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"SHE STOOD AT THE CENTER OF A SHATTERED WORLD"

IN 1925, A CATHOLIC COMMENTATOR on French fashion described the modern woman this way:

> We have to face the fact that women are not shying away from any means to make themselves look ridiculous. . . . Already we have the woman with the cigarette, the woman with the short skirt, the woman with the outrageously low-cut neckline and bare arms. . . . Now we have the woman without hair. . . . It is no longer only behind the bookstore window that one glimpses the *unfortunate* creation of an *unfortunately* famous author. It is also in our streets, our salons and even in our churches that we meet the rather uninteresting type, *"la garçonne."*[1]

The *"unfortunate"* creation referred to here is the protagonist of Victor Margueritte's infamous novel *La Garçonne.* Published in France in 1922, the novel depicts a modern woman who denounces her bourgeois family in order to lead an independent and promiscuous life in Paris. Banned by the Catholic Church, its sale restricted or forbidden throughout France, *La Garçonne* was nevertheless a best-seller and sold more than a million copies in France before 1929.[2]

The fear expressed here—that the novel, like a disease, was spreading from "fiction" to "reality"—typified a common prejudice concerning reading in the early twentieth century. The French widely believed that a book could be dangerous and have potentially catastrophic results. Books were endowed with considerable powers to trouble the senses and could even lead to a potential "loss of self,"

particularly in the case of female readers.[3] French men and women of all political persuasions shared the view that Margueritte's *La Garçonne* represented more than just innocent entertainment. For example, Renée Papaud, a radical feminist, had the same impression as the Catholic observer: "The suggestibility of a book is a fact. How many Werthers did Goethe produce, how many *garçonnes* are going to be born or have been born from the book of Margueritte!"[4] André Billy, the literary critic for the Radical daily *L'Oeuvre,* argued that Margueritte had succeeded in "giving form to a new feminine type." *La Garçonne,* in his opinion, acted as "an instigation and an excuse."[5] For these observers, *La Garçonne* played a definite and singular role in shaping postwar female identity.

The question of whether the *garçonne* was a "literary" or a "social" figure in the 1920s still concerns historians, who cite the scandalous banker Marthe Hanau and the journalist Louise Weiss as examples of "real" *garçonnes.*[6] But my own aim in examining Margueritte's novel is not to determine how much it influenced postwar social behavior. Instead, I want to explore the symbolic work performed by the novel—how the *garçonne* functions as a symbol of postwar cultural crisis and, through her own redemption, appeases both cultural and gender anxieties. Such a study must begin with the impact that *La Garçonne* had on French popular culture in the years after its publication in 1922. The fact that the novel became the focus of so much attention and controversy testifies to its ability to touch a nerve in postwar French culture—to address some issue beyond its superficial subject matter that resounded deeply in its readers. "An issue is captivating the reading public, fascinating even those who, ordinarily, don't even bother to read," reasoned José Germain, the literary critic of *Le Matin,* as a way of explaining the "fantastic" sales of the novel.[7] But what was this issue precisely? What was the source of the fascination and horror that *La Garçonne* offered to so many French men and women?

All Poetry, All Illusion Is Banished

La Garçonne was a publishing phenomenon (fig. 6). When it first appeared at the beginning of July 1922, it sold 20,000 copies in four days. Ten thousand copies were sold each week in August, 150,000 by the end of the summer, and 300,000 by the end of the year. In an age when the average printing for a novel by a popular author was 15,000 copies at best, these sales made news.[8] Furthermore, the phenomenal popu-

larity of *La Garçonne* continued throughout the decade. As late as 1926 and 1928, it appeared in re-editions, and by end of the decade, it had sold over a million copies. The historian Anne-Marie Sohn estimates that, given that from three to five people read each copy of *La Garçonne* sold, 12 to 25 percent of the French population most likely read the novel in the 1920s.[9] Because the novel cost 7.5 francs (a figure beyond what an average worker could afford to pay for a novel), the audience was overwhelmingly middle class. Young women were also thought to form a large portion of Margueritte's readership.[10]

However, the success of *La Garçonne* cannot be ascribed to the interests of one age group. During the summer and fall of 1922, it was the book everyone was talking about.[11] The sales figures for *La Garçonne* become even more impressive when one considers that the book suffered restrictive marketing because of its condemnation by the Catholic Church. The archbishop of Paris denounced it as obscene, and conservative Catholic groups worked to have it seized from bookstores. When the first movie version appeared in 1923, there was such a violent struggle to censure it that the film was shown only once.[12] The translation of the novel into other languages (ultimately fourteen in all) caused further uproar, because French conservatives were horrified at the impression of French women it might produce abroad.[13]

