

Monsieur Zola's Concierges

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Les commères après tout sont des poétesses au petit pied qui aiment les récits, les secrets dévoilés, les exagérations mensongères, aliment éternel de toute poésie; ce sont les matrones de l'invention humaine qui pétrissent, à leur manière, les réalités de l'Histoire. (Barbey d'Aurevilly, *L'Ensorcelée*)

RÉSUMÉ

Dans l'imaginaire collectif des Français de la Troisième République le type parisien du/de la concierge avait une connotation fortement péjorative: serviteur ambigu du bailleur et des locataires, on le considérait hypocrite, trop curieux, intrigant et bavard. Zola, dans plusieurs romans des Rougon-Macquart, s'appuie sur cette image stéréotypée pour répondre aux attentes voyeuristes de ses lecteurs tout en promouvant le postulat du roman naturaliste: représenter la classe ouvrière d'une manière socialement responsable. Le/la concierge zolien(ne) occupe une position charnière semblable à celle qu'occupe le/la concierge réel(le), entre la classe bourgeoise fictive et la classe ouvrière fictive, mais aussi, entre le lecteur bourgeois et la classe ouvrière fictive. Les concierges zoliens servent à encadrer des scènes à sensations et à guider le lecteur vers une meilleure compréhension des thèmes des romans et des protagonistes. Observatrice urbaine et commère, la concierge en particulier, comme l'écrivain naturaliste, veut tout voir, savoir, et dire. Dans le texte zolien elle devient le dispositif narratif qui permet à l'auteur d'intéresser et d'exposer ses lecteurs aux différents groupes sociaux tout en représentant la méthode naturaliste.

There is probably no other character more intimately connected to nineteenth-century French urban culture than the concierge. As pointed out by Jean Louis Deaucourt in his seminal study *Premières loges, Paris et ses concierges au XIXe siècle*, the bourgeois residents saw the concierge as “un prolétaire d'une misère agressive, mais doté de pouvoirs importants,”¹ while working-class tenants, obviously less concerned by the concierge's possible proletarian origin, often viewed him or her as a merciless enforcer of Monsieur Vautour's² interests. Male and female concierges were the gatekeepers of buildings, but also the hinge between the classes and the sexes. As employees, they became the enforcers of the landlord's economic interests; and as the building's managers, they found themselves in a position that allowed them to exert significant social control. While the economic interests of the landlord were often enforced by administrative and legal means, social control could best be achieved through gossip. It is particularly the female concierge, nicknamed “la pipelette” after the concierge Mme Pipelet in Sue's novel *Les Mystères de Paris* (1843), who is seen as the one controlling the residents and the neighborhood through her gossip. Max Gluckman has pointed out that gossip stories “police acceptable behavior and reinforce the

¹ Jean Louis Deaucourt, *Premières loges, Paris et ses concierges au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Aubier, 1992) 90.

² In nineteenth-century Parisian slang, the expression “Monsieur Vautour” described the landlord. See Alfred Delvau, *Dictionnaire de la langue verte: argots parisiens comparés*, 2nd edition (Paris: Dentu, 1866) 320.

values and demands of the dominant group.”³ In this respect, gossip might very well also reinforce the proprietor’s interests; but gossip also serves the individual who is initiating and controlling the gossip⁴ who in this case is the concierge.⁵

The concierge’s ambivalent yet seemingly omnipotent role within Parisian apartment buildings fascinated French realist and naturalist writers. Zola’s attraction to this representative of the Parisian working class is indicated not only by the great number of concierges that appear throughout the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle (e.g., Mme Léonce in *Le Ventre de Paris*, 1873; M. and Mme Boche in *L’Assommoir*, 1877; Mme Bergeret in *Une page d’amour*, 1878; Mme Bron in *Nana*, 1880; and M. and Mme Gourd in *Pot-Bouille*, 1882) but also by his purchase of Medardo Rosso’s now famous sculpture *La Concierge*.⁶ By placing this icon of Parisian working-class culture within his own bourgeois apartment – literally putting her on a pedestal – and displaying her as an integral part of his private sphere, Zola accomplished three things: firstly, he demonstrated his interest in the working class, possibly also emphasizing his own working-class ties (his uncle Adolphe Aubert worked as a porter in Paris).⁷ Secondly, he underscored the extent to which this Parisian type had influenced the development of his characters. Not only did his uncle’s family provide a model for some of the characters in *L’Assommoir*, but in his notes on the novel’s *personnages*, Zola explained that his own concierge had served as a foil for the fictional concierge M. Boche, “le type de mon portier, rue de la Condamine [...] un ancien militaire, un type original, un sournois à passion.”⁸ Lastly and most importantly, Zola reified his preoccupation with *la concierge* as a raconteuse and newsmonger who was able to control – not only through the power vested in her by the landlord, but also through her singular ability to channel and manipulate the flow of information and generate her own gossip stories. Like Zola himself, she was interested in “tout voir, tout savoir, tout dire,” in reworking, embellishing and/or exaggerating her story as necessary. Her descriptions, like Zola’s own, were never what Henri Mitterand labeled “platement réalistes,”⁹ but were instead, carefully thought-out narratives. Her strategies thus mirror those of

