

## Open Sesame: Plotting Birth Control in Michel Corday's *Sésame ou La maternité consentie* and Victor Margueritte's *Ton corps est à toi*

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In her study of the ways reproductive issues are worked out in Rachilde's fiction, Melanie Hawthorne notes that in the aftermath of France's defeat in 1870, women "were made to feel that their main value as citizens derived from their ability to reproduce the population" (178). The fertility decline in France preceded that in other modernizing nations by a full hundred years, becoming, by the last third of the nineteenth century, an integral part of the country's national identity, according to Elinor A. Accampo (238), who argues that political upheaval had imbued female domesticity with "extraordinary symbolic weight across the political spectrum," with women firmly ensconced "as bearers of tradition, particularly in their role as mothers" (239). The crisis became all the more acute in the wake of the crushing loss of life resulting from World War I.

Given this context, it is remarkable that Michel Corday should publish, in 1903, *Sésame ou La maternité consentie*, with the epigraph "N'être mère qu'à son gré" boldly displayed on the front cover. The novel's main character, thirty-year-old engineer André Lafont, inherits a mysterious elixir from his father that temporarily renders a woman infertile, making motherhood a choice, not an inevitable consequence of sexual activity: "Ainsi le 'Sésame' de la légende," his father explains in the letter meant for his son to find after his death, "ouvrait et fermait seul la porte merveilleuse" (3). As André grapples with the decision of whether or not to unleash this substance into the world, he finds himself entangled in a heated debate between pro-natalists and neo-Malthusians that has significant implications for the two women in his life. Neo-Malthusianism was based on the ideas of Anglican pastor Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834), who posited, in *Essai sur le principe de la population* (1798), that "la population tend à s'accroître selon une progression géométrique, alors que les subsistances augmentent selon une progression arithmétique, donc moins rapide" (qtd. in Cova, *Féminismes* 10). Neo-Malthusians departed from Malthus, who emphasized celibacy, in their advocacy of birth control.<sup>1</sup> The way Corday's principal neo-Malthusian, Pierre Acquin, explains it, Malthus favored a long period of chastity before a marriage later

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<sup>1</sup> See Francis Ronsin and Roger-Henri Guerrand for an in-depth discussion of neo-Malthusianism.

in life, then abstinence once the children from the union are “appelés au jour”—flawed thinking, according to Acquin, for whom “la continence est un fléau comme la faim” (134).

Twenty-four years after Corday published *Sésame*, Victor Margueritte, best known for his 1922 novel, *La garçonne*—considered so scandalous that his Légion d’honneur was withdrawn—, published *Ton corps est à toi* (volume one of a trilogy titled *Vers le bonheur*),<sup>2</sup> which tells the story of Spirita Arelli, whose progressive uncle/godfather insists that she educate herself, experience life, enjoy physical intimacy with partners of her choosing, and most important, have children only when she is ready. “*Ton corps est à toi*,” he tells Spi, “[n]on pour en mal user mais pour le rendre digne de l’âme qui l’enveloppe. Les deux ne font qu’un, jusqu’à l’heure où la mort dissocie l’esprit et matière. . . . Sache donc bien que nuire au corps, c’est nuire à l’âme, et réciproquement” (35; emphasis in original). Margueritte’s plot centers on Spi’s efforts to deal with an unwanted pregnancy and to reclaim the life that had been so full of promise. This article will examine how two male writers from very different time frames—the Belle Époque vs. the post-Great War “années folles”—used a similar approach to build novels around an issue that stood to change the fate of women and society as a whole forever. If showcasing birth control were not groundbreaking enough, both Corday and Margueritte also emphasize a woman’s right to be fulfilled sexually at a time when women had but two options: “to be sexually active was to be (sooner or later, for the vast majority of women) a mother,” states Hawthorne; “[n]ot to be a mother was to remain a virgin. The notion that women could be lovers, sexual partners, . . . was simply inconceivable, and yet a necessary step for feminism” (187).<sup>3</sup>

Both Corday and Margueritte<sup>4</sup> situate their argument for a woman’s right to control her fertility within the framework of the traditional *roman de formation*, which privileges the role of a charismatic mentor figure.<sup>5</sup> Filling that role in *Sésame* is the aforementioned Acquin, a lawyer who years earlier, with André’s physician father, created the elixir, but who knows nothing of his partner’s bequest to his son. Acquin is as eager to make a convert out of André as André is to learn what he can from Acquin, the elder Lafont having ordered his son to reflect, observe,<sup>6</sup> educate himself, and to look at life through the prism of the elixir (5) so as to make an informed decision about what to do with it. Acquin begins by inviting André to a public lecture about birth control aimed at women and workers, the groups who stand to profit the most from his theories. A firm believer that a woman should

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<sup>2</sup> Richard D. Sonn explains that Margueritte paid a visit to Eugène Humbert, a proponent of family planning, in the hope of getting information for his next novel. When Humbert warned him that birth control was a dangerous subject, Margueritte “shrugged off the warning, saying he had little to lose” (122), presumably in the wake of the *La garçonne* scandal. In the end, he gained a great deal: money from the 180,000 copies that were sold and the admiration of the Left (122).

