

1-1-2017

# Cerberus at the Gates: The Demonization of the French Female Concierge

Mariah Devereux Herbeck  
*Boise State University*



## CERBERUS AT THE GATES: THE DEMONIZATION OF THE FRENCH FEMALE CONCIERGE

MARIAH DEVEREUX HERBECK



LOCATED at the threshold of modern Parisian apartment living, the concierge maintains the common spaces, delivers mail and, until 1957, “pulled the cord” to permit dwellers to enter the building at all hours of the night. Neither owner of nor renter in the building that she tends, the concierge occupies the first-floor *loge* – a liminal space that is neither entirely public nor truly private – where she simultaneously lives and works. In the nineteenth century, the concierge was often poor and uneducated, yet influential thanks in great part to her post at the front door: “She was feared because of her intermediate position, straddling public and private, between tenants and landlords and at times in cahoots with the police, who turned to her whenever there was an incident and who sought to recruit her as a spy” (Arlès et Duby 230).<sup>1</sup> Her identity was so inextricably linked to her physical location at the entry to the building that she was often referred to as a *portière*. However, the concierge’s role of gatekeeper also earned her the far less flattering moniker of “Cerberus” – the mythological three-headed guard dog at the gates of hell. For instance, in his 1871 memoir, *At Home in Paris: at Peace and at War*, Jerrold Blanchard writes, “*Concierges’* boxes are usually gloomy; but that in which our Cerberus lived was in perpetual twilight” (13),<sup>2</sup> and even more recently, in

---

<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Laé, in his 2015 sociological study of the HLM caretaker in the projects on the outskirts of Paris, is at pains to distinguish the new “gardien” (usually male) figure from the old “portière” and “concierge” of the past: “Il fait partie des réparateurs de la vie collective. C’est le gardien. Loin du concierge de l’immeuble parisien qui peste contre ses riches propriétaires, leurs manières détestables décrites par Marguerite Duras” (Laé 7). As is evident in Laé’s recent sociological text, the French female concierge – despite her declining existence as more and more concierges are replaced by digicodes at the entries of Parisian apartment buildings – is still a maligned and despised figure from which today’s building guardians would like to distance themselves.

<sup>2</sup> James Rousseau, in *Physiologie de la portière*, describes the concierge as “le pauvre cerbère” (42), as does Pierre Larousse in the nineteenth-century *Grand dictionnaire universel*: “Le

José Benjamin's *La concierge est dans le cercueil* (2008), the eponymous character's loge is referred to as "l'antre du cerbère" (40).

The vilification of the female concierge in twentieth-century French literature is perhaps nowhere as blatant as in two seldom-discussed literary works: René Fallet's novel *Paris au mois d'août* (1964) and André de Richaud's 1950's short story "Échec à la concierge." In both Fallet's novel and Richaud's short story, a female concierge – no more than a secondary character in both texts – inspires vehement diatribes and vengeful reverie by the male narrative agent. The following textual analyses propose to examine the damning portrayals of the female concierge in Richaud's and Fallet's otherwise different texts, with particular attention given to the religious and mythical lexicons that serve to amplify her evil nature, as well as the narrative strategies that serve to disparage her image. Tinged with a binary rhetoric of good and evil, the novels depict working-class female characters who, despite being located both at the lowest level of the buildings they tend and at the lowest rung of society, possess powers that anger and intimidate the male characters with whom they come in contact. Close examination of these works will reveal not only this working-class woman's ability to unnerve middle- to upper-class men, but also the reasons for and implications of her subsequent downfall in these mid-century male-dominated, male-centric narratives.

Winner of le Prix Interallié, Fallet's *Paris au mois d'août* was subsequently adapted for the big screen two years later as a film of the same name starring Charles Aznavour. Today, however, Fallet's novel more frequently shows up in online readers' blogs than in academic articles, attracting descriptors such as "delightful," "touching" and even "cute" (*Goodreads*). As for "Échec à la concierge," according to my correspondence with author and literary critic Eric Dussert, Richaud likely wrote the short story in the 1950's, but it was virtually unknown until Dussert published it as the title work of a compilation of Richaud's short stories in 2012. Although "Échec à la concierge" has not presumably been widely read, Richaud's 1930 novel *La Douleur* was a source of inspiration for Albert Camus who was so taken with it that he read it "in one night."<sup>3</sup> Despite this rousing endorsement, Richaud's works were all but lost to oblivion – in part due to what Roger Colozzi

---

peuple, lui, n'y fait pas tant de façons, et le *concierge*, à ses yeux n'est pas même un portier, c'est un *cerbère*" (840).

