Scholarship on modern French journalism—reporting in mass-circulation daily newspapers—concentrates on grand reportage. This prestigious kind of reporting, based upon investigations, interviews and often international topics, usually appears in a series of articles above the fold on the front page. Very few women were grand reporters, because very few editors hired them as war correspondents, which was how grand reporters began, or as special envoys abroad.¹ The gendering of grand reporting was established as the image of the grand reporter, like that of literary men, was masculinized after the defeat by Prussia in 1870.² The image was only challenged by one woman who might have been considered a grand reporter, had she done international reporting in a mass-circulation paper.³ Séverine, pseudonym of Caroline Rémy (1855-1929), was the first French woman to support herself from journalism. As a social investigator and reporter, she became a model for many women aspiring to be journalists. However, she discouraged young women who sent her poems and stories, warning them about


her four years of apprenticeship, moving slowly up from transcribing other reporters’ copy to being a reporter, “finally allowed to timidly propose an adjective, an image, a phrase.” She insisted that women who wanted to be reporters had to be tenacious and accept that their written output would be ephemeral. Lurking in her reactions were suspicions about amateurism and literary types. Conversely, she mentored women who were determined to be reporters. One of these women was Marcelle Capy.

Dismissive attitudes about women journalists also reflected the link between French women journalists and fiction writers. The combination of factual and fictional writing, so prevalent in the first half of the nineteenth century that the terms journalist and man of letters were employed indifferently, declined as the mass circulation press arose and the number of journalists doubled between 1885 and 1900. However, many French journalists, especially women journalists, continued to write fiction well into the twentieth century, long after the practice of combining journalistic and literary writing declined elsewhere. Marcelle Capy employed popular dramatic and literary techniques in her reporting, and details from her investigative journalism in her novels. Scholars who believe that journalism must be coolly objective find her literary techniques problematic, but historians of women should welcome them as a qualitative approach to reporting the lives of women.

Cultural studies scholars studying the gendered nature of Anglo-Saxon journalism offer other ways to analyze reporting. Liesbet van Zoonen constructed a table of masculine versus feminine specialities, which includes in the feminine category, human interest and social reporting. Van Zoonen also identified different styles in the work of male and female reporters, with men emphasizing fact and sensationalism, while women stressed compassion, context and effects. Stuart Allen suggests that these distinctions operate to privilege male reporters as more truthful and serious. This paper will apply these insights to Marcelle Capy’s reporting on working women.

Very little journalism research has been done on social investigative reporting for feminist, communist, socialist or union reviews. One reason may be that neither the reporters nor the reviews are considered objective. However, the line between objective and opinion press is blurred in interwar France, when so-

---

4 Séverine [Caroline Rémy], “Le plus beau métier du monde,” L’Internationale, 7 October 1922.


Volume 39 (2011)
called informational newspapers were subsidized by political tendencies. Given the gender hierarchy in journalism, another reason for scholarly silence on this kind of investigative reporting is certainly that many women did this kind of reporting.

Several of the mid-and late-nineteenth century investigators of women’s labor were feminists. Starting in the 1890s, when the number of women in journalism rose dramatically, several inquiries were published in feminist and union dailies. A collection of articles on the subject by Aline Valette and Marcelle Capy, *Femmes et travail au dix-neuvième siècle*, edited by Marie-Hélène Zylberberg-Hocquard and Évelyne Diebolt, has been mined by historians of women’s work since it appeared in 1984. Their introduction to the collection compares the two reporters’s styles, characterizing Valette, writing in *La Fronde* in the 1890s, as “serious and scientific” (read “masculine”), and Capy, writing in the syndicalist organ *La Bataille syndicaliste* in 1913-1914, as literary and journalistic (not so masculine). The editors note that both authors could be condescending about working women’s passivity and lack of solidarity. Although Capy acknowledged the precarious nature of many women’s jobs, she followed the syndicalist line of blaming women for treating wages as “supplementary income.”

