

# Marie Colombier, Female Authorship, and the Tenets of Nineteenth-Century Literary Naturalism

Elisabeth-Christine MUELSCH  
Angelo State University

## RÉSUMÉ

*La tournée triomphale de Sarah Bernhardt aux États-Unis en 1880-1881 fut l'événement qui transforma la carrière de l'actrice Colombier. Pour se venger du mauvais traitement qu'elle avait reçu de Bernhard durant cette tournée, Colombier ne tarda pas à publier des calomnies au sujet de la célèbre actrice dans des colonnes de journaux, jetant par là les bases de sa carrière littéraire. Néophyte en littérature, Colombier rechercha le soutien d'hommes écrivains. Figurent parmi eux Paul Bonnetain, écrivain naturaliste de la troisième génération, qui était en quête de sujets littéraires non encore épuisés par ses confrères et qui suggéra à Colombier une entreprise de collaboration: la rédaction des Mémoires de Sarah Barnum. Ce roman d'une forte teneur naturaliste fut un grand succès qui propulsa Marie Colombier sur la scène littéraire même s'il lui valut l'appellation dénigrante de "romancière à secrétaires." Colombier n'en continua pas moins à collaborer avec des hommes, sans pour autant se sentir inférieure à eux. Cet article entend lire la carrière littéraire de Colombier à travers le prisme du naturalisme. Comme un grand nombre de naturalistes qui l'influencèrent, Colombier embrassa les préceptes de ce mouvement. En tant qu'actrice et dramaturge, elle connaissait bien les adaptations des œuvres de Zola par Busnach et incorpora des éléments stylistiques naturalistes dans ses textes ultérieurs. Dans les années 1890, en particulier, sous l'influence d'un marché littéraire en transition qui vit un nombre croissant d'écrivaines et d'éditrices participer à la production du capital culturel, Colombier s'aligne avec les collaboratrices à La Fronde et évalue des auteures naturalistes comme Pardo-Bazan.*

## ABSTRACT

*Sarah Bernhardt's successful US tour in 1880-1881, became the career-changing event for the actress Marie Colombier, who resented the ill-treatment that her "friend" Bernhardt had inflicted on her during the tour. Colombier retorted, quickly publishing slanderous columns about Bernhardt that became the basis for her writing career. A literary neophyte, Colombier sought the support of male writers. Among them were Paul Bonnetain, a third-generation naturalist, who was in search of literary topics not yet exhausted by others and suggested a collaborative endeavor: the writing of Les Mémoires de Sarah Barnum. This novel, with decidedly naturalist elements, became a bestseller that propelled Marie Colombier onto the literary scene, although she was denigrated as a "romancière à secrétaires." Colombier however continued to collaborate with men, never viewing herself as inferior to them. This article reads her literary career through the prism of naturalism. Like many of the naturalist writers who influenced her, Colombier embraced collaborative writing. As an actress and dramatist, she knew Busnach's Zola adaptations well and incorporated stylistic naturalist elements into her later texts. In the 1890s in particular, under the influence of a shifting literary market that saw an increasing number of female writers and editors*

*participate in the production of cultural capital, Colombier aligns herself with the writers of La Fronde and evaluates female naturalists such as Pardo-Bazan.*

In his *Dictionnaire des comédiens français*, Henry Lyonnet has few good things to say about Marie Colombier.<sup>1</sup> While he acknowledges her acting talent and good looks, he chides her for seeking “les succès de jolie femme,” sharpening her pen to slander Sarah Bernhardt, and ultimately abandoning the stage to become a novelist. Yet, Marie Colombier (1841-1910)<sup>2</sup> always understood herself as an actress, and her move to explore a career other than acting was initially most likely motivated by economic concerns. As an aging actress, she had to think about securing her future.<sup>3</sup> Marie Colombier “une des ‘lionnesses’ de la fin du siècle,”<sup>4</sup> whose beauty and talent drew admirers into her salon, many of them journalists, novelists and dramatists, learned fast, despite not having received any formal literary education. Male friends and admirers familiarized her with new texts and exposed her to literary theories. She was able to imagine and represent different characters, because of her training as an actress and this skill would come to bear when she began to write. Her ensuing close collaboration with naturalist writers would give her texts a distinct naturalist flavor, most likely not exclusively due to their input, but also the result of her own inspiration. Colombier always allowed her readers to infer that she took on a creative role in the collaborative process. After her initial successes and while advancing as a writer, she would also assume more agency and actively seek out interaction with other female journalists and writers, illustrating that she reflected on literary movements – naturalism, in particular, and its possible influence on female authors.

Today, Marie Colombier remains best known for her libelous writings against Sarah Bernhardt with whom she toured the United States in 1880-1881. Although the two women had been friends initially, the transatlantic experience – financially and emotionally draining for Colombier – had turned them into enemies. Already for some time, Colombier had contemplated broadening her professional prospects.<sup>5</sup> She now took revenge on her traveling companion by writing a series of progressively more sarcastic letters about the American tour. The missives were edited and published by Louis Besson, the journalist responsible for the drama section of *L'Événement*.<sup>6</sup> When writing her initial journalistic pieces, she also received some guidance from

<sup>1</sup> Henry Lyonnet, *Dictionnaire des comédiens français (ceux d'hier)*, vol. 1 (Genève: Bibliothèque de la Revue universelle illustrée, 1912) 375-76.

<sup>2</sup> Her birthdate is vague, some sources indicating 28 November 1841. See the following online article (unsigned) “Faits d’hier. Marie Colombier, une Creusoise à la naissance mystérieuse, et à la vie aventureuse,” *La Montagne* (13 févr. 2021): [accessed 14.3.2022] <[https://www.lamontagne.fr/auzances-23700/actualités/marie-colombier-une-creusoise-à-la-naissance-mysterieuse-et-à-la-vie-aventureuse\\_13915452/](https://www.lamontagne.fr/auzances-23700/actualités/marie-colombier-une-creusoise-à-la-naissance-mysterieuse-et-à-la-vie-aventureuse_13915452/)>. Henry Lyonnet gives her year of birth as 1844 (375); and it is noted as 1839 in *Le Petit Bottin des lettres et des arts* [2<sup>nd</sup> éd.], attributed to P. Adam, J. Moréas, and F. Fénéon (Paris: Giraud, 1886) 26.

<sup>3</sup> In his research on French actors and actresses in the second half of the nineteenth century, Christophe Charle contends that life for aging actresses was fraught with much uncertainty. Christophe Charle, “Des artistes en bourgeoisie. Acteurs et actrices en Europe occidentale au XIXe siècle,” *Revue d’histoire du XIXe siècle* 34 (2007/1): 71-104.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvie Jouanny, *L’Actrice et ses doubles. Figures et représentations de la femme de spectacle à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Genève: Droz, 2002) 425.

