1</sup> Whilst sports, including rugby, football, cycling and athletics, the cinema and theatre, especially escapist “théâtre du boulevard,” rapidly returned to pre-war levels of activity, publishing remained in the doldrums. The first post-Liberation issue of *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* carried a major article on “Le Livre et le papier,” charting a continuing decline in paper allocation from the Occupation onwards.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, although literature was all but driven from the pages of daily newspapers such as *Le Figaro* and *France-Soir*, in favor of coverage of sports, “spectacles” and film, it is possible, precisely because the sample is necessarily more limited, to draw some conclusions about the role of writing in the construction of a post-war national identity and its role in what *Les Lettres Françaises* called “la Renaissance Française,” particularly as regards its depiction of gender.<sup>3</sup>

On the face of it, the salient features of literary production in 1945 seem to point less towards the much-vaunted French “Renaissance” than towards a concern with continuity and conformity. The literary prizes for the year, which also include the belated awards for 1944, can hardly be seen to be rewarding innovation. No

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<sup>1</sup> “Il n’y a plus guère de livres, d’ailleurs, dans les librairies.” André Rousseaux, “Les Livres,” *Le Figaro*, Feb. 24, 1945.

<sup>2</sup> “Le Livre et le papier,” *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, Apr. 5, 1945.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of a post-war “Renaissance” was a European-wide cultural phenomenon: one of the most important cultural journals in Italy, for example, was Elio Vittorini’s *Rinascità*.

sooner had the Prix Fémina for 1944 been awarded, in January 1945, to Vercors and the team of Les Editions de Minuit, than they rejected it on the grounds that the jury were not themselves Resistants.<sup>4</sup> The Goncourt for 1944 went to Elsa Triolet, for *Le Premier accroc coûte 200,000 francs*, which probably owed as much to the jury's desire for rehabilitation after war-time collaboration as to the intrinsic merit of the work, an ambition which also inflected on the award of the 1945 prize to Jean-Louis Bory's *Mon Village à l'heure allemande*.<sup>5</sup> The Prix Renaudot for 1944 was more adventurous in rewarding Roger Peyrefitte for his novel *Les Amitiés particulières*, described by Christopher Todd as "a rather cynical story set in a Catholic boys' boarding school, in which the hero seduces a younger pupil, outmaneuvers a mysterious Jesuit priest who discovers their liaison and would appear to fancy the younger boy himself, and finally abandons his young friend to suicide, while saving his own skin,"<sup>6</sup> although it reverted to a more conservative stance in December 1945 in giving the award to Henri Bosco's *Le Mas Théotime*, a peasant drama set in Provence. Indeed, it came hot on the heels of the award of the 1945 Prix Fémina to Anne-Marie Monnet for her peasant novel set in Savoie, *Le Chemin du soleil*, which itself derived from a long tradition of peasant novels going back to René Bazin and best represented by Jean Giono.

Whilst Peyrefitte and Bory may have been relative newcomers, whereas Triolet and Bosco most definitely were not, 1945 saw the re-emergence of literary stalwarts from the interwar years, part of the phenomenon identified in the cinema by Jean-Pierre Jeancolas as "quinze ans d'années trente." Amongst familiar names from the pre-war period who published in 1945 were Georges Bernanos, Ramuz, Aragon and Eluard, André Chamson, Joë Bousquet, Colette, whose *Gigi* was one of the most popular novels of the year, Henri Troyat and Mauriac. Most indicative of the continuity between the pre- and post-war periods was the imperturbable progression of long novel-cycles begun in the 1930s, or even earlier: Georges Duhamel, who returned to publishing in style after remaining silent throughout the Occupation with three volumes, *Chronique des saisons ambres*, *Inventaire de l'abîme* and *Civilisation française*, also brought out the concluding volume to his long roman fleuve, *Chronique des Pasquier*, *La Passion de Joseph Pasquier*, whilst Jules Romains contributed volumes nineteen and twenty of what would be the twenty-seven-volume *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*, *Cette Grande lueur à l'Est* and *Le Monde est ton aventure*. In fact, the public's taste for this highly conservative genre was also satisfied by the first two volumes of Sartre's *Les Chemins de la liberté* and Troyat's *Tant que la terre durera*. There was also, as was to be expected, a brisk, but by no means overwhelming, trade in wartime and Resistance literature, both fiction and non-fiction, including le Père Bruckberger's *Si Grande peine*, *Nous sommes des rebelles*, by the pseudonymous "Indomitus," Pierre Molaine's *Violences*, about a Cossack fighting for France, Roger Vaillant's more subversive *Drôle de jeu*, and Colonel Rémy's *Mémoires d'un agent de la France libre*. Apart from some rare examples of spectacular new writing, such as Romain Gary's *Education européenne*, literature in 1945 provided a negative answer to a rhetorical editorial in *Le Figaro*, "Sommes-nous en période révolutionnaire?"<sup>7</sup> and contradicted any ambition for the much-vaunted "Renaissance." This is literature which forged the nation's identity in a past which