³ Max Gluckman, “Gossip and Scandal,” *Current Anthropology* 4.3 (1963): 307-16.

⁴ Robert Paine has argued that “[t]he gossip tries to collect information that he or she can then use to forward their self-interest: he or she tries to make their version of a story prevail, but also makes sure they have access to the flow of information.” Robert Paine, “What is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis,” *Man. New Series* 2.2 (1967): 278-85. For a more current discussion on gossip see also Clare Qualman and Emily Butterworth’s blog on laundry rooms and the dissemination of gossip: *Spinning Stories*, eds. Clare Qualman and Emily Butterworth, Nov. 2008, The Women’s Library, Web. 26 Dec. 2015 <<https://spinningstories.wordpress.com/about/>>.

⁵ Henry Monnier’s 1855 play *Le Roman chez la portière* focuses exactly on this aspect of the concierge, who invites neighborhood women to a communal reading, but uses the gatherings to assert her position by collecting and disseminating gossip.

⁶ “Émile Zola’s purchase of his *Concierge* (1883) must have given hope to the near-penniless Rosso.” “Medardo Rosso,” *Encyclopedia of World Biography* 2004, *Encyclopedia.com*, Web. 4 Jan. 2016 <<http://www.encyclopedia.com>>. In later years, Medardo Rosso stated that his masterpiece was an homage to his own concierge Orsola, who had always motivated him when he lacked creative energy. Yet, Sharon Hecker suggests, in “Reflections on Repetitions in Rosso’s Art,” *Medardo Rosso: Second Impressions*, Exhibition catalogue, eds. Harry Cooper and Sharon Hecker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) fig. 22, that Rosso’s sculpture was more likely influenced by Daumier’s concierge caricatures, and possibly also by Zola’s portrayal of Mme Gourd (*Pot-Bouille*), as the figure of the concierge became a popular topic of conversation in Milanese literary circles after the publication of *Pot-Bouille*. I doubt the latter, as M. Gourd, the concierge, is much more important in this novel than his wife.

⁷ Henri Mitterand, *Études, notes et variantes*, in Émile Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d’une famille sous le Second Empire*, ed. Armand Lanoux, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961) 1536.

⁸ Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, vol. 2, 1547.

⁹ Henri Mitterand, Introduction, in Émile Zola, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mitterand, vol. 5 (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2003) 243

the naturalist writer. Hence, Zola's fictional representation of *la concierge* can be seen as a *mise en abyme* of the naturalist method, while her sculptural presence in Zola's apartment would stand as the personification of this very method. At the same time, Zola's fictional concierge became an important narrative device for the naturalist writer, enabling him to bring his readers into the narrated world, allowing them to savor the concierge's juicy gossip, and appealing to their voyeuristic desires by having them become spectators of the intimate scenes that his concierge laid out for them.

La Prostituée and la Concierge

Much has been written about the role of prostitutes in naturalist texts,¹⁰ and it can be argued that Zola functionalized *la concierge* in similar ways. As the prostitute had access to the private existences of her clients – men of all social classes – she had the power to contaminate and corrupt the lives of upper-crust males and, by extension, corrupt French society at large.¹¹ The female concierge was, like the prostitute, of working-class origin, yet was paid to represent the interests of her bourgeois employer; she thus held an equally powerful position. She had the right of entry into the private sphere of “her residents,” regardless of their social class, and she had the power to determine their success or downfall.¹² Zola's female concierge does not participate in the heterosexual exchange; instead, her power is primarily anchored in a strong homo-social network – channeling and controlling the neighborhood women's gossip stories that keep her informed enable her to control the fate of others and secure her own social status, as well as her livelihood.¹³ Her rather negative public image (as a sexually unattractive woman scheming behind the scenes), gives a particular quality to her representation as an observer of Parisian society. The readers are attracted to her stories, yet feel ambivalent about her character.