<sup>5</sup> From the beginning, Colombier had planned to chronicle this tour, providing eyewitness accounts for French Sarah Bernhardt fans. See Jouanny 109.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Louis Besson, “Courrier des Théâtres” (*L’Événement* 11 nov. 1880:3), which is followed by a more mocking report in the “Courrier des Théâtres” of 21 jan. 1881:3. In the first edition of her novel *Courte et bonne* (Paris: Marpon & Flammarion, 1888), Colombier stated, in the dedication to Louis Besson: “C’est vous qui m’avez

the journalist Jehan Soudan, who had travelled with the two actresses, and who for a while was Colombier's secretary.<sup>7</sup> Her letters published in *L'Événement* lay the foundation for the articles that followed and that were eventually published in *Le Voyage de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique* (1881), for which Arsène Houssaye wrote the preface.<sup>8</sup> Colombier acknowledged his support the following year in the chapter "Chez Arsène Houssaye" of her *Carnet d'une Parisienne* (1882),<sup>9</sup> where she referred to *Le Voyage de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique* as her "premier né" to which Houssaye had been the godfather, "parrain" (*Carnet* 75), a metaphor that was not used accidentally.

As an aspiring author who came from the stage, lacking literary training, she was acutely aware of the necessity to solicit male support. She knew that the literary world was a man's world, in which women's writing was readily discredited and could easily be exploited to benefit male authors. Margot Irvine has argued that naturalist writers such as Edmond de Goncourt and Bonnetain sought out female collaborators in an effort to integrate "original female writing" into their own naturalist texts, thereby rendering these texts more authentic.<sup>10</sup> Irvine asserts that, in Goncourt's eyes,

la femme se limiterait à rédiger un texte à valeur documentaire. [...] Goncourt suggère que ce texte pourrait être transformé en un texte littéraire par un collaborateur mâle. Il présume un partage discursif entre hommes et femmes où l'écrivain mâle fournit l'élément créatif et artistique et où la femme partage l'expérience de son vécu, inaccessible à l'homme.<sup>11</sup>

However, Colombier might have assumed more agency in her collaboration with male authors. In identifying her book *Le Voyage de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique* as her first child and Houssaye

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improvisé romancière, en publiant mes lettres d'Amérique" (NP). Henceforth, references to this work will be indicated parenthetically in the text, with *Courte et bonne* and page number only.

<sup>7</sup> See Notice de personne: Soudan, Jehan (1850-1938). BnF Catalogue général: [accessed 14.3.2022] <<http://ark.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb12758595h>>.

<sup>8</sup> Marie Colombier, *Le Voyage de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique* (Paris: Dreyfous, 1881). Colombier later tells her readers that, for financial reasons, she decided to write a travelogue about Sarah Bernhardt's American tour for *Gil Blas* but was then directed by the *Gil Blas* editor to submit her text to the newly founded *Le Henri IV*. For this reason, *Le Voyage de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique* is preceded by a dedication to the director of the short-lived newspaper *Le Henri IV* and to its editors "qui m'ont accueillie, encouragée, revue et corrigée" (NP). Henceforth, references to this work will be indicated parenthetically in the text, with *Le Voyage* and page number only. This is her claim also in the second volume of her *Mémoires II – Fin de siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1899) 308-10. Henceforth, this volume of Colombier's own *Mémoires* will be referred to as *Mémoires II*.

<sup>9</sup> Marie Colombier, *Le Carnet d'une Parisienne* (Paris: Marpon & Flammarion, 1882). Further references to this work will be indicated parenthetically in the text, with *Le Carnet* and page number only. In the introduction, Colombier describes an ostensible conversation with a journal editor during which she expressed hesitancy about writing "des chroniques." She claims the journal editor reassured her that there were now also "chroniqueuses," who usually wrote under a pseudonym, asking her, however, to publish under her own name:

-Il y a des chroniqueuses aussi, mais elles portent d'ordinaire le masque du pseudonyme. Parlez à visage découvert. Nous y gagnerons.

-Des compliments? Vous êtes le plus fort. Je me rends. Mais vous savez...vous corrigerez mes *épreuves*.

Et voilà comment je suis devenue chroniqueuse. (*Le Carnet* 3)

Through this playful introduction, Colombier caters to preconceived gender notions. She expresses modesty, giving the editor ultimate control over her writing. Yet, she also demonstrates to her readers that she has successfully entered a domain traditionally occupied by men.

<sup>10</sup> See Margot Irvine, "... et je serais désireux de l'avoir, cette collaboration féminine": Goncourt, Daudet, Bonnetain et la collaboration littéraire des femmes," *La Littérature en bas-bleus: Les romancières en France de 1870-1914*, vol. III, eds. Brigitte Louichon and Andrea Del Lungo (Paris: Garnier, 2017) 39-48.

<sup>11</sup> Irvine 39.

as its godfather, Colombier had replaced biological creation with intellectual creation while assigning Houssaye a mere supportive role in the creative process.

In 1883, in the preface to Colombier's novel *Les Mémoires de Sarah Barnum*, Paul Bonnetain readily assumes this godfatherly role: "Quoiqu'indigne, et bien que n'ayant pas encore atteint la majorité exigée pour un tel pontificat, je dois tenir sur les fonts baptismaux votre 'petit dernier.'"<sup>12</sup> Bonnetain had asked Marie Colombier for a meeting in the spring of 1883, since he wanted to write a literary column in which he planned to portray well-known contemporaries by divulging intimate details about their personal lives.<sup>13</sup> To accomplish that, he needed to gain a deeper insight into the theatre milieu and the demimonde, which he hoped to acquire through conversations with Colombier. After their initial encounter, Bonnetain became increasingly smitten with the actress, and the two soon began a rather tumultuous relationship. Colombier, seventeen years his senior, would exert a significant influence on the young writer and his career path. Together, they embarked on a collaborative project, *Les Mémoires de Sarah Barnum*, which would become Colombier's bestseller. As Frédéric Da Silva has pointed out, Bonnetain might have played a role in the conception of the novel and most certainly introduced numerous naturalist elements into it;<sup>14</sup> the full extent of his collaboration though remains unclear. Marie Colombier always denied Bonnetain's conceptual collaboration and underscored that his contribution was limited to editorial work, also suggesting that the slanderous sexual passages, for which she was put on trial,<sup>15</sup> were not her doing, but were added during the editorial process.

