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French Peasant Women on the Home Front: Literary Representation of Wartime Everyday Life in Ernest Pérochon's Novel *Les Gardiennes*

Francuskie chłopki na froncie domowym: literacki obraz wojennej codzienności w powieści Les Gardiennes Ernesta Pérochona

ABSTRACT

World War I had a profound impact on the French countryside. The mass mobilization of men forced women to take full responsibility for running the farms, agricultural work, and family responsibilities. Despite this, their role has long been underestimated in historiography, which has focused mainly on the experiences of soldiers. The aim of this article is to analyse the literary representation of rural women in Ernest Pérochon's novel *Les Gardiennes*, published in 1924 and one of the few books devoted to this subject. Drawing on historical works on World War I and on the situation of peasants in the early twentieth century, the article examines how literary fiction contributes to the formation of collective memory. It also shows that Pérochon's novel, by offering a rare and multi-dimensional account of the everyday lives of French peasant women during the war, contributes to their better recognition in the history of the conflict.

Key words: World War I, peasant women, France, French countryside, Ernest Pérochon, *Les Gardiennes*

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STRESZCZENIE

I wojna światowa wywarła głęboki wpływ na francuską wieś. Masowa mobilizacja mężczyzn zmusiła kobiety do przejęcia pełnej odpowiedzialności za prowadzenie gospodarstw, pracę w rolnictwie oraz obowiązki rodzinne. Mimo to ich rola przez długi czas pozostawała niedoceniana w historiografii, która koncentrowała się głównie na doświadczeniach żołnierzy. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza literackiego obrazu kobiet wiejskich w powieści *Les Gardiennes* Ernesta Pérochona, wydanej w 1924 r. i będącej jedną z nielicznych książek poświęconych temu zagadnieniu. W oparciu o prace historyczne dotyczące I wojny światowej oraz sytuacji chłopów na początku XX w. artykuł bada, w jaki sposób fikcja literacka przyczynia się do kształtowania pamięci zbiorowej. Ukazuje również, że powieść Pérochona, oferując rzadkie i wielowymiarowe świadectwo codziennego życia francuskich chłopek w czasie wojny, przyczynia się do ich lepszego uwzględnienia w historii konfliktu.

Słowa kluczowe: I wojna światowa, chłopki, Francja, wieś francuska, Ernest Pérochon, *Les Gardiennes*

World War I was a particularly painful ordeal for the French peasantry, who paid a heavier price than other social groups. Mobilized in large numbers, peasants provided essential support for the war effort, both on the front lines, where they were among the most affected by the fighting, and behind the lines, where their absence disrupted the organization of agricultural work. Women then played a decisive role in maintaining farms, taking on agricultural and domestic tasks alone, while coping with shortages, requisitions and bereavement. However, this reality has long been minimized in historiography, which has focused more on the male experience of the conflict. As Françoise Thébaud points out: 'tens of thousands of titles have been written since the First World War. Women are absent from most of the themes addressed [...] or are in the minority in a history of the daily life behind the front lines, interpreted by men'¹. In the face of these gaps, literature can provide valuable insight, particularly when it is part of a realistic approach aimed at 'representing and imitating reality'². As Pierre Barral points out, 'the image transmitted by literature also deserves the attention of researchers of all specialties who want to conduct a scholarly analysis'³, because it provides concrete data on the period and social relations. However, even regionalist novels, where 'common people carve out a special place for themselves'⁴, rarely evoke the figure of peasant women, often limiting

¹ F. Thébaud, *La femme au temps de la guerre de 14*, Paris 1986, p. 16. All quotations translated by the author of the article.

² N. Woolf, *Le peuple dans le roman français de Zola à Céline*, Paris 1990, p. 9.

³ P. Barral, *Littérature et monde rural*, "Économie rurale" 1988, 184–186, p. 199.

⁴ E. Pérochon, *Les Gardiennes*, Paris 1924 [hereinafter: G] in parenthetical references. All quotations translated by the author of the article.

themselves to conventional representations of their work in the fields, at home or in raising children. In this regard, *Les Gardiennes* by Ernest Pérochon is a notable exception. Published in 1924, this novel offers a careful and nuanced look at the lives of rural women during the war, realistically depicting their daily lives marked by hard work, increased responsibilities and waiting for their husbands to go to the front. This article aims to analyse Pérochon's literary portrait of the French peasant woman. Drawing on historical works relating to World War I as well as research devoted to the peasant world of the early 20th century, it examines how this novel reflects historical reality and what it reveals to us about the condition of rural women in times of war.

