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## *L'élégance du hérisson*

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«Être maire de Paris, c'est aimer les concierges et les stars, parce que les concierges sont les stars de notre quotidien!» (Greco). Before Anne Hidalgo aligned the commonplace French apartment caretaker with celebrated icons of the stage and screen during her 2014 Paris mayoral campaign, the Parisian concierge had never stood so high upon a pedestal. The closest the French concierge had come to such limelight was perhaps the fictionalized representation of the working-class figure in Muriel Barbery's 2006 novel, *L'élégance du hérisson*.<sup>1</sup> The newspaper *Libération* described Barbery's novel as France's "surprise bestseller of the year" (Lançon) with 346,000 copies sold in less than a year after its release. Further attesting to its popularity, the novel was promptly adapted for the big screen by Mona Achache as *Le Hérisson* in 2009. It has since experienced international acclaim with over 6,000,000 copies sold worldwide (Lichfield) and has established its academic cachet in the United States and Canada, turning up as required reading on various syllabi in a myriad of disciplines from (the obvious) French literature and culture courses to (somewhat more surprising) philosophy and English grammar courses.<sup>2</sup>

Barbery's novel alternates between the first-person narration of 54-year-old concierge, Renée Michel, and that of suicidal, 12-year-old, Paloma Josse; both of whom reside in a luxury Parisian apartment building. Although worthy of attention, Paloma's narration will not be examined in the current article in order to devote attention to the novel's focus on a rarely depicted (and perhaps disappearing) figure in French literature—the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Parisian concierge. For all intents and purposes, Renée appears to be a (stereo-)typical concierge—she cleans the common areas, delivers mail and leaves her TV on incessantly. However, diverging from the norm within the walls of her humble apartment, she breaks character and spends her free time studying a variety of traditionally highbrow fields, from philosophy to modern art.

How, then, has a novel that features as one of its main characters a concierge with hidden uncharacteristically intellectual interests become an international success? Nelly Kapriélian explores why Barbery's exceedingly erudite novel became a hit and concludes that readers are drawn to characters who defy convention and appearances: "C'est dans le thème de la clandestinité ... comment un être *en apparence* fade est en fait autre chose que ce que l'on croit. Ils s'adressent à cette part narcissique en nous tous, à cette sensation de ne pas être compris à sa juste valeur, pas reconnu pour ce qu'on est vraiment" (my emphasis, 71). In other words, what attracts readers to Barbery's novel is not the rarely explored "concierge as main character" trope per se but the fact that the main character deftly plays the role of a concierge while exploring intellectual pursuits that are considered incongruous with her lot in life.

<sup>1</sup> Muriel Barbery (born in 1969 in Casablanca, Morocco) worked as a philosophy professor at both the secondary and university levels and is the author of three novels.

<sup>2</sup> Syllabi featuring Barbery's novel can be found on the websites of, among others, Carleton College (Ottawa, Canada), Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, MD, USA), Cameron University (Lawton, OK, USA), University of Florida (Gainesville, FL, USA), and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (USA).

As narrative agent of the novel—presumably the first French fictional concierge character to narrate her own story—Renée employs a theatrical lexicon in order to describe her clandestine autodidact identity. Both explicitly and implicitly on several occasions, she speaks of her “role” and the costume she dons in order to “play the part” of an uneducated Parisian concierge. While, as demonstrated above, real-life political figure Hidalgo inextricably links concierges to theatrical stars in order to legitimize their work (cleaning, distributing mail, surveilling the entry, etc.) and elevate their standing in modern Parisian society, fictional concierge Renée speaks in theatrical terms as a means to downplay her role as concierge and simultaneously hide the intellectual elevation that surpasses her socio-economic rung in modern Paris. In other words, Renée is well aware of the concierge’s un-star like status in French society and further recognizes the inherent limits of melding two conventionally incompatible identities—female concierge and erudite philosopher. In fact, according to Kaprièlian, it is precisely the depiction of a character’s *inability* to move up the social hierarchy that has made the novel a best-seller: “C’est un [...] miroir de cette ‘solitude’ contemporaine dans laquelle chacun semble se sentir coincé, plus, peut-être, qu’on ne le croit” (71). Seen in this light, the novel’s popularity has less to do with Renée’s idiosyncratic pastimes and more to do with her need to hide her intellectual aspirations. Barbery’s novel thus presents a reflection on and questioning of modern French society’s refusal to break free from a tradition of socioeconomic norms and hierarchy that prevent individuals from changing / challenging their social status.<sup>3</sup> In order to understand Renée’s ascribed place in French society and literature (and her covert defiance of it), it will be imperative to summarize the history of the concierge figure—both in and out of literature—after which, a textual analysis of Barbery’s novel will reveal to what extent Renée’s narration, replete with theatrical terms, sets the stage, so to speak, for a (re)examination of the often stereotypical image of the French female concierge and the role that she has been cast to play.

