

"THIS BEING WITHOUT BREASTS, WITHOUT HIPS"

"Massacre des hommes, vie chère, voilà ce qui est à l'origine du triomphe de la femme moderne."

H. Mignot

AFTER THE WAR, writers and social observers produced a new image of female identity: *la femme moderne*, they called this new creature, or sometimes *la garçonne*. In 1924, Jacques Boulenger, the editor of the literary weekly *L'Opinion*, described her in this way:

The war has undeniably had an enormous influence on young girls and young women; and I assure you, once again, that the *femme moderne* is above all a creation of the war.

Without a doubt, she is freer in her behavior than women before the war. . . . Nestled in the arms of her partner, she dances without a corset; she swims in a maillot. . . . Above all, she has a taste or desire for independence, or rather . . . she is absolutely determined to be independent.¹

This image of the modern woman—scandalous in her dress and manner, giddy with freedom—dances through most historical accounts of women in the 1920s.² Contemporaries saw the modern woman as "above all a creation of the war" that had allowed her to work and live independently for the first time. As a popular image, she can be traced to the "new woman" of prewar avant-garde circles. The new woman had embodied a modernist ideal of womanhood, pioneered by cultural radicals, and representing economic and sexual freedom.³ But she had also been considered strictly a bohemian, avant-

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garde phenomenon, confined to the eccentric fringes of society, where her style of life served as a critique of Victorian bourgeois culture.⁴ By contrast, the *femme moderne* could be the bourgeois girl next door. Here is how a young Parisian law student described her in 1925:

Can one define *la jeune fille moderne*? No, no more than the waist on the dresses she wears. Young girls of today are difficult to locate precisely. If you want to be true to French tradition, it would be barbaric, in my opinion, to call our pretty *parisiennes* young girls.

These beings—without breasts, without hips, without “underwear,” who smoke, work, argue, and fight exactly like boys, and who, during the night at the Bois de Boulogne, with their heads swimming under several cocktails, seek out savory and acrobatic pleasures on the plush seats of 5 horsepower Citroëns—these aren’t young girls!

There aren’t any more young girls! No more women either!⁵

For this observer, even the clothes that *la femme moderne* wore reproduced her inability to be defined within the boundaries of traditional concepts of womanhood. Her lack of a distinctly female form symbolized the unrestrained social and cultural space she seemed to inhabit—a space that was, above all, the creation of the war.

A “being” without a waist, without hips, and without breasts, she symbolized a civilization without churches, without palaces, and without sexes. In Mathilde Alanic’s 1921 novel *Nicole maman*, the hero, Colonel Rémy, returns home joyfully after the armistice, only to become an outsider in his own family.⁶ Overwhelmed by the difficulties of readaption to civilian life, he watched in bewilderment as his young daughter danced the tango with her boyfriends. Above all else, it was this young *femme moderne* who “made him conscious of the time that had passed, and of the sorrow that had changed his most intimate self.”⁷ For Rémy, the young woman embodied the war’s impact on himself and the world around him. André Beaunier, best known as the literary critic for *La Revue des deux mondes*, produced the same image of the modern woman in his 1922 novel *La Folle jeune fille*.⁸ Here Michel, another displaced and alienated veteran, interpreted his sister Sabine and her friends—young *femme modernes* all—as symbols of the “madness” of the age:

You are crazy and I am crazy. Papa is crazy. What a family! And the others are equally crazy too. It’s a mark of the times; one should predict the end of the world. . . . But if you really want to see the symbol of the era, it’s in the absurd behavior that young girls are showing.⁹

Why did Michel consider the modern woman a symbol of the era? Why in these novels does she epitomize the madness of the age and the impact of the war? To answer these questions, we must go back a few years in order to analyze some of the ways in which gender issues figured in the French interpretation of the war experience. Gender relations during the First World War comprise an enormous and complex subject for historical analysis, which I cannot pretend to do justice to here. But even a cursory glance at both the personal and fictional literature of the war reveals that gender issues lay at the heart of how both soldiers and civilians made sense of the war and its devastating effects. This literature, then, can help to explain the genesis of the postwar debate on women.

Poor Strangers That We Are!

Memoirs and fiction written during the war reveal a persistent imaginative habit among soldiers—a tendency to understand the world in terms of gross oppositions and dichotomies, what Paul Fussell has called the “versus habit.” According to Fussell, “prolonged trench warfare, with its collective isolation, its ‘defensiveness,’ and its nervous obsession with what the other side is up to, establishes a model of modern political, social, artistic and psychological polarization.”¹⁰ Obviously, French soldiers began by drawing a clear distinction between themselves and the Germans, but as the war dragged on, they made a second division as well—between the battlefield they inhabited and the homefront they had left behind. To a great extent, soldiers also “gendered” this division—that is, they opposed a “male” battlefield with a “female” homefront. Of course, no absolute gender boundaries of this kind could be drawn—politicians, older men, and war profiteers also populated the homefront. But because men and women inhabited largely segregated spheres during the war, soldiers did map their world in terms of an opposition between the sexes. The novelist Pierre Drieu la Rochelle described the front as a “country without women, where only man bears witness to man, where we suffer too much.”¹¹ One wartime observer noted that by the end of 1914, Paris had become a “city of women.”¹² As the historian Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau has put it, the woman represented “the reverse image of the war, and that which gave it meaning.”¹³

According to personal accounts of the war, the dramatic changes that men underwent at the front, their inability to relate the horror of

their experiences, the general ignorance about the war at home because of censorship—all led front soldiers to believe that they could no longer communicate with the homefront.¹⁴ Trench humor treated this problem with biting sarcasm. In his "handbook" on *L'Art et la manière d'accommoder et de raccommorder civils et poilus*, George Fabri, himself a soldier, set out to avoid "a new war: the war of *Poilus* and *Civils*."¹⁵ The engraving on the cover of Fabri's book portrayed the civilian as a large, almost overwhelming, masculine-looking woman (fig. 1). First published in trench journals during the later war years, Fabri's manual offered advice to *poilus* on leave who became infuriated when told by civilians that they "looked great"—an expression of doubt, as they understood it, concerning the suffering they had endured. Make yourself look as dirty as possible before going home, Fabri advised, dent your helmet, grow your beard, and fabricate heroic stories. Excuse yourself for not being wounded, and if wounded, for not yet being dead. (Perhaps you could bring this last happy news on your next leave.)¹⁶ Fabri warned his fellow soldiers not to be disappointed if they could not impress a civilian with their war tales, because in fact, to do so, "you must refer to something more horrible: the rationing of pastry or the closing of stores at 6:00 P.M., for example."¹⁷ Among the several "types" of civilians that Fabri described was the reproachful, ungrateful "*dimineuse*," who greeted the soldier with these words: "Yet another leave? . . . But aren't you always on leave?"¹⁸ Fabri mocked what he saw as ignorance concerning the war: "With great tact, let us inform those civilians who might not yet have noticed at all that there presently exists a phenomenon that is called: the war."¹⁹

Fabri's sarcastic suggestion of the wall separating (male) soldiers and (largely female) civilians conveys his sense of pride and anger as well as his alienation. This image of civilians—as indifferent to and even scornful of the heroism of the front soldiers—appeared again and again in trench journals during the years 1915 to 1918. Fabri's anger was certainly not universal; many soldiers described their leaves as joyful, happy times.²⁰ Still, Alain's cynical quotation—"Eight days of leave is like a man getting hung two times over"—enjoyed popularity among front soldiers.²¹ By the end of 1915, civilians and soldiers alike were voicing the belief that men and women had become strangers to each other, separated by a wall of ignorance and experience.²² In a 1917 account of a leave, the scholar Roger Boutet de Monvel also presented the homefront as ignorant, indifferent, and self-absorbed. Women, he argued, "do not dare admit it, but military exploits interest them little.

