



## Unmasking the Loyal Maidservant in *Germinie Lacerteux*

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### Article abstract

This article argues that by unmasking the secret life of the fictional maidservant, Germinie Lacerteux, the Goncourt brothers develop and describe a nineteenth-century social imaginary of the rebellious female servant. The rebellious maidservant emerges in the nineteenth-century social imagination through an interconnected web of discourses emanating from the period's literature, *faits divers*, household manuals and criminology reports. By analysing *Germinie Lacerteux* in conjunction with nineteenth-century household manuals, this article explores how the Goncourts contributed to this interconnected web of discourses that created the nineteenth-century cultural stereotype of the rebellious female servant. In revealing the 'true' nature of the maidservant in their novel, the Goncourts imply that the bourgeoisie must learn to see the image of the devoted servant as nothing more than a construct in the social imagination. The guardian angel whom the bourgeoisie sought to hire is a myth born out of their increasing fears surrounding the potentially dangerous stranger in their home.

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## Unmasking the Loyal Maidservant in *Germinie Lacerteux*

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**Abstract:** This article argues that by unmasking the secret life of the fictional maidservant, Germinie Lacerteux, the Goncourt brothers develop and describe a nineteenth-century social imaginary of the rebellious female servant. The rebellious maidservant emerges in the nineteenth-century social imagination through an interconnected web of discourses emanating from the period's literature, *faits divers*, household manuals and criminology reports. By analysing *Germinie Lacerteux* in conjunction with nineteenth-century household manuals, this article explores how the Goncourts contributed to this interconnected web of discourses that created the nineteenth-century cultural stereotype of the rebellious female servant. In revealing the 'true' nature of the maidservant in their novel, the Goncourts imply that the bourgeoisie must learn to see the image of the devoted servant as nothing more than a construct in the social imagination. The guardian angel whom the bourgeoisie sought to hire is a myth born out of their increasing fears surrounding the potentially dangerous stranger in their home.

**Résumé :** Dans cet article, nous analyserons comment, en démasquant la vie secrète de la servante fictive, Germinie Lacerteux, les frères Goncourt créent et entretiennent un imaginaire social de la servante comme femme dangereuse au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. C'est ainsi que la servante rebelle apparaît dans l'imagination sociale de cette époque par les références issues de la littérature, des faits divers, des manuels d'éducation domestique et des enquêtes criminologiques. En analysant *Germinie Lacerteux* en conjonction avec les manuels d'éducation domestique de cette époque, cet article propose d'étudier comment les Goncourt ont contribué à ce réseau interconnecté de discours qui a créé le stéréotype culturel de la servante rebelle du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. En révélant la « vraie » nature de la servante dans leur roman, les Goncourt insinuent que la bourgeoisie doit apprendre à considérer l'image de la servante dévouée comme une simple construction de leur imaginaire social. L'ange gardien que la bourgeoisie est convaincue d'employer n'est en réalité qu'un fantasme créé de toute pièce pour venir à bout de leur crainte croissante d'avoir accueilli un étranger mal intentionné au sein de leur foyer.

**Keywords:** Nineteenth Century, Social Imaginary, Servants, Household manuals, *Germinie Lacerteux*, The Goncourt Brothers, Rebellious, Maidservant, Revolt, Fear.

**Mots clés :** dix-neuvième siècle, imaginaire social, domestiques, manuels d'éducation domestique, *Germinie Lacerteux*, frères Goncourt, rebelle, servante, révolte, peur.

When first confronted with the shocking discovery of the secret double life of the Goncourt family's former maidservant, Rose Malingre, Jules de Goncourt wrote: 'Tout à coup, en quelques minutes, j'ai été mis face à face avec une existence inconnue, terrible, horrible de la pauvre fille!'<sup>1</sup> How did the Goncourt brothers' loyal servant of twenty-five years conceal her debts, theft, love affairs, pregnancies, drink problem, and her alleged hysteria, 'sans une échappade à [leurs] yeux, à [leur oreille], à [leurs] sens d'observateurs'?<sup>2</sup> Until Thursday 21 August 1862, Jules and Edmond de Goncourt believed that they had no reason to suspect that Rose was someone other than their devoted servant: 'Une habitude, une affection, un dévouement de vingt-cinq ans, une fille qui savait toute notre vie, qui ouvrait nos lettres en notre absence, à laquelle nous racontions tout.'<sup>3</sup> The uncovering of Rose's hidden life thus arrived as 'une grande amertume'<sup>4</sup> for the brothers, who had naively assumed that they knew their servant's true character: 'C'est affreux, ce déchirement de voile ; c'est comme l'autopsie de quelque chose d'horrible dans une morte tout à coup ouverte.'<sup>5</sup> It is this unveiling, or as I propose in this article, this *unmasking* of the supposed loyal maidservant that fascinated and horrified the Goncourt brothers, prompting them to perform a fictionalized autopsy of Rose's 'true' life through the plight of their eponymous maidservant in *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865). In revealing the 'true' nature of this fictional female servant in their novel, I argue that the Goncourt brothers are creating as well as adding to an entire nineteenth-century social imaginary concerning the female servant figure as a rebellious figure to be feared.