Contemporary feminist reviews were less critical of Capy’s work. Reviewing her self-published collection of articles entitled “With French Working Women,” Henriette Sauret praised it for not being “stuffed with figures and dates… She did the best kind of reporting, live reporting, and she did it incognito… She slipped into the ranks of laboring women, threw herself into their lives and times.” Present-day feminist researchers may also appreciate her eyewitness approach.

Capy’s early articles about women’s work are wide-ranging, perceptive, and well written. She visited at least a dozen industrial worksites, described the

---


actual procedures in many jobs, and reported on work discipline and the division of labor by gender. She also interviewed women workers on and off site and incorporated their voices and stories in her articles. When she posed as a working woman, she wrote vignettes with herself as an active participant observer. The personalization of women workers, use of dramatic techniques, and inclusion of the author in the text likely helped readers imagine the cramped, stuffy and often toxic worksites, as well as the repetitive labor and sometimes abusive supervision in these workplaces. Readers also got an inside-view of inadequate lodgings. They must have realized that these women were not just “hands,” but individuals who lived precariously, especially if they were single mothers. This was clearly compassionate reporting about the context and effects of paid labor on working class women, which may be why it is overlooked by journalism scholars.

Capy was born Marcelle Marques in 1881. For her nom de plume, Capy took the patronymic of the grandfather who raised her in the countryside. While attending university to prepare for the École Normale Supérieure, she heard a socialist pacifist speech by Jean Jaurès. According to Capy, “That decided the rest of my life.... Despite paternal disapproval, I abandoned university and went to Paris. I began as a petit reporter.” 13 A petit reporter might compile faits divers, short pieces on minor but unusual events, without a by-line. For three years, Capy lived frugally with two other single women in a sixth floor apartment. She was, in her words, “taken up by Séverine. She enlightened me, guided me, because until then I mainly had sentimental impulses.” 14 Like her American contemporary Nelly Bly (pseudonym of Elizabeth Cochran, 1864-1922), 15 Séverine engaged in theatrical antics such as dressing as a miner to descend into a mine. 16 In her early career, Capy used the same tactics, to experience many kinds of jobs, in order to understand women’s labor. 17

When La Bataille syndicaliste censored pacifist articles in 1915, Capy quit the paper. Although she remained close to socialists, she no longer adhered rigidly to syndicalist principles. Instead, she edited the pacifist feminist review La Voix des femmes and gave speeches on “The New Feminism.” 18 Nevertheless,

---

13 Marcelle Capy, “La Leçon de la solitude,” La République, 18 October 1934
16 Paul Couturiau, Séverine, l’insurgée (Rocher, 2001) and Séverine, Choix de papiers, ed. Evelyne le Garrec (Paris: Tierce, n.d.).
18 Reports (7 June 1914, 15 December 1915, 13 September 1916), Ba 2270 Dossiers de journalistes, Marques/Capy, Archives de la Prefecture de Police, Paris. See also the invitation “Banquet Féministe (Sunday, 30 March [n.d.])” in La Voix des femmes, Articles
Capy’s primary commitment was to integral pacifism. After reading a book by the famous integral pacifist Romain Rolland in 1915, she took up public speaking. Her partner during and after the war, Pierre Brizon, was a minority socialist deputy who opposed the union sacrée as early as August 1914. Together, they founded and edited a socialist feminist journal, La Vague (1918-1923) with a circulation of 12,500, and in 1923 she edited its successor, La Vague nouvelle. Not surprisingly, the police kept her under surveillance. After the war, Capy embarked on “peace crusades” and earned the sobriquet “peace apostle.” Despite some difficulties getting a passport, she travelled extensively in North America, Great Britain and Germany in the early 1920s. Her speeches emphasizing better understanding between peoples drew audiences of several hundred to two thousand people. She shared her experiences abroad in a series in L’Ère nouvelle, a socialist newspaper open to pacifists. However, the series did not elevate her to the rank of a grand reporter, since it was not an investigative series in a mass-circulation daily.

