

## “Sa Coquetterie Tue la Faim”: Garment Workers, Lunch Reform, and the Parisian *Midinette*, 1896–1933

Patricia Tilburg

**Abstract** This article understands the *midinette* as a key figure in the early twentieth-century Parisian picturesque. Specifically, the article examines popular depictions of the noon lunch break that romanticized the *midinettes* and warned of (and celebrated) the amorous seductions and picturesque allure of these women. A defining part of that allure was undereating. The Parisian garment worker was understood to be a delightfully frivolous undereater who happily sacrificed food for fashion and pleasure. Pulp fiction, songs, vaudeville shows, and even reform campaigns in this period proffered a novel representation of undereating and noneating in depictions of the *midinette*. The undereating *midinettes* of the early twentieth-century Parisian imaginary did so as a means of engaging more fully in the capitalist marketplace, making their bodies more appealing advertisements for and objects of urban consumption.

**Keywords** Paris, restaurants, workingwomen, labor history

In a lavishly illustrated 1899 study of the Parisian lunch hour, Georges Montorgueil, a journalist and practiced connoisseur of *les mœurs parisiennes*, noted wistfully: “[La Parisienne] only has an appetite to be pretty. To be appealing is the yoke under which all other needs of her nature are bent. Her vanity dominates her stomach; her interest in her appearance kills her hunger [*sa coquetterie tue sa faim*], or at least staves it off and allays it. . . . Her gourmandise recedes before the desire to be noticed.”<sup>1</sup> A reader familiar with turn-of-the-century French femininity might well presume that Montorgueil here alluded to the efforts by chic bourgeois ladies to maintain a fashionably slender form. But in fact this quotation is taken from a volume entirely devoted to the workingwoman’s lunch, and the sacrifice of food described above is made in

Patricia Tilburg is associate professor of history and chair of the Gender and Sexuality Studies program at Davidson College. She is author of *Colette’s Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870–1914* (2009) and is completing a book that interrogates representations of Parisian garment workers in popular culture, social reform, and labor activism from the 1880s through the interwar.

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Montorgueil, *Midi: Le déjeuner des petites ouvrières* (Paris, 1899), 39. Georges Montorgueil (1857–1933) was the pseudonym of the journalist, *homme des lettres*, and native Parisian Octave Lebesgue.

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the service of consumer purchases, not dieting; the laboring Parisienne “has cut back on roast beef for ribbons.”<sup>2</sup> Montorgueil’s lyrical reimagining of sweated garment workers’ privation as girlish vanity, far from idiosyncratic, was a common assessment of Parisian workingwomen in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The *midinette*—the ideal Parisian garment worker who took her very name from the noon lunch hour—loomed large in the social imaginary of early twentieth-century Paris. A capacious and imprecise term, *midinette* could refer to any (typically young) woman in the Parisian garment trades: milliners, dressmakers, flower makers, feather and fur workers, shopgirls, laundresses, poorly paid pieceworkers, or relatively well-paid seamstresses in the haute couture shops.<sup>3</sup> This attractive young garment worker with inimitable Parisian taste and a ready smile was featured in countless guide books, novels, films, songs, social commentary, and even reform campaigns from the era as an inescapable urban type. The great-granddaughter of the 1830s grisette,<sup>4</sup> the *midinette* also has played a supporting role in scholarly studies of the belle époque but has only recently begun to be considered as a historical phenomenon in her own right.<sup>5</sup> In line with recent ethnographic and

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Anais Albert suggests that only seamstresses and workers in haute couture could be deemed *midinettes*. However, press and popular culture references in this period often blurred this distinction. Thus, for example, press coverage of strikes in the confection industry in 1910 commonly used the term *midinette* to refer to the strikers. This blurring is significant, since, as Albert points out, seamstresses and milliners in haute couture were much better paid than other workingwomen (“Les midinettes parisiennes à la Belle Époque: Bon goût ou mauvais genre?,” *Histoire, économie, et société* 32, no. 3 [2013]: 61–74).

<sup>4</sup> The *midinette* was the turn-of-the-century and early twentieth-century version of the grisette, who had had her own moment as a literary and pop-cultural darling in the 1840s and 1850s. See Victoria E. Thompson, “*Splendeurs et Misères des Journalistes*: Female Imagery and the Commercialization of Journalism in July-Monarchy France,” *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 23 (1996): 363–64. For the grisette and other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antecedents to the *midinette*—that is, other cultural types of working-class femininity—see Thompson, *The Virtuous Marketplace: Women and Men, Money and Politics in Paris, 1830–1870* (Baltimore, MD, 2000); and Jennifer Jones, *Sexing La Mode: Gender, Fashion, and Commercial Culture in Old Regime France* (New York, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> See the work of the ethnographers Anne Monjaret and Michela Niccolai, “La midinette en chansons: Représentations masculines d’un idéal féminin populaire (1830–1939),” in *Représentations*, vol. 3 of *Le genre à l’œuvre*, ed. Mélody Jan-Ré (Paris, 2012), 101–16; and Anne Monjaret et al., *Le Paris des “Midinettes”*: *Processus de mise en culture et/ou en patrimoine de figures féminines, XIX–XXI siècles; Ethnologie des traces et mémoires d’ouvrières parisiennes* (Paris, 2008); as well as the sociologist Claude Didry, “Les midinettes, avant-garde oubliée du prolétariat,” *L’homme et la société*, nos. 189–90 (2013): 63–86. Judith Coffin refers to the way that the attractive image of the *midinette* increased public sympathy for *midinettes* in strikes of 1901, 1910, and 1911: the anti-Semitic press portrayed this as a battle of exceptionally French *midinettes* against “foreign” Jewish manufacturers (*The Politics of Women’s Work: The Paris Garment Trades, 1750–1915* [Princeton, NJ, 1996], 179). Charles Rearick’s study of the Parisian picturesque includes some discussion of the “pretty midinette” (*Paris Dreams, Paris Memories: The City and Its Mystique* [Stanford, CA, 2011]). On labor activism and *midinettes* during the era of World War I, see Patricia Tilburg, “Mimi Pinson Goes to War: Taste, Class and Gender in France, 1900–18,” *Gender and History* 23, no. 1 (2011): 92–110; and

sociological studies by Anne Monjaret, Michela Niccolai, and Claude Didry, I propose the *midinette* as a key figure in the early twentieth-century Parisian “imaginary” and interrogate the “symbolic work” performed by this type in French pop culture in the decades straddling World War I.<sup>6</sup> This article considers one defining moment of the working Parisienne’s day to which early twentieth-century French observers returned again and again: *midi*.

The noon lunch break was envisaged as affording Parisian artists, writers, and tourists alike a daily glimpse of the “fairies” (as they were repeatedly called) of the city’s luxury garment workshops as they took to the boulevards and parks for an hour in the sun: an hour of flirtation, window-shopping, laughter, and, I will establish, conspicuous undereating. Indeed, crucial to the picturesque allure of the lunch-time seductions that filled popular *midinette* literature was the notion of the female garment worker as a frivolous undereater who cheerfully forfeited food for fashion and pleasure. No longer the tragically starving workingwoman of nineteenth-century fiction and art, nor her virtuous, anorectic middle-class sister, whose physical wasting increased their moral fortitude,<sup>7</sup> the undereating *midinette* of the early twentieth century was imagined to do so as a means of engaging more fully in the capitalist marketplace—making her body a more appealing advertisement for and object of urban consumption.<sup>8</sup> This cultural fantasy of the *midinette*’s lunch hour, which fetishized the supposed moral precariousness of her lifestyle, as well as the sparseness of her diet, was echoed by bourgeois reformers who, in this same period, sought to carve out spaces for workingwomen’s lunches that kept them from the cafés and parks where they were believed to flirt much and eat little.

Paris has long been a prime site for scholars drawn to urban typology as a way of understanding social and economic change, with popular Parisian myths cementing, in the words of Adrian Rifkin, “the

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Maude Bass-Krueger, “From the ‘*Union Parfaite*’ to the ‘*Union Brisée*’: The French Couture Industry and the *Midinettes* during the Great War,” *Costume* 47, no. 1 (2013): 28–44.

<sup>6</sup> Here I find tremendously useful Rearick’s elucidation of the “Parisian imaginary” as a concept that scholars use to reference centuries of “awestruck description of Paris” and that becomes “crystallized as collective memories” that “[structure] how Paris has been viewed, described, and admired” (*Paris Dreams, Paris Memories*, 3). I use the term *symbolic work* in the sense employed by Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927* (Chicago, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> See Patricia McEachern, *Deprivation and Power: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Westport, CT, 1998); Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York, 1986); and Helena Michie, *Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies* (New York, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Monjaret and Niccolai argue that the *midinette* archetype occupied “la marge entre monde ouvrier et monde bourgeois” (the margin between the working and bourgeois worlds) and was thus a “personnage hybride” (hybrid figure), but they do not link this hybrid status specifically to consumption practices (“La *midinette* en chansons,” 101).

representation of change as a succession of mere appearances and nostalgias.”<sup>9</sup> I maintain that the *midinette* was just such a useful urban type, a modern yet nostalgic figure deployed to make palatable a novel system of economic and social relations. The novel system in question was what Lenard Berlanstein has called the “reorientation from manufacturing to services” in the French economy that began in the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> During that shift, the dominance of a highly skilled artisan class ceded before the less skilled, specialized industrial worker who made up the majority of the Parisian workforce by the turn of the century.<sup>11</sup> This shift appeared starkly in Paris, where ready-to-wear manufacture (*confection*) in the neighborhood of the Sentier existed alongside more traditional couture workshops run by the *grands magasins* and Parisian fashion houses.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, unprecedented strike activity and labor activism burst across France (as well as Germany, England, and the United States); strikes in the heavily feminine Parisian garment trades in 1901, 1910, 1911, and 1917–18 were part of this newly combative French labor movement from the 1890s through the Great War.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, this period witnessed, according to Gérard Noiriel, “more intense working-class militancy than any other period in recent French history,” including in the garment trades.<sup>14</sup> These first decades of the twentieth century also witnessed, not coincidentally I argue, a swell of romantic pop-cultural reimaginings of Paris’s workingwomen.

