French Women Writers, Children's Literature, and the First World War

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Recently, many scholars have begun to examine the cultural discourse produced during the First World War and how it shaped civilians' understandings of it. This represents a significant redirection of scholarly energies away from the political, military, and economic aspects that affected both the outcome of the war and the experiences of civilians on the home front. Scholarly works such as Charles Rearick's *The French in Love and War* (1997) examine the optimistic expression of patriotism ever present in French wartime culture. According to Rearick, French wartime culture emphasized "the little people" as personified by the "poilu," the popular representation of the French infantryman. Rearick argues that such representations comprised a discourse that sought to create a cohesive sense of national identity and experience among the French people.¹ Such rhetoric was employed by French authors, artists, and intellectuals to distinguish between the French and other "civilized" peoples versus the foreign and "uncivilized" Germans. This enhanced the clear sense of cultural superiority of the French over the enemy and imbued the war with a higher moral purpose."²

² While many scholars have contributed to these insights, here I rely chiefly on Charles Rearick and Martha Hanna, *The Mobilization of Intellect: French Scholars and Writers During the Great War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
A burgeoning area within this field of study is the examination of materials both concerned with and produced by women and children. As two non-conscripted groups, women's and children's experiences offer scholars a unique window into wartime culture. While women as the audience for wartime propaganda and for how they figured into nationalistic iconography has often been studied, few works have focused entirely on women as creators of wartime propaganda. Although children could not participate in combat, they became a primary target of the French government and intellectuals alike for indoctrinating patriotic zeal. One way in which they sought to reach children was through mass media. Posters, toys, advertisements, and storybooks were produced and circulated throughout Europe in support of the allies' war effort. The French government in particular utilized their relatively new national school system to indoctrinate children. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau's La guerre des enfants vividly illustrates the many media targeting children during this time period. Rife with characterizations of "barbaric" Germans, children's media relied heavily upon racist depictions of German aggression in order both to emphasize the benevolent nature of French national character and to frighten children with the monstrosity of foreign invaders.

This essay will examine several examples of war-related children's literature in order to ascertain how women authors in particular presented issues of warfare, violence, and international

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relations to children. By portraying the war experience in a manner appropriate for young children, female authors strove to instill notions of national pride and civic duty while presenting the war as a conflict necessary to secure French safety. By embracing these ideals, they not only espoused ideals of nationalism but also embodied notions of maternalism, offering uniquely gendered interpretations and representations of the First World War. But these are certainly not the only important elements in their works. Both *Toinette et la guerre* (Toinette and the War) by Lucie Paul-Margueritte and *Histoire d'un brave petit soldat* (History of a Brave Little Soldier) by Charlotte Schaller-

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Mouillot exposed children to the violent and potentially fatal aspects of warfare. Thus, these works can be read in a very different manner as well. Instead of merely justifying warfare, they stood as grim reminders of the realities of warfare—especially as they directly affected children, such as scarcity of necessities, the absence of parents, and the possibility of being orphaned. Materials created by children and adolescents reflect both national pride and a keen awareness of the sacrifices being made by the French public. While none of these works explicitly condemned war or the war, each possessed an implicit understanding of the potential consequences of warfare for both soldiers and civilians.

Lucie Paul-Margueritte's *Toinette et la guerre* (1915) is one of many examples of a comprehensive effort to portray the experience of the First World War through the eyes of a child. Aided by the vibrant illustrations of Henriette Damart, Paul-Margueritte chronicles the experience of Toinette, a young French girl whose father has been called to war. Living with her mother and brother, Toinette experiences the changes occurring on the French home front while her father experiences the perils of battle. Toinette's war experience begins when her father leaves to defend Belgium from German invaders. Soon after his departure, Toinette, her brother Riri, and their dog Jim begin playing soldier in order to become "bon français." Toinette rejects her favorite doll when she discovers it was "made in Germany," and she works alongside her mother to make Christmas care packages for soldiers, prompting her father to call her "une bonne petite marraine," or good little godmother to the soldiers. Throughout her father's tour of duty, Toinette follows the progress made by French soldiers abroad, dutifully marking the locations of French victories on her class's map of Europe.

