

# Destabilizing the Nineteenth-Century Maidservant Revolt Narrative: Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce* (2016)

JESSICA RUSHTON

DURHAM UNIVERSITY

*Abstract.* This paper argues that Leïla Slimani's novel, *Chanson douce* (2016), recontextualizes and renews a nineteenth-century French discourse surrounding the literary figure of the feared and rebellious maidservant through the representation of her twenty-first-century avatar: the nanny. By analysing how Slimani's nanny figure echoes the strategies of revolt used by vengeful maidservant protagonists in nineteenth-century novels, notably Mirbeau's *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (1900), I propose that *Chanson douce* transforms a discourse that characterizes a genre of nineteenth-century French literature: *le roman de la servante* (the servant novel). Writers of this genre posit a maidservant protagonist who revolts, seeks revenge and often has a hidden, double life. Fictions in this genre, as shown through Mirbeau's novel, act as performative texts: they embody and exacerbate the century's discourse around the feared, rebellious maidservant. By applying Georges Didi-Huberman's four categories of revolt to Slimani's protagonist, I investigate how the strategies of revolt implemented by dubious maidservants in nineteenth-century texts, are turned, in the twenty-first century, against the modern employer.

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'On la regarde et on ne la voit pas.  
Elle est une présence intime mais jamais familière.'<sup>1</sup>

In Leïla Slimani's Goncourt Prize winning novel, *Chanson douce* (2016), the nanny protagonist, Louise, is paradoxically an intimate stranger, never truly integrating into the family for whom she works. While Louise's role inherently connects her to the private sphere of the home, the nanny is perceived neither as a family member nor as a close friend: '[c]'est notre employée, pas notre amie.'<sup>2</sup> *Chanson douce* generates a sense of uneasiness about a stranger whose role providing personal services in the home allows her to infiltrate the private lives

<sup>1</sup> Leïla Slimani, *Chanson douce* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016), p. 66. 'You look at her and you do not see her. Her presence is intimate but never familiar.', Leïla Slimani, *Lullaby*, trans. by Sam Taylor (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198. 'She's our employee not our friend.', *Lullaby*, p. 165.

of a family. This anxiety around an employee's proximity to the home echoes a commonplace perception of the maidservant in the nineteenth century. The domestic servant likewise occupied an uncertain social space, neither a member of the bourgeois household nor a part of the working class. One may think of Célestine's definition of a servant in Mirbeau's *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (1900): 'un monstrueux hybride humain... Il n'est plus du peuple, d'où il sort; il n'est pas, non plus, de la bourgeoisie où il vit et où il tend...'<sup>3</sup> The bourgeois family saw this ill-defined figure as a potential threat to their lives; she was a feared presence from which they wished to distance themselves.<sup>4</sup> Yet the maidservant was a necessary evil: she had access to the most private details of her masters' and mistresses' lives but she was fundamental to the running of an efficient household and a reflection of its wealth and status.<sup>5</sup> This essential yet feared figure emerges as a new, disobedient maidservant protagonist in nineteenth-century literature, consequently giving rise to a literary genre that I label *le roman de la servante* (the servant novel). These works posit a maidservant protagonist who revolts, seeks revenge and often conceals a hidden, double life.<sup>6</sup> By analysing Slimani's nanny figure alongside Mirbeau's representation of Célestine, a nineteenth-century vengeful maidservant in *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*, this essay demonstrates how *Chanson douce* constitutes a twenty-first century renewal of this genre; Louise is a twenty-first-century avatar of the literary figure of the rebellious maidservant.

I analyse how *Chanson douce* subverts and transforms a nineteenth-century discourse of fear surrounding the servant figure who characterized *le roman de la servante*. Like the *bonne à tout faire* (the maid of all work), whose role in the household was crucial to its efficient and clean appearance, Louise becomes indispensable to the Massé family if they are to live their lives freely. She voluntarily goes beyond her role as a nanny, gradually taking on multiple duties in their household: cleaning, cooking, reorganizing the family's belongings, mending their clothes, attending parents' evenings and dance recitals. Slowly, Louise infiltrates the household, even sleeping at their apartment twice a week or more. The family gradually feels suffocated by this intense contact with their nanny, consequently distancing themselves from her. Louise revolts against this treatment using various strategies before retaliating in the worst possible way: murdering the children whom she was looking after. I here explore how

<sup>3</sup> Octave Mirbeau, *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p. 203. '[A] monstrous, hybrid human... it is no longer a part of the people from whom it has left; neither is it a part of the bourgeoisie, among whom it lives and to whom it tends.' All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

<sup>4</sup> See Sarah Maza, *Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century France: The Uses of Loyalty* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 314, 317.