They prefer the 'cine.'" Women's only reaction to the war, according to Boutet de Monvel, was: "It's lasting too long!"²³ The same year, another soldier told the story of how one young woman at a movie theater back home had declared a newsreel boring because "there were not even any corpses."²⁴ The biographer Michel Corday remarked in his Paris diary that year: "The fact is, Paris is remote from the war. The restaurants are crammed. What a contrast with those tortured towns of Eastern France, that endless stream of wounded down from Eparges into Verdun."²⁵

In viewing the material contrasts between trench and civilian life, returning soldiers saw the homefront as a world of extravagance and luxury, whose pleasures they were largely denied.²⁶ No-man's-land entailed a daily battle with mud, rats, lice, and rain, as well as the German enemy. It was a cemetery of dismembered, unburied bodies, where life expectancy was often as short as three months. Surrounded by corpses, the front soldier expected and even desired death at any moment. The contrast with the homefront, particularly in large urban areas, could not have been more stark. Louis Huot, the well-known psychologist and doctor at the front, claimed that his "stupefaction was profound" upon returning from Senegal in 1915, and witnessing Paris "as joyously animated as in peacetime, . . . as fierce in the pursuit of its interests and pleasures." Huot referred to the "divergence" between the mentality of the combatants at the front, who were subject "to a rigorous discipline," and of the civilians "who tend to liberate themselves more every day."²⁷ On 15 June 1915, the trench journal *Le Père* portrayed the homefront this way: "Look at the theaters! You can't even begin to count the number of shows that feature skimpily clad women singing with false bravado about the glory of the allies."²⁸

Maurice Donnay, the dramatist and member of the Académie française, wrote in his journal in February 1916 that the ways in which the people on the homefront passed their time during the war "shocked" and "offended" returning soldiers. A month later, he noted that men on leave in Paris "find that Paris is not contemplative enough, that there is too much luxury, gaiety."²⁹ In his 1917 *Carnet d'un combattant*, the historian Paul Tuffrau referred to soldiers who, upon returning to the trenches after a leave, "compared with bitterness their miseries with [the civilian's] pleasures."³⁰ "What struck me the most in Paris and elsewhere," wrote the novelist Georges Duhamel, "was the kind of unstable, unbalanced state into which all values—both material and moral—have fallen. . . . It's as if a good half of our contemporaries are swept away, uprooted by a whirlwind."³¹ In 1919, Jean Finot, a

veteran and the editor-in-chief of *La Revue mondiale*, argued that the war had had a double moral effect: on the one hand, heroism at the front had revived traditional values, but, on the other, corruption on the homefront had quickened their decline.³²

Soldiers equated this corruption with war profiteers, who made fortunes in the armaments and other war-related industries. More important, however, they associated lax morals and Parisian gaiety with women, who dressed extravagantly and became symbols of new wealth. In 1916, the trench journal *La Marmite* argued that "women have made the mistake of appearing thoughtless and carefree, and the skirts of 1916 look a little too lighthearted."³³ "You would never believe that we are at war," exclaimed one soldier in 1917, "The longer it lasts, the more they play: brightly lit stores, fantastic cars, chic women with little hats."³⁴ "For us and for History, this is the year of the war; for them, the year of short skirts," wrote the dramatist Abel Hermant the same year.³⁵ These writers would not deny that many women grieved and scrimped and kept their families together throughout the war. According to Audoin-Rouzeau, the devoted wife and mother outnumbered all other images of women in trench literature.³⁶ But to many soldiers returning on leave, this type of domestic woman was less visible than those who packed the theaters, cafés, and restaurants of Paris.³⁷ The relative comforts that women enjoyed at home seemed to throw into relief the hardships, sacrifices, and humiliations of trench life. A popular trench song called "*Les Petites femmes de mobilisés*" focuses on the contrast between the rigors of the battlefield and the pleasures of the homefront:

Les Poilus s'en vont, le cafard au front
trotinant parmi les cervelles
A l'arrière, l'on voit la gaieté, la joie
Et la guerre, nul s'en aperçoit
 Concerts, cinéma, casino
 Touts pleins de badauds
 Qui ont la vie belle
Nos femmes s'offrent du plaisir
Elles peuvent s'offrir ce qui leur fait plaisir
Elles rigoles des communiqués
Les petites femmes des mobilisés.³⁸

By the later war years, the gender divide separating the homefront and battlefield had become the subject of widespread commentary. A 1917 book of cartoons titled *Pourvu qu'elles tiennent* featured a woman

angered by an offensive because it meant that she would be able to go to the theater only twice a week.³⁹ Another sketch, titled "Let's Make Sacrifices," showed a woman knitting a sock and grumbling about the "beautiful sweater" she could have made (figs. 2 and 3).⁴⁰ Even after the war, these images persisted. In 1919, one journalist created a picture of the war as a period in which a "taste for refined pleasures became a part of women's lives," and during which "they could live 'a bachelor's life' and its freedom seduced them."⁴¹ In his sketches of wartime Paris, *Mado, ou la guerre à Paris* (1919), the writer and critic Maurice Level contrasted the frivolity of women's lives with the grave risks taken by the *poilu*. The cover of Level's book juxtaposes a woman applying makeup with the map of the Western front (fig. 4).⁴²

In fact, women's lack of knowledge concerning the war can be ascribed to government censorship rather than to any "demoralization" of the homefront. Censorship of books and the press was primarily responsible for the rupture between soldiers and civilians. Military defeats, the horrors of the trenches, the 1917 crisis of morale—these stories of the war had difficulty reaching the French at home because of a censorship office more powerful than its counterparts in either Great Britain or Germany.⁴³ But, far from being contested, these unfavorable images of women found a receptive audience in literary Paris. For example, Rachilde, the literary critic of *Mercur de France*, accepted uncritically Level's portrayal of women as irresponsible in *Mado, ou la guerre à Paris*. She suggested that a large group of Parisian women be brought together in a theater so that the book could be read to them.⁴⁴

If soldiers misinterpreted women's ignorance of the war as insensitivity, they exaggerated female wartime independence as a need to dominate men. In addition to complaining about women's frivolous lives, many soldiers expressed fear concerning their newly liberated ways. Soldiers returning to Paris confronted the sight of female postal carriers, tram conductresses, women ticket collectors, and even women street-cleaners clad in big hats and clogs, wielding heavy hoses.⁴⁵ As historians have argued, the economic and military exigencies of the war blurred conventional gender roles.⁴⁶ With 3.7 million of the active work force mobilized throughout the war, 1.5 million were left to do the work that normally employed 5.2 million.⁴⁷ Many working-class women quit traditionally feminine jobs, such as domestic services and textiles, to receive higher wages in the munitions factories, state railways, and the iron and steel industry.⁴⁸ They shoveled coal, fought fires, made grenades, drove motorcycles, collected tram tickets,

and cleaned the streets of Paris. Middle-class women were also increasingly active outside the home. The number of middle-class women entering liberal professions such as law and medicine jumped dramatically during the war.⁴⁹ Women teachers enrolled in male lycées in order to replace the *agregés* at the front. For the first time, middle-class women were allowed to go almost anywhere, and by 1917, the sight of them alone on the streets at night was common.⁵⁰ Many older bourgeois women took over the businesses and trades of their husbands and often traveled extensively. The entry of significant numbers of women into higher education and traditionally male professions had, in fact, begun decades before, but the war accelerated these trends enormously.