Les Gardiennes traces the life of Hortense Misanger, a 58-year-old peasant woman living in Sérigny, who, after the mobilization of her three sons and her son-in-law in the summer of 1914, tirelessly devotes herself to maintaining the family farm. The novel follows the historical events chronologically and begins at the time of the declaration of war. Like so many other French villages, Sérigny is emptying: the men having left for the front, only the women, children and old people remain, insufficient to carry out the agricultural work alone. They are also too few in number to ensure production at the necessary level: historians have pointed out that 'the peasants provided the largest contingent of mobilized men'⁵, estimating their number at 3.7 million, or 45% of the active agricultural population, which helps us understand the extent to which the situation destabilized the rural world. When the novel begins, Hortense is sitting in front of her house, pensive, a piece of knitting abandoned on her knees. This highly symbolic scene illustrates the upheaval in her condition: forced to abandon traditional feminine tasks, she must now assume the responsibilities left vacant by the men who have gone to war.

Like the peasant women of her time, Hortense had no alternative. The French government had not designed any plan for organizing agricultural production⁶, leaving the rural population to manage the challenges of the situation alone. Accustomed to watching over their homes⁷, women quickly understood that it was up to them to complete the harvest and continue work according to the usual schedule to ensure the subsistence of their families. However, for Hortense, the issue went beyond

⁵ É. Alary, *Histoire des paysans français*, Paris 2016. G. Fériet specifies that 'out of 7,935,000 men at the front, 3,856,000 were peasants, or 54% of those mobilized'. Idem, *Le paysan français et le fait militaire, de 1888 à 1988*, "Revue Historique des Armées" 1991, 183, p. 89.

⁶ É. Alary, *op. cit.*

⁷ On the role of peasant women in the family see, for example, G. Hayart, *Vie de paysanne*, Paris 1986, pp. 6–13.

simple survival: cultivating the land was, for her, an imperative duty. Was she thus responding to the call of the Prime Minister René Viviani, who exhorted women, in August 1914, to continue their work to avoid famine: 'To action! Tomorrow there will be glory for everyone'?⁸ Perhaps, but her commitment was above all a 'moral duty'⁹ towards her family: to preserve the farm, the pillar of stability and continuity of home¹⁰. From the very first pages, Hortense thinks of her sons and son-in-law who have gone to fight. Worried about their fate – 'the mother's heart broke at the thought of it'¹¹ – but far from being overwhelmed by anxiety, she anticipates their return. The questions they might ask resonate in her mind: 'What have you done with everything we left behind? Women! Have you remained good guardians of our homes? Have you kept the fire burning in our beloved homes?'¹². Letters from the front further reinforce her sense of responsibility: 'You must work so that the soldiers lack nothing; you must work until your strength is exhausted, until you die if necessary'¹³. Hortense's attitude powerfully embodies the resilience of French women of the time, which Mme de Witt-Schlumberger sums up as follows: 'We can cry inside, we don't cry outside, we work'¹⁴. On several occasions, the text highlights the reasons that motivate Hortense's commitment, depicting her as a typical peasant mother, concerned above all with the happiness of her loved ones, which she associates with a return to a simple and orderly family life before the war. Pérochon aptly illustrates women's motivations to fully invest themselves in tasks formerly reserved for men:

Young or old, women were guardians; guardians of the hearth, guardians of houses, of the land, of wealth, guardians of what had been amassed by the patient effort of the ages to facilitate the life of the race, but also guardians of ordinary virtues and guardians of what could seem futile and superfluous, of everything that made the air of the country light to breathe, guardians of sweetness and fragile beauty¹⁵.

⁸ É. Alary, *op. cit.*

⁹ M. Hanna, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹⁰ In pre-war rural societies, the farm constituted a primary element of the 'subsistence family economy'. É. Alary, *op. cit.*

¹¹ G, p. 5.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 3.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

¹⁴ F. Thébaud, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

¹⁵ G, p. 7.