<sup>5</sup> See Anne Martin-Fugier, *La Place des bonnes: la domesticité féminine en 1900* (Paris: Grasset, 1979), p. 72 for an explanation of how the number of servants in a nineteenth-century household determines its categorization.

<sup>6</sup> My definition of this genre includes, yet is not limited to, Balzac, *La Cousine Bette* (1846); Stendhal, *Mina de Vanghel* (1853 [1829–1830]) and *Lamiel* (1839–42); The Goncourt brothers, *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865); Maupassant, *Chambre 11* (1884); and Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Le Bonheur dans le crime* (1871).

Slimani's nanny echoes certain strategies of revolt used by Mirbeau's vengeful maidservant protagonist, which I read through the theory of revolt provided in Georges Didi-Huberman's recent study, *Désirer désobéir: Ce qui nous soulève, I* (2019). In particular, I apply his four categories of *soulèvement* (uprising): 'gestuel, verbal, psychique ou atmosphérique':<sup>7</sup> '[ne] se soulève-t-on pas avec des pensées, des paroles, des émotions, des gestualités, des formes et des actions [...] ?'.<sup>8</sup> I argue that Louise's use of these different *soulèvements* ultimately transcends that of the nineteenth-century literary maidservant; the nanny's revenge eventually destroys the middle-class family model.

### Reappropriating the Rebellious Maidservant Discourse: The Nineteenth-Century *Roman de la Servante* in the Twenty-First Century

The distrust evoked by the nanny figure in *Chanson douce* echoes similar anxieties embedded in nineteenth-century discourses surrounding the maidservant. The late eighteenth century saw a reorientation of the notions of the family that had implications for how nineteenth-century society viewed its servants. Cissie Fairchild's study of domesticity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries notes that, from 1750 to 1789, 'the traditional patriarchal family was replaced by a more modern, more affectionate, more egalitarian, and more child-centred one'.<sup>9</sup> This consequently meant that servants were expelled from the private sphere of the family as potentially dangerous strangers.<sup>10</sup> As Jacqueline Martin-Huan points out, this was not an issue for the nobles of the Old Regime, who felt a natural distance between themselves and the other classes:

La distance naturelle, que lui conférait sa naissance, permettait au noble d'être familier avec ses gens. Le maître nouveau riche craint le peuple; il sait que seul l'en sépare l'argent qu'il vient d'amasser, et que, par roublardise ou filouterie, on pourrait le lui enlever. [...] Il devient soupçonneux.<sup>11</sup>

This bourgeois anxiety affected how these new masters and mistresses perceived their servants. Their anxious need for dominance came alongside growing concerns about the servant's proximity to the family; servants were a potential threat to class stability, outsiders with the potential to change the status quo.

<sup>7</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Désirer désobéir: Ce qui nous soulève, I* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2019), p. 31. 'Gestural, verbal, psychological or atmospheric.'

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305. 'Do we not uprise with thoughts, words, emotions, gestures, forms and actions?'

<sup>9</sup> Cissie Fairchild, *Domestic Enemies: Servants and Their Masters in Old Regime France* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Jacqueline Martin-Huan, *La Longue Marche des domestiques en France du XIXe siècle à nos jours* (Nantes: Opéra, 1997), p. 26. 'A natural sense of distance, bestowed upon a noble from birth, allowed him to be familiar with his servants. The nouveau riche master fears the people; he knows that it is only his recently obtained wealth that separates him from the lower classes, and that one could take it all away from him by slyness or fraud. [...] He becomes suspicious.'