Women in the needle trades were some of the first to feel the pinch of these broader transformations and were on the front line of France’s struggle with increasingly competitive international markets for luxury fashion goods.<sup>15</sup> In addition, female garment workers made up the

<sup>9</sup> Adrian Rifkin, *Street Noises: Parisian Pleasure, 1900–1940* (New York, 1993), 7. See also Walter Benjamin, “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, 1999), 3–26.

<sup>10</sup> Lenard Berlanstein, *The Working People of Paris, 1871–1914* (Baltimore, MD, 1984), 6–7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 15. See also Roger Magraw, *Workers and the Bourgeois Republic*, vol. 2 of *A History of the French Working Class* (Oxford, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Green, *Ready-to-Wear, Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham, NC, 1997), 78–80.

<sup>13</sup> See Judith F. Stone, *The Search for Social Peace: Reform Legislation in France, 1890–1914* (Albany, NY, 1985), 2. Though beyond the purview of this project, labor militancy outside Paris also involved workingwomen in a spectacular fashion. See, e.g., John M. Merriman, *The Red City: Limoges and the French Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1985).

<sup>14</sup> Gérard Noiriel, *Workers in French Society in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, trans. Helen McPhail (New York, 1990), 73. Noiriel refers here specifically to the period 1890–1910.

<sup>15</sup> Berlanstein, *Working People of Paris*, 84–90. Berlanstein adds that “in the forty years before the Great War this capital of conspicuous consumption, audacious ideas, and sensual pleasures [Paris] did not simply preside over a Europe in rapid transition from a preindustrial to a mature industrial society. It participated quite fully in the transition” (202). As Noiriel points out, this was also “the first distinct phase of popular consumption’s importance,” as working-class purchasing power increased markedly at the turn of the century (*Workers in French Society*, 85).

majority of French workingwomen in manufacturing (three-fifths in 1896) and were often paid the lowest wages.<sup>16</sup> As a result, contemporary discourse on changing structures of labor after 1900—everything from pulp novels to ministerial correspondence—tended to fix attention on the female Parisian garment worker. The lunching *midinette*, whose eager consumption of the city's noncomestible pleasures complemented her meager food consumption, was a compelling capitalist invention in which labor was offered up as an attractive affirmation of the social hierarchy.

The *midinette*, I suggest, was also a compelling and politically useful antidote to the *femme nouvelle* of the early twentieth century. Mary Louise Roberts traces the potent discourse surrounding “bad” women in the period 1917–27: *femmes modernes* whose egotism and androgyny offered a convenient means for French men and women to make sense of the disruption of these years. Roberts demonstrates that the *femme seule* operated as a particularly effective symbolic reconciliation of traditional femininity and agitated socioeconomic relations in this period.<sup>17</sup> Following Roberts, I assess the discursive utility of the *midinette* as a feminine type that allowed one to reimagine both the working classes and the New Woman as pliant, (sexually) submissive, and content—just the qualities these groups were feared to lack. A proliferation of lunchtime narratives that established the *midinette*'s delicate appetite, coquettishness, and erotic appeal speak to, I contend, tremendous anxiety surrounding issues of production, consumption, and gender in the decades straddling World War I.

### *Midi and the Parisian Pittoresque*

Lunch breaks during which women laboring in Paris's luxury garment trades spread out across the city, particularly along the Rue de la Paix and in the Jardin des Tuileries, were the central setting for numerous films, novels, songs, and plays from the early twentieth century (most, though not all, written by men). As Anaïs Albert argues, the fact that the offices of the Parisian mass press abutted those of the couture workshops meant that lunching garment workers shared a daily space with many of the city's journalists and writers, who, according to Albert, devoted substantial space in their writing to the workingwomen of

<sup>16</sup> Mary Lynn Stewart, *Women, Work, and the French State: Labour Protection and Social Patriarchy, 1879–1919* (Kingston, ON, 1989), 37–38. “While tailors earned four francs daily in the provinces and 7.5 francs daily in Paris,” Stewart notes, “dressmakers earned two and four francs respectively. Broadly speaking, the higher the proportion of women, the lower the wages” (38). By the mid-1920s some four million Parisian workers toiled in some sector of the garment industry: Stewart, *Dressing Modern Frenchwomen: Marketing Haute Couture, 1919–1939* (Baltimore, MD, 2008), 92.

<sup>17</sup> Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes*, 150.

haute couture; in this way, “the *midinette* enters into the pantheon of the fin-de-siècle erotic imaginary.”<sup>18</sup> The narrative possibilities opened up by this setting were evident, removing the *midinettes* from their less picturesque workshops and placing them in an unregulated public space in which they could see and, more crucially, be seen.

In these texts, the *midinettes* are commonly depicted in joyous groupings: laughter, song, and birdlike flocking draw the narrators’ attention to these young women as they leave their workshops and take to the boulevards on their lunch hour. The opening vignette of the art critic Arsène Alexandre’s lyrical nonfiction work *Les reines de l’aiguille* (1902) (a self-described “étude parisienne” illustrated with etchings of attractive workingwomen) emphasizes the jubilant cacophony of the *midinettes*’ invasion of public space in a scene often-repeated in pop-cultural products in this period:

From noon to one o’clock, in the neighborhoods of the Opéra and the Madeleine, an unbelievable activity resumes, a frenetic swarm. . . . The seamstresses, exiting the workshops in waves at the stroke of noon, scatter noisily in search of food. They overflow with gaiety, the result of a first relaxation of their overexcited nerves, though not yet to the extreme. The street is, at this time, a little like their home; they feel at ease there and so fine that, for the most part, they come outside without jackets and hats.<sup>19</sup>

A joyful swarming, a headlong rush, an excess of gaiety—these workingwomen transform the boulevard into their home (“la rue . . . un peu comme un chez-elles”). They are relaxed and temptingly underdressed—a Parisian attraction that leavens capitalist productivity with girlish animation.

Georges Montorgueil, a writer who made a career of describing the Parisian picturesque, included a similar scene in his collection of vignettes *La vie des boulevards, Madeleine-Bastille* (1896), in which Paris’s workingwomen are likened to a delightful swarm of bees:

Between noon and one o’clock, a humming like a swarming beehive. The industrious bees with their slender corselets spread out around the neighborhood and forage for the nectar of their noon meal. These are the collaborators with whom Caprice associates to fashion marvelous pieces; the diligent workingwomen, daughters of Parisian taste, volunteer in the battalion of Fashion. In small groups,

<sup>18</sup> Albert, “Les midinettes parisiennes à la Belle Epoque,” 67.

<sup>19</sup> Arsène Alexandre, *Les reines de l’aiguille: Modistes et couturières (Etude parisienne)* (Paris, 1902), 17. Lisa Tiersten uses Alexandre as an example of social critics in this period who drew attention to the plight of the garment worker by criticizing the consumer rapaciousness of bourgeois Parisiennes (*Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siècle France* [Los Angeles, 2001]).

they strut through the crowd with their playful youth and the impertinent laugh of their white teeth, untroubled by the glances they receive.<sup>20</sup>

Montorgueil here joins together several components of the *midinette* ideal: diligence, taste, laughter, and youthful allure. The young women are also slender-waisted creatures who delicately collect bits of “nectar” rather than consuming a substantial meal.

Montorgueil was far from the only writer to compare lunching workers to bees. Alexandre insisted that these women favored eating in boisterous groups, “a need to stay in groups, like the sparrows of Paris. . . . Such is the necessity of collective labor and the effect of habit, as much with seamstresses as with bees.”<sup>21</sup> Jean Béarnais’s 1929 pulp novel *Nouvelle Mimi Pinson: Roman d’amour inédit* employs an analogous image: “The couture houses release their swarms of *midinettes*. The little fairies of Parisian couture hurry off to lunch.”<sup>22</sup> Comparisons to sparrows, bees, and fairies all presented these workingwomen as interchangeable, unmenacingly diminutive, and possessed of undersized appetites.

Most writers who took the lunching *midinette* as their subject emphasized the women’s airy joyfulness.<sup>23</sup> André Vernières’s didactic novel *Camille Frison, ouvrière de la couture* (1908), while devoting many pages to the moral temptations of the *midinette*’s noon break, also viewed the lunch hour through the insistently rosy lens of a connoisseur. The male narrator explores the Rue de la Paix at noon with a friend:

All is gaiety around us. Before going back up to the workshop, the female laborer likes to get some air. . . . Their complexions are glowing, their gestures exuberant, and their gait unrestrained. At one window, we see some disheveled models who blow kisses to their comrades passing by below. From one end of the street to the other, it’s like a great burst of laughter under the balmy April sun, a celebration where hearts warm and wills soften.<sup>24</sup>

Here the trope of the gay working Parisienne attains hyperbolic heights. Written at a time when labor disputes gripped public attention, it is politically telling that observers insisted on recording the garment laborer’s workday as “a great burst of laughter” and a “celebration.” Sweatshops are transformed into bordellos, with half-dressed

<sup>20</sup> Georges Montorgueil, *La vie des boulevards, Madeleine-Bastille* (Paris, 1896), 21–22.