<sup>3</sup> Marcelle Tinayre explores similar questions in *La rebelle* (1905), whose heroine deals with an unwanted pregnancy and also argues convincingly for a woman’s right to a sexually satisfying relationship—even outside the boundaries of marriage.

<sup>4</sup> William H. Scheffley mentions the two writers together (along with André Couvreur) as having been influenced by playwright Eugène Brieux; he references *Sésame* but a different Margueritte text (*Prostituée*) (385). Corday dedicated his novel to Brieux.

<sup>5</sup> Examples are not hard to come by: consider the role Vautrin plays for Eugène de Rastignac in Balzac’s *Le père Goriot*—or l’abbé Pirard for Julien Sorel in Stendhal’s *Le rouge et le noir*.

<sup>6</sup> Vautrin puts a high premium on observation, telling Rastignac “Il faut veiller pour bien savoir ce qui se passe autour de soi, dans Paris” (53).

have a child only when its well-being can be guaranteed, Acquin calls the government's pro-natalist position "[une] longue duperie" (59) and asks his audience to imagine the outcome if women gave birth as often as physically able: a France of forty billion citizens. He claims that what motivates the government is the need for more soldiers to fight wars and more workers whom it can pay less; for the slogan "Croissez et multipliez," he substitutes "Améliorez-vous" (59). Acquin is confident that his doctrine will engender "une race de bonté, de santé, prête aux grandes besognes" (60-61). Though his primary concerns are eliminating poverty and war and empowering workers, he also has women's interests very much at heart: "... il faut qu'elles ne se laissent féconder que librement, de leur consentement réfléchi. Il faut qu'elles ne fassent plus de malheureux, qu'elles ne créent plus que des heureux" (61). Such a stance aligns Acquin with Paul Robin (1837-1912), the real-life founder of the first French neo-Malthusian league (La Ligue pour la régénération humaine), which held lectures on contraceptive methods, distributed brochures, sold contraceptives, and supported abortion rights. He was exceptional among neo-Malthusians in his attention to the issue of motherhood and other concerns pertaining to women (Accampo 241), and advocated "free heterosexual love" (Cova, "French" 122).

The mentor figure in *Margueritte*, Sébastien Paccaud, is for all intents and purposes Acquin's double. A "néo-malthusien convaincu" (75), Paccaud believes that limiting births is a matter of individual responsibility, that what is at stake is nothing short of "[l]a santé et le bonheur de la race, quoi!" (76). For him, as for his counterpart in *Corday*, the "pullulation de l'espèce sur un monde insuffisant à la nourrir était... la cause de la plupart des maux dont souffraient les peuples" (76); neither he nor Acquin can fathom why selection is used as a matter of course on plants and animals but not on human beings. Both decry the patriarchal society that deliberately keeps women passive and dependent, not to mention completely in the dark about their bodies. Bucking tradition, Paccaud speaks openly with Spi at the onset of her menses, "appelant faits et choses par leur nom" (33);<sup>7</sup> Acquin, for his part, wonders aloud why scholarly treatises on anatomy are "muets sur les seuls organes de la génération, dont la connaissance profonde serait aussi nécessaire, pourtant, que celle des entrailles ou du cœur?... Toutes les parties du corps sont également nobles" (136-37). Both mentors' views reflect those of Swiss psychologist Auguste Forel, who, according to Mary Lynn Stewart, bemoaned the French public's distaste for "'calling things by their proper names,'" which to his mind only piqued their curiosity (105), and those of his countrywoman Anna Fischer, a doctor whose drawings of external genitalia in her 1905 women's health manual elicited such outrage that they were eliminated from the 1924 edition (118).<sup>8</sup>

More controversial than Paccaud's neo-Malthusianism are his beliefs regarding sexual freedom for women. A key component of his program for educating Spi is physical activity, which, in combination with work and study, will result, he believes, in a strong, self-

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<sup>7</sup> Sonn describes a 1927 anarchist meeting in Bordeaux at which Aristide Lapeyre urged his cohorts to read *Margueritte's* new novel. Reporting on the meeting, a police informer correctly identified *Margueritte* as the author, but erroneously substituted "cœur" for "corps" in the title. "The title that was still a mystery to the police," remarks Sonn, "would soon become a virtual catchphrase among the left-wing advocates of birth control" (123). Given *Margueritte's* emphasis on the physical, the error is highly ironic.

<sup>8</sup> Stewart comments that "[t]he publisher left a blank space in the text with the disingenuous caption, 'This engraving is of a purely technical order and of medical rather than profane interest'" (118).

sufficient woman who is not likely to find herself in a position of inferiority. Paccaud's emphasis on nurturing both body and mind harkens back to the humanistic program Ponocrates devised for Gargantua, only Paccaud's is aimed at women. He insists that Spi's mind, like Gargantua's, be purged of "toutes les erreurs que les préjugés y fourrent" and cleansed, just like the body, to remove "la croûte du passé" (80).<sup>9</sup> Corday's Acquin likewise subscribes to the dual cultivation of body and soul, especially in the context of physical pleasure, telling André "Toute créature humaine, homme ou femme, veut de l'amour. . . . Le corps et l'âme — et c'est tout un : la lampe et sa lumière — s'unissent dans un même besoin d'amour" (138). Paccaud considers the practice of preventing women from satisfying their sexual urges "simplement, proprement" barbaric (80). But he also urges moderation, warning Spi that giving herself to "la première tentation" would only make her "la proie des suivantes" (75). Instead, she should allow her intellect to weigh in: "avant de faire l'amour," he states, "forge tes armes" (81)—good advice, considering that Spi's most prominent feature is her sexuality: the novel's opening scene shows the fourteen-year-old doing chores on a hot day, topless and on the verge of removing her dress as well. Shortly thereafter, we find her dozing in the barn, bare legs exposed and sweat beading up between breasts that she fondles as she daydreams about the two boys courting her (an image reproduced on the front cover of the Flammarion Select-Collection edition). "[Une] garçonne pure," the narrator explains, "[e]lle n'était qu'instinct salubre, innocence, énergie" (29, 31). Three years later, she has become desire in the flesh, as this striking passage describing the effect of a passionate kiss reveals:

Une autre Spirita avait pris possession de l'ancienne, l'éliminait sans transition... Fondue, comme une cire molle, sous l'empreinte révélatrice : ce cachet de plaisir enfoncé au creux de sa chair, et d'où la femme avait surgi, avec son mystérieux relief. De la pointe de ses seins à la turgescence qui au centre d'elle-même se révélait, . . . Spi se sentait neuve... (58-59)<sup>10</sup>

In Spi, Margueritte offers us a unique and modern heroine ripe for a sexual experience that Paccaud has made clear is a woman's right, a belief shared by Corday's Acquin, who blames sexual continence for all manner of nervous disorders and insists that physical love is, for men and women alike, "aussi sacré, aussi impérieux que le besoin de pain" (134).

True to the standard *roman de formation* formula, both novels have plot lines that provide the protagonists with opportunities to test their mentors' principles. Once Acquin has established himself not only as a mentor but a substitute father akin to "papa Vautrin" (Balzac 107), and no less confident—"ce sera moi qui vous initierai... Comme cela, je remplacerai un petit peu votre papa..." (38)—he hands over supporting reading materials, including Malthus's *Essai sur le principe de population*, Carlile's *Livre de chaque femme*, and what he identifies as an English doctor's *Éléments de science sociale ou La religion sexuelle*—evidently George R. Drysdale's 1877 text on sexual health and sexually transmitted diseases—(121). Before long André gets caught up in a double drama: one

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<sup>9</sup> Ponocrates employs a substance called ellébore d'Anticyre on Gargantua to "lui nettoy[er] toute l'altération et perverse habitude du cerveau. Par ce moyen aussi Ponocrates luy feist oublier tout ce qu'il avoit appris soubz ses antiques precepteurs . . ." (Rabelais 88).

<sup>10</sup> For an interesting analysis of differences between erotica written by men and that written by women, see Lucienne Frappier-Mazur.

revolving around a neighbor, Mme Hélie, who is burdened with a husband in an insane asylum and an invalid child whose affliction is roundly blamed on his father's mental illness, and the other around his younger sister, Marie. The plot lines intersect when the two women fall in love—in Mme Hélie's case, with André himself, and in that of Marie, with a young man from an affluent family—but are unable to act on their desire for fear of becoming pregnant, and André realizes that he could, in theory, improve their lives if he were to unveil the elixir.

*Ton corps est à toi* features a similar sequence of events aimed at enlightening Spi and readers alike: edifying conversations, plus targeted readings (77)—Paul Robin's *Libre amour*, *Libre maternité* and titles like *Éducation sexuelle* and *Moyens d'éviter la grossesse* (whose authors are not identified). The specificity of these readings in works of fiction may strike readers as odd, but there might have been a method to Corday's and Margueritte's madness, for by listing the titles/authors, readers themselves become complicit in the learning process, unwitting doubles for the protagonists in need of enlightenment; storytelling and the advancement of a political agenda thus coalesce in a highly effective way. Spi, like André, finds herself embroiled in her own crises, on her own (circumstances having pulled Paccaud away) to reconcile her mentor's principles with her reality as a member of an uneducated and dysfunctional family highly distrustful of Paccaud's way of thinking. While working as a chambermaid to a wealthy socialite—a job that Paccaud discouraged her from taking because he considered it unworthy of her intellectual capabilities—she witnesses an orgy that brings out the animal in all its participants, one of whom tries to seduce her. As a result, Spi becomes thoroughly disgusted by the human body on whose beauty and nobility Paccaud has always insisted and, worse, begins to see herself as a victim, “[u]n gibier qu'on traque... une proie guettée par la frénésie de la chasse” (101). Even when her desire reawakens, she is not sure how to proceed: the technical information on birth control that Paccaud provided seems as out of touch with real life as the advice of the village priest, whose remedy for her lovesickness is, predictably, to love Jesus and strive for sainthood (saints being, after all, “les amantes de Dieu” [107]). Not surprisingly, religious instruction—still the mainstay for real-life females in France at the time, who more likely than not were in possession of a brochure distributed by the Catholic church that advised chaste marital sex for the sole purpose of procreation (Accampo 258)<sup>11</sup>—has no place in Paccaud's program; in fact, he tells Spi that the only person to whom she owes a confession is herself, citing Nietzsche's famous “Il y a trop peu d'amour et de bonté dans le monde pour en donner à des êtres imaginaires” (112-13).<sup>12</sup>

With Spi at a critical juncture in her pursuit of woman/selfhood, Margueritte puts Paccaud's “ton corps est à toi” principle to the supreme test by subjecting his heroine to a brutal rape, the very situation in which a woman's body is least her own. What is troubling about the rape scene is the mixed message Margueritte seems to offer when he shows Spi to be not only “ivre de stupeur, d'angoisse, de rage,” but “[ivre] de délices” (122) and an “inavouable volupté” (128), incapable of controlling her body's responses: “Tout vibre en

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<sup>11</sup> There were 170,000 copies of the brochure in circulation in the 1920s (Accampo 258).