Although Norman Ingram suggests that Capy was closer to the men in the “new pacifism” of the 1930s than to feminist pacifists, she was associated with feminist pacifists into the 1930s, notably as President-Founder of the Ligue des amies de la paix, a group allied to Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. It is true that Capy was an active member of the Ligue International de Combattants de la Paix, a group of militants formed in 1931 to fight war unconditionally through popular propaganda, like spectacles, as well as more traditional means. But Capy engaged in the more traditional activities, journalism de journaux, Thèmes, dossiers, journaux, Fonds Bouglé, Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, Paris.


21 Document on passport troubles (18 February 1924), Ba 2270 Dossiers de journalistes, Marques/Capy, Archives de la Prefecture de Police, Paris.

22 “Un apôtre de la paix,” La République, 11 January 1931.

23 “Jaunes et blancs” and “Les Exiles” in series “Sur les routes internationals,” L’Ère nouvelle, 6 and 26 June 1925.

and public speaking. Later, she wrote for an antifascist pacifist review, *Solidarité internationale antifasciste*, where one of her colleagues was so critical of the “République des camarades,” that he was convicted of inciting soldiers to disobedience in 1939. Capy was not implicated. However, she did publish in a collaborationist pacifist newspaper under the Vichy Regime, where she presented a delusional idea about making a socialist France in Hitler's Europe. Although she continued to express sympathy for workers, she voiced none for Jews. Her attraction to mysticism after the Second World War is also puzzling. Beyond suggesting that two devastating world wars may have contributed to these dubious and curious behaviors, this paper cannot address her later years.

After she left *La Bataille syndicaliste*, Capy wrote about working women for radical, feminist, and pacifist newspapers. For two years, she reported on war industries employing women and, on one occasion, worked in one of these industries. Her activities were duly tracked by police. “Women at Work,” the summarizing article in *Le Journal du peuple*, accepted new developments in women’s labor without engaging with contemporary contentions about possible effects on their health, family life, or maternities. “Woman has taken the worker's place. There is no question about whether this is good or bad for women.... It is useless to discuss the good or the bad of such a situation. It exists and all the discourse and all the writing will not change that. Under the imperious necessity of circumstances, women’s role has completely changed and a veritable

---


29 Extract of Chamois report (3 July 1916), Ba 2270 Dossiers de journalistes, Marques/Capy, Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Paris.
revolution in ways of life has happened.” Capy exaggerated the magnitude of the change in 1916, only citing statistics documenting the presence of 30,000 women in “private industries producing for the war effort,” a figure that pales beside data that more than a third of all Frenchwomen worked for wages before the war. But by the end of the war, when there were 430,000 women employed in all defense industries, her revolutionary language seemed prescient. Capy defended these women against critics of the quality of their work by quoting labor inspectors who reported that women exhibited “satisfactory and sometimes remarkable aptitude” in their new jobs.

The following year, 1917, Capy abandoned her dismissive attitude about women resisting organization. Reporting on a large strike by seamstresses, she celebrated women’s ability to organize and take action. Her positive reporting of that iconic strike stood out in the generally hostile press coverage, one that led to vilification of all women as internal enemies of the war effort. It signaled a more empathetic approach to working-class women.

In 1916, Capy had published a heavily censored pacifist tract, A Woman’s Voice in the Fray, with an introduction by Romain Rolland praising her as “A woman with compassion who dares to avow it.” In the tract, Capy pilloried representations of war as glorious and soldiers as heroic. She denounced much war reporting: “In the press, some who have given themselves the mission to lead the crowd... have imagined that it was necessary to make the people drunk with illusions. They declared the truth indecent.” Here she identified, but exaggerated, a real problem. Capy told poignant tales of wounded and disillusioned soldiers returning from the front. She tried to report a disturbing incident in which civilians shot four captured and wounded German soldiers escaping from a bombed cathedral in Reims. She called the state’s failure to

---

30 Marcelle Capy, Journal de peuple, December 1916.
33 “Eux et elles,” Le Peuple, 23 May 1917.
35 Marcelle Capy, Une Voix de femme dans la mêlée, preface by Romain Rolland (Paris: Librairie Ollendorff, 1916), i.
36 Capy, Une voix de femme, 2.
indict anyone “disgusting” and “cowardly.” The censors excised this disturbing chapter and others like it.  