An initial reading of *Germinie Lacerteux* suggests that the female servant protagonist embodies the figure of the fairy; she first appears as a loyal companion who protects and cares for her

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<sup>1</sup> Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Journal : Mémoires de la vie littéraire*, ed. by Robert Ricatte and Robert Kopp, 3 vols, Paris, Robert. Laffont, 1989 [1956], I, p. 848.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 849.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 841-842.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 850.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 849.

mistress, Mlle de Varandeuil, as well as her lover, Jupillon, and their secret child. Whereas fairies typically guide the destinies of other characters, the Goncourts' novel demonstrates the period's fears surrounding a figure who appears to hold the fate of her masters and mistresses in the palm of her hands. A second reading of the novel thus demonstrates that Germinie is an avatar of the malevolent fairy: a figure who rebels against her society, often casting curses upon the lives of other characters. One may think of the malevolent fairies in Perrault's *La Belle aux bois dormants* (1697), and the later 1812 Grimms brothers' adaptation. This article shows that the female servant also emerges as a figure who society fears will also revolt against her role of care and protection by turning on her masters and mistresses.

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The next generation of writers adapted the Goncourts' 'scientific' dissection in their Naturalist method of analyzing the temperaments of their characters, for example Émile Zola in the twenty novels of his Rougon-Macquart cycle (1871–93).<sup>6</sup> For David Baguley and Naomi Schor, *Germinie Lacerteux* is the founding text of Naturalism:<sup>7</sup> a literary movement that Baguley describes as '[l]ife stripped of its veils, its illusions, its pretensions, its poetry. Life in its monstrous, demystifying nakedness.'<sup>8</sup> The Goncourts labelled their novels 'documents humains',<sup>9</sup> insofar as their contents derived from a collage of various documents and sources from their investigations into real-life settings. Indeed, the two aristocratic writers took

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<sup>6</sup> Nathalie Saudo-Welby makes a similar point in "'The Soul with a False Bottom" and "The Deceitful Character": Analysing the Servant in the Goncourts' *Germinie Lacerteux* and George Moore's *Esther Waters*', in Christine Huguet and Fabienne Dabrigéon-Garcier (eds), *George Moore: Across Borders*, Amsterdam/New-York, Rodopi, 2013, p. 215.

<sup>7</sup> See David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 71-96, and Naomi Schor, 'Naturalizing Woman: *Germinie Lacerteux* », *Breaking the Chain: Women, Theory, and French Realist Fiction*', New York, Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 128.

<sup>8</sup> Baguley, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

<sup>9</sup> See Edmond de Goncourt, 'Préface', *La Faustine*, Paris, G. Charpentier, 1882, p. II. This quotation appears to be a nod to Émile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental*, Paris, G. Charpentier, 1902 [1880], p. 51: 'Nous préparerons les voies, nous fournirons des faits d'observation, des documents humains qui pourront devenir très utiles'.

‘expeditions’ into the world of the lower classes to create works that they deemed explicitly to show the truth of human nature, such as *Henriette Maréchal* (1865), and Edmond’s *La Fille Élisa* (1877).<sup>10</sup> When it came to transforming Rose’s double life into a novel, they likewise stated in the preface to *Germinie Lacerteux* that ‘ce roman est un roman vrai [...] ce livre vient de la rue.’<sup>11</sup> Jules’s mistress, Maria, is the first to inform the brothers of Rose’s story.<sup>12</sup> The Goncourts’ diary also documents Rose’s real lovers, as well as other people who serve as the inspiration for the secondary characters in the novel.<sup>13</sup> The different settings featured in *Germinie Lacerteux* are similarly ‘documented’ in their diary.<sup>14</sup> It is of course ironic that the very writers who prided themselves on their observation skills were in fact entirely blind to the alternate existence of their ‘loyal’ maidservant.<sup>15</sup> In the alleged first Naturalist novel, the Goncourts’ artistic representation of the truth was therefore not entirely created from their objective observations of the world; rather, it was formed through their culturally constructed fantasies of their servant’s hidden life.

Featuring a lower-class subject matter, the Goncourts’ novel sought to write against readers’ literary expectations of archetypal aristocratic heroes:<sup>16</sup> Germinie’s story, they argue, is a new form of the ancient genre of tragedy that puts the lower classes at its forefront.<sup>17</sup> Germinie’s secret, alternative lifestyle begins when she falls in love with Jupillon, the son of the local *crémère*; she exists as both a maidservant and a dedicated lover. The maidservant then steals

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<sup>10</sup> See George Joesph Becker (ed.), ‘On True Novels’, in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 117-119.

<sup>11</sup> Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Germinie Lacerteux*, Paris, Flammarion, 2017 [1865], p. 55. All subsequent references to this edition are abbreviated to *GL* followed by the page number in the main body of this article.

<sup>12</sup> Nadine Satiat describes the sources of inspiration found in the Goncourt’s diary in her introduction to the novel: ‘Introduction’, *Germinie Lacerteux*, Paris, Flammarion, 2017 [1865], p. 20-24.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Baguley, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55-56.

from her mistress, Mlle de Varandeuil, and accumulates many debts to provide Jupillon with the money he needs to fund his lifestyle. As the novel progresses, the maidservant's double life spirals out of control. She becomes an alcoholic and exhibits possible hysterical tendencies before she dies from a severe illness. Like the Goncourt brothers, Mlle de Varandeuil mourns her maidservant before she is made aware of Germinie's secret lifestyle: 'elle restait sans paroles devant cette vie dont le voile se déchirait morceau par morceau, dont les hontes s'éclairaient une à une.' (*GL*, 254). For Baguley, Germinie's life is depicted through this series of tragic falls she experiences.<sup>18</sup> He goes on to state how Germinie is a victim of her social status, 'and her fate illustrative of the plight of the "people".'<sup>19</sup> As Sander L. Gilman points out, Roman Catholic philosopher, Friedrich von Hügel, highlighted a common idea that was circulating during the second half of the nineteenth century; he claimed that it is 'by nature' that the lower-class female is 'physically weaker and more given to "coquetry, love of pleasure, dislike of work, desire for luxury and ostentation, love of ornament, alcoholism, avarice, immorality, etc."' than women of the middle and upper-classes.<sup>20</sup> The fictional maidservant's fate is thus perceived as predestined: her behaviour determined by her biology, class, and environment, as well as the male writer's prejudices of class, gender and race. In his laudatory article on the novel in the *Salut public*, Zola likewise observes that the fictional maidservant's fate