<sup>12</sup> Aphorism 129 in *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*: “Verbotene Freigebigkeit. — Es ist nicht genug Liebe und Güte in der Welt, um noch davon an eingebilddete Wesen wegschenken zu dürfen” (Nietzsche 123).

elle. Son corps chante... Elle frémit de cet élan du jeune oiseau, que ses ailes soulèvent, pour l'envol" (121). It is ironic, of course, that the rape occurs just as she is discovering the sexuality that her uncle has held up as so vital to a woman's well-being, and even more so that it leaves her pregnant, her body thus appropriated not just by the rapist, but by a fetus she did not ask for and does not want. What has been up to this point a straightforward argument for women's agency and equality is undermined, then, by the suggestion that Spi is so desperate for sexual fulfillment that she cannot help but get pleasure from a violent act.<sup>13</sup> And yet, as a plot device, it certainly provides forward thrust in her development in a narrative that is very much a *roman d'apprentissage*.

In a much less dramatic way, Corday seems to subvert his persuasive endorsement of neo-Malthusian values by giving voice to one of Acquin's cohorts, Bernard Fuchs, who is Acquin's polar opposite, as harsh as the elder man is gentle. Left to his own devices, Fuchs, described as "[u]ne sorte de géant" (50), would turn the issue of birth control into "un moyen de lutte et d'insurrection" (65). His nemesis is "les grands" who live off the fertility of the poor: "Il leur faut des ignorants, des résignés, des abêtis, tout le produit fatal de la famille nombreuse et pauvre ; il leur faut cette matière obéissante, cette masse fluide et docile . . ." (205). That he has a propensity for violence becomes evident when he attacks a protester at one of Acquin's lectures. Though Fuchs's approach does not appeal to André, who realizes that in his hands, giving women access to contraception would become "un engin de violence, une bombe silencieuse" (208), as an associate of Acquin's, Fuchs does the neo-Malthusian campaign no favors. At the same time, however, exposure to his hard-core approach is a crucial part of André's formation, helping him, like Rastignac, to realize that extremism may not be the best way to proceed.

A similar process seems to be at play when both novelists include strong representation for the opposing ideology, as if intent upon mirroring the neo-Malthusian/pro-natalist debate underway in real life. Joshua H. Cole expresses the philosophical differences between the two camps eloquently when he states:

In the Malthusian paradigm, . . . sexuality was to the individual as reproduction was to society. In each case the first term provided the motivating energy which drove the second. . . . The natalist assumption, on the other hand, that sexuality was to reproduction as the individual was to society, lent priority to the second term in each case, transforming both sexuality and the individual into functional vehicles for the realization of a society that was congruent with the physiological demands of nature. (670-71)

At the other end of the spectrum from Fuchs, Corday offers a trio of outspoken pro-natalist characters: André's boss, M. Chalambert, and his senator father; and a worker in the Chalambert paper factory named Choquart, who also happens to be the aforementioned man attacked by Fuchs. Just as Balzac's Rastignac is confronted with conflicting messages from Goriot and Vautrin (whose message overlaps in some respects that of Mme de Beauséant), André finds himself torn between these pro-natalists and the neo-Malthusians in Acquin's camp. The two Chalamberts are of a piece, believers that having as many

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<sup>13</sup> Frappier-Mazur's comment that "For many women, the most unacceptable aspect of pornographic and erotic literature is the representation of their passive acquiescence to, or even pursuit of, abuse and pain" (124) seems relevant here.

children as possible is “le vrai but, la raison d’être, au fond” (87), an attitude that neo-Malthusians would come to call “lapinisme” (Accampo 251). A member of a commission studying the birth rate, the elder Chalambert offers a well-reasoned argument against nearly every point in Acquin’s doctrine. He claims, for instance, that population growth could never surpass subsistence as long as industry and agriculture are thriving. “La vraie richesse,” he tells André, “c’est le capital humain ! Le grand stimulant des énergies et des intelligences, c’est le nombre. La qualité naît de la quantité. La preuve en est dans la famille, cette miniature de la patrie” (237). His “quantity over quality” principle runs directly counter to Acquin’s belief in the power of a stronger race, “prête aux grandes besognes” (61), as we saw above. A fear mongerer and xenophobe, the elder Chalambert predicts that if the low birth rate is not reversed, foreigners will infiltrate France and take it over: “. . . nos voisins, par une lente infiltration, nous remplaceront sur notre propre sol” (238-39). The Chalamberts’s enthusiastic discourse has the opposite effect on André as Fuch’s equally radical one, causing him to question everything his mentor has told him. Those doubts solidify when André meets the third pro-natalist, Choquart, the father of seven children, especially when he sees the latter’s attractive home and seemingly healthy, happy family. In *Ton corps est à toi*, the Chalambert/Choquart equivalent is a minor, albeit influential, character who appears only as the novel is coming to a close, when Spi is accused of helping a friend, Étienne, procure an abortion. Mermerod, the judge assigned to her case, accuses her of being “une petite anarchiste” (257) and quashes her eloquent defense of women’s right to ownership of their bodies with an impassioned speech that could easily have come out of the mouths of Corday’s pro-natalists: “La France a besoin d’enfants ! Et tous ceux qui essayent, par la parole ou par l’écrit, de limiter la moisson féconde, sont les ennemis de l’État. L’avortement est un crime contre la nature. Et la propagande anticonceptionnelle un attentat contre la société !” (269-70).