Male and Female Concierges

Although a secondary character, *le* or *la concierge* fulfills an important role in the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle. Zola's male and female concierges serve as a narrative device, which permits the author to draw the reader into the text, allowing Zola to uphold his claim of providing a socially-responsible

¹⁰ See here in particular Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 1989) and Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

¹¹ See here Peter Brooks's comments on *Nana*, in *Reading for the Plot* 143-71.

¹² The powerful position of the concierge in Parisian culture is well documented by Jean-Louis Deaucourt, who evaluated transcripts of court proceedings published in *La Gazette des Tribunaux*, in which concierges served as witnesses in trials of offenses against public decency. See Jean-Louis Deaucourt, “Une police des sentiments: les concierges et les portiers,” *Romantisme* 68 (1990): 49-60. In Zola's novels, both male and female concierges have the power to decide over the fate of their residents. A few bourgeois try to escape the concierge's control. In *Une page d'amour*, Malignon deliberately rents an unsupervised apartment in a poor Parisian neighborhood so he can secretly meet his married lover Mme Deberle. Émile Zola, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mitterand, vol. 8 (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2003) 416.

¹³ On the homo-social networking of the concierge, see Sharon Marcus “The Portière and the Personification of Urban Observation,” *Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, eds. Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (New York and London: Routledge, 2004) 348-58.

portrayal of the victims of society, while simultaneously satisfying his readers' desire for drama.¹⁴ However, Zola did not use the concierge only as a vehicle to describe public and private spheres to reveal the shortcomings of the different social classes, but also as a means to guide the reader to a better understanding of the plot and/or theme. The latter was primarily achieved through the representation of male concierges, while the portrayal of female concierges also helped to scaffold the female protagonist and her development within the novel.

Le Concierge

Despite the fact that Zola's contemporaries primarily associated women with the profession of concierge, male concierges are prominently featured in the *Rougon-Macquart* series, spanning the gamut of representations from henpecked husbands to petty bourgeois proprietors; they frequently provide the reader with a synthesis of the novel's major theme.

Zola's portrayal of the male concierge often suggests the callousness of the French bourgeoisie, although it focuses on mocking the aspirations of the petty bourgeois/working class concierge. Zola's male concierge, in Marxist terms a representative of the working class, does not see himself as such; he has internalized the interests of the bourgeoisie, often going beyond the call of duty to enforce them. Through the portrayal of the male concierge and his world, Zola's contemporary bourgeois readers could satisfy their voyeuristic desire and discover, ostensibly guilt-free, the misery of the working class. Zola's mocking representation of this character, a man worse than M. Vautour, as well as the already existing negative public image of the male concierge would have allowed the bourgeois reader to observe social injustices, while deflecting onto the concierge their own responsibility for the sufferings of the working class.

In *L'Assommoir*, M. Boche, concierge in a working-class neighborhood, is ready to evict insolvent tenants without the slightest qualm: "Boche, de nouveau, parlait de la couturière du second; il était d'avis de l'expulser; il calculait les termes en retard, avec une importance d'intendant dont la gestion pouvait être compromise."¹⁵ Rather than empathize with the less fortunate, M. Boche identifies with the landlord M. Marescot, who once belonged to the working class himself. Thus, by emulating M. Marescot, M. Boche attempts to upgrade his own status, believing that he, too, can become a property owner. M. Boche, a lazy, lecherous and henpecked husband¹⁶ can only aspire to be bourgeois, however: "Puis, en confidence, il avoua être le vrai maître de la maison."¹⁷ He will never ascend to the bourgeoisie, and thus is evoked a major theme of this novel: the social impasse of the working class.

M. Gourd, former manservant of an aristocrat and now porter of the bourgeois apartment building in *Pot-Bouille*, has not only internalized the values of his bourgeois employers and his

¹⁴ See Teresa Bridgeman, "The Doubly-Authorized Text – Personal Responsibility and Social Roles: Zola's *L'Assommoir*," *Negotiating the New in the French Novel: Building Contexts for Fictional Worlds* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 98-120.

¹⁵ Zola, *L'Assommoir, Les Rougon-Macquart*, vol. 2, 494.

¹⁶ In his notes Zola, describes Mme Boche as "Dominant son mari, le conduisant à la baguette" (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, vol. 2, 1547). In his portrayal of M. Boche, Zola follows very closely the physiologists' mocking description of the male concierge, e.g., Henry Monnier, "La Portière," *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, vol. 3 (Paris: Curmer, 1841) 41, or, James Rousseau, *Physiologie de la portière* (Paris: Aubert, 1841) who dedicates a chapter to the portière's husband, "Quand la portière a un mari, c'est un meuble de plus dans sa loge, et pas autre chose. C'est surtout dans le ménage de la portière que l'on peut dire que le sceptre est tombé en quenouille" (23).