dépend uniquement des événements de la vie, du milieu. Mettez Germinie dans une autre position, et elle ne succombera pas ; donnez-lui un mari, des enfants à aimer et elle sera excellente mère, excellente épouse.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>20</sup> See Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> Émile Zola, 'Germinie Lacerteux : Par MM. Ed et J. de Goncourt', in Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Germinie Lacerteux*, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

In their response to Zola's article, the Goncourts were in full agreement: Germinie would indeed have only succeeded in life if she was part of a different class.<sup>22</sup>

The Goncourts' perception of the maidservant links to a more general misogynistic perception of women by male writers. As Marie-Agnès Sourieau argues, the determinism featured in *Germinie Lacerteux* is the Goncourts' attempt at capturing 'une "vérité" de la femme' as an 'énigme sexuelle' – a theory which obsessed writers and doctors alike during this period.<sup>23</sup> The Goncourts had read Jean-Baptiste Louyer-Villermay's article 'Hystérie' (1818) in Nicolas Adelon and others' *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales* (1812-22) and Jean-Louis Brachet's *Traité de l'hystérie* (1847), and had also attended Charcot's famous lessons on hysteria at the Salpêtrière.<sup>24</sup> It is as a result of their fascination for the hysterical woman that Sourieau argues:

c'est parce que pour [les Goncourt] le comportement de Rose/Germinie ne peut s'expliquer et s'excuser qu'en raison d'un dérangement psycho-pathologique lié à ses origines sociales, qu'ils vont en faire une hystérique.<sup>25</sup>

*Germinie Lacerteux* thus seems predicated on the naturalization of the lower-class woman who is predetermined to succumb to hysteria, and therefore vice, as a part of her condition. This article, however, proposes to build upon these previous readings of *Germinie Lacerteux* in order to demonstrate that, by revealing the 'true' nature of the maidservant, the Goncourt brothers are describing, as well as developing their century's anxieties surrounding the female servant figure.

### **The Social Imaginary of the Nineteenth-Century Rebellious Servant**

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<sup>22</sup> Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, 'À Émile Zola', in *Germinie Lacerteux*, *ibid.*, p. 288-289.

<sup>23</sup> See Marie-Agnès Sourieau, 'L'Expression du mutisme dans *Germinie Lacerteux*', in Carrol F. Coates (ed.), *Repression and Expression: Literary and Social Coding in Nineteenth-Century France*, New York, Peter Lang, 1996, p. 73-79.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

After the Revolution, and more particularly the Terror, French society became increasingly wary about the strangers with whom they shared their homes. Female servants especially were deemed a threat to the bourgeoisie's class stability, and a dangerous influence around their children.<sup>26</sup> The century's laws classified servants alongside such outcasts – *bas-fonds* – of society: criminals, bankrupts, and paupers.<sup>27</sup> The female servant was thus the bourgeoisie's principal (and possibly only) contact with society's *bas-fonds*: the underbelly of the city that the bourgeoisie perceived as corrupt and disease-ridden. These fears concerning the servant class contributed to the development of the figure of the rebellious female servant as a social imaginary.<sup>28</sup>

Raymond de Ryckère's study of servant criminality, *La Servante criminelle : Étude de criminologie professionnelle*, published in 1908 but focusing on the nineteenth-century female servant, provides evidence of this construct of the rebellious servant. A self-professed specialist in female servant criminality, he gathered his evidence from the period's *faits divers*, doctors' reports, and household manuals, as well as from literature, in order to prove that the female servant was a dangerous woman. He argues that Octave Mirbeau's fictionalized maidservant in *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (1900), Célestine, 'est comme la cousine de Germinie Lacerteux'.<sup>29</sup> Ryckère paradoxically draws on the personalities and actions of these fictional servants, and later Leo Tolstoy's Katucha, a character featured in the novel *Resurrection*

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<sup>26</sup> See Jessica Rushton, 'Destabilizing the Nineteenth-Century Maidservant Revolt Narrative: Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce* (2016)', in Hannah McIntyre et Hayley O'Kell (ed.), *Echo. MHRA Working Papers in the Humanities*, vol. 15, 2021, p. 40-42, <http://www.mhra.org.uk/publications/wph-15>, (page consulted October 12, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Sarah Maza, *Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century France: The Uses of Loyalty*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 312.

<sup>28</sup> I apply to the maidservant Dominique Kalifa's definition of a social imaginary as 'un lieu où s'enchevêtrent mille images, mille références venues de la littérature, des enquêtes sociales de l'hygiène publique, des faits divers, des sciences morales et politiques, de la chanson, du cinéma'. See Dominique Kalifa, *Les Bas-Fonds : Histoire d'un imaginaire*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2013, p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Raymond de Ryckère, *La Servante criminelle : Étude de criminologie professionnelle*, Paris, A. Maloine, 1908, p. 4.



