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# Marcelle Cagy and the Pacifist Female Voices Amidst the Conflict

## **Abstract**

This article analyses the writings of French writer and journalist Marcelle Cagy (1891–1962), who held an uncommon position in the French intellectual field throughout the First World War. Going against the mainstream French feminist groups, who all prioritized loyalty to the fatherland over pacifism, Cagy remained faithful to her socialist and anti-war creed. Although little known to the larger French public, Cagy's double marginality as a woman and as a pacifist makes her work a singular testimony of the war years as well as a significant example of the rejection of the national climate and *Union sacrée's* rhetoric. In the first section of this article, I will locate Cagy in the national context, within the spectrum of attitudes adopted by female activists. I will then focus on her writings, studying in particular her text *Une Voix de femme dans la mêlée* ('A Woman's Voice Amidst the Conflict'). I argue that the strength of her criticism stems from her use of narrative, rather than from political-theoretical analyses. The short stories that compose the majority of her writings, presented as pieces of direct and "non-manipulated" testimony, offer a counter-point to national narratives and an attempt to *defamiliarize* the public perception of World War I.

## **Keywords**

women and WWI, pacifism, journalism, Marcelle Cagy

## Marcelle Capy and the Pacifist Female Voices Amidst the Conflict

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From the start of World War I, in France and in the rest of Europe, both authors and ordinary citizens were writing about the conflict. As the first modern war fought by soldiers who were mostly literate, it instigated an immense outpouring of written accounts. Poems, diaries, letters, pamphlets, and novels quickly became, and still remain today, an integral part of the war event itself. Although the majority of the authors, for obvious reasons, were men, women soon took part in the intellectual effort of documenting, representing, and trying to make sense of the ongoing conflict. Despite their limited presence in bibliographies and textbooks on World War I even today, as historian Dorothy Goldman has noted, women “wrote about their experiences constantly. Indeed, it would not be going too far to say that they found inspiration in the war” (96).<sup>1</sup> Being cut off from the front, the main stage of the “theater of war,” women focused on and described the “backstage” of the conflict, the home front, which oftentimes presented no less absurd and dramatic situations than the front itself, especially in the zones under military occupation. Less directly confronted by the war’s horrors as faced by the soldiers, the women on the home front described how precisely these same horrors manifested in civil society.

In France, the wartime texts of women cover a vast spectrum and range, from pro-war texts to pacifist pamphlets. Undoubtedly, the best-known woman writer of the time, Colette, wrote several texts that occupy an intermediate position on the spectrum of war literature written by women. Texts such as *Les heures longues* (‘The Long Hours’) and *Mitsou, ou comment l’esprit vient aux filles* (*Mitsou*) do not openly denounce the conflict. However, as Agnès Cardinal shows, what distinguishes them from pro-war writings is “the refusal to engage in public rhetoric of any kind [and the choice to] simply describe the absurd ways in which people behave” (Cardinal 161). Colette’s critique of the war society manifests itself in an oblique way, which also guaranteed protection from censorship.

In comparison to the number of publications by women in other belligerent nations, however, there are relatively few in France, and, as Cardinal comments, “it is astonishing that so few stories about women’s destinies in war-torn France ever reached publication” (152-53). One of the most successful texts (in terms of diffusion) on wartime France by a woman, *Fighting for France: From Dunkerque to Belpport*, was written by an American, Edith Wharton, and became a bestseller in the United States.<sup>2</sup> In France, the most common writings about the war were probably the accounts written by nurses, which often had the practical purpose of recruiting other nurses and developing greater visibility for charitable associations,

such as the Red Cross. Texts such as *Souvenirs d'une infirmière* by Julie Crémieux also shared a memorializing function in that they preserved the stories of the organizations their authors were working for.<sup>3</sup> Other accounts, more intimate and personal, sought to create memorials for the dead, or were written as therapeutic or cathartic texts, as means of coping with bereavement. Altogether, these types of publication were perceived by the government as essential to maintaining social morale, especially during the last years of the war. Women's voices, more than those of their male counterparts, were able to awaken love for the French nation, perceived as a feminine entity in the collective consciousness, and to promote "a sense of devotion and sacrifice leading to mobilization" (O'Brien 246).

However, the vast majority of women connected to war through male figures. Many women's personal accounts focused on how a woman's sacrifice was made "not directly to the country, but rather to the soldiers she was serving" (Darrow "French Volunteer Nursing" 84). Lucie Delarue-Mardrus's short novel *The Godmother* can be read as an example of this attitude of the renunciation of the woman's individual identity, as a sacrifice to the male participant in the conflict. Géo, the protagonist of the story, is a young lady who previously divorced her husband in order to live autonomously, but who becomes a godmother to fill the void that the war produced in her life. When she receives a letter from a soldier who turns out to be her ex-husband who enlisted a few months before, she repudiates her past choices and pledges to be faithful to this man. She thus accepts his understanding of what a woman should be, as expressed in the following passage:

A woman! I, a man, a simple man, a man like all the rest, demand and wish that a woman be, before all else, a woman—that is to say, my opposite. . . . While I earn outside the means to maintain the domestic establishment, I want her to be the mysterious spirit of the home, that spirit through which the miracle of daily life is accomplished—the miracle of order and direction in the household. . . . In hours of difficulty I expect from her, also, good advice, rather murmured than spoken. (Delarue-Mardrus 170)

We encounter here a penetrating presentation of one of the most important elements characterizing the understanding of gender roles during the war, which is based on the belief in the symmetrically opposite nature of men and women. We shall return to this point later on in our analysis.

