

1 The Facts of the Case

The killings took place on the evening of 2 February 1933, at the Lancelin family home—6 rue Bruyère, in the city of Le Mans. That name generally evokes the celebrated 24-hour Grand Prix car race which takes place on the outskirts of the town, but Le Mans has other claims to fame than motor-racing and murder. It is the capital of the province of Maine, at the point where the Loire country shades off into Normandy and Brittany. It is a major railway junction on the westbound lines out of the Gare de Montparnasse (now only an hour from Paris by high-speed train) and an important centre of the car and food industries, as well as being a university city. Its population has very nearly doubled since the Papin sisters' day, when it clustered much more tightly around the old town centre—the cathedral of Saint-Julien and the *vieux Mans*, a handful of higgledy-piggledy medieval streets of wooden houses that still attract the tourists. The rue Bruyère is only a short distance from the old centre, an unremarkable street of terraced bourgeois houses.

Number 6 belonged in 1933 to M. René Lancelin, a retired solicitor who lived there with his wife and daughter Geneviève (there was another married daughter). The family seems to have led the kind of life that had characterized provincial France since Balzac's day. They had a fairly spacious house, had since 1927 employed the two Papin sisters as live-in maids, and shopped, dined, and card-played their tranquilly sociable way through life. M. Lancelin had spent the afternoon of 2 February playing bridge with friends, and returned home at about 6.30 p.m., expecting to find his wife and daughter there ready to join him for dinner at his brother-in-law's house. He was therefore extremely surprised to find the front door bolted against him and to get no response to his increasingly frantic knocking and ringing, the more so as a light could clearly be seen in the window of the maids' attic room. After two hours or so he went to the police station. Three policemen—two of whom bore the names of Ragot and Vérité¹—managed to get into the house through a window at the back, and found Mme Lancelin and Geneviève lying

¹ These mean respectively 'morsel of gossip' and 'truth' in French. Still more curiously, another policeman involved with the case bore the name Deleuze, in common with the philosopher of schizophrenia whose best-known work is *L'Anti-Oedipe*.

across the landing, battered to death, their thighs and legs violently mutilated. More horrible still—and here surely resides what following Roland Barthes in *La Chambre claire* we might call the *punctum* of the case, that which gives it its particular and irreplaceable force—eyeballs lay on the stair-carpet, having been torn from the women with bare hands while they were still alive. That was, and so far as we have been able to tell remains to this day, unique in the whole of criminal history.

The horror of blinding and its evident link with castration, manifested in the Oedipus complex, were as we shall see to fuel much psychoanalytic interest in the case. This theme had been much in evidence in French culture a few years earlier, for 1928 had seen the appearance both of Buñuel and Dali's *Un chien andalou*, with its infamous opening sequence depicting the slitting open of an eye with a razor, and of Georges Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil*, which culminates in an orgy at the height of which a priest's eye is torn from its socket.² Such thoughts would have been a very long way from the minds of the appalled policemen as they contemplated the bodies, before making their way upstairs, where they doubtless expected to find Christine and Léa likewise dead.

A locksmith was called and forced the door of the maids' room. Christine and Léa were side by side in bed, on the floor near them the hammer which had been used to batter Mme Lancelin and Geneviève to death. The sisters readily admitted that they were the killers, Christine claiming that it had been in self-defence. It was her words that were to give the killings the status of an act of class vengeance: 'J'aime mieux avoir eu la peau de nos patronnes que leur avoir laissé la nôtre.'³ A bloodstained knife was found under Mme Lancelin's body, a battered pewter jug on the staircase—the other instruments of the crime. The sisters were immediately taken into custody. The following day's local newspaper, *La Sarthe du soir*, ran the story on its front page. Christine and Léa Papin's journey to gruesomely archetypal fame had begun.

The sisters' lives before the killings

Mistrust and fear of the 'lower orders', perceived as barely human and capable of the most hideous excesses, had long been a fairly widespread sentiment in France, particularly in reference to the Parisian 'mob'. The role played by the *sans-culottes* in the Revolution had left an enduring

² Buñuel and Dali were of course Spanish, but their film was shot in France.

³ 'I'd rather have had our bosses' hides than for them to have had ours.'