(1899), and Henrik Ibsen's Regine Engstrand, the maid character in *Ghosts* (1881), in order to bring his arguments about the 'real' criminal maidservant to life.<sup>30</sup> He concludes that servants are amongst the most dangerous of all female criminals: '[l]a servante est essentiellement une criminaloïde',<sup>31</sup> that is to say, a woman who projects an upright façade in order to conceal a criminal lifestyle. He emphasizes the period's fear that the maidservant is not all that she first appears. In seeking to expose the true life of a maidservant in *Germinie Lacerteux*, the Goncourts concurrently contributed to this interconnected web of discourses that created the nineteenth-century cultural stereotype of the rebellious female servant, thereby adding to their century's anxieties concerning household employees.

By reading *Germinie Lacerteux* in conjunction with examples from nineteenth-century household management manuals that express similar anxieties concerning female servants, this article demonstrates how the Goncourt brothers are feeding into the creation of the rebellious maidservant type in the nineteenth-century imagination. Household manuals provide a useful source for understanding how society perceived its servants. Nineteenth-century household manuals were principally written by upper-class women<sup>32</sup> to address the inexperienced mistresses of middle-class homes who were taking over responsibility for the hiring, education, well-being and potential dismissal of household servants, and who typically employed no more than three or four servants.<sup>33</sup> While the maidservant is typically perceived as a companion for her mistress, these upper-class writers of household manual writers can also be considered as

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> See Claude Petitfrère, *L'Œil du maître : maîtres et serviteurs de l'époque classique au romantisme*, Brussels, Éditions Complexe, 2006, p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Theresa McBride, states that 'One of the problems of the housewife at the beginning of the nineteenth century was her lack of training for her "profession"'. See Theresa McBride, *The Domestic Revolution: The Modernisation of Household Service in England and France, 1820-1920*, London, Croom Helm, 1976, p. 28. See also Maza, *op. cit.*, p. 19 and Cissie Fairchilds, *Domestic Enemies: Servants and Their Masters in Old Regime France*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984, p. 52.

figures of accompaniment for the bourgeois mistress insofar as they educate women in the management of their homes, as well as also providing a means of support for the growing fears surrounding servants during this period. Although the depiction of the servant is secondary to the manual's principal aim of accompanying the bourgeoisie in their education of running a household effectively, these manuals are essential to deepening an understanding of how the representation of the female servant was created and reinforced in the minds of nineteenth-century society, in particular the target readership of upper-class women and the petite bourgeoisie. The emphasis on servant unruliness in these guides seemed entangled with the insecurities of these new mistresses. As the historical studies on servants by Sarah Maza and Theresa McBride point out, this new readership formed of middle-class housewives had not been taught the basics of household management.<sup>34</sup> For Maza, this inexperience meant that 'mistresses were nervous and harsh because they were new to the game',<sup>35</sup> which resulted in the tighter rules found in household management to keep servants firmly under control. Household manuals implicitly provide a way of understanding the period's mistrust of even the most 'loyal' appearing servants, serving as a repository for certain social and gender biases of the nineteenth century, that is to say, a means for instilling prejudices surrounding the maidservant in this period.

There is a dichotomy of the loyal and the rebellious maidservant in the nineteenth-century French imagination. For their part, Anne Martin-Fugier and Susan Yates focus on an opposition between the good and the malevolent maid.<sup>36</sup> In particular, Yates' *Maid and Mistress* contrasts the *perle* (the pure and submissive servant) with the *souillon* (the sexual temptress whose

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<sup>34</sup> See Fairchilds, *op. cit.*, p. 52 and McBride, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> Maza, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

<sup>36</sup> See Susan Yates, *Maid and Mistress: Feminine Solidarity and Class Difference in Five Nineteenth-Century French Texts*, New York, Peter Lang, 1991. See also Anne Martin-Fugier, *La Place des bonnes : la domesticité féminine en 1900*, Paris, Grasset, 1979.

presence threatens the entire household), arguing that the latter figure represents the bourgeois male's image of the feared woman.<sup>37</sup> Rather than analyzing how the two archetypes exist as separate entities in *Germinie Lacerteux*, or how Germinie symbolizes her mistress's repressed sexuality by contrastive metonymy,<sup>38</sup> this article argues that the angelic fairy of the maidservant is an idealized image, born out of a fear of the subversive and threatening maidservant already rooted in the nineteenth-century cultural imagination. The Goncourts suggest that the angelic fairy evoked through the *servante fidèle* cannot exist in the nineteenth century in which female servants (because of their predetermined biology, class, environment and gender) ultimately succumb to vice. Their novel implies that the bourgeoisie must learn to see this image of the devoted servant as nothing more than a construct. While *Germinie Lacerteux* can be read as a novel focusing on the inevitable plight of a lower-class heroine, it should also be understood as a warning, playing on and stoking the fears of its nineteenth-century bourgeois readership: your servant is not who you think she is.

### **The Myth of the Angelic Fairy in the House**

At the start of *Germinie Lacerteux*, the Goncourts depict Germinie as a devoted maidservant who is relieved when she learns that her sick mistress will live: 'elle se mit avec une frénésie de bonheur et une furie de caresses à embrasser, par-dessus les couvertures, le pauvre corps tout maigre de la vieille femme' (*GL*, 59). Like the figure of the fairy who gifts others with her care, generosity and protection, Germinie also appears to tend to her mistress's every need. As the novel progresses, Germinie extends her generosity by caring for Jupillon, his family and their child. The Goncourts inform the reader that the maidservant makes herself indispensable to Jupillons in order to feel a sense of belonging: '[p]our être toujours là et avoir le droit de

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<sup>37</sup> Yates, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Schor explores this argument further in 'Naturalizing Woman: *Germinie Lacerteux*', *op. cit.*, p. 127-134.

