



Mille Pompons! Fantômette, the Famous and Unknown Schoolgirl Superhero of France —Julie M. Still

Introduction

North American girls who grow up reading English-language literature have a number of adventurous young heroines to admire and emulate: Jo March from *Little Women*, Anne Shirley from *Anne of Green Gables*, Nancy Drew from the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories, Hermione Granger from the Harry Potter series, Katniss from *The Hunger Games*, as well as Wonder Woman, Batgirl, and many others. These literary girls and women are bright, talented, and push the envelope of socially acceptable behaviour. They have careers, solve crimes, do magic, and live as full a life as their male literary counterparts. Girls who grow up reading French-language literature do not have as many models to choose from, and many of those are translations from English-language literature. One fictional character, however, is well known in France and is as bright and talented as the many English-language literary girls and women. Her name is Françoise Dupont, alias Fantômette, and she is virtually unknown in the English-speaking world. She could be described as a hybrid between Nancy Drew and Batgirl, only younger than either of these characters. Penny Brown, in *A Critical History of French Children's Literature*, states that “just as comic strips have their superheroes, the star of the modern adventure novel for young readers has to be Fantômette, the schoolgirl supersleuth and righter of wrongs” (276). Olivier Piffault, Thomas Clerc, and Christine Leroy all refer to Fantômette as the first French female superhero.

Fantômette visits exotic places; she crosses the desert, goes beneath the seas, and ventures into space. She flies planes, drives cars, skis, canoes, rides horses and camels, parachutes, speaks several languages and reads lips, knows martial arts, and has skills unusual for a girl her age, or for any one person, to possess. She always prevails over villains, including her primary nemesis, Le Masque d'Argent. She is sometimes in danger, but she never really gets hurt. While she has a safe home to go to and a cat to pet, there are no pesky parents to ruin all her fun. She

can go off to search for treasure or tie up criminals and still has time to do her homework. She has no concerns about money or basic necessities. Who would not want to read about Fantômette?

She initially appeared in novels, followed by a live-action television series, an animated television series, and graphic novels. The books have been translated into several languages, including Spanish, Hebrew, Chinese, Turkish, and Indonesian, but never into English. According to WorldCat, a primarily English-language bibliographic database, very few libraries in the United States or Canada own copies of the Fantômette books. There does not appear to be any previously published scholarly articles focusing on Fantômette in English. It is a mystery how this crime fighting student has escaped the English-language audience.

In this resource, I first present an overview of the character of Fantômette, her creator, and her origins. I also discuss the character's popularity in some Francophone cultures and explore potential explanation as to why the Fantômette's books were translated into some languages, but not English.

Who is Fantômette?

George Chaulet (1931-2012) created Fantômette and wrote all of the novels. The character's name roughly translates into English as "Little Ghost." This could refer to her ability to sneak up on people or her habit of catching criminals and then disappearing, leaving them tied up with a note for the police, signed with an "F," similar to Zorro's signature "Z." The first book in Chaulet's series, *Les Exploits de Fantômette*, was published in 1961 as part of the collection *Bibliothèque Rose*, from Hachette, a French publisher. Fantômette has brown hair and brown eyes. Chaulet provided only a vague description of her costume, specifying only that she wore a mask and a black cape, closed with a golden clip shaped like an "F": "une jeune fille masquée, avec une cape noire fermée par une agrafe d'or en forme de F" (*Exploits* 14). Jeanne Hives drew the initial illustrations, adding details, and later illustrators maintained the costume as she imagined it: a yellow tunic, black tights, a black mask, a black cape with a red lining, a clip in shape of the letter "F," and a black hat, topped with a pompom. Her tunic was initially loose-fitting and ended mid-thigh, with a belt at her waist. Copies published

from 2000 to 2005, however, used cover illustrations based on the animated television series, which featured a yellow romper worn over black leggings, still belted at the waist. In 2006, illustrator Patrice Killoffer drew a yellow crop top and short skirt instead of a tunic and added black gloves. For the ninth printing of the books, in 2010, illustrator Laurence Moraine returned to a tunic but made it clingy, shorter, and belted at the hip, with a hint of a developing womanly figure (see Chaulet, *Secrets* 78-81). The novels do not describe Françoise Dupont's transformation into Fantômette, and the process remains a mystery to readers. In *Les Exploits de Fantômette*, the narrator explains that Fantômette appeared for the first time three months prior to the events in the novel. The narrator also states that she worked primarily at night and alone (14).