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trace in popular memory, and Louis Chevalier has admirably shown, in *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses*, how tenacious that perception of the Parisian proletariat and sub-proletariat was. Christine and Léa Papin, however, had in all probability never set foot in the capital, or indeed left their native department of the Sarthe, which has always had a somewhat unglamorous, not to say backward, reputation. This owes much to its location, sandwiched between the more touristically enticing regions of Normandy, Brittany, and Touraine, and about as close as it is possible to get to Paris while remaining within *la France profonde*—an expression only imperfectly rendered into English by ‘deepest France’. *La France profonde* is by definition rural (but not coastal—it does not include Brittany, which qualifies handsomely on all other counts), impenetrable, and characterized by literal and metaphorical inbreeding, which was a crucial factor in the Papin case. It is an ideal location for the better-off class of Parisian intellectual to own a second home, though permanent residence there would be a species of purgatory. Provinces such as Auvergne and Burgundy spring most readily to mind when *la France profonde* is evoked, but the Sarthe, and the small province of Maine of which it forms part, qualified even more clearly in 1933 than today. Paulette Houdyer, author of the most widely sold book on the Papin case, has spoken of her profound attachment to the department where she was born and has always lived, and of her desire to explore the psychological complexities of the Papin sisters in part as a counterweight to sneering views of the Sarthe as a nest of yokels. Bookshops in Le Mans purvey glossaries of Sarthe idioms—an indication of cultural distance from the centre thrown all the more sharply into relief by the fact that the adjoining province of Touraine is classically that where the purest French is spoken.

La France profonde is no Arcadia—the inbreeding alone would ensure that—and has been the locale for some extremely gory crimes, real and imagined. Germaine Dulac’s silent film *La Souriante Mme Beudet* (1922), set in Chartres which is the capital of a neighbouring department to the Sarthe, depicts the stifling tedium of life there and how it leads the heroine to fantasize about murdering her loathsomely self-satisfied husband. Bertrand Tavernier’s film *Le Juge et l’assassin* (1976) is based on the real-life case of Joseph Vacher, a serial killer who operated in the eastern province of Franche-Comté during the Second Empire. Yet its working population has never inspired the same apprehension as those of the big cities—Paris, but also in different ways Marseille and Lyon. The humdrum tranquillity of its setting has tended to seem incompatible with such ‘unnatural’ violence as that shown by the Papin sisters. Yet we are about to see that that tranquillity and that violence

were two sides of the same coin, so that the killing can in a sense be seen as the logical—but not predictable—consequence of what had gone before, the most spectacular of all the returns of the repressed of *la France profonde*.

Christine and Léa were the daughters of Gustave Papin and Clémence Derée (Paulette Houdyer gives the surname as Redré), who had married in 1901. At the time he worked in his father's cloth-mill, she in a seedsman's shop. Their first daughter, Emilia, was born in 1902. Gustave seems to have been of an amiable and accommodating disposition, Clémence more headstrong and flighty—there are suspicions that Gustave was not Emilia's father. Gustave found work in a sawmill in the village of Marigné, to which they moved in 1904, and in March of the following year Christine was born. It was at Clémence's insistence that she was brought up by Gustave's sister Isabelle; the marriage appears to have been a loveless one on her side at least and the children largely unwanted. Notwithstanding this, a third daughter, Léa, followed in September 1911, just before the marriage finally came to an end. Clémence claimed that Gustave had sexually molested Emilia, and the couple were divorced in May 1913. The two elder daughters were then placed in care in the Bon Pasteur orphanage and house of correction in Le Mans, shortly after which Léa, only 2 years old, went to live with an uncle. In 1918 Léa was boarded out in her turn and Emilia decided to enter a convent, which marked the effective end of relations with her family. So far as can be ascertained she was to pass the remainder of her days there.

Christine, unsurprisingly perhaps for one from so evidently dysfunctional a family background, expressed a wish to follow Emilia's example, which was indignantly rejected by her mother. The age of majority in France at the time was 21, up until which time parents had the deciding say on where their children lived, so Clémence's word was final. In 1920, Christine was placed as a maid with the Poirier family in Le Mans. Anybody who has experience of *chambres de bonne* in Paris—now often converted into studio flats, but no larger than they ever were—will tend to think of live-in domestic service as a painfully cramped and humble occupation, whose unattractiveness will be reinforced by Dr Louis Le Guillant's observations in his piece on the Papin case about the extraordinarily high rates of mental disturbance and suicide among that category (Le Guillant 1963: 911–12). For a woman as evidently unmaternal and (within the very limited means available to her) materialistic as Clémence, however, the lure of no longer having to fend for her daughters must have been considerable, while for Christine the escape from institutional surveillance and opportunity to learn a trade, however modest, might well have been tempting.