<sup>3</sup> "Je ne connaissais pas André de Richaud. Mais je n'ai jamais oublié son beau livre, qui fut le premier à me parler de ce que je connaissais : une mère, la pauvreté, de beaux soirs dans le ciel. Il dénouait au fond de moi un nœud de liens obscurs, me délivrait d'entraves dont je sentais la gêne sans pouvoir les nommer. Je le lus en une nuit" (Camus qtd. in Colozzi 11).

describes as the author's reputation as an "alcoolique invétéré [et] homosexuel notoire," – an infamy that left him "littérairement et socialment infréquentable" (9). Although Fallet's and Richaud's texts have not been hailed canonical works of French literature, they do provide crucial insight into the collective contempt for the concierge that pervades French popular culture and literature well into the mid-twentieth century.

*Paris au mois d'août* relates a month in the life of forty-year-old Henri Plantin who, while his wife and three children are off on a beach vacation, stays in Paris where he works as a fishing supply salesman at La Samaritaine. Promptly after his family's departure, Henri meets Patricia Greaves, a British model, with whom he swiftly strikes up an extramarital affair. Before and after having met Patricia, Henri repeatedly reviles Madame Anna Pampine, or "la mère Pampine" as he disparagingly refers to the concierge in his building.<sup>4</sup> The maternal sobriquet is far from a term of familial endearment, and more likely representative of a secondary definition of "mère" found in the *Trésor de la langue française*: "Titre donné à une personne âgée par familiarité ou ironie."

In Richaud's short story, "Échec à la concierge," the eponymous character – a small and nimble seventy-five-year-old – also carries an equivocal maternal moniker of "la mère Guillot." Paratextually in the preface to the collection of Richaud's short stories, Éric Dussert describes the eponymous figure of Richaud's "Échec à la concierge" as a "figure de matron oppressive" (7) as well as a "monstre urbain" (7) and a "cerbère" (7). In two brief sentences of the collection's preface, the female concierge is thus astutely placed at the intersection of mortal and immortal life, with her overbearing maternal (and therein human) qualities linked inextricably to her mythical identity as the three-headed guard dog at the gates to hell.

From the opening pages of both Fallet's and Richaud's works, religiously charged lexicons reinforce the polarizing rhetoric of good and evil that pit the male protagonists against the female concierge villains. Henri prays for the concierge's death as early as the first chapter of Fallet's novel in apostrophic discourse: "Et puis, ce n'est pas tout. Il y a la mère Pampine. Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, faites qu'elle crève avant moi. Que j'éclate de joie" (15). His plea takes on heightened significance in the introductory portion of the novel since these four and a half pages provide the only moments of first-person narra-

---

<sup>4</sup> Another example of a maternal sobriquet for a concierge occurs in José Benjamin's novel, *La Concierge est dans le cercueil*, in which the narrator relies on a maternal nickname in a disparaging description of the eponymous character: "La moustache de la mère Jaillard lui inspirait à la fois de la crainte et de la répulsion" (24, my emphasis).

tion by Henri as narrative agent. Without explanation for the shift, the rest of the novel is narrated in the third person by an unidentified narrative voice.<sup>5</sup> However, the religiously charged lamentations do not end with the change of narration: “Dieu n’était pas pressé de rappeler à lui la mère Pampine, et Plantin, honnêtement, le comprenait assez. Tout Dieu qu’il était, il redoutait, comme ses brebis, la concierge du numéro six, la plus monstrueuse d’aspect, la plus vénéneuse d’âme du Passage” (16). Throughout the novel, religious references seem to serve but one purpose – to underscore Mme Pampine’s malevolent nature.