The scandal also centered on the author Victor Margueritte, who was a member of the Légion d'honneur, honorary president of the Société des gens de lettres, and therefore a literary figure of some standing.[14] The son of a famous general who was mortally wounded in the Battle of Sédan in 1870, Margueritte spent most of his childhood in Algeria and came to Paris in 1872 after his father's death. In 1896, he left a military career to marry a woman whose dowry did not meet required military standards.[15] Soon after, he began his literary career with his brother Paul, and slowly gained a reputation as a social novelist with radical socialist leanings.[16] *La Prostituée,* a fictional portrayal of women's prisons, earned him entry into the Légion d'honneur. He had already provoked controversy in the postwar period for his book *Au Bord du Gouffre* (1919), which bitterly attacked French diplomatic and military incompetence both before and during the war. By December 1922, several natalist and veteran groups were demanding that Margueritte be denied his membership in the Légion d'honneur. His expulsion, which occurred a month later, again sparked a protracted discussion in the press, but that debate moved away from the book itself and focused more on issues of free press.[17] All this publicity fed

sales of *La Garçonne,* and no doubt the controversy surrounding the novel contributed to its success.

Critical reviews of *La Garçonne,* published in daily newspapers and literary journals throughout the second half of 1922, provide clues concerning what about the novel readers found so scandalous and compelling. At the most superficial level, the debate centered on the sexual promiscuity of the novel's heroine and its explicit sexual passages. "This novel on young women is certainly not intended to be read by them," was the wry comment of Paul Souday, the well-known journalist for *Le Temps.*[18] Jean Guirard, the editor-in-chief of the Catholic daily *La Croix* called the novel "immoral" and reasoned that "if it has gone through numerous editions, this is because it awakens in man that which, more than anything else, reduces him to the level of beasts."[19] *Le Canard enchaîné* ran a satire meant to please even "the archbishop." Entitled "*La Glaçonne,*" it related the life story of a *jeune fille* who, "*naturellement froide,*" was born in "*Froidville*" and was greeted "*fraîchement*" by her father (a *glacier*) and her family.[20] Max and Alex Fischer, the novel's publishers at Flammarion, promoted this sexual aspect of the scandal in order to boost sales of the book. "*La Garçonne* . . . the most daring novel ever written," one advertisement boasted.[21]

To be sure, single, sexually active women had appeared in French literature before, for instance in Colette's novels, also extremely popular at this time. Most significant here was the fact that the *garçonne* of Margueritte's novel, Monique Lerbier, came from a "respectable" middle-class family. The satirist Georges de la Fouchardière argued that Monique's class origin was the "one mistake" that Margueritte made and the single cause of the novel's controversy.[22] Precisely the same argument was made by one elderly French woman, recently interviewed, who had read *La Garçonne* at the age of eighteen. Unlike the novels of Colette, she pointed out, the setting of the novel was not a bohemian world of music halls, artists, and intellectuals. Instead, it was *la grande bourgeoisie industrielle.*[23] The *garçonne's* middle-class background alarmed bourgeois feminists, who feared that their own cause would become associated with Monique's sexual misconduct. "The behavior of the *garçonne* is morally inadmissable," huffed Alice Berthet, the literary critic for the feminist *La Française,* in 1922. Berthet also worried about the impression that the *garçonne's* "liberated" life-style would make on young women. For her, Monique's independence seemed empty and bleak: "But this [Monique's] experience is

unhappy . . . because a life from which all poetry, all illusion, all tenderness is banished, is an abyss of shadows and disgust."[24]

Berthet's comment that Monique lives in an "abyss of shadows and disgust" points up another aspect of *La Garçonne* that can help explain the intensity of its controversy: for, in fact, the phenomenal popularity of the novel cannot be understood solely in terms of its sexual explicitness—a common attribute of several other, much less successful novels of its time.[25] Complaints about sexual explicitness also do not explain why veterans felt strongly enough about the book to join their voices in the general outcry, nor why the book was so widely read, when prominent critics universally denounced it as lacking in any literary merit. As the literary critic Gustave Téry put it, "this so-called chef d'oeuvre is really just FILTH."[26] At best a second-rate novel, why did *La Garçonne* come to represent the raucous pleasures of *"les années folles"*? Why has it remained so central to the cultural mythology of the postwar era, even today?[27] The answers to these questions lie in the *garçonne's* role as symbol, her ability to embody a world of shadows in which, as Alice Berthet put it, "all poetry, all illusion, all tenderness" had been "banished."