It is important to note that both Corday and Margueritte seem to delight in taking down the pro-natalists just when they begin to gain a certain purchase in the narrative; there are skeletons, it turns out, in their closets. Mermerod got a chambermaid pregnant fourteen years earlier, while married, and arranged for her to get an abortion. The young woman now works for Spi’s employer in Marseille, Lucien Bernier, who is, rather conveniently, a friend of Paccaud’s. Bernier has the incriminating letter, described, significantly, as a “Sésame ouvre-toi” (270) in which “[l]e futur champion de la morale publique et des familles nombreuses” (264) instructs his mistress on how to get rid of the baby; it is this evidence that exonerates Spi in the novel’s final pages. One might say, then, that the downfall of the consummate pro-natalist coincides with an upturn in the heroine’s fate. In *Sésame*, the Choquarts’s apparent prosperity belies a sobering reality: M. Choquart is an alcoholic whose children bear the mark of his addiction, suffering from “de[s] misères imperceptibles : lymphatisme, douleurs, anémie” (196) and more generally from neglect: four of them have been handed over to charity establishments and professional schools with free tuition; of the two youngest still at home, one works as a paper-folder in the Chalambert factory. The discovery that Choquart’s well-being is thanks to social welfare in various forms renews André’s faith in his mentor, as do his own close observations of the women directly affected by their husbands’ pro-natalism: Mme Choquart’s refusal to answer when her husband tries to get her to agree that “on ne danse pas devant le buffet” (174) does not go unnoticed, nor does Mme Chalambert’s “discrète amertume” which

leaves no doubt in André's mind that Chalambert is imposing the children on her "sans se soucier d'elle-même. Elle les subissait ; elle ne les appelait pas" (92). Despite her wealth and social standing, birthing six children in seven years has turned her into "une pauvre femme, blessée aux sources de l'être par [des] maternités trop fréquentes," one whose life will be "amoindrie et peut-être abrégée" (91).

Buttressing these minor female characters whose destiny is to *subir* are more vocal ones who give poignant expression to the neo-Malthusian ideology. Corday includes a self-proclaimed feminist<sup>14</sup> on Acquin's team, Clara Mignaud, who seems to have been modeled on feminist neo-Malthusians like Nelly Roussel (1878-1922), a disciple of Paul Robin, or Dr. Madeleine Pelletier (1874-1939).<sup>15</sup> Clara's "calme audace" (66) makes Fuchs's seething anarchism all the more untenable in André's mind. In a long conversation with André, Clara, a believer in the connection between birth control and "[l]'affranchissement féminin" (51), declares that gender equality can be achieved only by allowing women the freedom to choose if and when to become mothers, since the fear of pregnancy keeps them from acting on the very sexual desire that men are encouraged to satisfy: "Le jour où la femme experte disposera d'elle-même, le jour où elle ne sera mère qu'à son heure, elle deviendra vraiment l'égal de l'homme. Pas avant" (210). Just how aggressive Clara's feminism is becomes clear when she openly criticizes the institution of marriage, which she defines as "contrainte, oppression, amertume et déception" and even calls corrupt, with adultery serving as proof of its immorality (211-12); as for the notion of being faithful to only one person, she terms it backward and "barbare" (212). Where her message overlaps that of Acquin, and of Paccaud in Margueritte's novel, is her belief that nature has given women and men alike the same sexual desire, and that only when woman finds her "compagnon rêvé" should she embrace motherhood (213).

Echoing Clara's feminist message are none other than André's sister Marie and his love interest, Mme Hélie, despite the initial impression that each gives of being a long-suffering, virginal woman reminiscent of Balzac's Victorine Taillefer or the eponymous heroine of his *Eugénie Grandet*. Mme Hélie is introduced as a martyr figure whose life is consumed with visiting her husband at the asylum, caring for their son, and working as a lacemaker. But when André reveals his feelings for her, she metamorphoses into a flesh-and-blood, desiring woman capable of articulating her need for sexual fulfillment without the risk of pregnancy, one who wonders how it is possible to "créer de la vie sans le vouloir, sans le savoir ? . . . Pourquoi suis-je là, comme la bête, la plante, qui pullule, inconsciente ? Est-ce que je ne m'appartiens pas, à moi ?" (156). It is inconceivable to her that she has the right to take her own life, but not that to control when she gives it: "Alors, pourquoi ne suis-je pas aussi maîtresse de donner de la vie ? Pourquoi ne puis-je pas être mère, à mon gré,

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<sup>14</sup> According to Karen Offen, the term "féminisme" came into vogue in France during the early 1890s, and was usually qualified with an adjective (*social, Christian, etc.*), the two most important being *familial* and *individualist* (or *integral*). See page 654 for descriptions of each type.