¹⁷ Zola, *L'Assommoir* 495.

bourgeois residents, but has become bourgeois himself: “Je ne travaille plus pour manger.”¹⁸ He and his wife own a house in the countryside, and their loge is marked by elements that emulate bourgeois culture: “un petit salon aux glaces claires garni d’une moquette à fleurs rouges et meublé de palissandre”¹⁹ in which Mme Gourd, “douillettement assise, prenait son café au lait dans une tasse d’argent, devant un feu de bois dont les flammes égayaient la grande pièce claire.”²⁰ M. Gourd relegates undesirable work to others, treating them “avec l’esprit de domination brutale, le besoin enragé de revanche des anciens domestiques, qui font servir à leur tour.”²¹ The reader observes him exploiting Mère Pérou, who tries to collect her pay after being fired over a spilled bucket of water. “[L]e concierge tourna brutalement vers la vieille femme. – Alors il faut vous payer...” he says, using this as an opportunity to squeeze her hourly wage: “elle emportait enfin ses douze francs soixante lorsqu’il lui offrit de la reprendre, mais à trois sous l’heure seulement.”²²

In *Pot-Bouille*, Zola wanted to show the bourgeoisie “à nu, après avoir montré le peuple, et la montrer plus abominable, elle qui se dit l’ordre et l’honnêteté.”²³ M. Gourd’s portrayal not only mirrors the hypocritical behavior of the bourgeois residents in the apartment building, but exceeds it. He becomes a caricature of the residents who fiercely protect their bourgeois façade. His attempt to protect the moral façade of the house turns into a vicious attack on the working class when he characterizes a carpenter’s wife as loose for having spent the night with her husband in his room.²⁴ Yet M. Gourd turns a blind eye to the affairs of the bourgeois residents. In his attempt to purge the building from working-class elements, he is harsher than the landlord: “Et encore, si le propriétaire m’écoutait, il garderait son cabinet vide [...]. Pour cent trente francs par an, ça ne vaut vraiment pas la peine d’avoir de la saleté chez soi...”²⁵

While Zola’s grotesque portrayal of M. Gourd skewers the callousness of the bourgeoisie, contemporary bourgeois readers would most likely not have recognized themselves in Gourd’s hypocritical, excessively self-serving behavior: they would have interpreted this behavior as typical for a concierge, who was generally perceived as hypocritical.

La Concierge

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, only noble and wealthy bourgeois houses had a porter,²⁶ but by 1830 that had changed. As Deaucourt points out, “[c]ommence le règne des portières, car c’est de femmes surtout qu’il s’agit dans l’esprit du public.”²⁷

¹⁸ Émile Zola, *Pot-Bouille*, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mitterand, vol. 11 (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2005) 83. While the mistreated servants in the apartment building put M. Gourd in his place by reminding him of his own subaltern origins: “Va donc vider les pots de chambre de M. le duc”! (Zola, *Pot-Bouille* 186). Underscoring the menial nature of his former job, M. Campardon tells Octave Mouret boastfully that M. Gourd was “l’ancien valet de chambre du duc de Vaugelade” (Zola, *Pot-Bouille* 20). Campardon judges this a rather prestigious position, as it placed M. Gourd in the intimate realm of the aristocrat. Having M. Gourd as the concierge of the apartment building is, for Campardon, a mark of distinction. See here also Jean-Louis Deaucourt: “[c]’est bien d’ailleurs l’origine aristocratique de ce dispositif qui lui a valu d’être adopté par la bourgeoisie, beaucoup plus que son efficacité pratique” (19).

¹⁹ Zola, *Pot-Bouille* 20.

²⁰ Zola, *Pot-Bouille* 83.

²¹ Zola, *Pot-Bouille* 83.

²² Zola, *Pot-Bouille* 188.

²³ Zola, *Pot-Bouille* 13.

²⁴ Zola, *Pot-Bouille* 84.

²⁵ Zola, *Pot-Bouille* 84.

²⁶ In her article “Concierge: la difficile (recon)naissance de la femme,” *Romantisme* 159 (2013): 135-46, Caroline Strobbe points to Pierre Larousse’s “Concierge” entry in the *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* (Paris:

Zola's female concierges are powerful women who use their networking skills to manage residential and neighborhood communities. They form these communities by carefully controlling the flow of information, spreading gossip and forging alliances, partially serving the interests of their employers, but primarily seeking to increase their own influence and social status. Like the naturalist writer, they are *observatrices* and *expérimentatrices*, closely observing and collecting information about people, incidents and social settings, then transposing this information into a linguistic reality by organizing the facts to create their own (gossip) story. Zola observed Parisian society and then constructed his story to demonstrate the impact of heredity and milieu on his characters, attributing to the naturalist novelists the role of "juges d'instruction des hommes et de leurs passions."²⁸ Quite similarly, Zola's female concierges tell their gossip story, presenting to their listeners (wo)men and their passions – yet often in a sensationalist way.