She Bled Throughout Her Being

In the opening section of *La Garçonne,* Margueritte presents postwar bourgeois society as morally corrupt. The first scene revolves around a charity bazaar given by rich bourgeois patrons in the gilded ground-floor rooms of a ministry. The bazaar acts here as a parody of bourgeois charity, an ironic device intended to emphasize that charity—or social conscience of any kind—is the last thing on the minds of its organizers and patrons. Instead, it is a frenzied orgy "of every vanity and every corruption," in which what is for sale is not the small hand-crafted charitable items, but the marriageable daughters of rich men who sell them.[28] Given his own socialist political views, Margueritte's moral argument here—that capitalist greed had debased even family values—was not surprising. Still, many of the novel's critics chose to identify this postwar corruption with the war's destruction of bourgeois moral certainties. "In *La Garçonne,* Victor Margueritte has portrayed the society that the war has made," wrote Anatole France in his letter to the Légion d'honneur on Margueritte's behalf. "The immeasurable evils of a long war have produced abominable morals."[29]

In this first scene, Margueritte contrasts the opulent decadence

enjoyed by the patrons of the charity bazaar with the difficult sacrifices endured by the war wounded it will benefit. The patrons include profiteers such as Léonida Mercoeur, who earned enormous wealth from the war at the same time that he avoided fighting in it, and rich, bloodsucking "aliens" such as Jean Plombino, a Jewish contractor, and John White, an American businessman, who also earned fortunes in the war. Monique, the young, single daughter of one of Paris's most prominent families, looks around her at the other patrons, and notes the unjust imbalance she sees between wealth and suffering. "The idea that one part of humanity bleeds while the other amuses itself and gets rich upset her greatly."[30] Glancing at the "luxury and stupidity that paraded" around the charity bazaar, she remembers the "atrocious vision" of the Hospice de Bois-Floury, where she went to visit the war wounded:

> all those remains of men, fragments of an intelligence, hope and love that once were, now nothing more than misshapen stumps, crushed faces, white eyes and twisted mouths. It was an unbearable memory. It pursued her with an unspeakable horror. The crime of war . . . that all the gold in the world, all the pity on the earth would never wipe from the bloody brow of humanity.[31]

The French reading public should have been familiar with this opposition between opulence and suffering because it appeared so often in wartime literature. However, here it is a woman, Monique, who suffers from her awareness of the war's agonizing contrasts. As if she possessed the moral awareness of the *poilu,* Monique angrily voices his old resentments concerning war profiteers of the homefront. In addition, she demonstrates an exceptional sensitivity toward "all those remains of men" the memory of whom pursue her "with an unspeakable horror."

In this way, Margueritte uses an unfamiliar voice (because female rather than male) to draw a familiar portrait of the society "that the war has made." From the start, he privileges Monique as the voice of moral conscience concerning both the war and bourgeois gender relations. She is deeply in love and engaged to the dangerous and dissolute Lucien Vigneret, who sees his marriage to Monique solely in terms of a share in her father's wealth. Monique's father, another war profiteer, supports Monique's engagement only because it assures him the necessary capital to support a new and lucrative investment. This "exploitation" of women on the marriage market Margueritte parallels to the buying and selling under way at the charity bazaar.[32] Despite the father's willingness to bargain his daughter away for his own profit, he

is not beyond invoking the "family" as a means of persuasion: "Beyond our troubles and petty worries, there is only one thing that really counts: affection, tenderness . . . and the family!"[33] The moral bankruptcy of the Lerbier family, whose father sells his daughter to an unprincipled man and whose mother is interested only in appearing twenty years younger than she is, produces a picture of bourgeois society that is rotten to its traditional moral core.[34]

The second scene of the novel serves as a contrast and critique of the first. With her Aunt Sylvester, Monique visits the simple, austere office of Professor Vignabos, a celebrated historian at the Collège de France. The institution is described here as "an environment of sound ideology and free enquiry."[35] As Monique and her aunt enter Vignabos's office, three books about female identity sit on the table: Léon Blum's *Du Mariage*, Ellen Key's *Love and Marriage*, and Dr. Toulouse's *La Femme et la question sexuelle.*[36] All three were popular texts of turn-of-the-century cultural radicals, who criticized bourgeois marriage and demanded freer sexual expression for women. Blum, for example, argued that women had a polygamous instinct and should therefore be allowed to enjoy more sexual freedom before marriage.[37] The "new" or "bohemian" woman of the fin de siècle had supposedly embodied this cultural radical ideal of womanhood; she represented both economic independence and sexual freedom for women. Prewar critics considered these ideas signs of moral anarchy and national decadence, but they were taken up again after the war by writers such as Dr. Michel Bourgas and Marcel Barrière, who argued that since women's sexual needs were equal to men's, they were entitled to the same sexual freedoms.[38] During the course of her visit, Monique discusses the merits of these texts with Vignabos and his students Boisselet and Blanchet, all of whom are avid supporters of a woman's right to sexual and personal fulfillment both inside and outside marriage. By identifying these texts with a prestigious academic institution, Margueritte legitimates cultural radicalism for the bourgeois Monique, as well as for the bohemian new woman, for the insider as well as the outsider of bourgeois culture.

