“Aux Mères heureuses”: Zola’s Compassion for Working Mothers

Elizabeth Emery
Montclair State University, emerye@mail.montclair.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/modernlang-literatures-facpubs

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

MSU Digital Commons Citation
Emery, Elizabeth, ""Aux Mères heureuses": Zola's Compassion for Working Mothers" (2018). Department of Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works. 52.
https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/modernlang-literatures-facpubs/52

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.
“Aux Mères heureuses”: Zola’s Compassion for Working Mothers

Elizabeth Emery
Montclair State University

“Aux mères heureuses” read the headline of *Le Figaro* on Saturday 18 April 1891. The three-column text was not a news story; instead, it was a letter from novelist Émile Zola, addressed to “happy mothers,” those “fortunate” enough, as he states several times, to keep their children at home with them.¹ In this letter, Zola presented a new charitable organization directed by Marguerite Charpentier, the wife of his editor, who had adamantly encouraged him to visit (“Zola,” she had said, “il faut absolument que vous veniez voir mes bébés”). His text describes *La Société maternelle parisienne,*² which offered a new way of providing child care services for working women, a class neglected by most social aid organizations, which tended to focus on the destitute. As Zola points out in his letter, an entire class of industrious married women—particularly salesclerks, shopkeepers, and teachers—did not make enough money, even with their husbands’ income, to take time from work to care for children. Nor could they afford a live-in nurse. As a result, their only option was to send children to provincial wet nurses, a situation that led, in sixty percent of cases, to the child’s death. The novelty of a *Société maternelle parisienne,*

¹ This letter has been reprinted as “Aux Mères heureuses” in Émile Zola, *Œuvres complètes* (OC), vol. 14 (15 vols) (Paris: Cercle du livre précieux, 1966-1970), 822-27. With the exception of the *Rougon-Macquart* series, all references to Zola’s work refer to this edition and will be indicated parenthetically in the text as “OC.” Zola defines happy mothers as those with the means to keep their children near them: “Ô mères, mères heureuses qui gardez vos enfants, qui les voyez grandir dans vos bras, sous vos baisers.” *Le Figaro* was the primary newspaper of the aristocracy and the wealthy bourgeoisie and the rubric under which Zola wrote was dedicated to current events. The previous day, for example, had featured an article “Après le Testament” about the death of Émile Olliver, while the following day announced “Les Mémoires d’Aujourd’hui: Et l’Orchestre?” debating the future of orchestra reform with the arrival of Eugène Bertrand as director of the Opéra.

² He notes that Charpentier began the institution with Madame Eugène Manuel and Madame A. Sain, who owned
he argued, was to provide a third way: it consisted of a modern facility on the outskirts of Paris
where working women could send their children to board, while visiting them regularly. This
cost the same as it would to send them to their death in the country. While Zola’s letter purports
simply to describe this new facility, it was a carefully crafted fund raising appeal targeting
affluent *Figaro* readers: “Ô mères heureuses, écoutez-moi! Apportez toutes votre obole. Que pas
une de vous ne reste en dehors de la Société maternelle parisienne, car pas une ne doit échapper à
son coeur. Vous à qui la fortune permet de garder vos enfants, faites que toutes les femmes,
même les laborieuses, puissent au moins voir grandir les leurs!” (OC XIV, 827).

It is easy to dismiss Zola’s letter as advertising for his editor’s wife (also a family friend).
Yet the enthusiasm of his letter was not feigned. His tour of the facility (Fig. 1) marked him so
strongly that his enthusiastic description of it in this letter reappeared nearly word for word ten
years later in his descriptions of the nurseries established in the aptly named La Crêcherie, the
utopian community of his 1901 novel *Travail*:

> Et ce qui m’a ravi, c’est le plein soleil, le grand air dans tout cela, les larges baies, les
fenêtres ouvertes laissant entrer la belle joie robuste de la campagne [...] les petits lits
blancs, les murs blancs, toutes ces blancheurs nues, au plein air des croisées ouvertes
[...].³