<sup>21</sup> Alexandre, *Les reines de l’aiguille*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Béarnais, *Nouvelle Mimi Pinson: Roman d’amour inédit* (Montrouge, 1929), 1.

<sup>23</sup> Monjaret et al. note the appealing scene of the lunching *midinette* in Parisian parks, immortalized in a series of photographs from the first decades of the twentieth century (“Les jardins et leurs usages féminins,” in *Le Paris des “Midinettes,”* 395–98).

<sup>24</sup> André Vernières, *Camille Frison, ouvrière de la couture* (Paris, 1908), 49.

lovelies leaning out the window blowing kisses and others in the street softening wills and warming hearts with their flushed faces and exuberant gaits. Decades later Stéphane Manier's novel *Midinettes* (1933) opens with a chapter titled "Midi" in which the author likewise brightens at the sight of young female workers on their lunch hour around the Place Vendôme and the Tuileries: "I hear laughter, yes, emanating from the bars, the delicatessens, the bakeries. . . . Nothing but gaiety in this young corps of female laborers *en liberté*."<sup>25</sup> In *Les reines de l'aiguille* Alexandre spends pages detailing the lunch hour in the Tuileries, noting the picnicking workers' "delirious laughter" as they jump rope, read, and chat: "The spectacle, then, of these low-cost feasts is exquisite. The garden is delightfully warm."<sup>26</sup>

Urban chroniclers and fiction writers accentuated the childlike playfulness of the garment trade workers on their lunch break. Alexandre claimed to have witnessed lunching *midinettes* regularly playing schoolyard games: "The last crumbs shaken from their skirts, they begin spontaneous foot races and games of tag. Some, and not the youngest among them, suddenly pull jump ropes out of their pockets, to the applause of the others. And the soldiers are drafted to turn the handles for them and whistle at them, around the flying dresses and rhythmic jumps."<sup>27</sup> Playing tag and jumping rope while their skirts flutter merrily about them, these women seem anything but cogs in the industrial machine. What is more, they are joined in their game by soldiers: an attractive vision of female labor and the forces of order sharing public space just a year after female garment workers had taken to the streets of Paris in a thirty-five-day strike during which government troops were used against strikers.<sup>28</sup>

The primary narrative interest of these scenes and reportage was to posit the lunch hour as a liminal moment in the *midinette's* day in which she was vulnerable to sexual dissipation by way of working-class and (more often) middle-class men. Much of the lighter *midinette* fiction and entertainment featured male admirers who exploit the lunch pause to flirt with attractive, young garment workers.<sup>29</sup> In his 1897 study *La Parisienne* Montorgueil specified the varieties of lunchtime *midinette* seduction: "It's Don Juan's hour. We can lock up the milliner with a bouquet of violets, but we conquer the laundress only with a

<sup>25</sup> Stéphane Manier, *Midinettes* (Paris, 1933), 12.

<sup>26</sup> Alexandre, *Les reines de l'aiguille*, 20–21.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> Coffin, *Politics of Women's Work*, 178–83.

<sup>29</sup> Maurice Ordonneau and Arthur Verneil, for example, set the opening act of their vaudeville operetta *Mimi Pinson* (1882) during a noon break in which Parisian university students and amorous aristocrats surround groups of lunching workingwomen (*Mimi Pinson: Vaudeville-opérette en trois actes* [Paris, 1882]).

*gloria* [a sugared coffee with brandy].”<sup>30</sup> Alexandre described the amorous “intruders” who could usually be found circling the *midinettes* in the Tuileries: “From time to time, administrative *sous-officiers* escaped from the offices of the Ministry of War come to prowl around the groups [of *midinettes*]. Showing off their decorations, they engage comically in attempts at flirtation that sometimes seem to succeed.”<sup>31</sup>

The male narrator of Vernières’s novel *Camille Frison* is introduced to the pleasures of the *midinettes*’ noontime display by a colleague—a man who first met his own seamstress wife at a restaurant: “You will see all of the couture industry parade before you, and it is a true spectacle, you know!” In practicing a kind of erotically charged ethnographic observation, the two men lunch in the environs of couture workshops and then “stroll about [*flâner*] the Rue de la Paix.” Seated at the restaurant before noon to await the *midinettes*, the colleague serving as his friend’s “guide” explains that “the workingwomen of couture . . . have a certain number of common traits, and when you have observed one, you will know them all.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, in this dehumanizing pseudoscientific aside, the *midinettes* are again presented as interchangeable and alluringly knowable. The two friends are charmed as the lunching *midinettes* around them discuss fashion and love letters. They notice that “at one nearby table, some men have saved a place for a young female guest, who soon arrives, and sits across from their faces beaming with satisfaction . . . a rendezvous that will be followed by an absence from the workshop.”<sup>33</sup> Another workingwoman is drawn into a tête-à-tête with male diners when they notice her eyeing their dish of mussels and offer her a taste:

And the workingwoman, without being asked twice, puts her fingers into the dish. They find this an excuse for some banter, an occasion to engage in conversation. Now they are speaking quickly. They laugh readily. They are at their best. So, invitations—to go to the country on Sunday, or the theater, depending on the weather—are proffered, on the off chance, and timidly refused, which only leads ultimately to them being accepted. Then, when the time comes to pay the bill, the young men cry:

—Leave that alone, mesdemoiselles!<sup>34</sup>

The narrator’s guide indicates that this is simply “how things happen at the restaurant” for Parisian garment workers and their admirers.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Georges Montorgueil, *La Parisienne peinte par elle-même* (Paris, 1897), 87. On *gloria*, see William Walton, *Paris from the Earliest Period to the Present Day*, vol. 4 (Philadelphia, 1899), 187–88.

<sup>31</sup> Alexandre, *Les reines de l’aiguille*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Vernières, *Camille Frison*, 29.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

A visceral desire for food leads, during the meal, to a softening of this young woman's moral resolve (unlike her immediate acceptance of the food, she needs to be asked multiple times to agree to an outing).

One finds countless scenes of this ilk throughout *midinette* literature, in which the lunch hour—the park, the restaurant-bar, or, most dangerous, the unsavory *gargote* (cheap restaurant or dive)—is a site of predatory courtship.<sup>36</sup> Louis Artus's 1911 play *Les midinettes* (whose entire second act takes place in a Paris park during lunch) constructs an amusing subplot in the person of Monsieur Lherminier, an elegant older gentleman who moves between the high society salons of his family and peers and the Jardin des Tuileries, where he courts *midinettes*.<sup>37</sup> Lherminier is smitten with a “little milliner” named Julie, but he flirts with all of the young workingwomen in the park: “You cannot imagine the pleasure the ‘little twentysomethings’ that come here cause me, the pleasure for my eyes, my heart . . . and the rest. I think of them constantly. . . . I dream of them. I write of them.”<sup>38</sup> He illustrates this lyrical inspiration one afternoon in the park by serenading the picnicking *midinettes*. In this lascivious (but ostensibly charming) number, Lherminier defends a chic old gentleman who follows the young women “from the workshop to the restaurant”:

Walking behind your boots  
That have been recently resoled,  
He is just a little indecent  
Seeing your childish figures  
And shivers just a little in thinking about them.<sup>39</sup>

Here the lunch break is imagined as a time for female workers to present themselves for amorous encounters (“When you show him your nimble legs, / Raising your thin petticoat / With a slightly cheeky gesture”). The *midinettes*' pursuer covets their youth, energy, and slender bodies—and includes their poverty in the erotic catalog of their attributes (with their recently resoled boots). The last stanzas of the song make plain that their pursuer's intentions are not platonic: “At night, after the caresses, / He will speak gently” (before leaving “furtively” at dawn). The *midinette*, in her now empty bed, is told, “You will be gay!”<sup>40</sup>

The stage directions describe the lunching *midinettes* as “very inter-

<sup>36</sup> As Rebecca Spang demonstrates, the image of the restaurant as an “urban reference point” and a site of “erotic gastronomy” in popular literature dated back to the early nineteenth century and the invention of the modern restaurant itself (*The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* [Cambridge, MA, 2000], 215).

<sup>37</sup> Louis Artus, *Les midinettes: Comédie en quatre actes* (Paris, 1912). First performed at the Théâtre des Variétés, Jan. 31, 1911.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 85–86.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

ested” in Lherminier’s song, so beguiled that they join him in singing the refrain as they nod their heads, becoming, Lherminier says, his very own “Conservatoire de Mimi Pinson.”<sup>41</sup> The women applaud and laugh when the song ends. The good-natured tone of the piece offers a sense of just how familiar such a scene would have been: Lherminier, the fictive milliners, and presumably the audience seem to take for granted that young garment workers are cheerful and ready sexual prey, as interested in liaisons with wealthy older men as in matrimony with their humble peers. As confirmation of this assumption, Lherminier’s object of desire, Julie the milliner, spends the play equivocating between two men she meets on her lunch hour: an honest laborer named Grabure, who hopes to marry her, and Pierre, a bourgeois writer and the husband of one of her clients. The joyful denouement of the play finds Julie and Pierre kissing in the park, having decided to begin an “amourette”—a casual love affair—even as Pierre assures her that he will never leave his wife.<sup>42</sup>

Even when marriage is the conclusion of the lunching *midinette*’s seduction, it often is preceded by a fall from virtue and/or many trials. *Couturière sans aiguilles*, a vaudeville operetta from 1905, closes with the engagement of its protagonists, the seamstress Juliette and her suitor Agénor (a saxophonist at a café-concert); nevertheless, the couple reminisces about their first, lustful encounter in a restaurant at lunchtime. They sing to one another, “And this is how / In a restaurant / Between the *saucisson* and the cream / We become lovers.”<sup>43</sup> Though the affair leads to a marriage proposal, much of the operetta celebrates the sexual promiscuity of the atelier, where young garment workers candidly discuss lovers. The seamstress Clarisse is taunted by her coworkers because she misses lunch for a dalliance with a wealthy octogenarian, while the women as a group hail the lunch hour as a time for “Lovers that makes us blush.”<sup>44</sup>

One chaste young seamstress, Denise Savray in de Lannoy’s 1919 novel *Modiste et grande dame*, tries valiantly to avoid a restaurant seduction by taking the metro home every lunch hour to eat with her family.<sup>45</sup> Fate intervenes, however, when she is injured crossing the street dur-

<sup>41</sup> Mimi Pinson was a prototypical *midinette*—a fictional character from an 1846 poem by Alfred de Musset. This line specifically refers to a philanthropic effort by Gustave Charpentier to provide workingwomen with song, dance, and music lessons through his Conservatoire de Mimi Pinson. See Tilburg, “Mimi Pinson Goes to War”; and Mary Ellen Poole, “Gustave Charpentier and the Conservatoire Populaire de Mimi Pinson,” *Nineteenth-Century Music* 20, no. 3 (1997): 231–52.