Joseph Valeureux, the protagonist of Richaud’s work, is also male, but unlike Henri Plantin of Fallet’s novel, he does not narrate. An unidentified narrative agent who claims to have interacted with Joseph – “il m’avait confié ses projets de mariage et aussi son manqué d’argent” (47) – describes him as an impossibly tall (“près de 10 mètres de haut” [39]) twenty-something who wants nothing more than to find a job and marry his girlfriend, Jacqueline. Onomastically and cratylically, it is clear from the outset that Joseph is to be recognized as the “good guy” given his valiant surname “Valeureux,” a categorization furthered by the narrative agent’s description of him as nothing “short” of a saint: “Comme tous les géants, Joseph Valeureux était un de ces êtres doux et bienveillants dont on dirait que leur altitude empêche de voir le mal” (39). Virtuous Joseph must contend with the contemptible and meddling mère Guillot who has made it her mission to evict him so that her grandson may take his apartment. The first lines of dialogue between the concierge and Joseph consist of her warning him of her wicked ways: “Vous ne savez pas tout le mal que peut faire une concierge!” (40). In stark opposition to the angelic portrayal of Joseph, the opening line to Richaud’s short story relies on superlatives in order to hyperbolize the diabolical nature of the eponymous character: “La mère Guillot était la plus infernale concierge qu’on ait vu naître sous le ciel de Dieu, depuis qu’il y a des concierges et dont quelques-unes sont méchantes” (35). The religious rhetoric is paired, yet again as is the case in Fallet’s novel, with wishing ill upon the concierge – in this instance via litotes presented by the narrative agent: “Je ne veux aucun mal aux concierges, comme je ne veux aucun mal à la scarlatine, à l’impôt ou tout simplement la mort” (35). Forces of good and evil are at work in the short story and the concierge is portrayed as the devil’s handmaiden.

If both works express the characters’ loathing of the concierge, the reasons for their animus differ significantly. In Richaud’s work, hatred of Mme

---

<sup>5</sup> The narration remains consistent after this moment save for a few awkward moments of free indirect discourse, for instance when Henri’s love interest is referred to as “Pat. Pat. Ma jolie Pat. Ma chérie. Pat mon amour” (140).

Guillot is justified because she masterminds a plot to have the saint-like Joseph evicted, and takes perverse pleasure in gossiping about the building's inhabitants who thus become her "victims": "Dans sa conversation, les locataires jouaient comme à la polka des chaises. L'ordre importait peu. Elle ne choisissait que sa première victime" (35). In the case of Fallet's novel, the rationale for Henri's rancor is less clear. One weak explanation is that Henri loves feeding pigeons outside his window, a habit that angers Mme Pampine because of the mess they leave on the roof: "La mère Pampine avait alerté le gérant. La pollution des toits par les ramiers fut attribuée, en son entier, à Plantin" (18). In his anger against his fellow inhabitants who run to the concierge to complain about his behavior, he describes Mme Pampine's apartment as "la loge de Gorgone" (18). The comparison of the concierge to the mythical Medusa is perpetuated by Henri's hesitancy to make eye contact with her: "Henri . . . depuis toujours, fuyait les prunelles de pieuvre de la vieille" (175). Thus, it seems that it is Mme Pampine's intrusive vision that inspires Henri's rancor. Throughout the novel, he blames her surveillance and that of others for the downfall of his extramarital love affair: "La surveillance des Poule, des Snif, des Flouque et des Pampine l'excédait, salissait son amour" (176).

Distrust of the concierge's vision is a common trope that dates back to the nineteenth century when, according to Sharon Marcus, the fictional concierge's vision was portrayed as limitless: "Urban literature characterized the *portière* as an adept observer: her duties as mail distributor, rent collector, and maid gave her an intimate and composite overview of the building's individual parts" (43). In particular, Marcus asserts that the concierge and her intrusive vision posed a distinct threat to Parisian men: "The only significant threat to male enjoyment of the city was the *portière*" (50). A century later in Fallet's novel, Henri's enjoyment of Paris as a provisional bachelor appears to be indeed imperiled by Mme Pampine. In a rare moment of direct discourse, Mme Pampine threatens that she will reveal Henri's affair to his wife in order to *see* her reaction: "Eh bien, tant mieux, espèce de malpoli, tant mieux! On *verra* si votre femme s'en fout aussi!" (176, my emphasis). What Mme Pampine sees and can reveal for others are key aspects of her nefarious power.