While male combatants witnessed women taking on their jobs and family responsibilities, running businesses and even municipal governments, they themselves felt stranded on the edge of civilization in no-man's-land, where they became ciphers in a massive and mindless war machine. "During the torment," recalled a veteran in 1920, "life went on without us."⁵¹ As he left the battlefield in July 1915, the soldier Paul Cazin related the sense that "little by little we are being brought back to civilization."⁵² To the extent that women filled male roles, they collapsed conventional notions of sexual difference and reversed the boundaries of social marginality. Propelled from the margins of society, women had become the new "insiders," while men became the new "outsiders."⁵³

The considerable personal literature of the war—memoirs, diaries, and journals published both during and after the armistice—presented this set of gender reversals as having a devastating psychological effect on front soldiers.⁵⁴ After a trip to the trenches in 1917, in which he talked to soldiers about life at home, the novelist and journalist Gaston Rageot reported:

Most of them feared marital disgrace. Some said: "She'll wear herself out, and I'll have to take care of her"; others felt a confused humiliation in no longer being able to earn the money themselves. Finally everyone was convinced that they would not find their wives in the same condition as they had left them: either they would be dishonored or at best, they would become authoritarian, imperious, and act like bosses and drum-majors.⁵⁵

Many soldiers expressed anxiety about reasserting their authority in the home at war's end. The trench journal *L'Horizon* asked in December 1918:

The returning victor . . . will he suffer to find a deserted home where his authority—so dearly paid for—will no longer be recognized? Upon his return, will he be told that there are no longer any political distinctions between men and women, that they are two beings equal in rights, two social units. . . . Can he bear to take part in civil and political battles with a woman? To find in her a rival and competitor for the same jobs that he wants, and that she leads him in obtaining?⁵⁶

When asked why they wanted to survive the war, soldiers declared a desire simply to return to a safe and happy home. But soldiers also portrayed the moment of homecoming as traumatic because of their perception that wives and girlfriends had changed in dramatic ways. In Pierre Chaine's popular account of the war, *Les Mémoires d'un rat* (1917), the working-class *poilu* Juvenet is shocked when he returns home on leave and greets his wife, whose face is tinged with yellow as a result of working with melinite in a munitions factory. Chaine tells the story through a "rat" Juvenet has brought back from the trenches—a narrative device that also signals Juvenet's degraded sense of self. When Juvenet's wife takes the initiative of the first kisses, he feels shamed and dishonored: "this disgrace, added to all the other tribulations of the war, made the cup of his misery overflow."⁵⁷ In the 1936 preface to his very popular *La Guerre, madame*, originally published in 1916, the dramatist Paul Géraudy claimed that when the soldiers returned home, "they found women to be numerous, provocative, impatient." One man Géraudy knew trembled violently at the sight of his daughter dancing according to the new fashion. No less than Colonel Rémy in Mathilde Alanic's 1921 novel *Nicole maman*, the sight of this young modern woman dancing made him feel like an "outsider" in the postwar world.

According to the personal literature of the war, then, the homefront had become an object of both fascination and hatred, invested with hope and denounced with bitterness. This vision of the homefront also formed a central theme of the war's most famous and widely read fiction, in particular, Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* (1916). Reputedly the greatest novel of the war because it dared to speak its truths, *Le Feu* examined the lives of soldiers in one military squad. Historians consider it astonishing that Barbusse's *Le Feu* passed the censors.⁵⁸ The object of enormous controversy, the novel even received the Prix Goncourt in 1916. Extremely popular, it sold 230,000 copies that year alone.⁵⁹ Throughout *Le Feu*, the distinction between the front and homefront, "a difference far deeper than that of nations and with de-

fensive trenches more impregnable," irrevocably separates men and women.⁶⁰ One *poilu* in the squad reminisces how, in a town they had visited not long before, a woman "talked some drivel about attacks, and said 'How beautiful they must be to see!'" To this another soldier responds: "Beautiful? Oh, hell! That's like an ox saying: 'How beautiful it must be to see all those droves of cattle driven forward to the slaughter-house!'"⁶¹

Throughout the novel, Barbusse also presents the war as reversing the boundaries of social marginality, so that women become the new "insiders," and men the new "outsiders." At another point in the novel, Poterloo, also a *poilu*, tells the narrator how he had managed to sneak behind enemy lines to see his wife in occupied territory. Disguised in a German uniform, he was allowed only to circle his relatives' house and view her from a half-opened door. His happiness at being able to know her condition turned to shock and dismay when he discovered her in the company of a German soldier: "She was smiling. She was contented. She had a look of being well off, by the side of the *boche* officer."⁶² Poterloo also noticed the widow of one of his recently killed friends in the room: "She knew he'd been killed because she was in mourning. And she, she was having good fun, and laughing outright."⁶³ In shaping his narrative, Poterloo dwells on "the lamp and the fire that emanated a familiar warmth" and gave the scene a golden look as he stood looking into the room.⁶⁴ The image of the combatant—peering into a brightly lit, cheerful room from the darkness outside and aghast at his own wife's complacent happiness—perfectly encapsulates his newly marginalized status. Once again, the experience is traumatic: "She was smiling, my wife, my Clotilde, at this time in the war! And why? Must we be away for only a short time before we do not count anymore?"⁶⁵

The same symbolism appears later in *Le Feu* when several members of the squad go on leave in Paris after a particularly difficult battle. From the beginning, their experience of the homefront is alienating and upsetting. In a restaurant, they encounter a woman who describes what she thinks the war must be like: "Dear little soldiers . . . who can't be held back, who shout 'Vive la France' or who laugh as they die!"⁶⁶ At dusk, they watch the Parisians hurry home "toward the dawn of their lighted rooms." They pass a half-opened ground-floor window and "see the breeze gently inflate the lace curtain and lend it the light and delicious form of lingerie." Held back by the crowd, the men remain immobile on the sidewalk, "poor strangers that we are!"⁶⁷ Strang-

ers to a feminine world of security, sensuality, and light, the combatants are once again outsiders looking in.