The class war produced by the French Revolution only exacerbated these fears surrounding the servant, introducing and complicating the idea of possible equality between master and servants.<sup>12</sup> In the nineteenth-century imagination, masters were fearful of the maidservant as a purveyor of putridity and contamination who could potentially steal from them or kill them in their sleep.<sup>13</sup> These insecurities added to the bourgeois desire to distance themselves from their servants.<sup>14</sup> Mirbeau's fictional maidservant, Célestine, explicitly describes this distrust: 'nous avons la conscience des suspicions blessantes qui nous accompagnent partout', with anxious masters and mistresses locking doors and drawers, marking bottles and counting food supplies to prevent the maidservant from stealing.<sup>15</sup> According to Célestine, this mistrust emerged immediately after her second day at work: Madame had 'des yeux d'avare, pleins de soupçons aigus et d'enquêtes policières...'.<sup>16</sup> Célestine is thus one example of how bourgeois suspicions about servants were embodied by the new protagonist of an emerging nineteenth-century genre: *le roman de la servante*.<sup>17</sup> These maidservant protagonists disrupt the bourgeois order around them, seeking to assert their autonomy through different strategies of revolt.

Concerns about servant corruption also related to the maidservants who took care of the children.<sup>18</sup> As Andrew J. Counter points out, the nineteenth century saw servants as scapegoats for vice in the bourgeois home, blaming them for contaminating bourgeois children with *mauvaises habitudes* (bad habits/examples), such as sexual knowledge.<sup>19</sup> For her part, Fairchild argues that certain servants also took 'psychic revenge for the mistreatment they themselves had experienced' by abusing the household's children.<sup>20</sup> This violence was committed with the understanding that, unlike the masters and mistresses,

<sup>12</sup> Fairchild, p. 242.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Yee, *The Colonial Comedy: Imperialism in the French Realist Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp.145–46 makes a similar point about the nineteenth-century maidservant being the 'disturbing meeting point of the bourgeoisie' with dirt and sexual debauchery. This is also observed in the analysis of nurses, nannies, governesses, prostitutes and servants in Victorian England by Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 48. See also Susan Yates, *Maid and Mistress: Feminine Solidarity and Class Difference in Five Nineteenth-Century French Texts* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1991), pp. 74–76.

<sup>14</sup> See Fairchild, pp. 38–60 for the methods that masters and mistresses used in order to keep servants at distance.

<sup>15</sup> Mirbeau, pp. 315–16. '[W]e are aware of the hurtful suspicions that follow us everywhere'.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45. '[O]f a miser, full of bitter suspicions and police enquiries.'

<sup>17</sup> Emily Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 196 also recognizes that there has been a creation of an "anti-maid's discourse," set up by, among others, Zola, Maupassant and Mirbeau as an antidote to the saccharine, orthodox model' of the loyal maidservant. Examples of this loyal servant are: Balzac, *Pierrette* (1840); George Sand, *Jeanne* (1844); Lamartine, *Geneviève: Histoire d'une servante* (1851), an early inspiration for Flaubert's *Un cœur simple* (1877) and Maupassant, *Une vie* (1883).

<sup>18</sup> For example: *la bonne d'enfant* (nanny), *la nourrice* (wet nurse), *la gouvernante* (governess), *l'institutrice* (teacher) and *la bonne à toute faire* (maid of all work).

<sup>19</sup> See Andrew J. Counter, 'Bad Examples: Children, Servants, and Masturbation in Nineteenth-Century France', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 22. 3. (2013), 403–25.

<sup>20</sup> Fairchild, pp. 207–08.

children would be too weak to fight back. This abuse included violence and neglect through starvation.<sup>21</sup> Nineteenth-century judicial documents also indicate that female servants were the most prominent social group found to have committed infanticide, a fact that frightened masters and mistresses when considering the safety of their children.<sup>22</sup> Unsurprisingly, therefore, maidservants are featured committing infanticide in a number of works of *le roman de la servante*.<sup>23</sup> By centring the narrative on a killer nanny protagonist who commits various *soulèvements* against her employers and their children, Slimani recontextualizes and updates these fears of a dangerous servant figure in the twenty-first century. With its detailed representation of Louise's absurd methods of rebellion, the narrative centres on the maidservant avatar's psychotic behaviour and violence. The reader is left feeling uncomfortable, with Louise's *soulèvements* acting as a marker of her unstable mind.