According to Jean-Louis Deaucourt, the concierge’s existence is inherently theatrical because she inhabits and works in a “space both closed and open at the same time, eminently *theatrical*... propitious for exchanges, for comings and goings” (my emphasis, quoted in Marcus 42). At the crossroads of public and private French urban life, she is a gatekeeper who, until 1957, would decide whether or not to *tirer le cordon* for residents wishing to enter the building at night. She can allow or block passage, please or perturb, help or hinder those who reside in her building. She thus occupies a simultaneously powerful yet subordinate position in French society—inferior both physically as resident of her ground-floor loge and socioeconomically as a member of the working class, yet influential in terms of her powers of observation (both visual and auditory) within the walls of the apartment building.

3 A reader of an earlier draft of this article astutely pointed out the similarities between Renée’s story and the plotlines of nineteenth-century popular French catholic morality novels that wished to dissuade readers from stepping outside of their prescribed gender / socioeconomic roles. Attempting to return to the aristocratic order of the *Ancien Régime*, nineteenth-century popular literature repeatedly reminded readers of the dangers of not respecting their lot in life: “Ponctuellement touchés par le mauvais sort, les héros bien nés regagnent toujours leur richesse originelle. À l’inverse, les paysans et employés connaissant une ascension passagère descendent dans l’échelle sociale aussi vite qu’ils sont montés » (Artiaga 137). Undoubtedly, a future study of the similarities between popular nineteenth-century French fiction and Barbery’s twenty-first-century novel could prove fruitful given the novel’s ending that suggests that Renée is punished for stepping outside her concierge *loge* and ascribed social class.

Etymologically, the moniker “concierge” underlines the figure’s subservient role with its roots in the term “concergius” or “serviteur” dating from the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and formed from the Latin “cum,” or “with,” and “servus,” or “slave” (Sudant and Stébé 21). Concurrently, from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, “Le Palais de la cité,” or the medieval royal palace, had at its disposal a “Conciergerie” headed by “Le Compte des cierges”—a group in charge of security whose name was derived from their use of candles (“cierges”) at night as part of their services (Sudant and Stébé 21).<sup>4</sup> According to M. Meyzer, “concierge” may have originated from this designation. Consequently, confounding the concierge’s etymological history, the term for the concierge’s loge, or “conciergerie,”<sup>5</sup> could have origins not in the concierge’s ignoble role of slave to others but in the figure’s (en)lightening ability to protect and illuminate.<sup>6</sup>

Presently, the term “concierge” connotes two uses in French<sup>7</sup>: first, a concierge is a man or woman charged with the care of an important public establishment such as a castle or palace, a prison or a private apartment building. According to *Le Trésor de la langue française*, the concierge, more specifically, is “celui, celle qui, dans certains établissements publics ou immeubles particuliers, est chargé(e) de surveiller l’entrée, de renseigner les visiteurs, de distribuer le courrier, d’entretenir les parties communes, etc.” (*Trésor*). The secondary use of the term is derogatory and consists of two definitions in the *Trésor* that are labeled as “plaisant” and “pejorative”—the first refers to a “personne bavarde dont les propos n’ont pas un grand intérêt” and, the second to a “personne sans finesse, sans éducation.”