Having been protectors of the home and land for centuries, peasant women took on new responsibilities as a natural extension of their traditional role. War forced them to take on male tasks not by choice, but by necessity, to preserve the family balance and ensure the stability of the daily life in the face of the upheavals that were occurring.

Through the story of its protagonist, Pérochon highlights the 'war of women'¹⁶ who remained behind. Despite the extent of their commitment, these women received little recognition, and 'the sources of the time hardly dwell on the living conditions of women'¹⁷, as Sophie Villes points out. *Les Gardiennes* seeks to fill this gap by revealing their invisible fight, devoid of 'the aura of warrior heroism'¹⁸, and consisting of gruelling work, divided between field work, household chores and family responsibilities. When the war broke out, Hortense Misanger, who had entrusted the family farm to her daughter in order to enjoy a well-deserved retirement, was forced to return to work. With her elderly husband, exhausted by years of work, she came to the aid of young people overwhelmed by circumstances. Every day, she travels between her house, the farm of her daughter Solange, who is not very inclined to rural life, that of her daughter-in-law Léa, and the bakery run by the children of her cousin, who has gone to the front. As a true 'head of the household'¹⁹, she takes care of domestic tasks, ensures the upkeep of the houses and devotes herself to essential agricultural work. But Hortense is not alone in rolling up her sleeves: in Sérigny, we are witnessing the same 'voluntary mobilization of women'²⁰ as that observed in France during the summer of 1914. On this 'domestic front'²¹, everyone is involved: young girls and old peasant women alike, who, despite their age and fatigue, return to work with admirable determination. *Les Gardiennes* contains several scenes illustrating the hard work of women in rural life, between agricultural work, caring for livestock and other backbreaking tasks specific to the countryside. Pérochon documents this daily life in a literary manner, describing the endless days spent leading the cattle to pastures, harvesting the crops, mowing, drying and bringing back the hay, or preparing

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

¹⁷ S. Villes, *Le Lot, un département rural dans la guerre*, in: *Vivre et mourir en temps de guerre de la préhistoire à nos jours: Quercy et régions voisines*, ed. P. Foissac, Toulouse 2013.

¹⁸ A. Becker, *La spécificité du sort des femmes lors de l'occupation allemande du Nord de la France, 1914–1918*, in: *Genre, femmes, histoire en Europe. France, Italie, Espagne, Autriche*, eds. A. Bellavitis, N. Edelman, Nanterre 2011.

¹⁹ M. Gervais, M. Jollivet, Y. Tavernier, *La fin de la France paysanne de 1914 à nos jours*, in: *Histoire de la France rurale*, vol. 4, eds. G. Duby, A. Wallon, Paris 1976, p. 167.

²⁰ F. Thébaud, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

²¹ A. Lafon, *La France de la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Paris 2016.

the soil for sowing. He highlights the colossal effort they make to handle manual tools, carry heavy loads and endure the physical overwork caused by the uninterrupted succession of chores. The episode where Hortense takes to the plough to plough the land evokes the famous photograph of women pulling the tool, a symbol of the dedication of French peasant women during the war²². Far from being spared, the children must also 'take their share of the pain that the harshness of the times inflicts on everyone'²³. Marguerite, a seventeen-year-old teenager, illustrates this harsh reality: forced to share her time between the bakery she runs with her brother 'at the cost of inconceivable labour for which nothing had prepared them'²⁴ and domestic tasks, she symbolizes this youth crushed by the war. Exhausting work is a reality shared by all peasant women, and even those who are not inclined to it do not avoid it. In the novel, we see pregnant women performing tasks incompatible with their condition, despite the necessary precautions during pregnancy:

The young girl had climbed painfully onto the cart, she received the hay and placed it as best she could, once again. She raised her arms as little as possible, and from time to time brought her hands back to her thickened waist. When the hay came just within her reach, she packed it down by dropping to her knees²⁵.