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Her father kept well away from her after his abuse of Emilia, her elder sister safely behind the convent wall, her mother was at once indifferent and domineering, and Christine had only Léa to turn to for emotional sustenance. The extraordinary intensity of the emotional bond between the two sisters, without which their crime would have been inconceivable, derived from, as it nourished, their isolation in virtually all other respects. Maids were not particularly well paid, but their food and accommodation, however meagre, were provided; Christine and Léa turned out to have amassed surprisingly substantial savings, largely because they showed no interest in any kind of social or cultural life outside each other. Cafés, theatres, cinemas, dances held no attraction for them—maybe a reaction against their mother's extrovert lifestyle? Their only extravagance was clothes, presumably bought to be appreciated by themselves and each other. The sexual nature of their relationship completed the exclusive binding together of their dyad, ensuring that neither need want for or seek friends, family, or lover outside. That they were, as we shall see, to inspire the text in which Jacques Lacan first began to formulate the concept of the mirror-phase already begins to seem all too logical.

Christine and Léa first began working together some time after 1924, when Léa left the institution in which she had been a boarder. For the remainder of their free lives their greatest desire was to be employed (literally) under the same roof. It was in February 1927 that Christine was taken on by the Lancelins, to be joined by Léa two months later. It is significant that when first questioned by police after the killings Christine was to give the later date as that on which she had started work in the rue Bruyère. In October 1929 the sisters finally broke off relations with their mother. They were, at last, alone together.

There was virtually no verbal communication between the sisters and their employers. Mme Lancelin gave such domestic orders as were necessary, M. Lancelin and Geneviève uttering scarcely a word to Christine and Léa. Much was made of this, at the trial and in Lacan's article, but in the light of Le Guillant's observations, and the poignant quotation from a Spanish maidservant that he takes as his epigraph ('*Moi pas chien, moi humain*',⁴ Le Guillant 1963: 868), it was probably far from unusual. The social, economic, and above all cultural gulf between the employing and employer classes was far too immense to be bridged by fleeting pleasantries or yield meaningful conversations. The representation of master-servant relationships at this time most likely to be familiar to

⁴ 'I'm not a dog, I'm a human being.'

readers of this study is Jean Renoir's film *La Règle du jeu* (1939), in which the Marquise de la Chesnaye—named Christine—confides in her maid and the Marquis engages in good-natured banter with Marceau, the poacher briefly turned domestic servant. Renoir's characters, however, belong to the aristocracy (a luxurious Paris apartment, a country estate), and the relationship between the Marquis and Marceau makes sense only in the context of the film as a species of Bakhtinian carnival, in which the normal hierarchies of social relationships are inverted only to reassert themselves. In the world of the provincial bourgeoisie, altogether more financially and culturally restricted, the taciturn functionality of the relationship between the Lancelins and their maids might well have been the rule rather than the exception. It is significant that M. Lancelin's testimony situates the demise of any verbal communication between the sisters and their employers after the breach with their mother:

Cette brouille avec la mère a aigri certainement le caractère des filles qui sont devenues aigres et taciturnes. Depuis cette époque, ni ma femme ni moi n'échangions de conversation avec elles en dehors du service. Elles étaient polies, nous sentions que les observations seraient mal reçues et comme notre service de maison était très bien fait, et ne donnait lieu à aucune critique, nous patientions.⁵ (Dupré 1984: 142)

This was a curious thing to say, for two reasons. While the sisters' devouring absorption in each other would hardly have encouraged chit-chat at any time, with the Lancelins or anybody else, it clearly became exaggerated once they had severed links with their mother—the reverse, on a superficial reading at least, of what might have been expected. Furthermore, M. Lancelin's final sentence implies anything but an attitude of distant hauteur. 'Nous patientions' evokes—with hideous irony in view of what was to happen—the expectation, even the hope, of a change in the sisters' attitude, while 'nous sentions que les observations seraient mal reçues' no less ironically comes close to suggesting that the Papins exerted a bizarre kind of power over their employers. There are hints here, and elsewhere, of the emotional tensions and transferences that were to issue in the crime and have fed analysis and speculation ever since. The sisters habitually referred to Mme Lancelin—not, needless to say, to her face—as 'maman', and Louis Le Guillant has it that when their mother visited them after their verdict '[e]lles l'appelaient "Mme",

⁵ 'The quarrel with their mother certainly embittered the sisters, who became gloomy and taciturn. Since then, neither my wife nor I had had any conversation with them outside their work. They were polite, and since we felt that they would take exception to any comment and they did their jobs in the house impeccably, we were patient.'

comme leur maîtresse⁶—one of the many bizarre mirrorings with which as we shall see this case is riddled. In October 1928 Mme Lancelin is alleged to have compelled Léa to pick up a piece of paper she had dropped by pinching her arm until it bled. The precise balance between psychic and quasi-familial tensions on the one hand and ‘normal’ relations between dominant and dominated classes on the other is almost impossible to establish. What is certain is that by 2 February 1933 that balance had become a lethally unstable one.