Fantômette has few weapons: a dagger at her belt, a small blade, a rope, and a tear gas capsule in her pompom. When not fighting crime, righting wrongs, or solving mysteries, Fantômette is Françoise Dupont, twelve years old in the novels, living outside of Paris in the fictional town called Framboisy. Chaulet intentionally created an imaginary town so that he would not have to consider real events when writing (Chaulet, *Secrets* 65). When Fantômette visits real-life locations, however, Chaulet would carefully research them in order to describe them correctly (Chaulet, *Secrets* 66). Françoise Dupont has two friends, who are unaware of her secret identity: Ficelle, tall and thin, and Boulotte, short and stout. Françoise Dupont has a third friend, Pierre Dupont (unrelated to Françoise), who is a reporter for *Flash France*, a fictional newspaper. He sometimes aids her in her adventures, but he is more a companion than a rescuer. In the books, he smokes a pipe and wears a cap, and is around thirty. She calls him Oeil de Lynx (which literally translates as "lynx eye," and means someone who has a sharp eye or who is very observant). Fantômette also has a black cat named Mephisto and, like most cats, he is primarily interested in his next meal. While one of her teachers, Madame Bigoudi, frequently appears in the novels and other media, her parents never make an appearance, although they are sometimes mentioned in the television series.

There are fifty-two novels in the series, and the last was published in 2009, but none came out between 1987 and 2006. The novels spawned a French-language media empire. First, there was a twenty-one-episode live action television show, *Fantômette*, in 1993, followed

by a twenty-six-episode animated series, also called *Fantômette*, from 1999 to 2000 (both with thirty-minute episodes); four graphic novels or *bandes dessinées* in the 1980s, written by Chaulet himself and illustrated by François Craenhals and Endry; and an encyclopedia, *Les Secrets de Fantômette*, also by Chaulet, providing background on the series and the characters. Chaulet also wrote a novelette about an older, young adult Fantômette, with a romantic angle, which is included in the encyclopedia. In the live-action television show, Fantômette, Ficelle, Boulette, and Pierre Dupont are roughly the same age as in the books. Fantômette has a hiding place with computer equipment and rides a motorized skateboard-like scooter along the sidewalks and streets. Some episodes of the live action and animated series are on YouTube. In the available episodes, she does not engage in dangerous activities and is not in personal or physical danger. Fantômette appears in costume (partial or complete) to look things up on her computer, but does not often confront the villains.

In the animated series, Françoise / Fantômette is presented as an older teen, still wearing a school uniform but able to ride a motorcycle. She lives with Ficelle, Boulette, and their mother. Pierre Dupont, the reporter, is renamed Alexandre, and is probably in his early or mid-twenties. He is Ficelle and Boulette's brother, but he does not live with them. Françoise has blue eyes and she wears a short, brown wig, which she takes it off to reveal her long darker brown / black hair when she puts on her Fantômette costume. She has a secret hideaway in the house, opened by pulling on a book on a bookshelf. She has computers and other technical equipment in her hideout, where she also keeps her costume. In both series Oeil de Lynx knows her identity, but Ficelle and Boulette do not.