Considered either good or bad, adored or abhorred, respected or scorned, the concierge is a *casse-tête* of sorts of modern French society. If today the term “concierge” can be used as an insult for an uneducated gossipmonger, according to Eliza Ferguson in *Gender and Justice: Violence, Intimacy and Community in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Parisian concierge occupied a respected position, in particular as a credible witness to scenes of domestic violence:

The concierge typically lived in a room (the loge) near the entrance to an apartment building, noted the coming and going of all residents, and controlled access to an apartment building. It was quite literally the job of the concierge to know everybody’s business, and therefore he or she was a frequent and well-informed witness in criminal cases... Even if very few witnesses were interviewed, the concierge always figured among them. (119)

Ferguson explains further that concierges’ court depositions “revealed them to be frequent arbiters in domestic disputes. Not only was the loge near the building entrance,

<sup>4</sup> During this period, the term “concierge” was reserved for guards of royal palaces. It is not until the 19<sup>th</sup>-century that the concierge as we know her today becomes a fixture of the average Parisian apartment building: “Au cours de cette période du post-Haut Moyen Age, seuls les individus assurant la garde d’une maison royale ou seigneuriale seront dénommés ‘concierges.’ Il faut attendre le XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle pour qu’il qualifie la majorité des portiers” (Sudant and Stébé 21).

<sup>5</sup> Renée refers to her work place as “conciergerie” three times in the novel (58, 82 and 145).

<sup>6</sup> Renée provides both protection and illumination for those around her. In fact, her death is precipitated because of her effort to protect a local homeless man, Gégène, from being run over in the street (397). As well, she saves of Jean Arthens’ life, at least figuratively, by providing him knowledge in the form of the name of a flower: “Je suis venu parce que je n’arrive pas à me souvenir de quelque chose qui m’a beaucoup aidé, déjà quand j’étais malade et puis après, pendant ma guérison...c’est vous qui m’avez dit le nom de ces fleurs...Ah, madame Michel, mais vous savez ça m’a pratiquement sauvé la vie” (371).

<sup>7</sup> In the USA, “concierge” typically designates a hotel employee who assists guests in reserving tables at restaurants, buying theater tickets, etc. The French use of “concierge” is often translated into English as “janitor,” “caretaker,” or “maintenance man.”

and therefore on virtually any escape route, but the concierge, male or female, also had a certain status" (120). In fact, according to Ferguson's research, the concierge was a "person in a position of authority in the community" (121). Similarly, in *Apartment Stories*, Sharon Marcus describes the fictional female concierge of the 1840's as "a female type" that authors of the period "associated with the power to see into apartment buildings" (42). Thus, the concierge's access to the sights and sounds of the building is at once respected (as credible witness), mythologized (as seer with powers bordering on the occult) and finally reviled (as petty gossip).

No matter her title—of which she has many, some more pejorative than others, including "cloporte," "pipelette," "pibloque," "bignole" and "concepige"<sup>8</sup> (Sudant 25-26)—the 19<sup>th</sup>-century female concierge proves to be a lightning rod for authors and historians alike. The power she wielded in a court of law, described by Ferguson above, rarely translated into positive fictional depictions. Past and recent fictional (re)presentations of the female concierge perpetuate the negative image of the figure as unintelligent, duplicitous, conniving, and mean—from the manipulating Madame Cibot in Balzac's 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Le Cousin Pons* and the despised Madame Pampine in René Fallet's 1966 *Paris au mois d'août* to, more recently, the nasty Madame Triboulet in the 2010 film, *Les Femmes du 6ème étage*.<sup>9</sup> In the vast majority of fictional works, the French female concierge has been portrayed as less of an authoritative supervisor and arbiter and more as a meddling snoop. Take for example the elaborate negative portrait of Madame Pipelet in Eugène Sue's *Œuvres illustrées: Mystères de Paris*, in which he recalls Monnier's less glowing depictions of the concierge:

L'Hogarth français, Henri Monnier, a si admirablement stéréotypé la portière, que nous nous contenterons de prier le lecteur, s'il veut se figurer madame Pipelet, d'évoquer dans son souvenir la plus laide, la plus ridée, la plus bourgeonnée, la plus sordide, la plus dépénaillée, la plus hargneuse, la plus venimeuse des portières immortalisées par cet éminent artiste. (53)

Sue's superlative *enumeratio* makes it clear that the fictive addressee explicitly represented in the text—"the reader"—is to imagine a most repulsive image of Madame Pipelet, and by extension, of concierges (*portières*) in general.