Although Paul-Margueritte's work by no means minimizes the brutality of international conflict, her story, along with

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Damart's illustrations, portray warfare in metaphors accessible to children. One of Damart's most vivid illustrations is an image of children dancing around a tiger rug. At first glance, this may seem an innocent portrayal of children at play, but a closer look reveals that this is indeed a visual metaphor of the First World War. First, all the children have a variety of distinctive physical features. Second, each is wearing a different country's military uniform. It soon becomes clear that, all holding hands, these children symbolize the variety of world powers fighting against the Germans, who are also present in the form of a tiger-skin rug wearing a German military helmet. Once a ferocious beast, the tiger has been reduced by its enemies to a mere battle trophy.

While *Toinette et la guerre* focused mainly on the experiences of those at the home front, *Histoire d'un brave petit soldat* (1915) provided children with an idealized version of the experiences of soldiers at the front. Written and illustrated by Charlotte Schaller-Mouillot, this story begins in a toy box, something possessed by nearly all middle-class French children. Upon learning of the outbreak of war, one "brave" toy soldier decides to join the army in order to defend France. His fellow toys, which include wind-up dolls, stuffed animals, and airplanes, all help send him on his way, presenting him with sardines, bonbons, and champagne as he leaves for his tour of duty. Once in the field with his battalion, the soldier is confronted by German troops, whom Schaller-Mouillot portrays as morose green toy soldiers in contrast to the vibrant French red and blue. Their legs are permanently soldered together, moreover, perhaps harkening to the supposedly archaic and ultimately unsuccessful German military tactics. During the first days of battle, the toy soldier and his battalion successfully hold off German troops, earning both special governmental recognition in the regions they protected, as well as the adoration of thankful townspeople.

As the war continues, though, all does not bode well for Schaller-Mouillot's hero. In the midst of battle, the toy soldier's plane is shot down by a zeppelin, and German soldiers take him prisoner. After spending a great deal of time as a prisoner of war,
the soldier or "our little friend" makes a cunning escape and rejoins his battalion. Amidst much fanfare, he and his fellow troops come to the aid of the Belgians, who are portrayed by Schaller-Mouillot as running towards the French with open arms. Despite this grand welcome, the soldier also comes face to face with the grim realities of war. During a German offensive, the soldier is shot in the head on the steps of a church. Although during the 1910s this injury would almost invariably result in death, the soldier miraculously survives and is nursed back to health by no fewer than six young, attractive Red Cross nurses. The soldier makes a full recovery just in time to learn of the German defeat; he is welcomed home by his fellow toys with banners reading "Long live all the brave little soldiers."

Despite its being a children's book, Schaller-Mouillot's work is rife with politically charged images. First, the toy with whom "our little friend" shares his toy box are clearly meant to represent a variety of world powers. From blond Dutch wind-up toys to Japanese geisha dolls to black-faced African dolls, they represent not just a diverse collection of playthings, but a number of international powers. When examined in this context, the toy box becomes not just a home for the toys, but a metaphor for the world. Those who are in the toy box represent the powers that sought to end German aggression during the First World War and, therefore, can live in peace with each other in the same space. On the other hand, the German toy soldiers are never portrayed as living in the toy box—or, for that matter, living peacefully with any other toys. Schaller-Mouillot always portrays the Germans outside the toy box and, therefore, outside the bounds of peaceful society.

Depicting the world beyond the walls of the toy box as the space of the uncivilized German other, Schaller-Mouillot also employs politically charged images intended to instill patriotism. She often portrays French soldiers singing "La Marseillaise" as they charge into battle. Toys on the home front support their "brave little soldiers" with letters, gifts, and homecoming celebrations. Perhaps most telling, France's archenemy Kaiser Wilhelm II is portrayed not as a dominating military figure, but
as a sickly, hook-nosed tyrant who suffered from a "bad cold" from 1914 to 1915. All of these images served to instill patriotic sentiments in children and to undermine the image of the German military threat. Always outsmarting his enemies, "the brave little soldier" represents the inevitable French victory against German invaders who ultimately fall victim to their own military and cultural ineptitude. Schaller-Mouillot ends her story by telling her "little reader" to "keep dreaming in your little bed. Every time a French soldier falls in the line of duty, ten more come to replace him. Every day your dream of victory comes closer and closer to reality."