In the first two scenes, then, Margueritte contrasts two worlds—a morally decadent postwar culture, in which women are bought and sold on the marriage market, and a more radical, intellectual one, where women enjoy sexual freedom. Monique is aware of the corruption of the first, yet wary of the sexuality of the second. But when, by accident, she discovers that Lucien wants her only for her money, she is thrown into a frenzy of anger and makes love to the first man who

picks her up on the street. When her parents object to her refusal to marry Lucien and casually dismiss his dishonesty, Monique is no longer able to ignore the moral bankruptcy of her own family. In the climactic final scene of the first part of the novel, she denounces bourgeois marriage as "nothing but a coupling of interests, a mutual contract of buying and selling."[39] With a fortune she conveniently inherits at precisely that moment—when her Aunt Sylvestre dies in a tragic accident—Monique goes off to live and work on her own in Paris. When we next see her, Monique is dancing in a jazz club, drinking cocktails, and engaging in an openly sexual affair with a woman.[40]

But precisely when she embraces radical gender ideals, they become problematic in two senses. First, Monique's so-called liberation is accompanied by a particularly agonizing personal upheaval. When she discovers Lucien's deception, "inner turmoil seized hold of her to such an extent that it obliterated everything else. She stood at the center of a shattered world."[41] She suffers from a "double wound," having first given herself sexually to Lucien before marrying him, and then having been cruelly deceived and betrayed by him. Thinking of this, "she bled throughout her being, . . . and wanted to be severed, immediately and forever, from what had only moments before been the reason for her existence. A part of herself amputated . . . spoiled illusion, . . . mortified flesh."[42] Far from finding happiness or fulfillment in her life as a *garçonne,* Monique lapses into a semisomnolent, depressed state, half-asleep and half-awake. "Despite some apparent healing, she remained an invalid, still anesthesized with chloroform on the operating table."[43] In this way, Monique's emotional wounds reproduce the physical wounds of the wartime combatant. No sooner do her sexual exploits begin than she begins to feel a sense of emotional emptiness, as if "an invisible worm was born in the magnificence of the fruit."[44]

As Monique rejects a more conventional feminine identity, it becomes problematic in a second sense. She finds herself forced to give up some traditional female prerogatives. Increasingly she takes on the appearance of a man—cutting her hair short and wearing tailored clothing. More important, she engages in a breathtaking series of sex role reversals. After engaging in an openly lesbian affair with a female music hall star, Monique dates only more "feminine" types of men, artists, entertainers, and dancers. She treats these men purely as objects, relishing them as instruments of sexual pleasure but forgetting them as soon as she tires of their tricks.[45] She reduces one lover first to a "glorious pleasure machine" and, later on, to a "breeder."[46] Fur-

thermore, when Monique makes an attempt at (what is coded as) conventional feminine behavior, her efforts fail. As her feelings of apathy and malaise finally crystalize, she realizes that what she really wants is to bear a child. But after several affairs, her attempts to become pregnant are still unsuccessful. With a healthy sense of "*amour-propre masculin*,"[47] Monique first blames her failure on the men in her life. Ultimately, however, her doctor tells her that she is sterile, a fact that "made greater the desert of solitude within her."[48] Deeply depressed and isolated, she slides even further into a life of decadence and debauchery, retreating into her opium den every evening to sink into the recesses of narcotic oblivion.

Hence loneliness and despair weigh down Monique's supposedly joyous liberation. She begins to conceive of her life in this way: "She had won nothing with her freedom. Her work? What was the point if it only fed her loneliness? In pleasure, she had found only a pretense of love. If she could not have a child, what was left for her?"[49] Monique's sterility can be interpreted in several ways, first, as an attempt to reconcile her sexual freedom with the contemporary natalist movement. The natalists, intensified in numbers since the mass slaughter of the war, stressed the importance of woman's maternal role as the basis on which to rebuild France. Natalist doctors urged even single women to have children, declaring it inhumane and unhealthy to impose celibacy on them.[50] By making Monique sterile, Margueritte neutralized the meaning of her sexual rebellion in relation to natalist concerns. Since her reproductive apparatus was dysfunctional, she was no good to the republic anyway, and hence socially expendable.

One can also read Monique's sterility as the inevitable outcome of her decision to abandon conventional femininity. Having embraced a masculine life-style—identified with independence and sexual pleasure—Monique must cede the privileges of female reproductive power. In this way, erotic pleasure and maternal power remain separate, mutually exclusive ideals in *La Garçonne*, despite Monique's transgression of more superficial gender boundaries in appearance and behavior. Unable to become a mother, she remains woefully unhappy. Despite Margueritte's apparent embrace of cultural radical ideals, then, he reaffirms motherhood as the highest value of a woman's life, without which nothing else makes sense. The novel ultimately contradicts itself by denouncing as emotionally sterile female identity beyond a maternal role. In other words, Margueritte's radicalism is only skin deep.