Although the numbers of French women who supported the war and shared the *Union sacrée*'s rhetoric were numerous, a small minority of them embraced radically different views and positions.<sup>4</sup> In France, as in every other European nation, there were women who wrote against the conflict and the persons and institutions most responsible for its outbreak. Usually exposed to strict censorship, which at the time was particularly harsh for women, these women occupy an

overshadowed position in the intellectual landscape of the time.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I will analyze the writings of one of them, the French writer and journalist Marcelle Capy. In opposition to the mainstream feminist groups, which prioritized loyalty to the fatherland over pacifism, Capy remained faithful to her socialist and anti-war creed. Although she was little known to the wider public, her double marginality, as a feminist and as a pacifist, makes her work a singular testimony of the war years as well as a significant example of someone who rejected the general political climate of the nation. The first part of this paper briefly situates Capy in her national context, among other female activists. I then focus on Capy's work itself, studying in particular her text *Une Voix de femme dans la mêlée* ('A Woman's Voice Amidst the Conflict') and contextualizing it with contemporary publications that illustrated mainstream ideas concerning women's roles during the war.

### Women and national responses to the war in France

The decades before the beginning of World War I witnessed the growth of pacifist and feminist movements in Europe. By the end of the nineteenth century, the number of activists in women's peace societies in France swelled. The first Hague Peace Conference took place between May and June 1899 and strengthened the international dimension of feminist groups around Europe (Cooper 366). However, despite their growth and the consolidation of both national and international bonds, the outbreak of the war marked a strong setback for women's movements. Historians identify several causes explaining the division of the French feminist movement and the sudden aligning of the largest part of it to the nationalist cause.<sup>6</sup> One of the strongest reasons for this was probably the misguided belief that the defense of the fatherland would have granted political rights to women. By 1914, the largest women's organization in France was the "Conseil National des Femmes Françaises" 'National Council of French Women,' led by Sarah Monod and Julie Siegfried. Following the same path as the internationalist socialist movement, international religious groups, and international associations of scientists, the CNFF also retrenched itself and aligned with the government's position. When, in 1915, Aletta Jacobs and Jane Addams convened an International Women's Congress, which opened on April 28 at The Hague, French feminists refused to send a delegation (Accampo 181).

In a context marked by overwhelming support for the war and rampant nationalism, taking a stand against the conflict proved extremely challenging. Pacifism in France became "inescapably connected to 'defeatism'" (Shearer 89),<sup>7</sup> and the groups composed by the few feminists who remained committed pacifists (such as Jeanne Mélin, Madeleine Pelletier, and Louise Saumoneau) had a difficult time. They were "censored, sidelined and in some cases attacked in the pages of the feminist press" (Fell 54). Holding pacifist positions also became increasingly

dangerous, especially after November 1917, when Clemenceau became prime minister. Anyone who supported peace would be considered a spy and put on trial, which happened to H el ene Brion, whose trial in 1918 captured the public’s attention. Cappy was close to the radical and pacifist groups of women who supported Brion during her trial, and she also had connections to the feminist journalist Louise Bodin, who after the war wrote for the journal *La Vague* (‘The Wave’) which was directed by Cappy herself.<sup>8</sup> Born in 1891 in Normandy, Cappy moved to Toulouse for her studies. It was there that she met the socialist leader Jean Jaur es during one of his public speeches, an encounter that would indelibly mark the trajectory of her life. In the years before the war, she became part of a series of socialist and feminist activist networks. One of them, the “Comit e international des Femmes pour la Paix Permanente” ‘Women’s International Committee for Permanent Peace,’ was an almost clandestine group launched by Gabrielle Duch ene in 1915.<sup>9</sup>

Mentored by the well-established feminist journalist S everine (also a co-founder of the League of Human Rights), Cappy started to work as a journalist well before the war.<sup>10</sup> As a young aspiring writer, journalism appeared to her both as a necessary choice for sustaining herself and as an opportunity to establish links in French literary circles. Cappy’s personal development in this sector influenced her writings on the war in different ways, both stylistically and ethically. The type of journalism practiced by S everine is one deeply attached to the observation of reality. The principle defining it is illustrated in the following sentence: “I take notes. And I say what I have seen” (qtd. in Robert 148). It is from S everine that Cappy took up the habit of working in the places she wanted to document for her reporting.<sup>11</sup> Already before the war, when she was covering the condition of the female proletariat, Cappy took a job at a Parisian factory to report on the everyday life of working women.