Several details draw attention to various failures that the women face with courage, without ever letting themselves give up or giving in to the pressure of difficulties. This is the case, for example, with the following scene, which demonstrates the need to repeatedly redo poorly done tasks due to lack of training and adequate physical abilities:

One of these carts was moving heavily, too wide, unbalanced, threatening to drop its load at every jolt. A child was walking at the head of the team; on one side of the road, two women, old Candé and her daughter-in-law, were supporting the hay with their pitchforks. At the entrance to the village, as the team was entering an alley, a wheel jumped on a stone; the entire load slid, covering the two women who, in this narrow passage, had not had time to move

²² This is the photograph by J.-B. Tournassoud taken in 1917 in Oise, reproduced in American war posters which encouraged food preservation. <https://www.theworldwar.org/fr/learn/women> [access: 12.01.2025].

²³ S. Viles, *op. cit.* On child labour during World War I see also S. Audoin-Rouzeau, *La Guerre des enfants: 1914–1918: essai d'histoire culturelle*, Paris 1993.

²⁴ G, p. 16.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

aside. [...] Already the two women were emerging like moles emerging from the ground. Sweating despite the cool of the evening, they looked at each other for a moment without speaking. [...] Then the old woman said simply:

– Let's load it again²⁶.

Historical research on World War I has often highlighted the burden of women's work, insisting that it was 'synonymous with disarray, solitude, overwork, accidents'²⁷. Scenes such as the one cited, which punctuate *Les Gardiennes*, nevertheless allow us to grasp the extent of the efforts made by these women, the difficulty of a daily life punctuated by exhausting tasks and the constant sacrifices required by a commitment to a job for which they were neither prepared nor spared.

The challenge imposed on peasant women with the mass departure of men for the front went far beyond the simple need to replace the absent and to take on work that exceeded their physical strength and skills. In reality, it was the moment of the brutal collapse of a well-established order in peasant society, structured around 'the eternal sexual division of agricultural labour'²⁸. Historically, in these communities, men occupied a central position as the main actors in agricultural work and land managers, while women were confined to domestic tasks and the education of children²⁹. Mobilization deprived households of their leaders, profoundly disrupting family and economic organization. Éric Kocher-Marbœuf underlines the disorder of this period: 'it is hard to imagine the state of disorganization of the countryside during the first weeks of the war'³⁰. Pérochon, for his part, does not hesitate to describe with a touch of humour the chaos that descended on Sérigny:

The virile grip was lacking and the capricious beings on whom it was accustomed to weigh sought to emancipate themselves.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

²⁷ Y. Ripa, *Les femmes, actrices de l'histoire. France, de 1789 à nos jours*, Paris 2010.

²⁸ É. Alary, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Cf. M. Moscovici, *Le changement social en milieu rural et le rôle des femmes*, "Revue française de sociologie" 1960, 1, p. 315; S. Shortall, *Rurality and Gender Identity*, in: *Gender and Rural Globalization. International Perspectives on Gender and Rural Development*, eds. B.B. Bock, S. Shortall, Boston 2017, pp. 162–169; H. Whitley, K. Brasier, *Women Farmers and Women Farmer's Identities*, in: *Routledge handbook of gender and agriculture*, eds. C.E. Sachs et al., London 2020, pp. 360–369.

³⁰ É. Kocher-Marbœuf, *Les campagnes dans les sociétés européennes (France, Allemagne, Italie, Espagne, 1914–1929)*, in: *Les campagnes dans les sociétés européennes*, eds. P. Cornu, J.-L. Mayaud, Rennes 2005.

The children no longer obeyed, the servants spoke arrogantly; beggars with the faces of sorcerers coming out of nowhere threatened; people of ill repute raised their heads and sneered. Even the domestic animals thought they could do anything. Old placid oxen, stupefied by servitude, became mischievous, suddenly began to frolic and refused to be restrained; or else, at the moment when one wanted to untie them, they shook their heads with all their might, sending the yoke dancing far away³¹.

Women, who until then had never had decision-making power in society and were limited to complementary and subordinate roles, were forced to take on responsibilities that were previously unknown. They had to learn to manage the farm, organize work, and distribute tasks. In *Les Gardiennes*, a scene of shoeing a mule embodies this assumption of traditionally male responsibilities by women: the agitated animal only lets itself be controlled thanks to the intervention of an old blacksmith's assistant, who gives it a series of blows with a leather strap, thus proving 'that a virile will animated this very slight person'³² and asserting her authority.