The most notable concierge in the *Rougon-Macquart* series is Mme Boche, "très grosse. Une commère,"²⁹ wife of the aforementioned M. Boche. In *L'Assommoir* all characters, with few exceptions, are linked to her. On the narratological level, this function is extended to include the reader who, thanks to Mme Boche, is able to gain early insight into the past of Gervaise, the novel's protagonist.

Mme Boche, initially concierge of the house facing the run-down Hotel Boncœur where Gervaise, Lantier, and their two sons occupy a modest room, comforts Gervaise, who feels betrayed by Lantier, the man whom she had followed from Plassans to Paris. In the washhouse,³⁰ Mme Boche takes on a maternal role; fully aware that Lantier is a cheater, she does not reveal this information, because she does not want to distress the young woman. Always seeking to find some good gossip, Mme Boche seeks to please Gervaise, whose past she wants to uncover. In doing so, Mme Boche draws the reader into her sphere of influence, letting her/him listen to (read) and, it might be said, participate in the circulation of gossip as the reader will engage in Gervaise's life, think, reflect, and possibly talk about her.

At the beginning of the novel, Mme Boche, although a gossipmonger, is portrayed as an attentive person who helps the southerner Gervaise cope with urban life. The reader learns that life was different for Gervaise in the pre-industrialized south,³¹ which partly also explains her naïve and gentle character. Mme Boche, on the other hand, has been socialized in industrialized Paris, where human relations are commodified. Initially, Gervaise garners the empathy of the reader largely because the Boches are shown as friends rather than scheming acquaintances. They participate in all key events of the young woman's life. They become her foster family when she marries Coupeau. At the wedding they stand in for her parents, M. Boche serving as a witness, and Mme Boche watching over her sons.³² When Gervaise gives birth to Nana, Mme

Administration du Grand Dictionnaire universel, 1866) in which Larousse attributes the creation of the concierge position to Hugues Capet. At the time, this position was given to a nobleman who exercised by "ses baillis toute justice basse et moyenne" (quoted in Strobbe 135). Eventually, all aristocrats and wealthy people had their own concierge or suisse, who no longer was of noble origin. Progressing industrialization and the influx of workers into the city prompted the expansion of tenement housing for workers. In order to assure safety and supervision in these tenements, the landlords decided to employ concierges. Most of the concierges in the "maisons populaires" were women, a circumstance that also contributed to the devalorization of the profession (Deaucourt 99).

²⁷ Deaucourt 49.

²⁸ Zola, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mitterand, vol. 9 (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2004) 328.

²⁹ Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, vol. 2, 1547.

³⁰ The washhouse is a rather typical place where gossip stories are exchanged. See Qualman and Butterworth, *Spinning Stories*.

³¹ Zola, *L'Assommoir* 389.

³² Zola, *L'Assommoir* 434, 451, 460.

Boche attends to Gervaise,³³ she is, moreover, an eyewitness to Coupeau's accident, a pivotal moment in the story³⁴ that will lead to Coupeau's alcoholism and contribute to the disintegration of the family. After the accident, when all move into the apartment building of La Goutte d'Or, Gervaise as a shop owner and the Boches as the new concierge couple of the building, Gervaise considers them family, notwithstanding the apprehensions she has about moving into such a block, where her life would be subjected to the control of a concierge: "Les concierges sont une si sale espèce! Mais avec les Boche, ce serait un plaisir. On se connaissait, on s'entendrait toujours. Enfin, ça se passerait en famille."³⁵ Gervaise believes that their relationship with the concierge couple will remain untouched by the commodification process, and that the Boches will, indeed, remain "family." Gervaise's desire to understand them as family members conjures up the stereotype of the "mother" concierge, an image that was well engraved in the collective imaginary of the Third Republic, in part thanks to the 1841 concierge portrayals by Huart (*Muséum parisien*),³⁶ Rousseau (*Physiologie de la portière*), and Monnier ("La Portière"). In working-class apartment buildings, the concierge stood indeed *in loco parentis* if mothers were absent or drunk. Nana will thus refer to Mme Boche as "Mère Boche" when she reminisces with her lover Satin about her childhood.³⁷