### A Woman’s Voice Amidst the Conflict

*Une Voix de femme dans la m el e* is a collection of articles, some of which (the less polemical ones, those that could escape censorship) had been previously published in journals. In 1916, Cappy attempted to publish all her wartime articles as a book, but the French censorship board prevented her. Eventually, she could publish the collection as she originally envisioned it, but only twenty years later in 1936. In the preface to that edition, Cappy outlines the conflict she encountered with the censorship board. In justifying its prohibition, the censor wrote that each part of this book was a “drop of poison” (Cappy 11):

Si ce livre avait  et e  ecrit par un homme, je vous accorderais l’autorisation car, cela prendrait une allure politique et l’on sait bien qu’en politique tout

est relatif, et qu'il faut laisser quelques soupapes d'échappement afin de maintenir l'ensemble dans une bonne atmosphère. Mais . . . ce livre est écrit par une femme, c'est là le danger. Si nous laissons parler les femmes, où irons-nous? Et si nous laissons parler le cœur, où ira le moral des troupes? (Capy 12)

Had this book been written by a man, I would have authorized it. It would have taken on a political air, and everyone knows that in politics everything is relative and that one needs some criticism in order to maintain a good debate. But . . . this book is written by a woman, this is the danger. If we allow women to speak, where will we end up? And if we let the heart speak, where will the troops' morale end up?<sup>12</sup>

If wartime society could tolerate separate “drops” of these pacifist writings, what would be the effect of an entire “flacon de poison” (Capy 11) ‘flask of poison’? The censor’s answer makes evident the power of Capy’s text during the war years. As Capy herself defines it, her book was “le premier livre de compassion, de protestation et de bon sens écrit par une femme pendant la guerre” (Capy 9) ‘the first book written by a woman during the war expressing compassion, protestation, and wisdom.’ Capy’s first concern while writing was to bring to light the exact extent of the human cost of the war. Her book addresses a large number of topics, such as women’s work, wartime sacrifice, and the role of colonial troops, and it questions idealized representations as well as standardized terms and concepts used as pro-war propaganda. Most of the issues that she treated were overlooked by the mainstream newspapers, which makes her text an invaluable historical document.

The retrospective framework offered to the reader by the 1936 preface, which is followed by a second preface by Romain Rolland, reinforces another important dimension of Capy’s book. In her preface, she explains that she had initially renounced publishing *Une Voix de femme*, but that she felt compelled to change her decision because of the rise of Nazism and the threat of a second World War: “Je reprends aujourd’hui [le projet de publication] parce que ‘tout cela’ recommence. Nous voyons revenir ce que nous avons maudit: cet esprit de guerre fait de peur, d’avidité, de fanatisme, de verbalisme forcené, d’hypocrisie solennelle” (Capy 10) ‘I return today [to my publication project] because “all this” is about to start again. We see coming back all that we once repudiated: a wartime spirit based on fear, greed, fanaticism, extremist verbalism, and solemn hypocrisy.’ Both in 1916 and in 1936, Capy’s first purpose in making public *Une Voix de femme* was not merely to remember or to express her personal reaction to the war and her experience. Rather, she conceived writing as an attempt to change the course of social and political events. Because of its political intentions, her text belongs to the canon of engaged pacifist works that, from Henri Barbusse to Jean Giono, took

a clear stand against the war.<sup>13</sup> The title's expression of affiliation with Romain Rolland's book *Au-dessus de la mêlée* (*Above the conflict*) should be read not simply as an homage; it also points to this active goal that both writers share. In a way, Capy answered the call Rolland made to intellectuals, which was to prepare the ground, through monitoring and documenting, for the aftermath of the war and the reconstruction of the Europe that would come once the war had ended (Rolland 51-52).

Those who fight, those who cry, and those who manipulate their stories

Each of the five parts that compose *Une Voix de femme* follows a similar pattern: they start by stating the prevailing and commonly accepted view of a specific topic and continue by countering it through a number of what we could call "exemplary" stories. One by one, pro-war representations are dismantled by counter-narratives. By focusing on three sections of the book, my analysis aims at highlighting Capy's positions concerning gender relationships and propaganda messages, as well as the strategies she uses to articulate them.

The first part of the book, entitled "Ceux qui se battent" 'Those Who Fight,' is dedicated to the male experience of the war. As in other pacifist accounts, Capy attacks the rhetoric of heroism and the ways in which soldiers are depicted in the press. Her first target is the myth of the "poilu" (the French equivalent of the English *Tommy*), which dominated propaganda discourse on war and was also a popular term among pacifists. This genre, she writes,

[qui a été] créé par des pédants ou par des pratiques profiteurs, se donne pour raison majeure d'exalter le courage, l'héroïsme des soldats et de stigmatiser l'adversaire. Or, il se trouve que le genre "poilu" . . . va tout à l'encontre du but qu'il s'était proposé. Il dit vouloir glorifier les soldats, et il les montre sous un jour absolument faux. Il dit vouloir juger l'ennemi, et il l'insulte. . . . En fin de compte, le "poilu" qu'on nous représente est un sauvage et un inconscient, un être tout haine (sic), hors nature. Est-ce la vérité ? Non. (Capy 28)

[which was] created by pedantic intellectuals and practical profiteers with the primary goal of exalting soldiers' courage and heroism while stigmatizing the enemy. Yet, we find that the "poilu" genre . . . works completely against its original purpose. It declares its intention to glorify the soldiers, and instead it shows them in a totally false light. It claims to want to judge the enemy, and instead it insults him. . . . Ultimately, the "poilu" that has been presented to us is savage and reckless, a being able only to hate, an unnatural monster. Is this the truth? No.