For the young writer and journalist Bonnetain, the *Barnum* project served as a way to self-promote, as he willingly admits in his preface: "Ce genre de littérature [the preface] n'a-t-il pas été inventé pour permettre au *préfacier* d'entretenir le public de ses petites affaires et de se tailler une réclame sur le dos du *préfacé*?"<sup>16</sup> If we trust Marie Colombier, it was he who wanted to collaborate with her and write the preface to her novel (*Mémoires III*, 30-31). Bonnetain had been working on his novel, *Charlot s'amuse*, about a compulsive masturbator whose behavior was, in true naturalist fashion, explained through his genetic disposition and the milieu in which he grew up. Da Silva's careful analysis illustrates that some of the stylistic and thematic elements of *Charlot s'amuse* can also be found in *Les Mémoires de Sarah Barnum*.<sup>17</sup> The novel's title alludes overtly to the American circus magnate, suggesting that the female protagonist exhibits his character traits. Sarah Barnum is, of course, an only thinly veiled reference to Sarah Bernhardt.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Paul Bonnetain, préface, *Les Mémoires de Sarah Barnum*, by Marie Colombier (Paris: chez tous les éditeurs, 1883) V. Henceforth, references to this preface will be indicated as Bonnetain, with roman numeral page number.

<sup>13</sup> See Frédéric Da Silva, "Mirbeau et l'affaire Sarah Barnum – un roman inavoué de Paul Bonnetain?" [title in the Table des Matières], *Cahiers Octave Mirbeau* 17 (2010): 176-89. 181-82. On the first page of this article, the title is given as "Révélation et désaveux: Octave Mirbeau, Paul Bonnetain et l'affaire Sarah Barnum."

<sup>14</sup> Da Silva 184. Some articles among Bonnetain's "chroniques potinières" thematize topics in similar ways as they are described in *Les Mémoires de Sarah Barnum*. See Da Silva 183.

<sup>15</sup> See Da Silva: "Le procès se tint le 26 mai 1884 devant la Cour d'Assises de la Seine, laquelle condamna Marie Colombier à trois mois de prison et à 2 000 francs d'amende. Grâce à l'intervention de Pétrus Richarme, son amant en titre, l'actrice vit sa peine de prison commuée en quinze jours de réclusion dans un pavillon d'Auteuil" (180). See also Marie Colombier, *Mémoires III- Fin de tout* (Paris: Flammarion, 1899) 85-86. Henceforth, this volume of Colombier's own *Mémoires* will be referred to parenthetically in the text as *Mémoires III* with page number.

<sup>16</sup> Bonnetain VI.

<sup>17</sup> Da Silva 184-86. Indeed, most of the morally objectionable passages for which Colombier was put on trial, have their counterpart in Bonnetain's novel *Charlot s'amuse* (186-87).

<sup>18</sup> Even before the novel's publication the press had gotten wind of its content and had labeled the forthcoming *Les Mémoires de Sarah Barnum* a scandalous Bernhardt biography. After its publication, it was Octave Mirbeau's article "Un crime de librairie," in *Les Grimaces* (15 December 1883), that led to a duel between Mirbeau (siding with Bernhardt) and Bonnetain (siding with Colombier) and to a physical confrontation between Bernhardt and Colombier.

The novel showcases an egotistical and greedy Sarah Barnum, daughter of a Jewish courtesan who has inherited characteristics from her mother: a penchant for money<sup>19</sup> and prostitution which contributes to her own lasciviousness and debauchery, while fostering her frigidity. Never sexually or emotionally fulfilled, she ultimately perishes as an alcoholic.

Contemporary critics usually attributed all naturalist elements found in this novel, *Les Mémoires de Sarah Barnum*, to Bonnetain rather than to Colombier, as they disputed her literary talent. Her gender and her libertine lifestyle (the latter usually read as another indicator of her gender-role-defying behavior) worked against her when journalists and literary critics evaluated her work. Lucien Victor Meunier wrote, for example, in the socialist newspaper *Le Cri du Peuple*:

Je n'ai rien à dire de la signataire du livre, Mlle Marie Colombier, que je suis heureux de ne pas connaître. Quant à Paul Bonnetain, l'auteur de la préface, c'est autre chose. Je l'ai connu jeune, ardent, sincère, plein de cœur et de talent. Par quelle suite de circonstances en est-il arrivé à se faire le souteneur littéraire d'une vieille filasse fourbue, je l'ignore.<sup>20</sup>

Bonnetain emphasizes in his preface to *Les Mémoires de Sarah Barnum* Colombier's talent and skill. He praises certain "naturalist elements" of the novel and applauds Colombier for her ability to create convincing characters, a skill he attributes to her theatre background: "Vos personnages m'ont intéressé jusqu'au bout, car, avant tout femme de théâtre, vous les mettez si bien en scène qu'on les voit vivre et qu'on les entend."<sup>21</sup> Creating convincing realist characters was one of the foremost goals of naturalist writers. It was exactly for this reason, as Bonnetain asserts, that Edmond de Goncourt wanted female collaborators:

Notre grand Ed. de Goncourt, dans sa préface de *La Faustin*, préconise l'appel aux "souvenirs vivants" pour "les études psychologiques et physiologiques" sur la femme. "Je trouve, dit-il, que les livres écrits sur les femmes par des hommes manquent, manquent... de la collaboration féminine..." Et, il demande à ses lectrices de lui révéler par d'anonymes confidences ["]toute l'inconnue *féminité* du tréfond de la femme, que les maris et même les amants passent leur vie à ignorer."

Bonnetain continues: "Vous [Colombier] aviez lu cette préface d'Edmond de Goncourt et vous avez voulu lui apporter les 'documents humains' demandés."<sup>22</sup> Goncourt thought that women could provide gender-specific information that was inaccessible to male naturalist writers. While Bonnetain mentions that Colombier wanted to be this kind of "collaboratrice" for Goncourt, it was also rather obvious that, in order to create the female protagonist of her novel, she, as a woman, would have all the "documentary" material available and, as an actress, would be able to imagine and represent different characters quite easily.

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In a letter to *Le Figaro*, published on the front page of the paper under the heading "L'incident Colombier-Sarah Bernhardt," on December 21, 1983, Colombier denied any allusion to Sarah Bernhardt in her novel, no doubt because she was afraid of legal repercussions. However, as Da Silva has pointed out, she readily admitted to her portrayal of Sarah Bernhardt in *Les Mémoires de Sarah Barnum* in later editions of her novel (Da Silva 178).

<sup>19</sup> While Sarah Bernhardt was indeed the daughter of an influential Jewish courtesan, the novel provides an anti-Semitic reading of Bernhardt's family background. Promiscuity, greed, and the worship of money are given as racial character traits of the Jewish people.

<sup>20</sup> Lucien Victor Meunier, "Le Scandale du jour," *Le Cri du Peuple* 21 déc. 1883:1.