The killings

The precise details of what happened that evening remain uncertain, for while neither sister ever attempted to deny guilt their accounts of who did what to whom varied significantly. The trigger for the attack was a blown fuse on the household iron, which Christine had collected from the repairers only the previous day. The cost of the repair had been deducted from the sisters’ wages. This meant that Mme Lancelin and Geneviève returned to find the house in darkness, which, according to Christine, so angered the older woman that she attacked her. Christine’s account (under questioning from Dupuy, the senior policeman on the case) is remarkable for its combined sang-froid and confusion:

Voyant que Mme Lancelin allait se jeter sur moi, je lui ai sauté à la figure et je lui ai arraché les yeux avec mes doigts. Quand je dis que j’ai sauté sur Mme Lancelin, je me trompe, c’est sur Mlle Lancelin Geneviève que j’ai sauté et c’est à cette dernière que j’ai arraché les yeux. Pendant ce temps, ma soeur Léa a sauté sur Mme Lancelin et lui a arraché également les yeux. Quand nous avons eu fait cela, elles se sont allongées ou accroupies sur place; ensuite, je suis descendue précipitamment à la cuisine et suis allée chercher un marteau et un couteau de cuisine. Avec ces deux instruments, ma soeur et moi, nous nous sommes acharnées sur nos deux maîtresses. Nous avons frappé sur la tête à coups de marteau et nous avons tailladé le corps et les jambes avec le couteau. Nous avons également frappé avec un pot en étain qui était en place sur une petite table sur le palier, nous avons changé plusieurs fois les instruments de l’une à l’autre, c’est-à-dire que j’ai passé le marteau à ma soeur pour frapper et elle m’a passé le couteau. Nous avons fait la même chose pour le pot d’étain. Les victimes se sont mise [*sic*] à crier mais je ne me souviens pas qu’elles aient prononcé quelques paroles.⁷ (Dupré 1984: 32)

⁶ ‘They called her “Madam”, as if she were their mistress.’

⁷ ‘Seeing that Mme Lancelin was going to rush at me, I flung myself in her face and tore her eyes out with my fingers. When I say that I flung myself at Mme Lancelin, that’s wrong; I flung myself

The police photographs reproduced in Dupré's book leave no room for doubt about the savagery of the assault. The women's legs were slashed, as Dupré points out, like meat being made ready for the oven, the blood that gushed from them mingling with the menstrual blood Geneviève was losing at the time. The Papin sisters also had their periods at the time of the killings, but were never again to do so afterwards—a contrary, and real-life, example of psychosomatic menstrual disorder to the heroines' aberrant menstruation in Marie Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* or Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes*. Léa's account confirmed the details given by Christine, but was substantially more reticent. She was indeed to say, when first questioned: 'Pour moi, je suis sourde et muette'⁸ (Dupré 1984: 164). Christine's statements, on the other hand, show an assumption rather than a mere acceptance of responsibility for the killings. 'Mon crime est assez grand pour que je dise ce qui est'⁹ (Dupré 1984: 35) suggests an awareness, however unformed, that what she and her sister had done was an acting-out, in the most literal sense an *ex-expression*, a 'driving out', of something, or some variety of things, otherwise unsayable. The psychoanalytic interest taken in the case by Lacan and Dupré resides, we shall see, largely in this.

There had been an earlier intimation that all was not well with the sisters, in late August or early September 1931, when they had visited M. Le Feuvre, the mayor of Le Mans, making emotive but unfocused allegations of persecution. The town hall secretary had described them to the mayor as 'piquées' (= nutcases). Christine was subsequently to say that the purpose of their visit was to request the emancipation of Léa—still at the time a minor, though she had had full use of her earnings for two years—from her mother's tutelage. Eyewitness accounts, however, made no mention of this. Dupré argues that the mayor ('maire') was a homophonic surrogate for their mother ('mère'), from whom they were of course estranged—a view which suggests the intense emotional confusion and turmoil that were to erupt so dramatically two years afterwards.

at Mlle Geneviève Lancelin and tore out her eyes. While this was going on, my sister Léa leapt at Mme Lancelin and tore her eyes out. When we'd done that, they lay or squatted down on the spot; then I hurried down to the kitchen to get a hammer and a kitchen knife. With these two instruments my sister and I set about our two mistresses. We hit them over their heads with the hammer and slashed their bodies and legs with the knife. We also hit them with a little pewter jug which was on a little table on the landing, and we changed instruments several times—I handed the hammer to my sister and she handed me the knife. We did the same thing with the pewter jug. The victims began howling, but I don't remember their actually saying anything.'

⁸ 'As for me, I am deaf and dumb.'