In the last part of the novel, more prolonged relationships with two men, Boisselet and Blanchet, rescue Monique from her limbo of moral turpitude. The similarity in their names signals the parallel function of these two figures in the novel. Both are present in the earlier scene in Vignabos's office at the Collège de France, where they identify themselves as supportive of women's independence and sexual freedom. Because they, too, are attempting to redefine gender identity, they become eligible mates for Monique. Finally, both are veterans who fought bravely and survived the war only to experience difficulty in readapting to civilian life. Both, then, are the "new" men from no-man's-land. Together, as we will see, they represent alternative responses—one right and one wrong—to two cultural phenomena conflated after the war: the modern woman and the veteran's *crise de l'esprit*.

When we first meet Régis Boisselet in Vignabos's office, he voices a familiar bitterness and anger: "He still had on his heart the years of nightmare at the front, while behind the lines, in the hospitals and dancing halls, young girls like this [Monique] were playing the fool."[51] When Monique accidently runs into Boisselet again, his rancor seems not to have abated. He scolds her for her opium addiction and her self-pity, reminding her that others have suffered much greater sorrows than her own. To drive this point home, he tells her a story about a family with two sons; one was killed outright during the war and the other was permanently disabled. Aghast at the story, Monique is attracted to Boisselet's strong set of values. They begin a love affair, but it founders on Boisselet's inability to forget Monique's past of debauchery as a *femme moderne*, despite her pleas that "the past is the past. Neither you nor I can do anything about it."[52] Boisselet is troubled by his inability to reconcile himself to two kinds of pasts—that of his modern female lover and that of his own nightmarish war experience.

As Boisselet's jealousy becomes more violent, Monique begins to feel isolated and imprisoned by the relationship. At this point, she meets another lonely and depressed veteran, Boisselet's colleague Georges Blanchet. The two run across each other by accident at the Louvre, where each is viewing the ruins of ancient Babylonia. At the very moment she sees Blanchet, "in front of the winged bulls and giant friezes, Monique was thinking despondently of dead civilizations and the futility of her task."[53] A literal figuration of Paul Valéry's *crise de l'esprit*, the ruins act as a symbol for a dying bourgeois culture: "Myriads had been born, had suffered and had died. . . . And out of this whirlwind of evanescent dust, this is what remained: unfeeling stone, and a memory as deceitful as forgetfulness."[54] Seeing Blanchet plunges

Monique into a reverie about her own past, which she confuses with memory of the war and the psychic need for "forgetfulness." Blanchet congratulates her on attaining the equality they had discussed in Vignabos's office so long ago, but Monique bitterly replies: "Equality? . . . Yes, in annihilation! . . . Look at those! There's a lesson for you! . . . What ruination!"[55] By her own admission, then, Monique's embrace of a masculine life-style has led her into a no-man's-land of despair and annihilation, the ruins of a dead civilization.

But the ruins are also an ironic starting point for the future lovers' union, which will resurrect them and, by implication, bourgeois culture itself. By situating their first reunion there, Margueritte links the future of their relationship metaphorically to the fate of a dying bourgeois culture. When she and Blanchet begin to see each other, Boisselet, driven mad by jealousy, tries to kill Monique by putting a bullet through her heart. Because such a *crime passionnel* was a notoriously feminine crime in the early twentieth century, its commission by a man here represents yet another reversal in gender roles, one in which women certainly have the upper hand.[56] But precisely at this moment, when masculine self-possession collapses altogether, Blanchet resurrects male heroism, indeed masculinity itself, by placing his body between Monique and Boisselet's bullet and saving her life. Wounded, he loses consciousness and believes that he is back in the war hospital recovering from a trench wound. He awakens "another man" and sees before him "the re-emerging future in the white figure, the kind eyes, shining with life" of Monique, who, wearing a nurse's uniform, is nursing him back to health.[57]

Monique also experiences an awakening at this moment—to the shamefulness of her past and the loss of her childhood innocence. She wonders, "Was she worthy of such a love? Was she not bringing him a blackened soul, a profaned body?"[58] He reassures her by reinterpreting the debauchery of her past as a kind of moral suffering: "But I know! Yes, I know that you have suffered, like all hearts that thirst for the absolute."[59] Like Boisselet, Blanchet confuses his own moral suffering as a veteran with Monique's sexual exploits as a *femme moderne*. But unlike Boisselet, he is willing to forget her promiscuous past, *at the same moment* that he is finally able to put his own past, his own war experience behind him: "Think no more of the nightmares of the night! We are only beginning to live!"[60] Blanchet's second wound allows him to overcome his past and resurrect his own future and masculinity. Blanchet, not Boisselet, finds happiness *and* gets the *garçonne*.