Cartoons also expressed male anxieties concerning the war's disruption of conventional sex roles. One appearing in *La Baïonnette* of 26 November 1915, featured a female train conductor who wanted her husband to come home from the front so that *he* could watch the children.⁶⁸ Another by Henriot, the cartoonist for *L'Illustration*, depicted a man knitting and looking terribly upset while his wife went out to work. The caption read: "Considering that since the beginning of the war women have replaced men in nearly every position, only women's work remains to the men."⁶⁹ Still another by Henriot portrayed a young woman boasting that "on top of the allocation, I'm getting eight to nine francs a day for making bombs . . . unfortunately, the war will not last forever" (fig. 5).⁷⁰ Because of high-paying war industry jobs and government allocations, working-class women were often much better off financially with their husbands at the front. But the belief that these women prized this situation above their husbands' lives signals anxiety about the war's upheaval of gender roles.⁷¹ The conservative journalist Lucien Descaves shared this same fear in *La Maison anxieuse* (1916). Working-class women were quite happy to have their husbands away, Descaves argued, because they could spend more money on themselves. "When they see how we've been able to get along without them," he quoted one as saying, "these gentlemen will be less proud." As his title suggests, Descaves believed that anxiety pervaded relations between the sexes: "What I think is most sad about this provisional, relative emancipation of woman . . . is that out of the national war has come a precarious domestic peace."⁷²

The work of Henriot and Descaves serves as a warning that wartime accounts depicting women as sexually and economically liberated cannot be taken at face value. They do not provide evidence that the war liberated women in contrast to men, as historians have sometimes read them.⁷³ Rather, they show that many male soldiers and civilians perceived a dramatic change in gender roles to be occurring and responded to this change in anxious ways—by exaggerating women's happiness or distorting their motives and reactions. Accounts by French women support this interpretation. Rather than present a happy picture of liberated life, French women record fears that their new "insider" status will have a demoralizing effect on the men in their life. Marguerite Lesage, a bourgeoisie from Lille, indicated concern in her diary on August 31, 1917, in response to her friend's comment that

men "will be embittered" when they return home. "Their pride will be wounded," she worried, "inasmuch as we knew how to take their place and save their interests, and then again we will have lost our 'femininity.'" ⁷⁴ Another bourgeois woman, Madame Cloqué, predicted in 1915 that given the number of mutilated and wounded who would return after the war, the husband would have to stay home to care for the children while the wife "went to sit in the Chamber [of Deputies]." But Cloqué also warned her women readers: "Never forget that above all else you are a woman." ⁷⁵

Both Lesage and Cloqué seemed to understand that despite extraordinary circumstances, only their willingness to be women "above all else" would reassure their husbands of their manhood. Rather than celebrate their "liberation," these women expressed concern that changes in gender roles were causing men to feel angry, anxious, and dishonored. Colette related the same concern more indirectly in her wartime sketch of the bourgeois Sargent X. Arriving home on leave, he says he barely recognized his wife, a woman he describes as having been "so womanly and so weak." He explains that with her coat styled after the French military uniform and her hair stuffed underneath her military hat, she looked like a man, not a woman. In addition, like Juvenet's working-class wife, she moved boldly forward to embrace him in "the most scandalous manner." All this, he confesses, created in him "the most intolerant, unjust exasperation." ⁷⁶

The literature of female indifference to male suffering and disregard for conventional gender roles must be considered alongside another wartime literature that sang women's praises. As the historian Françoise Thébaud has argued, never have women in France been so honored by so many prominent political and literary figures as they were during the war. Eulogizers proclaimed that women had revealed their moral and intellectual aptitudes not only to themselves but also to the nation, that they had cultivated new qualities such as patience and a sense of social engagement, and that in their loyalty and devotion, they had acted as a source of strength that counterbalanced the horrors of war. ⁷⁷ In *La Revue* of May 1917, the lawyer and president of the Bar Henri Robert glowed about women in this way: "they have preserved their charm and elegance but at the same time lifted up their hearts to the heights of the drama where the nation's destiny played itself out. . . . They have done more! They have shown their heroism and their scorn for death." ⁷⁸

This literature was clearly propagandistic—attempting to paint a

favorable portrait of French women abroad. But to a great extent, it was also probably sincere. The figure of the self-sacrificing nurse or domestic mother, who tirelessly attended the wounded and awaited her beloved's return, embodied an ideal of moral courage that helped the French to sustain hope and faith in the war cause. According to trench literature, the soldiers emphasized female recognition of their sacrifices as central to their sense of self-respect and power. The war was a profoundly emasculating, dehumanizing experience for the *poilu* or front soldier. ⁷⁹ In memoirs of the war, novels, and trench journals, women's loyalty frequently allows the front soldier to recover some sense of himself as a husband, a lover, a fiancé, or a son—in other words, as an individual and a man. Eulogies to women's efforts on the nation's behalf represented women as nurses or mothers whose devotion lifted the hearts of the nation.

While these complimentary images of women served as propaganda, no evidence exists that the more negative portrayal of female wartime behavior, such as we have seen in trench journals, memoirs, and novels like Barbusse's *Le Feu*, was censored during the war. Two contradictory images of women—one "good" and one "bad"—coexisted in wartime literature, a polarization that has a long history in French culture. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's description of woman as either "courtesan or housewife" provides one better known example. As the cultural historian Maurice Crubellier has noted, "the bourgeois male representation of woman assumes a curious duality" in the nineteenth century: images of women were split between the virtuous mother and the decidedly unvirtuous prostitute. ⁸⁰ In light of this history, the good woman/bad woman duality of the war literature can be seen as simply updating an old theme. In addition, the soldiers' tendency to conceptualize their world in terms of gross opposites during the war probably helped to reinforce this dual vision of womanhood.

Whatever the origin of these images, my aim in examining them is not to determine which one—virtuous mother or ignorant pleasure-lover—appears more frequently in wartime literature, or more correctly "reflects" the "reality" of women's behavior during the war. ⁸¹ Rather, I would like to explore what symbolic work these images performed both alone and together—why they appear in wartime literature, what they symbolize in that context, and how they construct the larger meaning of the war experience itself. Because gender issues lay at the heart of how French men and women came to understand the war experience, these images cannot be reduced to mere "idealiza-

tions" or "distortions" of real women. Rather they are important in themselves as arbiters of cultural conflict and must be analyzed in that light.

She Is the Real Culprit

Far from canceling each other out, the two competing images of female identity that appear in wartime literature derive their meaning from the contrast set up between them. They were often juxtaposed in the same text, for example, in Chainé's *Mémoires d'un rat*. When Chainé's Juvenet discusses the hardship of trench life, his wife interrupts him with this question: "Do you know how many women perished in the factory explosion at Saint-Denis?" Silenced, Juvenet rushes to agree with everyone present "that women have been admirable." But soon after "by a strange revolution, the panegyric to women gave way to a violent diatribe against 'those who profit from the war in order to have a good time.'"⁸² Similarly, Maurice Donnay's *Lettre à une dame blanche* (1917) presents two contradictory images of women's wartime behavior. The book consists of a series of imaginary letters to an angelic, virtuous nurse who has given up her life in Paris to tend to the wounded. But despite his eulogies to women's "courage and good faith" throughout the book, Donnay also scorns the nurse's cousin, Clothide, the self-indulgent "*président de l'oeuvre des désœuvrées*," who spends the war complaining and drinking tea.⁸³ Of interest here as well is the review of Donnay's book in *La Revue des deux mondes* by André Beaunier, author of *La Folle jeune fille*. Although Clothilde was a minor character in Donnay's book, Beaunier devotes his entire review to berating her and condemning "the ridiculous and sad comedy that some *dames moins blanches* perform in Paris, and with them, a good number of men who, on this point, are women."⁸⁴ Beaunier's fixation on the "bad" woman here again suggests that the French reading public was receptive to this image, and that as a symbolic category of wartime behavior, the "bad" woman also included the "bad" man of the war, such as the war profiteer or the draft evader.