⁹ 'My crime is great enough for me to tell the truth.'

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What emerges fairly clearly from the different accounts given is that Christine, as the older and more intelligent of the two sisters, took the lead (she is quoted as having said: 'Je vais les massacrer'),¹⁰ and that she and Léa agreed to share responsibility equally. They said to each other afterwards: 'En voilà du propre!'¹¹ before putting on their nightgowns and snuggling up in bed together to await the police. Incarcerated separately, they protested by refusing to eat or drink for a week. During the six months or so between their arrest and the trial, it was Christine whose behaviour was consistently the more bizarre. In July she had to be put into a straitjacket to prevent her from trying to tear out her own eyes. This led to a brief reunion with Léa shortly afterwards, at which she ecstatically removed her blouse and cried: 'Dis-moi oui! Dis-moi oui!'¹² (Certain journalistic accounts speak of her exposing her private parts and fondling her breasts, but there is no other evidence to support this.) It also seems to have been at this time that she said, when asked why she had removed Geneviève Lancelin's clothing: 'Je cherchais quelque chose dont la possession m'aurait rendue plus forte'¹³ (Roudinesco 1993: 95). This might have been the phallus, in the symbolic sense in which Lacan uses the term—'[c]et inestimable objet de convoitise (celui qui n'existe pas, tout en encombrant la culotte de maman)'¹⁴ (Saint-Drôme 1994: 140). (For a detailed exploration of the phallus in Lacan see Bowie 1991, ch. 5.) Whether or not we find a Lacanian reading acceptable, there is surely no doubt that the 'quelque chose' Christine was seeking had strong sexual overtones, for she had said in custody that in another life she had been, or was to be, her sister's husband. Yet the July outburst was less the consummation of that 'marriage' than a breach within it, for once Léa had been led away by the warders Christine abandoned her attempts to be permanently reunited with her. Her last mention of Léa's name occurs in a letter on 19 July. It is as if the killing and its aftermath had finally destroyed the couple of which they were such an intense affirmation.

The trial and contemporary reports on it

They nevertheless stood together, though not side by side (a policeman separated them), in the dock of the Le Mans Palais de Justice on 30

¹⁰ 'I'm going to massacre them.'

¹¹ 'This is a pretty sight.'

¹² 'Tell me yes! Tell me yes!'

¹³ 'I was looking for something whose possession would have made me stronger.'

¹⁴ 'That priceless coveted object (the one which does not exist, even though it clutters up Mummy's pants).'

September. French legislation has always been fairly permissive in the matter of what can be said about suspects or accused in advance of a court's verdict, so that the guilt of the 'soeurs criminelles' had been bruited in the press from the moment of their arrest. An angry crowd massed outside the court, calling for the death penalty. This was still in force in France, as it was to remain until Mitterrand's accession to power in 1981, but no woman had been guillotined since 1887, though a journalist for *Candide* was to call for the Papins' beheading.

Inside the courtroom, forty journalists, mostly from Paris, were gathered. Their interest was less in the facts of the case, already widely known, than in the appearance and attitude of Christine and Léa. The notorious 'before' and 'after' photographs of the sisters—'before' dressed in their Sunday best, 'after' haggard and traumatized by the gaze of the police camera—have consistently fascinated writers on the case, notably Nicole Ward Jouve. *La Sarthe* described them in court as being 'comme des petites filles en classe alors que passe l'inspecteur', and commented on the distance between 'cette fille frêle (sc. Christine), toute ramassée dans son manteau' and 'la mégère surexcitée que nous vîmes le soir du crime'.¹⁵ The banality, even the invisibility, of evil can of course be seen as an index of its presence quite as much as its most florid manifestations (something Dostoevsky among others knew only too well), so that the sisters' innocently cowed demeanour was—is—inevitably more complex than it seems. The distance on which *La Sarthe* comments could well be that between one schizophrenic manifestation and another, though we shall see that for Lacan it is paranoia, not schizophrenia, that provides the key to the killings.

Germaine Brière, the defence lawyer, observed: 'J'ai trouvé, au lieu de deux brutes, deux pauvres filles'¹⁶—a particularly poignant remark in its suggestion of a potential mother figure, what Melanie Klein would call a 'good breast', arriving only after the appalling violence its absence had brought about. The sisters' responsibility for their act was the main concern of a trial in which the facts of the case were scarcely in doubt. They answered questions in a whisper or not at all, suggesting no grudge against the Lancelins despite Christine's defiant formulation when arrested. The three official psychiatric experts gave it as their opinion that the sisters were guilty as charged and merited no mercy; one of them (Dr Truelle) had just been charged with the clinical examination of Violette Nozières. M. Houlière, the lawyer representing

¹⁵ 'like little girls in school when the inspector comes round. . . . This frail girl, hunched up in her coat, and the overexcited shrew we saw on the night of the crime.'