<sup>15</sup> Roussel is widely recognized as the first feminist spokesperson for birth control in Europe; she was against abortion except as a last resort, and was vocal in denouncing the pain of childbirth (Cova, "French" 127). Pelletier, a psychiatrist and anthropologist, was known for what Angus McLaren calls "[a] full feminist defense of abortion" (482); she believed that women had long been used by men for their pleasure and that they must postpone expressing their own sexual desires as long as they lack economic independence and are obligated to bear children; it was, she said, the child "who plunged the woman back into subjection" (482).



seulement à mon heure? C'est affreux, c'est affreux..." (156). André's sister Marie undergoes a similar transformation: a twenty-five-year-old who has thus far devoted her life to keeping house for André—and serving as teacher to the Chalamberts's flock (she notes wryly that she will always have job security thanks to their investment in baby-making)—she is built up as an old maid who is completely ignorant about love and motherhood, whose time for those experiences has passed. When she falls in love with a doctor, Henri Vadier, it appears that a happy ending might be in store—until his old-school parents refuse to accept her because she is not wealthy enough. Touched by the plight of these two women whom he loves, now well-versed in both neo-Malthusian and pro-natalist policies, André realizes that he is in the curious position of being able to offer both his sister and Mme Hélie sexual satisfaction without fear of pregnancy by means of the elixir.

Paccaud wields a similar power in the Marguerite novel when he encourages Spi to pursue pleasure whenever her intellectual maturity catches up with the physical. But the rape throws Spi understandably off course, as does Paccaud's adamant opposition to abortion and to giving children up ("mettre un enfant à l'Assistance," he once told her, "c'est le vouer à végéter et à souffrir toute sa vie" [78]). Without her mentor's support, Spi enters a new stage of self-development in which she tweaks what she gleaned from her uncle's lessons to make it her own. She outright rejects his offer to help raise the child, for example, and insists on her right to do with her body as she wishes. One might say that she turns his "ton corps est à toi" slogan against him, asserting that "Tant que l'enfant est dans le ventre de la mère, il lui appartient. Elle a le droit de disposer d'elle et de lui... Il n'y a pas de loi, pas de justice qui puisse m'interdire de me libérer, avant terme, d'un enfant que je n'ai pas voulu !" (135).<sup>16</sup> She does everything in her power to abort the child, in tandem with real-life counterparts who consumed noxious substances and sought out abortion providers (typically midwives, who made more money from abortion than childbirth [McLaren 472]), often without their husbands' knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Unsuccessful, she attempts suicide with rat poison, clearly willing to give up her own life to avoid giving life to another. The fact that she compares herself to the sheep bearing red crosses that designate them for the slaughterhouse indicates that the pregnancy makes her no less a victim than the rape that caused it. While obviously self-destructive, her suicide attempt could be construed as a proactive measure, a choice made in an effort to find a solution to an unbearable problem.<sup>18</sup> Howard I. Kushner notes that suicide in nineteenth-century France was primarily a male activity, and that, by killing themselves, women were "entering the male sphere" (462); from that perspective, it is clear that Spi is striving to re-empower herself, even if doing so means self-annihilation.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ton corps est à toi* would seem to be the exception to Leonard R. Koos's claim that the "abortion plot of French literature" came to an abrupt end following the horrific loss of life in World War I and the passage of the tighter law (271). For a lengthy list of literary representations of abortion see Koos, page 267.

<sup>17</sup> Accampo, among others, estimates the number of abortions at the end of the nineteenth century at 100,000-500,000 per year (the wide range being the result of the impossibility of knowing exact numbers because abortion was illegal). Live births occurred in a range of 900,000 per year (258).

<sup>18</sup> Norman N. Holland observes that "Half-consciously, but mostly unconsciously, the individual chooses what seems the best solutions, those ... which he or she perceives as yielding the least pain and most pleasure with minimum effort" (286). Spi's decision seems to have been made much more than "[h]alf-consciously."

Further evidence that Spi has put her own spin on her mentor's principles is her declaration that "Je ne deviendrai mère qu'avec l'homme que j'aurai choisi pour cela. Sinon je préfère mourir" (136). She has stretched his precept that women have the right to choose their own sexual partners to its limit by insinuating that death is the only alternative, and then, in a further act of defiance, gives herself physically to the young man who first awakened her sexual feelings.<sup>19</sup> When her abusive mother kicks her out, Spi makes her way to Marseille, struggles to find work ("Enceinte, on n'en voulait nulle part . . ." [181]), and waits impatiently for her pregnancy ordeal to be over. Not once does she waver in her desire to reclaim ownership of her body. As her pregnancy progresses, she feels deformed, obscene (178); her innate "bonne volonté" (178) gives way to rebelliousness and hatred, even for the child in her womb, whom she perceives in unrelentingly negative terms ("le fardeau exécré" [178], "l'Intrus" [128, 193], "ce sale gosse qui lui distend le ventre" [195]). Nor does she change her steadfast belief that "Une mère qui a un enfant malgré elle devrait pouvoir le supprimer, avant qu'il soit né, comme elle a le droit de l'abandonner, ensuite !" (279). Despite the efforts of hospital personnel<sup>20</sup> who are confident that she will change her mind about abandoning her baby once she has him at her breast, she never softens toward the "avorton qui piaille" (196), "une mauvaise graine qu'un vent méchant a jetée en moi et fait germer" (215), outright refusing to nurse him<sup>21</sup>—"Non, et non, elle ne nourrirait pas, de sa substance, ce petit bout d'homme, malgré elle conçu !" (201)—even when he begins to starve. Spi's rebellion on this front is especially striking given the fact that in the decades leading up to World War I there was a campaign to encourage breastfeeding, part of the repopulation initiative that became all the more urgent after the war (Cole 642).