toujours y être [...] elle s'était faite la domestique de la maison' (*GL*, 112-113). The maidservant also has a deep affection for her mistress, whom she then even prioritizes over her own family. Indeed, Germinie's entire existence seems dependent on that of her mistress: 'Elle se sentait tout entière et pour toujours rattachée à sa maîtresse, et elle éprouvait comme une horreur d'avoir seulement pensé à détacher sa vie de la sienne' (*GL*, 102). The relationship between the maidservant and the mistress becomes a pseudo-familial bond, as Mlle de Varandeuil states: 'ce n'est pas une bonne, ce n'est pas une domestique pour moi, cette fille-là: c'est comme la famille que je n'ai pas eue!' (*GL*, 239). In the eyes of her mistress, Germinie embodies the idealized *perle*: the archetypal sincere servant 'who asks for nothing better than to serve her master's family until the day she dies'.<sup>39</sup> One may think of other loyal nineteenth-century fictional servants such as Honoré de Balzac's La Grande Nanon in *Eugénie Grandet* (1833), as well as the eponymous protagonist of Balzac's *Pierrette* (1840), George Sand's *Jeanne* (1844), Alphonse de Lamartine's *Geneviève : Histoire d'une servante* (1851), and of such as well as lesser known works as the anonymous *Louise, ou la bonne femme de chambre* (1841). Flaubert, of course, would go on to write his own tale of the devoted servant, Félicité, in *Un cœur simple* (1877).

While one can also trace this servant archetype through medieval French literature and neoclassical comedy,<sup>40</sup> Martin-Fugier traces its emergence back to the history of Catholicism: '[l]'exaltation du dévouement absolu de la servante repose sur la mythologie chrétienne.'<sup>41</sup> She draws attention to how certain nineteenth-century household manuals projected biblical imagery of pious, devoted servants through describing the 'vies de servantes parfaites comme sainte Blandine, sainte Rose de Lima, sainte Chrétienne, Marie Dias, Armelle Nicolas "la

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<sup>39</sup> Yates, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Martin-Fugier, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

bonne Armelle”’,<sup>42</sup> as well as Saint Zita, the patron of female servants and working women.<sup>43</sup> Andrew Counter further points out that although a number of these nineteenth-century instructional texts were ‘authored by Catholic clergy, published by Catholic publishing houses or at the behest of Catholic society, or reported by Catholic bibliographies’,<sup>44</sup> the majority were written by upper-class women and men who ‘all offer their advice within a specifically Catholic *social* frame, and [are all] explicit about the necessity of religious observance to good domestic relations’.<sup>45</sup> As one household manual points out, with regard to the servant, whether male or female:

Aussi doit-il obéir en tout, sans hésitation, sans observation, sans répugnance, à moins qu’il s’agisse de commandements contre la morale, car maîtres et domestiques doivent avant tout obéir à Dieu.<sup>46</sup>

These manuals therefore promoted the idea that servants should be considered as ‘chrétiens’, encouraging qualities such as ‘l’obéissance’, ‘une fidélité scrupuleuse’, ‘un zèle de tous les instants’, and ‘une discrétion à toute épreuve’.<sup>47</sup> Yet, as Cissie Fairchilds rightly maintains, ‘[t]his image represented what the worried employers of the nineteenth century desperately hoped their servants would be.’<sup>48</sup> The guardian angel whom the bourgeoisie sought to hire was therefore a myth born out of their increasing fears and mistrust of the stranger in their homes. The emphasis on the *perle* figure in nineteenth-century household management guides serves to mask, but in doing so also reveals, the century’s concerns over the *souillon*, a figure connected to dirt, sickness, animality, criminality and sexuality.<sup>49</sup> While Émilie Serminadiras points out that the Goncourts had an ambiguous attitude towards Catholicism, noting that ‘[ils]

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Andrew J. Counter, ‘Bad Examples: Children, Servants, and Masturbation in Nineteenth-Century France’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 22, n° 3, 2013, p. 405.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406.

<sup>46</sup> Madame Celnart, *Manuel complet des domestiques, ou l’art de former de bons serviteurs*, Paris, Librairie Encyclopédique de Boret, 1836, p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Fairchilds, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

<sup>49</sup> Yates, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

se faisant tour à tour les défenseurs et les détracteurs du catholicisme et de ses institutions’ especially in their novels, *Soeur Philomène* (1861) and *Madame Gervaisais* (1869),<sup>50</sup> the Goncourts use this Catholic social frame in order to create, well as feed into, the social imaginary of the rebellious maidservant in *Germinie Lacerteux*. Their novel reveals that the rebellious maidservant manipulates the image of the loyal guardian angel figure for her own advantage: she conceals her secret double life from the eyes of her mistress.

Whereas Yates sees Germinie as a ‘martyr figure’, whose life is ‘destroyed by submission to cruel and ruthless men’ while herself exemplifying ‘humility, generosity and selflessness’,<sup>51</sup> this view of her is a fantasy projected by the novel in order to first mask, and then to emphasize through counterpoint, the other side of her representation. Indeed, the more Germinie leads her double life, ‘elle devenait cette créature abjecte et débraillée dont la robe glisse au ruisseau, – *une souillon*’ (*GL*, 186). The dichotomy of Germinie’s character reveals how even the most long-serving, loyal servants are not fully to be trusted. The Goncourts present the maidservant as outwardly projecting the persona of a *perle* whilst internally revolting against bourgeois norms as a *souillon* who succumbs to her own desires:

Elle menait ainsi comme deux existences. Elle était comme deux femmes[...] [E]lle parvint à séparer ces deux existences, à les vivre toutes les deux sans les mêler, à ne pas laisser se confondre les deux femmes qui étaient en elle, à rester auprès de Mlle de Varandeuil la fille honnête et rangée qu’elle avait été, à sortir de l’orgie sans en emporter le goût, à montrer quand elle venait de quitter son amant une sorte de pudeur de vieille fille dégoutée du scandale des autres bonnes. (*GL*, 178).