³ Both descriptions of the children’s dormitories in the Crêcherie (the first dormitory and a second one created some
years in the future) repeat the same motifs: airiness, cleanliness, and sunlight, capital elements for utopian spaces in
Zola’s work, according to Évelyne Cosset in *Les Quatre Évangiles d’Émile Zola* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1990) 38-40. The beds in the first nursery are described thus: “Dans la vaste pièce blanche, ils étaient tout blancs, rangés le
long des murs blancs. De petites faces roses y sommeillaient, y souriaient. [...] La salle ouvrait sur une véranda
fleuries, que prolongeait un jardin. Tout le cher troupeau s’ébattait au soleil, dans l’air tiède” (OC VIII, 691). In the
second, “C’était un charme exquis, ces maisons de la toute petite enfance, avec leurs murs blancs, leurs berceaux
blancs, leur petit peuple blanc, toute cette blancheur, si gaie dans le plein soleil, dont les rayons entraient par les
hautes fenêtres” (OC VIII, 887).
Why did Zola’s visit so captivate him that he remembered it clearly a decade later, using this facility as the model for his fictional utopia? And if “happy mothers” are—as defined in his letter to the Figaro—those who have their children close at hand, why would he create an ideal future society where the happiest mothers are those who work, entrusting their children to a community-run child care facility? I will argue that a variety of factors—both personal and professional—conspired to make *La Société maternelle parisienne* an important reference that confirmed Zola’s longstanding beliefs about working women.

Before tracing the importance of Charpentier’s establishment, which would come to be known as “La Pouponnière de Porchefontaine,” it is important to sketch the social context that prompted its creation. As the works of Rachel Fuchs and other historians have demonstrated, being poor and pregnant in Paris during the nineteenth century was tantamount to disaster. Because of the high cost of raising urban children and the social stigma attached to bearing a child out of wedlock, nearly a quarter of all newborns (and half of all illegitimate ones) were abandoned. For those who kept their children, one of the most pressing concerns was feeding them. While early variants of infant formula were commercially available as of the 1860s, breast

---

4 For detailed information pertaining to the establishment of the Pouponnière, its administration, and the various changes it underwent over the years before it became a departmental institution in 1943, see Virginie De Luca and Catherine Rollet, *La Pouponnière de Porchefontaine: L’expérience d’une institution sanitaire et sociale* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1999).

5 See Fuchs, *Abandoned Children. Foundlings and Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France* (Albany: SUNY, 1984) xi-xii. She cites statistics from the 1860s during which a working woman’s top salary was about 600 francs per year (half that of a man’s) of which 300 went to housing, 115 to clothing, 36 to laundry, 36 to heat and light, leaving about one franc per day for food. In *Fécondité*, Zola paints a poignant scene of single mothers’ anguish about what to do about these babies: some, like Norine, have been impregnated by their employers and then chased from their work; others are the victim of incest. In either case, they cannot make a living while taking care of the child. Two options are presented: abandon the children to the state or find the money to send them to a wet nurse in the country in the hopes of bringing them back one day. Norine laments that the system is intrinsically unjust in placing such burdens on the woman: “Et ce serait moi qui paierais, quand je n’ai pas le sou, quand demain je serai peut-être à la rue, sans travail, sans pain!” (OC VIII, 187).
feeding—either by the mother or by a wet nurse—was the leading method for nourishing babies. This led to what has been called the “wet nursing business,” by which rural young women traveled to Paris to “sell” their milk to affluent families, often to the detriment of their own children. Working women, however, were generally unable to nurse on the job. Nor could they afford a live-in wet nurse. Day care facilities were available for those with fixed working hours (ending before 6:00 p.m.), but they were little frequented.

The most practical option for working mothers, as Zola illustrates with the case of Madame Menoux, la petite mercière of Fécondité, was to pay thirty or forty francs a month to send children to a wet nurse in the country. Zola expresses her anguish at this choice to which she sees no alternative: “Ah! c’est dur tout de même, d’avoir envoyé notre Pierre si loin. Moi qui, déjà, ne vois pas mon mari de la journée, voilà qu’il faut vivre. Comment l’aurais-je gardé, dans ce trou de boutique, où, du matin au soir, je n’ai pas une minute à moi?” (OC VIII, 214). This difficult decision was a typical one for working-class families, as was its result: hoping to receive news of her son, Madame Menoux talks to the agent with whom she placed him, only to have additional monies extorted from her for alleged sicknesses and clothes. Five years later when he finally returns to Paris, her son is unrecognizable—“blême, faible, comme s’il n’avait

---

6 See George D. Sussman, Selling Mother’s Milk: The Wet-Nursing Business in France 1715-1914 (Champagne: University of Illinois Press, 1982) or Fanny Fäy-Sallois, Les Nourrices à Paris au XIXe siècle (Paris: Payot, 1980). Zola graphically describes the filth of the agencies hiring out Parisian wet nurses, while outlining the repercussions of this system in Fécondité where a character refers to “les assassinations de la campagne” (OC VIII, 358).