<sup>4</sup> "Les Lauréats refusent le Prix Fémina," *Le Figaro*, Jan. 30, 1945.

<sup>5</sup> See Gisèle Sapiro, *La Guerre des écrivains, 1940-1953* (Paris, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Todd, *A Century of French Best-Sellers (1890-1990)* (Lewiston, NY/Lampeter, 1994), 84.

<sup>7</sup> "Enquête: Sommes-nous en période révolutionnaire?" *Le Figaro*, Jan. 30, 1945.

began with the immediate experience of Occupation and defeat and which extended back to the period before the First World War, and its portrayals of gender tended to reinforce stereotypes from that past.

Arguably, the most significant innovations in publishing in 1945 took place in the field of popular literature. The translation of Katherine Windsor’s novel *Forever Amber* (*Ambre*), a romantic romp set in Restoration England, built upon a taste for historical drama already whetted by *Gone with the Wind*, reissued after the war and boosted by the re-release of the film, and ushered in a number of French imitations, most notably Cecil Saint-Laurent’s *Caroline chérie*. Similarly, 1945 saw the launch of Gallimard’s *Série Noire*, under the direction of the former Surrealist Marcel Duhamel, which both created and fed on a vogue for popular Anglo-Saxon culture in the area of crime fiction. However, neither the historical bodice-rippers nor the hard-boiled crime novels did much to alter gender stereotypes of powerful and cynical men and “femmes” who were either weak or “fatale,” or both.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the adoption of an essentially American popular culture in film and popular fiction calls into question, as the writers for *Les Lettres Françaises* and other left-leaning cultural journals were well aware, any notion of a “Renaissance” which was peculiarly “française,” and post-war French national identity was forged, not merely in a celebration of the Resistance and the Liberation, but in an ambiguous mixture of nostalgia for the interwar years and fascination with the New World.

If the daily press, working within very severe constraints, relegated its literary coverage to a subordinate level in 1945, there is one particular exception which is highly illuminating regarding popular taste in the first summer since the war. *France-Soir*, the major evening paper of the capital and successor to Jan Prouvost’s interwar *Paris-Soir*, which ran up to six editions a day in spite of the paper shortage, as well as to the immediate post-Liberation *Défense de la France*, may have restricted its literary news to the literary prizes, but, in July and August 1945, it ran a series of twenty-six short-stories under the rubric “Le Conte de *France-Soir*,” which provide a fascinating glimpse into middle-brow popular culture of the period. The series evidently proved popular enough for the paper to introduce, in the autumn of 1945, a *roman-feuilleton*, *L’Assassin vient les mains vides...*, a French *roman policier* by Pierre Boileau, which asserted French, as opposed to American, expertise of the genre, and which was followed in November by *Anne et Mary: Femmes Pirates. Grand récit historique de Pierre Nezelaf*. This set *France-Soir* on a path of romantic historical fiction which it was to follow for the next forty years, though later in illustrated form, a genre increasingly targeting a female readership.<sup>9</sup>