Capy openly attacks the representation of the “poilu” because, instead of providing a lens through which the reality can be read, it limits our understanding of the complex dynamics of war. As a complement to the demonization of the enemy, the “poilu” myth provides a simplistic portrait of French soldiers as well, depicting them as fearless monsters-heroes. However, besides the general Manichean view of society from which this myth stems, and which Capy criticizes, a second dimension, less evident, emerges throughout Capy’s analysis. By presenting the soldiers as extra-ordinary beings, and by insisting on their specific “male” attributes, the “poilu” indirectly points to its female stereotypical counterparts, the “weeping woman” who remains at home—an opposition that is also mirrored in the chapters’ titles. In other words, Capy’s text suggests that the “poilu” transposes the oppositional logic, as visible in the dichotomy between good and evil, to the relationship between men and women. In doing so, this myth reinforces the normative understanding of gender of the time, which was structured on the belief in the irreconcilability of the differences between the two sexes. Although indirectly, in these pages Capy points to the mental polarization between sexes, touching upon a crucial element structuring French society at war. As Margaret Darrow shows, this oppositional schema was key because it translated itself into space, as the initial French policy was to “clear the war zone of women and to prohibit them, even nurses, from visiting it” (Darrow “French Volunteer Nursing” 81). In a way, the exaltation of the extraordinary qualities of the male soldiers is needed to justify the fact that, as Darrow puts it, the war had “to occur in a zone of pure masculinity,” and, as a consequence, that “a woman’s only connection to war was, [and should be], through her “hero” . . . ; he was for the *Patrie* only, and she was for *Patrie* in him” (Darrow *French Women* 21).

It should be mentioned that, at least from one point of view, Capy’s conception of women falls into this rhetoric of radical difference between genders based on their different biological functions. Her understanding of motherhood, indeed, seems to correspond to the common view (shared by other feminists as well), which conceives of women as almost mythical peace builders, whose peacefulness is a natural consequence of childbearing. Women are “le vase où la vie s’élabore dans la souffrance . . . , c’est pour cela . . . que leur cœur est en perpétuelle révolte contre tout ce qui détruit leur œuvre, tout de qui crée de la mort” (Capy 48) ‘the sludge where life begins amidst pain . . . , that’s why . . . the women’s hearts are constantly revolting against everything that destroys their work, everything that creates death.’ However, despite her moderate position concerning motherhood, her depiction of women and men in conflict destabilizes the boundaries between their two separate worlds. Gender categories do not appear as transparent in her text; rather, they are presented as social constructs. Contrasting the *poilu* myth, the anecdotes Capy reports demonstrate solidarity between soldiers,

including between French and Germans soldiers, in an attempt to re-humanize and de-militarize masculinity. The real soldiers “ne sont point des êtres extraordinaires, détachés de tous les biens de ce monde, impassibles, sans jugement et sans cœur. Au contraire, le péril a affiné leur sensibilité et ils sont un peu comme ces malades qui ont besoin que de tendres soins les entourent” (Capy 26) ‘are not at all extraordinary beings, detached from our world, unperturbed, without judgement, without heart. Quite to the contrary, danger has sharpened their sensibility and they are now similar to those ill persons in need of tender care.’ By presenting care and affection not only as legitimate needs, but also as soldiers’ primary needs, Capy challenges stereotyped gender categories. Men are allowed to cry, to show their suffering, to refuse the war, to be empathic with the suffering of their spouse (or other female relations) at home.

The stories collected in this book consequently also challenge the idea that soldiers’ experiences are incommunicable and that civilians at large will never be able to understand them. This incommunicability, so often denounced in soldiers’ accounts of the time, appears here rather to be a result of military rules and of the rigidity of the censorship system. The chapter dedicated to the soldiers begins with a subtle criticism of the strict separation between the front and the rest of society. Capy condemns the lack of awareness and sensibility of society for enabling this separation. “Hélas! on est arrivé à mépriser la solidarité humaine. On est arrivé à vouloir isoler ceux que la guerre frappe” (Capy 23) ‘Alas! We ended up disdaining human solidarity. We ended up desiring to isolate those whom the war strikes.’ What she wants the soldiers to know is, on the contrary, that “en France, il y a des cœurs qui souffrent de leur peine, qui savent le prix de leur sacrifice, qui sont l’écho de leurs sanglots” (Capy 26) ‘in France there are hearts who suffer for their pain, who know the price of their sacrifice, who are the echo of their sobs.’

The section entitled “Ceux qui pleurent” ‘Those Who Cry,’ focuses on this part of the population, those who stayed at home, and broadly on the non-combatants’ representation of the traumas caused by the conflict. The variety of the situations Capy deals with broadens the portrayal of women’s experiences of the war years, which was often limited to the figures and functions of the godmother and the nurse. She documents situations of unemployment, the awful conditions of women working in factories and in other sectors, from agriculture to the press, and discusses the question of refugees.