<sup>42</sup> Artus, *Les midinettes*, 121.

<sup>43</sup> Georges Sibre and Albert Verse, *Couturière sans aiguilles: Vaudeville-opérette en un acte* (Paris, 1905), 13. First performed at the Bobino, directed by Eugène Dambreville, with music by J. Deschaux, date unknown.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–7.

<sup>45</sup> Pierre de Lannoy, *Modiste et grande dame: Roman inédit* (Paris, 1919).

ing a gas explosion and is taken to a nearby café to be resuscitated. The restaurant is so perilous a place for the virtue of young workingwomen that even when brought there semiconscious, Denise promptly meets (and eventually makes a miserable marriage with) a dashing count.

Jean Béarnais's *Nouvelle Mimi Pinson* follows the travails of an orphan seamstress named Mimi and her suitor Jean, a Montmartrois painter.<sup>46</sup> Their first outing takes place during her lunch hour. While Mimi is accustomed to eating sparingly at a modest café with her friends, Jean takes her to a fine restaurant, where she dines lavishly. The couple proceeds to lunch together regularly, Jean proposes, and Mimi moves to Montmartre to live with him in anticipation of their marriage. Under pressure from his family, Jean, who, we learn, is actually a wealthy aristocrat, soon abandons Mimi without explanation to marry his appropriately upper-class cousin. While Jean eventually divorces his cousin-wife and returns to Mimi, much of the novel concerns the moral precariousness of Mimi's position, all beginning with flirtatious (and relatively copious) restaurant lunches.

In *midinette* literature, substantial or luxurious meals were often a marker of moral corruption or sexual engagement: Mimi's fateful grand lunch with Jean, the young woman dipping her fingers into the plate of mussels, the consummation of Julie and Agénor's love over *saucisson* and cream. Broadly speaking, however, the chroniclers of the Parisian *midinette* in many cases went to great lengths to convince readers that their attractive subjects were ordinarily willful undereaters and not especially hungry. Undereating is referenced repeatedly in these essays, novels, songs, and plays as part and parcel of the appealing, feather-brained frivolity of Parisian garment workers.

As historians of the body and gender have demonstrated, delicate appetites and disordered eating were, by the early twentieth century, (mis)understood even by many physicians as signs of "coquettishness" and as part of a trend toward a more slender silhouette for upper and middle-class women.<sup>47</sup> Though the *midinette* likewise was idealized for her small stature and thin waist, her undereating in favor of fashion was understood to result from a lack of appetite and a desire to economize for fashionable things rather than from the drive for modish thinness

<sup>46</sup> Béarnais, *Nouvelle Mimi Pinson*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> See Edward Shorter, "The First Great Increase in Anorexia Nervosa," *Journal of Social History* 21, no. 1 (1987): 69–96. Shorter notes that at the turn of the century "references to anorexia in aid of modish thinness and romantic acceptance begin to proliferate" (82). Middle- and upper-class women treated for anorexia nervosa in the first decade of the twentieth century evinced a desire to be more fashionably trim. Mary Lynn Stewart and Nancy Janovicek trace the fashion industry's particular investment in promoting a slender frame in the decades straddling World War I ("Slimming the Female Body? Re-evaluating Dress, Corsets, and Physical Culture in France, 1890s–1930s," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* 5, no. 2 [2001]: 173–93).

that preoccupied some middle-class women. These related but distinct images reveal how much is missed when scholars focus almost exclusively on middle-class women in histories of the body.

Susan Bordo demonstrates that Victorian fiction tended to use female hunger as a “code for female desire,” just one more voracious and threatening appetite of female sexuality.<sup>48</sup> Thus, for the *midinette* to be obviously undereating yet not particularly hungry provided an ideal, desirable, but not excessively desiring body for consumption by the bourgeois viewer/reader/lover. What is more, this vision of the *midinette* blurred generic conventions in nineteenth-century literature, where delicate appetites were the purview of virtuous upper-class ladies. By mapping slight appetites onto working bodies, pop-cultural narratives erased the privation of actual workers, at a time when this privation was itself the subject of government inquiries, reform efforts, and labor campaigns. In such narratives, therefore, the well-documented hunger of workingwomen was transfigured, as if by enchantment, into coquettish undereating.

Montorgueil rhapsodized about the working Parisienne’s noneating in *Midi: Le déjeuner des petites ouvrières* (1899), a book that contains remarkably few references to actual eating.<sup>49</sup> He reproached “moralists” who agonized over the hunger of these women and who claimed that the joyous comportment of the *midinettes* was a “ruse” that hid the misery of an underfed life:<sup>50</sup>

The laughter of the workingwomen rings true. And their joy is not an act. The mediocrity of their meals causes them neither sadness nor embarrassment. “One should not live to eat, said Harpagnon, but rather eat to live.” [These women] are not so sure of that: they live, or believe they do, and do not eat. . . . Their appetite is so frail that the most fragile emotion can cut it. Propose some pleasure to them unexpectedly and their appetite, as if by magic, disappears. In this way the theater has always, for the People, been at the expense of dinner.<sup>51</sup>

Here was the common refrain of the *midinette*’s enthusiasts: these were workingwomen who lived for and *on* pleasure—not food. As an example of this, Montorgueil recounted his time spent with Ernestine Curot, a seventeen-year-old workingwoman elected as the “Muse of Paris” in 1898. As one of the competition’s judges, Montorgueil was charged with taking Curot and two of her female companions to the famed couturier

<sup>48</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, CA, 1993), 206.

<sup>49</sup> Montorgueil, *Midi*.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

Charles Worth to be dressed for a fete at the Hotel de Ville, accompanying them to the fete, and escorting them home afterward. At the end of this busy day, during which Montorgueil never saw the young women eat, he suggested that they should at last have dinner:

The Muse looked at me with an almost ironic face: "Eat? But, Monsieur," she said, "we don't eat when we go to the theater!" I insisted, I invoked the physical necessity, the fatigue of this long day, the depleted strength that they needed to replenish. I preached in vain:  
—When we go to the theater, we do not eat.  
They did not eat. They went to the theater.<sup>52</sup>

Casting aside the wise words of their bourgeois escort, these young workers happily forgo meals in favor of entertainment—and Montorgueil is amused by their flippancy. Alfred Desfossez's 1904 play *Les midinettes*, whose entire first act is set in a "restau des midinettes," features an equally blithe *midinette* named Zuzut, who, when given some money by a male admirer to eat more substantially, announces she will instead use the money to go to the theater.<sup>53</sup> Here, as in many texts featuring *midinettes*, benevolent bourgeois paternalism confronts the worrisome if adorable lifestyle of the garment worker, with systemic malnourishment in the garment trades neatly transformed into a girlish lifestyle choice.

When *midinettes* are portrayed eating at all, it is often to highlight the charming lightness of their meals. Desfossez's band of lurching *midinettes* eats sparingly and frivolously: fries, pickles, pastries, *crèmes au chocolat*. In *Midi* Montorgueil referred to workingwomen's meals as "un repas d'oiseau," and in *La vie des boulevards*, as light fare: "fries or artichoke" and "some cherries."<sup>54</sup> A lengthy lunch scene in the moralizing novel *Camille Frison* likewise represented *midinettes* as impractical eaters and capricious consumers:

Some bought oranges from a street cart, others candy from the grocer, brightly colored cards, or complimentary theater tickets from the tobacco shop. Still others crowded around the ambulant pastry salesman. Further along, some waited, bowls in hand, in front of a shop where fries bubbled in the frying pan. . . . There were some who entered the dairy shop, the baker's, the delicatessen, to lay in hasty provisions before launching themselves into the commotion of a bar where they ordered only a white wine or a coffee.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 74–75.

<sup>53</sup> Alfred Desfossez, *Les midinettes: Drame en 5 actes et 7 tableaux* (Paris, 1904), 5, 7. Premiered at the Théâtre des Fantaisies Saint-Martin, Jan. 1, 1904, and performed later at the Théâtre de Belleville, Jan. 31, 1904, and at the Théâtre Montparnasse, May 14, 1904.

<sup>54</sup> Montorgueil, *Midi*, 38; Montorgueil, *La vie des boulevards*, 21–22.

<sup>55</sup> Vernières, *Camille Frison*, 38–39.