¹⁶ 'I found, instead of two brutes, two poor girls.'

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M. Lancelin and his family, concluded his speech by saying: ‘... puisqu’elles se sont conduites en bêtes fauves, il faut les traiter en sauvages et en bêtes fauves.’¹⁷

This depressing revanchism, however, was not the only discourse on offer in the courtroom, or indeed outside. Dr Logre, described as a ‘distinguished specialist in mental illness’, was called as a witness for the defence, focusing on the sisters’ mental state and in particular on the gulf between the shocking violence of the crime and its almost total lack of motive. *La Sarthe’s* report shows how many of the factors that have fascinated later writers about the case were at least touched upon in his speech—the element of sexual sadism, the sisters’ ill-defined persecution complex (the town hall episode was cited as proof of this), what he termed ‘l’extraordinaire duo moral que forment les deux soeurs, la personnalité de la jeune étant absolument annihilée par celle de l’aînée’¹⁸ (Dupré 1984: 90). Logre concluded his speech with a plea for further investigation and psychiatric reports—hardly a realistic option in view of the interest and emotions generated by the trial, especially since the three court medical experts (who unlike him had been able to interview the sisters) steadfastly maintained the conclusion they had already reached.

Logre was interviewed after the trial by the ‘true crime’ magazine *Allo Police*, having meanwhile been able to speak with the sisters. This is the first mention I have been able to find of the incestuous nature of their relationship, effectively censored from the official reports on the case. Logre is unambiguous in his rejection of the Papins’ statement that their affection was no more than a sisterly one, stating that:

Les soeurs Papin présentent toutes les apparences d’une affection anormale et amoureuse. Elles ne sortaient pas. On ne leur connaît nulle aventure sentimentale . . . Quand on les a séparées, à la prison, un désespoir insensé s’est manifesté chez Christine. Un amant éloigné d’une maîtresse adorée n’aurait pas eu de pires manifestations de douleur.¹⁹ (Dupré 1984: 92)

It is noteworthy that Logre imputes to Christine the ‘masculine’ role in the relationship, equating her with the male lover and Léa with the mistress in a manner that tallies with the stereotype of the male as more

¹⁷ ‘... since they behaved like wild animals, they must be treated like savages and wild animals.’

¹⁸ ‘the extraordinary moral duo formed by the two sisters, in which the younger one’s personality was absolutely annihilated by the older one’s.’

¹⁹ ‘The Papin sisters give every appearance of having an abnormal relationship, that of lovers. They never went out. Neither was known to have any emotional adventures. When they were separated, in prison, Christine showed the most intense despair. A lover forcibly removed from his beloved mistress would not have shown greater signs of grief.’

active and assertive. This polarization is later invoked in support of his diagnosis of *folie à deux* (to be reprised by Lacan), for:

Quand un fou engendre une folie voisine, cas fréquent, il y a toujours un sujet actif et un sujet passif. C'est exactement le cas ici. Christine est active et ordonne, Léa est passive et obéit. Les experts n'ont pas noté cette observation.²⁰ (Dupré 1984: 93)

The reservations we may well have about Logre's sweeping generalizations on *folie à deux* do not significantly detract from the thrust of his argument, which suggests that to equate the two sisters as identical partners in crime was to disregard the imbalance between them—an imbalance without that clearly betrayed an imbalance within. The sisters themselves, in their statements after arrest, initially seemed to endorse the 'official' view, stressing that they shared full and equal responsibility for the killings. As we have seen, however, this view was not to survive prolonged and repeated questioning, in the course of which Christine's dominance became ever more obvious. The Le Mans court clearly accepted this, as the different sentences handed down show, but not its possible implications concerning the sisters' sanity. Dupré points out that Logre's observations were published at the same time as Lacan's article, very shortly after the trial, which shows how rapidly what he calls the 'on-dit' of the case—the numerous discourses and reflections it inspired—came into play. What is remarkable is how many of the less condemnatory 'on-dits', such as that in *Allo Police*, figured in popular, non-intellectual publications.