In the case of Richaud's short story, as of the first page, the narrative agent denigrates Mme Guillot's vision: "Je serais aveugle et on m'offrirait d'y voir avec [les yeux de la concierge] que je préférerais la nuit éternelle" (35). The narrative agent recognizes, however, that the concierge is known as the neighborhood's resident clairvoyant: "Elle était toujours prise pour la reine occulte du quartier" (48). Akin to the aforementioned powers of vision,

concierges have long been associated with the occult, or possessing a “third eye.” Take for example James Rousseau’s accounts of the concierge’s visionary power in his illustrated anthology from 1841, *Physiologie de la portière*: “On ne saurait croire quelle puissance occulte est attribuée à la portière; elle joue dans notre vie le rôle du destin” (63). While Rousseau ostensibly accepts the concierge’s visionary role, the twentieth-century works of Fallet and Richaud seem to wish to denigrate the despised gatekeeper and deny her powers of perception, both ocular and occult.

In an attempt to downplay the concierge’s power, both the narrative voice of *Paris au mois d’août* and the narrative agent of “Échec à la concierge” animalize her; and, curiously, both texts choose the anteater as the concierge’s zoological counterpart.<sup>6</sup> In Richaud’s text, Mme Guillot’s tongue is most like that of a *tamanoir* or anteater when gossiping: “la langue pendante et surchargée de racontars comme celle du tamanoir repu est surchargée de fourmis” (35). In Fallet’s novel, it is the concierge’s nose that recalls that of the anteater: “La mère Pampine rentra précipitamment son nez de tamanoir” (40). Although neither narrator mentions the concierge’s eyes in these instances, anteaters are characterized by poor vision. The choice of the rather obscure anteater in these passages can thus be construed as implicitly undermining the concierge’s fabled powers of surveillance.

To return to the concierge’s situation at the threshold of the building, her keen vision has long been inextricably linked to her position at the *porte d’entrée*, a post from which she can monitor the comings and goings of all the inhabitants of the building she tends. Not surprisingly, her situation at the front door is referenced with differing degrees of animosity in these works. In Fallet’s novel, at three separate moments in the text, the image of the concierge on her doormat is the source of a series of damning comparisons, each one starting out “La mère Pampine, posée sur son paillason comme.” The narrative voice compares her to a mound of animal intestines in a slaughterhouse, to a woman who has been drunk for two weeks, and to a garbage can: “La mère Pampine, posée sur son paillason comme une poubelle renversée” (145). In each instance, her post at the entrance to the building inspires contempt and, in the latter case, she is linked to the refuse that she transports regularly across the threshold of public and private space. At one point, Henri calls her a “vieille ordure” (207). In fact, garbage takes on added significance since the novel ends – pardon the spoiler – with her

---

<sup>6</sup> Oddly enough, akin to modernization that seems to wish to render the concierge extinct with “digicodes” and CCTV, the Giant Anteater is categorized as “near threatened” due to “habitat loss” (“Giant Anteater”).

dead body found dangling from a refuse bin: “La face de la vieille était badi-geonnée du rouge vif d’un lot de tomates pourries” (208).<sup>7</sup>

In the case of Richaud’s short story, if stereotypical objects associated with the concierge and her place at the doorway – like a refuse bin or doormat – are absent, the importance of the demarcation between what constitutes interior and exterior space, and thus public and private life, is made abundantly clear. The only moment in the short story that associates the eponymous concierge with pleasure occurs when she is at the bar across the street from her building: “D’un air las, elle regardait la grande bâtisse et alors sa médisance devenait *statique*. C’était un plaisir de la voir assise à la terrasse de ‘chez Julien,’ les jambes écartées, devant son ‘45’ comme un travailleur lassé par une grosse journée de travail” (36, original emphasis). Outside the context of her home and work, she no longer represents a meddling presence, but instead she resembles a *male* worker relaxing at a bar. When she is perceived as neither concierge nor female, Mme Guillot no longer poses a threat to the “male enjoyment of the city” (Marcus 50).

In fact, Mme Guillot’s powers – ocular or otherwise – appear to wane when she leaves the building. From inside, she works to turn the inhabitants against Joseph, convincing them that he is to blame for the broken glass in the hallway and the urine in the elevator (all acts deliberately staged by her grandson). When she confronts Joseph outside of the apartment building in order to evict him, the formerly innocent Joseph lets loose with a string of expletives: “Toutes les fenêtres de la rue s’ouvrirent. Les gros mots tombaient de la bouche de Joseph qui la dominait de toute sa taille, lui coulaient sur la tête, en pluie, comme une douche” (48). He stands his ground outside the building, “planté sur le trottoir” (49) and the concierge – out of her element – is forced to take refuge inside her loge (49).