The same year in which Capy’s censored *Une Voix de femme* came out, two other books about women and war were published or republished: *Voix de femmes* (‘Women’s Voices’) by Ernest Gaubert (first edition in 1914), and *Les jeunes filles françaises et la guerre* (‘Young French Ladies and the War’) by Jules Combarieu. It is worth briefly presenting their positions. Both of these books acknowledge the increasing engagement of women in society. They do it, however, in order to reinforce the role of femininity and of motherhood as functions that serve the war

effort. Gaubert's short text, *Voix de femmes*, emphasizes the role of Spartan motherhood by presenting a collection of portraits of ultra-patriotic women. Some of them are ready to sacrifice all their sons to the fatherland while others ask for revenge in the name of "justice." Gaubert recounts a conversation with a young girl he meets at a factory: "—Est-ce que vous ne pourriez pas me faire prendre dans une fabrique d'obus?—Pourquoi donc, vous êtes bien ici.—C'est que les Boches m'ont tué mon homme; je me vengerai mieux, il me semble, en faisant des obus" (59) '—Could you get me transferred to a munitions factory?—Why, aren't you fine here?—The Germans killed my man and I think I would avenge him better by producing shells.' Another young widow, when hearing someone talking about peace, reacts: "La paix, maintenant! non, ce n'est pas pour rien que mon Jacques a été tué à Guise. Faut aller chez eux!" (35) 'Peace, now? No, my Jacques wasn't killed for nothing at Guise. We have to go get them!'

Combarieu's *Les jeunes filles françaises et la guerre* is an account presenting the heroism and the goodwill of French girls, from nursery school to high school and beyond, such as at the École Normale Supérieure de Sèvres. It consists of a collection of oral testimonies and letters from students, professors, godmothers, and nurses, accompanied by reflections and comments by the author. The war has fully revealed women's and girls' capacities and has made their active role in society essential. Therefore, Combarieu demands the acknowledgement of a series of rights for women and, in particular, advocates for progress in women's education. There are, however, limits to his program, which are visible between the lines and which are made explicit by Jacques Flach in the introduction to the book. After having presented a short historical perspective on the topic of women's participation in public life, Flach recognizes that this process was drastically accelerated by the outbreak of the war. At the same time, the war made feminist demands obsolete. Since the beginning of the conflict,

la question féministe a changé totalement d'aspect. . . . Il n'y a plus à parler de revendications de droits par la femme, de réforme de sa condition dans son intérêt propre, mais d'utilisation des forces dont elle est dépositaire ou détentrice, de réforme de sa condition dans l'intérêt de la société tout entière. (Flach XIII)

the feminist question has totally changed form. . . . It is no longer necessary to make a claim for women's rights, or to demand a reform of their condition in the name of women's own interests. Rather, we should now talk about the ways in which women's strengths might be used and about reforming their condition in the name of the interests of the society as a whole.

Women's struggles and demands, according to him, must dissipate when facing a war, when feminist discourse is swallowed up in patriotic fervor. What Gaubert's and Combarieu's books have in common is the recruitment of women's strength to the service of the patriotic cause. Their authors restore French women's honor and are willing to recognize their competencies, as long as they fit into the purposes of the patriarchal and militaristic society of the time.

It is precisely against what has been called the "mobilization of femininity,"<sup>14</sup> as exemplified by the two aforementioned books and their rhetoric, that *Une Voix de femme* takes position. Capy refuses praise from pro-war media and intellectuals who suddenly discovered the "heroism" of the French working women and used this rhetoric essentially to hide their miserable working conditions. In the section entitled "Le proletariat féminin" 'The female proletariat,' she begins by recalling how newspapers were praising women for their work:

Les hommes sont partis en masse et cependant les récoltes ont été ramassées, les terres labourées, les administrations fonctionnent, les tramways marchent, le métro n'est pas interrompu. Tout va. C'est un "miracle" et c'est à la femme française qu'on le doit, comme dit M. Emile Bergerat.<sup>15</sup> (62)

Men left *en masse*. Nevertheless, the crops were harvested and the fields ploughed. The bureaucracy functions, tramways run, and the metro continues without interruption. Everything is fine. It is a "miracle," and French women should get credit for it, as M. Emile Bergerat says.

Using indirect speech, Capy, in a first moment, seems to adopt the perspective of the journalist, but she then operates an abrupt shift, revealing her true opinion.

Que de misère il couvre ce beau mot d'héroïsme, et que sont méprisables ceux qui viennent souffleter les femmes avec des lambeaux d'appareils cornéliens! Si essuyant leurs larmes, elles sont allées prendre les places vidées par la mobilisation, c'est aussi parce qu'il leur fallait manger. Comment a été accueilli cet élan d'héroïsme, comme ils disent; cette poussée de famine dirions-nous? Par l'exploitation la plus grande, le marchandage le plus éhonté que l'on ait jamais vu [sic]. (62)

How much misery is obscured by this lovely word "heroism," and how contemptible are those who praise as heroic the suffering of women while backhanding them with tattered, theatrical pomposity! If, wiping their tears, these women go out and occupy public squares emptied by the mobilizations of war, it is because of their hunger. Yet, how was this burst

of heroism welcomed, so to speak? This thrust of famine, we might rightly say? By even greater exploitation, by the most shameless horse-trading ever seen.