To understand what symbolic work these two images performed by the contrast set up between them, let us examine in closer detail an example of their juxtaposition in a single text. In an article written on the eve of the armistice in September 1918, the novelist Louis Narquet began by praising women's patriotism: "Wife, mother, sister, fian-

cée. . . . She quickly overcame her own private, womanly grief in order to be united in the national danger, and this sacrifice of her wounded heart grew to total self-renunciation for the benefit and safety of the country."⁸⁵ As a symbol, the self-sacrificing wife or mother represents both civic patriotism and female recognition of individual men. Narquet presents her here not as a "citizen" but as a "wife, mother, sister, fiancée." He defines her civic identity in terms of her loyalty to the men in her life who were fighting the war. Her "total self-renunciation for the benefit and safety of the country" also affirms the dignity and courage of the individual husband, son, brother, lover engaged in the struggle. In a war that transformed its participants into anonymous ciphers, the woman's civic role was to reaffirm the personal identity of the soldier through her own "total self-renunciation."⁸⁶ In addition, by adhering to conventional female behavior—total self-abnegation for the sake of others—she reaffirms his manhood. As the historian Edward Berenson has argued, French notions of masculinity at this time depended heavily on just such conventional behavior: "The more [men] could persuade French women to conform to a masculine idealization of the *vraie femme*, submissive, obedient, emotional, unthreatening . . . the more French men could feel the virility to which they aspired."⁸⁷

Likewise, the ignorant, frivolous woman symbolized a painful indifference to both the individual man and the war effort. Narquet goes on to bitterly denounce middle-class women who led lives of pleasure: "As for amusements, they plunged into them with a kind of frenetic energy, not giving any thought to the sadness of the wounded and mutilated." According to Narquet, the bourgeoisie "insulted her husband in his deprivations and suffering" by spending enormous amounts of money on clothes and luxury items. Women "insulted" their men by denying them loyalty and respect at a time when they most needed it because of the dehumanizing conditions of the front. Like the women who performed male roles during the war, this bourgeoisie failed to conform to conventional female behavior. In this way, she "insulted" the soldier's sense of manhood. Because male and female roles were intricately linked in a larger vision of social organization, changes in one profoundly destabilized the other. In addition, traditional female values—self-denial, obedience, submissiveness—sustained *both* conventional notions of femininity *and* the war effort. Women's disregard of such values thus signaled a double betrayal—of the individual man as well as the war endeavor. If a woman's civic identity was defined in

terms of her personal self-renunciation and loyalty to individual men, her self-indulgence and disloyalty became signs of treason or patriotic indifference.

• In war and postwar literature, the images of the "good" and "bad" woman blurred individual relations between the sexes—loyalty to or abandonment of the fighting brother, husband, lover—with a general, moral response to the war. The loyal wife or mother symbolized patriotic duty and civilian morality; the indifferent, independent working woman represented a moral abandonment of the war and the principles for which it was fought. This conflation of gender and moral categories also had a long history in modern French culture. For example, belief in the virtue of the domestic wife/mother secured her status as the moral paragon of French society and formed the basis of the nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres. The virtuous wife, who assured the moral well-being of the soldiers and thus helped to sustain the war effort—this image was merely a variant of an old nineteenth-century theme in the discourse of gender. But, as we shall see, those who believed that the soldiers' moral well-being depended on women's loyalty left themselves vulnerable to the fragile nature of this formulation.⁸⁸

According to wartime literature, women's indifference to heroism at the front was traumatic for the male soldiers. This trauma, in turn, became confused in his mind with the moral and emotional suffering of the war generally. Paul G  raldy's *La Guerre, madame* (1916) illustrates how in war fiction, a soldier's contact with female indifference triggered moral anguish. Immensely popular, this fictionalized memoir of the war went through 61 editions by 1922.⁸⁹ At a key point in the story, the front soldier Maurice visits an ex-lover in Paris before returning to the front. Completely unaware of what is going on in the war, she complains endlessly of all her "deprivations"—her inability to dress fashionably, her boredom with Paris at night, the tastelessness of the food. The visit to Paris plunges Maurice into a dark depression, in which anguish concerning the war effort is inseparable from anguish concerning his worth and dignity as a man: "And perhaps we are simply ridiculous, dirty, wretched, bearded, deceived. . . . Ah! I feel faint-hearted. It's cold. The Germans are stronger than us. I should have died at Virton."⁹⁰ In G  raldy's account, Maurice's alienation from his ex-lover, who betrays him through her own indifference, kindles his profound despair concerning the war in general.

In less well-known wartime literature as well, women are endowed with enormous powers, symbols of the war's devastation and its hope

for resurrection. In Gaston Rageot's novel, *La Faiblesse des forts* (1918), for example, the theme of marital infidelity confuses sexual betrayal with moral abandonment. In general, Rageot did not enjoy great success as a novelist, but *La Faiblesse des forts* sold well, going through seven editions in its first year of publication. In addition, Rageot was a prominent leader of the natalist movement. His treatise on the subject, *La Natalit  *—also published in 1918—had an enormous impact on postwar natalist propaganda, examined in Part II of this study. As an important voice in the postwar debate on women, Rageot's wartime fiction merits close examination.⁹¹ *La Faiblesse des forts* concerns two brothers, Fran  ois and Marie Cordellier, both highly renowned doctors, who harbor a perfect faith in science and in the rational order of the universe. The war disrupts their union as brothers and their work as scientists because initially they respond to it in opposite ways. At least at first, Fran  ois feels himself come alive as he works to keep soldiers alive.⁹² Marie, however, almost immediately undergoes a profound moral crisis. He considers the war a futile, wasteful effort that throws into doubt his belief in scientific progress. Forced to remain home in order to recover from a wound, he suffers from "permanent lassitude, languor, . . . a sense of being nothing more than an obsolete object."⁹³

By contrasting the two brothers, Rageot outlines two alternative moral responses to the war: an active embrace of its principles, or moral despondancy—Val  ry *crise de l'esprit*. Furthermore, he connects these moral choices to the relationship both brothers have with the same woman—Fran  ois's wife, Lise-Reine. With his brother away at the front, Marie seduces Lise-Reine, whom he comes to love and desire "like life, like light, like resurrection. . . . On a ground littered with bodies, what else remains to the survivor except to eagerly seize the woman he loves and to intoxicate himself with her?"⁹⁴ Marie endows Lise-Reine with a certain redemptive power, as if she alone were capable of "resurrecting" him from the wound of his moral anguish. But her destructive powers are stronger still. Although Rageot initially portrays Fran  ois as energized by war work, as the war drags on, the latter's actions imply that his faith in science has been strained and even destroyed by the war.⁹⁵ But Fran  ois's angst about the war finds expression only indirectly, in the obscure feeling that something is terribly wrong with his marriage. He "feels a heavy weight on his conscience, a constant constraint . . . something imperceptible and oppressive" that "takes away his force and his lucidity."⁹⁶ When he discovers the affair between his brother and his wife, he suffers a com-

plete crisis, losing faith in his life's work as well as his love. Lise-Reine's sexual infidelity becomes not only a betrayal of a personal trust, but also a destruction of moral idealism.⁹⁷ François blames Lise-Reine, not his brother, for the sexual transgression: "the chance to destroy, to wreak havoc with a heart and an intellect, to annihilate an undertaking and the honor of a great name—admit it, this is what seduced you."⁹⁸