While the loyal and the rebellious maidservant figures are often considered as two separate entities or foils, the Goncourts reveal that the angelic, image of the servant as a fairy is a socio-cultural myth. This figure is used as a disguise for the *souillon* to go about her bidding.

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<sup>50</sup> Émilie Serminadiras, ‘Grandeur et folie de la religion : la représentation de la dévotion féminine de *Soeur Philomène* à *Madame Gervaisais*’, *Cahiers Edmond et Jules de Goncourt*, n° 22, 2015, p. 85-86.

<sup>51</sup> Yates, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

Ironically, Germinie prides herself on appearing as an exceptional servant: '[e]lle était à part de ses camarades' (*GL*, 130) who drank, went dancing and had affairs. Her reputation as a loyal maidservant provides her with the mask that exudes 'le parfum d'honnêteté sévère et insoupçonnable, spécial aux vieilles bonnes et aux femmes laides' (*GL*, 179). The old servants and ugly women are perceived as honest because they seemingly do not transgress the sexual code of their period. Yet, the Goncourts warn their readers that even old servants can hide their 'true' nature. While Germinie is labelled 'la vieille' (*GL*, 129) by the younger servants when she follows Jupillon to various dances in order to attract his attention, her physical description is embedded within nineteenth-century stereotypes that serve to connect the representation of the servant to the figure of the prostitute:

Germinie était laide. Ses cheveux, d'un châtain foncé qui paraissaient noirs, frisottaient et se tortillaient en ondes revêches, en petites mèches dures et rebelles [...] Son front [était] petit, poli, bombé [...] Son nez [était] court, relevé, largement troué, avec les narines ouvertes. (*GL*, 95-96).

In the most widely read study of prostitution in Paris in the nineteenth century, *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris* (Paris: J. B. Baillière, 1836), A. J. B. Parent-Duchatelet categorizes the prostitute through her physical appearance.<sup>52</sup> Gilman's study highlights how nineteenth-century European and Russian doctors and medical experts used Parent-Duchatelet's 'catalogues of stigmata to identify those women who have, as Freud states, "an aptitude for prostitution".'<sup>53</sup> For example, facial abnormalities such as 'misshapen noses, overdevelopment of the parietal region of the skull' and black thick hair are all signs that point to the 'primitive' nature of the prostitute's physiognomy.<sup>54</sup> Germinie can therefore be read as inherently doomed simply on account of her physiognomy. Her frizzy hair also foreshadows her future disobedience, as tightly curled hair was associated with 'primitive' traits and

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<sup>52</sup> Gilman, *op. cit.*, p. 95-96.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>54</sup> Gilman, *op. cit.*, p. 95-96.

therefore deviant sexuality in the racist mentality of the nineteenth century.<sup>55</sup> Gilman's study also highlights how, in the nineteenth century, stereotypes of the prostitute became linked to stereotypes of the black woman as possessed of broad buttocks, large hips, wide pelvises and even different genitalia.<sup>56</sup> Germinie's 'primitive' aspect is further emphasized by her 'ressaut des hanches' (*GL*, 96). Her initial description, therefore, predestines the character as a *souillon*. The Goncourts thus present their period's misogynistic view that women who succumb to their desires must be linked to the figure of the prostitute.

Furthermore, Germinie's split personality can be read as a symptom of her 'hysteria'.<sup>57</sup> The Goncourts exemplify their period's (male) bourgeois fascination with sexually transgressive women, assumed to have medical issues that require treatment. Yet the dichotomy presented by the Goncourts serves principally to tap into nineteenth-century discourses concerning the proper control of servants by warning their educated, bourgeois readership that they should ever remain cautious and vigilant even, or perhaps especially, around their most loyal, and long-serving servants, for these strangers may have a hidden agenda.

The Goncourts describe Germinie's behaviour as a 'mensonge d'apparences' (*GL*, 179), and even as a form of acting: '[une] horrible comédie qu'elle jouait' (*GL*, 158). By donning the mask of a loyal servant, Germinie skilfully suppresses her emotions:

Le miracle de cette vie de désordre et de déchirement, de cette vie honteuse et brisée, fut qu'elle n'éclatât pas. Germinie n'en laissa rien jaillir au dehors, elle n'en laissa rien monter à ses lèvres, elle n'en laissa rien voir dans sa physionomie, rien paraître dans son air, et le fond maudit de son existence resta toujours caché à sa maîtresse. (*GL*, 175).

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85-91.

<sup>57</sup> Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1994, p. 33-40.