Georges Chaulet

Fantômette was not the first character created by George Chaulet. According to Michèle Piquard, Chaulet grew up reading comics like *Les Pied-Nickelés*, *Zig et Puce*, *Bibi Fricotin*, and *Pim Pam Poum* (256). Chaulet initially approached the publisher Hachette with *Les Quatres As* (The Four Aces), a series about four friends going on adventures. Hachette, however, declined and the novels came out through another publisher. There were six novels in that series, published from 1957 to 1962. The series then shifted to *bande dessinée*, illustrated by

François Craenhals. Chaulet later proposed the Fantômette series to Hachette. This time, his idea was accepted. There is some discrepancy in sources over the conditions of publication. In an interview with Viviane Ezratty, Chaulet says that Hachette gave him freedom to write as he wished. According to Raymond Perrin, however, Chaulet noted that Louis Mirman, director of Hachette's *Bibliothèque Rose* collection, required the Fantômette books not involve politics, religion, or sex and not include cursing (39). Sophie Heywood notes that Chaulet listed further conditions: "no murders, no blood, and the villains must speak in a refined language without cursing" ("Pippi" 3). This may be why Fantômette's catchphrase is "Mille pompons!" Sylvie Bédard suggested there are other rules in the series: no parents, no financial problems, and the characters should not age or change notably from one novel to the next (129-30). Children were also to show respect for authority and be presented within a social hierarchy (Heywood, "Pippi" 5), which may account for the presence of the reporter, to show an authoritative adult. Chaulet notes that it took him three years to find his rhythm and set the style for the series.

Origin of Series

Hachette's publications for children were typically placed in one of two collections: *Bibliothèque Rose* and *Bibliothèque Verte*, each name referring to the colour of the book covers. A collection in this sense is a group of books with some aspect of uniform appearance (for example size, spine colour or cover design) and some similarity in content. *Bibliothèque Rose* started in the mid-1800s, whereas *Bibliothèque Verte* began when Hachette won the rights to republish the works of Jules Verne. They were not based on the gender of the reader but on the general age level. *Bibliothèque Rose* books were aimed at younger readers (ages 6 to 11), while *Bibliothèque Verte* titles were aimed at young teens (10 to 14). In the mid-1960s, Hachette's combined children's collections were producing one million volumes per month (Heywood, "Modernising").

Series novels for young readers (in the *Bibliothèque* collections) were primarily imports. The Stratemeyer Syndicate titles, such as Nancy Drew, were acquired by Hachette in 1955 and the Nancy Drew books were translated and launched in France, as were translations of series books by English author Enid Blyton (Piquard 218). The translated Nancy Drew series

was successful in France. Nancy was renamed Alice Roy and some details of her family history were altered to give her some French origins and connections (see Gregg). Peter Soderbergh notes that “in the 1970s Nancy Drew was the most popular juvenile book in France” (qtd. in Gregg 49). The Pippi Longstocking books (*Pippi Långstrump* in the original Swedish) were similarly altered in translation, with Pippi being renamed Fifi Brindacier. The Famous Five series by British author Enid Blyton, also translated into French, was very popular with young French readers. The popularity of these series in England and the United States might have inspired Chaulet to write the Fantômette books. Chaulet himself mentioned the *Arsène Lupin* books were an influence (Chaulet, *Secrets* 52), although there are also some similarities between Chaulet’s work and existing children’s detective series at the time.

The publisher, Hachette, was increasing the number of original titles instead of translating novels from other countries. In the 1940s only 10 percent of the titles in the *Bibliothèque Rose* were translations. By the end of the 1950s, this had risen to 50 percent (Heywood, “Pippi” 3). Fantômette was not the only series written in French at that time. Georges-Gustave Toudouze wrote books about five young women on a yacht travelling to exotic and exciting locations; each book title began with the phrase, “*cinq jeunes filles.*” Paul-Jacques Bonzon wrote a series, *Les six compagnons*, for young readers about the adventures of five boys and a girl. The first book in this series was published in 1961. Georges Bayard also wrote series such as *Michel* for Hachette starting in the late 1950s. While his later series included books focused on female characters, most of his earlier works were aimed at boys. Chaulet notes that by creating a female character he would not be able to simply write about his own life and change the names; his heroine would have her own life and do things he could not have done. He argued that a female character having adventures similar to the ones boys had in novels and *bande dessinée* would be more interesting. He also wanted to create a female character who did more than wait for Prince Charming to rescue her and propose to her (Chaulet, *Secrets* 53).