While the war clearly has a destructive effect on his work and his ideals, François can only partly admit it to himself; he becomes aware only of an obscure, oppressive force weighing down his spirit. In addition, he projects his sense of disillusion onto Lise-Reine, whose sexual transgression becomes a symbol for the war's devastation as a whole. Quietly assuming the burden of guilt, Lise-Reine leaves in shame and then redeems herself by dying as a nurse at the front—the "good" woman of the war. Before she dies, however, she writes both brothers: "It was this devastating war that tore you from your work and from your union. She is the real culprit. . . . The woman who passed between you was only her instrument, perhaps her symbol."⁹⁹ In Rageot's novel, a woman's sexual transgression represents at once a personal betrayal and the war's betrayal of the very virtues—*savoir* and *devoir*—for which it was supposedly fought. For François, Lise-Reine's marital infidelity provides a compelling, familiar way of talking about something terrifying and abstract—the war's destruction of his liberal, scientific faiths. Lise-Reine herself accepts her role as a symbol of the war, but asserts that the war, not she, is "the real culprit."¹⁰⁰

Lise-Reine's betrayal marks civilization's betrayal of itself. But she also acts as a symbol of "light, life and resurrection" to Marie when he is first wounded, and her death as a nurse at the front enables moral and emotional healing between the brothers to begin.¹⁰¹ Her two guises here—as redeemer and destroyer of faiths—repeat the good woman/bad woman imagery prominent in wartime literature. This same opposition would continue to appear in the postwar debate on women, although in slightly different form. On the one hand, the French woman as devoted *mère de famille* served as the privileged symbol of moral virtue and male virility, both of which she affirmed by upholding the traditional domestic ideal. On the other hand, the French woman as newly independent *femme moderne* became the privileged symbol of the war's most destructive effects, which she reproduced through her own sexual transgressions. Let us begin to explore the way these images of female identity worked symbolically by examining how the "problem" of female sexual infidelity emerged dur-

ing the war and became the subject of several popular novels published between 1919 and 1926.

She Lived It Up While I Was at the Front

In wartime literature such as *La Faiblesse des forts*, female betrayal of the fighting soldier took the form of sexual infidelity. Observations that women were engaged in extramarital affairs were almost always made in the context of comparison with the hardships of the war front. In 1916, Anatole France claimed that as many as 80 percent of French women were unfaithful and declared that their satisfaction in being far away from their husbands was one of the main causes of the lengthening of the war.¹⁰² In Géraud's *La Guerre, madame*, one woman tells Maurice: "But what women do know, all the same, is that their sons and husbands are dying. And at the same time, Maurice, they open their door to the first comer. . . . Women have been *infâmes*."¹⁰³ Louis Narquet noted in 1918 that "too many French women" had indulged in marital infidelity, "an odious moral crime considering that the husband is in continual threat of death."¹⁰⁴ The same year, the psychologist Louis Huot provided a detailed medical explanation for the so-called increase in women's sexual desire—what he called the "more developed excitability of the genital areas." He lamented that "the sacrifice of heroes at the front has been paid with such a humiliating misfortune."¹⁰⁵ In the frontpiece of his 1919 book on wartime women, Lieutenant Georges Grandjean wrote: "The men of the front demonstrated the bloody heroism of voluntary death; [the women] of the homefront ought to have shown the heroism of fidelity."¹⁰⁶

This commentary raises an intriguing set of questions: Did women's sexual activity increase during the war years? If so, why? If women were being unfaithful, with whom did they have sex? Other soldiers or civilians? Why were women, not their male partners, blamed? Historians disagree about how widespread female sexual infidelity was during the war, and why it might have occurred.¹⁰⁷ Once again, my aim in exploring the literary representation of female infidelity is not to determine the reality of women's wartime sexual behavior, but to analyze the symbolic work it performed in both war and postwar literature—how it acted as a provocative, familiar way for French men to express their moral and emotional trauma concerning the war. Sexual infidelity signified the wartime reversal of gender roles because in this case,

women were free and promiscuous, while men were "confined" to the army and trenches. Hence sexual infidelity expressed the "difference far deeper than that of nations" between the sexes' war experiences. In addition, it signaled women's scorn for traditional female values—purity, morality, discipline, and self-denial. As we have seen, in war-time literature such a rejection of conventional femininity frustrated soldiers' attempts to affirm their heroism and their manhood. In all these ways, female infidelity symbolized the isolation, alienation, and emasculation of the male combatant.

Female betrayal forms a strong theme of the other highly acclaimed and popular novel of the war besides *Le Feu*—Roland Dorgelès's *Les Croix de bois*. Published just after the armistice, *Les Croix de bois* was a critical and popular success, praised for its "realism," particularly among war veterans.¹⁰⁸ Dorgelès himself was a veteran and already known as the author of *La Machine à finir la guerre* with Régis Gignoux. In Dorgelès's novel, marital infidelity causes the worst kind of suffering among front soldiers, far more painful than physical deprivation or the confrontation with death. Like *Le Feu*, the novel centers on one squad of *poilus*. In one extremely moving and climactic scene, a soldier named Bréval has been wounded and begins to sob uncontrollably. His wife, he confesses, has been unfaithful; he wants Gilbert, his friend, to tell her that he forgave her before death. Then, continuing to sob, he abruptly changes his mind and in great anguish, blurts out: "Listen, tell her that it's her fault that I was killed . . . you have to tell her . . . and tell it to the world, that she is a bitch, that she lived it up while I was at the front." Bréval's outburst profoundly affects the other members of the squad: Sulphart sobs in one corner, his head buried in the folds of his arms; Lieutenant Morache "was livid. He was trying to control himself, but his lips and chin were visibly trembling." Crying as well, Gilbert cradles Bréval until he dies.¹⁰⁹

The scene is prophetic because Gilbert and Sulphart also soon suffer the wound of female betrayal. On a hellish, rainy night in the trenches, Gilbert gets a letter from his wife, Suzy, in which she tells him about the "charming boy" with whom she frequently goes out. "That doesn't bother you, does it, my dear?" she asks.¹¹⁰ The scene emphasizes Gilbert's sense of abandonment, which, in turn, prefigures his own death. Wounded in battle, yet overlooked and forsaken by the stretcher-bearers, he bleeds to death in a desolate forest. Also wounded in the same battle, Sulphart recovers in a hospital. His joy at having at last escaped the war is tempered by anguish concerning the cool tone and infrequency of his wife's letters. On the same day that

he celebrates his medical release from the army, he receives a letter from his concierge telling him that his wife has run off with a Belgian and taken everything with her. Sulphart returns to a house now empty except for a bed, a chair, and a calendar he and his wife were given as a wedding present. Rejected by their women, Gilbert and Sulphart remain anonymous ciphers, the non-men of no-man's-land.¹¹¹

In *Les Croix de Bois*, female sexual betrayal becomes a means of focusing the diffuse sense of anger and humiliation concerning the war that pervades the novel as a whole. Unable to get his own job back, Sulphart travels to Paris to find work. In the last chapter of the novel, ironically called "The Return of the Hero," he wanders an unfriendly Paris without money or a place to stay. His wife's betrayal becomes a symbol of a much larger desertion: of France itself in its attitude toward veterans. No less than Barbusse's *Poterloo*, Sulphart is a "poor stranger" in an indifferent world. A woman's treachery evokes the combatant's more general sense that he has been betrayed—by his elders, by his army officers, by his government, and by the French nation as a whole. Abandoned by army medics, Gilbert is left to die; abandoned by the homefront, Sulphart walks Paris alone and helpless. Sexually emancipated, the woman at home led a life that mocked the entrapment and isolation of her man in the trenches.