Two further national publications—one a daily newspaper, the other an illustrated weekly—likewise go to illustrate this. For *L'Humanité*, published by the French Communist Party, the Papin sisters were victims not only of class, but—*avant la lettre*—of gender oppression. The issue of 28 September announced that: 'Ce procès ne devrait pas être celui des soeurs Papin toutes seules mais aussi celui de la sacrosainte famille bourgeoise, au sein de laquelle de se développe et fleurit quand ce n'est pas les pires turpitudes, la méchanceté et le mépris pour ceux qui gagnent leur vie à la servir.'²¹ The issue of 29 September commented scathingly on the prosecuting counsel's description of the sisters as 'des

²⁰ 'When a mad person causes madness in somebody close to them—which is a common event—there is always an active and a passive subject. This is exactly what happens here. Christine is active and gives the orders, Léa is passive and obedient. The experts did not take this observation into account.'

²¹ 'This trial should not be of the Papin sisters alone, but of the sacrosanct bourgeois family, in whose heart the worst depravities can flourish, to say nothing of malevolence and scorn for those who earn their living in that family's service.'

chiennes hargneuses qui mordent la main quand on ne les caresse plus!', observing: 'Quant aux "caresses" dont parle Monsieur Riégert, les jeunes exploitées des places bourgeoises savent ce que cela veut dire et qui [*sic*] est une forme d'exploitation de plus.'²² This article closes with a ringing call to gendered political action ('Que des dizaines de milliers de "petites bonnes," partie de la jeunesse exploitée, viennent aux côtés de leurs soeurs des usines et des bureaux à l'action pour la défense de leurs revendications, pour l'émancipation sociale').²³

It is entirely predictable that a Communist Party publication should have seen the sisters as victims of class oppression, which by virtue of their condition they fairly obviously were. What is more surprising is the awareness of their oppression as females, obvious enough to a contemporary readership but in those pre-feminist days rarely alluded to as such. M. Lancelin's relations with the sisters were entirely proper, but that is scarcely the issue. Gender oppression, in that Stalinist era, was granted little or no space of its own in orthodox leftist discourse; it was at best subservient to class oppression, at worst a bourgeois diversion from it. One possible explanation for *L'Humanité's* unusually 'modern' attitude is that this was the beginning of the period of *la main tendue*—the policy of broadening alliances with non-marxist parties and groupings that was to lead to the Popular Front government of 1936. The industrial working class was still seen as the mainspring of revolution, but other social groups and categories were also welcome on board, including domestic servants whose relative invisibility and all but literal absorption into the lives of the bourgeoisie might hitherto have consigned them to a minor place at best. It is interesting in this connection to note that Christine and Léa always refused to pay Social Security contributions, preferring to rely on their cash savings—a mentality supposedly characteristic of the peasantry, and indicative of how far removed they and others like them were from the machinery of the modern state that the Communist Party sought ambiguously to take over or to smash.

Étienne Hervé, in the true-crime weekly *Déetective*, also argued for more understanding treatment of the sisters, on grounds of psychologically mitigating circumstances rather than class politics. *Déetective* was a

²² 'vicious bitches who bite the hand that no longer caresses them' . . . 'As for the "caresses" M. Riégert mentions, the young women who are exploited in the bourgeoisie's service know only too well what that means—it is yet one more form of exploitation.'

²³ 'May the tens of thousands of "ordinary maids," who form part of our exploited youth, join their sisters in factories and offices in action for the defence of their demands and for social emancipation.'

somewhat more complex publication than the label ‘true-crime weekly’ might suggest—associated with the left politically, incorporating ‘reports on the great political-criminal affairs of the moment’ (Rifkin 1993: 124) cheek by jowl with *faits divers*, making often sophisticated use of photo-montage. Hervé’s article is less sensationalist than we might think from its title, ‘L’Abattoir’, pointing out that the two prosecution doctors had visited the sisters for only half an hour each, arguing for compassion on the grounds of the sisters’ disturbed family background, and stressing, like Dr Logre, the need for more detailed expertise, preferably through a jury of medical specialists.

Nor were these left-wing Parisian publications the only ones to adopt a less vengeful and condemnatory tone. The weekly *Le Bonhomme sarthois*, whose title is scarcely the acme of metropolitan sophistication, had opined in February that the sisters did not appear in full possession of their faculties and were ‘des névrosées qui, souvent, paraissent en état d’hypnose’.²⁴ On the day after the trial (1 October), the same publication proffered a view that strikingly complements *L’Humanité*’s, but this time from the side of the provincial bourgeoisie who for the Communist paper were the enemy: ‘Personne ne peut se vanter de connaître à fond l’âme complexe des femmes et spécialement des servantes qui, chaque jour, circulent en silence autour de nous.’²⁵ Paranoia and the mirror-phase, we shall see, were to be fundamental to Lacan’s work on the case in particular, so that it seems appropriate that *Le Bonhomme sarthois* should both replicate the sisters’ evident paranoia and mirror *L’Humanité*’s call to revolt. Christine and Léa appear less as pathological exceptions than as metonymic representatives of their class and gender, at once all too familiar and disconcertingly unknowable in their otherness—uncanny in the sense in which Freud uses the word when he defines it as ‘that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar’ (Freud 1990: 340). The literary example Freud chooses to illustrate his concept is that of the Sand-Man in one of Hoffmann’s fairy stories—a character who tears out children’s eyes.