However, with progressing industrialization another representation of the female concierge emerged: one that was based on the fact that more and more single women were now working as concierges.³⁸ No longer only the porter's wife free to embrace her maternal role, the female concierge, now paid and officially in charge, had to consider her own financial interests. Gervaise's reflection that "les concierges sont une si sale espèce" foreshadows the other side of Mme Boche that will emerge more fully as the story progresses. Zola gradually alters Mme Boche's maternal traits, showing her more frequently as a person who seeks relationships based on the prospect of economic gain and/or gain in social status. It is not only Gervaise's reflection, however, that would alert Zola's contemporary readers – presumably less naïve than Gervaise – to Mme Boche's two-faced personality. Although attracted to Mme Boche's gossip, they would react to her from early in the novel with a sense of apprehension, simply because of her last name. In Parisian dialect, *boche*, a short form of *caboche* (head), was often used to refer to a pigheaded and slow

³³ Zola, *L'Assommoir* 472.

³⁴ Zola, *L'Assommoir* 479.

³⁵ Zola, *L'Assommoir* 492.

³⁶ See Louis Huart, *Muséum parisien: histoire physiologique, pittoresque, philosophique et grotesque de toutes les bêtes curieuses de Paris et de la banlieue* (Paris: Beauger, 1841).

³⁷ Zola, *Nana, Les Rougon-Macquart*, vol. 2, 1366. In the bourgeois apartment building, the concierge would stand *in loco parentis* for the "bachelor" who lived separated from his family. See Henry Monnier ("La Portière," 41). In *Le Ventre de Paris*, the concierge Madame Léonce takes care of the widowed Gavard, a man in his sixties. She not only has access to everything in his room, but also attends to his personal needs:

C'était une femme sévère, de cinquante et quelques années, parlant lentement, d'une façon interminable: elle s'était fâchée un jour, parce que Gavard lui avait pincé la taille; ce qui ne l'empêcha pas de lui poser des sangsues, à un endroit délicat, à la suite d'une chute qu'il avait faite. (Zola, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 5, 417-18)

While Madame Léonce rejects romantic advances, she has access to Gavard's body in ways a mother has access to her child's body.

³⁸ See footnote 26.

person.³⁹ It is, however, quite likely that in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war, Zola's readers would associate the name with the Germans who helped Thiers destroy the Paris Commune, the first workers' government ever created.⁴⁰ The Parisian concierges were seen as contributing to the fall of the Paris Commune as they had the reputation of denouncing the Communards to the French government.⁴¹ The last name of the concierge couple thus evokes betrayal of the working class.

Gervaise, considering the Boches her "friends," feels betrayed by them when they do not come to her defense during the rent negotiation process with the landlord: "Ils affectaient de ne pas la connaître."⁴² When Gervaise observes M. Boche openly displaying a willingness to sacrifice the residents for financial gain (Mme Boche is more careful about overtly taking sides, making sure that information will continue to flow to her from all sources), Gervaise begins to understand that family ties and friendship can be subordinated to the laws of capitalism: "Et Gervaise, avec un léger frisson se demandait si on la jetterait à la rue, elle aussi, le jour où un malheur l'empêcherait de payer."⁴³

The initial closeness between the Boches and Coupeaus gradually disappears, partly because of Nana, who does not respect Mme Boche's property⁴⁴ and partly also because Gervaise herself now actively engages in the commodification of human relations. She gives presents to the Boche to remain in their good graces (Gervaise's food sharing spurred by calculating self-interest reflects Mme Boche's manipulative dissemination of news), realizing too late that she has thereby transformed their relationship: "Gervaise comprenait sa faute, car enfin si elle n'avait point eu la bêtise de tant leur fourrer, ils n'auraient pas pris de mauvaises habitudes et seraient restés gentils."⁴⁵ Gervaise's social ascension, becoming the owner of a successful laundry, has displaced Mme Boche from her maternal as well as her leading role in the tenements. When Gervaise offers her leftover salad, Mme Boche is offended by what she perceives as almsgiving; however, when Gervaise stops giving presents altogether, "[i]l fallait voir le nez des Boche! Ça leur semblait comme un vol que les Coupeau leur faisaient."⁴⁶ Mme Boche now feels threatened not only in her social but also in her economic status. She reasserts her position and sphere of influence by forging alliances with people who care little for Gervaise (the Lorilleux, Lantier, M. Bijard), now calling her "la Banban" a derogatory term used by Mme Lorilleux to poke fun at Gervaise's limp, and circulating gossip about the Coupeau family. While Coupeau's alcoholism is a decisive factor in the family's disintegration, Mme Boche's gossip is equally destructive, making it difficult for the laundress to find support. Mme Boche's gossip thus contributes to Gervaise's own descent into alcoholism and to her socio-economic decline. The steady deterioration of the Mme Boche-Gervaise relationship therefore foreshadows the laundress's eventual demise.