Female sexual betrayal comprises a central theme of another post-war best-seller published a few years later, in 1923—Raymond Radiguet's *Le Diable au corps*. The story concerns a young woman, Marthe, who has an affair with a sixteen-year-old boy, François, while her fiancé, Jacques, is at the front. Marthe gives birth to François's son when Jacques returns after the war and marries her. But Jacques, unaware of Marthe's betrayal, raises the child as his own after her death in childbirth. The novel contrasts the sexual freedom of Marthe and François with the grim constraints placed on Jacques. Radiguet portrays Marthe as insensitive and cruel to "*le pauvre Jacques*," as he calls him.¹¹² Indifferent to the increasingly anxious, questioning tone of Jacques's letters, she throws them into the fire as she sits with François. When Jacques's leave is delayed, she is overjoyed; when he does come home, she retreats to a childhood room in her mother's house and refuses to sleep with him. Marthe's mother then blames him for her daughter's suddenly strange behavior. In Jacques's first letter to Marthe after returning to the front, he threatens suicide. But Marthe still responds passively, and it is François who dictates "the only tender letters that [Jacques] ever received from her" in order to prevent the tragedy.¹¹³ Jacques then falls ill, but again unconcerned, his wife refuses to visit

him unless accompanied by François, a demand that shocks even the latter. Indeed throughout the novel, François, despite his youth and infatuation, shows more sensitivity to Jacques's plight than does Marthe.

When *Le Diable au corps* first appeared, it caused enormous controversy.¹¹⁴ "*Le Diable au corps* has exploded in the literary sky like the last cannon burst after the armistice," observed one critic, connecting the controversy to the war's unfinished business. To some extent, the media hype surrounding the novel's publication caused the public uproar. The publisher Bernard Grasset ran a huge public relations campaign, including use of the cinema and large photographs of the author, an upstart at the age of seventeen. Grasset played on Radiguet's youth and claimed to have discovered a new literary prodigy. But mostly the controversy centered on the novel's so-called immoral and cruel representation of marital infidelity.¹¹⁵ Radiguet sent a copy of his novel to Roland Dorgelès. The author of *Les Croix de bois*, in turn, accused Radiguet of suffering from an "absolute lack of heart" in his casual treatment of Marthe's betrayal of Jacques: "I would not have had the cruelty to be so hard on the soldier . . . I loved them all too much."¹¹⁶ When the novel won the literary Prix du nouveau monde in 1923, the veterans' Association des écrivains anciens combattants raised an outcry, claiming that the novel "profoundly wounds the feelings of veterans."¹¹⁷ The scandal surrounding *Le Diable au corps* suggests that Radiguet's portrayal of Jacques's humiliation at the hands of Marthe struck a nerve in postwar culture. Five years after the armistice, veterans still claimed to feel the "wounds" of sexual infidelity.

In Colette's *La Fin de Chéri* (1926), still another popular postwar novel, a female writer expresses many of the same thoughts concerning the war's effect on gender relations. In *La Fin de Chéri*, sexual infidelity once more designates the veteran as the new "outsider" of postwar society. Colette intended the novel to be a sequel to *Chéri*, which she had written in 1919 after a short story completed several years earlier in 1912.¹¹⁸ *Chéri* takes place just before the war and nostalgically evokes the extravagance and innocence of the vanished Belle Époque.¹¹⁹ The six-year romance between a young man, Chéri, and his aging courtesan, Léa, ends painfully when Chéri decides to marry a proper young heiress named Edmée. In *La Fin de Chéri*, which Colette began writing in 1924, she stresses the difference between the pre- and postwar worlds. The once vibrant and carefree Chéri returns from the war to wander Paris like a ghost, to live a life of self-indulgent debauchery, and to recall hideous scenes of the front.¹²⁰ At home he

finds his wife, Edmée—a helpless, weeping child in *Chéri*—preoccupied with hospital work, inspired by a sense of her own importance, and most important, involved in a passionate liaison with a hospital colleague. (She thus combines both the "good" and "bad" images of female identity found in the war literature.) Edmée's affair and the changes in her life make Chéri feel lost and bewildered, in one critic's phrase, "even more of an outsider" in the postwar world.¹²¹ In many ways, the two characters have reversed their prewar roles in *Chéri*. Edmée, not Chéri, is now engaged in an affair, and this new sexual assertiveness is central to her role as the new master of the house.¹²² Chéri, not Edmée, now appears like a love-forsaken, lost child. His alienation and despondency send him back to the aging Léa, with whom his relationship is now long over. She has become a grotesque shadow of her former self, aged and fat. Colette compares her with Louis XVI and describes her as "straightforward, as jovial as an old gentleman." What Chéri notices, above all, is "that when she stopped smiling or laughing, she ceased to belong to any definite sex." Léa, the model of old-world femininity and sensuality in *Chéri*, has lost her proper sex altogether and is furthermore "virile and happy in that state."¹²³ Like Edmée, she creates an impression of power and self-containment that sharply contrasts with her feminine subservience in *Chéri*.¹²⁴ The meeting with Léa is fatal to Chéri; more desperate than ever, he commits suicide soon after. The reasons for Chéri's suicide are psychologically complex, but his inability to live in a "civilization without sexes" comprises a fundamental element of his postwar *crise de l'esprit*. In a 1926 review of *La Fin de Chéri*, the veteran and editor Jean Finot attributed Chéri's suicide to his inability to face the fact that "the past is dead; it cannot be brought back to life again."¹²⁵

The Spiritual Sovereignty of Woman

Characters such as Colette's Edmée exemplify the modern woman image that emerged during the war years and became prominent in the debate on women. Because she could communicate moral as well as gender anguish, the modern woman came to symbolize the loss of everything familiar in postwar France. In short, then, the modern woman became a privileged symbol of change. But she cannot be understood apart from her "good" woman counterparts in wartime literature—the domestic wife or the self-sacrificing nurse who upheld morals through her loyalty and virtue. As we shall see in Part Two, the image of the

woman-as-redeemer reappears after the war, particularly in the literature of the natalist movement. Here let us examine the symbolic work she performed in two novels—Jean Dufort's *Sur la route de lumière* (1921) and Francis Forest's *Thé dansant* (1922). Neither of these authors enjoyed the popular or critical success of Barbusse, Dorgelès, Radiguet, or Colette.¹²⁶ But their novels warrant our attention because they neatly summarize several themes that dominated the postwar debate on women, for example, the marginal, war-ravaged veteran who replaces the combatant as the new "outsider" of the postwar world. Marc Sangnier, the founder of the Catholic Sillon movement and himself a veteran, expressed the veteran's dilemma in this way: "violently torn away from our homes and our work for almost five years, we combatants, were exiled [*dépaysés*] in the most painful way, and seemed like foreigners."¹²⁷ The veteran, like the angry combatant before him, was the new "outsider" of the postwar world. In both Dufort's and Forest's novels, it is woman who, as redeemer of faiths, has the power to rescue these exiled and broken men.