### The Nanny Revolt: Strategies of *Soulèvement*

Like the nineteenth-century maidservant who relied on her masters and mistresses for her welfare (income, food, water, clothing and shelter), Louise lacks education, money and family support and is therefore dependent on her employers.<sup>24</sup> She relies on the Massés for her livelihood, as well as their home for her physical and mental wellbeing. She secretly showers in their home when her shower is broken, and invades the Massés' apartment when they are on holiday in order to feel closer to them. Louise's job thus provides her with a nest; her various strategies of revolt provide her with a means to defy this subordinate situation and gain a sense of power. The nanny's inferiority in terms of her class and subordinate role in the employer-employee relationship paradoxically provides her with the strength she requires to revolt. This corresponds with Didi-Huberman's theory that

lorsqu'il se soulève (ou même: pour qu'il se soulève), un peuple part toujours d'une situation d'*impouvoir*. Se soulever serait alors le geste par lequel les sujets de l'*impouvoir* font advenir en eux — ou survenir, ou revenir — quelque chose comme une *puissance* fondamentale.<sup>25</sup>

This paradox of Louise's power originating from her state of subordination recalls the 1933 case of the Papin sisters, two maidservants who murdered their employers. It is arguably Louise's oppressed existence as a servant, similar to that of the Papin sisters, that causes her heightened emotions of hostility and

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> See Apter, p. 198 and McBride, p. 99.

<sup>23</sup> See Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Une histoire sans nom* (1882); Zola, *Pot-Bouille* (1882); Maupassant, *La Mère aux monstres* (1883) and *Rosalie Prudent* (1886).

<sup>24</sup> See Maza, pp. 9–10 and Fairchilds, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Didi-Huberman, p. 48. '[W]hen a nation rises up, (or even: in order for it to rise up), it always starts from a state of powerlessness. To rise up therefore would be an interior gesture by which powerless subjects bring about — or arise, or amount to — something of a fundamental power.'

bitterness taking the form of different *soulèvements*. The Papin Sisters' murders highlighted the horror behind a maid's capacity to rise up, and the case had broad cultural resonance across French literature and cinema.<sup>26</sup> These texts and films seem to have paved the way for the disturbing narrative and extreme violence found in *Chanson douce*. Slimani moves beyond *le roman de la servante* and the Papin-sister-inspired text/film, transforming the murderous servant in the bourgeoisie home into a twenty-first-century nanny in a *bobo* (bourgeois bohème/boho) apartment. Her unsettling descriptions of Louise's psychological state modernizes the fears central to *le roman de la servante*.

Louise's manipulation of the household's atmosphere through her facial expressions and silence allows the nanny to revolt against her situation of powerlessness. She alters the safe setting of the home into one of terror. Louise demonstrates Didi-Huberman's fourth category of revolt, atmospheric:

Le regard noir de Louise était traversé par un orage. Ce soir-là, la nounou est partie sans dire au revoir aux enfants. Comme un fantôme, monstrueusement discrète, elle a claqué la porte [...].<sup>27</sup>

As Louise's construction of her identity depends on her job, any threat or insult to that position causes her to revolt. Her glare fills the mother, Myriam, with guilt and dread, unable to understand the sudden change in atmosphere as Louise avoids contact with her. Mirbeau likewise describes the ghost-like presence of Célestine: 'je m'habitue à glisser mes pas, à "marcher en l'air" [...] je me fais, à moi-même, l'effet d'un spectre, d'un revenant'.<sup>28</sup> Represented as ghosts, Louise and Célestine embody the spectre's powerful capacity to slip in and out of the home without a trace. Their invisibility intensifies the fears around the servant and the nanny as strangers who threaten to disturb and derail the safe space, or atmosphere, of the home. Célestine's masters and mistresses intensify their maidservant's silence by forbidding her to speak to them. Mirbeau describes how this silence personally affects the maidservant: '[c]e qui est terrible dans cette maison, c'est son silence. Je ne peux m'y faire...'.<sup>29</sup> Like her nineteenth-century counterpart, Louise is gradually silenced by the Massés; they avoid all communication with their nanny, separating themselves from their employee. Yet Louise's dreaded silent presence seems to have contaminated the entire apartment: '[l]es silences et les malentendus ont tout infecté. Dans l'appartement, l'atmosphère est plus lourde'.<sup>30</sup> This change in atmosphere is heightened by both the actions of the nanny and her employers.