Her collection of texts was perceived as a threat to national security, not only because it was written by a woman, but also because of the portraits of women that Capy made. Her purpose is, indeed, not simply a destructive and critical one. While demolishing the myth of the “poilu,” the primary and official narrative framework through which the war was recounted, she provides alternative narratives in which women, especially from popular classes, not only actively endure the war, but also resist its madness. The sentence that closes the book, coming after a long paragraph on the value and importance of reading, is a call to react reasonably: “Pendant que la bestialité s’est réveillée hurlante dans la chair de tant d’Européens qui se croyaient civilisés, nous, les femmes, instruisons-nous. Que toute cette horreur qui nous fait souffrir nous donne le dégoût de la brutalité” (183) ‘While howling bestiality was awakened in the flesh of so many Europeans who thought of themselves as civilized, we, women, must get informed and gain an education. May all this horror, which is making us suffer so much, give us disgust for brutality.’ Documenting all the specific ways in which the war affected women and their activities, Capy ultimately also recognizes their specific martyrdom and depicts them as autonomous heroes whose efforts need to be acknowledged independently from the contributions they made to the struggles of their male counterparts.

In the most anti-nationalistic chapter of the entire book, entitled “Les grotesques,” Capy denounces the general atmosphere of public ignorance. She presents the war machine as a system built on lies, in which “Il est défendu de voir les faits dans leur réalité” (24) ‘It is forbidden to see facts as they are.’ The crisis of language, the difficulty that characterizes the attempts to talk about the conflict by the people that took part in it, is exacerbated by the mass of lies and confusion created by misleading journalistic rhetoric. Capy accuses all the “philosophes de l’arrière” (93) ‘philosophers remaining behind the lines,’ who “voient la tuerie de leur bureau et s’époumonnent à chanter ses bienfaits” (68) ‘watch the butchery from their offices and run out of breath while singing of its benefits,’ of using a language imbued with idealism. To their abstract reasoning, which is used to hide the misery of everyday life, both of civilians and of soldiers, she opposes a resolute, realistic, and “materialistic” perspective, which regards life as the “bien suprême” ‘supreme good’:

Nos morts, “quelques milliers de tonnes de substance organisée,” auraient pu encore vivre quelque cinquante ans si la guerre n’était intervenue. Bah! cinquante ans, est-ce que cela compte dans l’infini? Oui, pour nous qui

sommes de simples humains et ne voulons à aucun prix nous lancer dans les nuées métaphysiques, cela compte. . . . Oui, une heure, une minute d'une existence quelconque, cela compte. (Capy 93)

Our dead, "some thousand tons of organized material," could have lived fifty years more if the war didn't take place. Bah! fifty years, what does this count after all? And yet, for us who are simple humans and don't want, no matter what, to lose ourselves into the metaphysical clouds, this counts. . . . Yes, one hour, one minute of any ordinary existence, this counts.

Without forgetting any of the corrupted layers of French society, composed as they are of people promoting the war without risking their lives, Capy unveils the network of alliances linking together the press, those working in the military, political parties (socialists included), and religious authorities.

### Empathic journalism

To each falsehood told on a given topic by journals and official accounts, Capy wrote a corresponding short story to offer a different perspective. "Aimez-vous les anecdotes?" (29) 'Do you like anecdotes?,' "Voulez-vous encore une histoire?" (30) 'Do you want to hear another story?': these and other similar questions open the narration, providing the reader with "facts" offered almost without commentary, as they are sufficient by themselves. These anecdotes allow Capy to take the pulse of society, following the belief that "c'est par les petits côtés de la vie que l'on juge les hommes" (31) 'It is through the small things in life that one can judge people.'

Talking about the war without a strong narrative framework, and mainly through images and short stories, is not uncommon. Quite the contrary, fragmentation characterizes numerous accounts of the Great War and seems to provide the most accurate way to depict witnesses' experiences.<sup>16</sup> This format seems also to facilitate Capy's quest for documentary accuracy, which became a necessary feature of any valid war account, especially after the publication of Jean Norton Cru's *Témoins* ('Witnesses') in 1929. Capy's text can be seen as a female counterpart to the faithful testimony of many soldiers. In a way, it can be said that Capy's text extends the domain of *témoignage* 'testimony' to the home front and responds to its same ethical standards of veracity.