Although Sharon Marcus describes the fictional female concierge of the 1840's as "a female type" that authors "endowed ... with authorial omniscience" (43), in the aforementioned 19<sup>th</sup>-century works by novelists such as Balzac and Sue, the concierge consistently figures as a character and not as narrative agent.<sup>10</sup> The trend of excluding

8 "Pipelet" and "Pipelette" are inspired by the concierge couple, Alfred et Anastasie Pipelet, in Eugène Sue's 1843 novel *Les Mystères de Paris*.

9 The concierge couple in *La Cage dorée* provides an obvious recent exception. However, they are a couple, thus changing the gendered dynamics of the female concierge's representation.

10 Although Madame Cibot is not a narrative agent, Sharon Marcus underlines her important focalization in *Cousin Pons*: "Cibot's" unexpected accompaniment of the omniscient narrator recurs throughout the novel. Even the narrator's description of Pons's apartment building emerges from Cibot's presence, contributing further to Cibot's appropriation of Pons's place as a central character whose point of view should focalize descriptive passages" (Marcus 71-72). Flaubert, on the other hand, ignored the concierge entirely in this work: "Flaubert passe sous silence l'existence même des concierges," (Caroline Strobbe 135). Although related more to authorial privilege than narrative privilege, Henri Monnier wrote and acted in the play *Le Roman chez la portière* in which the eponymous character struggles to write a novel because she must constantly respond to the demands of the tenants of her building. With this play that sets out to portray a concierge as erudite enough to pen a novel, Monnier takes the effacement of the concierge as source of narrative power one step further by choosing to play the role of the female concierge/author in drag himself—thus seemingly preventing the audience from seeing an "actual" female in the role of concierge / author. The masculinization of the concierge was a recurring theme in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Balzac describes La Cibot as having reached the age where "ces sortes de femmes sont obligées de se faire la barbe ... Une portière à moustaches est une des plus grandes garanties d'ordre et de sécurité pour un propriétaire" (Balzac 45).

female concierges from narrative control continues in most fictional works, literature or film, of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Although Monsieur Milot, the male concierge in André Dahl's *Voyage autour de ma loge* (1924) and Pierre Lunère's concierge / psychic (who happens to share the author's name and professions) in *Dans la loge de l'ange gardien* (2014) are the primary narrative agents of their respective novels, such narratological privilege is rare for the fictional male concierge character and practically unheard of for a female concierge. Marguerite Duras's 1954 short story, "Madame Dodin," for instance, features a female narrative agent but she is an unidentified resident and not the eponymous concierge character.

*L'Élegance du hérisson* presents the exception to the rule concerning various aspects of the ascribed role and identity of the female concierge. Narratively speaking, the novel bucks the trend of exclusion that previously barred female concierges from wielding narrative authority in the texts that relate their story. As one of two narrative agents, Renée narrates approximately 64% of the novel.<sup>11</sup> Her unprecedented narrative function for a female concierge is further accentuated by her familiarity with the narratee. Renée jokes with the fictive addressee when making fun of others' poor grammar, pronunciation, etc.,<sup>12</sup> and speaks directly to the narratee as "vous" on at least four occasions (130, 131, 213, 231). During three of these moments, she does so in order to engage the fictive addressee in a dialogue, asking questions such as, "Cela ne vous arrive jamais?" (213), and "Est-ce que ça vous fait le même effet, à vous, quand ça vous arrive?" (130). In the latter example, the pronoun "vous" is repeated three times, underlining the participation and complicity asked of the interlocutor. Akin to *Les Mystères de Paris*, the narratee is explicitly represented—this time via the pronoun "vous"—but to a very different end. Whereas the narrative voice of Sue's work aims to repulse the narratee, pushing him ("le lecteur") away from the vile *portière*, Renée's use of "vous" works to establish commonalities and connections between the imagined interlocutor and the concierge character, and effectively serves as an attempt to eliminate any distance—socioeconomic or otherwise—that may separate them.