A Woman’s Voice in the Fray covered a broader spectrum of working women than Capy’s journalism had. In a section on the “feminine proletariat,” she denounced the stereotype of Frenchwomen as “a doll, pretty no doubt, but frivolous and vicious.” In reality, “we have seen the working woman follow the working man to the factory, young women fill the schools, and the female intellectual proletariat take examinations and enter new positions.” Recognizing that there were still barriers to working-class women’s access to jobs and equal pay, she now attributed their lack of unionization to men treating them as rivals. After the war, she and other women journalists would develop her insights about an emergent segment of educated women employed in the growing service sector. Capy’s tract predicted problems after the war, when war widows would get meager pensions and would need to work, another topic she would return to years later.

Although her interest now extended beyond working-class women, Capy did not abandon a class perspective. Like other commentators in the first year of the war, she had dismissed wealthy Red Cross nurses as “ladies who play at being angels.” Also like other commentators, she conceded that the selection process for Red Cross nurses had improved since the beginning of the war. No doubt she had been influenced by the shift in war nurse memoirs from celebrations of war nurses as “white angels” to a more realistic representation of nursing that Margaret Darrow traces to the same year, 1916. But long after the war, Capy could be caustic about “comfortable” bourgeois women who sat around charitable meetings, “their fur coats on the backs of their chairs,” criticizing poor women.

---


41 Capy, Une Voix de femme, 36-38, 84-87, and 134.


43 “La Fin d’un monde,” La Vague, 13 February 1919 and “Femmes d’aujourd’hui, Mater dolorosa,” La Rumeur, 2 December 1927.
In the late 1920s, when Capy resumed writing about working women, she concentrated on artisans, new “intellectual laborers,” and war widows. These articles explore the impact of the war on lower-middle and middle-class women. A series entitled “The French Artisans” appeared in the independent and nonconformist daily L’Oeuvre. One article described a family living and working in a tiny, dark and stuffy apartment, with everyone doing piecework because the father returned from the war unable to support the family. Another article contained excerpts from an interview with a young woman who had to give up her art studies to earn a living as an artisan because the war “disrupted everything.” In a series on “Women’s Life” penned for another newspaper, she wrote sympathetically about women “who hide their poverty” because they came from middle class families squeezed by the economic repercussions of the war. Like other women journalists at this time, her examples were “cultivated young women” employed as secretaries for 500 to 900 francs a month. The article did not mention it, but the lesser sum was what Capy earned at the beginning of her career. Capy offered an example drawn from her own experience: a talented journalist forced to correct page proofs at home. Taking another poke at wealthy women, Capy indicted women who took the jobs of professionals, and specifically, the amateur journalist “who writes her copy in her automobile... and accepts payments at half the going rate.” Her antagonistic language bespeaks a resentment of amateurs felt by a woman who had to earn her living, in an occupation not yet professionalized. But her recognition that women in other classes engaged in paid labor was a positive step.

A subsequent article, “How Do Young Working Women Live?,” claimed that “the war that had ruined so many middle-class families and brought inflation in its wake, obliged young women to work early.” Capy argued that starting work early “physically and morally sabotaged young women’s lives.” In a rare reference to race, she contended that “We will see a race in which young women do not develop, wear out and find themselves ... condemned in advance to disastrous

45 Marcelle Capy, “Des tous de taupes aux ruches ensoleillées,” L’Oeuvre, 1 March 1929 and “Une femme moderne,” L’Oeuvre, 13 May 1929.
48 Marcelle Capy, Les demi-chomeuses,” L’Oeuvre, 7 December 1929.
maternities.” Since she opposed pronatalist pressure on women and her proposed solution was an inquiry into the health of young working women, we can assume her concern was with women’s health, not more births.