<sup>26</sup> See Rachel Edwards and Keith Reader, *The Papin Sisters*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> Slimani, p. 138. 'A storm flickered behind Louise's dark glare. That evening the nanny left without saying goodbye to the children. Like a ghost, monstrously discreet, she banged the door shut behind her [...]', *Lullaby*, p. 110.

<sup>28</sup> Mirbeau, p. 204. 'I am used to gliding as I walk, "walking on air", I feel like a ghost, a spectre.'

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 'What is awful in this house is the silence. I can't get used to it.'

<sup>30</sup> Slimani, p. 198. 'The silences and misunderstandings have infected everything. In the apartment, the atmosphere grows heavier.', *Lullaby*, p. 165.

Myriam ‘lui parle du bout des lèvres, lui donne des instructions précises’,<sup>31</sup> echoing Célestine’s mistress who also alters her behaviour toward her servant: ‘sa voix si douce, au début, si camarade, prenait maintenant un mordant de vinaigre. Elle me donnait des ordres sur un ton cassant... rabaisant...’<sup>32</sup> Both employers change their tone of voice, removing any sign of friendliness and affiliation. They consequently push Louise and Célestine to the peripheries of their homes, degrading them to mere providers of a service.

When Louise feels deprived of purpose, alone in her poor and decrepit apartment, her anger rises:

Quand elle ouvre les portes de son studio, ses mains se mettent à trembler. Elle a envie de déchirer la housse du canapé, de donner un coup de poing dans la vitre. Un magma informe, une douleur lui brûlent les entrailles et elle a du mal à se retenir de hurler.<sup>33</sup>

Slimani describes the feeling of a burning magma penetrating Louise’s insides when the nanny becomes faced with the unsuccessful reality of her life. She draws comparison between the two worlds. This anger can be read through Didi-Huberman’s theory of how ‘gestes de soulèvements se voient menacés de l’intérieur’,<sup>34</sup> through a process he labels *tourner vinaigre*: ‘[l]e vinaigre, comme son nom l’indique, est un “vin aigri” par la production d’acide acétique. Il connote l’affliction’.<sup>35</sup> The nanny’s loneliness and her oppressive position as a servant rather than as a family member, augment her bitterness. Célestine describes a similar sense of frustration with her lonely life as a servant: ‘[l]a solitude, ce n’est pas de vivre seule, c’est de vivre chez les autres, chez des gens, qui ne s’intéressent pas à vous, pour qui vous comptez moins qu’un chien’.<sup>36</sup> Slimani transports this bitterness into the twenty-first century by focusing her narrative on Louise’s unstable mental health. The nanny’s violent thoughts reveal a method of internal revolt which relate to Didi-Huberman’s category of *soulèvement*: *les pensées* (thoughts). At first, Louise’s thoughts seem to echo those of Célestine, whose heightened emotions of hostility towards her mistress cause her to revolt through violent thought: ‘[m]algré ma douleur, je l’aurais giflée...’<sup>37</sup> Yet Slimani’s narrative goes beyond Mirbeau’s description by emphasizing the ‘evil’ voices in Louise’s mind:

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. ‘speaks to her in a clipped voice, giving her precise instructions.’, *Lullaby*, p. 165.

<sup>32</sup> Mirbeau, p. 300. ‘her original softly spoken, friendly voice became an acidic bite. She gave me orders with a forceful, degrading tone.’

<sup>33</sup> Slimani, pp. 95–96. ‘When she opens the door to her studio flat, her hands start to shake. She wants to tear apart the sofa’s slipcover, to punch the window. A sort of shapeless, painful magma burns her insides and it takes an effort of will to stop herself screaming.’, *Lullaby*, p. 73.

<sup>34</sup> Didi-Huberman, p. 129. ‘[G]estures of uprising are threatened from within’.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. ‘*To turn sour*: [v]inegar, like its name indicates, is a “bitter wine” through the production of acetic acid. It connotes affliction’.

<sup>36</sup> Mirbeau, p. 136. ‘Solitude is not living alone, it is living with other people who take no interest in you, for whom you count for less than a dog’.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 105. ‘Despite my pain, I would have slapped her across the face.’