Blanchet's second great awakening coincides with the resurrection of Monique's femininity. Nursing him back to health, Monique becomes the good girl of the war, the woman in white by the bedside of the wounded. When Blanchet reassures her about her past, she listens to him "as the Mary Magdalene listened to the Savior."[61] Interestingly, she feels no sexual desire for Blanchet at all. When he embraces her for the first time, "a sort of modesty [*pudeur*] that she had never felt before" overcame her.[62] The *garçonne* grows her hair long again, gives up her independent life and marries Blanchet. According to Berthet of *La Française*, she "becomes, quite simply, a woman again."[63] In the sequel to the novel, *Le Compagnon* (1923), Monique (not surprisingly) overcomes her sterility, has children, and dies, like a saint, attending the poor.[64] Her triumphant return to the traditional domestic ideal of womanhood here represents a compromise on Margueritte's part. On the one hand, Monique fulfills the radical ideal of Blum and others: she leads her *vie de garçon* before marriage, yet ultimately finds an accepting, forgiving husband. As Paul Souday of *Le Temps* put it, "normally she would have a much better chance of ending up in the gutter."[65] On the other hand, Monique's reaffirmation of conventional femininity can be read as a conservative impulse to redraw secure boundaries of sexual difference. This reconstruction of sexual difference takes on even more importance as we become aware of its redemptive power, that is, its ability to resurrect Blanchet's future out of the nightmare of the past. What else is at stake in this triumphant embrace of traditional femininity besides a happy ending for a bad girl?

Empty Suitcases

Let us attempt another interpretation of *La Garçonne*, one that reads the novel as a discussion of postwar cultural anxiety in general. In this reading, the *garçonne* Monique symbolizes the returning soldier who is freed at last from no-man's-land but who has rejected the bourgeois world that sent him to war. A look at other French novelists of the period supports this interpretation. Writers like Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, for example, portray returning veterans in much the same way as Margueritte does Monique. As we have seen, the war was a profoundly formative experience for Drieu la Rochelle. "Drieu is a writer who can't get out of the trench," argues critic Alice Kaplan.[66] The conclusion of the armistice brought him no great satisfaction. Deeply ambivalent about the world to which he had returned, Drieu plunged

into Parisian social life and wrote novels about displaced veterans like himself, all of whom bear a striking resemblance to Monique.[67]

There are three clear parallels between Drieu la Rochelle's veterans and Margueritte's *garçonne.* First, Drieu's veterans return home thunderstruck and dazed by their experiences in the war. The soldier in the short story "La Prière d'Hargeville" (1918), for example, describes himself in this way: "War, like solitude you have obsessed me, you hold me in your grasp. . . . I am a poor child, fascinated and lost. Will I ever awaken from this mystical dream?"[68] Many of Drieu's young male characters, for example, Gonzague of *Plainte contre l'inconnu* (1924) or Gille of *L'Homme couvert des femmes* (1925), seem to be sleepwalking. Unengaged in life and uncommitted to any one person, they inhabit a dimly lit world of dreams and memories.[69] These veterans resemble, then, the "still anesthesized" Monique in her first days of freedom. Drifting in a kind of dream, Monique is also half-asleep and half-awake.

Second, like Monique, Drieu la Rochelle's veterans sink into a life of drugs and sexual promiscuity. Gille in *L'Homme couvert des femmes,* for instance, is described as "mad with pleasure."[70] Obsessed with death and sex, Gille and his friend Luc while away their hours in bars, salons, and opium dens. They engage in open sexual relations with prostitutes and single women. In "Nous fûmes surpris," a story that takes place not long after the armistice in the spring of 1919, soldiers go from café to café in Paris, drinking and talking rudely to women.[71] Guy, the main character, is "still attached to the principles that had sustained his parents," but "having no other guide than his disordered senses, he turns down dangerous roads, like a rebellious and lost blind man."[72] In "La Valise vide," Gonzague, another veteran, takes drugs as a way of "staying far away from Madame Lemberg, far away from women, far away from everything that was alive."[73] Drieu la Rochelle explains Gonzague's and his friends' behavior in this way: "Rather than being repressed altogether, their passions instead found unexpected outlets. Above all, it was necessary to disrupt unity and continuity."[74] Hence Drieu la Rochelle's veterans also resemble Monique in her life of debauchery. Monique's once honest passions, like those of the veterans, have been diverted into a blind rebellion against her parents' values.

Third, these veterans, like Monique, are sterile. Despite their many promiscuous relationships, they never have children and begin families. Gille, for example, cannot commit himself to either Finette or Jacqueline, the two women he loves. When he leaves Finette, she bitterly accuses: "the truth is, you are not capable of doing anything."[75] Gille's longing for a vaguely defined "ideal" woman, whom he never finds, reflects his quest for a new set of absolutes with which to reconstruct his life. The same emotional vagrancy characterizes Liessies, in "Le Pique-Nique" and Gonzague in "La Valise vide." These veterans pursue pleasure with an intensity that belies the spiritual emptiness it conceals: "all this freneticism was only depressing immobility, idle contemplation and sterile expectation."[76] Like Monique, their lives of pleasure bring them no sense of fulfillment or control.