The loyal maidservant mask thus allows Germinie to appear as a trustworthy, dependable servant whose life cannot be separated from her service. Germinie consistently lies as part of this deception: ‘Elle eut un éternel : – Je n’ai rien, mademoiselle, – dit de cette voix sourde qui étouffe un secret’ (*GL*, 158). The Goncourts repeatedly use the verb ‘étouffer’ to emphasize how Germinie masks her hidden lifestyle: ‘Déboires, mépris, chagrins, sacrifices, mort de son enfant, trahison de son amant, agonie de son amour, tout demeura en elle silencieux, étouffé, comme si elle appuyait des deux mains sur son cœur’ (*GL*, 177). In suppressing her emotions and experiences, the maidservant buries her ‘true’ nature behind a mask of silence. This performance consequently protects the maidservant from the suspicions of her mistress; the Goncourts highlight that ‘mademoiselle ne soupçonna rien’ (*GL*, 173). In the scene in which Germinie is caught sleeping in her mistress’s bed, the maidservant is again depicted as trying to hide her alternative lifestyle as a *souillon*: ‘[e]lle se mit à fourrager la pailasse en tournant le dos à sa maîtresse pour lui cacher le rouge de la boisson sur son visage’ (*GL*, 152). The Goncourts then demonstrate that by donning the loyal maidservant mask, Germinie ‘n’avait ni un propos ni un genre de tenue qui éveillât le soupçon de sa vie clandestine; rien en elle ne sentait ses nuits’ (*GL*, 178). While the writers suggest that the maidservant’s loyal performance<sup>58</sup>son affection pour mademoiselle’ (*GL*, 158), Germinie likewise dons the appearance of the loyal maid in a bid to protect her livelihood, as well as her life from possible imprisonment for stealing money from her mistress.<sup>59</sup> The Goncourts’ novel can thus be read as feeding into the social imagination of the rebellious maidservant as a figure who manipulates a loyal presence in order to mask her desires and ‘true’ nature.

### **The Fear of the Rebellious Maidservant**

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<sup>59</sup> See *Germinie Lacerteux*, p. 182-184.

In her 1832 nineteenth-century household management guidebook advising mistresses on the proper surveillance and control of their servants, Mme Celnart draws her bourgeois readers' attention to *les anciens domestiques*. She warns that servants, whether male or female, who have worked in a household for many years may come to abuse their positions:

Tout fier d'avoir acquis la bienveillance de ses maîtres, non seulement il ne fait rien pour la conserver, mais il semble prendre à tâche d'en abuser. Il se figure que ses longs services lui ont donné des droits, qu'il est dans la maison un personnage indispensable : que les autres domestiques lui doivent de la soumission, les étrangers de la déférence, ses maîtres, de la gratitude. [...] Comme il voit qu'à raison de son long séjour, de ses services passés, de son zèle, de son âge, on use d'indulgence à son égard, qu'on craint de le mortifier, il néglige son ouvrage, se fait juge des ordres qu'il reçoit, les modifie à sa convenance[.]<sup>60</sup>

By warning her contemporaries to remain vigilant around their long-standing servants, Mme Celnart expresses her society's fears of social revolution: 'Pour peu que la vieillesse, la bonté, la facilité de caractère désarment son maître contre cette domination croissante, le maître devient esclave et le serviteur devient tyran.'<sup>61</sup> Whereas the French Revolutionaries saw the 'tyran' as the King, and also by extension the master of the household, counter-Revolutionaries deemed the 'tyran' as the Revolutionary, and more exclusively, the Terrorist. This manual thus suggests that the bourgeoisie naturally assimilated the female servant with the *sans-culottes*, the Terrorists of the lower classes who they feared had the capacity to again take revenge on their masters and lead them to their deaths.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, during the Terror, a number of 'loyal' servants denounced their masters and mistresses to the Revolutionary Tribunal.<sup>63</sup> The female servant thus emerges in the social imagination as a figure who is associated with the dangerous Revolutionary.

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<sup>60</sup> Madame Celnart, *op. cit.*, p. 38-39.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>62</sup> Maza, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

Germinie exemplifies this bourgeois construct of the rebellious servant who relies on her previous reputation as an honest, trustworthy servant. Readers are told that as her double life begins to take over, ‘elle négligeait tout autour d’elle. Elle ne rangeait plus, elle ne nettoyait plus, elle ne lavait plus. Elle laissait le désordre et la saleté entrer dans l’appartement’ (GL, 186). In her 1901 manual, addressing her previous experiences in nineteenth-century households, Marie Delorme outlines how ‘l’excès de saleté et de négligence’ are the most unacceptable faults: ‘quand une domestique est absolument incorrigible sur ce point, ayez le courage de vous en défaire.’<sup>64</sup> Delorme is seeking to reinforce the bourgeois mistress’s power over her servants. Yet in doing so, Delorme lays bare the period’s wariness around servants: its fears of a backlash, even a Terror, which would see servants rising up to take the place of their masters and mistresses, killing them in their sleep, or harm their children.<sup>65</sup>

As the novel progresses, Germinie’s bitterness augments and she begins to defy her mistress:

Au moindre mot, elle se hérissait. Mademoiselle ne pouvait plus lui adresser une observation, demander la moindre chose, témoigner une volonté, un désir : tout était pris par elle comme un reproche. [...] Germinie redoubla de mauvaise humeur, de remarques impertinentes, de plaintes maussades. À tout moment, forgeant des torts à sa maîtresse, elle la punissait par un mutisme que rien ne pouvait rompre. (GL, 158).

While the Goncourts do not provide explicit examples of Germinie’s ‘remarques impertinentes’ or her ‘plaintes maussades’, they imply that the servant is rebelling by projecting her anger onto her mistress with her violent words and deathly silences. Germinie thus obtains a sense of power over Mlle de Varandeuil through these interactions. The rebellious servant is shown to punish her mistress, reversing the roles as if she were now the mistress reprimanding her servant. Mlle de Varandeuil then becomes aggravated by Germinie’s behaviour:

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<sup>64</sup> Marie Delorme, *Une maison bien tenue : conseils aux jeunes maîtresses de maison*, Paris, Librairie Armand Colin, 1901, p. 5.