That said, Renée is at pains to align herself with the typical portrait of the lowborn Parisian concierge. Approximately one third of the way into the novel, Renée reveals her pastime: she is writing a "[un] dérisoire journal d'une concierge vieillissante" (151).<sup>13</sup> In chapter two of the *Préambule*—the moment at which Renée presents her name, age (54) and self-deprecating self-portrait—she refers to what she says has previously been published about concierges and thus reveals that she is thus somewhat well-read: "il est écrit quelque part que les concierges sont vieilles, laides et revêches" (16). The literary lexicon continues as she crafts a definition of the concierge: "À semblable chapitre, il est dit que les concierges regardent interminablement la télévision pendant que leurs gros chats sommeillent" (16). On the preceding page, Renée describes herself as a "veuve, petite, laide" and notes that she lives alone with "un gros matou paresseux" (15)—demonstrating that, at least outwardly, she fits the mold for the typical representation of the female concierge. Similarly, as if she has read the *Trésor de la langue française's* entry on the concierge's lack of education and aims to adhere to it, she states in the introductory chapter, "Je n'ai pas fait d'études" (15).

11 Renée's literary narrative privilege does not translate to the big screen in the novel's filmic adaptation, *Le Hérisson* (2009). Paloma has access to narrative control via a handheld video camera while Renée does not. In fact, on the official English-language website for the film, Paloma is described as the film's main character and Renée is the secondary "grumpy concierge": "The Hedgehog is the timely story of Paloma (Garance Le Guillermic) a young girl bent on ending it all on her upcoming twelfth birthday. Using her father's old camcorder to chronicle the hypocrisy she sees in adults, Paloma begins to learn about life from the grumpy building concierge, Renée Michel (French Twist's Josiane Balasko)." (*The Hedgehog*).

12 Similarly, she tells jokes solely for the narratee's benefit, for example when she makes fun of a character's pronunciation of "les Chinois": "Madame Rosen ne dit pas: les Chinois mais les Chunois. J'ai toujours rêvé de visiter la Chune. C'est quand-même plus intéressant que de se rendre en Chine" (178).

13 Paloma's narration also is sourced in her writing that she calls her "Pensées profondes."

The initiatory chapters likewise introduce the theatrical lexicon that will pervade the novel—in particular, Renée reveals to what extent she views her concierge apron as a costume she dons, not as an outward expression of her true identity. In her description of the cover-up of her uncharacteristically erudite activities, she uses verbs such as “dissimuler” and “exhiber” (16). Via her carefully chosen costume, words and actions, Renée plays her professional role of concierge and thus seemingly falls in the footsteps of the concierges that came before her. Privately, however, she pursues interests that are not frequently associated with the French working class to which her *métier* belongs. Renée’s dual identity suggests the melding of two timeless adages: “All the world’s a stage” and “L’habit ne fait pas le moine.” She repeatedly relates her reflections on painting, literature, film and philosophy, all the while insisting that this side of her personality must remain hidden, as when she states that she must “reprendre [son] rôle de gardienne obtuse” (249) and “[endosser son] habit de concierge semi-débile” (162). In the same vein, Renée explains how she purposefully cooks food that smells unappetizing—“le pot-au-feu, la soupe aux choux ou le cassoulet des familles” (16)—in order to keep up appearances of a “real” concierge. Her “props” include two television sets—one in her back room or “antre” on which she watches critically acclaimed films, such as *Mort à Venise* (18); the other, closer to the door to her loge, blares mainstream television programming: “Tandis que, garante de ma clandestinité, la télévision de la loge beuglait sans que je l’entende des insanités pour cerveaux de prairies, je me pâmais, les larmes aux yeux, devant les miracles de l’Art” (18). Deaucourt’s description of the concierge’s loge as “eminently theatrical” (Marcus 42) takes on heightened significance in the context of Barbery’s novel. Given the steps Renée takes to set the scene in the front room of her apartment while in her “den” (“antre”) she devotes time to her intellectual pursuits, she effectively creates on- and off-stage areas of her home and thus turns her simple *loge* into a *loge d’acteur*. She carefully regulates how she is seen and heard by the residents of her building—all part of her efforts to perpetuate “le jeu des hiérarchies sociales” (17) in what could be construed as her “jeu des acteurs.”