Oranges, fries, candy, wine, and coffee—hardly the makings of a nourishing meal, but a list perfectly calibrated to evoke the gay impulses of the ideal *midinette*. A contemporary song, “La marche des ouvrières,” celebrates an equally insubstantial lunch:

Do you hear noon ringing?  
It's time for your lunch;  
The fried potato's bubblin'  
And the brie's runnin' at the dairy.  
Go get your beakful  
In a nice paper cone.  
And drink a dewdrop  
At the neighborhood Wallace.<sup>56</sup>

Some fries, a bit of cheese, and a drop of water from a public fountain—here is another sparse *midinette* lunch, no more than a birdlike “beakful,” but one that evokes pleasure rather than pathos. *Midinette* lunches were depicted in this way consistently—meals of small quantity, often composed of snacks or sugary treats.

Alexandre's extended chapter on the *midinettes'* lunch hour veers between romanticizing the lightness of the women's consumption and playing up the tragic insufficiency of their collations—two closely related responses, I suggest. Alexandre depicts the plaintive under-eaters (“huddled in their cloaks, they melancholically eat the humble and austere nourishment they hold in the fold of a newspaper spread open over their knees”)<sup>57</sup> and later refers to the “mouse-sized stomachs of the little Parisiennes.” He admits that “it is incontestable that in Paris, the workingwoman at four francs a day finds nowhere to feed herself adequately.” Yet, on the very next page, he concludes, “This life is essentially pleasant and emits a potent perfume of kindness, of affectionate temperament, and instinctive delicacy.”<sup>58</sup> He approves of the “pensive or cheerful young women” who descend from their workshops to buy a pleasantly insubstantial lunch from a seasonal fruit and vegetable cart: “delicious fruits and crudités . . . cherries, apples, pink radishes.”<sup>59</sup>

Montorgueil similarly notes the misery of these women's diets (“the ‘petite main’ makes a sum so modest that we ask ourselves by what miracle she is able to live. To this question one workingwoman responded: ‘Why, we do not eat our fill’”) and on the very next page assures readers that nonetheless “this distress” is hidden by a “mask of

<sup>56</sup> A. Poupay, “La marche des ouvrières,” quoted *ibid.*, 48. “Wallace du quartier” references cast-iron public drinking fountains that appeared in Paris in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>57</sup> Alexandre, *Les reines de l'aiguille*, 19–20.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, 25.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

insouciance and gaiety” provided by youth and taste.<sup>60</sup> These women, he insists, “remain piquant and so desirable that they would make some conquests of old men along their way if they were not all horrified by banal vice.”<sup>61</sup> Montorgueil adds that the “frugal meal” of fries, artichokes, and cherries was seasoned with “the salt of playful remarks and shot through with more laughter than the copious feasts of modish cabarets.”<sup>62</sup> Thus the “lugubrious” portrait painted by the reformers he cites is immediately banished by images of alluring women and quaint picnics.<sup>63</sup> Some workingwomen, Montorgueil continued, even found spare change for an occasional coffee or vanilla ice cream. In this way undereating and a frivolous diet are both denounced and eroticized.

Explaining the *midinette*'s undereating as a choice made in the service of an instinctive attachment to fashion and coquetry further eroticized the malnourished garment worker. As an example of his thesis that workingwomen's *coquetterie* deadened their hunger, Montorgueil pointed again to the behavior of Curot and her friends: “Did they eat during these blissful days [?] . . . Eat! Sure, they were considering it. Considering their beautiful gowns, yes, which they saw were lined with silk, and so, they confided to one another, later they could unstitch the lining and make two dresses out of one.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, not eating, Montorgueil revealed, was “the secret to not jeopardizing either the delicate gracefulness of her body or the return on her earnings.”<sup>65</sup> Once more, the Parisian garment worker is seen to prioritize what observers like Montorgueil wished she would—fashion. As a result, the reality of the sweated laborer, malnourished because of a meager salary, is neatly elided in favor of a chic coquette who chooses not to eat her fill in order to revel in the pleasures of Parisian couture.

Vernières's *Camille Frison* features a young garment worker who spends her lunch hour at a restaurant describing the “ravishing little embroidered collar” at Galeries Lafayette that she will soon buy: “She had gone without meat for eight days to have enough money.”<sup>66</sup> In Béarnais's *Nouvelle Mimi Pinson* the entire staff of a Parisian couture workshop curbs its eating to allow for fashion expenditures: “They had the habit of meeting up at a little café on the Rue Caumartin where they would lunch frugally on charcuterie and a café-crème. These meager meals enabled them to save up to buy powder, rouge and, on

<sup>60</sup> Montorgueil, *La vie des boulevards*, 186, 187.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 186, 188.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>64</sup> Montorgueil, *Midi*, 71.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>66</sup> Vernières, *Camille Frison*, 35.

occasion, a little, elegant outfit.”<sup>67</sup> One seamstress, Jeanne, considers taking a lover to sate both her physical hunger and her appetite for fashion: “I’ve had enough of being honorable, of depriving myself to preserve this elegance that they envy in us, to live this life of relentless privation.”<sup>68</sup> Downgrading her wardrobe does not occur to Jeanne as a solution. As in many renderings of Mimi Pinson, Jeanne’s concern for appearance and taste for fashion are represented as an instinctive drive—far more urgent than a steady diet. Manier’s *Midinettes* features Yvette, a twenty-six-year-old *second main* in a Parisian couture house who also sacrifices meals for her love of fashion: “To stay coquette, to save money, Yvette only eats once a day, at lunch, at an inexpensive restaurant.”<sup>69</sup> In this way novelists like Manier and Béarnais assuaged social fears about the wretchedness of sweated labor (by depicting workers’ undereating as a coquettish sacrifice for apparel and makeup) and reaffirmed cultural expectations about the impeccable tastefulness of Paris’s workingwomen.

Indeed, many scenes of the *midinette* lunch hour involve no eating whatsoever but instead depict garment workers covetously touring the boulevards’ shop windows. The (purported) *midinette* columnist “Gaby” from *Le journal de Mimi Pinson* described her own lunch hours thus: “I love to *flâner*. . . . My nose is pressed up against the shop windows of the boutiques in the neighborhood. . . . It amuses me so just to look—without even really seeing at times—the loads of things that are in there!”<sup>70</sup> Béarnais’s novel opens with *midinettes* rushing toward lunch who pause “in front of the sumptuous jewelry shops and admire the expensive necklaces, the rings that will never grace their fingers, the diamonds that will be worn at dreamlike parties by those who don the gowns fashioned by the skillful little hands.”<sup>71</sup> These young women are not fomenting revolution as they examine the luxury goods produced by their labor but beyond their reach. Rather, they are light-hearted *flâneuses* whose consumerist desires affirm the capitalist economy of which they are the bottom rung.

As Rita Felski and others point out, workingwomen’s taste for luxury was often portrayed as the first step in a descent toward sexual promiscuity.<sup>72</sup> To be sure, many of these stories understood appetites

<sup>67</sup> Béarnais, *Nouvelle Mimi Pinson*, 2–3.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>69</sup> Manier, *Midinettes*, 38: “Pour rester coquette, faire des économies, Yvette ne mange qu’une fois par jour, à déjeuner, dans un restaurant à bon marché.”

<sup>70</sup> Gaby, “Babil de Trottin,” *Le journal de Mimi Pinson, à l’atelier et dans la famille*, Aug. 10, 1908, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Béarnais, *Nouvelle Mimi Pinson*, 1.

<sup>72</sup> Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 72.

(for fashion, for food, for sex) as interrelated and corrupting. Béarnais's Mimi, before agreeing to her first meal with her soon-to-be-lover Jean, considers the example of her coworker Mado, who, thanks to a wealthy lover, is always fashionably dressed ("du dernier chic") and eats her lunch "in restaurants, à la carte."<sup>73</sup> Many philanthropists and reformers parroted the pop-cultural contention that the *midinette's* frivolous and underdeveloped appetite for food complemented other, more highly developed (and morally treacherous) appetites.

### Lunch Reform and the *Midinette*

Alongside these picturesque representations, the female worker's lunch drew increasing attention in the belle époque as a target of reform. Turn-of-the-century reformers generally agreed that the lunch break imperiled young Parisian workingwomen and so proposed initiatives to create lunchrooms, both secular and confessional, where *midinettes* could safely enjoy a wholesome meal for a modest sum.<sup>74</sup> Such initiatives, while engendered primarily by concern for the insufficient salaries and diet of the Parisian female workforce, were also motivated by interlaced fantasies and concerns about the moral susceptibility of the garment trade worker.

One of the first workingwomen's lunchrooms was established in the 1890s by the Union Chrétienne des Ateliers de Femmes—a group composed of garment trade *patronnes* and society ladies—at the place du Marché Saint-Honoré.<sup>75</sup> A short-lived Catholic restaurant, on the Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and another, the Restaurant de Dames Seules on the Rue de Richelieu, followed. This latter space included a reading room and library, a prix fixe restaurant, and a second, à la carte restaurant.<sup>76</sup> In 1893 a group of Protestant society ladies opened the Foyer de l'Ouvrière, a kitchen on Rue d'Aboukir in the neighborhood of some of the most poorly paid of the needle trades—military caps and hat manufacture.<sup>77</sup> Given the popularity of this endeavor,

<sup>73</sup> Béarnais, *Nouvelle Mimi Pinson*, 3.

<sup>74</sup> Albert, "Les midinettes parisiennes à la Belle Époque," 61–74. Albert is primarily interested in the *midinette's* lunch hour and in restaurant reform as part of a broader interest in workingwomen's consumption in this period, but she focuses on noncomestible consumption.

<sup>75</sup> This first effort faced several difficulties, such as finding an affordable location close to garment trade workplaces and developing a menu that was both appealing and modestly priced. For information on these early endeavors, see Comte d'Haussonville, *Salaires et misères de femmes* (Paris, 1900).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 48. Charles Benoist refers to the lending library at this establishment in *Les ouvrières de l'aiguille à Paris* (Paris, 1895), 233–34.