If Monique's sterility marked her disavowal of female identity, that of the veterans was linked to the theme of emasculation. In *La Comédie de Charleroi* (1934), Drieu la Rochelle's narrator argues that the technological and bureaucratic aspects of modern warfare deprived men of the opportunity to be warriors and heroes. "In this war, one called but no one responded. I realized that after a century of running . . . I was no longer doing anything but crying and gesticulating. . . . I realized that and felt the man die in me."[77] Similarly, at the beginning of *La Suite des idées,* the narrator announces: "I am not a man."[78] Drieu la Rochelle uses the metaphor "*valise vide*" or "empty suitcase" to describe the veterans' spiritual emptiness, their impotence at beginning new lives. Unable to break out of his isolation and communicate with others (in particular women), Gonzague, the central character of "La Valise vide," attempts suicide. In Drieu la Rochelle's words, Gonzague "was everywhere and nowhere. He remained outside of everything."[79] The veteran, like the war itself, was everywhere and yet nowhere.

According to the literary critic Benjamin Crémieux, several other young postwar writers besides Drieu la Rochelle voiced this sense of *crise de l'esprit.* Crémieux analyzes four other postwar novels—*Détours,* by René Crevel; *Femme de paille,* by Léon-Pierre Quint; *Le Coeur gros,* by Bernard Barbey; and *A la dérive,* by Philippe Soupault—in order to create what he calls "a sort of composite portrait of the *jeune homme moderne.*"[80] The heroes of all four novels, he argues, are identical in "their inability to grasp and then to hold onto whatever is there," most important, emotional attachments.[81] The hero of Barbey's *Le Coeur gros,* for example, oscillates between his friendship with Walt and his love for Walt's wife, Claude. Soupault's David "looked for a route without being able to make a choice."[82] Quint's hero boasts "no passion binds any part of me to anything."[83] These men are free for lack of being able to settle down, "abominably free" as the hero of *Détours* puts it.[84] Thus they resemble Monique in her emotional

wanderings, her fondness for highly sexual and uncommitted relationships.

According to Crémieux, the women in these novels contrast sharply with their male counterparts in that they "know what they want and are capable of persevering in their designs or their whims with a tenacity that guarantees their success." In particular, they take on *"l'initiative de l'amour,"* beginning and ending relationships with men as these suit them.[85] Hence these novels demonstrate the same kind of sex role reversals that we have already encountered in Monique's willful sexual exploits, but with one important difference. In *La Garçonne,* Monique plays both the modern woman, capable of sexual initiative, and the veteran, incapable of emotional commitment. Monique as *garçonne,* as girl-boy represents both the modern woman and the "no-man," the man made frail or feminine by the war.

Understanding Monique as no-man as well as modern woman helps us to comprehend why, despite her relatively sheltered young life, she is haunted by the memory of the "remains of men, fragments of intelligence, hope and love" at the Hospice de Bois-Fleury and why she chafes at "the idea that one part of humanity bleeds while the other amuses itself." Her role as symbol of the veteran also clarifies why her rejection of bourgeois values, far from liberating her, places her "at the center of a shattered world," suffering from the "spoiled illusion" of her past. She reproduces the "double wound" of the combatant, having given herself voluntarily to Lucien, as the poilu gave himself to the war, only to be cruelly deceived, as the soldier was, by the illusion of honor. Suffering from these wounds, he, too, "bled throughout [his] being," having been "amputated" from all that had given life meaning before the war. Even after the armistice, "despite some apparent healing," he remained an invalid, like Monique, "still anesthesized . . . on the operating table." However, as the veteran Blanchet's wound is transformed into a mark of male heroism, he recovers consciousness and a sense of the future. Again, his reawakening coincides with that of Monique, who for one last time grieves the past, the loss of childhood innocence, the ruins of a dead civilization.

Margueritte's Monique can also be interpreted, then, as the symbol of a displaced and dreaming no-man. In Berthet's words, she lives a veteran's life, in which all poetry, all illusion has been "banished." She is not the only modern woman in postwar literature to act as a symbol in this way. Camille Englemann plays a similar role in Marcel Prévost's *Les Don Juanes,* another best-seller published in 1922 by a popular writer and member of the Académie française.[86] *Les Don Juanes* was

often referred to in the same breath as *La Garçonne,* although Prévost's novel never enjoyed the spectacular success of Margueritte's. Otherwise the similarities between the two novels are striking.[87] *Les Don Juanes* also begins at the end of the war in an atmosphere of cultural and social dislocation. Prévost describes France in these terms: "ruins of houses, of factories and workshops, . . . ruins as well of what, in the home, could not be repaired with bricks and stones."[88] Like Margueritte's Monique and Drieu's veterans, Prévost's French seem to be sleepwalking: "Suffering from hallucinations, half-anesthesized, they wandered in the dark, not even asking where they went."[89] Promiscuous modern woman and bitter, uncommitted veterans also populate Prévost's novel. It concerns three *Don Juanes,* as they are referred to here, who in their relationships with men take what Crémieux referred to as *"l'initiative de l'amour."* Reviewers pointed out that since none of the three women has more than one relationship with a man, they are not true *"Don Juanes."* Still, the image of the sexually aggressive woman in the novel proved fascinating to critics. As Marc Varenne of *La Renaissance politique* put it, "They exist. No one would dare deny it. Why not, then, write their story?"[90]