Capy's formation as a reporter is at the origin of the imperative of truth informing her text. When exploring the elements that in the national context affected her writing, it is worth mentioning that this attitude was shared by several female journalists from the beginning of the twentieth century. We think, in particular, of *La Fronde* ('The Fronde'), the women-only journal founded by

Marguerite Durand in 1897, which was obliged to stop its publications only a few months after the beginning of the war.<sup>17</sup> The editorial line of the journal draws from the tradition of realistic literature combined with “petit reportage qui se fait dans la rue, au contact des événements” (Thérenty 119) ‘reporting made in the streets, in contact with events.’ Séverine, probably the most famous contributor to *La Fronde*, and the only woman recognized at the rank of *grand reporter* ‘senior reporter’ openly adopted the “posture” of a witness, claiming to talk about things not as a *rhéteur* ‘rhetorician’ but as a *témoin* ‘witness.’<sup>18</sup> This journal probably represented another crucial model for Cappy, specific to her experience and providing a pattern for talking about the home front during the war. In fact, along with her allegiance to truth, Cappy also shares with the *frondeuses* (the journalists writing for *La Fronde*) a peculiar writing style (Thérenty 118). Durand’s journal holds a singular position in the history of French journalism because it broke with the dominant vision of the reporting of the time. As a predominantly male activity, this genre had to maintain an objective perspective, giving an account of facts and avoiding the provocation of any empathic reactions in the reader. “Serious and scientific” were the two adjectives that characterized the good reporter of the time. Since the majority of the journalists of *La Fronde* were also fiction writers, they embodied instead an “artistic dimension” of journalism, which led them to practice a different version of reporting (Lévêque 47). Their approach to this genre was based on a form of empathic journalism, implicating the reader in an emotional understanding of the author’s descriptions. This same attempt is visible in Cappy’s *Une Voix de femme*, which does not respect the objectivity that, according to Cru, is supposed to guarantee the transmission of truth. The emotional involvement of the reader, and not only his/her intellectual participation, is actually considered a necessary element granting access to a truthful depiction of wartime society. The following passage gives a sense of this dimension of Cappy’s text:

Et voici que passe, maigre et fruste dans sa capote de simple soldat, un de ces éclopés venus reprendre souffle à l’air natal. Il porte un bras en écharpe et marche, grave, au milieu de la rue. Au passage, des officiers le saluent. Les mots s’arrêtent sur les lèvres. Un frisson court dans la foule parée. Car ce blessé aux joues creuses, c’est le rappel à la réalité, c’est le reproche vivant, c’est le spectre apparu au banquet et glaçant les convives. (150)

And here he comes, lean and rough in his common soldier’s greatcoat, one of these crippled men who regained breath in the native air. He has one arm in a sling and walks, serious, in the middle of the street. When some officials cross his path, they salute him. Words stop on the lips. A shiver runs through the crowd. Because this wounded man with hollow cheeks reminds them of

reality, he is the living reproach, the phantom appearing at dinner and turning the guests to ice.

The chills provoked in the people by the sight of the crippled soldier are the same that Capy's own writing attempts to provoke in her reader. In contrast to the illusions that the journals and propaganda media use to manipulate the public, using a rhetoric that she compares to the "décors de carton doré" 'sets made of golden paper,' Capy presents facts—the life that "takes you back": "On peut écouter un moment les tirades d'un acteur, mais la vie vous reprend, et devant elle les mots sonores de l'histrion comptent bien peu" (25) 'One can listen for a moment to an actor's tirades, but life takes you back, and before it, the showmen's loud words are worth little.' Thus, in Capy's view, empathy does not contradict reporting; on the contrary, it serves as a way to awaken the reader's consciousness. Simultaneously, it functions as a "call to reality." Literary techniques, such as the use of exclamation, of both oral and colloquial language, as well as the insertion of lyric passages (interludes in which space is given to the contemplation of the landscape), also have this function. Capy's stories often have abrupt and unexpected endings, which are also meant to have a shocking effect. For example, in "Simple Men," Capy discusses those who believe uncritically in government propaganda, have little imagination, and present the fact that the journal they read "said" something as enough proof to believe it. At the end of this portrait, we see these same people who think of themselves as being fully aware of the conflict and certain of their patriotic sentiments "tombe[r] assommés, comme des bœufs sous le maillet du tueur" (139) 'fall stupefied, similar to oxen falling under the mallet of the killer,' when they learn that one of their loved ones has perished.

As a solution to the question of how to write about the conflict, Capy thus mobilizes the feminine *frondeuse* tradition of reportage. The observations that Thérénty makes about Séverine are equally valid for her. Both of these two writers embody the figure of a reporter "qui ne laisse jamais oublier que son corps exposé est un corps de femme toujours prêt à se transformer en un corps compatissant, larmoyant autour d'une écriture de la participation qui désire faire ressentir au lecteur l'émotion" (119) 'who never lets the reader forget that her exposed body is a female body, always ready to become compassionate, through a writing that urges the reader to feel the emotion.' By collecting women's and civilians' memories, their letters and everyday dramatic experiences, Capy becomes the custodian of stories gathered together in a sort of "collective" journal underlining the absurdity of the war. Her text, as well as the texts composing the weekly column she will keep writing after the war in *La Vague*,<sup>19</sup> have both a deeply intimate and public dimension. They could be defined as a sort of "journal extime" 'un-private diary' (Tournier 9) *avant la lettre*, in which collective destinies are told through a subjective and affecting voice.