<sup>77</sup> Haussonville noted that high prices inevitably meant that the principal clientele comprised *demoiselles de magasins* and that the *directrice* was too forceful in pushing a "certain influence religieuse" (*Salaires et misères de femmes*, 52). The founding of the Rue d'Aboukir site is dated 1893 in Maurice Bonneff, "Fin de saison—fin de travail," *L'action*, July 18, 1908.

other locales opened in subsequent years—on the Rue Réaumur, Rue de la Victoire, Rue du Faubourg-Saint-Denis, Rue de Charonne, and Rue de Richelieu.<sup>78</sup> The Rue du Bac saw the establishment of a multi-confessional restaurant run by Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant ladies. In 1905 an alliance of public school teachers and labor representatives (including Clémence Jusselin, the secretary of the *Chambre Syndicale des Ouvrières Lingères* in Paris) founded “Les Midinettes”: Restaurants Coopératifs d’Ouvrières.<sup>79</sup> This project, which sought over time to make workingwomen the primary stakeholders in the cooperative, modeled itself after successful networks of workers’ restaurants in Geneva and in Lyon (established in 1890 and 1892, respectively).<sup>80</sup> Another Parisian establishment opened on the Rue Béranger offering a “pension complet”—meals and lodging for workingwomen at a cost of between seven and twelve francs per week.<sup>81</sup> The Cercle du Travail Féminin on the Boulevard des Capucines promoted itself as a “center of entertainment and friendship” for workingwomen without any confessional or political association. Its services included a restaurant, as well as affordable seaside vacations for subscribers. By 1908 the Cercle boasted 900 members and provided “carefully prepared” lunches in its restaurant for around 250 women for less than eighty centimes each.<sup>82</sup>

In addition to lunchrooms, some reformers focused on supporting businesses that provided employees with adequate lunching facilities on site—principally in the form of kitchens where workers could prepare and heat their own meals. The Ligue Social d’Acheteurs gave high marks to workshops that provided stoves and lunching spaces.<sup>83</sup> In 1906 the Rue Saint-Honoré saw the opening of the Réchaud, where for about ten centimes workingwomen could cook their own meals. The organizers provided supplements of vegetables, salad, and wine for a small price. By 1908 some 120 female garment workers from the neighborhoods of the Rue de la Paix and the Place Vendôme ate there every day.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> “Les Midinettes”: *Restaurants coopératifs d’ouvrières; Société anonyme à capital et à personnel variables* (Paris, 1905). This initiative is mentioned in Louise Compain, *La femme dans les organisations ouvrières* (Paris, 1910). Compain refers to a soon-to-be-opened *restaurant de midinettes* that has raised ten thousand francs in donations. Whether this is the same initiative as that incorporated in 1905 is difficult to say, though Jusselin is mentioned prominently in both places.

<sup>80</sup> “Les Midinettes”: *Restaurants coopératifs d’ouvrières*, 6.

<sup>81</sup> Bonneff, “Fin de saison—fin de travail.”

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> *Bulletin de la Ligue sociale d’acheteurs* (nov. 1904, 1er trimestre 1905), 7–8. Benoist observed that most of the diners were young women, as older and married women preferred to economize even further by remaining at the workshop to eat (*Les ouvrières de l’aiguille à Paris*, 234). The Ligue Sociale d’Acheteurs was founded in 1902 to raise awareness among bourgeois Parisian shoppers about the working conditions of those employed in the garment businesses they patronized.

<sup>84</sup> Bonneff, “Fin de saison—fin de travail.”

In his social investigation *Les ouvrières de l'aiguille à Paris* (1895), Charles Benoist estimated that, in the high season, twelve hundred to fifteen hundred lunches were served weekly in “restaurants-bibliothèques” for workingwomen in the needle trades. With a Parisian working population of some eighty-eight thousand *ouvrières couturières*, wrote Benoist, clearly more such venues were needed.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, by 1912 the number of lunchrooms and soup kitchens expressly serving workingwomen in Paris swelled to thirty-five—with names like the Repas de Midinette and Restaurant du Syndicat de l'Aiguille.<sup>86</sup>

The menus of workingwomen's lunchrooms offered a corrective to the widespread association of *midinettes* and frivolous eating. While the popular imagination envisioned *midinettes* lunching on a “beakful” of sweets and snacks, diners at the Foyer de l'Ouvrière enjoyed complete meals consisting of a meat dish, vegetable, and bread for only eleven sous.<sup>87</sup> The Restaurant de Dames Seules offered a ninety-centime *menu fixe* (a meat dish, a vegetable dish, a dessert, bread, and wine, beer, or milk), as well as an à la carte selection that included meat, fish, soups, salad, and vegetables.<sup>88</sup>

For some reformers, the economically driven malnourishment of the garment worker was the principal impetus for these lunchroom initiatives. A schoolteacher who helped found the Société des Midinettes (a restaurant cooperative) wrote of a former student, a leather worker, who was “reduced to nibbling a couple of fries or bits of charcuterie, while walking, showered by rain or wind. Isn't this a fortifying nourishment and consumed in conditions that promise a happy effect! . . . After this, you can go ahead and call all the congresses you want to combat the ravages of tuberculosis and to halt the white slave trade!”<sup>89</sup> Maurice Bonneff, a working-class activist who coauthored a number of *enquêtes* into the lives of French workers with his brother Léon, explained that workingwomen lunched outside by necessity, not by dint of a picturesque playfulness, and he quoted a workingwoman herself (rare in these sources):

First off, the bistros are not much interested in our patronage. We do not order apéritifs. And then, lunch rarely amounts to less than twenty-five sous. That's fine for rich people. To cut costs, sometimes, we order smaller portions. Often, we drink only water. This time, the bistro gets angry, and hits us with a fine. Yes indeed! When we

<sup>85</sup> Benoist, *Les ouvrières de l'aiguille à Paris*, 234.

<sup>86</sup> Office Central des Oeuvres de Bienfaisance, *Paris charitable et bienfaisant* (Paris, 1912).

<sup>87</sup> Bonneff, “Fin de saison—fin de travail.”

<sup>88</sup> Haussonville, *Salaires et misères de femmes*, 48. The prices on this menu closely approximate those found in sample menus provided in Benoist, *Les ouvrières de l'aiguille à Paris*, 232.

<sup>89</sup> “*Les Midinettes*”: *Restaurants coopératifs d'ouvrières*, 5.

ask for the bill, they have us paying ten centimes extra, to punish us for contributing, by way of our sobriety, to the slump in wine sales! They charge us for the silverware too. So much that, despite our rigorous calculations, our desire for economizing, we end up spending wildly: twenty-three sous!<sup>90</sup>

Bonneff remarks that this “economy of the little sou” is “infinitely distressing. . . . It gives us a glimpse of an entire life of privation and labor, and the anemia and the tuberculosis that decimate so many workingwomen.”<sup>91</sup> In their *enquête* titled *La vie tragique des travailleurs* (1911), unusual among many descriptions of the *midinette* lunch, the Bonneff brothers define these laborers’ undereating as a painful economic necessity, rather than as a sacrifice for fashion or a preference for insubstantial meals.<sup>92</sup> They demonstrate that even a modest daily midday meal exceeded the salary of many women in the flower industry. They also note that added money for food could not be gleaned from other parts of the workingwoman’s budget—minimal heating and laundry costs and “the already limited costs of clothes.”<sup>93</sup> Rather than blaming excessive coquetry and taste for fashion, the Boneffs highlight the inequitable salaries of women compared with men as the root of their pecuniary misery.

Yet many other reformers, even those decrying abusive labor practices, reaffirmed the prevalent notion of female garment workers as frivolous and willful undereaters. In his 1900 investigative report *Salaires et misères de femmes* the Comte d’Haussonville admitted that it was difficult to construct a menu for a workingwomen’s restaurant: “Generally, [these girls] have little appetite, despite their twenty years, and this is understandable given the sedentary existence they lead, deprived of fresh air and exercise. Big pieces of meat do not tempt them. They only like small dishes. Some demand dessert and coffee.”<sup>94</sup> In her study *Celles qui travaillent* (1913), the novelist (and former *ouvrière*) Simone Bodève concurred that it was a mistake to establish restaurants for workingwomen alone: “Our young women eat little and drink even less. . . . In places where a restaurateur is assured of a male clientele, the food will be both more varied and fresher, simply because its consumption is certain. . . . [To the young workingwoman] eating seems to be an irksome operation; eating a lot is, in her eyes, shameful and indelicate.”<sup>95</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Bonneff, “Fin de saison—fin de travail.”

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Léon Bonneff and Maurice Bonneff, *La vie tragique des travailleurs: Enquêtes sur la condition économique et morale des ouvriers et ouvrières d’industrie*, 4th ed. (Paris, 1911), 26–27, 330–31.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 315–16.

<sup>94</sup> Haussonville, *Salaires et misères de femmes*, 47.

<sup>95</sup> Simone Bodève, *Celles qui travaillent* (Paris, 1913), 128–29.