It could of course be argued that Spi's extreme negativity toward her child, like the depiction of her desire for her rapist, flies in the face of Margueritte's agenda, especially since there is little evidence that her actions are motivated by a desire to give her child a better life. In fact, Spi nearly kills her baby, who is so malnourished when she finally gives him up that he looks half his actual age. But it is important to remember that Spi's whole crisis could have been averted had she had access to birth control. The lack of options for women who "fall pregnant"—to borrow the French expression—sets in motion a downward spiral for Spi: shortly after turning her son over to authorities, she is taken for a prostitute and arrested, first for sleeping on a bench and then for helping a friend procure an abortion. Just as Corday aligned Mme Choquart with Mme Chalambert to demonstrate that the problem facing women where fertility is concerned cuts across class lines, Margueritte puts his heroine, whose intellect and upbringing paved the way for the kind of

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<sup>19</sup> The heroine of Margueritte's *La garçonne* accomplished the same goal but in a more shocking way: after learning that her fiancé is cheating on her, she offers herself literally to the first man she encounters.

<sup>20</sup> Spi's birth experience mirrors that of real-life poor women in the early twentieth century. Stewart describes the two-tier system of birthing according to which women who could afford to have a home birth hired a midwife or *docteur-accoucheur*, while everyone else went to a hospital (in Paris, La Maternité) or a public-welfare midwife (128).

<sup>21</sup> The career-minded heroine of Colette Yver's Belle Époque novel, *Princesses de science*, is devastated when she becomes pregnant and like Spi, refuses to nurse (in her case, so that she can return to her work as a doctor); her baby ends up dying because the wet nurse—who would not have been necessary had the mother opted to breastfeed—dilutes his milk.

future typically afforded only to men, on the streets, suffering the same fate as the lowest of the low-class Marseille women.

To drive home his point, Margueritte juxtaposes Spi with Étienne, who is in some respects the heroine's double, and in others, her complete opposite; she might also be said to temporarily replace Paccaud as mentor, given her confident "Compte sur moi pour t'instruire" when Spi first arrives in Marseille (187). In contrast to Spi's pregnancy by rape, Étienne's is simply the result of her having responded to her desire, apparently expressed for more than one man, since she is not sure of the father's identity ("Ernest, non Jules !," she tells Spi [185]). She gives her baby up, because doing so is within her rights—"j'en ai fait cadeau à l'Assistance," she quips, "J'l'aurais gardé, s'pas, si j'avais pu l'nourrir, en même temps que moi... Car il m'tenait à la peau, le mignon. . . . C'est l'État qui paye, il nous doit bien ça !" (185-86)—, but it dies at the age of six months. Although she vows not to get pregnant again because she now knows "les trucs pour me débiter" (186), she does, this time because she is too impatient for a condom—a striking reversal of traditional gender roles, to be sure. Her mother gives her herbs to abort the fetus, joking that the only solution to this problem is to "vous coudre le derrière, à toutes" (205), but they only make her vomit. She gets results, though, from one Mme Escartefigue, whose colorful name resembles those of abortionists often showcased in the fin-de-siècle press, according to Koos, such as "Madame Tiremonde," "La Mort aux gosses," "La Cacheuse," "Le Dégringoleur," "La Plieuse de la mort," figures that "acquired a quasi-mythical status during the period and freely circulated in the press and the popular imagination long after their court cases had been resolved" (266). Clearly Margueritte does not offer Étienne as an admirable character—she is too irresponsible and cavalier about her sexuality—but she bolsters his argument by allowing him to highlight the consequences for women, no matter what their class, of acting on sexual desire.<sup>22</sup> Étienne not only endures pain from the abortion procedure but incurs a hefty fine and a jail sentence as well, in keeping with the law, passed by a huge majority in 1920, which increased the penalty for abortion and banned the sale and distribution of *female* contraceptives<sup>23</sup>—emphasis on the adjective because condoms were not targeted.<sup>24</sup> The irony here is that Étienne's punishment is at odds with what tended to happen in real life at the time; as James M. Donovan explains in his study of criminal court statistics during the period 1825-1923, the numbers of acquittals for women accused of abortion increased throughout the nineteenth century, and especially after 1880 (157); juries tried only a very small percentage of abortion

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<sup>22</sup> Stewart mentions the fact that during and after World War I, there were a few sexual advisors who adopted a radical stance on female sexuality. Jean Marestan (pseudonym for Gaston Havard) encouraged both sexes to exercise their genital organs for their health, supported a woman's right to control her fertility, approved five contraceptive devices, and proposed medical abortions on demand. Little wonder he was under constant police surveillance during this time period (113-14).