7 See, for example, Zola’s Au Bonheur des Dames, where: “La direction ne tolérait pas ces accidents-là, la maternité était supprimée comme encombrante et indécente; à la rigueur, on permettait le mariage, mais on défendait les enfants” (vol. 3 of Les Rougon-Macquart), 5 vols (Paris: Fasquelle and Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1967), 730. References to this edition will appear in the text as “RM.”

8 See Liane Mozère, Le Printemps des crèches: histoire et analyse d’un mouvement (Paris: Éditions l’Harmattan, 1992). Rachel Fuchs also notes that although crèches dated from 1844, they were not widely-used until 1882 when older sisters could no longer take care of babies because education laws required them to attend school. Poor and Pregnant in Paris (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1992), 145. In 1873, for example, there were only twenty-three
jamais de sa vie mangé du bon pain. Deux mois plus tard il mourait dans mes bras” (OC VIII, 357).9

Madame Menoux was fortunate: unlike many other children, her son actually returned to Paris alive, if only for a few months. Docteur Boutan tells Mathieu Froment in Fécondité that the system is broken: “Quant à la nourrice au loin, c’est la mort presque certaine de l’enfant, et quant à la nourrice sur lieu, c’est une transaction honteuse, une source incalculable de maux, souvent même un double crime, le double sacrifice consenti de l’enfant de la mère et de l’enfant de la nourrice” (OC VIII, 203). By the end of the century, French politicians realized they were losing nearly 200,000 French babies a year because of problems related to abandon, nutrition, and hygiene.10 After the Franco-Prussian war, in an atmosphere increasingly driven by the importance of repopulating the nation, legislators under the Third Republic supported a variety of measures, both public and private, to decrease infant mortality. These included measures for better hygiene, the distribution of sterilized milk, postpartum shelters, a Société de l’allaitement maternel (Society of Maternal Breastfeeding), and a more tightly knit system of day care facilities (crèches).11 Yet single mothers—socially rejected because of their “immorality”—were excluded from participating in nearly all these services.

---

9 For the child’s point of view, see the description of Angélique Rougon’s abandon in Le Rêve (vol. 4 of RM, 1967) 821-24.
10 In 1901 Paul Strauss placed the number at 150,000. “Discours de M. Paul Strauss, Sénateur, fait à la Sorbonne le 15 déc. 1901,” reprinted (Paris: Imprimerie typographique Charles Blot, 1902). In 1891, however, Jules Simon had put the number at 180,000, or a battalion per year lost by allowing the offspring of the poor to die. Cited in Fuchs (1992), 60. These harrowing statistics were known as early as the end of the eighteenth century, thus prompting works such as Le Code des nourrices of 1781, but gained new patriotic significance under the Third Republic. Thanks to Lisa Algazi for bringing this text to my attention. Her work in progress, Indecent Exposure: Representations of Breastfeeding in Nineteenth-Century France, will make an important contribution to understanding the role ascribed to breastfeeding as a method for combatting infant mortality in nineteenth-century France.
The brilliance of Charpentier’s *Société maternelle parisienne* was precisely to support these *filles-mères* in a setting that conformed to the most modern standards of hygiene (Pasteur was a “président d’honneur”). Instead of bringing in a cadre of wet nurses from the countryside, Madame Charpentier and her staff hired single mothers from Paris who wanted to keep their children but could not obtain employment because of their outcast status. Although the policies changed a bit as the Pouponnière expanded (and moved from Rueil to Porchefontaine in 1893), in 1898 each single mother cared for her own child (weaned at seven months), while she nursed a newborn boarder from Paris (Fig. 2). In addition, she would support two already weaned boarders. In exchange, she received free food and lodging for herself and her child, as well as a stipend of 30 francs per month (the money sent by the boarders’ families) to constitute a personal savings. If her milk dried up she could stay on staff until her child was two. As a result, two children were “saved”: that of the *fille-mère* and that of the working mother. Furthermore, both children remained in close contact with their own mother, a distinct advantage for the children. As Charpentier put it, founding such institutions would help “toutes les classes intéressantes de la société [...].”12

La Pouponnière was a remarkable example of the *solidarité* that had come into vogue in the 1880s: three distinct social classes working together to help children.13 Rich society ladies (including Alexandrine Zola, who assisted with fund raising, and the Rothschilds, who were major donors) contributed to the upkeep of the Pouponnière, an institution intended to support the working classes by providing child care, while these working women financed the care of