While *bandes dessinées* were popular among young readers in France during the 1950s and 1960s, they were primarily aimed at a male audience. As Laurence Grove notes, “As an outlet for feminism expression, or even expression by women, *bande dessinée* is conspicuous by its absence” (265). There were some female characters in *bandes dessinées*. The website

Les héroïnes de BD provides basic information on several of them. Some, like the young Bécassine, showcased storylines involving more slapstick humour than drama. Others, like Sophie, Yoko Tsuno, and Natacha, were adults with more mature storylines. Barbarella appeared around the same time as the first Fantômette novel, but that character was highly sexualized and probably not aimed at young girls. Few *bandes dessinées* had young female characters in adventure stories.

Popularity

The Fantômette novels have gone through nine printings with six different cover illustrations. Piquard notes that in 1980, six million copies of Fantômette novels were sold (219), and the series averaged sales of 450,000 copies per year (256). The novels have not been out of print since their original publication. Consistent sales have led to a large fan base. At a 2012 conference on contemporary literature, author Thomas Clerc asked rhetorically who in his generation grew up without reading Fantômette. In her narrative on books that inspire young women, Régine Grosos includes Fantômette. She notes that in these books the heroines were as brave as boys (45). Bédard chose Fantômette as the text for her linguistic studies because the books had such an impact on her as a girl (128). It is in literature, perhaps, that the character left the greatest mark. Noted author and scholar of French children's literature Marie-Aude Murail compiled a book, *Amour d'enfance: Des auteurs jeunesse d'aujourd'hui racontent le livre qui a marqué leur enfance*, on the prominent childhood influences of famous novelists; Fantômette is one of the more frequent influences listed.

Readers throughout the Francophone world followed her exploits. Senegalese author Ndèye Fatou Kane lists the young crime fighter among her early literary influences (Ndao). Moroccan American novelist Laila Lalami said she read the books as a child ("Laila Lalami"). Congolese artist Caroline Kiminou wrote a blog post about Fantômette as one of her muses. Zeina Saleh Kayali, who is in charge of the mission to the Permanent Delegation of Lebanon to UNESCO, named Fantômette and Robin Hood as her favourite fictional heroes ("Questionnaire"). Like Nancy Drew, Fantômette is so enmeshed into the lives of young

women that she is a universal icon. Grosos, at one point, mentions Françoise, assuming that the reader would understand the reference to Fantômette's alter ego.

While character-based toys and games are not as prevalent in France as in the United States, there is some Fantômette-based merchandise (costumes, jewelry) and instructions for homemade crafts and costumes available. There are Fantômette cosplayers and online photos of women dressing as Fantômette at comic cons and other public events around the world (see Baudoux, for example).

Fantômette is a pervasive character in French literature and culture. As noted above, she is frequently mentioned as a role model for women. She also, however, appealed to male readers. Novelist Thomas Clerc said in 2012 that Fantômette was an icon for boys and girls. Chaulet himself estimated that roughly 25 percent of his readers were male (Chaulet, *Secrets* 55). Max Butlen quotes Chaulet as saying that, while the books were aimed at girls, they were above all about good and evil (46). This broader theme made them accessible to boys, even though they were written primarily for a female audience. Brown calls them "escapist fantasies" but notes that they "offer narratives of empowerment to young female readers accustomed to the homosocial world of the classic adventure story" (278). Fantômette is one of the few female characters who looks out for herself and overcomes not only adversity but the bad guys, sometimes physically.