<sup>21</sup> Bonnetain VIII.

<sup>22</sup> Bonnetain XII-XIII.

Yet, in his preface, Bonnetain hesitates to present her fully on par with male naturalist writers, downplaying her ability to take on serious subject matter. He distinguishes between two types of novelists, “les écrivains” and “les amuseurs,”<sup>23</sup> classifying Colombier among the latter, while claiming that entertaining is not “un mince mérite, d’ailleurs, en un temps où vos confrères enjuponnés poudrerisent Schopenhauer, ou nous servent du paganisme au cold-cream!”<sup>24</sup> The somewhat misogynist tenor of this statement, as Margot Irvine has pointed out, illustrates that Bonnetain questions female writers’ ability to treat serious topics.<sup>25</sup>

Whether this presentation was just an astute marketing strategy or whether it was Bonnetain’s genuine belief, remains open. His letters to his lover Colombier seem to indicate that he recognized her writing talent, attributing the literary success of *Les Mémoires de Sarah Barnum* primarily to her.<sup>26</sup> Many of Bonnetain’s prefatory comments about Colombier’s writing mirror those expressed in Houssaye’s preface to *Le Voyage de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique*. One cannot exclude the possibility that Houssaye as well as Bonnetain used clichéd descriptors, catering to readers with a well-established gender bias, holding pre-conceived notions about the intellectual capabilities of women, and assuming little literary talent in a female stage performer.

The prefaces written by Bonnetain and Houssaye at the beginning of Colombier’s writing career were necessary to vouch for her as a writer, and male prefaces would continue to serve as bulwark against attacks from the male literary establishment. Yet, after the phenomenal success of her *Mémoires de Sarah Barnum* (1883),<sup>27</sup> Colombier’s subsequent publications, her performances and even her social life were commented on quite favorably in the press.<sup>28</sup> She thus began to present herself more confidently as a person with ideas, endowed with wit and excellent observational skills.

In 1886, *Le Petit Bottin des lettres et des arts*, then in its second edition, she was labeled, disparagingly, “une romancière à secrétaires.”<sup>29</sup> However, Colombier did not view herself as a “deficient writer” but rather as an assertive, creative woman, leaving the fastidious, fiddly editorial work to her male collaborators, whose identity she did not hide. She addresses the issue quite playfully in her 1886 dedication to the Commedia dell’Arte character Colombine that precedes *On*

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<sup>23</sup> Bonnetain VII.

<sup>24</sup> Bonnetain IX.

<sup>25</sup> Irvine 45.

<sup>26</sup> See Bonnetain’s letters to Colombier in *Mémoires* III, 83.

<sup>27</sup> On the ensuing Marie Colombier-Sarah Bernhardt dispute and the Marie Colombier trial, see *Affaire Marie Colombier–Sarah Bernhardt, les pièces à conviction* (Paris: chez tous les libraires, 1884). Both their dispute and Colombier’s trial significantly contributed to the promotion of Colombier’s novel.

<sup>28</sup> Particularly noteworthy are the articles and bibliographical notes on Colombier in *Gil Blas* during the years 1886/1887. On 19 March 1887, *Gil Blas* announces, for example, that her novel *La plus jolie femme de Paris*, will be published as a feuilleton in *L’Écho de Paris* (the first installment of the novel is published on the second page, March 20, 1887). On 29 March, *Gil Blas* mentions, on its third page, the death of Marie Colombier’s mother. Almost four months later, Mirliton [Guillaume Livet] publishes the column “Le Livre du bord” (*Gil Blas*, 10 juillet 1887: 1-2), reporting on a pleasure cruise organized by Colombier’s publisher Marpon & Flammarion to celebrate the publication of her novel *La plus jolie femme*. The next month, under “Courrier des théâtres” (*Gil Blas* 17 août 1887: 4), we find a short note saying that Busnach intends to write a three-act comedy based on Colombier’s novel *La plus jolie femme de Paris*. Three months after that, Armand Sylvestre publishes “En pleine fantaisie” (*Gil Blas* 23 nov. 1887: 1), a flattering review of *Les Voyages de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique* (Marpon & Flammarion) – a new and augmented edition of her original *Le Voyage de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique*, including a report on the second voyage of Sarah Bernhardt to the Americas. For this edition Colombier invents a person who supposedly accompanied Sarah Bernhardt on her second voyage and reported to Colombier.

<sup>29</sup> *Le Petit Bottin des lettres et des arts* 26. Unsigned article. See note no. 2.

*en meurt*.<sup>30</sup> The dedication opens with Colombier asking Colombine to be the godmother to her new book *On en meurt*.

*Prête-moi ta plume  
Pour écrire un mot.*

.....  
Je viens chanter le couplet de Pierrot sous vos fenêtres, ma chère Colombine.  
C'est pour vous prier de parrainage en faveur de mon dernier-né.  
Sous la moquerie légère de vos propos mordants, sous les dentelles de vos spirituelles railleries et le fin satin de votre masque, ô soubrette alerte, nous reconnaissons en vous l'homme de la famille. (*On en meurt I*)

Colombier identifies Colombine as the maid who hides under her feminine appearance “the man in the house,” able to put those around her in their place.<sup>31</sup> The comment is, however, rather ambiguous as Colombine is not only the stock character with all the aforementioned attributes, but also one of the pseudonyms of the prominent *Gil Blas* contributor, Henry Fouquier.<sup>32</sup> For that reason, *Gil Blas* advertised Colombier’s novel as follows: “Le livre est précédé d’une curieuse dédicace à notre collaboratrice Colombine.”<sup>33</sup> The gender-bending here becomes rather complex. Colombier dedicates her new novel to Colombine, yet speaks of “parrainage,” which would make Fouquier the more likely addressee. However, Colombier also acknowledges that she is initiating an important strategic shift by dedicating the book to Colombine, a female stage character and, for that reason, she is asking the latter to look upon her kindly: “Je viens donc à vous, Colombine, mon petit dernier sur le bras. C’est pour moi une pose nouvelle, et je vous prie de n’en sourire qu’avec charité” (*On en meurt II*).