---

11 See Fuchs (1992), 131-44.
single mothers who might otherwise have abandoned their children or found themselves on the street. Though Zola was silent about single mothers in his letter to the Figaro (probably to avoid shocking the sensibility of potential donors), he did note that this was not charity; it was “l’aide au travail.” Indeed, Zola singled out the system of mutual support, women of all classes helping one another, for praise:

_QUE, chaque matin, la caresse de vos enfants éveille dans votre mémoire la misère des autres mères, qui vivent seules comme des femmes stériles! Faites-vous pardonner votre bonheur, donnez un peu de ce bonheur aux femmes à qui on le vole, établissez la grande égalité des femmes de toutes les classes dans l’amour et dans la joie de l’enfant! (OC XIV, 826-27)_

Evoking solidarity among classes (an entrenched Republican philosophy by the 1890s), and concluding with a reference to “la joie de l’enfant,” Zola lauded the project in no uncertain terms. Given the Pouponnière’s successful experimentation in socio-economic mixing and mutual aid, it is no wonder that later newspaper descriptions of it would describe the facility as a kind of successful utopian community, “une sorte de familistère infantile,” and that Zola himself would take inspiration from it to describe the nurseries of La Crêcherie in _Travail_.

The distinctions Zola draws in his letter between “fertile” and “sterile” women and “happy” and “miserable” mothers, however, also shows that he “constructed” the women of his time in accordance with the paternalistic belief that successful women were defined by procreation. While Zola certainly exaggerated this motif in the Figaro letter in order to flatter

---

13 De Luca and Rollet, 9.
wealthy mothers and to encourage them to donate to the (seemingly) less fortunate, Zola willingly repeated such propaganda in his late novels. This is particularly evident in *Fécondité*, where the constantly pregnant and home-ridden Marianne Froment is represented as superior to all other women of the novel, her very name incarnating Republican patriotism and fertility.\(^{15}\) Indeed, Chantal Bertrand-Jennings and Susie Hennessy have argued that the ideal woman and mother in Zola’s novels is she who sacrifices her own desires or beliefs to those of husband and children.\(^{16}\) In his *Figaro* letter, Zola thus pitted the idealized image of the happy stay-at-home mother against the miserable working mother, thus anticipating what has come to be known as the “Mommy Wars”—twenty-first-century North American debates about whether women should stay home with their children or support their families.

Zola does echo the paternalistic discourse of his peers, but the issue is more complicated, much as modern debates about whether mothers should stay at home take place largely among those with the economic luxury of doing so. There is no question that late novels like *Le Docteur Pascal, Paris*, and *Fécondité* sanctify motherhood, concluding with scenes glorifying the breast-feeding mother as a symbolic image of a healthy future France. But focusing solely on his message about repopulating France also overlooks the complexity of Zolian works in which such stereotypically “happy” mothers are surrounded by other more realistic figures who struggle to

\(^{15}\) Indeed, this kind of discourse has led critics such as Anna Krakowski, Jean Borie, and Naomi Schor to characterize the universe of his novels as dominated by figures of the “bonne mère” (Borie) or the stay-at-home mother (Schor). Jean Borie, *Le Tyran timide: Le Naturalisme de la femme au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Klinksieck, 1973), Anna Krakowski, *La Condition de la femme dans l’œuvre d’Émile Zola* (Paris: Nizet, 1974), and Naomi Schor, *Breaking the Chain. Women, Theory and French Realist Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

keep their families alive. As often as not Zola overtly praises the stay-at-home mother, while his fiction covertly sympathizes with those who work outside the home; his books give life to real women who struggle with the demands of sterility, childbirth, childcare, family, and society.

Part of this compassion for working women, as well as his enthusiasm for Charpentier’s Pouponnière, may stem from his personal experiences with single mothers. Although he became wealthy by the end of the 1870s, he was the child of an impoverished widow from the south of France who spent years trying to make ends meet in Paris. His wife’s story was even more sobering. Alexandrine Zola came from a harsh working-class background and was probably the model for many of Zola’s heroines, a fact that explains his idealization of the grisette figure in the early Contes et Nouvelles.17 Herself a fille-mère, at the age of nineteen Alexandrine gave up her four-day old daughter, Caroline, to the Assistance Publique.18

Alexandrine’s formative experiences would have provided Zola with critical insight into the hardships faced by single mothers in nineteenth-century France. When the Zolas were unable to have children of their own, they tried to locate Alexandrine’s abandoned child only to discover that she had died three weeks after being sent to a wet nurse in the country.19 The passages of Fécondité where Zola portrays the impossible choices confronting filles-mères and where he rages against the “wet nurse business” take on new resonance given his wife’s history, as does his support of institutions like the Pouponnière, in which—had it existed—Alexandrine could