Comparison to Nancy Drew and Batgirl

Even if Fantômette is fairly unique as a literary character, it is possible to draw comparisons to other young women in popular culture. While some writers have compared Fantômette to Wonder Woman (Brown 276-77; Leroy), she may have more in common with Batgirl. Although both Fantômette and Wonder Woman have secret identities and some interesting weapons and tools, Wonder Woman has some superpowers while Batgirl is simply very smart and athletic. Françoise / Fantômette is certainly an extraordinary girl, but she does not have superpowers. As Brown notes, "Fantômette has no supernatural powers, but depends upon her endless reserve of energy and staying power, sharp intelligence, amazing powers of deduction, and physical agility" (277). Like Batgirl, Fantômette has

a secret identity, with a superhero name and a costume, a utility belt, and a cape. It is also interesting to note that both characters appeared in print at the same time. The first Fantômette novel was published in 1961, whereas Batgirl made her first appearance in April 1961 in *Batman* #139.

Fantômette also shares characteristics with Nancy Drew. Like her, she has two female friends, one tall, thin, and stylish, the other short and plump. Nancy's friends help her solve mysteries, whereas Fantômette's friends are primarily Françoise Dupont's friends and schoolmates. Both sometimes have a male assistant: Nancy Drew has Ned Nickerson and her father; Fantômette has Pierre Dupont. Both use deductive reasoning and are very observant and exceptionally skilled and talented. Claudine Dannequin notes that many of the famous detectives, such as Sherlock Holmes and James Bond, work alone; she includes Fantômette and Nancy Drew in this list, contrasting them with other characters, including Blyton's Famous Five series. While they have healthy social lives and friends, their detective and crime-fighting work is usually done alone, requiring a significant amount of independence and resourcefulness. Fantômette, in the original novels at least, is considerably younger than Batgirl, Wonder Woman, and Nancy Drew.

Identity

A number of writers have commented on the dual identities of Fantômette / Françoise. In fact, this seems to have fascinated French scholars more than any characteristic other than her gender, for which the character is viewed as groundbreaking. Brown mentions the duality and notes that, unlike Superman and Wonder Woman, her transformation is never seen or described (277). It was not simply the changing from one to the other; it was the very act of having a second identity. Raymond Perrin comments on the boldness of wearing a mask (51). Masked superheroes were not new, but a young girl wearing a mask and fighting crime was. Grosos notes the juxtaposition between everyday Françoise and Fantômette the masked female crime fighter (44). Chaulet himself says he created a character with a double life, like Zorro, because it was more exciting (*Secrets* 53). Pascale Molinier sees Fantômette on a continuum between Enid Blyton's characters and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, again noting

her secret identity. However, Buffy did not wear a costume or disguise herself when battling bad guys. Fantômette had a crime-fighting uniform, just as she had a school uniform. Clerc comments that she is twofold, alone yet two. He later notes that after defeating the forces of evil, she returns to being an ordinary girl. Marie-Hélène Bauer also writes on the double life, schoolgirl by day, crimefighter by night, and the ordinariness of her surname, Dupont, which is similar to Smith or Jones in North America, in contrast to the excitement and daring of her nighttime vigilante persona. Bédard comments on this as well, but focuses on her first name, Françoise, a common French name. Leroy posits that it is because Fantômette is female that she must wear a disguise—that her emancipated femininity must be hidden and is only possible behind a mask. In a way, losing her individual identity as a young girl allows her to be more powerful as a masked crime fighter. Thus, the juxtaposition of the ordinary with the extraordinary fascinates both scholars and readers. The contrast between the ordinary schoolgirl with a plain name and the mysterious (masked) independent persona, able to confound and capture adult men with evil in their hearts, is compelling. Where is the crime fighter when the schoolgirl is in class or playing with her friends? Where is the innocent schoolgirl when the crime fighter is outsmarting and outmaneuvering those devoted to doing wrong? Both exist in the same person. The unseen transformation leaves the distinction to our imagination. How does Françoise make the mental shift between the two? We are left to wonder whether all schoolgirls harbour such unseen skills. Schoolgirl readers are given the possibility of becoming Fantômette themselves. This unexplained dual existence is part of the character's appeal and makes her all the more intriguing.