In response to the depression in the mid-1930s, Capy addressed some of the same issues. In a series on “Women in the Crisis,” she cited the 300,000 war widows who had not remarried since the war. She interviewed Mme Cassou, the President of the War Widow’s Union of the Parisian Region, about how many war widows had been unable to live on 280-franc pensions from the state and had had to take jobs. Unfortunately, many employers replaced them with younger, cheaper workers when the depression hit. A second article addressed the topic of women who had never had the opportunity to marry due to the war, but had found jobs to sustain themselves until the depression, when many were dismissed, for the same reason as war widows. Although Capy seemed to prefer that women marry and raise children without employment, she insisted that “more than a third of French production is in women’s hands.” Her second novel, Single Women, confirmed her sympathy with and ambivalence about unmarried women.

In these later articles, Capy offered a more conservative view of women’s roles than was obvious in her earlier writing. So did her first novel, Men Pass, published in 1930. Winner of the first Séverine prize for pacifist literature, Men Pass stood out among the thirty novels about the war published that year, because it was about the effects of war on the home front and on women. Capy described the novel as “the true story of a French village during the war”; reviewers treated it as a regional and pacifist novel about how enemies could get along in wartime, because it depicted peasant women whose fathers and husbands had left for the front or been killed in action, working amicably with the German prisoners of war sent to help them harvest the crops. But other interpretations of the novel are possible.

Long after the Armistice, Capy delved into the costs of women’s war work that she had elided during the war. The novel revealed some quite conventional

---

50 Marcelle Capy, “Comment vivent les jeunes travailleuses,” L’Oeuvre, 20 March 1930.
54 Marcelle Capy, Femmes seules (Tarbes: Hunault, 1938).
views about complementary gender relations. To quote: “To her, the household, the inner court, the vegetable garden and the orchard—the particular. To men, initiative, direction of work, sale of crops and animals, payment of taxes, politics—the general.” This nostalgic picture may reflect Capy’s happy childhood in a rural region to which she returned throughout her life. It does not conform to her two unhappy marriages, or to her frequent coverage of abandoned and widowed women.

In the novel, as fathers and sons left for the front and hospitals filled with the wounded, their wives and mothers worried about how men would provide for them after the war. Here Capy departed from wartime eulogizing of peasant women as self-sacrificing home-front heroines, to probe these women’s feelings, including fears that many of them would remain single, “without love in their youth, without sons to help them in their old age.” No doubt many women readers remembered those anxieties years after the war. The plot follows Madeleine, an attractive and educated young wife, taking charge of the farm when her husband, Sebastien, goes to the front. Capy detailed Madeleine’s capabilities much as she had detailed the skills of women in war industries a decade earlier. Having avoided contentious claims that allegedly male work defeminized women in wartime, about which, as scholars have noted, so many commentators at the time expressed alarm, Capy now acknowledged the negative effects of heavy outdoor labor. Madeleine is exhausted, her skin tanned, her face wrinkled, her clothing tattered. When Sebastien comes home on leave, he does not find her appealing, which hurts and humiliates her. Yet she gives him her savings when he asks for money to purchase perks the “Système D” provided for soldiers with money. Instead of showing any gratitude, Sebastien takes up with his godmother, the wealthy city woman assigned to write to and send him packages in the army. The psychological portrait of Madeleine is better developed than the motivations and personality of Sebastien. In many respects, the novel resembles a «he did her wrong» story. It is not as well written as her best reporting or her second novel, but it reveals a great deal about her attitudes toward marriage and women.

In sum, Marcelle Capy was an investigative journalist who did thorough and sensitive research and wrote about a wide range of working women. Journalistic research informed her novels and literary techniques enlivened her reporting. She transcended her initial ideological blinders about working-class women and some of her prejudices about bourgeois women. She might have been called a grand reporter, save for the accepted definition that grand reporters

58 Capy, Des hommes passèrent, 23-4.
59 Ibid., 76-7.
60 Rod Kedward, La Vie en bleu: France and the French since 1900 (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 114-117.
started in war reporting and wrote for mass circulation daily newspapers. If the definition cannot be altered to include her and others like her, scholars, especially feminist scholars, should at least do more research on other kinds of investigative reporters.