---

17 Marjolein Van Tooren has concluded that the grisette is the “model” female figure of Les Contes et Nouvelles. See her essay included in this volume. Zola’s understanding of Alexandrine’s experience also explains the preponderant number of substitute mother figures in the Rougon-Macquart series: his novels team with non-biological “mothers” like Alexandrine, who excel in caring for the children and families of others.
18 The seemingly staunchly bourgeois Alexandrine so successfully hid her past that it was only with the publication of Évelyne Bloch-Dano’s Madame Zola that these secrets came to light (Paris: Grasset, 1997), 13-17.
19 Bloch-Dano, 18-19.
A third intimate acquaintance, Jeanne Rozerot, Zola’s mistress, gave him even further understanding of the precarious social status of single mothers. In April 1891, when Zola visited the Pouponnière, he was awaiting the birth of their second child (Denise was born 1889 and Jacques would arrive in September 1891). Though Zola did support Jeanne financially and emotionally, she was officially a fille-mère since he did not legally acknowledge their children. In visiting the Pouponnière, he must have realized that his love for his mistress and their children was the only thing separating Jeanne from the other single mothers who had sought refuge there after being seduced by employers (she was initially his wife’s lingère).

Despite Zola’s overt confirmation of bourgeois stereotypes about “happy mothers” in his letter to the Figaro, it is also clear that he had long been intimately acquainted with other, less ideal scenarios in which children were unwanted impediments to women’s happiness. An 1878 essay, “Types de Femmes,” for example, published in Le Messager de l’Europe, clearly shows his understanding of the social realities of his time. In this piece, he traces the life cycle (from birth to death) of peasant women, urban workers, middle-class women (employee’s wife and shopkeeper’s wife), and aristocrats; the text reads like a master plan for the creation of female characters in his novels to come. In the Rougon-Macquart series alone, he devotes a great deal of

---

20 See Bloch-Dano (322) for more about her work raising funds for the Pouponnière.
21 Zola’s discovery of the joys of fatherhood also explain in part the seemingly puzzling shift in his work from a preference for non-biological mother figures in Les Rougon-Macquart series (Alexandrine as model) to a glorification of biological mothers in the novels published after the birth of his children (Jeanne as model).
22 He did express his desire to recognize them, but because he neglected to do so officially, his unexpected death left them at the mercy of Alexandrine. Bloch-Dano describes the latter’s generosity (particularly with regard to the standards of the time) at length in Madame Zola.
space to single, widowed, and working mothers, as well as to maternal figures. One thinks, for example, of the social exclusion of Adélaïde Fouque in *La Fortune des Rougon*, the trials of Gervaise Macquart in *l’Assommoir* and her daughter Anna in *Nana*, or of the sexual desire of the widowed Hélène of *Une Page d’Amour*, not to mention the efforts of the orphaned Denise Baudu, of *Au Bonheur des Dames*, to support her younger brothers.

Zola thus introduced his bourgeois readers to women they may or may not have encountered in their own sheltered lives. In particular, he built sympathy for the lower classes by illustrating the difficulties working mothers faced in earning a living at half the pay of a man and still supporting themselves and their charges.\(^\text{23}\) By creating believable characters from all classes and by emphasizing the impact of circumstance on behavior—the Naturalist focus on milieu—Zola encouraged reader sympathy not only for his characters, but for their real-world counterparts. *La Société maternelle parisienne* and its support of single and working-class mothers was a case in point. Marguerite Charpentier asked Zola to write a letter in support of her organization precisely because it was his work that had brought the plight of working mothers to the attention of wealthy readers of *Le Figaro*.

In fact, though Zola is often dismissed as a misogynist for his fantastical representations of female sexuality (*Nana* at one extreme and Angélique of *Le Rêve* at the other), it was precisely by writing novels that showcased different kinds of women that Zola promoted versions of female identity that diverged markedly from the stereotypes of his time. Dr. Raphaël Raimondi, an institutional health inspector, noted while evaluating *La Pouponnière de Porchefontaine* that

---

\(^{23}\) Indeed, an 1865 book review of Eugène Pelletan’s *La Mère* further reveals that Zola had long been cognizant of the difficulties facing nineteenth-century women. For more about this text see my preface to Susie Hennessy’s *The
the most important consideration in setting policy for child rearing was to begin considering women as *individuals* and not to make decisions based on women in general:

> Il ne faut pas faire de la Puériculture en cabinet, il faut faire de la puériculture pratique et non de la puériculture paradoxale. Les conditions ne sont pas les mêmes pour les mères de la ville, pour l’ouvrière que pour l’employée, pour celle qui travaille à l’usine que pour celle qui travaille chez elle.24

This focus on the individual is exactly what Zola does in his fiction. Although his novels feature preferred types, like Marianne in *Fécondité*, he nonetheless gives equal space (and voice) to different kinds of women within the same novel.