In addition to providing an accessible narrative of the war, Paul-Margueritte's and Schaller-Mouillot's works, combined with appealing and powerful images, illustrate the efforts of French women authors to present the proper roles of women, children, and others on the home front towards soldiers at the front. In each work, the patriotism of family, friends, and fellow countrymen plays a vital role in French victory. The character of Toinette represented the millions of children whose fathers, uncles, and brothers were away at war. By portraying Toinette, Riri, and their dog Jim playing soldier, creating care packages, and sending gifts and letters to their father, Margueritte's work demonstrates proper patriotic behavior for children. By portraying Toinette learning about battles in school, Paul-Margueritte incorporates official efforts by the French government both to educate children about the war and to instill national pride. Finally, by portraying such events as fierce battles, bombing raids, and the family's fostering of a Belgian orphan, Paul-Margueritte acknowledges the violence, terror, and devastation of war in a manner accessible to young children. Schaller-Mouillot's "brave little soldier" represented the millions of Frenchmen who fought valiantly on the front line, facing German threats every day.

Paul-Margueritte's and Schaller-Mouillot's works were written for young children. It is equally important to examine sources targeting older children and adolescents. Although also growing up in an environment full of nationalistic propaganda,
adolescents experienced the war in a very different manner than young children. Teenage boys could expect to be conscripted into battle if the conflict continued; teenage girls could expect to inherit the pressures of supporting the troops on the home front. Teenagers were also more capable of comprehending the challenges facing French society.

Some of the most striking wartime propaganda posters were designed by adolescents. Unlike their younger brothers and sisters, adolescents were not only targeted by nationalistic imagery, they were also active in its production. The status of young people as cultural producers is of particular importance because it placed them in a unique position as both consumers and creators of nationalistic rhetoric. Sponsored by the National Committee for Foresight and Thrift, French female students produced a variety of posters that portrayed the ways in which the average French family could help support the troops. Many of these posters focused on the conservation of rationed items. Fourteen-year-old Yvonne Vernet created a poster with a steaming plate of potatoes on a plaid tablecloth with the headline "Let's save bread by eating potatoes." Fourteen-year-old Louise Jaeger produced a poster featuring an arrangement of carrots, cabbage, and potatoes that admonished "Let's grow our own vegetable gardens." And sixteen-year-old Suzanne Ferrand designed a grape vine curling around a wine jug with the caption "Save wine for our soldiers." With these posters, adolescents both actively influenced and promoted patriotic domestic practices, placing them in a unique position between children and adult actors during the war.7

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Superficially, these posters seem to embody the maternalistic sentiments espoused by many feminists during the war. But, in addition to their much-evident patriotism, they also implicitly acknowledged national want, a potential weakness in the French war effort that threatened French vitality on the battlefield and, therefore, could jeopardize the certainty of French victory. While growing vegetable gardens and conserving wine and bread provided soldiers with better rations, they were also ways in which the average French civilian could powerfully and directly affect the war's outcome. Yet the very fact that the French government could not provide soldiers with adequate rations without asking civilians to sacrifice undermined the notion of French national strength and cultural superiority. Thus, the works of these teenaged girls served both as examples of nationalistic propaganda and documentation of perceived national weaknesses.

Taken together, the works of Lucie Paul-Margueritte, Charlotte Schaller-Mouillot, and French teenage girls attest to the ambivalent nature of French wartime culture. On one hand, nationalistic propaganda sought to instill in children a confident sentiment of national strength and vitality. On the other, these sources exposed the anxieties present within French wartime culture. Although none of these works specifically condemned the war, each of them stressed the hardships of French life during the First World War. While young children endured the absence and experienced the anxiety of possibly losing a parent, male adolescents also faced the prospect of conscription. Furthermore, all of these works illustrate the need for scholars to pay greater attention to children's understanding of the war, their internalization of and contributions to French wartime propaganda. Increased attention to such factors will increase both scholarly understandings of the First World War and the historical agency of children.