Although not formally educated, as mentioned previously, Renée admits nonetheless to possessing intellectual capacities superior to those around her—a fact that she would prefer remain a secret between herself and the narratee. In the very first chapter of the *Preamble*, she interacts with Antoine Pallières, the son of an “employer,” as she calls the owners of apartments in the building she tends. With an aside that establishes her tendency to view the residents critically, she reveals her knowledge of Karl Marx: “Devriez lire *l’Idéologie allemande*, je lui dis, à ce crétin” (13). Renée rues having spoken in this manner—not because she regrets calling Antoine an idiot, but because she believes that a concierge, a person whose place in the social ladder has been long situated at the bottom rungs, should not read Marx: “Une concierge ne lit pas *l’Idéologie allemande* ... De surcroît, une concierge qui lit Marx lorgne forcément vers la subversion” (14). She attempts to downplay the revelation of her communist intellectual interests by concluding the summary of her conversation with Antoine Pallières with a banality: “Direz bien le bonjour à votre maman, je marmonne ... en espérant que la dysphonie des deux phrases sera recouverte par la force de préjugés millénaires” (14). Part of her act requires her to adhere to long held stereotypes about the concierge and thus she actively changes her register, using the familiar “maman” instead of the more formal “mère”.

In other scenes, Renée attempts to cover up displays of cerebral superiority that presumably surpasses her lot in life by making deliberate grammatical errors. For instance, when talking to the doctor of one of the buildings residents, Pierre Arthens, she worries that she has surprised him with a sophisticated speech pattern. Renée states that she needs to take care not to reveal her intellectual capacity and therefore deliberately uses the wrong article when talking to him: “Pour effacer toute trace de mes méfaits, je m’autorise une petite hérésie. ‘C’est un espèce d’infarctus?’” (author’s emphasis, 96). With these

concerted efforts to speak poorly, Renée appears to emulate 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary concierges such as Balzac's La Cibot who inserts unnecessary letters into her speech, "Car Madame Cibot prodiguait les N dans son langage. Elle disait à son mari 'tu n'es n'un amour'" (Balzac 46). As Deaucourt summarizes, Balzac's portrait of the concierge strives to underline the concierge's strange ways: "ces bizarreries linguistiques qui ont toujours fasciné Balzac enferment en même temps l'insupportable portière dans son étrangeté véritablement monstrueuse" (156). By not speaking like members of the dominant social class, the concierge is perceived as a monster in comparison with the inhabitants of the building she tends. Renée—whose intellect may in fact surpass that of some of her "employers"—actively seeks the aberrant status of linguistically inferior concierge.

The novel hits a turning point when Renée meets the newest inhabitant of 7 rue de Grenelle—Kakuro Ozu. At first, Renée reigns in her linguistic adroitness in order to play up the "inépité" requisite of her profession: "Je me borne donc à des oui, oui, oui asthéniques" (162). However, Renée's carefully constructed mask of cultural incompetency begins to crumble when her resolve to appear "débile" proves to be not as strong as her repugnance for poorly spoken French. Madame Rosen, who is present to introduce the new resident to the concierge, commits a grammatical error: "Pouvez-vous pallier à ça?" (162). With this glaring gaffe, the theatrical lexicon returns: "Et pourtant, voici la tragédie: j'ai sursauté au *pallier à ça* au moment même où [Monsieur Ozu] sursautait aussi" (163). From that moment on, Kakuro looks at Renée "avec un œil tout différent ... un œil à l'affût" (163). Kakuro asks about the family of the recently deceased inhabitant, to which Renée responds, "Vous savez, toutes les familles heureuses se ressemblent" and, as if calling her literary bluff, Kakuro retorts, "Mais les familles malheureuses le sont chacune à leur façon" (164). Renée realizes that she has revealed the existence of her clandestine pastimes and she visibly shudders ("trésaille")—Kakuro has read Tolstoy and appears to assume that Renée has too. Renée's cat, one of her requisite theatrical props for her concierge role, provides the final blow in this proverbial one-two-three punch to her pseudo dim-witted concierge mask. As the feline saunters into view, Kakuro asks Renée his name. Before Renée can avoid revealing the pet's literary moniker, Madame Rosen blurts out "Léon." With this coup de grâce, in combination with the aberrant quotation from Tolstoy, her cover is effectively blown.