The strength of Capy's criticism stems from her use of narrative rather than from politico-theoretical discussion. Her reporting edges toward storytelling, which configures itself as a tactical practice in the sense that de Certeau gives to this adjective. In opposition to strategy, defined as the operation realized by a subject of a will and power in the position of establishing the rules of a game, instead, a tactic "insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety" (de Certeau XIX). A tactic is the resource of subjects playing at the margins of a political discourse, a position Capy shares, both as a woman and a pacifist. Women, as subjects deprived of political and civil rights, were unable to fully appropriate political discourse and to gain an authoritative voice in the public arena. We can read storytelling as a way to bypass this limited agency (which is further limited by censorship) and to indirectly tackle political issues. As in the case of the "poilu myth" and of the depiction of working women, Capy takes mainstream representations and manipulates them, transforming them, often through irony and sarcasm, into something that it is ultimately their opposite. In the section "Propos et dialogues" 'Remarks and dialogues,' she presents a series of portraits of corrupted men that profit at the expense of other people. In one of them, we encounter the "maître," a Catholic intellectual who preaches against violence in the name of God while hypocritically supporting the war (121). Again, it is not through an open accusation that Capy criticizes his opportunism and dishonesty, but rather through the following image, evoking the exemplary narrations of Christ's martyrdom along with Tartuffe's hypocrisy: "On sert le thé. Et le Maître, pour mortifier son corps et laver son âme, avale une assiette de petits fours frais. Ponce-Pilate se lavait les mains. Tartufe se remplit la panse. Et le Christ pleure par les mille et milles plaies qui saignent sur les champs de bataille" (121) 'The tea is served. The Master, to mortify his flesh and purify his soul, eats a full plate of *petits fours*. Pontius Pilate washed his hands. Tartuffe filled his belly. And Christ weeps because of the thousand wounds bleeding on the battle fields.'

If we can understand World War I as the result of a conflict between different narrations that shaped both its public understanding and its memory, Capy takes part in this fight by inscribing women's voices and perspectives in national and collective war narration. In the introduction to her book *A French Woman's Notes on the War*, the traditionalist writer Claire de Pratz, referring to those who wrote during the war years, writes: "Even though the *aperçu* of each of us may be too limited to admit of a general survey, . . . it is the total sum of our present experiences, sufferings, and fluctuating hopes which will constitute our contribution to the history of modern mankind" (IX). Each single text written by a civilian or a soldier and reporting on any aspect of World War I plays an indispensable role in understanding this historical period. Marcelle Capy's account, a testimony that did not find resonance in its time, belongs even more so to the

group of texts that will enable us to gain a fuller understanding of wartime French society.

#### Notes

1. However, differently from France, in the Anglophone context women writers' place during WWI is more invisible, especially in the field of history. See, for instance, Cardinal et al., particularly the rich bibliography on the topic at the end.
2. The main reason for its success is evidently its patriotic message. For her support of the war effort, Wharton, who had moved to France permanently in 1912, was decorated by the French President with the Legion of Honour.
3. Crémieux was part of the Red Cross. Her text was published in Paris in 1918 by F. Rouff. On the writings of nurses see Fell and Hallett.
4. The 'Sacred Union' was the name given to the political agreement made in the name of patriotism, in which parties of all colors decided not to oppose the government and its engagement in the war against Germany.
5. See Navet-Bouron.
6. See, for instance, Fell "French Women Do Not Wish to Talk about Peace."
7. On the topic of defeatism, see also Slater.
8. Capy visits Brion in the Saint Lazare jail, and this visit becomes the occasion to write a short piece reporting on the conditions of the female prisoners, which she published in her rubric in *La Vague*, on March 21, 1919.
9. See Bette.
10. For a detailed reconstruction of her career as a journalist, see Stewart. She collaborated with such newspapers as *La Voix des femmes*, *L'Oeuvre*, *La Vague*.
11. For more details on her work as a reporter, see Stewart.
12. All the translations from *Une Voix de femme dans la mêlée* are mine.

13. On the pacifist literature on WWI see Rasson.
14. See Darrow, *French Women and the First World War*.
15. Emile Bergerat was a journalist working for *Le Figaro*.
16. We can think of Barbusse's *Under Fire*, Blaise Cendrars's *The Bloody Hand*, and Gaubert's *Women's Voices*.
17. More details on the demise of this journal is recounted by Accampo: "Within two weeks after its outbreak . . . the police had already begun to crack down on *La Fronde*. Marguerite Durand had stated in her newspaper that German soldiers had no "monopoly on cruelty," and early in September, she wrote an editorial calling for the peace. The police even forbade Durand's ironic observation that the first victim of shells launched on Paris had been a woman. Indeed, they found even the title of her newspaper seditious, and Durand stopped its publications that same month" (176).
18. I refer here to the way in which the term "posture" is used by the scholar Jérôme Meizoz, namely as a dynamic self-representative frame, within which the work of a writer should be understood.
19. In 1918 Capy became the director of *La Vague*, a journal she founded with her second husband Pierre Brizon and where she wrote a weekly column entitled "Feminine Wave."

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