Le Bonhomme sarthois’s columnist Gros-René—a name redolent of peasant origins—also takes the opportunity to defend his department’s capital against the slanderous remarks of (mostly Parisian) journalists. He denies that the inhabitants were in a frenzy at the time of the trial and that fire extinguishers were ready at the windows of the Palais de Justice, describing Le Mans as ‘une ville calme, pondérée,

²⁴ ‘neurotics who often appear to be under hypnosis.’

²⁵ ‘Nobody can claim fundamental knowledge of the complex souls of women, and especially of the serving-women who each day make their way among us in silence.’

où personne ne s'emballé, même pour un procès sensationnel'. Such reactions, Gros-René goes on to say, would have been more likely in southern cities such as Toulouse, Marseille, or the much smaller Carpentras—*la France profonde* defending itself against the over-excitabile Mediterranean, and protesting that 'il ne faut pas juger l'ensemble de la population sur deux démentes—car nous persistons à croire que les soeurs criminelles ne jouissaient pas de la plénitude de leurs facultés'²⁶ (*Le Bonhomme sarthois*, 8 Oct. 1933). Once more, the popular press of the time was to show greater acumen in judging the Papin sisters than the courts.

The verdict and its aftermath

Merciful judgments on women who killed were not uncommon in the France of the time. *La Sarthe* of 26 September 1933—only a few days before the Papin trial—records the case of a woman, also called Papin, who was spared after killing one of her thirteen children in a moment of despair, and mentions another woman's acquittal for the killing of her violent and drunken husband. The Papins, however, clearly constituted a case apart, and their jury's deliberations lasted a grand total of four minutes. Christine was condemned to be guillotined in the main square of Le Mans, Léa to ten years' hard labour. On hearing the verdict Christine fell to her knees in the dock.

Léa immediately appealed against her sentence, but Christine refused to do so. Throughout the month of November *Police-Magazine* ran a series of articles by Maurice Corien calling the sisters' sanity into question. Léa's appeal was rejected on 30 November, and Christine's sentence, despite her refusal to appeal, commuted by the President, Albert Lebrun, to hard labour for life on 22 January 1934, whereupon the sisters were transferred to prison in Rennes. Christine's mental condition steadily worsened; she persistently repeated that she was 'bonne à rien' and did not deserve to live. Brought face to face with Léa, she claimed not to recognize her ('elle est bien gentille mais ce n'est pas ma soeur',²⁷ Dupré 1984: 188). In May of that year she was moved to the public asylum in Rennes, where she died of a lung infection consequent upon

²⁶ 'A calm, measured town, where nobody gets worked up, even about a sensational trial . . . One must not judge the population as a whole on the basis of two madwomen, for we remain convinced that the two criminal sisters were not in full possession of their faculties.'

²⁷ 'she is very nice, but she's not my sister.'

self-inflicted malnutrition on 18 May 1937. Her clinical records were destroyed in the 1944 bombing of the city.

Léa was released, with two years' remission for good conduct, in 1943. Legally prohibited from residing in Le Mans, she went to the Loire estuary city of Nantes, some fifty miles away. Her mother had not visited her in prison, contenting herself with sending a few affectionate letters; yet it was with her that Léa was to live until Clémence's death, almost as though life on her own were unbearable, even incomprehensible, to her. Her name, for public consumption at any rate, was no longer 'Léa'; she opted instead to be known as 'Marie', the criminal label driven out by the supreme signifier of redemptive female innocence. She was tracked down in 1966 by a *France-Soir* journalist, whose article compares her to a '[s]pectre du passé qui brûle au point de la réduire à la couleur de la cendre'²⁸ (Dupré 1984: 201). She worked as a chambermaid and cleaning-woman, living a life of tranquil anonymity in the same kind of minute but tidy room that she must have occupied in the rue Bruyère, and keeping mementoes of Christine and lace from the Lancelin house among her possessions. She was widely believed to have died in 1982, but as the Afterword will show was still alive in 2000.

M. Lancelin, unable to sell his house after the dreadful event there, lived in 6 rue Bruyère with a housekeeper until his death some twenty years after the crime. The house has since changed hands at least twice. In the summer of 1999 at least, it was the only one in its street not to bear a number.

²⁸ 'a ghost of the past that has burnt her until she is the colour of ash.'