Unlike the other inhabitants of the apartment building, Monsieur Ozu recognizes that Renée is not a typical concierge, or perhaps more aptly, he seems not to put stock in the importance of such a prescribed role in the first place. It must be noted that Monsieur Ozu is Japanese, not French—thus he is different from the "cast of characters" who inhabit Renée's building. As an outsider to the building and French society, he may be best apt to see through Renée's act since his view of her is not clouded by centuries' old stereotypes regarding the female concierge's place in French society. After their initial meeting, Kakuro sends Renée a copy of *Anna Karenina* (essentially testing his assumption regarding her literary interests) and invites her upstairs to his apartment for dinner.

Over the course of their evening together, Renée's dualistic identity is fully revealed. Monsieur Ozu remarks that Renée is "une personne peu ordinaire" to which she replies, "Au contraire ... je suis concierge. Ma vie est d'une banalité exemplaire" (281). Challenging her claims of leading a clichéd existence, he playfully brings up her high-brow pastimes: "Une concierge qui lit Tolstoï et écoute du Mozart [...] Je ne savais pas que ce fût dans les pratiques de votre corporation" (281). Kakuro, poised—as mentioned above—outside the social hierarchy that has determined the concierge's lot in life, encourages Renée to see beyond the stereotypes that she has long accepted, pointing to her friend Manuela, a cleaning lady, as an example of the "normalcy" of transgressing assigned identities: "C'est une grande dame, une aristocrate. Vous voyez, vous n'êtes pas la seule à démentir les normes sociales. Où est le mal? Nous sommes au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, que diable!" (285). Once again, thanks to his position as "other" to modern French society, he is able to



perceive social possibilities that are invisible to others—particularly to the iconoclast autodidact concierge.

Before Renée leaves his apartment, Kakuro invites her to return to his apartment the following Sunday so that they can watch Yasujiro Ozu's film *The Munekata Sisters*. On her second journey up the stairs, she finds herself face-to-face with Sabine Pallières, one of her employers. Renée has noticed Sabine's disapproving glances, likely due to Renée's new hairstyle and clothes that make her look less like a concierge and more like an inhabitant of the building: "On appréciera que j'ai renoncé à dissimuler au monde ma nouvelle apparence. Mais cette insistance me met mal à l'aise, quelque affranchie que je sois" (344). Since her "cover was blown" by Kakuro, she sheds more easily the concierge's apron and shakes off Sabine's request that she water the plants on a Sunday (her day off from her role of concierge). In this moment, she begins to openly recast herself—via her costume, words and actions—as more than a concierge.

Despite the liberation that Renée experiences with Kakuro, she turns down his third invitation—this time to dine in an elegant Japanese restaurant. The justification for her refusal is revealed during a conversation with Paloma during which she relates the story of her sister Lisette—a young woman who leaves the countryside to work in Paris for a rich family and dies dishonorably after giving birth out of wedlock. In other words, the classic story of a woman who failed to play her role in society and paid the price dearly for her transgressions. Renée reveals to someone other than the implied reader, her dual identity and its origins: "J'étais intelligente et indigente, vouée à pareille punition si j'espérais tirer avantage de mon esprit au mépris de ma classe. Enfin, comme je ne pouvais non plus cesser d'être ce que j'étais, il m'apparut que ma voie était celle du secret : je devais taire ce que j'étais et de l'autre monde ne jamais mêler" (362). With this story from her past, Renée reveals the impetus for her dual identity of outward concierge and inward intellectual—akin to her sister's illicit romantic interests, Renée's intellectual pursuits surpass her humble birth and, she fears, could be punishable.

Subsequent to the cathartic reveal of the justifications for her dual identity, Renée accepts Kakuro's dinner invitation: an act that requires them to leave the confines of the building that has until then housed their upstairs-downstairs relationship. As they prepare to cross the threshold of the building, leaving the semi-private space of the entryway and entering the public sphere of the street, they cross paths with two female inhabitants of the building at the front door—a space characterized by Renée's observation of inhabitants, not by her exiting *with* them. Failing to recognize Renée on the arm of Kakuro, the women refer to her blissfully and respectfully as "Madame": "Bonsoir madame, me disent-elles (à moi) en me souriant de toutes leurs dents" (381). In this space that Deaucourt describes as "both closed and open at the same time, eminently theatrical... propitious for exchanges, for comings and goings" (Marcus 42), Renée tries out a new role—that of herself. Like an actor who leaves the stage after a performance, it seems that she is no longer recognizable to her audience. By crossing the threshold of her building on the arm of Kakuro, in a new fancier "costume," she is able to shed the confining role of concierge. The reveal of her new identity is completed with Kakuro's assistance—he repeats the following statement three times: "Renée, vous n'êtes pas votre sœur" (388-390), thus revealing that he has both spoken with Paloma and thinks that Renée should free herself of her class (self-)consciousness: "Nous pouvons être amis. Et même tout ce que nous voulons" (390). Her act is up: she must no longer hide behind a mask of "inéptie."