Much has been made of Marianne in *Fécondité*, but there are many other mothers in this novel, including Madame Menoux, who anguish, as she does, about having to give up her son in order to make a living. La Moineaudé, a worker’s wife, does not want more children, but continues to bear them so her offspring can support the family. Norine is seduced then fired by her employer. Valerie Morange dies of an abortion while trying to balance her physical desire for intimacy with the financial need to keep her family small. Madame Beauchêne’s only son is tragically killed. This list does not include Sérafine de Lowicz (née Beauchêne), who does all she can to avoid having children, or Madame Angélín, who is unable to have children. Other characters may judge these women, but by giving space—and particularly voice—to a host of complex individual female figures with different backgrounds, different needs, and different social constraints, Zola’s fiction paints a complex picture of women and the roles they played in

---


*Mother Figure*, i-vi.
Moreover, while Zola may have implied that stay-at-home mothers were the ultimate “happy mothers” in his letter to the Figaro, his fiction tells a different story. Marjolein van Tooren points out in her contribution to this volume that they are among the most unhappy of his early fiction. Similarly, in the Rougon-Macquart series it is bourgeois mothers who are most prone to hysteria (Marthe Rougon and Hélène Grandjean, for example) or to being what Susie Hennessy terms “mères mégères,” so miserable with their own lives that they meddle incessantly in the lives of their children (Félicité Rougon and Éléonore Josserand, for example). In Zola’s fiction, these mothers are hardly “mothers” at all. In an 1881 article entitled “Femmes du Monde” he went even further, revealing his personal disgust for society ladies’ treatment of their children: “Pour une femme du monde, la maternité est un sujet à grand luxe, comme un dîner ou un bal.” Outsourcing the various services required to raise a child, they spend little to no time with their own offspring. While clearly intended as a condemnation, Zola’s text, like his fiction, may also have had the opposite effect: those who did not find marriage and motherhood the utopias they had been led to expect saw—through such images of “alternative” women—that they were not alone. They were not monsters if they did not conform to the happy mother stereotype.

What Zola condemns above all in “Les Femmes du Monde,” however, is not mothering itself, but indolence. The happiest “mothers” in Zola’s fiction are those who work. Hennessy has

---

25 See, for example, Linda Beane Katner’s doctoral thesis and articles analyzing the important role played by the discourse of working-class women throughout the Rougon-Macquart. Two of these articles, “Zola’s Female Discourse: The Orality of the Text” and “Characterizations of Group Discourse by Working-Class Women in Émile Zola’s Rougon-Macquart Series” are printed in Anna Gural-Migdal, ed., L’Écriture du féminin chez Zola et dans la fiction naturaliste (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004, 2nd edition), 47-72.
shown the most sympathetic mothers of the *Rougon-Macquart* series are not biological mothers, but maternal figures who have chosen to devote themselves to the children of others (Pauline Quenu and Hubertine, for example). Hennessy has suggested that these “happy” figures tend to have a sacrificial and virginal nature; I would add that they also share a healthy work ethic. Unlike the biological mothers of Zola’s fiction, who often take their children for granted or grudgingly spend time with them, his “happy mothers” have consciously made a choice to devote themselves to child rearing (Pauline, RM III, 996; Hubertine, RM IV, 824), thus becoming more authentic “mothers” than their biological counterparts.

Zola does not seem to have seen a contradiction in replacing the act of generation with labor. As Colette Becker and Véronique Lavielle have noted, work, for Zola, was a way of begetting life (the expression “en travail”—in labor—is still commonly used to describe women giving birth). The hard-working yet childless Alexandrine Zola seems to have served as a model for this ideal of the non-biological mother figure in *Les Rougon-Macquart*; he did not shift to the fictional consecration of biological mothers until he became a father. The blissful breast-feeding scenes of *Le Docteur Pascal, Paris*, and *Fécondité* suggest that the stay-at-home Jeanne increasingly replaced Alexandrine as Zola’s ideal female figure.