A certain Dr. Parfait, writing in a magazine aimed at *midinettes* in 1909, emphasized the deleterious health effects of workingwomen's insufficient meals: "The mealtime of the workingwoman—yours, charming lady readers—is perhaps the most interesting and most alarming aspect of her situation, as much from the point of view of the stomach as that of the crowded closeness of the restaurant." Tuberculosis and stomach ailments were a certain result of such undereating, the physician warned. He suggested, however, that these inadequate meals were in no small part the result of workers' appetite for fashion: "Some workingwomen, rather than trying to feed themselves well, prefer to lunch on a ten-centime black coffee and a croissant . . . so that they can buy themselves a bit of ribbon, a cravat, or a bouquet of violets."<sup>96</sup> To convince his working-class readers to heed his advice, Parfait patronizingly framed his admonition as beauty tips: "Remark—and this argument will have more value in your eyes than all the best ones in the world—remark, I say, that frequent congestion of the face often leads to eczema. . . . Eczema that disfigures, that makes the most beautiful woman ugly, and that resists even the most energetic treatments."<sup>97</sup> Tuberculosis and any of the other serious health ailments Parfait enumerates in this article evidently would not concern the gay *midinette* in the way that threatens to her beauty might. Here another middle-class male reformer relies on a potent cultural fantasy of *midinette* frivolity even as he tries to combat systemic malnourishment in the garment trades. Bodève similarly explained the undereating of Parisian workingwomen in part as a result of their devotion to fashion. Bodève refers to the lunch hour as the best time to see the *ouvrières parisiennes* "lively and happy": "Those privileged ones that can 'treat themselves' to restaurants lunch on four mouthfuls and a thousand words, then rush off to the department store to try on hat styles."<sup>98</sup> Other workingwomen, led astray by their "vanity," agree to accompany a seducer to a meal simply for "the joy of entering a beautiful restaurant" and later "kill themselves with night work [*veillées*] and privations to have a wardrobe without asking for anything from their lover."<sup>99</sup> Intentional and frivolous undereating in the service of fashion and beauty worked as only one important element in a prevalent vision of the *midinette* as sexually available and desirable yet politically neutered.

The *midinette's* lunchtime corruption, a scene reiterated across popular literature in this period, bled into government investiga-

<sup>96</sup> Dr. Parfait, "Midinette et l'hygiène: Vous mangez trop vite," *Midinette: Journal de la femme et de la jeune fille qui travaillent*, Nov. 12, 1909, 10.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Bodève, *Celles qui travaillent*, 14.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 67–68.

tions of conditions in the garment trades. Indeed, turn-of-the-century lunchroom initiatives were driven not only by perceptions of working-women's undereating but also by alarm about the lunch hour as a space of temptation, seduction, and moral peril—a fall from virtue that was itself a staple of romantic representations of these women.<sup>100</sup> In 1901 the Commission Départementale du Travail de la Seine held numerous meetings on the question of the *veillées* (supplementary late evening hours imposed on many workers during the high season). As part of this debate, Stéphanie Bouvard, leader of the *fleuristes-plumassières'* union and one of only two women involved in the commission's deliberations, advocated requiring all employers to provide refectories.<sup>101</sup> Workingwomen, Bouvard argued, often lived too far from their workplace to return home for lunch and earned too little to eat at restaurants. More important, having the *ouvrière* lunch in a designated space at the workshop would "safeguard her morality and remove her from the influences of the street."<sup>102</sup> M. Walckenaer, a mining engineer and member of the commission, was sympathetic to Bouvard's argument: "It is the fear that young women, obliged to go out into the street and to take shelter in cheap cabarets for their meals, find themselves exposed to moral or material dangers more frightful than the inconveniences of their current way of life."<sup>103</sup>

Fear of these unspecified but doubtlessly well-understood "moral dangers" seems to have helped shape reform initiatives. The founding documents of the Société des Midinettes' restaurant cooperative included as justification of its work a vision of the moral dangers of the lunch hour: "And here, then, is my workingwoman, obliged to go eat outside, in the street, in the square, on a bench on the boulevard, exposed to bad weather, to glacial temperatures, to rain, to wind; exposed also to all the repugnant and dangerous promiscuities, so much so that her moral health is as threatened as her physical health."<sup>104</sup> Inclem-

<sup>100</sup> Spang notes that the restaurant had been perceived, since its inception in the early nineteenth century, as a space of erotic adventure (*Invention of the Restaurant*, 215).

<sup>101</sup> "Séance du 22 février 1901," in *La question des veillées devant la Commission départementale du travail du département de la Seine: Extraits des procès-verbaux des séances, 1900–1901* (Paris, 1901), 25. Bouvard served on the commission as a *délégué* of the Bourse du Travail.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 28. The commission could not agree on the proposition, and it was withdrawn. One delegate, M. Antourville from the Bourse du Travail, who disagreed with Bouvard and Walckenaer, insisted that the diminution of health that would result from workers' enclosure inside all day was more perilous than the "influence of the street," which was "not as dangerous as we claim." Furthermore, remaining in the workshop for lunch could be even more threatening from a moral perspective, "especially in the mixed-sex workshops, where the men and women live together from morning till night in a closeness that leads to familiarities and intimacies that are almost impossible to achieve in the street" (*ibid.*, 26). Antourville also feared that employers would take advantage of the policy to keep employees working through the lunch hour.

<sup>104</sup> "*Les Midinettes*": *Restaurants coopératifs d'ouvrières*, 4.

ent weather and moral danger are placed side by side as threats to the lurching *midinette*. Paul Deschanel's 1909 initiative, *Réfectoire: Société Mutuelle de Prévoyance Alimentaire des Dames et Demoiselles Couturières, Lingères, Modistes, Brodeuses*, afforded women in the garment trades during the low seasons "a wholesome and fortifying meal" but also "a shelter from bad weather and the temptations of the street."<sup>105</sup> The *Ligue Sociale d'Acheteurs* praised one couture house for offering a stove where employees could heat up their lunch "so as to have them avoid a meal at the corner restaurant where one is always badly fed and exposed to often dangerous encounters."<sup>106</sup>

In *Salaires et misères de femmes* Haussonville described in detail the scenario to be avoided by the creation of workingwomen's lunchrooms:

While they mull over an economical meal, menu in hand, a gallant from the dairy shop arrives and proposes adding something to their lunch or even paying for the whole thing. If they refuse on account of pride, the gallant does not surrender. He returns the next day and offers some object for their toilette, a silk ribbon or a plated brooch. After all, there's nothing wrong with this. So, each young woman who consents to have something paid for, whether a lunch or a ribbon, is on the path that will lead to her ruin.<sup>107</sup>

Echoing popular *midinette* literature, Haussonville's sociological study neatly joins fashion, food, and moral ruin—and does so with the narrative suspense of a pulp novel. In his 1895 study of the needleworkers of Paris, the journalist, historian, and later politician Charles Benoist composed a similarly lurid scene in which a workingwoman, driven by dreams of copious restaurant lunches and fashion purchases, falls for her seducer:

She who hardly earns enough to feed herself, who lunches sparingly and hurriedly at noon, and is bent in two over her work, she has a dream: to be able to eat, like this girl or that girl, at a restaurant . . . which she imagines as a place of delights. As soon as she has a couple of sous, she will go. As soon as she has gone, she will be unable to go without it, by vanity and pleasure.

One day not too far off, she will meet a gallant from her class there. . . . She will resist as best she can, but for all sorts of reasons her best is not good enough. First off, she is poor, and second, she is a coquette. . . . She has the curiosity to know and the desire to have:

<sup>105</sup> "Pour les ouvrières parisiennes: Une oeuvre utile," *Midinette: Journal de la femme et de la jeune fille qui travaillent*, Nov. 12, 1909, 4.

<sup>106</sup> Baronne Georges Brincard, "La Ligue sociale d'acheteurs et les Maisons de la liste blanche," presented to the Assemblée Générale of the Ligue, Apr. 23, 1904; *Bulletin de la Ligue sociale d'acheteurs*, Nov. 1904, 7. In compiling its *liste blanche* (businesses given a seal of approval because of their fair labor practices), the Ligue specified which fashion houses provided their workers with space and facilities to prepare and enjoy midday meals.

<sup>107</sup> Haussonville, *Salaires et misères de femmes*, 21.

a bagatelle, a bauble, a ribbon. . . . The modest workingwoman gives in one night. In a dark alley, she slips through a half-open door into a disreputable house. . . . She will not come out again.<sup>108</sup>

Restaurant dining again figures as a gateway temptation leading inexorably to desires for fine things, a seduction, and, in short order, moral ruin. Like many fiction writers and *midinette* enthusiasts, Benoist knits together this imaginary workingwoman's meager diet and her supposed *coquetterie*—and conflates hunger and acquisitiveness as the cause of her fall. The very tone of the passage echoes the melodramatic narrative of much *midinette* fiction—a virtuous but dreamy working-class girl, a gallant encounter, a dark alleyway.