Clearly, Colombier reflects on Colombine’s major role on stage, which consists of keeping all the threads together, controlling the turn of events, thereby usurping a powerful role, which undercuts the power of men. Furthermore, Colombier attributes a certain level of subtlety and open-mindedness to Colombine and surmises that the character will not be the one to criticize the actress’s spelling:

Vous êtes trop fine, ô Colombine, pour faire de bourgeoises gorges chaudes devant mon oubli de l’orthographe d’Académie. Je mets mon orgueil à l’ignorer, non par mépris des Quarante, mais parce que, si je devais attendre qu’ils fussent tombés d’accord, je n’aurais pas trop de toute leur immortalité, laquelle me fait peur comme la pire forme de la vieillesse. (*On en meurt II-III*)

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<sup>30</sup> Quotes from this text are from the following edition: Marie Colombier, *Nathalie: On en meurt* (Paris: Marpon & Flammarion, 1888). Apparently, the first edition, published in 1886, only had the title *On en meurt*. In this regard, “Bibliography,” *Gil Blas* (23 avril 1886:3), announcing the publication date of the novel as 23 April 1886. Henceforth, all references to this novel will be given parenthetically in the text, with the indication *On en meurt* and page number.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Colombine stands for transgressive humor and subversive performance. See Domnica Radulescu, “Caterina’s Colombina – the Birth of a Female Trickster in Seventeenth-Century France,” *Theatre Journal* 60.1 (Mar. 2008): 87-113. [accessed 20.3.2022] < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25070159> >.

<sup>32</sup> He signed, for example, an article on Marie Colombier’s project of publishing the new and augmented edition *Les Voyages de Sarah Bernhardt* with his pseudonym Colombine. “Chronique,” *Gil Blas* 26 juillet 1886: 1. He was co-founder of *L’Écho de Paris*, another journal in which Colombier would publish.

<sup>33</sup> “Bibliographie,” *Gil Blas* 23 avril 1886: 3.

Not only does Colombier mock the members of the Académie française, but she also rejects the value put on normative French orthography as a form of bourgeois pedantry, brushing off contemporary critics who lambasted her spelling.<sup>34</sup> In a rhetorical question, Colombier then asks Colombine whether the latter is holding a grudge against her because she uses secretaries, only to reject the thought immediately, pointing to a longstanding tradition of actresses using male secretaries: “Me gardez-vous rancune sur la question de secrétaire? Je n’en crois rien, ma chère Colombine. Les cas sont trop nombreux parmi les plus illustres de la famille. Rachel avait Crémieux. A-t-on pris jamais les poulets de Phèdre pour des plaidoiries d’avocat?” (*On en meurt* III). Thus, Colombier presents her use of secretaries as legitimate, given that the creative aspect, the development of ideas, resides with her, while the secretaries only take care of formal aspects. In later years, she would underscore that distinction even more clearly. About the role of her collaborator Paul Bonnetain, she would write in the third volume of her *Mémoires*: “Le collaborateur était [...] chargé de la correction des épreuves” (*Mémoires* III, 34).

Collaborative writing between male writers was indeed not uncommon; the Goncourt brothers might serve here as the most notable example of the period. They were eventually imitated by the “néo-réalistes,” the two Rosnys and Paul and Victor Marguerite.<sup>35</sup> Yet, when collaborative writing happened between a man and a woman, the woman’s writing ability was usually perceived as inferior to that of the male collaborator; she was considered mostly to have played a supportive role. In her dedication to Colombine, Colombier reverses this commonly held perception.

One reason for Marie Colombier’s more assertive stance may have been her literary success, having produced a bestseller; another reason might very well have been the shifting literary market that included an increasing number of women writers, editors and publishers, who redefined the cultural field.<sup>36</sup> Mary Louise Roberts has pointed out that by 1890 women were no longer liminal voices in the political field; they expressed their opinions at public gatherings and in the media.<sup>37</sup>

The year 1897 marked the appearance of the first issue of the daily *La Fronde* – a paper produced exclusively by women –, demonstrating that it was possible to write and publish as a woman without male guidance or advocacy. One year later, in 1898, Colombier published the first volume of her *Mémoires*,<sup>38</sup> ending a period of sparse literary production during which she had been financially supported by her lover, the industrialist and politician Petrus Richarme. His death in 1892 forced her to increase her literary output, primarily to insure her solvency. The first volume of her *Mémoires* received a very favorable review in *La Fronde*:

La littérature féminine va compter un succès de plus à son actif. L’événement parisien de demain sera la publication des *Mémoires* de Marie Colombier. Le premier volume *Fin*

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<sup>34</sup> Colombier’s literary ambition and non-normative spelling would also be used to discredit her during the trials she had to endure when fighting for the inheritance Richarme had left her (*Mémoires* III, 331).

<sup>35</sup> “Néo-réalistes,” a term created by Jules Huret, describes the new generation of naturalist writers. J.-H. Rosny, Paul Marguerite, and Paul Bonnetain would be among those writing the “Manifeste de cinq” against Zola in 1887, claiming to be his disciples, but rejecting the “obscenity” of his novel *La Terre*, just published in *Gil Blas*.

<sup>36</sup> That their presence was very much perceived as a threat to male writers and journalists is, for example, addressed in Maupassant’s novel *Bel-Ami*.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts. The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002) 131.

<sup>38</sup> Marie Colombier, *Mémoires I – Fin d’Empire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1898). Henceforth, references to this volume of Colombier’s own *Mémoires* will be referred to parenthetically in the text as *Mémoires* I with page numbers.



*d'Empire* paraîtra chez Flammarion précédé d'une préface du grand poète Armand Sylvestre.

C'est un historique extrêmement pittoresque et mouvementé des dernières années du régime impérial: on y trouve tout l'intérêt d'un roman avec toute la documentation d'un livre d'histoire politique. T]héâtres, galanteries, l'époque des Tuileries revit avec tout son charme et toute sa gaieté dans ses pages primesautières où se manifeste toute la finesse et observation féminine.<sup>39</sup>

Not only are her *Mémoires* seen as a valuable contribution to “feminine literature,” but they are also read as a document that illustrates particular feminine qualities: finesse and observational skill. Although the first volume of the *Mémoires* received good reviews in other newspapers as well, those reviews provided more cursory commentary without addressing the author's literary qualities.<sup>40</sup> *La Fronde*'s review, however, hails the *Mémoires* as another female success story and values the author's [female] skill set.