Of the authors of these twenty-six stories, only two had a prior literary reputation: Edith Thomas, who had published during the Occupation in Les Editions de Minuit, and who contributed two pieces, neither of which drew upon her Resistance experience, and the romantic novelist Thyde Monnier, also the author of two stories. In other words, none of the authors of the “contes de *France-Soir*” carry any literary baggage and their stories can be read without preconceptions. What is interesting at first sight is the lack of interest in the war, the Occupation and Liberation. There are only five references to 1940-45, and only two of those substantial, one of which is “Jeannette et Bérénice,” by Marcelle Segal, which evokes the memory of the Resistance and Deportation, and to which we will return, and

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of post-war popular crime fiction, see Gabriel Thoveron, *Deux siècles de paralittérature* (Liège, 1996), 431-45.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the decline in popularity of the *feuilleton* and its replacement by the *roman-photo* and the comic-book narrative, see Thoveron, *Deux siècles*, 437-38.

Pierre Molaine's "Pile!... Non. Face!...", narrated by the survivor of a tank battle in 1940 and which is very similar to the final section of Malraux's *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg*. Otherwise, Jean Sabran's "Dans un champ de tournesols," although set in 1942 and evoking the "Exode," is essentially a peasant-novel, located on the Loire, in which a wily countryman gets the better of Parisians who have buried their savings on his land.

In fact, if it was assumed that the readers of *France-Soir* did not wish to be reminded of recent history on their holidays in 1945, the peasantry and the countryside proved popular, evidenced, as we have seen, by the literary prizes awarded to Bosco and Monnet. In addition to "Dans un champ de tournesols," Edith Thomas, in "Marthe," recounts the fate of a simple-minded countrywoman who dies whilst trying to walk to the hospital in the nearest town, whilst Bernard Gervaise, in "Après la bataille," and Henri Saint-Alain, in "La Vengeance de l'instituteur," tap the vein of rural dispute and comedy already exploited by Gabriel Chevalier in the *Clochemerle* series. This comforting reliance on rural stereotypes, tragic or comic, is counterbalanced by two stories set in the United States. "Hara-Kiri," by Georges Reyner, is the story of an unsuccessful author and the charismatic editor of a New York literary magazine, whilst the same author's "Le Paradis" satirizes American consumerism in a tale of a futuristic couple who, in their pursuit of simplicity, journey to the original island of Robinson Crusoe, only to find it covered in the trappings of modern tourism.

By far the majority of the stories, however, concern sexual relationships. Some, such as Georges Dolley's "Heureux pères," adopt a comic format akin to that of the popular "comédies de boulevard." Here, a young man is paid a large sum of money to recognize the child of a total stranger's mistress. The mistress, however, gives birth to quintuplets and the real father is denounced by his wife, who is visiting a friend in the same maternity clinic, for being unable to produce children (the theme of birth-rate, incidentally, is a recurrent underlying one in many of the stories). In Jacques Lombard's "Ici... on ne divorce pas...", a divorced couple who work in the same office in the Ministry of Defense, beg the Minister separately to allow them to change offices, only to find their request granted, but with them both being relocated to the same office. The only solution is for them to re-marry and the story concludes: "This time they were happy and of course they had a lot of children."<sup>10</sup> In the context of French post-war anxieties, this may be read as not merely a conventional fairy-tale ending, but an indirect reflection of the concern for an increase in the birth-rate.