Benoist returns to the restaurant later in his study, reasserting the inevitability of workingwomen's fall after exposure to its temptations. Once these women have the occasion "to lose themselves, they are lost: and such an occasion is offered them at least once a day. Where then? They tell you themselves: at the dive restaurant [*la gargote*]!"<sup>109</sup> Benoist investigates a *gargote* on his own one afternoon, employing the sensational tones of a feuilleton in his description: "In the Paris of elegance, one hundred feet from the Madeleine, a boutique painted bright red. First we see a room where a fat man with a hoarse voice and an apoplectic expression reigns over the gleaming zinc counter. At the back, a second room, from which curls acrid smoke, part grease and part pipe fumes, a thick bluish vapor that clings to you as soon as you enter."<sup>110</sup> Benoist climbs to the second floor, where he finds a number of workingwomen ordering their "semblance of a lunch," all with the "same monotone and weary tone": "If they eat, it is either nothing or less than nothing. The worst poison at the *gargote* does not affect the stomach. Here, in this kind of private dining room, there were no masons or carpenters, as there were downstairs. There were only gentlemen, and what gentlemen!"<sup>111</sup> On the very next page Benoist conjures an imagined milliner: "Hunger does not move her and she waits. While waiting, she calculates . . . three hundred francs per month, an apartment and furnishings. Neither perversity nor passion. Business and, in a manner of speaking, an 'installation.' She adds a liaison to the daily routine of her life, without missing a step, like a flower or a feather on a hat."<sup>112</sup> The fall of this fictive hatmaker, Benoist avows, is brought on not by "material misery" but by an attachment to fine things; another workingwoman is represented as an intentional underreater unmoved

<sup>108</sup> Benoist, *Les ouvrières de l'aiguille à Paris*, 118–20.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 123–24.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

by hunger.<sup>113</sup> Later in the same work Benoist places hunger and moral frivolity on a comparable plane of social priority when examining the degradation of the garment trade worker: “One must first combat hunger, then vanity [*la coquetterie*], vanquishing in the *ouvrière* both the human animal and the woman. One must drive Paris out of Paris, deprive the street of all its temptations.”<sup>114</sup> The Parisian street is, for Benoist, the site and origin of these women’s seemingly unavoidable moral ruin, and the lunch hour the critical space in which their (very literary) fall began: “There, in the street, the novel opens that will draw to a close at the wine bar.”<sup>115</sup> Workingwomen’s lunchroom initiatives appear in Benoist’s study as a weapon against sexual and moral temptation, not simply or even primarily as a space for affordable meals. Thus reform-oriented social scientific inquiries, like their pop-cultural contemporaries, seemed unable to avoid imagining garment workers’ lives in melodramatic and romantic literary terms.

Union organizers suggested a different danger for lunching *midinettes*. In the March 22, 1901, meeting of the Commission Départementale du Travail de la Seine, Jusselin reported on the recent strike in the needle trades. The strike had failed in part, she claimed, because certain employers had forced their workers to eat in their workshops (some even providing lunch and a small daily raise for those women who remained) to “prevent workingwomen from coming into contact with strikers.”<sup>116</sup> Indeed, police reports throughout this period indicated that the lunch hour was a key moment for police agents’ surveillance of workingwomen and their possible contacts with labor agitators.<sup>117</sup> During garment trade strikes in 1917, for example, the Préfecture de Police conducted surveillance of restaurants frequented by *midinettes*, using police spies to assess the influence of syndicalizing young men on lunching workingwomen.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 143–44.

<sup>116</sup> “Séance du 22 mars 1901,” in *La question des veillées*, 28.

<sup>117</sup> See, e.g., Report from the Chef du Service des Renseignements Généraux to the Préfet de Police, “Au sujet de lettres anonymes adressées à des ouvrières des Maisons ‘LAROCHÉ’ et ‘MORIN,’” Sept. 29, 1917. Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris, BA 1376, Grèves de l’habillement, 1917 à 1918.

<sup>118</sup> Report from the Ministre de l’Intérieur (Direction de la Sécurité Générale) to the Préfet de Police, Sept. 11, 1917, no. 2432. Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris, BA 1376, Grèves de l’habillement, 1917 à 1918. One report referenced a sixteen-year-old *brodeuse* who claimed to have witnessed young men in the restaurants pressuring workingwomen to strike. A subsequent report indicated that an agent sent to frequent these restaurants was unable to find either this *brodeuse* or any evidence of syndicalizing in the restaurants. Report from the Chef du Service des Renseignements Généraux to the Préfet de Police, “Au sujet d’une certaine effervescence qui se serait manifestée parmi les *midinettes*: Modistes, brodeuses, couturières, travaillant dans le quartier de l’Opéra,” Sept. 28, 1917. Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris, BA 1376, Grèves de l’habillement, 1917 à 1918.

### The *Midinette en Grève*

Despite a profusion of reportage and fiction that denied hunger in the garment trades, female garment workers demanded increased lunch allowances and lunch facilities throughout the various strikes in their trade from 1901 to 1917. The organ of the hatmakers' union, *L'ouvrier chapelier*, published a letter from a workingwoman in the garment trades in 1914 that gave some sense of the appalling lunch conditions in such ateliers—and the way that “lunch reform” was in some cases more concerned with controlling *midinettes* during their breaks than providing a sustaining meal: “The house provides lunch, but in such a deplorable and insufficient fashion that everyone is obliged to buy themselves something else with their own money and at exorbitant prices. . . . Lunch is obligatory for everyone and no one can leave during those hours.”<sup>119</sup> This garment worker counters visions of a gaily undereating *midinette*, placing the blame for light meals squarely on workers' meager salaries rather than girlish lack of appetite or fashionable outlay.

Yet, when workingwomen in the Parisian garment trades took to the streets in these years, even the socialist press seemed to leaven their militancy by recycling the image of the cheerily lunching *midinette*. During the *grève des midinettes* of September 1910, several newspapers described the striking women as carefree lunchers. When protesting women were hemmed in by police agents on September 28, *Humanité* reported: “The *midinettes* then headed out of Paris and organized, in small, smiling groups, light tea parties on the grass of the city walls.”<sup>120</sup> During a significant garment trade strike in May 1917, *Humanité* again tagged the popular trope of the lunching *midinette*:

Noon.

A long cortege advances along the *grands boulevards*. It is the *midinettes* of Paris, with their blouses adorned with lilacs and lilies of the valley. They run, they jump, they sing, they laugh. Yet this is neither the feast of Sainte-Catherine nor the Mi-Carême: it is the strike.<sup>121</sup>

Thus even this socialist newspaper views female labor militancy in the Parisian garment trades through an unmistakably nostalgic lens.

By the end of World War I, as Parisian garment workers joined massive strike mobilizations, labor leaders and socialist journalists

<sup>119</sup> “Chez les modistes,” *L'ouvrier chapelier*, May 1, 1914. The letter was penned, according to the editors, by “une de nos actives camarades du Syndicat” (one of our friends active in the union) at the Maison Lewis.

<sup>120</sup> “La grève de Reaumur: Dinette sur les fortifs, bagarres à Montmartre,” *L'humanité*, Sept. 28, 1910, Archives Nationales, F/7/13740. The same scene was recorded in the *Petite république* that day.

<sup>121</sup> “La grève des midinettes parisiennes,” *L'humanité*, May 16, 1917.

underscored the purportedly novel activism of female garment trade workers by suggesting that the romantic image of the under-eating *midinette* now was outdated (disregarding the significant and well-publicized strikes by female garment workers in the first decade of the century). In May 1917 one left-leaning journalist, covering the garment strikes that spring, noted that the movement seemed to have won over “all the workshops where the fairies of the needle have so long toiled without demanding anything”:

This is no longer the time when Jenny l'Ouvrière and Mimi Pinson contented themselves with a lunch of a cone of fries and a dinner of a cutlet of brie seasoned with a couple of sentimental refrains from the “masterpieces” of Paul Delmet or some other equally mushy novelist.

The war, which has changed many things, modified all of that. And it is not a pity.<sup>122</sup>

This passage does several things at once. It applauds the (seemingly) newfound activism of workingwomen in the garment trades, but it does so by reaffirming a romantic vision of these women as formerly frivolous (reading popular romantic literature, singing, not striking, under-eating). The author uses the literary prototypes of Jenny l'Ouvrière and Mimi Pinson as useful references for readers to situate the current labor unrest in its proper historical context: *midinettes* once were flip-pant and unengaged; since the war, they no longer accept their exploitation. Thus even keen supporters of garment trade activism reified a pop-cultural representation of workingwomen as dainty eaters, sentimental consumers, and quiescent citizens. This is a pointed illustration of the way that the *midinette* archetype could bolster and obscure political action. Here striking garment workers are depicted as heroically overcoming their historical lethargy, giving the 1917 actions increased weight while eclipsing the very real contributions of female labor activists in the decade before and ignoring the role that such images might have played in suppressing garment trade activism in years past.

Mary Lynn Stewart suggests that by the 1930s garment workers “encountered less criticism . . . about inappropriate clothing and sexual behavior” and attributes this shift to “increased labor organization and militancy.” I offer that a pervasive pop-cultural investment in

<sup>122</sup> “Les grèves féminines parisiennes: Et on s'en fout . . . On f'ra la s'maine anglaise,” press clipping, May 24, 1917, Archives Nationales, F/22/170, Grèves, 1908, 1916, 1918. These strikes, which seem to have begun with workers in the Maison Jenny, ultimately included thousands of workingwomen demanding the *semaine anglaise* (a workweek that included an obligatory half-day off on Saturday afternoon, instead of only Sunday off) and a daily allowance to help with the cost-of-living increases of the war years. Paul Delmet (1862–1904) was a composer of popular Parisian songs at the turn of the century.

a nostalgic notion of Parisian garment workers as attractive coquettes was stimulated in the decades straddling the war as a means of managing this increased labor action by Parisian women.<sup>123</sup> Focus on the moral perils of the lunch hour, while grounded in a picturesque fantasy of the *midinette*, may have made female labor militancy more palatable. Indeed, by 1917 many employers were providing midday meals for their employees, indicating some progress in this regard since the first significant *midinette* strikes in 1901.<sup>124</sup> The preceding analysis, however, also suggests that the ubiquitous appearance of an adorably undereating young workingwoman somewhat neutered the perceived threat of working (female) bodies across the political spectrum at precisely a time when visions of proletarian misery were poised to bring significant change in France. What is more, the lunching *midinette* was an especially potent and commercially attractive version of the *femme nouvelle*—a young woman who bolstered the consumer economy with both her labor and her acquisitiveness by a seemingly effortless denial of troubling female hunger and desire.

<sup>123</sup> Stewart, *Dressing Modern Frenchwomen*, 99.

<sup>124</sup> “Les grèves féminines parisiennes.” See also “Les ouvrières en grève,” *L’humanité*, May 24, 1917.