Regardless of the inspiration behind such portrayals of mother figures, it is impossible to overemphasize the importance Zola assigned to work, particularly in the 1890s when it became one of his most critical concepts. He called work his “faith” (“foi”) in an 1893 speech to

---

26 *Le Figaro* (27 June 1881), reprinted in OC XIV, 681.
28 He met Jeanne in 1888 and Denise was born in 1889.
students, proclaiming it “l’unique loi du monde, le régulateur qui mène la matière organisée à sa fin inconnue!” Positing work as a kind of therapy, he advised regulated work as a way of calming even the most “tortured” of souls. 29 Work was so important a concept for Zola that he had Balzac’s motto about work—Nulla dies sine linea—inscribed on the mantel of his office at Médan and understood it as a vital force, a way of generating life.

A great deal of Zola’s enthusiasm for the Pouponnière, in fact, seems to have stemmed from its ability to assist women with their work (“l’aide au travail”), thus combining biological reproduction with labor. Far from condemning mothers who worked outside the home, he sympathized with them, as long as they continued to be “mothers” by spending time with their children. “Toute femme qui travaille, à Paris, ne peut pas être mère,” he wrote in his letter to the Figaro, “et elle qui devrait être récompensée de son courage à lutter et à vivre, elle se trouve sous cette fatalité monstrueuse d’être comme punie de bien faire” (OC XIV, 824). He finds the situation intolerable: “il est mauvais que le travail soit puni, que la femme qui travaille soit par là même frappée dans sa maternité” (OC XIV, 826).

La Pouponnière’s model of different social classes caring for one another in a work environment dovetailed nicely with earlier social projects that made their way into Zola’s books. The achievements inaugurated by Octave Mouret (at Denise Baudu’s request) in Au Bonheur des Dames, for example, included books, libraries, and a maternity ward, though no child care. La Pouponnière, in which mothers and “adoptive” mothers all worked together, mirrored Zola’s often leftist-leaning social ideals, his aesthetics (attention to hygiene, light and air, and nature),

and his personal preoccupation with encouraging women to work while keeping their children nearby. It is no wonder that the concept of a communally run childcare facility would have enchanted him and that he would have adopted it as a model for *Travail*.

Indeed, if the novel *Travail*, with its paean of praise to working (“Ah! travail sacré, travail créateur et sauveur, qui est ma vie, mon unique raison de vivre!”; OC VIII, 756) is any indication, Zola may well have been intrigued by Charpentier’s Pouponnière not just as a model for helping single and working mothers, but also for rehabilitating idle (and thus unhealthy) upper class women by bringing them out of the secluded confines of their home and into contact with others. In *Travail*, Sœurette Jordan, the devoted sister of the engineer Martial Jordan, has long been interested in children, in teaching, and in nursing. But, she admits, social conventions have limited her contact with the outside world to the few charity cases recommended by her priest. As her brother and Luc Froment turn the family steel mill into a model society, the aptly named La Crêcherie becomes a kind of home for the workers. It is Sœurette, however, who creates the most important *crèches*, the internal nurseries and schools to ensure the mill’s future (OC VIII, 62). These creations engage her talents in design, building, and administration, the work giving her a freedom she did not previously have. The nursery she establishes and directs resembles Charpentier’s Pouponnière not only in its emphasis on hygiene, fresh air, and sunlight, but also in its goal of mixing social classes. In the Crêcherie, even the directors, “sachant combien cet élevage en commun était profitable à la Cité, ” send their children to her, “donn[ant] l’exemple, en voulant que les enfants de leurs enfants fussent élevés, dès les premiers pas, avec les enfants des autres.” Sœurette conceives of this work as more important than marrying and having children of her own and is presented as one of the happiest of Zola’s non-biological
One of the important messages Zola conveys in *Travail* is that women feel fulfilled by work. Although he is not creative about the kinds of jobs they select (teaching and nursing for the well-educated, manual labor for others), all are encouraged to find the job that best suits them and women are not explicitly precluded from any position. The mothers of *Travail* are happy because—as in Charpentier’s *Pouponnière*—they choose to work and can do so in a space where they have access to their children. Zola’s ideal version of childcare seems to depend less on the constant presence of the biological mother herself—who may be working outside the home—than on a concerned and engaged community of caregivers, thus echoing the saying “it takes a village to raise a child.” In Zola’s novels biological mothers are often less important than the people who take on the responsibilities of motherhood when others can or will not. Increasingly, in his late works, the community becomes the mother of all.