As was the case with Bonnetain, the book reviewer of *La Fronde* notices Colombier's keen observational skill but, while this is a quality cherished by naturalist writers, the reviewer deems it a feminine quality. This insight may have contributed to Colombier's decision to position herself closer to other women journalists, novelists, and publishers and to emphasize that her own journalistic career began well before the publication of *La Fronde*. Thus, in the second volume of her *Mémoires* she writes, in the third person, about the accounts she had previously published on Sarah Bernhardt's American tour:

Mise en goût par la reproduction de sa lettre à Besson, dans les journaux de France et d'Amérique, elle s'était faite, bien avant la *Fronde*, reporter volontaire, et elle alimentait des nouvelles de la troupe le courrier des théâtres de l'*Événement*; les feuilles parisiennes répétant celles d'Amérique, se faisaient câbler les notes dont la signature féminine amusait. Le nom de Marie se trouvait ainsi reproduit dans les journaux du Nouveau-Monde, tirant par centaines de mille. (*Mémoires* II, 283)

The confidence and assertiveness displayed in this self-representation are noteworthy, especially when compared to the image Colombier put forward of herself in 1882 in her *Carnet d'une Parisienne*, where she claimed modesty and reluctance to work as a “chroniqueuse” under her own name.<sup>41</sup>

In the second volume of her *Mémoires* the readers also learn about Colombier's first encounter with the journalist Séverine in 1882 (*Mémoires* II, 312-15). At that time, Séverine was at the beginning of her journalistic career, working with Jules Vallès. She was his intellectual collaborator and helped him relaunch the socialist newspaper *Le Cri du Peuple*. After Vallès's death, she would take over the paper, thereby becoming the first woman to run a newspaper in France. The description of the initial encounter between the two women serves primarily to illustrate that Marie preceded Séverine as a female journalist and columnist. Colombier, while in the bookstore of Marpon & Flammarion, noticed a young woman asking for *Le Carnet d'une*

<sup>39</sup> “On dit... un peu partout,” *La Fronde* 10 nov. 1898: 1. Unsigned article.

<sup>40</sup> A review in *Gil Blas* speaks of the “très grand succès” of this first volume, surprising even the publisher as copies went out of stock. “Échos et Nouvelles,” *Gil Blas* (9 déc. 1898: 1); see also “Bibliographie,” *L'Intransigeant* 12 déc. 1898: 3.

<sup>41</sup> See footnote 9.

*Parisienne*: “Elle avait bien l’air d’une petite bourgeoise, toute simplette, mais pourtant!... Ce beau rire à dents blanches, cette exubérance, cette gaieté n’étaient pas d’une bourgeoise... Qui pouvait bien être cette femme qui s’offrait un livre à 3 francs 50?” (*Mémoires* II, 313). Upon finding out from the salesperson that it was Séverine who was buying the book for Vallès, Colombier decided to visit the writer:

Dès ce moment, elle [Marie Colombier] devint camarade avec Vallès qui lui fit quelquefois le plaisir de dîner chez elle. Ce ne fut que plus tard, qu’elle se lia avec Séverine. À cette époque, il y avait très peu de femmes de lettres: Jane Thilda [Mathilde Kindt<sup>42</sup>] au *Gil Blas*, Etincelle [Marie Henriette Biard] au *Figaro*. Marie qui venait de prendre une part militante dans la littérature, était donc une exception [since she did not use a pseudonym]. (*Mémoires* II, 314-15)

In the third and final volume of her *Mémoires*, Colombier attributes significantly more weight to the description of Séverine, accentuating the relationship between the two women and insinuating close professional as well as social ties. Since 1897, Séverine had been writing the daily column “Notes d’une frondeuse” for *La Fronde* and, maybe even more importantly for Colombier, was well connected on the literary market and knew how to sell and resell her journalistic and literary pieces.<sup>43</sup> In her prefatory remarks to the third volume of her *Mémoires*, Colombier states that she intended to dedicate her last volume to Séverine. However, according to Colombier, Séverine declined the honor, afraid that Colombier’s enemies would become hers. Colombier therefore decided to dedicate the volume “aux femmes”: “Qu’ils [*les Mémoires*] leur soient une leçon, un enseignement. Qu’elles sachent bien qu’elles doivent toujours être sur leurs gardes, quelle que soit leur situation, régulière ou PAS, du moment qu’elles sont isolées dans la vie. Elles offrent une proie facile pour tous les corbeaux” (*Mémoires* III, V).

The third volume received a glowing review in *La Fronde* and, in emphasizing that Colombier had dedicated this volume “aux femmes” and that “toutes auront profit à le lire,”<sup>44</sup> it aligned the book with *La Fronde*’s mission to be a newspaper for all women. The volume is advertised as being written like a “veritable roman,”<sup>45</sup> since the account in the *Mémoires* is in the third person, establishing a certain distance between Colombier as the author and narrator and Marie as the protagonist. In addition, this volume is also advertised as offering “un exceptionnel intérêt de curiosité littéraire à cause d’une série de lettres inédites de *Paul Bonnetain*, le maître romancier, confession amoureuse d’une admirable éloquence et que tous les curieux de psychologie voudront lire.”<sup>46</sup>

While these letters, according to *La Fronde*’s reviewer, have a romanesque quality – “l’impression de réalité qui s’en dégage est d’autant plus vive qu’il n’y a pas de masques sur les personnages; les physionomies sont à découvert, c’est la vie même”<sup>47</sup> –, Colombier justifies their

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<sup>42</sup> She was the inspiration for Guy de Maupassant’s Madame Forestier in *Bel-Ami*.

<sup>43</sup> Colombier claims, in her *Mémoires* III (359-60), that Séverine inspired her to generate income by writing her *Mémoires*, reusing material previously published, as Séverine had done herself. See Christiane Chaulet-Achour, “Séverine (1855-1929) et Jules Vallès (1832-1885). Un couple intellectuel?” *Féminin/Masculin 3 – Couples en création*. (CRTH de l’UCP et éditions encrage) 209-26, footnote 6. [accessed 21.4.2022] [http://christianeachour.net/images/data/telechargements/articles/A\\_0143.pdf](http://christianeachour.net/images/data/telechargements/articles/A_0143.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> “Bibliographie,” *La Fronde*, 27 nov.1899: 3.

<sup>45</sup> “Bibliographie” 3.

<sup>46</sup> “Bibliographie” 3. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>47</sup> “Bibliographie” 3.

inclusion in her *Mémoires* as a payback response to Bonnetain who had, without her consent, included her letters in his semi-autobiographical novel *L'Opium* (*Mémoires* III, 64-65).<sup>48</sup> Bonnetain's inclusion of Colombier's letters contributed to the valorization of the documentary quality of his naturalist text. In using Bonnetain's letters as an integral part of her *Mémoires*, Colombier not only retaliates against her former lover,<sup>49</sup> but she also draws on naturalist literary strategies to produce her own "realist" text, which in the mind of *La Fronde's* reviewer can be read like a novel. In addition, Bonnetain's letters serve as a guarantor for Colombier's talent as a writer. In these letters to her, he makes a distinction between their books and hers (presumably *Les Mémoires de Sarah Barnum*): "Aussi bien, je trouve nos livres, le tien surtout, dans toutes les escales: à Port-Saïd, chez les officiers des highlanders écossais; à Aden, au mess des grenadiers de la reine."<sup>50</sup>