Like most comedies, these stories rely upon a narrow set of gender stereotypes, in which women appear as stupid, unfaithful, manipulative and domineering in a variety of combinations, and the men, however ineffectual, as being ultimately in command. In the aforementioned "Heureux pères," for example, the mistress and mother of the quintuplets is remarkable only for her absence. The woman often appears as a "veuve": experienced, manipulative and occasionally "fatale": in Georges Vidal's "Léocadie," for example, the eponymous heroine, a glamorous widow on the Côte d'Azur attracts rich men with fast and expensive cars, only to cause them to have expensive accidents. She is revealed as the proprietor of the only garage on that stretch of the Côte.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, many of the female characters are depicted as weak and simple: in "Crêpe satine," by Thyde Monnier, for example, the heroine, married to an unexciting bourgeois husband, sets her heart on a dress of

<sup>10</sup> "Cette fois ils furent heureux et bien entendu ils eurent de nombreux enfants." Jacques Lombard, "Ici... on ne divorce pas...", *France-Soir*, July 12, 1945.

<sup>11</sup> Georges Vidal, "Léocadie," *France-Soir*, Aug. 19-20, 1945.

“crêpe satine” which is beyond the financial reach of the household. Lucille Meffre, whose “cœur frivole” has never reconciled her to the economic realism of her husband [“Why can’t husbands give presents like lovers, and why do they always ask you if you ‘need’ the clothes you ask for?”],<sup>12</sup> takes a lover who buys her the dress. Her husband, however, reveals that he has repented and has been working overtime to save the money which she needs. The reaction is indicative—“Lucile didn’t move. Her frivolous little soul felt pass through it something of greatness...”<sup>13</sup>—and so is the message: in times of austerity, male prudence, and male generosity, will triumph every time over female frivolity. This is carried to such an extent that, in “Une Pauvre victime,” by the paper’s literary editor Marcel Augagneur, a young and apparently frivolous wife is pardoned by her husband for her debts but immediately divorced when she admits to having prudently saved 200,000 francs from her housekeeping income. The stereotypes have been transgressed and reversed in an unpardonable fashion. The same syndrome appears in “Mon Capitaine,” by Bernard Gervaise, in one of the rare allusions to the war, when a returning prisoner of war, a corporal, discovers that his wife has joined the Army and been appointed as a Captain in the Ministry of Defense: his subsequent disorientation is only resolved by his demobilization, when his wife is no longer “Mon Capitaine,” and when the gender hierarchy is restored.

At the same time as the woman appears unintelligent and frivolous and is punished when she transgresses that stereotype, she can also appear paradoxically in a complementary role as persecutor and harridan. In a story set in England or Ireland and which has its origins in the territory of the cartoon, “De Charybde en Scylla,” the hen-pecked husband throws himself from a cruise-liner in a storm and swims to a desert island, only to discover that the wife he has been trying to escape has been washed up on the same island. In Daniel Poiré’s “Semaine d’épreuve,” the widower hero, who has “a cruel and lively memory” (“un souvenir cruel et vivace”)<sup>14</sup> of his first wife, prudently decides to test out a potential future wife, another widow, by making frivolous telephone calls to her each day throughout the week. Encouraged by the uniformly kind and courteous response, he telephones to make a proposal of marriage, only to discover that all the previous calls have been taken by the widow’s maid, and that the widow is as acerbic as his first wife. He decides to marry the maid.

None of which makes for particularly heartening news for any “Renaissance,” let alone “revolution,” in gender roles in 1945, at least as depicted by a representative corpus of middlebrow fiction. In this context, the most interesting story is “Jeannette et Bérénice,” by Marcel Segal, one of the rare evocations, as mentioned, of the Occupation. It is a cleverly crafted tale: ostensibly about two former *Résistantes*, Jeannette and Bérénice, one of whom, Bérénice, has been deported to Buchenwald, who meet by chance in 1945 in the Métro at Havre-Caumartin. The superficial plot of the story revolves around the two ex-*Résistantes*’ experiences of their struggle and narrow escapes, their promises to meet up, and their failure to get each other’s addresses before they are swallowed up in the Metro again. Doubts about this simple, if poignant, narrative surface fairly early on, however. When the two meet up at Havre-Caumartin, we are told that “Jeannette wiped his damp pate and his grey

<sup>12</sup> “Pourquoi les maris ne savent-ils jamais offrir comme les amants et vous demandent-ils toujours si l’on a ‘besoin’ des parures qu’on leur réclame?” Thyde Monnier, “Crêpe satin,” *France-Soir*, July 4, 1945.