While Zola was compassionate about the fate of working mothers, he was even more concerned about children. In them lay the hope for a world where arguments about class, religion, and economics would be superseded by shared commitments to improving the social fabric. In his utopian novels, then, women’s individual happiness becomes secondary to that of the collectivity. Furthermore, Zola’s emphasis on social well being in *Les Quatre Évangiles* and his predilection for tight-knit communities resembling nurseries tend to fall into nineteenth-century stereotypes about maternal spaces and woman’s work (charitable work, teaching, nursing) much more so than the more realistic *Rougon-Macquart* series.

---

30 While this sounds heroic, had Luc Froment not fallen in love with another woman (Josine), Sœurette would gladly have married him. She thus conforms to the self-sacrificing model of the “happy mother” that occurs throughout the *Rougon-Macquart* series.
Given his strong advocacy for children in the late novels, it is ironic that Zola neglected to acknowledge his own children publicly before his untimely death, thus naively entrusting their upbringing to the good will of just such a maternal collective. Denise and Jacques’ upbringing reads like the scene from *Fécondité* in which two “mothers” dedicate themselves entirely to a child. Norine, the fille-mère who gave up her first child, keeps her second, raising him with her sister, Cécile, who is unable to have children. Together, they work to support one another to the extent that “l’enfant avait deux mères, uniquement occupées de lui” (OC VIII, 363). These mothers are said to be happier for their common task: “très unies, très gai es, vivant sans homme comme au couvent, assises les journées entières aux deux côtés de leur petite table, avec le cher enfant entre elles, qui était leur unique raison de vivre, de travailler et d’être heureuses” (OC VIII, 364). A classic Zolian scene of self-sacrificing “mothers,” these fictional women are happy because of their work, the shared commitment to the child. Though they did not live together, Zola’s “two wives,” Alexandrine and Jeanne, dedicated themselves to raising Zola’s children after his death: “nos enfants,” as Alexandrine called them.31 Alexandrine, the legal wife, had absolutely no formal obligation to provide for the children (and, indeed, her recognition of and support of them shocked contemporaries), yet true to Zola’s vision, she worked with Jeanne to perpetuate *Fécondité*’s ideal of mothers working—“sans homme”—toward the welfare of the children.

Marguerite Charpentier’s Pouponnière clearly played an important role in Émile and Alexandrine Zola’s imaginary as a successful model of a female-designed and run institution that could improve society and create jobs for women. After Zola’s death, Alexandrine signed a

31 Bloch-Dano 311.
contract with l’Assistance publique so that their house in Médan would become a Pouponnière. In another case of life imitating fiction imitating life, the house at Médan was deemed excellent—like the Pouponnière and la Crècherie—because of its geographical position, its “maximum d’aération, d’espace et de salubrité,” and its sunlight (Fig. 3). The Pouponnière de Médan was thus created to house thirty children suffering from severe digestive ailments (they ranged in age from one day to two years old), with the goal of curing them and returning them to their “mamans heureuses.” By 1909, the house was full of children, working and playing in the very spaces in which Zola had engendered his own fictional mothers and children. Given Zola’s enthusiasm for La Pouponnière, as well as for his own fictional nurseries, it was only fitting that his cabinet de travail at Médan should become one. It remained full of children until 1967 when it would undergo several other transformations before attaining its present incarnation as a museum (1985).\(^{32}\) Figure 4, children occupying themselves in the shadow of Zola’s motto—Nulle dies sine linea—perfectly captures the two “gospels” of his Quatre Évangiles—life and work—that he considered essential for men and women alike.

This essay confirms the work of other scholars who find Zola’s “construction” of female identity contradictory: sometimes paternalistic and sometimes phantasmagorical, his representations of women can also be enlightened, particularly when he gives voice to individual female characters. In his embrace of networks of social support created and run by women, however, there is no such ambiguity. Zola supported women’s work as excellent work and Charpentier’s Pouponnière as a supreme example of the results such a system could achieve.

---

\(^{32}\) See Becker et al., 275, and Alain Pagès, “Histoire de la maison de Médan,” Les Cahiers naturalistes online [http://www.cahiers-naturalistes.com/histoire_de_medan.htm].
Figure 1. La Pouponnière de Versailles. *L’Hygiène et l’enfant* (1 April 1906).
Figure 2. “La Pouponnière de Porchefontaine,” *Illustration* (1 July 1893): 13.
Figure 3. “La Pouponnière de Médan,” *L’Hygiène et l’enfant* (June 1909).
Figure 4. “La Pouponnière de Médan,” L’Hygiène et l’enfant (June 1909).