In fact, however, in Dufort's *Sur la route de lumière*, woman first acts as a destroyer of faiths. The soldier Olivier Mauret returns home from the war without an eye and an arm, and struggles "to restore the heaping ruins left by four years of systematic destruction." No less than Valéry or Duhamel, he sees the war as "the monstrous fruit of an essentially industrial and scientific civilization" that presently lies in ruins, "torn apart by doubt and suffering." Like Marie in *La Faiblesse des forts*, Olivier has learned from the war's experience that "the supreme good" is a woman's love.¹²⁸ But his fiancée Fernande, in whom he has placed all hope of happiness, is repulsed by his mutilated body. Throughout the course of the novel, she increasingly withdraws and finally rejects him totally.¹²⁹ As she does so, his hope for a new life disintegrates: "he was nothing more than a phantom, wandering amidst other phantoms, in the sterile and cold agitation of the world."¹³⁰ Once again, a woman's betrayal transforms the soldier into one of Valéry's European ghosts—a Hamlet meditating on the life and death of truths. When, after Fernande's departure, Olivier's friend Daniel asks him if he still believes in "duty" and "personal dignity," he responds "with bitter irony" that they are "merely pretty words. . . . I have given all, sacrificed everything for these words. Now I know what they hide."¹³¹

But in Dufort's novel, the redemptive woman ultimately triumphs. Daniel offers Olivier hope by arguing that if the "solemn education of the war" could engage the French "to come back to the most profound

sources of life," it would bring about "the rallying of wills to the service of civilization." When Olivier asks, "But whose voice . . . would be at once authoritative and persuasive enough to be heard by men?" Daniel "simply" responds, "That of a woman":

Oh! without doubt, we will create marvellous air-machines capable of bringing us from one continent to another, we will dig eighteen-league tunnels under the seas, we will tear from nature more of its secrets . . . but if, first, we do not recognize the spiritual sovereignty of woman, we will not be guided in our labor by the great emotions that she alone can exalt and that alone are capable of making societies progress toward ever higher levels of civilization.¹³²

Woman's "spiritual sovereignty" takes precedence over scientific technology (airplanes and undersea tunnels) as the guarantor of "civilization" and progress. If, as Paul Valéry and Georges Duhamel claimed, technology or *savoir* had betrayed civilization itself, woman alone, in her role as moral guardian, could save it. In terms of the novel's plot resolution, Dufort also presents "the route toward the light" as female salvation. Olivier and Daniel each marry extremely conventional, domestic women—"loyal wives," who like Duhamel's Penelope, assure their passage back from the postwar *crise de l'esprit*. "Without her, God knows how long I would have groped around under this still so pale, so indecisive light," claims Daniel at the novel's end.¹³³

The same redemptive image of woman organizes the theme of moral crisis/resurrection in Francis Forest's *Thé dansant*. Its hero, the veteran André Chesnau, is once again a disaffected outsider unable to re-enter postwar society. The novel begins in the changing room of the *Académie d'armes*, where, in a strange postwar version of a Greek chorus, several older men scold the veteran for his inability to live his life once again.¹³⁴ One of the chorus of elders, the Marquis de Serquigny, urges Chesnau to go to a "tea dance" because:

they reflect a certain state of things. During the war, women acquired a taste for independence. In addition, the education of children no longer plays a central role in their life. . . . Their little brains are given over to luxuries and pleasures.¹³⁵

Serquigny repeats a truism of the war literature—that women have lost their way and succumbed to a life of luxury and pleasure. He identifies the *thé dansant* as the spatial metaphor of the postwar "state of things" and defines this new cultural regime in terms of women, who have rejected their traditional domestic role and become independent.

In the image of the "tea dance," women and the postwar cultural "state of things" merge into a single symbol of change.

Taking his elders' advice, Chesnau begins to frequent the *thé dansant* and becomes involved with a modern woman, Hélène Sézanne. She is a cagey, elusive character, mercurial in her movements, a play of surfaces. She lives to dance and dances to live; her life has no other purpose. But through Hélène, Chesnau himself begins to emerge from his ghostly withdrawal and to long for emotional commitment. When Hélène declares that she sees nothing more in him than a dance partner, he suffers from the by-now-familiar "wound" of betrayal. "The passing months had brought him only vain hopes and profound deception. His heart had opened itself up only to be wounded."¹³⁶ But just as his manhood is most grievously injured, Chesnau meets and falls in love with another woman—Madeleine LaPlane. When he first glimpses her, she is sitting quietly in a friend's parlor doing embroidery. With her head bent over in concentration and her entire body radiating serenity and virtue, Madeleine evokes the image of Duhamel's Penelope—the loyal wife who awaits the soldier's return.

Symbol of traditional domesticity and "the spiritual sovereignty" of woman, Madeleine will offer new life and moral resurrection to Chesnau. When he first meets her, she gets right down to business in a conversation concerning contemporary art: "You can be proud," she argues, "to belong to a country that affirms its genius and vitality, even in the wake of an unprecedented ordeal."¹³⁷ Brought up short, Chesnau surprises even himself by making this impassioned statement:

We owe the glory of France to the common people. The peasant with his robust good sense, and the worker, rebel against alcohol and vice, are and always will be the living forces of the country. From these powerful trunks, in which a rich sap flows, the branches that bear the fruit you admire are born.¹³⁸

Madeleine's sense of solidity and the clarity of her values begin to sew up the borders of Chesnau's world as soon as she appears, bent over her embroidery in the parlor. With a flash of her needle, she inspires Chesnau to resuscitate his masculinity through the mere suggestibility of language. By evoking the "robust" peasant/worker, in whose loins the "rich sap" of the future flows, he reasserts his own masculine power as well as the moral virtue of France.

After meeting Madeleine, Chesnau returns to the *thé dansant* and begins to think of Hélène, with whom he is still in love. Then, "suddenly, for some inexplicable reason, the image [of Hélène] disappeared

and was replaced with that of Madeleine Laplane, thoughtfully embroidering."¹³⁹ Chesnau's mental substitution here identifies Hélène and Madeleine as competing female images, mirror opposites that construct each other. While Hélène lives to dance *le shimmy* and *le fox-trot*, Madeleine's philosophy of life, "one must make oneself useful," leads her to run a nursery for the children of working mothers.¹⁴⁰ If Hélène wants only a dancing partner, Madeleine embodies the desire for domesticity, marriage, and children. At the novel's end, Chesnau leaves Hélène for Madeleine, and the chorus of elders is again brought in to proclaim: "Happiness demands a stable foundation. . . . To have a goal, a lofty purpose, and to keep one's eyes fixed upon it: this is what I propose to you." The contrast between the chorus' advice to Chesnau at the beginning and the end of the novel marks the traveled path of moral restoration: from apathetic veteran to born-again Chesnau, from the fevered pursuit of pleasure to rock solid goals. The redemptive Madeleine, brandishing her needle and "the spiritual sovereignty" of woman, has upheld the values for which the war was fought, assured Chesnau's homecoming at last—and made the world safe for still another war.

In her roles as destroyer and redeemer, the French woman acted as the privileged symbol of postwar crisis and restoration. This dual view of woman had deep roots in French culture and emerged in wartime literature as a contrast between the self-sacrificing nurse and the sexually promiscuous wife. These two images represented not only different ways of imagining the female self, but also two competing moral responses to the war. The bad/good images of women in wartime literature blurred gender and moral anxieties in such a way that gender itself became a primary means of understanding the war's meaning and impact. Similarly, in the postwar debate on women, the symbolic presence of the modern woman and the domestic mother created an arena for acting out cultural struggle and tension. In particular, the modern woman—represented here by the mercurial Hélène—became the object of explosive controversy, largely because she symbolized both moral and gender trauma. The next two chapters explore the provocative, scandalous nature of *la femme moderne* by examining two controversies with which she came to be associated: first, the best-selling novel *La Garçonne*, by Victor Margueritte, and second, her visual presence, that is, the short hair, loose-fitting clothes, and low-cut dresses that comprise postwar fashion.