Camille Englemann, the most vivid and interesting of the three *Don Juanes,* owns a large bank that she has taken over for her father (presumed dead) during the war. At the same time, Camille has somehow managed (and the improbability of this is significant) to volunteer in the army and be wounded twice. Hence, she reproduces the experiences of both sexes in the war. Like Monique, Camille is both modern woman and veteran. On the one hand, her male colleagues consider her "a man in terms of her intelligence and energy," and compare her with Elizabeth I or Catherine II in that she inspires "the same combination of esteem, admiration and naïve fear as those past destroyers of men [*consommatrices de mâles*]."[91] On the other hand, Camille's "ravaged face" and her skeletal, "wasted" body tell the story of where she has been, a story she tries to camouflage except in front of her own mirror. "Justly proud of her waist size before, she now was nothing more than a bony silhouette." One of Valéry's European ghosts, Camille is described as a "phantom" and a "frightening shadow of her former self."[92]

Prévost's portrait of the ravaged, sunken body of Camille contradicts her male colleagues' perception of her as a powerful, intimidating woman.[93] As a woman made man, she is able to intimidate others, but she inspires only revulsion and anxiety in herself. Prévost figures, in one body, postwar gender confusion in all its guises. Camille is at once

the newly empowered "destroyer of men," who can inspire sexual fear in her colleagues, and the man destroyed by the war, anguished by his own emasculation. "I have sacrificed the woman that I was," she says to herself, "I have sacrificed the balance and joy of my life to an obscure impulse that I called my duty."[94] Rejected in love, she blames it on the hideous scars that the war has left and decides to commit suicide. "I can no longer endure the suffering from my wound and the operation I underwent," she writes in her suicide note, "I have acted like a courageous man; and because I am not a man, I am punished for my courage."[95] For Camille as well as Monique, then, the war's gift of freedom becomes a mixed blessing, "the sacrifice of the woman that she was." But unlike Monique, Camille fails to reconstruct a more conventional female identity, and this very failure leads to her suicide.

Camille's inability to return to a traditional model of femininity can also explain why *Les Don Juanes*, published the same year as *La Garçonne* and containing much of the same sexually explicit subject matter, never became as well-known or as widely read as Margueritte's novel. Even though *La Garçonne* was considered scandalous and outrageous, its ending had a pacifying effect. The novel worked simultaneously on two levels to soothe and to dispel postwar cultural anxiety. First, it normalized dramatic wartime changes in women's lives, and second, it reconstructed a rational future out of the nightmare of the war. In Margueritte's novel, Blanchet's war-devastated masculinity is able to recover thanks to the restoration of Monique's femininity. By ultimately embracing domestic femininity, Monique appeases the cultural/gender anxieties raised throughout the novel and covers over the ruptures of the war experience. Such a recovery does not take place in *Les Don Juanes*: here Camille, like Colette's Chéri, cannot reconcile herself to the past. Margueritte's figuration of postwar cultural crisis through the character of a promiscuous *femme moderne* accounts, in no small part, for the controversy surrounding *La Garçonne*. Likewise, by ultimately reconstructing a stabilized universe from the ruins of a civilization, the novel ensured its own popularity and its tenacity as a central cultural myth of the era.

3

"WOMEN ARE CUTTING THEIR HAIR AS A SIGN OF STERILITY"

FASHION WAS A HIGHLY-CHARGED ISSUE during the twenties. In 1925, an article in *L'Oeuvre* jocularly described how the fashion of short hair completely overturned life in a small French village. After the first woman in the village cut her hair, accompanied by "tears and grinding of teeth" on the part of her family, the fashion quickly became "epidemic: from house to house, it took its victims." A gardener swore he would lock up his daughter until her hair grew back; a husband believed that his wife had dishonored him. A scandalized *curé* decided to preach a sermon about it, but "unfortunately he had chosen the wrong day, since it was the feast of Jeanne d'Arc." As he began to condemn bobbed hair as indecent and un-Christian, "the most impudent young ladies of the parish pointed insolently at the statue of the liberator."[1] By claiming the bobbed-cut Joan of Arc as their mascot, these young women grounded their quest for "liberation" in the rich, tangled mainstream of French history. They appealed to the ambivalent, yet strongly traditional image of *Jeanne la pucelle*, at once patriotic, fervently Christian, and sexually ambiguous.

The fashion among young women for short, bobbed hair could inspire enormous tension within the family. Throughout the decade, newspapers recorded lurid tales, including one husband in the provinces who sequestered his wife for bobbing her hair, and another father who reportedly killed his daughter for the same reason.[2] A father in Dijon sought legal action against a hairdresser in 1925 for cutting the hair of his daughter without his permission.[3] "At present, the question