Gervaise, who gradually loses all of her material possessions and finally considers selling herself, can no longer be exploited for material gain. The only way she will be useful to Mme

³⁹ For the various meanings of *boche* see "Boche," Encyclopédie universelle 2012, *Academic 2000-2014*, Web. 14 April 2016 <http://encyclopedie_universelle.fracademic.com/29000>. See also the entry "Boche" in Eugène Boutmy, *Le Dictionnaire de la langue verte typographique* (Paris: Lisieux, 1878) 65.

⁴⁰ Boche was a derogatory term for Germans that became popular in the second half of the nineteenth century. During World War I and World War II, it was widely used to refer to German soldiers.

⁴¹ See Deaucourt 221.

⁴² Zola, *L'Assommoir* 493.

⁴³ Zola, *L'Assommoir* 494.

⁴⁴ Zola, *L'Assommoir* 520.

⁴⁵ Zola, *L'Assommoir* 521.

⁴⁶ Zola, *L'Assommoir* 521.

Boche is in form of a good gossip story, one that will strengthen the concierge's influence in the apartment building and in the neighborhood. When Coupeau finally suffers *delirium tremens* and is hospitalized at Sainte Anne, Gervaise becomes interesting again, as she is able to provide sensationalist news of her visits to Coupeau at the psychiatric ward: "Les Boche, qui traitaient la Banban [Gervaise] par-dessous la jambe maintenant, lui offrirent pourtant un cassis dans leur loge, histoire d'avoir des détails."⁴⁷

The Boche couple stages Gervaise's reenactment of Coupeau's behavior as a spectacle for all the tenants, giving Mme Boche the power to control the community: "La concierge criait au monde de se ranger, les gens débarrassaient le milieu de la loge, en se poussant du coude, avec un frémissement de curiosité."⁴⁸ Gervaise presents a spectacle that "exploits the shock value of the taboo,"⁴⁹ and together with the tenants, the reader is drawn again into Mme Boche's sphere of influence, envisioning Gervaise's performance in the loge, a performance that illustrates her loss of self and her betrayal of Coupeau. Zola frames this scene, in which the laundress becomes a dehumanized subject, as a concierge gossip story in order to achieve a dual purpose: justifying its place in a naturalist novel, and playing to the voyeuristic desires of his readers. When Coupeau finally dies, Gervaise returns to the loge, where a group of gossiping women has gathered. She believes that they are there to hear her story, "[m]ais on ne l'écoutait pas."⁵⁰ Her spectacle has been replaced by a newer, more interesting story. Mme Boche's and the other scandalmongers' lack of interest in Gervaise anticipates the laundress's total disintegration as a person and the fact that her actual death will go unnoticed for days, "Un matin, comme ça sentait mauvais dans le corridor, on se rappela qu'on ne l'avait pas vue depuis deux jours; et on la découvrit déjà verte."⁵¹

Not quite as prominent as Mme Boche, but equally successful in controlling the flow of information to secure her own social and financial status is Mme Bron. In *Nana*, Mme Bron the concierge in the Théâtre des Variétés is, much like Mme Boche, able to create and control a community through her gossip. It is in large part through her that the reader discovers the world behind the stage. Muffat, Nana's lover, thinks of her as a valuable source to obtain information about Nana's whereabouts,⁵² and Nana herself is well aware of the fact that Mme Bron's power derives from her knowledge of intimate affairs. Thus, Nana closes the window as "cette curieuse de madame Bron n'avait pas besoin d'entendre."⁵³ Clearly, Mme Bron controls and filters the flow of information in the theater. As concierge, she rules not only over the theater community, but also over the men who venture behind the stage, into her loge, to see the actresses. She is the intermediary between the actresses and their suitors. Lascivious, infatuated males of the upper crust, "les messieurs corrects," wait "dans le désordre de la loge,"⁵⁴ for hours to see the objects of their desire, often in vain. This situation is clearly reminiscent of an early scene in which infatuated men are waiting for Nana in the various parts of the latter's apartment.⁵⁵ These

⁴⁷ Zola, *L'Assommoir* 784.

⁴⁸ Zola, *L'Assommoir* 789.

⁴⁹ Teresa Bridgeman, *Negotiating the New in the French Novel. Building Contexts for Fictional Worlds* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 107.