It is known that during the World War I, a third of farms were run by women³³ and the protagonist of the novel Hortense Misanger embodies this reality by taking charge of the management of her children's farms. Faced with the demands of the work and the responsibilities that fall to her, she proves herself fully up to the task, leading with authority and not hesitating to call to order those who challenge her directives: 'listen to my orders and do not let your words fly before mine...'³⁴, she firmly tells a recalcitrant servant. We see her confront every day the difficulties that French peasant women left alone in the countryside really had to face: the lack of agricultural equipment and draft animals, requisitioned for military needs³⁵. She must try to repair the broken mower, without which the work in the fields is even more difficult, and manage as best she can, while 'coal was very rare, petrol was impossible to find, and all the good horses were in the army'³⁶. Hortense's main worries are linked to the shortage of manpower, a problem designated by historians

³¹ G, p. 38.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 15.

³³ Management challenges are analyzed based on authentic documents in É. Sullerot, *Histoire et sociologie du travail féminin*, Paris 1968, pp. 137–138. Cf. also É. Alary, *op. cit.*; F. Thébaud, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

³⁴ G, p. 18.

³⁵ Cf. M. Gervais, M. Jollivet, Y. Tavernier, *op. cit.*, pp. 40–41; G. Fériet, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

³⁶ G, p. 135.

as the major one during the war due to the massive mobilization of men and the lack of official measures to remedy it³⁷. The two farmhands who help her are largely inadequate, especially since they are ignorant of many tasks and show little inclination to make an effort: 'handling the scythe; one does not know how, the other does not want to'³⁸. In *Les Gardiennes* one sentence masterfully illustrates the need for a general mobilization to work³⁹ that took place in the French countryside during this period: when, in the middle of the season of intensive agricultural work, we learn that 'La Misangère would have hired the Devil'⁴⁰. After asking her relatives, who were not very enthusiastic about the idea, and faced with a total shortage on the labour market – 'the old, the young, the lame as well as the gallant, the cheap as well as the innocent, all the farmhands were already hired'⁴¹ – Hortense hires anyone who can help her: a young girl from the orphanage, a twelve-year-old cripple, as well as three auxiliary soldiers and a few prisoners assigned as reinforcements by the village authorities. Indeed, in the situation that paralyzed the countryside, the French government adopted such solutions, and Chantal Antier does not fail to emphasize the challenges faced by women, forced to 'manage all this disparate workforce'⁴². Hortense demonstrates exceptional skills in motivating the discouraged, forcing the lazy to work, flattering temporary workers, and keeping an eye on everyone in order to avoid unwanted rapprochements between her employees and her daughter, who does not miss much her husband who has gone to the front. She succeeds in taking advantage of these defective human resources, whose inability to do any work is highlighted in the text:

The army sent teams of auxiliary or convalescent wounded soldiers temporarily unfit for war. Teams composed in a strange way, where one found priests, clerks, city workers and a few rare peasants, the latter of rather bad will, moreover, because they would have preferred to thresh their own harvest. All these people, accustomed in the rear garrisons not to burn their blood on the secondary tasks of the army, incapable otherwise or very weak, did not provide as effective assistance as had been hoped⁴³.

³⁷ This administrative negligence is explained by a general conviction that the war would not last long. M. Gervais, M. Jollivet, Y. Tavernier, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

³⁸ G, p. 9.

³⁹ C. Antier, *Les femmes dans la Grande Guerre*, Paris 2011, p. 37.

⁴⁰ G, p. 143.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

⁴² C. Antier, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁴³ G, p. 135.

It also appears that this old woman excels in her role as a farm manager. Not only does she organize, but she also masters finances, ensuring that resources are managed with absolute rigor. Entirely devoted to the mission of making the family farm prosper, she knows how to assess priorities and adopt effective solutions to improve productivity. She sells animals raised on the farm, buys modern machinery to make the hard work easier, and does not hesitate to invest in government bonds, 'without asking anyone's permission or advice'⁴⁴. Hortense Misanger thus embodies the French peasant woman who, at the outbreak of war, finds herself 'suddenly promoted [...] to the rank of head of the family'⁴⁵, and who fully assumes this new role, taking on responsibilities that she had never had before.