Françoise / Fantômette's skin tone is another important aspect of her identity. While many of the covers of the novels present her as a pale rosy-cheeked young girl, Chaulet's own drawings, and those of some other illustrators, such as Patrice Killoffer and Laurence Moraine, show her complexion as notably darker than that of Ficelle and Boulette. While Killoffer and Moraine illustrated editions published in the 2000s, Chaulet's images span the entire life of the character; they are not revisions made in recent years, when greater emphasis has been placed on multiculturalism. The diversity in the character's skin tones is very evident in the *Les Secrets de Fantômette*. Chaulet's illustrations opposite the avant-propos, and on pages 42-43,

48, 65, and 149 show Fantômette with a darker skin tone than either Chaulet (standing next to a life-size copy of his drawing) or other characters in the novels. Whether he intended to depict Fantômette as a person of colour is unknown, though his drawings could be interpreted that way. The section of *Les Secrets* showing covers of the novels demonstrates a clear contrast in skin tones, depending on who drew the cover illustrations, especially on pages 100-101, 142-43, and 108-109. In some of the drawings, she has an almost Mediterranean or African appearance, or certainly mixed ancestry. That Fantômette might have been the earliest Afro-European masked crime fighter is an astonishing idea, and one that needs further research.

Translations

One question we are left with is, why, given her importance in France and how widely the novels were translated into other languages, were the books not translated into English? Many other well-known characters and stories originally published in French have been translated: the adventures of the Smurfs (a translation of the *Schtroumpfs*), Tintin, Astérix, and Valerian and Laureline, for example. The works of Jules Verne were also translated. Why not Fantômette? The novels were translated into other languages. Why not English?

I would argue that her independence, given her young age, was a factor. She was out late into the night pursuing criminals. In contrast, Nancy Drew was sixteen or eighteen, depending on the edition, and she spoke regularly with her father and the housekeeper who served as a surrogate mother. Batgirl was an adult. Swedish character Pippi Longstocking was a young girl, but she had superhuman strength and lived an eccentric lifestyle. Fantômette was not quite a teenager and acting on her own, only keeping in touch with an unrelated adult male, reporter Pierre Dupont, which might have given rise to concerns about child abuse. Perhaps it was Fantômette's age and the dangerous situations she found herself in that prevented her from crossing the Channel and the Atlantic, although a number of young female characters in English-language literature have found themselves in physical danger or in peril, such as the Disney princesses and the characters in the *Series of Unfortunate Events* books. Kitty Pryde was introduced to the X-Men comic book series in the late 1970s and she was just a few years older than Françoise Dupont at the time, but she had superpowers and was part of a crime-

fighting group. While these titles do show a precedent for English-language works showing young girls in danger, they were not always seeking it out or doing so alone. It could be that Hachette was more focused on translating English works into French than in marketing English translations of their own works abroad, although, again, the *Fantômette* books have been translated into several other languages.

Perhaps there are legal, copyright, or contractual issues involved, although Hachette has an American subsidiary, and other titles are translated into English and sold in the United States. It is more likely that no English-language publishers wanted to have the translations done. American fiction series aimed at children sold well, but schools and libraries had mixed feelings about buying fiction series for young readers (see Romalov; Wertheimer and Sands). Even Isabelle Jan, whose book on French children's literature was translated into English, comments on the poor quality of many French detective series written for children. She states that many of them were "unexciting" and "a reversion to the most elementary form of compensatory tale" (134). She includes the *Fantômette* books in this grouping. Jan also refers to characters who appear to be outlaws while fighting for justice as "not wholly acceptable to children" (132). Publishers were interested in translating other types of French literature. Gisèle Sapiro's research refers to "large conglomerates who prefer to reprint classics, university presses engaged in the canonization of modern French literature, and small independent publishers investing in living writers" (320). The smaller publishers focus on literary writers, which would not include children's detective series books. Thus, there did not appear to be an appetite in the publishing or library communities for translating children's detective series into English.