⁵⁰ Zola, *L'Assommoir* 794.

⁵¹ Zola, *L'Assommoir* 796.

⁵² Zola, *Nana* 1261.

⁵³ Zola, *Nana* 1333.

⁵⁴ Zola, *Nana* 1203.

⁵⁵ In this particular case, even the male concierge is portrayed as being unsuccessful in enforcing the proprietor's financial interests. The concierge's powerlessness is symbolized by the fact that he remains unnamed. Early on in the novel, he tries to collect the rent from Nana, but to no avail (Zola, *Nana* 1123). Like all the other creditors, he has to wait and is fobbed off with glib excuses. The concierge's interaction with Nana, or the lack thereof, foreshadows

wealthy men venture into the female space and are kept at arm's length; and just as they are kept in suspense, so, too, is the reader. While Mme Boche's portrayal and the depiction of her relationship to Gervaise scaffold for the reader the laundress's development, Mme Bron's portrayal serves to support and illustrate the character of the protagonist Nana. Mme Bron, much like Nana, is able to manage men of all social classes, not only in the interests of her employer, the theater director, who benefits economically from the wealthy men's interest in the actresses, but also in her own: Mme Bron assures her own financial advantage by running *une buvette*, where she sells beverages to the extras.⁵⁶ While actresses and suitors see her as a messenger, she carefully steers this transmission process, always attending to her own interests first.

The Concierge, the Reader, and the Naturalist Method

The image of the concierge held in the collective imaginary of the Third Republic was primarily a negative one: two-faced and powerful, nosy and conniving, the concierge was generally perceived as an intrusive person who, although a member of the working class, would pursue the interests of the landlord and more often than not, his or her own.

In his novels, Zola drew on this image of the concierge to satisfy his bourgeois readers' desire for drama, while simultaneously advancing an important postulate of the naturalist novel: providing a socially responsible portrayal of the working class. Like the real concierge, the fictional concierge became the hinge between the classes. However, Zola's fictional concierge was not only the hinge between the classes on the representational level (fictional landlord – fictional working class) but also between bourgeois readers and fictional working-class tenants or employees (e.g., Mère Pérou and Nana). In essence, the fictional concierge served as an intermediary between bourgeois readers and Zola's representation of the working class. Zola framed ethically questionable, sensationalist representations such as the one of Gervaise performing in the Boche loge, as part of Mme Boche's maneuvering to control and disseminate gossip. In doing so, the author deflected responsibility for the creation of the scene onto his fictional character, Mme Boche. The abusive behavior of M. Gourd toward members of the working class highlights the shortcomings of the bourgeoisie, yet his portrayal is so grotesque that bourgeois readers, already biased against the profession in general, would hardly have read it as a criticism of the bourgeoisie. They would have been drawn into the text because of the sensationalist quality of scenes such as the one that unfolds between M. Gourd and Mère Pérou, assigning responsibility to and blaming the hypocritical M. Gourd.

Zola's fictional concierges often serve as a means to guide his readers towards a better understanding of the novels' major themes (e.g., M. Boche represents one of the major themes of *L'Assommoir*, the social impasse of the working class), or they help scaffold the female protagonist (e.g., Mme Bron's character and actions mirror those of Nana).

Yet it is particularly the female concierge, whose privileged position enabling her to move freely between public and private spheres, and between members of different social classes, turning her into an "urban observer,"⁵⁷ that fascinated Zola. She is a woman who exerts control not only through the power vested in her by the landlord, but also through the gossip stories she hears,

the power she holds over men regardless of their class, summing up the major theme of the novel, in which men of all classes fall victim to the lure of her sexuality.

⁵⁶ Zola, *Nana* 1204.

⁵⁷ See Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Oakland, USA: University of California Press, 1999).

channels and generates. Her methods resemble those of the naturalist writer. She is *observatrice* and *expérimentatrice*, observing and collecting information, transposing this information into a linguistic reality, arranging it to create her own gossip story.

Her character, thus, becomes the ideal narrative device that permits Zola to engage his readers with the text, exposing them to the habits and values of the different sexes and social groups, having his readers become spectators of the intimate scenes his concierge presents to them. In doing so, Zola not only appeals to his readers' voyeuristic desires but, by having them participate in the concierge's news gathering and processing, he also exposes and habituates them to the strategies of the naturalist writer.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Many thanks to Mariah Devereux Herbeck for sharing concierge material with me, to Nadège Horner for providing valuable information on Medardo Rosso's sculpture *La Concierge*, and to Andrea Gogröf for many helpful suggestions.