After this life-altering dinner during which Renée comes to embrace her dual identity—pardon the plot reveal—she is killed by a dry-cleaning truck. Given this shocking and, moreover, disappointing conclusion to the novel, the take-away message is decidedly glum. Although Renée and Kakuro see beyond the traditionally un(der)valued and limiting role of "concierge," her truncated narrative, even if indirectly, denies her all but a fleeting place in a world where ground-floor concierges can relate to and have

relationships with fellow erudite fourth-floor inhabitants. To this effect, in his critique of Barbery's novel, Philippe Lançon links Renée to another hedgehog in the tale told by the beggar character in Jean Giraudoux's 1937 play *Electra*, underlining the role her socioeconomic status plays in determining her fate: "Mme Michel meurt comme le hérisson d'*Electre*, renversée par une camionnette en traversant la rue, au moment où sa magnifique nature était enfin reconnue et où, peut-être, l'amour allait venir. Pauvres pauvres: quand la vie devient rose, il faut qu'ils meurent" (Lançon). In comparing Renée's figurative identity of hedgehog to the literal one described in Giraudoux's play, Lançon reverses the relationship found in *L'Élégance du hérisson*: instead of Renée play-acting in the novel that tells her tale, the beggar narrates the tale of a hedgehog in the context of a theatrical play. In both cases, the outcomes of their tales are far from comic and utterly tragic.

The conclusion to Barbery's novel suggests that after Renée crosses the threshold—between her theatrical space and the real world, between the limits of private and public spheres, and between rungs of the hierarchy inherent to the structure of her own building and that of capitalist, bourgeois-dominated Parisian society—there is no other alternative offered to a working-class concierge than death. Similar to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity according to which, "performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all" (528), according to Barbery's depiction of the concierge, the refusal to "play the role" of one's socio-economically ascribed identity continues to be a risky endeavor in 21<sup>st</sup> century French society. In Renée's case, even if her cause of death is ruled an accident within the story, her death takes on auspicious signification for the novel that attempts to privilege her narrative and her intellect over that of presumably "more important" individuals. Just as Renée feared would happen, stepping outside the boundaries of her social class proves deadly. Maintaining the status quo—that is to say, ensuring the survival of a traditional social hierarchy in which the concierge remains at a bottom rung of society and in her first-floor loge—comes at a price, as it necessitates the demise of the concierge (and her narrative voice) who dares to step outside her assigned role.<sup>14</sup>

That said, Renée's story is nevertheless of paramount significance since it is her death that heralds the end of the novel. Paloma, the aforementioned other narrative agent of the novel, takes up narration of the final chapter in order to relate how she learned of Renée's death and its effect on her. The last words of the novel are Paloma's to Renée: "N'ayez crainte, Renée, je ne me suiciderai pas et je ne brûlerai rien du tout. Car, pour vous, je traquerai désormais les toujours dans les jamais. La beauté dans ce monde" (409). The conclusion attests to Renée's positive influence over others and underlines her "starring" role—to borrow Mayor Hidalgo's term—in the novel, as well as in the lives of those who knew her. If the ending to Barbery's novel is not altogether liberating with respect to a female concierge's social opportunities in 21<sup>st</sup> century France, Renée's narrative—theatrical lexicon and all—nonetheless challenges the role of un(der)valued and underestimated gatekeeper that the concierge has long been cast to play in French society.

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<sup>14</sup> Oddly enough, Roland Barthes—a 20th-century French theorist opposed to essentialist language (or the use of binary systems—good vs. bad, black vs. white, etc.) in favor of questioning the relationship between the signified and the signifier and an analyst of the "myth" of the bourgeoisie and the social system imposed by that class—was killed by a dry-cleaning truck.

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