Judiciously, *La Fronde's* book reviewer makes no reference to Séverine's refusal to accept Colombier's dedication, mentioned in Colombier's preface to the third volume of her *Mémoires*. How close the relationship between the two women truly was cannot be surmised from Colombier's *Mémoires*. Clearly, the relationship was more complicated than described by Colombier. It was during Séverine's time at *Le Cri du Peuple* that Lucien Victor Meunier's unfavorable review was published, labeling Marie Colombier "une vieille filasse fourbue,"<sup>51</sup> In the same newspaper issue, Paul Alexis published, under his well-known pseudonym Trublot, a slightly more favorable commentary, titled "L'Affaire de la rue de Thann," in which he mocks the physical altercation between Sarah Bernhardt and Marie Colombier that followed the publication of *Les Mémoires de Sarah Barnum* as an excess of naturalism, all the while crediting Bonnetain as a talented naturalist writer and giving no credit to Marie Colombier.<sup>52</sup>

Colombier first mentions Séverine in the third volume of her *Mémoires* in reference to the early period of her friend's career, when she was working for *Le Cri du Peuple*. Colombier quite skillfully reiterates the point made previously in the second volume, namely, that in the 1880s she was the more successful writer of the two, even though Séverine would become the first woman to run a newspaper, albeit one in which critics had failed to recognize Marie Colombier's literary talent. Séverine is described as a guest at Colombier's Christmas Eve soirée in the mid-eighties (1886/1887?), an evening presumably celebrating the successful run of Colombier's novel *La plus jolie femme de Paris* in *L'Écho de Paris* which, according to Colombier, helped raise the print-run of this newspaper (*Mémoires* III, 137). In describing the young journalist emphatically as "Séverine, le brillant écrivain, à l'aurore de sa renommée" (*Mémoires* III, 139), Colombier not only establishes herself as the already seasoned and successful author who welcomes the young journalist into her home, but she also underscores Séverine's strength and quality as a writer. This will allow her, as will become clear, to further emphasize her own qualities as an author well-

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<sup>48</sup> Paul Bonnetain, *L'Opium* (Brussels: Kistmaeckers, 1883). The novel features a poet, a thinly veiled alter ego of Bonnetain, who embarks on an assignment in the colonies while still mourning the relationship to his former mistress, an actress who sends him letters from Paris. The actress very much resembles Colombier who had encouraged Bonnetain to leave as a foreign correspondent to Tonkin, as she did not want to compromise her longstanding relationship with Richarme. The novel is a typical example of *littérature coloniale*, while its pessimistic tone betokens the influence of naturalism.

<sup>49</sup> Bonnetain died in March of 1899 in Laos, most likely by his own hand. Colombier could thus safely include his letters in her *Mémoires* without fearing retaliation.

<sup>50</sup> Bonnetain's letter, with the heading "Colombo (Île de Ceylan) 27 matin." No date given, but most likely between January and May of 1884. Qtd. in *Mémoires* III, 83.

<sup>51</sup> Victor Meunier 1.

<sup>52</sup> Trublot [Paul Alexis], "L'Affaire de la rue de Thann," *Le Cri du Peuple* 21 déc.1883: 3.

grounded in the tenets of naturalism. The presentation of Séverine as a guest at Colombier's Christmas party is carefully orchestrated to allow for a parallel construction later in her *Mémoires*. The publication of *La plus jolie femme de Paris* in the *Écho de Paris* did not begin in December 1886 as indicated in her *Mémoires*, but in March 1887. By July, the serialized novel had already been published as a book, an event celebrated with a cruise by Marpon & Flammarion,<sup>53</sup> this latter also described as subsequent to the Christmas Party in Colombier's *Mémoires* (*Mémoires III*, 143-57). Hence, Colombier respected the actual sequencing of events, but found it important to predate the publication of her novel in *L'Écho de Paris*.

Richarme's death in 1892 had a major impact on Colombier's life. She tried to overcome her difficult economic situation by increasing her literary production and, specifically at this time, by writing her three-volume *Mémoires*. In the third volume, Colombier tells her readers that his death led to her moral and physical breakdown, contending that she developed diabetes and tuberculosis; and, on recommendation of her physician, she departed for Monte Carlo. Her stay there serves as another opportunity to suggest an increasingly close relationship with Séverine, since the journalist and her mother, Mme Rémy, supposedly joined her. Colombier's account of their interaction is characteristic of her self-representation. She contends that it was she who initially helped Séverine, by finding an accommodation in Monte Carlo for her and her mother ("une amie Séverine, sachant Marie dans la principauté, lui avait écrit, la priant de choisir un logement pour elle et pour sa mère, madame Rémy") and that out of gratitude, Séverine promised to care for Colombier, saying "vous n'allez pas rester malade. Je vais vous soigner, moi, vous distraire surtout" (*Mémoires III*, 278). According to Colombier, they spent time together going on walks, dining, or meeting up with other artists (*Mémoires III*, 279). Colombier now presents herself as on par with Séverine, underscoring that the latter, far from the radical socialist fighter she was when working for *Le Cri du Peuple* – Colombier contrasts Séverine with Louise Michel – has become a *femme à la mode* who accentuates her femininity:

On avait l'étonnement d'une autre Séverine que bien peu ont connue, coquette, élégante, habillée par le bon faiseur, chapeauté merveilleusement par August Lévy, très amincie, presque maigre. Et ses yeux! des yeux aux reflets changeants, qui ont l'air de regarder au-delà, pendant que la lèvre se marque d'un pli douloureux; des yeux de rêve, aux reflets métalliques, froids comme une lame d'acier. Elle faisait l'étonnement des bons bourgeois, des étrangers qui se la désignaient et contemplaient stupéfaits cette femme dont l'allure s'harmonisait avec la toilette: sans doute ils s'étaient attendus à une Louise Michel! (*Mémoires III*, 279-80)

Séverine was a close friend of Marguerite Durand, the editor of *La Fronde*. A former actress, Marguerite Durand stood for feminine beauty and elegance. She was often described, as Mary Louise Roberts has pointed out, with recourse to a lexicon focused on her appearance and more likely to be used to describe an actress.<sup>54</sup> Séverine, equally beautiful, could also look back on her theatrical past, and it is doubtlessly for this reason that Colombier preferred to emphasize Séverine's fashionable appearance and only indirectly refer to her emerging feminist agenda. This representation allowed Colombier to present herself as another actress who had successfully

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<sup>53</sup> Mirliton [Guillaume Livet] 1-2.

<sup>54</sup> Marguerite Durand very much played with preconceived gender expectations to dissuade male attacks. See Roberts 51-62.

embraced a writing career. All three women applied the notion of seduction as power, which they had learned in theatre, to their new careers as journalists and writers.