<sup>65</sup> Fairchilds, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

Une dizaine de fois, mademoiselle avait tenté de piquer là-dessus l'amour-propre de Germinie ; mais alors, tout un jour, c'était un nettoyage si forcené et accompagné de tels accès d'humeur, que mademoiselle se promettait de ne plus recommencer. (*GL*, 186).

After attempting to reprimand her servant, Germinie's repercussions prove too much for Mlle de Varandeuil. She decides henceforth to keep up appearances by explaining to her friends that 'Germinie est malade, et j'aime mieux qu'elle ne se tue pas' (*GL*, 187). Mlle de Varandeuil's *laissez-faire* attitude masks her concerns about having to replace Germinie were she to die or be dismissed. Yet the mistress's fears of losing Germinie have become greater than her fears of keeping a potentially deranged servant in her home:

L'habitude, la volonté qui s'éteint, l'horreur du changement, la crainte des nouveaux visages, tout les dispose à des faiblesses, à des concessions, à des lâchetés. [...] [M]ademoiselle ne disait rien. Elle avait l'air de ne rien voir. (*GL*, 158-159).

The narration repeats this reasoning when Mlle de Varandeuil's suspicions of Germinie increase: 'comme elle connaissait la nature entêtée de sa bonne et qu'elle n'espérait pas la faire changer, elle ne lui parlait de rien' (*GL*, 177). Although Mlle de Varandeuil feels particularly close to her servant, showing signs of affection towards her in the novel, this scene shows that the mistress would therefore prefer to suffer in the terrible company of her current servant than potentially end up alone or alongside someone worse. The mistress reflects the period's anxieties around the hiring of new servants, and thus strangers, to the home.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the 'bureau de placement' emerged as a business in the nineteenth century specifically in order to provide masters and mistresses with the reassurance that they were hiring reliable, trustworthy servants.<sup>67</sup> This was a service that the previous centuries had not needed, with the turnover of servants being small as they often remained in one employment their entire lives.

Mlle de Varandeuil's actions also reveal that she fears a backlash from her servant:

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<sup>66</sup> See Martin-Fugier, *op. cit.*, p. 65-66.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Parfois, quand Germinie était sortie, elle se hasardait à donner avec ses mains goutteuses un coup de serviette sur la commode, un coup de plumeau sur un cadre. Elle se dépêchait, craignant d'être grondée, d'avoir une scène si sa bonne rentrait et la voyait. (*GL*, 187).

Mlle de Varandeuil's anxieties around her servant are emphasized by her scandalous need to clean her own home. Cleaning up after her maidservant, the mistress transgresses the social codes of her period, becoming the servant to her servant. Germinie becomes the 'tyran' of her household: 'elle ne travaillait presque plus; elle servait à peine' (*GL*, 187). The Goncourts shock their readership<sup>68</sup> by reversing the roles between the mistress and the servant, echoing the warning in Mme Celnart's household manual. Mlle de Varandeuil has indeed reverted to the original domestic role in which she had found herself as a young girl. With the Revolution negatively impacting her family's financial situation, Mlle de Varandeuil is then seen by her father as 'une domestique qu'il avait là sous la main' (*GL*, 69). Her father then even goes as far as treating Mlle de Varandeuil worse than his actual maidservant-mistress who is consequently elevated to a position of power in the home:

Elle finissait par gouverner l'intérieur, le père et la fille. Un jour arriva où M. de Varandeuil voulut la faire asseoir à sa table, et la faire servir par [Mlle de Varandeuil]. C'en était trop, Mlle de Varandeuil se révolta sous l'outrage et se redressa de toute la hauteur de son indignation. (*GL*, 74).

While in this past scene Mlle de Varandeuil revolts against her servitude, her current situation with Germinie forces her back into submission. Germinie thus reinstates the fears of yet another female servant reversing the roles between maidservant and mistress. Blind to the alternate life of her maidservant, Mlle de Varandeuil ironically worries that she would probably hire someone worse than Germinie. The Goncourts are here warning their bourgeois readership to

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<sup>68</sup> Flaubert describes how 'Le livre des Bichons excite un dégoût universel, dont ils paraissent être très fier'. See Gustave Flaubert, *Cf. lettre de Flaubert à sa nièce Caroline*, 6. Fév. 1865, *Lettres de Flaubert à sa nièce Caroline*, Paris, Fasquelle, Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1922. For more readers' reactions, see 'Réactions diverses' in Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Germinie Lacerteux*, *op. cit.*, p. 275-289.

take note of both Mlle de Varandeuil's mistake with Germinie and their own mistake with Rose.

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By reading the Goncourt's novel alongside nineteenth-century household management guidebooks, we can see that *Germinie Lacerteux* reflects and reinforces nineteenth-century fears surrounding the rebellious female servant. The Goncourts suggest that even the most loyal servants are not to be trusted. Their novel reveals how the bourgeoisie imagined that their female servants were angelic, fairy figures in the home as a way of masking their fears of the rebellious female servant. Like the malevolent fairy figure, the *souillon* is a threat to her master and mistresses' lives and has the potential power to destroy all order within the home. She is a figure who is intertwined in the bourgeoisie's mind with the Revolutionary Terrorist of the French Revolution. While Germinie does not go as far as murdering her mistress in her rebellion, other tyrannical rebellious maidservant types can be found in further novels and short stories in this period, such as the murderous female protagonist featured in Barbey d'Aurevilly's short story 'Le Bonheur dans le crime' as part of *Les Diaboliques* (1874), and Octave Mirbeau's fictional maidservant in *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (1900). The Goncourts create and feed into this social imaginary of the rebellious maidservant; they alert their readership to the fact that the only thing standing between a mistress and her servant is the money that separates their very fragile class positions.