<sup>13</sup> “Lucile reste immobile. Sa petite âme frivole sent passer quelque chose de grand...” Ibid., 2.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Poiré, “Semaine d’épreuve,” *France-Soir*, Aug. 5-6, 1945.

moustache...”<sup>15</sup> When the two are split up by the departing Métro, Bérénice’s visiting card, left on the platform so that the two can never contact each other again, is under the name: “Roger Duval, insurance broker, 20 Rue Montholon.” In other words, these are two male *Résistants*, who have adopted female *noms de guerre*. Unlike “Mon Capitaine,” the names may transgress, but the roles certainly do not, and this is compounded by the two comrades’ conversation on the platform. Discussing his wife’s failure to react to his narrow escape, Jeannette comments:

You see, Elise is a woman...How can I explain it to you? If someone came and said: “Madame, your husband has just climbed Mount Everest,” she would reply: “He’ll have torn his trousers again.”

The two men burst out laughing.

Lots of women are like that, said Bérénice. They see the trivial side of things. That doesn’t prevent them from being good women.<sup>16</sup>

Contrary to the carefully nurtured post-Liberation myth of “des centaines de milliers de femmes-résistantes,” the Resistance remains a predominantly male preserve, due in part to contemporary (and traditional Republican) fears of women undermining the progressive vote.

A brief survey of popular fiction in the immediate aftermath of the Liberation shows, as one might expect, little change from the patterns and stereotypes of its counterpart at the beginning of war in 1940, in which many of the same authors dominated and where many of the same themes and preoccupations were already present: the fascination with the United States and the world of Hollywood, for example, exemplified by Michel-Georges Michel’s novel *Star*, or Courtney Ryley Cooper’s *Etrange jeunesse américaine*.<sup>17</sup> In fact, in 1945 mass-publishing was overwhelmingly conservative in taste, and, predictably in popular fiction genres, like the “Contes de *France-Soir*,” gender roles remained firmly traditional and stereotypical: gay characters were represented as cynical and manipulative, not merely in Peyrefitte’s *Les Amitiés particulières*, but also through the character of Daniel in Sartre’s *Les Chemins de la liberté*, in which, in the unfinished fourth volume, he was destined, inevitably, to become a Collaborator. In the *France-Soir* summer stories, women were invariably depicted as either superficial, frivolous and, occasionally, victims, or as persecutory, with no middle ground. Whilst, underneath the propagandist exaggeration of the “hundreds of thousands of Résistantes,” there was an undoubted and, until recently, occluded reality, in the popular stories the Resistance welcomes women’s names but not the women themselves. Nor, incidentally, do the male characters particularly conform to the post-Liberation mythology of the “virility” of the Resistance: even “Jeannette” and “Bérénice,” who have been authentic Resistants, have returned to a comfortable and unexciting petit-

<sup>15</sup> “Jeannette essuya son crâne moite, sa moustache grise...” Marcel Segal, “Jeannette et Bérénice,” *France-Soir*, July 24, 1945.

<sup>16</sup> “Elise, vois-tu, c’est une femme... comment t’expliquer? Si on venait lui dire: ‘Madame, votre mari vient de réussir l’ascension du Mont Everest’, elle répondrait: ‘Il aura encore déchiré son pantalon’.

Les deux hommes s’esclaffèrent.

Beaucoup de femmes sont comme ça, dit Bérénice. Elles voient le petit côté des choses. Cela ne les empêche pas d’être de bonnes femmes.” Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> See Nicholas Hewitt, “Les Best-sellers de 1940: ce que lisaient les Français à la veille de l’invasion allemande,” in *L’Année 40 en Europe* (Caen, 1991), 229-36.

bourgeois lifestyle, the lifestyle of *France-Soir*'s readers which ensured the continuity of a certain idea of the republic.