*'Il faut que quelqu'un meure. Il faut que quelqu'un meure pour que nous soyons heureux.'* Des refrains morbides bercent Louise quand elle marche. Des phrases, qu'elle n'a pas inventées et dont elle n'est pas certaine de comprendre le sens, habitent son esprit.<sup>38</sup>

Louise does not believe these voices have been invented in her mind, refusing to take ownership over them. Her lack of control over these voices demonstrates her unstable mental health. Unlike Célestine, who seems to control her violence by choosing to commit theft, Louise acts upon her violent thoughts through murder. She therefore exemplifies Didi-Huberman's theory that '[o]n ne refuse, on ne désobéit, on ne se révolte, on ne soulève pas sans violence, à quelque degré que ce soit'.<sup>39</sup>

Murder, is not, however, Louise's only physical act of revolt against her employers. Earlier in the novel, Louise feels humiliated by her employers when she is reprimanded for feeding the children out-of-date food. She is obsessed with not seeing food go to waste, a reflection of her compulsive behaviour. Considering her employers as selfish *bobo* consumers, Louise seeks revenge through a strange and disturbing action, or to use Didi-Huberman's category, a *geste* (gesture) of revolt, by placing a stale chicken in the centre of their kitchen:

Là, au centre de la petite table où mangent les enfants et leur nounou. Une carcasse de poulet est posée sur une assiette. Une carcasse luisante, sur laquelle ne reste pas le moindre bout de chair, pas la plus petite trace de viande. On dirait qu'un vautour l'a rongée ou un insecte entêté, minutieux. Une mauvaise bête en tout cas.<sup>40</sup>

Louise washes the carcass with soap and positions it in the middle of the table as a trophy of the success of her rebellion. Slimani builds suspense by leaving the horror of the chicken carcass until the second sentence. It consequently shocks the reader on account of its incongruity; the carcass is expected to be in the garbage and yet it is placed in the middle of the table, spotlessly gleaming. It stands as an omen of death, foreshadowing Louise's killings whilst at the same time representing a symptom of the nanny's psychosis. Taking place in the heart of the employer's house, Louise's revenge symbolizes how the nanny, in the manner of her nineteenth-century counterpart, occupies the middle of the home with the power to destroy, disturb and derail family life. The rotting carcass also represents the idea of the maidservant as the bringer of disease and vice into the nineteenth-century home.<sup>41</sup> Read in light of this nineteenth-

<sup>38</sup> Slimani, p. 230. '*Someone has to die. Someone has to die for us to be happy.* Morbid refrains echo inside Louise's head when she walks. Phrases that she didn't invent — and whose meaning she is not sure she fully grasps — fills her mind.', *Lullaby*, p. 193.

<sup>39</sup> Didi-Huberman, p. 183. 'We do not refuse, disobey, revolt, or rise up without some sort of degree of violence'.

<sup>40</sup> Slimani, p. 175. 'There, in the middle of the little table where the children and their nanny eat. A chicken carcass sits on a plate. A glistening carcass, without the smallest scrap of flesh hanging from its bones, not the faintest trace of meat. It looks as if it's been gnawed clean by a vulture or a stubborn, meticulous insect. Some kind of repulsive animal, anyway.', *Lullaby*, p. 145.

<sup>41</sup> See Apter, p. 192 and Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the*

century discourse, the fears that Myriam expresses after this carcass scene could just as easily have applied to a rebellious nineteenth-century maid: '[e]lle se dit qu'elle est folle. Dangereuse peut-être. Qu'elle nourrit contre ses patrons une haine sordide, un appétit de vengeance.'<sup>42</sup>

Moving beyond *le roman de la servante* literature, Slimani's novel explicitly evokes the mental health of her maidservant avatar. She describes Louise's deterioration into madness which impacts the nanny's methods of revolt. While *Chanson douce* echoes certain nineteenth-century anxieties surrounding servants, Slimani elects to transform and renew these anxieties in a twenty-first century context, where violence, loneliness, anger and madness are intertwined in the most diabolical way.

*Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 48, who explain how the maid was connected to disease in the bourgeois imagination.

<sup>42</sup> Slimani, p. 185. '[S]he thinks the nanny must be mad. Maybe dangerous. That she nurses a sordid hatred for her employers, an appetite for vengeance.', *Lullaby*, p. 154.