Les Gardiennes highlights the heroism and terrible existence of peasant women who, left to their own devices, face the war with a determination forged by necessity. To ensure the survival of their families and preserve their property, they have no choice but to be hard on themselves and others. They are used to it, having always worked tirelessly, chaining together endless days between domestic tasks and agricultural work⁴⁶. Hortense, moreover, is perfectly aware of this and emphasizes it: 'We need hardiness because we live in times of great misery'⁴⁷. Thus, what is necessary must be done without excuses, regardless of fatigue, illness or any other obstacle. For Hortense, the land is a precious asset that must be cherished and cultivated at all costs. Her long-standing peasant soul refuses to see the fields neglected, left fallow, unproductive. She leads her family with a firm hand, forcing them to work tirelessly so that each plot is preserved and cultivated with care: 'The first in the fields, she held her people in hand and did not let them breathe until the work was done. At the slightest deviation, she shook them hard'⁴⁸. Many episodes show her implacable rigor, accepting no weakness or slackening. Among the most striking, we find one where, outraged by her daughter's idea of selling the animals, she 'walked on her and twisted her wrists while shouting insults at her'⁴⁹. She herself struggles to neglect nothing and persists despite the fatigue that overwhelms her: 'She ran from one place to another,

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 167.

⁴⁵ J.-C. Bonnet, *La paysannerie française d'une guerre à l'autre*, in: *Histoire des paysans français du XVIII^e siècle à nos jours*, ed. J.-P. Houssel, Roanne 1976, p. 410.

⁴⁶ On the work of peasant women, cf. S. Schweitzer, *Les femmes ont toujours travaillé. Une histoire du travail des femmes aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles*, Paris 2002; Y. Ripa, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ *G*, p. 23.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

worked violently, ordered, scolded, jostled everyone'⁵⁰. Her determination is particularly evident after her husband's health incident: she devotedly cares for him, preparing nutritious meals for him and getting up at night to watch over him, while also fulfilling her obligations in the four houses she runs. The situation takes its toll on her: 'He was getting fat... She, on the contrary, was floating in her clothes'⁵¹, but this does not cause her to interrupt her activities. Despite so many exhausting concerns, she also finds time to provide support to other families and to devote herself discreetly to those who need it most, in particular to her cousin's children who are struggling to keep the small family business running. Sophie Villes emphasizes that 'the practice of mutual aid within relatives or between neighbours is strengthened by conflict'⁵², and Hortense's behaviour perfectly illustrates this peasant solidarity, when she comes to the aid of neighbours overwhelmed by the immensity of the work or lends them tools and machines. Pérochon grasps the reasons for her intense commitment, which are almost a biological instinct, a natural impulse dictated by her psychic constitution and her peasant personality: 'It was still necessary to stand guard around weak souls and to note all cowardice. There was in her an obscure certainty, a primordial and profound need, the instinct of women of upright sense thanks to whom races can last sheltered from disorders'⁵³. It is not without reason that she is nicknamed 'Great Hortense' – ready to assume every responsibility with inexhaustible energy, she embodies the strength and resilience of simple women, entirely devoted to watching over their families.

With *Les Gardiennes*, Pérochon pays tribute to French peasant women, whose determination and daily sacrifices played a vital role in the victory. Apart from the ending, when Misangère, proud of the work accomplished, hands over a prosperous farm to her son-in-law returning from the front, the novel repeatedly celebrates the success of women: 'In the humblest souls, there was the exhilarating feeling of victory; a painful, slow victory, bought at the cost of obscure and incredible pains to which, in the tragic disorder of the war, perhaps insufficient attention was paid'⁵⁴. But above all, it highlights the immense sacrifice required by this victory. The combat behind the front lines proves exhausting for these women overwhelmed by the physical and emotional weight of their responsibilities. Their determination masks a very real distress, as Thébaud rightly points out: 'this

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 143.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 165.