<sup>23</sup> Female methods available at the time were, according to Stewart, sponges, rings, douches, and "prophylactic peccaries [*sic*]" (122); however, women tended to resist using them because, as we have seen, they were so ill at ease with their bodies. The withdrawal method (dependent on the man, of course) was widely used, but not particularly effective. McLaren discusses the advent of the rhythm method, which could not have been very effective since it was thought that a woman's safe period was mid-cycle (468).

<sup>24</sup> The fact that the number of abortions increased without a concomitant increase in the birth rate reveals, according to Accampo, just how desperate women could be, especially in the wake of the 1920 crack-down (259). For an expansive discussion of how the law came about, see Jean Elisabeth Pedersen.

providers and abortion seekers, and, as Koos points out, the former were rarely convicted even in the face of overwhelming incriminating evidence (266). Real French society was apparently more tolerant of the practice of abortion than its fictional counterpart in the Margueritte novel.

Spi is poised, at the end of *Ton corps est à toi*, for a much brighter future than Étienne: she has a stable job, a renewed interest in learning (“Elle redevenait la fille spirituelle de l’oncle Paccaud” [247]), and what we would call in modern parlance a “friend with benefits” with whom “[e]lle aimait seulement, en temps voulu, contenter son désir, comme elle apaisait, sans excès, sa faim ou sa soif” (243). Her approach to her sexuality surely must have been easier to stomach by neo-Malthusian opponents than that of Étienne, whose attitude might be said to feed into the Decadent vision of woman as “perverse and potentially dangerous” (Wilson 94). In short, Spi is enjoying the very situation that Paccaud envisioned for her before the rape drove them apart, but she got there in her own way. That she has regained her independent spirit is undeniable: she refuses to make love without taking precautions and to have the baby with which her lover hopes to tie her down because, she tells him bluntly, he is not father material. When interrogated by Mermerod during the abortion scandal, she defends herself with grace, boldly recommending that lawmakers spend time with the poor so they can see why women come to each other’s aid “pour se débarrasser de leur charge, quand elles ne se percent pas elles-mêmes le ventre, avec la première pointe venue !” (257). It is significant that she, like Acquin in the Corday novel, suggests an alternative for the slogan “*Croissez et multipliez*,” but rather than his rather benign “*Améliorez-vous*,” she offers the more militant “[C]roissez et ne multipliez pas” (281 ; emphasis in original). Paccaud, who reappears as the novel comes to a close, dubs this “l’évangile du Prolétaire,” to which Spi responds, “Il faudrait un nouveau Christ !” (281). One might even say that she and Paccaud—a bit like Candide and Pangloss—have exchanged roles, since he ends up softening his stance on abortion, dreaming of a day when doctors will be legally authorized to perform the procedure “à la simple demande de la mère” (279). He also resurrects, notably, the epigraph of Corday’s novel when he posits that “Le seul moyen d[e] préserver l’avenir, c’est que toute femme, dorénavant, ne soit mère qu’à son gré” (279).

It is no surprise that the gains for women are more modest in Corday, given the different sociopolitical situations at the times the two novels were published. André ultimately decides that the time is not yet right to unveil the elixir, a decision motivated in large part by self-interest, since Mme Hélie’s insane husband is conveniently at death’s door, opening up a sexually fulfilling future not only for Mme Hélie but André himself. Marie, on the other hand, is left in the lurch, more alone than before because Henri, unable to reason with his parents, poisons himself. Still, Corday upends readers’ expectations by having the man, not the woman, commit suicide over a failed love affair, leaving Marie’s future if not bright, at least open. As for Acquin, who never finds out that André has the elixir, though far from satisfied, he remains as hopeful as Paccaud in the later work: “Toute révolution a sa Terreur,” he avers. “La crise est éphémère. Les bienfaits en restent acquis à jamais...” (270).

By embedding a decidedly modern political agenda in a traditional novelistic form with which readers were undoubtedly very familiar, Michel Corday and Victor Margueritte, in concert with female contemporaries such as Colette, Marcelle Tinayre, and Colette Yver,

thrust their readers into a world where women had the potential to fully own their bodies and, more generally, where mankind, as Scheifley proposes, in reference to playwright Eugène Brieux's 1904 drama, *Maternité*, could "control nature in her lavish, indiscriminate, and hence cruel production of life" (25). For Corday, this feat requires magic, as his title's reference to the Ali Baba tale indicates;<sup>25</sup> he is, as Hawthorne aptly puts it, "a sort of Jules Verne of feminism, in that he merely anticipates—rather than invents—what science can bring about once it catches up with imagination" (178). Margueritte, on the other hand, needs no magic, in large part thanks to his heroine's indomitable and altruistic spirit. Back in touch with her "humeur combative," Spi is equipped to rescue other women—"éclair[ant] leur ignorance, . . . secou[ant] leur stupidité" (241)—, in effect becoming the post-World War I "nouveau Christ" of which she confirmed the need and for which the Belle Époque world was simply not quite ready.

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<sup>25</sup> The phrase "Sésame, ouvre-toi" first appears in writing in Antoine Galland's *Les mille et une nuits* (1704-17); the magical phrase opens the cave in which forty thieves have hidden a treasure.

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