The timing may also have been off. English translations of other French works began to appear just as the *Fantômette* series was taking a hiatus or ending altogether. The *Exploits of Arsène Lupin* by Maurice LeBlanc was not translated into English until 1977. Cinebook started publishing English versions of some of the *Valerian and Laureline* books, by Pierre Christin and artist Jean-Claude Mézières, in 2011. *Tintin au Congo* by Hergé was not translated into English until 2005, and the racial images and representations in the book caused an uproar (Vaclavik). These works, however, did not feature pre-teen girls. It may also be that the cultural and political timing was off. The *Fantômette* books were being translated into Spanish and

Indonesian in the mid-1980s. Why not translate them into English then? Around the same time, from early 1980s to early 1990s, the English-speaking world was rocked by news coverage of child predation trials. The McMartin Preschool (United States), Christchurch Civic Creche (New Zealand), and Martensville (Canada) trials, among others, all happened within a ten-year period and played into the “stranger danger” fears that had been growing since the 1970s. Introducing the stories of a pre-teen girl who went out at night seeking to engage with criminals, sometimes accompanied by an unrelated adult man, would not have been well received. It might be pointed out that more recent French works for younger readers with female leads, such as *Les Sisters* and *Les SuperSisters* by Christophe Cazanove and William Maury have been translated into English by Papercutz. However, these characters are not schoolgirls by day, superheroes by night. The Fantômette books could seem quaint by modern standards: she did not have computers or cell phones and contemporary young readers might have difficulty relating to her. For whatever reason, legal, cultural, or something else, the moment seems to have passed, and it is unlikely that publishers would be willing to translate the works now.

The novels, however, could be used as a teaching tool in French classes as *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry often is. Yet few American libraries own copies of Chaulet’s books, as demonstrated by searching bibliographic databases such as WorldCat. Even universities with large French departments and programs own few, if any, of the books. Some Canadian libraries own copies, but even there the holdings are sparse. A library in China owns more of the books than any one library in North America. Perhaps they are simply not catalogued or the holdings are not included in the national and international bibliographic databases. Regardless, here again, in places where one might expect to find such works, their absence is remarkable. New and used copies are available from online retailers, including French Amazon, but finding enough for a class to use might prove difficult. The lack of availability would make the novels, in full or in excerpted form, difficult to assign as class reading.

Conclusion

Fantômette played (and continues to play) an important role in French culture. She was a role model for generations of girls and young women, being an action heroine as well as a

student and a friend. She did normal girl things and also solved crimes. The duality of her existence meant that she kept the two roles separate. While many American superheroes have two identities out of fear or a need for safety, Fantômette seems to do so out of choice, to create another existence, allowing her to have adventures and still maintain an average schoolgirl life. Perhaps it was her way of being a powerful girl without offending social mores. Her mask and secret identity allowed Fantômette to be ferocious and respected, in a way that a girl might not be otherwise.

Fantômette has never been introduced to an English-language audience. Given the sparsity of copies in North American libraries, interested parties are dependent on the used copies available through English-language online booksellers. The window for translating the books seems to have closed. Contemporary American parents, all too aware of the dangers of modern life, are unlikely to want to promote the idea of a young girl spending time with an unrelated adult man and going off on a motorbike fighting adult criminals. Thus, English-speaking readers, even those who are learning French, are unlikely to read about the exploits of the student by day, masked crime fighter by night, and all of her adventures. *Mille pompons* indeed!

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this paper were presented in 2015 at two conferences: the annual meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Popular and American Culture Association in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Pippi to Ripley: Gender and Sexualities in Science Fiction, Fantasy and Comics in Ithaca, NY. Comments at those conferences were very helpful in crafting this article, as were comments from the editor and reviewers of this journal. I am especially grateful to Dr. Alyssa Belanger for introducing me to Fantômette.

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