⁵² S. Villes, *op. cit.*

⁵³ *G*, p. 54.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 81.

bravery hides real overwork'⁵⁵. This backbreaking work is not without its victims: infectious diseases are on the rise, agricultural accidents – particularly injuries caused by tools – are on the rise, and 'There were some who paid with their health or even their lives for this passionate bravery'⁵⁶. The novel illustrates this reality through tragic fates: a woman dies in childbirth, alone, in the middle of the marshes, without any help; Hortense's husband succumbs a few months after a fall, exhausted by the work his wife had forced him to do despite his weakness. Hortense herself, overwhelmed by guilt, caring for her dying husband and an ever more crushing workload, becomes so exhausted that she loses weight and can no longer eat. Thus, if these women held on and allowed the countryside to survive, they paid a high price, both physically and morally. Behind the image of the inflexible and resilient peasant woman, Pérochon sketches in filigree a darker reality: that of a silent and invisible suffering that accompanies victory. *Les Gardiennes* thus reminds us that the war not only claimed lives on the front, but also shattered those who remained behind, in the shadows of the fields.

With *Les Gardiennes*, Ernest Pérochon – little known today but very popular in his time⁵⁷ – is part of a wave of tributes to peasant women⁵⁸, who courageously took charge of the farms during the war, taking on all the agricultural work alone, ensuring the survival of the household and facing the difficulties linked to shortages, requisitions and the rigours of daily work. He depicts their trying daily lives, their dedication and their sacrifice, while presenting them as figures of courage as well as individuals confronted with their own limits. If literature does not always offer a strictly faithful representation of reality, its contribution to historical knowledge remains precious. Since the artistic effect is of crucial importance, the plot and the characters can be shaped to meet narrative imperatives, at the risk of certain distortions. Nevertheless, the novels shed light on the environments they describe and make it possible to supplement traditional sources – land registers, price lists, archives or professional press – by restoring the lived dimension of the events⁵⁹. In this

⁵⁵ F. Thébaud, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

⁵⁶ G, p. 82.

⁵⁷ His novels have a wide readership and fragments of them appear in school textbooks. Cf. P. Barral, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

⁵⁸ Examples include S.-G. de Bouhélier's poem *La Louange des femmes*, written for the former Prime Minister Louis Barthou's address on the war effort of women and published in 1917, as well as several newspaper articles published at that time. Cf. F. Thébaud, *op. cit.*, pp. 36–37.

⁵⁹ This is the aim of regionalist novels. Cf. A.-M. Thiesse, *La littérature régionaliste en France (1900–1940)*, "Tangence" 1993, 40, pp. 57–58.

perspective, *Les Gardiennes* is part of what could be called 'non-scientific filiations'⁶⁰, capable of enriching historical research and providing more embodied knowledge of the period. All the more so since Pérochon, the son of a farmer and a schoolteacher in Deux-Sèvres, writes about a world he knows intimately⁶¹. Women have long been the great forgotten in the history of World War I, an omission that is often explained by the fact that 'the war of women is less glorious than that of the combatants, at the very least different'⁶². Some historians have even pointed out that 'the history of women requires ingenuity to compensate for the absence of documents'⁶³. In this context, the story of the life of the 'Great Hortense', as recounted by Pérochon, takes on a particular value: his novel seems to be one of the few in France to offer a detailed description of the lives of women behind the front lines. Thus, through this story with its evocative title, the author perpetuates the heroic image of French peasant women, these 'guardians of the peasant soul and guarantors of continuity'⁶⁴.

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⁶⁰ A.-M. Thiesse, *Le mouvement littéraire régionaliste (1900–1945)*, "Ethnologie française" 1988, 18, 3, p. 231.

⁶¹ This is evidenced above all by the regionalist style of his works, analyzed in P. Rézeau, *Notes sur le lexique d'Ernest Pérochon*, "Revue de Linguistique Romane" 1978, 42, pp. 81–122. On the work of Pérochon, cf. also R. Durand, „*Million*” par Ernest Pérochon (1936), *un voyageur poitevin au temps de la Réforme*, "Actes des congrès nationaux des sociétés historiques et scientifiques" 2009, 130, 7, pp. 107–121 and R. Ponton, *Les images de la paysannerie dans le roman rural à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle*, "Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales" 1977, 17–18, p. 65.

⁶² F. Thébaud, *op.cit.*, p. 43.

⁶³ M. Perrot, *Où en est l'histoire des femmes?*, "Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques" 2005, 36, <http://journals.openedition.org/ccrh/3067> [access: 14.01.2025].

⁶⁴ M. Gervais, M. Jollivet, Y. Tavernier, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

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