In the last volume of her *Mémoires*, Colombier suggests that, initially, she did not experience any great financial difficulty following Richarme's death. She seemed confident, at that time, that she would benefit from the significant inheritance Richarme had left her. Séverine, during those days, is presented as the cheerful entertainer who reminded Marie Colombier of her social responsibilities, telling the latter that she had mourned enough and that she had the moral obligation to share her wealth with her friends (*Mémoires* III, 315-16). Colombier supposedly agreed to Séverine's request, portraying herself as the modest actress and writer, whose actions were geared toward the benefit of others.<sup>55</sup> Colombier asserts that she put Séverine in charge of doing the honors for the *réveillon* of the 24<sup>th</sup> of December 1893 in her home.<sup>56</sup> Thus, Colombier writes: "Après le Noël obligé, on prit place dans la salle à manger, à une grande table, présidée par Séverine, à laquelle Marie avait délégué ses fonctions et en l'honneur de qui se donnait cette fête" (*Mémoires* III, 317). The description of the Christmas Eve soirée mirrors the earlier one to which Séverine had supposedly been invited in the mid-1880s. However, the more recent one, presided over by Séverine, has a decidedly more literary feel. Most notably two successful women writers are mentioned as guests, the poet Tola Dorian and the Spanish naturalist writer Emilia Pardo-Bazan:<sup>57</sup> "[U]ne femme supérieure, la marquise Pardo-Bazan, [...] représente avec un tel éclat, dans la littérature espagnole, le naturalisme catholique, alliant avec une belle audace les procédés du vérisme à la Flaubert et à la Maupassant avec les mystiques envolées de sœur Thérèse de Jésus" (*Mémoires* III, 318). Through this description Colombier insinuates that she is surrounded by successful female writers and literary theorists, implying that she has close ties to the two writers of renown. Furthermore, by critically assessing Pardo-Bazan's understanding of naturalism, differentiating it from Flaubert's realism and Maupassant's naturalism, Colombier attempts to convey to her readers that an exchange on naturalist theory and style might have taken place between Pardo-Bazan and herself. Indeed, comments on naturalist writers and naturalism abound in her *Mémoires*, no doubt the result of her connections, as she collaborated with Paul Adam<sup>58</sup> and Paul Bonnetain, was friends with Paul Alexis, and knew Busnach's Zola adaptations rather well, even working with Busnach on a stage adaptation of her own work *La plus jolie femme de Paris*:

Busnach vint à Marie et lui demanda s'il lui plairait qu'il tirât de son roman une pièce de théâtre. Elle avait pour Busnach, pour son œuvre une très vive admiration, estimant que nul n'aurait pu extraire des œuvres de Zola des pièces intéressantes comme celles qui ont pour titre *L'Assommoir*, *Pot-Bouille* et *Nana*, dont le premier acte est une comédie de l'observation la plus fine, et pourrait se jouer à part, et aurait ainsi un succès d'esprit et de

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<sup>55</sup> This was a typical feature of actresses' memoirs. See Jouanny 35-107.

<sup>56</sup> The event is noted in "Nouvelles et Échos," *Gil Blas*, 27 déc 1893:1. Séverine's anonymity is respected by referring to her with the letter "S," as in the following: "Vingt-cinq personnes ont réveillonné chez Marie Colombier [...] La fête avait été improvisée pour les adieux de son amie S..., qui part pour le Midi" (1).

<sup>57</sup> Both Tola Dorian and Pardo-Bazan had also been journal editors. For more information on Tola Dorian in this capacity, see Melanie Hawthorne, "Peripheral Publishing, or is Tola Dorian Totally Boring?" in *Peripheries of Nineteenth-Century French Studies: Views from the Edge*, ed. Timothy Raser (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2002) 64-65.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Adam collaborated with her on the novel *On en meurt* (*Mémoires* III, 212). At that time, he was still a naturalist, having just published *Chair molle* (1885).

parisianisme [...]. L'histoire de cette collaboration, c'est tout un poème. (*Mémoires III*, 152-53)<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, when talking about Pardo-Bazan, Colombier skillfully shows how naturalist approaches to writing have impacted female writers. Her *Mémoires* illustrate that she knew naturalist novels well and was able to incorporate naturalist narratives into her own text. Not only does she copy Bonnetain's literary strategy of including original letters into one's own text to give it more authenticity, but she also alludes, through her portrayal of Séverine, to Zola's work.<sup>60</sup> Séverine thus becomes the vehicle to conjure up *Le Ventre de Paris*. In the role she attributes to Séverine on Christmas Eve of 1893, Colombier evokes Zola's depiction of life in les Halles, the Parisian stomach that feeds all the classes of the city. Séverine becomes this feeding body that provides nourishment to all Parisians. She is represented as presiding over this literary *réveillon* with a bohemian demeanor, bringing all of the guests together by feeding them a plebeian onion soup, the dish she habitually served to the poor in les Halles on Christmas Eve.<sup>61</sup> Yet, the dish is also eaten by bourgeois night owls arriving in les Halles after a long night of partying, a situation quite similar to the Christmas Eve at Colombier's house in the mid-1880s, when Séverine had been a guest (*Mémoires III*, 319).

It is difficult to determine whether the naturalist elements in Colombier's texts were solely the work of her male collaborators Paul Bonnetain and Paul Adam or whether her own writing became increasingly influenced by naturalism; her theoretical reflections seem to indicate the latter. As suggested earlier, collaborative writing was a practiced approach among naturalist writers, giving full recognition to both collaborators if they were male, but not so much if one was female. For Colombier, collaboration was never about not receiving credit for her work. She certainly admitted to collaboration but always under the premise that the creative aspect resided with her. Oscillating between actress and writer, her self-image seemed to stabilize as *femme auteur* in the 1890s, especially in the later years when she sought to align her work with that of Séverine and *La Fronde*. Contemporary critics and later literary scholars have acknowledged that Edmond de Goncourt influenced Bonnetain, that Zola had his followers, and that the members of the Médan group influenced one another. Rather than labeling Marie Colombier "une romancière à secrétaires," one should perhaps entertain the thought that her style might have been influenced by that of her collaborators yet might also have been formed through her own reflection on naturalist texts.

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<sup>59</sup> The stage adaptation project is also well documented in the contemporary press. See, for example, *Gil Blas* 17 août 1887: 4.

<sup>60</sup> Rather critical of Zola initially, accusing him of being a "theoretical" naturalist, who refused to endorse violent class struggle, Séverine became close friends with him over their defense of Alfred Dreyfus. See Évelyne Le Garrec, *Séverine – une rebelle (1855-1929)* (Paris: Seuil, 1982) 169-73.

<sup>61</sup> Le Garrec 145-46.