Both Richaud’s and Fallet’s works—fictional texts that are in theory about love affairs – conclude not with weddings but with the welcomed death, or anticipated death, of their respective concierges. For Henri Plantin in Fallet’s novel, Mme Pampine’s death is a happy event – all the more so since she dies before informing his wife of his affair: “La mère Pampine était morte pour de bon . . . Des ondes de joie parcouraient Plantin, qui tenait enfin sa preuve personnelle et par neuf de l’existence de Dieu” (208). Not

---

<sup>7</sup> Garbage figures prominently in Marguerite Duras’s twentieth-century short story, “Madame Dodin,” in which the eponymous concierge character despises her tenants because they do not empty their refuse bins regularly: “On s’y fait engueuler parce qu’on a une poubelle” (121). She dreams of dying and leaving her tenants with a full garbage bin to take care of: “Ce qu’elle souhaite, c’est mourir en dormant, une nuit. ‘Avec le matin la poubelle pleine. C’est dommage, je serai pas là pour voir la gueule que vous ferez’” (184).



only is her death welcomed, for Henri it also represents the triumph of good over evil and renews his faith in his preferred all-seeing, all-knowing (but less meddling) entity – God. In Richaud’s short story, the image of Mme Guillot on her deathbed is not as much a source of happiness for Joseph as it is a moment of ironic amusement for the reader. After having moved out, saintly Joseph and Jacqueline send flowers to their former concierge without knowing that Mme Guillot is on her deathbed. More significantly, they send red carnations – the precise flower that she anticipates she would eventually place on her (alive and well) husband’s grave upon his death: “Elle poussa un grand cri quand elle lut la carte de viste . . . ‘Le bouquet que je devrais mettre sur le cercueil de Pépère!’” (53). Both concierges die or are dying where, in theory, they should be all-powerful: the ground floor of the apartment buildings they tend. Mme Pampine’s powers to see, know and tell all are thwarted since she dies before revealing Henri’s secret to his wife. Mme Guillot’s visionary powers are dashed when her prediction of dying before her husband is proved false.

In both Richaud’s short story and Fallet’s novel, the despised mythical Cerberus guarding the threshold between public and private lives turns out to be a mere mortal woman whose death is cause for celebration. These mid-century tales end with their main (male) characters’ wishes all coming true: good triumphs over evil, man slays mythical beast/woman, and the inhabitants take the upper hand over the building caretakers. In other words, these works succeed in eliminating the only “significant threat to male enjoyment of the city” (Marcus 50) – the female concierge.

BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

#### WORKS CITED

- Arlès, Phillippe and Georges Duby. *History of Private Life IV: From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*. Cambridge: Belknap Harvard, 1990.
- Benjamin, José. *La Concierge est dans le cercueil*. Paris: Arcadia, 2008.
- Blanchard, Jerrold. *At Home in Paris: At Peace and at War*. London: Wm. H. Allen and Co., 1871.
- Colozzi, Roger. *André De Richaud, ou, L'éternel retour au pays comtadin*. Brantes: Toulourenc, 2008.
- Duras, Marguerite. “Madame Dodin.” *Des journées entières dans les arbres*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997.
- Fallet, René. *Paris au mois d'août: Roman*. Paris: Denoël, 1964.
- “Giant Anteater.” *World Land Trust*. Web. 3 August 2016.

- Laé, Jean-François. *Dans l'œil du gardien*. Paris: Seuil, 2015.
- Larousse, Pierre. *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle: Français, historique, géographique, mythologique, bibliographique, littéraire, artistique, scientifique, etc.* Paris: Administration du Grand dictionnaire universel, 1866.
- Marcus, Sharon. *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999.
- "Mère." *Trésor de la langue française*, Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales. Web. 5 January 2017.
- "Paris au mois d'août," *Goodreads*. Web. 3 August 2016.
- Richaud, André. *Échec à la concierge: et autres textes*. Talence: Arbre vengeur, 2012.
- Rousseau, James. *Physiologie de la portière*. Paris: Aubert et cie, 1841.

Copyright of Romance Notes is the property of University of North Carolina, Department of Romance Languages and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.